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# The Neo-Positive Value of Symbolic Representations and Ritual Politics: Reconsidering the South Korean Allegory in Popular Film, *Asura: The City of Madness*

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**Abstract:** The article is a preliminary effort to join neo-positive and historical institutional analysis from comparative politics with insights from discursive and phenomenological analysis. It highlights a message arising from a South Korean film related to moral–ethical dimensions and the implications of development policy. Taken in symbolic as well as empirical terms, the film proffers that economic development policy not attending to political institutional development—including correct institutional *practices* at the micro-level—is feeding Asia's demons (e.g., *asuras*) rather than its forces of stability and (rational, democratic, participatory) political order. The film suggests that institutional atrophy and social decay may emerge from the breakdown of political institutions and participatory politics as a political system moves from rationalized institutions and practices into what the current work calls, "mafia politics." Political ritual and political theatre are actively employed in the film in ritualized acts of the desecration of political order. The current work suggests that the analysis of symbolic representations relating to ritual politics and performativity (e.g., "political theatre") located in certain art forms, such as international film, may be useful in studies of religion and politics, and in qualitative comparative political and historical institutional analysis more broadly.

**Keywords:** ritual politics and political theatre; institutional atrophy and social decay; mafia politics; religion and politics; culture and politics

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Had Kafka imagined himself in South Korea, his story, *In the Penal Colony* (Kafka [1919] 2011), might have looked something akin to the South Korean film, *Asura: The City of Madness* (Kim 2016).[1] Why revisit a 2016 Korean-language film? A sweeping satire regarding the wholesale rejection of all moral–ethical measures in modern, industrializing politics, the film suggests an empirical argument regarding development (to the extent that we are interested in such arguments from films). Presented in comparative political and historical institutional terms, the argument could be framed as the following: (1) International or domestic development funds may be empowering criminal elements rather than the forces of political stability[2] in certain local contexts in Asia; indeed, it satirizes the same using parody and *live-action anime*. (2) Under conditions of the weak development of democratic institutions,[3] such funds may contribute to institutional atrophy (Huntington 1965; Huntington 1996a, pp. 214, 217, 283; regarding rationalisation of political practices and authority, see Huntington 1966) rather than to democratization and/or participatory governance at the local level and, indeed, may contribute to social decay (Huntington [1968] 2006, pp. 86, 124–125, 140) rather than to cohesion or social solidarity. (3) Economic interventions into local contexts that do not attend to the construction of democratic institutions, *and correct institutional practices*, in which channels of communication run in both directions, may cause significant social unrest (Ibid., pp. 5, 24, 266, 316, 346); potential or real violence (Huntington 2017) (including crime, Huntington [1968] 2006, p. 283); and may even stir potential war, rebellion (Ibid., pp. 155, 170, 264, 391), and/or revolution-related (Ibid., pp. 78, 264, 266, 292, 314)[4] social forces in hidden quarters.[5]

The film implies that the moral–political philosophy of *every individual for himself at all costs* that is inherent in mafia politics results in an extraordinary degree of social and political

violence at the domestic (e.g., nation-state) and communal levels. It denotes a loss of the social contract by which individuals and communities within a society *willingly* choose good behaviour and good faith in social, economic, and political interactions. Durkheim calls this type of willing choice *organic solidarity*. He associates it with modern Western societies, who, he says in the late 19th century, are leaning toward a *division of labour* as their source for *organic* social solidarity rather than (social catharsis and common consciousness violently achieved through means of *mechanical* solidarity via) repressive law (Durkheim [1893] 1996, pp. 40, 85, 101, 106, 331). It is not certain whether Durkheim was right in this estimation, or whether repressive law might be necessary for social cohesion under certain modern circumstances; the film suggests a few contexts in which it might.

While the film was produced in South Korea, its message may apply more broadly to both national-level and international development policies. Posturing, including nuclear weapon displays and testing by North Korea since the film's release, suggest that certain material artistic works may be worthy of further analysis by social scientists as symbolic representations and political symbols.[6] Neo-positive analysis is invoked,[7] relating to (comparative and international) religion and politics. And in a preliminary manner, this work draws upon components of discursive, phenomenological, and historical institutional analysis. The neo-positive analysis developed herein assumes a world of comparative and/or multiple epistemologies (Geertz [1957] 2016; Cover 1983; Açikel 2006; Scharf 2022; see also Fish 1982)—particularly to be expected in the contexts of religion and politics—and attempts to address the film in those terms.[8] Much of the analysis of the film centres upon performativity, ritual politics, and political theatre. That is, the current work defines ritual politics as ritualized political activities of a highly symbolic value, directly related to religion or religiosity, and it suggests that the linking of performativity with ritual politics in political activities on the ground provides a useful working definition, following both Goffman and Kertzer, of political theatre (political theatre, as discussed below, may or may not include a religious component). See (Goffman 1959; Kertzer 1988, pp. 14, 44–45).

Who is the "author" of symbolic representations in an art medium such as film? Jacques Derrida notes that the word has multiple inherent meanings beyond authorship (Mitchell 1991, pp. 144, 148; Derrida [1967] 1978, pp. 7–9, 11–14, 178–79, 185, 227).[9] Indeed, he observes that words take significance in narrative and symbolic forms (Derrida [1967] 1978, pp. 23, 75, 207–208, 267, 336 n31),[10] which may imply authorial intent or meanings beyond authorial intent.[11] For the purposes of this work, it is the material presence of symbolic representations, and their likely set of meanings, that matter rather than their authorship in individual persons, per se. The latter may be inaccessible as real data; likewise, were we able to access the information regarding the authorship of specific symbolic representations in film, we might find more than one, or several authors, each with his or her own (competing) authorial intent(s) with regard to the symbolic representations presented.[12]

That is, symbolic representations that appear to carry weighty cultural and/or political significance may be worthy of further effort at explanation and/or contextualizing, regardless of the authorship of them.[13] Such tools from the social theory of the disciplines may assist neo-positive social scientists in providing important resources for "reading" or "making legible" (Scott [1998] 2020, pp. 30, 78; Geertz [1983] 2008) such artistic indicators or signals in international artistic works, and for identifying them when they emerge.

## 1. Film in South Korea and in Political Science

English-language research by political scientists relating to Korea has, for example, emphasized the significance of film in relation to American efforts to reduce film quota policies in Korea, as well as queries as to the popularity of American film in relationship to (political) trust and distrust (Kim et al. 2006, pp. 430, 435); the use of government-funded short films in "food diplomacy" for the promotion of *halal* foods (Deniar and Effendi 2019, p. 812); cultural exchange with regard to film in international context as a measure of improved relations between Israel and South Korea (Cohen 2006); ideological change,

individualism, and neoliberal film themes in Korean gangster film (Gillespie 2016); and the level of viewership of Chinese film and television as correlating with more positive views of China in Asian countries such as South Korea (Linley et al. 2012, pp. 501, 504, 514–15). Work in Korean Studies relating to cinema or media, per se, has traced the historical shift from film(s) supporting colonial administrations to an industry slowly asserting liberation themes and nationalism, and, finally, to a marked and intentional erasure of symbols of colonialism from Korean film (An 2018); the influence of Korean film on Hollywood and Bollywood, the construction of myth in Korean film, and questions regarding our concepts of national cinema more broadly (Chung and Diffrient 2015); as well as feminist critiques of, "misogynistic culture and male-centered narratives in Korean films." (Kim 2018, p. 506) In addition, some other disciplines address, for example, the impact of Korean art and cultural products such as K-Pop (Korean popular music) in parts of Eastern Europe (Marinescu and Balica 2013).

A perusal of works relating to art more broadly in political science finds early works at the vanguard of the question by Murray Edelman ([1964] 1985), including the role of a range of art forms in the creation of image and narrative, and, thereby, in the construction of how people see political questions (Edelman 1996). Additional analyses of art in political science include attention to the impact of great works of art on political ideas in their own cultural contexts (Negash 2004); media images in social rebellions such as the Arab Spring (Khatib 2012); and legendary icons, image, and art in the development of national identity (Mitra and König 2013). Similarly, scholars such as Timothy Mitchell present artistic renderings as representations (including those using humans as models) in World Fairs, festivals, and other fora in the construction of Western conceptions of the Middle East and of Egypt in the 19th century (Mitchell 1991, pp. 1–2, 13, 17, 23, 46, 126, 172).

Additional works outside the discipline address, for example, art and icons in computer science, media, and advertising, where the power of art is well recognized (See, for example, Clarke and Henderson 2002). In history, regional, and cultural studies, culture and art, including internet culture and popular film, are discussed in terms of their representations and framing of the past in the context of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust (Skolnik 2015). Others examine the role of aesthetics, power, and control in the culture revolution of Syria (Weiss 2022).

The word "art" is invoked across disciplines in relation to the "state of the art" in various disciplinary contexts, theoretical, methodological, and the like. Given the long and ignominious propensity of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes to imprison great artists, or worse (Skloot 1993; Frank 1987)[14]—as well as the great theoretical frameworks of French sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu regarding the power issues surrounding art, taste, and what counts as high culture (Bourdieu 1986)—rather than leaving art to other disciplines or sub-fields, art as it relates to material, comparative, and international politics may be worthy of increased attention by neo-positive political scientists, per se.

Film may receive more attention from political scientists than some other art forms, particularly in tracing trends regarding depictions of international relations (Gregg 1998); the relationship between Hollywood, specific administrations, and choices in the construction and orientation of films relating to geopolitics and national politics (Dodds 1998); political limits on filmmaking (Hozic 2014); Hollywood film as carrying ideological content that has shaped the political and institutional agenda in American politics (Scott 2000); American political culture and film (Franklin 2006); restrictions on critical and fiction film, the use of propaganda film, and the significance of (artistic and other) discourse, symbolic representations, and political ritual (primarily non-religious) in the construction of politics in the Syrian state (Wedeen 1999, pp. 112, 202–204);[15] the use of ARAMCO films in the construction of the U.S. and Saudi relationship (Vitalis 2009); and Hollywood as a moral arbiter and economic Leviathan (Hozic 2001). Political theory finds more widespread attention to film as myth-making relating to war but also as everyday lived socio-politics in the domestic context (Nelson 2015); the film medium itself as providing, through moving image, non-causal experiences of unpredictability, discontinuity, and resistance, and,

thereby, contributing to democratic theory (Panagia 2013); interpretive frameworks from major political theorists in relation to aesthetics and image in film, as well as their political exegeses in relation to particular film(s) (Fraser 2018; Flisfeder 2019) and many others.

## 2. Symbolic Data: Art, Symbol, Religion

I have argued, drawing upon Schneider (1987) and Hodder (1989), that film may be read, carefully, as a material and cultural text (See Sohn 2021; also Franklin 2006). That is, drawing analogy from the disciplines of cultural anthropology and of archaeology, film may, under certain circumstances, be treated as an ethnographic material-cultural source by political ethnographers.[16] While such an endeavour must be treated with limited and serious analytical discretion by neo-positive social scientists, there may be instances in which it is a useful and even important source of, most likely, symbolic data.

Derrida tells us that words are symbols; words represent an item or an experience, they are not that item or experience in itself.[17] Moreover, he maintains that words may hold more than one meaning at a time; our choice of meaning, or authorial intent, may not hold with different readers, or over time, in our written works (Derrida [1967] 1978, pp. 73, 227, 325 n13).[18] And other interpretations of our work may be as valid, or even more valid, than our authorial intent; indeed, do we really maintain authorship, or is there some other, more transcendent source behind great works of art, including writing? (Derrida [1967] 1978, pp. 20, 27–28, 60, 62, 228–29)[19] Derrida may ask the question by way of suggesting the answer for himself.[20]

While the present writing does not suggest that social scientists must move into the arena of the Transcendental (Jaspers 1959, p. 62) as an object of analysis or study, it works from the starting observation that variations on many types of (transcendental-related) representational frameworks—which we sometimes call religion—matter greatly and may even be predominant, culturally, in many parts of the world (See Raudino and Sohn 2022; Tessler 2022; Raudino 2022; Tessler 2011; Haynes 2020, 1998, 1993; see also Cantwell Smith 1984; Sohn 2023).[21] Religions are not going away (Norris and Inglehart [2004] 2011; Fox 2015; Hurd 2008. See also Shaw 2009; and discussion in Sohn and Raudino 2022, pp. 2–10). Neither do multiple epistemologies show signs of receding. Thus, including them to a greater extent in our neo-positive analyses—through attention to cultural and symbolic data and the frameworks related to them—may be important.

## 3. Discursive Tools: Subjectivity, Meaning, and "Truth"

Symbolic data, and symbolic representations, call upon some of the methodological tools inherent in other disciplinary frameworks, such as discursive analysis as derived from scholars including Jacques Derrida and others. Adding these tools to the methodological toolkit of neo-positive social scientists may provide powerful avenues for analysis, especially for the study of symbolic representations, as suggested by scholars within the discipline, including Timothy Mitchell (1991, pp. 144, 149); in relation to the study of ritual, or political ritual, as significant for social status, community hierarchies, solidarity, and/or politics, as noted by James Scott and others (Scott [1985] 2008, pp. 43, 238–40, 331. See also, in other disciplines, Kertzer 1988; Bastien 1985; Turner [1969] 1995; Said [1978] 1995).[22]

It has long been theorized that a scholar's (subject) position or "standpoint" as an observer can have a strong impact on his or her (otherwise) analytical work, leading some to problematize the possibility of rigor in historical analyses in general, while in no way giving up on that possibility (Heidegger [1962] 2001, p. 194).[23] That is, scholars such as Heidegger place human lived experience in time (*Dasein*) first in all acts of human interpretation and analysis and suggest that the key to unpacking the problem of objectivity (e.g., exiting a sort of circularity, or tautology, of analysis procured through experience and internalized situational assumptions on the part of the observer) would most likely lie precisely in *emphasizing* the situatedness (or subject position?) of the person/scientist/scholar doing the observing, and in deriving terms and definitions based upon the objects of analysis

rather than "fancies and popular conceptions" as an ideal and to the extent possible.[24] This estimation applies from the tidy laboratory to the messy political–ethnographic street. While it is usually the best that we can hope to achieve, it is also true that for the scholar to find the "simple meaning" (פשט) (Halivni 1991)[25] of a text, of archival documents, observations, interviews, or of patterns in any of these is a difficult task in the best of circumstances. Variations in subjectivity among scholars allow for a range of meanings according to hermeneutic methods. That is, there may be fewer truths than we once thought, and/or there may be a wider range of legitimate interpretive frameworks or experiences to justify the analysis of multiple meanings or interpretations of the same objective, historical, and material realities.

However, as social scientists, by the epistemological orientation suggested herein, we need not give up on the idea of truth, or even objectivity as an ideal goal of scientific method; although we may need to give up on the idea of more than a few Truths with a capital "T."[26] That is, according to some of the significant, original, late-modern scholars of hermeneutics, while it is important to account for all of the factors informing interpretation mentioned above, not all possibilities within a range of interpretations are valid (Gadamer [1960] 2004, pp. 269–71). Some interpretations may be "arbitrary," which would inherently affect our ability to understand related phenomena (Ibid., p. 271). That is, even while accepting a relatively "fluid multiplicity of possibilities" in a given context of observation and interpretation, "not everything is possible." (Ibid.) The goal herein, then, is neo-positivist in the sense of striving to observe, report upon and, "seeking to know the real world as it exists rather than as we wish to imagine it" (Sohn and Raudino 2022, p. 23; see also, Kuhn [1962] 2012, p. 111; Hoyningen-Huene 1992). That goal persists albeit (and perhaps precisely as a cause of) addressing qualitative and cultural data, and seeking to account for symbolic materials, meanings, and representations as closely as possible within a neo-positive frame.

Some right and wrong answers may find themselves on a continuum of right-ness and wrong-ness, or they may relate to material lived experiences[27] that are sufficiently different across demographic and other variables that two seemingly impossibly opposing answers can be, at once, empirically and/or materially correct. Nonetheless, remaining within hermeneutic methods, themselves, is the recognition of validity versus non-validity in interpretation, as well as right and wrong (in the sense of correct or incorrect) (Ibid.).[28] Thus, it is worth our while as scholars to ponder which variables may be most apt to lead us in the direction of higher degrees of validity and empirical accuracy rather than the opposite. The neo-positivist approach herein is informed by such corrections to some of our historically more rigid claims to truth in our scholarly endeavours, such as 19th century claims regarding primitivity, and the like—while not giving up on smaller material truths, per se—in order to report upon material approaches to cultural and political questions that may or may not, themselves, constitute deeply held normative views, positions, or conceptual frameworks on the part of individuals, groups, or communities.

## 4. Phenomenological Tools: Experience, Ritual Politics, and Political Theatre

A phenomenological approach informs the current preliminary work in the simplest sense of informing the analysis with accounts or representations of the lived experience of persons.[29] Not all fictional accounts in film would fit this category. In this sense, *film as a political–ethnographic source may, under certain conditions, provide symbolic representations regarding the real lived experience of a theme or issue in a specific socio-political and/or cultural context*. Baron, Havercroft, Kamola et al. have drawn upon phenomenology to analyse indirect, hidden forms of violence through analysis of practices and the coercive restructuring of social relations (Baron et al. 2019). For them, "Phenomenology, with its focus on background practices, structures, and the constitution of social relations, provides a methodology for uncovering this form of violence." (Ibid., p. 203).

The current approach seeks, similarly, to encourage attention to (social and political) practices, questions of subjectivity, and social relations, while, however, emphasizing

lived experience, per se. Experience, too, involves and helps to unveil informal, indirect, and hidden practices and processes. That is, the most basic unit of analysis, here, is not individual attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours, nor even formal rule(s) or institutional practices, although experience may be informed by all of these. Patterns relating to individual experiences may be analysed through verbal and textual sources, such as personal accounts, interviews, biographies, archival materials, political–ethnographic observation, and art sources, such as film.

Phenomenologically, the current work is informed by Goffman's dramaturgical framework (Goffman 1959) regarding self-presentation in either a political[30] or ritual frame (Goffman [1969] 2005, pp. ix, 57). It may be worth noting that I am not distinguishing between ritual order and social order, as Goffman does in some contexts (Ibid., p. 42). Rather, in the context discussed herein, *political ritual is used to establish a (new) social and political order based upon crime, and symbolic referents from religion are employed to highlight those ritual desecrations of the existing social and political order, including the consent of the governed, and the protection of a rational public order and participatory governance*. Goffman's dramaturgy was, in some ways, distinct from, but also influential upon and influenced by, phenomenology (See, for example, MacCannell 1983; Smith 2005). Intentionality (Buber 1937; Levinas 1999. See also Tallon 1978; Cohen 2010) and world construction (Berger [1969] 1990) do play a role in the discussion herein in the sense that the current writing submits that the live-action anime genre of the film provides a message regarding destruction or atrophy (and their potential positive antithesis, construction) resulting from certain political inputs. The significance of religion, religious imagery, and ritual politics in this world construction (a term developed to explain religious frameworks) appears in punctuated moments throughout the film, and in extended form in its long finale.

## 5. *Asura: The City of Madness*, or "Demon City": Symbolic Representations, Moral Good, Ritual Politics, and Political Theatre

The fictional feature film, *Asura*, highlights the significance of symbolic representations for political analysis, particularly relating to ritual politics, and political theatre. Empirically, it provides a subtext suggesting some of the problems that are endemic to money-first policies, that is, economic development without prior and concerted attention to the construction of political institutions and the building and enforcement of correct (micro-level) institutional practices in the areas of participatory governance and public participation. The film begins by doing so in symbolic form through the title itself, "Asura," by reference to *asuras* or *demons*,[31] who may be highly empowered, charismatic, and/or talented evil people in several Asian[32] and East Asian religious traditions, or fallen demi-gods. That is, the specific suggestion in the film is that economic development policies (whether funding originates from domestic, regional, or international spheres) are empowering Asia's "demons" rather than its forces of participation, stability, and—in moral philosophical and/or religious terms—good.

These points are highlighted through mimicry and satire; that is, democratic institutions are actively mimicked and the destruction of them is satirised in highly symbolic treatments akin to "Gotham" in American symbolic treatments of the same (Burton 1989; Nolan 2008). While the filming is as dark as Gotham, *Asura's* mad city, as presented through the live-action anime, reflects somewhat more realism, although it retains traces of a comic/cartoonish (e.g., serial) form in acting, cinematography, and in the English dubbing. One might endeavour not to overstate the cosmic implications of the film's story with its nearly comic violence; nevertheless, *Asura* invokes epic battles between good and evil in the Hindu Vedas, and in some Buddhist traditions.[33] Asura is also the name of an insect, a specific type of moth found in Asia. Likewise, the term "Asura" is associated in some parts of Asia with gnats, spirit possession, and madness (Zan 2010, pp. 20–21), hence the full title of the film, *Asura: The City of Madness*.

The film suggests a moral–philosophical message regarding participatory politics, social solidarity, and the greater good. Ritual politics and political theatre, strongly present

in the film, have been developed by scholars in other contexts, primarily in the discipline of anthropology, including David Kertzer, who applies Victor Turner's research and framework regarding ritual to ritual and politics (Kertzer 1988, pp. 40, 63). In the case of Turner, ritual provides an opportunity for profound, transformative, and potentially transcendent community building (e.g., *communitas*) (Turner [1969] 1995, pp. 96–97, 105, 107, 109, 112, 118, 127, 129). The film presents "demons" in the antithesis, engaging in wilful ritual desecrations of the agreed-upon social and political order in order to achieve social decay, as well as political–institutional and democratic atrophy. The line between human and god may be opaque or even porous in some Asian religions in the sense that humans can become sainted, and, from there, may be deified, gaining the status of gods; likewise, Divinity may be seen as able to incarnate itself on earth in human and other forms.[34] Asuras, or demons, may be similarly treated in some Asian religions and are presented as everyday humans (albeit evil) in the film.

On the surface, *Asura: The City of Madness* is simply another dark action–mafia parade. It portrays notable extremes in politics and appears to proffer, by their absence, some combination, *within one's own societies and social communities*, of several real moral imperatives including an agreed-upon moral framework, power sharing, and domestic-level intercommunal coexistence. That is, a feudal state of nature (Hobbes [1651] 2017; see also Van Mill 1994), as depicted in the film, does not quietly result in the survival of the fittest, nor does insurrection against sovereign legitimate authority, also aptly portrayed, against systematic, rational political order more broadly (McLean 1981). The film's last scenes—and many throughout—imply that the state of nature, in fact, may itself be the argument for political order above ostensibly more important individual interests in personal wealth accumulation, when the latter is achieved at the cost of public peace and freedoms.

Political theatre stands out in the film. Observing the film in terms of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical and phenomenological work (Goffman 1959, pp. preface, 8, 10–46) on the *performativity* of the individual vis à vis both the self and the community, joined with David Kertzer's work regarding the power of ritual in politics (Kertzer 1988, pp. 51, 110),[35] this film takes performative political ritual to new ultra-modernist extremes in what we can only hope that, in real life is, "The Road Not Taken." (Frost 1998, p. 137) *The current work seeks to join three theoretical foci, or variables, for observation and analysis: (1) Goffman's questions of self-presentation and performativity; (2) Kertzer's emphasis on ritual in a political context through ritualized political activities of highly symbolic value or content; and (3) (religious) ritual, as linked with politics, including a significant religious component, religious symbols, religiously symbolic meaning, or which employs (neutrally) or exploits any of these. When the last two variables are present, I am calling it ritual politics. When the first two, or all three, variables are present, I am calling it, following Goffman and Kertzer (and, in the current work, adding an emphasis on religion, or religious components): political theatre* (Goffman 1959; Kertzer 1988, pp. 14, 44–45). In that sense, this work is informed by but different from that of Wedeen. While religion is present in the relatively secular context (Wedeen 1999, pp. 7–8)[36] within which she observes issues relating to power and control, Wedeen takes seriously especially secular, or secularised (or, at times, secularised, quasi-religious) political ritual, emphasising acts intended to assert and enforce state elites' control of symbols, as well as their control of the construction of symbolic meanings, through discourse, art, and propaganda film in her work on the Syrian state (Ibid., pp. 25, 78, 88, 112, 198 n10, 202–204). The suggestion herein is that we can observe and study such performative ritual political acts, or political theatre, in a (political–sociological rather than psychological) dramaturgical frame for useful social–theoretical insight and analysis. Political theatre might or might not involve actual politicians or government officials. It does so in the film, *Asura*. Moreover, ritual politics and political theatre in the film occur in both a pristine, hygienic press conference context as well as in almost comically violent brawls. That is, the characters appear to enjoy a degree of all-out purgative carnage that is rarely allowed in any society, as they pummel one another freely with drinking glasses, metal rods, and anything else available (Sobczynski 2016). They

coordinate acts of political theatre for sound bites and photo opportunities, cultivating such labours to new levels of art and artifice.

The film begins with Detective Han Do-Kyung, a disaffected police officer who is overcome by the money involved in the development process in his town; he sees development efforts (especially the construction of new neighbourhoods and luxury mini-cities within the city) as contributing to a political environment of lawlessness.[37] By the time the film begins, Detective Han has given in and decided to join the mayhem. He helps in a series of events that lead to the murder of a witness against the mayor. Han decides to work for the mayor, full time, leaving his position on the police force. A second man is killed along the way, and it is unclear whether Detective Han only believes that he is responsible, or if he actually was responsible for the death; it may have been an accident in the midst of a street fight. Nonetheless, Han's actions throughout the film are directed by his presumption that he caused that death, and that it was, in fact, a murder. His assumption that he is guilty leads Han to be manipulable by the special prosecutor, who has made it his job to destroy the mayor.

The relationship between (the soon-to-be no-longer detective) Han and his immediate colleague and partner, Moon Sun-Mo, provides a significant theme of the film. Sun-Mo is young and energetic. Their relationship changes over the course of the film. Initially, as detective, Han is mentor to Sun-Mo. They meet for lunch at the same fish and sushi restaurant frequently, where Han recommends that Sun-Mo join him in working for the mayor. Sun-Mo is not certain. Han gives Sun-Mo advice throughout the film. Han emphasizes certain principles: "Sun-Mo. What did I tell you to do to survive? Know your place and never cross the line." (Kim 2016, 00:47:32) Sun-Mo responds: "To stop at the line. I'll take care of my own business, okay?" (Ibid., 00:47:40) The two exhibit generational power dynamics and shifts in their balance of power, as Sun-Mo behaves deferentially to the new boss (e.g., the mayor), only later to win his favour as the bright, shiny, debonair (and heedlessly headlong into trouble) new guy. Han, the tried and true, debonair but of an older generation, picks up the pieces. Han does so sometimes quietly, and sometimes by beating someone very quickly and efficiently without fanfare. By the half-way mark of the film, Sun-Mo has come into the boss' good graces, and Han is on the edges of them, not quite the inside man anymore (Ibid., 1:01:55). Nonetheless, Han continues to make concerted efforts to laud Sun-Mo in the presence of the mayor in order to increase Sun-Mo's chances of doing well. Han's efforts succeed beyond his wishes as Sun-Mo all but replaces him in the mayor's esteem.

The mayor, meanwhile, is childlike, calculating, and brutal. He seeks attention and adulation and is willing to stop at no end of public performance to achieve those goals. The mayor's childlike character appears in his glee at hearing that people liked him in the press conference footage of a (well-planned and orchestrated) violent incident in which the mayor was injured (Ibid., 00:55:35). Secretary Eun tells him the press is calling the mayor "Braver than the U.S. Ambassador During his Attack" (an attack on the mayor that left the mayor bloody) (Ibid., 00:55:40). Only the audience knows, as do the mayor and his colleagues, that the wound was actually self-inflicted in the midst of the near riot. The mayor says in response to the press praise, with his characteristic gleeful smile, "Who? Me?"

It does not help Han's position with the mayor that he is playing the even-keeled person among the strong fists, or "gundogs," as Han calls himself, on the mayor's team. Han quietly suggests to the mayor, "It might be best not to provoke Tae for a while;" Tae is one of the mayor's mafia associates. The mayor sends everyone else away and offers Han a visceral warning: "Han, I'm easily scared. Don't scare me more." Han, not heeding, continues, "You shouldn't give the prosecutors any foothold." The mayor replies with questions regarding a murder that they are covering up; then he says to Han, "Don't play innocent." The mayor asks Han to stand outside rather than in the inner-circle (Ibid., 00:56:10).

Meanwhile, Sun-Mo, nervously, almost despite himself, does something wild, violent, and reckless in order to achieve the boss' attention and favour. He does not appear to be

cut out for this type of brutality, so he forces himself into it, shaking all the while. Han moves to reprimand Sun-Mo and is shooed away by their boss, the mayor. The mayor says to Sun-Mo, gesturing to Han as well, "I like crazy bastards like him." Then, to Sun-Mo, "You're a real man, Sun-Mo." (Ibid., 1:01:25)

Han queries Sun-Mo about why the mayor is shutting him out. Sun-Mo says something evasive and pithy. Han warns him, "Don't be rude. That can get you killed." (Ibid., 1:01:58) Sun-Mo responds, half-respectful, half-derisive: "Yes, sir." Han proceeds to give Sun-Mo instructions to which the latter chides Han about his wife. Han puts him down. Sun-Mo responds, "Fuck, you're annoying. Always talking down to me." (Ibid., 1:02:26) Han: "You're still just a kid." Sun-Mo replies, "I spent last night drinking with the mayor, and he said he wanted to be a lifelong partner to this kid." Han: "So?" Sun-Mo: "Just letting you know." After his reckless act, which impressed the mayor, Han tells Sun-Mo that he is not impressed by it. Sun-Mo says with reproach, "You told me to go earn respect so I tried harder than anyone. Is that so wrong?" In the end, Sun-Mo says, "Han...if you're jealous, you lose!" (Ibid., 1:03:08)

Han continues meeting with some of the prosecutors, under duress of their investigation into the murder in which he believes he is implicated and which he is covering up (Ibid., 1:04:10). Sun-Mo calls him on his meetings for disloyalty to the mayor. Han ultimately turns the state's evidence against the mayor to save himself (Ibid., 1:05:27). He wonders if he is doing the right thing. The mayor finds out that Han has been meeting with prosecutors. The mayor responds with immediate violence, nearly putting out Han's eye with a lighted cigarette (Ibid., 1:20:16). The attack is a surprise to Han. But Han does not defend himself against the mayor, which, physically, he is quite able to do. The mayor asks, "How can a dog bite its master?" (Ibid., 1:20:18)

The violence of the ever-smiling mayor comes out when he is under threat. He asks Han if he believes the mayor can be hurt by the murder of a witness. Han nods, yes. The mayor strikes him and yells, "Fuck no! It's just a passing storm! However strong the wind, it won't bring me down!" (Ibid., 1:20:55) Meanwhile, the prosecutors meet to discuss how to handle the situation (Ibid., 00:53:40).

Han's relationship with his wife, Yun-Hee, provides another subtext. She is sick in the hospital with a potentially terminal disease. He dotes on her; nonetheless, she does not trust him because she says he is a bad man who has done many bad things. She is in the hospital throughout the film. When the doctor says that they should operate one last time, Han requests in a matter-of-fact voice, "Don't let the interns practice on her this time." (Ibid., 1:23:24) And later, "Please save her, okay?" (Ibid., 1:23:47)

Displaying high levels of performativity and ritual politics, the mayor and his people bow ceremoniously at a press conference, where the mayor states, emphatically, "Whatever criticism...I won't try to avoid it. If you wish to condemn, I'll wholeheartedly accept all the criticism! Today...being able to stand in good conscience before you.... It makes my heart overflow!" The mayor assiduously takes off his glasses and wipes his eyes for the cameras, which can be heard clicking feverishly (Ibid., 1:23:28, 1:23:37). Performativity appears to be the driving principle of the mayor in every action, facial expression, and word, whether smiling and genteel to his followers, gleeful and self-reverential at praise, or brash and violent to his underlings.

The recording that Han has made for the prosecutors against the mayor—at significant danger to his life—is not admissible (Ibid., 1:24:34). Meanwhile, the mayor's mini-paramilitary troupe (e.g., thugs and hitmen) meet at a practicing range for target practice; it has some limited markings of a U.S. military base but most likely is not one, as crucial markings are missing, such as a Federal seal and a U.S. flag. The markings may be historical remnants, or simply appropriated decorations (Ibid., 00:57:27).

Performativity, and a joining of ritual and politics, come into play on a number of occasions throughout the film, as with the bowing at the press conference. Near the end, at a funeral, the mayor makes a show of mourning, pounding his fist on the ground and praying on his knees. The wife of the deceased cries and joins him on the floor. The mayor

wails ceremoniously (Ibid., 1:31:34). By this time in the film, the audience knows him well enough to know that all is staged for this man. Every act is performativity. He employs, calculates, and capitalizes upon religious ritual, symbols, and the values of the people around him in various contexts actively to manipulate their sensibilities in effort to draw them into supporting him.

The mayor smiles throughout the extensive expressions of despotism caused by some of his (pre-arranged and staged) political scenes. His smile is not unlike that of the Joker (Burton 1989; Nolan 2008); although, unlike the Joker, the mayor insists upon his moral superiority and his hero-like raising of the city to new levels of *legitimate* greatness and honour through graft and crime. And he never gives up the con. He does not share the Joker's self-awareness and self-loathing (Sobczynski 2016) (to the degree that the Joker might be seen, in Gramscian terms, as an "intellectual," although some scholars treat the Joker in terms of mental illness) (Gramsci [1948] 1992).[38] The mayor, on the other hand, smiles continually, a smile that says that he really believes in himself as the jovial, good-willed hero leader. He does not appear to be burdened by self-consciousness (Sobczynski 2016).[39]

Han is allowed into the V.I.P. room at the same funeral, wherein he and the mayor begin to spar. The mayor indicates that he visits funerals regularly (Kim 2016, 1:33:07). "These are the things people live for," the mayor says; it is not certain whether the mayor means funerals as life cycle rituals, or the meat stew that he says he uses as an excuse to visit funeral homes (Ibid., 1:33:18). The mayor intimates that Han should move on and let his wife die. Han challenges the mayor. Han ends the conversation with a ritual act of self-inflicted violence to demonstrate both his fealty and his anger at how the mayor is treating him (Ibid., 1:34:59). In a sense, he appears to threaten war against the mayor if the latter will not accept his fealty, loyalty, and service: Han bites a drinking glass and chews on the glass before the mayor, mouth bleeding. It is as if to say, here is my blood; what more do you want from me? Han blows blood from his mouth and across the table. Han says, "Just tell me if I live or die." (Ibid., 1:36:00) The mayor retorts, "Everyone dies, when the time comes." (Ibid., 1:36:04)

A battle ensues for some time as police, parishioners, and mafia thugs murder one another throughout the mortuary home. In the finale, Han leans up for his last opportunity to shoot the mayor immediately before Han, himself, dies, face with the pallor of death, and his mouth still bloody from chewing on glass (Ibid., 2:07:23). The audience sees his grimace and contorted face, in which now it is he who most resembles the Joker—dare we say, a demon? He has beaten the mayor at least on that question. Han laughs manically. He looks up; Sun-Mo lies dead in the distance. In the background, a song in English to Jesus Christ, and against Satan, plays.[40] Han tries to stand up and falls. His blood-marked face lies dead with eyes open and glassy. His body still emits a few drops of sweat from the exertion of being only just past fighting, even as he lies dead. See also (Sobczynski 2016).

The moral–ethical message of the film is strong. Not only does absolutely everyone die by the end of the film, with the exception of the one male morally upright figure (the special prosecutor), but they do so in the middle of a set of funerals in a mortuary home with people offering prayers and *Asanas* to their departed loved ones—in a few cases (perish the thought to say it), possibly without sincerity. It may not be a surprise that the few morally upright women are not as lucky. They perish in the brutality with everyone else. It is perhaps a lucid reminder of the real outcomes of some forms of maximizing-as-blueprint[41] (or *Lord of the Flies* as the ideal-typical, natural human condition) (Golding 1955) rather than as an analytical tool to deconstruct power relations and political manipulation tactics. That is, the film offers a reminder to think about who becomes caught in the cross-fire of such socio-political choices and determinations in terms of the construction of political institutions and institutional practices. The film appears to see its job as making stark just how appalling abject immorality in politics really looks from the outside. Perhaps it shares this message, too, with some of the darker *Batman* films (Burton 1989; Nolan 2008).

Performativity, again, marks the film and the mayor throughout it. The mayor intentionally selects his press conference victims for their ability to enable him to make pithy, empty, ringing statements, such as, to the upstanding, and ultimately correct, special prosecutor: “In this day and age, you thugs aren’t afraid to show off your power, huh?” (Kim 2016, 00:04:28) He cries, “Stop fighting!” (Ibid., 00:52:12) when a set of real mafia friends, in pre-planned coordination, disrupt his large political event. And he exclaims, albeit quietly, “Let go, you idiot!”(Ibid., 00:52:26) to his security officer for getting in his way while he, the mayor, watches the fighting with joy from a distance as the orchestral conductor of it. Likewise, as previously mentioned, the mayor willingly impales himself (Ibid., 00:52:45–00:53:06) on a sharp object, stealthily hidden from public view or cameras. He emerges, victorious, “apparently” morally righteous, and injured with gore so that his rallying cries to make theirs a “Rich City!” will be joined by a more powerful photo opportunity. The mayor ritually and symbolically humiliates the (male and female) Redevelopment Solutions Committee meeting by making, in comic guise, somewhat lurid references to bodily functions; the committee members leave in insult. And the mayor demonstrates his ultra-alpha-male status by wandering around the hall of the subsequently cancelled meeting without any pants (a signifier of power vis à vis “lesser” men).

The story, from the opening to closing lines, is told through the eyes of Detective Han, who is also the narrator. He has become corrupt in the development process and is more self-conscious than the mayor, certainly. However, in his consciousness of the horror of which he is a part, he epitomizes the *Nihilist* state.[42] The film opens to his distinctly sardonic and possibly bored statements: “I can’t stand people;” (Kim 2016, 00:00:54) he divulges that his city is filled with “rotten people;” (Ibid., 00:01:00) that the redevelopment projects of the city make it worse (Ibid., 00:01:06); and, “As for me, I side with the winner.” (Ibid., 00:01:28) In the end, however, no one wins. As the film ends, and he lies dead, Han’s voice comes from the mayhem of the mortuary hall; he says, “I knew this would happen. But. . .it couldn’t be helped.” (Ibid., 2:08:58)

## 6. Conclusions

Certain international films may be usefully addressed as political–ethnographic sources of material culture, and possibly political signalling. It is suggested that social scientists and neo-positive political scientists can draw upon some aspects of discursive, phenomenological, and comparative historical–institutional analysis to study symbolic representations in international cultural materials, such as art and film. Questions of ritual politics, political theatre, social cohesion, as well as social decay and political–institutional atrophy are highlighted. The latter may emerge from inputs of economic development money without sufficient attention to the development of political institutions of democratic and/or participatory governance, *as well as correct institutional practices*, to ensure the effective mediation of increasing social participation, which Huntington tells us inevitably follows economic empowerment. A money-first outlook, in the film’s dramatic depiction, leads to a disruption of the moral–ethical foundations of the social and political order in conjoining organized crime with politics.

Ritual politics and political theatre are actively employed in the film in ritualized acts of the desecration of the agreed-upon political order. Asuras (or demons) lead the systemic disruption symbolically and in live action. Discursive analysis is invoked in effort to gain theoretical insight regarding transcendental-related representational frameworks (e.g., religion), as well as authorship, objectivity, and truth in analyses of film as material, cultural, and historical text. Phenomenological models are briefly raised in order to highlight rituals and theatre in politics, as well as lived experiences, as theoretical and explanatory variables. The analysis herein assumes a world of comparative, multiple epistemologies, and addresses the film in those terms rather than evaluating it in terms of (a range of) specific epistemologies outside of its cultural *moyen*. The overall message is that development policy that does not attend to political institutional development—including correct institutional *practices* at the micro-level—is feeding Asia’s demons rather than its

forces of stability and (rational, democratic, participatory) political order. Asia's demons, as symbolically depicted in the film, may be seen in the highly caricatured mayor, in the corrupt detective (and then former detective) Han, and in some of the mayor's mafia allies. Returning to the empirical level, the film appears to proffer several real moral imperatives at the local and domestic levels, including an agreed-upon moral–political framework, power sharing, and (domestic-level) intercommunal coexistence.

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## Notes

1. Korean with English subtitles; also available in English, dubbed. The English dubbing has a cartoon quality. The original Korean language includes intonation and is preferable for full comprehension of the substantive and cultural content.
2. For Huntington, when social groups and communities are newly brought into participation with one another, political institutions must be in place to foster the establishment of civil society. Regarding "civil society," see (Huntington [1968] 2006, p. 37).
3. Huntington is concerned with corruption and violence that may emerge in the presence of economic empowerment without democratic political institutions and correct institutional practices. See (Huntington 2017). See also (Huntington [1968] 2006, pp. 170, 214, 266, 316; Crozier et al. 1975; Huntington 1996a, 1982, 1981). Regarding institutional knowledge and institutional continuity, see, for example (Huntington 1981, p. 126). See also discussion in (Sohn 2022). Regarding the state as holding the legitimate monopoly of violence, see, for example (Huntington 2014).
4. Likewise, Huntington reminds the reader of Weber's admonition that culture, ideas, and even theology can act as independent variables upon institutions, including global institutions, such as the macro-socio-economic institution of modern capitalism; see discussion in (Sohn and Raudino 2022, pp. 17–18; see also pp. 8, 12). See (Huntington 1991; Weber 2011). See also (Fox 2015, p. 36). In this sense, by my read, Huntington was a Weberian; see also (Açikel 2006; Prager 1981; Guliyev 2011; Rosen 1995, pp. 17, 21). While Huntington has been criticised for his arguments regarding a posited clash of civilisations—and the current research does not adopt certain attitudes implied in his work toward Islam—it should be noted that Huntington's argument, there, as well, pertains to the salience of cultural variables as driving forces (e.g., as independent variables) in international political processes and dynamics, see (Haynes 2021, pp. 39–40, 47–48; Huntington 1996b, 1993).
5. Regarding corruption and monies in politics, political institutions, and political development, see, for example (Stockemer et al. 2013; Lu 1999; and Nye 1967).
6. "North Korea Shows Off Largest-Ever Number of Nuclear Missiles at Nighttime Parade" by Reuters Press in *The New York Post*, 9 February 2023, https://nypost.com/2023/02/09/north-korea-shows-off-largest-ever-number-of-nuclear-missiles/ (accessed on 24 March 2023). See also "A Timeline of North Korea's Nuclear Tests" by CBS/AP in *CBS News/Politics*, 3 September 2017, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/north-koreas-nuclear-tests-timeline/ (accessed on 24 March 2023).
7. Kraft argues that neo-positivism began as an intellectual movement in The Vienna Circle of scholars in the early decades of the 20th century. See (Kraft 1953, p. 18). For Kraft, it began as a movement within the study of logic in the discipline of philosophy; it sought precisely to link philosophy with empiricism through the study of signs and symbols in empirical terms, or what they called neo-empiricism and neo-positivism (Ibid, p. 161). The Vienna Circle addresses signs in terms of logic (Ibid., p. 24); mathematical symbols (Ibid., pp. 17–18); the structure of language and meaning (e.g., word/sign, given/referent, and meaning[s]) (Ibid., p. 73); and even addresses the structure of language and meaning across languages, that is, taking into account *different languages* (with their varied symbol systems, given/referents, etc.) (Ibid., pp. 61–62). The meaning of a word/sign is somewhat more fixed for the Vienna Circle than it is for Jacques Derrida, for example (see discussion below); nonetheless, the Vienna Circle allows for some amount of *subjectivity* in regard to the meaning of words while insisting upon an empirical referent as anchoring the meaning of a word/sign (Ibid., pp. 73–74). That is, words/symbols do not exist in a vacuum, nor do they emerge from the clear blue sky; they are tied to and bounded by the empirical. One scientific issue is to find the given/referent to the extent possible and to explain its structural relation with the word/sign. That said, according to Kraft, "The Vienna Circle shares with traditional positivism, after all, the restriction of all positive knowledge to the special sciences and of philosophy to the logic of science" (Ibid., p. 24). Likewise, they are concerned with epistemology, whereby the development of facts, "must be conducted by using the methods of empirical science;" and epistemology relates to the "logical analysis of knowledge, 'the logic of science,'" etc. (Ibid., p. 25, see also p. 161). Imagination (a concern of Derrida and others) as related to objectivity, subjectivity, the inevitability of interpretation, and to concept formation for neo-positive inquiry plays some heretofore relatively unspecified role (Ibid., pp. 90,

145, 156, 162). Political scientists have noted the emergence, or resurgence, of neo-positivism in political science; see, for example (Isaac 2015, p. 269). See also, regarding the use of (subjective) observation in both positive and neo-positive analysis (Ayeni et al. 2019), who, in addition, investigate the relationship between imagination, interpretation, fact, and fiction in the social sciences. And regarding neo-positivism as rejected by some discourse analysis, see (Olsson et al. 2021, p. 89).

8 The current work begins with a definition whereby "epistemology" means our (deeply-held philosophical) ideas regarding what is knowable, or what can be known. Literally, then, it means, roughly, *the logic of what can be known*, or the logic of Knowledge (and/or analysis of the logic of Knowledge construction). In comparative and international terms, epistemology is not the logic of what can be known against a sort of universal standard; rather, it is our own individual, community, field or disciplinary, societal, or even national deeply-held views regarding *what can be known* and *what counts as Knowledge*. It influences our world views, or, you might say, we formulate our world views out of our epistemological premises at every level, individual, community, society, etc. See, for example (Geertz [1957] 2016; Cover 1983; see also Laitin 1995, p. 456). And, in scholarship, it may influence the topics that we view as *knowable objects of research*, the methods that we choose, and those topics and methods that we therefore view as legitimate. See (Scharf 2022; see also, King et al. [1994] 2021, pp. 215, 288, 302, 702). Religious *versus* secular epistemologies are obvious examples for which there may be many multiples of each around the globe. See (Fish 1982) regarding ontology (our theories relating to body, being-ness, material existence, and/or materiality broadly construed) (e.g., relating to the extent to which a sign or symbol may be "'read' into being;" Ibid., p. 703) versus epistemology (our ideas regarding how we know and what can be known; Ibid., pp. 697, 700).

9 See, regarding the dangers of idealism and objectivism with regard to linking words to meaning (Derrida [1967] 1978, p. 11–14). "The 'subject' of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author" (Ibid., p. 226). See also (Said 1978, p. 673; 1983, p. 185). Likewise, for Derrida, a word is a signifier, and the thing it is meant to represent is the signified. Meaning regarding a word is *not* contingent upon context and thus endlessly changing; however, it is bounded by "historicity and temporality" (Derrida [1967] 1978, p. 14) so that different individuals and communities may read it differently at different times and places (Ibid., p. 227).

10 Regarding questions of "the real" in symbolic representations, in his case relating to efforts to create a sense of a real world—our own as well as (and in contrast to) that on exhibition—see (Mitchell 1989, p. 224).

11 Scholars disagree regarding the extent to which scholars should adopt Derrida's framework. See (Fish 1982; Searle 1994; Wolterstorff 1995, p. 165).

12 Regarding approaches to availability of information relating to authorship and/or authorial intent, see (Searle 1994, p. 648). This discussion comes prior to any questions regarding authenticity or veracity in an individual's account of his/her self, interests, intent, motivations, etc., a methodological issue to take into account in interviewing. See (Gluck and Patai [1991] 2016).

13 According to Said, Derrida, like Foucault, was keenly critical of positivism; see (Said 1983, p. 185; see also Foucault [1975] 2012, pp. 56, 74, 254).

14 Regarding narratives of imprisonment in related literary fiction, see (Klots 2016).

15 Relating to symbolic language and image in creating spectacle (Wedeen 1999, pp. 1–5); symbolic practices to display citizen compliance (Ibid., p. 73); Foucault, intention, compliance, and resistance to state discourses (Ibid., p. 153); and Syria not quite achieving Foucault's carceral society (Ibid., p. 18).

16 On material culture as text in the study of archaeology, see (Hodder 1989).

17 For example, words describing experiences, such as "separation" or "exile," in and of themselves, "cannot directly manifest the experience" (Derrida [1967] 1978, pp. 207–8). See also Edward Said's discussion of Derrida's critique of treating text in terms of "direct reference," or something akin to inherent meaning (Said 1978, p. 675).

18 See also Edward Said's discussion of Derrida in (Said 1983, pp. 183–84).

19 Regarding the "transcendental signified," see also (Said 1983, p. 185).

20 Implying that writing is inherently a transcendent-oriented endeavour: "Writing is an initial and graceless recourse for the writer, even if he is not an atheist but, rather, a writer;" see (Derrida [1967] 1978, p. 11). Derrida also describes writing as, "a certain absolute freedom of speech," and as a, "freedom to augur," reflecting an act of revealing rather than an authorial control over words and meaning (Derrida [1967] 1978, p. 12). Paul Mendes-Flohr includes Derrida in a list of philosophers of the 20th century who were religious persons. See (Mendes-Flohr 2015, p. 17).

21 In suggesting a pluralism in relation to religion-state engagement by contrast to mutual insulation of the same, see (Arfi 2015, p. 659).

22 Said on representation, (Said [1978] 1995, pp. 21, 118, 273); cites Derrida, (Ibid., 363). Said discusses his position in regard to Derrida, of whom he was a critic, in (Said 2001, for example, pp. 6, 11, 18, 82, 165–67).

23 Regarding the notion of standpoint in a different theoretical context, see (Hartsock 2019).

24 "If the basic conditions which make interpretation possible are to be fulfilled, this must rather be done by not failing to recognize beforehand the essential conditions under which it can be performed..." (e.g., through the circularity of the ontological rootedness of the Being/person in historical and situational context). Rather, "What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come

into it in the right way. This circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move; it is the expression of the existential fore-structure of Dasein [*Being in Time*] itself," (Heidegger [1962] 2001, pp. 194–95, emphasis added).

25 See especially discussions of simple meaning as well as the utility—and burden—of allegory, metaphor, and other types of interpretation in some contexts (Halivni 1991, pp. 6, 35, 59). Note, פשט, or simple meaning in *halakhic* exegesis may be close to راي in Islamic interpretation, where the latter means common sense, but not where it refers to rational discretion.

26 We may not need to give up the notion of universal principles in the Kantian sense. Regarding the notion of universal principles as laws linked with moral–ethical questions, and the tension between (definitions of rationalist) interests and ethics, see (Darwall 1976, pp. 167–68).

27 See brief discussion of phenomenology, below.

28 Gadamer asserts, for example, an "actual meaning" of a given text under interpretation and that a recognition of its "alterity," or radical difference, from the reader (Heidegger would say, observer) is a necessary starting point to approach that actual meaning or, "its [the text's] own truth," (Gadamer [1960] 2004, pp. 271–72, emphasis added). Gadamer addresses the concept of validity not in the statistical sense. Gadamer discusses validity in explaining Husserl's concepts of life world and personal world (Ibid., pp. 238–39), in contrasting validity with justice (Ibid., p. 541), and in other contexts.

29 With an emphasis on performance and daily lived experiences, see (Goffman 1959, pp. 1, 16, 42, 63, 80, 103, 112, 116, 124, 157), where Goffman draws upon human lived experience—as well as inexperience—in terms of an individual's appeals to truth claims, empirical correctness, self-presentation, experience of the self, social relations, and to inform decision making; and where he explains the use of human experiences as an object of study. See also (Goffman [1969] 2005, pp. 156–60). Heidegger's, Gadamer's, and Derrida's works are all important in the development of phenomenology, see (Moran 2000). Jose Casanova addresses a phenomenology of secularism, see (Casanova 2009, pp. 1049–50, 1052). The type of phenomenology emerging from Goffman, which informs the current work, is to be distinguished from that which Hillary Putnam calls, "old phenomenalism," and which Derrida might call Idealism or Objectivism, with their emphases on sense perception and "sense data," see (Putnam 1977, p. 487). See also (Derrida [1967] 1978, p. 62). There is something in the 20th century philosophical distinctions—as relate to words and meaning—between philosophical positivism, philosophical realism, human experience, and the apparent emphasis of metaphysics (within philosophy) on transcendentalism that is worth investigating in this regard but is beyond the scope of this article. See, for example, (Schlick and Rynin 1948, pp. 479–80).

30 Regarding the implications of Goffman's frame analysis for understanding political mobilisation and political consciousness, see (Gamson 1985).

31 *Asuras* are usually understood as evil in Buddhist and Hindu traditions. In Persian/Iranian tradition, the corollary word, *ahura*, is treated as Divine and Good rather than evil. See (Russell 1987, pp. 58, 104; Salomon 1993). For Schmid, *Asuras* in medieval Buddhism were associated with the path of fighting and other evil; were contrasted with the path of Buddhism; and were among the paths of *samsara*, or suffering, ignorance, and rebirth (Schmid 2008, pp. 294, 297). Regarding religion in Korea, see (Buswell 2018).

32 The effort herein decidedly is not to reify religion in Asia, nor to treat it as a homogeneous whole; rather, some overlapping tendencies regarding approaches to *asuras* are noted. Regarding efforts not to reify or homogenize Asia qua region, see (Pinkney et al. 2015). Not discussed in detail herein are Persian approaches to the term, asura; those appear to treat asuras differently than (and, perhaps, as opposed to) trends herein noted relating to South and East Asia.

33 Regarding concepts of *Asura* in additional contexts, see (Mahajan 2001, p. 526; Hiltebeitel 2002, p. 7; Premasiri 2006, p. 83).

34 See Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank's extraordinary study of religion and state in Chinese politics (Ashiwa and Wank 2009).

35 Linking ritual performativity with the verbal utterance, or word(s), through the lens of Derrida, see (Oren and Solomon 2015, p. 319); and drawing upon David Kertzer in regard to the ritual construction of notions of immanent communal need in relation to security, see (Ibid., pp. 325–26, 333–34). For Jaspers, *immanence* is related to transcendence in some form: "Immanence, as the concrete reality of the world and as the real consciousness of human beings regarding this world and themselves, is now perceived as a possible source for elucidating transcendence due to the metaphysical depth it contains." (Miron 2012, p. 227) Jaspers uses the term, *Existenz*, to suggest a link between claims to intellectual superiority and to unique knowledge or experience of the Divine, or of transcendence. See (Jaspers 1959, pp. 21–24, 47, 62–64).

36 Wedeen suggests that the elder Hafiz al-Asad regime, while part of an official minority within the Muslim tradition, was characterized by a secular cult of personality around the person of Asad; and his followers and supporters tended to be secular in outlook. Religious Muslims were his primary detractors because of his secular character, and that of his regime. Likewise, religion was apt to be a subject of parody by his supporters and detractors, alike. See (Wedeen 1999, pp. 7–8, 47, 127).

37 Relating to studies of urban politics and a review of such works in political science, see (Trounstine 2009). See also (Singerman and Amar 2006)

38 Film critic, Peter Sobczynski, notes that the narrator of the story is, in fact, filled with self-loathing; see (Sobczynski 2016). Treating the Joker in terms of mental illness, see (Skryabin 2021); Skryabin addresses the Joker character in Todd Philips (2019), director, *Joker* (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers).

39 Sobczynski refers to the mayor's behaviours as insane. See (Sobczynski 2016).

40 A traditional spiritual song in Christianity, "Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down."

41 For the notion of "blueprint," see (Geertz [1973] 2017, pp. 93–95).

42 "Nihilism is profound boredom with a world that has lost its meaning;" see (Thiele 1997, p. 503).

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