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Cultural Hybridity in the Contemporary Korean Popular Culture through the Practice of Genre Transformation

Kyunghee Kim
The University of Western Ontario

Supervisor
Blackmore, Tim
The University of Western Ontario

Graduate Program in Media Studies
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

The focus of this dissertation is to show how the media of contemporary Korean popular culture, specifically films, are transformed into “hybrid cultural forms” through the practice of genre transformation. Since the early 21st century, South Korean popular culture has been increasingly spreading across the globe. Despite its growing attention and popularity, Korean pop culture has been criticized for its explicit copying of Western culture with no unique cultural identity. Others view the success of Korean media, both its creative mimicry and its critique of the West, as a new hybrid form that offers the opportunity for reassertion of local identity as well as challenging the global hegemony of the West. Chapter 1 explains the focus of my study and objectives, research questions, methods, background, and the historical development of Korean popular culture. Chapter 2 provides a literature review of the major scholarly works that characterize contemporary Korean film. Chapter 3 considers how I approach Korean films from the perspective of theories of cultural hybridity and film genre, introducing the work of Homi Bhabha, Rick Altman, Thomas Schatz, John Cawelti and other scholars. The two chapters that follow analyze the case studies of two genre films—the Korean Western, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (2008) and the post-apocalyptic sci-fi action film, *Snowpiercer* (2013)—to elucidate how these films function as a “hybrid cultural form,” and how the practice of genre transformation has a role in unsettling and changing the cultural messages and codes of the dominant culture’s forms. This dissertation argues that cultural hybridization is a key survival strategy of the contemporary Korean media production commercially, aesthetically and culturally. The practice of genre transformation plays a

decisive role in creating cultural hybrid texts, which contribute not only to increasing cultural exchange and dissemination but also to the artistic development of cultural expression and, more importantly, to enhancing cultural diversity in an age of global transnationalism.

Keywords

Contemporary Korean Popular Culture; South Korean Film; Cultural Hybridity; Genre Transformation; Western Genre; Spaghetti Western; Manchurian Western; Kimchi Western: *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*; Post-apocalyptic Genre; *Snowpiercer*.

To my late mother...

Acknowledgments

This study was completed with the assistance of the faculty, staff, and many fellow doctoral students who made my time in Media Studies at Western a great experience. My deepest gratitude goes to my supervisor, Professor Tim Blackmore, for his intellectual generosity and steadfast support. This dissertation would not have been possible without his unparalleled patience and dedication. His questions, comments, discussions, and encouragement at every stage were extremely important motivations in completing this project. I will be forever grateful for his wise and true mentorship throughout the writing of this dissertation. My sincere thanks also go to Professor Carole Farber for her careful readings, insights, and invaluable comments. Her research methodology course was immensely helpful, which allowed me to write efficiently. I also thank Professor Michael Raine for providing film studies expertise and constructive feedback. I would like to express my special thanks to my thesis examiners, Carole Farber, Susan Knabe, Allan Pero, and Dale Bradley for a productive defense, valuable comments, and suggestions. Finally, I wish to thank my family: my husband, Dr. Sungwhan Cho and my wonderful son and daughter, Seyong and Serin for being warmest supporters throughout the process of writing this dissertation.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Thesis Statement and Purpose

This dissertation considers how contemporary Korean popular culture is transformed into “hybrid cultural forms” through the practice of genre transformation. The primary focus of this thesis is to demonstrate the interplay of different global and local cultural elements in Korean media texts, highlighting the power exercised by the narrative form, to illustrate how the practice of genre transformation functions within its formal and ideological constraints. Genre as a narrative system (Schatz 16) operates as a matrix in the process of communicating and framing the audience’s reading of the text. Considering that global media goods are mediated and transmitted in shared forms and patterns embodying codes and symbolic meanings, it is important to investigate cross-cultural products like Korean media through the lens of the genre’s specific functions and effects within the text in order to account for the process of cultural hybridization.

In the twenty-first century, Korean popular culture is no longer only for Koreans or people in Asian countries. The popularity of Korean popular culture known as the “Korean Wave” (*Hallyu* in Korean) has been increasingly spread across the globe. Korean TV dramas have generated record breaking ratings in Japan, China, and other parts of Asian countries and music idol groups have claimed top spots in Asian pop

charts (Kim, “Korean” 2). Korean stars have become cross-cultural icons. Korean films have received critical recognitions in the international film festival circuit and among foreign filmmakers. For example, Park Chan-wook won the Grand Prix at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival for *Oldboy*. Kim Jee-woon’s *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003) and Bong Joon-ho’s films include *Memories of Murder* (2003), *The Host* (2006), *Snowpiercer* (2013), and, *Okja* (2017) were widely acclaimed by critics and international festivals. Kim Ki-duk’s *Pieta* (2012), Lee Chang-dong’s *Secret Sunshine* (2007) and Hong Sang-soo’s *Right Now, Wrong Then* (2016) won awards at Cannes, Venice, Berlin and the Locarno International Film Festival. Korean genre auteurs, such as Park Chan-woon, Kim Jee-woon, Bong Joon-ho were also invited to work in Hollywood. The rising reputation of Korean cinema has triggered Hollywood’s purchase of numerous Korean box office hits for remake. As Korean culture gains global exposure, critics have begun calling it Hallyuwood (Chris Berry) or the “the Hollywood of the East.”

Despite its growing attention and popularity, *Hallyu* products are often criticized for lack of creativity and for explicit copying of Western culture with no unique cultural identity. Some local critics view Korean popular culture as a “regional variant of commodified global pop culture,” which has “nothing uniquely Korean” (Lee, “Mapping” 184). Some describe the immense influence of Western culture on Korean pop culture and its explicit mimicking of Hollywood as “Copywood” (Kim Mi-Hui), which is not an authentic expression of South Korean culture or values.

As opposed to the Copywood thesis, scholars such as Christina Klein argue that South Korean filmmakers borrow globally popular styles and form to tell uniquely Korean stories, exploring the country’s history and national identity, and that “such

borrowing does not lead inevitably to a loss of cultural identity” (Klein, “Copywood”). Researchers agreed with this point and view the success of Korean media—both its creative mimicry and its critique of the West—as a new hybrid form that offers the opportunity for reassertion of local identity as well as challenging the global hegemony of the West, which is neither passive mimicking nor reaffirming of one’s subordination to the dominant power, but struggling against becoming a replica, creating something different— an independent identity (Grinker 3).

Among the many reasons and factors for the recent surge of Korean popular culture, I would emphasize the new generation’s producers’ strong desire to create an independent and autonomous space to control the narrative by their own agency. For example, internationally renowned Korean film directors such as Park Chan-wook, Bong Joon-ho, and Kim Jee-woon claim that they are not the heirs of Korean classic movie makers, rather, their models are foreign films, especially Hollywood. However, they “set the elements of a conventional popular genre in an altered context, thereby making us perceive these traditional forms and images in a new way,” a process which Cawelti calls genre transformation (Cawelti, “Chinatown” 288). These directors’ skillful practice of generic transformation has become an effective tool for refreshing the old cinematic form, while simultaneously being a subversive tool for breaking generic rules and conventions and for debunking cultural myth and ideology. It is a productive tool for creating something different which enables them to reach a wider audience and at the same time, achieve their auteurs’ ambitions.

The purpose of this dissertation is to elucidate how these films function as a “hybrid cultural form,” and how the practice of genre transformation accomplishes a

subversive role for creating cultural hybridity. In doing so, the dissertation aims to offer important interpretations of the cultural issues and specificities that are incorporated in film text, which are often unnoticed or overshadowed in the mainstream perception and often fail to translate into dominant narratives. This dissertation also aims to provide useful information about contemporary Korean popular culture, its unique aesthetics, values, and the popular trends in its filmmaking. So far, few have pursued the function of the hybridization process in Korean film text through genre transformation, despite its crucial role in creating cultural hybridity

1.2. Research Questions

One of the key reasons for the popularity of Korean media texts are their similarities to Western cultural form. However, hybridity, according Homi Bhabha, is “the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects[...], It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” (*Location* 159-60). In other words, hybrid objects imitate dominant cultural forms, but they must possess subversive elements that undermine dominant ideas and their underlying assumptions. Hybrid objects open a space of translation, a “Third Space” in Bhabha’s terms (56) where different cultural elements, perspectives, meanings, and values conflict, negotiate and translate, and new forms of identity emerge that are “neither the One...or the Other...but something else besides” (41). What is important in hybridity, Bhabha emphasizes, “the incommensurable elements—the stubborn chunks—as the basis of cultural

identification...[to] find their agency” (313) that offer a possibility to articulate cultural differences “without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (5).

In order to claim Korean media text as a hybrid cultural form in the light of Bhabha’s notion of hybridity, those texts must display resistance to and subversion of dominant narratives and establish a Third Space where different cultures and values interact, negotiate, and create an alternative cultural form, a new breed (brand). We must interrogate how the alternative cultural form is created and what role the practice of genre transformation plays in the process of becoming a hybrid form; how the hybrid form influences our perception of the media texts; whether it offers a new way of viewing or interpretation; and how the hybrid form make Korean media text unique. These are the major questions I aim to answer throughout the dissertation.

1.3. Research Methodology

In order to accomplish my goal, I drew on theories of cultural hybridity, primarily Homi K. Bhabha’s hybrid theory, and the film genre theories of Rick Altman, Thomas Schatz, and John Cawelti, and applied them to case studies. I have taken two well-known genre films as cases for study: the Korean Western, *The Good the Bad the Weird* (2008) and the post-apocalyptic SF action film, *Snowpiercer* (2013). I chose these films because they are considered to be examples of cultural hybrid products: both Western and SF genres have produced films which, as mass popular texts, are instantly and explicitly recognizable as imitations of Hollywood productions. These genres have been relatively foreign, marginal or absent in Korea. As the focus of this dissertation is to investigate cultural hybridity, I excluded films by Kim Ki-duk, Hong Sang-su and Lee Chang-dong because they have made films that are largely considered to be art house

fare. Other successful genres, such as crime action, thriller, family, historical drama, war films are excluded from the analysis since these films were already popular and relevant in Korea. In addition, I call extensively on books and academic journals published in both Korea and North America, as well as press reports, critic's blogs, film review sites such as *Rotten Tomatoes*, *IMDb*, *Variety*, etc., Korean film magazines and webzines such as *Cine 21*, *Korean Cinema Today*, and annual reports, statistics, director's interviews, and film news published by Korean film institutions, such as the Korean Film Council and KMDB (Korean Movie Database). The scope of this dissertation is the contemporary Korea media culture from the mid-2000s to 2010s.

1.4. Background

South Korea¹ was not a traditional powerhouse of popular culture in Asia, nor did it have such export capacity a little over a decade ago (Shim, "Hybridity" 3). Up until the mid-1990s, Korean media products were generally considered boring and of relatively low quality (Lee and Stringer, "*Snowpiercer*" 266). Having difficulties acquiring a secure financial base, the Korean film industry had released mostly small-scale crude films. The content was not artistic or thoughtful enough to interest intellectuals. Many factors impeded the regular development of the Korean media industry from its early stages, such as lack of resources, technologies, and the nation's habit of strictly censoring media texts. Under these long-unfavorable conditions, the unexpected boom of Korean popular culture has drawn much international interest and academic attention. Many researchers

¹ Throughout this thesis, "Korea" refers to the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

have attempted to put forth reasons for the sudden emergence of this unexpected phenomenon.

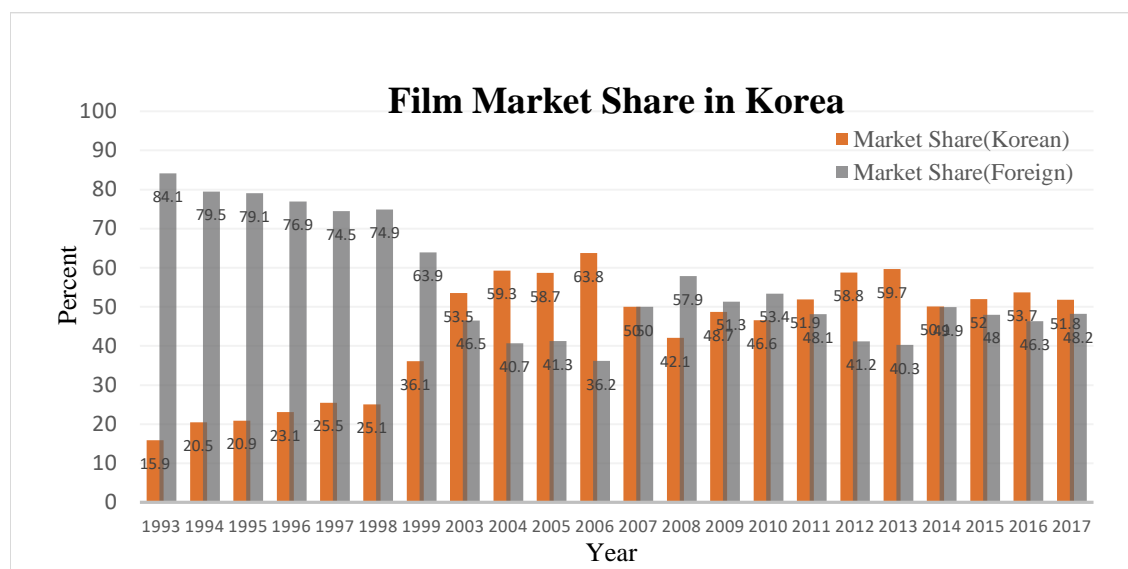
Hallyu has often been viewed as “the consequence of felicitous timing” (Chua and Iwabuchi 4). In the late 1990s, the Asian financial crisis struck. South Korea was one of the countries most affected countries by this shock. In 1997, due to the severe foreign currency shortage, South Korea was bailed out by the International Monetary Fund. Korea was pressured by the U.S. film industry and the World Trade Organization to open their media sectors (Shim, “Globalization” 241). The Korean government allowed Hollywood studios to distribute films directly to the local theatres. Hollywood’s domination of the nation’s cinema was a fatal blow to the already shrinking Korean film industry. This caused the market share of local films to drop from 27 percent in 1987 to a mere 15.9 percent in 1993. In this circumstance, commentators predicted that the Korean film industry would perish in the near future (Shim, “Growth” 16).

However, the international market conditions ironically worked favorably for the export of Korean media products. In the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, Taiwanese and Hong Kong cinema declined and the popularity of Japanese television dramas began to weaken in Asian countries. This made the cheaper Korean programming a popular alternative in the media markets in China and Hong Kong. The media liberalization in East Asia is also a factor in the growth of Korean media industry. Waterman and Rogers observed that “countries of the Asian region as a whole had a relatively low dependence on intra-regional program trade before the 1990s” (Shim, “Globalization” 240). Many Asian governments had for a long time been on the defensive against cultural influences from foreign countries. Following global trends, however, they

began to open their television programming markets in the 1990s. At the same time, economic development among many Asian countries afforded their citizens leisure and facilities to consume more cultural artifacts. Even the previously tightly controlled television markets in China and Vietnam had loosened their television programming import policies. For example, in the early 1970s imported programs occupied less than 1% of total airtime on the CCTV network in China. In the late 1990s, this percentage rose to 20-30% according to different regions in China (Shim, "Growth" 26). Under the pressure of the global market liberalization, the Korean government recognized "media and cultural sectors as industries that could produce profit" (Shin and Stringer 219) and began to support media industry that encouraged the large Korean conglomerates to increase financing and investment to the media industry. Other important factors for the success of the Korean media industry at that time include the country's democratization, lifting government censorship, and "the creation of a nationwide distribution network for local films, young directors and screenwriters, often educated in the West, [who] took over the reins and began trying out fresh ideas" (Klein, "Copywood"). As a result, the situation changed dramatically, for instance, the domestic market share of Korean films reached 58.7% in 2003 and 63.8% in 2006 as shown in Figure 1.1. This is one of the largest domestic market shares in the world outside Hollywood. Hollywood producers often complain about difficulties in getting their films into Korean theaters.

The emerging *Hallyu* was explained as the transformation of global cultural flows in which various political, economic, and cultural factors interact in shaping the contour of cultural globalization in the region. This view is certainly a valid account for the growth of Korean media industry. However, we need more explanation for *Hallyu*.

Cultural goods are not like any other commodity that people can simply replace with anything available. If Korean media products received such positive and passionate response across the nation, it seems likely that there are values or aesthetics that interest or appeal to audiences.



Note: The graph is created using the data from *Korean Cinema 2001, 2016, 2017, and Status & Insight 2013- 2016* published by Korean Film Council

Figure 1.1: Total Korean and Foreign Films Market Share

One possible reason for the success of *Hallyu* is the “cultural proximity” proposed by Joseph D. Straubhaar. According to Straubhaar, “audiences feel competing sets of proximities or attractions to programs from different places. Audiences are structured both by the evolving cultures they live in and by structures of class, race, gender, and cultural geography in terms of program choices and interpretations they make of local, national, regional, and global television programs” (Straubhaar 5). Cultural proximity among East Asian audiences occurred not only in terms of geographical intimacy but also by sharing an emotive code regarding Asian history, urbanism, and a similar experience of modernity. East Asian scholar, Beng Huat Chua, views that Korean media products were positively received due to “cultural affinity”

(Chua and Iwabuchi 6). The argument suggests that audiences derive similar experiences from watching the same programs, an idea supported by Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities" in Asia. Critics view Korean popular culture's success as arising from its ability to touch the right chord of Asian sentiments, such as shared Confucianism and family values (Shim, "Waxing" 14). However, many countries within the influenced area of the Korean wave such as the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, South America, Australia, and Africa, had not felt close cultural ties to Korea nor had strong interests in Korean popular culture until quite recently. Why are these countries so fascinated with the Korean media, when both geographically and culturally they are so distant from Korea?

Contemporary Korean pop culture is very similar to Western culture in its method, form, and style. Many Korean critics suggest that Korean pop culture has developed by mimicking and plagiarizing Western culture, and that contemporary Korean culture is could be criticized for largely neglected innovation in forms and genres, instead settling on narrative negotiation between a national aesthetic pathos and a postmodern image culture born out of consumption-led capitalism (Kim and Choe 14). Korean film critic, Chung Sung-ill, describes this copycat discourse as follows:

There are no indigenous genres in the Korean cinema. Rather, they are all imitations of or variations on Western and other Asian film genres. Hollywood created the western, Japan developed the samurai film, and Hong Kong invented the martial arts film. In contrast, Korea merely accepted various film genres from other countries and modified them (Chung, "Variations" 1).

For example, it is noteworthy to look at what American film director Martin Scorsese expressed after he watched Korean films produced the late 1990s and the 2000s:

[The Films] crept up on me, slowly and without warning...The narrative was intricate, but not in a manner that drew attention to itself—it was only as the movie unfolded that you came to understand how complex it was. The settings

seemed banal, the concerns of the characters life-size, the focus uncomfortably intimate. The film left me unsettled—what had I just *seen*? [...] I was intrigued. I saw some pictures by another Korean filmmaker named Bong Joon-ho—a completely different approach, more overtly comic in his first feature, *Barking Dogs Never Bite*, but the comedy was savage and merciless. In *Memories of Murder* and *The Host*, I saw a clear link to American genre filmmaking, but it was interpreted and felt in a completely new way...Park Chan-wook's *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, like his subsequent pictures *Lady Vengeance* and *Old Boy*, seemed to come out of a different strain in genre filmmaking--American drive-in movies, J-horror, Shaw Brothers' martial arts epics. But the violence and action and chaos became expressive instruments, and the films were as ferocious as a great Eric Clapton guitar solo...The films ...speak of, to, and from their culture, sometimes critically but never indifferently or disinterestedly—for that reason, they are genuine cultural ambassadors. (Scorsese x)

Viewers of the Korean films produced in this period probably share Scorsese's feelings and impressions. From Scorsese's description, several characteristics are noticeable: the movies show familiarity with Hollywood genre films, they deliberately juxtapose familiar images and film grammars, and make different points of world view collide with each other, creating ruptures by breaking the line between comedy and tragedy or "black humor" which is described as "[the] puzzling combination of humorous burlesque and high seriousness" (Cawelti, "Chinatown" 288). This ironic double causes shock, disruption, and challenges narrative conventions, which can create confusion and provide entertainment for audiences who were trained to read film through the lens of Hollywood. Due to this unusual tendency, viewers often ask, "What is going on in contemporary Korean film?" (Paquet, "Genre"). Above all, local sentiments and national identity are infused in these films.

John Cawelti observes how American filmmakers in the 1970s approached toward Hollywood genres differently and offers the four major modes of generic transformation: 1) burlesque proper; 2) cultivation of nostalgia; 3) demythologization of generic myth (for Cawelti, this is the most powerful mode of generic transformation), 4)

the affirmation of myth. For Cawelti, the generic transformation is an important factor in filmmaking as a vital source of artistic energy to the younger directors (297). Cawelti's insight of the generic transformation offers a relevant measure to examine the contemporary Korean film and its hybridity. New generation Korean directors deliberately use traditional genre conventions of their predecessors, but rearrange them in the altered context. They intentionally subvert the normative boundaries. Such alterations result in the creation of different artistic forms that dismantle the dominant norms and underlying assumptions that are embedded in the generic narrative. Genre disruptions suggest alternative world views, meanings, and realities. This practice demonstrates Homi Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity that "natives and minorities strike back at imperial domination by recourse to the hybridization strategy" (Shim, "Hybridity" 27). As a political aesthetic, hybridity offers the possibility to articulate cultural differences. Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity is extremely useful to reflect today's global media landscape within which meanings and signs are produced and circulated across diverse cultural boundaries. It would be a particularly important theoretical framework for identifying, characterizing, and analyzing contemporary Korean media products.

1.5. The Historical Development of Korean Popular Culture

South Korea's popular culture has evolved in a close relationship with the nation's modern history. It would be difficult to discuss today's Korean culture without understanding the process of Korea's modernization which has much to do with national and cultural identity. In order to gain some insight into the country's modern experience and its specific geopolitical situation, this chapter will briefly survey the historical development of the Korean popular culture in the national and cultural context.

If we consider popular culture as the production of the modernization consuming culture through the mass media, the first instance of the ‘popular’ emerged in Korea during the early part of the twentieth century. The word ‘popular’ has originated from Latin’s ‘populous or people’ (Oxford English Dictionary). However, popular culture in Korean translation, is not suggested as synonymous to people or nationhood. For example, people’s art, such as *pansori* (musical storytelling) or *tal chum* (mask dance), are traditional art forms that were presented prior to the twentieth century in Korea. The literal translation of popular culture is *taejung munhwa* (public or mass culture) that is connoted, ‘public’ imposed by state or market, rather than “popular” or “entertainment”. As Michelle Cho notes, the word “popular” is more aptly translated into *inki* (popular) or *yuhaeng* (trendy), which are associated with the market-driven and star-icon interest of the masses. Thus, when we consider the Korean popular culture, there is no a clear distinction between the mass and the popular. Indeed, media critics agree that the Korean popular culture is located in between the words, *taejung* (mass), *inki* (popular), and *yuhang* (trendy), which always correlate and occur at the same time with the discourse of modernity (Cho 189). In this respect, the major discussions of the Korean popular culture began with the introduction of foreign culture and media technology in the specific situation of Japanese colonization (Kim, *Virtual* 5). For instance, the motion picture became a form of entertainment and business around 1910. The Korean film industry began primarily by presenting foreign films, not by producing national products (Eungjun Min 26). Korea had no control over the imported films and their exhibition.

In 1919, the first Korean film, *Uirijok Gutu* (Royal Revenge) was produced. This was a kino-drama (a combination of motion picture and theater drama) which

initially gained popularity (27), but kino-dramas soon began to lose their appeal because they were not complete motion pictures unlike foreign movies. Korean-produced films during this period were technically poor with weak plots, most of them adapted from traditional Korean novels or stories. They often imitated Japanese and European films, copying ideas from already produced films. In these early productions, the artistic quality was absent (29).

Nevertheless, the medium of film functioned as a means of catharsis for Korean people who had lost their country to Japan (32). There are several sentimental Korean melodramas called *shinpa*, an exact copy of the Japanese *shinpa* film (33). This genre dominated the trends from 1920s to 1930s in Korea. The *shinpa* melodrama became a special type of national film for entertainment as well as a means of expressing anger and fury against the Japanese imperialism (34). *Arirang* (1926) and *Looking for Love* (1928) exemplify this genre that inspired national spirit in the people's mind who were frustrated by the failure of the Independence movement against Japan in 1919 (30).

However, these films eventually faced severe Japanese censorship, consequently the film themes changed to more persuasive and enlightening messages. The rigid censorship contributed to shrinking the film production in 1930s. In 1935, *Chunhyang*, a remake of its original 1923 version, became the first film with sound in Korea. Around 1938, Japan exercised strong policies to erase Korean culture, such as prohibiting the use of Korean language, enforcing a name changing program forcing Koreans to change to Japanese names, enforcing conscription, and restricting the freedom of speech by closing major Korean newspapers. In 1938, the Japanese government created language laws that

abolished Korean dialogue in films and forced Korean film companies to enter joint ventures with Japanese film companies (31).

After the Liberation in 1945, importing Japanese cultural products was officially banned in Korea, which continued until 1998. Nevertheless, the Japanese cultural influence in Korea has persisted. For example, the Japanese television programs since the 1970s acted as a main source of ideas for the Korean television programs. In addition, popular songs and animations also inspired the foundation of Korean popular culture. In this way, “Japanese pop culture in Korea had already set its roots deep into the emotional structure of Koreans” (Chau and Iwabuchi 4).

Before the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, Korean filmmakers produced films discussing stories of Korea’s Liberation and began to work in a variety of genres, such as melodramas, literary adaptations, and documentary. However, during the War (1950-1953), most vintage Korean films either disappeared or were destroyed, with many filmmakers being kidnapped or relocated to North Korea. Since the U.S. military occupation that began immediately after Korea’s liberation from Japan, the presence of the United States in Korea was overwhelming (Kim *Virtual* 2).

Critics argue that removing Japanese rule from Korea instead led to the American domination, with Bruce Cumings declaring that “Korea had been denied its liberation” (qtd. In Choi 359-360). With South Korea constantly threatened by North Korea as well as being surrounded by other powerful nations such as China, Russia, and Japan, many Koreans had hoped that the United States would come to their aid when threatened by others. However, the dependency was never military and economic, but rather ideological and cultural.

Many Korean elites attributed Korea's colonization, the Korean War, and the national division by other's hands to the national weakness and the backwardness in modern knowledge. It was believed that adapting the Western way of modernization was essential for Korea to develop the nation and to protect national sovereignty from foreign powers. Consequently, from the early 1960s to the next three decades, the Korean military dictatorship accelerated industrialization and modernization under the slogan "let's live well". The idea of Western modernization and technology was meaningful for Koreans as it was a superior model to emulate. In this way, Korean people deeply internalized "colonial consciousness," acquiring the Western worldview, cultural norms, and values, eagerly adapting this alien system as their own while disregarding and disparaging indigenous culture and identity" (350). Through a massive influx of Western cultural products, particularly from Hollywood, "South Koreans acquired a detailed sense of distinction according to the property of Western symbolic capital, which South Koreans have neither the resources to produce nor the cultural taste to appreciate, they adapted Western cultural ancestry as their very own" (353).

Since early 1960s, the South Korean military regime began to regulate Korean media, using the media as propaganda to legitimate the regime's emergency rule, promoting national security issues and anti-communist themes. By the 1970s, South Korea had some of the most powerful governmental controls over the media by authoritarian regulation until the transition to democracy in the early 1990s. All media programs including imported ones, were heavily censored both before and after broadcast. Any criticism of the government or positive portrayal of North Korea was

prohibited and representations of sex and violence also restricted due to the concern of distasteful influence over public morals (Min 48).

However, among mainstream media outlets, Christina Klein reminds us, a U.S. military television network called Armed Forces Korea Network-TV (AFKN) was free from Korean government interference and control. AFKN carried news reports from the major US broadcasts and offered a valuable outsider's perspective on Korean political events while transmitting pop songs (which played the leading role in popular culture at that time), pop chart programs, radio, comedy, musical, TV shows, and countless film genres. In this manner, AFKN functioned as a major channel for the flow of popular culture from Hollywood into Korea, free of the strict censorship during the 1970s and 1980s (Klein 27). More importantly, AFKN was a crucial source of inspiration, a reservoir of imagination, and a rich source of education in how genre works for "young Koreans that bore fruit decades later in the genre-bending, smart, commercial films of Bong Joon-ho and his generation of directors" (35). Hollywood style and genre conventions became typical norms and narrative conventions of Korean popular culture. In this way, the supremacy of Hollywood persisted for most of the twentieth century (Min158).

To sum up, Korean popular culture began with modernization and developed through colonization and neocolonization. In other words, popular culture was transplanted in and transmitted to Korea by foreign forces, the powerful Other, in which the unequal power relationship has deepened Korea's cultural dependency and subordination. As a result, Korean popular media products are often criticized as copies

of either American or Japanese popular forms, that there is “nothing uniquely Korean” in the cultural artifacts (Lee, “Mapping” 184).

During the early 1990s, the landscape of Korean popular culture began to change radically. For instance, the government censorship was lifted in 1996. Korean filmmakers have enjoyed their freedom of artistic expression and experiment. New generation directors become known their reputation both at home and abroad for their genre experiment and cinematic innovations that have led to a Korean film renaissance in both its creativity and commercial success (Ae-Gyung Shim and Brian Yecies 64). Scholars view the recent growth of Korean popular culture as a signal of contraflow in the Western-dominant global flow of media (Kim, “Rising”) that has challenged the Western cultural hegemony in Asia (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008).

1.6. Chapter Organization

This dissertation will consist of six chapters that will be organized as follows. Chapter 1, as the introduction, lays out the ground work for the dissertation, explaining the focus, objective and purpose of my study, research questions, methods, background, the historical development of Korean popular culture, and chapter organization.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review that examines the major scholarly works that characterize contemporary Korean film, its major development of themes, the films’ aesthetics and trends in relation to South Korea’s social and cultural change, as well as recent studies of Korean genre films..

Chapter 3 introduces two theoretical frameworks as the primary method for the analysis of the case studies. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section explores Homi Bhabha’s theories of cultural hybridity, focusing on key concepts such as

“Mimicry” and “Third Space” in order to identify the various ways in which hybridity is exhibited by Korean media texts. The second section will discuss the theories of film genre, exploring the works of Rick Altman, Thomas Schatz, and John Cawelti to investigate how genre and its transformation operate, and how it is critically involved in creating hybridity.

Chapter 4 analyzes a Korean Western, *The Good the Bad the Weird*. As the director Kim Jee-woon notes, his film is inspired by many genre films and is homage of those genre predecessors. Before conducting my analysis, I examine three western genres that have predominantly influenced Kim’s film: the American, Italian, and Manchurian Western. I review these genres relying on the works of Western genre theorists such John G. Cawelti, Christopher Fraying, and Will Wright. Based on their insights, I discuss the films’ major adherence to and deviation from genre convention and rules. The focus of this case study is to examine the effect of each genre’s different approach to the text, the local sentiment and national identity that is inherent in the film, and the possibility of newly emerging cultural identity suggested by the text.

Chapter 5 analyzes the Korean post-apocalyptic action thriller, *Snowpiercer*. Before conducting the analysis, the major genres that are borrowed by the film such as dystopian, post-apocalyptic SF genres, are reviewed, and the historical and cultural context of science fiction in Korea will be discussed, particularly since SF has, as a genre, long been marginalized in Korea. The focus of this case study is how the film uses the dominant form of film language, disrupts the dominant narrative form, criticizes various cultural issues, and how the film offers an alternative cultural and political view of Korea, while avoiding the politics of polarization and cultural hierarchy.

Chapter 6 summarizes the findings and insights gained during the analysis of the case studies. The conclusion will be presented. In addition, ideas for future research will be provided.

Chapter 2

The New Wave

2.1. A Creative Move toward Global Vernacular

After long foreign domination and poor international standing, South Korean cinema has grown remarkably over the past decades in quantity and quality. This resulted in the “winning back the heart of domestic audiences who had once preferred foreign films particularly those from Hollywood” (Shin, “Globalization” 51). The contemporary Korean cinema is also becoming the object of global interest and is widely considered the most successful and significant non-Hollywood cinema available in the world today (Ryoo, “Globalization” 141). Critics called this a ‘renaissance’ of Korean cinema. This chapter introduces major studies related to the distinct characteristics and the new tendencies presented in the recent Korean cinema.

In *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Culture, Identity, Politics*, Hyangjin Lee is concerned with the ideological underpinnings of contemporary Korean films. Lee analyzes both South and North Korean films that treat socio-historical themes in order to investigate the link between the operations of ideology in the text, with the historical and cultural contexts (Lee, *Contemporary* 188). According to Lee, one of the recurring themes of Korean cinema is the burden of the ideological heterogeneity between the communist North and the capitalist South. Ironically the complexity of this theme stems

from the keen awareness that Koreans have of their cultural homogeneity (4). This study uncovers that the sustaining power of cultural homogeneity among the Korean people has not been entirely lost despite their half century of political confrontation (188). Lee's study shows that there are two distinct traits in Korean films: 1) the regimes in the South and in the North are both depicted as claiming historical legitimacy over the other. However, 2) Korean films from both sides subtly adopt the rhetoric of 'one nation', justifying the necessity to reunify the country (4). This rhetoric reflects the genuine aspiration of the Korean people to restore their cultural homogeneity and solidarity, which transcends the current ideological confrontation. The idea of 'one nation' is deeply valued on both sides due to their firm sense of ethnic homogeneity. The idea of oneness in contemporary Koreans self-identity represents an indirect reference of their country to an extended family (4). Since the late 1980s, the South Korean films have challenged the ideological repression more provocatively and questioned what the true meanings of national prosperity for Korean people, dealing with 'forbidden' subjects and variety of issues. In contrast to these new developments and innovative move in South Korean film, recent works of North Korea still lay ideological emphasis on the rhetoric of patriarchal lineage in the North Korean leadership and the primacy of the leader's family (192).

Jeeyoung Shin, in "Globalization and New Korean Cinema," explores the relationship between New Korean Cinema and media globalization. Shin considers how the Korean government's implementation of globalization policy assisted the growth and internationalization of Korean cinema while paying attention to some of the major characteristics of recent Korean films. According to Shin, the contemporary Korean cinema is both an effect of and a response to media globalization since the transformation

of Korean cinema is closely related to the Korean government's unique policy of globalization (*Segyehwa* in Korean). One of the main *Segyehwa* policies stresses the promotion of Korean culture and values under the motto of "Koreanization". In other words, to globalize successfully, Koreans must first have a good understanding of their unique culture and traditional values and maintain strong national identity and spirit (J. Lee, "Globalization" 56). Shin argues that this state-lead policy not only "provides a perfect ground for the ongoing commercialization and commodification of "traditional" culture by the culture industry, while claiming to protect cultural identity from the threats of cultural imperialism or homogenization [but also promotes] cultural autonomy and integrity" (56). Inspired by the spirit of the time, young directors are responsive to contemporary domestic affairs and politics and began to create new hybrid form of cinema which brought vitality to Korean film scene and "provides an important means for their self-definition that not only distances itself from xenophobic and moralizing adherence to local cultural tradition but also challenges Western cultural hegemony" (57). In this regard, the direction of New Korean cinema is a searching for the new identity of the nation that can be defined by its unique cultural experiences and traditions.

In her article, "*Chunhyang*: Marketing an Old Tradition in New Korean Cinema", Hyangjin Lee analyses *Chunhyang* (2000), directed by Kwon-Taek Im. Lee considers how Korean oral tradition is newly interpreted for a more global audience. Lee observes that the reinvention of tradition in *Chunhyang* is a distinctive marketing strategy of New Korean Cinema as it works to highlight its cultural uniqueness from other national cinemas. Lee observes the film, *Chunhyang* is Im's cinematic sublimation of 'Korean-ness', which creates a new Korean identity by the contemporary reconstruction

of culture tradition. Lee argues that Korean-ness is constantly being reconstructed in Korean cinema. This is shown in Im's previous art film, *Sopyonje* (1993), which has been immensely popular and is a successful realization of the old tradition in a contemporary form. This overwhelming response of the nation created the *Sopyonje* syndrome which reveals Korean's nostalgic sentiments and sense of loss (Lee, "Chunhyang" 74). An interesting finding is that Korean audience prefers Korean themes, but in a Hollywood style of entertainment. In this sense, the new Korean films recreate Korean tradition and identity in a creative imagination to satisfy the contemporary audience. For that reason, Lee concludes that marketing an old tradition in New Korean Cinema should be understood as the product of the profit-making motives of the film industry and of the diverse demands of its audience (76). This creative reconstruction of tradition and identity in new Korean cinema is often criticized for its illusory and fictitious depiction. Critics such as Kyung Hyun Kim argues that Im's film has failed to construct "new cinematic language" because "it avoids social or political problems of contemporary Korea and instead locates his film in the purity of a wholly pre-modern Korean past, where the "value of tradition, nation, and family remained intact and united" (Jackson 115).

In *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, Kyung Hyun Kim traces the trajectory of masculinity in new Korean cinemas. Kim states that South Korea underwent a radical transformation between the 1980s and 1990s from authoritarian culture into democratic and cosmopolitan society. This radical transition and changed reality created anxiety and crisis. Korean men are deeply threatened, tortured, and psychologically emasculated. This Korean man's identity is mirrored in the films. According to Kim, the

primary theme of the new Korean cinema produced from 1980s to 1990s is the tensions between the masculine agencies and social problem of post-military era. Male characters are often depicted as self-loathing and pathetic male, and the targets of public embarrassment. Since the late 1990s, this image of the Korean man has transformed into a “self-sufficient subject that is capable of destroying others” (Kim, *Remasculinization* 275) thereby the brutality and violence ubiquitous in many Korean films. Kim observes that genre films were increasingly remasculinized “transposing its own historical pain and gentrifying it into the pleasurable elements of gender relations ready for commercial consumption” (274). As seen in *Shiri* (1999), the image of Korean man represents “well-proportioned bodies in sleek suits and professional jobs also began to appear with regularity and unprecedented force” (10). Kim argues that the male character transformed into an object of desire that indicates a cinematic empowerment of imagined remasculinization for the younger generation audience who had no experience of the pain of historical event. This representation of masculinity reflects Korea’s on-going quest for modernity and a post-authoritarian identity in the country’s sociopolitical changes. In the meantime, the female subject, Kim points out, is fetishized for the narrative pleasure of male gaze that “underpins not only the gender imbalance of power, but also Korean cinema’s commercialization that has adopted a narrative convention akin to Hollywood’s” (275).

Similar argument has been made by Eungjun Min, Jinsook Joo, and Han Ju Kwak in *Korean Film: History, Resistance, and Democratic Imagination*. These authors note that since 1990s, a considerable amount of gangster genre films have been produced in Korea and diagnose that these generic texts can be cultural symptoms corresponding to

the specific situation of Korean society, “particularly the transcoding of collective desires, anxieties and fantasies” (Min 174). The male hero of these gangster films performs their uncontrolled masculinity and desire, refusing to be contained within the system. The male hero’s desires “represent repressed libido or subversive impulse, which is sediment and fermented in 1990s Korean society” (176). Through the violent action of the male protagonist, “male audiences could temporarily and fictitiously regain their masculinity, which is in reality threatened seriously” (177). In this way, the Korean gangster films articulate male audience desire and pleasure that is “a common hidden dream of ordinary Korean adult male. For them, sensual pleasure through sex and alcohol is related to the desire to escape from everyday drudgery into a realm of freedom and plenitude” (177). However, most heroes in these films are killed in the end due to the violence that is generated within the system. In that sense, the authors conclude that the character’s violence in the Korean gangster films signifies a resistance against the dominant system as well as reaffirmation of the logic of the system (176).

Jinhee Choi in *The South Korea Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs*, examines how the South Korean film industry responded to regional and global demands by modernizing industry practices from the late 1990s to the late 2000s and elevating film production values (2). Through analysis of wide range productions, genres, and cycles in the contemporary industry: blockbusters, gangster films, romantic comedies, dramas, horror etc., Choi demonstrates how Korean cinema has incorporated, reworked, and replaced the generic norms and aesthetic conventions of other national cinematic styles; Hong Kong, Japanese, European, and Hollywood, among others. Choi argues that new generation directors have pursued commercially viable films with nation-

specific content and aesthetic finesse. Despite its emphasis on commercial cinema over festival-oriented cinema, the distinction between commercial and art cinema in the South Korean Film is not sharp, but rather overlaps between the two (Choi, *South* 193). This recent “resurgence of socially conscious, and /or aesthetically experimental films and the industrial boom” (6) in the late 1990s, Choi labels as ‘South Korean film Renaissance’

In “The Meaning of Newness in Korean Cinema: Korean New Wave and After,” Moon Jae-cheol tries to interpret the newness in contemporary Korean cinema. According to Moon, the recent achievement of Korean cinema dates to the cinema movement from the 1980s to the mid-1990s, which Moon termed “Korean New Wave” and its effect. New Wave films were critical of social reality capturing political tension challenging the governing powers and ideology. New Wave directors tried to redefine traditional national values and identity, emphasizing the social responsibility of films by showing novelty in practice. However, in the late 1990s, the post-New Wave reestablished relations with the popular. According to Moon, “New directors prioritize the receptivity of popular film” (Moon 44) and they no longer felt compelled to present all things Korean. However, when they explore Korean topics, it is through a universal cinematic language that the world can understand. Notable characteristics in the post-New Wave are that the dichotomous view between popular film and art film is crumbled; Irony can elicit an important political effect; the post-New Wave films emphasize spectacle or emotionally charged images rather than deep themes which reveal the dilemma faced between art films and entertainment or mainstream films and alternative films. Considering auteurism that functions through distinction, Moon claims that the

strategy using irony and strong sensitive images can be considered as newness and innovation in contemporary Korean cinemas (58).

In *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era*, Kyung Hyun Kim notes that contemporary Korean cinema caught between the conflicting interests the auteur cinema and its market forces, continues to negotiate with both real and virtual cinematic representations (Kim, *Virtual* 6). In his reading Korean cinema, Kim borrows Deleuzian concept of “virtual” which refers to “past that coexists with the present and of a truth that coexists with the false” (20). Kim uses the term “virtual” interchangeably with “the artificial or less than real...both real and dreamlike,” more precisely “the utopian imaginary” (21). Kim claims that Korean film today is a virtual act that produces reimagined history and its social referents in forms that are both truthful and fantastic (21). In the process, the boundary between “the way things are remembered” and the “way things really were” has been confused through the massive repository of images and the generic conventions between Hollywood and non-Hollywood (5). In other words, the auteurship in South Korea since the beginning of the century mediates between the fantasy desired by the masses and reinvented modernist dreams that “failed to reawaken auteurist shock values” (201). Although these filmmakers achieved new standard for cinematic visions through their reconstructions of “North Korean (Park Chan-wook’s *JSA*), colonial-era Korea (Kim Jee-woon’s *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*), and contemporary, hyperurban Seoul (Park Chan-wook’s *Oldboy*, Bong Joon-ho’s *The Host*, and Kim Jee-woon’s *Bitter Sweet Life*)”(201), these generic sets of Korean cinema, Kim argues, are not real, rather a metaphysical or virtual space, which is filled with “the virtual dream of both a utopian end of history and the destruction of the corporate

capitalist system” (212). Although critics agree that the Korean cinema lacks cinematic innovation, others argue that the Korean cinema created a new form of cinematic language.

In “The New Cinematic Language of South Korean Film,” Andrew Jackson sheds light on the new tendency in the recent Korean films. His analysis of five popular films by different directors shows that the new Korean films stray from conventional style; these films deal with heavy subject matter or taboo subjects and avoid the purity of pre-modern Korea; these are not intended as art house film nor foreign festival film yet they balance between domestic and foreign audience and artistic concerns. These three elements fill the films with apparent contradictions: experimental and mainstream; art house films and the film for mass audiences; heavy subjects and entertaining (Jackson 115). These contradictions are, Jackson argues, central concepts of a new languages in Korean film. Jackson concludes that “[Capturing] this sense of contradiction [leaves] the audience with more questions than answers; a reminder that this contradiction has yet to be resolved” (129) and that this is the new cinematic language which gives Korean film its Korean identity.

In “‘Just Because’: Comedy, Melodrama and Youth Violence in *Attack the Gas Station*,” Nancy Abelman and Jung-ah Choi analyze Korean anarchic youth film, *Attack the Gas Station* (1999) directed by Sang Jin Kim. The authors introduce the film ‘hysterically funny’ and they consider the film as “the first truly comedy-like South Korean comedy action film” (Abelman and Choi 132). The authors investigate the reason for the popularity of this “too ruthless to laugh away” film, particularly to its youth audience. Abelman and Choi argue that the reason for the film’s success is the

combination of new-generation style of the attackers, its MTV-like aesthetics, and its melodramatic approach (133) in which the film offers conventional melodramatic narration of personal histories and of social inequalities in South Korea. The authors assert that this combination of the violent style and comfort convention make the film appealing. There is little rationale for why the film's protagonists, the four male buddies attack the gas station late at night. The film's answer is 'Just because' 'because we are bored' (134). The authors view that the attack does not conform to standard narrative, rejecting coherent narration and the cause and effect logic. This humorous violence is considered a "rejection of the collective subject and of grand narrative" (135) through which the film celebrates 'difference'. By doing that, Abelmann and Choi suggest that the film portrays "anti-normative youth culture [that] works as a romantic fantasy" (136) and creates some "counter-cultural codes" (136). In this regard, New Korean film is seen as a creative effort and an experiment to search for a new filmic vocabulary that is more palatable to the regional and global the audience.

In his recent article, "Sliding through Genres: The Slippery Structure in South Korean Films," Pablo Utin observes the unique narrative tendency of contemporary Korean cinema, its strategies of genre mixing such as unmixed compressed coexistence of opposing and even contradictory conceptions, tones and genres, from horror to comedy or from melodrama to slapstick. These sudden shifts in genre and tone create an emotional disorientation that does not allow for a consistent way of relating to the situations depicted, thus creating a moral gap. This unique phenomenon of experiential slip, Utin defines as 'the Slippery Structure' (Utin 54). Utin questions, "why this slippery strategy tends to appear in films of the New Korean Cinema" (54). Utin scrutinizes

whether there is a link between this unusual tendency towards adopting a slippery generic structure and the Korean society and its “rollercoaster experience of compressed and condensed modernity” (55). Utin concludes that “The Slippery Structure in South Korean Cinema as a compressed generic structure can be thought of as a cinematic manifestation of South Korean compressed modernity” (56). Utin’s insight provides an important lens in understanding how the society’s specific experience influence the creation of the unique tendency of cinematic expression in Korean film. Many outside viewers question what is represented in Korean films that make them popular, at home and abroad?

In “Interpreting Chris Berry’s Full Service Cinema in an International Context: Korea vs. Bollywood,” Ranjan Chhibber notes that Korean film makers recognize the power in all genres and harness all its filmmaking styles. As a result, Korean cinema is receiving international acclaim, not for being something exotic, but for the same reason films from Western nations do: for its cinematic artistry and illuminating *mise-en-scène* (Chhibber 42). Ranjan argues that unlike its modern history, Korean cinema has been struggling against mimicry and for a distinctive, independent identity that serves as a role model for the filmmakers of Asian nations (42). As a result, Hollywood is anxious to distribute these films and began to produce remakes of successful Korean films. In this way, Korean film became more than a good imitation of American cinema that interests American and global tastes.

In “Full Service Cinema: The South Korean Cinema Success Story (So Far)”, Chris Berry considers the reason for the recent success of the South Korean cinema. According to Berry, Hong Kong cinemas emphasized action genres that appealed to younger audiences whereas Taiwan’s emphasis was on romances and melodramas

suitable for all the family, but both were one dimensional, purely commercial, and they were unable to satisfy the multiple tastes and market (Berry 12). In contrast to Hong Kong and Taiwan, South Korea has effectively pursued in “full service cinema” (13) which means that South Korean film industry remains diversified including “mainstream feature films, and active documentary movement, art cinema, animation, film festival, an archive with an active screening program, and so forth” (11-12). Berry goes on listing more reasons for South Korean cinema’s commercial success both at home and abroad, such as its high level of cinematic literacy and fostering its young filmmakers, the effort of establishing international film festivals and in art-house cinemas in Seoul. There is also a wide range of film publications and film courses available in South Korea.

Many studies have discussed how recent Korean cinemas have hybridized American media cultures in terms of production techniques, genres and styles. Researchers observe that genre bending in Korean cinemas manifests in the expansion of generic limits.

In *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Wave*, Darcy Paquet traces the most transformative change of new Korean cinema. Paquet notes that in late 2000, new generation directors create new aesthetic to Korean cinema that is “youth-oriented, genre-savvy, visually sophisticated and not ashamed of its commercial origins” (Paquet, *New* 63). According to Paquet, new generation directors were active participants in the cinephile movement of the early to mid-1990s which encompassed a broad range of cinema including European auteurs and Hollywood B-movies. Due to its weak film heritage and influence of the Korean film, young generation directors “are unable to claim affiliation to any lineage within film history, but at the same time they show a

sponge like resilience where they can assume whichever lineage suits them” (65). The energy is viewed as “the adventurous spirit of children without fathers” (65). The new generation directors, such as Jee-woon Kim, Park Chan-wook, and Bong Joon-ho effectively appropriate Hollywood genre conventions and style but tweak them differently challenging hegemonic ideology by creating cultural hybridity. The cultural hybridity enables them both aesthetically innovative and commercially successful as well as appeal to the global audience.

In “Waxing the Korean Wave,” Doobo Shim inquires how Koreans appropriate global popular cultural forms to express their local sentiment and culture (Shim, “Waxing” 3). Shim examines the Korean struggle for cultural diversity in the face of a possible erosion of their cultural particularity. In the process, Shim argues, cultural hybridization has occurred as local cultural agents and actors interact and negotiate with global forms, using them as resources through which Koreans construct their own cultural spaces. By this, Shim underlines that the globalization, particularly in the realm of popular culture, breeds a creative form of hybridization that works towards sustaining local identities in the global context (13). Shim’s study shows the tendency of the contemporary Korean culture as a hybrid cultural form. However, other critics disagree to apply the hybrid thesis to the contemporary Korean culture.

In “Critical Interpretation of Hybridization in Korean Cinema: Does the Local Film Industry Create a Third Space?”, Dal Yong Jin argues that even though there’s obvious blending of different cultural elements, Korean movies primarily does not create new forms of the third space, nor does it maintain national values, such as traditional Korean mentalities and socio-cultural characteristics, against Western culture. Jin points

out that the shrewdly articulated Western styles and genres cannot guarantee the development of a new form of culture. In many cases, Korean media products in global form are “simply repackaged for local audiences” (Jin, “Critical” 58) rather than establishing a new creative culture or a third space, one that is free of American influence. Recent studies focus on the new aesthetics in East Asian film as new independent form that is not a derivative or some regional category but a new global and legitimated category. In “Once upon a Time in Manchuria: Classic and Contemporary Korean Westerns,” Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient analyze the intertextual linkages between George Steven’s *Shane* (1953) and the Korean Manchurian Western, Sin Sang-ok’s *The Man with No Home* (1968), addressing how the latter film blends American Western conventions with Korean melodramatic sentiments. In the chapter’s latter part, the authors examine the contemporary Korean Western, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*. The analysis shows Kim’s film is “the ongoing process of re-imagining the legacy of colonial history from multiple perspectives” (Chung and Diffrient 121), both harnessing iconography associated with Korean Manchurian Western and the Italian spaghetti Western and “destabilizing clear-cut thematic/moral binaries” (122). Hence, the authors argue that Kim’s movie is de-nationalized, revisionist Western that is a cinematic contribution to “a significant “migratory” film that attests to the resilience and adaptability of the Western genre in a global context” (122).

In “J-Horror and Kimchi Western: Mobile Genres in East Asian Cinemas,” Vivian P.Y. Lee looks at the transnational mobility of contemporary East Asian genre films as a regional as well as globalized phenomenon. Lee examines the interplay of generic codes and conventions analyzing two genres: US remakes of Shimizu Takashi’s

horror the Ju-on series and Kim Jee-woon's Western, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*. Lee's analysis reveals, "the cross-breeding between different cultural and generic conventions have contributed to the regional character of popular genre films in East Asia... this regional quality is also what enables East Asian films to claim a place in the "global popular" today" (Lee, "J-Horror" 137). Lee argues that these films show hybridization and stylistic eclecticism, which is productive as "deviation from type has paved the way for further updating and cross-fertilization of the genre" (137). In that sense, Lee suggests that "these genre films belong to a new "global vernacular" through which the "lingua franca" of popular cinema is no longer the uncontested property of Western (American) cinema" (120).

In her recent work, "Staging the "Wild Wild East": Decoding the Western in East Asian Films," Vivian P. Y. Lee acknowledges the long existing intergenic and intertextual dialogues between the Western and Asian cinema. Exploring the Western's trajectories in East Asian cinema, Lee analyzes three Asian Western genre films which are recently produced. Considering distinctive patterns of the Western's transnational dialogues outside its Euro-American context, Lee argues that the latest phase of East Asian Westerns are formal and ideological nonconformities and that each film embodies the film histories of their respective locations or translocations. This has distinctive patterns of reinventing and problematizing the paradigmatic form in the respective contexts. Setting out these points, Lee concludes that 'Asian Western' should not "designate one category of regional film genre but a process of continuous transmutation as the genre traverses national and cultural terrains" (Lee, "Wild" 150).

In *Eastern Westerns: Film and Genre outside and inside Hollywood*, Stephen Teo attempts to challenge the popular view on the Western genre that is perhaps the most representative genre created by Hollywood as a cultural instrument for its global expansion. Teo analyzes Asian western genre films from an Asian point of view, employing an alternative sensibility of Asian cultural ideas and values which are different from Euro-American perspective. Teo's work demonstrates how Asian filmmakers construct counter-discourses independently with their own variations of the genre. The Asian western is often seen as both a derivative of American and Italian Western, yet departing from them in significant ways (Teo, *Eastern* 7) and transforming the norms of American and European Westerns. Teo argues that Asian Western must be recognized as a distinctive genre in its own right as the Asian western is much more unique in essence—its 'Eastern' dimension, and identity (2).

In "Bad Jokes, Bad English, Good Copy: Sukiyaki Western Django, or How the West Was Won," Olivia Khoo analyzes how Mike Takashi's *Sukiyaki Western Django* both localises and globalises American genre, at the same time, "de-values and re-values the "original" (Khoo 80). By doing that, Khoo illuminates the politics of reception of atypical cultural products that frustrates conventional expectations. In Khoo's account, Mike's self-cultivated public persona as a cult film icon is a deconstructive maneuvering of intertextual/metatextual references and it is also a contributing factor to the unwelcoming responses from critics educated in the American Western convention. Khoo views that the film's generic impurities and transgressions account for both its critical potential and the critical negligence of film scholarship. However, this film's critical, method and practice is, Khoo argues, "reducible neither to the universality of Hollywood

nor to the particularity of multicultural identity” (92). Inspired by Tarantino’s description of his Western film, *Django Unchained* as “Southern” rather than a Western, because the film is set in America’s South rather than the Western frontier and the film “deals with America’s horrible past with slavery” (92) that Western genre film “never dealt with because it’s ashamed of it...” (92), Khoo stresses that it is necessary to rethink Asian Western as a “legitimate object of enquiry” (93) since it is a new critical frameworks as a new genre of *Eastern Western* that emerged though the practice of generic mutation and transformation.

Many observed new generations of Korean producers who have been deeply influenced by Western media, in their creative “mimicry and appropriation” (Bhabha *Location*) of foreign cultural styles, have created hybrid cultural forms that are accessible to international audiences (Shim, “Globalization” 254). Film critics view “contemporary Korean cinema is both innovative and industrially successful in an effort to both copy and critique the West in order to overcome the older limitations of modern Korean filmmaking” (Moon 36). Doobo Shim argues that the current commercial success of Korean media is an outgrowth of Korea’s struggle for cultural continuity when confronted by the threat of global cultural domination (Shim, “Hybridity” 31). Today’s global media culture in which the borders between the global and local are blurred and new meanings and signs are produced and circulated across diverse cultural boundaries, without looking at the power relationship between global and local, the cross-cultural text cannot be properly understood. Janet Staiger encourage us that when we encounter a cross-cultural product, the analysis should focus on “the questions of power, presumptive authority, purity and origination of the dominant genre” (Staiger 215).

Homi Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity explains how "natives and minorities strike back at imperial domination by recourse to the hybridization strategy" (Shim, "Hybridity" 27). The concept of hybridity enables us to locate the ideological sites of unequal cross-cultural contacts and communications that are not always observable from the surface. This political sense of hybridity provides us an effective tool in reflecting on cross-cultural media like Korean films. The next chapter introduces Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity as the primary theoretical framework for analyzing Korean film texts, their complex cultural connectivity, alternative narratives from different socio-cultural context, the emergence of new meanings of media texts and their effects in expanding the formal, aesthetic, and political boundaries of cultural form.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Frameworks

3.1. Cultural Hybridity

Homi K. Bhabha argues that the Western understanding of cultural values and norms were formed through the binary thinking of Western rationalism (Rutherford 219). Bhabha states, “cultures are never unitary themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of Self to Other [...], the difference of cultures cannot be identified or evaluated within a universalist framework” (Bhabha, *Location* 52). Therefore, the holistic view of culture and “any monolithic description of authoritative power, is not going to be a very accurate reflection of what is actually happening in the world” (Rutherford 221). Bhabha urges us to move away from the singular and universal form of claim to cultural identity in the modern world and “to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (Bhabha, *Location* 2).

Bhabha has developed “the concept of hybridity to describe the construction of cultural authority within conditions of political antagonism or inequity” (Bhabha, “Culture” 58). For conceptualization of the cultural hybridity, Bhabha borrows the colonial tactic of double talk, ‘mimicry’ that is “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (Bhabha, *Location* 122). For Bhabha,

mimicry represents the ambivalence of colonial discourse, which reveals the colonial desire to reform the colonial subject into “a subject of difference that is *almost the same, but not quite*” (122) For instance, under the principle of civilizing mission, the colonial education conceived of a reformed colonial Other, “a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (124-5). In other words, the colonial educator produced an in-between person as a recognizable Other who mimics the colonizer, who can be an Anglicized, but can never an original English person. This hybrid identity, as an effect of colonial mimicry, Bhabha describes as follows:

[T]he discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference [...] mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy; mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of double articulation a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. (122)

Mimicry forbids the exact replica, but allows only partial resemblance, “[a]lmost the same but not white” (128). This partial imitation continually produces difference and distance between Self and Other, thus the colonized presence appears similar to the colonizer while maintaining their difference. No matter how little the difference is, its effect is large. Comparable to the “one drop policy”, the result of a single drop difference signifies “not quiet/not pure.” There are only two categories between the colonizer and colonized, either pure (Self) or not pure (Other). Through this mutually exclusive binary classification of Self and Other, the colonizer determines who is ruler/ruled, and superior/inferior. Colonial double discourse has exercised a discriminatory politics of hierarchy through which the colonial power secures its original identity and authority. This discriminatory identity and representations become the cultural norms from which

racial stereotypes, jokes, and statements are produced. In this sense, hybridity represents “the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities” (159).

However, the hybrid object is ambivalent by containing both elements of I and Other. The partial I in the hybrid subject “breaks down the symmetry and duality of Self/Other, inside/outside” (165). Hybridity is, thus, a form of menace as it unsettles the colonial discourse that Bhabha explains through Jacques Lacan’s concept of mimicry as follows:

The effect of mimicry is camouflage [practiced in *human* warfare] ... it’s not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically. Its threat [...] comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory ‘identity effects’ in the play of power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no ‘itself’. And that form of resemblance is the most terrifying thing to behold. (128-129)

Mimicry, acting like a camouflage, does not regard assimilation as the background, rather it seeks to disguise, disturb, and threaten the dominant power. Through hybridity, the authority no longer represents of an essence; but a partial presence that reveals the limits of colonial essentialism. Hybridity, Bhabha argues, is not a force from ‘outside’ rather it “works with, and within, the cultural design of the present to reshape our understanding of the interstices—social and psychic—that link signs of cultural similitude with emergent signifiers of alterity” (Bhabha, “Forward” ix). The forms of cultural difference that constitute the subject of hybridity, Bhabha stresses, are “neither historically synchronic nor ethically and politically equivalent” (ix). Bhabha’s point is that the reverse use of hybrid is productive as displaying ambivalent hybridity forces the dominant culture to look back at itself and see the mutual constitution of Self and Other. This opens the possibility of the colonizer’s self-reflective criticism on the presumption of essentialism that is constructed in relation to the Other and this discloses that the

colonial discourse is “both incomplete and virtual” (Bhabha, *Location* 123). In this regard, Bhabha’s notion of colonial mimicry is a subversive strategy for challenging the fixity of cultural identity.

Then, what is the function of hybridity? Bhabha describes hybridity as “the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects [...]. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” (159-60). The hybrid object “retains the actual semblance of the authoritative symbol but reevaluates its presence by resisting it as the signifier of *Entstellung*—*after the intervention of difference*” (164). It means that the colonized repeats the colonizer’s sign but constantly produces “its slippage, its excess, its difference” (122) that Garcia Canclini describes as the “manner of adapting foreign ideas with an inappropriate meaning” (Garcia-Canclini 49). In this way, hybridity challenges the dominant idea and order within which it calls into question the transparency of colonizing authority (Ashcroft et al. 184).

Threatening authority, hybridity opens a space of translation that Bhabha terms, “in-between space” or “Third space” in which different cultural elements meet, conflict, and negotiate with each other. According to Bhabha, the Third Space acts as a liminal space in a stairwell, where the upper position and lower position mobilize into the same level, where cultural differences are articulated “without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha, *Location* 5). The important function of the third space is to ensure the equal and fair positions between different cultures in the process of translation which Bhabha considers as “a precondition for the articulation of cultural different” (56). This

space of negotiation makes possible “the emergence of a hybrid agency that refuses the simple binary representation of social antagonism and finds their voice in a dialectic without seeking cultural supremacy or sovereignty” (Bhabha, “Culture” 58). By disruption of cultural canon and authenticity, hybridity increases diverse interpretation and revisions that enhance its creative potential and the capacity to find new forms of expression through which new cultural meanings enter the world and political change occurs. All of the above suggests that Bhabha’s hybridity is neither a blind copying nor a passive blending of different cultural elements but an active creation and inscription of cultural sign.

By activating this Third Space, hybridity enables the “achievement of agency and authority, rather than the fulfillment of the ‘authenticity’ of identity—however mixed, however, ‘multi’, however intersective or intercultural” (Bhabha, “Forward” xii). Bhabha’s formulation of hybridity can be more fruitful as on one hand, it accommodates better today’s cross-cultural product since its ambivalence suggests the possibility of complex intercultural connectivity between Self and Other, which can ease the rigidity of the binary opposition. On the other hand, the concept of Third Space contributes to the emergence of new alternative cultural translation, and so increasing the capacity of intercultural dialogue.

3.2. Theory of Film Genre

This section explores the notions of genre film and film genre, their definitions and characteristics, cultural functions, and generic transformation as a conceptual tool for the analysis of the Korean genre films.

3.2.1. Genre Film

Film genre theorist, Rick Altman argues that film genre study is an extension of literary genre study (Altman, *Film* 13) and its first theorist is Aristotle. Aristotle's notion on genre is that genres have essential qualities that are organized to create similar effects on their audience (20). In other words, each different type of poetry provides different pleasure and experience, for example, tragedies arouse the emotion of pity and fear (2) as well as cathartic effect. Classical literary genre theory has differentiated literature from popular writing, based on the underlying assumptions of aesthetic value, such as 'true' art vs. popular culture, high-brow vs. low-brow. In this way, good art has been thought of as "original, distinctive, and complex", while popular art was considered as "formulaic and unsophisticated" (Grant, *Film* 5).

Genre film developed in the American film industry between 1915 and 1930 in order to create success at the box office. Filmmakers repeatedly use their proven formulas and standard production process to economize communication between the creator and audience (Schatz 4). According to Barry Grant, in the classic studio system, genre movies are produced like Ford's assembly line cars with interchangeable parts. In providing films this way, studios could quickly create and audiences could readily understand the films, and producers could easily group films in generic categories. (Grant, *Film* 7-8). Genre movies are thus, essentially "commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations" (1). In contrast to art cinema or experimental cinema, genre films are often regarded "as the equivalent of 'popular cinema'" (1), often criticized for lacking originality or authenticity by the cultural theorists who are associated with Frankfurt School. The most influential

figures among them, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, termed popular culture as “the culture industry” and argue that the cultural industry “had turned folk art into commodities of mass culture, and their generic formulas functioned simply to control the mass consumers by organizing and labelling them like the films themselves” (5). Then, what is “genre” in regard to genre film?

3.2.2. Definition of Film Genre

According to Stephen Neale, the term ‘genre’ is derived from “a French word meaning ‘type’ or ‘kind’” (Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 7). In the light of its etymology, genre can be understood as a conceptual tool that enables us to identify the recognizable elements from the artworks, letting us classify, categorize or differentiate them from one another. However, many critics agree that film genre is one of the most difficult matters to identify or to discuss because it encompasses multiple meanings and performs many tasks at the same time. Rick Altman reminds us to understand a range of meanings inherent in the concept of genre itself (Altman, *Film* 17) and defines film genre.

First, Altman views film genre as a “blueprint” that provides a formula and pattern from which films are derived. In other words, genre provides an industrial model with an effective formula. Producers use them to “guarantee the success of a film to a new subject, producers minimize their risks and justify the production” (Moine 64). Thereby genres undergo predictable development, repeating certain strategies or tropes. Like other commercial products, genre film changes and innovates in order to succeed. As a result, individual genre film has variations, however as described by Altman, “like a train, genres are free to move, but only along already laid tracks” (Altman, *Film* 22): genres are not free to just go anywhere.

Second, genre is a “structure” which means that genre provides frameworks within which film texts are embodied. Similarly, John Cawelti defines film genre as “structures of narrative convention... in terms of paradigms for the selection of certain plots, characters and settings of such a sort that these narrative elements not only create effective stories, but become endowed with certain aspects of collective ritual, game and dream” (Cawelti, *Six-gun* 19). This narrative structure within which the story is told, suggests to an audience how to read and interpret a text in a particular way.

Third, genre is a “label” by which it is understood that genre is a useful category when it comes to the decisions and communications in marketing and consuming media products. Altman views that genre exists based on “public recognition rather than on individual’s spectator perception” (Altman, *Film* 15). Therefore, genre must be defined by industry and recognized by the mass audience. If not, it cannot be genre as film genres are “not just scientifically derived or theoretically constructed categories, but are always industrially certified and publicly shared” (16). This publicly recognizable category enables a bridge to multiple concerns in the process of production, distribution, exhibition and consumption among the film industry, mass audience, and critics.

Fourth, genre is a “contract” between authors and readers. According to Altman, audiences of each genre film are conditioned to different viewing position having different attitudes, assumptions, and expectation due to the different communication frame (14). In other words, audiences use their knowledge of genre, so before they watch a film they will know the story, characters, conventions, and mise-en-scène of the genre. The audience’s pre-reading contributes to the institutional, ideological and cultural factors that influence audience reception. By using their various knowledges, audiences

shape their expectations and decide which media texts they will consume in order to achieve predictable pleasure. In this regard, genre, Francesco Casetti argues, is “a collection of shared rules that allows the filmmaker to use established communicative formulas and to organize his own system of expectations” (Casetti 271). This shared rule supposes an agreement between film producer and viewer concerning the recognition of genres (Moine 27). Then, how does film genre work?

Thomas Schatz argues that film genre is a communication system that is comparable to a verbal language system. Inspired by Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic distinction between *langue* (the grammatical rules) and *parole* (individual utterances), Schatz explains the film-language analogy, stating that the speaker’s and listener’s shared knowledge of the grammar rule enables them to express their ideas and thoughts that people listen to and interpret. In the same manner, “our shared knowledge of the rule of any film genre enables us to understand and interpret the individual genre films” (Schatz 19). For Schatz, thus, film genre as a cinematic language system is “rules of expression and construction and the individual genre film [is] a manifestation of these rules” (19). The difference between language and film genre is, Schatz points out, that the grammar of language system is relatively neutral, meaningless, and consistent between speakers hence, “a verbal statement represents a speaker’s organization of neutral components into a meaningful pattern” (19), while a film genre as a meaningful narrative system has “its cultural significance” thereby a genre film “represents an effort to reorganize a familiar meaningful system in an original way” (19). This cinematic language system has fundamental shared components between filmmakers and audience, such as characters, settings, themes, and icons. These generic conventions develop a familiarity that allows

audiences immediately to recognize them and offers conventional expectation or feasible prediction. These aspects of recognizable familiarity are the source of excitement and pleasure of genre film spectatorship (Altman, *Film* 25). This effective communicative ability of genre serves the overall economy of cinema that critics call a “short-circuit interpretation” (Moine 88), or “economy of expression” (Grant, *Film* 8). However, pleasure of genre film lies not only in repetition of familiarity but also in variation. Stephen Neale points out that “genres are instances of repetition and difference” (Neale, *Genre*, 48), stating that “If each text within a genre were, literally, the same, there would simply not be enough difference to generate either meaning or pleasure. Hence there would be no audience. Difference is absolutely essential to the economy of genre” (49-50). This would be true because no movie goer would want to see the same movie again and again. To attract audience and to achieve box-office success, difference is fundamental factor in genre. But the difference, Neale clarifies, establishes the relation of similarity as “an economy of variation rather than of rupture, a better formulation as far as genre is concerned would be difference in repetition” (50). This variation implies that the difference in generic text functions within the genre rules since genre films are commercial products, thus viewing genre films is consuming “commodities of a specific kind” (51) which entails different sets of expectations and predictability.

3.2.3. Functions of Genre

Genre as a significant narrative medium not only produces economical and aesthetic effects but also performs important social and cultural functions. According to Altman, genres have either a ritual or an ideological function. Seen from the Levi Strauss’ ritual approach, genre can serve as “a form of societal self-expression” (Altman,

Film 26). This means that the popular genre is a form of collective expression, more precisely, the form of an audience's desires, aspirations, and beliefs. In other words, the audience chooses films that please them and so reveals its preference. The spectator's selection encourages the film studio to produce films that fit the spectator's expectation. In this sense, filmgoers are offered not only entertainment but also a satisfaction that is a similar to the emotions evoked by religious practice and ritual (218).

In contrast to the ritual function, the Althusserian ideological approach emphasizes, "how audiences are manipulated by the business and political interest of Hollywood" (219). The ideological approach to genre "characterizes each individual genre as a specific type of lie, and untruth whose most characteristic feature is its ability to masquerade as truth" (Altman, "Semantic" 30); Althusser claims that Hollywood mass produced genre films by relying on simplistic plots and conventions help to distract us from the awareness of the real problems of society. Such films function as an effective means of the myth making that lures audience into false assumptions and beliefs, reinforcing the norms and values of the status quo. For example, typical Western genre "tends to portray the frontier of western as meeting point between civilization and savagery" (Cawelti, *Six-gun* 20). This clash between hero and his enemy Indian implies the opposing values between order and chaos, good and evil, superior and inferior. This idea, Cawelti notes, served for the need of Aboriginal peoples' assimilation or extermination of nineteenth century American society. In this way, western genre provides a fictional justification "for its brutal elimination of the native Indian cultures" (21) and "for enjoying violent conflicts" (22). Popular genres are an effective means of popular entertainment as well as functioning as an "ideological machine" (Dudley 111),

which continues constructing cultural representation and myths, affirming the normative social values and ideologies. However, Berry Grant points out that popular cultural works offer various cultural groups a site in which ideological struggle takes place “rather than [forcing them to be] mere purveyors of the status quo” (Grant, *Film 6*).

In addition to the ritual and ideological function of genre, John Cawelti proposes a psychological function of genre, using Freud’s concepts of human impulse and wish fulfilment. According to Freud, human desires or impulses are often blocked or censored by the conscious mind because these wishes are unacceptable and disturbing for the ego in the conscious mind. These unconscious wishes or repressed impulses constantly seek to find expression and are ultimately fulfilled “sometimes in dreams, sometimes in neurotic behavior, and sometimes in art” (Cawelti, *Six-gun* 141). For example, in westerns, the American hero has to solve the conflict between the hero and villain to protect community or to defend law and order. This is morally and socially right within the narrative structure. The western hero is legitimately allowed violent execution, revenge, and the destruction of his opponents “[releasing] the feelings of hostility and aggression” (140) that are forbidden or are difficult to satisfy in normal life. In this regard, popular genres are a cultural way of “creating an acceptable resolution of the inescapable complications and limitation of human life” (18) that works as an imagined wish-fulfilment of freedom through the cinematic expression and fantasy.

Considering all the functions genre plays in genre film, cinema genres, as Raphaëlle Moine points out, can be considered as cultural spaces, in which meaning is inscribed and normalized. Cinema genres, M. Augé notes, operate like anthropological sites where “a principle of meaning for those who inhabit [the sites], and a principle of

intelligibility for those who observe... [and recognize] reference points that are known without having to have been learned” (qtd. in Moine 207). The members of the community “find themselves in [the sites], and see their relationships with others and the world mediated through them” (208). In a similar way, film genres “construct cinematic and cultural sites, and generic denominations affect films at these sites, giving them an identity, establishing their relationship with other films, and situating them in history” (207). Moine also identifies that genres are symbolic spaces that “cease to be inhabited or “experienced”, become sites of memory... in which we find the image of that which we no longer are, and therefore of difference” (207).

3.2.4. Analytic Approach to Film Genre

As a strategy for the analysis of genre of film texts, Rick Altman proposes the semantic/syntactic model based on the hypothesis that genres arise when a set of semantic vocabularies are generated through a syntactic relationship (Altman, *Film* 221). According to Altman’s distinction between the semantic and the syntactic, the former is “a primary, linguistic element of which all texts are made” while the latter is “the secondary textual meaning” (224). The semantic elements include characters, settings, technical cinematographic elements, more precisely. For example, in Westerns, elements such as dust, horses, leather clothing, cowboys, a sheriff or Native Americans, and so on, are all semantic. The syntactic elements are the constitutive relations that links the semantic elements such as, in Westerns, the dialectic between binary division, like “culture and nature, community and individual, future and past”, on that relationship, “man encounters of his uncivilized double...on the border between two lands, between two eras ...[and] between two value system” (220). Audience response is, Altman

believes, heavily conditioned by the semantic signal because the semantic elements set up specific syntactic expectation. For Altman, it is important to examine this constant circulation in both directions between the primary linguistic and the secondary textual in order to understand how generic meaning comes into being (225). This dual approach to genre texts provides a useful tool for tracing “different levels of genericity” more critically and for examining the films that “[combines] the syntax of one genre with the semantics of another” more accurately (221).

3.2.5. Genre Transformation

John Cawelti observes that the contemporary American film producers have created a new kind of relationship between themselves and the traditions of popular culture seeking a new cinematic expression (Cawelti, “Chinatown” 287). One key practice in this tendency is the generic transformation which Cawelti defines as “[setting] the elements of a conventional popular genre in an altered context, thereby making us perceive these traditional forms and images in a new way” (288). According to Cawelti, there are a number of reasons causing this tendency. One of them is that the major traditional generic patterns “have reached the point of creative exhaustion” as well as “people become tired of their predictability” (296). Another major reason for the tendency of generic transformation is that the cultural myths that once embodied in the traditional genres are “no longer fully adequate to the imaginative needs of our time” (296). Cawelti divides the various relationships between traditional generic elements and altered contexts into four major modes.

The first major mode of generic transformation is “the burlesque proper” in which the elements of a conventional genre are set “in contexts so incongruous or

exaggerated that the result is laughter” (288). For example, the elements of genre formula “can be acted out in so extreme a fashion that they come into conflict with our sense of reality” (288) or by the breaking the convention, “the line between comedy and tragedy is not so simply drawn” (286) or “black humor” which is described as “[the] puzzling combination of humourous burlesque and high seriousness” (287-8).

The second mode of generic transformation is the cultivation of nostalgia. In this mode, “traditional generic features of plot, character, setting, and style are deployed to recreate the aura of a past time” which “evoke[s] a sense of warm reassurance by bringing before our mind’s eye images from a time when things seemed more secure and full of promise and possibility” (289).

The third, the most powerful mode of generic transformation, is the use of traditional generic structures as a means of demythologization. In this mode, films “deliberately [invoke] the basic characteristics of a traditional genre in order to bring its audience to see that genre as the embodiment of an inadequate and destructive myth” (290). As an example, Cawelti mentions Arthur Penn’s *Little Big Man* (1970). In the film, the conventional portrayal of western opposition between pioneers as civilized and Native Americans as uncivilized and the savage other, is reversed in that “it is the Indians who are humane and civilized, while the pioneers are violent, corrupt, sexually repressed, and madly ambitious” (292). From this different approach to the genre, the dominant narrative of the conquest of the West is “demythologized from the triumph of civilization into a historical tragedy of the destruction of rich and vital human culture” (292). The demythologization mode makes trans-valuation between conventional and inverted

meanings possible and offers a new critical perspective and alternative space of imagination and translations.

The fourth mode of generic transformation is “the affirmation of myth for its own sake: In films in this mode, a traditional genre and its myth are probed and shown to be unreal, but then the myth itself is at least partially affirmed as a reflection of authentic human aspirations and needs” (294). Cawelti uses Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969) as a coherent example of reaffirmation of myth, describing that Peckinpah’s outlaw protagonists are “despicable bounty hunters ...they kill the guilty and the innocent indiscriminately...brutal, coarse, and quite capable of leaving a wounded comrade behind” (295). Throughout the film, their reckless and uncontrolled violence is ugly and disturbing that does not support the values of the traditional western, such as justice of violence and the myth of individual heroism. However, in the final massacre in the Mexican village, “these coarse and vicious outlaws have somehow transcended themselves and become embodiments of myth of heroism that people need in spite of the realities of their world” (295). Most contemporary American films, Cawelti views, employ one of these modes at some point which contributes to significant artistic development and cultural transition (297).

3.2.6. Genre Bending and Genre Breaking

Echoing Cawelti’s notion of generic transformation, Todd Berliner considers how filmmakers in the 1970s revised Hollywood genres, and divides the unusual genre practices into two categories: genre benders and genre breakers. Berliner defines genre bending as “[using] genre topoi to trick us, misleading us into expecting something true to form, all the while setting us up for something unconventional” (Berliner, *Hollywood*

171). This means that genre benders secretly rework genre conventions without breaking them yet they exploit our familiarity by using generic convention for deception. As Stephen Neale describes, “genre benders use genre to set booby traps for viewers who unwittingly allow themselves to be manipulated by conventions familiar to them” (Berliner, “Genre” 29). One of the examples Berliner mentions for genre bending is the police-detective film *The French Connection* (1971). This film adheres to traditional genre convention, at the same time, deviates from the genre form in order to make us uncertain about the meaning of the film. This unusual design of film genre creates both “the calm pleasure” with the familiarity and “the exhilarated pleasure” that challenges us with novel or complex genre properties (Berliner, *Hollywood* 171). Genre bending is not subversive but rather it refreshes conventional genre, reinforcing its vitality and versatility. In doing so, genre benders differentiate their films from other conventional genres and garner more reviewers’ attention for the film’s novel qualities. Moreover, they can reduce commercial risk by using the familiar genre identity in the film marketing. Still genre bending can cause commercial risk if the level of genre deviation and genre disruption are greater than the aesthetic excitement created by the genre experiment. The mass audience may find it too difficult to make sense of the genre text or be unwilling to endure the genre deviation.

Unlike genre benders that “[violate] conventions without advertising” (Berliner, “Genre” 25), the “genre breaker loudly broadcasts its violation of tradition, inviting audiences to join in the film’s efforts to expose and often mock, genre conventions” (25). These films break Hollywood’s standard trope of the genre, often comment and criticize on the earlier films of the same genre, in order to point out that “Hollywood genre films

are deceptive and contrived” (26). As an example of this, Berliner uses Robert Altman’s *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976), because the film “employs irony as a self-critical discursive trope to debunk and demystify the central motifs and icons of the genre” (26). This film attempts to break the typical western story as well as the myth of heroism in the genre. Genre breakers invite spectators to recognize the irony and to share a joke about genre. Genre breakers make audience “feel superior to the genre film they debunk” (27): that is the distinguishing pleasure of genre breakers (27). Both genre bender and genre breaker play with viewers’ generic expectations. The main difference between the two is that genre benders do not reveal ideological weakness within the genre while genre breakers blatantly point out generic flaws and subvert genre tradition (27).

3.2.7. Genre and Cultural Differences

John Cawelti reminds us that genre is a structural paradigm that is created by one culture but one that can easily move across different cultures, undergoing important changes (Cawelti, *Six-gun* 17). Echoing Cawelti’s idea, Andrew Tudor states that “genre notions are sets of cultural conventions. Genre is what we collectively believe it to be” (Tudor 7) yet Tudor underlines that genre is not universal to every culture and there is no basis for assuming that a certain genre will be understood in the same way in every culture. In order to understand genre, one needs to also understand the cultural context that produced it and the various perspectives that it supports and from which it operates.

As noted above, genre is a significant narrative convention through which cultural meanings, signs and values are constituted, articulated and communicated. Popular genres also mirror the collective ideals, shared pleasures, and desires of society and the particular condition under which they are made. Illuminating media texts through

the lens of genre offers a powerful perspective in understanding not only the formal and aesthetic aspects of them, but also their socio-cultural and ideological dimensions as well (Schatz vii). The notions of genre outlined this chapter will be employed throughout the analysis of the case studies, to identify their various influences (aesthetic, cultural, political and ideological) of the generic formula from their foreign predecessors and the complex intercultural exchange, to probe into how the traditional generic rules and frameworks are adapted, appropriated, and changed, as well as how the practice of genre transformation plays a pivotal role in the development of social change (race, class, gender, and ethnicity), and in creating cultural hybridity. In the following chapters, the case studies of two genre films: *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (2008) and *Snowpiercer* (2013) will be conducted.

Chapter 4

Case Study 1: *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*

This chapter analyzes the Korean western, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* by exploring various influences of the genre formula from their foreign predecessors, examining how the traditional generic rules and frameworks are emulated, redirected, and translated differently and how the film challenges and revalues the dominant norm. The analysis shows how the practice of genre transformation as a powerful aesthetic strategy plays a decisive role in creating a unique form of cultural hybridity, which enables the emergence of alternative interpretation, new meanings of cultural texts, and a new form of cultural expression.

4.1. Introduction

The Good, the Bad, the Weird (2008) is a South Korean Western film directed by Kim Jee-woon and written by Kim Jee-woon and Kim Min-seok. The film is heavily influenced by American and Italian Westerns. The director publicly expresses that his film is an homage to Sergio Leone's Spaghetti western, *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly* and Korean Manchurian western, *Break up the Chain* (1971). In addition, Kim's western has many intertextual linkages, such as to the J-Western, Hong Kong martial art film and American Sci-fi action films such as *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner*, and *Mad Max* (Morris

220). The film also contains various generic elements, such as comedy, fantasy, adventure. The film was shot for ten months in the Gobi Desert in Dunhuang, China (Chung and Diffrient 117). It has garnered huge media attention because of its big budget of 17 million dollars, the most expensive film in South Korea film history at that time, and also because of its unprecedented casting of three top-level stars in South Korea: Song Kang-ho, Lee Byung-hun, and Jung Woo-sung. The film “was the biggest theatrical release of the summer and the most popular film of 2008 in South Korean market” (Cho, “Genre” 49).

The director, Kim prefers calling his film a “Kimchi Western” as opposed to an “Asian Western” or “Oriental Western,” saying that “Kimchi is a Korean dish of fermented cabbage, it’s very spicy and very hot...the film reflects Korean people, who are very dynamic and spicy, just like kimchi” (Selavy). Kim Jee-woon who is often called a genre alchemist, a genre chameleon, and genre stylist, is one of the representative directors of “the genre–influenced, image-centered movement that took shape in the late 1990’s with the debut of new generation of filmmaker” (Paquet 37). Their films are mostly characterized as “youth-oriented, genre-savvy, visually sophisticated, and not ashamed of [their] commercial origins” (63). As mentioned above, Kim strategically mixes various genre elements in his films, therefore Kim’s films contain multiple genre values and aspects at the same time as they violate the conventions of the genres. For example, *The Quiet Family* (1998) has comedy and horror genre; *The Foul King* (2000), comedy and drama; *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003), horror, thriller and mystery; *A Bittersweet Life* (2005), film noir, action genre, and drama.

The Good the Bad the Weird is another of Kim's cinematic experiments as an attempt to add something that is missing in Korean film. For Kim, "traditional Westerns have a low-key construction, a slow pace and simple action" (Selavy). Kim's films aim at modern day audiences who are interested in the films that "feature vivid graphics and the latest technology" (Wheeler). In his western, Kim particularly focused on visual spectacle (H. Kim, *Kim Jee-woon* 136). According to the director, this film was intended to present an endless landscape that was overflowing with emotion about life and death, seen in a humorous way in order to create, "cinematic excitement and sensation" (Kim, "The Good"). The director wanted to convey the story of men racing along the plains driven by powerful impulse, but in a way that isn't macho. The whole film, as Hyung-seok Kim aptly describes, "gives the feeling of running and playing within a single rhythm" (60). Due to the skillful "modulating of the rhythm of this single film between high and low speeds," the film is often introduced as a "roller coaster movie" (60). By displaying visuals at a high speed, tempo, non-stop exciting action, and humour with constant flowing music, the director imagined viewers enjoying "a two-hour rock concert and cheering" (140). The film focuses more on offering viewing pleasure and entertainment, virility, energy, and craziness, rather than focusing on historical insights or political messages.

As director suggests, the main themes of the film are: "life", "desire", and "the irony of life" (138-9). Kim relates the genre western to the idea of "life and desire" explaining that although men's "desire [is to] bring man down and [destroy] them [because] it is only when he has that desire that a man is really living and breathing" (139). Kim's film effectively exhibits "that crazy pursuit... [in which the protagonists

are] chasing each other wretchedly for those desires” (139). The chaotic chase, chasing and being chased, Kim likens to life. It is also Kim’s way of dealing with the irony of life humorously. After he finished filming *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, Kim thought of a new film title for it: *No Country for You People* which was inspired by his favorite saying, “Man makes plans and God breaks them” (138). This ironic twist challenges the nationalistic ideology of the Manchurian western which I discuss further below.

The Good, the Bad, the Weird has received conflicting reactions from the audience. The film can be both confusing and entertaining for the foreign audience. Many criticize the film for drawing shamelessly on its Western forebears and for lacking control over the narrative flow and resolution (Kyu Hyun Kim). Others view the film as distinguished for its translation of genre form. The repetitive restaging of recognizable genre elements is not a mindless act of genre’s a repetition compulsion. The film supplies vitality in Korean genre cinema (Cho, “Genre” 47), achieving a refreshing innovation and stylistic eclecticism, “[paving] the way for further updating and cross-fertilizing the genre, and producing a new genre of popular cinema” (V. Lee, “J-Horror” 29).

4.2. Exploration of Western Genre

Director Kim Jee-woon says that his western is inspired by many different film genres, and draws heavily on generic elements from American, Italian, and Manchurian westerns. Without understanding those genres, it would be impossible to fully understand the film. Hence, before I analyze the film, I will provide a comprehensive review of three western genres: the American, Italian and Manchurian westerns that predominantly influenced *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*.

4.2.1. Hollywood Western

The western has been the most popular American film genre. According to Edward Buscombe, “about a quarter of all Hollywood features between 1926 and 1967 were westerns” (Van der Heide 36). Among all Hollywood genres, the western has always had the closest connection to America due to its unique tale about American characters and values that takes place on or near a frontier of the American West during the historical period between 1860 and 1900 (Tudor 4). The western genre, as William McClain argues, is not merely one more genre for American audiences. Westerns constructed a national myth and demonstrated American values that were identified as “irremovably and fundamentally American,” therefore, the western was regarded as a “national genre” (McClain 57).

The major theme of a western is, according to Peter A. French, “the conflict between...the ‘world view’ of the westerner and that of the easterner, the cowboy /gunslinger and the settler/entrepreneur/townsperson/Christian” (qtd. in Cawelti, *Six-Gun* 129). Western films reflect the traditional American moral values that are derived from frontier history, such as rugged individualism, frontier folk equality, the open frontier, and other characteristics of the western way of life (129). The debut of western in the US began with cinema’s first blockbuster, Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). The silent films developed in the first three decades of the twentieth century and set the representative generic narrative formulas, such as settings and iconic characters (Van der Heide 37). Some representative western films are *Stagecoach* (1939), *My Darling Clementine* (1946), and *The Searcher* (1956) directed by John Ford, *High Noon* (1952) directed by Fred Zinnemann, and *Shane* (1953) directed by George Stevens. In the

later films, which were produced in the 1960s such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969), the basic western genre's value and code are called into question or subverted and rejected in their comic parody (Schatz 40). So then, what are the major factors in the long-term success and popularity of the western genre?

John Cawelti views that the major source of the western's popularity is the artistic power of unity in the western formula; its unique setting, situation and cast of characters with a strong emphasis on a certain kind of hero and action makes it a successful genre (Cawelti, *Six-Gun* 46). However, he believes that this does not fully account for the popularity of the western genre. As a crucial characteristic of western popularity, Cawelti proposes the genre's dramatic power, what Northrop Frye calls, the "mythos of romance." According to Frye, "the essential element of plot in romance is adventure" (Frye 186) and the romance of the adventure can be realized through the successful quest. The complete form of the successful quest "has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe or both must die; and the exaltation of the hero" (187). This romance of adventure, such as the central action of chase, dramatic quest, final shootout, and the crucial battle, Cawelti argues, is the dramatic power the western genre possesses, which strongly appeals to the audience (46).

Another characteristic of romance in the western is the conflict between the hero and the enemy. By destroying the enemy, the hero ultimately saves the community from danger and protects the values of civilization. Thus, the hero's action is, Frye argues, "analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a low world" (187). These qualities of

romance presented in the western are considered to be the source of popular entertainment and the central elements in maintaining the western's long-term success.

The basic narrative pattern of the western is that evil appears and causes problems that threaten the civilized community. This situation calls for the hero to resolve the problem. The hero initially tends to avoid being involved in the situation. As the situation develops, the hero takes action and destroys the evil adversary. The hero's action reinstates law and order. The major characteristics of the western formula consist of a particular kind of geographic setting, prototypical male protagonist, and core American values.

The western tale generally takes place in the American West, which essentially defines the western, not because of its geographical setting, like the Rocky Mountains or the Great Plains, but because the setting is symbolic of a "meeting point between civilization and savagery" (Cawelti, *Six-Gun* 20). This rough setting generates crises in which Indians are portrayed as savage, inferior, and diabolical, and represent a threat to the community, while the American hero is a defender of law and order. This representation of the Indian, Cawelti argues, justified the assimilation or "brutal elimination of the native Indian cultures" (22). The frontier setting effectively creates "the visual images of the thematic conflict between civilization and savagery and its resolution" (24). Therefore, the western setting, Cawelti argues, "provided a fictional justification for enjoying violent conflicts and the expression of lawless force without feeling that they threatened the values or the fabric of society" (22).

Three central character roles dominate the Western: the townspeople or agents of civilization, the savages or outlaws who threaten this first group, and the heroes. The

Western hero possesses physical strength and a considerable skill with guns, as well as some impulse toward violence, and some willingness to behave savagery. The hero initially uses self-control to avoid a fight. When faced with a threatening situation, his mode of control changes, and he destroys the enemy. The story is so structured that the hero's action is based on his responsibility to save the town people from the savage, which legitimately allows the hero to destroy his enemy, if necessary by using some of the enemy's tactics (11). In this respect, violence in the western is, Cawelti argues, "characteristically the hero's means of resolving the conflict generated by his adversary" (12). This representation of a legitimated indulgence in violence on the part of the responsible American hero, according to Peter Homans, is the Puritan norm of the primacy of will over feeling. Homans ascribes the popularity of the western to the cultural influence of Puritanism because of its "emphasis on the necessity for inner control, repression... and its representation of a legitimated indulgence in violence" (11). These characteristics of the western, Homans recognizes, provide a significant cultural discourse and the artistic construction that leads "an ordered vision of character, event, and detail" (Homans 135). Therefore, Homans underlines that the analysis of the western must explicate not only the element of the genre's formula but also the interrelationship between the "organizing and interpretive principle for the myth as a whole" (qtd. in Cawelti, *Six-Gun* 12).

4.2.1.1. Western Myth

Western films play a key role in the establishment of the various myths of the United States. For Richard Slotkin, the primary rhetoric of the western as a frontier myth is "the confrontation between civilization and savagery. [This conflict is resolved] in the

destruction of savagery and the regeneration of white America through the experience of violence in the war against savagery” (Cawelti, *Six-Gun* 144). Slotkin sees the influence of the frontier myth as morally and politically negative since the idea was used to justify resorting to violence and “idealizing the white male adventurer as the hero of national history” (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 655). According to Slotkin, western myth also constructs the cultural representation of cultural otherness as savagery that is exploited “to justify the expropriation of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans” (Cawelti, *Six-Gun* 144). Slotkin further argues that the frontier myth “became a strong rhetorical resource for glorifying the global exercise of American power and the great shootout of the Cold War which eventuated in the tragedy of Vietnam” (144).

Will Wright highlights the significance of the western myth for its production power of symbolic meaning. Wright approaches the western from the perspective of myth as a means of knowledge production in the world. For Wright, the myth of Western operates like “a cultural language by which American understands itself” (Wright 12). For example, characters in westerns are commonly represented as the hero and villain. The simple binary structure means that the differences between them are easily generalized. Wright warns that this simplistic presentation of the western has significant impact on American social belief because of their readily recognizable meanings that “reinforce rather than challenge social understanding” (23). Along with the criticism discussed, western myth has been a target of feminist criticism for its construction and celebration of heroic masculinity (Cawelti, *Six-Gun* 149). From the feminist view, the major limitations of the Western genre have been its rigid separation of gender roles; the easy resolution of problems by male violence and lack of female heroes who operate

outside the domestic sphere. In the western, the individual male competes aggressively in the new world away from the support of community and family while the women represent the values of the past associated with family, home and community (152). As seen above, the traditional myth of the frontier is, Cawelti argues, “profoundly limited by its deep commitment to sexism, racism, and WASP ethnicity” (146) that could no longer establish meaning in the contemporary world, and no longer helps us to see our way through a complex environment. Cawelti asserts that “the myth of the West must inevitably be replaced by a new myth of multiculturalism” (146). Most genre critics agree that the American western, as a popular genre, functions as a social ritual that is the key to its success. According to Cawelti, rituals reaffirm cultural values, resolve tensions, and establish a sense of continuity between present and past. From this view, Cawelti argues that with its historical setting, its thematic emphasis on the establishment of law and order, and its resolution of the conflict between civilization and savagery on the frontier, the western functions as America’s foundation ritual (49). Another crucial aspect of the western’s popularity is its psychological function. Cawelti observes that the western acts out a vicarious gratification or expression for people’s repressed desires and impulses. Considering Western genre elements, like the clash between cowboy hero and villain, the importance of resolution through violence, the western performs the psychological function of “[releasing] the feelings of hostility and aggression” (140).

4.2.1.2. Western Adaptation World Wide

Although the western was initially specific to American culture and history, the genre appeals to different cultures and filmmakers around the world. Western’s generic conventions are widely adapted in different contexts by film makers in East Asia, India,

Latin America, Eastern Europe, East and West Germany, and particularly Italy. Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's samurai films have close links to the western. Kurosawa's films have been remade as westerns in Hollywood and Italy. Such films are *Rashomon* (1950) as *The Outrage* (1964) by Martin Ritt, *The Seven Samurai* (1954) as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) by John Sturges, and *Yojimbo* (1961) as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) by Sergio Leone. Perhaps most famously George Lucas freely adapted Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress* (1958) as *Star Wars* (1977). These non-American westerns appropriated Hollywood's tropes, yet they often critique the western myth, American core values, and America itself (Kalinak 7). In this way, genre crosses national and cultural borders and appears to be transnational, however William Van der Heide observes that in practice, the term "genre" is most frequently applied to American cinema and is predominantly devoted to American genre films. "Non-American" films that cross national boundary are "usually given a national label: the Japanese samurai genre, the Chinese Kung fu genre and Indian stunt film...often presented as devaluation of the purity of the genre" (Van der Heide 28). As an example, the term "Spaghetti Western" was, according to Fraying, first coined by American critics to refer pejoratively to Italian Westerns. Film journalists often applied culinary labels to what they considered as "'inauthentic' or 'alien' Westerns: Sauerkraut Western (produced in West Germany), 'Paella Western' (international coproductions shot in Spain), 'Camembert Westerns' (produced at Fontainebleau), 'Chop Suey Westerns' (made in Hong Kong), and most recently 'Curry Westerns' (financed and made in India)" (Frayling, *Spaghetti* xi). No such label has been applied to the Hollywood Western, which Fraying suggests, would be called "Hamburger Western" (xi). William Van der Heide points out that even if these

sort of labeling seems “harmless and amusing filmic versions of the diversity...they really function as a threat to ‘keep off my land’” (Van der Heide 28).

4.2.1.3. American Westerns and Korea

Western genre films, Don Moser (1963) claims, became “a worldwide phenomenon...a global myth...the modern Odyssey” (qtd. in McClain 57). Moser’s suggestion certainly holds true in Korea. American Westerns, such as Fred Zinnemann’s *High Noon* (1952), George Stevens’ *Shane* (1953), were immensely popular among the Korean moviegoers in the 1950s as “the public was hungry for escapist entertainment to cope with emotional and financial hardships in the wake of the civil war” (Chung and Diffrient, “Once” 100). Renowned Korean writer, Ahn Junghyo describes Korea’s love of Hollywood film in his novel, *The Life and Death of the Hollywood Kid* (1992): “Absorbing diverse models of life manufactured in Hollywood . . . we came to believe that the wide plains of the American West were our beautiful, lost home from some previous life. Denying our poverty-stricken home and dirty streets, we came to mistake the screen world as our idealized reality” (qtd. in 100-101). According to Im Hi-Seop, the American Western gave Korean viewers positive impressions of American power, amusement and western “frontier spirit” (Lee, *Big Brother* 73). With its typical ending where justice triumphs, the western gave a sense of America as a worthwhile role model to the Korean audiences. Western heroes like John Wayne could always make things right. Koreans wanted to see this kind of American hero and wanted to believe that the American fighting men would help to defend their nation and liberty (74). Korean viewers admired American Westerns, idealizing the American hero and embracing core American values and ideas. The western genre was inspiring to Korean audiences as a

way of satisfying the desire of Korean men. In a country in which almost every town, city and village is surrounded by mountains, where no and open plains are visible across the country, and where gun ownership is illegal, many Koreans have a fantasy of gunslingers chasing “bad guys” across open plains, which, as Kim Jee-woon once said, is only possible in this genre (Wheeler).

4.2.2. Italian Western

Italian westerns, also known as Spaghetti westerns, emerged in the mid-1960s. Italian filmmakers appropriated the Hollywood western genre to create low-budget westerns, hiring some recognizable American actors from Hollywood B westerns, in order to give the films an American appearance. According to Sir Christopher Frayling, between 1963 and 1969 alone “over 300 Spaghetti Westerns were released in Italy” (Frayling, *Spaghetti* 256). Such low-budget Italian Westerns received harsh criticism from American critics for not being “genuine” Westerns, who described them as “an inferior imitation of the American Western” (Fridlund 3). These films were criticized “for their destructive view of the West,...brutality, and for their excessively rich ‘visual style’” (Frayling, *Spaghetti* 180), and “for the [film’s qualities of being] long, slow paced, boring, difficult to follow” (Leinberger, *Ennio* 43). As Bosley Crowther notes, there is a “disquieting lot of violence and sadism” in Italian westerns, which in turn, have deeply infected American Westerns (McClain 56). According to McClain, these films “were not simply aberrant, but edge-cases of a growing trend” (56). For example, the disturbing violence of Italian films contributed to the collapse of the production codes of Hollywood’s traditional censorship, as well as providing filmmakers a new range of rating systems that enabled their film’s depiction of what had previously been

unacceptable in American film production. Films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969), introduced more “lurid forms of violence and sex to American screen” (56). Despite such negative criticism, these films were huge commercial successes, and enjoyed popularity around the world. Spaghetti westerns had a significant impact on American movies and the subsequent revision of the western genre (Leinberger, *Ennio* 44). The most well-known spaghetti westerns were made up by Sergio Leone. His notable Dollars Trilogy consists of *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966). Leone’s three Westerns significantly altered the way westerns were made, and changed viewers’ perceptions of the western worldwide. Critics argue that spaghetti westerns gave audiences an “unfamiliar and alternative perspective on the American West that deconstructed the elements of the classical Hollywood western” (Leinberger, “Dollars” 134).

In his analysis of Spaghetti westerns, Sir Christopher Frayling views Leone’s films as a form of critical cinema, as the films seem to be Leone’s commentary “on the ways in which ‘classic’ western situations were traditionally filmed” (Frayling, *Spaghetti* 180). According to Frayling, Leone’s films depart significantly from the Hollywood Western genre in two ways. On one hand, Leone’s films rearrange the images, codes, and themes of traditional Hollywood westerns, but reinterpret them in a critical sense and recreate them “without being subjected to the usual ideological constraints” (160). Leone has less interest in the opening of the new frontier. His heroes are not the pioneers of a new West and their actions have nothing to do with the traditional quest for self-fulfillment, or restoring law and order to the frontier community (189). Bosley Crowther

describes the heroes of these films not as “the kind of hero we’re accustomed to see in Western film. He’s a selfish and vicious non-conformist toward the inviolable moral code” and condemns the films as “a dangerous overturning of the apple cart” (qtd. in McClain 59). Leone challenges Western frontier myths and their implications, such as the notion of rugged individualism and the development of the frontier.

On the other hand, there is a sharp distinction between the characters and ethics of the Spaghetti westerns as opposed to the Hollywood western. Frayling notes, “Leone makes no attempt to engage our sympathy with the characters, but watches the brutality of his protagonists with a detached calm; they are brutal because of the environment in which they exist. And they make no attempt to change that environment. They accept it without question” (Frayling, *Spaghetti* 160). In other words, Leone’s heroes are not intended to set an ideal for today that the traditional western emphasized. Leone is neither interested in the “inner man” nor in finer motivation, rather portrays his protagonists as “stylish, rhetorical, and flamboyant” (180). Leone’s films present no universal moral principle, in keeping with the director’s statement that “what interested me was on the one hand to demystify the adjectives good bad ugly and on the other to show the absurdity of war. What do ‘good’, ‘bad’, and ‘ugly’ really mean? We all have some bad in us, some ugliness, some good” (172). Leone’s protagonists are experts in killing using superior technical skill. When they first appear, the heroes usually kill one or two, sometimes three at once. They often live outside the law and follow their own moral codes. They are often deceitful, self-centered, evil and amoral. Their primary motivation is money hence they focus on individual gains and material rewards. It is hard to distinguish which one is good and which one is evil. They are partly good, but not always

good. They are usually evil but sometimes good. The Spaghetti western redefined the way good and evil is thought about and that leads to “a dramatic paradigm shift in the moral code of Western” (Leinberger, *Ennio* xvii).

Another big difference between Spaghetti westerns and American westerns was movie sound tracks. Leone’s Dollar trilogy significantly benefited from the Italian composer Ennio Morricone’s musical score, which played a crucial role in creating the unique and dramatic “mood and rhythm of the films” (Van der Heide 44). Morricone’s use of many unusual types of sound, such as the human voice, whistling, a variety sound effects such as gunshots, cracking, whips, and many instruments, such as the organ, trumpet, and electric guitars, contributed to the movie’s success. According to Christopher Wagstaff, “the music of the spaghetti western was important in signaling to inattentive viewers the moments when they should pay attention” (qtd. in Donnelly 151).

As discussed above, the Spaghetti western rearranges the codes of the Hollywood western which proved to be popular in Southern Italian society, and “[provided] a fusion of the rules of the Hollywood Western with a Latin-Italian cultural context...[they] also play a key role in challenging the universal moral implied by the classic Hollywood contributions to the genre” (Frayling, *Spaghetti* 189). As a result, Leone’s westerns, Jeffrey Richards states, “represented an extraordinary and potent cross-fertilization of American and European cultures” (Richards vi).

4.2.2.1. Spaghetti Western and Korea

From 1966, Italian westerns were released in Korea. The Dollar trilogy by Sergio Leone and *Django* by Sergio Corbucci were extremely popular among Korean audiences and dominated 1967’s imported movie market. But unlike the American

western that had evoked a sense of justified violence, presenting Koreans with American frontierism and humanism, the Spaghetti Western attracted criticism the way it valorized negative social effects, and glorified immorality with its depiction of unethical and cruel violence. At the same time, shocked Korean audiences also enjoyed the genre's changes. The movies' moral ambivalence and ambiguous politics inspired Korean filmmakers to make Korean Westerns. In September 1967, the Korean government banned the importation of any more Spaghetti westerns due to their perceived immoral, unjust violence (Chung and Diffrient 101).

4.2.3. Manchurian Western

The term "Manchurian Western" was coined by Korean director Oh Seung Uk in his book, *Korean Action Film* (2003) to refer to Korean action films set in Manchuria, produced in 1960s and 1970s (Y. Y. Kim 100). The Manchurian Westerns are influenced by a variety of cultural forms such as Hong Kong martial arts movies, Hollywood classic westerns, and Italian westerns. Manchurian westerns are also mixed with characteristics of war films, espionage films, and family melodrama based on the Korean historical, geographical, and cultural context.

These action films used to be called as Manchurian action films (Manju *hwalguk*) and "continental film" (*taeryukmul* in Korean) because the action takes place in on the Asian continent (Chung and Diffrient 97). According to Kim Soyoung, the meaning of "*hwal*" (action) in *hwalkuk* (action film) is related to energetic bodily movement, thus "*hwal*" signifies "vitality" as opposed to "power." Such vitality is, in Kim's view, "the form of energy directed against authority" (S. Kim, "Genre" 110). Kim argues that "the *hwal* (vitality) component in action movies has the potential of this anti-

power” (110). Not surprisingly, the stories of the Manchurian action films are mostly about “Korean resistance guerrillas and their heroic struggle against the powerful Japanese military force in Manchuria during the colonial period” (An, “Ambivalence” 38). One pioneering Manchurian Western is Chung Chang-hwa’s *The Horizon* (1961), which is believed to be permanently lost. However, a year later, legendary Korean director, Im Kwon-taek debuted with *Farewell Tuman River* (1962), and many more films followed such as Shin Sang-ok’s *The Man with No Home* (1968), and Yi Man-hui’s *Break up the Chain* (1971). *Break up the Chain* is one of the major inspirations for Kim Ji-woon’s *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (2008).

The Manchurian Western is a significant case of cross-cultural exchange, drawing the semantic components from both Hollywood and spaghetti westerns. The open field, horse riding, and gunslinger all were used to displace the American frontier tale, telling instead a fictional story of Korea in a different historical and social context. The key characteristic of the Manchurian western is the narrative’s strong nationalism. In the story of Manchurian western, Japanese military forces were normally assumed “as a collective threat pitted against the “good guys,” that is, “Korean resistance guerrillas and spies” (Chung and Diffrient 101).

As a film setting, Manchuria has a historical collective memory for Koreans because it is part of Korean ancient history and also plays a role in Korean’s present fight for independence. Manchuria is a “barren desert landscape that serves as a geographical and cultural parallel to the American West” (V. Lee, “J-Horror” 135). However, the historical and social situation between American West and Manchuria were very different. According to Thomas Lahusen, in the first decades of twentieth century

Manchuria was a colonial site that was unlike any other colonial place. Lahusen describes Manchuria as

the site of competing colonialism and conflict between Russia/the Soviet Union, Japan, Western powers and a China ravaged by warring factions, civil war, and invasion...Most of the colonists were land-hungry peasants and other Chinese immigrants pouring into (inflowed) Manchuria in an unending stream. As to the foreign colonizers, many of them were emigres who had nowhere else to go... Jews fled the pogroms of the Russian Empire and later, the Holocaust; White Russians fled the civil war after 1917; impoverished Japanese settlers tried to build a new home in the margins of the empire; Koreans—perhaps the best of all “Manchurian candidates”—were caught between Japanese expansion and Chinese nationalism. More than fifty nationalities speaking forty-five languages came to live in Harbin—all these nationalities contributed with the Chinese, to “little Paris of the Orient” and on other occasions, “the worst of all American Chicagos.” (2)

Manchuria when compared to the American West, seems to be a more chaotic and complicated place where various nationalities, languages, cultures and social groups gathered and coexisted, as well as where numerous desires, interests, and politics came into conflict. With this diversity and complexity, it would not be possible to distinguish hero/villain, good/evil, friends/enemies, culture/nature in a simple binary world view. In this respect, the Manchurian setting provides a unique historical backdrop. Manchuria is an important part of the history of the Korean independence movement. It was the battle field upon which Anti-Japanese struggle during the period of Japanese occupation was waged (1909-1945). The stories of Korean colonial diaspora in the Manchurian setting evoke traumatic memories of the country's past, thereby conjuring up a powerful nationalist sentiment for the Korean people.

The Manchurian setting also provides a space of adventure and geographical fantasy for Koreans. In the 1960-70 Cold War era, when these films were produced, the country's northern border was blocked by communist countries such as North Korea, China and the Soviet Union, while the rest of the Korean peninsula is surrounded by

oceans on which foreign travel had been prohibited. Although geographically not far, Manchuria was not reachable land and only attainable on screen. The actual locations of these films were in South Korea. Displaying powerful scenes in which virile Korean men acted on the vast landscape beyond the national boundary, Manchurian westerns create a form of escape, empowering viewing experience and excitement for the Korean people who were confined and frustrated in the narrow land (S. Kim, "Genre" 105). These images generate the hopeful perspectives, fantasy for adventure and desire for the strong ideal male that cultivated the myth of masculinity as well as a false dream about Manchuria (S. Lee, "Representations" 459).

The main characters of Manchurian westerns are portrayed as "romantic assertive, adventurous, competent, intelligent and muscular" (An, *Popular* 145). The hero's physical prowess is the primary means of their fight against the powerful Japanese military force. Their heroic action provides adventurous romance and "offers historical compensation and fantasy to the audience" (An, "War" 794). In the earlier Manchurian Western, the heroes usually died after the heroic fight for the country—deaths that were glorified as honorable and patriotic acts. However, the heroes' altruistic deaths are rarely seen in the later films such as *Break up the Chain*. Once they fulfil their mission, the heroes are asked to stay by the independence army, but they decline the offer and head into the sunset of the Manchurian plain, that, Kim argues, indicates their "uncontrollable virility (*hwal*)". In other words, they contribute to the country's liberty but refuse its collective nationalism and are free from it (S. Kim, "Genre" 110).

There are some similarities between Manchurian and American westerns in the way that they perform some ideological functions. According to Jinsoo An, "Manchurian

action films project the romantic impulse toward the new geography, a quasi-frontier comparable to the west in American cultural myth, where men of action ultimately claim their place” (An, “Ambivalence” 43). Heroes in Manchurian westerns are anticolonial fighters pursuing the independence of Korea that project Koreans’ “romantic dream of reclamation and repossession of the land that is engrained in the discourses of anti-Japanese nationalism” (43). The American hero’s violent action in American frontier texts is required for the regeneration of law and order, while the hero’s violent action in Manchurian westerns justifies Korea in its struggles “against the brutal colonial power of Japan” (56).

Manchurian westerns, according to Jinsoo An, reflected a “growing cultural anxiety over Japanese cultural infiltration” (56) in the social circumstance of the time. In the mid-1960s, the South Korean government normalized diplomatic relations with Japan for economic reasons: “Money from Japan in the form of compensation, grants, and loans was vital to the early stages of [South Korean economic] development” (An, “War” 802). However, strong anticolonial sentiments grew among the South Korean people who protested the government’s foreign policies. By rendering “a more romantic and spectacular view of the colonial past” (An, “Ambivalence” 47) and powerful images of the anticolonial struggle of muscular Korean heroes, Manchurian western re-ignited and intensified the anti-Japanese nationalism and the nationalist ideology (56). In doing so, Jinsoo An further argues that Manchurian western revitalized “masculinity in South Korean films in the 60s” (An, “Popular” 143).

The Manchurian western can be also viewed as new attempt to produce livelier, faster paced, more sophisticated, and larger scale movies. Since the 1960s, Korean films

were mostly tear-jerking melodramas with slow and long speeches that people were tired of. By embodying the vast cinematic space like the western, Manchurian Western reveals a strong desire of Korean film to catch up to global film, specifically Hollywood. Like Hollywood heroes who solve the crisis in western frontier with their physical strength, Manchurian westerns highlight Korean muscular men's heroic triumph over their enemies in order to win national independence. This nationalist imperative genre had been forgotten for almost four decades until the contemporary Korean western was released.

4.3. Conventionality of Genre

The Good, the Bad, the Weird, is a western comedy, adventure, martial arts action, fantasy film influenced by countless films. The film unabashedly uses the film language and generic conventions of its predecessors. The director of the film, Kim Jee-woon, believes that even if the global audiences had never seen Korean movies, they have watched Hollywood films. He wanted to communicate in the familiar cinematic language with the global audience. However, without being tied up in genre conventions and formula, the film keeps evading and breaking the generic rules and codes, creating a subversive text. The focus of this case study is to examine conventionality of genre, exploring how the film incorporates, emulates and rearranges the genre elements and conventions of major traditional genres. In addition, I will analyze the unconventionality of the film in order to illustrate what process of development, variation, deviation and transformation the movie passes through, and how the film move beyond and across the generic boundaries and thus creating cultural hybridity.

4.3.1. Iconography

The Good, the Bad, the Weird opens with a spectacular shot of a gliding eagle over the wide-open desert and a moving train in the middle of a vast plain (Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1: Vast open desert stretching from horizon to horizon in *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*. © CJ ENM

This familiar visual image, imitating the characteristics of a large-scale Hollywood western and its endless American frontier (Figure 4.2) stimulates cinematic excitement and viewing pleasure of what John Cawelti terms, the “cultivation of nostalgia” which “evokes a sense of warm reassurance by bringing before our mind’s eye images from a time when things seemed more secure and full of promise and possibility” (Cawelti, “Chinatown” 289). The aerial view of the landscape moves into the moving train where a robbery takes place. This image is reminiscent of *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) which (Figure 4.3) is known as the first western movie (Van der Heide 37).



Figure 4.2: Landscape in *Stagecoach* (1939) by John Ford



Figure 4.3: *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) by Edwin S. Porter



Figure 4.4: The train robbery in *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*. © CJ ENM

Kim's western incorporates numerous iconic scenes and images from main stream cinema, particularly Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns. The film unabashedly mimics a three-way stand-off from Leone's *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly*, perhaps the most iconic movie stand-off, following the sequence alternating between close-ups of the three men's faces, their intense eyes, and their hands inching closer toward their guns before the weapons are drawn.



Figure 4.5: The final showdown of *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly*. United Artists



Figure 4.6: The final showdown of *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*. © CJ ENM

4.3.2. Three Lead Conventional Characters

As is evident from its title, the film's most noticeable similarity to Leone's *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly* is the triangular opposition of the lead characters. In both films, characters are not ideal American heroes who settle issues and establish law and order. The three protagonists are rather morally ambiguous. The adjectives they represent are vague. The Good in both Leone's and Kim's films, are bounty hunters, wearing western hats; they demonstrate superior marksmanship, serious, quiet, sometimes good and sometimes mean, selfish and cold behavior. Their main concern is money. The Bad in both films are ruthless assassins, cold hearted, wearing black suits. Like Lee Van Cleef in Leone's film, the Bad in Kim's film kills very easily, and exudes violence. The Ugly in Leone's film is replaced by the Weird in Kim's film. The character of the Weird is apparently comic relief that is very similar to Leone's Ugly (Eli Wallach). Both the Ugly and the Weird are comedic, clownish, humorous, and friendly and provide entertainment value for the viewer.



Figure 4.7: *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly*. United Artists vs *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*. © CJ ENM

4.3.3. Conventional Plot

The Good, the Bad, the Ugly, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* as well as the Manchurian Western, *Break up the Chain*, share a similar plot in which three main leads are searching for treasure in a war setting. As the Good and Ugly in Leone's film forms a temporary partnership, the Good and the Weird temporarily cooperate to search for treasure together. The treasure is supposed to be a monetary (material) treasure in Leone and Kim's film while in *Break up the Chain*, the treasure is a lost Tibetan Buddhist statue, a politically important object that contains a secret list of Korean independence fighters.



Figure 4.8: Tibetan Buddhist stature in *Break up the Chain*. Korean Film Archive



Figure 4.9: Treasure map in *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*. © CJ ENM

Charles Leinberger, film music scholar notes, “*The Good, Bad, Weird* (2008) is a whimsical, fast-paced, and very violent [film]” (Leinberger, “Dollars” 144). Its music uses electric guitar, solo trumpet, human whistling, and tubular bells, however, it sounds more similar to “the big-band music composed by John Barry for the James Bond films rather than anything Ennio Morricone composed for westerns. There is, however, a whistled theme with banjo accompaniment for some of the desert-crossing scenes that is

reminiscent of ‘Cheyenne’s Theme’ from *Once Upon a Time in the West*” (144). The last chase scene in *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* uses the music, “Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood” which is also used in Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (2003).

At the surface level, the film repeats numerous iconographies, familiar cultural references from the previous genre films, rearranging them in constructing the film. By doing that, the film gives the audience a certain comforting pleasure watching what they have seen in the past and promotes a certain expectation of the film. When I use the term “audience,” I understand that there is no “single” audience; I am thinking of both Korean and Western audiences in general knowing that for many people, my claims might be disputed.

However, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* playfully manipulates the borrowed film language and the rules in a different context. The text translates generic conventions differently, at times ambiguously or inappropriately, thereby moving the film in an unconventional direction, deviating from the classic genre tropes and narrative conventions which break what Rick Altman calls “genre contract” between the genre film and its audience. This “potential disruption”, Michelle Cho states, creates surprise, unexpected pleasure or disappointment that increases “genre vitality” [that distinguishes the film] “from the well-worn criticism... [of] genre’s repetition compulsion” (Cho, “Genre” 47).

4.4. Unconventionality of Genre

4.4.1. Unconventional Setting

The Good, the Bad, the Weird is, according to the director Kim, an attempt to invent a new genre, the “*Kimchi* western,” intended to offer entertainment and to magnify

“cinematic excitement and sensation” in a humorous way (Fiona). In order to achieve this objective, Kim constructs a unique genre world. Despite its displaying spectacular images of typical Westerns and wartime spaces of violence and disorder, the film set of Manchuria in 1930s is not like the American west in traditional westerns which is a “meeting point between civilization and savagery” (Cawelti, *Six-Gun* 20). There, the simple binary worldview mythicizes the Western frontier spirit that brings civilization to the uncivilized field. In Kim’s setting, it’s hard to identify a clear division between civilization and savagery or the confrontation between two sides. In Kim’s film, none of the protagonists is interested in accomplishing those missions. The film focuses more on the aspect of entertainment while political or thematic messages are less significant. For Kim Jee-woon, “traditional westerns have a low-key construction, a slow pace and simple action” (qtd. in Sélavy). In a similar way, the set of the ordinary Italian Westerns, have “monotone space with wind and dust, collapsing wooden buildings and a dirt wall” (qtd. in Bell).

In contrast to this rather slow paced and monotonous atmosphere, the setting of Kim’s western has more diversity and international space where numerous ethnic groups, cultures, and languages coexist and intermix. Hence national and cultural identities are more ambivalent and chaotic than they would be in a Hollywood western. Kim proposes that Manchuria in the 1930s is a very suitable time for an atmosphere of lawlessness for a western. Because many countries such as “China, Japan, Russia fighting for the control of Manchuria at that time...there are a lot of bandits, which was also perfect for a [w]estern...to show that very rough, wild time” (qtd. in Huddleston). Ethnically and linguistically different groups inhabit this lawless space for different reasons, which

makes the film set more crowded and chaotic as well as more attractive and visually richer. In this way, the film creates a postmodern visual atmosphere using various color tones. This postmodern characteristic is well exhibited in the image of Manchurian local bandits (Figure 4.10).



Figure 4.10: Multinational local bandits. © CJ ENM

Each bandit wears a variety of colors, styles of clothing and different uniforms and hats depicting armies such as Manchurian and Russian, and at the same time, according to director, they are waving “Mongolian swords along with German guns. This seemingly unbalanced coordination came from the idea that they might have taken anything from anybody, and would have wanted to show off what they stole” (Bell). Such colorful spaces and rich characters in Kim’s western are rarely seen in the traditional western, which is a new experiment that as Kim mentions, is intentional (H. Kim, *Kim Jee-Woon* 119). Along with the maximum use of brilliant color sense and tone, the multinational and multicultural setting of Kim’s western is a distinctive world that is disconnected from the American and Italian western.

The Manchurian setting of Kim's western is also differentiated from that of the traditional Manchuria western. In the Manchurian western in 1960s and '70s, the historical importance of nationalism is highlighted. The set of the traditional Manchurian western is a space of resistance, struggle against the Japanese force for Korea's independence, "as the cradle of the nation" (An, "Ambivalence" 41). Manchuria, as Korea's national space, is part of a discourse that is crucial to the nationalist imaginary in Korea, which is also challenged and questioned through the presentation of multiethnic interactions in which Koreans occupy a limited position. These representations make the colonial era far more obscure, multifaceted, and even contradictory than the essentially homogenous "dark" times that the nationalist scenario emphasizes and to which the films' surface narrative seems to adhere.

The space of Kim's western is no longer "excessive suffering and sacrifice" (56), rather it appears to be an adventurous space on which to stage an action spectacle, where the characters run full speed across the field, firing at their enemies. The action corresponds to the film's intention that the spectators get a thrilling, exciting, pleasurable cinematic experience. This is not a mere replacement of one cultural and historical context by another. *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* creates an imaginary world that projects what the audiences desire to view. According to Kim Hyung-seok, the author of *Kim Jee-woon*, the film "from the outset, intentionally creates spaces unconnected with historical facts or the reality of the era" (Kim, *Kim* 40). Recreating the historicity of Manchuria was not the film's main concern: "The basic idea of historical spaces in this film is something [that] 'could have been like this'" (40). For example, in the

marketplace scene, there is a huge Buddhist statue, an elephant and a camel passing through Manchuria. Is that realistic?



Figure 4.11: Buddhist statue in Manchurian marketplace. © CJ ENM



Figure 4.12: An elephant roaming around in Manchurian marketplace. © CJ ENM

Whether that is true or not is not important since this film is not a historical recollection, rather the cinematic stage of the film is an imaginary fantasy space created by “a good combination of the sci-fi genre imagination and this kind of statelessness” (40). It seems closes to *Blade Runner*, *Star Wars*, and *Mad Max*, where it “would have been” rather

than it “has been”. This means that the film setting is what Kyung Hyun Kim suggests is “virtual space”. “Virtual,” Kyung Hyun Kim notes, is “artificial or less than real...the realm of both real and dreamlike” (Kim, *Virtual* 21). In other words, it uses a historical backdrop but the images presented are not historically accurate. The space in *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* is a utopian imaginary where both truth and fantasy of the past coexist. This virtual space, Kyung Hyun Kim calls “an ironical screen where history and its social referents can return only in forms that are both truthful and fantastic” (21). According to the director, “before starting a film, he calls to mind a certain space and the space assumes its contours, the film as well becomes more and more fleshed out” (Kim, *Kim* 41). In this way, the film’s unconventional space and unfamiliar reality moves the film into unconventional directions creating unconventional characters that are best suited to the space.

4.4.2. Unconventional Characters

Kim Ji-woon’s three main characters are neither archetypal nor mythic beings, like the heroes in traditional American westerns. They are not typically good or bad. There is neither Puritan mission for the establishment civilization in savage land, nor the messianic hero to protect the town’s people or to defend law or order. Kim’s characters are much like the characters of Italian revisionist westerns, especially *the Good, the Bad, the Ugly*. Authority is not important for Kim’s protagonists. Each character is driven primarily by their desires. In Kim’s film, there are no pauses and commas in the Korean title because there is no clear border between the qualities of **놈놈놈**; as opposed to the English title, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, or originally *Il Buono, il Brutto, il Cattivo*. In the original Italian, *Angel eyes* (the Bad) is the Ugly, and *Tuco* (the Ugly) is the Bad.

By a simple translation error, the ugly and the bad are reversed (Leinberger, *Ennio* 58). Nevertheless, the American title works as is because both characters have the traits of both bad and ugly. Like Leone's characters, Kim Jee-woon's characters are morally ambiguous. They're all have some good, bad and weird in their own way. However, as mentioned above, Kim's space is more diverse, colorful, chaotic or dreamlike. To fit better in this specific space, Kim creates more complex, exaggerated and multi-dimensional characters. Their behaviors change depending on the situation. The director emphasizes that his characters need all three personalities in order to survive, rather than just being good, bad, or weird, especially when they want to reach their desires (Huddleston). Unlike Leone's characters who have no home or name, all three characters in *the Good, the Bad, the Weird* have names and homes. In contrast to the characters of Manchurian Westerns in the '60s and '70s, Kim's characters are more individualistic, and are indifferent to the nationalist mission. They concentrate on their own desires, protect themselves best in the wild environment, and enjoy living for their pleasures rather than sacrificing themselves and wallowing in self-pity for their lost country.

4.4.2.1. Unconventional Good

As Sergio Leone's the Good (Clint Eastwood) character is powerful and victorious with "unorthodox moral codes" that redefine the qualities of ideal western hero (Leinberger, *Ennio* 49), the Good (Park Do-won played by Jung Woo-sung) in *The Good, The Bad, the Weird*, is a cool, confident, and cynical bounty hunter with superior marksmanship. He rarely talks and always keeps himself composed. Although both characters are greedy for money, Leone's Good shows pity for the dying soldiers,

whereas Do-won shows no pity for dying people. The dialogue between Do-won and Tae-goo, demonstrate the characteristics of Do-won:

Do-won: Even if you have no country, you still gotta have money.

Tae-goo: You are the most cold-hearted Korean I ever met.

He is not interested in the country's independence or politics. He is completely cold, impassive and selfish. He is propelled only by monetary gain. That is why Tae-goo expresses, "You [Do-won] scare me more than him [the Bad]." However, Do-won acts more lawfully because he chases his targets not only for the bounty on them but also because they are bad. According to director Kim, Do-won in the film has a specific mission to perform "super-spectacular action" (Huddleston). Do-won performs martial arts-flavored choreography magnificently. For example, in the fighting at the marketplace, he fires his rifle as he uses his rope to swing from roof to roof, while all the time his long coat flaps like a cape. In this scene, the Good clearly displays the characteristic of Asian actors in Chinese martial art films. Another example, in a chase scene, he spins his rifle, cocking and reloading it at full gallop. His clothing is designed more for its spectacular effects than fighting because it is not suited to fighting. That is not like action characters of traditional western, spaghetti western, and traditional Manchurian western.



Figure 4.13: Firing and swinging from a rope. © CJ ENM

Although Do-won displays the most indifferent attitude to his country's independence, in the last chasing scene where everyone, such as Chang-yi's gang, multi-ethnic bandits, and the Japanese Army chase the Weird, Do-won suddenly turns to the Japanese army and blazes his shotgun. This is the triumphant, even patriotic, moment in this most apolitical of blockbusters. The good's ability to run and simultaneously turn and shoot appears to be an imaginary fantasy, projecting Korea's desire to rewrite its past into something that could have been. The scene is a form of imaginary wish-fulfilment, instead looking back at the dark and traumatic past.



Figure 4.14: Running and shooting. © CJ ENM

Finally, the Good, Do-won is shown terrifically riding his horse, firing away and enjoying intense action as it plays at to the rhythmical and lively music, “Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood.” The pulsing rhythm of the music reflects Do-won’s excitement and his galloping heart that releases his wild virility and freedom.

4.4.2.2. Unconventional Bad

Like Leone’s *Angel Eyes* (played by Lee Van Cleef), *The Bad* (Park Chang-yi played by Lee Byung-huen) displays many of the stereotypical villainous traits. He is dressed a black suit, black gloves, has pitch black hair and an intense stare. According to Frayling, the Bad in black was known as “Sentenza in the script and in the Italian version of the film, meaning sentence or judgement...The Sentenza has no spirit. He’s professional in the most banal sense of the term. Like a robot” (Frayling, *Sergio* 266-217). In contrast to the machine-like character of *Angel Eyes*, Chang-yi’s character expresses strong emotions. Chang-yi is more villainous, manic, energetic than *Angel Eyes* of Leone’s film. He is a psychotic killer, brutally and accurately wielding rifle, guns, and especially swords and knives. He is an idealist and a narcissist therefore he has

strong self-respect and a desire to be the best. He can die but cannot be second. For instance, in the scene when Kim Pan-ju addresses Chang-yi and says, “You are the best in all of Manchuria,” Chang-yi’s eyes change completely and in a devilishly sarcastic tone he asks: “just Manchuria?” indicating his extreme displeasure. Kim quickly realizes his mistake and tries to fix the insult to Chang-yi’s pride saying, “Best in Manchuria means the best on the continent. I am not good with words, please do not get me wrong.” After Chang-yi fails his mission, Kim Pan-ju insults him mentioning his origin as a wandering orphan, causing Chang-yi to slay his employer ruthlessly.

As strong as is his pride, Chang-yi is extremely psychologically insecure and emotionally vulnerable. He is traumatized by his past, that his finger was severed by the finger ghost, which Hyung-seok Kim aptly notes is “essentially a form of castration” (H. Kim 69). Haunted by the gruesome memory, Chang-yi “goes through the process of an Oedipus complex” (69). He has been roaming around Manchuria repeatedly cutting off his victim’s fingers. As a result, he is known as “finger ghost” himself, which represents that “he is essentially standing in place of the man who castrated him” (69). Chang-yi is sharpening his skill exercising excessive violence and waiting for the time to avenge. Chang-yi’s pathological obsession for killing the finger ghost displays “a patricidal urge toward the individual (father) who castrated him” (69). This makes him extremely sensitive about the existence of the real finger ghost. Whenever someone mentions the finger ghost, Chang-yi loses his balance and automatically attacks them. One of his subordinates asks curiously about the rumor that the Chang-yi and finger ghost once had a fight and there are several theories about who the winner is. Chang-yi is insulted by the tactless question and immediately executes the inquirer (Figure 4.16).



Figure 4.15: Who won the fight between You and Tae-goo? © CJ ENM

When Chang-yi encounters Mangil who is like Tae-goo's brother, even though Mangil carries the treasure map, Chang-yi didn't ask about the map. He only asks where Tae-goo is and mercilessly tortures Mangil in a frenzy to provoke Tae-goo (Figure 4.17). This shows that Chang-yi's focus is to revenge Tae-goo, not the treasure. It is evident that the plot significantly deviates from the narrative convention of Leone's film.



Figure 4.16: I will show you who the best is. © CJ ENM



Figure 4.17: Chang-yi tortures Mangil to provoke Tae-goo. © CJ ENM

When he finally reaches the place indicated on the map and meets the Good and the Weird, instead of searching for treasure, Chang-yi suggests to the Good and the Weird a game in which only one survives. Tae-goo argues that they do not see eye to eye with each other so there is no point in fighting and avoids it. In order to lure the Good and the Weird into the game Chang-yi bets all of his wealth.

Do-won (the Good), who has no clue about the secret between Chang-yi and Tae-goo, asks Chang-yi, “Why drag me into this?” The Bad responds, “Can’t call it a real game without Park Do-won.” This indicates that Chang-yi acknowledges that Do-won is one of the best. However, Do-won insults Chang-yi asking, “Think you got the skills?”

implying that his is no match for Do-won. Do-won attacks Chang-yi's pride. Chang-yi's agony by the extreme humiliation is visibly demonstrated in his eyes which are intensely furious, but suddenly change to show unbearable pain.



Figure 4.18: Unbearable humiliation. © CJ ENM

Both the Weird and the Good are still not interested in a three-man showdown. As a last resort, Chang-yi reveals his severed finger calling Tae-goo “finger ghost,” which is probably the most surprising moment in the film, as well as a critical moment of rule breaking of the western genre convention.



Figure 4.19: Can you hear this, finger ghost? © CJ ENM

Revealing Tae-goo's true identity as the legendary finger ghost, the film destabilizes the central motif of the western and violates the genre tradition (Berliner, "Genre" 25). This unexpected turn breaks the genre predictability and audience's generic expectation. Tae-goo says that he forgot everything when he left Korea and asks Chang-yi to forget about the past. Tae-goo shows no interest in Chang-yi's money. He just wants to survive. Chang-yi cannot allow that. Chang-yi shoots Tae-goo's hat repeatedly, an obvious reference to the hat shooting sequence between Clint Eastwood and Lee Van Cleef in Leone's *For a Few Dollars More* (1965).



Figure 4.20: Hat shooting in *For a Few Dollars More*. United Artists



Figure 4.21: Chang-yi shoots Tae-goo's hat. © CJ ENM

In this unavoidable match, each protagonist's primary focus is clear. Do-won (the Good) focuses on only money which means that he wants Chang-yi's money, the bounty on him, and the treasure. Because Tae-goo has the treasure map and knows where the treasure is buried, Do-won must not fatally shoot Tae-goo (the weird) until they find the treasure. If then, Do-won's first shot will be the Bad. The Weird obviously knows Do-won's calculation. Tae-goo's wish is just to walk out alive. In this equation, Tae-goo will shoot Chang-yi first to save his life. Chang-yi's goal is to recover his honor. However, he has a dilemma because the Weird represents his past humiliation which has haunted him for the last five years and the Good represents his present humiliation so he must defeat both at once. That is highly unlikely in the battle among the best. Chang-yi, the villain, is ironically the bearer of the past which he is unable to overcome, are that ultimately leads him to death.

The film makes the villain suffer deeply and so evokes a strong sense of compassion from the spectators. This factor, Hyung-seok Kim argues, "contributes to the film's characteristic quality and represents a sensibility that cannot be sensed in most commercial films that present macho masculinity" (75) such as westerns. Through this

pitiful character, the film displays sensibility, dilemma, and irony, making the narrative unusually complicated. However, the film, as Hyungsoek Kim notes, “does not give the death a weighty feeling of ending. Instead, it gives the nuance that Chang-yi who had lived such a painful life, can now be at peace through death” (75). Through his death, Chang-yi finally can escape from his traumatic memory, the source of his painful life. According to Kyunghyun Kim, “The peaceful death represents both Korea’s fear of forgetting its troubled past and the need to put its painful past to sleep” (K. H. Kim, *Virtual* 205). In this sense, the film’s portrayal of Chang-yi’s death discloses Koreans’ desire to overcome the traumatic and shameful country’s past. Do-won (the Good) and Tae-goo (the Weird), by contrast, survive. Do-won keeps on chasing Tae-goo for his bounty and Tae-goo keeps on running for his dream, which reflects Koreans’ wish to survive in the unlimitedly competitive globalized neo-liberal society while thriving economically.

4.4.2.3. Unconventional Weird: Funny, Resourceful, Ambivalent

The Weird (Yoon Tae-goo played by Kang-ho Song) in *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* plays the similar role as Tuco, the Ugly character in Leone’s *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly*. According to Frayling, the Ugly character is “charming and funny” (Frayling, Sergio 216) and is “a creature of instinct, a bastard, a tramp” (217). Like Tuco, Tae-goo is comic, friendly, unpredictable, and closer to human nature. The film is about human life and how it can get complicated, how things can go wrong. The director wished to exhibit this through the Weird character in a humorous way. Therefore, the director wanted the weird to “lead the story and pace of the film” (Huddleston). The movie’s focus is to make an enjoyable piece of entertainment that is more entertaining than the

typical western (Huddleston). Tae-goo is the origin of trouble as well as the source of entertainment in some unusual ways.



Figure 4.22: Tae-goo runs away from the train. © CJ ENM

The Weird is a realist. His primary concern is his survival in the chaotic and violent environment. For him, sustaining his life is first, the rest, such as the grand nationalist ideals, justice, honor, pride, or money are secondary. He solves his immediate problems practically, without being nervous or discouraged. Regardless of the situation, even if it is extremely cruel and highly serious, Tae-goo's whimsical and quirky behavior creates humor. For example, in the middle of the bloodletting and gruesome violence in the marketplace fighting, Do-won wants Tae-goo to run to the other side to see where the enemies are shooting from,

Tae-goo: Why should I be the one?

Do-won: Then who else?

Tae-goo: Should I run straight on or zigzag around and make 'em confused?
 [*Do-won stares impassively*]

Tae-goo: Fine. I'll decide.



Figure 4.23: "Should I run straight on or zigzag around and make 'em confused?" © CJ ENM

Tae-goo's silly response and body gags are unexpected and witty. After he narrowly avoids bullets and hides himself from the gunmen, the Weird suddenly appears putting on a brass diving helmet. Shielding his head with it, he shoots back at the other gunmen. He inventively uses whatever gadgets or devices he finds to suit his purpose, regardless of conventions and norms.



Figure 4.24: Amazing helmet. © CJ ENM

Chung notes, Tae-goo's costume and gadgets are post-modern. For example, Tae-goo rides motorcycles instead of horses, he wears pilot hats instead of cowboy hats and uses sunglasses and foldable opera glasses in the vast desert. Chung calls this offbeat use of semantic elements a "weirding process" through which the film de-familiarizes the semantic elements of the dominant genre (Chung and different 118). The Weird's incongruous use of materials creates what Cawelti terms a "burlesque image" which evokes laughter (Cawelti, "Chinatown" 288).

The Weird is Kim Jee-woon's new character. Kim believes the adjective "ugly" is limited, the adjective "weird" sounds interesting, curious, something more. In fact, in the film, the Weird is ambivalent. He is not simple comic relief but is more complex than he appears. Tae-goo has a vicious past—as the notorious finger ghost—that he wants to forget. When Do-won says Chang-yi is the finger ghost, Tae-goo blithely responds, "Is Chang-yi finger ghost? that is not what I know. So you're after him cause he's the Finger Chopper?" Tae-goo's secret identity is an important reversal and plot twist that disrupts the predictable structure of previous western genre films. Through Tae-goo's ambivalent character, the film also conveys local sentiment.

The Weird's desire to forget his past is seen as a reflection of Korea's desire for amnesia about its national shameful and traumatic history. Tae-goo is perhaps a more Korean character than the Good and the Bad. Tae-goo's top priority is survival; thus, he wants to focus on his future rather than the past. Korea has a small land size but the country has a long history of civilization. The country is surrounded by powerful neighbors and has been invaded repeatedly. These traumatic events have had a deep influence on its culture and characteristics. In order to survive and keep their national

sovereignty, Koreans have developed a culture of resiliency, resourcefulness, and tenacity (Harvey and Chung 140) that Tae-goo well represents.

Tae-goo not only wants to forget his past, but also deliberately shuns being involved in fighting. When Chang-yi (the Bad) forces a showdown for supremacy, Tae-goo tries to elude the fight saying, “Is that all? Killing us to fill your void in life? That’s just stupid! You, be the best. Tell people I lost. I willingly give up that honor! Just live as the best honorably. If that [to be the best] is your reason for living, mine’s finding the treasure and getting out of here alive. We don’t see eye to eye, man. Got that? Let me go.” He willingly gives up his honor. For Tae-goo, remembering his past and fighting to preserve his honor would not help for his survival in this harsh environment.

Tae-goo has an ambivalent view of the country which is demonstrated in the dialogue between Do-won and Tae-goo:

Tae-goo: I want to go back to my home and buy some land where I want to build a house and raise

Do-won: Why buy land when your country’s stolen?

Tae-goo: For folks like us, it’s the same living under nobility or the Japs.

He wishes to live in his homeland peacefully, but unlike heroes of the traditional Manchurian western, Tae-goo is indifferent to the country’s independence. Tae-goo’s words, “For folks like us, it’s the same living under nobility or the Japs,” Chung notes, reveal “the popular sentiment of a majority of colonial citizens whose concerns for daily survival far outweighed the master narrative of a stolen nation” (Chung and Diffrient 121). None of the lead characters in the film participate in the fight for the country. In this way, the film depicts the national sensitivity without clear thematic binaries: such as “good Korean fighter versus bad Japanese,” which significantly undermines the narrative

framework of the traditional Manchurian western and its essential ideology of nationalism.

This lack of thematic historicity in Kim's film has been criticized by several local critics for having an empty narrative. Yi Hyong-gyong labels it an "action roller coaster" which lacks substantial themes beyond gunplay and chases, while Soyoung Kim expresses her disappointment at the film's focus on "action for the sake of action" (qtd. in 120). However, Chung argues that although Kim's film treats history and political implications lightly, the film clearly rejects "the colonial era's nationalist historiography" which Chung views as "the most significant generic experimentation of Kim's film" (120). This subversive aspect of the film, Chung argues, "puts the film on equal standing with a group of recent 'colonial modernity' films that collectively offer a re-interpretation of the colonial era beyond the conventional binary of Japanese oppression and Korean resistance" (120).

4.4.3. Colonial Modernity

Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson explain "colonial modernity":

In the nationalist perspective, the colonial state as agent of change delegitimizes the modern itself. This is a value-laden, essentialist use of the concept, because modernity is neither a universal good nor a historical necessity. This conception of modernity denies Koreans agency in the construction of their own modernity. Colonialism intervened in Korea's path to modernity, but this did not automatically make Koreans mere passive recipients of modernity. Koreans participated directly and indirectly in the construction of a unique colonial modernity—a modernity that produced cosmopolitanism (a sense of shared universals) without political emancipation. Colonial modernity possessed liberating forces and a raw, transformative power, and it affected the more nuanced forms of domination and repression in the colony. Its sheer complexity must be recognized... Colonial modernity meant the loss of vested interests for some social groups, but it provided opportunities for social mobility for other. (Shin and Robinson 11)

The Good, the Bad, the Weird is an illustrative case of participating in colonial modernity by presenting “multiple identities in the colonial context” and “the complexity and diversity of... identity formations” rather than assuming the collective identity as “natural” (18). For example, when Tae-goo stops by an opium den, he is escorted by Seo Jae-sik, the owner of the opium den who speaks Chinese and wears Chinese clothing with a Manchurian queue² which signals that he is a Chinese citizen. However, he suddenly speaks Korean and introduces himself as a Korean independent fighter and that his opium funds are for the national independent movement. In order to obtain the treasure map from Tae-goo, Jae-sik explains the political conditions in northeast Asia and “Japan’s imperial ambition to take over Gando³, home to many Korean expatriates in China and former territory of the ancient Korean Kingdom of *Balhae*” (Chung and Diffrient 119). While Jae-sik is speaking, his barmaids drug Tae-goo, puffing the opium smoke in Tae-goo’s face. Tae-goo expresses that both Jae-sik’s talk and the barmaids’ smoke just give him a headache. Jae-sik goes on saying, “But Gando belonged to us! This land is rightfully ours. We owned out to here in the past. Your map is the key to the future...The future of Korea, rests on that map.” To Tae-goo who is intoxicated, Jae-sik’s nationalist

² In the Japanese colonial era in Manchuria, “China demanded Koreans to adopt ‘Manchu customs of hair and clothing styles’ ... to secure their land and tenancy in Manchuria...to become naturalized as Chinese citizens” (Park 204).

³ According Jinsoo An, “Early Korean migrants in Manchuria were farmers from the northern border who moved to the [Gando: Jian Dao in Chinese] area in pursuit of economic survival. After annexation, many Korean nationalists steadily moved to this part of Manchuria to continue their armed campaign for independence. However, migration and settlement often caused hostile responses from the Chinese residents and officials who were suspicious of Korean people’s colonial linkage to the Japanese government. The Japanese officials also kept watchful eyes on Korean settlers’ activities for anything that might signal an alliance with the independence movement. They often responded brutally toward Koreans’ involvement in the militant nationalist campaign. For instance, the counterinsurgency campaigns in the 1930s murdered thousands of innocent Koreans. Thus, the differing viewpoints on Korean settlers’ citizenship and political affiliation created enmities and suspicion from both sides, making life in Manchuria difficult to navigate” (An, “Ambivalence” 41-42).

rhetoric sounds like an auditory hallucination. Jae-sik turns out to be a double agent working for a Japanese collaborator.



Figure 4.25: This land is rightfully ours! © CJ ENM

Through Jae-sik’s ambiguous identity, the film seeks to show the complexity and diversity of colonial identity and “the practices of ordinary people—individuals who participate in the construction of colonial modernity” (121). Shin and Robinson point out that Japanese colonial hegemonic policy “provided ‘space’ for groups to reconstruct their own being—some took an oppositional stance, others reformed, still others supported colonial hegemony” (9). The film more focuses on the lives of normal folks and their struggles to sustain daily life in a harsh situation where people keep resisting, collaborating, and negotiating, and shows that sacrifice for a national cause is not everyone’s priority. By doing that, Kim’s western challenges the myths of nationalism—such as Korean fighters and their honorable sacrifice for the country—which is the essential component in Manchurian westerns, and destabilizes the rigid form of thematic/moral binaries: “colonized and the colonizer, the victim and the victimizer, and good and evil” (118). Considering its pluralist and revisionist approach, Chung stresses

that Kim's *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* is "a timely cinematic contribution to the ongoing process of re-imagining the legacy of colonial history from multiple perspectives" (Chung and Diffrient 121).

4.4.4. Irony and Demystification

As mentioned above, the film is about life. In the film, people's lives are shown ironically as they go wrong or in a different direction irrespective of their wills (H. Kim, 122). This aspect is humorously shown throughout the film. For example, Kim Pan-ju and Chang-yi meticulously plan and try every possible means to search for the map, but are unable to get it, while Tae-goo, someone totally unconnected with the map, accidentally obtains it. However, in the end, the map turns out to be nothing. As the director states, "the true nature of the map may be a MacGuffin" (141).⁴ After the wild racing around, the three protagonists reach the site marked on the map, but there is nothing. Tae-goo wonders, "Did I come to the wrong place?" This betrays both expectations of the film characters and audience. This is hinted in the line of Kim Pan-ju when he gives a mission to his subordinate: "Even if the map is there, it isn't. Even when you've seen it, you haven't." However, the real irony in the film is that the map shows the right spot where the treasure is buried. After the three-way showdown, they see the crude oil erupting (the rich vein of black gold) but they do not even recognize what they have discovered.

⁴ "MacGuffin" is a term coined by Alfred Hitchcock (Gottlies 47). "The MacGuffin is simply the device that gets the action going, especially in a spy story or thriller: the secret or the missing papers, whatever it is that the characters in the film are searching for" (48). Hitchcock explains a MacGuffin with a story about two men in a train. "One man says 'What's that package up there in the baggage rack?' And the other answers 'Oh, that's a MacGuffin.' The first one asks, 'What's a MacGuffin?' 'Well, the other man says, 'it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.' The first man says, 'But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,' and the other one answers, 'Well then, that's no MacGuffin!' So, you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all." (48).



Figure 4.26: A geysir of crude oil erupts. © CJ ENM

Even if they did recognize it, they are unable to claim it, because it is on someone else's land. The winner in the gun battle is Tae-goo (the Weird), however he does not earn anything from the site. This is sharply different to the endings of Leone's films where the finder/winner keeps almost all of the reward. In this way, the film debunks the myth of the typical spaghetti western that the winner is keeper. In Kim's film, the final treasure neither belong to the winner nor to the country. This demystifies the ideology of the Manchurian western that the outcomes of people's struggles belong to the country. Another example of the irony the film displays is, as Chung notes in the original ending of the Korean version (which was cut off in the international version), that the Weird survives and tries to bury Chang-yi's corpse as a belated atonement for cutting off his finger. In the process, the Weird accidentally finds a bag of diamonds from Chang-yi's pocket that Chang-yi had stolen from the safe of Kim Pan-Ju. Tae-goo, completely unrelated to Kim Pan-Ju, indirectly benefits from the traitor's wealth (Chung and Diffrient 120). By employing irony, the film mocks the central motifs of the standard

genre convention and effectively subverts the cultural myths embodied in the previous genre convention as an attempt to seek new perspectives.

Although *The Good, The Bad, The Weird* breaks the myths of the classic western, Italian western, and Manchurian western, it is not completely free from revealing Korean national sensibility, particularly in the colonial setting in Manchuria. All the protagonists seem to be indifferent about the country's fate or the national independence project on the surface, however at some point they all seem to play the patriotic role of whatever adjective they represent. For example, ChangYi, the Bad, kills Kim Panju, a powerful capitalist, which to a Korean audience is regarded as rightful punishment for selling out his country. Tae-goo, the Weird, kills Seo Jae-sik, the owner of the opium den, who is a fake independence fighter as well as a double agent working for the Japanese. Do-won, the Good, in the final chase scene, suddenly reverses, running and shooting at the Japanese army triumphantly. This is probably the most important moment to reviving the nationalist spirit. By the lead characters' actions, some critics view Kim's film as displaying "empty...Jingoism" (Cho, "Genre" 66). Ironically these deeds are not done out of patriotism or altruism. These actions are done for the individual's needs or pleasure. Chang-yi kills Kim Pan-ju because Kim insulted Chang-yi. If anybody insults him, Chang-yi automatically kills them for his own pleasure. Although he calls Kim a traitor who sold out his country, he is simply imitating nationalist rhetoric.



Figure 4.27: The Bad executes a traitor. © CJ ENM

Chang-yi's murder of Kim Pan-ju has nothing to do with patriotism but follows his pattern of behavior during the film. After murdering Kim Pan-ju, Chang-yi turns on classical music, dancing around and taking Kim's things. These actions serve him, not the country. Tae-goo kills Seo Jae-sik. Tae-goo's only purpose is to escape the opium den with his stolen map. For Tae-goo, there is no other way to escape but by killing Seo Jae-sik and his servant in an unexpectedly cruel way (Figure 4.28). From the Korean nationalist perspective, Seo Jae-sik deserves to die, but Tae-goo's killing of Seo Jae-sik is purely motivated by his survival instinct, not by patriotic intentions.

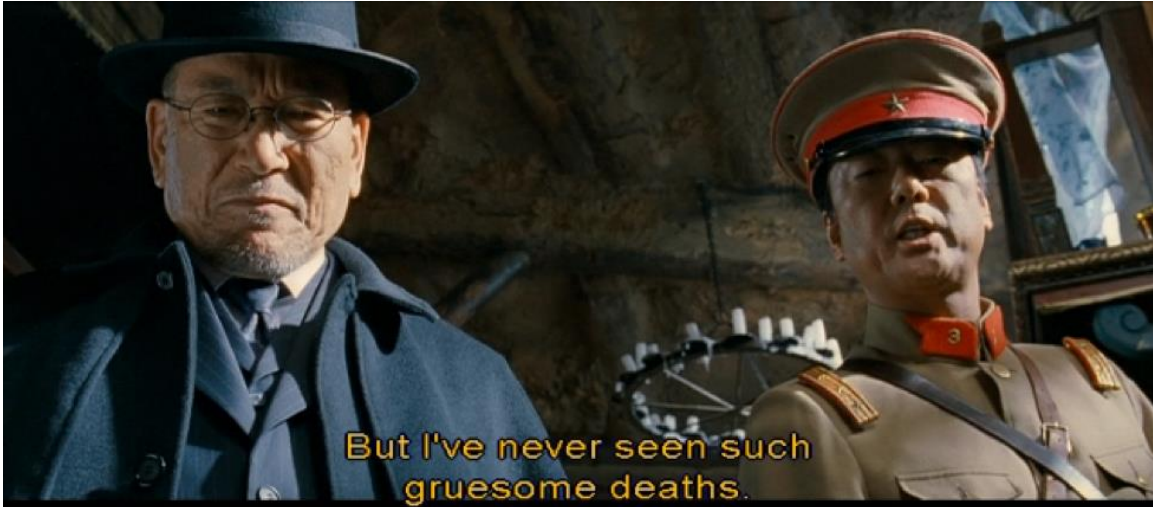


Figure 4.28: Japanese officials are looking at the corpses of Seo and his servant. © CJ ENM

Finally, the Good, Do-won singlehandedly shoots down many Japanese soldiers. He is thrilled by the sensation of speed as he runs across the vast Manchuria plain, stylishly shooting his targets.



Figure 4.29: Enjoyment of freedom and exhilaration. © CJ ENM

This is not the desperate struggle of the battleground in order to save the country, rather it is for his own enjoyment of freedom and exhilaration. If these three leads have done something beneficial for their country, it is completely coincidental, unintentional, and

ironic. Kim explores these ironic aspects humorously and deconstructs the nationalist myth that is implicit in traditional genre.

4.5. Conclusion

As discussed above, the film repeats numerous generic iconographies, genre clichés and many other cultural references that evoke nostalgia and give the audience a certain expectation of the genre. Despite its displaying spectacular images of typical westerns, the film's set is not like the traditional American frontier, which provides the thematic structure central to the American national spirit. There is no confrontation between civilization and wilderness, no American frontier myth, no messianic hero who saves the community, or racially superior hero who conquers the racial Others' villainy. Unlike the setting of spaghetti westerns, which are slow paced and monotonous, the setting of *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* has more diversity, multiple ethnic groups and is more colorful, more crowded and visually postmodern in a way that is distinctively different to its predecessors.

The set also departs from that of the traditional Manchurian western where Korean male heroes struggle for their country against the Japanese imperial force. Rather than being historically accurate, the setting of Kim's western is a more adventurous and virtual space for spectacular action, the unstoppable drive of individual desire, and a thrilling spectacular experience. In this way, the film imitates previous genre forms and models but resists genre specific ideologies. As is apparent from its title, the film's three characters bear resemblance to Leone's characters of *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly*. There is no clear-cut morality and the adjectives are vague. In contrast to Leone's characters, Kim's film alters the characters, which results in both a betrayal of audience expectation

and the production of cinematic novelty. Unlike Leone who has no interest in depicting the “inner man” (Frayling, *Spaghetti* 180), Kim’s western portrays new complex personalities. Specifically, the Bad shows his strong sensibility and psychological complexity, and his relationship with the Weird through the film shows aspects of local sentiment, which is quite different from its previous genre models. There are also many moments displaying offbeat props and the incongruous juxtaposition of seriousness and humor, which creates laughter. Some genre elements of the film are recognizable but at the same time others are unrecognizable.

While the characters of traditional Manchurian westerns collectively fight for the country’s independence, Kim’s characters are more individualists and are indifferent to the nationalist mission. They concentrate on their own desires, mainly protect themselves in the wild environment, and enjoy chasing their own pursuits rather than wallowing in self-pity or sacrificing for their lost country. The film removes the collective identity of the nationalist fighter in Manchuria. The film also explores the lives of Korean migrants in colonial Manchuria, reinterpreting the colonial era, presenting “multiple identities in the colonial context” and “the complexity and diversity of... identity formations,” rather than assuming the collective identity as “natural” (Shin and Robinson 18). These characters are not typical heroes of the American-European western, nor the typical Korean heroes.

These unconventional characters have a crucial impact on the re-evaluating of Korean identity. For example, there is an essentialist Korean sociocultural “concept of *han* which is frequently characterized as the essential ‘Korean ethos’” (S. S. Kim, “Korean” 263) or “the root of Korean culture” (254). “This concept of *han* is popularly

understood as a uniquely Korean collective feeling of unresolved resentment, pain, grief, and anger. Han is often described as running in the blood of all Koreans and the quality of Korean sorrow as being different from anything Westerners have experienced or can understand” (255). However, recent studies reveal that the discourse of han emerged in a colonial context. According to Sandra So Hee Chi Kim, in the early colonial era, the Japanese colonial authorities, writers, scholars, and critics appreciated Korean arts as “the beauty of sorrow” which were repeatedly described as a uniquely Korean aesthetic. The beauty of sorrow is translated as “a Korean essence that is lonely, sorrowful and superstitious” (260) which is seen as essentially different from Japanese art that is characterized as “optimistic and playful” (262).

In other words, this collective representation of Koreans as a sorrowful people “was linked to an idea of Korean helplessness and naïveté” (261) that “served to provide a racialized essence ...which *Koreans were different from the Japanese*” (261) as well as providing “[justification for] the need for Japan’s superior leadership” (261). Kim argues that the collective characterization of Koreans as a sorrowful people is a colonial stereotype about Koreans that is “nothing more than a social construct” (253). This particular representation of cultural difference, Homi Bhabha warns, “must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition” (Bhabha, *Location* 3). Kim’s *Kimchi* western refuses a simplistic description of colonial identity. None of main protagonists of the film display an inherent essence of sadness. Even if history resulted in the loss of their country, the heroes are not uniformly in a state of sadness, rather they are unbowed by their condition. These characters resist the tendency to represent the collective national identity of having sorrow in their blood.

They project energy, virility, and craziness, and strenuously pursue their own desires. In the cinematic space, national ideology and colonial identity are losing their value. They are neither the heroes of American-European westerns nor of traditional Manchurian westerns but something else in-between. By re-imagining the colonial history of Manchuria with new characters, the film dismantles not only generic ideology of collective nationalism but also the myth of cultural identity.

In addition, the film ironically mocks the central motifs of the standard genre conventions and effectively subverts the cultural myths and assumptions embodied in the previous genres' conventions. Such alterations demonstrate the process of genre transformation the film went through in which the traditional generic structures are used as a means of demythologization (Cawelti, "Chinatown" 290). Through this artistic intervention, the film opens a "Third space of enunciations," which is "the 'inter'—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (Bhabha, *Location* 56) where political changes occur. As a result, different perspectives, meanings, values and new identities emerge that are "*neither the One ... nor the Other... but something else besides*, which contests the terms and territories of both" (41). It is neither American, European, nor traditional Manchurian western but something else besides: *Kimchi* western. All things considered, it is clear that *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* is a hybrid cultural product where a cultural minority translates the signs of the dominant culture differently or inappropriately. By resisting the rigidity of binary opposition and cultural authority, the film subverts the myth and ideology of the dominant genre and enables alternative narratives and new meanings to emerge, manifesting themselves in the practice of genre transformation.

Chapter 5

Case Study 2: *Snowpiercer*

5.1. Introduction

Snowpiercer (2013) is a South Korean post-apocalyptic sci-fi, action genre film directed by Joon-ho Bong and written by Bong and Kelly Masterson. The film is an adaptation of the French dystopian graphic novel, *Le Transperceneige* by French authors, Jacques Lob, Benjamin Legrand, and Jean-Marc Rochette. Bong borrowed the motive and background of the film from the source text, changed most of the original story, and created almost an entirely new story. *Snowpiercer* is set on a train after the destruction of the world: it is a microcosm of human society, complete with different social and economic classes of passengers that form a sort of contemporary version of “Noah’s Ark.” The film deals with today’s global anxiety about future environmental disaster, social inequality in neo-liberal capitalism, and potential revolution against the existing system. The film is a multi-national project that includes components of English, French, and Korean media. It is also Bong’s English language debut film. The film was funded by a Korean conglomerate (CJ Entertainment); the KRW 45 billion (\$39m) budget (*Korean Cinema 2013* 16) which was the most expensive Korean film in history at the time. *Snowpiercer* implements the Hollywood blockbuster model and style using a multinational cast and crew, mostly American actors, high technologies and advanced

special effects, with English as its primary language. However, without being confined by a Hollywood frame, Bong experiments with multi-generic conventions to present his vision, using local elements that carry political significance. There were problems and obstacles with the film's distribution (most of which came from Harvey Weinstein)⁵, however, the film proved to be a major critical and commercial success as it accumulated 9.3 million viewers in Korea and \$86 million overseas. The film received almost universal acclaim. Scott Foundas of *Variety* wrote that it was "[a]n enormously ambitious, visually stunning and richly satisfying futuristic epic from the gifted Korean genre director Bong Joon-ho" (Foundas). *The Hollywood Reporter* wrote a similarly positive review, commenting, "*Snowpiercer* is still an intellectually and artistically superior vehicle to many of the end-of-days futuristic action thrillers out there" (Tsui). The film has a 95% approval on *Rotten Tomatoes* where the critics' consensus is that "*Snowpiercer* offers an audaciously ambitious action spectacular for filmgoers numb to effects-driven blockbusters" (*Rotten Tomatoes*).

The film begins with a climate engineering scheme, dispersing the cooling substance, CW-7 into the atmosphere to solve global warming. However, this advanced geo-engineering technology has failed at the point we join the narrative. The result is a global ice age that destroys almost all life on the planet. The only survivors are the passengers of *Snowpiercer*, a massive train powered by a perpetual-motion engine, travelling around the globe. In order not to be frozen, the train must keep moving.

⁵ The Weinstein Company (TWC) bought US rights to *Snowpiercer* for English-speaking markets including UK. The company executives claimed that the "film wouldn't be understood by audiences in Iowa and Oklahoma" (Burr) and suggested to the director "how the film might be "improved" for American audiences... included deletions of some 25 minutes... the elimination of most of the character-detail...and to add explanatory voiceovers at the beginning and end of the film [that the director] rejected" (Rayns 38).

Snowpiercer is organized based on a class hierarchy, so that the elite positioned in the front of the train enjoy a luxurious life while people in the tail are cramped in small dirty spaces where they manage to stay alive eating only protein bars made from cockroaches. People in the tail section are treated inhumanely and their children are abducted by the front section. In this rigidly rationalized system, people are constantly manipulated into believing in the train's social and political order where everyone must keep their pre-ordained position. If one goes against the authorities, the elites resort to brutal violence to punish the defier.



Figure 5.1: Breaking arm. © CJ ENM

Curtis, the leader of the train's tail section, revolts against the rigid social inequality. His goal is to change the owner of the engine. One of the messages from a mysterious helper encourages him to free the train's security specialist, Namgoong Minsu, from the train's prison car. Curtis rescues Minsu because he needs to open the train's secure doors in order to move to the front. After the battle for control of the train,

Curtis reaches the engine room, however when he meets the engine owner, Wilford, Curtis realizes that each step of the revolution has been planned by Wilford. By disclosing the secret of the train system and its fundamental problems, the movie takes an unexpected turn that results in the destruction of the whole system and its passengers, with the exception of two surviving children, a teen girl and a younger boy (Eve and Adam figures).

5.2. Genre in *Snowpiercer*

5.2.1. SF Genre in South Korea

Snowpiercer is largely classified by critics and journalists as a SF thriller, dystopian, and apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic in genre (*Variety*, *Rotten Tomatoes*). Compared to the full-fledged and popular SF genre in the West, SF in South Korea is marginalized. Despite the general unpopularity of SF in Korea, Bong's previous films, *The Host* and *Snowpiercer* have been remarkably successful. Before analyzing the film, it would be worthwhile to briefly outline SF genre adaptations and the unique situation SF occupies in South Korea in order to better understand the hybrid nature of such films. SF as a genre was introduced in Korea in the early 20th century. Since the '60s and '70s Korea has transformed itself into a highly-industrialized country. However, SF as a genre in any media remains surprisingly peripheral in South Korean society. There are number of reasons for this. First, SF is a genre foreign to South Korea. While it seems to be particularly American and Japanese in origin, Science Fiction usually appears in industrial cultures. Some of the first recognizable SF came from Britain, France and Germany, spreading to other societies powerfully affected by the second industrial revolution (America, Russia, Poland, Italy, Spain and China). The public recognition of

SF as a genre in South Korea is much different to the type found in Western society, where SF is largely described as the literature of “cognitive estrangement” (Suvin 5-6). The cognitive element of Western SF suggests a literature that is more logical, reasoned, and scientific. SF in the West is about a scientifically possible future that is unfamiliar. However, the equivalent term to SF in Korean is 공상과학소설(Fantasy Science Fiction). This was translated from a Japanese version of an American SF magazine, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*. Accordingly, SF in Korea implies more imagined fantasy science fiction rather than scientifically plausible fiction. In addition, SF in Korea mostly began with Japanese manga and animation, so SF is considered juvenile and not very serious. Another reason SF as a genre has remained marginal, as Gord Sellar points out, is related to its national and postcolonial identity (Sellar 153). Korea’s modern turbulent history and its numerous difficult cultural experiences have caused people to focus more on reality, historical memories, and alternative pasts rather than future fantasy. That is why Korean society is more past-oriented when compared to Western society, which tends to be more future oriented. In the early 2000s, Korean film makers began to actively produce SF films such as, *2009 Lost Memories* (2001), *Yesterday* (2002), *Resurrection of the Little Match Girl* (2002), *Natural City* (2003), and *Save the Green Planet* (2003). These are mostly SF stories about the past, and were not commercially successful, which has meant that there has been almost no established SF in Korea. Bong’s SF filmmaking is deeply influenced by Western SF. Many scenes, tropes, and characters in *Snowpiercer* remind the audience of numerous Western SF texts like *Metropolis* (1926), *Things to Come* (1936) carrying us right to and beyond Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985) with its images of grotesque aristocrats; *Blade Runner* (1982) for its grim futuristic settings;

Soylent Green (1973) for the concept of the near or outright cannibalism implied by the nutrition bar of the people living at the end of the train tail; *Alien* (1979) for the images of mechanical, almost organic, walkways and the progression through the train's gates.

5.2.2. Apocalyptic/Post-apocalyptic/Dystopian Genre

Snowpiercer is largely classified as an apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic, dystopian SF genre film because the story is about a future ice age, the aftermath of a major disaster, and the last survivors are struggling under an oppressive totalitarian regime. Before proceeding to analyze the film, it is necessary to survey the apocalypse/post-apocalypse and dystopian genres to identify how the film employs the shared genre conventions of its predecessors, and how it reorganizes the elements of the conventional formula to tell its own story.

"Apocalypse," according to Claire Curtis, in popular terms, refers to a "disastrous, violent and catastrophic end event" while in technical terms, "apocalypse" means "revelation," "referring within the Jewish and Christian context to divine prophecy concerning the end times and the final battle between good and evil" (Curtis 5). In this sense, traditional apocalyptic tales of disaster are produced by natural or supernatural phenomena (Booker and Thomas 53). In the traditional apocalyptic idea, Martens points out, "there is hope beyond human hope...a life that is guarded and guided by a loving God...who cares, and who will come to reward all according to their deeds (Romans 2: 6). This God leads us beyond despair to hope" (Martens 190). The modern form of disaster stories has proliferated under the subgenre of science fiction after "the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in August, 1945, followed by Cold War nuclear tensions" (Booker and Thomas 53). These films reflect the fears of our age, not only the destructive power

of modern technology, but also the sense that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. In her seminal essay, "The Imagination of Disaster," Susan Sontag writes about the science fiction films of the 1950s and argues that "science fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster, which is one of the oldest subjects of art" (Sontag 44). These films reflect our deepest anxieties about physical disaster (47) that are "wrought by the irresponsible use of science, though science, used responsibly, can also be the key to dealing with the disasters" (Booker and Thomas 53). Whether the catastrophe is caused by nature or humans, apocalyptic films are more about the event itself. However, the post-apocalyptic stories focus on "the very idea and possibility of starting over, with all the potential hope and utopian imaginings that starting over implies" (Curtis 2). Therefore, the key distinction between the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic genres is that the primary focus of the apocalyptic genre is "surviving the event," while the focus of the post-apocalyptic genre is "surviving the aftermath" (6). Post-apocalyptic films envision "the logical outcome of an apocalyptic cataclysm caused by human hands" (Martens 163).

These films are, John W. Martens notes, warnings to all that "this is our fate if we do not shape up, but they are unwilling to imagine a world completely and utterly devoid of hope" (164). Post-apocalyptic fictions tell about a world without social laws and order, in which "people are stripped of humanity" (Curtis 7) and thus savagery and brutality abounds, including the extreme of cannibalism. This savagery is similar to that in the horror genre; causing journalists to blur the genres without making clear distinctions between them (Harris 35). Sobchack clarifies the difference between both genres as follows: "both genres deal with chaos, with the disruption of order, but the

horror film deals with moral chaos, the disruption of natural order (assumed to be God's order)...the SF film, on the other hand, is concerned with social chaos, the disruption of social order (man-made), and the threat to harmony of civilized society going about its business" (Sobchack 30). However, she points out that there are many "films in which it is not easy to distinguish whether the chaos is moral or civil, whether the order threatened is God-given or man-made" (3). Critics and journalists also classify *Snowpiercer* as dystopian sci-fi. The traditions of dystopian fiction and post-apocalyptic fiction have much in common; therefore post-apocalyptic narratives are often confused with dystopian narratives. However, there is a distinction between both genres. According to Eaton, "post-apocalyptic stories focus on the rebuilding or dealing with the destruction of organized civilization whereas dystopian narratives deal with problematic on-going societies that are often highly structured" (Eaton 477). James Comb also suggests the difference between dystopian fiction and post-apocalyptic fiction can be found in the idea of "control and chaos" where "control futures are dystopias, such as in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949), chaos futures are usually post-apocalyptic, for instance, *The Road* (2009) there is no unified society or government" (Harris 27-28). However, in many cases, these genre elements are crossed, mixed, and overlap in one text. *Snowpiercer* is an example of one of these films which incorporates diverse genre components, such as the apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, horror, and dystopian genres.

5.2.2.1. Setting, Theme, Characters

In post-apocalyptic films, the stories commonly take place in a world destroyed by nuclear war, World War IV (Martins 164-5) or some sort of ecological disaster. The semantic elements of post-apocalyptic film include figures such as the wasteland/empty

city/ruins, where there is an absence of social institutions. The syntactic structure provides fantasies of survival in imagined aftermaths, with social chaos and devastation being overcome by conservative values and the establishment or discovery of a utopian community (Harris 54-55). As Broderick notes, a recurring theme in post-apocalyptic films is reinforcing the conservative social order rather than providing a new alternative to the existing social systems (Broderick, “Surviving” 362). Susan Sontag describes this imaginary disaster in science fiction films as “a popular mythology for the contemporary negative imagination” (Sontag 47). Sontag argues that the SF films’ familiar scenarios with their “happy endings” offers a fantasy that serves “to distract us from terrors, real or anticipated—by an escape into exotic dangerous situations...to normalize what is psychologically unbearable, thereby inuring us to it. In the one case, fantasy beautifies the world. In the other, it neutralizes it” (42). The protagonist in the post-apocalypse genre is a typically white male action hero (Broderick 373) who is a “recasting of the Judeo-Christian myth of a messianic hero annihilating oppressive tyranny” (375). This hero plays a “predestined role...to confront the evil regime” (378) and defends the good survivors from the forces of evil (377). The main heroes in post-apocalyptic films, Martens points out, are similar to the characters of Western films. Like Max in *Mad Max*, the hero “offers hope not just to them but to all people” (Martens 170).

5.3. The Genre Conventions in *Snowpiercer*

Snowpiercer certainly uses the well-trodden genre conventions of sci-fi, fantasy, thriller, apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic/dystopian, horror, and action in terms of the film’s setting, themes, and lead characters (*New York Times*). The setting of *Snowpiercer* is in 2031.

5.3.1. Setting

The story begins in the train's tail section which is dark, filthy, claustrophobic and crammed with shabbily dressed passengers. The train cars are divided by massive iron gates which are strictly controlled by soldiers with rifles. This is a dystopian world ruled by its oppressive authoritarian ruler. The world outside of the train is completely frozen. Cities, buildings, structures, and landscape are all covered with ice. There is nothing but wasteland, emptiness, ruins and death, which is a typical setting for the post-apocalyptic genre film's aftermath.



Figure 5.2: Completely Frozen. © CJ ENM

5.3.2. Themes

The major themes of the film are the issues of ecological catastrophe and ideological repression by an authoritarian political system. Bong's previous movies, such as *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (2000), *Memories of Murder* (2003), *The Host* (2006), *Mother* (2009) are described as social satire and political commentary on Korean society.

For example, in *The Host*, the system disturbed the dysfunctional family that struggles to save their own teenage girl from a powerful monster. The system does not help but instead hampers the family. The similar theme is recurrent in *Snowpiercer*. Free from the national boundaries, *Snowpiercer* depicts a global version of absurd system for its international audience. For Bong, the SF genre is an excellent tool to convey this relentless deep, dark story, saying, “I really wanted to make a movie about one generation of people coming to an end and a new generation beginning... You can only do that in the genre of sci-fi. It’s not so often you get the chance to make this type of film. It’s also a story about the evil system” (Oakes). Although it is a SF movie about the future, it is also very much about the present situation of global inequality across the world, including the rigid social division between haves and have-nots, as well as child labor. What Bong highlights in the movie is that the dark system has its own sick logic, therefore whether it is worthwhile to sustain such a corrupt system is one of the main questions the movie raises.

5.3.3. Characters

In *Snowpiercer*, there are three white male leaders, Curtis (Chris Evans), Gilliam (John Hurt), and Wilford (Ed Harris) who are famous leading men in other Hollywood genre films. As Barry Grant points out, in most Hollywood genre films, white men perform heroic deeds and drive the narrative, with stars and genres reinforcing each other (Grant, *Iconography* 19). These three star actors and their track records playing heroes certainly suggest that the film will be a Hollywood genre film. Specifically, the familiar genre characters allow spectators the pleasures associated with genre predictability and expectation, evoking a sense of nostalgia (Cawelti “Chinatown” 289).

Curtis Everett (played by Chris Evans, well-known for his role as an American superhero in Hollywood films) is the lead protagonist, representing a politically aware member from the train's tail section. Curtis is an ideal hero figure. He is prudent, strong, brave, and sharp. Curtis believes that the train owner, Wilford, is responsible for people's miserable lives. Therefore, he raises a revolution to overthrow the evil regime, to re-establish social order, and ultimately to save the people in the train's worst off area. Before starting the revolution, he is clever enough to deduce the guards have no bullets.



Figure 5.3: No bullets. © CJ ENM

While proceeding toward the front, he fights heroically against the counter-insurgency forces. When the train passes an extremely long tunnel right after Yekaterina bridge, the lights of the train go off and the revolutionary army is trapped in the dark space and hopelessly slaughtered by the soldiers wearing infrared goggles. Curtis remembers that the little Chinese boy, Chan, has a match and shouts for fire.



Figure 5.4: A torch. © CJ ENM

Chan makes a torch and runs with Andrew (Andy's father) and Grey. Curtis saves the rebel forces from a brutal massacre and keeps moving forward.

Gilliam (John Hurt, who played Winston Smith, a victim of totalitarian state in *1984* [1984] and Adam Sutler, a totalitarian leader in *V for Vendetta* [2005]), also plays both these archetypes in *Snowpiercer*. Gilliam is a savior figure in the tail section. He is missing one arm and one leg. 17 years before, thousands of people in the rear cars, with no water and nothing to eat, had stopped being human and began to eat the weak. When people were about to kill a baby, Gilliam cut off his own limbs to save the baby and the other weak people.

As suggested to by the statue of the crucifixion near Gilliam in Figure 5.5, Gilliam's role is reminiscent Jesus Christ's. Gilliam is a wise mentor, a father figure, and the person Curtis trusts most. He advises Curtis as the revolution progresses.



Figure 5.5: Gilliam with the statue of the crucifixion. © CJ ENM

Wilford (Ed Harris who played Christof, the mastermind of Truman’s illusory world, in *The Truman Show* [1998]). He plays a similar role in *Snowpiercer* as the creator of the sacred engine/train/world, Snowpiercer). Wilford is another familiar white leader who foresaw that the geoengineering project dispersing CW-7 would fail and built the revolutionary mega-train to save humankind. Wilford believes that the survival of humankind relies on the engine that enables the train system to keep moving operating as something of metaphor for the second industrial revolution. The train is a closed ecosystem that requires the maintenance of a balance. Wilford focuses on maintaining the optimum balance of the system, controlling everything. In this way, Wilford represents God, the creator and the protector of the system.

These familiar post-apocalyptic settings, themes and typical white male heroes from Hollywood movies cultivate nostalgia (Cawelti, “Chinatown” 289) evoking a sense of reassurance and certain promise of predictability and expectation. The stars’ familiar

character types help the audience immediately identify the heroes' narrative roles and patterns of action, and their moral values in the familiar genre films, which is in Thomas Schatz' words, "narrative economy for filmmakers and viewers" (Schatz 24). This leads the audience into anticipating how the heroes will act, how they will resolve the problems, how they will save the people, offering hope to the world, as in similar genre films. However, the film secretly redesigns genre conventions by revealing unconventional sides of the conventional characters, or creating new unconventional characters. In doing so, the film disrupts and mocks genre conventions as well as challenges the dominant cultural norms and generic myths.

5.4. Deviation From the Genre Convention

5.4.1. Unconventionality of Conventional Characters

Curtis is a heroic revolutionary leader. However, while fighting, Curtis suddenly slips on a fish and falls down.



Figure 5.6: Heroic fighting. © CJ ENM



Figure 5.7: Slipping on fish. © CJ ENM

This unusual scene produces off-pitch comedy that mocks the hero's magnificent actions, resulting in slapstick humor. The hero's slipping in this grave situation is an unusual mistake that erodes the generic convention. This slipping scene also foreshadows that Curtis' revolution and devotion, based upon false beliefs, will be futile. It is a cue that the film might slip through the generic framework and turn in unexpected directions.

There is another unconventional side to Curtis. He is haunted by a past event. At the end of the movie, he reveals how he committed cannibalism, confessing "You know what I hate about myself? I know what people taste like. I know that babies taste best" (*Snowpiercer*).



Figure 5.8: Babies taste best. © CJ ENM

Curtis' confession is probably the darkest and most shocking moment of the movie. However, many audiences find this serious moment to be the most memorably hilarious. For many of them, it is really hard to hold back laughter and many of them note that when Curtis says, "I know that babies taste best," people emit guffaws in the theater. This is a case of what Cawelti calls "black humor" that is derived from the puzzling combination of humorous burlesque and high seriousness (Cawelti, "Chinatown" 287). This strangely unexpected turn significantly unsettles the generic moral codes and the myth of the white male hero.

When Curtis meets Wilford, Curtis learns that Wilford orchestrated the whole revolution with Gillam. He realizes that he has been Wilford's puppet, and his long journey from the tail to the front is nothing but fulfilment of Wilford's plan. Nevertheless, Curtis still firmly believes that the engine is the only source for human survival, that there is no alternative world. Wilford persuades Curtis to be his successor

as the ruler of the system. Curtis is convinced by Wilford's logic and almost accepts his offer. However, when he discovers little Timmy working under the floor, literally a cog in the train engine, he realizes the system is utterly corrupt. The massive train runs only because it sacrifices little children, the weakest of the weak: it cannot run forever. Curtis sacrifices his arm to rescue Timmy and ultimately decides to destroy the whole system. By exploiting this familiar genre character who usually saves both the people and their world, the film completely breaks the familiar narrative code and accompanying perceptions.

The film depicts Gilliam, another conventional messianic hero, quite differently. When Curtis meets Wilford, Curtis learns that Gilliam had been secretly cooperating with Wilford. This causes Curtis deep confusion. Gilliam and Wilford share the fundamental belief in the necessity of maintaining the train's sustainable ecosystem. In order to control the train's population, Gilliam and Wilford regularly instigate revolutions to kill enough people. This clearly makes Gilliam, the wise old leader, look unfamiliar and unconventional. In addition, when Curtis painfully expresses his feeling of guilt for having both good arms and being unworthy to a qualified leader, Gilliam, the Christ-like figure says, "having both arms is good especially when you hold a woman" (*Snowpiercer*). Curtis seems to be noticeably uncomfortable at the benevolent father figure making a sexual innuendo. However, Gilliam's line hints at the other side of his true character that Curtis has never suspected.



Figure 5.9: The Christ-like figure makes a sexual innuendo. © CJ ENM

Later, Curtis hears the exact same line from Wilford, proving that Wilford and Gilliam are the same figure with different faces. Curtis has been deceived and manipulated by Gilliam who Curtis has trusted the most. Curtis experiences deep despair at Gilliam's betrayal. The movie perversely twists its conventional characters, thereby debunking the myth of the messianic leader.

Wilford, the creator of the sacred engine, produced the myth and ideology of the train: the engine is to be worshipped because it is eternal, and provides everyone with a preordained place in its universe. These are pure deceptions since Wilford knows that the engine has a serious flaw, and that the system cannot work forever. In order to conceal the flaw, Wilford abducts little children from the tail section and enslaves them as a disposable part of the machine. Wilford explains how he operates the system saying,



Figure 5.10: Wilford uses Gilliam's line, word for word. © CJ ENM

I believe it is easier for someone to survive on this train if they have some level of insanity. As Gilliam well understood, we need to maintain a proper balance of anxiety and fear, chaos and horror in order to keep life going. If we don't have them, we need to *invent* them. In that sense, the Great Curtis Revolution you *invented* was truly a masterpiece. (*Snowpiercer*)

In Wilford's logic, social injustice, inhumanity, massacre to control the population, and child labor, are justified for the continued existence of humankind. However, the real reason for these injustices is not so that humankind will survive but to secure an opulent life for the few at the expense of the many. This is clearly demonstrated when Wilford says,

The Great Curtis Revolution! A blockbuster production with a devilishly unpredictable plot! Who could have predicted your counterattack with the torch in the Yekaterina Tunnel! Pure genius! That wasn't what we had in our plan...We, Gilliam and I. Our plan...Our original agreement was for this insurgency to end at the Yekaterina Tunnel and then the survivors would go back to the Tail Section to enjoy much more space... but...Unfortunately, the front suffered greater losses than anticipated, for which Gilliam paid the price. (*Snowpiercer*)

The agreement between Gilliam and Wilford for population control is a treaty for the massacre of poorest. To put it another way, for Wilford, controlling the population means eliminating the underclass. As Wilford says, if the front suffered more losses than anticipated, Gilliam must pay for it. But nobody needs to pay for the losses and the sacrifices of children in tail section. Wilford is not striving to sustain human beings but instead to preserve the privilege of a few. In this way, all three white protagonists appear initially like typical white heroes in apocalyptic/postapocalyptic genre films, but eventually look unfamiliar, revealing significant flaws. Undercutting stereotypes means that the film unsettles the myth of heroism and deviates from the dominant generic formulas and their values.

Hollywood is the definitive center of creating and representing ideologies of race, class, and gender stereotype on screen. Ethnic characters are often flat stereotypes in genre movies, eroticizing and marginalizing people of color and minorities (Grant, *Iconography* 17). Unlike the genre typification, the movie introduces unconventional lead characters portraying their unique qualities, as well as introducing new racial representation, altering the white leading story substantially. There are two prominent characters who play key roles in the progress of the tale: Namgoong Minsu and his daughter, Yona. It is important to analyze what roles these new unconventional characters play in the Hollywood film, and what effect these characters have in making the movie different, creating cultural hybridity, that is neither American nor Korean.

5.4.2. The First Unconventional Character, Namgoong Minsu

Namgoong Minsu (Gang-ho Song: this is the third-time Song has played a main lead in Bong's films, following *Memories of Murder* and *The Host*). Minsu is a specialist

who designed the train system's locks for Wilford. He was confined to the prison car with his daughter. After the uprising, he is released by Curtis. Minsu is an Asian man, but not a stereotypical Asian character depicted by Hollywood: he is not an exotic Asian, martial artist, villain, sidekick, or conformist. Minsu is a drug addled, sluggish, and eccentric Korean man. Minsu does not seem to be a "typical" Korean man either, considering the low rate of drug use in South Korea. The Korean film viewer would understand a "typical" Korean man to be: most Korean men are trained in mandatory military service so they tend to be highly disciplined and focused. They are also widely known as being diligent. Minsu's role on the train is indispensable to both Wilford and Curtis, if they wish to accomplish their objectives. However, Minsu seems indifferent to the revolution and maintaining the train system. He has hazy drug-dulled eyes yet when he snatches the prison keys from the rebels to rescue his daughter, Yona, his eyes become sharp and his actions quick and meticulous. Minsu's face is expressionless and shows no clue of what he is thinking, making him utterly unpredictable. Throughout the movie, Minsu displays some distinct characteristics, such as ambiguity, resistance, and independence.

5.4.2.1. Ambiguity

In many respects, Minsu is an ambiguous character. For instance, he uses materials such as Kronole, the train's industrial waste, both as an entertaining drug like others do, as well as he uses it as an explosive substance. As well, Minsu uses cigarettes somewhat surprisingly. After being rescued from the prison car, Minsu draws out two Marlboro cigarettes from his shoe, shocking everyone because the last cigarettes had been smoked some ten years before, apparently. Minsu smokes one of them and blows

out the smoke toward everybody and says, “Do you wanna take a sip?” (*Snowpiercer*) stimulating everyone’s repressed desire.



Figure 5.11: Minsu smokes a cigarette. © CJ ENM

Then, he suddenly throws the cigarette butt to the other side of the car, causing a stampede as the crowd dives to pick it up. In that short moment, Minsu snatches the prison keys from a rebel and manages to open the drawer where his daughter, Yona, is imprisoned. Minsu calculated how to use the cigarette to divert people’s attention. Later when Curtis and Minsu arrive at the front of the engine room, Curtis is unable to handle his anger and emotions. Curtis shouts at Minsu to open the gate, punching at it. In order to cool down Curtis, Minsu hits Curtis and they have a fist fight. After that, as a gesture of empathy, Minsu casually throws the other cigarette to Curtis, saying, “You should be honored to smoke the last cigarette in the world, you, tail car hick.” Minsu is not interested in smoking itself. Why, then, has Minsu kept the cigarettes for such a long time? The important thing for Minsu is not cigarettes per se but something else. Minsu

reminds Curtis of what he needs: “Think of what Kronole is. This fucking flammable industrial waste. Light it up and boom! It is a bomb, you idiot! I didn’t stock this shit for years just to get high. It’s to blow up this gate. Give me the matches! 불! [Korean]. Fire! [English]” (*Snowpiercer*). The material Minsu wanted to keep is neither cigarette nor hallucinogen, but the bomb and the match. Minsu shouts “Fire!” directly in English, his only English line in the entire movie, indicating how important fire is for Minsu’s plan that is, escaping from the closed system. Minsu’s Kronole addiction and keeping the cigarettes are perfect camouflage for collecting explosive material and keeping the matches, without raising suspicions about his plans. Minsu’s usage of the dominant norm differently and inappropriately is an effective demonstration of Bhabha’s notion, the ambivalence of mimicry – “almost same but not quite” as an insurgent strategy of “counter-appeal” (Bhabha, *Location* 129-30).

5.4.2.2. Resistance

Despite casting multi-ethnic actors, actors in Hollywood genre movies usually speak English fluently, or accented English, or are dubbed, so the audience has no problem understanding what the actors say. As mentioned previously, *Snowpiercer* is a Hollywood style genre movie, its primary language is English. The film runs in English for the its first 20 minutes. However, when Minsu emerges and speaks only Korean⁶ in an indigenous way, Bong uses language to indicate that this is not a standard genre film. Although there are some basic subtitles produced by the mechanical translator, if the audience has little or no background knowledge of Korean language and culture, what

⁶ “Korean, along with Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese, categorized by the US Defense Language Institute as a Category IV, meaning that it is considered one of the most difficult language for American to learn” (K. H. Kim, *Virtual* 213).

Minsu says is incomprehensible. Minsu's line may sound like a cryptic code or the delirious raving of a foreign drug addict. Edgar (played by Jamie Bell) believes exactly that Minsu has completely lost his senses, shouting:

Edgar: Look at him, man, he's gone. Look at his eyes. He's fried his brain with that fucking shit. Are you Nam? Nam, are you listening?

Minsu: [*speaking in Korean*] Yes, I am listening, fuck. My name is not Neam, Nam. Mother--! Up to Namgoong is my last name and Minsu is my first name, you, ignorant!

Mechanical translator: Unknown words found. Please try again with correct vocabulary (*Snowpiercer*).

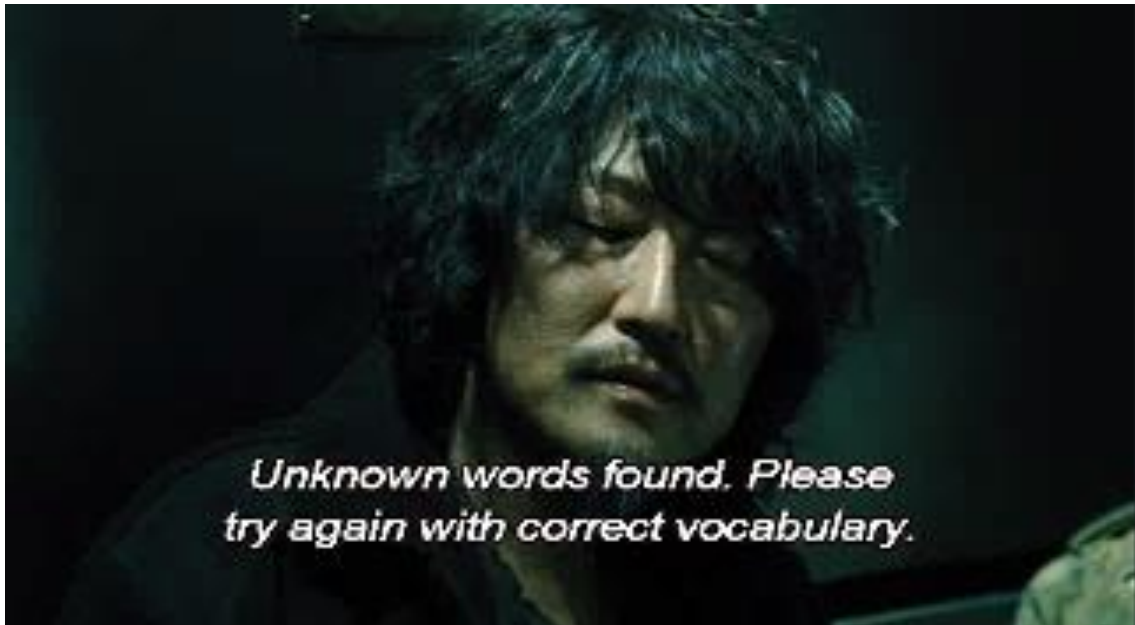


Figure 5.12: Minsu speaks Korean. © CJ ENM

The machine translator is obviously not capable of translating such indigenous Korean expression, but instead reports a problem. Minsu expresses his feeling in his mother tongue, uninterrupted by the train's dominant language, mocking his listeners and articulating an idea that is not possible to convey in English. Because the film does not provide subtitles, there is no way for an English speaker to decipher Minsu's lines.

However, what he says in Korean, can hardly be ignored because he holds the key to the film's action. The movie makes the audience uncomfortable, yet encourages them to ask their own questions about its foreignness. English speaking audiences often noted that they could not understand what Minsu said, but they felt it was something important enough that they looked online for help translating Minsu's lines. These visibly untranslatable gaps between languages and cultures are what Lawrence Venuti would call "foreignization."

In *The Translator Invisibility*, Venuti identifies two translation strategies, "domestication" and "foreignization." According to Venuti, translation "inevitably domesticates foreign texts, inscribing them with linguistic and cultural values that are intelligible to specific domestic constituencies...always an exclusion of other foreign texts and literatures, which answers to particular domestic interests" (Venuti, *Scandals* 67). Domesticated translation is immediately recognizable, intelligible, and familiarized. For Venuti, the method of domestication is "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home" (Venuti, *Translator* 20). In contrast to domestication, foreignization seeks to retain the original language, keeping the intended meaning and cultural specifics intact. The strategy of foreignizing translation disrupts "the cultural codes that prevail in the target language...deviating from native norms to stage an alien reading experience" (20) that encourages the target audience to pay more attention to the foreign elements of the text they receive.

This creative method of translation is what Mark Nornes would call "abusive translation." In *Cinema Babel*, Nornes discusses two approach of translation: the "corrupt" approach and the "abusive" approach. According to Nornes, "corrupt

translation” is “consumable,” a “readily digestible package that easily supplants any ideological baggage carried by the original film” (Nornes 157), while an abusive translator handles the target language violently in order to release the original meaning (176-177). For Nornes, abusive translation is “an inventive approach to language use and a willingness to bend the rules, both linguistic and cinematic”: as a result, the foreign aspects and experiences are “valued, and where abuse helps inject a palpable sense of the foreign” (179). Despite the film plot being narrated primarily in English, Minsu’s lines are, as Lee and Stringer point out, “neither dubbed nor spoken in accented English.” Instead, *Snowpiercer* finds novel ways to deliver them via Minsu’s distinct voice (Lee and Stringer 271), capturing the unique character and preserving the integrity of “Korean sound” (267). Maintaining the original is a vital component of foreignization and abusive translation since the machine translation does not smoothly represent the meaning of source language, one that is strange to the target audiences, Venuti’s “foreignization” and Nornes’ “abusive translation” are positive forms of resistance and constitute productive translation practice because they restrain the cultural reduction and preserve the foreignness of the original. By inventing a unique method to deliver local expression sentiment, the movie highlights cultural differences and characteristics, resisting monotonous conventional communication and the cultural imperialism inherent in it.

5.4.2.3. Independence

As is usual in most Hollywood movies, English in *Snowpiercer*, is a standard language through which the ruler’s orders and messages are addressed, circulated, and communicated: but not for Minsu. In the film’s context, Minsu presumably knows how to speak English since he designed the train’s security system for Wilford eighteen years

before, and has lived on the train ever since. However, Minsu obstinately speaks only Korean. This suggests that Minsu consciously chooses what language he speaks, defining himself with his independent voice.

In *Decolonizing the Mind*, postcolonial theorist, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o sees language as the enabling condition of human consciousness and identity, stating, "The choice of language and the use of language is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to the entire universe" (Ngũgĩ 4). Ngũgĩ considers English usage in African countries a "cultural bomb" that continues to affect "people's belief and identity in their languages, and in their capacities and ultimately in themselves" (3). Colonized people more and more desire to distance themselves from their own cultural heritage and are ultimately alienated from their pre-colonized selves. A foreign colonial language is one of the greatest threats to the native culture under imperialism. Ngũgĩ's notion about an effect of the imperial language on a colonized country holds true in Asian countries. In South Korea English is considered a crucial instrument one must have in order to gain social prestige and economic success (Collins 424). Children start to learn English from their infancy (some preschoolers know English vocabularies but not Korean vocabularies, or cannot properly pronounce Korean words). Many Korean parents send their children to English speaking countries to provide an opportunity for early English acquisition. The cost of sending their children to an English-speaking country is often more than half of their income. English education causes many issues in South Korea. One of the serious repercussions is family separation, where mothers stay in a foreign country with their children while they get an education, while so-called "wild goose fathers" remain in Korea to provide financial support. The enthusiasm for learning English is often

described by the Korean phrase, “People were born to learn English.” Many observe that English fluency is not only an essential skill for survival but is also a “true measure” of another Korean societal hierarchy, along with gender and class (426). The overpowering force of English remains a source of oppression, another kind of colonialism in people’s mind, which evokes “inferiority and superiority complexes” about English (Kim, “English” 119). English produces hegemonic knowledge, normalizing its universality and authenticity.

Considering the English fever and its dominant status in Korean society, Minsu’s gruff reaction to the English speaker, attacking his ignorance of Korean names and making fun of their mispronunciation of Korean words, creates an additional comic effect and catharsis for Korean audiences that rarely get such a public opportunity to air such grievances. The translation scene makes the relationship between English and Korean look unfamiliar and strange. When two Korean adults first encounter each other speaking Korean, because they are not yet friends, they must use honorifics with each other as a mark of respect, which is quite different from western culture. When Minsu speaks to the English speakers, he omits the Korean honorifics (because there are no English honorifics that are equivalent to the Korean ones) which implies that Minsu does not respect his adult listeners. Minsu treats his listeners like people who are either much younger or socially lesser than he is. Minsu’s speaking Korean in an English way strangely reverses the positions of cultural representation, where there is a supposedly superior English speaker and inferior non-English speaker. The film’s reversal of the linguistic relationship undermines the cultural hierarchy between hegemonic global

language and local language which challenges the acceptance of the universality and authority of English.

Another and clearer example of reversal of the linguistic relationship is shown in the scene, right before the train enters into the Yekaterina tunnel. Mason orders the counter-insurgency force to kill 74% of the tail inhabitants. Curtis has no idea what Mason is planning. Minsu says something alarming in Korean in a serious tone. Curtis desperately wants to know what Minsu says.

Minsu: 커티스, 니들 완전 좃 됐다.

Curtis: [*desperately asking Yona*] What? What did he say?

Yona: [*translating*] He said, you guys are fucked.

Minsu: 야 이 꼬리칸 놈들아!

Yona: [*translating*] You, stupid tail sectioners!

Minsu: 원래 이 에카테리나 지나고 나면 바로 터널이 나와.

Yona: [*translating*] There's a tunnel right after Yekaterina Bridge.

Curtis: Tunnel?

Yona: Umm, a fucking long one.

Minsu: 튀어! [*Run away quickly!*] (*Snowpiercer*).

Curtis completely relies on Yona's translation to receive the critically important information, spoken in Korean, in this life or death situation. Curtis, the English speaker becomes a receiver and Minsu, the Korean speaker becomes a provider of information. The film's reversal of the apparent English-Korean linguistic dominance indicates where the power truly lies.

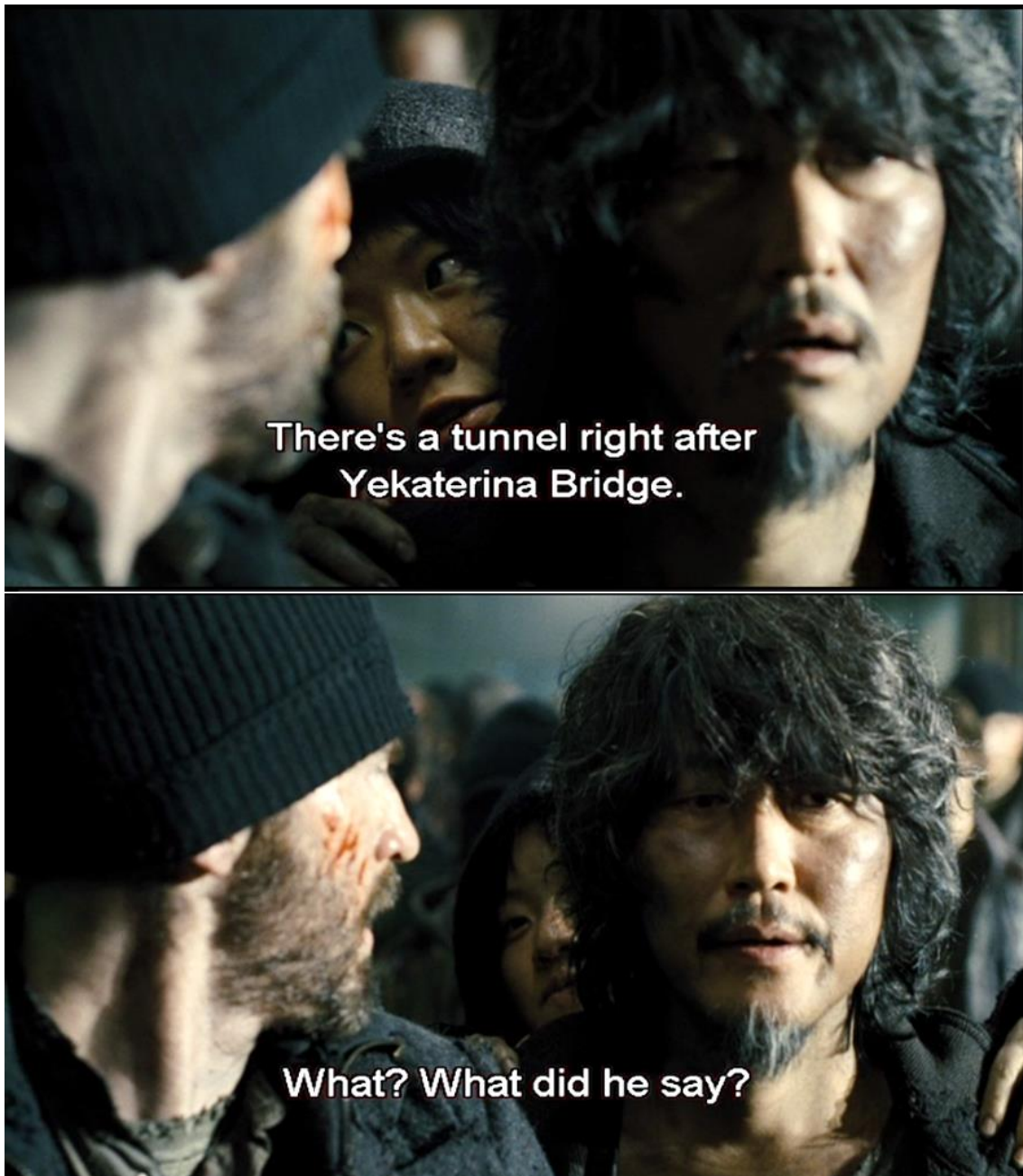


Figure 5.13: Minsu provides important information that Curtis must decipher to survive. © CJ ENM

Minsu is an independent thinker, unlike other passengers who unanimously believe in Wilford's doctrine. Snowpiercer is highly systematized and structured based on the economic and political hierarchy that is justified by the system's ideologies. The authoritarian regime continues producing the train's mythology, propagandizing the

public. The film uses gruesome images to parody the way ideology functions in the dystopian society. When Andrew whose child has been abducted, is grotesquely punished for throwing his shoe at the people who stole his child, Mason puts the shoe on Andrew's head.



Figure 5.14: Mason gives a lecture on the train's order. © CJ ENM

She calls it disorder, size ten (Andrew's shoe size) chaos and argues that for there to be civil society, all passengers must keep their pre-ordained positions: "Would you wear a shoe on your head? ...A shoe does not belong on your head. A shoe belongs on your foot. A hat belongs on a head. I am a hat and you are a shoe. I belong on the head, you belong on the foot. So it is.... Know your place! Keep your place! Be a shoe!" Andrew's frozen arm is shattered. As Curtis passes through the school car he sees Wilford's propaganda at work:

Teacher: If we ever go outside the train?

Children: We all freeze and die.

Teacher: If the engine stops running?

Children: We'd all die!

Teacher: Who takes care of the Sacred Engine?

Children: Sir Wilford!

Teacher: Because all life is here—aboard the train, within the great embrace of Sir Wilford. And nothing can live outside the train (*Snowpiercer*).



Figure 5.15: Children learn Wilford's ideology at school. © CJ ENM

Everyone in the train has been indoctrinated by Wilford's ideologies that have become undisputed truth. When presented as the only way of thinking, hegemony prevents people from questioning or doubting. However, Minsu keeps observing the outside, suggesting that the audience look at the melting snow, and notice, "A jetliner stuck upside down in the gorge. A decade ago, you could only see a part of the tailfin above the ice but now...you can see...the plane's body..." (*Snowpiercer*).



Figure 5.16: Minsu observes a single snowflake. © CJ ENM

Minsu's observations bring about questions that threaten the foundation of the train's world: "What if we could survive outside? (*Snowpiercer*) Let's see the real! Minsu's independent lens shows the spectator a different worldview, and the world that goes Minsu's vision is one example of the way the film destabilizes the political binaries such as front/ tail, inside: life /outside: death, and subverts the existing dominant order.

In a similar vein, Minsu uses standard (or normalized) meaning somewhat differently (in his own way). For example, Minsu's role in the movie is to open the gates toward the front. However, the gate Minsu intends to open is not the gate Curtis and Wilford mean. When Curtis and Minsu arrive at the engine car, Curtis tells Minsu what he went through for the last 18 years, why and how much he hates Wilford, and how long he waited for this moment. Curtis is convinced that if he removes Wilford, he will change the world, but he never questions the system itself.

He desperately wants to open the front gate begging Minsu to open it. But Minsu's reaction is unexpected. Expressionlessly, Minsu clarifies the difference between Curtis and Minsu:

Curtis: Open the gate, please!

Minsu: Thanks for the story, Curtis. But *I don't want to open the gate*. You know what I really want to? It's to open the gate.

[Curtis is lost for words and shakes his head.]

Minsu: But not this gate. That one! *[pointing to an exit hatch]* *The gate to the outside world*. It's been frozen shut for 18 years. People might take it for a wall. But it's a fucking gate. Let's open it and just get the hell out! (*Snowpiercer*).



Figure 5.17: The gate to the outside world. © CJ ENM

A gate is a gate for everyone on board, but the meaning of Minsu's gate is not necessarily the same. For Minsu, changing leaders is not the solution to the existing problem. The problem is the closed system itself. Whoever becomes the leader, will perpetuate the existing system, something that would not be changed, its problems

remaining as long as the system is maintained. Minsu's alternative vision is based on his observations. Producing a slippage between the standard meaning and his own meaning, Minsu clearly makes a double articulation that is "both against the rules and within them" (Bhabha, *Location* 128). This is an apt example of Bhabha's notion of mimicry which is repetition with difference: "*almost same but not quite*" (127). By opening the alternative gate, Minsu ultimately wants to escape from the whole political enclosure and its construction of generalized knowledge. This is a vital moment of emerging cultural hybridity that disturbs the authority of the dominant culture, "its illusory standard of normative or correct usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words" (Ashcroft et al. 38). By having Minsu speak untranslated Korean, the film finds new forms of expression and ensures the preservation of cultural differences and foreignness, increases diverse interpretations, enhances its creative potential in the Hollywood framework, and creates new space where diverse cultural agents come into play in global film making.

5.4.3. The Second Unconventional Character, Yona

Yona (A-sung Ko who played a daughter of Gang-ho Song in Bong's previous film, *The Host* and plays Minsu's daughter in *Snowpiercer* as well.) Yona is an Asian teenage girl. According to Barry Grant, one of the inextricable parts of the Hollywood genre system is the white masculine perspective which was built upon certain racial and gendered assumptions. Therefore, "race, ethnicity, and nationality are commonly stereotyped in genre films, sometimes together" (Grant, *Iconography* 90). However, Yona in *Snowpiercer* does not represent either of Hollywood's racial or gendered stereotypes. She is not submissive or servile, which is a common stereotype of Asian

women, and more importantly she is not sexualized, perhaps the most offensive and painful stereotype of Asian young women. Due to Yona's extraordinary ability to sense what's going on behind the next gate, and to alert the rebels to proceed or not, Yona is crucial to the revolution's success. As Minsu says "if we try to go to the front, we need her help" (*Snowpiercer*). More importantly, Yona plays a decisive role in the film's conclusion. At the engine room, Curtis is almost persuaded by Wilford and takes his offer to be a new leader of the train. Even though Minsu planned to open the gate outside, it is impossible to open it without Curtis's agreement, because he has the last match. When Yona runs to Curtis to ask for the match, Curtis rejects her (Figure 5.18).



Figure 5.18: Yona asks Curtis for the last match and Curtis ignores her request. © CJ ENM

Yona hears something underneath the floor and opens the floor to discover little Timmy working inside the engine (Figure 5.19).



Figure 5.19: Timmy works inside the engine. © CJ ENM

This shocking reality wakes Curtis from Wilford's illusion that the engine is sacred and the engine is eternal. By divulging the hard truth about the train system, Yona changes Curtis' direction from preserving the system to destroying the hopeless status quo. Curtis places the matchbook in Yona's hand and says "Go." With the match, Yona ignites the Kronole bomb. The closed system is unlocked by Minsu, or more accurately by the cooperation between the two unusual Asian heroes (or anti-heroes) and the white male hero who saves the world and re-establishes social orders, as is typical of in similar genre films. This is one of the most important moments in the film, significantly breaking the generic code and narrative convention. Bong discards the racial and sexual stereotypes that are deeply rooted in Hollywood, and challenges the assumptions of the dominant narrative. Furthermore, through Yona's role, Bong delivers his political commentary about revolutionary movement as a social transformation that must be led by the indigenous population, and not by a patriarchal white male. The young minority female

whose ideas and vision are usually neglected in a conventional revolution, should enter the central arena or find agency to participate in socio-political change.

5.4.4. Unconventional Ending—A Positive Destruction

The conclusion of *Snowpiercer* is ambiguous, rather than offering a narrative closure. The open quality of the ending creates an ambivalent site of translation. The radical destruction of *Snowpiercer* is largely viewed as pessimistic since almost all aboard, including the white leading heroes die. An audience expecting a traditional genre ending may feel lost, confused, and betrayed.



Figure 5.20: The closed system is unlocked. © CJ ENM

None of white male heroes save both the world and themselves with it. The two survivors, Yona and the five-year-old boy, Timmy, are train babies who were born in the moving train. They have never experienced the Earth. They emerge from the train, one Asian and one African American and step onto the Earth that is a new world for them.



Figure 5.21: The side door to the outside opens. © CJ ENM



Figure 5.22: The first step on earth. © CJ ENM

They discover a living thing in the outside world, a fully-grown polar bear watching them on a mountain. Many audiences view this scene as a sign of the end of humanity as they interpret the bear, one of the top predators of the food chain, as

watching the prey (Yona and Timmy) in the near distance. This is one possible conclusion.

In contrast to such pessimistic view, the director has offered that he has a hopeful vision with the film's ending. For example, Yona and Timmy walk outside the train. They breathe calmly and Yona takes off her fur hood. This is a hopeful sign as the environment outside the train is recovering and inhabitable. The visibility of polar bear is read as the return of the emblematic victim of the global warming.



Figure 5.23: A polar bear watching Yona and Timmy. © CJ ENM

The presence of bear is also resonant of the beginning of a new world what Koreans associate with the Korean foundation mythology. In the mythology, the founder of Korea, Tangun, was the son of the heaven's emperor and his mother was a bear woman who had been transformed from a bear.

Another important hopeful sign is that the film offers the imagined emancipation of humanity from the restriction of the current system. In an interview, the director

expressed, “the movie is about a system. If you take the train as the frame or the context of this world, it’s really about how people are trapped within the system and how people try to escape the system or change the system” (qtd. in Chen). In *Snowpiercer*, Wilford’s train is an allegory for global capitalism and the train’s slogans, such as “If the engine stops running, everyone will die...All life is here—aboard the train...nothing can live outside the train” (*Snowpiercer*), represent the prevailing ideology of our times, the impossibility of imagining alternatives to capitalism. This ideological closure is described by Fredric Jameson: “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (Jameson 76). By derailing the unstoppable super train from its global trajectory, the movie raises an imaginary revolution offering a symbolic termination of global capitalism. It is, as Jeong aptly puts it, “a potential positive one that deranges the Symbolic and opens the Real of unknown futures immanent in the present. As a chance of encounter with unpredictable rupture, it enters the void, the ‘beyond-the law’ of situations” (Jeong 369). With the destruction of the closed train system, the whole political and economic orders as well as its social and cultural tendencies are destroyed. Social divisions and hierarchies such as master/slave, dominant/dominated, superior/inferior, center/margin, front/tail, and global/local narratives are no longer relevant. The film places the future of humanity in the hands of Yona and Timmy. Yona, a teenage girl as a symbol of the most vulnerable victim who died due to the flawed system in Bong’s previous films, and Timmy, the weakest and the most dehumanized by the system, take their first steps onto a new world that is no longer moving, no longer rattling and no longer closed. It would not be meaningful to debate whether they are White Caucasian, Black, or Asian. Such division is the legacy of the train system. These

children are the future generation whom Curtis and Minsu; as the parent generation, wanted to save at the cost of their lives. However, it is clearly indicated that there is no white race in the post-train world. With the end of the white race, the movie completely shatters genre conventions in a revolutionary counterattack against Hollywood's genre system. A new generation may begin a new life with a different set of possibilities and opportunities. No one can anticipate exactly what sort of world the coming generation will establish. It is not about what is better or worse, rather the movie more focuses on whether humanity can break the ideology of the system within which we are imprisoned. By imagining a future that is not part of the current state of order, *Snowpiercer* breaks its ideological cage and transcends our political horizon. By doing that, it opens new space which enables new visions, and alternative narratives for the future enter to the world.

5.5. Conclusion

This case study traces how *Snowpiercer* emulates the American film model and reworks conventional genres, highlighting how the film diverges from the dominant narrative form; how the practice of genre transformation is used to subvert and criticize hegemonic discourse; how the film offers an alternative view while ignoring the politics of polarity. The analysis shows that the film recycles shared semantic and syntactic components of genre conventions, most notably Hollywood apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic and dystopian SF genre film, with the familiar themes, settings, characters, tropes and iconographies. The film is set in the aftermath of global catastrophe, a completely frozen wasteland, empty ruins and death, depicting the people's struggle under a dystopian oppressive regime. One of the most immediately recognizable genre elements the film exhibits is three familiar white male leads played by iconic Hollywood stars. Curtis

(played by Chris Evans), is instantly recognizable as Captain America whose narrative role, pattern of action, and moral values in other films are readily identifiable. This familiarity of character provides the audience with a strong expectation and a certain promise of predictability that he will save the people and the world. The film offers, initially, a sense of nostalgia (Cawelti, "Chinatown" 289). However, as the movie progresses, the three conventional characters reveal some different sides, disturbing and shocking truths. Curtis confesses his experience of cannibalism; Gilliam turns out to be one of Wilford's collaborators; Wilford hides the secret of the system that runs on child abuse. The relationship between these three men is complicatedly twisted. In addition, the film keeps eluding genre conventions and our expectations, forming incongruous combinations that blur "the line between comedy and tragedy" (286). Curtis slipping on the fish, and his line while he confesses, "the babies taste best" create unexpected slapsticks, absurd sense of humor or "black humor" (287) in Cawelti's words. By using genre conventions differently, the film interrupts conventional perceptions and "calm pleasure with the familiarity" (Berliner, *Hollywood* 171) and forces us to rethink the conventional narratives and assumptions.

The film also introduces new unconventional characters, Namgoong Minsu and his daughter, who play key roles in the progress of the plot, altering the white-lead story substantially. Minsu does not passively listen to the ruling ideas and myths, but rather thinks critically and questions the standard meaning and normality of the system, observing real changes of the outside world, and suggesting an alternative vision and worldview. Minsu consciously chooses what language he speaks, one that is not the standard language of the train nor of the genre. He also uses the dominant norm

differently and inappropriately to undermine the authority of the system order as well as disrupt the current worldview. Through the characters of Minsu and Yona, the film rejects racial and sexual stereotypes that are ingrained in Hollywood genre films, and challenges the assumptions of dominant narrative codes. Minsu is no longer a dependent side kick character who is subservient, nor is he a superstitious Asian man. Rather he is a critical, reasonable, and independent thinker with more insight than anyone else in the system. Yona, the young minority female, is an active player whose role and vision is key to the major change from the same old story. Through this unusual handling of genre properties, the film not only redefines the cultural identities of minorities but also empowers them, such as the young female minority, to achieve agency and to participate in socio-political change.

By opening an alternative gate, *Snowpiercer* breaks the frame of typical post-apocalyptic narrative, as well as the myth of genre. No white male heroes save the world. There is no reestablishment of traditional society and conservative values. Such unexpected narrative events significantly unsettle the generic moral codes. The film produces a self-critical discursive trope as an effective tool to “debunk and demystify the central motifs and icons of the genre” (Berliner, “Genre” 26). The film is an example of demythologization that “deliberately invokes the basic characteristics of a traditional genre in order to bring its audience to see that genre as the embodiment of an inadequate and destructive myth” (Cawelti, “Chinatown” 290).

Based on this case study and from the perspective of genre transformation, *Snowpiercer* reveals a manifestation of cultural hybridity “*almost the same, but not quite*” as an insurgent strategy of “counter-appeal” (Bhabha *Location* 129-30). The film mimics

the authoritative symbols (genre conventions and standard norms) but translates them differently and subversively, and revalues the myth and assumptions of discriminatory knowledge (159) that are ingrained in the genre convention. By using a Hollywood narrative framework and challenging the authority of cultural hegemony, the film opens a new space where diverse cultural agents come into play and diverse interpretations emerge. Through the innovative practice of genre transformation, the movie formulates a cultural hybridity that not only resists simplistic description of cultural identity but also opens a “Third Space,” in Bhabha’s words, where cultural differences are valued and local sentiments and cultural characteristics are maintained, increasing the likelihood of inter-cultural dialogue and contributing to promotion of a creative potential and the capacity to find new forms of cinematic expression.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

While shooting *Snowpiercer*, director Bong said in an interview that Chris Evans (Curtis in *Snowpiercer*) appeared on TV and said, “I am working on a small but very unique sci-fi movie” (Suskind). Bong acknowledges that Chris is right. From his point of view, it is a small budget film compared to Hollywood, however it was the most expensive South Korean production to that date. It was also a large budget compared to Bong’s earlier works. This tells us where the Korean cultural industry is located on the grid of the global market, in terms of its budget scale. Even if it was the biggest budget in South Korea, in order to compete with Hollywood, as Bong said, “the budget was very, very limited...I accepted those limitations and just worked within them” (Suskind). Most Korean directors probably feel the same way. There is no other way but to accept this limited budget because it is a pre-established situation. As mentioned in the introduction, in the 1990s with the economic crisis and the pressure of opening the national market, the Korean cultural industry was driven to the verge of sinking, with Korean film’s domestic market share dropping to less than 16%. The quality of national films remained crude and low. Nevertheless, as Kyunghyun Kim points out, since the late 1950s, American popular culture has heavily flooded into Korea.

This exposure of Korea to American media contents was “perhaps as great as that of any other country in Asia” (Kim, *Virtual* 14), which means that Hollywood products set a new global standard among Korean audiences. In these circumstances, the most pressing issue Korean producers faced was to reach audiences by producing competitive films of a quality similar to Hollywood films, in order to survive. Since Hollywood was successful, Korean producers had to use Hollywood as a benchmark for production. Mi Hui Kim notes that “Korean cinema has no choice but to duplicate the scale and entertainment value of Hollywood movies if it wants to boost box office competitiveness and maintain market share” (Kim “Copywood”). If genre was Hollywood’s invention and a verified way to commercial success, mimicking genre may have been the logical choice for Korean producers to look to Hollywood for proven formulas and standard production process, as well as the essential characteristics of genre movies as “commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situation” (Grant, *Iconography* 1). One of the most important reasons that Korean producers use genre practice (global standard popular genre convention) is to survive commercially.

Throughout my analysis, it is readily evident that the films exploit familiar genre conventions, narrative plots, settings and tropes, amplifying attractive iconic scenes that the directors admired and wished to see on the screen. The films create sheer generic pleasure, accompanied by an aura of nostalgia (Cawelti, “Chinatown” 289) with its secure comforting pleasure, creating a thrilling and exciting viewing experience. For example, *The Good the Bad the Weird*, uses the familiar semantic elements, narrative motifs, and iconographies of Hollywood and European genre films unabashedly. Despite

displaying familiar images of typical westerns, the film intentionally violates the rules, departing from the thematic structure of the classic American, Spaghetti, and traditional Manchurian western. The film revisits the colonial past, resisting the simplistic description of colonial identity from previous films, and challenging the essential components of previous models. Unlike the heroes of the previous models, the main protagonists in *The Good the Bad the Weird* are marginalized people who were ousted from their stolen country. None of them, however, are subject to sorrow or grief, or are required to make a sacrifice over the loss of country. The Bad suffered a traumatic past and seeks to avenge it, but such stories are common around the world and are not uniquely Korean in essence. The film focuses more on the Weird who is not the ideal messianic hero of the American western, the stylish hero of a spaghetti western, or a glorious fighter for country's independence in the Manchurian westerns. He is just one of the ordinary people whose immediate and foremost concern is surviving in the harsh environment. He is uncontrollable, chaotic, and an unpredictable loser type of character. He is certainly not a typical western hero but his scenes are full of sparkling humor and wit. Although the film reveals the Weird's secret identity, which significantly changes the story, the film pays more attention to the Weird's tenaciousness, resilience, and resourcefulness which represent Korean culture and its people's characteristics. For the Weird, "survival" is more important than law and honor more than anything. The Weird's interests reflect perhaps the most urgent issue the Korean people face and need to solve. Even if the film takes place in 1930s Manchuria, the situation is not much different from today's where the Korean people face limitless competition in the global market.

The film also explores the lives of Korean migrants in colonial Manchuria. None of them are independent fighters or nationalists as portrayed in typical Manchurian westerns. Breaking narrative convention, redefining colonial identity, resisting the simple description of identity from a binary perspective (Bhabha, *Location 2*) and using irony, the film playfully mocks the central motifs of the standard genre convention and effectively undermines the cultural myths embedded in the genre convention, seeking new meanings and aesthetics. *The Good the Bad the Weird* revisits historical space and rewrites cultural identity and the colonial past both through experimentation and violation of existing genre conventions. Changing the genre means that the film revitalizes and updates obsolete genre conventions and myths to communicate with today's audience. Kim uses global film language for his own purposes to develop artistic creativity and to revalue cultural identity, resulting in his own the new brand, the Kimchi western, which is not American-European, Asian, or Manchurian, but is very similar to all.

Reusing genre expectations in order to further artistic achievement is more prominent in *Snowpiercer*. One of the striking examples in *Snowpiercer* is that Minsu speaks Korean in his indigenous tone of voice without any dubbing, translating or subtitling, within the Hollywood style blockbuster genre film. By downplaying the privilege of English—the standard genre language and its cultural supremacy—the film pays attention to the foreign elements, the raw Korean language spoke in Minsu's voice, which embodies the film's distinctive identity. The film empowers the minority's agency to articulate its identity, perspectives and meanings in its own voice. With this “abusive” approach toward language, the film violently bends the genre conventions, ensuring the foreign aspects and experiences are valued and preserved.

The film delivers Minsu's combative language without translation. By letting him express his emotion in his native language, the film gives life to specific regional culture and makes sure of a dialog between different cultures, rather than passively accepting the normality of English. In breaking this normality, the norm starts to look unnatural—revealing that the accepted standard language is not necessarily normal in other places, just like the normality of white heroism is not necessarily “normal” but is constructed in and by Hollywood genre film. Cultural hegemony is part of Hollywood's cultural construction. Minsu is eccentric, ambivalent, but a non-conformist free spirit, unrestrained by the system. He is independent and rebellious—an unconventional character created by Bong. As a visionary director, Bong clearly conveys his thought and social and political commentary through Minsu. Minsu forces us to see what is going on under the surface and challenges the myths and common beliefs of the system in which people are cocooned, forces us question the truths we are told, and gives us a wakeup call about the comforting fantasy that the hero will save the world and safely return the conservative order. By debunking the genre myth and betraying the spectators' expectations, the film urges us to escape from Wilford's iron cage.

By disrupting the majoritarian sense of cultural canon and authenticity, the film creates a space of conflict, confusion, and dissonance that challenges conventional norms. The film keeps exploring possibilities beyond the Hollywood formula. There are shocking, surprising, hilarious moments for both global and local audiences. *Snowpiercer* increases diverse interpretations and revisions which enhance its potential to find new forms of expression that in turn create new cultural meanings. Bong's method is neither blind copying nor a passive assimilation of different cultural elements, but rather the

opening of a “Third Space” where cultural differences interact “without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha *Location* 5), and where the active creation and inscription of cultural sign increases the chance for more flexible and democratic ways of performing intercultural dialogue. Even if the film appears to be a typical Hollywood-style blockbuster, it significantly resists cultural norms, canon, myth, and assumptions that are constructed by American popular culture; the film violently breaks the generic mold. Though the process, Bong solidifies his autonomy as the primary author of the film and his control over the film gives it a unique identity, etching his auteur’s signature on a film that is not exactly American and not exactly Korean—a monstrous hybrid form.

The objective of this project has been to show how the media of contemporary Korean popular culture, specifically films, are transformed into “hybrid cultural forms.” My approach has focused on the analysis of the film texts from the perspective of genre transformation. These case studies reveal that Homi Bhabha’s notion of cultural hybridity is evident in Korean films that imitate dominant cultural forms and models “strategically [as] an insurgent counter-appeal” (129-30). The practice of genre transformation plays a powerful and crucial role in creating cultural hybridity in Korean cinema by refreshing genre conventions, critically reevaluating of cultural myths and assumptions, allowing cultural minorities to rearticulate their cultural identities and experiences, and actively creating counter narratives while preserving local characteristics. Hybrid forms of Korean cultural products must be clearly distinguished from “Copywood,” the pejorative label for the Korean cultural products that refers to “cheap imitation films essentially no different from the inferior counterfeit products” (Kim, *Virtual* xv).

The unique cultural hybridity in Korean films contributes to commercially and artistically reaching a wider audience. As Kyung Hyun Kim points out, “though the democratization movement of the 1980s briefly flirted with the ideas of decolonization, cultural independence, and sovereignty” (14), until the 1990s, Korean cinema could not use the genre forms creatively, and “no cultural alternatives could effectively challenge the hegemony of Hollywood until Korean commercial films” arrived (14). South Korean directors looked to Hollywood for tools to reach a mainstream local audience. As shown in the Korean film market share in Figure 1.1 (page 9 above) since 2003, Korean films have steadily maintained a domestic market share of close to 50 percent. According to Klein, “this causes difficulties for Hollywood producers to get their films into Korean theater...[South Korean directors] revive its [production]... steady supply of high-quality entertainment and aesthetically innovative works” (Klein, “Copywood”)

The cultural hybridity in Korean films also contributes to developing artistic quality. As Kyung Hyun Kim notes, Korea’s blockbuster auteurs of the early twenty-first century, ironically “have attained their stardom by fully exploiting their love-hate relationship with the genre films from Hollywood, Japan and Hong Kong...their works display hybridity that equally engages both national identity and global aesthetics, art and commercialism, conformity and subversion, and narrative coherence and stylistic flair” (*Virtual* 12-13). This Korean pastiche of Hollywood’s aesthetic “began to build its own audience base in the late 1990s...and star directors...were in great demand not only at international film festivals but also in Hollywood” (14). Since the early 2000s, Korean films have been increasingly recognized in the international film festival circuit and among foreign filmmakers. For example, Park Chan-wook won the Grand Prix at the

2004 Cannes Film Festival for *Oldboy*. After the success of *Joint Security Area* (2001), Park's Vengeance Trilogy: *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Old Boy* (2003), and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005) was widely recognized as a new form of genre-branding—Asian extreme (Lee 114). Park's *The Handmaiden* (2016) caused him to receive his third invitation to the main competition of the Cannes Film Festival. The film won the Award for Best Film Not In English at the 71st British Academy Film Awards in London. Kim Jee-woon is a representative genre bender who constructs new films using old formulae, such as the eclectic approach to genre of *The Quiet Family* (1998). Kim's *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003) received critical attention and is considered a great achievement of contemporary Korean horror. Asian film scholar Vivian Lee says, "A *Tale of Two Sisters* enhanced critical and popular expectations around the genre and contributed to the Korean movie industry's horror boom" (Lee 108). Bong Joon-ho's films include *Memories of Murder* (2003), *The Host* (2006), *Snowpiercer* (2013), and the recent film, *Okja* (2017), all of which were widely acclaimed by critics and international festivals. Kim Ki-duk's art-house cinematic works, *The Isle* (2000) and *3-Iron* (2004) won awards in Venice and Berlin and received the Best Director Award for *Samaritan Girl* (2004) at Berlin. Recently Kim won the Golden Lion Award for *Pieta* (2012) at the Venice Film Festival. Lee Chang-dong won the Best Director Award at the 2002 Venice Film Festival for *Oasis*. For his *Secret Sunshine* (2007), the lead actress Jeon Do-yeon won the Best Actress award at Cannes in 2007. Hong Sang-soo has received international recognition, especially in European countries. He won the Golden Leopard in 2015 at the Locarno International Film Festival for *Right Now, Wrong Then*.

Korean genre auteurs, such as Park Chan-woon, Kim Jee-woon, Bong Joon-ho were also invited to work in Hollywood.

The rising reputation of Korean cinema triggered Hollywood's purchase of numerous Korean box office hits for remake. However, according to Chung and Diffrient, "none of the Hollywood films based on Korean genre films have successfully achieved the cult status of the originals in both Asian and international markets" (249). For example, the Twentieth Century-Fox's remake of the Korean romantic comedy, "*My Sassy Girl* (2008) failed to 'Americanize' much of the culturally specific humor of the hit...Paramount's *The Uninvited* (2009), adapted from Kim Jee-woon's...*A Tale of Two Sisters*... Spike Lee's *Oldboy*..." received negative reviews (249). Spectators have expressed their disappointment: the remake is "utterly unnecessary," "colorless and soulless in the extreme,[bearing] no one's fingerprints at all," "Garbage never smells good, but you won't find a landfill anywhere more offensive than Spike Lee's stupid remake of *Old Boy*...This one stinks at 10 below zero" (qtd. in 249). Chung and Diffrient argue that the failure of Hollywood remakes of Korean films is due to "the untranslatability of narrative circumstances and characterizations unique to South Korean culture" (249). These "untranslatable" elements are "local cultural references in the Korean originals" and "local sentiments and cultural context" that are the unique qualities of Korean texts, which Bhabha calls the "foreignness of cultural translation" (Bhabha, *Location* 325). This untranslatable foreignness in Korean film text makes Korean films distinctive from an exact copy by Hollywood, instead they are something else—a hybrid form that preserves cultural difference and local identity, rather than erasing them.

Based on the analysis of the hybrid nature of Korean films, this dissertation concludes that Korean producers' desire and need to go global has conditioned Korean films to use global film languages. Through the deliberately imperfect imitation of dominant culture created by reconfiguring generic elements, the films challenge and revalue the dominant norms, allowing the cultural minority more agencies to speak for itself, and producing more dialogs between different cultures, all of which reinforce cultural diversity. Cultural hybridization is a key strategy of Korean popular culture, specifically since the early 21st century, for survival commercially, aesthetically, and culturally. The practice of genre transformation plays a decisive role in creating culturally hybrid texts that contributes not only to increasing cultural exchange and dissemination but also to the artistic development of cultural expression and, more importantly, to enhancing cultural diversity in an age of global transnationalism.

The major contribution of this dissertation is its scrutiny of contemporary Korean genre films, which are globally spread and look familiar and approachable because of their usage of the globally shared generic conventions, as well I have worked to trace the way those genres have been translated and reformed. The dissertation also demonstrates how the practice of genre transformation effectively operates to evade narrative closure, to accomplish subversive functions, and to create cultural hybridity. The dissertation offers additional interpretations to the cultural specificities that are inherent in film texts and is often unnoticed in the mainstream perception. This dissertation will assist researchers practicing in media studies, popular culture, and film studies seeking illumination and appreciation of Korean popular culture, its unique aesthetic values, and the popular strategies of its filmmaking.

While conducting this project, I have observed that Korean directors' artistic enthusiasm has continuously explored new themes and forms. Genre in the Korean film industry has been increasingly diversified. As shown in Figure 6.1, the box office top 15 Korean films of all time were produced in Korea except *Avatar*. Thematically, the successful blockbusters are tailored to Korean audiences through locally specific backdrops such as in *Roaring Currents*; *Ode to My Father*; *Masquerade*; *A Taxi Driver*; *The Attorney*, the historical fiction, *King and the Clown*, and the colonial era films such as *Assassination*.

Table 6.1: Korea Film Box Office Top 15 (All Time)

Rank	Title	Genre	Release	Country	Admissions
1	The Admiral: Roaring Currents	History, war	2014	Korea	17,615,162
2	Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds	Fantasy, drama	2017	Korea	14,410,773
3	Ode to My Father	History, family drama	2014	Korea	14,262,507
4	Veteran	Crime, comedy	2015	Korea	13,414,200
5	Avatar	SF, fantasy	2009	US	13,302,637
6	The Thieves	Crime, comedy	2012	Korea	12,983,841
7	Miracle in Cell No.7	Comedy, drama	2013	Korea	12,811,435
8	Assassination	Period drama	2015	Korea	12,706,483
9	Masquerade	Historical drama	2012	Korea	12,323,595
10	A Taxi Driver	History, drama	2017	Korea	12,186,925
11	Train to Busan	Zombie, disaster	2016	Korea	11,566,862
12	The Attorney	Political drama	2013	Korea	11,374,879
13	Haeundae	Disaster, drama	2009	Korea	11,324,561
14	The Host	SF, family drama	2006	Korea	10,917,221
15	King and The Clown	Historical fiction	2005	Korea	10,513,715

Note: The table was created using data from the database of the Korea Film Council 2018.

In Korea, action, film noir, thriller, horror, gangster comedy, and crime comedy genres have been popular. These genres have continued flourishing and developing.

Recent examples of these genres are *Asura: The City of Madness* (2016), *Master* (2016), *The Villainess* (2017) and *The Merciless* (2017). Along with existing popular genres, new genre diversification is notable. Unlike films from Hollywood, some genres such as SF, fantasy, zombie, superhero films have rarely been attempted, and remain marginal in Korea. However, these uncommon genres, such as fantasy: *Along with the Gods* (2017), the SF zombie film: *Train To Busan* (2016), supernatural mystery thriller: *The Wailing* (2016), and superhero film *Psychokinesis* (2018) have recently emerged and won surprising success. Considering many young Korean producers' artistic enthusiasm and creativity, and their various attempts to embark on new areas of exploration by innovatively revitalizing diverse genres and themes, their various accumulated experiences and positive recognition both home and abroad suggests that the future of Korean film industry is a healthy one.

Based on the findings of this dissertation, I would like to broaden my research further by exploring the new genre films recently produced in Korea, encompassing SF, adventure, fantasy, and zombie action films. I am particularly interested in the new zombie film, *Train to Busan*, and a SF adventure drama, *Okja*.

Train to Busan (2016) is the first zombie blockbuster in Korea directed by Yeon Sang-ho. *Train to Busan* is Yeon's first live action film debut. The film was the highest grossing Korean film of 2016, (Jeong, "Looking" 55). *Train to Busan* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival Midnight Screening, which led to selling of the film to 160 countries, making it the most profitable Korean film, outside of the country, of all time (Conran 5). Director Yeon is known as the most disturbing adult animation director working in Korea today. His work shows his propensity for distrust and criticism of

society. Yeon's first indie animation film, *The King of Pigs* (2011) was the first Korean animated film to screen at Cannes and won multiple awards. His next animation, *The Fake* (2013), which dealt with cultish religions in Korea, garnered many festival invitations including the Toronto International Film Festival's Vanguard Section. His zombie apocalypse animation *Seoul Station* (2016) is a prequel of *Train to Busan* (KOFIC 31).

As mentioned before, the zombie genre has been rare in Korea, nearly no one has been interested in producing or investing in it. According to the director, when he was showing several producers the script for *Train To Busan*, he was told: "you think it's possible to make a zombie film like this?" while others were not even interested. But he was convinced that it would be a lot of fun and interesting enough for the audience (Jeong, "Interview" 30). Reviewers called the movie "*Snowpiercer* meets *World War Z*", or "*Snowpiercer* with zombies" (Jagernaut) because the apocalyptic zombies outbreak on the high-speed KTX (Korea Train Express) from Seoul to Busan, with the passengers then battling it out for survival with the zombies. Critics view *Train to Busan* as "the latest example of how, now that Korean directors are competing more directly with Hollywood, they're incorporating more foreign influences to critique their government" (Borowiec). According to a *BBC* report, European and US film studios are vying to make their own versions of the film (Chen). It is interesting how the zombie film, a very unusual genre in Korea, has been transplanted onto Korean soil; how the same zombie story unfolds differently in the claustrophobic train reflects a specific social, cultural Korean reality that makes particular meaning for Koreans; however, being ignorant of that context has not hurt the film's acceptance worldwide.

Another good example of a genre-defying film is *Okja* (2017) directed by Bong Joon ho, which mixes SF, fantasy, adventure, action drama and social satire. The film was fully funded by the U.S. streaming giant Netflix, casting multinational actors and using Hollywood production techniques. The film is about a girl, Mija and her giant pig, Okja. This pig is a new breed produced by a multinational food corporation called the Mirando Corporation, a Monsanto-like entity. These genetically modified pigs are sent to 26 different countries to be raised. One of the piglets, Okja, and little Mija have grown up together on a remote mountain farm that belongs to Mija's grandfather. Mija and Okja are best friends: Okja is mischievous, loving and loyal. After ten years, Mirando has a contest to see which pig has grown to be the super pig. Okja is taken from Mija by the Mirando Corporation and prepared to be shipped off to America. Mija sets off to get Okja back and desperately fights to rescue Okja. While the young Korean girl struggles against the powerful American corporation, the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) is involved in the rescuing of Okja from Mirando's inhumane treatment. Bong accurately reflects the absurd and dark side of corporations and global capitalism as seen from the perspective of a child.

In *Okja*, two languages are used: English and Korean. The movie creates lots of jokes and humor through mistranslations and gaps between Korean and English. As in *Snowpiercer*, Bong cleverly uses this element as a subversive tool of English supremacy. For example, when the leader of ALF group J, who speaks only English, explains their plan to use Okja in order to reveal the Mirando Corporation's animal abuse and asks whether or not Mija agrees with this, Mija, who only speaks Korean, clearly says, "I wanna take Okja back to mountain." One of the AFL members, K, is a Korean-American

who acts as a translator between J and Mija. K wants to succeed in their mission so he intentionally mistranslates saying, “she agrees to the mission.” Right before he jumps out of the truck, K tells Mija, “My name is Koo Sun-bum.” But the subtitle appears, “Mija! Try learning English. It opens new doors!” (a comment that mocks Korean society’s obsession with English education). This obvious mistranslation creates unexpected comic effects which only Korean-English speakers can fully enjoy. It also clearly shows how K’s mistranslation significantly misdirects the plot. Later J finds out that K mistranslated Mija’s words. J becomes furious and beats K seriously, saying “Never mistranslate. Translation is sacred.” Later when K joins J and Mija to rescue Okja, K shows the tattoo on his arm that is clearly embossed: “Translations are Sacred.”



Figure 6.1: Translations are Sacred. Netflix

Using mistranslations in a humorous way in the film and on a meta level, Bong reveals the issues of transnational cultural product that only English-Korean speakers can understand.

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Curriculum Vitae

Name: Kyunghee Kim

Post-secondary Education and Degrees:

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
Ph.D. Media Studies, 2013-2018

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
M.A. Comparative Literatures, 2007-2009

Chungnam National University, Daejeon, Korea
M.Ed. German Language Pedagogy, 2000-2003

Kunkuk University, Seoul, Korea
B.A. German Language and Literature, 1984-1989

Honours and Awards:

USC Teaching Honour Roll Award of Excellence
The University of Western Ontario
2010-2013

Related Work Experience

Research Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2018

Graduate Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2013-2017

Instructor, Korean for Beginners and Intermediate
The University of Western Ontario
2007-2013