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The New Military Regime's
Rule over Culture and the Ad-
vent of the New Film Culture

1980~1987



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- 1. *Good Windy Day* (Lee Jang-ho, 1980)
- 2. *The Aema Woman* (Jeong In-yeob, 1982)
- 3. *Eoh Wu-dong* (Lee Jang-ho, 1985)
- 4. *X* (Hah Myung-joong, 1983)
- 5. *Our Joyful Young Days* (Bae Chang-ho, 1987)

Korean cinema was never free from political and social constraints, which impacted heavily upon the films themselves. Although the resulting tension limited the Korean cinema, it also inspired a strange dynamic force. During this time, outside forces stimulated rigorous self-reflection in the Korean cinema. First, there was the people's art movement, which absorbed the passion for social reform and the politics for moving from dictatorship to democratization. Second was the appearance of a new young generation of filmmakers who started out in super-8 mm cinematography and took their intellectual adventure into new films. Such popular forces gradually penetrated the official policies of the new military regime and the resistance of the established film industry.

A Period of Stimulation and Distraction

The new military regime enforced nationwide martial law on 17 May 1980 and started to arrest and imprison democratic figures. Soon after, in Gwangju, there was excessive suppression by an airborne unit. Students and citizens came together spontaneously to protest against it, and this was the beginning of the Gwangju democratization movement. It ended after thousands of people were killed by military suppression. The Gwangju Democratic Uprising transformed the Korean social movement from an intellectual one into a people's movement. It also changed attitudes to the United States and created a strong sense that national liberation and social democratization were the goals of the movement.

In the historical context, the early film policies of the new regime military that appeared after the suppression of the Gwangju Democratic Uprising were an extension of the policies of the 1970s. Because concentration of ownership in the film industry and the foreign film compensation policy were continued until the mid-1980s, Korean film production remained merely a means of acquiring foreign film import quotas. Add to this strengthened censorship, and as a result output was mainly composed of vulgar commercial films. Furthermore, the

supply and demand situation was irregular, so that many films never made it into release. The filmmakers continued to demand freedom of expression, but their demands were buried by political and social problems. In the early 1980s, before the fifth revision of the Motion Picture Law, two trends emerged from the confusion. One was the film *Good Windy Day* (Lee Jang-ho, 1980), the first response to the changes and desires of the period. The other was the erotic film *The Aema Woman* (Jeong In-yeob, 1982), which opened the era of late-night screenings at the theaters. Conquering the new military regime's censorship policy with the exact opposite strategy, these two films express symbolically how the symptoms and obsessions of the 1980s encountered mainstream Korean cinema. If the former film challenged political taboos to put Korean cinema back in touch with the times, then the latter challenged sexual taboos as a distraction from the effects of the times. The fact that both films were followed by many sequels and spin-offs indicates that they were in tune with the desires of the times. Especially, in the case of the latter film, it was a natural outcome of the 3S (Sex, Screen, Sports) policy that was the foundation of the new military regime's cultural policy. Both films were all part of the natural trends brought on by the changes in the period. They were also internalizations of the eighties scene that reflected the new military regime's film policy—propagated from the top downwards—as well as the nationalistic cultural movement that spread from the bottom upwards. In this way, Korean cinema in the 1980s moved on through the struggle between progress and regression.

Changes in Substructure and Generations

In the mid 1980s, Korean cinema finally gained its long-hoped-for freedom in production. The opportunity came with a bigger crisis. In fact, the tendency to promote a monopolistic structure that affected the substructure of Korean cinema was ended with the fifth revision of the Motion Picture Law in late 1984, the corresponding Enforce-

ment Ordinance of July 1985, and the subsequent year's sixth revision. However, the main point of the double revision was the total opening up of the film market. The creation of opportunities for independent production after the dismantling of the monopolistic structure was only a measure the Korean industry took after opening up the market to foreign films. Korean cinema froze in fear as it faced direct distribution by foreign film companies (permitted by the sixth revision of 1986), without having time to fully enjoy its new freedom. The opening up of the domestic market to imports was not the result of an independent negotiating strategy within a multi-party framework of negotiation. Instead, it was an anti-cultural and anti-national measure that sacrificed cinema in order to delay US trade pressures for the opening up of the Korean market in the general manufacturing area. Consequently, Korean cinema was suddenly thrown into a *laissez faire* system after years of habituation to absolute government control over film had left it without any competitive abilities. When opposition to direct distribution by foreign distribution companies in Korea inspired filmmakers to organize and reflect on their circumstances, this provided the foundation for the later appearance of the Korean New Wave. However, it had no immediate results.

Twenty-three years after the first Motion Picture Law was promulgated in 1962, the freedom to establish film production companies and the activation of independent film production was finally made. This accelerated the changing of the guard from one generation to the next. Deflated by the sudden crack in the old system, the Yushin generation rapidly disappeared, creating a demand for new people to take their place. First of all, there was a group of directors who accommodated the sensibility of the times within the established framework of commercial film. Broadly speaking, this includes Im Kwon-taek and Lee Doo-yong, who started a new cinema aesthetics during this period. Other representative examples include Lee Jang-ho and Bae Chang-ho, who led the trends of the 1980s. Following them in the new mainstream of Chungmuro were Chung Ji-young,

Shin Seung-soo, Jang Gil-soo, Hah Myung-joong, and Park Chul-soo. The change of generations was completed with the appearance of directors like Jang Sun-woo, Park Kwang-su, Lee Myung-se, and Park Chong-won in the commercial cinema during the late 1980s. In particular, the appearance of the “Korean New Wave”—as they were called by foreign film festivals in the late 1980s—became possible when the independent cinema movement that tried to address real social problems from the early 1980s on encountered the fissures in the mainstream film industry.

The Film Industry Changes Its Thinking about Films.

The belief in reform that continued from the Gwangju Uprising of 1980 to the People’s Struggle of June 1987 against the Jeon Doo-hwan dictatorship and demanded democracy represents the spirit of the 1980s. (For about twenty days from 10 June 1987, more than five million people participated in demonstrations that eventually led to the dismantling of the authoritarian regime.) Confrontational films played a role by having an impact upon the mainstream film industry. Categorized as “non-institutional films” in the absence of the term “independent film” at the time, these confrontational films indicate the activist trend among young filmmakers who advocated “open cinema,” “popular film,” and “national cinema.” Their cultural movement films signified an aesthetic practice that overthrew the established cinema as well as a social practice that produced a critical audience rather than just consumers. These films were realist, in line with the spirit of the times not only in 1980s cinema aesthetics but also in culture in general.

The wave of social issue films in the mainstream film industry reflects the connections between it and the independent films. This tendency appears across a variety of genres and in mixed genre films. Tackling social contradictions and the structure of oppression by exploring the absurdities of contemporary reality was the primary trend distinguishing the 1980s from the 1970s. However, with the exception of a few

auteur films, most commercial films simply followed the trend rather than engaging in pointed critical analysis. Regardless of genre, many films simply combined social issue themes with the aesthetics of the Chungmuro style or Hollywood film grammar. However, the social issue films during this time, despite their imperfections, can be seen as models for Korean New Wave films. After having taken the trouble to work out how to combine a cinema with social responsibility, these achieved considerable success. (Lee Yeon-ho)



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1. *The Aema Woman* (Jeong In-yeob, 1982)
2. *Women Don't Fear the Night* (Kim Sung-soo, 1983)
3. *The Aema Woman 3* (Jeong In-yeob, 1985)
4. *The Stolen Apple Tastes Good* (Kim Su-hyeong, 1984)
5. *A Night of Burning Bone and Skin* (Cho Myung-hwa, 1985)