

## Remembering and Forgetting Dictatorial Regimes

### A comparison between Argentinean and Korean Cinema

#### Introduction

History and memory have become controversial public issues in Argentina and Korea. Similar historical events have affected the socio-political development of both countries during the last centuries. After years of authoritarian regimes, the dilemma of remembering/forgetting and defining/redefining the traumatic past has become one of the main themes reflected in contemporary cinema. Through several movies that deal with this issue, I selected three Korean movies: *Peppermint Candy* (1999), *President's Barber* (2004), and *The President's Last Bang* (2005); and three Argentinean movies: *The Official History* (1985), *The Night of Pencils* (1987), and *Kamchatka* (2002).

All these movies selected are fiction. The use of fiction emphasizes how filmmakers reinterpret the history of their own countries and how those interpretations have changed through the process of democratization. The narratives of fiction are more flexible and creative, especially as time progresses.

The purpose of this work is to investigate how the reinterpretations of the dictatorial regimes in the contemporary Argentinean and Korean cinema reflects some of the trends in which collective memories portray these difficult times for the general public. First in this paper I will analyze the Korean and Argentinean movies related to military governments. Then, I will explain how the tonal shift of their narratives reveal different dimensions of collective memory.

## 1. A Comparative Analysis of the Movies

*Peppermint Candy* represents an icon among fictional movies related to the military rule in Korea. It broke the tendency of creating heroes that sacrificed themselves for the nation in order to focus on the private psychological traumas of the military rule<sup>1</sup>. The narrative of the movie was shot in a reverse order. The story starts in 1999 and finishes in 1970. The reverse chronological narrative shows the main character's desire to forget his past although his past continues to haunt him<sup>2</sup>. Making an analogy to the history of Korea, he is leaving the contradiction of forgetting versus remembering a traumatic past. The view of a railroad track and of a moving train is framed between segments. The train is his memory coming back to his past life until discovering the beginning of his traumas. It is interesting to figure out how evil the main character becomes while seeing the chronological time pass from 1970 to 1999. For instance, during the first five chapters he looks like a monster, however in the last two chapters, he looks healthy, happy, and innocent. This shows that his participation as a soldier in the Kwanju massacre permanently destroyed his life.

In *The Official History* the theme of remembering versus forgetting is also presented as the main topic of the movie. Alicia, the main character of the film, a professor of Argentinean history seems to be intrigued about the real identity of her adopted daughter. She became concerned about this issue only after her students put information on the blackboard about missing people. In *Peppermint Candy*, Yong-ho suffers from crisis of masculinity that will end with his suicide. Connecting the historical trauma of the military regimes in Korea, his troubles began in May 1980 when was sent to Kwanju to quell the uprising as a conscripted soldier. The beginning of his crisis had a symbolically representation when he met with Sunim in a restaurant. Sunim said to him that his hands "made me think that you are good person". He looks at his hands, the same hands that have

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<sup>1</sup> Kyung Hyun Kim. *The Resmascilization of Korean Cinema*. Durham: Duke University press, 2004. p.19

<sup>2</sup>Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park. "Peppermint Candy: The Hill not to forget" in Chi-Yun Shin and Julia Stringer eds. *New Korean Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005. p 163

been used to torture people, and touches the legs of Sunim, who will be his future wife. He is no longer the person that Sunim met before the military service. Now, he is becoming a monster. Moreover, in the fourth chapter, he is portrayed as a person who enjoyed torturing, as an evil creature. However, in the fall of 1984 when he tortured a person for the first time he behaved differently. He felt sorry, sad and unhappy.

The *Official History* also describes the psychological crisis of the main character. During the first thirty minutes of the movie, Alicia looks unhappy. Her sadness would disappear at the same time that she would seek for the true past of her adopted daughter. Like Yong-ho, her husband, who is a collaborator, entered in a crisis of masculinity that also ends in a dramatic way (with their separation and economic bankruptcy). In both films, the collaborators, the evils are becoming more and more fragile while the victims are overcoming their crisis.

There are many metaphors for nostalgic references in both films. Two of the most interesting metaphors in *Peppermint Candy* that connect Yong-ho with Sunim, his first love, are the candies and a camera. The peppermint candy symbolizes the pure first love, Sunim. During the second chapter, he went to see her at the hospital and he carried a box of peppermint candies that she gave him fifteen years ago. She gave it to him when he was in the military service and he unintentionally dropped them before going to Kwanju. He symbolically dropped the candies the day that he starts to change. Moreover, the camera is an instrument to capture life's moments and desires. In this case, the camera reflects the inability to photograph the beauty of life. Unlike *Peppermint Candy*, all metaphors in *The Official History* are directly related to the Argentinean history. The first scene of this movie is a raining day in a high school ceremony at the beginning of the year. This scene referred to the myth of Argentinean independence<sup>3</sup> that represents the nostalgia of freedom. Moreover, the daughter of Alicia likes to sing a famous song named "In the Country Called No Remem-

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<sup>3</sup> There is mythological image of the inhabitants of Buenos Aires on May 25, 1810, under a raining waiting for demand the independence of Argentina from the Viceroyalty of La Plata River.

brance"<sup>4</sup>. The act of signing this song several times through the movie is to reflect her desire of wanting to remember her real family.

The third chapter of *Peppermint Candy* is called "Life is beautiful" but nothing seems to be beautiful in his life. He has a frustrated and adulterous marriage. Moreover, he is violent towards his wife and disrespectful to his daughter. The ironic title of the chapter also symbolizes the contrary that life can be ugly. For instance, while he is eating with his lover in a restaurant, he met a man that he used to torture. Following the meeting, in a scene at the restaurant's toilet, he sarcastically said to the victim "life is beautiful, isn't it?". It is interesting that there are no evils and victims as a polarized dichotomy in the movie. In the narrative all are victims of an authoritarian government both oppressors and victims were tortured and persecuted. The effects of the torture lasts not only the under military rule but also after it, "life is not beautiful".

Unlike *Peppermint Candy* and *The Official History*, *The President's Last Bang* and *The Night of Pencils* deal with two controversial specific historical incidents: the assassination of Park Chung-hee and the so-called "night of pencils"<sup>5</sup>. There are no Argentinean movies that deal with the downfall of military governments. Through the history of Argentina, there were no assassinations of important military leaders. For these reasons, these movies only can be compared in terms of their critical responses related to different interpretation of the same historical fact among scholars.

Facts and fiction are quiet confusing in both movies producing some critical responses. For instance, because of the four minutes of documentary footage in *The President's Last Bang*, the movie had to face a lawsuit during 2005. The final decision of the court was that the movie "should

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<sup>4</sup> Personal translation from the original title "En el país de no me acuerdo". The song is from Maria Elena Walsh a famous poet that was persecuted during the military regime.

<sup>5</sup> The "Night of Pencils" was the name of an official political operation between August and October of 1976. During these three months the policy kidnapped several students that participated in the manifestation for the student transportation free ticket in La Plata.

take out the actual footage of the incident"<sup>6</sup>, and also the court ruled that the film is "a distorted and biased account of the president and may dishonor his reputation"<sup>7</sup>. *The Night of Pencils* also deals with controversial responses. For example, on 15 September of 1998, *Página 12*, a leftist newspaper, published an article in which apparently Pablo Diaz, E.R.P.'s militant activist, was not the only survivor. In this article, Emilce Moler, another survivor, said that the students like her had a political project; they were not fighting only for a free transportation student ticket. Moreover, in an interview to Jorge Falcone, the brother of the main character, published in the book "Montoneros" written by Viviana Gorbato, he said: "my sister was not a naive person that only fought for the student free transportation ticket. She was a political militant", and then he also stated "my mother participated in the Youth Peronist political group"<sup>8</sup>.

These two movies also have in common the construction of main characters by using the stereotype of being the victim or being the oppressor. Because *The President's Last Bang* focuses on the entire last night of Park Chung-Hee, the director uses some symbols to show Park's personality and habits. For example, during the last night, he is drinking with young girls, enjoying enka songs, and speaking fluently in Japanese. The director constructs a dehumanizing figure of Park that doesn't explain how he was during the 18 years in power, and why he is still having a kind of legitimacy among scholars as we can observe in Nahm's history book: "in spite of his authoritarian rule, had done so much for the nation"<sup>9</sup>. The director also made a lot of association between Park and Japan to align him with Korea's former colonizers<sup>10</sup>. In *The Night of Pencils* the seven main

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<sup>6</sup> Kim Tae-Jung. "Court Orders President's Last Bang to be edited" in *The Korea Times*, 01/31/2005. Online: <http://times.hankooki.com>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Gorbato, Viviana. *Montoneros: Soldiers of Menem, Soldiers of Duhalde* (Montoneros, Soldados de Menem, Soldados de Duhalde). Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1999. p 96

<sup>9</sup> Nahm, Andrew. *A History of the Korean People*. Korea: Hollym Publishers, 1996, p.431

<sup>10</sup> Despite Park Chung-Hee joined the Japanese military and was trained at an officers' school in Japan, he was speaking Japanese as many Koreans who grown up under the colonial Japanese rule. This characteristic is not enough to support the claim that he was pro-Japan.

victims<sup>11</sup> are portrayed as completely innocent people who really are ignorant of the political situation of the country. They only talk about the student free transportation ticket without referring to their participation in political groups. To reinforce this idea, the last scene is a picture of two unknown young students and a legend that said "the student free transportation ticket is still working on La Plata". It seems that the military rulers were only looking for them because of their demands about the ticket unlike because of their political activities in clandestine groups.

Regarding the main theme of *The President's Last Bang*, there is still a huge debate about the reasons that the KCIA's head decided to kill the president. According to Bruce Cummings, on October 1979 leaders of the military junta discussed the possibility of decompression of the Yusin dictatorship in order to calm down the social disorder. As well, other scholars argue that the Yusin system had increased his authoritarian power, so, "by the late 1970s Park had become somewhat isolated, even from his own supporters"<sup>12</sup>. Even though the movie portrayed the discontent among the military leaders, it focused more on the KCIA head's dream of a democratic South Korea. This dream is represented in several examples such as when he said at the trial "for democracy we offer our life". Also, the movie starts with a legend that said "on October 1979 students and civilians call for democracy and protest Park's oppressive rule". Moreover, in the last dinner of Park, the president talks about students' demonstrations. During this conversation, Kim showed a more democratic perspective about the situation when Cha commented "give a lesson to Kim Young-Sam" and he replied "shut up". Therefore, through the movie, the director reinforces the idea of the struggle between democracy and authoritarian regimes.

*The President's Barber* and *Kamchatka* portrayed the consequences of military governments through the eyes of the sons of the main characters, both children. Unlike the other movies analyzed

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<sup>11</sup> In the movie the seven students used the same name that the students have in reality. All are quiet famous political activists and their names are: Pablo Diaz, Maria Claudia Falcone, Horacio Húngaro, Claudio de Acha, Panchito Lopez Muñanec, Daniel Racero, and Maria Clara Ciochini.

<sup>12</sup> Carter Eckert, eds. *Korea Old and New History*. Korea: Ilchokak Publishers, 1999. p. 370

here, these films don't focus on people directly involved in the authoritarian regime. For instance, the main characters of *The President's Barber*, the barber and his son, are completely apolitical people. Although the barber has a painting of Park Chung-hee in his shop, he is not a political activist. He put the picture there because he lived in front of the blue house and he thinks that he should respect the president no matter who the president is. His character reflects the everyday people that played an important role in the legitimization of Park's government. Another example that portrayed the barber's disinterest for the socio-political situation of Korea is the day that his son was born. His wife was going to give birth on the same day that a huge manifestation against the government was taking place on the street of their shop<sup>13</sup>. So, the barber and his wife were passing through the activists in order to go to the hospital. He and his wife didn't know what was going on, for example she asked him "what is this? Get over here". The case of *Kamchatka* is quite different because the parents in the movie are political activists. However, the director focuses only on the sons' lives in a countryside house where they are surviving as refugees.

Like all movies studied in this paper, *The President's Barber* and *Kamchatka* use a lot of metaphors related to the political situation of their respective countries. In the last twist of *Kamchatka*, the father gave his son the famous game TEG (War's Tactic and Strategy). This game was often played by the son and father. During the last time that they played together, the son won for the first time. He won because he could resist his father's invasion to Kamchatka. The country in the game symbolized, like the son said by the end of the movie, "resistance". The underlying argument is that the son in the future should resist authoritarian governments like his parents did.

The main point of comparing *Kamchatka* and *The President's Barber* is to show that the effects of suffering military governments are still affecting the society. In the case of *Kamchatka* the consequences are stronger because the children lost their parents during that period. In *The President's Barber* the effects of the past are presented in a more positive perspective. Although the bar-

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<sup>13</sup> According to the movie the baby was born on April 19, 1960. In reality, on this day a enormous crowd of students and young people went to the president palace and demanded to see Rhee. The regular army fired into the demonstrator to stifle it

ber's son suffered from torture, he could recover as soon as Park was assassinated. The perception of the children in Kamchatka and *The President's Barber* are quite different because their parents were not involved in the regime in the same way.

Among several analogies that appear in *The President's Barber*, the argument that the barber used to convince his wife to have the baby is quite interesting. He compared the situation of his wife with the demands against the government. On one hand, she should have the baby because "the law said this". He seems to be familiar with following rules without thinking, similar to the main objective of oppressive governments. On the other hand, he said that she should give birth to the baby because of the "Plus Five". The argument is related to the Five Amendments of the constitution used for the political groups against the government in that period. Moreover, the most original aspect of these movies is the use of comedy for portraying metaphors. By using humor, controversial and traumatic historical facts are expressed and reinterpreted such as, the torture of the barber's son, and the barber misunderstanding of the president's official messenger about punishment to people who have diarrhea<sup>14</sup>.

Unlike *Kamchatka*, the main characters of *The President's Barber* feel quite confused about Park's regime. They are not completely sad neither totally happy. For example, when the barber is invited to work for the president, he feels proud. However, by the end of the movie, when an official offers him work for the new president, he said "no" because he wants to be free. Furthermore, when he went to Park's funeral he looked sad and unhappy, but when he came back and saw his son sitting and watching other children playing soccer because he cannot play after the tortures, he became quite angry. Finally, the mixing of these feelings will end when his son will work again thanks to a remedy made with an eye of Park's picture. Metaphorically, this means to say that only with the end of an authoritarian government, people can walk again and feel free.

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<sup>14</sup> After spies from North Korea were found, the government decided to punish under the Martial Law all infected by the so-called Marxius Disease. Of course, the government use the word diarrhea or disease in political terms not as a physical natural problem as the barber understood.

Another interested point is how most of the movies portrayed torture of political activists and also apolitical people. For instance, in *The President's Last Bang*, the director shows how one person is tortured because he had a Picassos painting in his house. When the officials were torturing him, they ask "don't you know that Picasso was from the Spanish Communist Party?". In *The Night of Pencils*, the seven students are portrayed as people who were not really involved in politics. This theme of torturing innocent people is also presented in *The Official History*, when Ana said to Alicia that she was tortured because she used to have a communist boyfriend, in *Kamchatka*, when the father told his son that if he likes his friends, he cannot call them because everybody's life would be at risk. Another example is in *The President Last Barber*, when the barber's son is tortured. The main theme of how authoritarian governments torture innocent people, highlights that oppressive regimes affect every citizen of these governments.

As I analyzed in this section, all these narratives reflect different approaches to the authoritarian governments. According to Jeffrey Olick, social actors such as filmmakers are caught in webs of meaning that they all participate in creating. Therefore, there is no real truth in those films not only because they are fiction but also because they are subject of personal experiences and perceptions of the past that reflect some of the trends in which collective memories are portrayed. These different perceptions are evidently presented in *Peppermint Candy* and *President's Barber*. Furthermore, a cultural history is not something static and unchangeable. It is taken and reinterpreted, like filmmakers did, in each act of cultural consumption done in their daily lives<sup>15</sup> such as the director portrayed in *The President's Last Bang*.

## **2. The Construction of Collective Memory**

All movies discussed here shift the terms of debating the consequences of authoritarian governments in different ways. The different stages of a political system such how democracy shaped

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<sup>15</sup> De Certau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. California: University of California Press, 2002, pXiii

the way in which these histories are made and understood. These transformations are revealed in the narratives of the movies. For example, the narrative of the two Argentinean films close to the beginning of the democratization, *The Official History* and *The Night of Pencils*, are promoting leftist propaganda rather than critically analyzing the past. Even though these movies were shot during the democratization of the country, they were not portraying diversity opinions. Both are still involved in the ideological conflict of leftist versus rightist that characterized these authoritarian regimes. The three Korean movies described above also represented a shift in their reinterpretation of the past. For instance, unlike *The President's Barber*, *Peppermint Candy* describes the process of dehumanization that occurred while living under an authoritarian government. While *Peppermint Candy* reflects how everyone suffered under a military system, and how the consequences of the official oppression destroyed the lives of people forever. *The President's Barber* presents a more controversial perception because later movies even challenge the leftist discourse. In this movie there are no permanent psychological consequences, for example, as soon as Park Chung-hee was assassinated the barber's son could start to walk again.

The diversity of perspectives is not only related to the progress of time but also to the consumption of cultural history. The interaction between consumers (audience) and producers (filmmakers) of movies enable them to create an interpretative community that shapes the mode of acquisition<sup>16</sup> of movies. Under these dynamics, directors as consumers of cultural history shift into producers of culture and collective memory. The process of consumption redefines the role of memory as "one component in a complex and shifting amalgam of perceptions that form the persuasive and permanent, though ever-changing, historicity of the world"<sup>17</sup>. The theme of this argument is that collective memory as portrayed in movies enables memory-makers such as directors to proliferate the diversity of one memory among societies, like *Peppermint Candy's* reconstruction of the

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<sup>16</sup> "Modes of acquisition" is a Bourdieu's concept. According to him, the manner of consuming which creates the object of consumption is the process by which vulgar artifacts is abandoned and transformed into a distinguished and distinctive works of culture.

<sup>17</sup> Olick, Jeffrey. *States of Memory*. Duke University Press, 2003, p.2

past compared with *The President's Barber*. However, the directors are not always successful in creating the images that they want in the public because the audience also has the capability of reinterpreting the movies as shown in the critical responses to *The President's Last Bang* and *The Night of Pencils*.

## **Conclusion**

By focusing on the selected films and analyzing their themes and narrative approaches, this paper explains through interpretation of the authoritarian regimes in Korean and Argentinean, that contemporary cinema reflects some of the trends in which collective memory portrays these difficult and traumatic events for the public. Those interpretations have shifted through the process of democratization as we can observe in the way that these themes are approached in *Peppermint Candy* and *The President's Barber* or in *The Night of Pencils* and *Kamchatka*. Even though Korean as well as Argentinean movies have changed as times of democratization progress, Korean movies represent more diverse perspectives and reinterpretations of the past. Unlike Koreans films, Argentinean movies are still immersed in the logic of evil governments versus victims. All Argentinean movies analyzed here focus on the people who disappear while the Korean movies deal with different issues such as the experiences lived by common people (*The President's Barber*), the interpretation of controversial historical incidents (*The President's Last Bang*) and the traumas of collaborators (*Peppermint Candy*). In other words, the diversity of perspectives reflected in the Korean cinema indicates the confidence of Koreans that democratization has succeeded.

In addition, the comparison made between the Argentinean and Korean movies contribute to the understanding of how similar political traumas are perceived in different cultures. Despite the different dimensions of the reinvented past that are depicted in both the countries' movies, are concerned about remembering the psychological and social consequences of living under military regimes. Their narratives shaped in fictional stories play a powerful role among young generations of

people who have grown up under democratic governments. For that reason, the struggle between remembering and forgetting is a parallel theme in both societies and their contemporary cinema.

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## **Filmography**

### Korean movies:

Lee Chang-dong - Peppermint Candy (1999) –

Im Chan-sang - The President's Barber (2004) -

Im Sang-su - The President Last's Bang (2005) –

Argentinean Movies:

Luis Puenzo - The Official History – La Historia Oficial (1985) –

Héctor Olivera - The Night of Pencils - La Noche de los Lápices (1987) –

Marcelo Piñeyro – Kamchatka (2002) –