

Memories of Memories: Historicity, Nostalgia, and Archive in Bong Joon-ho's *Memories of Murder*

by JOSEPH JONGHYUN JEON

Abstract: This paper reads Bong Joon-ho's *Memories of Murder* (2003) as a commentary on the possibilities of historicity at the proverbial end of history. It argues that the film ultimately instantiates a kind of spectral historiography that comments on the archive's possibility as well as its limits.

Toward the end of *Memories of Murder* (*Sarin üi Ch'üok*; Bong Joon-ho, 2003), Detective Cho (Kim Roe-ha)—a sort of comic, but disturbing, sidekick figure—learns that he must have his leg amputated. A few days earlier, an innocent former suspect had painfully driven a rusty nail into Cho's leg during the course of a drunken brawl. Left untreated, the leg becomes infected with tetanus, a fact Cho learns when he finally checks into the hospital. The irony is clear: Cho—basically a thug with a badge and little formal training—is fond of cruelly kicking suspects and even covers his boot with fabric in order to prevent scuffing. His ailment thus functions as symbolic punishment, and justice is belatedly served. Crucially, the same cannot be said about the central murder case in the film; the killer is never caught. That justice is served in a crime film should come as no surprise, but the fact that a police officer is the object of discipline signals the film's larger ambivalence toward generic conventions.

Since its inception in the nineteenth century, the classic detective story has proliferated so widely that it has become impossible to clearly delimit its characteristics. Subgenres have emerged (thriller, police fiction, private-eye narrative, hard-boiled noir); women and minorities have taken on the duties of the detective, once the purview of white males; and the traditionally Western form has been reconfigured to suit the new international contexts to which it has been imported. Despite the genre's multiple permutations, however, what remains consistent is the propulsion toward knowledge, the drive toward the truth. Thus, Todorov's timeworn description of the dual structure of the classic detective fiction, driven by the disparity

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between the veiled story of the crime and the emergent story of the investigation, still holds a degree of descriptive purchase.¹ This structure of disparity ensures that the central actions of the narrative become those of searching, discovering, and ultimately ascertaining knowledge. Even in manifestations of the form that ultimately refuse to satisfy this impulse, there remains at least a provisional nod toward what is a teleological structure, in which justice and punishment are the ideal forms of closure that function as juridical judgments based on the knowledge of the truth acquired through investigation.² This fundamentally epistemological imperative usually involves the reconstruction of the crime by the investigator, who separates the facts that matter from those that are irrelevant, assembles this relevant data, and produces a narrative that reconstructs the crime. In the most classic form, this process of investigation proceeds from entropy to order, and what often propels this movement is the detective's use of clues. Franco Moretti argues that *clues* are not *facts*, but rather rhetorical figures; clues represent a moment of multiple possibilities of signification and semantic ambiguity that the detective must contain and reduce into a clear and unproblematic fact. The task of the detective, according to Moretti, is thus to "dispel the entropy, the cultural equiprobability that is produced by and is a relevant aspect of the crime: he will have to reinstate the univocal links between signifiers and signifieds."³ The fact, then, is a stabilized clue, in which the myriad possibilities of signification have been contained, and to which one meaning has been ascribed.

In many ways, recent discussions of historiography are similar to those that surround the detective genre. Both are concerned with rules and guidelines that inform various traditions of narrative that are specifically intended to understand and represent a past that is, at least on some level, unknowable. Ronald R. Thomas has argued that "controlling the historical account is, indeed, the objective of most detective stories: the detective's goal is to tell the story of a past event that remains otherwise unknown and unexplained by fixing the identity of a suspect and filling in the blanks of a broken story."⁴ On the one hand, historical empiricists, like Arthur Marwick, argue that, through a rigorous examination of primary sources, a historian is capable of producing an accurate account of history. On the other hand, less positivist historians, like Hayden White, emphasize the narrative quality of historical accounts and argue that historiography is invariably the "work of construction rather than of discovery."⁵ Thus, any historical account is as reflective of the historian's perspective as it is of the events or phenomena that she or he describes.

As in Todorov's description of the disparity between the story of the crime and the story of the investigation, at stake in these historiographic debates is the extent to

1 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 47.

2 On how the thriller departs from classic detective fiction, see David Glover, "The Thriller," in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 138.

3 Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms* (New York: Verso, 1983), 145–146.

4 Ronald R. Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4.

5 See Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2000); Hayden White, "Historical Pluralism," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 3 (1986): 487. See also Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

which the historian's account of history can be regarded as an account of events as they actually happened. In short, the abiding question of historiography is whether or not it is itself possible. Another way to stage this debate, in terms that resonate with *Memories of Murder*, is by contrasting the different attitudes toward historical facts exhibited by each camp. Empiricists believe, as Michael A. Stanford puts it, that "a historical fact accords with a judgment about the past in which historians agree," whereas poststructuralists suggest, as E. H. Carr states, that "the facts of history never come to us 'pure' since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form: they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder."⁶ In discourses both of detective fiction and of historiography, then, there is a special privilege accorded to the status of the fact, but one in which the primacy and stability of the fact are called into question.

Memories of Murder is centrally concerned with ways in which detection might be analogous to historical inquiry. And the reverse structure of justice, in which the policeman becomes criminalized, is symptomatic of a larger inversion in the film, which stages the detective story as a failed mode of historiography. Based on the actual story of Korea's first serial killer, the film interweaves a criminal narrative with an implicitly retrospective meditation on modern Korea. The period represented in the film is an absolutely crucial moment in modern Korean history, coinciding with the end of Chŏn Tu-hwan's military dictatorship in 1988; the appearance of violent crimes in the sleepy rural villages in which the film is set serves as a synecdoche for the vexing emergence of Korean modernity in general. But though the film narrates an actual series of events, it simultaneously breaks down the possibility of historical memory, and for the same reasons that police investigation falls short: detectives, like the unsuccessful empiricist historian, ultimately cannot ascertain facts. So while the epistemological values of detection provide the generic armature for the film, in the service of a "true story," this framework is gradually emptied out, and the abiding momentum of the whodunit narrative (along with its epistemological imperative) dissipates. In the end, the violent crimes cease to serve as occasions for trauma and function instead, strangely, as objects of nostalgia, not because the murders themselves are somehow retroactively celebrated, but because they mark a past in which both investigative detection and historical memory seemed possible. Typical of the post-International Monetary Fund (IMF) financial crisis moment in Korean cinema, the film thus registers an anxiety of forgetting that is distinct from traumatic repression, driven instead by an inability to record fact in an uninhabited present. The present becomes forgotten, in other words, not because time passes and memory fades or, alternately, because it is too painful, but rather because of an imagined inability to make memories in the first place.

Memories of Murder, in turn, redresses this breakdown by foregrounding the archival procedures of a particular historical moment as a site of potential remedy. The film abounds with archives, piles of documents, photographs, and other bits of evidence collected in the course of investigation. But though any meager hope for historical memory depends on the extent to which these archives might rectify the problem of forgetting, the hope of the archive in the film is not the feverish desire for memory's

6 Michael A. Stanford, *A Companion to the Study of History* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 124; E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Penguin, 1987), 65.

return, not what Derrida calls an archive fever or malady, which he describes as a “compulsive, repetitive and nostalgic desire . . . to return to the origin, a homesickness.”⁷ Rather, it is a kind of spectral hope, to invoke an alternate Derridean notion, for an archive that might recall not only the past but also the way in which that past has been irretrievably forgotten. The film ultimately instantiates a kind of spectral historiography that comments on the archive’s possibility as well as its limits. The point of such a historiography is not epistemological: truth, knowledge, and certainty of fact remain unavailable ideals. Rather, the film aspires toward imagining a heterogeneous history, in which knowledge about the past is informed by a recognition of the past’s inevitable distance and absence. This formulation of historiography thus attends to the central question of poststructuralist historiography, which focuses on its own terms of possibility. If narratives of history reflect the contingencies of their own positionality as much as they recount historical events, then a responsible historiography should hold these contingencies in balance, even when (and especially when) they produce tension with one another. A crucial feature of historiography in the film, then, is the nostalgia that it invokes in its very title. Unlike the nostalgia that Derrida dismisses as a kind of deluded homesickness, nostalgia in *Memories of Murder* functions in constructive terms.

Generic Paperwork. In the course of the hospital scene, a striking detail registers briefly on the screen. Because Cho has no family, Detective Pak (Song Kang-ho) must approve the surgery. As he signs the requisite paperwork, we quickly see on the form that the date is October 20, 1987, precisely a year after the first murder occurred (a fact earlier confirmed by the coroner) and almost a year from the date of the opening scene of the film, October 23, 1986, when the first corpse is discovered (Figure 1). Coincidences of date in this film, as we shall see, are far from coincidental. Here, the camera lingers over the detail for a moment in a tight shot of the document.

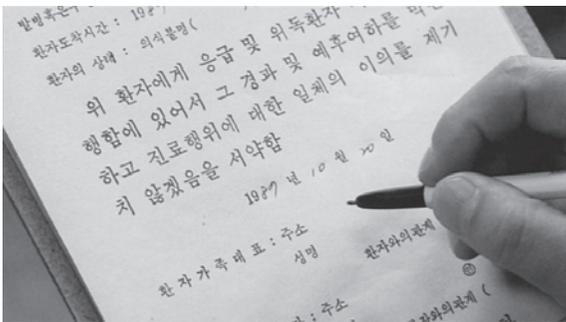


Figure 1. The camera briefly lingers over hospital paperwork for Detective Cho’s operation in Bong Joon-ho’s *Memories of Murder* (CJ Entertainment, 2003).

This is a prominent trope in the film, quick close-ups of documents and newspapers that situate the viewer in the chronological trajectory of the investigation. The filmic apparatus—the materiality of the cinema, specifically the screen—coincides in this moment with the apparatus of bureaucracy, paperwork. The

close-up of the document, mostly framed by the edge of the film screen, momentarily bridges the diegetic action of the characters with the extradiegetic viewing

7 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 91.

performed by the cinema audience, as if we were no longer watching a film, but rather reading this document, searching it for facts like the characters who hold it in their hands. As in the apparatus theory of critics like Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, in which the film apparatus doubles the modes of the ideological and psychological apparatus, Bong here materially links film to structures of power, but his focus is ultimately finer, attuned to the fundamental *ideologeme* that authorizes these power structures and animates the archive. In particular, Bong places an emphasis on the *fact*.

In the narrative of the film itself, solid facts are hard to come by; the investigation consists of a series of vigorously pursued trails that ultimately reach a dead end. At one point, for example, Detective Pak becomes convinced that the perpetrator is completely hairless, based on the lack of hair samples found at the crime scenes, and so decides to hang around a bathhouse, keeping an eye out for a man without any pubic hair. Needless to say, his efforts fail. Given the difficulty that the detectives in the film have ascertaining facts (who killed the victim, when, where, why, and how?), the plain appearance of such a fact as a date is arresting, particularly in the banal, bureaucratic form of a hospital document. Marking an important, though otherwise unacknowledged, anniversary, this fact reminds us that a year has passed since the first murder, but at the same time it calls attention to the paucity of facts in the investigation. Indeed, it seems that the only certainty we can claim one hour and forty-five minutes into a film that is just over two hours long is the fact of time.

So, though we are rarely offered dependable investigative facts throughout the film, we are constantly reminded, as if in compensation, of calendrical time. Dates in the film are provided with regularity, not only extradiegetically on the screen but also consistently in diegetic form via the news media, particularly in print. Painfully aware of the public antipathy toward the police in the period (especially in the decade following the notorious Kwangju uprising in 1980), the police chief is constantly

reading about his murder investigation in the Seoul-based *Chosŏn Ilbo*, Korea's oldest and largest newspaper. The chief's concern for public relations highlights the extent to which the events in this remote rural village have garnered national attention; police activity itself has become the object of scrutiny. So even as the police investigate the crimes, they themselves are investigated; they become as much the objects of surveillance as their suspects.

In the newspaper shots, the camera focuses in on a news story that presents the facts of the investigation (Figure 2). At the top edge of the screen, which coincides with the newspaper page, we can see the date, along with an account of various key, often



Figure 2. A tight shot shows *Chosŏn Ilbo*, Korea's most widely distributed newspaper, in *Memories of Murder* (CJ Entertainment, 2003).

embarrassing, moments in the investigation. Combined with the rehashing of dates throughout as an element of police work, we get a sense of time simply passing.

In this way, the film instantiates what Walter Benjamin famously described as “homogeneous and empty time,” which, as Benedict Anderson suggests, is marked “by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar.”⁸ In contrast to *messianic time*, a premodern conception that is marked by “prefiguring and fulfillment,” *homogeneous and empty time*, for Anderson, is crucial to the birth of a nation’s imagined community because it allows for a developing sense of temporal coincidence between figures who otherwise do not interact; thus, a coherent society is constructed out of discrete individuals.⁹ As we will see, the relationship between calendrical time and the construction of a modern Korean nationhood is certainly a concern of the film. But for the moment, I want to consider the emptiness of this version of time. In messianic time, events are understood in relation to one another according to some preordained order, but the modern conception of time implies no such order. Similarly, in *Memories of Murder*, the fact of time (and, indeed, facts in general), as presented both in news media and also on the bureaucratic hospital document, is ultimately marked not just as indeterminate but also as banal. Or to use a word that becomes significant later in the film, the fact is *ordinary*.

If one primary site of the ordinary fact is in the bureaucratic documents of the state (with particular emphasis on police paperwork), then the alternative site that the film offers is the newspaper, which functions not only as an analogous form to the imagined community of the nation, as Anderson would have it, but also as an alternate model for investigative detection that threatens the power of the state. Significantly, newspapers do not succeed where the police fail; the newspapers in the film do not in any way supplement the facts of the murder investigation or solve the case. Rather, the newspapers check the power of the police by making police unscrupulousness the object of their investigation and by offering an alternative model of historiography that wrests the ordinary facts of everyday life away from the state and its bureaucrats.

Through the focus on newspapers, the film expands its questioning of the fact to the scale of history, and an implicit preoccupation that emerges is the status of history in a milieu where facts are not only scarce but also underwhelming. One might ask, then, does the paucity of fact in this film also mark the end of history? As previously mentioned, the film is based on the true story of Korea’s first serial killer, who was never caught. The lack of closure in the investigation becomes an occasion for the film to explore deeper failures of historical memory. But *Memories of Murder* does more than simply register the frustrations of investigation, and instead transforms this story of failed detection into a parable of epistemological uncertainty, expanding its scope such that it becomes a historical parable. The emergence of a serial killer in the rural areas of Korea functions to signal an encroaching modernity and awakens this rustic setting to the horrors of modern life.

8 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 263; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 24.

9 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 226.

Furthermore, the years that bracket the film—1986 and 2003—are significant in relation to Korean history, as they denote a period that coincides with Korea's emergence as a globalized, world economy. As a somewhat representative figure of that shift, Detective Pak transforms from small-town detective to urban salaryman over the years; the film skips the specifics, instead using the transformation to allegorize the larger demographic shift that characterized Korean modernity. As in Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003), in which the protagonist Daesu is imprisoned for fifteen years, roughly from the time of the Seoul Olympics in 1988 until after the IMF crisis in the late 1990s, *Memories of Murder* paradoxically foregrounds the era of Korea's rapid modernization by skipping quickly over it. *Oldboy* compresses the period into a split-screen montage that juxtaposes Daesu's excruciatingly incremental efforts to escape his cell with media representations of the major national and global historical events that he misses while incarcerated. More radically, *Memories of Murder* omits the intervening period entirely. Significantly, the dates of Daesu's imprisonment in *Oldboy* are almost precisely the fifteen years that *Memories of Murder* skips over, 1988 to 2003. This elision, in both films, gives historical change the effect of suddenness; it is not gradual, but something we awake to discover, much to our surprise and confusion, as if we had not just forgotten the previous period, but somehow failed to experience it properly in the first place.

It is thus not enough to say that *Memories of Murder* plays with the genre according to postmodern orthodoxy, compressing time, unmooring fact, undermining metanarratives, and tautologically making certainty impossible even as it coaxes us toward it. It is insufficient as well simply to foreground national difference—to claim, for example, that the film reimagines the Hollywood crime thriller in a Korean context.¹⁰ It is also not enough to group the film into the robust tradition of Korean trauma narratives, like *Peppermint Candy* (*Pakha satang*; Lee Chang-dong, 2000), which link the desire to forget to historical repression and thus to Korea's traumatic experiences of colonization, war, and dictatorship.¹¹ Furthermore, *Memories of Murder* is not exactly a "metaphysical detective story," which foregrounds abstract philosophical questions of reality and existence through the mental peregrinations of its investigators as investigation itself loses any urgency.¹² Rather, one must recognize the way in which the film first enthusiastically embodies and then apathetically abandons generic conventions. The film begins comfortably within the all-too-familiar terms of the blockbuster mystery-thriller, and although the mystery-thriller tropes are rendered artfully in Bong's deft hands, they remain highly recognizable within this generic territory. The streetwise, intuitive detective clashes with a scientifically informed technocrat, but, as one might expect, their abrasive relationship eventually evolves into one of mutual respect. There are false leads, chase scenes, young women in danger. Furthermore, any casual viewer of *Law and Order* (NBC, 1990–2010) or any other conventional procedural will immediately recognize

10 See Christina Klein, "Why American Studies Needs to Think about Korean Cinema, or Transnational Genres in the Films of Bong Joon-ho," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2008): 873.

11 See Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 22–26.

12 Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, "The Game's Afoot: On the Trail of the Metaphysical Detective Story," in *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, ed. Merivale and Sweeney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 2–4.

the harsh interrogation room scenes, the police chief (gruff, but ultimately well intentioned) haranguing the detectives for their screwups, the tense interviews with witnesses, the cordoned-off crime scenes ringed with curious onlookers, and the police bantering as they survey the site for clues. As if nodding to low-brow generic conventions, the detectives at one point even watch a popular television cop show called *Inspector Chief*. Though it ultimately transcends them, this is a film full of clichés.

But just as viewers settle in to what should be a recognizable formula, the film seems to lose interest in its own generic commitments. My claim here is not so much that it reinvents the genre, but rather that it seems compelled to discard it. As the cycle of murder and subsequent investigation turns increasingly episodic and becomes less driven by an imperative to discover the truth, the film replaces one sense of temporality with another; the teleological gives way to the indeterminate. The familiar teleology of the detective plot gradually loses its momentum and eventually dissipates, as if to reveal that we were never moving toward an end, but rather wandering around aimlessly, as in one of the large fields that the film's cinematography frequently captures in its steady, wide-angle gazes.

These transformations are both definitive and nearly imperceptible. What seemed to be urgency now becomes, from this wider perspective, mere anxiety, which in turn further disperses into a kind of amnesiac haze. History and crime are no longer traumatic, not because the old wounds have been healed or because troubling cases have been solved, but because they are no longer remembered. And what had seemed a plot of detection becomes something like a narrative of nostalgia in which the object of nostalgia is ambiguous. It is crucial to note here that the particular form of memory that the film's Korean title signifies, *ch'ŏok*, is one that implies nostalgic fondness. But though nostalgia replaces detection and investigation as a kind of compensatory mode of looking at the past, this is not just any nostalgia and not a kind of Derridean archive fever. Rather, the title registers nostalgia for violent death, as if murder were to be remembered fondly, and as if the archive could confront the specter of its own violent forgetting.

There is such a seamless transition between narrative modes, from detection to nostalgia, that one scarcely notices that the initial rules of the game have shifted. As the murders pile up, the detectives' investigation stalls, so as the events proceed, they seem to repeat rather than to progress. Plot gives way to episode, and episode gives way to incident, each step on this steady continuum betraying the false promises of suspense and delivering only dead ends or banalities. At stake is our attitude, not just toward the historical past but, more specifically, toward the recent past, that which seems proximate to the present but also appears threatened by the widespread forgetting that pervades our age. The banality of the fact in the film, I argue, registers a profound anxiety about historical memory, but not so much about whether old traditions will be preserved. Rather, *Memories of Murder* registers an anxiety about how the present and recent past will be remembered, and about how current events will be processed into historical knowledge, given the attenuated status accorded to the fact.

The film mobilizes numerous generic devices and motifs, specifically those of the detective-thriller variant, but then disappoints any expectations of closure and any built-up anticipatory suspense. This kind of genre bending is central to Bong's filmic

practice, which often displays a propensity for brilliantly juxtaposing cacophonous generic elements. His masterful film *The Host* (*Koemul*; Bong Joon-ho, 2006), for example, blends elements of the Godzilla-like monster movie with unlikely partners (melodrama and slapstick) into a brilliantly baroque assemblage.¹³ As in *Memories of Murder*, genre bending in *The Host* disappoints the social expectations that come along with genre: the monster, for example, functions far less allegorically (or more complexly so) in comparison to, say, the way in which Frankenstein's monster figures the dark side of Enlightenment rationality in Mary Shelley's novel or the way in which the towering Godzilla embodies the twin horrors of urbanization and modernization in Japanese cinema.¹⁴ At stake in *Memories of Murder*, then, is not only the limit of category but also what it means to give up on a genre that has been so thoroughly propelled by a drive toward truth. And what is striking about the film is the way in which these generic questions become entangled with difficult historical questions about the consequences of Korean modernity. In short, the film links generic tradition to cultural tradition and imperils both. In this entire calculus, the underlying problem is like a kind of amnesia, forcing us to ask foggily, where are we and how did we get here? Ultimately, the real missing person in the film is neither the absent murderer nor an unfound victim, but rather the body politic of the national imaginary.

Kind of Plain, Just Ordinary. As stated above, the detectives never catch the killer, and there is no punishment or justice (except for the aforementioned reprimand of Detective Cho). The lack of closure has to do of course with the desire to remain true to the original unsolved murders on which the film is based, but it is significant to note that the main narrative of the film ends late in 1987, omitting the subsequent murders, which continued until 1991, as well as the ongoing investigation. In so doing, the film's time frame also connects the end of the investigation with the end of Chŏn Tu-hwan's military dictatorship and the beginning of democratic globalization. As Michael Robinson has suggested, "The year 1988 is generally accepted as a watershed between a long period of military intrusion in South Korean politics and a shift toward more open, liberal democratic governance."¹⁵ Instead of following the subsequent murders, the film climaxes, in an anticlimax par excellence, at the point where the main suspect is proved innocent, a moment that registers the absolute failure of detection, including both Detective Sŏ's modern scientific method and Detective Pak's more homespun

13 Klein, "Why American Studies Needs to Think about Korean Cinema," 880. See also Darcy Paquet, "Genrebending in Contemporary Korean Cinema," July 6, 2000, <http://www.koreanfilm.org/genrebending.html>.

14 One could argue that the monster allegorically figures US military presence and imperial influence in Korea. Certainly, the genesis of the monster, which is somehow a product of chemicals dumped into the Han River by US military scientists, seems to support this reading. But at the same time, the allegory in the film seems somewhat complacent, seeming to diffuse and displace the location of the monstrosity. The monster as allegory thus becomes more abstract, a figure perhaps of neoliberalism or globalization, the perils of which are themselves characteristically diffuse. See Hsuan L. Hsu, "The Dangers of Biosecurity: *The Host* and the Geopolitics of Outbreak," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 51 (Spring 2009): <http://ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/Host/index.html>. It should also be noted that the actual computer-generated imagery of the monster was outsourced to a US graphics company, further complicating the allegorical registers of the monster's monstrosity.

15 Michael Robinson, "Contemporary Cultural Production in South Korea: Vanishing Meta-Narratives of Nation," in *New Korean Cinema*, ed. Chi-yun Shin and Julian Stringer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 15.

approach. Throughout the film, Sō makes clear his fidelity to orderly, scientific investigation, repeating on a number of occasions what is something of a catchphrase, that “documents never lie.” By contrast, Pak favors a more intuitive, nearly shamanistic form of investigation, telling his suspects to look into his eyes so that Pak might discern their guilt.

Although the film seems to privilege Sō’s effective seriousness over Pak’s buffoonery, both ultimately prove inadequate. In the climactic scene, Sō learns that the latest victim is a young girl he had met through the course of the investigation. Suddenly, Sō loses his patience and sheds his commitment to scientific method as well as any concern for habeas corpus, dragging the main suspect forcefully from his home to a remote railroad tunnel where he plans to mete out justice with his own hands. “Nobody will care if I kill you,” he tells the young man, drawing his gun and kicking him in hopes of forcing a belated confession. Before Sō can finish the job, Pak arrives with paperwork from the United States containing the results of DNA tests. (The detectives had sent the sample abroad because adequate technology did not yet exist in Korea.) Pak hands it to Sō and cuffs the suspect, already assuming that the document will confirm their suspicions. Sō tears open the envelope and examines the document. We see a close-up of the document over Sō’s shoulder, and we catch a glimpse of the date on which the request was sent to the laboratory (October 21, 1987). This is followed by a tight shot of Sō’s astonished face with the camera placed behind the documents, and then an even closer shot of the document focusing on the most important paragraph, which states that the suspect’s DNA does not match that found at the crime scenes (Figure 3).

At this point, Sō completely abandons his faith in documents. “There’s a mistake,” he says. “This document is a lie. I don’t need it.” He tosses the papers to the ground

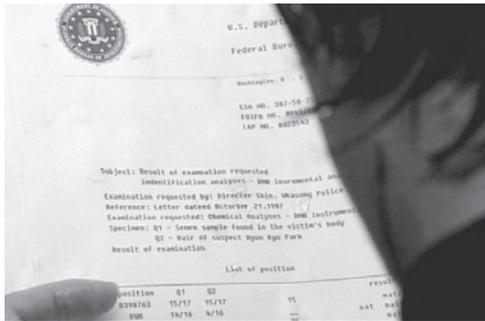


Figure 3. Detective Sō examines DNA test results sent from a US lab in *Memories of Murder* (CJ Entertainment, 2003).

and walks to his gun, which he had dropped earlier, as Pak scrambles to the documents. Pak intervenes with his own investigative method and tells the suspect to look into his eyes, but he is unable to discern the suspect’s guilt. Resigned, Pak releases the suspect from his grip as a train emerges from the tunnel. Still cuffed, the suspect stumbles away into the dark tunnel.

Still cuffed, the suspect stumbles away into the dark tunnel. The elegiac music that has played throughout the scene resolves in a sorrowful, foreboding chord as the screen fades to black. This final darkness of the tunnel, as the main suspect retreats into it, signals once and for all the final failure of the fact, figuring detection as, at best, a tenuous exercise in speculation and, at worse, an act of hubris. The moment marked here—the end of the investigation, the end of military dictatorship, the beginning of economic growth and democracy—is sounded by a decidedly mournful tone.

The nostalgia for murder implied in the film's title is not a sadomasochism that takes pleasure in cruelty and violence, but rather an expression of a particularly vexed relationship to the certainty of facts, and thus the failure of the investigation opens onto a broader, more pervasive sense of unsettling indeterminacy. We find out in the film's denouement set in 2003, when the narrative picks up years after the climactic moments of the investigation, that Detective Pak has quit his job and become a juice-machine salesman, living with his family in a modern apartment, perhaps in Seoul, like many formerly rural residents who migrated to Korea's capital and economic center. Crucially, the film has also leaped over the entire period of Korean modernization, picking up after the fact. We see that Pak has adopted a more Western style of dress (he wears a suit and a tie), eats sitting at a table with chairs instead of cross-legged on the floor, and has trouble drawing the attention of his children away from video games and cell phones. On a sales trip, the former detective returns to the countryside and sees the field where the first corpse was discovered back in 1986; he tells the driver to pull over. Wandering wistfully to the old crime scene, an irrigation ditch in the vast field, he finds a young girl who tells the former detective that she had seen a man not too long before looking into the same ditch. When the girl asked this stranger why he was looking, she explains, he told her that he had done something there years ago and had come back to take a look. Realizing that this young girl has seen and can identify the murderer, the former detective asks what he looked like. We see a cautious glimmer of the old investigative curiosity and anticipation in his face. But the girl disappoints. "Kind of plain," she says, "just ordinary."

In contrast to the teleological plot of the traditional detective story, the final fact, the only one we know for certain about the murderer, is the fact of his ordinariness. The potential testimony of an eyewitness thus becomes useless. Distinguished as indistinguishably mundane, like the fact of the date earlier in the film, the murderer functions no longer as the antagonist, but more as the object of nostalgia for a time when the certain fact still *seemed* possible, even as these possibilities were disappearing. As signified by the return to the *mise-en-scène* of the film's opening, with its oscillations between tight shots of faces and wide shots of landscapes, we have not progressed much from the beginning. Facts have not accumulated, and history is blank: we still have no satisfactory way to understand what has transpired, no traction with which to generate narrative coherencies that make sense of experience. The former detective pauses for a moment to absorb the information; we see a close-up of his face before the image fades to black, then the credits roll against a black background for a moment before a final wide shot of the field emerges.

The sequence mirrors (with a difference) the opening shots of the film, which focus closely on the face of a young boy in the field who himself is focusing intently on a small insect perched on his finger, an instance of close looking that contrasts against the wider views of the landscape and horizon, and one that suggests that the open field is not unintelligibly indeterminate—it is robustly filled with particulars. This trope is immediately repeated in Detective Pak's initial examination of the first corpse, which he finds hidden in a covered segment of an otherwise open irrigation channel (Figure 4). The enclosed space forms a small dark tunnel about the size, appropriately, of a coffin. The detective leans in to look at the corpse in the narrow space and then looks up

at the boy, who sits perched on the concrete directly above the corpse, which he cannot see. He peers quizzically back at Pak. The decomposing corpse as evidence of a brutal crime contrasts with the cute innocence of the boy, unaware of the corpse beneath him. Pak barks at some noisy children nearby, and the boy begins to parrot everything he says, even mimicking Pak's facial expressions, in a typically Bongian comic moment that breaks from the tragedy at hand and redirects its emotional energies. The scene ends with a shot of the vast open field as the opening credits appear. The field, like the boy, provides an opposing image to the corpse. The enclosed corpse marks finality and thus a linear temporality that has a beginning, middle, and clear end (death). By contrast, the open field is bounded only by horizons, which forever recede as one approaches them. The corpse draws the detective not only into investigation but also into its version of temporality, demanding a narrative closure that matches the corpse's own unfortunate sense of teleology. But as we have seen, detection in the film fails to meet the call.

In Korean culture, the rural areas of the nation often evoke nostalgic responses. Many urban residents maintain ties to their ancestral hometowns, where they care



Figure 4. Detective Pak looks into a covered portion of an irrigation ditch at the first corpse in *Memories of Murder* (CJ Entertainment, 2003).

for the gravesites of their deceased relatives. Though the open field depicted in the opening of the film is indeed redolent of this kind of nostalgia, this setting functions differently by the end. Rather than figuring a premodern past, a bygone agrarian way of life, the field in these final scenes, after Pak talks to the young girl, do not trigger nostalgia exactly, but instead appropriate the nostalgic gaze in order to

figure the uncertainties of the future, of what comes after modernization. Counterposed against Pak's distressed gaze after the young girl's revelation, the final shot of the open field serves more as the landscape onto which Pak's discomfort is projected than as a source of comfort. In other words, though the wide-open space might stand in contrast to Seoul's burgeoning cityscapes, it functions here as a figure for the daunting prospect of ontological uncertainty and infinite possibility, and as a repository for all the unsettled anxiety left behind by the failure of detection in the film. If the film's title suggests nostalgia, then it does so in unfamiliar modes, bearing witness to the indeterminate present rather than expressing longing for a prelapsarian home.

Nostalgia is typically associated with illusion and false consciousness, but nostalgia (for murder, for violence) in the film is posited as a mode of historiography, however limited, at the very moment when fact seems inevitably to disappear into the archive. If the age of globalization has ushered in an amnesiac culture, in which we have become severed from our relationship to the present, then perhaps the illusions and delusions of nostalgia, often cast as a kind of misperception of the past and of history, have become instead useful tools, modes of spectral attention attuned not only to the traces

of the past but also to what is unrecoverable from it. Nostalgia implies a fundamental ambivalence for its object, which becomes immediately substituted for an illusion or delusion. Derrida's description of nostalgia as a kind of compulsive homesickness, for example, implies an imaginary, psychic investment in the ideal of the home as a compensatory figure for some other kind of lack or absence. But affixing murder as the object of nostalgia seems to resist the ambivalence toward the object at the heart of nostalgia. The important dynamic here, then, becomes the productive tension between nostalgia's object-ambivalence and the epistemological imperatives that characterize discourses of murder. In a discussion of Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* (1997), Rey Chow articulates nostalgia in similar terms, as "not simply a hankering after a specific historical past," but rather "a condition that can never be fully attained but which is therefore always desired and pursued." Focusing more on emotional convergences between people, and on what it means to be happy together, Chow's specific context is different, but the nostalgic imperative she describes—"pursuit of what is ultimately unreachable"—is the same.¹⁶ This is a nostalgia not for murder itself, not for a return to violence or even for a time and place, but for the kind of attention that murder demands.

The Archive at the End of History. The difference between the opening scene and the final one seems to dramatize Fredric Jameson's well-known argument about the postmodern's inability to think historically, and more specifically about the difference between modern and postmodern temporalities.¹⁷ Modernism requires a "culture of incomplete modernization" in order to foreground the value of temporality, because subjects are still capable of contrasting modernization against older agrarian models, whereas in postmodernism "the premodern vanishes . . . then the very sense of an alternate temporality disappears as well, and postmodern generations are dispossessed (without even knowing it) of any differential sense of that deep time the first moderns sought to inscribe in their writing."¹⁸ The opening scene is a study in contrasts, between the enclosure of the irrigation ditch and the vastness of the field, between the harsh temporal finitude of the corpse and the spatial infinity of the horizon, and between the innocence of the unaware child perched directly over the corpse and the criminal perversity required for such a brutal rape and murder. The final scene, however, lacks what Jameson might describe in the earlier scene as "comparatist perception."¹⁹ Whereas the opening scene turned on a series of oppositions, the final scene depicts Pak as a solitary, confused, and distressed figure, standing alone in discomfort with the knowledge given to him by the young girl, who, unlike the young boy in the opening scenes, does not serve as a contrasting figure. This final scene thus expresses Jameson's sense of unnoticed dispossession, as though the consequence of never arriving

16 Rey Chow, "Nostalgia of the New Wave: Structure in Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together*," *Camera Obscura* 14 (1999): 36.

17 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 1.

18 Fredric Jameson, "The End of Temporality," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (2003): 699.

19 *Ibid.*

at narrative and juridical closure and of breaching the genre has prevented the past, specifically the recent past, from ever being recorded as history.

This failure, in various forms, has been described as the end of history, and the end of temporality, which Jameson glosses as “a dramatic and alarming shrinkage of existential time and the reduction to a present that hardly qualifies as such any longer, given the virtual effacement of that past and future that can alone define a present in the first place.”²⁰ Our sense of time passing becomes attenuated, as does our experience of the present. These temporal shifts in turn express a deep problem in Korean history and historicity, the feeling that modernity was lived but somehow not apprehended, that the recent past—more specifically, the all-too-quick period of modernization—has been forgotten because it was never properly recorded. Jameson has argued more recently, however, that the end of history is itself historicizable, and that this movement away from temporality toward space is a symptomatic fiction of globalization and late capitalism.²¹ As such it is more an *ideologeme* than an *episteme*, more an allegorical trope than an epochal structure of feeling. The end of history is not a temporality, in other words, so much as a recurring figure that is evoked in certain historical circumstances.

Following Jameson, I do not read the film’s rendering of the end of history, the failure of the detective story—cum—historical narrative, as an epistemological moment, nor do I wish to rehash the debate between Francis Fukuyama and his critics. Rather, I want to think of the end of history as expressed by *Memories of Murder* as an appropriation of that ideologeme and thus as an explicit commentary on Korea in the globalized age. Beyond merely pointing out a symptom of an era, this appropriation, more importantly, critiques an ethos. Treating the end of history as a trope rather than an epistemological moment, the film, in short, represents a past that is remembered as missed, remembered as somehow unmemorable. But this blankness, rather than authorizing neoliberal forgetting, resolves instead into an inchoate sense of uneasiness. The end of history is not an ending at all but a beginning, though one characterized less by blind optimism than by caution and discomfort. In the final scene, then, Pak gazes at a would-be object of nostalgia, the wide-open rural space that earlier signified a premodern way of life, but here it is bereft of these associations. In gazing at the field, Pak is not nostalgic for a time and place; rather, following the interaction with the young girl, he is reflecting on the past, on the murder investigations, and on a life he no longer lives. In the previously discussed sense of *ch’ŭok*, he is remembering murder. As a moment of awakening and coming to consciousness, the complex operation is one that holds the fondness of nostalgic remembrance in tension with horrific violence. It is a nostalgia that is incapable of ambivalence toward its object. The end of the film thus coincides not with amnesia and apathy toward an increasingly distant past, but rather with an open-ended expression of restlessness and an implicit call for an alternate form of historiography that might supplement the failed investigatory model. *Memories of Murder* thus intervenes in this critical moment, at the proverbial end of history, as if to suggest that, though we may be standing at the precipice of late capitalism

20 Ibid., 708.

21 Ibid., 695–718.

and global amnesia, it might not be too late to remember. The end of history, in short, is not the end of historiography.

The film offers a much more concrete figuration of this new imperative, and can thus be read not only as a narrative of failed investigation and detective obsolescence but also as a narrative of a newly emergent freedom for the Korean press in the late 1980s. The period of these murder investigations was also a time when the state's tight grip on the press during the Chŏn Tu-hwan administration finally loosened under the pressure of student protests. In fact, *Memories of Murder* might be understood as an allegorical treatment of the central driving tension behind these sweeping changes, the opposition of student groups to police brutality in particular. As John Kie-chiang Oh has suggested, "[T]he scale and nature of demonstrations in the summer of 1987," a period which coincides with the height of the investigation in the film, "were unprecedented."²² Detective Cho's amputation is a clear commentary on the issue of police brutality, but the film registers this issue more subtly elsewhere. A riot erupts at one point, for example, and policemen, led by Cho's right foot, suppress the crowd. At another point, we hear a brief news broadcast on a television in a restaurant about the trial of Mun Kang-je, a policeman charged in Inchon for torture and sexual assault, before Cho throws a bottle through the screen and starts a fight with the patrons of the restaurant, who were disparaging Mun and the police in general. In fact, the conflict between the police and the main, legitimate suspect of the film—a boyish man with soft hands who attended a four-year university (a crucial point of class distinction)—reflects the kind of conflicts that were erupting between police and prodemocracy student demonstrators all around the country. The memory of these conflicts was so strong that Chŏn Tu-hwan was sentenced to death in 1996 for his role in the Kwangju massacre, in which some 2,000 protesters of martial law were killed, though he was later pardoned.

Press freedom in this period, in some ways, can thus be understood directly in relation to the police, as the force that checks that arm (or leg) of the state's power, and does so ironically through an investigative method borrowed from the very institution it monitors. To be sure, the press in postwar Korea is notorious for its complicity with the state and *chaebŏl* (powerful corporate conglomerate) dominance, but at this historical moment, and in relation to the police, it seems to figure differently. In this narrative of failed detection, the investigative function seems to pass from police to press, as does the responsibility for social justice. Skepticism about the police has made them the object of discipline, and no longer its purveyor. A new kind of detective, Detective Sŏ, comes to the small rural town as a volunteer for the investigation, bringing with him big-city know-how and sophisticated investigative techniques. Although he does not narrate his inspiration, it is likely that he is motivated by stories that publicized these rural crimes to urban audiences in the press. Korean newspapers in this period were given the right to place correspondents in rural areas, and the kind of press coverage that the film depicts in this murder case might not have been possible before these newly accorded press liberties. So though he is a police officer himself, Sŏ also represents, by virtue of his very presence in the countryside, the power of the press in the public imagination in this period.

22 John Kie-chiang Oh, *Korean Politics: The Quest for Democratization and Economic Development* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 91.

Of course, the global media in the age of deregulation is often regarded (appropriately) as a conspiratorial force with movements of late capitalism, and it is easy to dump the representations of the news in the film onto the scrap heap of postmodern amnesia. But it is significant to note that the period that the film narrates, an era that coincides with the murders, is one marked by an emergent press freedom, which becomes capable—if only temporarily—of checking and opposing the power of the state.

It is worthwhile at this point to review the dates offered in the film. Cho's hospital visit occurs on October 20, 1987, which is also precisely the one-year anniversary of the first murder. The FBI lab report that Detectives Pak and Sō receive at the climax of the film shows that the request for tests was sent a day after Cho's surgery, on October 21, 1987. Although the date of the climax is not explicitly given, one might fairly estimate—factoring in bureaucratic delay, international mail time, and rural postal service—that this FBI document arrives at the Korean countryside around a week or so after the original request was sent. So let us approximate that the climactic scene of the film takes place on or about October 29, 1987. I am of course taking liberties here, but they are authorized, I would suggest, by the film's subtle insistence on the prominence of calendrical time. The date is also an auspicious one in modern South Korean history; it is the date on which the government's constitution was officially and extensively amended to provide for democratic reforms and to limit the power of the military in national government. Though the official end of the Chōn Tu-hwan administration came later, the constitutional amendment formed the legal grounds for this profound transformation. In other words, the climax of the film coincides closely with a fundamentally transformative moment in national history.

Although the filmic moment is one of tragedy and confusion, depicting the ultimate failure of the investigation, the simultaneous historical moment is one of great optimism; the end here is also a new beginning. Furthermore, one of the most crucial elements of the constitutional amendment was Article 21, paragraph 2, which guaranteed both a free press and the right to free assembly: "Licensing or censorship of speech and the press, and licensing of assembly and association shall not be allowed."²³ While it is fair to point out that corruption, along with the forces of global capitalism, foreclosed on any reasons for optimism for the press fairly soon after this period, it is also fair to point out that the film finds something worthwhile and hopeful to preserve. Bits and pieces of the news media and its documentary possibilities are quietly omnipresent; police events are always accompanied by their representation in the press, often to the frustration of the police. So what do we make of this depiction of past hope when the future proves it to be unjustified? What does it mean for a 2003 film, released when the press was viewed cynically, to depict the press in 1987, the year press restrictions were formally lifted by the Korean government, including the prohibition against putting correspondents in rural areas?

In his review essay on Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, titled "Marx's Purloined Letter," Jameson positions himself late on the chain of sleuths, just as Derrida had famously

23 Quoted in Oh, *Korean Politics*, 104. These constitutional changes came partially in response to great public demand. See Susan Chira, "Korea's Press Awaits the Promised Freedom," *New York Times*, July 1, 1987. See also Kyu Ho Youm, *Press Law in South Korea* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996), 58–59.

positioned himself with respect to Edgar Allan Poe and Jacques Lacan years earlier on the subject of Poe's seminal tale of detection, featuring the preeminent detective figure C. Auguste Dupin. But perhaps the most important originator of discourse in the essay is not Marx but Benjamin, whose concept of messianism, as Jameson explains, plays an important role in Derrida's oddly optimistic reading of late capitalism. Contextualizing such hopefulness in such a milieu, Jameson points out that Benjamin's messianism is marked by "the pain of disappointment and the sharp experience of defeat." He continues,

The very idea of the messianic then brings the whole feeling of dashed hopes and impossibility along with it: and it is this that it means in Benjamin as well. You would not evoke the messianic in a genuinely revolutionary period, a period in which changes can be sensed at work all around you; the messianic does not mean immediate hope in that sense, perhaps not even hope against hope; it is a unique variety of the species hope that scarcely bears any of the latter's normal characteristics and that flourishes only in a time of absolute hopelessness.²⁴

Against its representation of the end of history staged as the end of detection, *Memories of Murder* posits this sort of messianic hope, what Derrida elsewhere describes as "messianicity without messianism."²⁵ Easily dismissible as mere nostalgia—not quite for a time and place, but more for the possibility of facts and knowing—the representation of the press in the film presents the possibility of what is for Derrida, ultimately, a kind of spectral hope that emerges only when there is no reason for it, through a kind of heterogeneous experience of time. The hope is based not on the abiding strength of institutions like the press as such, but rather on the press's critical capacities with respect to everyday life.

The press in 1987 from the perspective of 2003 no longer signifies an unqualified optimism. In the intervening period, the Korean media as well as the global media in general had done much to disappoint those early days of heady enthusiasm. But rather than attempting to recuperate the press itself as a mechanism for restoring some sense of historicity, Bong preserves not its institutions but its function, specifically its ability to archive, and in a manner that calls attention to its own limits. Furthermore, he claims this ability not for newspapers or for journalism in general, but for film. In this respect, one might draw a parallel between the liberalization policies of the 1980s that ushered in the new era of press freedom and the confluence of governmental policies and material conditions in the late 1990s and early 2000s that relaxed censorship and gave filmmakers opportunities to explore their craft with relatively little interference. *Memories of Murder* was, of course, made in this context. One characteristic of this moment in Korean cinema was the ability of serious, challenging cinematic art to appeal to a broader public and to achieve commercial success.²⁶ This was made possible by a combination of factors: the easing governmental oversight of content combined with

24 Fredric Jameson, "Marx's Purloined Letter," *New Left Review* 209 (1995): 106.

25 Jacques Derrida, "Marx and Sons," in *Ghostlier Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's "Specters of Marx,"* ed. Michael Sprinkler (London: Verso, 1999), 250–251.

26 See Darcy Paquet, "The Korean Film Industry: 1992 to the Present," in *New Korean Cinema*, ed. Chi-yun Shin and Julian Stringer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 33.



Figure 5. A sequence of shots shows the police chief reading the newspaper in *Memories of Murder* (CJ Entertainment, 2003). The first three show the extraneous cut that divides the shot into two discrete parts. The remaining frames display the flickering image of the chief through the space underneath the passing train.

increased government financial support, the withdrawal of *chaebŏl* interest from the film industry because of the IMF crisis, and the emergence of venture capitalists who were less intrusive in the filmmaking itself and thus more conducive to artistic freedom.²⁷

A brief scene in the film suggests this parallel between newspaper journalism and film in decidedly material terms. After the early blunders in the investigation, the police chief reads in the *Chosŏn Ilbo* about the changes made to the investigative team. We see a close-up of the newspaper, which he is reading while walking. The chief turns the page by slapping the paper shut, shifting one page from right to left hand, and then reopening it. This is, of course, a fairly standard means of turning large newspaper pages, especially if one is reading while standing. But at precisely the moment when the page turns, there is an odd, arguably unnecessary cut to the next shot. In other words, instead of the camera focusing steadily on the paper while the chief turns the page to reveal the next one, there is an extraneous cut that divides the shot into two discrete parts, as if to suggest a material equivalence between the newspaper's page as a unit of information and a spliced segment of film. The second shot, after the cut, is reframed to magnify the effect. In addition, in the upper right-hand corner of the shot we see the steady blur of a train passing by; its continuous movement and distinct whirring sound are somewhat reminiscent of a film projector. Furthering the connection, the next shot shows the chief, still reading the paper, from the other side of the passing train, and we see the chief flicker in between the passing wheels, another image that is suggestive of the mechanisms of film projection and of zoetropes, which are often cited as a protofilmic technology (Figure 5). So at the very moment that the audience is invited to view the news media at work in monitoring the actions of the police, we are also subtly presented with an imaginary conflation of film and newspapers,

27 Ibid., 43–45. See also Dal Yong Jin, "Cultural Politics in Korea's Contemporary Films under Neoliberal Globalization," *Media, Culture, and Society* 28, no. 1 (2006): 5–23; and Doobo Shim, "Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia," *Media, Culture, and Society* 28, no. 1 (2006), 31–35.

as if the two media were somehow fundamentally alike, not just in social function but also, more radically, in material apparatus. And though this connection is suggested as a formal similarity, by implication it extends to their ideological function as well. This formal self-consciousness, which positions film in relation to news media, thus extends to the latter's capacity, however short-lived, to critique culture.

Any hope for either film or journalism, however, remains messianic in the sense Jameson describes, in that, for Bong, these moments of press and filmic freedom are transient at best. Bong is too deft a social observer simply to hold aloft film or the press as a potential site where this crisis of memory and history might be resolved. He positions film in a relationship to globalization similar to that which the press took toward military dictatorship in the period he chronicles. In both cases, although it is the government that relaxes the strictures under which these enterprises operate, however motivated by public pressure, the Korean press in the 1980s and Korean film at the turn of the twenty-first century appropriate the power to check ideologically the very institutions that grant them these opportunities in the first place. But if film can perform the same function that the press provided in the late 1980s, it can also suffer the same fate. The film ultimately refrains from any triumphalism: the investigation remains a failure in 2003, just as it was in 1987. Globalization exacerbates the problem; its drive toward futurity makes it ambivalent toward the past and in so doing causes a rupture in temporality itself, frustrating the detective's imperative toward coherent and ordered temporalities.

More important than solving the case is the mode of attention required for investigation, and the most important historiographic value that film advocates is its archival sensibility. As I have suggested, narrative modes of memory and history in the film prove woefully inadequate, an inadequacy that is dramatized by the failure of the detective. Frustrations of the viewer in relation to genre become the frustrations of global subjects in relation to history. But though the fragments of the past fail to cohere, they seem at least accessible, however ordinary, trivial, or banal, in the form of archival matter. The end of history, *Memories of Murder* implicitly points out, is ironically accompanied by a steep ramping up of archival activity, the overabundance of which is perhaps one reason for this end. Everything has been documented, but narrative seems incapable of ordering the archive.

The hope of the archive, however, is more specific in the film than a vague hope for the utility of aging mementos. This is not the hope of the cold case, in which some later detective, keener and sharper, perhaps armed with technologies that we cannot imagine, will heroically solve the mystery at last. Rather, if paper documents (bureaucratic forms and newspapers) maintain the possibility of fact in the film, however attenuated this possibility might be, the medium of film in *Memories of Murder* preserves the possibility of distinct temporality. The hope of the archive is not exactly the hope for memory or even for history, but the hope for a return of temporality, the sense of time happening in relation to historical time, that is equally aware of the way in which it immediately vanishes. Implicit in this hope is a heterogeneous experience of time. Mary Ann Doane has attributed this characteristic to the discursive power of film in the early twentieth century. Film, she suggests, archives "the experience of presence." She adds, "[I]t is the disjunctiveness of a presence relived, of a presence haunted by

historicity. . . . [F]ilm makes visible not a knowledge of the original but a certain passing temporal configuration.”²⁸ The experience of presence in the film, in other words, is inextricable from an experience of absence as well.

Doane goes on to describe the archival procedures implicit in the apparatus of film as a kind of compensatory technology against modernity’s deleterious effect on human temporal experience, which she describes in the lexicon of loss: “It is not only the past which seems ‘lost’ and in dire need of reconstitution, but the present as well, a present that is the victim of rationalization and estrangement. . . . What film archives, then, is first and foremost a ‘lost’ experience of time as presence, time as immersion.”²⁹ *Memories of Murder* attempts to archive *presence* and *the present* in such terms, and not in any naive endeavor to represent presence as such. Rather, the film imagines the possibility of a presence haunted by historicity, in which one feels at once the proximity and distance of the past as well as the way in which the recent present slips away from us, unevenly recorded for posterity.

Early on in the investigation, we see Detective Sō putting in a late night at the police station. The lights have been turned off because of an air-raid drill; we hear a siren in the background and a voice on a loudspeaker that barks out procedural instructions.



Figure 6. Detective Sō goes over some evidence late at night at the police station in *Memories of Murder* (CJ Entertainment, 2003).

Holding a flashlight that reflects back the film projector’s light, Sō flips through a series of documents pertaining to the case (Figure 6). In one sequence, he flips through a series of similar photographs depicting the murder victims, another reference to the film medium itself. Not unlike a flip book, the series of stills is suggestive of the individual static images that compose a strip of film, thereby connecting the material act of investigation to the filmic apparatus. Sō proceeds to examine each image and document with care and deliberation,

but eventually his eyelids begin to get heavy, and he nods off for an instant.

In short, Sō is examining a kind of archive imagined in filmic terms, but the scene places less emphasis on the answers that might be found than on the careful attention with which Sō attends to all the individual pieces of evidence; his diligence and attentiveness, and not the facts of the case, are the focal point of this scene. In addition, the wailing siren in the background and the evacuation drill proceeding on the street below place Sō’s late-night efforts in a broader historical context; this is indeed an archive haunted by history. Though their methods could not be more different, the close-ups of Sō looking at documents here parallel the recurring motif of Detective Pak peering intently into the eyes of his suspect, in shots anticipating the final tight view of Pak at the end of the film looking directly into the camera. Neither attempt at close looking is

28 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 23.

29 *Ibid.*, 221–222.

ultimately effective in the investigation, but effectiveness seems ultimately less important than the act of attentive looking itself, a kind of archival looking, which the filmic apparatus seems to facilitate and to appropriate from detection and journalism.

When the narrative of detection unravels, we are left with an archive of clues that do not add up to conclusions and unmoored facts that float about freely, unrestrained and undisciplined by the rigors of closure. Both through its representations of investigation as well as through its subtle positioning of filmic artifice in relation to other modes of investigation, *Memories of Murder* privileges the kind of close looking that the archive demands, even (and especially) when that object of attention is unintelligible or indeterminate. By chronicling and cataloging the various investigative modes that attend to murder—not only in the form of police investigation but also in journalism and, by implication, in filmmaking—the film archives the heightened attention and concentration of such pursuits, taking up the Jamesonian question of how to go about thinking historically in an age that has forgotten how.

So even though generic questions of the detective narrative are left open-ended, the film seems to persist with a sense of hope in the face of hopelessness. The hope of the archive is not the belief that some later genius will succeed in figuring out a failed case. Rather, it is a more modest historical hope, not for facts or historical narratives, but for the attitudes required to interpret them. Instantiating a spectral historiography, this hope is not exactly for history's return, but for a heterogeneous experience of time, a kind of time traveler's appreciation of what is proximate and available to memory in relation to that which is not recoverable or available. The centerpiece of this hope then, as Derrida describes it in *Archive Fever*, is "the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. . . . A spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it, like religion, like history, like science itself, to a singular experience of the promise."³⁰ Here and elsewhere, Derrida suggests that what must be remembered in order to have a future worth living is not only the forgotten past but also the forgetting itself. His notions of *spectrality* and *hauntology* are not efforts to reproduce fully the past in the present—they define themselves against *origin* and *ontology*; rather, they imply efforts to reconsider and foreground our relationship to various modes of absence. If we see the ghost of Hamlet's father, we do not mistake it *for* Hamlet's father; we see that it is indeed a ghost.³¹ The imperative of spectrality, and of spectral historiography, is to bear witness not only to the past but to its estranged strangeness as well. *Memories of Murder* thus functions as a kind of archive that is at the same time aware of all the attending dangers. Implicit is a double refusal of blind nostalgia for origin and home, on the one hand, and of rampant postmodern indeterminacy, on the other. The hope of the archive is thus not a hope for figuring out whodunit or what happened, and not a resurrection of a transcending past, but a return of a haunted present that might complicate our pervasive resignation with lost time and call attention to our own amnesias. It is not the hope of progress, technological or otherwise. It is the possibility not of memory itself but, perhaps, of the memories of memories. *

30 Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 36.

31 See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).