

Youngja's Heydays* and the Broken Bodies of Authoritarian Construction

*Rachel Min Park***

Youngja's Heydays (Yǒngja ūi chǒnsǒng sidae, directed by Kim Hosŏn 1975) follows the story of a Korean woman named Youngja, as she tries to survive in the harsh environment of metropolitan Seoul. Leaving her countryside home in an effort to eke out a living in the city, she moves from job to job—first as a maid in a wealthy household, then as a bus conductress, and finally as a “hostess” (the euphemistic name for prostitutes in South Korea at this time). The film follows her relationship with Changsu, a laborer who falls in love with Youngja and desperately tries to save her, presumably in pursuit of a middle-class dream (marriage, a home, kids). By simultaneously depicting the abhorrent material circumstances of lower-class laborers in Korea and the melodramatic (and tragic) relationship between Changsu and Youngja, *Youngja's Heydays* treads a curiously fine line between reality and its excess. In using stylistic techniques such as point of view shots, muted sounds, and palimpsestic overlay, *Youngja's Heydays* employs the aesthetics of excess to emphasize the fractured subjectivity and banality of commodification in an authoritarian, developmental state that comprised South Korea in the 1970s.

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** Rachel Min Park received her BA in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Berkeley and her MA in Korean Studies from Korea University. She also works as a translator from Korean to English.

In terms of genre, *Youngja's Heydays* has been classified as part of the “hostess film” genre that proliferated in the 1970s, under the state censorship of the Park Chung Hee era. These films often depicted young girls from rural areas suffering from some form of trauma, migrating to the city (Seoul), and eventually working as prostitutes. Marked by racy depictions of women’s nude bodies and sex scenes, these films were originally denounced as exploitative films that pandered to the most carnal and base desires of viewers or as mere commercial instruments for surviving the authoritarian apparatus of control. Other more nuanced readings have argued that these hostess films are reflective of the contemporaneous social problems, such as the massive use of female labor in the state’s developmental project (in factories, brothels, etc.) and the subsequent exploitation of female bodies in Korean society. Nevertheless, most of these analyses have focused on the social relevance of hostess films as a whole, seeing their circulation as a symptom of larger societal problems. In this sense, Molly Hyo Kim’s article can be considered unique for its sustained analysis on the formal and aesthetic elements of two representative hostess films: *Youngja's Heydays* and *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars*. Kim notes two especially pertinent aspects of these films—their capacity to bypass the state censorship board despite their screening of the dilapidated and dismal poverty in Korea as well as their archetypal construction of women’s sacrifice.¹ Kim goes on to argue that certain stylistic elements, such as facial close-up shots, point of view shots, and selectively muted sound, are employed in *Youngja's Heydays* to emphasize the construal of Youngja as a self-sacrificing “good woman” putting the needs of her men and family above hers.

However, these critical analyses (Molly Hyo Kim’s included) all tend to focus on the element of sexuality or the commodification of women’s bodies to the extent that they are sold, bought, and traded for sex. Without

1 Molly Hyo Kim, “Genre Conventions of South Korean Hostess Films (1974–1982): Prostitutes and the Discourse of Female Sacrifice,” *Acta Koreana* 17, no. 1 (June 2014): 459.

denying the importance of these aspects of the film, I would like to instead emphasize the *overall* commodification of bodies in *Youngja's Heydays* and the way the film deploys formal techniques such as shot/reverse shots, point of view shots, and establishing shots to continuously blur the line between the real and the surreal. On one hand, the film continuously uses establishing shots to frame its narrative within a larger sociohistorical context, portraying the interiors of factories and sweatshops in which the workers are all shown as mute and preoccupied with manual labor. Moreover, while much attention has been paid to the sex scenes in which Youngja is working as a prostitute, it should also be noted that Changsu similarly uses his body to earn capital (albeit not in a sexual way). For instance, the scenes where Changsu is working as a masseuse/scrubber depicts nude male bodies in mass, with Changsu also servicing clients in a corporeal manner. While sexuality and the gendered notions of labor play an important role, the film nevertheless stresses a general, totalizing impulse towards the commodification of human bodies and their loss of subjectivity.

The totalizing nature of such alienation and the commodification of human bodies points to Achille Mbembe's claim that "necropolitics," the power to define who gets to die and having the right to kill, is a more accurate description of the developmental state's power than the traditional Foucauldian notion of biopolitics, the state's power to define how bodies live their lives. In developing his theory, Mbembe borrows heavily from Georges Bataille's ideas surrounding death and sovereignty as a form of "excess," in which sexuality is also implicated. Seen in this way, the radical nature of the sex scenes (and hostess films in general) may lie in the way they remind us of the "regime of the taboos surrounding [excretion and appropriation]." That is, in provoking certain reactions—whether they be disgust, shock, or morbid curiosity—the screening of such bodily images demands that we ask ourselves why we have such reactions to begin with.² Who creates and perpetuates the taboos surrounding sexuali-

2 Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1

ty and to what end? These questions become particularly pertinent when considering the reality of sex work within the parameters of Park Chung Hee's regime—the paradoxical rise of female workers and their simultaneous mistreatment in precarious positions of labor, the sanctioning of prostitution to US soldiers in *kijichons* (military camptowns) but banning it elsewhere. Put differently, the manifestation of postcolonial authoritarian power appears to reside in designating which bodies are considered disposable and able to be suspended in a kind of social death.

Youngja's Heydays includes scenes of broken and sick bodies to underscore the fallibility (that is, the humanness) of such bodies—to remind us that they are in fact neither machines nor substitutes for machines. The most striking example is, of course, the scene in which Youngja loses her arm while working as a bus conductress and then receives a large sum of money for her injury. Perhaps the most shocking part of the exchange is its sheer banality: through the setting of the office, the exchange of body parts for money is officialized, bureaucratized, and made as a part of the larger state apparatus—to the extent where the disposal of the human body is entirely normalized.³

(Winter 2003): 14–45.

- 3 Here, I am particularly reminded of Georg Lukács' comments on bureaucracy and the general commodification and fetishism that occurs under the capitalist mode of production: "Bureaucracy implies the adjustment of one's way of life, mode of work and hence of consciousness, to the general socio-economic premises of the capitalist economy, similar to that which we have observed in the case of the worker in particular business concerns. The formal standardization of justice, the state, the civil service, etc., signifies objectively and factually a comparable reduction of all social functions to their elements, a comparable search for the rational formal laws of these carefully segregated partial systems. Subjectively, the divorce between work and the individual capacities and the needs of the worker produces comparable effects upon consciousness. This results in an inhuman, standardized division of labour analogous to that which we have found in industry on the technological and mechanical plane." [Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), 98-99].

Still, the more disturbing aspect of the film may be its portrayal of sickness and diseased bodies, presented within the frame of sexuality. After Youngja has fully fallen from grace and has become a prostitute in earnest, we discover she has been infected by a venereal disease. Changsu, after engaging in Youngja's services, wakes up one morning to find that he also has a sexually transmitted disease. Fully aware that he could have only caught this disease from Youngja, he goes to violently confront her, and then takes her to the doctor to receive treatment. At the hospital, Youngja is told by the doctor to refrain from sexual intercourse and drinking alcohol or coffee, and to take the medicine consistently. Of course, as someone whose means of earning a living is contingent upon engaging in sexual intercourse, this remedy creates a dilemma for Youngja. If she is to get better, she must "rest," no longer using her body as a means of labor. In a society where bodies are commodified and measured by their productivity—that is, their capacity to earn capital—what does it mean to have a "resting" body, a body that can no longer work? Ironically, it is this very labor that made Youngja sick in the first place and her only hope at recovering her body is to stop using that body. Changsu, in forcefully dragging Youngja to the hospital, states that her body is "rotting away" and pays for her treatment in its entirety, and gives her a daily stipend so that she does not have to "work." While this exchange highlights Molly Kim's notion of the sacrificial prostitute, in which the prostitute feels guilty about her "impurity" and later exiles/sacrifices herself for the sake of her man,⁴ it also emphasizes the way bodies are suspended in a half-living, half-dying situation for the sake of the state's larger developmental project. Moreover, as a disease that has spread (from a customer to Youngja and then to Changsu), the sexually transmitted disease reminds us of the dissolving borders of the body, in which the embedded violence of the state has catapulted a larger social disease that transcends individuals and contaminates all in a web of complicity.

But I postulate that in reminding us of the weakness of human bodies,

4 Kim, 464 and 471-472.

this moment of sickness provides an instance of possible subversion and resistance to the state's larger rhetoric of modernization and developmentalism. After their visit to the hospital, the film goes to a scene in which Youngja is at the brothel and told by the brothel's owner that she has a customer. We see Youngja's hesitation and her agonizing over whether or not to receive the customer, of whether or not to earn capital, through close-up shots of her face. After sending the customer away, the madame of the brothel angrily berates her for losing money, and Youngja cries, "I'm a person too. And sometimes I can get sick!" Her sickness thereby functions as a kind of rupture in the illusion created by the state's modernization project, that reifies all humans and their relations for the sake of earning capital, by pointing to her subjectivity. Youngja reminds us that she too is more than a body, and that she can get sick and feel pain and sadness.

In his examination of postcolonial Francophone African authoritarian states, Achille Mbembe reminds us that "to exercise authority is, above all, to tire out the bodies of those under it, to disempower them not so much to increase their productivity as to ensure the maximum docility."⁵ Unlike the Francophone African states that Mbembe describes in *On the Postcolony*, there is no central figurehead or *commandement* portrayed as the figure of authority in *Youngja's Heydays*. Yet the social context of the time makes it impossible to ignore the connections between the film's representation and the state policies of the authoritarian Park Chung Hee regime. In fact, the absence of any explicit reference or representation of an authoritarian figure further strengthens what Mbembe describes as an "intimate tyranny."⁶ This absence actually demonstrates how insidious the rhetoric of authoritarian control is, to the extent that it is embedded within the practices of daily life. Youngja's sickness and moment of temporary defiance provide a possible form of resistance in that she tempo-

5 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Studies on the History of Society and Culture 41 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 110.

6 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 129

rarily suspends her complicity with the state's ideology: in refusing to be a productive or docile body, that is, in asserting her subjectivity as a human being, she refuses the fundamental dehumanization and inherent violence that is so central to the authoritarian state's regime and construction of legitimacy. Nevertheless, Youngja is forced to return to prostitution and this reminder of her subjectivity is fleeting. The tragedy of her life, and of so many other workers, is that the exploitative measures of authoritarian control are so deeply woven into the fabric of society that to merely live is to become complicit.

Ultimately, both formal elements (palimpsest, point of view shots, and moving camera shots) and narrative elements (Youngja's sickness) serve to blur the boundaries between the real and the surreal in *Youngja's Heydays*. Rather than seeing either mode as significant or dominant in and of itself, I believe that it is the constant, dialectical *movement* between the two that functions as the film's possible locus of resistance. Moreover, the film frames the human body as the border between the real and its excess, emphasizing the body's corporeality in order to show the fallibility of the authoritarian state's discourse surrounding modernization and economic development. While it may be difficult to see *Youngja's Heydays* as a radical political critique, neither can it be entirely dismissed as a purely commercial work pandering to the pleasures of spectatorship. Considering the oppressive nature of state censorship that was fully in place at the time of the film's release, *Youngja's Heydays* may instead be indicative of the way art and culture provides small spaces of resistance from within the state's control. In pointing out the very limits of reality, *Youngja's Heydays* forces us to question where the borders of control are delineated and the way authoritarian state legitimacy is constructed.

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