Cinematic Memory of Social Trauma: "Han" and Collective Redemption in Korean Films Based on True Events

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Abstract

This paper examines Korean films based on true events, exploring how they represent the unique "Han" culture within Korean society and how they construct collective memory through cinematic art to seek collective redemption from social trauma. Through in-depth analyses of films such as *Memories of Murder*, *Silenced*, and *Hope*, this paper argues that these films elevate individual "Han" to a national level by showcasing the tension between individual suffering and social injustice, thus creating a cinematic memory of social trauma rooted in "Han." Moreover, these films do not merely dwell on the venting of "Han" but guide the audience towards emotional resonance and rational reflection through narrative strategies and aesthetic expressions, ultimately pointing towards the possibility of collective redemption. Our investigation shows that Korean films drawing from actual events, as a specific cultural product, both reflect the deep scars of Korean history and offer new paths toward social healing and cultural revitalization.

1. Introduction

South Korean cinema experienced a major shift in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the emergence of films based on true events. These films, often depicting real-life incidents of social injustice, crime, and historical trauma, not only found commercial success but also sparked public debate, sometimes resulting in legal and social reforms (Lee, 2000). This trend highlights a complex interplay between cinema, society, and collective memory, especially within South

Korea's unique historical and cultural context, profoundly shaped by the concept of "Han" (한/恨).

"Han" embodies a collective sense of unresolved resentment, sorrow, and grief, stemming from historical experiences of oppression, injustice, and suffering (Kim, 2017). It is a multifaceted emotion, encompassing both individual and collective experiences, often linked to a sense of

helplessness and a desire for justice and redemption (Yoon & Williams, 2015). Understanding "Han" is crucial to unpacking the intricate connections between social trauma, collective memory, and its cinematic portrayal in this study.

Korean films inspired by true events provide a unique perspective on "cinematic memory," a concept explored in this study. Building on Halbwachs' (1992) idea of collective memory, which suggests that social contexts shape individual memories, this study examines how films — as powerful tools of mass communication and cultural production—contribute to the formation and interpretation of collective memory, particularly concerning traumatic historical events and social issues (Sturken, 1997). These films actively shape, rather than simply reflect, reality by selecting, framing, and interpreting real events, thereby influencing how audiences perceive the past and present (Landsberg, 2004). In the South Korean context, these films frequently engage with sensitive topics like the Gwangju Uprising, the Korean War, and various social injustices, offering a platform to revisit these events through the eyes of those who lived through them.

This study explores how Korean films based on true events act as a site for the expression and negotiation of "Han" concerning social trauma and collective redemption. It investigates the narrative and aesthetic techniques employed in these films to evoke emotional responses and foster a sense of shared experience. This paper aims to answer the following research question: How do Korean films based on true events construct cinematic memory of social trauma, and how is "Han" culture presented and expressed in this process? Analyzing films such as *Memories of Murder* (dir. Bong Joon-ho, 2003), *Silenced* (dir. Hwang Dong-hyuk, 2011), and *Hope* (dir. Lee Joon-ik, 2013), the study reveals how these cinematic works, through their depiction of individual suffering and collective trauma, contribute to a process of social reflection and reconciliation. Furthermore, it examines the potential of these films to facilitate collective redemption by cultivating empathy, advocating for social justice, and inspiring collective action. The theoretical framework draws on trauma theory, particularly Caruth's (1996) insights on the intricate relationship between trauma, narrative, and history. It also incorporates perspectives from social justice theory, which emphasize the need to acknowledge and address historical injustices as a foundation for reconciliation and healing (Minow, 1998).

Ultimately, this research aims to enhance our understanding of cinema's role in shaping collective memory and fostering social healing in societies confronting the legacies of historical trauma. By examining the relationship between "Han," cinematic memory, and collective redemption in Korean films based on true events, it sheds light on the broader implications of this phenomenon for film, culture, and society studies in South Korea and beyond. The study's strength lies in its interdisciplinary approach, merging film studies, memory studies, Korean studies, and trauma studies to offer a nuanced analysis of a significant cultural phenomenon.

2. Constructing Cinematic Memory: Exploring the Emotional Expression of "Han" in Relation to Social Trauma

As a unique cultural phenomenon, Korean films based on true events profoundly explore the complexities of "Han." This form of "Han" transcends personal grievances, embodying a collective sentiment deeply embedded in the socio-historical fabric of Korean society and connected to social trauma. These films craft cinematic memory by weaving together individual and collective "Han," evoking deep resonance and reflection from the audience. This section examines how these films construct cinematic memory, particularly the interplay between the

emotional expression of "Han" and social trauma, and how they utilize underclass narratives and historical reflections to vividly depict "Han."

2.1 Individual Destinies and Social Injustice: The Underclass Narrative as a Channel for "Han"

In this study, "Han" is understood as a complex and multifaceted cultural concept unique to Korea, encompassing a collective sense of unresolved resentment, sorrow, and grief stemming from historical experiences of oppression, injustice, and suffering, particularly under Japanese colonial rule and during periods of authoritarian regimes. It is not merely a personal emotion but a shared cultural sentiment deeply embedded in the Korean psyche, intertwined with a sense of helplessness, a longing for justice, and a yearning for redemption. This sense of "Han" finds a particularly potent outlet for expression and exploration in Korean films based on true events. These films, by their very nature, delve into real-life incidents of social injustice, crime, and historical trauma, providing fertile ground for the manifestation of "Han". The rawness and authenticity associated with these narratives amplify the emotional resonance of "Han," making them a powerful vehicle for its cinematic representation. Furthermore, "Han" can manifest as both passive resignation and a catalyst for resistance and social change, a duality that is often mirrored in the narratives of these films as they depict individuals and communities grappling with the aftermath of social trauma. The inherent tension within "Han" - between the weight of past suffering and the aspiration for future justice - finds a parallel in the construction of cinematic memory. These films, in their portrayal of past events, not only evoke the emotional residue of "Han" but also contribute to a collective remembering that shapes how Korean society understands and confronts its history. Therefore, the concept of "Han" provides a crucial foundation for the exploration of social trauma, intertwined with the construction of cinematic memory in these films. This understanding of "Han" draws upon the work of scholars such as Kim (2017), who emphasizes its collective and historical dimensions, and Yoon & Williams (2015), who highlight its connection to a desire for justice and redemption. Furthermore, it acknowledges Yim's (2002) assertion that "Han" carries significant ethical implications, reflecting a sense of moral responsibility. This definition serves as a crucial theoretical lens through which this study examines how Korean films based on true events construct cinematic memory of social trauma and explore the possibility of collective redemption. By focusing on the cinematic representation of "Han," this study aims to illuminate how these films engage with Korea's historical and social realities, offering insights into the complex interplay between individual suffering, collective memory, and the pursuit of social justice.

In Korean films based on true events, the experiences of individuals from marginalized groups often serve as vital channels for expressing "Han." By focusing on these groups, these films reveal how structural injustices and oppression push individuals to their limits, thereby generating intense "Han." These underclass individuals, whether helpless victims stripped of their basic rights under oppressive power, ordinary people bearing social responsibility and a sense of justice, or "heroes" with a spirit of resistance, have their life trajectories closely linked to social reality, their personal fates becoming microcosms of social injustice. It is worth noting that the underclass narrative differs from the concept of marginalized groups, which is more inclined towards the crisis and anxiety of cultural identity brought about by social marginalization. Instead, it emphasizes the social problems faced by vulnerable or oppressed groups in the social power structure and the emotional tension they bear.

The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argued that individual memory is a product of social frameworks and is connected to groups and society. In his book *On Collective Memory* ,

he systematically expounded on the relationship between social groups (such as family, religion, and social class) and collective memory, placing "memory" within the framework of social analysis and endowing it with sociological significance. This collective memory is not a mere aggregation of individual memories but a social construction, a product of individuals' continuous negotiation and revision in interaction with others. In Korean films based on true events, the personal memories of underclass individuals are often placed within a broader socio-historical context, interwoven with collective memory, thereby more profoundly demonstrating the social roots of "Han." For example, in the film *Hope*, the personal trauma of the young girl Sowon, who was sexually assaulted, is not just a family tragedy but also a manifestation of society's collective responsibility for inadequate child protection. The image of Sowon's father becomes representative of the social father figure. Through the kinship narrative, it gains the collective empathy of the audience, shifting the audience's attention to the social scandal of child sexual abuse and guiding the audience to consider individual trauma within a social context. Similarly, in the film *Silenced*, the sexual assault of children at a school for the deaf reveals the injustice of the social power structure and the defects of the legal system. This narrative strategy of linking individual suffering to social issues resonates with what American sociologist C. Wright Mills termed "the sociological imagination." In his book *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (1959) argues that the sociological imagination enables individuals to understand the connection between personal troubles and broader social structures, thereby transcending the limitations of individual experience and recognizing the universality of social problems. By showcasing the suffering of underclass individuals, these films closely link individual "Han" with social "Han," evoking the audience's strong indignation towards social injustice.

Regarding the study of collective memory and social trauma, Ron Eyerman (2001), in his book *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, uses African Americans as an example to explore how the history of slavery evolved into the cultural trauma of African Americans. He points out that the formation of cultural trauma is not an overnight process but a long-term and controversial one, in which intellectuals, artists, and activists play important roles. The formation mechanism of this cultural trauma is closely related to the dissemination and influence of the media. As media scholar Stuart Allan (2010) argues in his book *News Culture*, news media play a crucial role in constructing and disseminating cultural trauma by selectively reporting and interpreting events, influencing the public's perception and understanding of traumatic events. Through storytelling, performances, and rituals, they transform past suffering into collective memory and give it meaning and value, thereby influencing the formation and development of group identity. Korean films based on true events, in constructing the cinematic memory of social trauma, share similarities with the process of cultural trauma formation described by Eyerman. By depicting the experiences of individuals from marginalized groups, these films link personal suffering to broader socio-historical issues, thereby forging a collective trauma memory.

Moreover, the use of underclass narratives in Korean films based on true events serves not only as an emotional outlet for "Han" but also as a mechanism for social intervention. By portraying the plight of marginalized groups, these films compel audiences to contemplate social injustice and power structures, thus contributing to social reform and progress. As Judith Butler (2004) posits in *Precarious Life*, the lives of marginalized groups are often deemed "precarious," rendering their experiences more vulnerable to being ignored and forgotten. This emphasis on the living conditions of marginalized groups underscores film's unique capacity as a "visible" medium. As visual culture scholar Michael Baxandall (1985) emphasizes in his book *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, visual media can present and frame reality

in a unique way, thus influencing the audience's cognition and understanding of the world. The films give these groups a voice and an image, allowing them to be seen and heard, thus challenging mainstream society's indifference to marginalized groups and stimulating the audience's empathy and sense of justice. This emphasis on underclass narratives reflects the strong sense of social responsibility and critical spirit of Korean films based on true events, making these films more than just simple entertainment but an important force for promoting social change. Meanwhile, the emotional expression of the underclass in the film is not purely sensational, but restrained, which is also related to the social responsibility it bears, and lays the groundwork for the subsequent "collective redemption."

The individual destinies of underclass characters are closely linked to the broader social environment, and their "Han" stems not only from personal experiences but also from structural social injustice. By presenting the suffering and struggles of these individuals, the films intertwine individual "Han" with social "Han," constructing a cinematic memory of "Han." This cinematic memory is not a simple replication of reality but a distillation and sublimation of social reality. This distillation and sublimation of social reality is precisely the embodiment of the charm of cinematic art. As film theorist André Bazin (2005) emphasizes in his ontological inquiry of "What is cinema?", film, through its combination of documentary and dramatic qualities, can create a unique "sense of reality" that transcends simple representation and reconstructs and reinterprets reality. Through a particular focus on the marginalized groups, such as the underclass, and a critique and reflection on social injustice, these films not only vividly portray the multiple facets of "Han" but also demonstrate the active role of cinema as a socio-cultural practice in constructing and negotiating collective memory.

2.2 Trauma Memory and Historical Reflection: Social Critique as the Political Expression of "Han"

If the "underclass narrative as a vehicle for 'Han'" focuses on revealing the generation of "Han" through the connection between individual destiny and social injustice, then "social critique as the political expression of 'Han'" emphasizes the elevation of individual "Han" to collective and even national "Han" through the representation of historical events and social issues, thereby prompting profound reflections on history and reality. Korean films based on true events often draw material from major historical events or social problems, such as the democratization movement, political scandals, and major criminal cases, which have left deep traumatic memories in Korean society. Through the representation and reflection of these events, the films not only express sympathy for the victims and condemnation of injustice but also prompt the audience to consider historical lessons and responsibilities in reality.

In the study of collective memory, memory and forgetting are always two sides of the same coin, interdependent. As Paul Ricoeur (2004) points out in his book *Memory, History, Forgetting*, memory is not always reliable; it is influenced by various factors, including personal subjective will and the manipulation of social and political forces. Therefore, the memory and writing of historical events are essentially a process full of controversy and negotiation. This negotiation and contestation of historical memory are particularly evident in societies undergoing transitional justice. As historian Charles S. Maier (1988) discussed in his book *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*, how to deal with the historical memory of the Nazi Holocaust became a key issue in the reconstruction of postwar German national identity. Korean films based on true events participate in this negotiation process by representing historical events. They provide a perspective that allows obscured or forgotten histories to resurface and prompts the audience to explore historical truth. For instance, *1987: When the Day Comes* (dir.

Jang Joon-hwan, 2017) utilizes a multi-narrative approach, leading the audience back to the critical juncture of Korea's democratization process from the perspective of ordinary people. This "retrieval" and "representation" of history provide an opportunity for society to reflect on history, confront trauma, incorporate elements of nostalgic aesthetics and subsequently trigger collective emotional resonance.

The construction of trauma memory is closely linked to social critique. Misztal (2003) argues in Theories of Social Remembering that collective memory serves as a powerful tool for social critique, facilitating societal change by exposing past injustices. This function is particularly prominent in films that directly challenge official historical narratives or reveal concealed historical truths. As historian Howard Zinn (2017) contended, history is not merely an objective record but an arena of power struggles where different groups vie to shape interpretations of the past. Korean films based on true events, through their portrayal of historical trauma, not only evoke empathy for victims and condemnation of oppressors but also critique deep-seated problems within Korean society. For example, *The Attorney* (dir. Yang Woo-suk, 2013), set against the backdrop of the "Burim Incident," exposes the dark underbelly of Korean society through the journey of lawyer Song Woo-suk defending students, contesting authoritarianism and state violence while prompting viewers to reflect on judicial fairness and social justice. This profound social critique lends these films a potent sense of reality and political significance that transcends simple historical re-enactment.

Furthermore, Korean films inspired by true events often employ a restrained and nuanced approach to social critique, a characteristic linked to the expression of "Han" in Korean culture. "Han," as Yim Hyung-chan (2002) argues in "Cultural Identity and Cultural Policy in South Korea," carries significant ethical implications, extending beyond mere emotion to embody a sense of moral responsibility that reflects the collective experiences and values of the Korean people. This moral responsibility is evident in the sustained engagement of Korean filmmakers with social issues. They not only expose societal problems through their films but also actively participate in related social movements, striving to promote social progress through their actions. Consequently, in these films, the expression of "Han" often intertwines with the pursuit of justice and the yearning for reconciliation. For instance, *Memories of Murder*, while depicting the societal panic and trauma caused by serial murders, refrains from simply portraying the murderer as an embodiment of evil. Instead, through a detailed depiction of the investigation process, it reveals the deficiencies in areas such as the legal system and police force construction in Korean society at that time, thereby prompting the audience to reflect on the social system and to pursue the "lonely figure" that represents a lingering sense of injustice. This restrained and profound expression gives these films a stronger artistic appeal and social impact.

The construction of cinematic memory is a complex process involving multiple facets such as individual memory and collective memory, personal trauma and social trauma, and historical events and current issues. Korean films based on true events construct a unique form of cinematic memory through the emotional expression of "Han" and the presentation of social trauma. This cinematic memory concerns not only the past but also the present and the future. Through underclass narratives, it reveals the connection between individual destiny and social injustice, elucidating the mechanisms that generate "Han." Through the representation and reflection of historical events, it elevates individual "Han" to collective "Han," thereby prompting profound reflections on history and reality. These films do not merely dwell on the venting of "Han" but demonstrate the political expression and social critique function of "Han" through their critique of social issues and pursuit of justice. In the next section, we will further explore how these films, while presenting social trauma, seek the possibility of collective redemption through narrative

strategies and aesthetic choices such as authentic narrative and binary opposition. By following these two paths, the films interweave individual "Han" with national "Han," prompting the audience to engage in profound reflections on history and reality, thus endowing "Han" with the functions of political expression and social critique. This in-depth exploration and expression of "Han" make Korean films based on true events an important cultural phenomenon and social force.

3. The Mechanism of Cinematic Memory: Narrative Strategies and Aesthetic Choices in Films Based on True Events

If the second section primarily explored how Korean films based on true events construct the cinematic memory of "Han" through emotional expression and social critique, this section will further analyze its implementation mechanism, that is, how these films transform real events into visual texts with strong emotional impact and social critique through specific narrative strategies and aesthetic choices. This section will focus on two aspects: "authentic narrative and social concerns" and "binary opposition and emotional tension," delving into the characteristics of Korean films based on true events at the narrative and aesthetic levels and their relationship to the construction of cinematic memory.

3.1 Authentic Narrative and Social Concerns: The Realism and Social Intervention of News Adaptation

Authentic narrative is a prominent feature of Korean films based on true events. These films are often based on real events, faithfully restoring or artistically processing the events in an attempt to reproduce the original appearance of the events on the screen. This authentic narrative not only enhances the authenticity and credibility of the film but also narrows the distance between the film and the audience, making it easier for the audience to empathize. Numerous films based on true events share a close connection with news stories. In Making Meaning, David Bordwell (1989) examines how films, including those based on real events, utilize narrative strategies to engage audiences and shape their understanding of the world. These films go beyond simply reproducing news events, offering an in-depth exploration and critique of the underlying social issues. Robert Stam (2000), in *Film Theory: An Introduction*, argues that the adaptation process often involves a critical reinterpretation of the source material, illuminating underlying social and political issues. This combination of authenticity and social concern imbues Korean films based on true events with a strong sense of realism and social intervention.

The emphasis on authentic narrative and realism creates an intertextual relationship between these films and news reports. As Bill Nichols (2017) observes in Introduction to Documentary, both documentaries and news reports strive to present "reality," but they differ in their approaches and objectives. Documentaries often delve into depth and interpretation, while news reports prioritize timeliness and objectivity. Korean films based on true events often blend these characteristics, resembling news reports in their focus on social issues and documentaries in their profound analysis and interpretation. For instance, films like *Voice of a Murderer* (dir. Park Jin-pyo, 2007) and *Children...* (dir. Lee Kyu-man, 2011), based on real cases of kidnapping or disappearance, not only depict the events and their investigation but also explore related social issues, including police efficiency, media ethics, and family relationships.

Robert M. Entman's concept of "framing" helps to understand how news reports and film narratives influence public understanding of events. In "Framing: Toward Clarification of a

Fractured Paradigm," Entman (1993) defines framing as the selection and emphasis of specific aspects of an event to guide the audience toward a particular understanding and interpretation. News reports shape public perception through framing, while films employ narrative and audio-visual language to construct their frames. Korean films based on true events construct a unique "social problem frame" through the representation and adaptation of real events, linking individual experiences with social problems, thereby arousing the audience's attention and reflection on social issues. For example, *Silenced* not only tells the story of the sexual assault of children at a school for the deaf but also examines this event against the backdrop of injustice in the Korean social power structure and the defects of the judicial system, thus constructing a critical social problem frame.

It is worth noting that the social concern of Korean films based on true events does not stop at exposing social problems but further calls for social change and action. These films often convey a positive spirit of social intervention by showing the struggles of victims and the efforts of various sectors of society. This social intervention is reflected not only in the content of the films but also in the production and distribution process. Miller's (2007) concept of "cultural citizenship" provides a valuable framework for understanding this phenomenon, emphasizing the role of cultural participation in shaping social and political life. By actively engaging with social issues and mobilizing public opinion, these films demonstrate how cultural products can contribute to a more active and engaged citizenry. Many film production teams collaborate with social organizations, leveraging the films' influence to advocate for improvements in relevant laws and regulations and the resolution of social problems. The release of Silenced, for example, spurred widespread attention to child sexual assault in Korean society, eventually prompting the Korean National Assembly to revise relevant laws to strengthen child protection. This real-world impact underscores cinema's potential as a catalyst for social change, a notion further explored by Miller and Yudice (2002) in *Cultural Policy*, which examines the intersection of culture, politics, and social activism. This proactive social intervention elevates Korean films based on true events beyond mere artistic expression, transforming them into a significant social force.

Authentic narrative and social concern are defining characteristics of Korean films based on true events. Through the representation and adaptation of real events, these films not only enhance their authenticity and appeal but also imbue them with a profound sense of realism and social intervention. They establish an intertextual relationship with news reports, both focusing on social issues and providing in-depth analysis and interpretation. By constructing a unique "social problem frame," these films link individual experiences with broader social problems, arousing audience attention to and reflection on these issues. Moreover, these films actively call for social change and action, demonstrating a strong sense of social responsibility. This dual function of reflecting and shaping social reality positions these films as significant cultural artifacts that not only document social issues but also actively participate in the discourse surrounding them, contributing to what Habermas (1989) termed the "public sphere." This blend of authenticity and social engagement makes Korean films based on true events a unique cultural phenomenon, playing a crucial role in the construction of cinematic memory.

3.2 Binary Opposition and Emotional Tension: The Aesthetics of Tragedy and the Psychological Sedimentation of "Han"

In addition to authentic narrative and social concern, Korean films based on true events often employ a strategy of binary opposition to heighten emotional tension and amplify the expressiveness of "Han." This binary opposition manifests across multiple dimensions, including good vs. evil, the powerful vs. the weak, oppression vs. resistance, and forgetting vs.

remembering. These oppositional conflicts create dramatic tension, underscore social contradictions, and profoundly reveal the complex connotations of "Han." This use of binary opposition is further illuminated through the framework of structuralism, which posits that meaning arises from the interplay of opposing forces (Levi-Strauss, 1963). By establishing these oppositions, the films not only generate narrative conflict but also mirror broader social and ideological structures. Furthermore, these films often possess a strong tragic tone. By depicting the characters' helplessness in the face of fate and the futility of resistance, they express the psychological accumulation and catharsis of "Han," a sentiment that resonates with the tragic aesthetic tradition in Korean traditional culture.

The narrative strategy of binary opposition finds rich expression in Korean films based on true events. Firstly, the opposition between good and evil is a prevalent pattern. Many films evoke audience sympathy and indignation by portraying kind and innocent victims juxtaposed with evil and cruel perpetrators. In Hope, for example, the young girl Sowon and her family embody kindness and innocence, while the sex offender represents pure evil and brutality. This stark contrast between good and evil underscores the victim's suffering and the legitimacy of "Han." Secondly, the opposition between the powerful and the weak is another recurring pattern in these films. Many films criticize social injustice and the abuse of power by showing the helplessness and resistance of underclass individuals in the face of powerful forces. For example, in *The Attorney*, the lawyer Song Woo-suk faces a powerful state machine, and what he wants to protect are weak and helpless students. This contrast between the powerful and the weak highlights Song Woo-suk's sense of justice and spirit of resistance, and it also amplifies the "Han" of the underclass. This emphasis on the struggle between the powerful and the powerless can also be analyzed through the lens of critical theory, which examines how power structures operate within society and impact marginalized groups (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). The films, by portraying these struggles, implicitly critique the existing power dynamics and advocate for social justice.

Emotional tension is highlighted in binary opposition. Sigmund Freud, in his psychoanalytic theory, explored the structure of the human psyche and instincts. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he proposed the opposition between the life instinct and the death instinct, arguing that this is the fundamental driving force of human behavior (Freud, 2011). Although Freud's theory mainly focuses on individual psychology, it is enlightening for understanding the emotional tension generated by the binary opposition in films. By showing the characters' struggles and conflicts in the binary opposition of good and evil, the powerful and the weak, etc., the films evoke strong emotional responses from the audience, including sympathy, anger, sadness, despair, and so on. These emotions are intertwined to form a powerful emotional tension, driving the audience to pay attention to the fate of the characters in the film and to reflect on social issues.

The tragic aesthetics of Korean films based on true events are closely related to the psychological sedimentation of "Han." These films often show the characters' helplessness in the face of fate and the futility of resistance, thus creating a strong tragic atmosphere. The creation of this tragic atmosphere is related to the tragic aesthetic tradition in Korean traditional culture. Martha C. Nussbaum (2001), in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, explores the important role of emotions in moral judgment and ethical life. Building upon Aristotle's concept of catharsis (Aristotle, Poetics, ~335 BCE), one can argue that tragic works, through their portrayal of suffering and the impermanence of fate, evoke empathy and fear in the audience, ultimately deepening their understanding of life's complexities and moral dilemmas. The tragic aesthetics employed in Korean films based on true events, particularly through the depiction of characters' suffering and the accumulation of "Han," function similarly, prompting audience resonance and reflection. For example, the tragic ending of the special forces members in *Silmido*

(dir. Kang Woo-suk, 2003) is not only a lament for their individual fate but also an accusation against the state apparatus and a concentrated catharsis of "Han." This tragic ending not only enhances the artistic appeal of the film but also makes the emotional expression of "Han" more profound and powerful. Moreover, in *Memories of Murder*, the fact that the murderer is never brought to justice is not just a reference to the unresolved endings of many real-life cases. It also serves as a metaphorical representation of the lingering sense of injustice, leaving a haunting and unresolved feeling. This approach has become a hallmark of how "Han" is portrayed in these types of films.

Korean films based on true events construct a unique mechanism of cinematic memory through narrative strategies and aesthetic choices such as authentic narrative and social concern, binary opposition, and emotional tension. On the one hand, these films enhance the authenticity and appeal of the films through the representation and adaptation of real events, construct a "social problem frame," arouse the audience's attention and reflection on social issues, and actively call for social change. On the other hand, they create emotional tension through the narrative strategy of binary opposition, strengthen the expressiveness of "Han," and show the psychological sedimentation of "Han" with the power of tragic aesthetics. These two mechanisms interact, making these films not only have a strong character of realism and social intervention but also have profound artistic appeal and emotional impact. In the next section, we will further explore how this cinematic memory achieves redemption and how this collective redemption is realized through two paths, individual and social, reflecting the complex attitude of the Korean people in the face of "Han" and their efforts to seek reconciliation.

4. The Redemption of Cinematic Memory: The Path of "Untying Han" and Collective Reconciliation

Whereas the preceding sections explored the portrayal of "Han" and the construction of cinematic memory in Korean films based on true events, this section examines how this cinematic memory contributes to the process of redemption. This redemption encompasses both the individual "untying of Han" and a broader societal reconciliation. Rather than merely dwelling on the expression and critique of "Han," these films endeavor to chart a path toward its untying, thereby facilitating individual and collective redemption. This "untying" is not a simplistic act of forgetting or forgiving, but rather a complex and profound journey of emotional transformation and social repair. This section analyzes how these films illuminate this path of "untying Han" on two interconnected levels: individual redemption intertwined with emotional resonance, and social redemption interwoven with collective reflection, ultimately constructing the possibility of a shared, collective redemption.

4.1 Individual Redemption and Emotional Resonance: Trauma Narrative and Self-Healing of Subjectivity

In Korean films based on true events, individual redemption is often deeply connected to emotional resonance. By portraying the pain, struggles, and self-healing journey of individuals who have experienced trauma, these films evoke a strong emotional response from the audience, thereby facilitating an individual 'untying of Han.' This 'untying' is not about simply forgetting the pain; it involves confronting the trauma directly to achieve emotional transformation and sublimation through the individual's own process of healing. This process can be further understood through Ricoeur's (1984) concept of "narrative identity," which posits that individuals

construct their sense of self through the stories they tell about their lives. By engaging with the characters' trauma narratives, the audience participates in a form of collective meaning-making that contributes to both individual and social healing. Trauma narrative becomes an important bridge connecting individuals and the audience and achieving emotional resonance.

Trauma narrative plays an important role in Korean films based on true events. These films often reveal the impact of trauma on individuals by showing their psychological state and spiritual dilemma after experiencing trauma. As Dori Laub (2003) argues in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, traumatic experiences are often difficult to express in words because trauma can disrupt an individual's narrative ability, making it difficult for them to form a coherent and complete narrative. However, as an audiovisual medium, film can use images, sounds, narratives, and other means to present traumatic experiences and help individuals construct trauma narratives. In Korean films based on true events, we can often see trauma survivors trying to tell their stories, although this process is full of pain and struggle. For example, *Birthday* (dir. Lee Jong-un, 2019) shows the daily life and psychological state of the families of the victims of the "Sewol Ferry" incident, allowing us to see the lasting impact of trauma on individuals and families, as well as their efforts to seek comfort and healing in pain.

The self-healing of subjectivity plays a crucial role in individual redemption. After experiencing trauma, individuals often feel helpless, desperate, and even lose control of their lives. However, the characters in Korean films based on true events often show strong subjective consciousness. The characters actively strive to overcome the negative impacts of trauma, seeking diverse paths toward self-healing. This healing journey is not linear but fraught with challenges and setbacks. As Herman (2022) emphasizes in Trauma and Recovery, the process of healing from trauma is protracted and demands sustained individual effort. Within these films, characters pursue self-healing through various avenues, such as seeking support from family and friends, engaging in social activities, and accessing psychological counseling. In *Marathon* (dir. Jeong Yoon-chul, 2005), for example, a young man with autism, supported by his mother and coach, challenges himself and achieves self-transcendence through marathon training. This depiction of self-healing not only highlights the characters' agency in navigating their recovery but also serves as a powerful example and source of inspiration for audiences.

Emotional resonance is a key link in individual redemption. Korean films based on true events evoke the audience's empathy through delicate emotional depictions and authentic emotional expressions, enabling the audience to empathize with the characters' pain and struggles and to feel their experiences. This emotional resonance can not only help the audience better understand the impact of trauma but also provide social support for individual redemption. Cathy Caruth (1996), in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, points out that traumatic experiences are often difficult for others to fully understand because trauma is unique and individual. However, film, through its unique audiovisual language and narrative methods, can construct an emotional space, allowing the audience to experience and feel the characters' emotions in this space, thereby achieving emotional resonance that transcends individual differences. The power of this emotional resonance lies in its ability to reconnect individuals isolated by trauma to the social group, making individuals feel that they are not alone, thereby enhancing their confidence and courage to overcome trauma.

Individual redemption and emotional resonance are one of the important paths to "untying Han" in Korean films based on true events. These films show the pain and struggle of individuals after experiencing trauma and their process of achieving emotional transformation and sublimation through the self-healing of subjectivity. At the same time, the films evoke the audience's empathy through delicate emotional depictions and authentic emotional expressions,

thus providing social support for individual redemption. This individual "untying of Han" is not simply forgetting or forgiveness but a deeper and more lasting emotional transformation based on facing the trauma directly, through active self-healing and extensive emotional resonance.

4.2 Social Redemption and Collective Reflection: Historical Reconciliation and the Construction of Social Justice

If individual redemption and emotional resonance focus on the "untying of Han" at the individual level, then social redemption and collective reflection are more concerned with how to achieve "untying of Han" at the social level, that is, how to achieve collective reconciliation by collectively reflecting on history and promoting social justice. Korean films based on true events, while presenting individual destinies and social problems, also actively explore the path of social redemption. This social redemption is not simply forgetting history or suppressing the expression of "Han" but, on the basis of facing historical trauma directly, promoting social reflection and constructing social justice to achieve a broader and deeper collective reconciliation. This process of collective reconciliation is often linked to the concept of "transitional justice," which encompasses a range of judicial and non-judicial measures aimed at redressing past human rights abuses and building a more just and democratic future (Teitel, 2000). By engaging with themes of historical trauma, social injustice, and the pursuit of justice, these films contribute to a broader societal dialogue about the necessary steps towards achieving genuine reconciliation.

Historical reconciliation is an important part of social redemption. As Bloomfield, Barnes, and Huyse (2003) point out in their handbook *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict*, historical reconciliation is a complex process involving coming to terms with past injustices, acknowledging different perspectives on historical events, and building a shared vision for the future. Korean films based on true events provide an opportunity for historical reconciliation by reproducing historical events, especially those that are controversial and traumatic. These films not only allow people to re-examine the past but also prompt people to think about how to build a more just and inclusive society. For example, *May 18* (dir. Kim Ji-hoon, 2007), by presenting the historical scene of the Gwangju Democratization Movement, allows people to remember this history, reflect on the harm of state violence, and consider how to prevent the recurrence of tragedy.

The establishment of social justice is paramount to achieving societal redemption. In *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence*, Minow (1998) highlights the crucial role of transitional justice, arguing that it encompasses not just accountability for past crimes but also multifaceted dimensions including institutional reform, truth-telling, and reparations for victims. Korean films based on true events contribute to the establishment of social justice through their exposure of social problems and critique of social injustices. For example, *Silenced* aroused widespread concern in Korean society about the protection of the rights and interests of children with disabilities and promoted the revision of relevant laws, which can be seen as a manifestation of transitional justice. These films convey a strong signal of pursuing social justice by showing the struggles of victims and the efforts of all sectors of society, and they also provide a realistic path for social redemption.

Collective reflection is a necessary condition for achieving social redemption. Korean films based on true events trigger profound reflections on history and reality by presenting individual and collective traumatic memories. This reflection is not only directed at specific historical events or social problems but also at the culture and national psychology of Korean society. In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Desmond Tutu (2000), taking the social reconciliation after the end of apartheid in South Africa as an example, emphasizes the important role of the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission in promoting collective reflection and achieving social reconciliation. Although South Korea does not have a similar committee, Korean films based on true events play a similar role to a certain extent. They guide the audience to conduct collective reflection by presenting the truth and trauma of history, thereby promoting social reconciliation. The practice of collective reflection, despite its challenges, is fundamental to the sustainable development of Korean society.

Korean films based on true events explore the path toward "untying Han" and the possibility of collective reconciliation, intertwining individual redemption and emotional resonance with social redemption and collective reflection. At the individual level, "untying of Han" is realized through trauma narratives and the self-healing of subjectivity, while emotional resonance provides crucial social support. At the societal level, "untying of Han" necessitates broader historical reconciliation and the establishment of social justice, for which collective reflection serves as a prerequisite. These films contribute to historical reconciliation, facilitate the establishment of social justice, and trigger collective reflection by reproducing historical events, exposing social problems, and portraying the struggles of victims alongside the efforts of various sectors of society. The interweaving of individual and social redemption forms the unique "untying of Han" model in these films. They provide not merely an outlet for emotional catharsis but, more importantly, engage in building a more just and inclusive society through the power of the moving image. As a vital cultural practice, these films not only represent social trauma and construct cinematic memory but also actively explore the path toward "untying Han" and the possibility of collective reconciliation, revealing the complex attitude and redemptive efforts of Korean society when confronting historical trauma. Operating on both individual and societal planes, these films achieve artistic expression while simultaneously participating in the shaping of reality, becoming a significant force in driving social progress.

5. Conclusion

Korean films based on true events, as a distinctive cultural phenomenon, not only occupy a crucial position in Korean cinematic history but also exert a profound influence on Korean society. With "Han" as the emotional core and real events as the narrative framework, they construct cinematic memory, depict the pain of Korean social history, and explore the path toward "untying Han" and the possibility of collective redemption. This study has provided an in-depth analysis of Korean films based on true events, focusing on four key aspects: the construction of cinematic memory, the emotional expression of "Han" and social trauma, the mechanisms through which cinematic memory operates, and the redemptive potential of cinematic memory.

Through the analysis of these films, we can see that they not only have a strong character of realism and social intervention but also have profound artistic appeal and emotional impact. They interweave individual "Han" with social "Han" through underclass narratives and historical reflection, constructing a cinematic memory of "Han." They realize the construction of this cinematic memory through narrative strategies and aesthetic choices such as authentic narrative and social concern, binary opposition, and emotional tension. They explore the path of "untying Han" and the possibility of collective reconciliation by presenting individual redemption and emotional resonance, as well as social redemption and collective reflection.

The uniqueness of Korean films based on true events lies in the fact that they do not simply dwell on the venting of "Han" or the criticism of social problems but, more importantly, try to participate in building a more just and inclusive society through the power of cinematic art. This

effort is reflected at both the individual and social levels. At the individual level, these films help individuals achieve "untying of Han" by showing self-healing and emotional resonance after trauma. At the social level, they promote "untying of Han" and redemption at the collective level by promoting historical reconciliation, constructing social justice, and triggering collective reflection.

Of course, we should also see that the construction and redemption of cinematic memory is a complex and long-term process that cannot be achieved overnight. Although Korean films based on true events offer a possibility, the realization of "untying Han" requires the joint efforts of all sectors of society. In addition, this study mainly focuses on the analysis of film texts, and not enough attention is paid to the production, distribution, and reception of films. Future research can be further expanded from these aspects. For example, queer cinema and feminist cinema can be incorporated into the research field, also further explore the audience's reception and response to these films, as well as the significance and influence of these films in international communication.

In conclusion, Korean films based on true events, as an important cultural practice, not only present social trauma and construct cinematic memory but also actively explore the path of "untying Han" and the possibility of collective reconciliation. They are not only a mirror of Korean society but also a window. Through this window, we can see the complex attitude and redemptive efforts of Korean society in the face of historical trauma, and we can also see the unique role of cinematic art in promoting social progress.

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