The Last Korean Animation: *Wonderful Days* and the Aesthetics of Global Monopoly Capitalism

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This essay looks at *Wonderful Days* (2003), South Korea's most ambitious animated film. In production, distribution, and reception, it stands out as Korean animation's greatest failure, the valorization of decades of outsourcing experience that was supposed to pay off in an original Korean work. The most expensive animated film ever produced in Korea, with a cost of 13 million USD and a year-long marketing campaign (Martin 2011: 138, 145), it was in theaters for only two weeks and made back only USD 1.9 million (146). Korean adult-oriented, feature-length animation retreated in its wake, and the entire industry collapsed soon after.

Yet calling *Wonderful Days*, and by extension Korean animation, a failure is not as justified as it might seem from box office numbers. Such a huge project involved many animators and companies, experiences that built many careers and left many lessons. Studio Tin House, the company assem-

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bled for *Wonderful Days*, evolved into Studio Mir, now a hugely successful outsourcing company for American productions. Though Korean animation subsequently hid under the protection of the 2003 revised Broadcasting Act, which shielded Korean television animation from foreign competition (Hyun-suk Kim 2013: 22), *Pororo the Little Penguin* (2003), released in the same year, built a foundation for the global success of Korean children's animation and character merchandise. Pinkfong, the Korean company behind "Baby Shark," was valued at 1 trillion won ($1.1 billion) in 2022 (Y. Lee 2022), dwarfing *Wonderful Days*' infamous losses.

What is at stake in the term *success*? Rather than defining it through profits or cultural presence or critical acclaim, this essay forwards a dialectical definition: in the zero-sum game of global capitalist imperialism, failure is always in relation to the success of another, and against animation monopoly capital, no national industry can win.

The success or failure of Korean animation symptomatizes Korea's position in the world economy generally. This was emphasized in a humorous meeting between former president Moon Jae-in and "children's president" Pororo in 2017, in which Prorot, an AI robot, was called upon to lead the "people-centered fourth industrial revolution" (Sohn 2017; *Chosun Ilbo* 2017)

Pororo is also a child of the Korean peninsula (J. Park 2011). Originally animated partially by North Korea's SEK studio during the "sunshine" period of cooperation between North and South Korea, his importance to the Moon administration was also the expectation that, to South Korean liberals, the next stage of Korean economic development was the incorporation of North Korea's cheap and sophisticated labor force into a unified, technologically sophisticated Korean economy.

How can such a monumental economic and political task be carried by an animated penguin child? Animation, perhaps more than any other medium, is ontologically dependent on physical labor. Every line and movement is drawn, and nothing exists until it is given life by the animator's hand, the foundational distinction drawn historically between early animation's "illusion of life" and live action's photographic "representation of reality" (Wells 2013: 7, 15). Animation was thus one of the first industries to be fragmented on a global scale, maximizing labor arbitrage as early as Jay Ward Productions' outsourcing of *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*

Figure 1 President Moon Jae-in meets with "Children's President" Pororo.

and Friends (1959–64) to Mexico (Sito 2006: 252), a process fully globalized by the 1970s (256). But, in bringing to life a "raw material made exclusively of human ideas" (Wells 2013: 7) with maximal efficiency, it is also one of the most technologically sophisticated cultural industries. Pixar invented new technologies to satisfactorily realize an imagined world, starting with its usage of RenderMan for *Toy Story* (1995), "the first software product to be awarded an Oscar" (Geaghan-Breiner and Nigh 2021), continuing a trend of Disney's repeated revolutions in technology such as the multiplane camera for *Snow White* (1937) and the use of Xerox for *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961). As Hannah Frank (2014: 3) points out, from the very beginning cel animation was "predicated on the principles of scientific management" and the basic division between creative and manual labor within the animation production process "married the Taylorist emphasis on efficiency and standardization to the Fordist model of mechanization of the labor process." This contradiction has only grown more acute with the use of AI, which threatens to make superfluous the accumulated experience of decades of Korean outsourcing labor.

Wonderful Days confronted this task head on. Its failure was not in its box office numbers but in its ambition: to break through what Joon Yang Kim (2014: 91) calls the "cerebral/manual dichotomy" of Korean animation and, through leveraging its history of "labor intensive and low-skilled tasks," join

the "creative" value-added labor processes that dominate the global value chain of animation (H. Yoon 2017: 637–38).

In this, *Wonderful Days* sought to challenge American and Japanese animation at the apex of global animation production. The film's failure at an aesthetic, narrative, and market level was the exhaustion of that effort. And where Korean industry goes, so does the world, as Korea is the preeminent model of late-industrial capitalist economic development, the so-called "miracle of the Han river." I will argue that the profits and global presence of Korean popular culture-sans-animation is not a sign of overcoming the limits of *Wonderful Days* but ossifying them and capitulating to American and Japanese monopoly control of the global economy. *Wonderful Days* is not merely a failure of the past but a case study in the blockage of third world development itself.

The Background of Korean Animation

The reasons for the collapse of the Korean animation industry have been well diagnosed: neglected by the culturally fickle state and overly dependent on outsourcing for survival, perverse profit incentives prevented the development of an indigenous industry, especially in the postdictatorship period of free-flowing, speculative investment (J. Lee 2011: 141–42). When the global market contracted and 3-D animation replaced 2-D animation as both a popular aesthetic and a labor-saving technology, the Korean industry collapsed, its decades of 2-D experience suddenly made worthless (144). This failure can be dismissed as one of inattention, an aberration in Korea's otherwise successful developmental state policies (211), about which Korean academics, policymakers, and industry figures studying animation have argued for decades.

Against this, *Wonderful Days* stressed in promotional materials the newness of its aesthetic. The film used what the producers called "multi-type layer animation," a combination of 2-D, 3-D, and miniatures. In theory, this would combine Korea's indigenous 2-D animation industry with the 3-D industry Korea aspired toward. By 2003, not only had Pixar become the global aesthetic standard for the most profitable animated films, computer animation developed new technologies with every film with applications to

other mediums, such as the mocap (motion capture) work done on for Gollum in 2002's *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* and CGI (computer-generated imagery) for the PlayStation 2 released in 2000 and the Xbox in 2001. Most importantly for Korea, the computer animation industry threatened to make the Japanese hand-drawn anime industry obsolete, offering Korea a rare chance to overcome its East Asian rival and former colonizer.

The third aesthetic, combining miniatures and painted backgrounds with digital postproduction enhancements, further linked Korea's labor-intensive past and its capital-intensive aspirations for the future. *Wonderful Days* was advertised in the Korean media as the second movie in the world to use a SONY HDW-F900 digital camera, first pioneered by George Lucas in *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones* (2002), the first blockbuster to be shot completely digitally. The success of the Star Wars prequels' digital technology contrasted with the Japanese-American coproduction *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001), immensely expensive because of its entirely digital animation and a box office bomb. The film served as an explicit reference for *Wonderful Days*' director Kim Moon-saeng, who pointed to his own film's proposed cost as highly competitive compared to both American and Japanese animation (Kim Hye-jin 2003).

The usage of Industrial Light and Magic's technology at great expense was not just an aesthetic choice. It was meant to prove to Korean VCs (venture capitalists) and chaebols (Korean conglomerates), set free by liberalization and globalization, that Korean animation was worth investing in. To Korean investors seeking quick profits during the speculative bubble that followed the IMF crisis, animation seemed to have great potential as one of the few already globalized, capital-intensive industries, ironically thanks to decades of neglect and political persecution by the crony-capitalist state. While steel and chemicals, formerly privileged and protected, were forced to shed the institutional stickiness of decades of protectionism and import substitution, Korean animation was already using the most advanced American technologies acquired through outsourcing.

The new democratic government was also interested in the animation industry. Infamous in the Korean film industry is the "Jurassic Park moment," in which the recently elected Kim Yong-sam government observed that "the export revenue of *Jurassic Park* (1993) had matched the foreign sales of

Hyundai cars that year" (Jeon 2019: 16). What followed was a reclassification of movie production from "service" to "semimanufacturing," matching the tax benefits in the manufacturing industry (16). Corporate and government money soon flowed into the film and animation industries, and the final lifting of formal censorship in 1996 promised them a new life. However, financial incentives had opposite effects on film and animation. Fiscal incentives only encouraged profit chasing in the existing outsourcing industry and made animation's dependence on it even worse. From 1986 to 2000, exports increased from $7 million to $167 million, a twenty-four-fold increase. However, this was "completely driven by offshore outsourcing, which accounted for 97 percent of 1999 exports" (N. Lee 2011: 129).

The boom was short-lived, and already by 2004 Korean animation exports had declined to $62 million (N. Lee 2011: 143). Increased competition from low-wage competitors like China, India, and the Philippines undercut South Korea's competitive position as a source of cheap labor. Even within Korea, rising wages and new expectations for working conditions meant that the animation industry, which had seen stagnant wages throughout the 1990s and the same labor conditions of the 1980s, no longer attracted young workers looking for "globalized" industrial opportunities (144).

Within the outsourcing industry, there were two distinct value chains in the Korean animation industry, an American system of "fabless" outsourcing and a Japanese "keiretsu" system of subcontracting. The American production chain, reliant on a few large suppliers with a strict division of labor, became unviable after the bubble burst. American companies, having used Korean labor for their immediate profit-driven needs and never sharing advanced technologies, left nothing in their wake and took most of the market with them. For example, 90% percent of Sunwoo's revenue in 2002 came from its lucrative US buyers such as Disney, Fox, and Nickelodeon (145), which Korean animation producers had no hope of matching.

In the post-American system, ambitious companies turned to original animation or licensing and marketing, both high-value-added activities possible with new government support and a new Korean economy of now multinational conglomerates like Samsung and LG. The Korean government and Korean animation companies hoped that they could become regionally hegemonic in animation markets that did not want to pay the

American premium, such as the children's television animation market in Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. *Pororo* was exported to more than 100 countries, finding success especially in France(Kim 2013: 16). Korean companies leveraged every advantage they had over Japan and other regional producers, such as Korea's early high level of web connectivity, which allowed *PUCCA*, an "animated online e-card service" from 2000 using Flash animation, to explode in popularity on the early internet. Originally targeted at foreign markets (18), *PUCCA* was licensed by Jetix Europe in 2004 and made into a globally distributed TV show in 2006.

Other firms stayed in outsourcing but attempted to move up the value chain within it, differentiating themselves from new low-wage competitors by the quality of their work and long-established relationships with American companies for long-running shows with an expected look and output schedule. AKOM continued to work on *The Simpsons*, a loyal relationship rewarded with work on *The Simpsons Movie* (2007), *The Simpsons* Ride at Universal Studios theme parks (2008–), and the video game *The Simpsons Game* (2007). Sunwoo and Rough Draft Studios found work on *Family Guy* seasons 2–6 after proving the superiority of their work compared to American studio Film Roman; and Digital eMation, which took over *Family Guy* after season 7, alternated with Rough Draft in animating even- and odd-numbered episodes of *Futurama*.

In the Japanese value chain, rather than the bubble-like expansion and contractions of American investment, regional supply chains extended slowly over decades-long connections between Japanese and Korean companies. Just as Japanese outsourcing had begun as an extension of the Keiretsu relationship between suppliers and core industries, the "family-like" relationships between tiers of the production process extended the internal Japanese system internationally, with Korea now at the middle level of production processes such as layouts and key frames (146–47) and China and Vietnam doing the labor-intensive tasks formerly done by Korea. Even today, most of the most high-budget and globally successful anime see Korean, Vietnamese, and Chinese names in the credits, such as 2022's *The Rising of the Shield Hero*, season 2, coproduced by Japanese studio Kinema Citrus and Korea's DR Movie with work by a variety of subcontracted Chinese firms like Shanghai Phantom and Shanghai Honghuang Art, or *Attack*

on Titan: The Final Season (2020), which featured Korea's Maru Animation, Vietnam's Nam Hai, and China's Fast Snail Animation Productions Co., among others, in a complex web of global subcontracting relationships assembled ad hoc.

The third option was to leverage this accumulated experience to generate original animation, using every historical advantage, hidden opportunity, and contradiction between the two major monopolistic production chains.

The government did make significant efforts to sponsor the domestic industry. In 2001, the first five-year plan for animation was announced (231) and KOCCA was created to set up foreign coproductions and help animated projects secure funding (236). Revenue from domestic original animation increased from 75 billion to 107 billion won in 2004–6 and reached 137 billion won in 2007 (147), helped by the TV quota system for children's animation and at least somewhat making up for the collapse in exports. Nevertheless, at 921 billion won in sales in 2022, animation had the lowest sales out of all cultural products at only 0.6 percent of the total (KOCCA 2023: 3), a dismal record for an industry that was initially the vanguard of Korea's economic opening to the world.

Funding for the massive production cost of *Wonderful Days* came from both the government and existing animation companies. Chosen as a "star project" by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, it received 150 million won from the Korean Film Council in 1998 (Kim Hye-jin 2003: 175) and 300 million more in 2003 as part of an effort to sponsor a series of animated films including *My Beautiful Girl Mari* (2002) and *Oseam* (2003) (90), and 400 million was won by Sunwoo (T. Jeong 2003), a Korean animation company that served as a mediator between the industry's norms and the government's policies.

Wonderful Days' most important private investor was Samsung Venture Investment, a subdivision of the massive conglomerate founded in 1999 to invest in technology-focused small and medium industry. Despite the shock of neoliberalism forced by IMF dictate, Korea had begun liberalizing economically as soon as Chun Doo-hwan came to power in 1980, a process that greatly accelerated with democratization in 1993. The 1995 Motion Picture Promotion Law that incentivized investment in film was followed by the founding of KOSDAQ in 1996 and the general "Special Law to Promote

Venture Capital Companies" on July 30, 1997, mere months before the Asian financial crisis. After a brief collapse, VC finance became even more widespread in its wake. With the state continuing to strongly incentivize avenues of VC profitability (Ko and Shin 1999: 459), animation combined the government's desire for cultural production with Chaebol VC investment in capital-intensive industries at the cutting edge of global standards.

However, the government could no longer guide Samsung's actions as it had in the past. Already focusing on the global marketplace rather than the domestic profitability of cultural production or the demands of the state for cultural promotion, Samsung's investments in animation were the last vestiges of the earlier chaebol model of having one's tentacles in every part of the economy, with state patronage more important than suitability. Halfway through production, Samsung pulled out as *Wonderful Days*' budget spiraled out of control, giving Samsung a final "excuse [to] fold their cultural industry businesses" (Shim 2008: 19), which had begun with the breakup of Samsung Entertainment Group in 1999. In doing so, it closed the curtain on the sprawling chaebol empires in which politics, culture, and profits intermixed according to the state's whims.

Wonderful Days' Aesthetic Ruptures

Wonderful Days' "multi-type layer animation" attempted to combine all three developmental paths in its production at both an industrial and aesthetic level. The 2-D animation was handled by DR Movie, an outsourcing company that is closely integrated into Japanese anime production, an exclusive partner with the Japanese animation studio Madhouse and partially owned by it since 2001. The live-action miniatures were handled by Tin House, a Korean Television "CF" ("commercial film," a "Konglish" phrase meaning TV advertisements) company. The 3-D animation and compositing were handled by Independence, a special effects company working with the latest VFX software, Inferno. Inferno was imported from Autodesk Media and Entertainment, a division of the California based software company Autodesk now famous for its work on James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009).

Wonderful Days sometimes appears more like a tech demo for investors than a coherent film. In one scene, bullets fired at a tank appear as bullet

Figure 2 CGI bullet holes on the screen create a first-person shooter aesthetic.

holes in the screen, giving the viewer a point-of-view shot closer to a first-person shooter video game than the rest of the film's 2-D hand-drawn animated aesthetic (fig. 2). Similar shots appear throughout the film, such as a scene in which an axe is thrown at the viewer and then the camera following the axe in three-dimensional space.

The most incongruous scene takes place one-third of the way into the film, in which a female dancer performs at a club. Though it is subsequently revealed that the setting has plot relevance, the scene opens without this context and the viewer is treated to a roughly two-minute surreal music video in which backgrounds undulate and melt and the performer multiplies, becomes disembodied, and turns into a flower. A colorful, complex geometric pattern is repeatedly highlighted, contrasting with the flowing of water, flowers, and the performer's hair and dress (fig. 3). The scene is the closest the film comes to abstract hand-drawn animation, in which the morphing of objects and lines into different forms of life expresses what Paul Wells (2013: 44) emphasizes as animation's "abstract forms in motion" opposed to cinema's "assumed 'objectivity' of the exterior world." The scene is impressive and abstractly beautiful but was so incongruous with the aesthetic and pacing of the film that

Figure 3 Surrealist music video in the middle of the film.

it was greatly reduced on release and only restored later in the director's cut. It now lives on mostly as an upload to YouTube, where Korean commenters marvel at its artistic qualities. The animation, a reminder of psychedelic animations like the British/American production *Yellow Submarine* (1968), Japan's *Belladonna of Sadness* (1973) and the work of French comic author Jean Girard (Kwon 2004: 167), hearkens back to an animation history that Korea never had, subject to military dictatorship, cultural censorship, and anti-communism while the global cultural revolution occurred.

Both scenes are highlighted in a "making-of" video that came with the DVD release and focuses on the use of miniatures and CGI (computer graphics) to create a "new" type of animation (2003). We are shown that the bar scene and the stage in which the dance takes place were handmade miniatures, and the labor-intensive nature of the production is shown, such as the hand-painted detail of guardian deity statues that briefly appear at the entrance of the film's museum of human history where the first confrontation between the two main characters occurs, a scene that is highlighted in the film's promotional materials and that combines 2-D and 3-D in a multilayered aesthetic (fig. 4).

Figure 4 A scene highlighted in advertisements highlights the mix of styles and layers.

Even when the subject of the making-of feature is the advanced CGI used to create 3-D POV shots, the use of miniatures and intensive human labor that goes into them is emphasized. The film's opening scene is highlighted as a miniature, in which the construction cranes looming in the background were hand-constructed and even hand-glued (fig. 5). As the director himself points out, miniatures were used because of Korea's backwardness in background animation, a lack he sought to overcome through "exerting himself" on the film's technical development (Kwon 2004: 172).

Not only does the tedious labor of the production mirror the exploitative conditions depicted by the film itself, scenes of Seoul's working-class neighborhoods were also used as reference images for the slums and factories. Overall, the making-of feature traces out the whole production process, from miniatures and hand-drawn blueprints, to storyboards and hand drawings, to computer mapping of environments and motion, to sound production, and the director introduces the film with a pen in hand and a computer behind him, adept at both the old and new technologies.

One reason these background elements and miniatures are highlighted is that these are where the film's Koreanness is mostly to be found, such as

Figure 5 Korean worked hand-glued miniatures.

in the beginning of the film, where a masked dancer does a traditional folk dance (*samulnori* 사물놀이) among a variety of other cultural elements and the main character appears in a folk mask (*tal*탈) in the background of the scene.

However, the film itself avoids Koreanness, going for a generic postapocalyptic look and designing the main characters after Keanu Reeves and Winona Ryder (Martin 2011: 144). In its global release as *Sky Blue*, the film went through major reedits, changes in dialogue, and the marketing gave no indication that the film was Korean (148). In fact, the Japanese release, dubbed and reedited by anime studio GAINAX (producer of globally popular anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*), was considered by many Koreans to be the superior version because of a more streamlined story. *Wonderful Days* was criticized by Korean audiences on release for not being authentically Korean and instead copying Japanese anime, even by staff that worked on

the project, a failure they saw as closely tied to its history of subcontracting rather than original production (A.-R. Yoon 2010: 213–14, 360) and "a perceived lack of 'creativity'" in the "compulsory transition from 2-D to 3-D and the conflicting in-between experiences this transition encourages" (286). Rather than a strength, the attempt at an original aesthetic combination seemed to bring out the worst in each and to satisfy no one.

The nature of Korea's position in global animation value chain is reflected in the aesthetics of the film itself, with 3-D animation spectacle borrowed from US technology and anime-inspired 2-D animation, the main substance of the film's aesthetic, borrowed from Japan. If Korean culture is in backgrounds and miniatures, this is also where the labor-intensive work of Korean hands is to be found. *Wonderful Days*' "multi-type layer animation" draws attention to animation's "multiplanar image" of cel layers that move in relation to each other within a flat space (Lamarre 2009). For Thomas Lamarre, this relation creates an ontological freedom, in which background movements have their own autonomy and movements within foreground explode into multiplicities. But in the case of *Wonderful Days* and Korean animation more generally, it seems to create only an imperialist hierarchy of national labor in the layering of cels, the result of which only reaffirms Korean dependency.

Rather than a failure of *Wonderful Days* to become the *Spirited Away* or *Toy Story* of Korea, the implications of Korean animation in the animated image's layers bring into question the ontological nature of national animation itself. Lamarre (2009: 90) goes only as far as pointing out that Korean work on Japanese anime "raises questions about whether such animation is actually produced in Japan." *Wonderful Days* provides some answers to these questions, not only in the contradictions of its aesthetics but in its narrative contradictions, as the film tries to incorporate Japanese anime's eco-criticism, cliché genre elements of Disney, and a Korean anti-colonial, proletarian undercurrent into a single whole.

The Proletariat in Transition

Wonderful Days takes place in a dystopian, ecologically destroyed world. The rich political elite live in a city named Ecoban, which is literally pow-

ered by the pollution produced by the industrial wasteland outside the city, Marr. In the opening scroll, Ecoban is called an "arc" that protects "human civilization" from both the ecological catastrophe and class struggle outside. Over ominous music, a voice-over explains that refugees were turned away and settled in the oil fields. This leads to the opening scene of the film in the present, where Marrian industrial workers producing energy suffer an industrial accident and the Ecoban ruling elite, differentiated from the working class in their extravagant, pseudo-ascetic fashion, show indifference to the lives of their workers.

An early dispute between one of the main characters and the film's most irredeemably evil villain lays out the class conflict setting. In the scene, Jay, a woman of Ecoban, salutes the production site's supervisor (called Commander Locke in the dub) and asks him to stop work for the safety of the workers, to which he scoffs and responds that the workers are mere beasts of burden meant to be worked to death. When the production site collapses, Locke tells a Marrian supervisor to abandon them and when he objects, Jay is told to shoot him. She hesitates, using a technicality of her position to get out of the task, and Locke shoots instead. A second worker then disconnects the bridge they are standing on from the rig, with scenes showing its collapse and dozens of workers falling to their deaths. Locke commands Jay to return to Ecoban, frustrated by her lack of obedience, but showing indifference and even amusement at the deaths of the workers and the collapse of the production rig.

In this allegorical representation of South Korea's historical combination of military discipline and capitalist development, the main dispute between Jay and other Ecoban citizens is over the most efficient means of labor discipline. Jay, in discussing the incident, objects to fellow Ecoban citizen Simon that such actions will provoke riots and that mass violence is counterproductive to their energy needs. Simon attempts to find a middle ground, criticizing the implications of Jay's words for their society's reproduction but agreeing that Commander Locke's methods are too extreme. Jay leaves the conversation feeling cynical and powerless against the dehumanization endemic to Ecoban's basic functioning, and it takes the main character Shua's emergence to give her hope. Shua lives in the polluted slums and is working on behalf of his father to steal the code for the energy system of

Ecoban in order to destroy it. On the run after a successful theft, he runs into Jay, and when they confront each other, she realizes he is a former citizen of Ecoban she played with as a child but believed was dead. Coming from the ruling elite but living among the workers, he is a figure with the potential to unite them in class harmony.

Wonderful Days' opening scenes of manual labor in heavy industry is reminiscent of the propagandistic scenes of industrial construction in *Robot Taekwon V* (1976), Korea's most well-known animated film, and of the reassembly of the robot in that film's many sequels across both military dictatorship periods. *Robot Taekwon V* represented "the prosperity of the nation through the symbols of the heavy chemical industry, the visual images that implied the power of the steel industry, [and] a symbol of national confidence, scientific achievement and successful industrial development" (H. Lee 2020: 154), and, in critiquing this image, *Wonderful Days* seeks to pick up where Korean animation had been left behind by the military dictatorship. In fact, in the same year as *Wonderful Days*, a "near-complete film print of [*Robot Taekwon V*] was discovered" after being lost for decades, which generated a huge amount of nostalgia and nationalism around the film (Magnan-Park 2011: 111), its anti-communism repurposed under a progressive administration and targeted toward Japan (112). Restaging Korea's Fordist past in the democratic present, *Wonderful Days* represents not only the industrial remnants of development but what previously could not be represented, the radical worker rebellion that was still a regular occurrence on the streets of Seoul.

The movie picks up the love story subplot in the middle of a riot by the Marrian slum dwellers. The riot resembles the militant labor protests of the 1980s that overthrew the military dictatorship, with masked and headbanded groups waving red flags and confronting riot police with makeshift clubs. But as Jay enters the scene, the slum rebellion gains a mystical, apolitical quality. She passes through a mist as chanting Buddhist monks go by and disappear again. Shua enters the scene in conversation with a blacksmith who laments that "now they are rioting in the morning, guess that means no business today." Earlier class conflict is replaced by riots of the lumpenproletariat in a carnivalesque space of heterogeneity and directionless, nonideological violence, which the characters are no longer interested

in. Shua's surrogate younger brother Woody navigates through the fights between the rioters and police to find his goggles, and Shua and Jay look for each other on motorcycles. Shua rescues Jay in her motorcycle, first from a Molotov cocktail and then from a rocket launcher, transitioning from the representation of working-class struggle to an image of organized terrorism, an image closer to global fears in the wake of the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq than anything specific to Korean society. From these deterritorialized images the film leaves behind the riots to pursue Jay and Shua's middle-class love story (Lovins 2022: 6) without ever showing any resolution to the riot scene.

Whereas earlier scenes of class struggle corresponded to a lingering Korean industrial proletariat forged in class struggle, its dissolution into mist corresponded to a developing neoliberalism. The KCTU (Korean Confederation of Trade Unions), the radical umbrella union that had broken with the FKTU (Federation of Korean Trade Unions), the historical yellow union tolerated by the dictatorship, had been created only in 1995. Soon after, labor reforms caused both unions to declare a general strike in 1996, the first of its kind in Korean history. The strike, which provoked widespread middle-class support against the secretive and dishonest mechanisms for forcing the reforms through, forced the government to back off. But in substance, nearly everything in the bill was passed in parts and the post-strike labor movement was too weak to resist (Koo 2000). By 1997 and the IMF crisis, the new pseudoprogressive Kim Dae-jung attempted to share the pain of the IMF crisis in a tripartite commission of government, management, and workers, a form of political representation the labor movement had long sought. Initially accepting its position as a partner in austerity, rank-and-file resistance caused the KCTU to pull out and take a hard-line stance. IMF dictate, forced through regardless, led to further labor conflicts, and the KCTU remained illegal until 1999, a decade after so-called democratization.

The year 2003 continued 1997's political clashes: five years of neoliberalism under Kim Dae-jung fundamentally reshaped both the Korean economy and the Korean political scene, with a neoliberal, proglobalization liberal political elite becoming hegemonic against the fractured and defeated state capitalist right wing tied to the dictatorship. But on the streets, there

was a very different image: a national wide rail strike of 150,000 workers, led by the president of the KCTU, previously imprisoned for two years, as the culmination of violent clashes between riot police and company thugs against workers and democratic activists. Workers set themselves on fire, and in October the union president at Hanjin Heavy Industries, Kim Ju-Ik, hanged himself from a crane on the company's premises. All of this occurred under Roh Moon-hyun, a new president who was seen as being to the left of Kim and was elected after some of the largest protests in the country's history in the wake of the acquittal of two American soldiers who ran over and killed two Korean schoolgirls in November 2002.

These protests reveal the contradictions at play in the image of South Korea in *Wonderful Days*. On the one hand, they were constituted on old issues of the Marxist left: anti-imperialism left over from the role of the United States in the Gwangju massacre, national pride and anti-Japanese sentiment immediately after the 2002 World Cup cohosted by Korea and Japan, in which Korea, by making it to the semifinals (further than Japan), got "payback for colonialism" (Longman 2002). But these protests also pioneered the form new social movements would take in Korea, from the usage of the internet and abstract, virally spreadable images such as photos of candlelight vigils and the predominance of youth instead of workers and possessing physical space in the city instead of workplaces or political offices, and thus the protests contained both "South Korea's robust social movement tradition" in "nationalistic and festive gathering of the recent World Cup" and a fashioning of "new political sensibilities liberated from authoritarian era preconceptions and limits" in the new age of the internet's "cultural ignition process" (Kang 2016: 3, 5).

As a spectacular image, industrial labor conflict remained an image all Koreans would be familiar with in 2003, as the KCTU sought forgiveness for its initial capitulation through increasing radicalism. But as a social force, labor was fading, unable to keep up with the new neoliberal regime of irregular workers and the fracturing of the political alliances of the past.

Ecological Utopianism

Leaving behind the working class allows Shua to find his motivation to fight Ecoban. In the finale, Shua unites with the slum dwellers he previously looked down on, with the blacksmith and rioters symbolically brought together in the DIY welded tank used in the final assault on Ecoban. But this is Shua's plan, and the slum dwellers sacrifice themselves in their tank while Shua flies above them in an air glider for his personal redemption.

Shua's utopian solution that will save both Ecoban and Marr is the mythical land of Gibraltar, representing as the end of pollution, the clearing of the sky, and the beginning of classless society. It is eventually revealed that the environment has already recovered and there is not enough pollution to continue to run Ecoban. The Ecoban elite were therefore conspiring to produce pollution and eventually kill the rest of the Marrian population off and by extension themselves, turning into a parasitic class that would sooner destroy the environment than allow it to heal itself. To match the declassed lumpenproletariat of the riots, the bourgeoisie is replaced by a neofeudalist aristocracy that is purely parasitic on nature's internal harmony. Rather than revolution, classless society comes from nature as a self-healing system merely to be discovered and allowed to thrive. Utopia is initially achieved through the love of Simon for Jay, the antagonist who originally pushed Shua into the slums out of jealousy and is redeemed by sacrificing himself for Jay's sake after she has been shot. But even this Disneyesque gendered middle-class fantasy of male sacrifice for a damsel in distress that is "indifferent to race, class, and social conflict" (Giroux and Pollock 2010: 83) only appears briefly, and the film ends with an impressive digitally animated collapse of Ecoban and the emergence of the sun from behind the clouds.

This eco-utopian solution saturates the setting as well. Jay, on her motorcycle trip back from the industrial accident to Ecoban, rides through a giant metal spine, with Ecoban represented as the brain that is connected to the working body but artificially separated and Jay's motorcycle as the connecting thread between the worlds (fig. 6). After the riots, Jay and Shua meet in an abandoned wind farm and then on the boat that Shua lives on, the only location in the film with any remaining nature. Birds, fish, flowers, gusts of wind, and rays of sunlight hint at what could be, emphasized by the film's international release title, *Blue Sky*.

Figure 6 Jay rides her motorcycle through the spine that connects the factories to Ecoban.

Ecology as a utopian solution to class conflict is a major feature of postmodernism (Jameson 2003). *Wonderful Days* finds it in Japanese anime and Japanese postmodernism: superflat's "eco-rejuvenation" after the atomic bomb and at end of the world (Lamarre 2009: 142), the postmodern rejection of grand narratives and the "extinction of nature" (183), and Studio Ghibli's reframing of the relationship between technology and nature (49). For Lamarre, these reflections on nature are expressed aesthetically through anime's multiplanar layering, which escapes the "ballistic logic" of cinematic modernity's relationship with nature (5, 10). *Wonderful Days* contains these aesthetic features as well: Jay's and Shua's motorbikes are computer-generated 3-D animation, while the riots are hand-drawn animated backgrounds and character movements. A 3-D POV effect of a rocket-propelled grenade being launched emphasizes both the aesthetic rupture of the violence and the ideological passivity of the slum dwellers compared to the weapons they wield. Throughout the film, the separation of the 2-D, anime-like characters from the cold, digital 3-D world of Ecoban consistently reinforces human alienation in a degraded nature. But there is an aspect of this borrowing of Japanese anime's concerns that is problematic in the Korean

context. Japanese ecological utopianism in anime can equally stand for the "rising sun" after the end of the earth "as a symbol of Japanese integration, of Japanese nationalism and empire" (Lamarre 2009: 143), otakudom's theaters of "love and fascism" (154), and the immanence of Nazi racial ideology to Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian concern with technology and ecological destruction. *Wonderful Days*, in borrowing an aesthetic from the imperialist core, borrows an ideology as well.

Although South Korea has a long history of ecologically minded literature (Thornber 2012: 78) and protests against breakneck industrialization under the military dictatorship had ecological content (80), ecology as an alternative to Marxism and working-class politics is an American import and itself a kind of political colonialism and linguistic imperialism (W.-C. Kim 2014: 2). Historically, not only were ecological concerns—as separated from proletarian class struggle—alien to South Korea, they were associated with Japanese "reactionary environmentalism" (Reitan 2017), in which ecofascism became an ideological justification for the Japanese Empire and rural degradation served as a motivator of Japanese settler colonialism in Korea. During the colonial period Korea became associated with the "primitive" natural state of premodern Japanese folk practice, both the object of a nostalgic gaze for Japanese colonizers and a land destined to backwardness (Atkins 2010: 132). What Iyko Day (2020: 64) calls "romantic anti-capitalism" based on "Malthusian, ecofascist and eugenicist beliefs" took Asians as the cause of environmental destruction even within Asia, with Japanese imperialism reproducing ideologies of racial hierarchy while simultaneously advocating a pan-Asian empire. But what distinguished the Japanese Empire from previous settler colonialism, and thus necessitated this contradictory racial ideology, was the lateness of empire that found an already formed Korean national consciousness and developmentalist modernity (Gottesman 2020). Korean anti-imperialism confronted Japanese ecofascism with an increasingly proletarian movement with no nostalgia for the "semi-feudal" past and a commitment to modernization and materialism.

Emerging out of the Japanese colonial period, a common understanding that a failure to modernize had been the cause of colonial occupation and national humiliation united North and South Korea and the subsequent military dictatorship in the South as well as its opponents, who increasingly

turned toward the working class and Marxism to resist. Even the "New Community Movement," the military dictatorship's concept of rural revitalization, took modernization as its starting point and was appropriated on these terms by farmers themselves (Han 2004: 75).

In the 1980s, the *minjung* movement looked for an authentic Korean "people" in folk culture, and this return to the past for the first time critiqued industrial modernity's relationship to nature (Jongman Kim and E. A. Kim 2023) and ecological conceptions of modernity that were repressed by the drive toward industrialization (S. Park 2018), replacing class struggle with a more abstract, individualistic concept (N. Lee 2011: 4). Nevertheless, it elevated factory workers and farmers as "true minjung" and in practice took the form of students going to the workers and farmers (11) as well as a reevaluation of North Korean socialism (6). More fundamentally, though breaking with "the metanarrative of state-led development," *minjung* was "not conceived as a primordial opposition to modernity and modernization" (6). It was, at its core, a restoration of a "true historical subjectivity" to Korea's "failed history" (4–5), fundamentally distinct from the postmodern end of historical metanarratives.

It was only in the wake of the breakdown of this alliance in the postdemocratic period, the crisis of Marxism and communism, and Korea's exposure to global economic crises that environmental movements gained autonomy in theory and political practice (S. Park 2018: 506, 524). But even here, new rural movements were opposed to any "romanticism" of the "idyllic" rural past, confronting "all political, social and economic problems in partnership with different types of progressive groups" (A. Park 2016: 106).

The combination in imagery of old and new social movements in *Wonderful Days* reflected an objective situation: Korea's inability to leave behind its industrial, proletarian past. Even the renewed candlelight protests in 2016 against Park Geun-hye, which took much further the characteristics of a street festival postmodern, multi-identity "captivation" than 2002's anti-American movement (Kang 2016), grew out of protests on the same site that were already occurring throughout 2015 over labor reforms, the president's reputation as the "daughter of a dictator," the Sewol ferry disaster, and a confrontation between the government and the KCTU over the arrest of its president, Han Sang-gyun. More fundamentally, the financial bubble of the

post-IMF period was a mere blip in Korea's dependence on manufacturing, which has remained the core of Korea's economy despite theories of so-called neoliberal "financialization" (S. Jeong, Hart-Landsberg, and Westra 2007).

Wonderful Days attempts to "imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" (Jameson 2003), a mimicry of the Japanese postmodern condition. But if Korea's reality does not easily conform to that condition, the world itself must shrink to compensate.

The final scene and last showcase of the multi-type layer animation has computer-generated clouds and a sunshine light on the hand-drawn backgrounds and characters. This has the effect of highlighting the flatness and painterliness of the 2-D and miniatures, the advancement of Korean 3-D animation overwhelming everything else. But this is followed by an image on a map, revealing Gibraltar to be a tiny island with a population that seems inconceivably tiny, given the opening images of massive industrial manufacturing and class struggle. The scene lingers on Shua flying in the clouds, leaving behind the island shrinking from view for the openness of the sky. A visual metaphor for the hoped-for future of Korean animation, the result was instead the film and industry remaining stuck on that small piece of land it wished to leave behind, dragged down by Korean material realities.

The Afterlives of Wonderful Days

Wonderful Days did have two unexpected fans. Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, cocreators of American animated show *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005–8), had originally wanted to outsource production of the show to Japan, having grown up watching Japanese anime and envisioning an anime-inspired martial arts for the action and an Asian setting with Asian characters. The Japanese studios were uninterested, and so after being recommended *Wonderful Days* by a friend, DiMartino and Konietzko decided to animate the show in Korea with the film's studio, Tin House. Tin House, as is typical of the Korean animation production system, went through various restructurings, becoming JM Animation and then Studio Mir, working on both Avatar and its follow-up, *The Legend of Korra* (2012–14). *Avatar* and *Korra* became huge successes for Studio Mir and "Korean" animation. Not

only did the show win Emmy and Annie Awards, it marked the first time a Korean won either award, Sang Jin Kim of MOI Animation (a spinoff of DR Movie that worked on season 3) receiving an Emmy Award in 2006 and Jae Myung Yoo of JM Animation winning an Annie Award in January 2007. Most promisingly, as *Avatar* went on and particularly during the production of *Korra*, Koreans took on more and more of the creative labor, taking over character designs and backgrounds and even participating in storyboarding and the direction of the show. Studio Mir would go on to produce its own animation for Netflix, directly distributed to global audiences, with *Voltron: Legendary Defender* (2016–18), *Dota: Dragon's Blood* (2021), and *The Witcher: Nightmare of the Wolf* (2021), and the studio's Ryu Gi-hyun would become executive director of Netflix Animation in 2019. Bypassing Japan, Netflix went straight to Korea, which worked hard, was willing to work exclusively for Netflix, and already had long-standing relationships with American studios, and Studio Mir was happy to bet on Netflix to take on Japanese anime in the American market. Despite the failure of *Lookism* (2022), Studio Mir's animated adaption of a Korean webtoon, Netflix is involving itself even further in Korean animation, directly producing *Lost in Starlight*, its first Korean-language animated film.

But whether working with Nickelodeon on *Avatar* and *Korra* or with Netflix on *Dota*, the American home office never gave up final control over the intellectual property at the top of the value chain, and it remained driven by an economic race to the bottom rather than any allegiance to Korea. *Squid Game* (2021), the massively successful Korean Netflix show, cost five to ten times less to make in Korea as it would have in the United States (Sherman 2021). And despite all its work on *Avatar*, Studio Mir's hand-drawn 2-D animation has been left in the cold for the Netflix "live action" remake, with digital work done by DNEG Virtual Production, a British VFX studio. The new Netflix-produced shows are an evolution of the American animation value chain that initially turned to Korea to outmaneuver American labor unions in animation (Sito 2006: 262), now globalized and fully "fabless."

In the other direction, Studio Mir produced *Big Fish and Begonia* (2016), a Korean-Chinese coproduction in which Korea served as production lead and China served as outsourcing labor. Though the film was not particularly successful, China built on it to develop its own animation industry,

relying on its massive internal market for recent successes like 3-D films *Ne zha* (2019) and *Monkey King Reborn* (2021) and 2-D television show *Mo dao zu shi* (2018–21). Despite state-led policy shifts to emphasize the domestic market, foreign success has not followed and China, once the center of global animation outsourcing, is already losing out to cheaper alternatives (Li 2011: 196). Following the model of Korean animation, *Wonderful Days*' "failure" is an image of Chinese animation's likely future.

After nearly two decades of obscurity, *Wonderful Days* was rereleased in 2020 with new voice actors, new lines, and the opening narration removed. This was a de facto response to much of the criticism of the initial film, emphasizing the central conflict and the relationships between the characters.[1] Director Kim, when asked about the rerelease, called on audiences to use this opportunity not to reevaluate the film but to meet the "challenge" of developing the future of Korean animation (Jo 2020). Though quickly reforgotten, the film remains a marvel of labor and technology, a unique aesthetic experiment, and the foundation for much of the subsequent Korean animation industry. But few have dared to match the director's challenge to the American and Japanese monopolies of the global animation value chain, instead further integrating themselves in subordinate positions or competing in easier markets. *Wonderful Days* was the apogee of a transitional moment when it appeared that South Korean animation could be a world-leading cultural industry. Instead, it reaffirmed the international hierarchy of animation production in a multilayered image that condemned Korean labor to the background.

However, from a different perspective, *Wonderful Days* is not a mere mimicry but the valorization of the Korean labor already present in "Japanese" and "American" animation, now generalized into a global system of production. In this sense, the film was the last "Korean" animation: a glimpse of what could be beyond the national developmentalist form and the division of animation labor that imprisoned it.

Notes

1 "Won-deo-pul de-i-j" 원더풀 데이즈 ("Wonderful Days"), Namuwiki, https://namu.wiki/w/원더풀%20데이즈 (last edited October 13, 2023).

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