

TAEHYUN BAEK

THE AESTHETICS OF MEMORY AND RESISTANCE:
CINEMATIC PRACTICE OF THE KOREAN NEW
WAVE IN *A SINGLE SPARK*

ABSTRACT

This study examines how *A Single Spark* rearticulates the social realism of the Korean New Wave as a cinematic practice of memory situated at the junction of representation and mediation. The film foregrounds the labor of recording by showing how social memory acquires form and authority through the collection of traces, the arrangement of testimonies, and the editing of fragments into a coherent narrative. It also develops an affective regime in which the repressed history of labor becomes perceptible through rhythm, as registered in the cadence of work, the duration of silence, and the suspended time of witnessing. Within this sensorial field, structural violence becomes perceptible as an experience organized through perception.

The film's self-reflexive design consists of the chronicler's narration, the mother's testimony, and the worker's silence. This composition installs ethical distance as a formal principle. That distance becomes a condition for cinematic thought, shaping how the film acknowledges the limits of testimony while sustaining the demand to remember. The analysis situates this sensorial realism within the institutional discourse of the 1990s, when film festivals and critical writing reframed realism as a privileged language of national identity and cultural legitimacy. This institutionalization also preserved the reflective tension of this sensorial realism, enabling the Korean New

Wave to persist as a mode through which Korean cinema continues to negotiate memory, history, and mediation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern history of Korean cinema is a history of struggle over the language of perceiving reality (Kim 2004: 15-19). Throughout the trajectories of censorship, industrialization, democratization, and globalization, cinema in Korea has evolved beyond a medium that merely records social experience to become a cinematic practice through which such experience is interpreted and reflected upon (Choi 2010: 1-14). Korean cinema has continuously existed on the unstable surface of reality, and the worlds it presents have been formed within the persistent tension between institutional control and aesthetic resistance (Park, in Gateward 2007: 15-35). The Korean New Wave of the 1980s and 1990s emerged precisely at this point of tension, marking a decisive moment when Korean cinema began to rethink its historical experience. This period did not simply signal the rise of a new generation; it marked a transformation in which the old language of realism regained its cinematic practice and was reconfigured as a sensibility capable of organizing social memory.

The films of the New Wave functioned not as factual reproductions of reality but as a mode of social realism that explored the relations between memory, emotion, institution, and cinematic practice. This transformation was closely intertwined with the political and economic shifts that defined the conditions of Korean cinema. Under the military regime of the 1980s, filmmaking operated under censorship and production control, where the direct representation of reality was effectively prohibited. Thus, cinema developed a language of metaphor, discontinuity, and silence to navigate the boundaries of expression. Following the June Democratic Uprising of 1987, the atmosphere of democratization that spread across society opened new possibilities to recall the repressed layers of reality and emotion. The relaxation of censorship, expansion of film festivals, and growth of independent film movements allowed cinema to participate in the formation of social memory and the reconstruction of public discourse (Robinson, in Shin&Stringer 2005: 15-31). These changes enabled realism to move beyond a mere instrument of social critique and evolve into a politics of memory.

Research on Korean cinema in the 1990s primarily developed around institutional perspectives such as structural changes following industrialization, the diversification of genres, and the establishment of global distribution networks. Consequently, the Korean New Wave has often been reduced to a form of pre-industrial social cinema. Although discourses on realism have acknowledged its value in terms of political engagement and social critique, they have rarely illuminated the cinematic structure

of thought embedded within it. The social realism of the 1980s and 1990s was not merely a mode of critique; it constituted a response to the question of how history should be remembered and how the suffering of others might be represented. This shift marked the movement of realism from a mode of representation to a mode of cognition, and understanding this transformation remains a crucial task for contemporary scholarship on Korean cinema.

For Moon (2006: 1-19), the “New” within the Korean New Wave is not a matter of stylistic renewal but a desire for historical self-recognition shaped by the contradictions of colonial experience, national division, and modernization. He argues that the realism of the Korean New Wave operates as an aesthetic practice that reflects on the violent memories embedded in Korea’s modern history. This perspective offers an important foundation for reconfiguring the modernity of Korean cinema and exposes its dual position as a product of modernity and a site of critical reflection upon it.

Shin interprets the resurgence of Korean cinema after democratization through the cultural structure of *ssitkim* (씻김), a traditional ritual of purification and release (Shin 2014: 20-106). He argues that Korean cinema derived its sense of renewal not from the achievement of democratization but from its failure, that is, from the effect of an incomplete historical transition. His discussion reads the New Wave not as a point of industrial growth but as a process of mourning and ethical reconfiguration, analyzing how cinema restructured social sensibility through the repeated working through of trauma. Korean cinema was not a product of political liberalization but a practice that transformed unfinished historical tasks into an artistic practice.

Kyung Hyun Kim further introduces the concept of “post-trauma” in Korean cinema through his analysis of *A Single Spark* and *A Petal* (Kim 2004: 107-129). He argues that these films do not simply reproduce the memory of violence but construct a new ethics of witnessing by exposing the impossibility of testimony and the necessity of ethical distance. *Park Kwang-su*’s film is understood not as a continuation of revolutionary narrative but as a form of ethical gaze that endures historical rupture. In this sense, the realism of the Korean New Wave is redefined as a complex structure operating at the intersection of affect and cinematic practice. Kim extends this line of thought (Kim 2006) by conceptualizing the Korean New Wave as a discursive field of negotiation between *minjung* (people’s) cinema and art film discourse. He analyzes how the oppositional realism of the 1980s was reconstituted within the institutional frameworks of the 1990s. According to her, realism ceased to function solely as a language of critique and was transformed into a form of institutionalized cultural capital. When the Busan International Film Festival officially proclaimed the “The Revival of Realism” in 1996, the Korean New Wave was repositioned from a critical movement to an aesthetic of national identity (Yi in Yi & Ha 1996: 9-29). This process of institutionalization, while attenuating the radical edge of realism, established the institutional conditions through which cinematic reflection could persist, thereby carrying a dual significance within the historical trajectory of Korean cinema.

These studies collectively demonstrate that the Korean New Wave was not merely an aesthetic trend or political movement; it was a complex intersection of cinematic practice, institutions, and affect. However, a critical gap remains: few studies have examined the realism of this period through the lens of a cinematic practice of memory and mediation. The realism of Korean cinema has always spoken on behalf of the experiences of others, confirming its own cinematic position within that very distance. The core of the New Wave lies in the recognition of the impossibility of representation and in the reflective stance that emerges within that gap, rather than in the representation of social reality. This awareness expands realism from a language of representation to a mode of cognition and, ultimately, to a system of cinematic thought.

This study focuses on this epistemological transformation, reinterpreting the realism of the Korean New Wave as a form of cinematic cognition rather than a language of social critique. Its objectives are threefold. First, it seeks to identify the “industrial or generational transition” in the 1980s and 1990s as a decisive moment in which the cognitive structure of Korean cinema was reshaped. Second, it aims to demonstrate that the films of this period functioned less as representations of reality than as devices for constructing memory. Third, it examines how film festivals and critical discourse reconstituted the continuity of critical reflection in the process of institutionalizing New Wave realism. By foregrounding mediation as a formal problem and institutional trajectory, this study extends existing accounts of New Wave realism and specifies how realism endures as an ethical practice of memory. Through these aims, the study argues that the realism of Korean cinema operated as a historical structure of cognition that mediated memory, affect, and cinematic practice, beyond simply being a mode of social critique. Ultimately, the Korean New Wave was not a record of historical events but a cinematic mode of thought that produced historical consciousness. Cinema did not serve as a mirror reflecting reality but functioned as a space of reflection that continually questioned how reality might be remembered. In this sense, the Korean New Wave is not the past of Korean cinema but a central legacy that continues to constitute the present of its thought.

2. THE HISTORICAL FORMATION OF KOREAN NEW WAVE

The emergence of Korean New Wave cinema was closely intertwined with the rapid political and economic transformation of South Korea from the late 1970s to mid-1990s. Under a regime of strict governmental control, the national film industry concentrated on the production of commercial entertainment, while critical representations of social reality were effectively constrained by censorship. Within these limits, a younger generation of filmmakers gradually sought to visualize the darker aspects of contemporary life. The *Young Sang Shi Dae* (영상시대) movement of the 1970s and the film collectives of the early 1980s experimented with politically

resistant images outside the boundaries of the commercial industry. This established the foundation upon which Korean New Wave cinema would later develop (Mun 2012: 359-388).

The production environment of the 1970s was characterized by rigorous censorship. Political and social conflicts were excluded from cinematic representation, compelling filmmakers to embed indirect signs and metaphors within narrative structures (Yi 2020: 10-32). The traumas of war, violence of industrialization, and hardship of urban poverty were transposed into stories of familial collapse and individual despair. This strategy enabled filmmakers to convey the fractures of reality without overt political confrontation. Audiences, reading between narrative and *mise-en-scène*, perceived the latent tension of repression, while cinema visualized the invisible truth residing within those gaps. Although censorship restricted direct expression, film—within its limitations—generated new layers of cinematic reality.

The 1980s marked a period in which state violence and the growing desire for democratization collided within Korean society. The Gwangju Uprising in 1980 epitomized this confrontation, but censorship in the press and arts prevented the event from entering the realm of public memory. Paradoxically, this repression became the driving force for new cinematic expression. Independent film collectives such as *The Seoul Film Group*, *Yallasung* (알라성), *Shadowplay* (그림자놀이), and *PURN Production* (푸른영상) took 16 mm cameras to the streets, recording realities that had escaped official documentation (Kim 2013: 149-157). Their practice transcended artistic autonomy and assumed the character of social testimony. By the late 1980s, this tendency expanded to campus-based video activism, combining political engagement with the ethics of documentation. Cinema was no longer merely an industry governed by the state and capital but emerged as a medium of social articulation.

The nationwide democratization movement of June 1987 opened new possibilities for Korean cinema. With the relaxation of censorship and resurgence of independent film production, filmmakers expanded the social foundation of realist filmmaking (Paquet 2009: 16-53). Films turned their cameras toward the streets, factories, and campuses, establishing new spaces for collective expression. This era consolidated the ethics of testimony and social memory, allowing cinema to emerge as a medium of social articulation. Directors such as *Park Kwang-su*, *Jang Sun-woo*, and *Lee Myung-se* inherited the activist realism of the previous generation while exploring the intricate relation between individual interiority and social structure. Their works did not merely expose contradictions but also captured the affective and cinematic dimensions of those contradictions, defining a renewed phase of Korean realism.

The formation of Korean New Wave cinema was decisively influenced by the institutional transformations of the film industry in the early to mid-1990s. The revision of the Motion Picture Law in 1984 and expansion of international distribution networks following the 1988 Seoul Olympics altered the conditions of film production and exhibition. The growing attention of overseas film festivals introduced Korean

cinema into the global discourse, enabling its works to be interpreted not merely as social commentary but as expressions of national identity. The establishment of the Pusan International Film Festival in 1996 marked the institutional culmination of this trajectory.¹ Its inaugural edition featured the retrospective *Korean New Wave: Retrospectives From 1980 to 1995*, which defined the movement as a historical turning point in Korean film history (Ahn 2012: 31-57). The festival framed the films of the 1980s as a “revival of realism,” positioning socially critical directors as the foundation of a new Korean cinema. The retrospective represented a critical moment in which the Korean New Wave was formally acknowledged as a cultural category within the international arena.

Such institutional recognition provided the conditions for the Korean New Wave to move toward the center of the national film industry. The current of independent realism was no longer perceived as a peripheral movement; it was redefined as a form of cultural capital acknowledged by the state and industry. This process of institutionalization partially diminished the movement’s radical cinematic practice (Kim 2013: 309-313). Realism gradually shifted from a language of social critique to a cultural brand, being recontextualized through the frameworks of film festivals and critical discourse. Emerging from an aesthetic of resistance, the Korean New Wave came to occupy a complex position within the intertwined systems of state endorsement and industrial approval. *A Single Spark* was produced at the very center of this transitional moment. Its financing also condensed this conjuncture: a public fundraising campaign organized by roughly 7,600 citizens raised approximately KRW 250 million as seed money (Chon 2020: 2), and the film eventually secured conglomerate backing through *Daewoo’s* investment (Paquet 2005: 38). The post-democratization film environment allowed for social engagement, but industrial circulation required a degree of formal compromise. *Park Kwang-su’s* direction navigated these conditions by pursuing critical realism and institutional viability. He incorporated the foundational practice of realism inherited from the independent film movement into the narrative framework of commercial cinema, producing a new cinematic mode that revealed social reality while integrating affective and cinematic dimensions (Shin 2014: 43-64). This strategy exemplifies how the Korean New Wave negotiated its position along the boundary between artistic expression and institutional structure.

The Korean New Wave constituted a movement defined by two interrelated forces: political resistance and institutional legitimation. Its aesthetics originated in a mode of social realism that sought to reveal the conditions of reality, but it developed into a cultural practice that organized collective memory and social meaning. Within this

¹ In 1996, the official name was Pusan (PIFF), but it has since been changed to Busan (BIFF).

trajectory, *A Single Spark* occupies a dual position: restoring the memory of labor while exposing the institutional conditions that shape such restoration. This historical framework provides the foundation for examining the structures of representation and mediation in the following sections.

3. RECONSTRUCTING MEMORY: SOCIAL REALISM AND MEDIATION IN A SINGLE SPARK

3.1 *The Dual Temporality of Memory and the Aesthetics of Social Realism*

A Single Spark represents a pivotal point in the evolution of realism within the Korean New Wave. The film re-documents the realities of labor obscured by the shadow of industrialization while exposing the process through which memory is constructed. Its narrative and form resemble not a retrospective recounting but a reassembly of remembrance. By restoring a past event and revealing the gaze and affective structure through which that restoration takes place, the film foregrounds the mechanisms of representation itself. Rather than directly narrating *Chun Tae-il's* life, the film centers on the process through which *Young-su*, the writer, reconstructs his biography. This structure invites critical reflection on the historical truth of the event and the system through which it is represented.

The narrative of *A Single Spark* juxtaposes two temporal dimensions: one depicting *Chun Tae-il's* life as a sewing laborer in the *Dongdaemun Pyeonghwa Market* of the 1970s and the other following an intellectual *Young-su* in the 1980s who investigates and documents *Tae-il's* story. These two times are not arranged in linear succession but interlock as structures that define each other's meaning. The past is rendered in black and white, accentuating the texture of factuality, whereas the present is filmed in color, visualizing the process by which memory is reconstructed. This contrast transcends mere differences in *mise-en-scène*, distinguishing the temporality of memory from the ethics of seeing. Black and white embodies the order of fact and the trace of suffering; color signifies interpretation and restoration. Through this parallel structure, the film reveals that memory is a continual rewriting within the consciousness of the present, rather than being a complete reproduction. The scenes depicting *Chun Tae-il's* life repeatedly return to the spaces of labor. The confined architecture of the sewing factories, the incessant sound of needles, and the dense air filled with heat and dust visually embody the violence of industrialization. The camera closely follows the movements of bodies, translating the rhythm of labor into sensory experience. This visual rhythm oscillates between monotony and tension, transmitting the temporality of labor through affective means. *Chun's* gaze is always directed upward, but the camera captures him from below, accentuating the hierarchical weight of structural oppression. Through this cinematographic stance, the film compels the viewer to perceive the pressure of environment before

the psychology of the individual.

At the center of memory lies *Chun Tae-il's* self-immolation. This event does not serve as the film's climax but as the axis around which memory is constructed. The scene is not rendered as a grand spectacle; instead, it unfolds through silence and absence. The camera lingers on the stillness surrounding the flames rather than on the fire itself. The absence of sound and the elongation of time prevent the viewer from consuming death as sentimental drama. This choice reveals an ethical stance that resists turning *Chun's* death into an image of heroism or martyrdom. Rather than representing the tragedy, the film exposes the distance and tension generated in the process of retelling that tragedy (Kim 2017: 105-121). From the perspective of the present, the figure who records *Chun Tae-il* is an intellectual *Young-su*. He occupies an external position: one who has not directly experienced the realities of labor. This character gathers materials, listens to testimonies, and organizes memories to write a book about *Chun's* life. His gaze seeks to restore *Chun's* existence, but it simultaneously exposes the limits of that restoration. The process of documentation is one of interpretation, and such interpretation is inherently incomplete. The film does not conceal this incompleteness. Within the narrative, the chronicler persistently reflects upon his own gaze, confronting the point at which language can no longer contain the reality of labor. Thus, this figure functions as a device that articulates the gap between testimony and representation (Bae 2008: 95-103). By presenting the intellectual's narration in parallel with *Chun Tae-il's* experience, the film investigates how memory is mediated. *Chun's* voice never appears as direct speech but is transmitted through recollection, documentation, and interviews. This structure reveals that memory is not fixed within individual consciousness but continuously translated through social relations. The film critically depicts the process by which the language of testimony becomes organized within the intellectual's discourse, thereby exposing the structural condition in which the worker's voice can only be mediated by another's language. In doing so, the film questions the cinematic practice of memory while visually articulating the site where the politics of representation operates.

Therefore, the narrative of *A Single Spark* follows a dual movement: the impulse to restore a forgotten history and the awareness of the limits of representation revealed in the process of that restoration. By juxtaposing these two movements, the film reveals that the recovery of memory is not a simple return to the past, but an act of cognition situated in the present. When images of the past intersect with the gaze of the present, memory ceases to be a closed record and becomes an open field of thought. *Chun Tae-il's* death remains not a completed narrative but a continuing question that demands renewed reflection. Film aesthetics reorganize the cinematic practice of realism within the structure of affect. The image does not imitate reality but invites a reconsideration of it through the movement of emotion. The scenes of labor function not as representations of suffering but as constructions of social sensibility, while the scenes of death are expressed not through close-ups of outcry

but through the persistence of silence. This restraint of emotion extends the film's ethical stance. Rather than provoking sympathy or identification, the film sustains the conditions of distance and reflection. At this point, the Korean New Wave sought to unite the language of social critique with the practice of writing history.

A Single Spark extends social realism into the domains of affect and cinematic practice. The film records the suppressed realities of industrialization while revealing the process by which memory is translated into institutional language. The representation of the past is always mediated by the gaze of the present, which is conditioned by structural circumstances. The film broadens the scope of realism by exposing, rather than concealing, these conditions. At this juncture, the Korean New Wave matured into an aesthetic that united the language of social critique with the cinematic practices of remembrance. *A Single Spark* reorganizes the memory of Korea's modernization through the death of an individual. What the film engages with is not death but the ways in which death is repeatedly narrated. Memory appears not as a fixed narrative but as the outcome of social practice through which the film becomes a medium of cinematic reflection. This structure reveals the essential orientation of the Korean New Wave: the recording of reality and the cognition of memory mutually generate a space of social awareness. The film's aesthetics of remembrance left a lasting imprint on the historical narratives of later Korean cinema, establishing the grounds upon which realism could continue to renew itself (Kwak 2003: 90-113).

3.2 Testimony, Mediation, and the Incompleteness of Representation

The narrative of *A Single Spark* restores the memory of suppressed labor while revealing the mechanisms through which that restoration is mediated. This is because the film does not directly reenact *Chun Tae-il's* struggle but places the process of recording him anew at its core. At the center of the screen is not *Chun Tae-il's* own voice but *Young-su*, who organizes and interprets his story (Lee 1996: 39-72). He stands as a witness to reality and an organizer of the narrative, translating *Chun's* life into the language of society. Such a structure demonstrates that the memory of labor can never speak autonomously; it is always reconstructed through the language of another subject.

The narration of *Young-su* is presented as an ethical attempt to restore *Chun Tae-il's* life. He collects documents, conducts interviews, and leaves records to uncover the reasons for *Chun's* self-immolation. However, this is not merely a factual reconstruction process. His gaze translates *Chun's* act into the language of interpretation; through this translation, the worker's voice becomes partially institutionalized. The film does not conceal this institutionalization; rather, it exposes how the intellectual's perspective shapes the construction of *Chun's* memory. The chronicler seeks to comprehend *Chun's* suffering, but by reordering that pain through his own language, he unconsciously exercises power. The film renders this inevitability of mediation visible as a fissure within its narrative. Thus, the memory of labor appears in the form

of the intellectual's testimony. The film weaves together interviews with coworkers, the mother's recollections, and fragments from notebooks and diaries such as scattered pieces of memory. However, these fragments do not remain independent utterances. In the process of editing, they are absorbed into the chronicler's narration and reorganized in a single narrative order. This structure restores labor's memory from the intellectual's perspective while reinserting that memory into his discursive system. The film's social realism operates in this contradictory position. There exists a will to reveal suppressed voices, but the mode of presentation reproduces the structure of the power it seeks to contest. The film juxtaposes the impossibility of testimony with the control of the narration, continually exposing the residue of what cannot be spoken. This tension remains unresolved until the end.

The mother's narrative constitutes another stratum of this film. Her voice is presented as the source of emotion and the locus of mnemonic truth. However, her testimony does not exist in a wholly independent language. Her sorrow and remorse are mediated through the chronicler's editing and interpretation before reaching the audience. On screen, the mother becomes a symbol of grief while functioning as an image embedded in *Young-su's* narrative. He regards her with an affectionate gaze; thus, we apprehend her not primarily as a laborer's mother—a speaking subject—but as a bereaved mother—a sign of motherhood. Within this dual structure, emotion coexists as the ground of truth and an aesthetic device. The film sustains this coexistence while exploring how the transmission of emotions is transformed into social meaning. At this moment, emotion operates not as a simple exchange of feelings but as an affective language generated at the site of what cannot be spoken. Silence and sobbing, together with the camera's slow zooms and fixed shots, convert that affect into a visual rhythm. Emotion does not replace reality but becomes the conduit through which reality is sensorially perceived. In other words, we come to view *Chun Tae-il's* story not primarily through a historical lens but through the gaze of emotion.

This film's structure is directly connected to Korea's modern and contemporary historical consciousness. *Young-su* is an outsider who has not directly experienced the reality of labor, but he voluntarily assumes the responsibility of recording it. His actions embody a form in which empathy and reflection are intertwined; through this process, the film tests the possibility of ethical representation. However, the moment the outsider's gaze organizes *Chun Tae-il's* life, it inevitably occupies the position of power. The film remains largely unaware of this, presenting Chun only as he is captured through the intellectual's perspective. Rather than resolving this limitation, it leaves *Young-su's* gaze as an unfinished process of inquiry. This narrative choice prevents *Chun's* story from being subsumed into a closed conclusion and sustains a structure of continual questioning (Kim 2015).

A Single Spark transforms this strategy of representation into a rhythm of affect, functioning not as proof of fact but as a medium of perception. The expressions,

silences, and breaths of the characters on the screen form layers of emotion that resist translation into language. This emotion constitutes not a simple exchange of sentiments but the residue of social experience. Through these affective layers, the film enables the sensory recognition of structural violence. However, this emotion does not lead to complete identification. The spectator is guided to empathize with the characters' suffering while becoming aware of how that suffering is presented. The film's structure aligns the viewer not with the workers as subjects of representation but with the intellectual gaze that observes them and sustains a tone of sympathy. This imbalance is not a narrative flaw but a structural condition that reveals the inevitability of memory being translated into social language. This narrative structure corresponds to the broader current of Korean cinema at the time. By refusing to replicate reality and highlighting what could not be articulated within the dominant discourse, the film fulfills a distinct social function (Kim 2005). Korean cinema of the 1980s and 1990s did not simply reproduce reality; it transformed repressed emotions and memories into visual rhythms, constructing a new stratum of social realism. *A Single Spark* stands at the center of this transition. The presence of the chronicler threatens the credibility of representation; however, without him, the structure of memory could not be completed. From this ambivalent position, the film converts the limitations of realism to aesthetic conditions. In other words, the moment the impossibility of representation is acknowledged, the film acquires the capacity to make reality sensorially perceptible.

Chun Tae-il's story is presented through the intellectual's self-reflection. Within this dual structure, his memory functions only as a renewed point of social practice. This configuration extends beyond the restoration of past facts, transforming the act of remembering into a cinematic practice that renders it present. Film realism does not indicate a fixed meaning; rather, it is continually generated through the processes of interpretation and perception. The camera often moves as if it were still, gazing intently at faces or deliberately excluding surrounding sounds. Such a direction does not seek to display reality objectively but to lead the spectator to contemplate within the space of absence. In this sense, realism is no longer a genre of social representation but an aesthetic structure that produces a rhythm of cognition. *A Single Spark* does not reconstruct a completed history but continually explores the process of its historicization. The film attempts to restore the voice of labor while revealing that such a restoration is always predicated on incompleteness. Memory exists only through the processes of interpretation and mediation, and this incompleteness forms the foundation of cinematic reflection. Restoration, interpretation, testimony, and narration illuminate one another to form the film's inner tension, which has left a lasting influence on how Korean cinema continues to think about reality.

This incompleteness does not remain a mere limitation. *A Single Spark* shapes a new sensorial realism through the absence of testimony. The pain that eludes language is transformed into the rhythms of silence, emptiness, and breath, becoming

perceptible through the senses. This rhythm does not draw the viewer toward simple identification but makes reality felt anew within the distance of pain. The Korean New Wave allows social reality to be experienced not through the reproduction of fact but through the structure of emotion. At this point, social realism moves beyond the cinematic practice of narration to become a reflection of sensation, and memory revives as a present experience unfolding across the visual and aural planes.

4. THE KOREAN NEW WAVE AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF MEMORY

A Single Spark exposes the dark underside of Korea's modernization. This section traces the process through which memory is translated into a social language. The key lies in how the film transforms an individual's death into a question of historical debt, guiding the spectator to perceive the past through an ethical sensibility. In this respect, the camera does not merely evoke sympathy or emotional agitation but enacts a social transposition of the historical event it represents. Through every element of its image and narrative, the film compels the viewer to perform acts of judgment, thereby visualizing the process through which perception becomes a part of the structure of collective memory. Such representation extends beyond personal experience and unfolds as a form of social affect.

The social consciousness awakened by the film's realism begins with its structural choice to depict the writing of history through the gaze of the intellectual. Through this framing, the film refuses to consume *Chun Tae-il's* death as an isolated event and constructs it as a site of social meaning (Lee 2018: 131-133). What is crucial is that the camera does not present his act as a heroic decision. The meaning of *Chun's* death is produced not by the worker-subject but by the intellectual who interprets it. Thus, *Chun's* self-immolation transcends the individual tragedy and moves into the sphere of social cognition. The spectator does not remain a passive witness to suffering but is guided to contemplate the structure that generates such pain through the intellectual's gaze. Thus, the film functions not as a device of identification but as an apparatus of mediation—one that inherits the gaze of intellectuals who, throughout the 1980s, sought to write counter-histories. What is important is that the nature of the film is integrated with the institutional and discursive mechanisms within society. In the cultural environment that followed democratization, films belonging to the current of social realism came to function as a language of critique and a sign through which national identity was articulated. Works dealing with social suffering were transformed into public values, and emotional experience was translated into the language of institutions. *A Single Spark* exemplifies this transformation. The film's affective structure does not end within the spectator's interiority; it extends into journalistic discourse, educational narratives, and the rhetoric of cultural policy. This expansion signifies the incorporation of social realism into a broader system of collective memory. Subsequently, the rhythm of affect articulated by the film became

the framework through which Korean society continued to remember *Chun Tae-il*.

Since the 1990s, social realism in Korea has shifted from the language of social movements to that of cultural identity. Institutions absorbed the critical ethos of cinema and rearticulated it as a form of public value, while social realism became part of the national discourse (Tolentino 1999: 84-90). *A Single Spark* exposes the boundary of this transformation. The film's affective language was renamed within festivals and critical discourse as a "revival of realism." In particular, the retrospective *Korean New Wave: 1980–1995* at the Busan International Film Festival positioned films as the central work of the movement, institutionalizing social realism as the identity of Korean cinema (Ha/David 2014: 25-33). This act of naming stabilized the film's meaning within an institutional framework but simultaneously confined its cinematic practice within a fixed mode of interpretation. Memory was consolidated as a social value, but the process of its formation came to be regulated by institutional structures. The languages of film festivals and criticism accelerated the institutionalization of memory (Kim 2014). *Chun Tae-il's* death extended beyond the affective structure of the film to become a national narrative of commemoration. Forms such as textbooks, documentaries, memorial events, and museums shared the emotional grammar that was first established by the film. However, as emotion was institutionalized it transformed into a stabilized meaning. The film's unresolved questions and ethical distance were gradually replaced by fixed schemata. The incompleteness inherent in social realism was reinterpreted within institutions as a "completed value," and memory was converted from an object of reflection into a form of normativity. This transformation partially effaced the instability that once defined realism but simultaneously preserved realism as a language of social consensus.

The institutionalization of social realism during this period was not merely a process of approval but a reorganization of collective affect. The audience's emotions were rearranged within the language of institutions through which society constructed its own mode of perceiving the past (Han 2017: 213-228). Nevertheless, *A Single Spark* continues to be re-screened and re-evaluated. This persistence demonstrates that the film still functions as a cinematic practice of the present. It does not exist as a completed record of the past but as a mechanism through which society reflects upon itself. This function is inseparable from the fact that the film's institutionalization foregrounded the intellectual's authorship while displacing the worker's gaze, translating it into the framework of public memory. We must not forget that cinematic representation is, by nature, an act of incompleteness. Every act of representation takes place from a position that speaks on behalf of another's pain, and the instability of that position constitutes the very ground of ethics. The film refuses total understanding and identification, thus establishing a space for cinematic reflection. This attitude persists even within the process of institutionalization. Although memory has been formalized through public systems, a gap of ethical distance and self-reflection continues to remain at its core. That gap is the source of

the critical continuity sustained by the Korean New Wave.

A Single Spark stands as the most distinct example of how cinematic representation expands into the system of social memory. The film begins with an aesthetic of revealing reality and arrives at a social practice of shared remembrance. Through this process, social realism ceases to be a singular aesthetic category and transforms into a cinematic system in which emotions, institutions, and memories intersect. The film organizes collective memory through the flow of affect, and that memory generates new modes of cinematic reflection. This cyclical structure forms the sustainability of the Korean New Wave and establishes social realism as a social language. The contemporary significance of *A Single Spark* lies in its capacity to provide a lasting space to reflect on how society constructs memories. What the film leaves behind is not merely the restoration of an event or the myth of an individual but an attitude toward memory and historiography. The rhythm of affect is transposed into the emotional structure of society, and cinematic language continues to circulate within institutional frameworks. This complex movement constitutes the essential legacy of the Korean New Wave, in which cinema attains social meaning and reveals the process through which the politics of memory become the language of culture.

5. CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF THE KOREAN NEW WAVE

The Korean New Wave emerged at the intersection of modernization and democratization as a collective attempt to rearticulate the repressed realities of society in a renewed social language. Despite censorship and industrial constraints, cinema reconstructed the strata of life excluded by the state and became a space in which the cinematic practice of memory could take form. *A Single Spark* stands at the apex of this movement, translating the silence and debt paid for industrialization into the visual language of the film. By restoring the reality of labor and structuring the process of that restoration as a narrative, the film presents a new cinematic dimension of realism.

The realism articulated in this work is not a reproduction of fact but the ethics of remembrance. The past is rewritten within the perception of the present, and this process of reconstruction constitutes the center of the film. The juxtaposition of images and the intersection of temporalities operate not only as cinematic devices that reveal reality but also as a visualization of how memory is shaped through social relations. Realism no longer concerns the mere representation of fact; it evolves into an ethical attitude through which society reflects upon itself. In this process, the film constructs a social affect structure that connects individual experiences with collective memory.

A Single Spark restores the memory of labor by showing how such restoration inevitably passes through another's language, with the presence of the recorder, the structure of editing, and the restraint of emotion exposing the incompleteness

of representation. The film reveals the silence embedded in the historiography of modern and contemporary Korea. Although it does not recover the subjectivity of those marginalized within the larger social currents of its time, the Korean New Wave paradoxically emphasizes their significance by exposing the absence of their voices in history. The pain of workers is translated into social awareness through the rhythm of affect. The film continues to compel the spectator to perform an ethical judgment within the distance between empathy and reflection.

Simultaneously, the film inevitably fixes its meaning within the dimensions of institution and discourse. Since the 1990s, social realism has come to occupy a dual position as a tool of critique and a signifier of national identity. Film festivals and critical discourse placed *A Single Spark* at the center of the Korean New Wave, defining its meaning as a “revival of realism.” However, this naming confines the film’s significance to a socially sanctioned value, subsuming its critical potential within institutional structures. As the film’s affective structure was transformed into a mode of collective memory, social realism was further solidified as a language of resistance and an authorized aesthetic. This institutionalization process became a condition for the continuity of the Korean New Wave. Critique, resistance, and institutionalization did not cancel one another; their coexistence sustained the cinematic vitality of the medium. *A Single Spark* stands at the heart of this tension, illustrating the forms of critical language that persisted even through institutional assimilation. The Korean New Wave extended the sensibility of social ethics while rewriting history through its cinematic practice. Its instability—its refusal of closure—constituted the very condition through which realism could survive within the institutional order.

Ultimately, *A Single Spark* embodies the most complex legacy of the Korean New Wave. The film reconstructs reality while revealing the limitations of its own act of remembrance. The social realism pursued by the Korean New Wave contains a dual nature: an ethical sensibility that exposes social inequality and a self-reflexive gaze that contemplates its own mode of representation. These two elements define and sustain one another, shaping the historical sensibility of Korean cinema.

The Korean New Wave no longer remains a historical style; it endures as a structure of perception and a mode of remembering. The questions posed by *A Single Spark* continue to resonate. They reappear in the works of subsequent generations, renewing the forms of memory and the configurations of social responsibility. The dual legacy of the Korean New Wave resides in this capacity for renewal. As cinema functions not only as a mirror reflecting society but also as a medium through which society reconsiders itself, *A Single Spark* remains a film of the present.

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Taehyun Baek

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