Women on Screen

Understanding Korean Society and Women through Films

Edited by Korean Film Archive
About the Director

Director Kim Ho-sun was born in Bukcheong, North Hamgyeong Province on March 9, 1941 and graduated from Sungkyunkwan University with a degree in Korean literature. After college, he worked as an assistant director under the tutelage of Yu Hyun-mok and made his debut as a director with the film Hwanryeo in 1974. But it was his second film Yeong-ja’s Heydays, a melodrama released in 1975, that solidified his standing in the Korean film industry (a.k.a. Chungmuro). Drawing in 360,000 people within the first 87 days of its opening, Kim Ho-sun rose through the ranks very quickly to become the highest-grossing director. In the following year, 1976, he released Cuckoo’s Dolls, which did tepidly at the box office, but later, in 1977, he released Winter Woman, which topped all box office records that had been set before, drawing in over 585,000 moviegoers. Winter Woman broke the record set previously by the director Lee Jang-ho with Heavenly Homecoming to Stars (1974), which had drawn in 460,000 viewers. It wasn’t until 1993 when Im Kwon-taek’s film Sapyonje was released, hitting the 1,000,000 mark in audience attendance, that

Kim Ho-sun’s record would be broken. In 1979 he directed Sleep Deeper than Death and Admiration of Nights, and entered the 1980s with Three Times Each for Short and Long Ways (1981). The following year he made Ardent Love (1982) and the sequel to Winter Woman, but was not able to appeal to a wide audience. He continued with My Daughter Saved from Den of Evil 2 (1986), Seoul Rainbow (1989), The Song of Crazy Love (1990), and Death Song (1991), and in 1993, he made When Adam Opens His Eyes. In 1996 Kim Ho-sun directed Anniquin and received the best film award from the Daejong Film Awards, but the critics’ reception of the film was lukewarm, and the film failed devastatingly at the box office.

Kim Ho-sun is best known for Yeong-ja’s Heydays. It is a love story between a small-town girl from the country, Yeong-ja (played by Yoom Bok-sun), and a bathhouse body scrubber, Chang-su (played by Song Jae-ho). Yeong-ja comes up to the capital city Seoul without
being aware of what life will be like there. She ends up descending into a life of prostitution but fights furiously to survive in order to hold onto the love she and Chang-su have for each other. The critics gave the director high praises for his dispassionate story-telling and cool-headed viewpoint throughout the film; at the same time, he did not allow the film to become purely eye candy, elevated the story of a prostitute into social commentary. The film was also highly regarded for addressing social issues prevalent during the 1970s such as conscription into the Vietnam War. Actress Yeom Bok-sun who played Yeong-ja garnered acclaim for her strong portrayal of the character. Kim Ho-sun’s record-breaking film, Winter Woman, was also an important film in the director’s filmography. Adapted from Jo Hae-il’s bestselling book, the film is about an adolescent girl, Ehwa, who matures into a young woman and has relationships with four different men. As a result of the film, Chang Mi-hee became one of the three most in-demand actresses who helped propel women’s roles in the film industry.

Afterwards, director Kim Ho-sun made Three Times Each for Short and Long Ways, adapted from the book of the same title, one of several controversial films released that year. The story is about what happens inside an apartment between a sound effects engineer (played by Song Chang-sik) and a high-class call girl (Chang Mi-hee), and the scenes are played out with a comic touch. The film did very well at the box office and was received very well by the critics. The film was an exceptional work of art that satirically portrayed contemporary life circumstances within the confines of an apartment.

Seoul Rainbow is a film Kim Ho-sun directed about sex scandals involving people in power, and it spurred hot debate. The film initiated a conversation about political circles that had long been considered taboo in Korea. Also, critics hailed the work as a masterpiece, and the director was able to reclaim his place in the film world after years of being in a slump. Although there were critics who chided the film for focusing more on the sex scandals than on the aspects of political corruption, it was still successful at the box office.

Another film by the director, Death Song, is about the short, tumultuous life of Korea’s first soprano and legend Yun Sim-deok. She enters Tokyo Music School on a government scholarship and majors in vocal music. Meetings with students Kim Woo-jin and Hong Nan-pa stir her passion for music further, but gossip about her love affairs leads her to have a mental breakdown. In the end, as if she is giving a forewarning, Yun Sim-deok writes her final song, “In Praise of Death,” and she chooses real death for herself. The director Kim Ho-sun, starting with his debut film Hwanmyeo, has committed to telling stories about young women living through the harsh conditions of modern-day life. In 1975, Kim Ho-sun, together with notable people such as the novelists Kim Seung-ok and Choe In-ho, the director Ha Gil-jong, and the film critics Ahn Byeongs-seop and Byeon In-sik, formed the association “The Film Era” seeking to revitalize Korean film. Consequently, they also published the industry magazine The Film Era for two years between 1977 and 1978.

• Sources: Korean Film Directors Association, written by Kim Jong-won, Encyclopedia of Korean Film Directors, Korean Literature Archives (2004)
Film Commentary

Yeong-ja’s Face and the Failure of the Dialectic in Yeong-ja’s Heydays

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Yeong-ja’s Heydays starts with Yeong-ja’s face and ends with her face. Yeong-ja’s face in the narrative is one of aesthetic ideology and is a fundamental component in the film. Her face appears mostly in close-ups. When the expressions on her face and her facial physiognomy command the scenes, according to the theory of photogénie, they have the power of animism; Yeong-ja’s countenance can draw the emotions, spirit, and soul out of a person. The close-up shots draw out the personality of the anonymous individual on the screen and bring us closer to the character psychologically. This is also a demonstration of the film’s magic. The close-up shots allow us to see a particular scene in more detail, and, at the same time, they are a way for the character to escape from the physical setting in which she is situated. In the film, the close-ups of Yeong-ja’s face let us get closer to where she exists, while we can also see that she is “under siege” in the story or that she is the “property” of a particular space. Laura Mulvey argues that people derive intellectual enjoyment as they watch a woman’s body being made into a fetish and something to be gawked at. An imperative moment in a film is precisely when the female character confronts the narrative and, at that moment, forces the narrative to come to a stop. Yeong-ja’s face is shown in close-ups repeatedly and is a substitute for what Mulvey refers to as the woman’s body. The fact that she loses one arm but still sells her body is not erotic but strange. In the film, Yeong-ja’s face looks bizarre, taking the place of her body that is no longer an object to be viewed by the audience with pleasure. She is still harmed by others, and we see a familiar expression arrested on her face, one we have seen before, as she cries out in soliloquy. In the final scene, we see, on one quiet morning, two men riding off on motorcycles on a deserted road, and Yeong-ja’s face is superimposed over the shot. Yeong-ja’s face and voice are thoroughly exploited and injured throughout this narrative. Therefore, it is necessary to explore further her transformations in this film.

Face of Fear

We can divide Yeong-ja’s different faces into three categories. As the story continually takes Yeong-ja down into harsher spheres of life, we see her face close-up. When her face is captured during flashbacks, the shots are rather customary. It is easy to link her face in the present to her face in the past. Our faces express what we feel, and how we feel results from our experiences in the past. Aside from these ordinary shots in the film, other faces are presented. First is the face of fear. The film starts with night shots of a back alley in a brothel district. The forward-tracking camera moves from one alley to the next looking for women who are hiding from a police raid, and here we find Yeong-ja. We see her from the point of view of the police who are chasing after the women. In a series of shots, we see a woman who has her arms wrapped around a man, a woman who
has fled wearing only her underwear, a woman’s back as she tries to hide; all this is seen through the camera, but it also represents the point of view of the police officers in the film. Yeong-ja tries to run from the camera and looks into the camera pleadingly. The camera/police officer is the object of her repellence and fear. The angle and perspective of the camera, representing the eyes of the police, capture Yeong-ja huddled over and hiding; the camera puts her in an extremely frail and powerless position. The camera is seen again acting as the attacker halfway through the film when she is raped by the bourgeois college student, when her face expresses fear again. The shot of her, seen from above, is the perspective of the college student. Once again, she tries to run from the camera and looks afraid. The college student who rapes her is the son of the household where she works as a maid, and soon she is forced to leave the house. This is the point at which her life starts to crumble. The police’s and the son’s perspectives are identical as captured by the camera, and we can see the extreme abuse the woman’s character goes through throughout the film. The audience watching can’t distinguish their own viewpoints from the other violent viewpoints materialized through the camera work, and thus, the audience ends up gaining power over Yeong-ja. Yeong-ja’s rights are taken away by both the camera and the men in the film. We can say that her face of fear is one of powerlessness, a reaction to the violence against her.

Face of Death

Yeong-ja’s second face is one of death. In one scene, as if she feels like she is destined to lead a shacked life, she lifts her head up a little and closes her eyes. The face of fear might have been in reaction to unexpected violence against her, but her face of death is like a moment caught in a photograph. This face appears the most frequently throughout the film, and a film critic at the time, Ahn Byeong-seop criticized it as “non-series acting.” The look she holds with her eyes closed and head slightly tilted back freezes the narrative to show Yeong-ja’s injured appearance as she is continually mistreated throughout the film.

However, both faces display a passive element which encapsulates her resignation to the fact that there doesn’t seem to be any way out of her circumstances. She shows the face of death when she decides that she is going to commit suicide on the train tracks, or when she sends her monetary compensation home after she loses her arm, or when she laments her misery as she gets drunk. The moments she displays the face of death are also the only times when she wholly focuses attention on herself. At these moments, she discards her red lipstick, dress, and everything else that makes her a sexual object. The face of death appears in three tragic moments in the film. The first scene takes place after she writes to her mother, goes to the motel room she shares with a friend, and drinks alone:

the second scene is when she tries to kill herself on the train tracks; and the third scene is after she loses her arm and goes to the red-light district for the first time. She loses her arm in an accident while working as a conductress: a job she held because she had not been able to make ends meet working at the sewing factory. One of the most indelible scenes in the film occurs when she is working in the brothel. One day she is drinking alone and crying out about her situation to herself. As she is lamenting, another woman from outside the room shouts at Yeong-ja; here, again, she is attacked, but this time it is her voice that is attacked. It is one of the few moments where the film shows her thinking about her situation as she closes her eyes. Her voice then becomes incredibly important. But in the end, her voice is taken away by someone else. In the scene at the train station, her face is accentuated to contrast with the fast-moving train that has stopped right in front of her. The fast-moving machine and the woman's still face, with eyes closed, face each other, making palpable an unfulfilled promise Yeong-ja made to herself. In this delicate scene, the woman is silent. Her face is highlighted to indicate that nothing can be said or done. The third look of death, we can say, is also one of no expression. It is her face that does not express anything but looks blank and uncomfortable. This face is the same as the one in which her eyes are closed. She looks at the outside world feeling numb and so she acts like a zombie, already dead.

**Face of a Ghost**

The last face to mention is the face of a ghost. One can say that in the final scene, her superimposed face is best described as the face of a ghost. Perhaps she attempts suicide and gets hit by the train, and later it is she as a ghost standing in the last scene, smiling. Only at the end do we see Yeong-ja looking directly into the camera and smiling. However, that does not fit in with this tragic narrative. Also, it is too simple to say that the film ends happily, that Yeong-ja is able to put her harsh life behind her and is offered a chance at a hopeful future.

The image of Yeong-ja is superimposed on the scene in which the two men ride off on their motorcycles early in the morning. These two men from Yeong-ja's life talk to each other on this secluded but cool road as they ride off. The camera films from behind as they ride forward. Yeong-ja's face largely looms behind them. Yeong-ja is assaulted over and over again in the film, first by the film camera and then by her attackers. Even in the scenes when she is alone she is not free to express herself. In the last scene, we see one man from her past and one from her present, but she ends up being a nonentity for her existence in the film seems to depend on a relationship with a man. Her choosing death in the manner of her attempted suicide is brought on by a man's actions, and her choosing life seems to depend on a man rescuing her. Therefore, although she doesn't play a ghost, she is like a ghost. In other words, both men—the man in her life now, who is a cripple, and Chang-su, the man from her past—have at one time rescued the fallen Yeong-ja, and in the last scene, they appear to be satisfying their own fantasies of being a hero. Their male fantasies are realized as Yeong-ja's existence begins to fade and she becomes merely a visual effect. In reality, Yeong-ja is a character who embodies "non-place," but in this scene, her face is juxtaposed with the image of the men riding off, and she slowly takes up the entire screen, making her role an antinomy. In the end, the woman has no real place in the narrative, and she can take up space only as a visual effect. The
disjunctive placement of Yeong-ja's face on top of the two men riding off confidently on the asphalt road is parallel to what was happening at the time in Korea. Just as the female body was injured due to others sexually exploiting it, the faces of Korean cities were rapidly changing due to the dictatorship that had spearheaded development.

In summary, the repeated close-up shots of Yeong-ja's face serve as a ruler to measure a woman's place in society. Yeong-ja is someone who descends to the low rungs of society sometimes appearing connected and other times estranged. Certainly the camera, characters' voices in the film, montage, and special effects all collude in shaping Yeong-ja's face; her place in the film can only exist when she is fearful, or facing death, or ghost-like. In essence, then, Yeong-ja is made by the men in the film as well as by the men who produced it. The film shows us that women who occupy the position of the subaltern not only lack a voice, but are endlessly violated, making them characters who are imperfectly formed and inarticulate, who then become merely the sign of "waste" that overflows through the film.

A Broken Face
Yeong-ja's Heydays topped the box office during the time it was released. When the film first opened in 1975, the number-one film up to that time had been The Sting, a Hollywood film, with 330,000 in audience attendance. Yeong-ja's Heydays broke that record by drawing in 361,124 people, and it became the highest-grossing film of the year. The success of Yeong-ja's Heydays, following as it did Lee Jang-ho's Heavenly Homecoming to Stars, helped establish a unique Korean genre referred to as "hostess films." Scores of films in this genre, with women in leading roles, flooded the theaters afterwards. Women's faces were now fragmented and broken, and their bodies were now shown accompanied by languid music to stimulate men's sexual fantasies. In Byun Jang-ho's film Ms. O's Apartment, a story about a real-life hostess girl, the opening scene follows the conventions of a soft porn movie. The female protagonist, the hostess girl, takes off her clothes after she finishes playing tennis. The camera takes a shot of her entire back, and when she changes into her robe, the camera ends with a medium shot of her. As she showers, the sound of the running water accompanies the transition to the next shot, which is a close-up of her face; she has her mouth half open as the water streams down her face.

After she comes out of the shower, she sits in front of her vanity. She starts to put on her make-up. Again the film plays soft porn music first, thereby reinforcing the visual tone. The woman's face is shown in parts: first her lips up close, then her eyebrows. After seeing different parts of her face, we see someone secretly watching her: the security guard who works at her apartment complex. The audience then becomes a participant in the film's subject, voyeurism, as they watch the woman's face and body in fragments.
Yeong-ja’s Heydays sets itself apart from the other “hostess” films that deluged the theaters after its release because it is a reflection of society at the time. Yeong-ja’s face is not seen in fragments; instead, the film displays her entire face and deformed body, making her character seem different from the characters in other films. Through the film’s use of handheld-camera techniques and real-location shots, the characters Yeong-ja and Chang-su end up speaking for the lower classes and their difficult day-to-day lives. Yeong-ja’s story also shed light on the rapid population growth in cities at the time, as well as on the social conditions resulting from that growth. This begs the question: how did this film succeed at the box office and with the critics? To answer this question, we need to delve deeper into the dictatorship of Park Chung-hee and his Yushin regime, and into The Film Era and its activities. The young directors who were distinguishing themselves at the time had the support of film critics, who were male, and in their films, they used realism as a cover for the vulgar eroticism that was popular at the time. With a woman wasting away in a subaltern status, The Film Era’s vulgarism was reiterated by the male film directors of the “Korean New Wave” during the late 1980s when the country was struggling for democracy.

The Yushin Regime, The Film Era, and Women: The Failure of the Dialectic

Having graduated from college or returned from studying overseas, directors such as Kim Ho-sun, Ha Gil-jong, and Lee Jang-ho joined film critics such as Byeon In-sik to make their collective presence known in the Korean film industry by espousing “The Art of Korean Film” in the 1970s. What resulted was the formation of The Film Era. While the overall number of college students was low, those who were in college were regarded as elite intellectuals, and those who were pursuing film were treated like vagabonds. The directors of The Film Era were seen as speaking for the young generation that was receiving minority treatment at the time. The Park Chung-hee government gave financial incentives to support films that promoted his national policy. They were given the distinction of being “Superior Films.” Most of these films were adapted from classic literary works or were anti-communist films. The young directors of The Film Era disdained these films and found them so dull and uniform as to be unappealing to the masses. However, the reality was that their films did not do very well with the public either at the time. The directors did not directly criticize the government through their art films, but by making their sexually charged films commonplace, they were able to register their hostility towards what they felt was an unjust power structure. Films like Heavenly Homecoming to Stars, Yeong-ja’s Heydays, Winter Woman (1977, directed by Kim Ho-sun), and The Home of Stars (1978, directed by Ha Gil-jong) titillated viewers and were successful at the box office, but they also began to expose the heavy tendency towards exploiting women and moving away from intellectualism. Although the authoritarian government and the young culture opposed each other, they both contributed to the perpetuation of a disjointed society. What was more problematic was the fact that the directors of The Film Era channeled the public’s libido, which had been repressed by the powers of the authoritarian government, into the vulgar eroticism of hostess films. In later generations, the film industry has for the most part described the defiant youth culture and The Film Era as having been oppressed and distressed by the dictatorship government. But in this dichotomy between
oppression and defiance, defiance becomes more of a side note, and the explanation becomes too simple. Conversely, the directors of The Film Era wanted to get rid of a culture that was driven by intellectual and anti-communist motivations, but in the process, they became a culprit in creating a youth culture that manipulated women's sexuality. They were a group that profited economically by implying that the root of societal disorder and problems was tied to women's sexuality. What The Film Era produced as its reaction against the government was plainly "Resistance Merchandising."

If we use Yeong-ja's Heydays as a model, we can see that two fundamental historical phenomena are missing from the films of The Film Era. The first are President Park Chung-hee's authoritarian policies—anti-communist laws, national security, laws against rebellions, anti-sedition laws—and specific cases such as those of People's Revolutionary Party Incident, or of college student Kim Sang-jin, who disemboweled himself during a protest for democracy. There were numerous intellectuals who died in defiance during this turbulent time in history. Their stories were left outside film screens. During this bleak time in history, the directors of The Film Era were in denial of their own backgrounds and propagated sensational elements in their films. In Yeong-ja's Heydays, Yeong-

ja is raped by the college son of the steel factory owner, and in Heavenly Homecoming to Stars, the main female character Gyeong

ah is forced by her first love, college student Ha Yong-su, to have an abortion, after which he abandons her. The two male college students' betrayals become the main reason for the two women's downfalls. As mentioned earlier, in Yeong-ja's Heydays the camera films from the perspective of the college student who rapes Yeong-

ja. He is unaffected by President Park Chung-hee's order for industrialization, but he is a perpetrator of rape who is out to sow his wild oats; the film is a co-conspirator in producing these types: educated but irresponsible men.

The second element missing in films by The Film Era is the topic of working women. During the Yushin regime of the 1970s, many people left their agricultural livelihoods to relocate to the cities. Many women went to the capital to join the many laborers contributing to the government's goal of making $10 billion in exports. Women worked in much harsher conditions and made less money than men; hence, women's struggles to earn enough capital were never-ending. However, on screen, these women have disappeared, and the women left holding our attention are hostess women.

Love Me Once Again (1968, directed by Jeong So-yeong), a melodrama about a mother's love, is representative of the films made in the 1960s; this film was also turned into a TV series. Director Im Kwon-taek, who is well known internationally, directed another hostess genre film, Wang Sib Li, My Hometown (1976). This film is about two different women: a hostess woman who returns to her hometown in the countryside, and another woman, who after getting married, ends up swindling the man she loved before her marriage so that she can escape her financial hardship. The latter, who is also a mother with three children, is played by Kim Young-ae. After Wang Sib Li, My Hometown, this type of mother character nearly disappears from the screen, and the mothers we see next are the kinds in films deemed "excellent" by the political power structure: mothers who sacrifice themselves for the good of the country and their family. The directors of The Film Era rejected this template for a mother character and put forward unmarried women as protagonists. The directors from The Film Era replaced the government-sanctioned image of mother, that of a pure woman,
with women who work as hostesses, who contaminate both the city and the newly arrived women from the countryside. An abject hostess is redeemed only when she becomes a mother. A film that ends this way ends happily. Regardless of whether they were made with the support of the Yushin regime or by The Film Era, these types of films suggest that a woman's life depends on her sexual relationship with a man. In either case, the woman's role is determined by the patriarchal system. The narrative of a laboring woman who struggles to support herself is replaced with that of a woman whose independence is tied to her sexual relationship with a man.

President Park Chung-hee, hoping to stay in power permanently, instituted the Yushin Constitution in 1972. "Yushin" is a Confucian term that does not mean revolution, but the making of something new out of something old, renewal for the sake of the old. The autocrat Park Chung-hee used this rhetoric as a political strategy to craftily evade revolution, innovation, conservatism, or reactionism, and to remain in power permanently. Hostess Yeong-ja is the perfect subaltern that resulted from the failed dialectic between the Yushin generation and The Film Era, between counterculture and official culture, and between political culture and youth culture.

Related Materials

Kim Seung-ok, "[Memo on Adaptation] Creating an Adaptation Is More Difficult than Creating an Original Work"

Film Vol. 3:1, January / February 1975, pp. 68-69

It might seem troubling or even perverse to think that I, a novelist, would take on another novelist's work and trim it to fit a film script. Adapting my own work would cause a number of problems to surface, but revising someone else's work is definitely more challenging than having to create an original work.

The reason that I have been attracted to screenplays is that a film script must be artistic as well as commercially appealing, and it must have the power to influence and change the hearts and minds of the audience. Taking on Yeong-ja's Heydays posed a big dilemma for me; the first reason was that it was the second film of director Kim Ho-sun, and the second was that it was based on a work written by a colleague, Jo Seon-jak.

Also, I had to think about how to show all the tragic transformations that Yeong-ja goes through within the limitations of a script. I racked my brain over several days thinking about whether I should base the script on the original work or just borrow the title and create an entirely different story. In the end, I rationalized that it was my duty to create a film script that retained the spirit of the
main female character from the novel.

I thought about how I could write a screenplay that would be different from the ordinary stories we were used to seeing all our lives, but that would also be a story that the audience could feel was about them. I didn’t want my job to end with the production of the manuscript; I considered myself partly a salesman, and I wanted to see if I could win over the audience.

*Yeong-ja’s Heydays* is not a unique story. However, it is a true story. The welder falls for the maid who works at the steel factory owner’s house. Yeong-ja is cold and is difficult to get close to. Is it because when he goes over on an errand, she opens the front door and he accidently brushes against her bosom? When he asks her to go see a movie, she rejects him, adding that she wouldn’t go out with someone like him. He feels angry, but he decides that when he has the opportunity, he will corner her and make her his girlfriend. In an effort to vent his indignation, he seeks out a prostitute named Chang-suk.

This is the same Yeong-ja that appears in the novel *The Tomb of the Patriots* (*Jisachong*). In Jo Seon-jak’s other novel, which has the same title as the film, *Yeong-ja’s Heydays*, Yeong-ja’s fate leads her to take a job as a conductress and then to embark on the low life of a prostitute.

This is the basic storyline from the novel. However Yeong-ja is fighting to overcome her situation in the midst of the tragedies that befall her. It was important that through the character Yeong-ja, the audience would ask the question: “How do we improve our lives while afflicted by poverty, ignorance, and disease?” I had actually written the screenplays *Mist* (1967, directed by Kim Soo-yong) and *Estacy* (1974, directed by Jo Mun-jin) based on my novel *Trip to Muxin*, but it was difficult to take *Yeong-ja’s Heydays*, the most ordinary story, and convert the various storylines into moving images.

I felt like Yeong-ja’s horrible fate of first losing her arm and then dying in a fire was too cruel. And at the same time, it felt like the people of modern society were complicit in abandoning her.

As a result, the novelist Jo Seon-jak, the director Kim Ho-sun, and I spent three months in a brothel town and held discussions in order to find the true face of Yeong-ja. When I was writing the rough draft of the script, I was initially stumped about what would happen after Yeong-ja loses her arm, and I would sit for hours at a bar in Mia-ri taking apart the script until I could think of an idea.

“Not having an arm is hard on my business. But I think I could survive if someone like you came by regularly. All I have is debt.”

I buy Yeong-ja an artificial arm and become her main source of business. When the city orders the brothels to close, the girls from the Cheongnyangni brothels have nowhere to go. Yeong-ja follows me to where I work as a body scrubber at the public bathhouse, and she stays there for a while. She had left all the money she made over the years with a malicious married woman, and when she goes to look for her, she gets caught in a fire and dies.
As soon as I wrote down one idea, another idea would arise, and after that I would have to debate with the director. This cycle would last two months. While struggling to create a Yeong-ja character that everyone could relate to, I found myself falling in love with her. Once I had decided that the film's underlying theme would be how the main characters could survive their cruel circumstances and live a beautiful life, the "phases" that Yeong-ja went through came to me easily. There was another challenge: whom to cast in the role of Yeong-ja. It would be much easier to write with a specific person in mind. I had to change motels seven times to keep up with the rush of inspiration that would fill me at various times while I wrote. I would write with a number of different actresses in mind: An In-suk, Kim Ja-ok, Lee Yeong-ok, Yeom Bok-sun, and Kim Ok-jin. As for the role of Chang-su, I wrote it with the actor Song Jae-ho in mind from the beginning, and this made it easier for me to illustrate Yeong-ja's transformation.

Yeong-ja is our lover, and at other times she is our sister. She is also someone whom we end up abandoning. In the original work, she meets a cruel ending. Through Yeong-ja, we realize that we have to establish our own life path.

In film, it's important not to portray a tragic figure in a tragic light. A film must be able to show that life can be beautiful even in moments of darkness. If the film leans too much toward the aesthetic side, it can have the opposite effect. It was taxing trying to figure out how to show scenes portraying Yeong-ja's grim circumstances and the ugly side of society in a realistic manner because we couldn't ignore the censorship authority.

Some people say that an adapted screenplay lacks originality, but frankly, adapting a work is more challenging than inventing an original work. One can imagine that the work of a scriptwriter in this situation is like that of an architect who also has to be the onsite engineer with a deep understanding of the surrounding area. From the point of preproduction to actual filming, the director sought my advice on virtually all aspects of the film and would select scenes based on my feedback. While this was incredibly rewarding, it meant that I could not part with the manuscript at any time, and this took a mental toll that would often lead me to get ill.

The three months that took to write the screenplay for Yeong-ja's Heydays were the most difficult yet most gratifying times for me as a writer. If I ever get a similar project in the future, I hope to have ample time to understand the character and the story fully before picking up my pen.