

Book Note

Political Moods: Film Melodrama and the Cold War in the Two Koreas by Travis Workman. Oakland: University of California Press, 2023. x, 259 pp.

Scholars and authors have meticulously chronicled the history of South Korean cinema, recently also turning to North Korean cinema. Interestingly, however, few books encompass both film industries within a single volume.¹ To comprehensively acknowledge the political and social transformations on the Korean Peninsula, it is imperative to concurrently evaluate the cinematic directives of both Koreas. Each side often mirrors the other, and separate analyses can lead to misconstrued and erroneous conclusions.

In his latest monograph, *Political Moods: Film Melodrama and the Cold War in the Two Koreas*, Travis Workman explores the “noncomparable” (1) national cinemas of the two Koreas. Both film industries, stemming from the same roots and belonging to “a singular modernity” (1), are interwoven with the same national traditions and identity. The book particularly focuses on the apex of the Cold War era (1950–1960), with a detailed analysis of melodrama—a genre frequently appearing on both sides and influenced by Japanese, Hollywood, Chinese, and European film aesthetics.

1. The first English-language work to analyze the evolution of both South and North Korean cinema was Hyangjin Lee’s *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture, Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). While Lee explores the cinematic landscapes by examining the national identity formulas in both South and North Korea, Workman approaches this through a specific focus on the mode of melodrama, the “body mode” (an embodied and multisensory mode of visual representation) (13), considering its three-dimensional and affective aspects. Workman thus echoes Yi Yeongjun’s haptic realism theory (22), supporting the practice of looking at films as total works of art, rather than just reflections of a certain genre.

As Workman argues, melodrama signifies transnationality, with traces evident in both Koreas' cinemas, thus serving as a cinematic bridge between them. In this way, he highlights more similarities between selected films from both sides rather than emphasizing differences. Moreover, without neglecting "the political differences between a revolutionary state-socialist society and an anticommunist neocolony of the US" (26), he examines the function of the "melodramatic mode" (26) across diverse genres and political systems on the peninsula. While the book is primarily theoretical, it also showcases technical aspects of North Korean film diegesis, such as the meanings of flashbacks and close-ups—focusing on the collective image of the new paradise state and "the body of the sovereign" (44)—and the pedagogical function of scripts (film literature). This is essential, as theory and practice in North Korean filmmaking are inseparable.

Workman deals with North Korean cinema's melodramatic realism in part 1, beginning with the DPRK's first feature film (referred to as an "art film" in North Korean terms), *My Home Village* (*Nae gohyang*, 1949). While Workman's arguments are valid in many respects, the interpretations of the film's documentary footage (47–50, 54) as progressing toward the "way to the hyperreality of myth" (50) can be considered contentious. This is primarily because the original release of the film is not available to contemporary international audiences. Allegedly, the original version contained Soviet military assistance and a soundtrack based on Soviet musical themes, suggesting that archival footage of Kim Il Sung might not have been as emphasized or even included to the same extent as in later releases.

Describing it as "an early classic of North Korean socialist realism" (67), Workman further analyzes *The Newlyweds* (*Sinhon bubu*, 1955), which depicts national reconstruction and socialist industrialization in the post-Korean War era relative to the issue of women entering the workforce. On a broader scale, it presents gender egalitarianism within the family as an allegorical microcosm of the greater socialist community and communal labor. While the technical aspects, such as close-ups and a "symphonic soundtrack" (68), echo Soviet-style socialist realism, the typical Korean and Japanese melodramatic mode is also evident in the heroine's dilemma of navigating public and private spaces. Her initial repressive double burden, "the problem of housewifization" (69) inherited from the Confucian patriarchal system, transforms as she rebels in pursuit of gender equity in the factory and society through the political consciousness of the modernized DPRK (symbolized by her factory uniform), while still fulfilling her loyal housewife role at home (where she wears a *hanbok*). The film epitomizes the clash between the traditional nuclear family in Korea and evolving gender roles within the new modern socialist state, without relying on strict verisimilitude

to convey historical authenticity. Instead, it transforms abstract concepts into idyllic pseudo-realistic forms by crafting emotionally compelling melodramatic sets (70).

Workman also analyzes another iconic North Korean picture, *Return to the Fatherland* (*Joguk euro doraoda*, 1963), which depicts a Gaeseong family and the completion of the Children's Palace. The setting of Gaeseong here functions as a politically charged symbol, not only representing the divided nation but also prominently conveying the definitive and unambiguous victory of socialism (in the DPRK) over the capitalist system (of the ROK). Workman then describes the fusion and partial transition from socialist realism to Juche (subject) realism, which emerged as the dominant political and artistic doctrine of the 1970s, as exemplified in the big screen adaptation of *The Flower Girl* (*Kkot paneun cheonyeo*, 1972). While the character development from naivety to political awareness follows established socialist realist conventions, the larger-than-life aesthetic—emphasizing Kim Jong Il's directive to “aim high in creation”—serves to reinforce the collective mission of liberating the nation from colonial incursion (86). This shift is marked by the innovative use of montage, cinematic milieu, and particularly the operatic Juche soundtrack (*Juche sori*), which diverges from the documentary realism prevalent in earlier works.

Workman rounds out his analysis of North Korean cinema by turning to folklore films, including *The Tale of Heungbu* (1963), *Rim Kkeokjeong* (1987–1989),² *Hong Gildong* (1986), and *Bulgasari* (1985).³ He notes that these films exhibit similar melodramatic moods, characterized by themes of “waiting and late arrival” (91–92). He explores how traditional folklore narratives, initially constrained by their mundane origins, were reconfigured through advancements in technology and narrative techniques during the 1980s, resulting in “new kinds of reflection on history and reality” (93) and capturing the interest of millions of viewers.

While *The Tale of Heungbu* effectively integrates socialist realist values with supernatural elements (98), later adaptations modernize these elements through enhanced visual techniques and technical innovations (101, 105, 108–109). This enhancement astounded North Korean audiences, who were previously unfamiliar with such sophisticated visual effects and narrative techniques, elevating these

2. While Workman cites the release period of the five-episode folklore production as being between 1986 and 1993, North Korean sources suggest it was actually released between 1987 and 1989.

3. Although there are no explicit definitions of Juche realism, socialist realism, or melodramatic realism, Workman effectively addresses these concepts by showcasing melodramatic narratives—including fantastical folk stories—in some of the most prominent North Korean films.

films to the realm of “fantastic entertainment spectacle” (106).

In part 2, Workman examines the melodramatic mode in post-liberation and postwar South Korean films, focusing on historical references to the “lost object” (117–118), the nation, authentic Korean identity, and the aspiration for a unified territory. The analyzed films—including *Hurray! for Freedom* (*Jayu manse*, 1946), *A Hometown in the Heart* (*Maeum ui gohyang*, 1949), *Madame Freedom* (*Jayu buin*, 1956), *To the Last Day* (*I saengmyeong dahadorok*, 1960), *The Housemaid* (*Hanyeo*, 1960), *Aimless Bullet* (*Obaltan*, 1961), and *The Empty Dream* (*Chunmong*, 1965)—not only reflect the transformed social roles of men and women and the changing family structure, an “allegorical microcosm” (28, 67) of the national community, but also address Western modernization, national reconstruction, and socialist development. These transformations are attributed to the post-liberation period and the Korean War, resulting in national division and replacement of colonizers (from Japanese to Americans). Additionally, these films echo the collective suffering endured during the colonial period. The search for a lost Korean identity, amid the complexities of “liberation” and national independence, became crucial for the nation and for the reinvention of national cinema in the South. Similar to the North, South Korea produced a variety of genres in the 1950s and 1960s, including musicals, folk stories, comedies, family dramas, horror, fantasy, and war films, but it was melodrama that experienced a golden age during this period.

While “Korean realism” is as abstract as Juche realism, Workman refers to Yi Yeongil, who labels it an “elitist idea of national realism,” and Kim Soyeon, who addresses the strong influence of neorealism (141). The shift from proletarian realism to national realism, incorporating the heavy adaptation of European neorealism and classical Hollywood narratives—such as family dramas, film noir, espionage films, historical epics, and musicals—is clearly detectable in the modern, post-liberation melodramatic style. Workman analyzes this perpetually evolving melodramatic mode, “a poetic mode” (179), in South Korea through various lenses: the image of traumatized Korean families (148), depiction of poverty (159), and portrayal of “the other” in anticommunist productions (164), such as *The Hand of Destiny* (*Unmyeong ui son*, 1954) and the banned *Piagol* (1955). In chapter 6, he further explores the melodramatic mood in the invisible (offscreen) space (178) and experimentation with film aesthetics like visual surrealism, dream visions (188), and the unsettlingly strange and mysterious (197).

Workman uses primary sources from North Korean film critics such as Pak Yeonghwan, Gyeong Ryongil, Kim Rakseop, Kim Jongho, and Kang Ho, as well as South Korean film historians including Yi Yeongil, Kim Soyeon, An Seokju, and

Yi Yeongjun. Consequently, he shows that to comprehensively understand not only the evolution but also political, social, and cultural developments of the two Koreas' national cinemas over the decades, joint evaluations prove to be the most effective and objective approach, rather than analyzing these elements in isolation. The Korean Peninsula serves not only as a living testament to a divided nation, which shapes the contemporary societies on both sides, but also as a space where the North and South develop in tandem. The causes and reflections of these developments have been intertwined since the post-liberation period, as evidenced in the film productions of each era. Both film cultures can and do complement each other, offering divergent interpretations of shared historical contexts. *Political Moods*, which does well to convey this important point, is thus an essential resource for university courses and for the public seeking to discover the cinematic landscape of the two Koreas.

Gabor Sebo
Assistant Professor
Department of Asian Studies
Palacký University Olomouc

