

# Ephemeral (Mis-)Encounter, or Male Melancholia for the Mother in Jinho Hur's *Christmas in August* (1998) and *One Fine Spring Day* (2001)

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## Abstract

*This essay explores changing gender tropes in Korean cinema of the early 2000s. Since its inception, Korean cinema has tended to portray a male protagonist who clings to his mother, reflecting unfortunate historical events in the twentieth century that in effect "castrated" postwar males. However, this tendency changed as Korean cinema evolved into New Korean Cinema in the late 1990s. Korean cinema has in that advancement fully developed a conventional film style, staging a male subject's presumed Oedipal trajectory towards having a "lawful" relationship with a woman other than his mother. Hur Jinho's two films, *Christmas in August* and *One Fine Spring Day*, seem to bracket this transition in Korean cinema. They dramatize this change in the male subject in a highly stylized mode, depicting their male subjects' love and separation as well as their melancholy for their lost mothers and sublime release towards growth. The films also utilize various cinematic tropes—especially maternal faces framed in cameras, windows, and photo albums. This essay seeks to understand the cultural significance of these cinematic tropes that in effect symptomatically demarcate and extend the fluctuating cultural boundaries of gender and related cultural politics in South Korea.*

In a poignant scene in *Christmas in August* (Jinho Hur, South Korea, 1998), a man sits by a window in an old café. Shot from outside, his face shows through the café window. The camera fixes on the man's gaze, and a car slowly appears in the frame, reflected in the window. The man's face thus overlaps with the reflection of the car, and then of a young woman stepping out of it, constituting an "encounter"—yet also a "mis-encounter"—between the two people. This logic of (mis-)encounter recalls Jacques Lacan's mirror stage of infant development, which he illustrated with a baby's enchantment with her own reflection in a mirror, seeking recognition from her mother. A mother smiling at her child's mirror-image secures the infant's "boundary" between herself and others, the animate and the non-animate, and life and death. Thus, the mother's recognition constitutes, as Michael Eigen puts it, "the home base of the human self." <sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[#N1]</sup>

In *Christmas in August*, the man in the café seeks recognition from the woman who steps out of the car. However, his "encounter" falls short of genuine interaction with her, as he sees her only as a reflection in a window. The reflection he sees, unlike what he would see in a mirror, is translucent, and, thereby, difficult to distinguish from the unreflected background. Also, the man remains inside, unnoticed and difficult to recognize, either outside or inside (since his own image is even blurrier). The man therefore receives no comforting smile from the object of his gaze, nor can he form a narcissistic relationship with his own image. As the sequence ends, he places his hand on the smeared window, following the

woman's image as she moves in a desperate, futile attempt not to lose her—or her recognition of him. She soon walks beyond the man's visual field, leaving him alone in a murky reflection: a pre-Symbolic realm, fully saturated with melancholic pathos. Thus does this scene emblemize the primal dyad with the mother—the primal plenitude to which a human being and a melodramatic film cling. This moment cannot, however, remain stable; the maternal image should be disavowed as a male subject grows, yet too often it persistently shadows him.

The insecurity involved in seeking the mother's recognition in the early stage of human life pervades film theories. Christian Metz, for instance, argues that cinema depends on a “missed encounter,” highlighting an inevitable delay between when the pre-filmic object is shot and images are screened. A film thus delivers only a “lost object,” seeking to suture this fundamental loss (or castration). [2] [#N2] Laura Mulvey more specifically describes a woman's screen presence as a form of loss, reminding viewers of her “absence” from reality, like the unbearable memory of bleeding castration, which a cinematic (and cultural) apparatus must disavow. Classic cinema deploys many such mechanisms of disavowal and fetishism to conceal such loss. A mother (the symbolic source of castration) will be discarded as her son matures into a fully formed subject. [3] [#N3]

Cinematic mechanisms for disavowing the mother have evolved over the course of film history; “therapeutic mothers” (or whores) populated Hollywood and European cinema in the 1940s and '50s, supporting male characters who had been “castrated” in the devastating reality following World War II. [4] [#N4] Similarly, male characters in Korean cinema of the 1970s and '80s also cling to the mother figure; although, they diverge from the Oedipal trajectory, maintaining convoluted relationships with their mothers. [5] [#N5] The male characters are depicted as quasi-children or buffoons: wrecked, disordered —“castrated.” [6] [#N6]

However, the male subject's reliance on the mother has changed as Korean cinema has evolved since the late 1980s. Korean films then began to present fully-mature male subjects, who were secure and firmly established in traditional social roles. This reflected global and industrial changes in Korean society, as well as in the “New Korean Cinema,” which pursued new modes of realism and classic film conventions. [7] [#N7] Yet this momentary change in male representation was never complete; it regressed as Korean society faced other national crises in the late 1990s. The disastrous Asian financial crisis affected Koreans intensely, and during this period the screen was populated with fondly recalled fictional images of happy families and “therapeutic mothers.” [8] [#N8]

Released in the late 1990s, Jinho Hur's debut films, *Christmas in August* (hereafter, *Christmas*) and *One Fine Spring Day* (2001, hereafter *Spring Day*), inherited this altering tendency in male representations—but with a significant difference, marking a transitional phase in representation of masculinity in Korean film and melodrama. In fact, Hur's films were well received by Korean viewers, due largely to the director's celebrated cinematography. Unlike emotionally-charged classical melodramas, Hur's films resonate emotionally through scenic nature and music, thereby effectively delivering the melancholic pathos and sorrow that permeate moments of love, first encounters, and separations.

As the films begin, both *Christmas* and *Spring Day* center on their male protagonists' wistful longing, bordering on melancholia (a pathological symptom that, according to Sigmund Freud, occurs as a subject loses a love object [9] [#N9]) over their late mothers. Thus, these male protagonists no longer cling to their mothers, departing from a longstanding tradition in representations of male subjectivity. Nevertheless, these films remain haunted by the specter of the absent mother, who returns persistently to the male subjects in disguised forms, particularly as love interests in melancholic and ambivalent romantic relationships. These male characters seek to capture the images or voices of their romantic

love interests (whom they substitute for their late mothers), surely an alternative form of mourning. Unlike mourning, however, melancholia progresses unconsciously, operating even when the subject considers it overcome. [10] [#N10]. In these films, we see this Freudian distinction between melancholia and mourning reflected in the male protagonists, who have stopped “mourning” by leaving their mother figures behind, but remain unconsciously “melancholic” over them.

The male protagonist in *Christmas*, who seeks to capture the maternal image through photography, experiences failure through his own “death,” apparently signifying suicidal melancholia. However, in *Spring Day* the male character’s sound-recording of his “mother” (or Mother Nature) differs, although it still fails to capture the sound of his real mother; the male character’s quest for the ephemeral quality of sound encourages him to embrace a sublime experience that takes him beyond the self’s current boundary. In this essay, I suggest that the experience of sublimity anticipates a new self that enables the male character to separate from his mother.

To be sure, this difference in the consequences of male melancholia between the two films suggests a degree of ambivalence in Freudian melancholia. Freud mentions that melancholia and mourning are never completely separated. Later, Freud states that aspects of melancholy are present throughout the course of mourning, as in the case of producing a moral ego-ideal, for melancholy does not always take a pathological turn. [11] [#N11]. In this light, the suicidal melancholia depicted in *Christmas* as well as the sublime depicted in *Spring Day*, while reflecting efforts to regain primitive reunions with mothers, constitutes distinct tendencies of male subjectivity that are in tension with one another. As these two modes of male subjectivity oscillate in distinct modes surrounding the traditional maternal dyad (making variations), this oscillation itself also suggests that Korean melodrama seeks to represent a new mode of male subjectivity that was on the verge emerging throughout the convoluting period of the late 1990s.

## Christmas: Images Seen through Camera, Window, and Shadow

*Christmas* follows the narrative of Jungwon (Sukgyu Han), a photographer, who runs a camera shop and will soon die of illness. The film depicts his doomed life through a love story involving Darim (Eun-ha Shim), a naïve young traffic officer. After visiting Jungwon’s shop to develop pictures of illegally parked cars, she finds herself returning to the shop again and again, gradually falling in love with him while knowing nothing of his impending doom. Jungwon tries throughout the narrative to capture Darim’s image in a photograph, a quest that never succeeds; thus, his desire to reunite with his mother persists into his own death, which occurs near the end of the film.

As the film begins, Jungwon rides his motorcycle directly towards the camera, but then an image of him asleep is superimposed, showing him simultaneously in mobility and repose. We hear children’s voices as the camera follows Jungwon to an elementary school. As the camera slowly pans across the playground, Jungwon muses, “When I was little, I would be left alone at school. Contemplating the empty playground, I was reminded of my late mother, and thought about the fact that my father and I will *die* someday.” This monologue is delivered in voiceover; the voice, abstracted from the living body, intensifies the melancholic tone, thereby foreshadowing Jungwon’s death, a fate that is revealed gradually as the narrative progresses.

This dark image of the protagonist’s late mother contrasts with an image of his love interest, Darim. Despite several encounters, the film never manifestly portrays the love this young couple shares. Instead, the filmmaker repeatedly presents Jungwon “riding” his motorcycle. In the opening sequence, his destination turns out to be the memory of his late mother (buried at the elementary school), a chance meeting with his first “love”—but later he rides for Darim, suggesting that his true destination remains his

mother. In one sequence, Darim rides with him, but viewers see this only once. Jungwon's motorcycle trips are soon interrupted by his sudden hospitalization.

Viewers often see this young couple's story in double-images, through windows, camera lenses, and in photographs. When Darim first visits Jungwon's shop, she appears as a reflection in the door window. As another shadow approaches and speaks to her, they meet as *shadows*. In an earlier scene, Jungwon gazes at Darim, whom viewers see through the shop window, captured in soft focus and extreme long shot—doubly framed by the window and the screen—thereby fixing her presence as an “image.” Later, as Darim speaks to Jungwon through the window, the camera alternates between Jungwon inside and Darim outside, allowing them to be seen together without *being* together.

The largely undefined relationship between Jungwon and Darim (and her image) finally reveals its full meaning towards the narrative's end. In the aforementioned café scene, it is Jungwon who waits for Darim. As the car (from which Darim emerges) appears as a reflection in the glass, he encounters her, but only momentarily. With the camera remaining on Jungwon's gaze, reflected in the window, the scene portrays their encounter as a reflection once again; but this time he is not with her. This sequence marks the film's melodramatic climax, in which Jungwon prepares for his own death and thus can no longer bear to face Darim. The camera shows her, as she walks beyond Jungwon's gaze, unwittingly smiling into the distance while Jungwon traces her figure hesitantly with his look . . . and his hand. This proves a feeble gesture, however, as Darim remains on the other side of the window (available to Jungwon only as long as her image is framed by it): a visible, yet “ungraspable,” object of desire.

Jungwon's photography seems to extend the act of gazing through the window, but, here, gazing equates to *capturing*. Throughout the film, we witness Jungwon photographing people. One day, as he is photographing Darim, we see the reverse image of Darim's face gradually coming into focus, waiting to be imprinted on the film negative, and thereby reenacting Jungwon's effort to capture his love. His cautious gesture towards “her” ends in failure, though; at the moment he presses the shutter, the old camera falls apart, leaving her image “untaken.” This scene resonates with Susan Sontag's treatment of photography's capacity to copy reality as it is (retaining the ontological traces of the photographed object while presenting an iconic resemblance). Sontag contends that photographs grant the viewer instant access to the real. Nevertheless, such access “widens,” rather than narrows, the viewer's distance from reality (or the origin). After all, a photograph proves only that an object *has* existed; it cannot bring the object into reality, which is recalcitrant and inaccessible through the lens. In *Christmas*, Jungwon's attempt and failure to capture Darim surely echoes this tragic characteristic of photography, as Sontag notes: “to possess the world in the form of images is, precisely, to *re-experience the unreality and remoteness of the real*.” [12] [#N12]





[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0042.105-00000002.jpg\]](#)

Figure 1.

*"Ephemeral (Mis)Encounter."*



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0042.105-00000001.jpg\]](#)

Figure 2.

*Darim in Christmas in August*

Through such doubling of images, Jungwon repeatedly alternates (through photography) between trying to capture his love and facing his death. One rainy night, Jungwon receives an unexpected visit by an old lady, who asks him to photograph her for her own funeral. As she poses, she materializes in the camera's lens, just as Darim once did. This moment does not, however, end in failure: the camera embalms the old lady's presence as if in her own death. This moment reminds the viewer of what André Bazin calls photography's religious impulse: a photograph preserves reality much like ancient Egyptians embalmed corpses. Bazin muses that, as a photograph reproduces objective reality it "contributes to the order of natural creation instead of providing a substitute for it," setting the original before the viewer and allowing it to "live again." [13] [#N13]. Nevertheless, "photography does not create eternity as art does; it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption." [14] [#N14]. Such *photographic reliving* paradoxically makes photography an artistic medium given naturally to doubling—the *death* of the living or the mutual exchangeability of death with life in "the ontology of the photographic images." [15] [#N15]. Such doubling deepens the shadow of death cast over the old lady's photograph and photographic time preserved in the film.

As such, Jungwon finds his life immersed in dark images of death and mourning: a phone call informing him of the death of his friend's father, the old lady asking for a photo for her own memorial, his yearning for his late mother and his own death. At one point, the film briefly shows Jungwon visiting a hospital. Only his muted sobbing and empty gaze into the cloudy sky implies his agony and grief on learning of his impending death. This moment of pain passes quickly, however, as thunder and lightning charge the next scene; the following day, Jungwon is hospitalized. After that, Darim wanders around Jungwon's closed shop, making his absence all the more conspicuous, thus heightening the tragic pathos of their futile quest for love.

Near the end of *Christmas*, Jungwon contemplates family photos. Lovingly caressing each photograph, he lingers nostalgically on these fragments of *his* own memories. Such a gesture also carries another layer of melancholic sentimentality, directed not at his mother but at himself, as he retreats into the past in anticipation of death. The camera freezes Jungwon's face, and then his mobility, thereby emblemizing his actual death in the next scene. As the camera clicks, his smiling face is superimposed over his own portrait at his funeral. In this way, Jungwon's desire for his love, or for the stilled moments of his life, transforms into his own "becoming"—the very object over which he was melancholic, thereby collapsing his ego and his object of desire together—the reenactment of the mechanism of melancholia in psychoanalysis. [16] [#N16]. As such, Jungwon's longing for his mother, combined with his passion for photography, could not help but result in the doubling of his death as he has lost hope for consummating his love while facing his own ontological finality.

*Spring Day*

*Spring Day* similarly positions Sangwoo (Ji-tae Yoo), a sound-recording professional, in a melancholic situation with his grandmother (Yeong-sun Son). Throughout the narrative, Sangwoo follows (and looks after) his grandmother, who suffers from dementia, suggesting his longing for the mother figure. In parallel, Sangwoo takes field trips with Eunsu (Young-ae Lee), a producer at a local radio station, to record the sounds of nature (not to mention Eunsu's voice as the mother substitute). Unlike Jungwon in *Christmas*, Sangwoo eventually detaches from his mother figures through his separation from Eunsu

and his grandmother's death. In the final sequence, Sangwoo goes out alone to record nature sounds, emblemizing the sublime moment when he assumes a new self-identity.

*Spring Day* begins with the camera following Sangwoo's grandmother, walking, seen from behind. Over this long shot of a decrepit old lady, we hear Sangwoo's voice offscreen: "Grandma . . . I want to go with you." The film portrays such "following" repeatedly, representing Sangwoo's longing to stay with his grandmother in an imaginary dyad with a mother figure. Grandma's dementia mires her in melancholic pathology over her late husband. Her present memory deficit contrasts with her lucid experience of, and persistent visits to, the "past." She regularly visits a local train station, waiting pathetically for her (late) husband to get off work, as she once did. She recognizes an old photograph of him taken in youth—the only memory she has and the substratum of the past temporality in which she is stuck. As she touches the photograph and smiles, this photographic memory trace may arouse a sudden sense of punctum, to use Roland Barthes's term. As Barthes might say, the photograph can prick the grandmother like an acute pain, transporting her to a particular latent personal memory. Thus, the photograph "annihilates itself as medium to be no longer a sign but the thing itself." [17].[#N17]

In *Spring Day*, the grandmother's pathological attachment to the past/family album is consummated as she herself turns into a photographic image. Near the end of the film, the (grand)mother is ready to "leave." She dons a cherished old traditional Korean dress and holds a parasol. The camera captures her leaving the house, again from behind. Sorrowful music accompanies her. As she passes through the doorway, she turns back, adopting the posture of her own photographic image, visualizing herself "becoming" the mortal image, entering the melancholic temporality. The camera freezes her once again, cutting to her funeral. This cinematic parallel homologizes her leaving home with her own death, thus imposing a double meaning on her "departure."

Struggling in the closed circuit of his own melancholy, however, Sangwoo (unlike Jungwon in *Christmas*) escapes from a seemingly predestined, self-imploding fate. After Grandma's funeral, we see Sangwoo on a floor, leaning against a wall—where his grandmother would sit—contemplating her shoes on the doorstep. The shoes articulate her absence, heightening the melancholy that bathes the scene. By positioning himself in his late (grand)mother's place, Sangwoo alters the meaning as he reverses the shoes' direction—from pointing outwards to pointing inwards (as if she had returned and left her shoes at the door). This small gesture signifies Sangwoo's futile longing for her while still affirming her absence. Yet this scene, along with his conscious affirmation of her absence, may also suggest that Sangwoo's longing for his grandmother seems no longer a case of pathological melancholia. Instead, he is ready to leave her, much as the Freudian concept of mourning predicts a subject's ability eventually to overcome the loss of a beloved figure. As the camera searches the room that Grandma once inhabited, it finds only photographs of her on the walls. For Sangwoo, she *has returned*, yet in the form of a photograph. Nevertheless, this visualization of her absence prepares Sangwoo to terminate his own pathological mother-attachment.

In *Christmas*, however, it is Jungwon who is absent; Darim replaces him. In the final sequence, Darim wanders around Jungwon's forlorn shop. She notices her own photograph on the wall—precisely where Jungwon once hung a picture of his first love. Darim's fixed face displaces Jungwon's lost love, his late mother, and his own presence, all of which cast mortal shadows over his life. The camera zooms out, holding on Darim as well as the photograph and the now-vacant store. At this moment, we hear Jungwon in voiceover: "She will live forever in my memory." This underscores Darim's "vivid" or living presence, standing in for the absent Jungwon. This nuanced shift in gender role from *Christmas* to *Spring Day* casts Sangwoo in a new light: he can depart the mother figure and mature into a man with "lawful" romantic relationships.



## “Capturing”

*Spring Day* fills its narrative with scenes of Sangwoo and Eunsu in the countryside together, recording sounds. The film minimizes mise-en-scène details, and their trips barely follow a linear narrative arc. Such cinematic “ellipses” empty out secular emotions, such as joy, pain, and sorrow, all of which suffuse the love and separation they eventually experience. The film thereby renders its fictional universe abstract and frees its characters from melodramatic conventions. [18] [#N18]

One night, the young couple arrives at Gangneung, a quiet town where Eunsu lives. While a piano plays, we see a smoothly curving road near a misty port. Depicted in extreme long shot from a slightly low angle, the road is enveloped by the night sky, which fills most of the screen. Sangwoo’s car emerges and glides along until the characters appear in close-up. Over this picturesque landscape, the music, punctuated by the occasional ship’s horn, gently embraces the human arrival at the original province (of “nature”).

This diegetic abstraction extends to the ephemeral quality of natural sounds the couple records. G. W. F. Hegel contrasts the abstract quality of sound with images provided by sight, observing that, “[w]ith sound, music relinquishes the element of an external form and a perceptible visibility [. . .] The ear [. . .] listens to the result of the inner vibration of the body through which what comes before us is no longer the peaceful and material shape but the first and more ideal breath of the soul.” [19] [#N19] In this respect *Spring Day* differs from *Christmas* insofar as it involves the act of recording *sound*—instead of photographing a face—while pursuing an object of desire. In contrast to recording sound, the photographic act engages a stationary object that is therefore easier to “capture.” *Spring Day* nevertheless converges with *Christmas* in the sense that both films suggest ultimately that we cannot preserve the past by capturing a present moment, whether in image *or* sound.

An early sequence finds Sangwoo and Eunsu in a bamboo forest. Surrounded by luxuriant bamboo groves, we see them in long shot, recording the sound of the bamboo swaying in the wind. The camera captures the soaring bamboo canes from a low angle, and then cuts to a high angle of the young couple gazing up at the sky, sharply contrasting the loftiness and grandeur of nature with the feeble presence of human beings. The camera slowly, silently zooms in on them, as if reenacting their caution when approaching and capturing nature/sounds. As they pause and play back the recording, the sound of bamboo, accompanied by tranquil piano music, flows. This harmonic melody resonates through the forest and heightens the emotions called forth by their encounter with nature. As Sangwoo and Eunsu lift their faces with eyes closed, the camera zooms up to the sky. The film represents the immensity of nature with sheer sound: the rising piano music and the sound of the breeze through the bamboo, expressing the spirituality embedded in nature. As the camera returns to the high-angle view showing the couple with eyes gently closed, it illustrates the moment at which they feel themselves elevated along with the bamboo as they approach the true mode of the bamboo’s sound, “the ephemeral spirit of nature.”

This human encounter with nature evokes a sense of sublimity: blending pleasure with mortal fear, the scene tempers an elevated feeling of self with the fear of self-destruction. In art history, the notion of the sublime derives from an encounter with nature or with nature’s effects—mountains, oceans, the sky—all of which we commonly associate with nature’s unbounded forces. Immanuel Kant contends that the human subject experiences the sublime when encountering the immensity of nature but cannot grasp it through ordinary human faculties; the subject becomes overwhelmed by the experience of “an abyss in which it (the imagination) fears losing itself.” Thus, for Kant, the experience of the sublime is involved in the human awareness of one’s own incapacity to comprehend it in the imagination as well as mortal fear. [20] [#N20]



Nevertheless, the sublime also engages with pleasure, particularly as an uplifting feeling that often accompanies the human engagement with nature, which in effect grounds the modern subject. According to Thomas Weiskel, who explores the relationship between sublimity and the modern self, argues that German aesthetics of the eighteenth century (particularly German Romanticism) inherited the Stoic notion of nature (*physis*), holding that nature implants “something more elevated and divine than us” that transcends the human: thought, imagination, speech (*logos*). [21] [#N21] Thus, nature embodies the divine through infinity, immensity, and vastness, which ultimately touch us through the self-discovery of human reason. Later, Romanticism’s reliance on the imagery of nature was channeled into the conceptual constitution of the modern subject—born in the Enlightenment, in confrontation with God. As a result, the modern subject inherits a convoluted relationship with God: he challenges God yet simultaneously imitates divinity (through human reason). In this light, the human encounter with nature carries a double meaning. [22] [#N22]

*Spring Day* illustrates the encounter with nature—a moment of self-discovery—by contrasting human finitude with nature’s infinite vastness. When Sangwoo and Eunsu visit a temple, the viewer observes Sangwoo waiting on a wooden floor well into the night, hoping for the proper moment to capture “the sound of a temple.” A wind chime sways gently in the breeze, breaking the silence, and then snowflakes flutter in the vacant temple garden. Sangwoo remains lost in the sound of nature until Eunsu exhales a muffled sigh, representing their mutual delight and awe arising from a doubled sense: their inability to truly represent the sublime encounter, and the elevated sensibility they experience as they feel themselves “soaring.” Here human apperception confronts nature, taking the path Kant describes when humans strive to contain nature through either the senses or the imagination. The imagination inevitably falls short, of course, leading to its collapse—anticipating the “Kantian shift” from the external (the sublime object) to the internal (our faculty of reason). Kant argues that this defeat of the imagination reveals “the presence of our reason and its province of the unconditioned, of the supersensible totality.” [23] [#N23] Thus, for Kant, “it is not the boundless sky that appears awesome but reason itself”: the vast and supersensible power within us, which indeed captures the universe in a grain of sand. [24] [#N24] In this way, Kantian sublimity facilitates the elevation of reason above nature, [25] [#N25] playing a crucial role in forming the modern self.

In *Spring Day*, the human encounter with nature in a doubly bound relationship parallels Sangwoo’s relationship with his grandmother. Throughout the narrative, Eunsu accompanies him on his “journey” to capture nature (and achieve maturation). They drive to the bamboo forest, the temple, a river, and Gangneung together. At one point, Sangwoo tries to teach Eunsu to drive, and they sit together behind the wheel. As the camera captures them through the car’s window, they occupy a single spot, “united,” literalizing Sangwoo’s longing to reunite with his (grand)mother and his longing for nature (as in *Mother Nature*).

Nevertheless, Sangwoo’s feeling of complete union is illusory, just as there is no romantic self in objective reality. One day, as Sangwoo records a river’s sounds, he hears Eunsu humming. Maintaining a careful distance, Sangwoo silently moves his microphone towards her. Employing stealth as he tries to capture her voice (or really her), he finds her voice nearly muted (echoing her faint smile in long shot), illustrating his struggle to record “her.” Later, Sangwoo drives to see Eunsu following their breakup. The film signifies the fervency of his desire through the apparent “speed” at which he drives. We see Eunsu through her apartment window, after which the camera cuts to Sangwoo’s longing face and then back to Eunsu. The window frames her from a low angle in back light as if she were some romantic ideal on Sangwoo’s fantasy screen. The camera shows him staring up from a steep angle, emphasizing his smallness and the seeming impossibility of reaching his goal.

Sangwoo has already verbalized the impossibility of true representation in an earlier scene. At the radio station he tries to persuade Eunsu that the third time is the best time to record a sound. He finds it difficult, however, to articulate his preference: “the third one is better, because, because . . .” signifying the impossibility of expressing the quality of natural sound in language. The ineffability of sound mirrors Eunsu’s ineffability, and the sounds of nature echo the irreducible tension between transcendental reason and the physical existence that cowers in the isolation of the modern subject. By reconstituting the human as the transcendental self, Kantian sublimity effaces sensory apperceptions and adheres to reason, summoning the divine. Nevertheless, corporeal existence remains part of being human, always threatening to spoil the awesomeness of reason. Reason, as redefined in Kantian thought, is therefore destined to fail in its own project of total representation (transparency); it is merely grounded in a total system, what Kant calls *Das Ding*.

As such, the Kantian sublime operates at the expense of the empirical, or natural, self. This sacrifice of the higher part of the self constantly menaces the modern subject. [26] [#N26] *Spring Day* dramatizes this latent danger through the presence of Sangwoo’s (grand)mother who, as I have suggested, mourns her late husband throughout the film. Her repeated visits to the train station (where her husband used to work) prompt Sangwoo to “follow” her (as in the first scene), enabling him to duplicate his own melancholy for his late mother. As Sangwoo attempts to escape from this closed circuit, the grandmother’s shadow darkens. At one point, she receives an unwelcome guest: her husband’s mistress, a reminder of an unbearable past episode. Her continuous longing for her late husband has led only to the return of a repressed memory. This moment anticipates Sangwoo’s failure to achieve total union with his love/nature. That he wishes to substitute Eunsu for his late mother becomes clear when he shares a childhood anecdote and she can see how his feelings for her are entangled with nostalgia for his late mother. Sangwoo concludes this anecdote by proposing marriage. Unfortunately for Sangwoo, this attempt to sublimate his melancholy in his current love only triggers the couple’s break-up, in effect losing his mother a second time.

This failure to capture Eunsu (or her voice) leads Sangwoo to part successfully from his (grand)mother in the film’s final sequence. Sangwoo’s separation (and growth) remains, however, inconclusive. Contemporary psychoanalysis indicates the critical role of the maternal voice in the constitution of the self. Before an infant begins to see clearly, he is surrounded, sustained, and cherished by his mother’s voice (like a “sonorous envelope,” to use Guy Rosolato’s phrase), which signifies the enveloping state of plenitude an infant enjoys with its mother. [27] [#N27] However, the infant must introject the mother’s voice to learn how to speak; to refine his own voice he must efface maternal displacements that are unsuitable for the paternal position. [28] [#N28]

Out of this essential relationship, the maternal voice oscillates in a male subject between two opposed qualities: one that of a Lacanian *objet petit a*, the other abjection. In *Spring Day*, Eunsu’s voice repeatedly emanates from a radio into Sangwoo’s environment (as it does the night they return from a trip to Gangneung), reenacting the maternal voice that functions as a sonorous blanket and envelopes an infant in security. [29] [#N29] For Sangwoo, his mother’s voice simultaneously represents a negative symbol—of his status of not yet being *in place* in the patriarchal order, or abjection—which the male subject must resist. The male subject must draw and redraw his own boundary in relation to his mother’s voice to maintain his position in a phallogocentric universe. [30] [#N30]

Echoing this psychoanalytic understanding of a male infant’s relationship with the maternal voice, Sangwoo cannot bear to hear Eunsu’s voice after their breakup. On his way home after breaking up, he turns off the radio. In the final sequence, he also leaves behind her taped voice before setting out on his own to resume his interest in recording the sounds of nature. In this way, Eunsu’s presence fades from

the cinematic diegesis even as it escapes the bounds of male subjectivity.

## Waiting, Becoming

In contrast to their “disappearing mothers,” *Christmas* and *Spring Day* stage father figures lacking the same authority. As Jungwon’s death (in *Christmas*) looms, his father overhears him sobbing. The father wants to comfort him, but hesitates. Instead, he turns, facing the yard. We see his worried face reflected in the door window; the dim, blurry image articulates his impotence while facing his own son’s death. Sangwoo’s father is situated similarly. While his grandfather lives only in his grandmother’s memory, his father is marginalized as well. Fathers are like “shadows” in these films, but neither fearsome nor ghostly; they accompany their sons silently. As such, the fathers’ presence is invisible and inaudible, signaling their absence or the continued state of castration.

As noted, representations of male castration and cinematic tropes of male masochism prevailed in early Korean film history. In 1987, Koreans’ calls for democracy put the longstanding military regime in retreat; a democratic civilian government soon followed. As Korean society changed radically in the political and social domains, the Korean film industry was also evolving, particularly in anticipating a new form of male subjectivity. Korea has also, however, experienced crises both small and great during this time, including the rigors of the IMF measures. While the crisis lasted only a few years, it affected Korean society intensely, causing deep-seated despair and confusion across Korean society. While struggling in the shadow of this pervasive insecurity, Korean men also faced another challenge: women’s participation in the political and economic domains continued to increase, in effect threatening the traditional privileges men had enjoyed in both public and domestic spaces. [31].[#N31] Korean men unsurprisingly expressed considerable anxiety heading into the new millennium.

In this context of social change and crisis, Koreans witnessed new modes for male subjects. As noted, fictional images of successful fathers and happy families appeared in the media in the late 1990s, apparently to suture the insecure male identity. In addition, both the individual home and the mother emerged as instruments for resolving this crisis through a “therapeutic mother” model, [32].[#N32] as if he is regressing to the classical model of the male subject and seeking attachment to the mother in the pre-Symbolic state as a last resort. While these films seem to return to the classical gender relationship by retrieving the male’s attachment to the mother figure, *Christmas* and *Spring Day* follow another path, particularly through the resolute “detachment” (or separation) of sons from their mothers. One might say that this resolute departure symbolizes Koreans’ efforts to establish a new industrial society, with fully grown politics and culture (which took place in the early 2000s), along with fully blossoming democracy.

[33].[#N33]



Figure 3.

*Separation in One Fine Spring Day*

Furthermore, in addressing the dark reality and social anxiety plaguing Koreans at the new millennium, these two films, unlike other media representations, empty out such cultural fears; the films' proclivity for ellipsis in narrative and mise-en-scène silences social and political reality while muting climactic delight and melodramatic pathos. Instead, the films take their time depicting their characters' contemplation of nature, seeking to reconcile conflicted human nature (emotions) with natural temporal duration, letting repressed emotions diffuse into the vacant landscape under ethereal music. [34].[#N34]

Thus does *Spring Day* portray the breakup of Sangwoo's love in silence. As the film nears its end, Sangwoo and Eunsu stand facing each other on a rural road. The camera depicts them together in close-up, from a slightly high angle. The camera's focus obscures background details, leaving only the watercolor-toned blue sky. The vastness of the sky contrasts with the smallness of the young couple, seen now in long shot. The visual vacancy echoes the narrative ellipsis. Eunsu softly suggests they break up, and Sangwoo agrees quietly, expressing little emotion. It is within such an ellipsis that these films stage the new positionality of their male protagonists, in which human contemplation of nature parallels gestures of riding and waiting. Jungwon rides his motorcycle; Sangwoo drives his car. Jungwon's riding seals him in his closed circuit of melancholy, but Sangwoo's driving towards Eunsu (and following his (grand)mother on his bike) eventually metamorphoses into "waiting." [35].[#N35]

Such detachment from the mother, like waiting, echoes the favorable atmosphere of Korean politics and economic life in the early 2000s. Consider the films' endings. Jungwon sits before the camera. As it clicks, we see his face superimposed over a photograph of his own funeral. Thus, through taking pictures, or trying to "capture" the maternal face, he sinks into a photographic image of mortal stillness, in effect memorializing his never-satisfied melancholic desire. From Jungwon's death, *Christmas* shifts to a snowy playground at the elementary school where he imagined his mother in memory as the film opens. This claustrophobic realm, reserved for his late mother and childhood memories, only



guarantees the perpetuation of the state of male castration. Conversely, *Spring Day* leaves the viewer with hope by positioning Sangwoo in boundless nature.

In the final sequence, Sangwoo sets out on a trip. Depicted in extreme long shot, he is standing alone in a huge field of reeds. The scene thus highlights the contrast between the vastness of nature and the puny presence of the male protagonist, echoing the sublime moment in which a human confronts divinity and understands the imminent separation from the mother. On an epistemic level, this moment of sublimity replicates the Kantian moment in which the human faculty cannot grasp the unbounded forces of nature, just as the human can also be torn from communal existence and directed beyond conventional existence. [36] [#N36]. This sublime moment features Sangwoo struggling to find a new significance in life. He is positioned slightly to the right of center onscreen, weighing the larger, wild void, and thereby crystallizing a visual tension between nature and the human spirit. As Sangwoo smiles, facing forwards, the camera zooms in slowly on his face, duplicating the human gesture of capturing and waiting—for what he is becoming, or his new self.



[/f/fc/images/13761232.0042.105-00000004.png]

Figure 4.

*Sublimity and Growth in One Fine Spring Day*

## Author Biography

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# Notes

1. Michael Eigen, *The Electrified Tightrope* (NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993), 123. [\[#N1-ptr1\]](#)
2. Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," Ben Brewster (trans.), *Screen* 16, no. 2 (1975): 57. [\[#N2-ptr1\]](#)
3. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18. [\[#N3-ptr1\]](#)
4. Many German films after World War II have shown this tendency. *Murders Are Among Us* is typical. Also, the femme fatale in film noir epitomizes the threatening mother in cinema. [\[#N4-ptr1\]](#)
5. Kyung-Hyun Kim, *The Remasculization of Korean Cinema* (Durham & London: Duke University Press), 2005; Hyo-in Lee, *Younghwa-ro ikneun hankuk sahoi munhwasa (Korean Social and Cultural History Reading through Cinema)* (Seoul: Gaema gowon), 13–38. [\[#N5-ptr1\]](#)
6. Kim, *ibid*, 13–22. [\[#N6-ptr1\]](#)
7. New Korean Cinema, as a cultural discourse, refers to a group of films that were released in the late 1990s and into the early 2000s. [\[#N7-ptr1\]](#)
8. Sojin Park, "Jagi Kwanri-wa Kajok Kyeongyeong Sidae-ui Bulanhan Sam: Sinjaju Jueui-wa Sinjaju Jueui-jeok Jucae (Anxious Life in the era of 'Self-management' and 'Family Control': Neo-Liberalism and the Neo-liberal Subject)," *Kyeongje-wa Saho* no. 84 (2009): 12–39. [\[#N8-ptr1\]](#)
9. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," In *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1917/1989), 584–89. [\[#N9-ptr1\]](#)
10. *Ibid.* [\[#N10-ptr1\]](#)
11. *Ibid.* [\[#N11-ptr1\]](#)
12. Susan Sontag, "The Image-World," eds. Stuart Hall and Jessica Evans, *Visual Culture: the Reader* (London: Sage, 1978/1999), 85 with my emphasis. [\[#N12-ptr1\]](#)
13. André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" in *What is Cinema?: Essays Selected and Translated by Hugh Gray*. vol. 1. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967/2005), 15. [\[#N13-ptr1\]](#)
14. *Ibid.*, 14. [\[#N14-ptr1\]](#)
15. This phrase is identical to the Bazin article to which I am referring in this section. [\[#N15-ptr1\]](#)
16. Freud explains that melancholia involves a double transfer of erotic cathexis after losing a love object: part of the cathexis "has regressed to identification, but the other part, under the influence of the conflict due to ambivalence, has been carried back to the stage of sadism which is nearer to that conflict." Freud, *Ibid.*, 584–89. [\[#N16-ptr1\]](#)
17. For Barthes, *punctum* is personal experience that cannot be shared with others—in contrast to *stadium*, a collective, conventional experience. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26–45. [\[#N17-ptr1\]](#)
18. Melodrama is, of course, highly charged with pathos and emotion. Influenced by German Expressionism, among other traditions, it usually visualizes emotions and melancholic pathos with expressionistic mise-en-scène, acting, lighting, and music. Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," ed. Christine Gledhill, *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1987). [\[#N18-ptr1\]](#)
19. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. II trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 890. [\[#N19-ptr1\]](#)
20. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), 97. [\[#N20-ptr1\]](#)

21. Thomas Wieskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 13. [\[#N21-ptr1\]](#)
22. Ibid. [\[#N22-ptr1\]](#)
23. Linda Brooks, *The Menace of the Sublime to the Individual Self: Kant, Schiller, Coleridge, and the disintegration of romantic identity* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 64. [\[#N23-ptr1\]](#)
24. Kant, Ibid. section 26, Brooks, Ibid. 22. [\[#N24-ptr1\]](#)
25. This concept culminates in the famous Kantian aphorism about what inspires awe: "the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." Kant, Ibid. [\[#N25-ptr1\]](#)
26. German Romanticism seeks to bridge the chasm within the Kantian self, but, instead of acquiring its ontological certainty, it generates only a self-annihilating notion, resulting primarily from its innate aspiration for the divine. In this process of revision, the modern self retains its innate negativity within itself, without (re)constituting its presumed total unity. The modern self thereby triggers long-troubling questions embedded in cultural demarcations between knowledge/reason/masculinity and being/nature/femininity. Weiskel, Ibid. [\[#N26-ptr1\]](#)
27. Guy Rosolato, "La Voix: Entre Corps et Langage," *Revue Francaise de Psychoanalyse* 37, no. 1 (1974): 33–50. [\[#N27-ptr1\]](#)
28. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 81. [\[#N28-ptr1\]](#)
29. Ibid., 72. [\[#N29-ptr1\]](#)
30. Ibid., 86–87. [\[#N30-ptr1\]](#)
31. Seongkwon Kim, "Mirae Hangukkajogui Jeonmangkwa Jeongchaekkwaje (Prospects and Counter-measures of the Future Korean Family)," *Bogeon Bokji Forum* (2011): 10–12. [\[#N31-ptr1\]](#)
32. Sojin Park, "Jagi Kwanri-wa Kajok Kyeongyeong Sidae-ui Bulanhan Sam: Sinjayu Jueui-wa Sinjayu Jueui-jeok Jucae (Anxious Life in the era of 'Self-management' and 'Family Control': Neo-Liberalism and the Neo-liberal Subject)," *Kyeongje-wa Sahoi*, no. 84 (2009): 12–39. [\[#N32-ptr1\]](#)
33. Korean democracy has been said to have fully matured during the late 1990s through the 2000s. [\[#N33-ptr1\]](#)
34. In fact, some Korean film critics complained that these films abstract social and historical backgrounds. Changkyu Joo, "Hankuk Yeonghwa-ui Him" (The Power of Korean Cinema), in Soyoung Kim, ed, *Hankuk-hyeong Blockbuster (Korean Blockbuster: Atlantis or America)* (Seoul: Hyunsil Munhwa Yeongu, 2001), 179–83. [\[#N34-ptr1\]](#)
35. The gesture of waiting prevails in *Spring Day*, as exemplified by the grandmother's waiting for her late husband and Eunsu's waiting for Sangwoo one night. [\[#N35-ptr1\]](#)
36. Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), 129–44. [\[#N36-ptr1\]](#)

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