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Beyond Partition: The Political Horizons of Contemporary Indian and Korean War Films

To think trans-Asia is to think the legacy of colonialism. Otherwise, one runs the risk of lapsing either into an unthinking presentism that celebrates an Asian economic miracle (however tenuous), or into a nostalgic neo-orientalism that evokes the region's past glories to argue for a continual Asian ascendancy. Intriguingly, both these tendencies arise from a deep sense of inadequacy that is constitutive of trans-Asian modernity: in that sense, they return us to colonialism. This essay is an attempt to map, through the lens of cinema, postcolonial forms of history and identity for which "trans-Asia" may be a productive frame. Here, the analytic fulcrum is the recursive historical experience of national partition at the moment of decolonization.

Palestine/Israel, South Asia, and the Korean Peninsula remain the three salient instances of postcolonial partition in Asia. Of these, the first has mutated into an agonizing ambit of occupation and segregation, its future shrouded in uncertainty. No doubt, contemporary Israeli and Palestinian cinemas abound in tropes of partition: films such as *Wedding in Galilee* (1987), *Divine Intervention* (2002), *The Bubble* (2006) and *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) unfold around borders and check posts, displaced communities, fractured selves. However, the region's tormented history and shifting cartography mark it as fundamentally distinct from the South Asian and Korean experiences of post-partition nationhood.

This essay will focus on Indian and South Korean films¹ to pursue the following questions: What remains of the national, when the nation unravels at the point of the postcolonial state's inauguration? What representational strategies does cinema adopt to work through the legacies of political truncation? What differential projections of the future of community and politics do these strategies intimate in the two cultures? My objective here is three-fold: to establish cinema's capacity to mourn the loss of national unity and its attendant social suffering; to demonstrate that such mourning work remains deeply contingent and local even as it speaks to a general structure of trauma; and to argue that because of cinema's historical embeddedness, a single cinematic genre—in this case, the genre of war films—leads to divergent politics of mourning in India and Korea, including rather dissimilar imaginations of the future. The first part of the essay draws on my research on post-partition Indian cinema²; the rest of it extends that work to a comparison between recent war films from the two countries.

I.

The political truncation of India at the end of British colonial rule in 1947 led to a social cataclysm in which roughly one million people died, and ten to twelve million were displaced. In marking a blighted desire for national unity, this event—the Partition—has emerged as a collective experience of loss, and has launched a long and tortuous process of mourning. For nearly four decades, as part of a more general and willed cultural amnesia, cinema remained relatively silent about this tumultuous moment in modern Indian history. This reticence, overdetermined in nature, can be related to at least three key factors: the exigencies of post-independence nation building; the difficulty of reliving on screen an ordeal that was still too fresh and vivid; and trauma's disjunctive temporal structure, particularly its initial latency leading to problems of referentiality, representation and knowledge.

Cinema's silence about Partition was never complete. All through the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, films about communal tensions, the division, and its aftermath surfaced within commercial cinema—films such as *Lahore* (1948), *Nastik* (1954), *Ora Thakey Odharey* (1954) and *Chhalia* (1960). Similar concerns motivated the patently politicized work of directors influenced by the India Peoples' Theatre Association, including Nemaï Ghosh's

Chhinnamul (1950), and Ritwik Ghatak's "Partition trilogy"—*Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1962). Then, in the early 1970s, the Bangladesh war revived memories of 1947 and inspired a few films like the Bengali melodrama *Alo Amar Alo* (1971), and M.S. Sathyu's *Garam Hava* (1973). The latter film overcame early problems with the censors to win the National Award for best film of the year. Nevertheless, these works remain as so many "stranded objects" within a cultural landscape marked by discretion, if not outright evasiveness.³

Then again, as Foucault reminds us, silence is not a simple absence of discourse: rather, silences must be articulated with representations to grasp the overall patterns of discursivity. Many films in the two decades after 1947, whose narratives have nothing to do with Partition, include offhand references to refugees, homelessness and poverty; others incorporate stock documentary footage of the homeless to establish a broad post-1947 milieu. Placing these filmic depictions alongside the silences and gaps helps us discern a series of tropes that enable implicit and indirect figurations of Partition. Take, for instance, the box office hit *Shabnam* (1949), made under the Filmistan banner and starring Dilip Kumar and Kamini Kaushal. The narrative is a romantic caper set in 1942-43 as the Japanese invasion of Burma precipitates an exodus of expatriate Indians. The 1949 film uses footage of refugees from 1947 to make a film about population movements a few years ago: dimensions of the Partition experience are simultaneously evoked and elided.⁴ It is equally intriguing that the 1950s abounds in films about dispersed families, siblings separated in their infancy, characters getting disfigured or losing their limbs in accidents and natural disasters, amnesiac protagonists, suspicions concerning paternity, and pregnancies out of wedlock producing bastards and foundlings. Could it be that these generic tales express deep and pervasive anxieties about contemporaneous social conditions that include uprooted refugees, scattered families, and stupefied survivors of riots—including kidnapped and violated women?

Adopting an allegorical reading strategy, it becomes possible to piece together from these fragments a contemporaneous structure of sentiments. What drives these halting figurations is a subterranean desire to make sense of experiences that defy easy explication and assimilation. The need to engage and understand the incomprehensible, to grasp the objective conditions and to perhaps move beyond: this suggests an imperative to mourn, to overcome a shell-shocked state. In contrast, an incipient mission of nation-building in the wake of independence demands that the horror be forgotten, that collective endeavor be directed toward forging a radiant future. That demand encourages a disavowal of the entire experience of Partition, and advances a concerted effort to project a modern, rational and secular national life. Popular cinema's attempts to deflect the trauma of 1947, to shape a "national cinema" through the consolidation of genres and audiences (seen, for example, in the efforts of Filmistan and Navketan studios), and to enable its differentiated publics to dream of social mobility (e.g. through the invocation of genteel bourgeois living in the cycle of Bengali romantic melodramas starring Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen) make sense in the context of this project of nationhood. Nevertheless, traces of the loss seep into the films—from the morbid sensibility of the early Raj Kapoor films (especially *Aag* [1948] and *Awara* [1951]) to the ambiguous hero of Mehboob Khan's *Amar* (1954), from the lyricism of Guru Dutt to the loaded lyrics of film songs (for instance, Radha's song in *Mother India* [1957], beseeching villagers not to abandon their flood-ravaged land). These cinematic traces, when read as runes, intimate a melancholic cultural field—something like Benjamin's "landscape of ruins." Such an insight shifts us away from a characterization of the broad cinematic "silence" as an outright act of forgetting, toward its recasting as a distinctive mode of historical engagement.

The decisive emergence of Partition in public discourse after the mid-1980s was, like the earlier deferral, overdetermined. The change came from the convergence of multiple factors: a burgeoning disillusionment with postcolonial achievements leading to a national soul-searching and a crisis of political legitimacy; a gradual attrition of the hegemonic sway of secularist ideals and the rise of a Hindu-chauvinist nationalism in India (with a mirroring surge of Islamicist politics in Bangladesh and Pakistan); and the distance—even hindsight—afforded by the passage of time. The decisive and immediate catalyst for the discursive turn was the outbreak of anti-Sikh riots, largely instigated by political groups, after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at the height of the separatist movement for Khalistan in 1984. The eruption of sectarian violence in bourgeois, middle-class neighborhoods of

metropolitan centers like Delhi revealed the endemic fissures of Indian society and polity; it nullified convenient and standardized assumptions about such violence always taking place elsewhere, in localized areas among lumpen or backward populations.⁵ In the wake of 1984, a new self-consciousness regarding the constitutive role of communal strife in national life made reflections on 1947 not just more likely, but something of an imperative.

The two television series *Buniyaad* (1986-88) and *Tamas* (1987), broadcast on the state-run network Doordarshan, brought back the horrors of 1947 with an undeniably visceral force. Directed by Govind Nihalani and based on Bhisham Sahani's novel, *Tamas* became the eye of a political storm involving demonstrations by its detractors and supporters and the ransacking of several television stations. A legal battle went all the way to the Supreme Court, the final verdict upholding the broadcast of the mini-series. Irrespective of the merits and limitations of these two shows, the sheer reach and impact of television ensured that Partition was to be an overt component of cultural memory from then on. By 1997, the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence and bifurcation, Partition had spawned its own culture industry—with numerous popular and academic volumes, newspaper and magazine articles, television features, and films produced at home and abroad about 1947 and its legacies.

What emerges from the preceding discussion is an overall hermeneutic of mourning, its arc running from the halting allusions and fragmentary articulations of the early years to the more explicit and often totalizing representations of the past two decades. Nevertheless, the hermeneutic itself remains highly tenuous: full of gaps and recursions, detours and disarticulations, it embodies the vicissitudes of memory work now further compounded in the context of social suffering endured in the form of an abiding sense of loss and the periodic, more flagrant outbreaks of violence. If traumatic experiences produce difficulties of comprehension and narrativization, then shards of memory continue to be available for myriad interpretations and political appropriations. A Freudian understanding of mourning work (*trauerarbeit*) presupposes and promises a process of rationally working through the experience of loss, whereby subjects come to terms with it. Extending this model to the collective level, one might argue, following Adorno, that a society must overcome the objective conditions that produced the trauma in the first place. In post-Partition South Asia, this involves accepting and moving beyond the territorial truncation and the material and psychic losses it inaugurates—including the loss of an ideal of unity, and a searing sense of betrayal that puts to question the very future of the community. There is nothing in the social production of meaning and affective communities that guarantees such outcomes. On the evidence of films of the past six decades, mourning the Partition has proceeded in multiple, even unanticipated ways, forging manifold political energies and publics. A brief consideration of two films will illustrate this point.

Gadar (2001), a massive box office hit, returns us to the fateful days of the late 1940s. It chronicles the romance between Sakina, an upper class Muslim woman, and Tara Singh, a blue-collar Sikh truck driver. Sharif Ali, Sakina's father, who rises to political prominence in post-independence Pakistan, tries his best to break them up. His strong loathing of India leaves no doubt that his opposition to their union is not simply a matter of class antagonism. The film makes some gestures toward striking a non-partisan balance: Sharaf Ali's eldest son, who has gone mad possibly from the trauma of Partition, keeps talking about *Azad Hindustan*—independent (and undivided) India. But ultimately the film's jingoistic tone fully resonates with the vituperative atmosphere of South Asia in the 1990s, shaped by the resurgence of strident religious fundamentalisms and exacerbated by the Kargil war of 1999. In what



1: *Gadar*: Tara Singh face Sharif Ali

is, by far, its most charged sequence, shot in front of a mosque, Tara Singh gives in to Sharaf Ali's demands and agrees to convert to Islam, out of his love for his wife. He even publicly proclaims *Islam Zindabad* (Hail Islam) and *Pakistan Zindabad* (Hail Pakistan), but refuses to utter *Hindustan Murdabad* (Down with India). The staging of this spirited refusal—Singh holding on to his position in the face of a convoy of Pakistani army men, their guns trained on him—is calculated to produce patriotic twangs in the heart of even the most cynical Indian. His refusal is rendered all the more moving because it comes after he agrees to give up his religion (proving his secular disposition) and to praise the breakaway nation (signaling his magnanimity and lack of malice) for the sake of love, the cardinal cinematic emotion. However, Sharaf Ali's demands go too far: for Indian audiences in 2001, this fictitious mayor of late 1940s' Lahore becomes all too real, one with the “treacherous” and “bastard” nation of Pakistan that is not content to have been born, but continues to threaten India through its alleged involvement in anti-Indian terrorist activities and its overt belligerence. In the symbolic order of *Gadar*, there is no way out of the totalizing historical trajectory that 1947 inaugurates.

Naseem (1995) takes place in the months before the demolition of the Ayodhya mosque by Hindu fundamentalists in December 1992, an old man's fond reminiscences of his life in pre-Partition India serving as counterpoint to the mounting communal strife of the present. Thus the narrative introduces a split temporality: even as contemporary life moves inexorably toward chaos and sectarian violence, a movement charted by the film's obsessive marking of dates on the calendar leading up to December 6, 1992, the old man's memory work brings back a utopian strain of harmony that will not die. This kind of temporal osmosis reminds us that many futures were once possible in the past, and there was nothing inevitable about the reality that transpired. The film mourns Partition and its anxious legacy by bringing us out of an unavoidable teleology promoted by radical politico-religious groups, and by pointing to other, more peaceful potentialities for community life in South Asia. The old man passes away as news of the destruction of the faraway mosque casts a pall on his Bombay neighborhood: in his passing, the film marks yet another death of the dream of communal harmony. But it is a dream that will—*must*—withstand a thousand deaths: here, it remains alive in *Naseem*, the old man's teenage granddaughter and the addressee of his reminiscences.

II.

Korea's liberation from colonial rule, coming with Japan's surrender in 1945, seemed to last only a month: Soviet and US forces carved up the peninsula in two dominions, North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea or DPRK) and South Korea (Republic of Korea or ROK), instituting governments beholden to the competing ideologies of communism and capitalism. Thus, while the Japanese occupation (1910-45) of Korea produced political and cultural instability, the Korean partition was as much an outcome of Cold War polarization as a legacy of colonialism. The division was cemented in blood: the Korean War (1950-53) brought death and anguish to the region, destroying the landscape, rending the social fabric, dispersing families. The trauma inflected the lives of multiple generations, and shaped two societies simmering with mutual distrust. As Michael Robinson has observed, the two Koreas “developed political cultures that were narrowly defined by their primary Other: the South's virulent anti-Communism in response to the North, and the North's unique brand of socialist self-reliance and enmity toward the South as a dependency of global capitalism⁶.” Paranoid security concerns legitimized the centralization of power by the state and the general militarization of society on both sides of the border. Furthermore, each side “impose[d] its own narrative of national becoming” to shore up “its claim to be the single true political expression of the Korean people,” which then “led to interesting bifurcations of Korean history and its traditional cultural legacy.”⁷

In many ways, the desolation wrought by the bifurcation and the war appeared as a continuation of colonial privation. Korean modernity, already overshadowed by Japanese economic and cultural dominance, was truncated by the experience of colonization. The last phase of Japanese occupation was marked by particularly draconian measures aimed at subjugating and breaking down Korean being: these included a ban on Korean language teaching in colonial schools and Korean publications; the adoption of Japanese surnames on the part of Korean nationals as ways of enforcing cultural assimilation; and the ruthless conscription of Korean women into prostitution to

“comfort” Japanese armies fighting all over east and southeast Asia. Thus, the task of reconstructing the two Korean societies was complicated by multiple structural problems, not the least of which were a fissured historical consciousness, a deep sense of inadequacy, external pressures, and security paranoia. Concomitantly, the work of mourning the trauma of national partition was shot through with a range of political and cultural imperatives.

From its inception, South Korea came under the influence of the army (a fallout of post-partition belligerence) and collaborators of the colonial state (a carry-over of the ruling bloc). An authoritarian state set up formal systems of cultural censorship, and instigated an amorphous, possibly more efficacious, matrix of self-censorship. For a political system that struggled to establish its legitimacy, careening from one decree of emergency to another, representations of poverty, social injustice or rift were anathema.⁸ Park Chung-hee’s dictatorial regime (1960-79), in particular, sought to reduce cinema to a statist propaganda machine. This tendency culminated in the 1973 amendments to the Motion Picture Law, centralizing film production and yoking it to the ideology of the Yushin System. Meanwhile, the astonishing export-led economic growth of the 1970s brought rapid changes in people’s lifestyles: as Western influences and the modalities of an urban consumer society eclipsed traditional Confucian values of frugality, hard work, and respect for authority, a struggle for cultural identity ensued. The contradictions of political repression, social inequities, cultural flux and burgeoning aspirations generated such systemic tension that it could not be contained by authoritarianism. A series of upheavals—Park’s assassination in 1979, the outbreak of nationwide protests following a coup that catapulted General Chun to power, the Gwangju Massacre of May 1980—deepened the pervasive sense of crisis and energized the ongoing *minjung* (common people) movement of students, workers and intellectuals.⁹ This broad based struggle for social justice was instrumental in the transformation of the political arena, eventually forcing the government to hold elections in 1987. Democratic institutions and rights gained in strength all through the 1990s: in 1997, Kim Dae-jung, once jailed and then exiled for his life-long opposition to authoritarianism, was elected president.

If one were to assemble a hermeneutic of mourning from Korean cinema’s engagement with national partition over the past six decades, what would it look like? Would it be analogous to the long-term pattern that emerges in the Indian instance, allowing for the specificities of Korean history? My answer here must remain significantly constrained by my limited knowledge of Korean films; nevertheless, I submit that such an analogy would not be off the mark. The singularity of Korean national experience contends with a more general temporal structure of trauma to produce the peculiar contingencies of cinematic mourning work in Korea; all the same, projections of collective loss on screen—whether in India or in Korea—proceed from a period of relative silence, marked by displaced allusions or allegorical figurations, to an eventual crescendo of direct, explicit representations. This is not to say that Korean cinema in the 1960s and 1970s was silent about the bifurcation; nevertheless, films such as *Red Scarf* (1964), *South and North* (1965), and *The Demilitarized Zone* (1965) were more strident Cold War propaganda than nuanced works of mourning.¹⁰

An allegorical trope is nothing new or unusual for Korean cinema: one of its foundational moments, the silent film *Arirang* (1926), was a national allegory produced in the midst of Japanese occupation. The title comes from a popular folk song that speaks of lovers’ separation and yearning for reunion. This cultural association enabled the film to produce its own intimate publics, for whom the underlying emotions rang with the force of national destiny. The film’s plotline, about a student who suffers from temporary loss of sanity, regains his senses only when his sister is about to be raped by a Korean collaborator of the Japanese colonial government, and is subsequently jailed for murdering the collaborator, is a thinly-veiled reference to the crisis of modern Korean consciousness and the roadblocks to Korean nationhood. The story of the protagonist’s thwarted “reawakening,” and other “visual allegories,” allowed the film to exploit “loopholes in Japanese film censorship.”¹¹ The practice of live narration (*byeonsa*) in theatres during the screening of silent films provided a further channel to circumvent censorship, the narrators relatively free to elaborate the hidden subtexts of seemingly apolitical narratives. To this day, the *Arirang* imaginary—embodied in the sorrowful melody, the legendary film—continues to offer a shared framework for negotiating national unity and loss.¹²

Im Kwon-taek, the most prominent Korean auteur until the mid-1990s, was feted internationally for a series of works that cloaked their politics in stylized aesthetics and allegory. Such a strategy allowed him to produce, within a highly regulated cultural context, an oeuvre marked by deep engagement with the contradictions of modern Korean society. Im had managed to remain in business through the repressive 1970s by working on officially sanctioned “quality films.” By the end of that decade, he launched subtle interrogations of nationalist history, presenting a Japanese protagonist sympathetic to Korean nationalism in *The Genealogy* (1978), and complicating the anxious polarization between benign capitalism and evil communism in *The Hidden Hero* (1979) and *The Pursuit of Death* (1980). His growing global reputation (including accolades at European festivals such as Berlin and Cannes) earned him the respect of a Korean state always eager for international recognition: like Satyajit Ray in India, Im became the icon of an entire national cinema. This stature, along with the gradual democratization of South Korea, enabled him to move toward a more realized cinema of social critique: at stake was a recalibration of Korean history and identity. Introducing reflective formalist cues—long shots, extended takes—within a melodramatic mode, films like *The Surrogate Mother* (1986) and *Adada* (1987) question the legitimacy of nationalism by calling attention to, and mourning, the oppression of the familiar woman-as-nation figure. This work of critical mourning is extended to address the decimation of local cultures and lifeworlds in *Sopyonje* (1993) and, finally, the unraveling of a national community in *Gilsottum* (1986) and *Taebek Mountains* (1994). The corpus of Im’s films prepares the ground for, even perform, the cinematic turn to frequent and overt representations of national truncation.

III.

The balance of this essay examines recent Indian and South Korean war/espionage films as a principal genre that works through the ongoing consequences of partition. At the heart of these narratives of patriotism and deception—beyond their codes of honor and sacrifice, their formal invocations of mythic heroism and spectacle—rings an unmistakable note of sorrow. In a fundamental sense, these films derive their charge from a melancholic anxiety about how to deal with the lost object of nationalist desire—the Other across the border that looks and feels so much like the Self. As I hope to demonstrate, these mainstream Indian and Korean films have much in common in terms of their plotlines (intense male melodramas in which the women have limited, highly coded roles) and their synaesthetic spectacles of violence (harnessing the latest audiovisual technologies and special effect arsenals); yet, there is a fundamental difference between the two cultural formations in the way they “resolve” the question of the breakaway self, a difference that stems from divergent prognoses of political future.

If 1997, the fiftieth anniversary of independence/partition, afforded an occasion for collective reappraisal in India and Pakistan, mutual attempts to build harmonious relations were rather short-lived. The next summer witnessed matching nuclear tests conducted by the two states. Mounting tensions led to the outbreak of the Kargil War in 1999, a battle that was highly localized, but whose animosity was widely disseminated by the new media networks and exacerbated by resurgent religious chauvinisms in the region. From the late 1990s, a slew of Hindi films put audiences in the middle of Indo-Pakistani armed confrontations and cross-border terrorist activities. This was not the first time that Bombay cinema turned to the war/espionage genre: as early as 1950, a film titled *Kashmir* dwelt on the incursion of Islamicist terrorists and Pakistani paramilitary forces. Interestingly enough, some of the most celebrated Hindi war films did not involve Pakistan at all: for instance, *Haqeeqat* (1964) was about the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict, while *Saat Hindustani* (1969) dealt with the war of liberation in Portuguese-occupied Goa. But now films like *Border* (1997), *Mission Kashmir* (2000), *L.O.C.: Kargil* (2003) and *Lakshya* (2004) focused squarely on tensions with Pakistan.

The films attempt a modicum of impartiality (after all, they are widely seen across the border—in legal or pirated distribution), but ultimately a rabid jingoism triumphs in these patriotic tales. J. P. Dutt’s *Border*, whose box office success provided a shot in the arm for the Indian war-film genre, centers around the famous Battle of Longewala during the Indo-Pak war of 1971. Partition’s ambivalent legacy is the substance of the narrative, and is explicitly referenced not only in its title but also in the song “*Mere dushman, mere bhai, mere humsaye*” (My enemy, my brother, my double [reflection/shadow]) which accompanies the end-credits. But there is no evident

uncertainty or ambivalence in the characterization of Kuldeep Singh who commandeers an Indian army unit in the deserts of Rajasthan bordering Pakistan. A seasoned military man who also fought in the Indo-Pak war of 1965, Singh displays a steadfast loyalty to the nation, a single-minded sense of purpose, and an insatiable appetite for victory: as he keeps saying, “No one wins a war by being dead,” implying that victory will come only if one is able to eliminate the enemy. When some Pakistani spies are caught, Singh kills them off execution style; he turns livid when his subordinate officer dithers in pulling the trigger. As the two belligerent armies gather in their trenches, Singh stomps out in the open intervening space in broad daylight, defiantly facing the prospect of being hit by snipers’ bullets. When a Pakistani officer phones up Singh to rail him, he has a fit and starts shouting abuses, claiming they are scared low-lives who nag like women: in a move typical of much patriotic rhetoric, the enemy is berated through a feminizing analogy.

The disdainful reference to nagging women ties up with an early scene in which Singh finds out that his wife has been trying to get him transferred, so that he does not have to go to the battlefield. There is no place for such timorous machinations in his relentlessly macho worldview, and Singh responds in anger without stopping to consider his wife’s perspective: for him, one’s duty to the motherland comes before one’s duty to one’s family and loved ones. This gendered rendering of patriotic obligation has been a mainstay of Hindi films: men respond to the public call for heroic sacrifice, women come in their way and are eventually left behind to mourn, to bear the marks of social loss. Two other narrative strands, pertaining to the lives of Lieutenant Dharamveer and the BSF (Border Security Force) officer Bhairav Singh, reiterate this ideology—although with greater ambivalence. The celebration of Dharamveer’s engagement to Kammo is disrupted by the news of war, and the cancellation of his leave: as his blind mother, widowed in the 1965 war, sits shell-shocked on the porch, muttering “I won’t let him go” over and over, he quietly bids farewell to his tearful sweetheart and leaves for the front. Bhairav Singh gets to know of the outbreak of war on his wedding night, and has to take leave of his bride the very next morning. Even in the middle of their nuptials, Bhairav has a vision: he splits, and a part of his self runs off with his BSF buddies. The homosocial dimension of military patriotism is alluded to as engendering a realm of belonging in which the only presence women are allowed is *in absentia*; it is further developed in scenes of camaraderie among the army men, most notably in the musical sequence in which the soldiers read letters from their families, happily engaged in sentimental exchanges.

What of the film’s religious undertow? Hit by multiple bullets and delirious with pain, Bhairav Singh picks up a landmine and approaches a Pakistani tank shouting “Mother, here I come!” One could argue that he is a devoted Rajput soldier, and therefore his invocation of *Shakti* is in keeping with the demands of cinematic verisimilitude. But a very particular structure of sentiments, evident to Indian audiences, is being evoked here: it has its roots in the historical memory of legendary Rajput resistance to medieval Muslim invaders. At another point, when only a hundred and twenty Indian infantrymen are surrounded by some six hundred Pakistani soldiers and forty tanks, Major Kuldeep Singh energizes his men by reminding them of the militant Sikh Guru who declared that one *Khalsa* resistance fighter amounted to one hundred and twenty five thousand Mughal imperial troops. As mythologized history is evoked to inspire grossly outnumbered men, the secular trappings of the film begin to unravel. And as heavy artillery firing destroys an entire village, only the temple of the mother goddess remains standing: if this miraculous “escape” symbolically stems the long history of the destruction of temples by Islamic invaders, it also reveals the film’s persistent framing of patriotism in religious terms. Bhairav Singh is also allowed the most overt and grandiose “secular” gesture in *Border*. When heavy bombing sets homes on fire, he salvages a copy of the *Koran* for a distraught Muslim villager—an inheritance from his dead father. Overcome with emotion at this magnanimous action, the guy asks why Bhairav would risk his life for a holy book of another faith. Bhairav replies that to him, all religions are equal and all gods are sacred. The villager looks towards the camera in what approximates a direct address to the audience, and wonders why some people call Hindus infidels. Referring to the Islamic holy war or *jihad* against infidels, the sequence effectively suggests that contemporary Islamic fundamentalism is misguided in its anti-Hindu and anti-Indian attitude; at the same time, it manages to divest Hindus of such bigotry.

The film ends with a series of images which imply that common people on both sides of the border suffer equally: a close up of a dead Pakistani soldier's hand holding a photo of his beloved; Dharamvir's mother running through the battlefield, his fiancée Kammo waiting at the village bus stop; a group of *burkha*-clad Pakistani women keening on the desert sand. Finally comes the poetic and wistful declaration: "My enemy, my brother, my double." And yet, what goes on before forcefully promotes a Hindu-Indian patriotism whose ire is directed unequivocally toward Pakistan. We are informed at the beginning of the film that it is based on "true" events, and that it is dedicated to the memory of the director's brother who died in the 1971 war; but such ontological reference to real, lived experience cannot mask the patent ideological operation of the narrative in its affective address. If, as Fredric Jameson put it, History is what hurts,¹³ then in the universe conjured up by *Border*, Pakistan—and, by causal regression, Partition—remains that History, the Other, the untranscendable ground of trauma.

Border aspires to a level of craftsmanship¹⁴ that would compare well with global standards: it is a product of the new "Bollywood," the contemporary Bombay film industry that has not only embraced the odd epithet signaling both its acknowledgement of the hegemony of the Hollywood culture industry and its desire to achieve similar levels of success, but has also embarked on an ambitious program of "makeover" involving corporatization, adoption of state-of-the-art technologies, and aggressive marketing strategies at home and abroad. Take, for instance, the remarkable scene in which Kuldeep Singh falls down in front of an enemy tank after fighting valiantly all night long. As he lies half-prone in the foreground of the frame, his back to the camera, he helplessly watches the barrel of the tank being lowered to aim straight at him (and at the audience). At this tense moment, an aircraft enters the frame from the background, drops a bomb on the tank and flies really low over Kuldeep and the camera, making spectators duck ever so slightly. The relief that comes from this appearance of airforce backup at the end of a long night of siege is turned into palpable bodily sensation through this remarkable staging.

Cinematic patriotism hit a new peak in J. P. Dutta's *L.O.C.* (aka *Line of Control*) about the Kargil war. In 1999, terrorists based in Pakistan crossed the Line of Control established at the end of the 1971 war, and attempted to cut off the Kashmir Valley from Ladakh by closing down the strategically important National Highway One. Pakistani and Indian forces were soon engaged in a bloody conflict in the remote, mountainous region of Kargil. As Pakistani forces had positioned themselves on the upper slopes, Indian troops initially suffered heavy casualties in the war that raged from May until July. Once again, Dutta makes some gestures toward unbiased representation: whenever one soldier talks about revenge, another remarks about the families of dead soldiers on both sides; a commander of the Indian army insists on burying the bodies of dead Pakistani soldiers; while reporting victory at a post to his superior officer, a soldier admits that the Pakistanis also fought valiantly. However, in the context of the entire narrative, these elements remain ineffectual: if anything, they serve to underscore the humanity of the Indians, their grace under fire, to a national public. The choice invectives that the two sides exchange (curs, wolves, rats, swine, and *motherchod*—the curiously bilingual form of "motherfucker" that is widely used in the northern half of India) indicates that no love is lost between them on the battlefield. The strong religious dimension of patriotism is underscored through the loud and frenzied invocations to various gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon—Kali, Durga, Ram and Krishna—that rend the air as Gurkha, Jat and Rajput regiments charge at an enemy perceived to consist of Islamic *jihadis*. It is reported that Muslim soldiers in the Indian army called out "Allah Ho Akbar" and tied green bands over their helmets as they attacked their Pakistani counterparts: apparently, they value their ties to the nation more than their religious affiliations. However, we never hear their chant on a soundtrack that is thick with Hindu incantations. Through such strategies of inclusion/exclusion *L.O.C.* frames the Kargil war as a holy war, and contributes in effect to the tide of religious nationalism coursing through contemporary South Asia. At the same time, the film wants to maintain a pretense of espousing universalized ideals and institutions. When Lieutenant Colonel V.K.Joshi tells his subordinate that they must under no circumstance cross the L.O.C., the implication is loud and clear: while India respects international laws, it is Pakistan that has broken them repeatedly.

In keeping with the current aspirations of the Bollywood culture industry, Dutta invests the film with an epic scope and feel: he borrows liberally from famous war films including Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985), Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998). An action sequence from the last

film¹⁵ appears to be the model for a scene that is repeated several times with different characters in *L.O.C.*: in each case a soldier risks his life and charges uphill through a fusillade of bullets and throws a hand grenade into the enemy bunker, thereby managing to wrest a strategic location away from the adversaries. The main difference from the sequence in *Thin Red Line* is that in *L.O.C.*, most of these heroic soldiers die in the process of securing victory for their units. This structure of repetition introduces a curious element of banality in the narrative: what hold sit together may be a morbid interest in the violent spectacle of young male bodies being ripped apart—an interest that is not altogether different from the fascination with repetitive actions in videogames, and in pornography. Of course, the spectacularization of violence is not the only consideration behind the recursive structure. Repetition finally achieves commemoration: by the end of the film, its painstaking recording of the battle locations and regiments wrests a mythic domain within the national-popular for previously unknown locales like Kukarhang, Tololing, Khallubar, Batalik and Tiger Hill.¹⁶ Nevertheless, repetition here produces a pornography of violence, bleeding out ethical considerations in the service of a patriotic moral outrage.

The film features an unprecedented galaxy of contemporary film stars; the characters are drawn from all parts of the country, and we hear snippets of various regional languages. There is thus a potent sense of the entire nation behind the war efforts, just as there is a strong impression of the entire film industry's involvement in this project of memorialization and mourning.¹⁷ But what is the precise nature of this mourning work? Much of it takes place in the intensely homosocial space of the warfront: at various points, army officers express their anguish at the shocking loss of lives; men cradle the dead, shed tears over them, plant a kiss on their foreheads. In this respect, *L.O.C.* presents a far less gendered representation of bereavement than *Border*: both men and women mourn the fallen heroes. However, the film also stresses the heterosexuality of its characters to the point of neurosis: time and again, battle scenes are punctuated with flashbacks of the soldiers' intimate moments with their wives and fiancées. I cannot think of another film that emphasizes the normativity of heterosexual coupling in such an obsessive-compulsive manner, as if the soldiers' sexuality is a matter of national importance and the source of a deep anxiety. I will argue that the anxiety stems from the winds of change that are blowing through Indian society: on the one hand, emerging cultural norms must allow for a sensitive and caring masculinity; on the other hand, such accommodations destabilize conventional modes of *being a man*. Trauma, hysteria, mourning continue to be viewed as weaknesses associated with women: masculine subjectivities find it difficult to acknowledge such conditions and symptoms publicly. A properly masculine form of mourning must unfold along a logic of displacement, whereby grief is channelized into anger. In a situation of war, loss feeds a craving for revenge: in this film, the death of each soldier incites his colleagues to more violent acts in a bid to avenge his martyrdom. In its repetitions, *L.O.C.* seems to propose an endless, inevitable cycle of violence. To sum up, the structure of the film reveals, no doubt unwittingly, that a traditionally masculinist conception of mourning—which cannot admit the necessity of public expressions of grief—must unfold as continual and unending rounds of violence.

For a film that is ultimately about the impasse over Kashmir, *L.O.C.* never brings up the question of Kashmiri people's right to political self-determination. Instead, it reduces the issue to a clash between Pakistani aggression and Indian patriotism. If *Border* refers obliquely to Partition, the title of the later film refers back to the Indo-Pak conflicts of 1965 and 1971. The original trauma of Partition has now been replaced by the continuing trauma that is Pakistan. That is to say, the loss of 1947 has itself been lost—or, rather, it has been transformed into the ever-threatening existence of the neighboring country. On the evidence of *L.O.C.*, it appears that more than five decades after the truncation, many Indians (and for that matter, Pakistanis) have yet to come to terms with the experience: if anything, they have regressed deeper into a melancholic state so that they now turn their redoubled rage at the breakaway part.¹⁸ The context in which *L.O.C.* was produced, circumscribed by the nuclear stand-off, the Kargil war, and the bombing of the Indian Parliament by alleged Pakistan-trained terrorists, would seem to support such a claim about a melancholic drive toward revenge and mutual destruction.

IV.

The thirst for violence and retributive justice, evident in Hindi war films of the past decade, also drives much of contemporary Korean cinema. Spectacular brutality in Korean (and Indian) films serves dual purposes, one techno-

economic and the other ideological. It allows for a bravura display of filmmaking prowess, a display that announces the arrival of a national cinema in the global arena (signaled by appellations such as New Korean Cinema or Korean New Wave). It also seeks to overcome past inadequacies, and current anxieties about identity in a time of flux, in terms of a very specific form of empowerment of the male national subject—what Kyung Hyung Kim has called a process of “remasculinization.”¹⁹

However, closer scrutiny of the two cinemas reveals rather distinct inflections to this process of brutalization or remasculinization, particularly in relation to the national Other. Compared to their Hindi counterparts, recent blockbuster Korean war/espionage films such as *Shiri* (1999), *JSA* (2000), *Tae Guk Gi* (2004), and *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (2005) evince a markedly different attitude toward the community on the other side of the border. The ire of these populist narratives is directed against foreign imperial powers (which, in spite of South Korea’s capitalist culture is, quite often, the USA²⁰), and against high-level army bureaucrats on both sides, whose power is contingent on the reproduction of bellicose confrontations. In contrast, common people (romanticized since the *minjung* movement) are depicted as yearning for a lost unity.

Employing a familial trope that is common to figurations of social rift, *Tae Guk Gi* tells the story of two blood brothers who get caught in events beyond their control, and find themselves fighting for two warring armies. The serendipitous nature of their separation and incorporation into opposite factions underscores the lack of agency in choosing sides. Although, in a telling sign of continuing ideological biases, the brother fighting against the communists is portrayed as willfully responding to the call of patriotism, while the other one is swept up in a brutal frenzy. Deriving much of its passion from the brothers’ attempts to save each other, this male melodrama leaves its audiences with a strong impression that left to themselves, Koreans would have forged a strong and unified nation at the end of Japanese occupation. The arc of the narrative turns the two Koreas into fraternal doubles, separated by a cruel twist of history. The film begins and ends in present times, when the surviving brother undertakes a journey to recover the other’s material remains. This framing sets the film up as a poignant work of mourning, whose addressee (as in the Indian film *Naseem*) is the old man’s granddaughter—and, by extension, her generation.

JSA tells the affecting story of four soldiers, two from each side, who are stationed along the no-man’s land at the 38th parallel, and who become friends by chance. They send each other notes, exchange cassettes across the border, and finally break international law to get together furtively at night. During the daytime martial rituals—marching, target practice, presenting of arms, inspections—the friends square off against each other in mock antagonism; the only fusillades they exchange are playful spitballs. Then one day something goes wrong, and two soldiers end up dead. The Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission dispatches a woman officer, a diasporic Korean-Swiss national, to enquire into this frontier skirmish. The narrative unfolds in the course of her investigations, largely through flashbacks from multiple perspectives. Interestingly, this central female character is nobody’s romantic interest: she remains primarily a witness to the disaster wrought by an obdurate militarism.



2: *JSA*: Spitball exchange across border

If there is a romance here, it is between the friends from the two sides—a natural intimacy that transcends the artificially imposed border. This dimension is captured in the intensely romanticized iconography of the music cassette, tossed across the border, “flying across” the full moon. The utopian message is loud and clear: in spite of



3: JSA: Rituals of animosity

all the animosity between the two states, Korean people long for unity. At a crucial point in the plot, one character says “Let’s start over again”—appearing to articulate a collective desire. We also learn that the investigating officer’s father was one of seventy-six prisoners of war who, at the end of the Korean war, refused to choose one half of their homeland over the other—opting to settle in Switzerland instead. Holding onto this memory of disavowing national partition, the film counters a teleology of inevitable division, in sharp contrast to mainstream Indian war films whose resolutions reproduce and reiterate precisely such an inescapable trajectory.

What is it about recent Korean history that inspires such a shift in South Korean attitudes toward North Koreans? After all, until the 1970s, there were hardly any sympathetic representations of northerners on southern screens: almost all portrayals were stereotypes of brutal guerillas and terrorists, treacherous snipers and spies. In fact, the few exceptional instances of positive representations of Communists ran into serious trouble with the repressive regime; for example, *Seven Women Prisoners* (1965) was banned and its director, Lee Man-hee, imprisoned under the National Security Law.²¹ The end of the Cold War produced a series of geopolitical changes, prompting Koreans to reevaluate their national ideologies and policies. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent reunification of Germany raised possibilities of a realignment in the Korean peninsula. A series of official steps in the wake of the election of longtime pacifist Kim Dae-jung to the presidency of South Korea furthered the thaw in political relations. In particular, Kim’s “Sunshine Policy” adopted in 1997 sought to engage North Korea instead of isolating it. Cultural and tourist exchanges between the North and the South peaked in 2000, after the President joined North Korean leader Kim Il-jong in a bilateral summit in Pyongyang. Limited attempts were made at economic cooperation, most notably embodied in the Kaesong Industrial Park constructed a few miles to the north of the demilitarized zone.

In the 1999 film *Shiri*, a big-budget, high-octane action film that allowed Korean cinema to showcase its technical chops and box-office viability, a Communist female terrorist infiltrates the ranks of South Korean secret intelligence, falls in love with an intelligence officer, gets impregnated by him, and then goes down fighting his men while attempting to blow up a stadium hosting a friendly football game between the North and the South. While the generic setting permits an enticing measure of old-school paranoia dressed up in the latest technologies—the infiltrators plant miniature surveillance devices in decorative fish in the intelligence officer’s aquarium—the film’s title refers to another type of fish that inhabit the streams running between North and South Korea. These fish, like the mingling soldiers of *JSA*, and the terrorist of *Shiri*, perform a fluidity of belonging across artificial boundaries: they seem to *naturalize* the possibilities that President Kim’s voyage to the North inaugurates. What is at stake in these natural, historic and filmic peregrinations is what Suk-young Kim describes as a redefinition of “the spatial semiotics of both Koreas as open to the other side.”²²

Even after the Kargil War, even after the bombing of the Indian parliament by alleged Pakistan-trained terrorists, India and Pakistan have attempted to “normalize” bilateral relations. Recent years have seen the exchange of POWs, and the opening of bus and rail services between the two countries. People in the region fantasize about the power of a joint cricket dream team. The two Koreans national teams have begun to march together at the Olympic Games. But how feasible are the fantasies of reconciliation in South Asia or Korea? The South Asian Partition, resulting from the endgames of empire, is of a different nature from the Cold War scission of Korea. The colonial order, with its genius for enumeration, rationalization and formalization, elaborated existing demographic differences and introduced new fissures in the name of efficient governmentality. Archaic and endemic tensions between religious sects were turned into imperialist instruments of “divide and rule”: for instance, once census procedures categorized certain populations as minorities, their anxious political mobilization caused cracks in the anti-colonial movement. Subjective suspicion congealed into palpable structures of rancor—structures that are operative to this day. Thus the objective conditions that produced postcolonial truncations—in South Asia, in Ireland, in the Arab world—are yet to be overcome: unlike the territories divided during the cold war, these postcolonies cannot hope for reunification. Of course, no easy return to a prelapsarian plenitude is possible even in the case of territories divided during the Cold War—as the German experience shows so vividly, traces of the intervening years of division persist as social, economic and cultural incommensurabilities long after the demolition of the Berlin Wall.

Even as Korean films articulate a popular longing for unity, they also register the difficulties of reunification. With the demise of the female sniper in *Shiri*, the child conceived of her union with the intelligence officer also perishes: in spite of a strong desire for a united future, it does not seem viable as yet. Kim Ki-duk’s haunting film, *The Coast Guard* (2002), strikes a bleaker note. One evening, two young lovers in a small coastal town get drunk with friends and cross military barriers to enter the forbidden coastline. As they copulate on the beach, First Private Kang—an overzealous soldier—mistakes them for spies and opens fire. While the young man dies on the spot, his girlfriend Mee-young loses her sanity. Both Kang and Mee-young are traumatized by the experience: for the rest of the narrative, they remain trapped in the experientiality of that single horrific moment. The shell-shocked and infantile Mee-young runs to every young man, mistaking him for her dead lover, desperately seeking carnal intimacy. Kang turns into a paranoid schizophrenic, seeing spies everywhere, wanting to mow everyone down with his gun. Their psychosomatic symptoms—disorientation, hallucination and mental arrest—are projected onto the craggy landscape and the claustrophobic environment of the fishing settlement cum security camp. The scenic coastline is overrun with fences, barbed wires, and warning signs: it feels more like a concentration camp. The civilians resent the military presence; the local youth taunt the soldiers, complaining that the army is freeloading off taxpayers’ money, using non-existent enemies as their excuse. Indeed, the soldiers engage in seemingly pointless routines and exercises, in a performative quest for the legitimacy of their charge. Their gradual brutalization becomes palpable in terms of these obsessive rituals and pointless chores. It is as if the army is stuck in a 1950s mentality, a state of originary trauma, while the civilians are ready to move on. In its split temporalities, abject spaces, stranded selves, Kim’s film conjures up a melancholy nation turned against itself: Koreans are now fighting the enemy within. The internalized schism and the institutionalized violence stand in the way of national reconciliation.

My point here is that recent war genre films coming out of India and Korea—two countries that experienced two distinct kinds of truncation—project very different futures of community life and politics. In the absence of any real possibility of unification, Indian war films ultimately uphold a brand of patriotism that is vitriolic toward the “lost objects” of Indian nationalist desires. The proleptic stretch of cultural imagination comes up against its *realpolitik* limits. In contrast, most Koreans believe that the two parts will soon reconcile: hence their war films, at least since the appearance of Im Kwon Taek’s 1994 film *Taebek Mountains*, can engage in fantasies of reunification in stories about the entanglement of intimacies and enmities. The cultural mourning work undertaken by mainstream films thus involves very different temporalities: in India, a totalizing drive toward parochial triumphalism, and in Korea, a more tentative and wistful search for reconciliation.

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References:

¹ While I am aware of the limiting implications of this bracketing of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and North Korean Cinemas for my subsequent claims about cinema's role in shaping historical consciousness in the two regions, concerns of space and cogency prompt me to adopt the narrow focus.

² Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*. Duke University Press, forthcoming 2009.

³ Eric Santner uses the phrase in talking about the rare and exceptional films of post-war Germany that engaged critically with the nation's Nazi past. *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany*. Cornell University Press, 1993.

⁴ The same footage shows up in many other films, for instance in the films division documentary, *The Agony of the Partition* (1985).

⁵ On the role of such narrative tropes in the making of post-riot communities, see Gyan Pandey, *Remembering Partition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁶ Michael Robinson, 'Contemporary Cultural Production in South Korea: Vanishing Meta-Narratives of Nation,' in Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer, eds. *New Korean Cinema*. New York University Press, 2005, 16.

⁷ Robinson, 18.

⁸ For details, see Eungjun Min, Jinsook Joo, and Han Ju Kwak, *Korean Cinema: History, Resistance and Democratic Imagination*. London: Praeger, 2003.

⁹ Nam Hee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.

¹⁰ See Hyangjin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture, Politics*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, 49-54.

¹¹ Kyung Hyun Kim, 'Korean Cinema and Im Kwon-Taek: An Overview', in David James and Kyung Hyun Kim, eds. *Im Kwon-Taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema*. Detroit: Wayne State University, 2002, 20.

¹² Its allegorical potency is in evidence, for instance, in the massive annual Arirang Festival in the North Korean capital Pyongyang, and in the nationalist globalism of the English-language South Korean television channel Arirang.

¹³ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982, 100-2.

¹⁴ For an appreciative account of the auteurist elements in J. P. Dutta's films, see Lalitha Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003, 63-105.

¹⁵ The sequence I have in mind features the actor Dash Mihok as Private Doll.

¹⁶ In fact, the film even lists the names of various regiments who fought valiantly at Kargil but who could not be represented in its four hours plus running time.

¹⁷ Three of the biggest contemporary stars, Amir Khan, Salman Khan and Shah Rukh Khan, all Muslims, are conspicuously absent from this lineup.

¹⁸ Here my reading is informed by a Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia, further developed by Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997. See especially chapter six.

¹⁹ Kyung Hyung Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

²⁰ Korean privation during the US occupation of the late 1940s is the focus of several films. In *Silver Stallion* (1991) and *Spring in my Hometown* (1998), for instance, Korean women (and by extension, all of Korean society) have sold themselves to the GIs.

²¹ Suk-young Kim, 'Crossing the Border to the 'Other' Side,' in Frances Gateward, ed. *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007, 219-42

²² Suk-young Kim, 225.