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The Authoritarian Period
and a Depression in
the Film Industry

1972~1979



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- 1. KBS-TV advertisement
- 2. *Rainy Days* (Yu Hyun-mok, 1979)
- 3. *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* (Lee Jang-ho, 1974)
- 4. *A Road to Sampo* (Lee Man-hee, 1975)

The Watershed of the 1970s

In the 1970s, the world was gasping for air with the Vietnam War, Middle East conflicts, the Watergate scandal, the Sino-American honeymoon, and the anti-US demonstrations in Iran. Korea also went through rapid changes with the beginning of the Yushin (“revitalizing reform”) period in 1972, which instituted an even more authoritarian government. (In October 1972, Park Cheong-hee [a.k.a. Park Chung-hee] proclaimed martial law and the Yushin regime began with the declaration of a state of emergency. The National Assembly was dissolved, political party activities were stopped, and part of the constitution was suspended. Democratic forces in society fought against this regime, but the Yushin regime finally ended when Park Cheong-hee was assassinated on October 26, 1979.) These changes included rapid industrialization accompanying high-speed growth, and the development of the leisure industry, including television. Under such circumstances, Korean cinema slipped out of its 1960s golden age and found itself stuck in a slump as it entered the 1970s. Ironically, the film industry’s slide into bankruptcy was the inverse of the general Korean growth curve.

Audiences dropped from their 1960s highs of 178 million to about 70 million or a third of that figure in 1976. Annual admissions dropped from 5 to 6 per capita to 1.8. This rapid drop in audiences was matched by a drop in theaters from 659 in 1969 to 541 in 1976. Underlying this were inherent problems in the revival period that had begun in the late 1950s, betraying the apparent prosperity of the times. Korean cinema only enjoyed a golden age when there was no other source of entertainment. It was not prepared to cope with rapid changes in Korean society, when television and other forms of entertainment spread widely. This made it harder for ordinary films to attract audiences. Some contemporary journalists reflected the prevailing gloom by even speaking of the “dark ages of cinema.”

The government only responded to the downturn in the film industry with a few revisions of the Motion Picture Law, in an effort to correct

the “loss of public trust due to the excess of disorganized film companies and lack of investment.” The Korean Motion Picture Promotion Corporation (KMPPC) was established to promote Korean-made films according to the 1973 revision. However, this revision also fueled the over-concentration of film capital by changing the registration system into a license system with the avowed aim of strengthening control over film companies. Most of the film producers who benefited from this thought of Korean film production as a cursory act for obtaining a foreign film import quota and had no sense of responsibility for taking part in cultural development. This made a bad situation in regard to quality worse. Therefore, the government changed the enforcement ordinance of the Motion Picture Law again and announced new film policies every year. However, they did not have any practical effect, because they patched over the problem rather than treating its underlying causes.

The 1970s: Master Filmmakers and New Talents

In spite of the slump and the control exerted by the Yushin regime, during the 1970s the so-called master filmmakers and new directors looked for a way to co-exist and just get on with making films.

Kim Ki-young made *The Woman of Fire* (1971) and *The Insect Woman* (1972); Yu Hyun-mok made *Flame* (1975) and *Rainy Days* (1979); Shin Sang-ok made *Three Days of Their Reign* (1973) and *A Boy at His Age of 13* (1974); Kim Soo-yong made *The Earth* (1974); and Lee Man-hee made *A Road to Sampo* (1975). Another film from this period that cannot be left out is Im Kwon-taek’s *Weeds* (1973), which was a turning point in his style.

Kim Ki-young’s *The Woman of Fire* and *The Insect Woman* were remakes of his earlier *The Housemaid* (1960), and he remade it again as *Carnivore* in 1984. They were unique and mysterious films in Kim’s auteur style. Director Yu Hyun-mok based his *Rainy Days* on an original novel by Yoon Heung-kil, sublimating ideological conflict and the tragedy of national division into an accomplished art film. Shin Sang-

ok's *A Boy at His Age of 13* was also an impressive film that told the tragedies of war from the boy's point of view. However, except for the hugely successful *The Woman of Fire*, none of these films was a commercial hit, even though they were adaptations of literary works. Instead, new directors gained attention with their new and fresh visual language and sensibility. Lee Doo-yong debuted in 1970 with *The Lost Wedding Veil*; Lee Won-se and Lee Kyung-tae in 1971 with *The Lost Season* and *Bounty* respectively; Ha Kilchong in 1972 with *The Pollen of Flowers*; Hong Pa, Park Nam-soo, and Kim Su-hyeong in 1973 with *Love with My Whole Body*, *My Sweet Home* and *Young Ones* respectively; and Lee Jang-ho and Kim Ho-sun in 1974 with *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* and *Hwannyeo* respectively.

Among these films, young audiences loved Lee Jang-ho's *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* because it was a tasteful and cheerful adaptation of Choi In-ho's tremendously popular newspaper serial novel. After that, Kim Ho-sun's *Yeong-ja's Heydays* (1975) and Ha Kilchong's *The March of Fools* (1975) were also successful and the "new wave" was born. Inspired by this, these three directors combined with two other directors (Lee Won-se and Hong Pa) and one critic (myself) to form the group called Young Sang Shi Dae (The Era of the Image). Under the flag of the "Art Movement of the Korean Cinema," new actors were recruited, prospective directors were trained, and the film magazine called *Young Sang Shi Dae* was founded. Made when the Young Sang Shi Dae movement was most active, director Kim Ho-sun's *Winter Woman* (1977) set a record for the decade among Korean films when it attracted more than 580,000 people.

Korean Cinema Genres in the 1970s

The most prominent 1970s genre was the melodrama. The *Love Me Once Again* series was launched in 1968 by director Jung So-young and was the most successful set of films in the 1960s. The third episode in the series was released in 1970 and had the best box-office results that year. On that momentum, *Love Me Once Again (Final Epi-*



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- 1. *Winter Woman* (Kim Ho-sun, 1977)
- 2. *The Woman of Fire* (Kim Ki-young, 1971)
- 3. *Testimony* (Im Kwon-taek, 1973)
- 4. *The Wild Flowers in the Battle Field* (Lee Man-hee, 1974)
- 5. *Never Never Forget Me* (Moon Yeosong, 1976)

sode) was made the next year. As the absence of political life made the social situation in the late 1960s become blocked, it can be assumed that the audience chose these *shinpa*-style melodramas in search of psychological escape.

This enabled a change of generations with the unprecedented success of Lee Jang-ho's *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* in 1974. In 1975, he followed up with *It Rained Yesterday*, breathing new life into the melodrama. However, in an effort to overcome the economic slump, a huge number of "hostess films" were made in the late 1970s. These were melodramas featuring hostesses or prostitutes as main characters. They included Byun Jang-ho's *Miss O's Apartment* series (1978, 79); Jung So-young's *The Woman I Betrayed* (1978) and *The Man I Left* (1979) series; and Noh Se-han's *26×365=0* series (1979, 82).

Also in the 1970s, there were period films, horror films, action films, and even disguised co-production films, all struggling to overcome the depression. Among the period films, *Gate of Woman* (Byun Jang-ho, 1972), *An Executioner* (Byun Jang-ho, 1974), *Concentration of Attention* (Choi In-hyun, 1976), and *A War Diary* (Jang Il-ho, 1977) were well received critically. Notable among the horror films were *You Become a Star, too* (Lee Jang-ho, 1975) and *A Remodeled Beauty* (Jang Il-ho, 1975). Among the action films, there was *Manchurian Tiger* (Lee Doo-yong, 1974). Furthermore, the KMPPC directly produced national policy films. These included *Testimony* (Im Kwon-taek, 1973), which portrayed the war seen from the point of view of a female college student, and *Wild Flowers on the Battlefield* (Lee Man-hee, 1974), which portrayed the tragedy of fratricidal war with lyrical realism. Other national policy films included anti-communist films like *Wonsan Secret Operation* (Sul Tae-ho, 1976) and *The Last Words from a Comrade in Arms* (Lee Won-se, 1979). Included in the enlightenment films were *Parade of Wives* (Im Kwon-taek, 1974) and *Mother* (Im Won-shik, 1976).

In the late 1970s, as period films, horror films, and action films went into decline, high-teen and hostess films boomed. The high-teen films

were triggered by director Moon Yeo-song's hit film, *Never Never Forget Me* (1976), and the cycle overwhelmed other film genres. Similar films included *Blue Classroom* (Kim Eung-chun, 1976), *I am Really Sorry* (Moon Yeo-song, 1976), *Ever So Much Good!* (Lee Hyung-pyo, 1976), and *Yalkae, A Joker in High School* (Suk Rae-myung, 1977). The cycle ended in 1978 with the omnibus film *Our High School Days*, co-planned, produced, and directed by a trio of high-teen film directors; Kim Eung-chun, Moon Yeo-song, and Suk Rae-myung.

The Remnants of the 1970s

However, the 1970s was not all gloom and pessimism. It was definitely a time of economic depression in the film industry, but urban development and the growth of the youth culture cried out for freedom from the authoritarian Yushin regime. Director Ha Kilchong tried political allegory with the "Blue House" in *The Pollen of Flowers* (1972) and the dreams of defeated idealism in *The March of Fools* (1975). The character of Yeong-ja in *Yeong-ja's Heyday* goes from being a maid and bus conductor to becoming a one-armed prostitute. She shows the despair and "miracle" typical of a country girl who comes to the city as part of the huge wave of rural to urban migration. Even though the film was within the censorship standards and the enforced ideology, it showed hope in the midst of the social violence imposed on women.

Furthermore, the second-run theaters in the city that appeared in the aftermath of industrialization added to suburban culture from the 1980s on and attracted audience members with *shinpa* melodrama, horror, and action films. The young people of this period were the so-called "cultural center generation." They formed small cinema groups such as the Korean Short Film Association, Society for Image Research, and Khaidu Club. They also developed a deeper film culture and more professional knowledge than the previous generation by participating in cinema groups at European cultural centers such as the Cine-Club and the East-West Film Association. Later on, they

became the mainstays of Korean cinema. Such dynamism shows new energies and new consumers of popular culture that defy the idea of cinematic dark ages. Indeed, it indicates a spark even in the midst of industrial stagnation and harsh censorship. (Byun In-shik)