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Memories of Murder: A Reminder of Dictatorship and Blood

Democracy in Korea developed over a relatively short period of time compared to the Western history, but the course of development was stained with violence and sacrifices. The struggle for democracy reached its peak in the 1980s, and it was also during this period that a notorious serial murder case happened in a small region called Hwaseong. *Memories of Murder*, a film directed by Bong Joon-ho, focuses on this mystery and demonstrates how the protagonist detectives pursue the culprit, although they end up failing to arrest the murderer. However, *Memories of Murder* can be interpreted as a film that uses the murder mystery to cover up its true theme of a criticism towards the military regime led by president Chun Doo-hwan in the 1980s. **By using various methods of allegory that involves symbolic use of characters, colors and objects with addition to ambiguous editing, the film proposes a sharp criticism of the violence conducted by the Korean dictatorial military government in the 1980s and accuses the government as the actual cause for the sacrifices of Korean citizens during the time of democratic movements.**

To start with, the film starts with a scene that visually relates an iconic character with the protagonist to discreetly suggest the military administration as the real killer of the victims in the addressed murder case. The scene first shows a young boy sitting in a crop field and catching grasshoppers as one of the protagonists, Doo-man, comes to investigate a crime scene where a woman's corpse was found in a sewer next to the field. Here, the camera shoots both the boy and Doo-man in the same shot to clearly show that they are wearing clothes with matching color and pattern. The implied relationship gets even more obvious when the boy

starts to mimic Doo-man's action intentionally, leading to the conclusion that the boy can be equated as Doo-man. The boy, however, quickly hides the grasshoppers he had caught to kill behind his back when he hears the detective coming. Since the grasshoppers are highly likely to be killed by the boy soon, his behavior is like that of a killer who is hiding evidence of his guilt after encountering police at the scene of his crime unexpectedly ("The Symbols that Bong Hid"). Thus, the equation is established that Doo-man, a detective, is regarded the same with the boy, who is a "killer", equating a detective with a criminal. In a social point of view, this equation may be interpreted as a cynical account of the violence that the Korean government posed over citizens using its dictatorial power in the 1980s. The violence of government may be best represented with the case of Gwangju democratic uprising, which was a popular uprising in the city of Gwangju, South Korea, from May 18 to 27, 1980. During this period, more than 600 Gwangju citizens who were demonstrating against the Chun Doo-hwan government were beaten brutally, or even killed. One survivor recalled that "They would crack open his head, stomp on his back, and kick him in the face. When the soldiers were done, he looked like a pile of clothes drenched in meat sauce" (Lee 46).

Next, the victims of murder are depicted as women wearing red clothes, and although the color of clothes may seem no more than a minor detail, it carries a symbolic meaning that leads to the historical background of the 1980s regarding the political inclination of the military government. Despite a wide spectrum of age, female victims of the Hwaseong serial murder all had one common feature of red clothing. Red is a color that is traditionally regarded as a symbol for Communism, and Korea has a traditional strong anti-communistic tendency that derived from the traumatic fear of North Korean communism after the Korean War in the 1950s (Hwang). The Korean government, especially the military administration in the 1980s, used this tendency to denounce anti-government protesters as communists, calling them 'the Reds'. They put the protesters into brutal and inhumane violence under the pretext

of eradicating communists in South Korea, as Kwang-yeong Shin says “Anti-communism has been the core part of the three repressive pillars, legitimizing the brutal oppression of political dissidents and the frequent violation of human rights by the police and intelligence agency.” Therefore, the fact that the victims of serial murder were all wearing red could be interpreted as a metaphor that implies the fraud anti-communist policies that suppressed people fighting for democracy under Chun Doo-hwan’s military government.

Moreover, the symbolic use of items in *Memories in Murder* is also notable in the delivery of subtle criticism toward Korean military administration’s violence, and this method is accentuated by connecting a real sexual torture incident that happened in 1980s with the main plot. One female student who participated in an uprising was arrested by the police in June 1987, and she stated later that the police who investigated her committed sexual harassment during investigation. Although details of the sexual torture were not revealed explicitly, the victim stated that when she refused to reveal the names of fellow students in the student movement, “the policeman committed unimaginably cruel sexual violence” for two days (qtd. in Jung 13). In the film, this case is reported by a TV program and a crowd of policemen including the two detectives and other residents of the town are watching it. Frustrated by the news, one of the residents say that they should cut off the genitals of all policemen, and his words triggers one of the police to viciously beat the man with his military boots on. Ironically, the policeman gets his leg pricked with a rusted nail during the fight, and he ends up getting his leg amputated. This incident connects the genitals that needs to be cut off with the leg with military boots on that also needs to be amputated, leading the audience to a more direct synecdoche that stands for the unreasonably forceful policies of Chun’s military regime. Therefore, the synecdoche using the military boots implies that the genuine message behind this scene was that the misdeed of military government under Chun Doo-hwan needed to be terminated for the restoration of healthy democratic society in Korea

In addition, the last scene of the film demonstrates the aftermath of the murder through ambiguous scripts and change in shots, through which a cynical criticism on the unreasonably light punishment sentenced to the former politicians during the 1980s can be inferred. The scene depicts a young girl talking with Doo-man who came back to the place of first investigation after several years from the Hwaseong murder case. The two continue meaningless dialogue, but suddenly the girl tells Doo-man that she saw a suspicious man several days ago, and just as surprised as the audience are, Doo-man asks her the man's appearance. The girl answers that he was just an "ordinary man," without any special features. The girl repeatedly accentuates the word "ordinary," and right after the line the camera zooms in and shoots Doo-man's face directly, as if to show that Doo-man is the man the girl is describing repeatedly. As mentioned above, Doo-man represents Korea's policemen and government authorities who killed countless citizens, and this scene implies that the criminals are now living an ordinary life hidden among ordinary people. The message of this scene is a cynical comment on how lightly the politicians were punished, supported by the fact that the two presidents, Chun Doo-hwan and Rho Tae-woo, were granted amnesty after living only 2 years in prison. In fact, Chun is known to be living quite a luxurious life, enjoying golf at exclusive clubs and holding extravagant family events in famous hotels, according to Washington Post (Harlan).

In conclusion, although implementing a mystery narrative, *Memories of Murder* conveys a discreet code of criticism against the 1980 Chun Doo-hwan military administration, demonstrating the fact that the government resulted in many innocent citizens' deaths. By using symbolic characters, color and objects combined with vague word use that relate the protagonists to political leaders of the dictatorial government, the film obliquely claims that the actual criminal that led to sacrifices of Korean citizens was the dictatorial administration. Furthermore, deliberate connection between several real incidents in the plot clarifies that the

corrupt political authorities should be eradicated from the government for development of democratic values in Korea. The title *Memories of Murder* thus should be interpreted as the memories of slaughter that the dictatorial government conducted on its citizens, and that the countless citizens who died for democracy in Korea were the victims of their government's violence.

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