

# Gender Representation in the Gwangju Democracy Movement (Gwangju Uprising): A Discussion of the Films *A Taxi Driver* (2017) and *A Petal* (1996)

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**Abstract:** Between 18 and 27 May 1980, South Korea witnessed what became known as the Gwangju Democracy Movement or the Gwangju Uprising. On this occasion, South Korean citizens, especially young people belonging to the student movement, took to the streets of the city demanding democracy and were violently repressed by the government, resulting in a death toll that is still unknown today. This paper aims to analyze two films that deal with the Gwangju Democracy Movement, *A Taxi Driver* (Hun Jang, 2017) and *A Petal* (Jang Sun-woo, 1996), focusing mainly on gender issues as the two films differ in this regard: *A Taxi Driver* has a story centered on male characters and brotherhood between men, while *A Petal* has as its protagonist a girl who is the victim of various forms of violence as a result of the Gwangju Uprising. We will try to show that the films construct a masculinist representation of the Gwangju Democracy Movement, even when they use female characters. The methodology used is based on Pierre Sorlin's sociology of cinema.

**Keywords:** Gwangju Democracy Movement, Korean cinema, *A Taxi Driver*, *A Petal*, gender.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to analyze two Korean films that deal with the event known as the Gwangju Democracy Movement, which took place between 18 and 27 May 1980. Gwangju (or Kwangju) is a city in the southwest of South Korea with a population of 1.5 million. Among the Korean films that deal with the Gwangju Democracy Movement, this paper will focus on *A Taxi Driver* (Hun Jang, 2017) and *A Petal* (Jang Sun-woo, 1996). The choice is made partly because the films use different narrative forms, and partly because they both address gender issues more or less directly, constructing problematic visions of male and female participation in the conflict.

*A Taxi Driver* is a classic narrative film whose story is told chronologically, interspersed with moments of comic relief and melodrama. The film's focus is an individual story centered on two specific male characters whose journeys of overcoming and transformation are intended to move the viewer.

*A Petal* is a film that comes close to what is known as an "art cinema" narrative (BORDWELL, 2013). Its story is told in an interspersed style that doesn't immediately give viewers all the information they need to understand the events. The narrative logic is mainly psychological. Although there is a central protagonist, the focus of *A Petal* is not on her individual story but on

what her story reveals about the Gwangju Democracy Movement in a broader and more general sense.

When analysing films, it is necessary to set a goal, otherwise one runs the risk of becoming tired and inconclusive. The information a film provides can be inexhaustible, especially when formal issues (editing, photography, staging, etc.) are considered. This essay will focus mainly on gender issues, as the two films differ in this respect: *A Taxi Driver* has a story centered on male characters and brotherhood between men, while *A Petal* has as its protagonist a girl who is the victim of various forms of violence as a result of the Gwangju Uprising. However, we will try to show that *A Petal* does not effectively construct a narrative of female protagonism, as the character has no agency and is a constant victim of situations beyond her control. In addition to the issue of gender, the analyses will also suggest that the student movement, which has demonstrated a great power of popular mobilization throughout Korean history, is also underrepresented in the films.

## METHODOLOGY

Film analyses in the humanities have mainly focused on the worldviews and ideological constructions of meaning - in the Gramscian sense - disseminated by audiovisual media. This approach is clearly expressed in Pierre Sorlin's *Sociologie du Cinema* (1985, Mexican edition), whose methodology we will follow here. According to Pierre Sorlin,

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Ideology is not simply a screen, a lie designed to deceive the exploited, it is not consciously organized as a distorted vision of things: while it ignores specific problems, it integrates others that are not necessarily secondary (...). There is not only one ideology in our societies, and ideology is only an abstract entity that covers many different manifestations<sup>1</sup> (1985: 18-19, our translation).

Sorlin notes that Sigfried Kracauer was the first author to attempt to establish a connection between a society's mentalities and its films. In his work *From Caligari to Hitler*, Kracauer argues that German expressionism anticipates Nazism. Sorlin acknowledges that while the link established by Kracauer may be tenuous at times, it nevertheless inaugurated an essential perspective for studying cinema within the human sciences (1985: 40-42). According to Sorlin, Marc Ferro developed this perspective more complexly, believing that cinema offers a 'counter-analysis' of society by revealing its lapses, secrets, confessions, and denials (1985: 43).

Sorlin argues that cinema does not show social reality but rather puts it on stage, selecting and redistributing certain aspects of society: "films are no longer considered as mere windows to the universe. They are one of the instruments that a society has at its disposal to stage and showcase itself"<sup>2</sup> (1985: 252, our translation). In constructing a vision of society based on the reorganization of sound and visual materials, cinema "contributes to the interference of symbolic relationships onto concrete relationships"<sup>3</sup> (1985: 171, our translation).

This analysis will follow Pierre Sorlin's methodology, focusing on the construction of worldviews related to the role of gender in the Gwangju Democracy Movement rather than what the films reveal about it. While the formal aspects of the films will not be exhaustively explored, the narrative construction will be closely examined, particularly in its contribution to the social staging of the event.

## The Gwangju Democracy Movement

South Korea faced repressive and dictatorial governments during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Organized civil society groups, mainly the student and women's textile workers' movements, confronted these governments. The Gwangju Democracy Movement occurred during this mobilization period and serves as the backdrop for *A Taxi Driver* and *A Petal*.

Following the end of the Second World War and the defeat of the Axis in 1945, the Korean peninsula was no longer occupied by Japan, which had been the case since 1910. Instead, the United States took control of the south, while the former Soviet Union took control of the north (LEE, 2010: 22). Consequently, the US initiated procedures to relocate Syngman Rhee, the former president of the Korean provisional government who was residing in the United States, to South Korea. Upon returning to Korea, Rhee strongly campaigned for the independence and unification of the peninsula. He became the first president of the Republic of South Korea in 1948. During his presidency, Syngman Rhee ruled in an authoritarian manner, and his government was marked by strong repression of the opposition, persecution of communists, and alignment with the US, which supported him (LEE, 2010: 23).

In 1950, North Korean troops invaded the South, sparking the Korean War, which lasted until 1953. This conflict further consolidated the authoritarian power of Syngman Rhee, who declared martial law and arrested opposition leaders before the end of his term (RA, 2022). He was re-elected in 1952 with a large majority, as the opposition was heavily suppressed.

Two years after his re-election in 1954, Rhee attempted to change the constitution to allow for subsequent presidential re-elections. The government coalition secured 135 of the 136 votes required to pass the constitutional amendment. They argued that 135.3333 votes would correspond to two-thirds of the necessary votes in the Assembly and that this number should be rounded down instead of up (LEE, 2010: 25). This period marked the beginning of government corruption and widespread dissatisfaction in Korea, which was still suffering the effects of the war. In 1956, Rhee won the presidential elections, but the opposition coalition elected Myeon Jang as vice-president. Rhee manipulated the situation to remove the vice president, leading to an upsurge in anti-government protests.

In 1958, the National Security Law was adopted to suppress opposition protests, which resulted in the

<sup>1</sup>"la ideología no es simplemente una pantalla, una mentira destinada a engañar a los explotados, no es conscientemente organizada como visión deformante de las cosas: si bien ignora ciertos problemas, integra otros que no necesariamente son secundarios (...). En nuestras sociedades no hay una ideología, y la ideología no es sino una entidad abstracta que recubre un número considerable de manifestaciones diversas".

<sup>2</sup>"Los filmes no son considerados ya como simples ventanas que dan al universo, constituyen uno de los instrumentos de que dispone una sociedad para ponerse en escena y mostrarse".

<sup>3</sup>"contribuye a la interferencia de relaciones simbólicas sobre las relaciones concretas".

suspension of local elections and the containment of pro-democracy acts for the next 40 years. Following Rhee's victory in the 1960 elections, several protests erupted across South Korea, led mainly by high school students, due to high suspicion of fraud and corruption. The escalation of conflicts resulted in the death of some students. This tragedy, along with the further exposure of corruption cases involving Rhee, led to the end of his government in April 1960.

From 1960 to 1961, South Korea experienced a sense of freedom and democracy, which had not been felt since the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula. However, on 16 May 1961, General Park Chung-hee staged a coup that brought the extreme right to power. In 1963, Park became the President of the Republic of Korea and established an anti-communist government.

At the start of this government, Chung-hee forged closer ties with Japan and was strongly criticized for this, prompting several protests led, once again, by student groups, especially in Seoul. As the protests increased and the students demanded Park's departure, martial law was declared in the city in 1964. The installation of martial law did not stop the protests, and in 1965, a student was beaten to death by the police. Park decreed the temporary closure of some universities, a measure whose reaction added to the revolt against the rapprochement with Japan.

In 1967 and then in 1971, Park Chung-hee won the presidential elections. In 1971 he carried out a self-coup and in 1972 he introduced a new constitution that gave him more freedom to commit repressive acts. The new constitution provided for indirect presidential elections with no term limits.

The protests continued, and the political tension reached its peak with the demonstration by the women who worked at the YH Corporation textile company. During the rally, a large number of people were injured and one worker died. Student protests against Park's government also strengthened, gathering 50,000 people in October 1979. More than a thousand protesters were arrested.

On 26 October 1979, Park Chung-hee was assassinated, and new indirect elections were announced. The population was frustrated because they looked forward to choosing their president directly. However, on 12 December 1979, another coup d'état led by General Chun Doo-hwan installed a new military dictatorship (LEWIS, 2002: 5-6). Following the coup,

various democratization movements held demonstrations demanding freedom of the press, social rights, better wages, democracy, and an end to martial law. However, Doo-hwan's government strongly repressed the protests. On 17 May 1980, martial law was extended to the entire country (LEE, 1999: 41), leading to the closure of universities, media censorship, a ban on political activity, and mass arrests.

The imposition of martial law led to an uprising in Gwangju, where thousands of protesters took to the streets in demonstrations lasting from 18 to 27 May 1980. This event became known as the Gwangju Democracy Movement or the Gwangju Uprising. In response, Doo-hwan deployed the Republic of Korea Army's Special Warfare Command to suppress the uprisings, resulting in the deaths of 164 civilians, 23 soldiers, and 4 police officers, as well as the disappearance of 47 people, according to the government's released document (CHOI, 2006: 1). However, some activist groups have disputed these figures, suggesting that the death toll could have been as high as 500 (LEWIS, 2002: 69).

The movement was of significant importance for the development of South Korean democracy, as it had an impact on politics and redefined the relationship between democratic movements and authoritarian governments in South Korea (CHO, 2003: 67): "the Gwangju uprising in particular demonstrated the people's potential for the highest form of revolt against an unjust state power [...]" (CHO, 2003: 68). In this context, the Gwangju Democratic Movement played a significant role in the struggle against a repressive and violent government, highlighting the power of the people in South Korean society.

As previously mentioned, the student movement played a crucial role in the democratic struggle in Korea. In addition to participating in demonstrations, students also worked to politicize the population and workers through seminars, factory activities (*gonghwal*), rural activities (*nonghwal*), evening school activities (*yahak*), and activities with the urban poor (*binhwal*). According to Park (2005: 279), there were reading groups focused on Marxist themes, classes on the Russian, Chinese, and Cuban revolutions, as well as on dependency theory and imperialism in general. These activities could be considered potentially subversive, particularly given the existence of North Korea. Additionally, they served as recruiting centers for new movement leaders opposed to the dictatorship (Park, 2005: 277).

The Gwangju Democratic Movement symbolizes resistance to authoritarian governments in Korea and has been depicted in several films<sup>4</sup>, including *A Taxi Driver* and *A Petal*. Cinema has played an essential role in preserving the memory of this event and constructing it as a manifestation of Korean national identity (SHIN, 2020)<sup>5</sup>.

### A Taxi Driver

*A Taxi Driver (Taeksi Woonjunsu)* is a 2017 film directed by Jang Hun. It is based on an actual event that occurred during the Gwangju Uprising in South Korea: the coexistence of a Korean taxi driver and a German reporter during the days of the conflict. The story follows the taxi driver's political and moral transformation due to this encounter. Shim (2021:462) explains that the film focuses on the individual sphere while addressing broader historical events, such as the escalation of violence in the Korean struggle for democracy.

However, the film's choice to construct a narrative of individual transformation primarily based on male solidarity results in excluding women as active political subjects in the events of Gwangju. The male characters are "caring fathers, colleagues, honest workers, professionals, protesters and revolutionists, and individuals driven by noble causes. Women, however, are reduced to mourning mothers who cry for their victimised sons, or are cast as mere providers of food, thus acting in the traditional social position of caregiver" (SHIM, 2021: 465). At various points in the film, female characters are depicted as responsible for cooking and delivering pre-prepared meals to the main characters.

Similarly, the film chooses not to emphasize the vital role of the student movement in Korea's democratic mobilizations despite its enormous capacity for collective organization. Instead, it prioritizes the meeting between the German and the taxi driver. Although the students are characters in the film, their achievements as a mobilized group are not highlighted.

The narrative of *A Taxi Driver* takes place in the 1980s in Seoul, the South Korean capital, and Gwangju, the former capital of South Jeolla province. At the beginning of the film, the viewer is introduced to the main character, the grumpy and unpleasant Kim (played by the famous South Korean actor Song Kang-ho), a taxi driver, widower, and father of an 11-year-old daughter who lives precariously in the back of his landlady's house. In the film's opening scenes, we see, from Kim's perspective, a confrontation between young people and the police on the streets of Seoul during a demonstration against martial law, which had been introduced during the government of President Park Chung-hee (1961-1979). As we have seen, with the coup by dictator Chun Doo-hwan in 1980 and his installation in power, martial law was extended to the whole country, causing even more demonstrations to erupt in the streets, organized mainly by the student movement. In the film, we see Kim's irritation at the heavy traffic caused by the demonstrations and the indifferent way he views the political situation in which the country found itself. For him, the young people were just idlers who got in the way of his taxi rides. Kim puts ointment on his nose to protect himself from tear gas, which suggests that confrontations between young people and the police have become commonplace for the character. Kim even proclaims his supposed patriotism by saying that those students should spend some time working in the scorching desert of Saudi Arabia to realize how good Korea was. To close this initial sequence introducing Kim, he takes a pregnant woman in labor to the hospital. He is annoyed because her husband has forgotten his wallet at home, which suggests the driver's impatient and irritable personality. He is only calmed down by the promise of being paid double the next day, which indicates that he is a greedy character.

From the outset, the viewer is also informed that Kim has a difficult financial situation, with rent arrears. In the relationship between Kim and his landlady, the female character presents herself negatively by impatiently demanding the rent, while her husband, Kim's work colleague, is understanding towards him, in a precise moment of male solidarity in the face of difficulties. Despite this, the landlady takes care of Kim's daughter when he is late, and not her husband, with whom Kim is friends.

From the outset, Kim is constructed not only as grumpy and politically alienated but also as prone to character deviations due to his financial condition: without thinking twice, he "steals" a lucrative taxi ride

<sup>4</sup>In addition to the films analysed in this paper, we can mention: *Peppermint Candy* (Lee Chang-dong, 1999), *Scout* (Kim Hyun-seok, 2007), *May 18* (Kim Jihoon, 2007), *26 Years* (Keun-hyun Cho, 2012), *The Attorney* (Yang Woo-seok, 2013), *Excavator* (Lee Ju-hyoung, 2017), *Kim Gun* (Kim Sang-woo, 2018) e *12.12: The day* (Kim Sung-su, 2023).

<sup>5</sup>The student movement appears in *Human Acts: A Novel* (Han Kang, 2017), the first chapter of which presents the point of view of a student who took part in the mobilisations in Gwangju.

from a colleague, not realizing that the job is to take a German journalist, Jürgen Hinzpeter (played by Thomas Kretschmann), to the dangerous conflict zone of Gwangju. This dishonesty will be the catalyzing event for the entire subsequent narrative.

During the journey, conflicts arise between Jürgen and Kim, as the taxi driver complains about the risks involved in the journey. The film tries to show Kim as petty and individualistic, always thinking about his gains. In contrast, Jürgen, the foreigner, on the other hand, shows empathy and concern for the protesters in Gwangju. Jürgen identifies with the struggle of the Korean people, while Kim seems to care little for his compatriots. Thus, the film initially establishes a significant difference in behavior and commitment between the two characters, only to bring them closer together throughout the film as Kim becomes more humanized and politically aware.

Kim's ability to deal with difficult situations - the same ability that gives him a certain devious character - allows them both to reach Gwangju despite the army's blockades. From the moment they arrive in the city, the film's narrative tests Kim's capacity for altruism, and he progressively shows himself capable of acts of bravery and solidarity.

A significant milestone in the altruistic turnaround occurs when Kim realizes that the political tension in Gwangju is too great and, fearful that his car will be damaged - a worry that is clearly small in the face of the scenes unfolding before the viewer's eyes - he decides to abandon Jürgen along with the student demonstrators and head back to Seoul. On his way out, however, Kim comes across a lady asking for a lift and, at first, simply ignores her. Seconds later, thinking about money, the taxi driver decides to return and asks the lady if she could afford the fare. In the taxi, she tells him that she was looking for her youngest son because she had received news that a soldier had violently assaulted someone who looked very much like him and was in hospital. The film thus thematizes the countless cases of police violence against students during the protests for democracy. Kim doesn't believe that a soldier is capable of this, a belief that the film will later deconstruct. At this point, the film begins to represent Kim with ambivalence: on the one hand, someone who is alienated and stingy, and on the other, someone who shows some concern for people. The viewer is left to assume that he is, above all, someone hardened by life but not without character.

Song Kang-ho is an internationally known actor who has played characters similar to Kim from *A Taxi Driver* on more than one occasion: a greedy, somewhat comical conman in need of money who, throughout the story, shows his true kind nature and wins the audience's sympathy. This also happens in *Parasite* (Bong Joon Ho, 2019) and *Broker* (Kore-eda Hirokazu, 2022), so although he is an excellent actor, it is possible that he may be repeating himself in his roles.

Another key moment in Kim's change is the brief rapprochement with one of the city's taxi drivers, Tae-su, which develops amid a misadventure. Kim and Jürgen are reunited at this point, and both agree to return to Seoul. However, Kim's taxi has broken down because he, always in need of money, hasn't had it properly maintained. At this point, Tae-su offers to help take the vehicle to the garage, but the repair would take at least two hours, which would be beyond the time the curfew allows the protagonists to return to the capital. This causes Kim great concern, given that his daughter has been left alone in Seoul. Unable to understand the taxi driver's situation because he doesn't speak Korean, Jürgen tries to offer Kim money, believing that this is once again a problem of greed on the taxi driver's part. However, feeling offended and distressed at being unable to contact his daughter, Kim quarrels with the German journalist, who accuses him of being aware of the journey's dangers (we know he wasn't). Trying to smooth over the disagreement, Tae-su explains to Jürgen that Kim's daughter was alone in Seoul and the phone lines in Gwangju had been cut, making it impossible to contact her. The construction of this scene reinforces the idea that Kim is a worried father and makes the other men around him sympathize with his situation and try to reduce the tension of the moment.

Taxi driver Tae-su then takes them to his house to eat and spend the night until the car is ready to leave. The film then shows us a moment of brotherhood between the male characters, with very little participation from Tae-su's wife, responsible for cooking. Again, it is essential to note the absence of active female characters in fighting for democracy. The women shown throughout the plot are reduced to the same roles - wives and mothers - at home preparing food or in the hospital, shown prostrate, begging, while questioning the death of their loved ones. On the other hand, the men are shown in the film as the main political subjects who are united in organizing the movement, as is the case with the group of students, made up only of men and taxi drivers.

The next day, another sequence contributes to Kim's moral trajectory: he tells his new companions that the reason for his excessive concern with money stems from the medical debts from his wife's cancer treatment, who eventually died of the disease. His need for money, therefore, now has a noble motive. Waiting for his car to be repaired so he can return to Seoul, Kim buys his daughter a new pair of shoes, surprising the viewer that this father knows exactly what size she is. He finally manages to call home and is reprimanded by his landlady, while her husband is very understanding of his absence, in a scene in which the woman is portrayed as the villain not only for charging Kim rent but for reprimanding him as a father, which the viewer knows is unfair.

Kim is about to return alone to Seoul and reunite with his daughter because Jürgen has decided to stay in Gwangju again to capture images of the conflict, which is intensifying by the hour. However, courageously and selflessly, he changes his mind because a taxi driver should never abandon a passenger. At this point, Kim realizes the importance of Jürgen's records of the atrocities committed by the government.

A second sequence in the hospital shows that the conflict has reached new levels of violence, and one of the young people from the student movement that the audience was following is now dead. Jürgen is depressed by the violence he has witnessed, but Kim encourages him to continue recording. The taxi driver insists that they go into the conflict zones together to film the scenes of the uprising, and at that moment the heroism of the duo Kim and Jürgen is at its peak. Kim, who used to be an alienated taxi driver, now joins the people's struggle of Gwanju, risking his own life so that Jürgen can denounce the conflict in the international press.

The film moves towards its finale with dramatic action scenes. The soldiers shoot at the rioters, and several people are wounded and killed. Kim now realizes how the soldiers are capable of extremely violent acts against the population, unlike what he had previously thought. In this context filled with military violence, the citizens of Gwangju ask Hinzpeter to leave the city immediately with his recordings and expose the conflict to the world. A dangerous extraction operation is successfully organized, with taxi drivers sacrificing themselves to provide cover for Kim.

Before leaving Korea, Jürgen asks for Kim's contact details so that he can pay for the repair of the taxi that

was damaged during the flight to Seoul. Kim, who has always been concerned about money, surprisingly gives a false number to refuse the offer without offending the German. Skipping ahead twenty-three years, the film shows us Jürgen's return to Korea to receive a tribute. On this occasion, he says publicly that he wishes to thank the taxi driver he never met again, who was essential in making the information about the Gwangju Uprising public. As Jürgen speaks, the film shows Kim still working as a taxi driver, but now without any trace of his grumpiness and stinginess: on a cold winter's night, he cares for a tired student with no money and lets him pay less for the ride. The sequence is a clear contrast to the opening scene in which he is annoyed at not being paid for a woman in labor, which makes it clear that Kim now feels affection and no longer contempt for the students. Conveniently, the student forgets a newspaper in the taxi with the news about Jürgen's visit to Korea, in which he says that nothing would be possible without the taxi driver and that he wishes he could thank him. Kim shows no intention of receiving the honors for his actions but instead says that it is he, Kim, who should thank Jürgen, in a clear reference to the fact that the Gwangju Democracy Movement was an event that transformed his attitude toward life.

*A Taxi Driver* is, above all, a film about the individual transformation of a previously irascible and alienated man, promoted by his encounters with other men, especially a well-meaning foreigner. Through actions of male solidarity amid difficulties, Kim undergoes an experience of moral improvement while Korea discovers the strength of its democratic mobilization. In this choice, the film adopts a masculinist perspective, assuming the male figure as the standard of representation. This position results in the marginalization and exclusion of women so that everything that concerns the feminine is reserved for the private sphere. At the same time, the experiences of men are valued in the public sphere (KANG, 2010).

In her paper "Women's Experiences in the Gwangju Uprising: Participation and Exclusion," Kang Hyun-ah discusses women's crucial roles in the Gwangju Democracy Movement. These female figures were at the forefront of various actions, such as producing Molotov cocktails, caring for the bodies that arrived, and publicizing the conflicts (KANG, 2010: 199). Similarly, Gwangju's sex workers, known as "Call Box Street", played a significant role in donating blood to the wounded and hiding young men wanted by the military (RHEE, 2019: 85). According to Moon Seung-

sook, *A Taxi Driver* suggests that "men are creative actors and legitimate citizens, whereas women are reproductive and domestic beings who cannot be full members of the nation since as a part of nature they can only contribute their bodies as a precondition for building or developing the masculine nation" (MOON, 1998: 57).

## A Petal

Adapted from the book *There a Petal Silently Falls: Three Stories* (Ch'oe Yun, 2008), *A Petal* (Ggnotip, 1996) is the seventh film directed by Jang Sun-woo. Twenty years before this production, in the 1970s, Jang was imprisoned for participating in demonstrations against the Korean dictatorship, so his political activism predates his activity in cinema.

During the 1990s, with the loosening of censorship, the production of independent films increased considerably in South Korea, giving rise to the so-called Korean New Wave. As part of this movement, films sought to present stories and subjects previously censored by the military dictatorship, thematizing social and psychological problems more darkly. Park Kwang-su, Chung Ji-young, Lee Myung-se and Jang Sun-woo are important directors of the Korean New Wave. In *A Petal*, Jang tries to show the psychological trauma and violence that follows conflicts.

The film follows the story of a fifteen-year-old girl traumatized by the death of her mother during the Gwangju Uprising, and it is through the reconstruction of the protagonist's traumatic memories that we come to see this historic event in South Korea.

In the opening scenes, we see actual images of the violence in Gwangju, with the bodies of young people lying dead on the streets of the city and soldiers violently beating students. The scenes are accompanied by the song *Petal*, sung by Kim Choo-ja. The same song reappears at the end of the opening, but this time in the protagonist's voice, actress Lee Jung-hyun. The character, who doesn't have a name, is a delicate and cheerful young teenager who wears a flower in her hair and who sings and dances for two older boys, who we later discover are her brother and a friend. She dances on a lawn while the young men rest under trees. It's a sequence that aims to establish the innocence and tranquillity of this hitherto happy and healthy teenager's life.

In the rest of the film, however, the girl is shown dirty, behaving strangely, with torn clothes, messy hair,

filthy teeth, and being unable to speak, opposite to the scene shown earlier. She follows a lonely laborer called Jang, who lives in an old house and becomes desperately attached to him, even though he constantly assaults and rapes her.

For much of the film, everything is largely incomprehensible to the viewer. The film doesn't develop along classic narrative lines, opting for time jumps and gaps between narrative units. Therefore, it refuses cinematic spectacle in its approach to the Gwangju Uprising, opting for an aesthetic as dark and violent as the events narrated. Thus, it aligns itself with other realist avant-gardes in world cinema.

The viewer wonders how the girl in the film's opening got into that situation. The girl refuses to stop following the man despite suffering physical (especially sexual) and psychological violence and moves into his precarious and filthy house. There, we hear the character mention her mother for the first time, saying that she had a hole in her stomach, without further clarification, as the girl is visibly confused.

While living with Jang, the girl has several flashbacks that are filmed in black and white. In these sequences, we see interspersed images of the protagonist and her mother during the Gwangju Democracy Movement, although nothing is clarified initially. The images seek to represent the logic of the memory of trauma, "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (CARUTH, 1996: 11). These memories emerge mainly amid Jang's abuse and aggression, overlapping the different types of violence that cross the protagonist, that is, present and past violence. It is possible to see that these fragments of memory show moments from the Gwangju Democracy Movement - the escape from the shots fired by the soldiers, the arrival at the demonstration, and the lifeless body of her mother on the ground - and are shown without telling the whole story of the event, in an order that is at first disconnected. At times, the black-and-white flashbacks are mixed with colorful animations, which may symbolize difficulty in dealing with the trauma immediately and directly.

One of these combinations of animation and flashback occurs when Jang arrives home drunk and begins a series of assaults and offenses directed at the character. The camera turns to the image of the girl crying, and at that moment, a black-and-white

sequence begins. In it, we see several bodies being transported, including the protagonist and her lifeless mother. The scene is then interrupted to show the girl being sexually assaulted again, while the character's face is shown with a distant expression. We then see the animation of a soldier's boot, which turns into a giant insect heading towards the protagonist. The monster is attacked by a kind of giant centipede, which prevents it from reaching the character. At the same time, we see a helicopter illuminating the scene with a spotlight. With a quick change of perspective, we see that the air transport has also turned into a flying insect-like monster chasing the girl. As the girl runs away, the written word *oppa* comes out of her mouth in a possible call for her older brother. Finally, as an answer to this call for help, a knight appears on the scene, eradicating the monster, rescuing her, and taking her away.

The memories are always shown in black and white, while the animations are brightly colored and playful. Through these memories, the film seeks to reconstruct not only the protagonist's but also a collective memory, since the black-and-white fragments discuss the violence against all the protesters in Gwangju.

Parallel to the protagonist's narrative, we see events involving some students, friends of the character's brother, traveling to look for the girl. The group comes across some men who have seen her and discover that the girl has been sexually assaulted and harassed several times along the way. Through this, viewers find that Jang is not the first to abuse the girl and that she has been suffering sexual violence for some time. In a parallel montage to the search for the girl, we follow her memories and discover that, in addition to the trauma that permeates her, there is an intense guilt over her mother's death.

This feeling is explored during a flashback of the character who, according to Rhee (2019: 78), represents the *sikkim kut*, a South Korean shamanic burial ritual in which the deceased person's spirit is cleansed so that they can enter the world of the dead. The girl is shown walking through a cemetery and leaving dried flowers. She starts a conversation with her dead brother, asking if he recognized her or if he could remember her dress. When she arrives at her brother's supposed grave and places the last flower, she narrates the story of her tragedy during the Gwangju Democracy Movement. The flashback then, in Rhee's words, "connects the dead with the living and the past with the present" (Rhee, 2019: 78).

In this flashback, we discover, from the protagonist's narration, that her brother was murdered while doing his military service because he was accused of taking part in the student movement. This affected her mother, who decided to move to Gwangju. We see that the mother asks her daughter to stay home, but she doesn't obey and follows her. Both arrive at the site of the demonstrations, where we see the bodies of protesters. In the crowd, looking for a safe place, the protagonist's mother runs through the streets until she finds an open door. She asks her daughter to wait for her inside. However, again, against her mother's orders, she is desperate not to be left alone and follows her mother through the streets of Gwangju. At that moment, images of the demonstration take over the screen, accompanied by placards and shouts from the demonstrators calling for the fall of dictator Chun Doo-hwan and the release of opposition leader Kim Dae-jung. Among the crowd's voices, we hear the one belonging to the protagonist's mother, thus marking the moment when she becomes part of the collective sentiment clamoring for justice and democracy.

However, the shots fired by the military replace these voices, causing the demonstrators to run in the opposite direction in an attempt to preserve their lives. During this escape, the protagonist falls, prompting her mother to return a few steps to help her. The protagonist's mother is then shot while holding her daughter's hand. To save her life, the girl desperately tries to free herself from her mother's hand. The entire flashback is interspersed with scenes from the present, in which the protagonist seems to be suffering a nervous breakdown from accessing such traumatic memories.

Back in the flashback, we see the violence of the military in images of violent beatings. Among the bodies of young people abandoned in the street, we see that of the character who, all bloodied, is presumed dead. The girl is put in a lorry with the murdered youths, and we see authentic and shocking images of faces disfigured by the soldiers' bullets. At the end of the flashback, we discover the full story of the protagonist, who not only lost her brother and mother in the Gwangju Democracy Movement but also feels guilty for their deaths.

Throughout the last part of *A Petal*, we follow the group of friends as they travel around towns and bars, looking for the protagonist. Towards the film's end, the young people arrive at Jang's hut after receiving

information that she was there. But the girl is no longer there, and our last image of her is of her begging in a town. Jang is inconsolable and asks the young people to find the girl. He promises that he will be good to her from now on. It's important to clarify that, earlier on, the plot tries to build a specific change in Jang's attitude by showing him looking for suitable clothing for her, even though he has subjected her to countless abuses.

The film ends without the girl being found, refusing any possibility of reinserting the character into a group of acquaintances who care about her. In a voice-over, one of the friends asks the viewer not to be indifferent if they see a girl in dirty, threadbare clothes on the street or walking in a cemetery and to look at her with affection. The film's intention with this ending is clear: to make the character a more general symbol of the violence of the Gwangju Uprising and the trauma it caused in Korean society. By denying the possibility of a reunion, the nameless girl comes to represent Korea's open wounds, impossible to heal, caused by the sequence of repressive dictatorships that the country has gone through. The female body is used to represent the violence of that period. The girl emerges as the ghost of collective trauma, a specter destined to wander constantly.

Unlike *A Taxi Driver*, in which men were the only protagonists, *A Petal* (1996) has a female character as its protagonist. However, the girl has no agency but is merely a support for exposing the violence of the soldiers, the dictatorship, and her compatriots, thus symbolizing the nation's violated body. There is not precisely a denunciation of the abuses committed against women during the Gwangju Uprising and in Korean society, impoverished and brutalized by so many decades of neglect by its rulers, but the use of the female figure as an allegory of a violated nation. Thus, the film reduces the protagonist "to a passive and weak being, fully exposed to the excessive violence" (YI apud RHEE, 2019: 79). Her mental imbalance may also suggest that madness is a female attribute.

*A Petal* doesn't set out to present the traumatic stories belonging to individual Korean women or to represent them as figures of great importance to the movement since the girl joined the demonstration accidentally. The nameless girl has no individuality since the little we know about her is related to a brief moment of relaxation with her brother and the moment of violence that ends her perfect and innocent world. According to Kim, the film, based on this "gendered

trauma, hidden under the veil of universalist narration and the weight of history, prevents women's trauma from being exposed, while such gendered traumas also blur the distinction between perpetrators and victims" (KIM, 2011: 180).

## CONCLUSION

After analyzing both films, it's possible to see the relevance of both in thematizing an essential event in the democratic struggle in South Korea, suggesting that the country understands the Gwangju Democracy Movement as a landmark event in the re-democratization of Korean society that should not be forgotten. In *A Taxi Driver*, we see an initially alienated character who becomes politicized and starts to show solidarity with his fellow man. In *A Petal*, we see an essential denunciation of the violence following the uprising, which results in a physically and psychologically devastated society. The importance of these messages should not be ignored.

However, the social staging of the Gwangju Democracy Movement in the films analyzed gives political protagonism to men, even when it creates a narrative centered on a female character. In addition, the strength and organizational capacity of the student movement are under-represented since the focus is on individual trajectories, even when these, as in the case of *A Petal*, are metaphors for the nation. According to Sorlin, films construct relational spaces between characters, linking individuals and groups in such a way as to establish "hierarchies, values, networks of exchanges and influences"<sup>6</sup> (SORLIN, 1985: 202, our translation). In the hierarchies constructed by the films, both women as political agents and the organized student movement are placed below male individuals, either because the story focuses on individual male transformation (*A Taxi Driver*) or because female participation is limited to being the target of the most diverse violence (*A Petal*).

As we argued earlier, ideology in complex societies is multifaceted so there isn't one ideology but several ideological manifestations that coexist, including in cultural products. Thus, the films analyzed express both a progressive political vision, which sees violence and the repression of democratic opposition as inadmissible, and an alignment with patriarchal thinking by conducting their narratives either on male

<sup>6</sup>"jerarquías, valores, redes de intercambios y de influencias".

brotherhood or on the sacrificial body of women so that the discussion of gender inequality remains "in the back seat of the representation of the 'shared' history of democracy" (RHEE, 2019: 92).

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