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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Down and Out in Eco-Dystopia: Class and Gender in *Wonderful Days*

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## Abstract

*The film Wonderful Days plays out in a science fiction setting the history of Korea's struggle against dictatorial rule. The plot concerns an attempt to end the exploitation of the oppressed workers. However, the symbolism is muddled and confused because of the reactionary approach to gender. The symbol of the Korean middle class and only female character is a passive observer, which elides the crucial role of the middle class in the struggle against dictatorship. By succumbing to gender roles typical of Korean romantic dramas, the film fails at effectively dramatizing Korean class conflict in its futuristic post-apocalyptic setting. This article brings history into the analysis of this film and by extension to analysis of science fiction and film overall. It offers an example of the integration of historical analysis into scholarly work on popular film.*

## Keywords

Korean film, gender, class, *Wonderful Days*, science fiction

## Article history

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## Introduction

*Wonderful Days* (원더풀 데이즈) is a 2003 South Korean science fiction anime-style film. Though it carries a heavy-handed environmental message wrapped around an unconvincing and underdeveloped love triangle, the film can tell us something about South Korean attitudes toward class conflict on the one hand and toward women on the other. Positing a scientifically-advanced, Edenic “living city” surrounded by wastelands destroyed by environmental degradation, *Wonderful Days* plays out in a science fiction setting the history of Korean labour’s struggle against violently oppressive dictatorial rule backed by the wealthy. The inhabitants of the city live in a state of comfort that can only be sustained by ruining the surrounding environment, which is populated by a disempowered underclass of manual labourers held in check by a ruthless security force. The protagonist of the film seeks to destroy the city’s source of power and bring about equality, while the antagonists attempt to thwart the plot and maintain their superior status and their lives of luxury. However, as with the actual Korean labour movement, the film’s symbolism is muddled and confused because of its reactionary approach to gender. It reduces its symbol of the Korean middle class—Jay, the security forces officer who is its only female character—to a passive observer and in so doing elides the crucial role of the middle class in the struggle against dictatorship. By succumbing to gender roles typical of Korean romantic dramas, *Wonderful Days* gets in the way of its own message and thus fails at effectively dramatizing Korean class conflict in its futuristic post-apocalyptic setting.

Because the film was not widely seen, it would be well to briefly limn the setting and plot. A prologue informs us that the year is AD 2142. After an unspecified

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1. Kim Sae-hoon, “*Wöndölp’ül teijü* munjejöm punsök ül t’onghan Han’guk changp’yön aenimeisyön üi kaesön pang’an [A Study Analyzing the Successes and Failures of *Wonderful Days*, Offering a Plan for Improving Korean Feature-Length Animated Film],” *Aenimeisyön yön’gu* 3, no. 2 (December 2007): 13-14; Lee Jong Han, “*Wöndölp’ül teijü* üi sösa chön’gae e isö ünuyöök tosang kihohwansang kwa p’aet’ön e kwanhan yön’gu [A Semiotics Narrative Structural Study of Images in *Wonderful Days*],” *Chohyöng mediöhak* 9, no. 2 (November 2006): 105-106; Su-hyun Park, “Aenimeisyön p’üllo chön’gae pangsik e taehan pigyo punsök—*Param kyegok* üi *Nausik’a wa Wöndölp’ül teijü* rül chungsimüro [A Comparative Analysis of Plot Development in *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* and *Wonderful Days*],” *Han’guk aenimeisyön haehoe haksul taehoeji*, (December 2006): 43-44.

2. Park KiSoo, “*Wöndölp’ül teijü* sösa üi t’üksöng yön’gu [A Study on the Properties of *Wonderful Days*],” *Korean Language and Literature in International Context* 29 (December 2003): 397, 400, 403-406, 414.

3. Daniel Martin. “How *Wonderful Days* Became *Sky Blue*: The Transnational Circulation of South Korean Animation.” *Acta Koreana* 14, no. 1 (2011): 140, 144-145.

4. Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient, “Interethnic Romance and Political Reconciliation in *Asako in Ruby Shoes*,” in *New Korean Cinema*, edited by Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 199-201; Daniel Martin, “South Korean Cinema’s Postwar Pain: Gender and National Division in Korean War Films from the 1950s to the 2000s,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 19, no. 1 (2014): 99; Jane Chi Hyun Park, “Sassy Girls: A Transnational Reading of the Monstrous Girlfriend in South Korea, India, and the United States,” in *Pop Empires: Transnational and Diasporic Flows of India and Korea*, edited by Sharon Heijin Lee et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2019), 232-233; Chi-Yun Shin, “Two of a Kind: Gender and Friendship in *Friends* and *Take Care of My Cat*,” in *New Korean Cinema*, edited by Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 117-131; Gina Yu, “Images of Women in Korean Movies” in *Korean Cinema: From Origins to Renaissance*, edited by Kim Mee hyun (Seoul: CommBooks, 2007), 261.

apocalypse, the inhabitants of the technologically-advanced futuristic city of Ecoban live lives of ease and plenty made possible by the DELOS system, a technology that generates energy from environmental pollution, which is reportedly rampant. Outside the city but in service of it are the Marrians, so-called because they are required to live in a squalid shantytown known as Marr. The film tells the story of Shua, an exiled Ecoban resident who lives among the Marrians as part of the Hot Dog gang, an outlaw group that ostensibly seeks to destroy DELOS and end Ecoban’s tyranny. His mentor and ally is none other than the creator of DELOS, Dr Noah, who ten years’ prior turned against Ecoban because of its hoarding of resources and exploitative treatment of the Marrians. Shua’s efforts cause the antagonist, known only as the Adjutant, to order the destruction of Marr to forestall its inhabitants’ rebellion, provide a massive pollution boost, and eliminate Noah and thereby prevent him from destroying DELOS. Shua must now complete his task before Marr is destroyed, with the additional complication that his childhood friends Jay and Simon are Ecoban security officers dedicated to protecting Ecoban.

In part due to its catastrophic failure both at the domestic box office and internationally, *Wonderful Days* has not brought much scholarly attention in either Korean- or English-language scholarship. Film scholars in Korea focused on discerning why the film, at the time the most ambitious, expensive, and anticipated film in the history of Korean animation, failed so spectacularly.<sup>1</sup> Park KiSoo’s critique is perhaps the most scathing, calling the film’s characters and linear narrative a simplistic, overly-familiar good versus evil dichotomy. Jay as a character never comes into focus because the narrative does not have sufficient space for the three central characters to develop, and its unclear metaphorical aspects constrain it into a simple love story and good/evil conflict rather than a struggle between different groups seeking to restore or preserve the decimated environment.<sup>2</sup> Daniel Martin examined the place of *Wonderful Days* in the reception of Korean animation, particularly abroad. He argues that, despite the filmmakers’ deliberate avoidance of overt markers of Koreanness (to better appeal to international audiences), the film evokes Korean melodrama in its story and characters, particularly the central love triangle: Jay struggles to choose a lover between the lower-class (and therefore “good”) Shua and the high-status (therefore “bad”) Simon, both of whom just so happen to be Jay’s childhood playmates.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the film is fundamentally at odds with itself, desperate to shed its Koreanness yet thoroughly Korean at its core in a way its creators did not intend or even recognize.

This article builds on this existing work. I do not disagree that the film’s narrative, and especially its love story, is disconnected from its metaphorical reading. In fact, I argue that it actively *acts against* that reading. Martin’s insight that the movie is fundamentally at odds with itself, aggressively shedding outward markers of Koreanness while remaining constrained by Korean storytelling conventions, is spot on. Where I depart is, in the case of Park KiSoo and other Korean critics, on the question of what the metaphor is; I argue it is class conflict rather than environmentalism. For Martin, I extend his contention that the movie is at odds with itself, but in another respect. Park KiSoo is right that the narrative lacks space for all three characters but does not go further to ask which of the three is given short shrift, and why. The answer to the first question is Jay, and I argue the answer to the second question is that she is the woman member of the love triangle and thus, as was conventional in Korean drama of the time, the one whose role is passive, truncated, and overlooked.<sup>4</sup> Her gender marks her as one who cannot be the protagonist, so she is forced out of this role in favour of

5. Eunju Chi and Hyeok Yong Kwon, "Unequal New Democracies in East Asia: Rising Inequality and Government Responses in South Korea and Taiwan," *Asian Survey* 52, no. 5 (2012): 905-907.

6. Nancy Abelmann, "Women's Class Mobility and Identities in South Korea: A Gendered, Transnational, Narrative Approach," *Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 2 (1997): 404.

7. Chi and Kwon, "Unequal New Democracies", 913, 921.

8. Hwang Gyu-Jin, "Explaining Welfare State Adaptation in East Asia: The Cases of Japan, Korea and Taiwan," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 40, no. 2 (2012): 192; Hyun-Chin Lim and Suk-Man Hwang, "'A New Wine in a New Bottle?': The Social and Political Realignment under Restructuring in South Korea," *Journal of International and Area Studies* 8, no. 1 (2001): 5; Nam Eun Young, "Social Risks and Class Identification after the Financial Crisis in Korea," *Development and Society* 42, no. 2 (2013): 242, 255.

9. Ko Eunmi, "Changes in Wage Differentials among College Graduates in South Korea, 1998-2008," *Korean Journal of Labor Economics* 34, no. 1 (2011): 119.

10. Ji-Whan Yun, "Labour Market Polarization in South Korea: The Role of Policy Failures in Growing Inequality," *Asian Survey* 49, no. 2 (2009): 277-279.

11. Nam, "Social Risks and Class Identification," 242; Ji-Whan Yun, "The Myth of Confucian Capitalism in South Korea: Overworked Elderly and Underworked Youth," *Pacific Affairs* 83, no. 2 (2010): 238.

12. Hong Doo-Seung, "Social Change and Stratification," *Social Indicators Research* 62 and 63 (2003): 47-48; Nam, "Social Risks and Class Identification," 239.

13. Lim and Hwang, "'A New Wine in a New Bottle,'" 6-8.

14. Carter J. Eckert, "The South Korean Bourgeoisie: A Class in Search of Hegemony," *The Journal of Korean Studies* 7 (1990), 116.

15. Eckert, "South Korean Bourgeoisie," 133, 138-139, 147.

16. Eckert, "South Korean Bourgeoisie," 130.

Shua, despite his inappropriateness both narratively and metaphorically. While the metaphor of Korean class conflict demands that Jay be the linchpin of the story, her place in typical Korean love triangles sabotages her ability to play this role, fatally weakening both the story and the metaphor.

### **Class, Dictatorship, and the Bourgeoisie: Korea during the Production of *Wonderful Days***

Few deny that the "Miracle on the Han"—the rapid growth of the South Korean economy in the 1960s and 1970s that took the country from one of the world's poorest to one of its richest—is a monumental success story that greatly increased the quality of life for all Koreans. This rapid development led to a strong belief in the possibility of upward social mobility, and income inequality remained relatively low until the late 1990s. The 1997 Asian financial crisis threw water on the Korean economy and booming cultural industry,<sup>5</sup> precisely when *Wonderful Days* began production. Throughout that decade, there emerged "increasingly visible class distinctions and fixed class subcultures [that] contributed to a growing sense of limited mobility horizons, challenging the long-standing developmentalist ideologies of open mobility".<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the 1997 crisis (usually referred to as "the IMF crisis" in Korea), the most jarring economic event to hit South Korea in its history exercised a profound influence on *Wonderful Days*. The Korean economy recovered relatively quickly, but other effects touched off by the crisis continued to reverberate throughout the time the film was being made. Neoliberalist reforms enacted in response to the crisis stimulated a spike in poverty and a continuing trend of rising inequality, strengthening capital and weakening labour.<sup>7</sup> Measures to lower unemployment were effective, but most of the created jobs were temporary, significantly lower-paying, and lacking in stability and benefits,<sup>8</sup> and the post-crisis restructuring left the giant conglomerates in an even stronger and more dominant position despite being carried out under the auspices of a progressive government.<sup>9</sup> Leftist president Kim Dae Jung (in office from 1998 to 2002) expanded programs to help struggling workers even as his government went on the offensive against workers' unions.<sup>10</sup> Unemployment for young workers rose while those over age 65 were forced to return to the work force, mostly in low-paying positions with little job security since Korea's weak social safety net means becoming unemployed can readily result in poverty.<sup>11</sup> The percentage of Koreans claiming middle class status dropped from 60% in 1994 to 54.9% in 1999, while that of those claiming lower class status rose from 38% to 44%.<sup>12</sup> Hyun-Chin Lim and Suk-Man Hwang described Korea in the wake of these reforms as "in the throes of drastic class differentiation generated by neo-liberal structural adjustment".<sup>13</sup>

These conditions exacerbated the existing tense relations between rich and poor, which are deeply rooted in South Korean history. The capitalist class has weak legitimacy as it is "estranged from the very society in which it continues to grow."<sup>14</sup> Many wealthy families were slave-holders in pre-modern Korea, while bourgeois collaboration for personal gain with first Japanese colonizers and then with successive Korean dictatorships further tarnished the capitalist class.<sup>15</sup> There is little love for giant conglomerates like LG and Samsung among the public, despite their disproportionate role in the economy and the prestige of securing employment with them. Rather, businessmen are seen as prone to fraud and exploitation, "surrounded by an aura of public disapproval and illegitimacy."<sup>16</sup> This antipathy is mutual, as the bourgeoisie have done little to get the other economic classes on board with the capitalist project, instead focusing on their own

17. Eckert, "South Korean Bourgeoisie," 131.

18. Kong Tat Yan, "Labor and Neo-Liberal Globalization in South Korea and Taiwan," *Modern Asian Studies* 39, no. 1 (2005), 178; Nam, "Social Risks and Class Identification," 243.

19. Eckert, "South Korean Bourgeoisie," 123.

20. Seung Hyun Park, "Film Censorship and Political Legitimation in South Korea, 1987-1992," *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 1 (2002): 128-132.

21. Kang Chun-man, *Han'guk hyōndaesa sanch'aek 1980tae: Kwangju haksal kwa Sōul Ollimp'ik* vol. III [*Strolling Through Modern Korean History, the 1980s: The Kwangju Massacre and the Seoul Olympics*] (Seoul: Inmul kwa sasangsa, 2003), 159-160; Hae-Yung Song, "Democracy against Labor: The Dialectic of Democratization and De-democratization in Korea," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 2, (2013): 343.

22. See, for example, the contemporary dramas *Dae Jang Geum* and *Winter Sonata* and Cannes Grand Prix winner *Oldboy*, among others.

interests.<sup>17</sup> Still, the middle class so highly values its separation from the lower classes that self-identification as "middle class" is wildly different from people's actual class status, with many more claiming to be middle class than those who actually are. Further, the middle class only supports workers' demands from the upper class the middle class deems "reasonable".<sup>18</sup>

The state did its part to facilitate divisive class relations as well, by cracking down on unions to keep wages low and hours worked high and making it illegal for college students to work as manual labourers, blocking the forging of relationships between the middle class and workers' unions. Though the government has the power to rein in the conglomerates through its control of the banks, no administration has yet had the will.<sup>19</sup> Historically this stems from the fact that from its inception in 1948 to the first free elections held in 1987, South Korea was held in the grip of a right-wing (usually military) dictatorship that had no desire to protect workers from the conglomerates. Apart from the two brief democratic intervals between dictators—lasting barely a year combined—Syngman Rhee, Park Chung Hee, and Chun Doo Hwan wielded their enormous powers to keep wealthy capitalists in charge and the workers in their place. Park's economic reforms throughout the 1960s and 1970s spurred spectacular economic development that turned Korea from one of the world's poorest to one of the world's richest countries. Yet economic prosperity was not accompanied by liberalizing government. Instead, Park had to tighten his grip and use ever-increasing levels of violence to maintain his model of highly productive, poorly paid labour whose productivity fuelled massive growth. Almost immediately upon seizing power, Chun Doo Hwan sent troops to crush nonviolent protestors in the city of Kwangju in May of 1980—the infamous Kwangju Massacre. News of the act was strongly controlled, but rumours leaked and people talked. By 1987 the Korean people had had enough. That year, Chun announced he would keep his promise to step down, adding that his replacement would be his former military subordinate, Roh Tae Woo. Not fooled by Chun's transparent attempt to continue ruling from behind the scenes, the Korean middle class—though, pointedly, not businesspeople—took to the streets en masse, ensuring Roh could not take power without a bloodbath. Chun and Roh relented and allowed free elections, ending the dictatorship for good.

Film too was harnessed to the developmental project. The dictators strongly censored Korean cinema until 1989, banning any systemic criticism of life in South Korea. Even the early democratic governments continued a milder form of censorship, such that only about half of the films produced from 1988 to 1992 were approved for release. One of the taboo subjects for the censors was, unsurprisingly, labour relations. 1989's *Guro Arirang* explores the lives of young female factory workers who are portrayed as undereducated, overworked, and trapped in poverty. The film includes a love story symbolizing the unity of workers and student activists. It was heavily censored to neuter its criticisms of labour conditions and, like *Wonderful Days*, was both a critical and commercial failure; another film dealing with labour relations would not be released for almost six years after *Guro Arirang*.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, tackling labour relations and class conflict head on was a risky proposition in the early years after the dictatorship fell. *Wonderful Days* represented an opportunity to do so behind the cloak of a science-fiction, ostensibly non-Korea setting.

### **That *Wonderful Days* is Almost a Metaphor of Class Conflict in Korea**

It is against this backdrop of rising inequality and economic uncertainty that *Wonderful Days* was produced. With a protracted seven-year development, the



film's production period spanned the 1997 crisis, the weakening of the middle class, the presidency of Kim Dae Jung and its confirmation of the robustness of Korea's democracy, and uncertainty about the future of Korea. It is not surprising, then, that a big-budget science fiction film would feature gross economic inequality, class conflict, victimization of workers, the end of an unpopular exploitative system, and police as villainous protectors of the status quo who are indifferent to the suffering they inflict in the name of peace. *Wonderful Days* can be seen a metaphorical reading of the end of the dictatorship inflicted with the prevailing conditions of the period in which it was made. Shua and the Hot Dog Gang represent the oppressed workers whom we are shown suffering murderous violence at the hands of the Adjutant for the profit of Ecoban, whose residents are never shown doing anything productive. This is made clear in the film's opening scene, wherein an accident at a Marrian work site poses a danger to Ecoban. The Adjutant callously orders a worker to take extreme measures to eliminate the danger, unconcerned that these measures will kill many workers at the site. He, in turn, represents the dictators, with Simon as the police and military who prioritize order and stability for the city's contented residents over even the very lives of the workers. Dr Noah stands for the intellectuals who abandoned the establishment to stand up for the workers and were punished for it. Jay is the middle class around whom the central conflict pivots—or at least *should*.

This opening scene sets the pattern for how the movie treats Jay. When the worker refuses the order to cause the deaths of his fellows, the Adjutant orders Jay to kill him. She also refuses. The Adjutant then kills the worker himself and orders another worker to carry out the task. The scene ends with the Adjutant admonishing Jay for not obeying his orders, and Jay offers no response. The film seems to be establishing Jay and the Adjutant in opposition, both to drive the narrative and to set up Jay-as-the-middle-class on her journey to joining with the exploited workers against the dictatorship. Yet she is entirely passive, her sole contribution being what she does *not* do and her only explanation being “it's not [her] job”. The next scene focuses entirely on Jay as she rides alone through the ruins outside the city on her futuristic motorcycle, one of three extended “Jay riding silently alone” sequences in the film. She narrates the sad story of the creation of Ecoban and the conflict between the Marrians (workers, called “Diggers” in the international cut of the film to make their function in the story even more explicit) and the residents of Ecoban (the upper and middle classes who do no manual labour but benefit from that of others).

One could be forgiven, then, for believing, as this author did, that Jay is the film's protagonist. Its first two scenes focus entirely on her, she delivers its opening narration, and she openly defies (if only through inaction) the antagonist in the latter's first appearance. But from this point she is shunted aside for the film to focus primarily on Shua and his (and only his) antagonistic relationship with Simon. This is a critical mistake, because Shua is the only character of the central three that has no journey to go on, no learning to do. When we first meet him, he is already fighting the good fight, striking against Ecoban and trying to bring it down, and never does he waver from this goal. He is exiled from Ecoban through the deceit of Simon, not through any action of his own (closing off any sort of redemption arc). He does not lament his exile, nor is he ever tempted to put aside his rage at the inequality and the injustice of the city in exchange for leaving behind poverty and returning to a life of wealth and comfort. He refuses to take part in a Hot Dog robbery of Ecoban supplies because he believes the gang

is only using the revolution as cover for their theft, so he does not even take the Han Solo journey from scoundrel to revolutionary.

We are introduced to Shua in the midst of his first attempt to sabotage the city. How he infiltrated the city is not explained, and he comes remarkably close to succeeding in his task (including defeating Jay in hand-to-hand combat) before Ecoban security finally manage to chase him away. The film's climax has him using his custom-built glider to enter Ecoban in secret to deliver the MacGuffin that will bring down Ecoban—essentially the same thing he was doing when he first appeared—while Jay, who has lived in Ecoban her entire life and has dedicated herself to protecting it, does not even attempt to dissuade him from destroying her home. Shua does not grow or change in any way, not even by Jay's death or the accomplishment of his lifelong goal, as far as we can tell from the film (which ends with the destruction of Ecoban, Shua nowhere in sight). He is exactly where we left him, despite his being the primary driver of the plot and the character with whom we spend the most screen time. This is fatal to the film not only from a storytelling perspective—a protagonist who wants to do the right thing for the right reasons, then does it, then disappears before the film's ending is not very compelling—but from a metaphorical reading of the film's depiction of class conflict as well. It was not the working class who ended the dictatorship, since a country as firmly and fiercely anti-communist as South Korea rendered a worker's revolution nearly impossible, but the middle class, represented by Jay. It was only when the middle class joined the almost daily student demonstrations that Chun Doo Hwan and his crony Roh Tae-woo were forced to give up power and allow free elections.<sup>21</sup> Yet Jay, reduced by gendered storytelling conventions to the twin fates of passivity and supporting the main (male) character, is robbed of her agency, which in turn erases the middle class's driving role in real history from the film's metaphorical take.

The harm done by Jay's loss of her place due to those conventions is actually worse than I have laid out so far. That is, it is not strictly true that Shua never wavers in his commitment to destroying Ecoban. Early in the film Dr Noah cajoles him to use his glider against the city as he ultimately does in the film's climax, but he refuses for reasons that are not given. It is not until Jay rejects Ecoban and leaves the city to be with Shua that he is finally motivated to start his final journey, a clear illustration of the trope that a woman's role in a story is to spur a man to action. In reality, it is *Jay's* decision to act against Ecoban that is the true climax of the film—Jay/the middle class rejects the dictatorship—with the subsequent destruction of the city being the dénouement, but the filmmakers, focused on the conflict between the two men, seem not to realize it. Jay and Shua spend the night together, and the next morning Shua, alone, takes his glider into the city for a final assault on Ecoban, an assault Jay is not invited to be a part of or even told about. Jay's role is not to act but to inspire *men* to act. Shua launches the final struggle against Ecoban alone. It does not seem to occur to him to partner with Jay, a trained security officer who has lived in the city her entire life and so might know how best to penetrate its security. Instead, having been duly inspired by Jay's wordless inaction, he leaves her behind to do *What a Man's Gotta Do*, while she gets to read about it in a letter and has to hurry to join him in the film's final sequence where she can finally fulfil her final purpose of dying to, yes, spur the *other* man (Simon) to action.

Simon, on the other hand, has the growth and redemption arc that Jay should have. It is he whose cowardice and deception leads to Shua's expulsion from the city, who tries to kill Shua, and who is redeemed and saves Shua. It is his journey

from stalwart supporter of the regime to an enemy who ensures the destruction of Ecoban at the climax. In the final sequence, he refuses to shoot Jay to stop her from inserting the MacGuffin into the “blow up the city” slot, and after the Adjutant kills Jay, he in turn kills the Adjutant and sacrifices his own life to save Shua and to seal Ecoban’s doom. Simon has, then, the role that Jay should have. If she were permitted to take her place as representative of the middle class who, after long tolerating the oppression of the working class in the name of security and peace, finally can no longer bear the violence and suffering this oppression entails, then Simon would no longer be necessary and could be excised from the story. Park KiSoo’s criticism would be realized, as Simon’s absence would allow more focus on Jay and even Shua, thereby both benefiting the narrative and simplifying and solidifying the metaphorical reading of Jay/the middle class refusing to continue to oppress Shua/the working class and instead joining with him to take down Ecoban/the dictatorship. Without Simon there is no love triangle and so no reason to establish Shua as an Ecoban exile (which never factors into the story except to connect the three central characters as children, another trope of Korean melodramas<sup>22</sup>). But the patriarchal conventions of storytelling shackle her to the role of the object of men’s desire. They fight over her, and in the end she must die so that her death may inspire *Simon* to turn face and reject Ecoban/dictatorship. As is typical of misogynist love triangles, the conflict is not really about her but about the men’s conflict with each other, in which she is simply the chew toy they are fighting to possess and thereby gain a victory over the other.

There are other areas in which the filmmakers reveal their adherence to gender stereotypes. It is well to remember that Jay is a trained security officer who operates high-tech equipment (both her futuristic motorcycle and later a flying hovercycle) and is trusted to carry and use firearms. Yet she is either outclassed or uninvolved in *all* of the action setpieces for which she is present, including the final climatic gun battle. She refuses to use her weapon when ordered by the Adjutant, yet also does nothing to stop him from gunning down an unarmed man. As mentioned above, Shua attempts to sabotage Ecoban early in the film, and Jay is part of the security force searching for him. He gets the drop on her, disarms her, then defeats her in hand-to-hand combat despite, so far as the audience knows, having no training of any kind. Simon, on the other hand, gets to defeat Shua hand-to-hand. When some of the Marrians riot against a platoon of Ecoban security marching through their streets—standing for the riots and demonstrations of 1980s Korea that brought down the dictatorship—Jay becomes lost and in danger from the rioters, only to be saved by Shua. She then abandons the city chasing after Shua, her duty to stop the riot or at least to restore some kind of order apparently forgotten. Jay is present during the duel between Simon and Shua but does not intervene, either to assist Simon as a fellow officer or to protect Shua after Simon angrily shouts that he has tried to murder Shua in the past. She finally does intervene when the young boy Woody, whom Shua regards as a brother, is endangered. Her intervention consists of stepping between Simon and Shua so that the former cannot shoot the latter. She does not attempt to disarm him, to confront him about his earlier confessed attempted murder of Shua, or even to speak to him at all. Then it is Woody, the boy, who unleashes a torrent of water from a pipe that allows the three of them to escape from Simon.

Shua’s and Simon’s duel arises from a security forces raid on the Hot Dog gang and a group of Marrian sympathizers. The Hot Dogs had earlier attacked an Ecoban outpost outside the city to seize shipments they presumed (correctly) were to be used against the Marrians. They succeed in seizing these shipments



and attempt to sell the contents to the sympathizers, but Ecoban security tracks them and ambushes the deal. The film's longest firefight ensues and the sympathizers and one of the Hot Dogs are killed, along with a number of the security forces. Jay arrives during this battle but does not take part in it; once again she passively observes the story instead of acting as an agent within it. Hot Dogger Moe is given an emotional scene on witnessing the death of his friend David, while Jay emotionlessly watches the battle and its aftermath. This passivity in the face of brutality taken in isolation is not, of course, necessarily a bad thing. Finn in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* passively watches stormtroopers gunning people down and, shocked, cannot bring himself to participate. It is this brutality that causes him to abandon his life in the First Order and eventually join the Resistance. But this is in the context of a film in which Finn takes very much an active part in the story. For Jay, it is yet another scene of her standing around watching men do things. Finn's shocked inaction comes early in the film and motivates his participation in the story, while Jay's comes during what is in fact the emotional crux of the story, the moment Jay comes face to face with her complicity in protecting Ecoban. Standing passively in horror might have worked in another movie, but in this one, if this scene was indeed meant to show us her change in mind, it is inexcusable that she does not turn her weapon against her former comrades, or at least attempt to help anyone still under the guns of the police. But the filmmakers allow themselves to be bound—or perhaps do not realize they are bound—by storytelling conventions that cause them to treat the revelation that Simon attempted to murder Shua (when they were children, yet!) as the catalyst for her rejection of Ecoban, a rejection that is in the final sequence is side-lined in favour of Simon's redemption anyway.

### Conclusion

*Wonderful Days* began a seven-year development cycle with the best of intentions: to showcase Korean animation on the world stage. Yet in the end it pleased neither domestic nor international audiences. Despite its futuristic, de-racialized setting, it remains at its core a fundamentally Korean story. Instead of leaning in to its fundamental Koreanness, the filmmakers sought to efface it. Produced against a backdrop of rising inequality and economic uncertainty in Korea, *Wonderful Days*'s depiction of capitalism run amok, apocalyptic environmental destruction, and the grinding of the working poor under the heel of the rich should have resonated throughout much of the world in grip of early 2000s neoliberalism, but the film's metaphorical reading is subverted by its adherence to gender stereotypes that blunt its critique. The revolutionary role of the middle class, represented in the film by Jay, is obscured by the character of Simon, who is unnecessary or even actively harmful to the movie's metaphor but is demanded by the convention of Korean melodramas. This results in a film that lacks overt markers of Koreanness yet is inextricably bound up in the tropes and genre conventions of Korean media. Thus the film fails to connect with either the domestic or international audience and confuses and frustrates its metaphorical thrust.

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