

**THE TRANSITION FROM “FANTASTIC  
REALITY” TO THE “REALISTIC  
FANTASY” IN THE 1990S AND THE  
NOVEL AS PRACTICE – REREADING  
KIM YOUNG-HA’S “JEON TAE-IL AND  
SHOWGIRL”**

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**Abstract:** A perspective that seeks to understand ‘what a novel does’ before asking ‘what a novel means’ stems from a will to deconstruct the notion of a transcendental reality. This will reveals that a novel is not simply ‘about’ something, but that it ‘constitutes’ something producing new meaning by communicating with the external world. In this way, the literary scene of the 1990s serves as a suitable experimental ground for a perspective that focuses on the novel’s performativity, as it was a time and space where the conceptual frameworks once considered representations of reality were lost. While an amorphous reality and inner self are constructed alongside the process of writing, the contradiction that serves as the foundation for the existence of the subject of authenticity persists. Therefore, as a part of a project to sketch a big picture of how the (im)possibility of forming a subject of authenticity in the 90s is realized through the novel, this paper focuses on Kim Young-ha’s novels. His novels reveal an internal motility through a cognitive shift: moving from viewing reality fantastically to the recognition that reality itself is a

fantasy – that is, from ‘fantastic reality’ to ‘realistic fantasy’. Based on this understanding, “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl!” gains the possibility of being read anew, freed from its initial interpretation as a mere reflection of its era. Through the montage-like insertion of advertisements, this novel doesn't just reflect a reality controlled by capitalism. It creates a reality as another form of virtuality by embodying the fantasy of advertising. Within this fantasy, attempts to deconstruct the dichotomous perception that gives rise to conflict are repeated. In this way, a moment is captured in which the novel's immanence and transcendence resonate to produce meaning.

**Keywords:** 1990s, Fantasy, The performativity of novel, Authenticity, Kim Young-ha, Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl.

### 1990년대 ‘현실의 환상성’으로부터 ‘환상의 현실성’으로의 전환과 실천으로서의 소설 – 김영하의 「전태일과 쇼걸」 다시 읽기

**초록:** 하나의 소설 텍스트에 대하여 그것이 ‘무엇을 의미하는지’를 묻기에 앞서 ‘무엇을 하는지’를 파악하고자 하는 관점은 선형적 실재라는 관념을 해체하려는 의지에서 비롯된다. 그리고 이 의지를 통해 소설은 원본에 대한 이차적 재현에 그치는 것이 아니라 그 자체로 내재적 운동성을 지니며 외재와 소통함으로써 새로운 의미를 생산해 낸다는 것이 드러나게 된다. 이처럼 소설의 실천성에 주목하는 관점에서 1990년대의 문학장은 현실의 표상으로 여겨졌던 개념들이 상실된 시공간이라는 점에서 적합한 실험장이 된다. 무정형의 현실과 내면이 소설을 쓰는 과정과 함께 구성되는 동안 진정성 주체의 존립 근거가 되는 모순이 지속되는 것이다. 이에 본고에서는 90년대 진정성 주체의 형성 (불)가능성이 소설을 통해 실천되는 것의 큰 그림을 그려보고자 하는 기획의 첫 발걸음으로 김영하의 소설에 주목해 본다. 그의 소설은 현실을 환상적으로 보는 것에서 현실 자체가 환상이라는 인식으로, 즉 ‘현실의 환상성’에서 ‘환상의 현실성’으로의 인식적 전환을 통해 내재적 운동성을 드러낸다. 그리고 이러한 이해를 바탕으로 할 때, 제목에서부터 시대에 대한 반영적 표상이 강하게 나타나는 「전태일과 쇼걸」은 그 첫인상에서 벗어나 새롭게 읽힐 가능성을 지니게 된다. 이 소설은 몽타주적으로 삽입되는 광고를 통해 자본주의에 잠식된 현실을 반영하는 것에서 나아가 광고의 환상성을 체화함으로써 또 다른 가상으로서의 현실을 만들어낸다. 그리고 이 환상 속에서 대립과 갈등을 초래하는 이분법적 인식에 대한 해체의 시도가 반복된다. 이로써 소설의 내재와 외재가 공명하면서 의미를 생산해 내는 순간이 포착되는 것이다.

**키워드:** 1990년대, 환상, 소설의 실천성, 진정성, 김영하, 전태일과 쇼걸

## **1. Introduction: Reconstruction of Reality and Inner Self and Kim Young-ha's Fantasy**

### **1.1. Loss of representation of reality and inner self in the 1990s**

This paper raises an issue about the problematics of reading a novel as a reflection of something else, and instead seeks to capture the process by which new meaning is produced within the text itself. To this end, this study signifies Korea's 1990s as a fertile territory for understanding the productivity of the novel, and offers a re-reading of Kim Young-ha's novel. The 1990s, which began with the monumental historical events of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, holds a historical significance of both catastrophe and transition on a global scale. South Korea, which also bears the scars of division, is no exception to this broader historical flow. The 1990s in South Korea is described as a period in which there was a strong sense of historical self-awareness that not only felt the need for change but also felt that change had actually occurred (Hwang Jung-a, *황정아* 2020: 119). This period is characterized by a sense of 'discontinuity'.

In particular, it is said that the progressive forces of the 1980s in Korea were able to dedicate themselves to the transformation movement perhaps because they deliberately ignored the fact that revolutionary ideologies were globally in retreat (Kang Nae-hui *강내희*, 2013: 32). This highlights the shock of the historical turning point that hit Korean society. While the 1980s could be unified under the ideology of progress in history, in the 1990s, with the collapse of socialism and the retreat of revolution, historical-philosophical imagination was no longer a standard that could help understand life and drive practice (Hwang Jong-yon, et al, *황종연 외* 1999).

In the literary landscape of the 1990s, this transformation leads to a crisis of representation surrounding both reality and the inner self, in conjunction with the artistic trend of postmodernism. The conceptual frameworks of the 1980s, such as history, era, and nation collapse (Ryoo Bo-sun, *류보선* 1996: 53), and reality can no longer be identified or made meaningful through the ideologies of the past. The ideologies that had dominated everyday life are now merely described as a play

that comes to an end without acting, and the 1990s marks an era where even such a play has come to an end, rejecting any reflection of reality.

In this context, where the very external objectivity of reality has become uncertain, the inner self of individuals living within that reality is depicted as lacking a central subjectivity. As society transitions from an era dominated by dreams of community and solidarity to one of solitary individuals, the symbols of capitalist commodities come to replace the inner lives of individuals, who have become depoliticized.

However, the barrenness of the 1990s, paradoxically, becomes a historical condition that enables the discovery of literary productivity because of the lack of substance in both reality and the inner self.<sup>1</sup> This can be related to a key literary development shown by the so-called ‘April 19 generation’ of the 1960s in Korea – writers who also belonged to the first generation raised with the Korean alphabet (Hangul). These writers transformed the language of the previous era, which had been considered a representation of reality or ideology, into a medium for independently shaping the formless and unrepresentable object of the individual’s inner self.

Representative figures of the 1960s such as Kim Seung-ok and Lee Cheong-jun provide clear examples. Their sentences, grounded in the ‘inner self’ as the origin of writing, allow the unreal to appear as if it were real through the act of writing itself. This is distinctly different from sentences that directly reflect social reality or objective experiences. In other words, their sentence is not writing ‘about’ something, but writing that ‘constitutes’ something (Baeg Ji-eun 백지은, 2004; 2006). In this sense, their works hold practical significance and demonstrate the effectiveness of literature, as literature itself shapes reality and inner life through its resonance with life outside the text (Baeg Ji-eun, 백지은 2008: 230).

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<sup>1</sup> However, the actual Korean literary discourse field in the 1990s appeared to lean toward ‘post-textualist’ tendencies, and consequently, there was insufficient discussion regarding the internal motility of text. With the global flow of capitalism, terms like ‘nation,’ ‘the people,’ and ‘resistance’ lost their central status in literary history, leading to a historicist shift based on ‘Postmodernism-Postnationalism-Postcolonialism.’ At this time, perspectives focusing on the internal reality of literature were condemned as ‘literary-centric’, and a dichotomy between discourse-centered research and literature-centered research has persisted. In relation to this, for a discussion arguing that the productivity of the text is not something inherent to the text but rather resonates with historical and social contexts, refer to: Lee Seong-ah, 이성아 2025.

The way the productivity of literature leads to its performativity can be understood through discussions that focus on the internal potential for expansion of an image to interpret its politicality. According to Bergson, the image is defined as a self-moving material, not a representation of reality. This is a perspective that prioritizes the movement of difference that exists potentially prior to any transcendental concept in the image. Through this, the generation of new values formed in the unconscious and their discovery become possible. This unconscious can be otherwise defined as the unrepresented. All results of representation, whether image or language, prove by their very existence that there is something unrepresented, or excluded. And looking into this unconscious reveals that we are situated within an order that divides what can be seen from what cannot be seen, thereby bringing forth the possibility of changing the conditions of visibility (Hito Steyerl, 2012). The perspective that focuses on the internal motility of the novel similarly seeks to focus on what newly takes shape and appears at the level of the unconscious – something that is not merely represented through the novel, but rather crosses the boundaries of representation. Through this, the performativity of the novel will be revealed as it creates a dissensus with the existing distribution of the sensible.

If, in the 1960s – a period when individuals who had internalized modernity began to emerge in earnest – the issue of constructing an ‘own world’ was at the center of critical discourse, by the 1990s, that issue was reframed through the concept of ‘authenticity’. Kim Hong-jung, who viewed society based on a structured order of collective heart, defines authenticity as follows: it is “a new ideal that emerges in the process by which a modern individual – who has internalized individualistic values – recognizes a gap between the role models imposed by the community and their own ‘genuine’ desires, and seeks to overcome that gap subjectively (Kim Hong-jung, 김홍중 2009: 26).” In other words, authenticity begins from the individual’s inner self, but it cannot be secured solely within that self. Rather, it is an ideal of the self that is constructed through the contradictions and confusions that arise in the relationship with the community.

In an era where ideology – once the sole center and mirror of reality – has been lost, and where the transcendental notion of a ‘true self’ can no longer be accepted, authenticity becomes something that lacks a concrete, imitable form. Put differently, just as the literature of

the 1960s became a process of own world-construction by giving language to desires that penetrated everyday life, the literature of the 1990s does not aim to represent authenticity, but instead practices its construction. It does so through repeated attempts at self-overcoming within the symbols of capitalist commodities that have replaced ideology (Seo Young-chaе, 서영채 1999).

## **1.2. Kim Young-ha’s Fantasy and Novel as Practice**

From the perspective of focusing on the performativity of literature as what makes it literature, Kim Young-ha (김영하)'s texts from the 1990s become an important experimental ground. Existing studies on him share a view that explores the possibility and ethics of the individual against the backdrop of the 1990s, a period facing an unprecedented crisis in perception of the immediate present. At this point, the narcissistic character type frequently appearing in his novels is said to reveal the limitations of the traditional epistemology centered on the subject. Furthermore, the repetition of images filled with capitalist symbols is interpreted as a way in which the ego of a schizophrenic subject is constructed amid social and cultural conflicts.

These discussions reject transcendental or fixed nature of the inner self and the reality, and conceptualize them as a space of infinite potentiality. However, by failing to notice that the novel itself can also be a space of infinite potentiality, the narrative or images of the novel remain as having been written by such a conception. In contrast, studies that read Kim Young-ha’s fantasy or imagination not as the ‘fantastic reality’ but as the ‘realistic fantasy’ read the resonance between the novel’s internal and external aspects (Wu Chan-je, 우찬제 1999: 1250).

The Korean literary field in the 1990s is said to have expanded the theoretical possibilities of fantasy, acting as a fertile ground for fantasy (Jang Sei-jin, 장세진 2003: 212). According to Todorov, who theoretically established fantasy literature, the essence of the fantasy lies in ‘hesitation’ between the real and the imaginary, that is, the epistemological uncertainty. However, with the influence of scientific positivism in the 19th century, the supernatural was absorbed into the system of modern scholarship, and with the modernist novels of the 20th century, the reality they represented could no longer lead to a

common consensus. Consequently, fantasy literature lost both its basis for existence: ‘the real’ and the ‘imaginary’.

Against this backdrop of a dual loss, the novel texts of the 1990s created what can be called ‘modern fantasy’ by shifting the opposition between the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’ to the gap between ‘reality’ and ‘language’. To look at this more specifically, the opposition between the ‘real’ (which had no doubt about its representational possibility) and the ‘imaginary’ (the supernatural that defies scientific explanation) became the gap between ‘reality’ (the actual world outside the text) and (the text in) ‘language’.

While modern fantasy thus sustained a ‘hesitation’ by shifting the object of doubt from the supernatural to language, Kim Young-ha's fantasy goes a step further, placing reality itself under suspicion. Beyond the idea that reality represented through language is fantastic, it posits that there is no such thing as an actual reality existing outside the uncertainty of language, and that reality itself is a fantasy ‘constituted’ through language.

This shift in perception refers to Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum (Jean Baudrillard 2001). From Baudrillard's critical perspective on late-capitalist society, a reality in which commodities are priced not by their use-value but by their symbolic value is interpreted as an illusion, or a simulacrum, has swallowed up reality. The key point here is not merely that the illusion has gained power equivalent to reality, but that the illusion generates reality, and thus the very difference between reality and imagination has been dissolved.

The inverted relationship between reality and illusion is related to how, in Kim Young-ha's novel, digitized cultural experience replaces ontological experience and constructs a world in itself. In his novels, “Heaven in the name of the Three Kingdoms” (삼국지라는 이름의 천국) and “The Wind Blows” (바람이 분다), individuals become isolated as their real lives are encroached upon by the virtual world of a game. If the analysis of these novels were to stop merely at diagnosing a reality in which cultural experience has overwhelmed lived experience, it would not abandon the ‘reality’ that the novels deny, and the novels would ultimately remain a tool for diagnosing that reality.

Conversely, a perspective that can overcome this limitation is to recognize that experiences in the virtual world ‘produce’ lived experiences, and to see that the internal tension of an individual torn between these two experiences is materialized through the novel's

‘unique stylistic sensibility’ (Choi Seung-tae, 최승태 2023: 203). In this way, the inner self is presented as something created in an interrelationship with a reality that is being generated. What is most important here is the discovery that the novel possesses a productivity as it embodies the formation of inner self.

The novel “Calling” (호출), in which events narrated as if they actually happened are revealed to be merely the character’s imagination, also demonstrates a narrative program ‘rewriting while being written’ through a shift to ‘realistic fantasy’ (Wu Chan-je, 우찬제 1999: 1263). Regarding the character who only imagines the act of calling but cannot actually perform it, it is correct but insufficient to interpret this as a meaning that an individual’s freedom from dominant power is possible only in the virtual world. Although the character in “Calling” appears to be alienated from reality by repeating the imaginations, through these very imaginations, he become able to write a novel, and the novel becomes the second chapter of “Calling”. In other words, his imagination within the novel is transformed into his reality (Baek Chang-ik, 백창익 2025: 80). The novel is written through imagination, while at the same time writing reality as fantasy, and in doing so, resonates with the external world.

Through a transition from ‘fantastic reality’ to ‘realistic fantasy’, Kim Young-ha’s fantasy of the 1990s demonstrates that the novel is not merely ‘about’ something but also ‘constitutes’ it. Focusing on this point, this paper aims to offer a new reading of the novel “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl” (전태일과 쇼걸) – which is easily interpreted as a diagnosis of contemporary reality from its title – on a perspective that seeks to capture the performativity of the text.

## **2. The Transition of Fantasy and performativity in “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl”**

### **2.1.A review of prior research on “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl”**

The novel “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl” starkly reveals the 1980s, steeped

in ideology and community consciousness, and the 1990s, dominated by capital and desire, through the metonymy of ‘Jeon Tae-il’ and ‘showgirl’. The protagonist, ‘the man’, who lived in an “era where he would recall an NHK video of the ‘Gwangju Uprising’ even when dreaming of sex”, now thinks of that past as “nothing special”. And he goes to a movie theater where <A Single Spark> (아름다운 청년 전태일) and <Showgirl> are playing at the same time.

As is clear from the novel's content, the work is first read as a ‘seal on a historical phenomenon’, where the political individual of the 1980s is dissolved into a post-political one by the omnivorous nature of 1990s capitalism, and even Jeon Tae-il’s sublime ideals are commodified (Joung Yoon-he, 정윤희 2017: 165). This interpretation is a valid diagnosis of the era, focusing on literature’s function to capture temporal changes and sociocultural phenomena. However, if the function of literature ends there, it loses its reason for being. While literature can serve as a lens to examine the sensibilities of individuals who lived through such periods, it is not necessarily the best lens for this purpose.

Meanwhile, the montage-like insertion of advertisements and specific brands in “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl” is interpreted as having the meaning of fiction or fantasy, related to the effect of virtual images. An ad is defined as a fantasy because it presents a product’s symbolic value, not its use-value, thereby moving daily life into the imagination and making the consumer smile with happiness (Joung Yoon-he, 정윤희 2017: 174). However, the virtual image is interpreted as reflecting a fragmenting reality or as demonstrating the omnivorous nature of capitalism that makes reality fantastic, thereby presupposing the existence of an objective external reality. For example, interpretations that read the narrative technique of juxtaposing brand names and ad as a reflection on a consumer society where desire has become the dominant pathos, or as a reflection of changes in perceptual modes and fragmented lifestyles due to mass media, fall into this.

On the other hand, a discussion that addresses “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl” through the concept of metafiction is read as moving closer to the discovery of the novel's productivity. Metafiction can be a narrative form possible in a postmodern society that dismantles the idea of an absolute, objective reality conceived by the reason-centered subject. It shows that the novel is not a reflection of reality, as in its traditional concept, but a reflection of representation itself. As the

objective external reality that past realist novels sought to reflect turned out to be absent in postmodernism, the novel came to represent not the outside world but itself – that is, the process of writing.

By means of metafiction, the creative process of the fictional world is revealed, and it becomes clear that reality is not something that precedes and can be imitated, but something that is written. In other words, metafiction makes a shift to 'realistic fantasy' possible by exposing the aesthetic conventions of literature that make one forget the difference between reality and fiction, thereby making readers aware that the real world is an extension of fiction and can be another fiction (Chae Young-hee, *채영희* 2019: 29).

However, existing discussions that focused on the significance of metafiction repeat the limitations previously reviewed. It interprets the metafictional techniques in “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl” as a method to make reality understood as it is, by showing the daily life of a fetishized late-capitalist society as it is or by showing an attitude of accepting capitalism into one’s life (Chae Young-hee, *채영희* 2019: 62). Accordingly, this paper will thoroughly examine the productivity that “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl” possesses as a work of metafiction. Through this analysis, it seeks to capture what the reality-lacking fantasy of the 1990s, which is being written along with the novel itself, truly is.

## **2.2. The reality created by the game “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl”**

“Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl” may be read as a novel about ‘the man’, who is depicted as the main character of the narrative. However, it is in fact the story of the narrator, the author within the novel. The accidental recollection, which is said to be the primary method of narrative development, is less about ‘the man’ reflecting on his own past and more about the narrator attempting to show what kind of person ‘the man’ is through his past. This can be confirmed through the following descriptions: “‘The man’ was not the kind of person who could live married to a working-class woman.” and “What is certain is the fact that in a place called Gwangju, the man and the woman did not have sex.”

Like this, what drives the novel's development is not the thoughts or actions of 'the man', but the narrator's discourse about them. This follows naturally from the narrator's clear statement at the beginning of the novel that this story is a novel – that he himself is the author writing "Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl".

The narrator begins the novel by stating that "it has no interest in explaining the relationship between three events": a man and a woman came to see a Jeon Tae-il biopic, on a weekday afternoon, by themselves. However, the narrator offers no mention of what the novel intends to do, and instead, an advertisement that seems entirely unrelated to the story's content is inserted, and the narrative proceeds to the next chapter.

Because of this, "Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl" is read like a thought experiment conducted by the narrator. As a manipulator of fiction, the narrator clearly reveals his position but presents a manipulated world without clarifying his intent, thereby provoking thought and prompting the reader to go through a process of deduction (Yoo Hui-sok, 유희석 2017: 68). However, since no hypothesis is set up to be verified, it's more fitting to call it a 'game' with a strong purpose of play rather than a 'thought experiment'. From this perspective, the novel's beginning lays out the groundwork and presents the rules of the game to the reader, who is a participant, before the game begins.

The fact that he met her in front of the Seoul Cinema was a completely coincidental event. However, in a certain sense, there is no such thing as a 'completely coincidental' event. (...) This novel has no interest in explaining the relationship between these three events. (...) It doesn't matter whether it is by chance or by inevitability (Kim Young-ha 김영하 1997: 199-200).<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the beginning, the story that follows is read like an explanation for the relationship between the three events, repeatedly posing the question of chance versus inevitability. And through the revealed intervention of the narrator in these descriptions, the reader is

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2 그가 그녀를 서울극장 앞에서 만나게 된 것은 전적으로 우연한 일이었다. 그러나 어찌 보면 '전적으로 우연한' 일이란 없는 것이다. (...) 이 소설은 이 세 가지 사건의 관계를 해명하는 일에는 관심이 없다. (...) 그것이 우연이든 필연이든 중요하지 않다 (김영하 1997: 199-200).

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faced with a continuous dilemma: what is this manipulation of fiction trying to accomplish, and does it really not matter whether something is by chance or inevitable?

When “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl” is viewed as a game created by the narrator, the advertisements and specific brands placed throughout the novel are read just like the ads we encounter when consuming TV programs or internet content. It could be argued that showing how the daily lives of individuals in a capitalist society are not free from the encroachment of commodification. However, considering the novel’s metafictional form, it is more accurate to see the intrusion of advertising not as something that ‘dominates’ the narrator’s game, but as a deliberate ‘choice’ made by the narrator. The next question, then, is why the narrator chose to insert ads into his game-like content. It is at this point that a reversal of reality and fantasy occurs.

The key to enabling this transition is that individuals living in a capitalist society are not unaware of the fantastical nature of advertisements. All people of the contemporary are caught in a ‘double-bind’, in which they criticize the system while being a part of it. Even if escape is impossible, individuals in a capitalist society know that advertising drives their desires by presenting continuously updated images of a better future through the fantasy of commodity value. They also know that the purpose of advertising is to implant fantasy in as many people as possible to conceal capital’s pervasive influence and more thoroughly dominate reality.

It is from this awareness that a peculiar reversal occurs. The presence of ads within the content one wants to consume implies that the content holds enough value to satisfy the purpose of the ads. In other words, it means that many people want that content. This is why the ads placed at each point of change, as if dividing the novel’s chapters, and the brands that unnaturally pierce the interior of the novel, paradoxically make the novel itself appear to have a certain value.

“Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl” is a meaningless game. Because it is revealed to be a mere fiction manipulated by the author-narrator, and in which it has already been declared that it “does not matter” whether something is by chance or by inevitability. However, this novel attracts participants by adopting the strategy of advertising, in which the symbol itself has become the value of the commodity. The reason readers participate in this game despite the fatigue of being exposed to ads is that the very fatigue caused by the ads’ intrusion creates a fantasy of the

game's value, which in turn evokes the desire to participate.

Thus, the advertisements inserted into the novel not only reveal the author's critical awareness of a reality inverted to symbolic value but also become the very force that drives the novel itself. The game that is made possible by this process then constitutes the reality of the reader. Baudrillard's theory – that representation has come to replace reality – implies that reality is not something distorted by images but is rather absent, and is only derived after a play of infinite reference between images. In this way, something called reality is created by the meaningless play of “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl”.

### **2.3. What is practiced through participation in the game**

If so, what is the reason the author-narrator of “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl” carries out this meaningless game, or what is the reality that is derived from that very manipulation? If we have grasped the motility occurring within the novel, what must do now is interpret the meaning that emerges through its resonance with the outside of the text. Of course, this meaning is not a message finalized by the author's consciousness or social phenomena, but something that is practiced through the novel's productive form.

This is made possible by the narrator who, despite having directly created the character ‘the man’, acknowledges his otherness. The narrator, who claims to be the omniscient manipulator of the novelistic game, not only describes the outward actions of ‘the man’ but also knows his unstated inner world. For example, the narrator knows that ‘the man’ suddenly laughed while reading a newspaper article related to the enactment of the May 18 Special Law because “he was reminded of the story of a Democratic Liberal Party congressman who, during the last regular National Assembly inspection, requested that the amount of meat and flour in the kalguksu noodle soup enjoyed at the Blue House be made public.”

However, there are narratives that contradict this: “To this day, the man still could not remember why he went on a trip to Gwangju then” and “It is unknown why the man decided to go see <A Single Spark> so easily.” As revealed here, the narrator does not put language on the memory of ‘the man’ who has lost the 80s, or on the confusion

he experiences in the reality of the 90s. Instead of the individual's contradiction in the face of a generational change being resolved, what is revealed is a dilemma over whether something is a matter of chance or historical causality, and ultimately the awareness that such a dilemma is completely unnecessary. The novel, which appears to have value by embodying the fantasy of advertising, does nothing but repeat valuelessness.

However, the fact that a contradiction does not find the language for a resolution and remains a contradiction means that the struggle to overcome it continues. When that struggle loses its power, the contradiction is no longer a contradiction; in other words, the narrator's words “it is unknown” are a statement that makes one circle around that unknowable something. In this struggle and wandering, the awareness that “what is important is that it is still doing so” is practiced, regardless of whether the reality before us is due to chance or follows historical inevitability.

‘Beyond the Boundaries’ – they puzzled over the Gwangju Biennale’s slogan for a while. What boundaries should we cross? What does the ideology of Gwangju have to do with boundaries? C scoffed. Maybe it’s the boundary between a visitor’s room and an execution ground? (...) Deconstruction? What have we ever integrated to deconstruct? the man muttered in front of Jeon Soo-cheon’s work, where silkworms were spinning thread. C then said, Man, deconstruction is just another name for integration, isn’t it? A silkworm deconstructs itself while spinning thread, but in the end, that thread makes cloth (Kim Young-ha 김영하 1997: 214-215).<sup>3</sup>

Right. But then why do those things exist together? The visitor’s room and the execution ground, pleasure and death, progress and regression. Gwangju and the Biennale? C said with a bitter smile, and continued

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<sup>3</sup> ‘경계를 넘어서’—그들은 광주 비엔날레의 슬로건 앞에서 한동안 고개를 갇아거렸다. 무슨 경계를 넘어야 하나? 광주의 이념과 경계는 무슨 상관이 있나? C가 비아냥거렸다. 면회실과 사형장의 경계 같은 게 아닐까? (...) 해체? 뭘 통합한 적이 있다고 해체를 하지? 그 남자가 누에고치가 실을 짓는 전수천의 작품 앞에서 중얼거렸다. 그러자 C가 말했다. 형, 원래 해체란 통합의 다른 이름이잖우. 누에는 실을 자으며 자신을 해체하지만 결국 그 실들은 천을 만들잖수 (김영하 1997: 214-215).

(Kim Young-ha 김영하 1997: 205).4

In the novel, the ‘boundary between a visitor’s room and an execution ground’ means a boundary in which it’s important that it’s still divided that way, ‘whether by chance or not’. C says that the boundaries the Gwangju Biennale – a place where opposing things are mixed, giving an “unpleasant sense of dissonance” – seeks to deconstruct are also of that nature. In response to ‘the man’s question about whether there was ever an integration which is a premise for deconstruction, C replies that deconstruction and integration are ultimately the same thing. Their conversation recalls the earlier question about things that are ‘still’ in opposition and inverts it.

Regarding opposing things, what is more important than asking for their causality is the fact that they continue to maintain a state of opposition, and that deconstruction and integration are merely a matter of naming. If so, the question “why do those things exist together?” leads to a suspicion of the human act of drawing boundaries and creating frameworks of opposition on things that have inherently existed together. In other words, the idea of opposition does not arise because conflicting things happen to be together, but rather from a cognitive framework that draws lines and divides hierarchies on an empty foundation. This shift in thinking reveals that ‘the man’s cynicism and ennui do not stem from a loss of ideology, but from the very cognitive system that dichotomizes ideology and daily life.

Film is king, C said self-deprecatingly. You can say that again. I heard that when <A Petal> was being filmed, traffic was controlled on Chungjang-ro and Geumnam-ro, and citizens voluntarily became extras, didn’t they? C, why don’t you try that too? Tell them you need to clear out Chungjang-ro and the roundabout in front of the provincial office because you need it for a poem about Gwangju. C laughed painfully and said, Film seems like a very convenient genre. No one says anything even if the director shoot a pornographic film like <To You, From Me> and then shoot a work like <A Petal>. But why can’t poetry or novels do that?” (...)

The two people who had left Mangwoldong returned to Seoul, to their

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4 그러게. 그런데 왜 그런 것들은 함께 있을까. 면회실과 사형장, 쾌락과 죽음, 진보와 퇴행. 광주와 비엔날레? C가 씩씩하게 웃으며 말을 이었다 (김영하 1997: 205).

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daily lives (Kim Young-ha 김영하 1997: 216-217).<sup>5</sup>

C, who writes poetry, looks at film with envy, as it can ‘arbitrarily’ move between the Gwangju Uprising and pornography. And he coldly mocks himself for not being able to do the same. This is likely a feeling that ‘the man’, who has a past where revolution and asceticism were undoubtedly joined, also feels. For them, ‘Mangwoldong’, where the cemetery for the victims of the Gwangju Uprising is located, has meaning as a space-time distinct from not only ‘Seoul’, which is always filled with commodity signs as if a biennale were being held, but also from ‘daily life’, a concept that transcends the category of space. Accordingly, the novel’s critical awareness proceeds to a deconstruction of the dichotomy between ideology and daily life – that is, to the insight that creating opposition among things that have inherently coexisted without boundaries, and then deconstructing or integrating them, is merely the result of a human consciousness superimposed on reality.

And this reflection, in turn, meets the novel’s form, which is a game that repeats worthlessness through fantasy. For a being thrown into this world, it is impossible not to frame the world they face. Therefore, reflection on this must necessarily take the form of a continuous practice, leaving contradictions as contradictions. As a result, the practical movement created by the novel’s internal and external resonance can be said a ceaseless reflection on the dichotomous framework of perception that gives rise to opposition and conflict. If this is the quest given to us who have participated in the game “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl”, then the reward would be the recognition that

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<sup>5</sup> 영화가 왕이야. C가 자조적으로 말했다. 그러게 말이야. <꽃잎> 촬영을 한다니까 총장로와 금남로에 교통을 통제하고 시민들이 자발적으로 엑스트라가 되었다지? C, 너도 한번 해보지 그러냐? 광주를 소재로 하는 시를 쓰는 데 필요하니 총장로와 도청 앞 로터리를 좀 비워달라고. C가 아프게 웃으며 말했다. 영화는 참 편리한 장르 같아. <너에게 나를 보낸다> 같은 포르노를 찍다가 <꽃잎> 같은 작품을 찍어도 아무도 뭐라고 하지 않잖아. 근데 왜 시나 소설은 그게 안 되지? (...)

파전을 안주삼아 이동막걸리를 한 뒷박쯤 마시고는 망월동을 떠난 두 사람은 서울로, 일상으로 다시 돌아갔다 (김영하 1997: 216-217).

reality is not a solid thing as we have accepted it to be, but rather a fantasy, and the freedom felt from that recognition.

### **3. Going Out: The (Im)possibility of Subject Formation in the 1990s and the Practice of Novel**

The conventional way of reading a novel text is to ask ‘what it means’. However, before asking about any meaning a novel reflects or implies, what can be and must be asked first is ‘what it does’. The will to erase ‘meaning’ from the conventional question of reading originates from a desire to deconstruct the notion of a transcendental reality waiting to be reflected. Through this, a novel is revealed not to be a mere secondary representation of an original, but to possess an internal motility of its own. It is shown that a novel produces meaning in a way that “rewriting while being written” by its internal communicating with the external.

The literary scene of the 1990s serves as a suitable experimental ground for proving the novel as practice, in that it was a time and space where conceptual frameworks once considered representations of reality and the inner self were lost. An amorphous reality and inner self are constituted along with the process of writing the novel, and are revealed as if they possess substance. This paper, therefore, focuses on Kim Young-ha’s novels as one piece of the puzzle, aiming to sketch out the broader picture of how the (im)possibility of forming a subject of authenticity in the 90s is realized through literature. His novels reveal an internal motility through a cognitive transition from seeing reality as fantastic to the recognition that reality itself is a fantasy – that is, from ‘fantastic reality’ to ‘realistic fantasy’. And based on this understanding, “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl”, which shows a strong representational sign of the era from its very title, gains the possibility of being read anew, free from its initial impression.

In the novel, advertisements inserted without regard for narrative development are made to function as a way to enable participation in the novelistic game by the author-narrator, who clearly reveals that the novel’s world is a manipulated fiction. Human being in the present era, caught in a double-bind by capitalism, is not ignorant of the desires of advertising, even while existing within the fantasy that creates images of a utopia through commodity value. Accordingly, the

meaningless novelistic game is paradoxically revealed to have value through the ads inserted into it. In a society dominated by capital from which an escape route can no longer be found, an ad inserted into any content serves to implant the illusion that that content has enough value to fulfill the desires of advertising. Moving beyond the interpretation that “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl” shows the omnivorous nature of capitalism through ads, the interpretation that the novel embodies the fantasy of advertising to create a reality as another fantasy is made possible by this understanding.

What is repeatedly realized in the game made possible by the fantasy is the endless deconstruction of the dichotomous perception that gives rise to opposition and conflict. The subject of authenticity of the 90s cannot be defined by any inherent nature it may contain; it is revealed to be possible through the practical process of struggle surrounding contradictions. For Todorov, who saw hesitation between reality and the imaginary as the core of fantasy, this uncertainty is extended to the mode of existence of literature, and it is said that “literature, more generally, denies the existence of any dichotomy (Todorov, Tzvetan 1996: 293).” “Jeon Tae-il and Showgirl”, by embodying the fantasy of advertising to create another fantasy that replaces reality, deconstructs the dichotomy through its form. Simultaneously, this is also achieved through the novel’s content, thereby showing the resonance between the immanent and the transcendent. It will now be the reader’s role to repeat the contradictions in the newly emerged reality by interpreting the conjunctive particle ‘and’ placed between ‘Jeon Tae-il and showgirl’ as a sign of togetherness, instead of definitively labelling it as an indicator of separation.

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