MELODRAMATIC AND FORMULAIC: THE GLOBAL APPEAL OF KOREAN TELEVISION DRAMAS

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ABSTRACT

International fervor for Korean pop culture has constituted a contra-flow against Western media hegemony. Since 1997, the global rise of South Korea’s entertainment industries has come to be known as the Korean Wave, or Hallyu. Contra-flows—subaltern cultural exchanges that move in opposition to Western hegemonic media (Thussu 2007, 11)—are complex, under-investigated, and controversial in their importance as they exhibit what Arjun Appadurai describes as "disjunctures between economy, culture, and politics" (Appadurai 1996, 33). In contra-flow, capitalist power structures are insufficient to understand why media texts are disseminated across borders, cultures, or language. This study expands on the investigation of the Korean Wave by examining one of its central entertainment exports—Korean dramas—for their exhibition of hybridized and glocalized genre conventions. I employ a multimethod approach to both establish the cinematic language through which Korean dramas tell their stories and to test the salience of this framework with non-Korean audiences. First, I analyze five Korean dramas popular with English-speaking viewers—utilizing a close reading—for their use of a melodramatic narrative mode. In this close reading, I also perform a critique on the hybridized genre signifiers which position Korean dramas within a schema of subgenres. These subgenres resemble film genres of Hollywood and other national cinemas. Second, I conduct a survey of Korean drama fans living
outside of South Korea. Respondents describe genre as one of the most important factors in deciding which shows to watch. The findings of this study suggest that the use of a variety of genres codes in Korean dramas gives audiences multiple places to find familiarity, and the melodrama structure helps viewers follow the story. Even with barriers of language and culture, genre acts as a bridge for understanding and enjoyment.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to a great number of people, but in particular my thesis advisors Dr. Matthew Tinkcom and Dr. Diana Own for your help, patience, and encouragement. I could not have undertaken such a large project without you.

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   Katie
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INTRODUCTION

“So you read these types of books. Are they fun?”

“I read them because they’re fun.”

“But don’t they always say the same thing?”

“That’s why it’s fun. Even if you get betrayed there’s one friend who trusts you. Everything your teacher or mentor says is right so you only have to follow what he says. If you work hard, results will follow. The bad guys will get punished.

That’s nice”

“That’s too obvious though.”

“That’s what’s good. The world sucks because you can’t do what’s obvious and simple.”

(Just Between Lovers 2017)

Why are so many people watching South Korean television dramas? In Just Between Lovers (2017), a young woman, Ha Moon Soo, notices that her new friend Lee Kang Do has a large collection of wuxia1 novels and comics. The genre, she posits, is overly formulaic and simplistic. How can something that falls so rigidly into prescribed patterns be fun? In this moment of reflexivity, characters in a melodrama comment on the pleasure of entertainment often considered cliché and low-brow. The exchange calls attention to the fact that trope-driven genre stories can be fun. What critics identify as a flaw are actually a feature which audiences seek out and ritualistically revisit over and over again.

Just Between Lovers is a South Korean television drama that was initially broadcast by South Korean cable network JTBC in 2017 and licensed by streaming video on demand (SVoD) platform Viki for online distribution in territories all over the world, including the United States.

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1 Wuxia is a popular Chinese genre that describes martial artist adventure stories set in ancient China.
After acquiring international distribution rights, Viki outsourced the creation of subtitles. A network of volunteers then translated *Just Between Lovers* into English and thirty-three other languages ("Just Between Lovers" n.d.). In this way, a television show from a small South Korean cable company was made available to viewers from all over the globe.

This show is just one of hundreds of South Korean television shows that have been distributed internationally since 1997. Although the craze for South Korean television began regionally in East Asia, the form has spread all over the globe and even into the United States. Articles about South Korean dramas can be found on *MTV*, *Teen Vogue*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Variety*, *New York Magazine’s Vulture Blog*, and even *Forbes*. The Korean Wave, or *Hallyu*, as it has been dubbed, has challenged traditional ideas of Western hegemonic media dominance and has helped shape a reconceptualization of audiences.

It is not a coincidence that the Korean Wave aligns with the rise of the internet. Internet distribution and the affordances of computing power and digitization have been key to the dissemination of Korean dramas worldwide. Simultaneous to the Korean Wave, Western media companies also began to experiment with internet-based global distribution models. Netflix, a pioneer in streaming video, has expanded into nearly every country on the globe (baring China) and early in its corporate history began looking for programming with global appeal ("About Netflix" 2019).

Marketing studies have found that audiences respond to things that are familiar (Celsi and Olson 1988). The preference for the recognizable over the foreign is the reason global companies create specialized products for different markets to satisfy local customer tastes. Beginning in 2014, Netflix began licensing exclusive “Netflix Originals” which included global storylines and

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casts (“About Netflix” 2019). Shows *Marco Polo* (2014-2016), *Sense8* (2015), and *Narcos* (2015), all span continents and languages, while operating within popular genres, historical, science fiction and crime, respectively. Netflix wanted to attract new audiences and new territories by providing “must see” content. Meanwhile, South Korean television was moving internationally without owning the means of dissemination.

As entertainment companies look to produce and license content that will be appreciated beyond national borders and across languages, an in-depth look at the Korean drama texts offers insight into what audiences find accessible. Korean dramas are fascinating media products because, while there have been very successful format sales, such as the U.S. remake of *The Good Doctor* (2017-), the original South Korean productions are attracting an increasingly large Western audience. These dramas are finding success even without the expense of making local versions. A study by the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) in 2014 estimated that 18 million Americans watch Korean dramas “based on numbers of visitors to popular streaming sites” (“About 18 million Americans enjoy K-dramas: Korea Creative Content Agency” 2014). For comparison, there are five million subscribers to HBO’s streaming platform HBO Now (FierceCable 2018). Part of the reason for this success may be due to the Korean drama’s reliance on frames already familiar to international audiences, specifically the use of genre.

Korean dramas are inherently melodramatic. They depict the world in simple terms of good and evil and tell emotional stories which encourage audience identification with the heroes and heroines. This structure, though it seems simple, affords great opportunities to explore complex social issues and critique institutional power structures. The lack of complexity in the main characters shifts the responsibility for the danger and conflict away from individuals and onto the social world. Moreover, into this mode are mixed other familiar genres. Action
adventure stories, romantic comedies, and police, lawyer, doctor procedurals. Korean dramas make liberal use of the cinematic conventions of Hollywood as well as neighboring cinemas in Japan and Hong Kong. Genres follow similar patterns and encourage viewers to expect certain storylines, tropes, and iconography. The familiarity of these genres allows viewers to follow along and engage with the texts, enjoying the feeling of anticipation or the subversion of expectations.

This is not to say that Korean dramas are simply replications of Western cinematic traditions or that Hollywood has had a homogenizing effect on media. Instead, Korean dramas represent a hybridized product which mixes tools, practices, and narrative conventions with Korean social, political, and historical preoccupations. The result of this mixing is the creation of something that is both distinct, but familiar enough to be understandable to audiences.

In this study, I expand on current research of the Korean Wave by analyzing the prevalence and use of genre in the Korean dramas using a multimethod approach. In the first chapter, Hybridization of Genres in Contra-flow, I discuss the problem of genre in terms of how it is understood within film studies, how genres are created, and how genres influence audience behaviors. I also discuss the flow of genre conventions into South Korea, review the history of the Korean Wave, and the subgenres of the Korean drama. In chapter two, I Know This Story: Hybridized Genre Conventions in the Korean Wave, I perform a close reading on five Korean dramas popular with non-Korean audiences to illustrate how genres are hybridized and used to communicate social themes to viewers. In chapter 3, Genre and Korean Drama Viewer Behavior, I test the importance of genre as a framing device through a survey of Korean drama fans. Together, the two methodologies employed in this study test the use of generic conventions, and
whether genre iconography, tropes, and themes are clear and important to non-Korean audiences of Korean dramas.
CHAPTER 1: HYBRIDIZATION OF GENRE IN CONTRA-FLOW

The problem of genre has been the work of scholars since Athens was a city-state. A great deal of work has been done to try to define what it is, what it does, and what that means for the creation and appreciation of art. I expand on this research by exploring genre’s role in culture flows. In particular, I examine how genre is hybridized and glocalized within the Korean television industry. The melodramatic narrative structure, along with recognizable themes, iconography, and conventions from a variety of transnational genres help frame Korean dramas for global audiences. The salience of the genre frame creates an easily exportable media product. In order to understand how genre contributes to culture flow, I build on the literature from a variety of disciplines, most importantly cultural studies, film studies, and media studies.

This literature review is divided into two sections. In the first section, I trace the problem of genre. I discuss relevant literature on (1) genre theory, (2) media effects and framing theory, (3) how postcolonial theories of culture flows help explain the creation of the Hollywood genres as well as the rise of so-called global genres, and (4) the application of genre as a marketing tool. In the second section of the literature review, I consider the case of the Korean drama and its use of genre. I provide: (1) a brief history of media hybridization in Korea—focusing on film—in the twentieth century, (2) a brief history of the Korean Wave and the growth of a global audience (3) a discussion of how many scholars have accounted for the success of the Korean-wave with particular emphasis on glocalization in mediascapes, and (4) a review of scholarship on Korean drama texts and genre.

In these two sections I establish how genre relates to culture flows and why studying Korean dramas for their use of generic conventions contributes to scholarship on contra-flow, the Korean Wave, and to a wider understanding of how global audiences engage these texts.
The Problem of Genre

Genre is an interdisciplinary problem with ramifications for a wide range of studies because it is connected with human cognition. When people encounter new information, their first action is to classify it. Categorization is “the most basic phenomenon of cognition and consequently the most fundamental problem of cognitive science” (Cohen and Lefebvre 2005, 2). It defines what people know, how they know it, and how they value it. As people learn, they create internal models against which they apply values. Albert Bandura’s work on social cognitive theory (SCT) in his 1986 book, Social Foundations of Thought and Actions, describes how information conveyed through symbols is ranked based on past experiences creating models for future behavior (Bandura 1986, 17). Bandura contends that “people act in terms of value preferences” and that those values come from modeling social cues (Bandura 1986, 324). Modeling values is linked to taste as, for example, children can change their minds about foods if they perceive the food is enjoyed by others (Bandura 1986, 324). Categories, therefore, do not exist objectively; they are always socially constructed. How a piece of media is labeled will impact how audiences engage with it. Will an audience understand it? Will audiences like it? A key part in setting viewer expectations and forming relationships between text and audience begins with categorization. Genre is one of the earliest ideas concerning artistic expression. Theorized first by Aristotle, genre is the way we categorize art forms.

Genre Theory

Many studies of film genres take as their starting place the Hollywood genre system which emerged in the early half of the twentieth century (Altman 1999, Cawelti 1986, Elsaesser 1991, Gates 2006, Grindon 2011, Krutnik and Neale 1990, Schrader 1986). During that time, the
major studios specialized in particular types of films such as horror, western, and musical. Specialization was partly a result of marketing and partly a requirement of mass production. During that time, many of the ideological and artistic constructs of genre as expressed in film were codified and disseminated globally. Some of the most stable, and therefore iconic genres to emerge out of this period include melodrama, western, musical, romantic comedy, adventure, and film noir.

Foundational for the purposes of this study is the work of Thomas Elsaesser and Thomas Schatz on melodrama, Leger Grindon and Frank Krunik and Steve Neale’s work on romantic comedies, John Cawelti’s work on film noir, and Philipa Gates work on detectives in film and television. Additionally, Elsaesser and Schatz’s work on melodrama is influenced by Peter Brooks’ analysis of the melodramatic mode in literature and theater (1991). By conducting close readings of a collection of films, these scholars are able identify iconography associated with particular genres. They underscore the various influences on the creation of a distinct film genre, such as film practices in other national cinemas, literatures, and historical contexts. These scholars also stress that these genres tend to express common themes grounded in specific ideological concerns. This technique of understanding genre benefits from its historical standpoint. Representative films can be selected for comparison within a certain period of time, such as film noir (Schrader 1986, 177-179). However, once genre becomes detached from this particular industrial system and time period and approached from a textual perspective, genre becomes increasingly difficult to define.

Since the publication of Aristotle’s Poetics, scholars have been trying to answer the question, “what is genre?” This deceptively simple question has a variety of answers depending on who is asked. In their film studies textbook, Corrigan and White build on the studio system
definition by defining genres as “a set of formulas and conventions repeated and developed throughout film history… [and are] grounded in audience expectations about characters, narrative, and visual style” (2018, 340). Richard Altman presents genre as an unstable negotiation of conventions in which producers, distributors, consumers, cultural arbiters, and fan communities all play a role in the forming and formalizing of genre (1999, 12). Thomas Schatz highlights codification of genre as an ongoing process by which “exposure and familiarity” create “a cluster of narrative, thematic and iconographic patterns” (1986, 93). Steve Neale describes genre as “forms of textual codification” (Neale 1980, 19). Though there is a great deal of debate as to who has more power in the creation of genre—producers or audiences—and to what extend and in what ways distinct genres should be defined and delineated, what recurs in genre literature is the importance of audience expectations.

Genre categories carry symbolic information that prime audiences to receive content in certain ways. Further, Thomas Schatz argues that genre is similar to Claude Lévi-Strauss’ concept of mythical thought: “like language and myth, the film genre as a textual system represents a set of rules of construction that are utilized to accomplish a specific communicative function” (Schatz 1986, 96). The communicative aspect of genre is important as it exposes the extent to which genre is based on shared ideas about a media text’s structure, content, and purpose. In this way, generic codes are what media effects theorists call “frames.”

**Framing Theory**

Media effects theorists, who are interested in how mass media shapes understanding of new information, describe *framing* as a symbolic process through which meaning is ascribed and categorized. “Frames highlight some bits of information about an item that is the subject of
communication, thereby elevating their salience (53),” writes Robert Entman in his 1993 article, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm.” For film and television, highlighting information can be done through cinematography, such as providing a close up of two people looking at each other, which frames the text as a romance. It can also be done through the score such as the use of dissonant tritones in horror.

To illustrate how frames work, Entman identifies four main actors in the framing process: “communicators,” “text,” “receiver,” and “culture” (1993, 52). For Entman, frames (1) “organize [communicators] belief systems,” (2) are symbolically represented in the text through “keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgements,” (3) guide receivers “thinking and conclusions”—though not necessarily the communicator’s frames—and (4) are accessed through culture as a social group’s “empirically demonstrable set of common frames” (1993, 52-53). Frames exists simultaneously inside and outside a media text because they are part of culture. The communicators of genre are aware of its conventions when they make a new media product, those conventions are then inscribed into the text, and receivers’ expectations of what that content is and how they value it are primed by their awareness of genre. Entman’s “causal agents” identify the places where frames impact how messages are received, but it does not consider how frames are created or enter the culture.

Media distributors package content in line with established patterns, encoding information. Audiences then decode that information according to their preexisting experience and attitudes. A frame is particularly salient when it is easily accessible to both the encoder and the decoder (Scheufele 1999, 116). When media travels across borders, culture and language, the initial frame can become less salient. Salience, Entman defines as “making a piece of
information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences” (1999, 53). The presence of symbolic information alone does not make it meaningful. Many symbols cannot be decoded as intended because the new audience does not know the referent. Therefore, for genre to work as a successful frame for media texts, its salience across multiple cultures must be established.

**Culture Flow**

Framing as a theoretical construct rose to prominence in studies of Nazi propaganda and developed over the twentieth century to grapple with social constructivism, which sought to balance the downward power exerted by hegemonic media powers and the role that audiences play in interpreting frames (Scheufele 1999, 105). This social constructivist approach is also seen in the rise of theories that problematize the Western hegemonic view of globalization. Historically, studies of culture flows have focused on the homogenizing impact of Western cultural domination. However, in the 1990s, postcolonial theorists including Homi Bhabha (1994), Roland Robertson (1992), and Joseph Straubhaar (2007) challenged this conception with the idea of hybridization. Hybridization argues that when two cultures come in contact a “third space” for culture is created (Bhabha 1994, 217). The collision of old and new inevitably inform each other because “difference and variety” are essential to culture industries in a capitalist economy (Robertson 1992, 173).

This highlighting of difference plays an important role in cultural hybridity theory. According to Roland Robertson: “Global capitalism both promotes and is conditioned by cultural homogeneity and cultural heterogeneity. Joseph Straubhaar’s definition of hybridization emphasizes the creation of what Bhabha calls the “third space”:
Global forces bring change, but that change is adapted into existing ways of doing things via historical process in which existing local forces mix with new global ones, producing neither global homogenization nor authentic local culture, but a complex new hybrid with multiple layers of culture, where traditional forms may persist alongside new ones.” (Straubhaar 2007, 6)

When two cultures come in contact, there are ramifications for both cultures. The site of the mixing, or “third space,” creates something that is recognizable to both culture but is also new.

The “multiple layers” Straubhaar describes are visible in so-called “global genres.” Global genres work by mixing a shared cinematic language with local concerns. Building on Moretti’s work on the development of the modern novel, Dudley Andrew argues that Hollywood is a formula that is adapted into the local culture and is then inflected with “traditional oral or theatrical story-telling” practices to create a new “patois” (Andrew 2011, 1003). Hollywood cinema “would thus be the medium’s classical language, that is, Latin” and local genres are “vernaculars” in that they are “related to, but set against the one universally recognized language of movies” (Andrew 2011, 1004). This hybridization produces new ways of engaging a familiar form:

Filmmakers from Africa to Asia and Australia reach into their local heritage of scary stories and combine them with transposable parts from a store of global iconography. They use these hybrid horrors to explore the present-day anxieties of their people in a cinematic language that is increasingly transnational. (Costanzo 2014, 248)
Iconography, editing techniques, sound design, and cinematography, can all be used to communicate genre that feels familiar to a Hollywood production, while the particularities of the narrative can engage with specific local historical or sociological concerns.

Genres do not present themselves exactly the same way across national cinemas (Altman would argue that is the case even within nations), but certain aspects still read generically even if the cultural specificity is inaccessible to the viewer. Symbolic cues recognizable as comedy, fantasy, thriller, and action are apparent in film and television productions outside of United States and Western culture industries. Even to say that these film genres are the invention of Hollywood is to obscure their transnational roots. William Costanzo challenges the perception that Hollywood is a monolithic force in the creation of genres and points to the absorption of “German Expressionism, French Surrealism and British Gothic and Parisian Grand Guignol” in the creation of Universal’s 1930s horror classics (2014, 247).

An advanced form of hybridization is glocalization. In glocalization, there is an intentional adaptation of a foreign product for a local audience—but where the producer is in fact the foreign company attempting to sell local. Glocal began as a marketing buzzword, and is credited to Japan’s strategy of dochakuka, roughly meaning “global localization” (Robertson 1992, 174). Glocalization runs counter to the idea of global standardization (Ibid. 174) because it posits that customers are more attracted to the familiar and therefore a local versioning is more effective. Daya Kishan Thussu argues that glocalization comes from a “commercial imperative” rather from a place of respect or “particular regard” (Thussu 2007, 21). Glocalization is also most often associated with dominant regional powers moving into foreign markets and creating products that would attract customers in that market, like a McDonald’s offering the McPaneer Royal in India (Schlossberg and Cohn 2016). For film and television, Hyejung Ju outlines three
places of “reciprocal intervention” between global and local: media production, media
distribution, and media consumption (Ju 2014, 34).

Hybridization and glocalization challenge cultural homogenization, but the narrative of
Western media dominance is further complicated by the existence of contra-flows. Contra-flow
is the concept of subaltern cultural exchange that moves in opposition to Western hegemonic
media (Thussu 2007, 11). Contra-flows are complex, under-investigated, and controversial in
their importance as they exhibit what Arjun Appadurai describes as “disjunctures between
economy culture and politics” (Appadurai 1996, 33). These are divided into ethnoscapes,
mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes” (33). Ethnoscapes refer to
movements of people such as immigrants, tourists, and refugees. Mediascapes are made up of
mass media such as film, television, and the news (35). Technoscapes describe flows of
production, “both mechanical and informational” (34). Financescapes are flows of capital (34)
and ideoscapes are flows of values, often political in nature (36). Appadurai differentiates
between mediascapes and ideoscapes because they do not necessarily travel together (Appadurai
1996, 33). A film, for example, may be screened in another country, but the political ideologies
embedded in the text may not be understood by the new audience.

National cinemas, argues Michael Walsh, are characterized by conventions that arise out
of a particular “National Imaginary.” The “National Imaginary of Social Imaginary” are
ideological schemas derived from a mythic history and are associated with ideas of cultural
identity (Walsh 1996, 8). Embedded into national cinemas are “referential knowledges that
national audiences are expected to draw on, as well as conventions of character, narrative, setting
or even formal representational patterns” (Walsh 13). This definition of national imaginaries
aligns with Appadurai’s ideoscapes. Ideoscapes present a challenge for translation between
cultures that may have different conventions which “govern the collective reading of different kinds of text” (Appadurai 1996, 36-37). In other words, they have less salience. A television show made in one culture may contain a specific political viewpoint, but if the audience for the television show is unfamiliar with that frame, it will be discarded. Hybridity theory also has ramifications for ideoscapes. Dal Yong Jin argues that power imbalances between global forces mean that the mixing of cultures always has political ramifications, and dominant ideologies may suppress alternative philosophies (Jin 2016, 14-17).

However, outside of the political and ideological values encoded into media texts, genre, which includes artistic, structural, and narrative conventions are also exchanged. As these conventions are less ideologically rigid and can be adapted to fit local circumstances, they have greater salience and can be decoding by a larger transnational audience. Genres do contain thematic ideological regimes in addition to artistic convention, so part of the work I undertake in this study is to discern if those themes are consistent between Hollywood and South Korea, or if this is a place where ideoscapes are lost, hybridized, or substituted for something new.

*Genre and Marketing*

Although not usually related to globalization studies, scholars of film, television, and marketing have studied how audiences respond to texts and how they make decisions on consumption. These studies, because of their interest in marketing, typically track hegemonic media flows in order to understand how to effectively frame texts in order to sell a movie or television show. However, studying how audiences make decisions about which Korean dramas they watch will expand knowledge of how mediascapes travel in contra-flow.
Numerous studies have shown a strong correlation between genre and audience behavior (Austin 1981, d’Astous et. al 2007, Hixson 2005, Finsterwaler et. al 2012). In surveys and interviews, film audiences have expressed strong genre preferences which influence their decision on whether to view a movie. Genre preferences help set expectations and drive audiences to theaters (Finsterwalder et al. 2012, Celsi and Olson 1988, Hixson 2005). “Firstly, the accurate portrayal of genre ensures that consumers create realistic expectations of the film” (Bridges 1993); and secondly, genre preferences are of great importance because people are more likely to value media that are personally relevant to them (Celsi and Olson 1988; Hixson 2005). Genre cues are picked up by audiences through audio-visual information, including music and dialogue. Music in particular “plays a pivotal role in creating the overall mood and tone of the trailer, thus drawing the viewer into the storyline of the trailer without being consciously aware of it” (Finsterwalder et al. 2012, 592).

Genres are more than just a useful tool for understanding what a media is; they also shape the process of enjoyment. A piece of media that clearly includes iconography, music, and narrative components that are associated with a known genre is more likely to find an audience. Recurring symbolic patterns in media texts can be understood because of the salience of genre frames. Global salience helps explain effectiveness; however, it does not completely explain the way in which audiences interact with genre. Apart from genre’s purpose of organizing media types and conventions, film scholars argue that audiences have an affective relationship with genre:

Participation in the genre film experience reinforces spectator expectations and desires. Far from being limited to mere entertainment, filmgoing offers a satisfaction more akin to that associated with established religion (Altman 1999, 218).
Thomas Schatz refers to this relationship as “ritualistic” (1986, 93). Audiences have pre-existing knowledge of genre which they enjoy watching enacted over and over again. Genres satisfy not only in their conformity to expectations but also in their subversion. “Part of the pleasure is in being surprised by variations in the recipe” (Costanzo 2014, 37). The importance of this engagement, as Garth Jowett says, is integral to popular culture:

“To succeed, popular culture cannot stray too far from recognizable formula, or categories, because the audience will experience difficulty in relating to it; but it must also constantly provide an interesting variation on the theme.” (Berger 1992, vii).

The ritualistic aspect of genre viewership comes from viewers’ desire to see how a media text will make the familiar new again. Additionally, because genre is a system of categorization it is associated with certain value judgements. Therefore, viewers’ genre preferences often drive their viewing behavior.

Genres have been shaped by culture flows because hybridization of culture is often reflected in genre. On an intrinsic level, the mixing of genre iconography and modes is also part of the process of building new genres or keeping a genre from becoming stale. However, because of the salience of the genre frame, genre can actually play a role in disseminating culture. South Korean television dramas—or Korean drama as it is usually discussed—are often considered tropey and formulaic. This negative valuation is belied by the growth of a strong global following in the last twenty years. Rather than a detriment, the clear generic telegraphing in these texts may help explain what makes them transnational objects. In this next section, I will discuss how South Korea hybridizes genres from a variety of national cinemas and review current scholarship on the success of the Korean Wave.
Contra-flow and the Korean Drama

The Korean Wave, or hallyu, describes the global rise of Korea’s entertainment and culture industries beginning in the late 1990s. Previous research on the Korean Wave has focused considerable attention on the political, economic, and technological forces that drove the unprecedented international demand for the Korean culture industries. The focus by South Korea’s government on incentivizing an export driven economy, the economic austerity in the 1990s that encouraged cheaper local production, and the rise of the internet and changing practices of distribution, together conspired to create entertainment products that flowed through the market with greater ease. The massive growth in Korean pop culture exports began regionally with the popularity of the Korean television genre known as Korean drama. Following this success, other Korean pop culture exports grew substantially and today include Korean pop music (Kpop), video games, movies, as well as technology and beauty products (Jin 2016, 43).

In beginning an analysis of the Korean drama, it is important to clarify that this name is a false cognate: “Korea uses drama strictly to describe…the scripted television series” (Javabeans and Girlfriday 2002, 269). Moreover, most scholars use Korean drama to describe the miniseries, which usually consists of 16-20 episodes with an episodic runtime of approximately fifty minutes (Jin 2016, 46). Other forms of drama include weekend dramas, running upward of fifty episodes, daily dramas, and thirty-minute situation comedies such as the hit High Kick (2006-2007) series. These formats do not directly map to their American counterparts; for instance, the first High Kick series aired 167 episodes between November 2006 and July 2007, considerably more than a single season for an American sitcom. Korean dramas of all types rarely have more than one season, though there have been exceptions and anthology formats where the title and
premise are rebooted with a new cast. This means that Korean dramas have a distinct beginning, middle, and end, rather than lasting until viewer or cast interest wanes. I will also focus on the miniseries and will, for consistency with the literature, refer to Korean miniseries as Korean drama.

Although the Korean Wave is an example of contra-flow—the rise of a local industry pushing against the tide of Western cultural imperialism, and more locally, Japan’s mature entertainment industries—Korean dramas themselves are characterized by their mixing of features, conventions, and ideas from diverse group of cultures. In order to understand how genre is represented textually as well as perceived by audiences, it is first necessary to understand the culture flows that move from the West and other regional powers into Korea. Drawing from studies of Hollywood, Hong-Kong, and Japan’s influence on Korean film and television, I will outline how conventions of cultural production were hybridized and glocalized within Korea.

*Entertainment Media Flows into Korea*

In the 1930s, during the Japanese occupation, Korea had a thriving film industry. Japanese directors and Korean directors were both working in the Korean peninsula and Korea was the largest market for Hollywood films in Asia. Kim Soyoung—drawing from W.E. B. Du Bois and Benedict Anderson—describes the Japanization and Americanism during this time as engendering a colonial double consciousness. Korean directors borrowed Japanese Shimpa—a theatrical tradition—in the creation of anticolonial action films, or *Hwalkuk* (Kim 2005, 98). They also filmed melodramas in the Hollywood style. The 1930s was the first of Korea's three cinematic golden eras (Ibid. 98) yet this era of production was heavily influenced by other dominant cultures.
The second golden era for Korean cinema took place in South Korea in the 1960s. South Korea was liberated from Japan, and the Cold War and the partition of the peninsula following the civil war had only strengthened the South Korean government’s political relationship with America. Despite this relationship, protectionist and interventionist polices of the South Korean government limited the theatrical distribution of Hollywood films and other foreign films. The government wanted to move South Korea from an agrarian-based country to an export driven industrial power. Beginning in 1965, foreign imports of films were limited to only companies that invested in local production. Although the import of foreign films decreased, the local South Korean film industry thrived. South Korean films generated millions in domestic movie ticket sales (Molen 2014, 154) and the dominant genre of this era was the melodrama (McHugh 18-19).

Despite Hollywood’s diminished influence at the box office, the hybridization of the melodrama continued. Hollywood style cinematic conventions, even recreations of similar shots, can be seen in South Korean films from this time. However, this is not to say Hollywood had a homogenizing influence, the South Korean melodramas grapple with local themes and ideological concerns which distinguish them from classical Hollywood melodramas, as discussed by Hye-Seung Chung in “Toward a Strategic Korean Cinephilia” (2005).

Hollywood, however, was not the only film industry being hybridized. Toward the end of the 1960s, the South Korean film industry became increasingly connected to Hong Kong. This connection was partially the result of government intervention—“the second stage of the state-led economic development plan (1967-1972) emphasized the importance of foreign investment capital in order to facilitate an export-driven industry”—and partially the result of limited regional options in the Cold War landscape (Kim 2005, 99). South Korea’s government was virulently anti-Communist which excluded the People’s Republic of Chinese, and after decades
under Japanese rule, Japanese cultural goods were banned from South Korea (Ju 2014, 34). The quota on foreign films strengthened the need for co-production, and Hong-Kong—still controlled by the British—was an ideal partner. Yet through Hong Kong, Japanese and Chinese film conventions mixed and were passed on to South Korea (Kim 2005, 103). One example of glocalized cinema was Korea’s *One-Legged Man* series, which Soyoung Kim describes as an adaption of Hong Kong’s *One-Armed Swordsman* series, which in turn was influenced by Japan’s *Zantoichi* series which features a blind swordsman (99).

The end of the second golden age came as a result of political turmoil. In 1961, the democratic government was overthrown, and an autocratic military dictatorship was briefly installed. This gave way to the Presidency of Park Chung-hee and the Third Republic in 1963. Park, a former member of the military junta, was democratically elected; however, the Park presidency grew increasingly autocratic. In 1972, President Park ended term limits and dissolved the National Assembly. The end of democracy was shortly followed by severe censorship which suppressed the film industry. Movie attendance subsequently decreased, ending the second golden era (Kim 2005, 103). Censorship continued even after President Park’s assassination in 1979, and through the eight years of military dictatorship that followed. During this period, imports of foreign films were also restricted. In the 1980s, only twenty to twenty-five foreign films were screened in South Korea a year (Paquet 2009, 46).

Hollywood distribution did not increase until 1987 when the United States government successfully lobbied South Korea’s authoritarian government to allow them to open branch offices in Korea (Molen 2014, 154). Shortly thereafter, the South Korean government began to transition back into a democracy. The Kim Young-sam government, Korea’s first civilian elected leader in approximately twenty years, believed that Korea needed to be able to compete in the
global culture industries. The Korean government’s initiatives to promote the entertainment industries have been attributed in some studies to the success of the Hollywood production *Jurassic Park*, because the international gross of this Hollywood blockbuster was higher than exports of Hyundais in 1993 (Molen 2014, 154, Paquet 2009, 34). Hollywood blockbusters returned to South Korea, and their modes of production, cinematic conventions, and use of technology were actively being studied not just by filmmakers, but by the government. Unrestricted access by Hollywood to the Korean market resumed when the film quota system was controversially disbanded as part of negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (Ju 2016, 30).

Japan also regained limited access to South Korea beginning in 1998. Bans on Japanese *manga* were completely lifted and Japanese films that had won awards at major international film festivals were allowed to be screened in theaters. Japanese-Korean film co-productions were also able to be distributed in Korean theaters. Prior to the beginning of what is referred to as cultural liberalization, there had been a market for Japanese manga in South Korea and some popular anime such as *Candy Candy* were allowed to be broadcast if they were dubbed into Korean (Choi 2017, 184-185). However, Japanese manga were often smuggled in to South Korea or subject to extreme scrutiny by the South Korean government. Japanese manga, and in particular *shōjo manga*, were extremely popular with young women and influential on Korea’s own pop culture (Choi 2018, 185). Additional concessions continued. Notably, in 2004, Japanese dramas were allowed to be aired on cable and satellite networks (Suzuki 2004). Japanese dramas often adapt manga storylines and conventions, and these adaptations were popular in many countries in Asia, including South Korea.

Prior to the beginning of the Korean Wave, media from Hollywood, China, and Japan were screened, produced, hybridized, and glocalized within South Korea. South Korean films
carry generic markers indicating their influences. When South Korea began increasing their own local television production again in the 1990s, these hallmarks carried into South Korean serialized television dramas.

The Korean Wave—Korean Pop Culture Goes Global

1997 is generally considered the beginning of the Korean Wave, marking the year South Korean dramas were first exported. This date coincides with the crash of the South Korea’s financial markets and the “IMF crisis” wherein South Korea was forced to ask the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a substantial bailout. The crash combined with the restructuring and austerity measures demanded by the IMF led to the most severe economic depression in South Korea’s history (Paquet 2009, 61). Large family owned conglomerates that had survived the market crash closed film divisions and cut investment to non-core businesses (Park 2009, 61). Although this depression hurt South Korea’s film industry, Dal Young Jin argues that the economic depression of 1997-1998 actually increased local television production (2016, 47).

Despite the fact that South Korea now had greater access to international television imports as part of the deregulation, the high cost of these shows encouraged South Korean television networks to invest heavily in less expensive homegrown alternatives (Jin 2016, 47). The South Korean television miniseries was similarly attractive to foreign markets because of its low cost, which was significantly cheaper than the licensing fee for the highly popular Japanese dramas (Ibid.). The first successful South Korean television export was, What Is Love All About, to China in 1997 (Ju 2014, 35). The drama Sparks opened up the Taiwanese market in 2000 and a “regional craze for [currently airing] Korean television dramas grew” in Southeast Asia shortly
thereafter (Jin 2014, 47). In 2004, Winter Sonata’s smash success in Japan cemented the status of South Korean cultural products and stars (Ju 2014, 35; Jin 2014, 47).

Interest in Korean dramas was not limited to Asia. Latin America and the Middle East began licensing Korean dramas for broadcast in 2002 and 2005, respectively, (Kim 2007, 146) These licensing agreements were early indications of expansive global interest in Korean culture products. Sherri Molen describes the penetration of South Korean culture into the United States beginning with cable and satellite services (2014, 160). These services were targeted toward Korean communities living abroad, but English-language subtitles (designed for first-generation Korean Americans) made them accessible to others. The vice-president of WOCH-TV, a Korean television station in Chicago, received around 500 e-mails from non-Koreans who were watching the shows with the assistance of English subtitles (Ibid.). Accessibility was further increased by the global adoption of the Internet, peer to peer file sharing, as well as innovations in video streaming. Social media also created new ways of engaging with and sharing an interest in South Korean pop culture.

As with Japanese anime, the affordances of the internet allowed communities interested in Korean dramas to share files online. Dedicated groups of fans began voluntarily providing subtitles. The practice of watching Korean dramas online with subtitles became legal when Streaming Video on Demand (SVoD) services began licensing Korean content for online distribution. Dramafever, like the cable and satellite services that came before, was launched in 2009 to provide access to Korean dramas to Koreans living in the United States. Contrary to expectations, the market for Korean dramas was even larger than the founders expected: “45% of beta testers who joined the site for a full year reported they were Caucasian and less than 13% actually reported Korean ethnicity” (Molen 2014, 163). In 2012, Dramafever reported that “75%
of their two million unique monthly viewers spoke English as a first language and were not of Asian descent” (Molen 2014, 163). The large number of non-Koreans and viewers not of Asian descent suggests that cultural proximity theories and focus on similar ideologies are not sufficient to explain the appeal of Korean dramas. Further, not enough work has been done to break the binary of West versus East within these studies.

Since this time, Dramafever has closed, citing the rising cost of licensing South Korean content in an increasingly competitive industry (Herman 2018). Current SVoD providers include Viki, a Japanese owned service which offers television and movies from other Asian countries in addition to South Korea; Kocowa, a joint venture between the three largest South Korean broadcast networks; Netflix; and Amazon. Unfortunately, the proprietary nature of SVoD platform’s customer data makes it impossible to get more detailed and updated metrics on viewing behavior. The rising licensing fees must therefore be taken as a proxy for the continued interest in Korean dramas in the West (Spangler 2018). The success of other sectors, such as Kpop, are easier to track with groups like BTS charting in the United States and performing at major American Awards shows.

The export of television dramas began during a time of economic turmoil. Their shows were less expensive than shows made in other foreign markets and so were attractive even though South Korea’s industry was not as advanced as regional neighbors like Japan. Although the exports began in traditional broadcast and cable business television models, they were adopted into new internet-based distribution systems. In both broadcast, cable, and online models, Korean dramas attracted a widespread and diverse audience.
Korean Wave Mediascapes

Previous studies of the Korean Wave have focused on various aspects of Appadurai’s five disjunctions. A great deal of research has focused on ethnoscapes—the movement of people—and the use of Korean drama diaspora communities (Park 2013). Studies of ideoscapes—movement of ideologies—include studies on the importance of Confucian values for viewers in China, Japan, and East Asia. These studies place emphasis on cultural proximity theory which argues that culture flows are facilitated by similarity (Chae 2014, Iwabuchi 2013). However, Youna Kim’s 2007 review of countries which licensed Korean dramas, indicate that these cultural products are breaking through both cultural proximity and disporas. Sherri Molen’s work on technoscapes and financescapes helps understand how that was possible, but the question of why these dramas were embraced by such a culturally heterogenous group is under-investigated. There is currently limited research focusing on Korean dramas as mediascapes. Mediascapes are made up of mass media such as film, television, and the news. Appaduri emphasizes that mediascapes are “narrative based” and can inspire “the desire for acquisition and movement” (Appadurai 1996, 35-36).

Studies of mediascapes often focus on glocal nature of Korean pop culture. South Korea intentionally pursued the creation of products that reflected the taste and interests of non-Korean audiences (Jin 2016, Ju 2014, Kim 2007, Molen 2014). Korean dramas drew inspiration from successful Hollywood productions as well as Japanese media such as manga, anime, dramas, films. They adopted successful “media sales strategies from Japan and the United States in respect to making profits” including the exploitation of star power for marketing and advertising, copyright, release strategies like widowing, and joint venture sales models (Ju 2014). Japan and other regional markets also influenced the casting of Korean dramas: “many Asian television
buyers agree that Korean stars in the purchased drama are the element to be considered first followed by plot” (Ju 2014, 36). Stars with global appeal were considered more valuable and could command higher salaries.

Interventions in production can also be seen in the grooming of Kpop idols. Idols are developed by agencies who carefully construct new acts with an eye toward their international appeal, such as developing Korean Americans, Chinese, and performers who have lived overseas (Kuwahara 2004, 218). Boy bands are put together to “embody overlapping masculinities” in order to reach diverse audiences (Anderson 2014, 118). A survey of Korean and Japanese students also found differences in preferences of men and women Korean celebrities, with less masculine presenting stars more highly regarded in Japan than in Korea (Kuwahara 2014). These idols are then cast in Korean dramas so at to leverage the idol’s star power in selling the drama to international markets. The intentional and reciprocal interventions in the production of Korean dramas marks these texts as glocal.

The idea of glocal, however, as discussed by Koichi Iwabuchi in his foundational study on the contra-flow of Japanization, goes beyond simply modifying products to make them palatable to foreign tastes, but functions to disguise the culture of origin. Iwabuchi’s study on the global circulation of Japanese cultural products in the early 1990s argues that this strategy has ideological implications:

Profits brought about by cultural power are becoming articulated less in association with symbolic and ideological domination by the powerful nation-state and more with local camouflaging which smoothes the economic expansion of transnational corporations. (Iwabuchi 2002, 47)
Mediascapes, Iwabuchi claims, need to be “odorless” (Iwabuchi 2002, 46) in order to succeed. An “odorless” product, according to Iwabuchi, is free of distinctly Japanese characteristics that might be unpalatable or confusing to foreign audiences. However, Iwabuchi’s work was on Japan, a former colonizer, and therefore a country likely to meet more ideological resistance, particularly in East and Southeast Asia.

In contrast, South Korea’s status as a former Japanese colony that has hosted U.S. military troops since the end of World War II makes it less ideologically exceptionable. Dal Yong Jin describes an effort to mask the South Korean government’s role in the Korean Wave for fear of political reprisal (2016, 38), but the essential Korean-ness was often viewed as part of the Korean drama’s appeal (Chae 2014, 204). This “Korean-ness” is often embodied in the Korean actors who became the stars of the Korean Wave. Young Eun Chae’s article on the *Winter Sonata* star Bae Yong-Joon’s popularity in Japan builds on Iwabuchi’s description of a colonialist nostalgic gaze. Bae, Chae contends, presents an old-fashioned masculinity reflective of Confucian values and is therefore an object of desire that is tied up in ideas of an idealized past (2014, 204-205). Hyejung Ju’s industry analysis also finds that Korean stars engender in audiences a desire for acquisition which bolstered the Korean tourism industry (Ju 2014, 38). Hyejung Ju describes the use of “unique characterizations of Korean-ness” as a key component in the marketing of Korean dramas to foreign buyers (46). In a way, the Korean-ness acts as a brand for a particular kind of masculinity or femininity as embodied by its stars. However, there is a gap in the research to explain how this brand of masculinity and femininity are appreciated by countries who do not share Confucian value systems.

The Korean Wave is successful not simply because of its ability to create products for foreign markets, but because South Korea merges this strategy with its own culture. The Korean
drama is a glocalized product that can be examined in terms of how it adopts global systems of finance and technology, or for the ways socio-political values and histories are regionally shared. However, the texts themselves are glocalized in the way they leverage stars and cinematic conventions. Moreover, the glocalized Korean product still maintains a “Korean-ness” which is part of its marketability. The hybridity of the Korean drama allows it to benefit from capitalist systems desire for “difference and variety” (Robertson 1992, 173), while still providing a product familiar enough to be easily understood and valued. This differentiates the mediascapes of the Korean Wave from Iwabuchi’s Japanization in that ideoscapes are one component of the Korean drama’s appeal. In additional to stars and cinematic conventions, genre itself plays an important role in Korean dramas.

Genre Hybridization in Korean Dramas

Academic scholarship on Korean dramas tends to highlight melodrama for the very good reason that it launched the Korean Wave. Korean dramas which fall into the “melo” subgenre are known for their emotional storylines featuring close calls with incest, cancer, fractured families and tragic accidents. These dramas remain some of the largest hits of the Korean Wave. Scholars who are focused on cultural proximity theory—which situates contra-flows as existing between similar cultures—highlight the presence of Confucian values, chaste romances, and arguably less violence, as large parts in their appeal in crossing national borders (Chae 2014, Youna Kim 2013, Iwabuchi 2013). However, the almost exclusive focus on melodrama and the short hand of “Korean drama” to describe all miniseries exports creates the impression that these are monolithic entities rather than a structure encompassing diverse conventions.
There has been a great deal published on the use of genre in Korean cinema, with special attention to directors like Bong Joon-ho whose features such as *Memories of Murder* (2003), *The Host* (2006) and recently *Okja* (2017) are made memorable by their riffing on and mixing of established genres (Jin 2016, Paquet 2009). Director Bong’s work has garnered international acclaim beyond the festival circuit leading to films like *Snowpiercer* (2013), a Hollywood science fiction thriller, and *Okja*, a Netflix original production that is at once a children’s adventure, a horror movie, and a social satire. Scholarship of Korean television, however, engages genre discussions mostly in terms of structural genres such as reality television, news, and drama (Jin 2016). A fairly recent advancement in research on Korean television includes scholars such as Dal Yong Jin who are analyzing the transnational distribution of television in the reality genre as well as formats—recipes to make specific programs that are licensed for the purpose of local production. However, the subgenres of Korean drama are surprisingly under explored. Ju’s detailed industry history of the Korean Wave hints at the importance of subgenres within Korean drama to producers and distributors:

> With the export of Korean drama, Korean network stations are still major agents who have constantly revised the export strategies for their programs to different foreign markets within and beyond Asia. For example, the consideration for genre selections in the sales of Korean drama is significant because different foreign markets demand different genres to cater to local preferences. For instance, romances and modern miniseries (less than 20 episodes) among Korean dramas are sold more to East and South Asian market, the historical drama is favored more in the western market, and the family drama appeals more in the Latin American market. (Ju 2014, 46)

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3 It should be noted that this study relies upon literature published in English. Additional work on genre in television published in Korean was not included in this study.
It is unclear whether the western market described is the U.S. or when this generic preference was true, as imports to Korean language cable and satellite stations targeting a diaspora audience might differ from a SVoD distributor whose customers are more heterogeneous. However, Molen’s discussion of the considerations of network stations does make clear that genre plays a role in the movement of the Korean drama world-wide and reaffirms the importance of further investigation.

The cultural hybridity of South Korean genres is emphasized by the adoption of English words for genre categories. Konglish, (hangugeo-sik yeongeo), is the pronunciation of English loan words as they are spelled in Hangul. Loan words include Comedy, Action, Thriller and SF (Sci-Fi). Like the words themselves, the conventions of these genres have been relocated to South Korea and infused with distinctive aspects of Korean culture. The editors of the long-running Dramabeans website, an English-language Korean drama fansite for non-Korean viewers, published a book in 2013 called, Why Do Dramas Do That. The book is not an academic text but fills a gap in the literature by outlining terms and conventions frequently used in Korean dramas that may be unfamiliar to non-Korean audiences. The book provides definitions for some of the more common Korean drama genres, as well as a guide to the flexible way genres are deployed within a series.

The book elaborates on the perception that all Korean dramas are melodramas, or “melo” in Konglish. Melos “are the stories that are designed to engage pathos, emotion, sentimentality, and well, drama” (Javabeans and GirlFriday, 2013, 269). Although not all Korean dramas are melos, it is not uncommon for a story to take a melo turn. Melo elements may appear in a story that was not previously considered dramatic. It is common for comedies to infuse increasingly dramatic elements as the show heads toward its conclusion in order to heighten the emotional
stakes (267). For the purposes of this paper I will use the term melodrama, as the Western genre closest to the definition of the Korean melo.

The fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode, according to Peter Brooks, “is the desire to express all…characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings” (1991, 52-53). Brooks sees melodrama as the expression of deeply held sentiment, by characters who fall into character types or “psychic roles” in a polarized world of good and evil (Ibid.). Within these narratives, archetypical figures are confronted with an unjust world and the sympathy of the audience is engendered through identification with their struggle against evil. This construction of melodrama, along with melodramas use of excess in music, performance, and speech, are present within the Korean drama.

Other distinct Korean drama subgenres include the sageuk, makjang, and the trendy drama. The sageuk, according to Why Do Dramas Do That, is the traditional historical drama and is used to characterize anything set before the end of the late Joseon dynasty. The Joseon dynasty lasted until the twentieth century Japanese occupation, so this is fairly substantial period of history. The imagery of the saeguk is usually characterized by traditional clothing, such as the hanbok, and stories are usually center around the political intrigue of the royal court. In a traditional sageuk drama, historical accuracy is considered extremely important; drama was “one form of preserving a history that conquering forces have sought to overwrite” (Javabeans and Girlfriday 2012, 243). Characters were therefore drawn primarily from history and costuming and set design were scrutinized by viewers keen to ensure there were no anachronisms (243).

If the sageuk is the most revered of the subgenres domestically, the makjang is its lowbrow counterpart. Javabeans and Girlfriday argue makjang is more a “sensibility than a genre,” where shows are marked by “a stylistic, tonal, or narrative element that is intentionally
provocative, and dramatic to the point of excess” (283). Makjang dramas are perceived as intentionally employing “excessive, absurd storylines in the name of viewership ratings rather than plot logic” (292). Makjang has a comparable significance to “soapy” and is similarly disparaged by critics.

Finally, the cool sibling to these genres is the trendy drama. The trendy was influenced by popular Japanese dramas in the 1990s and feature contemporary, urban stories and often have a glossier more modern look. They include faster editing and the mise-en-scene includes fashionable costumes, modern music, and more cosmopolitan locations (230). Stories tackle current concerns such as “marriage, careers, and dating” and feature young attractive stars (215). This genre often overlaps with the romantic comedy, to the extent that “the term trendy drama has been falling out of common parlance in the past several years, as the ‘ro-co’ (Korea’s nickname for romantic comedy) takes a rise” (230). The romantic comedy has a distinct structure: “The meet-cute gets the couple off on the wrong foot, spurs a round or twenty of bickering, develops into courtship that leads to angst and probably separation and resolves into eventual reunion” (153).

Other genre terms such as comedy, romance, crime, mystery, adventure, fantasy, supernatural, horror, and science fiction are identified in describing dramas throughout the book, but are most often mentioned in relation to the frequent mixing of genres. The “fusion” Korean drama combines the conventions from a variety of genres (243). Though there are undoubtedly differences between how the domestic Korean audience conceives of these terms and the way a Western audience might understand them, the lack of attention in the book suggests the authors found these genres more intuitive for non-Korean audiences. This supposition is bolstered by the
colloquial use of Konglish terms, melo, ro-co, comedy, SF, and action to describe Korean dramas in marketing materials.

Korean genres tend to follow set patterns based on their subgenre. Different subgenres are also viewed as distinct subtypes by viewers, both local audiences as demonstrated by their different names, and global as demonstrated by media buyers whose preferences vary regionally. These subgenres are similar enough to Hollywood conceptions of genre that English loan words are often used within South Korea to describe different types of dramas. However, this aspect of Korean dramas has not received much attention from scholars.

**Statement of Purpose**

Genre is a particularly salient framing device because global exposure to Hollywood conventions make it decodable internationally. Other ideological frames, such as Confucian family values, are decodable regionally, but they are less apparent to international audiences. Although the popularity of South Korean media is arguably strongest regionally and within Asian diasporic communities, most studies of Korean dramas do not fully explain their success in moving across borders and into substantially different cultures. A critical reading of the texts for transnational genre frames combined with an audience reception study will enhance discussions of the Korean Wave as a contra-flow.
CHAPTER 2: I KNOW THIS STORY! HYBRIDIZED GENRE CONVENTIONS IN KOREAN DRAMAS

Method 1: Close Reading

Close Reading Objectives

I conduct a close reading on five Korean dramas from five different subgenres: melodrama, action/adventure, romantic comedy, crime/mystery/detective, and historical/sageuk. The close reading is limited to the first two episodes as these are usually the first viewers see—particularly if viewers of Korean dramas are watching online where television is selected rather than scheduled—and because the opening episodes are the most important in establishing characters, conflict, and story world. I examine characterization, looking particularly at moral complexity and victimization, as well as formalist aspects of musical scoring, mise-en-scène, performance, and the use of genre iconography. Melodrama, as the operative mode of Korean dramas, is given special significance. I review other genres for their integration into the melodramatic mode and for the variations in tone and theme these genres create. Additionally, I discuss the use of Hollywood narratives tropes and cinematic language as well as the genre conventions of other national cinemas and describe how these features are hybridized with the South Korean national imaginary. Finally, using hybridity and glocalization theories, I examine how the genre conventions replicate, subvert, and challenge Western viewer expectations.

Texts

The texts of the close reading include: My Mister (2018), Healer (2014), Because This Is My First Life (2017), Signal (2016), and Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo (2016). The five Korean dramas selected for the study were chosen based on their popularity with international audiences, their genre, and their recency.
The first criteria, popularity, was satisfied by selecting dramas that were highly rated according to end-of-year polls conducted on English-language fansite Dramabeans. Dramabeans is an English language Korean television fansite founded in 2007 (“About This Site” n.d.). The site offers episode recaps of currently airing Korean dramas predominately written by Korean Americans. It also provides casting and production news and free-ranging discussions of favorite tropes, actors, and explainers for non-Korean audiences. The Dramabeans readership is international, with fans from all over the globe regularly participating in conversations about currently airing Korean dramas and wider discussions of the Korean entertainment industry. While other blogs and fansites for Korean dramas exist, Dramabeans has run an end-of-year poll of their users’ favorite dramas for many years, which offered a consistent way to assess popularity over a multi-year period. Other data that might have indicated popularity, such as number of views, are unfortunately proprietary information owned by streaming platforms. End-of-year lists have been generated by other blogs and entertainment websites, but these are often part of promotional campaigns or are based on South Korean Nielsen ratings so they may not represent the opinions of non-Korean audiences.

The second criteria, genre, was satisfied by looking at how Korean dramas were categorized by distributors and critics. Genre descriptions were taken from the streaming video on demand (SVoD) service Viki, entertainment media website IMDb.com, Dramabeans promotional posts, and Korean entertainment website Soompi’s promotional articles. Most dramas have more than one subgenre and genre language was not used consistently among these sources. Final genre coding was done based recurring descriptors which fall within the wider categories identified for this study: melodrama, action, romantic comedy, crime/detective/mystery and historical/sageuk.
Table 1: Sample of Genre Coding for Korean Dramas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Show</th>
<th>% of Votes</th>
<th>Genre (Viki)</th>
<th>IMDB</th>
<th>Dramabeans</th>
<th>Soompi</th>
<th>Final Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td><em>My Mister</em></td>
<td>7.43%</td>
<td>Drama, Family</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Romance melodrama</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Melodrama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Action, Adventure</strong>, Drama,</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>part action movie, part</strong></td>
<td><strong>action romance</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>Comedy, Crime</strong></td>
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<td><strong>suspense thriller, part</strong></td>
<td><strong>Action &amp;</strong></td>
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<td><strong>mystery, and part</strong></td>
<td><strong>Adventure</strong></td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td><em>Healer</em></td>
<td>13.80%</td>
<td><strong>Romance</strong></td>
<td><strong>Romance</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Adventure</strong></td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td><em>Because This is My First Life</em></td>
<td>11.28%</td>
<td><strong>Romance</strong></td>
<td><strong>Comedy, Drama, Romance</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cohabitation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Romantic-comedy</strong></td>
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<td>2016</td>
<td><em>Signal</em></td>
<td>7.57%</td>
<td>Sci-Fi &amp; Fantasy, Thriller &amp;</td>
<td><strong>Crime, Drama, Fantasy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Paranormal police</strong></td>
<td><strong>mystery fantasy drama</strong></td>
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<td>2016</td>
<td><em>Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo</em></td>
<td>24.90%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Drama, Fantasy, <strong>History</strong></td>
<td>time-slip fusion <strong>sageuk</strong></td>
<td><strong>historical fantasy drama</strong></td>
<td><strong>Historical/Sageuk</strong></td>
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Source (Viki, IMDb, Dramabeans, Soompi. See Appendix 1 for full citations).

The third criteria, recency, limited the pool of genres to dramas that premiered in South Korea in the last four years. The majority of scholarship on Korean dramas has focused on the early successes of the Korean Wave and it is my intent to build on that analysis by reviewing more recent productions. Again, the Korean dramas were selected based-off year-end polls conducted by Dramabeans.com where viewers were encouraged to vote for their top dramas of the year. Poll results are aggregated for the years 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018. To qualify for a Dramabeans year-end poll, the drama must have aired the majority of episodes during that calendar year. To that end, the drama *Healer* is included even though it began airing in December of 2014.
Once a pool of qualifying Korean dramas was created based on popularity and airdate, the most popular Korean drama for the subgenres of melodrama, action, romantic comedy, crime/detective/or mystery and historical/saeguk were selected.

**Defining the Melodramatic Mode**

Thomas Elsaesser provides a historical definition of melodrama as “a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects” (Elsaesser 1991, 74). This description is helpful to keep in mind given the adaptability of the genre to different times, locations, and cultures. Melodrama has its roots in French stage productions and a trend toward theatricality (as opposed to realism) is another defining hallmark. Emotions are heightened through music, voice, and gesture. The underscoring of sentiment, often referred to as excess, creates an affective response in the audience. This is often combined with characterizations which signify simplified moral codes. Melodrama, according to Peter Brooks, is the personalization of good and evil evolving from a break in the morality of traditional society (Brooks 1991, 61). Characters are depicted as either good and pure or evil. It presents a world governed by the logic of the excluded middle, in which characters lacking in complexity stand in for wider “ways of being” through which the social world is interrogated (65). For such pristine characters to suffer so miserably, it must be true that the world itself is broken. Although melodramatic stories are always stories of personal travail, Brooks describes “social melodramatists” such as Charles Dickens, as authors who take advantage of this narrative structure to commentate on the morality of the world in which people live (65).

Applying this conception to Hollywood, Elsaesser describes the social melodrama as the form that succeeds by expanding presentation of victimhood across a wide group of characters.
By widening the scope of suffering, these films are able to unearth how “evil” is “firmly placed on an existential level, away from the arbitrary and obtuse logic of private and individualized psychology” (86). In sacrificing depth of character, the author of the character’s pain and dissatisfaction is the structures in which they live. Elsaesser also describes the family melodrama as one “where the world is closed, and the characters are acted upon” (79). Emotional actions are larger, or feel larger, because “strong actions”—in Elsaesser’s terminology—are limited by the social world: “the hysterical outburst replaces any more liberating or self-annihilating action, and the cathartic violence of a shoot-out or a chase becomes an inner violence” (79).

Hollywood melodramas were popular in Korea during the Japanese occupation and through the partition of the Korean peninsula. In the 1960s, the form was hybridized by South Korean directors. South Korean directors critiqued the orientalist lens of Hollywood and encoded their films with the trauma of Korea’s occupation and displacement of the Korean people during the twentieth century (McHugh 2005, 24). Where Western conceptions of melodrama understand the form as associated with theatricality rather than cinematic realism, Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann argue that South Korea’s dramatic history, and the compressed time in which the nation grappled with violent political disruption and moved from a predominately agrarian economy to an industrialized nation, positions the melodrama as the genre of realism for conveying the experience of social life (McHugh and Abelmann 2005, 4). In South Korea, melodrama transitioned from cinema to television where it was serialized and branded Hanguk drama, adopting the English loan word from drama.

South Korean television dramas were ubiquitous by the 1980s. The “economic miracle” of South Korea’s industrialization and the development of the electronics industry made televisions a staple of Korean homes. Still under autocratic rule, the majority of programming
was created in a highly censored environment. For scripted programming, melodramas—the genre that dominated Korea’s film production in the 1960s—filled the airwaves (Lee 2005, 243). Drawing on Thomas Elsaesser’s work on melodrama, Keehyeung Lee describes these programs as presenting a “classic Manichean moral scheme that polarizes good and evil” (Lee 2005, 235). However, in the 1990s, following the end of the military autocracy, censorship eased and dramas such as *Moraesigye*, or *Sandglass* (1995), began to grapple with the social concerns of the recent past. This expansion of the scope of Korean dramas, from the domestic to the social world, continued the legacy South Korean melodrama films which in the 1960s had commented on the legacy of Japanese rule, the rise of Communism, and the trauma of the civil war.

The melodramatic conventions of the Korean drama, like in Western cinema, have been critically “despised and disparaged” for their formulaic structures, excess sentimentality (Lee 2005, 230) and focus on the fantasies and sufferings of women. And like many of the pop culture products consumed by women, their popularity has endured. However, the image of the Korean drama has undergone some rehabilitation, in part due to the international popularity of the form, but also because of the broadening of generic conventions at play within drama series. Levine and Newman’s article, “Upgrading the Situation Comedy” presents the aping of cinematic styles on television as a way to legitimate television genres associated with “hackneyed tropes” (Levine and Newman 2012, 51). Keehyeung Lee’s examination of *Sandglass* describes the show as melodrama mixed with cinematic realism in the form of segments meant to recreate newsreel coverage of the massacre of student protestors at Gwangju in 1980. In *Sandglass*, genre conventions were also hybridized with the Hong Kong-style action sequences and a *bildungsromen* structure (Lee 2005, 235). Premiering two years before the Korean Wave began,
Sandglass marked an evolution of the drama form and forecast the diversification of the generic mode of the Korean drama.

An assessment of the uses of genre, both for transnational genre conventions and the national imaginary of South Korea, reveals a cinematic language and narrative structure that are at once accessible and specific. The texts of Korean dramas are underpinned by a melodramatic mode that rises and falls within the texts. Characters are easily recognizable as heroes with whom an international audience can identify through their victimization, thwarted ambition, and moral decency or, conversely, audiences are free to hate the loathsome petty villains whose selfishness causes so much harm. Other modes of generic pleasure are layered onto this framework that similarly have transnational roots and expressions, creating a diverse range of narratives that appeal across different audiences and taste cultures.

**Melodrama: My Mister**

Melodrama: “Stories that are designed to engage pathos, emotion, sentimentality” (Javabeans and Girlfriday 2013, 269) and tell serious narratives in an excessive style (“Genre” 2019).

I will look specifically at five Korean dramas released between December 1, 2014 and December 31, 2018. Given the length of these programs, with episodic runtimes often exceeding an hour and episode counts of sixteen to twenty, the close reading of the texts will be confined to scenes primarily from the first or one or two episodes. I will begin with the most recent drama from this collection, *Na-ui Ajeossi, or My Mister* (2018) which tells the story of an impoverished young women, Lee Ji-an (IU), and a middle-aged engineer at an architectural firm, Park Dong-hoon (Lee Sun-kyun). Their lives become inextricably tangled when a bribe finds its way to the wrong desk, disrupting the hierarchical power structure of the office and threatening to destroy
what was already an extremely fragile existence. The first episode will be accessed for the moral complexity of the characterization, formalist aspects such as musical scoring, mise-en-scène and excessiveness of the acting, as well as for hybridization and the effectiveness of the generic frame.

Characterization

The characters of My Mister are readily sorted into good and bad. This is most clear with Park Dong-hoon; his gentleness is apparent almost from the beginning of the first episode. A large winged insect flies onto one of the women in the office who immediately begins to scream and the room dissolves into panic. When the bug lands, Dong-hoon prevents a colleague from swatting the insect and instead tries to catch it. Missing his first attempt, the bug flies over to land on the young antisocial contract employee Lee Ji-an. Unlike the other women in the office, Ji-an looks at the insect dispassionately, disinterested in both it and the overall office commotion. As Dong-hoon slowly approaches, Ji-an coolly swats it, ending the charade.

After his effort to save the insect, Dong-hoon’s colleagues begin a game of masculine posturing, describing animals they have killed. To their surprise, it is Dong-hoon with the most harrowing story of slaughtering a pig with his entire family. While performed almost as a joke, the story of the pig slaughter at once places Dong-hoon as more masculine than his peers, but also suggests that the act, which took place in his childhood, was from a time when he was helpless and unable to exert his moral code.

Later in the episode, Dong-hoon and his brothers attend his niece’s wedding. His older brother is divorced from his wife and struggling financially. Dong-hoon’s brothers hatch a scheme to funnel off the envelopes of money gifted by the wealthier wedding guests and split the
profits. When Dong-hoon realizes what is happening, he quietly tries to stop it. However, he only succeeds in exposing the theft to his former sister-in-law and embarrassing his family.

Dong-hoon’s goodness and moral decency are clearly presented, but he is not unsusceptible to family pressure and temptation. Dong-hoon’s moral code is tested for a third time when an envelope is mistakenly delivered to him at work containing nearly $50,000. The unsolicited bribe from an unknown source catches him by surprise and he hides it in his desk. Unable to smuggle the money out of the office, Dong-hoon leaves it there and although he attempts to retrieve it later, he gets scared when he sees the security cameras and security guards and decides to go home. The financial struggles of his family, presented during the wedding incident, tempt Dong-hoon to bring the unexpected windfall home. His moral fall, however, is prevented by Ji-an’s own compromising behavior.

Ji-an’s presentation in the first episode falls less cleanly onto the side of moral righteousness. Ji-an kills the bug without regret in the first scene and is later shown stealing instant coffee from the office. Stolen coffee, however, pales in comparison to her late-night abduction of her grandmother from a care facility when she becomes unable to pay the medical bills. In the most theatrical sequence in the episode, Ji-an wheels her paralyzed grandmother out of the hospital, bed and all, and pushes her up the street toward home. Her muted expressions and dearth of dialogue make the moment simultaneously beautiful and ambiguous.

Later, when Ji-an is asked if she feels guilty about killing the bug, and if she’s ever killed anything else, she dispassionately replies, “a person.” This revelation is left unaddressed in the first episode, but further works to divide her from Dong-hoon. It is Ji-an who ultimately steals the bribe money from the office. Having spied the money’s arrival, she manipulates Dong-hoon’s guilt and paranoia into making him leave the cash envelope behind in his desk by
requesting he buy her to dinner. Once she has seen him go home empty handed, Ji-an is able to convince a maintenance worker at the office building to cut the power long enough for her to make it to Dong-hoon’s desk, steal the money, and return undetected. However, her conduct, even agency, in committing this crime is framed as understandable given the smothering and violent world she inhabits.

Ji-an’s theft of coffee, moving her grandmother out of a care facility without paying, and finally her theft of the bribe money, are all presented as the only choices left by an unjust world. When the janitor is unsure whether to assist Ji-an in her plan to get to the office undetected, she removes her glasses to show him her bruised face from her beating by Kwang-il, the loan shark to who she owes a large financial debt. Her victimization provides justification for her actions. However, the show does not let her stray too far into “fallen women” territory. Her care for her grandmother—the implied reason for her massive debt—frames her as a filial granddaughter who takes responsibility in any way that she can.

In comparison to Dong-hoon and Ji-an who are presented sympathetically, the villains of My Mister appear in the first episode as simple caricatures of corporate greed and moral depravity. Wearing dark suits with well-coiffed hair, they are not individuals but a collective, jockeying for power as if they are pieces on a board game—a cinematic metaphor literally played out with the faces of the executives on pog pieces. Only one of these characters stands out, Do Joon Young, a younger man who is later shown to be having an affair with Dong-hoon’s wife. The villain’s simplicity of characterization draws attention to the wider social ills that they represent. The executives profit when buildings fail safety inspections because they are permitted to renovate and charge their tenants more. The executives are uncaring when their infighting threatens to hurt salaried employees and contract workers. Their way of life is presented as petty
and irresponsible and is personalized by their corruptive influence on the marriage of Dong-hoon. Dong-hoon is emasculated and made impotent by their behavior, both at work and at home.

Outside of the corporate villains is Kwang II, a loan shark who serves as Ji-an’s most ruthless human antagonist. He invades her home, waits for her in the dark, and is an ever-present menace. His rage and fits of violence are not grounded in any deep psychological character study. When Ji-an accuses Kwang II of having a crush on her based on his personal obsession with her debt, he violently attacks her. The violent loan shark is a staple of the Korean drama and the scourge of poor heroines everywhere. He is the physical manifestation of both her desperation and poverty.

Formalist Elements

The score of My Mister is dominated by a simple, melancholy piano accompaniment. Often the score is mixed softly, with the diegetic sounds of the office rising to prominence, helping situate the viewer within the scene. Strings and a flute are added occasionally during particularly introspective moments or to underscore the scenes of violence. Rather than sweeping, the score remains quiet and slow. Korean dramas often use emotional ballads to heighten the soundtrack, but in the first episode, vocals are only featured in the score in two scenes. A shot of the subway running through the city at night, and during Ji-an’s midnight escape from the nursing home, pushing her grandmother’s hospital bed down a winter street with a theatrically large moon hovering over the frame. Another two scenes feature the diegetic music of the radio, once at an assignation between corporate executive Do Ju Young and Dong-hoon’s wife, and once when Dong-hoon and Ji-an share an awkward drink. In general, the music of My
*Mister* is less overwrought than is common in the melodrama genre and in many other Korean dramas, but it is used conscientiously to heighten the feeling that the characters are confined with few options.

The mise-en-scène is dominated by gray office furniture, gray rooms, and muted colors in costuming. Dong-hoon is dressed in a dark gray suit unlike the black of most of the executives in the office. A red sweater worn under his coat is similarly dull but gives him a bit of warmth which is missing from his surroundings. Ji-an is in black which emphasizes her smallness and general lack of emotional expression. The lighting is cool and many of the scenes, particularly with Ji-an, are dimly lit so that she slides into the background un-noticed by almost everyone but Dong-hoon.

The performances of the first episode are characterized by their restraint. The movements of characters are careful and concise, from Dong-hoon’s attempt to catch a bug to Ji-an’s simple sign-language instruction to her grandmother to not answer the door to anyone. The pace of the first episode slowly builds as office life is complicated by family life and finally the instigating incident of the bribe which ads a layer of paranoia and existential crisis. Dong-hoon’s emotions slowly begin to buckle under the increased pressure. In contrast Ji-an’s emotions are left intentionally ambiguous, such as the fall out to Ji-an’s beating. The camera is placed behind her rather than a close up on her face. As she coughs into her hand and sips instant coffee, it unclear whether she is crying or not. The performances of the villains are less subtle, with bursts of violence from Kwang-Ill and the loud bluster of the corporate executives as they discuss their nefarious schemes for self-advancement.

The tone of the first episode with its emphasis on restraint despite heightened circumstances skews *My Mister* more toward realism than theatricality. Flourishes of heightened
behavior serve as moments of relief in an otherwise bleak set-up. At the end of the episode, Dong-hoon is manhandled into an elevator where he is being interrogated about the bribe he received. Dong-hoon’s desperation to get to Ji-an and extract from her an explanation is the emotional climax of the episode. The pressure on Ji-an is mounting and with it the anticipation of seeing her emotionally break. The lack of payoff plays with generic expectation and viewers are left waiting to see what will happen next.

Hybridization

The extraordinary arrival of the bribe serves to break-down the banal evil of poverty. In doing so, the personalization of societal ills draws attention to wider problems in South Korean society, such as the corruption in the real estate development industry, the precarious position of the elderly, the pressure created by family, and the high cost of healthcare. These concerns are embodied in the villainous characters who drive Dong-hoon and Ji-an to act in ways that go against their character. In place of complex motivations, villains carry out real injustices that reside within the South Korean national imaginary.

Framing

The melodramatic mode creates a simple frame that makes a story steeped in South Korea’s current political and social concerns feel universal. Without knowing that nearly half of South Korea’s elderly live in poverty (Hu 2015), foreign viewers can understand the pressure of having to support older relations. The presentation of suffering creates easy identification with the protagonists. Moreover, the use of formalist elements such as scoring helps the audience readily understand what is happening even if they do not understand the language. For instance
the scene of Ji-an’s late night hospital getaway is scored with a ballad and staged against a theatrical moon which lets the audience know that they shouldn’t be afraid for the old woman, but rather impressed with Ji-an’s perseverance and sense of filial obligation even when she is barely able to take care of herself. Muted colors and use of a hand-held camera in some scenes create a sense of cinematic realism which enhances the seriousness of the narrative for viewers. The audience is left waiting for more of these moments of generic pleasure and for the payoffs promised in the exposure of the corporate machinations and a solution to Ji-an’s dangerous lifestyle.

**Action/Adventure: Healer**

Action/Adventure: Contains “numerous scenes where action is spectacular and usually destructive,” as well as “inter-related scenes of characters participating in hazardous or exciting experiences for a specific goal” (“Genre” 2019).

The Korean drama *Hilleo*, the Hangeuk pronunciation of the English word “healer,” premiered in December 2014 and ran through February 2015. The twenty-episode series tracks the adventures of a mysterious young man, Seo Jung-hoo (Ji Chang-wook)—code name Healer—who has remarkable martial arts abilities and works as a “courier,” guarantying the safe transport of anything, or anyone, for a price. When one of Jung-hoo’s deals goes wrong and he finds himself with a price on his head, he begins investigating the mysterious forces that want him dead and the girl who unwittingly seems to be at the heart of the mystery. Tabloid reporter, Chae Young-shin (Park Min-young), CEO of a broadcast news agency, Kim Moon-sik (Park Sang-won,) and his younger brother investigative journalist Kim Moon-ho (Yoo Ji Tae), and Jung-hoo himself, are tied together by a complex history of politics, corruption, and personal betrayal.
Characterization

The moral complexity of the three main protagonists, action hero Seo Jung-hoo, ingénue Chae Young-shin, and reporter Kim Moon-ho are less straightforward than in My Mister. Jung-hoo is introduced while sexualizing the animated avatar he is playing tennis against in his loft apartment. From there, we watch him go to “work” which involves various small cons in order to make contact with his client. His mission is supposed to be a simple pick up, but quickly deteriorates when it becomes clear he is not the only thug-for-hire on the scene. With the help of his partner, a mysterious older woman with superhero hacking abilities, the subway system is breached and Jung-hoo engages in an all-out battle with a collection of anonymous goons in a dimly lit subway tunnel. It is through the action set pieces that the audience is positioned on Jung-hoo’s side and where his core ethics are finally unearthed. The seemingly uneven fight and his general aura of “coolness” wins the audience to his side and Jung-hoo’s insistence on moving the fallen bodies of his assailants off the tracks so that they don’t get hit by oncoming trains cements him as “the good guy” despite his line of work and existence outside of society.

Young-shin is similarly involved in a subterfuge when first introduced. Working as a tabloid reporter, she poses as a delivery person to find out if the girl living in a luxury apartment is secretly dating a high-profile celebrity. However, her motivation is later elaborated in voiceover monologue where she explains her dream to be a serious investigative journalist. Her current line of work is simply the best she can do given the incredibly steep financial and intellectual hurtles baring a place in an elite news organization. Young-shin, however, is not a victim, at least not yet. Though later episodes will reveal a history of violence in South Korea’s foster care system and action genre conventions will maneuver her into the position of damsel in distress, initial audience identification is through the use of voice-over monologues. All three
protagonists Jung-hoo, Young-shin, and Moon-ho, reveal themselves through “self-explanatory speeches,” which Daniel Gerould identifies as one of melodrama’s signature constructions (Gerould 1991, 125). These speeches serve to make the character’s actions understandable even when their morality is disputable.

The character who appears most virtuous is Kim Moon-ho, the handsome charismatic journalist who receives a hero’s entrance at the site of a union strike. He marches into the scene immediately commanding attention. When he is banned from reporting on a man who self-immolated in order to bring attention to government corruption, he responds by cockily flirting with his producer, going on the air, and reporting live the forbidden story. He even humbly accepts his own culpability and that of the media generally in allowing the suffering to get so extreme that actions this self-destruction were necessary. Kim Moon-ho is the Gregory Peck or James Stewart, the charming man whose conscience will not let him back down from injustice. However, a trunk full of secret tapes is housed in his apartment, and Moon-ho is revealed to be the person who hired the thugs Jung-hoo fights in the subway. Moreover, the veneer of affection Moon-how shows his older brother Kim Moon-sik is quickly shattered, revealing a much uglier relationship. These actions cast doubt upon the role he will play as the story moves forward and present a moral ambiguity more in line with film noir and crime genres.

Villainy in Healer is more readily announced. CEO Kim Moon-sik, who will act as the main antagonist, is introduced halfway through the first episode. Sitting at a desk in a grey suit, Moon-sik stands in for the powers who act in the background, reframing society to support the agenda of the rich and powerful. In his first scene, Moon-sik explains to other similarly suited men via video conference call that he intends to spin the union strike as an illegal act by dangerous radicals. Operating from a giant office in the middle of grand resistance, Moon-sik has
the power to silence the suffering of union workers who lives have been damaged. Following the call, it is revealed that Moon-sik is the current employer of Healer’s services and is fully aware that his younger brother is currently acting against him.

However, because villainy in melodrama is always personal as well as social, Moon-sik is also the loving husband of a paralyzed woman. His wife, Choi Myung Hee, is unequivocally the soul of goodness and decency and his affection for her complicates (for now) Moon-sik’s straightforward villainy. Their connection hints at the corruption and historical wrong that allowed this marriage to take place. The only other antagonists in the first episode are the squadron of nameless thugs that correspond more to Hong Kong action movie convention than as symbols of any larger evil.

The moral ambiguity of the main protagonists reflects the mixing of genre codes within the first episode of Healer. Although strong emotional acts are only available to some characters such as Moon-ho and paralyzed Myung-hee, other characters such as Jung-ho, existing outside of society, are able to enact their personal codes. Jung-hoo alone can physically take on the agents of societal evils, but in the first episode he has yet to realize this power. The other characters who actively took part in rebellion are shown in flashback. A group of idealistic young students race through the night in a Jeep, fearlessly reporting the news in violation of the government’s censorship laws. The contrast of the ethical lapses in the present with the idealism of the past posits society itself on the moral spectrum. A buried trauma defines the present era and only through the personalization of the struggle between good and evil in the three protagonists can, in Brooks words, the social order be “purged” and “ethical imperatives” clarified (Brooks 1991, 61).
Formalist Elements

In addition to formalist elements of Hollywood melodrama, *Healer* borrows from Hong Kong action cinema in its stunt work and sound, while also incorporating Hollywood car chases set to period appropriate pop music. Rather than “shoot-em up” fight scenes, Jung-hoo faces teams of suited henchmen in dark alleys. Foley work underscores punches and kicks with wooshes and smacks and wires suspend Ji Chang Wook and his stunt double in the air to get the perfect shot.

The music in *Healer* is one of them clearest indicators of what genre convention is dominating the action. Jung-hoo’s small cons while on his job are scored with a jazzy theme, playing homage to Hollywood spy films. As thugs arrive, the score again switches into the tenser synthesized cords of an action film. In contrast, Young-shin’s less sophisticated grifts are scored with a guitar which shifts the tone from serious to light and poppy. Reporter Moon-ho’s music is darker. Though he’s just visiting a strike, the strings and drums heighten the scene, so it plays like a thriller. Musical cues shift again when Moon-ho is at home where piano music and minor key notes on strings bring him back to the world of melodrama, where there are secrets and unspoken pain.

In general, Jung-hoo’s life is filled with minor keys and piano music, mixed with technical flourishes of an action thriller. Young-shin’s musical cues are more upbeat and less refined, with music that wouldn’t be out of place in a comedy. Moon-ho is in a thriller and melodrama, and the flashbacks to the past rely on old songs which create a sense nostalgic adventure. The main theme, however, serves to bring the disparate elements of the three main characters together. Piano, guitar, strings, and electronic sounds mix in an optimistic upbeat number. This theme appears in moments of heroism: Jung-hoo taking on a small army of thugs
single-handedly in the subway tunnel; Moon-ho preparing to go on air after being told not to report the story of the man who set himself on fire.

Finally, the main love-story theme (“Eternal Love” by Michael Learns to Rock) is teased at the end of the first episode. A mainstay of Korean dramas is the song that scores the love story. Pop songs, particularly for dramas set in the modern day, typically score the heterosexual love of two attractive young people, and move their romance from fun, to sweet, and later to emotional pain as separation looms. Though Jung-ho and Young shin only meet in the last second of the first episode, the presence of the song indicates the fateful meeting.

Mise-en-scène also serves to set the tone and communicate generic information. Colors in Healer are washed out. Jung-hoo spends his time either in shadows with few light sources or in places filled with cool, almost grey, lighting. Jung-hoo’s clothes are black and his hat and sunglasses work to create his action hero image and obscure his face in line with his covert activities. Diegetic cameras, audio recording devices, and screens are frequently used by villains and heroes alike, creating a panopticon effect. Though Jung-hoo’s life lacks color, Young-shin’s home is notably lit with warmer colors and diegetic lamps that set it apart from the rest of Healer’s story world.

The cinematography of Healer eschews the realism of My Mister in favor of telegraphing story elements and developing the overarching mystery. Pans and zooms give symbolic weight to objects which represent love, loss, aspiration, and guilt. During fight scenes, Hollywood intensified continuity editing cuts rapidly around Jung-hoo’s hits in a way that Hong Kong movies starring accomplished martial artists do not. Hollywood’s influence is also felt later in the first episode, a flashback moves the action to a truck where young journalists criticize the government over the airwaves. The police arrive and a chase scene ensues. One member of the
crew takes off on his motorcycle acting as a distraction to ensure the getaway. Behind the wheel, a calm and determined young man steers through tight alleyways down back streets, performing stunt driving fetes. Obstacles are pulled into the road impeding the pursuit of the police until the students finally escape. It is a classic scene from many Hollywood productions. The choice of music in this scene, however, is an old Korean pop song which serves to locate the students in time and heighten a specifically Korean feeling of youthful nostalgia.

Finally, the performances in *Healer* are larger and more emotional in line with melodrama. The mystery set up in the first episode hints at larger emotional payoffs to come, but even in the first episode, *Healer* is operating on a heightened emotional level. The story of the union striker who set himself on fire draws tears from the reporter accompanying Moon-ho to the hospital and the sentiment is highlighted by the score. Moon-ho’s mysterious battle with his brother causes him to throw things, drink alone late at night, and brood, seemingly on the verge of tears. His sister-in-law, Myung Hee, is also shown to be living with pain, her happiness played too intensely which suggests its falseness. Jung-hoo’s actions are also an excess, only expressed physically, and Young-shin fluctuates rapidly between energetic displays and stillness. For both Jung-hoo and Young-shin, large reactions and theatrical flair are mainly for comic effect, but they also serve to endear the audience to these two characters.

*Hybridization*

While melodrama frames the narrative, it is liberally mixed with action conventions. These moments highlight both the malleability of the melodramatic framework but also the hybridization of global action genre traditions. Jung-hoo, for example, is given the “cool” hero entrance. In his first introduction, he is a man in motion, sweating and attempting witty banter.
This presentation of masculinity, however, is immediately undercut when it is revealed his flirtatious asides are directed at a video game avatar. His “tennis match” is then interrupted by the maternal figure in his life and told to go to work. Bhabha describes “colonial mimicry” as a form of hybridization in which the colonial power is represented only partially, creating an ironic effect” (Bhabha 1994, 86). The employment of it at Jung-hoo’s introduction critiques Jung-hoo’s alienation from the rest of the society. However, it is not just an American heroic ideal that is being subverted. Jung-hoo’s status as a highly skilled warrior who we learn makes a living as a freelance henchman and who dresses primarily in black draws comparison to Japanese shinobi or ninja. The scene undermines the mysterious cool ideal and instead presents an immature young man.

Colonial mimicry has been an intrinsic part of the Korean action film genre, beginning with the first hwalkuk (action) films of the 1920s. Influenced by Japanese theater and Japanese directors working in Korea, hwalkuk films by Korean directors critiqued the colonial authority. Kim Soyoung describes the “primal scene of Korean actions movies” as “a young boy gazing at a local girl abused by colonial authority,” which inspires a rescue and “a crime of justice” (2005, 98). This primal scene is missing from the first two episodes of Healer, but its eventual presence is foreshadowed by both the action and melodrama genre cues. Jung-hoo is not a hero yet; he is just a loner with some good combat skills. He does, however, fit into another one of the hwalkuk conventions, what Kim Soyoung describes as the displacement of “muscular bodies” (107).

Korea’s rapid transition from an agrarian society to an industrial society, also explored in melodrama, moved the healthy young man without technical skills to the edges of society. The work of Korean “action cinema often tended to opt for the state ideology to reclaim the marginal male and incorporate him into the industrial labor force” (99). Healer follows this trajectory,
establishing Jung-hoo as a lost soul in need of saving even as he himself must work tirelessly to save those around him.

Jung-hoo and Young-shin are presented as people currently on the wrong path, and their current professions critique Korean youth culture. Jung-hoo’s obsession with money, his disinterest in society in general, and his wish to immigrate, allegorize a consumerist Western oriented ideology. Young-shin’s pursuit of celebrity scandal instead of real issues reads as shallow in comparison to flashbacks depicting a group of crusading young journalists in 1980. These young journalists are also acting outside the law, but their motives couldn’t be more different. In 1980, a group of six—four young men a woman and a young boy—race through the streets in a covered truck bed, illegally broadcasting censorship free news throughout a city that seems flat compared to the monstrous high rises of the present day. Their bravery, cleverness, and idealism highlight how those characteristics have been warped in the present day. Moral clarity exists in the past and appears to be lost in the present.

The Hong Kong connection also helps illuminate the thematic significance of the car chase scene. The car’s driver is revealed to be the young Moon-sik, who in the present is actively working against South Koreans laborers. This doubling of Moon-sik in the past and present follows a recurring motif of Hong Kong cinema and foreshadows his character arc. In Hong Kong action cinema, as Meghan Morris explains, “the one who yearns to become identical or to be the master is usually a villain…who has betrayed his own master in the past and now uses his powers for evil” (Morris 2004, 186).
Framing

*Healer* blends the conventions of the action genre with its melodramatic storyline. The domestic family relations of *My Mister* are intimate drawings compared to the intricate intergenerational drama that personifies the social ills and failed promise of the South Korean student idealism of the 1980s. Action set pieces act to punctuate character and mix Elsaesser’s “strong actions” with emotional actions. However, violent acts are the realm of socially alienated characters and represent an underlying break in society. In this way, *Healer* exhibits similar generic language to that of *Sandglass*, which was also written by Song Ji-nah.

The first episode of *Healer* is the plant half of the “plant and payoff.” Props like photographs act to transition the large cast of characters between locations and from the present to the past. The relationships between characters are teased but left unexplained as the camera zooms and pans on, pictures, tape cassettes, and other symbolically laden objects which provide clues for later revelations. However, the genre iconography, music, and characterization prepare viewers for a show of epic proportions.

The generic conventions of two transnational cinemas help orient viewers who might not understand the authoritarian censorship of Korea in the 1980s or current concerns about freedom of the press in a country where family owned conglomerates dominate the media landscape. The personalization of social issues provided by melodrama create a point of recognition to the outsider. Generic pleasure is still gratified by a fight sequence, a car chase, or the recognizable figure of a good man standing up for what he believes. At the same time, however, difference is introduced through colonial mimicry and hybridization.
Romantic Comedy: *Because This Is My First Life*

Romantic Comedy: Contains light-hearted comedic scenes of romance. In Korean dramas, “The meet-cute gets the couple off on the wrong foot, spurs a round or twenty of bickering, develops into courtship that leads to angst and probable separation, and resolves into eventual reunion” (Javabeans and Girlfriday 2013, 153).

The Korean drama *Ibeon Saengeun Cheoeumira*, translated for English speaking audiences as *Because This Is My First Life*, moves away from the epic saga of *Healer* to take on the concerns of the modern woman, using the genre best known for grappling with gendered power relations, the romantic comedy. Both melodrama and the romantic comedy have historically been regarded as women’s genres (Altman 1999, 72) and have been both beloved and reviled for their preoccupation gender and sexuality.

*Because This Life Is My First Life* follows Yoon Ji-ho (Jung So-min), a television writer who has just turned thirty, and Nam Se-hee (Lee Min-ki), a 38-year-old computer programmer at a technology start-up. When Ji-ho is displaced from the house she shares with her younger brother and his new wife, she is connected through mutual friends with Se-he who is in need of a roommate. However, confusion around Ji-ho and Se-hee’s ambiguously gendered names and character descriptions (Ji-hoo is good looking and quit smoking and Se-he is quiet and likes cats), as well as Se-hee’s busy work schedule, results in each expecting they are living with a person of the same gender. When the misunderstanding is brought to light, Ji-ho and Se-hee struggle to reconcile their obvious compatibility with the societal pressures, mostly in the form of their parents, to legitimize their living situation through marriage.

Mixing the romantic comedy into the melodramatic mode critiques the presentation of women and the options afforded to them by society. Steve Neal and Frank Krutnik describe the romantic comedy as addressing similar concerns to the melodrama: “one of the prime features of
the romantic comedy is the negotiation between female desire and the places ‘offered’ to women in patriarchal society, especially in terms of marriage and family” (Neal and Krutnik, 1990, 133). However, they stress that “the romantic comedy…offers a different perspective on the problems and issues which mark the discursive field of certain ‘women’s picture melodramas” (133). On the superficial level, generic expectations for melodrama are thwarted love and an excess of emotion in place of sex, whereas the romantic comedy is preoccupied with sexual desire and is destined to end at the altar (134). However, the Korean melodrama with its library of easily recognizable tropes and widespread popularity also makes it a fertile ground for self-reflexivity and meta storytelling. Comedy easily slides in and out of the melodramatic structure, providing incisive social commentary while also engaging issues emotionally.

The first two episodes of Because This Life Is My First are accessed for their use of melodramatic and romantic comedy conventions. Unlike the romantic comedy in movies, the pace of the key “moves” play out much slower when stretched over sixteen episodes. Leger Grindon, building on Valdimir Propp’s “moves”—or turns in the narrative that progress the “master plot” of a story—identifies: (1) “unfulfilled desire,” (2) “the meeting” (3) “fun together” (4) “obstacles arise” (5) “the journey” (6) “new conflicts” (7) “the choice,” (8) “crisis,” (9) “epiphany,” (10) “resolution.” (Grindon 2011, 9-10). The first episode works to establish “unfulfilled desire,” both in terms of disappointed love and personal achievement, as well as the “meeting.” The second episode begins to move the story into “fun together” and introduces the “obstacles” to their cohabitation. However, the wider focus on their lives and aspirations beyond the romantic makes room for a more expansive commentary on the current state of gender relations. It is in these places where the melodramatic mode rises to prominence and acts in the service of realism.
Characterization

Ji-ho, in serving as both the melodramatic heroine and the romantic comedy heroine, subverts both forms. She is poor and confined by her poverty and limited options, she feels oppressed by her family who she refers to as “patriarchal,” and she is taken advantage of by her work colleagues who pay her very little and yet expect her to live in the office for three-month periods in order to meet the demanding drama writing schedule. However, Ji-ho is also a writer—the preferred career of Hollywood romantic comedy heroines—has a degree from prestigious Seoul National University, and she has the love and support of her two best friends, Woo Su-ji and Yang Ho-rang. Her career and friends—who fulfill the classic romantic comedy role of Ji-ho’s allies (Grindon 2011, 14)—are aspirational rather than pitiful. Ji-ho is not framed as “good,” but is made relatable through voiceover and through her easily recognizable struggles. Throughout most of the first two episodes, her problems are mundane: walking in on her brother in an intimate moment, looking for affordable housing, finding out the boy she likes has a girlfriend, and dissatisfaction with her job. Ji-ho is an everywoman and therefore her wider conflict is a social conflict facing all women.

The first episode opens with Ji-ho as a child sitting alone watching a birthday party on the television and realizing for the first time that she is supposed to blow out the candles on her birthday cake and make a wish. This is followed by a montage of childhood birthdays in which her younger brother blows out her candles and her father helps himself directly to her cake, the party effectively stolen from her by the entitled men in her life. It is later revealed that it is her birthday, and her family has forgotten, a trope right out of Sixteen Candles (1984). Young and single, Ji-ho falls into the category of women who do not have time to date because their careers are so demanding. Unlike, Sandra Bullock in The Proposal (2009) or Sandra Bullock in Miss
Congeniality (2000), however, Ji-ho’s career has not given her financial independence. Ji-ho does not challenge the patriarchal status quo, she is victimized by it. The opening sequence, while edited for comedy with a series of rapid cuts and focusing on the father’s gross manners, anticipates the more serious manifestations of this same problem.

At the end of the second episode, Ji-ho, finally stands up for herself at work. The confrontation is tense, uncomfortable, and not at all funny. Later that evening, after a deflating dinner with her old classmates, she returns to her temporary studio only to be visited in the middle of the night by a drunk co-worker. The man, angry at Ji-ho for pushing back at work, begins to threaten her, first physically then sexually. Although she is able to fight him off, the incident transforms Ji-ho and our understanding of the world. Co-habitation romantic hijinks are all well and good, but the security a house and a respectful partner represent are serious business. This scene, which eschews the light comedy of the romantic comedy, reframes Ji-ho as a melodrama heroine.

Ji-ho’s romantic counterpart, Se-hee, also does not at first appear to fall into the melodramatic mode, mostly because of his aura of difference. If melodramas rely on character types, Neal and Krutnik argue that romantic comedies celebrate character “specialness” (1990, 139). Se-he’s extreme pragmatism, stiff and overly blunt personality, meticulousness and technical proficiency, all suggest he may fall on the autism spectrum. However, despite issues with social interaction, Se-hee usually comes out the better in his confrontations with his co-workers and friends who respect his intransigence and prefer to find work arounds for his peculiarities rather than to isolate him. If Se-hee is victimized at all, it comes from his inability to deal with his parents. His mother’s histrionics and threats concerning his lack of interest in romantic relationships break down his closely guarded autonomy and prevent him from living
the life he imagines for himself. The threat Se-hee and Ji-ho’s parents pose is played comically big, hugging the line between comedy and melodrama.

**Formalist Elements**

The opening theme is an up-tempo number of accordion music, cartoon sound effects, and chimes. It has a cute twee quality that signals the show will be sweet and innocent. The credits include shots of the couple, the house they share, but also feature hand drawn illustrations on top of stills, evoking comics and cartoons. South Korea, like Japan, has a rich history of comic storytelling called *manhwa* and is a large consumer of Japanese shōjo manga. To a Western viewer, however, the comic book touches suggest the show will be juvenile. Once the show begins, the visual aesthetic largely vanishes, and the cartoon sound effects create a form of sound montage that underscores moments of humor.

The mood is set by musical stings, pop songs, and generically coded music used to heighten scenes to the point of absurdity. Punchlines are often highlighted with asynchronous contrapuntal sounds, such as the noises of dogs or farm yard animals to indicate a particularly awkward or crass moment, a thunderclap at a surprise revelation, or the honking of brass instruments when a character’s mistake is corrected. The music of a New Orleans funeral or blues chords change moments of disappointment into jokes. Music that usually accompanies an action scene plays as the programmers work to meet a deadline for releasing an update to their software. This strategy serves to undercut emotion by either playing a character’s actions or emotions too seriously for the moment or deflating them completely. Pop songs also weave in and out of the episodes infusing scenes with a light-hearted teasing tone, or a romantic mood.
The fated meeting between the future lovers is also emphasized by the score. When Ji-ho and Se-hee bump into each other, not realizing they are already roommates, the music takes on a magical tone with chimes. Chimes also accompany their text message conversation when both mistakenly believe they are talking to someone of their same gender. Later when they meet as strangers, the score highlights how easily they fall into conversation with the return of the light-hearted music. Again, Se-hee’s unexpected kindness to Ji-ho has a magical quality suggested by the return of the chimes. As Ji-ho and Se-hee connect later at the bus stop, their love theme begins to play and Ji-ho makes the decision, has dictated by genre convention, to act on her desire and kiss him.

The majority of the musical cues are more recognizable as comedy than drama. However, the melodramatic cords do make their appearance in the first two episodes. During the attack on Ji-ho by her co-worker, the score drops out, only to pick up again as Ji-ho walks the street at night in her pajamas looking for a place she feels safe. Ji-ho’s voiceovers are often matched with quiet piano music and strings. Only when she’s alone in an underpass does she breakdown and cry. In this moment of excess emotion, the notes of Ji-ho and Se-hee’s love theme play, indicating her vulnerability and exactly where she is finally going to go in order to find a place to sleep.

Mise-en-scène also communicates the romantic comedy genre. Colors are bright and saturated. Clothes are trendy and lipstick is bright. Everyone’s hair is shiny and glamorous. Some effort has been made to downplay actor Lee Jun-ki’s glamorous image by keeping Se-hee buttoned up in oxford shirts without ties and a simple hair style. In general, however, the attractiveness of the cast and their trendy wardrobes and make-up move Because This is My First Life into Grindon’s mainstream romantic comedy (Grindon 2011, 83).
The least colorful setting is Se-hee and Ji-ho’s house. The more muted colors match Se-hee’s simple and uncomplicated aesthetic. Blues, beiges and wood give the home a more masculine feeling and help to set off the shades of pink Ji-ho frequently wears. The lighting in Because This Is My First Life is notably warmer than either My Mister or Healer. Rather than being oppressive, the house is represented as a warm cozy escape. To emphasize this point, Ji-ho looks at a variety of places within her budget before moving into Se-hee’s condo. Any of those apartments would have fit within the world of My Mister, but Ji-ho is spared this particular humiliation.

Large emotional actions are used both for comedy and for dramatic effect. Ji-ho’s father is always too loud. Se-hee’s former tenant screams in frustration at being evicted. Ji-ho, the every-girl, keeps her energy notably below that of her friends. However, moments of extreme absurdity are played big, such as when Ji-ho runs screaming down the street after seeing her brother in flagrante. Even Se-hee’s deadpan reactions are too large. Whether the excess plays as comedy or melodrama is indicated by score and the editing. Lingering shots of tears in dark underpasses read as melodramatic, but quickly edited montages filled with reaction shots and scenes featuring jump cuts heighten the comedy.

Hybridization

Because This Is My First Life falls most comfortably into the romantic comedy genre. Popular conventions of the romantic comedy include: “obstacles which keep [the couple] apart and prevent their mutual recognition of this compatibility: misunderstandings, misrecognition of each other’s characters, misguided impressions of their attachments to others, the ‘mistaken belief’ that the correct path to happiness excludes love” (Neal and Krutnik, 1990, 141). To this
should also be added comedy’s reflexivity, as established genres tend to become more meta as they age.

This is particularly clear through metacinematic storytelling and devices. Allusions to *Sixteen Candles* in the first sequence are quickly followed by cuts featuring Ji-ho writing a currently airing melodrama complete with shots of the melodrama being acted. Cameos from well-known Korean drama actors Yoon Doo-joo and Yoon So-hee further sell the parody of the show within a show. In the melodrama Ji-ho writes, moments of peek emotion turn into increasingly bizarre product placement. The sequence then cuts to a third gaze, that of the fictional audience watching the drama, their pleasure turning suddenly to confusion and horror at the poor execution and reliance on *makjang*, or soapy sensibility. In the drama within the drama, characters scream and cry in order to sell health supplements, lipstick, and hoverboards. The layered reflexivity of Ji-ho’s characterization as well as the explicit commentary on the Korean drama industry positions *Because This Is My First Life* as a critique on the melodrama by way of the romantic comedy.

The romantic comedy’s comfort in navigating women’s sexual desire and fantasy makes it an ideal choice for challenging the polarized moral codes presented in melodrama which tend to villainize sexuality. Hollywood romantic comedies of the 1930s focus on “the woman’s willing acceptance of the man, of union. Hence the necessity in these films of structuring a perspective on female fantasy” (Neal and Krutnik, 1990, 142). By focusing on three main women, Ji-ho and her two friends, *Because This Is My First Life*’s is able to portray a range of non-traditional women who have different relationships with the institution of marriage. Ji-ho, for example, objects to the patriarchal marriage as practiced by her parents. Ji-ho’s friends are both sexual adults who are very comfortable in their sexual identity but are less comfortable in
their actual relationships with men. Similar to the romantic comedies of the 1930s, the drama’s focus on eccentric individuals who do not conform to society requires that the institution of marriage be negotiated before it can be “sanction[ed]” with their union (Neal and Krutnik, 1990, 140). Many scholars see the romantic comedy as a conservative genre which ultimately re-establishes the heterosexual status quo (Neal and Krutnik 1990). This is a fair critique, however the non-judgmental portrayal of women’s sexual desire in romantic comedies and acknowledgement of how economics play into power dynamics make the genre better suited to progressive causes than is often acknowledged.

Finally, the romantic comedy is an important vehicle for the show’s critique on patriarchal traditions. Like melodrama, it personalizes this topic with parental figures representing traditional values that constrain the younger generation’s pursuit of happiness; “Rather than displaying respect due to elders, romantic comedy is more likely to mock fathers as rigid tyrants who stand in the way of change” (Grindon 2011, 3). “Romantic comedy expresses its subversive social implications in that the conflict between generations results in the overthrow of the old by the young, but its counter-tendency toward stability results in the eventual reconciliation of the feuding parties in the creation of a new family” (3-4). The show deconstructs marriage as more than just an institution that confers financial stability, but one that requires conformity to certain socially ascribed roles. The difference between marriage and co-habilitation is more than just sex, but the acceptance of behavioral constraints imposed by family and friends.

However, even within the romantic comedy, the melodramatic theme of displacement common in Korean films is present. Ji-ho’s desperate search for a home provides the set up for the romantic comedy, but it directly addresses the social structures that led to it. Ji-ho cannot be a
modern woman and remain in her father’s home. When her brother gets married, he and his new wife get the house he shared with Ji-ho, despite her considerable financial and personal investment in the property. Later when she moves in with Se-hee, her status as a woman again makes her unacceptable to the older generation as a viable roommate, despite the fact that she can pay her way and contribute to the upkeep. In the first two episodes, Ji-ho makes her way between three different homes, and will find herself at many more before the show’s conclusion. Work places filled with men are also hostile, though this is a theme that will be explored more in subsequent episode in the character of Su-ji.

Navigating between melodrama and the romantic comedy, where does a successful conclusion come from? Melodrama requires the expulsion of “clearly identified antagonists” (Brooks 1991, 61) while the romantic comedy requires “the eventual reconciliation of the feuding parties through the creation of a new family” (Grindon 2011, 4). When the antagonist is positioned as patriarchy and represented through the parental figures, in particular the fathers, these two conclusions are incommensurate. The very thing that makes these ideas unreconcilable however, also speaks to text’s engagement with South Korea’s #MeToo movement. The stories of women who were sexually harassed in the workplace have returned to the press following the transnational #MeToo movement (Bicker 2018, Maresca 2018, Haynes and Chen 2018). Directors, politicians, pastors, and prosecutors have all faced accusations and a study by the Korea Institute of Criminology revealed that 80% of Korean men said they had assaulted a girlfriend (Kim Sa-sol 2017). Realism, then, is achieved when the story places Ji-ho in danger and acknowledges the darkness at the edge of the fantastic whimsey of the romantic comedy. The antagonist is within families and marriages as well as at the workplace. It cannot be
expelled, but neither can it be left to fester. The terms of gender relations need to be renegotiated and the conventions of the romantic comedy are being deployed to unearth these issues.

*Framing*

The conventions of romantic comedy are easily recognizable in their use of music, mise-en-scène and the “master plot” Grindon 2011, 9-10). The expectation of the couple meeting is emphasized by the score, and the misunderstanding and obstacles prime viewers for the next “move.” Audiences are able to expect a lighthearted interrogation of love filled with hijinks. However, the deployment of these codes is hybridized to address Korean concerns. The concerns of the international #MeToo movement are addressed, but so are the Korean expectations of marriage and life as a woman in the work place. Moreover, obstacles that are more situated in Korean culture, such as the expectations of parents of their children and their children’s spouses, can be fit into the generic understanding that couples in romantic comedies are expected to meet with impediments.

*Crime, Mystery, and Thriller: Signal*

Crime/Mystery/Thriller: Contains “inter-related scenes of characters participating, aiding, abetting, and/or planning criminal behavior or experiences usually for an illicit goal” and “characters endeavoring to widen their knowledge of anything pertaining to themselves or others.” The “narrative…is sensational or suspenseful” (“Genre” 2019).

2016’s critically acclaimed and highly rated series *Sigeuneol*, or *Signal*, mixes the police procedural into the melodramatic mode and adds a fantasy twist for good measure. Borrowing a conceit from Hollywood’s *Frequency* (2000), *Signal* is the story of two police detectives in
different eras who can communicate through a walkie talkie. In the present day, Detective Park Hae-young (Lee Je-hoon) is the young criminal profiler whose horrible experiences with law enforcement in his youth inspired both his current career and his disdain for the institution he represents. In the past timeline which spans 1986 to 2000, Detective Lee Jae-han (Cho Jin-woong) evolves from country police officer to Seoul detective. Linking the two timelines in Detective Cha Soo-hyun (Kim Hye-soo), who was a young colleague of Lee Jae-han and one of the first women detectives in South Korea. In the intervening years between the two timelines, Soo-hyun rose to become a competent senior officer in the violent crime division. The three detectives are connected by the kidnap and murder of a school girl in 2000, which leads to the creation of a new cold case division. Together, Hae-young, Jae-han and Soo-hyun work to solve cases inspired by some of the most infamous crimes in modern South Korean history, and in the process, challenge decades of institutional corruption.

The combination of the police procedural—which relies on an episodic format arranged around the case of the week—with an overarching melodramatic storyline allows Signal to explore how crime is both a symptom and consequence of an unjust society. In doing so, Signal’s project dovetails with film noir. As the series progresses, simplistic evils give way to complex webs of culprits, and the detective protagonists are undermined in their quest to carry out law and order by malefactors within the system itself. The duel timelines also mean that a successful resolution in the present comes at the expense of the past. Marginalized and attacked by forces outside and inside the precinct, justice and moral clarity fall to the detectives who must be guided by their own moral codes. However, although Signal makes liberal use of the generic codes of multiple subgenres of detective fiction, these conventions are ultimately in service to melodrama which inspires in audiences a sentimental understanding of victims rather than the
psychology of criminality. To understand how the generic codes of the detective complicate and are ultimately in service to melodrama, the first two episodes Signal are explored.

Characterization

The first two episodes of Signal focus most strongly on Detective Park Hae-young. Following the opening credits, the establishing shot of the first episode is a school yard. Non diegetic text tells us it is July 29, 2000. The camera slowly pans up on a pretty young girl, Yoon-jung, sitting on the steps observing other children playing. Park Hae-young is introduced through an eyeline match of her gaze. He’s an outsider, standing in a shadow, not wearing the school uniform of his peers and instead wearing dirty jeans and a brown striped shirt. His clothes blend into the wall and the ground, cuing viewers to his status as a marginalized outsider, both economically and socially. Later, as the rain pours down, Hae-young considers offering his umbrella to Yoon-jung, but then runs away in embarrassment. Instead, Hae-young watches a mysterious woman with an umbrella walk Yoon-jung away from school.

Later, as Hae-young sits alone at home, he sees that Yoon-jung has been kidnapped. The next day when Hae-young walks to school, he finds it mobbed by press with cameras. The camera flashes and noise trigger a series of memories, presented in an intense soviet montage sequence. The clips are all diegetic moments, but the scenes are fragmented and presented out of order. Clips Yoon-jung walking away from school with the umbrella woman are interspersed with more violent images of a young man being arrested by police. The montage alludes to events in the past, but any explanation about who these people are or what other crime has been committed are left for another time. The result for viewers is an overload of sensation that affectively situates the audience in Hae-young’s point of view. Throughout these sequences tense
music plays, overlaid by the voice of a news anchor, the flashes of cameras, wails, static and finally, Hae-young’s own plaintive voice, coming from what seems to be his own mind.

The montages link Yoon-jung’s kidnapping and murder with Hae-young’s own experience with injustice. This case carries personal weight for Hae-young not just because of his slight acquaintance with the victim, but because his intense and traumatizing experience with the police as hinted at through briefs shots in the montage sequences. In all the montages, the figures of police officers are missing, falling out of frame or angled away from the camera. The excessiveness of the noise, images, and score are overwhelming, creating an intense connection between the audience and Hae-young. This groundwork ensures empathy with the protagonist even when he is introduced again in the present day under less sympathetic circumstances.

Hae-young in the present is a prickly cynical man who has perfected the most iconic of literary detective archetypical skills, ratiocination. In full Sherlock Holmes fashion, Hae-young smugly walks a journalist through the actions of three actors suspected, without proof, of being involved in a love triangle. The camera lingers on Hae-young pausing to slowly sip his iced coffee, his eyes looking into the camera in a metacinematic nod to the countless times a scene like this has appeared. However, in another case of colonial mimicry, his bravado is undercut by the arrival of an older woman, Violent Crimes Detective Cha Soo-hyun. Detective Cha reveals that Hae-young’s deductions are not because he is some sort of genius, but because he dug through someone’s garbage. Taken to the police station for questioning, Hae-young reasserts his psychological profiling skills in an attempted act of dominance. This time he profiles Cha Soo-hyun followed by one of the detectives on her team, Kim Gye-chul. Gye-chul, he correctly accuses of taking bribes, an act Hae-young holds in contempt. His own work for the tabloid
journalist Hae-young frames as both within the law and also acceptable as he didn’t request payment for his services. Profiling, for Hae-young, is a hobby.

While Hae-young oxford shirts and refined appearance in the present day and air of superiority mark him as a brainy gentleman detective in the style of Sherlock Holmes, Hae-young’s reliance on a personal code of honor and his marginalization and distain for the police force position him as a hardboiled detective. Cynical, angry, and frustrated, Hae-young appears days away from leaving the force. However, in South Korea, private detectives are illegal. The law bans “finding out a certain person’s whereabouts and contacts” and “investigating his or her private life” (Lee 2018). Hae-young is forced to operate within a system he does not believe in and despises and has therefore created for himself a persona of an aloof genius as a coping mechanism. The contradictions in his character are fused together through his melodramatic introduction, which establishes both his personal obsession with crime and his inability to believe in institutionalized justice. In comparison, his new colleague Cha Soo-hyun is a conventional police officer who on first introduction would not appear out of place in an U.S. police procedural.

Cha Soo-hyun’s character, the second of the main leads to be formally introduced, exudes confidence and experience. There is a physicality to Soo-hyun that reads as competence and bravado. She is one of the boys, unconcerned with a little office violence, willing to throw a punch if need be, and able to administer a withering lecture or cutting remark. However, for all her hard edges, her anger when roused is righteous. She takes both her job and the victims extremely seriously and this anger is what ultimately inspires Hae-young to trust her. Unfortunately, Soo-hyun’s conviction and empathy are not matched with real power within the police force. Soo-hyun has tenacity, but no resources and no support. In the buddy cop dynamic,
she is officer who prefers to operate by the rules and it takes Hae-young’s reckless disregard for rank and procedure to begin the investigation which will ultimately lead them to some of the most powerful people in South Korea.

Soo-hyun is not able to completely satisfy as a detective because of the ways she remains defined by her relationship to the men in her life, Hae-young and Jae-han. Despite exhibiting characteristics associated with masculine police officers, Soo-hyun also performs a maternal role in the 2015 timeline. When Hae-young breaks rules, Soo-hyun takes responsibility and shields him within her team. Soo-hyun’s femininity is more conventional when Signal transitions to the second timeline and the year 2000. Sixteen-years ago, Soo-hyun was still a uniformed officer with long hair who was required to wear a skirt. Lacking authority and confidence, Soo-hyun endured sexist colleagues who treated her like an outsider rather than a fellow officer. The only person she seems close with is Detective Lee Jae-han. Paradoxically, however, he is the only officer she would prefer to see her as a woman. Soo-hyun is imbued with the qualities of both a mother and the ingénue. In the past, Soo-hyun is in need of Jae-han’s protection and desires his love. In the present, she must guide Hae-young and protect him from the people within the police force who seek to silence and ostracize him. The three detectives comprise a fractured allegorical family that can only be healed by investigating and purging the system.

Lee Jae-han, the paternal figure, first appears in a flashback to 2000. The camera shifts from young Hae-young, exiting the busy precinct in defeat, to a plain clothes detective coming up the stairs. Jae-han, we learn, is the detective in charge of the missing person’s case. His authority in leading the case, however, is undermined at every turn by the Chief of Police, Kim Bum-joo, who hurls insults at Jae-han and dismisses his leads. As Jae-han’s fellow officers run off to pursue a new suspect, Jae-han exits alone. In his stack of papers, the audience sees the
complaint Hae-young filed as a child reporting the culprit is a woman. Jae-han’s belief in Hae-young in this moment proves his moral superiority to his fellow officers who failed to take the testimony of an eyewitness. Jae-han’s isolation within the force is highlighted as he searches a dark hospital alone at night. The unsteady light of his flashlight, and eerie noises, and the score dial up the tension. Jae-han occupies a dangerous world full of shadows, both literal and figurative.

In 2000, Jae-han exhibits some of the classic characteristics of the detective. He has a rumpled, world weary presence matched by a deep voice and a laconic delivery. He is also the object of affection for Soo-hyun, the only woman in an office of men. His own interest in her is hinted at, but unexpressed because Jae-han puts his work before romance or sentiment. However, despite his marginalization, the Jae-han of 2000 is the idealized police officer rather than a hardboiled detective. He is an aspirational authority figure who is good and kind.

Therefore, he no sooner is he introduced, then a bat flies at his head. Jae-han, we deduce, has been missing for nearly sixteen years. Jae-han is the perfect victim of melodrama in that he is almost too good to live. His idealized heroism and depth of feeling make him the personification of what the justice system should be. Without the tragedy of Jae-han’s disappearance and likely death, there would be no need for Hae-young and Soo-hyun to take up his cause years later.

The trick of Signal, however, is that Jae-han reappears. Jae-han goes missing in 2000, but the magic walkie talkie then connects Hae-young to the Jae-han of 1989. In this way, Jae-han the icon is deconstructed by the fantasy conceit and the narrative develops Jae-han from an ordinary man into the heroic ideal. The Jae-han from 1989 is inexperienced, awkward, and his biggest challenge is finding the nerve to talk to the girl he likes. He is still a good man, but an untested one who is learning what his moral code should be and how far he is willing to go to ensure the
guilty are punished. Jae-han fulfills two roles: he is both the victim who needs saving, and the blunt instrument that must dispense justice on his own terms. *Signal* is structured around dramatic irony. The tragedy of Jae-han has already happened, and yet the audience watches it play out, desperate to stop the inevitable. This gives every scene with Jae-han an over-determined quality, as if his every action is fated.

Unlike the heroes who adopt some of the tropes of detective fiction, the villains within the police force are quickly identifiable and their motives are simple and transparent. In the present, Kim Bum-joo has become the director of police and his chief concern is maintaining his power. He spies on potential threats and attempts to close down investigations into past events that might expose his assent to power at the expense of victims and their families. In 2000, when he was only Chief Kim, his dismissal of Jae-han reinforces that he is the antagonist. Ahn Chi-soo, a Section Chief in 2015, functions as his lackey, berating Soo-hyun and Hae-young. He monitors and attempts to restrict their movements, and his connection—along with Kim Bum-soo—to the missing Jae-han is the most damning indication of their villainy.

Other villains—such as the perpetrators in the case of the week plots—are similarly coded as evil without a great deal of explanation or interest in their inner psychology. Motives are simplistic and evil characters are unsympathetic. As such, there is a strong affective response in watching them evade justice and the suspense builds as the audience fears that they will go unpunished for their crimes.

*Formalist Elements*

The excessiveness the score is one of the clearest indicators of the melodramatic mode. String’s heighten tension and pathos and provide additional clues to conspiracies. Characters
miss each other in stairwells and the music indicates their fated connection. Quiet moments are few and far between, keeping the emotional engagement high. The full orchestra crescendos as the detectives race to find a suspect. At other times, the score reflects the conventions of horror, another affective genre, utilizing stingers in discordant keys or sharp abrasive noises to create a sense of dread and uneasiness. Finally, an acoustic guitar adds sense of melancholy as characters struggle to come to terms with their feelings of loss, bitterness, and resignation.

Songs with vocals are used less frequently than in either Healer or Because This Is My First Life, but when they appear, they pack an emotional punch. Unironically sentimental, they underscore the tears on the verge of being spilled. The sudden shifts in tone and score pace the drama, moving the narrative through time and from moments of quiet grief to bursts of violence or action.

Signal’s cinematography is both highly stylized and gritty, the same characteristics used to describe film noir. Characters move through shadows, often blending into the backgrounds. One of the defining aspects of film noir is its visual style which emphasizes “darkness and shadows that, in turn, reflect the shady moral universes” (Corrigan and White 2018, 364). In order to achieve a noir ascetic using color, John Cawelti describes how in Chinatown (1974) “Polanski carefully controls his spectrum of hue and tone…with occasional moments of rich golden light” (1998, 184). Similarly, Sue Turnbull describes the visual style of Miami Vice (1984-1990) as “neon noir” (2014, 82). Signal’s colorized take on noir also uses a carefully controlled color pallet. Greens, greys, and browns are combined with a filtered lens giving the episodes a grim but distinct visual appearance. This makes other colors, such as the gold of a flashlight or a red purse stand out and give them added visual significance.
The symbolic effect of this color pallet is clearly seen in Signal’s second case which takes on one of the most notorious unsolved crimes in Korean history, the Hwaseong serial murders. Occurring in the five-year period of 1986-1991, ten women were raped and murdered. One of the few details connecting the women was that the women were wearing red. Throughout the series, red colors take on an ominous significance. The woman who kidnapped the school girl wore dark red lipstick. The first victim of the serial killer had a red purse. Red lights can be seen on the railway tracks where women walk home alone at night.

In addition to the use of color, physical objects carry symbolic and emotional significance. Most obvious is the magical walkie talkie connecting the detectives in two timelines. However, there is also focus on calendars and photos which attempt to orient both the detective and the audience to particular moments in time. Soo-hyun’s most prized possession is a framed photo of Batman with an inspirational quote. Behind the photo of Batman is Soo-hyun’s only photo with Lee Jae-han. Even the objects in melodrama are expressive.

In Signal, characters scream and shout, whisper threats, and choke back tears. There is an intensity to every conversation in the first two episodes as the relentless pace pushes characters from one extreme to the other. Daniel Gerould describes the speeches of melodrama as dynamic expressions characterized by “exclamations, energetic intonations, expressive vocabulary, and rhythmic constructions” (1988, 122). In short, the excess of melodrama is the opposite of the terse and laconic performances of the film noir detective. This disjuncture was actually a subject of criticism in South Korea. In particular, Lee Je-hoon’s performance as Park Hae-young was panned for being overly theatrical and his line delivery awkward (J.K. 2016). Generally considered a talented actor, the negative reaction to his perceived overacting was strong enough that his agency issued a response (J.K. 2016). Lee Je-hoon’s performance becomes more
restrained following the first few episodes, but even adjusting for this, actors deliver performances that adhere more to the melodramatic mode.

Hybridization

*Signal* falls into a long lineage of fictional detectives. Detectives have been a popular staple of film and television from the earliest days. Philippa Gates describes the detective hero as rising in prominence in the early silent era (Gates 2006, 58). Hollywood, Britain and France were all in the business of detective stories in the early years of the twentieth century (Gates 2006, 58-63). Prior to film, detectives were transnational literary icons with Edgar Allen Poe’s Dupin and Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes. Philippa Gates describes the evolution of the investigator as adaptable, shifting to mirror “the social, historical, economic, and political moment” (Gates 2006, 5). The conventions of the detective genre evolved over its long history, from gentleman sleuths who relied on ratiocination to the hardboiled detectives of the film noir period to the modern television police procedural. Inhabiting the mystery or crime genres—as described by Gates (2006), or Cawelti’s (1986), respectively—the search for facts or clues to uncover a truth moves the detective through the narrative. One of the most influential periods in detective iconography was Hollywood’s film noir movement of the 1941 to 1953 (Schrader 1986, 170).

Historically, melodrama and film noir could be separated by melodrama’s focus on idealized women who suffer passively and film noir’s men of action who most guard against the trap of femininity. Melodrama is concerned with the perspective of women. Films like *Waterloo Bridge* (1940) derive their tension from dramatic irony. The film follows heroine Myra’s journey from dancer to prostitute and the audience waits for the moment when her lover will begin his
investigation and finally learn the truth. In film noir, the narrative is reversed. The detective meets the fallen woman and must uncover the crime. The passivity and purity of the melodrama heroine is at odds not only with the erotic image of the femme fatale, but also the hardboiled detective who has the power to dispense justice. Cawelti argues that “the true thrust of the myth” of the hardboiled detective is “the marginal hero becoming righteous judge and executioner” (1986, 186). Evil is thus identified and cathartically repulsed, but the detective is unchanged, returning to his “marginal situation” until such as time as his services are inevitably required again (1986, 186).

Of these two paradigms, Signal falls comfortably into melodrama. The main influence of the stylistic conventions of film noir serve primarily to elevate the genre critically, by disguising a genre that is often seen as lowbrow with one of Hollywood’s most influential genres. However, by using true crimes Signal adds a veneer of realism to the cases and taps into their power in South Korea’s national imaginary. Real life crimes inspired the storylines for both the British and U.S. police procedurals, according to Sue Turnbell. Dragnet, a U.S. crime drama which aired from 1951 to 1959 and again from 1967 to 1970, was famous for its opening lines: “Ladies and gentlemen, the story you are about to see is true. The names have been changed to protect the innocent” (Dragnet 1951-1959). According to Turnbell, Dragnet, was particularly important in defining the generic conventions of police procedurals. Each episode dealt with a single case “investigated by a cast of ongoing characters,” and the crime had already taken place so that the criminal act would not be depicted on screen (Turnbell 2014, 72). Episodes ended with “punishment meted out to the offenders and the assurance that the law, if not justice, had prevailed” (2014, 73). Turnbell further argues that the form evolved with Hill Street Blues (1981-1987) which hybridized elements of melodrama to critical acclaim (2014, 77). However, it was

Though at first appearing to exist in contradiction, melodrama and film noir both depict a world where society is exposed as morally compromised. Both genres fall into what Barbara Klinger calls “the progressive genre” (1986, 81). In melodrama and film noir, power structures benefit the rich and the difference between a politician and a gangster is often simply semantics. The hardboiled detective, according to Cawelti, is a marginal figure whose investigation reveals a “complex conspiracy involving a number of people from different spheres of society” and what he discovers is corruption and moral bankruptcy (1986, 185). This concern with ambiguity, institutional failure, and the personalization of morality present fertile ground for hybridization.

The stylistic influence of film noir is also apparent, as are its concerns with societal corruption and conspiracy. However, it never falls completely into the moral ambivalence of that genre. The core team are still white knights battling back evil forces. And these evils are particular to South Korea. Each case is inspired by a real crime. The Hwaseong serial murders in *Signal* are a national trauma that can’t be moved past but are also a personal tragedy for Detective Lee Jae-han. The wider project in exploring this crime is to ask the simple question, could society today do better than the past? And what evil still needs to be purged? Melodrama is the purposive force throughout a narrative structure that borrows heavily from the police procedural.
Framing

*Signal* liberaly borrows detective iconography and tropes and hybridizes these symbols with South Korean social, institutional, and political concerns. *Signal’s* use of both the melodramatic and detective iconography clearly communicate to audiences what to expect from the narrative. Villains are embedded in the very institutions that are supposed to keep society safe, and only through undertaking a dangerous investigation into the crimes of the past can justice be done. The melodramatic language of music indicates this is a personal story with high emotional stakes. The stylish shots reminiscent of film noir imply this will be a dark and serious drama. And the police department setting suggests that this will be at least partially a procedural story in which detectives must solve a series of cases. The character types are at once new and familiar. Hae-young is a clean-cut young man who sees himself as superior to his colleagues, but he is secretly working class and keen to break the rules. Jae-han is a sweet every-man detective, but he is isolated and seemingly without friends and does not have a partner within his own timeline to rely upon. Finally, Soo-hyun’s first appearance suggests the seasoned veteran, but that image is deconstructed by a trip to the past timeline. The hybridity around these detective types adds interest, but it remains clear that these are the heroes with who audiences will identify.

**Historical and Sageuk: Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo**

Historical/Sageuk: The “primary focus is on real-life events of historical significance featuring real-life characters (allowing for some artistic license)” ("Genre 2019") A popular historical subgenre of Korean dramas are the sageuk dramas which “explore time periods as far back as a couple thousand years, or...set as recently as late Joseon,” 1910. (Javabeans and Girlfriday 2013, 245).
Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo (henceforth referred to as Moon Lovers) is a melodrama that incorporates the generic conventions of Korean sageuk, fantasy, and other transnational genres. Moon Lovers follows a young woman, Go Ha-jin (IU), who has fallen on hard times in modern Seoul. However, after diving into a pond to rescue a small child, she begins to drown, only to emerge in another pool in the year 941 C.E. In the past, Ha-jin is recognized as Hae-soo, the cousin of 8th Prince Wang Wook’s (Kang Ha-neul) wife. With no idea how she arrived and who Hae-soo is, Ha-jin fakes amnesia and slowly adjusts to her new life. Ha-jin’s association with Prince Wang Wook, as well as her modern comportment and sensibilities, throw her into the path of the rest of the Wang family. Most significantly, she finds herself both drawn to and terrified of 4th Prince Wang So (Lee Joon-ki), who is destined become the fourth ruler of the Goryeo Dynasty. He is also destined to murder and imprison his own brothers.

The historical setting of Moon lovers begins in the year 941 C.E., during the reign of the first king of the ancient kingdom of Goryeo, Taejo Wang Geon. The Goryeo Dynasty began with the unification of the three kingdoms of the Korean peninsula: Later Goryeo, Silla, and Later Baekje (“Goryeo” 2019). Taking place just five years after conquest of Later Baekje, the newly formed country is still finding its footing. Inside the palace, the King’s twenty-nine consorts, many the result of strategic political alliances, have produced a large collection of potential heirs, eight of which are featured in the drama. The scheming of the queens, princes, princesses, and noble factions, as well as the harsh brutality of life at that time, confine Ha-jin to a dangerous world where simple actions could get her killed. An examination of the first episode establishes the melodramatic thrust of the story, cueing viewers that despite the presences of swords, horses, and other tropes of the historical action-adventure story, Moon Loves is a romantic melodrama.
Characterization

Ha-jin—played by IU, the star of My Mister—is the prototypical melodrama heroine. Beautiful, tiny, warm hearted, but with just enough sparkle in her personality (when happy) to endear her to audience, Ha-jin would be the ideal woman if only the world was fair. Instead, she is introduced—through a monologue delivered at homeless drunk with whom she shares her soju—as a trusting woman who was ruined by a man who exploited and deceived her. The details are vague, and the show has no real interest in exploring her psychology, only her situation. The pressures on Ha-jin are purely external and beyond her ability to fix. In traveling to the past, Ha-jin finds herself, at least at first glance, not much worse than she was before. In fact, with a roof over her head and as an aristocratic member of a household with a servant looking out for her, she has more support and community than she ever had in the present.

Ha-jin’s response to this unexpected increase in status is to tell Prince Wang Wook, the head of her new household, that she is not the type of girl that takes handouts and will therefore work to be a useful and productive member of society. Hard work and a positive attitude are the archetypical characteristics of Korean melodrama heroines. In, Why Do Dramas Do That? the authors argue that the Japanese manga character Candy—whose popular anime Candy Candy ran in Korea in the 1970s and 1980s—popularized this character type (Javabeans and Girl Friday 2013, 625). The influence of the Candy, whose theme song proclaimed “I’ll endure and endure and endure some more why would I cry,” is recognizable in the scores of Korean drama heroines who work a long list of part time jobs, maintain an upbeat attitude, and are beloved by rich handsome boys (Ibid.). In the historical setting, Ha-jin is denied even the agency of pursuing financial independence through hard work, making her attitude at once more admirable, and
more pitiful. Her safety is tied to the men in her life and their choices inevitably become her burden.

In contrast to the wholesomeness of Ha-jin, Prince Wang So is a figure out of a gothic romance. Angry, tortured, brooding, and marked out as different by a scar on his face, Wang So does not quietly endure; Wang So slaughters his horse in the courtyard in an act of rebellion. (Hilariously he still has to clarify the point he was trying to make to a man standing next to him). His awful attitude and flair for the dramatic are rationalized by a flashback to his childhood where his own mother, protesting her husband the King’s plan to marry again, attempts to murder Wang So and succeeds in slashing his face. The rejection of his mother and the perceived rejection of his father who sent him to live as a political hostage with a noble family far from the capital, has turned his excess of emotion into acts of savage violence. A brilliant warrior who has fought in many battles, he acts like a wild animal, especially in comparison to his pampered brothers first show frolicking shirtless by a pool.

Even dressed in black, murdering animals, and inspiring fear in not a few people, the drama presents Wang Soo’s situation as unjust. More outwardly sympathetic characters reach out and offer him friendship, and his rare smiles and impressive physicality suggest he may be a good man, if the situation was different. More than these actions though, Wang Soo is portrayed by Lee Joon-ki, who at that time of Moon Lovers had starred in six historical series. Lee is an action hero known for his martial arts skills and for his emotional acting. For viewers familiar with Korean dramas, Lee’s star image allows the production to present a dark and unheroic man in the first two episodes, without fear that this portrayal will alienate the audience from accepting him as a romantic hero later in the story.
If Wang So is a romantic hero in the Brontean mode, Prince Wang Wook’s gentle scholar is his antithesis. Although in attendance at the silly bath scene, Wook comports himself with a maturity superior to his younger siblings. He is later shown reading books, caring for his sick wife, and taking an interest in the concerning behavior of the woman he believes to be Hae Soo, but is actually Ha-jin. Sweet, calm, and nurturing, Wook is an aspirational love for Ha-jin, who is happy to admire him without expectation. In turn, Wook’s interest in Ha-jin soon moves beyond that of a distant relation. He pities her when he finds her in distress and begins to find Ha-jin’s strange actions as cute and amusing. One thing Wook does have in commons with his half-brother So, is that beneath his reserved exterior, Wook is also a man of action. When Ha-jin locks herself inside due to her distress at her situation, Wook kicks the door down to get to her. He was motivated by his concern for his sick wife, but once inside, he is able to provide Ha-jin with emotional reassurance.

The rote characterizations of the three protagonists are matched by their antagonists, the most obvious of which is Wang So’s mother. Queen Dowager Yoo is the extreme progression of a world where women only have power through their children. Her affection for her husband, King Taejo, is inextricably linked to economic security and her future is bound up in the order of succession. Only if one of her sons becomes King can she be assured of a place in the household. In the flashback sequence where the Queen Dowager Yoo maims her own son, she pleads with her husband to not marry again. She reminds the king that their oldest child the crown prince has only just died. She wonders how her husband can act so pragmatically in a moment when she would give her own life to have her child back. When the king tells her there are lives at stake in resolving the political situation, Yoo takes her young son’s hand and falls to her knees. Unable to understand how her husband can marry another woman while she is grieving, she asks, “If that is
all you care about, why should we both living anymore” (*Moon Lovers* 2016). Holding a knife to her son’s throat, she demands her husband choose between his son and his kingdom. This jarring shift from maternal grief at the death of child to filicide is a “fiercely logical description of the changed ontology” (Brooks 191, 62). If her husband is not a father, only a king, then Yoo and her children are not people worth love and affection, but objects that can be discarded as convenient. If her love is worthless, then why must it cause her to suffer? Yoo wants to be stopped, but King Taejo is only able to prevent the murder, not the rupture in Yoo’s worldview. Her full transformation into villainess is solidified by her refusal to see her son So when he returns home after four years. Although she is able to maintain her affection for her other children, her actions are now motivated by ambition and the desire to rule—through her other son—the country that was more important than her heartbreak.

**Formalist Elements**

The sudden and abrupt changes to the score whiplash from whimsical, to magical, to suspenseful, to romantic at breakneck pace. The first episode opens with almost whimsical accordion music. The music choice is jarring. The first shot of the heroine frames her cut lip in the reflection of her compact mirror. Someone has clearly hurt Ha-jin, and she is experiencing an emotional breakdown complete with liquor bottle in hand. And yet the music and setting have the lightness of a family outing. She’s sitting next to a pond full of boats and children are nearby playing and laughing. There is a feeling of wrongness; Ha-jin does not belong here.

The music becomes momentarily melancholic, scored on the piano, as she cries to the homeless man—also extremely out of place in this setting—about her plight. Moments later, a boy falls into the pond and yet again the score lacks the suspense to match the situation. Violins
pluck cheekily until Ha-jin makes up her mind and jumps in the water. Immediately a more mysterious, magical inflection enters the music. After rescuing the boy, the moon passes in front of the sun and Ha-jin sinks into the pond. Voices reminiscent a choral music in a church suggest something spiritual is happening. Ha-jin flashes back to the worst moments of her life. The camera cuts to an image of her far away body, continuing to sink against the outline of a large moon. In Korean iconography, the moon symbolizes femininity and is often the totem of the queen, while the sun is the king. Completing this symbolic transition, the edge of the moon transforms into the outline of the sun. The scene has moved to the other side of the eclipse.

Against the theatrically large eclipse, a lone rider in black gallops across the horizon carrying a sword and followed by a company of men on horseback.

The camera cuts to a close up of Wang So’s face and then an establishing shot of him gazing over a snow-covered landscape. As it cuts back to the riders galloping toward a city, horns give the score a jaunty sound and the strings return. The music, briefly reminiscent of a western, frames Wang So as the dangerous man who comes to town. This is reinforced by shots of villagers hiding as the men in black move through the streets. The music changes again in the next shot at a new location—the royal princes’ private hotspring. Flutes enter the score, as we enter the traditional world of Goryeo Korea.

These rapid shifts within the first few minutes are emblematic of the show overall. The tone changes rapidly between comedy, high-drama, sweeping romance, and melodrama. At times the score relies on cinematic music evocative of Hollywood productions, at other times Pansori music—a Korean folk theater tradition—signals danger or heightened emotions. Pansori is also used for comedic effect, as when it accompanies So’s unexpected entrance into a room where his brothers whisper about his dangerous reputation. However, So is just as likely to be scored by...
electric guitars as he is by traditional music. Court scenes are more likely to use flutes and other classical Korean instruments which reflect the sageuk style. Romance, in contrast, is coded with modern pop ballads. Shifts between traditional and modern often create a sound montage, such as the Pansori drums which play as So nearly runs Ha-jin down on his horse, only to be abruptly switched with a swelling romantic ballad as they look into each other’s’ eyes. The fusion style of the drama enhances the melodramatic quality of the score because the clashes are impossible to ignore, the conflict in tone draws attention to the conflict on screen.

*Moon Lover’s* costumes are ornate confections conveying character’s status and personality. Prince Wang So always wears black and hides his scared face behind a black *Phantom of the Opera*-style mask. His hair is long, dark, and wild. Prince Wang Wook in contrast is carefully coiffed and dressed more often in soothing blues. Ha-jin is often dressed in pink, highlighting her youth beauty, and innocence. All of their clothes have a sumptuous quality which identifies them as members of high-ranking and wealthy families. Common people, such as Ha-jin’s maid, wear plainer clothes in rougher fabrics. Makeup also provides clues as to who are the positive characters and who are the negative characters. Princess Yeon-hwa, sister of Price Wook, is given darker eye-makeup to match her cutting remarks. Of the princes, only Wang So and Third Prince Wang Yo wear eyeliner. Yo is the oldest living son of Dowager Queen Yoo and her favorite. The shadows around Yo’s eyes signal that he is an antagonist and also serve as a warning to So’s dark fate.

The emotional states of the characters are also underscored by camera work. When characters are distressed, the hand-held camera becomes shakier and the editing more abrupt. When Ha-jin fears she has lost her mind, the camera roams around the set, focuses on strange faces and behaviors, and wobbles uncomfortably. A similar technique is used in the flashback
where Queen Yoo slices her son’s face. Colors are desaturated in the shots of So riding across country, accentuating the cold desolation of the landscape. The cinematic excess clearly telegraphs every character and their motivation and the theatricality of the music moves the show more into fantasy than even the time-travel plot device.

Excess also permeates the performances. Lee Joon Ki’s Price So is a particularly large performance. He smirks and sneers, intimidates and threatens, but also suffers. His every emotion reads clearly on his face from moment to moment. However, the nuance of the performance comes from his ability to personify the different forces that control his life. The aristocratic families that try to control him as a political weapon, his rejection by his mother, his desire to be accepted within the royal household, and his rage at the lack of power he has to control his situation, are all encapsulated by his strong emotional reactions from scene to scene. Dowager Queen Yoo is similarly commanding in her dramatic turn from grieving mother to child’s nightmare. Ha-jin, in contrast, spends most of the first episode confused and terrified by her situation. It is only through excepting her lack of power that she is able find some measure of happiness. Lavish historical sets, costuming, and camera work telegraph every characterization, every emotion, and every plot point. The score challenges and reinforces visuals in equal measure, proving additional information, such as the magical nature of Ha-jin’s jump into the pool or her fated connection with Wang So. It anticipates the plot and identifies key actors and relationships. Despite the large cast, the fantasy elements, and the time period which may be unfamiliar to non-Korean viewers, the narrative arc of the story is easy to follow, engendering strong identification with the characters because of their theatrical states. All these things are necessary for the ritual gratification afforded by narrative texts.
Hybridization

Unlike the other dramas critiqued, Moon Lovers was not originally authored by a Korean drama writer. Moon Lovers is a Korean adaption of the Mainland Chinese television series Scarlet Heart from 2011, which itself was itself an adaption of the novel Bu Bu Jing Xin by Tong Hua. The remake exemplifies a format sale, where a previously successful television show is sold as a sort of blueprint for the creation of a glocal version by the acquiring party (Jin 2016, 57). Within East Asia, this sale represents a contra-flow. South Korea has previously adapted Japanese and Taiwanese television dramas, but the adaptation of shows from mainland China is rare. Since the Korean Wave, South Korea’s culture industry, particularly the television drama, is considered by Chinese officials to more advanced than their local industry (Wan 2014). Despite the fact that Scarlet Heart was already an immensely popular television series that ran for two seasons in China, the South Korean remake was highly anticipated by Chinese audiences and was aired simultaneously in South Korea, China and Singapore (Ng 2016). Simultaneous airing is only possible if episodes have been pre-screened by Chinese censors and approved for broadcast. Unlike most Korean dramas, Moon Lovers was completely pre-produced rather than filmed concurrent to airing. This allowed the producers more flexibility in selling the drama internationally. Moon Lovers is a glocal product meant for a global audience.

Moon Lovers’ global heritage is apparent in its use of genre. Korean melodrama and sageuk genres are blended with the Chinese wuxia elements, and Hong Kong action. Within all these genres, are mixed the older multinational forms. Wuxia, according to Stephen Tao, was influenced by “indigenous practices in literature, opera, and the oral narrative tradition” as well as older genres based on history and “the shenguai pian, the fantasy strand dealing with gods and demons, supernatural powers of flight and emission of bodily energy” (Tao 2005, 191-192). Tao
also identifies “the medieval European romance, the Hollywood swashbuckler, the western, and the European detective mystery” as influences on wuxia films of the 1920s (Tao 2005, 192). Wuxia’s use of fantasy elements stands in contrast to the Korean sageuk, which was touted for its adherence to historical facts.

For South Korean viewers, melding the saga of the founding family of the Goryeo (alternatively Ryeo) dynasty with time travel transformed *Moon Lovers* into a “fusion drama” (Javabeans and Girlfriday 2013, 255). In recent years, South Korea has increased production of fusion dramas which combine fantasy or action elements into historical setting. Faction dramas—a Korean term made of the combination of the English words fact + fiction—co-opt “historical facts for entertainment value…due to the contemporary perspectives held by characters, the loose adherence to facts, or the slick production values boasting flashy action scenes and a background scored with pop-music needle drops” (255). *Moon Lovers* falls comfortably into these generic conventions. For viewers familiar with Hollywood productions, gothic romance fiction, and Western historical adventure genres, those conventions are also easily recognizable as well.

Hollywood’s classic swashbuckler is a handsome man of action. Dressed in period costume, he fights injustice. Iconography includes royal courts and evil advisors, demonstrations of athleticism such as sword fighting and horseback riding, and boyish comradery. *Moon Lovers’* elaborate costumes and sets as well as Prince Wang So’s action set pieces fit into this mode, but thematically *Moon Lovers* eschews the swashbuckler genre. Jean-Loup Bourget describes the common narrative of the swashbucklers as the story of an “apolitical man” who is transformed into a rebel after being falsely accused of treason (1988, 56). These films “advocate violent revolution” but are safely situated in a remote time period (56). In this way, colonialism can be
critiqued, even actively assaulted, but any relevance to current inequalities is downplayed. This definition of a swashbuckler is not a perfect fit for either Prince Wang So or Prince Wang Wook, who are both born into a political life. As the Moon Lovers progresses, both men dream of abandoning their family and living an apolitical life, but a mix of duty, ego, and ambition pull them into the toxic web of familial and factional politics whose corrosive force leads to their spiritual ruin. The element of hubris which causes their downfall also strays from the strictly melodramatic mode.

Bourget describes melodrama as “bourgeois tragedy, dependent on an awareness of the existence of society” (1988, 54). The downfall of characters is social or political rather than metaphysical (54). However, the time travel element, like in Signal, does create a sense of fate. History has already been written. What is less clear is how it will inevitably play out. The overarching tragedy of the princes, however, is background to the story of Ha-jin/Hae Soo.

Ha-jin is an ordinary girl in extraordinary situations. Her power is limited to her ability to charm those around her who wield actual authority. Her goodness, loyalty, and love are all that she can offer and they have already led to her ruin in one lifetime. Her melodramatic perspective turns the high tragedy of the Princes’ tragic fall into a backdrop against which her romantic tribulations are staged. Princes plotting revolution and social reform are love interests. In this way, Prince So becomes a Heathcliff like figure rather than a true revolutionary. The infusion of other genres of wuxia, action, sageuk, and fantasy serve the melodrama by adding excess, interest, and heightened emotionality to the story.
**Framing**

The first episode of *Moon Lovers* quickly establishes its narrative trajectory. Hae-jin’s youth, prettiness, purity, and positive attitude convey that she is the heroine of a romance. The time travel element, historical setting, and arrival of a tortured and brooding man in black convey the scale of this romance. The royal court setting set expectations for wicked queens and palace intrigue. Hinted at through flashbacks to Wang Soo’s past as well as his brutal slaughter of his own horse, is the heighten danger that surround the characters. However, these dangers are in the realm of historical fantasy and are situated amongst the rich and powerful. Unlike the family melodrama of *My Mister*, the genre conventions of *Moon Lovers* anticipate an epic romance between two star-crossed lovers rather than a serious social melodrama. Music and costuming clearly communicate which characters are good, which are bad, and which might be bad right now, but only in a romantic way.

**Close Reading Key Takeaways**

The close reading of five Korean dramas identified as being from five different (though overlapping subgenres) reveals the dominance of the melodramatic mode. Protagonists are either good or sympathetic through the portrayal of their suffering and villains embody thematic evils such as patriarchal oppression, institutional corruption, or corporate perfidy. These polarized worlds present easy entry points for non-Korean viewers who can easily identify the conflict and identify emotionally with the protagonist. Additional genre elements give the subgenres different tones, either by accentuating the comedy and giving the drama a light-hearted feeling, incorporating exciting action sequences, or leaning on dramatic and suspenseful lighting and music to instill a sense of dread.
# Table 2: Selected Findings from Close Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drama</th>
<th>Subgenres</th>
<th>Characterization</th>
<th>Formalist Elements</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>My Mister</strong></td>
<td>Melodrama</td>
<td>Heroes</td>
<td>• Gray/black colors &amp; dark shadows&lt;br&gt;• Realism with occasional theatrical iconography&lt;br&gt;• Score intensifies emotions&lt;br&gt;• Emotional scoring&lt;br&gt;• Lyrical songs&lt;br&gt;• “emotional actions”</td>
<td>• Institutional moral decay&lt;br&gt;• Isolation&lt;br&gt;• Family values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Family&lt;br&gt;• Drama</td>
<td>Villains</td>
<td>• Wealthy&lt;br&gt;• Corporate&lt;br&gt;• Immoral</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Healer</strong></td>
<td>Action/Adventure</td>
<td>Heroes</td>
<td>• Gray/black colors&lt;br&gt;• Intensified continuity editing&lt;br&gt;• Dramatic lighting&lt;br&gt;• Suspenseful action score&lt;br&gt;• Nostalgic pop songs&lt;br&gt;• Pop ballads&lt;br&gt;• “emotional actions”&lt;br&gt;• Big reactions for comic effect</td>
<td>• Institutional moral decay&lt;br&gt;• Isolation&lt;br&gt;• Disaffected &amp; marginalized youth culture&lt;br&gt;• Social trauma and historic legacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Crime&lt;br&gt;• Drama&lt;br&gt;• Romance&lt;br&gt;• Comedy</td>
<td>Villains</td>
<td>• Wealthy&lt;br&gt;• Corporate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Because This is My First Life</strong></td>
<td>Romantic Comedy</td>
<td>Heroes</td>
<td>• Pinks &amp; warm colors&lt;br&gt;• Intensified continuity editing&lt;br&gt;• Asynchronous contrapuntal sound for comedic effect&lt;br&gt;• Emotional scoring&lt;br&gt;• Pop ballads&lt;br&gt;• Big reactions for comic effect&lt;br&gt;• “Emotional actions”</td>
<td>• Gendered power relations&lt;br&gt;• Patriarchal oppression in traditional roles&lt;br&gt;• Modernity v. tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Romance&lt;br&gt;• Comedy&lt;br&gt;• Drama</td>
<td>Villains</td>
<td>• Patriarchal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Signal</strong></td>
<td>Crime/Mystery/Detective</td>
<td>Heroes</td>
<td>• Distinct color pallet&lt;br&gt;• Film noir style&lt;br&gt;• Intensified continuity editing&lt;br&gt;• Emotional scoring&lt;br&gt;• Pop ballads&lt;br&gt;• “Emotional actions”</td>
<td>• Institutional moral decay&lt;br&gt;• Isolation&lt;br&gt;• Social trauma and historic legacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Thriller&lt;br&gt;• Fantasy/Sci-fi&lt;br&gt;• Drama&lt;br&gt;• Police</td>
<td>Villains</td>
<td>• Powerful&lt;br&gt;• Immoral</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Many of the formal techniques are familiar to viewers steeped in Hollywood cinema, however other cinematic traditions, notably those of various Chinese cinemas and Japan are also present. This iconography is mixed with South Korean theatrical tradition—such as pansori—and with their specific history, traditions, and social concerns. The effect of this hybridization is the creation of something that is both new and recognizable. Western mediascapes moved into the Korean peninsula and are now reflected back changed. The use of a variety of different tones, often expressed musically, destabilizes Korean dramas. Genre elements from a variety of cinematic traditions rise and fall within an episode or season, keeping audiences unbalanced and in a heightened state of emotional engagement.

Excess in sentiment, fated relationships, dramatic irony, and a world filled with cruelty—the hallmarks of the melodramatic tradition—catapult five different stories along similar narrative arcs. Korean dramas are formulaic, and critics point to the over-use of some tropes to denigrate the genre. A more serious critique has also been made of the gendered values, particularly of the pure heroines and their sexual antagonists. There is certainly room for feminist critique as well as critique of industrial practice which leads to storytelling laziness. However, these formulas are also undisputedly popular and provide international audiences with a media text that is by design international and accessible.
Method 2: Korean Drama Survey

Melodrama is the dominate genre of Korean dramas. Onto this narrative structure, elements of action, crime and in particular, romance and comedy, create variations in tone. These variations produce the subgenres of Korean drama. Genres, as categorical structures, impact how viewers enjoy, value, and respond to media. Past studies by researchers interested in movie marketing have found that genre plays an important role in audience decision making about what films they see in theaters (Austin 1981, d’Astous et al 2007, Hixson 2005, Finsterwalder et al 20012). In March 2019, I conducted an exploratory survey to understand how audiences outside of South Korea watch Korean dramas and how this audience makes viewing decisions. By surveying current consumers of Korean dramas, the survey results provide a guide for how viewers evaluate their viewing options when they are consuming content outside their culture or language.

The survey fielded for this study consists of seventeen questions and was conducted online using Qualtrics between March 6, 2019 and March 20, 2019. There were 178 responses of which 158 satisfied the target population criteria. Responses were aggregated and analyzed using SPSS.

The findings of this survey support the importance of genre as an important factor in driving the decisions of Korean drama viewing behavior among fans located outside of South Korea. Romantic comedy and romance are the most popular genres among respondents and the survey also indicated that genre preferences are also correlated to the prioritization of different aspects of dramas. For instance, respondents who were very likely to watch romances were connected to respondents who made viewing decisions based on actors. Finally, the majority of
respondents pay for a streaming video on demand (SVoD) service, and approximately two-thirds watch Korean dramas on Netflix.

**Research Questions**

The research questions addressed here are:

1) Is genre an important factor in selecting which Korean dramas viewers watch?
2) Do viewers of Korean dramas have similar genre preferences?
3) How do viewers of Korean dramas make decisions about what shows they watch?

These three questions were designed to see how and to what extent genre plays a role in Korean drama viewing behavior.

**Hypothesis**

Genre is among the most important ways by which people understand media content and make decisions about what types of media they consume and enjoy. Evidence suggests that people are more likely to go to the theater if they believe that a movie is in a genre they like (Hixson 2005). Studies of movie trailers have found that trailers are more effective marketing tools if they are clearly able to communicate the genre into which the movie fits (Finsterwaler e.al 20012). Based on this research, the main hypothesis I am testing—the genre hypothesis—is stated below:

\[ H_1: \text{Genre is the most important factor in selecting a Korean Drama} \]

In addition to testing this core hypothesis, I performed exploratory research into other factors that drive viewer behavior, such as advertising, actors, and recommendations to see how this information influences Korean drama viewer behavior. I also assess how people are learning
about new Korean dramas and on what platforms they are watching Korean dramas. The ways that people watch and how they learn about Korean dramas influence what kinds of information they receive about Korean dramas before making viewing decisions. In that regard, they act as communicators of genre information.

Target Population

The audience for Korean dramas is global, making it a particularly difficult population to quantify. Some countries have publicly available audience statistics—ratings—for broadcast television. However, viewership on online platforms is proprietary. Prior demographic information on Korean drama viewers in the United States was published by SVoD platform Dramafever in 2012. Dramafever reported that 75 percent of Dramafever’s two million unique monthly viewers “spoke English as a first language and were not of Asian descent” (Molen 2014, 163). Additionally, the majority of viewers were millennials (Ambrosino 2014) and women (Orsini 2018). A study by the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) in 2014 estimated that 18 million Americans watch Korean dramas “based on numbers of visitors to popular streaming sites” (“About 18 million Americans enjoy K-dramas: Korea Creative Content Agency” 2014). In 2017, The KOCCA surveyed 4,753 people who watch Korean dramas with English subtitles and found that romantic comedy was the preferred genre at 72% followed by melodrama at 11.9% (Yonhap 2017). Approximately three-quarters of respondents were in their early thirties or younger and 95.1% used an internet streaming service to watch (Ibid.).
Sampling

The survey queried viewers of Korean dramas who do not live in South Korea. The target population was individuals aged 18 and older—to satisfy Internal Review Board (IRB) best practices—and included individuals who watched a Korean drama in the twelve months preceding the survey. The survey restricted respondents to relatively current viewers to minimize the risk that respondents would not be able to accurately recall information.

Given the limitations in identifying this fractured audience, this survey relies on purposive convenience sampling undertaken by reaching out to individuals on fansites, online forums, and South Korean pop culture news websites. Additionally, the survey was fielded on social media using hash tags and I leveraged my personal network. The survey respondents were members of fan communities and are comparatively educated media consumers. As such, they are more likely to have developed strong preferences when selecting Korean dramas. This data might not be emblematic of patterns of other viewers, but it is valuable in that fan communities, like the diaspora communities in Jung-sun Park’s ethnographic study, act as transnational conductors, finding and distributing content within their personal networks (2013). Fan communities are usually more likely to be open to other transnational cultural products, and their preferences provide insight into how South Korean cultural products are localized.

Survey Design

The survey was launched using Qualtrics and respondents were provided with a consent form adapted from Georgetown’s IRB templates. The consent form required respondents to indicate they were eighteen-years-old or older and that they understood that their participation was voluntary. The key measures included:
1. Thinking about Korean dramas you have watched in the last year, who or what drew your attention to those programs? (Please select all that apply)
   - Recommendations from friends or family
   - Articles on Korean entertainment news websites
   - Internet streaming service platforms (like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video or Viki)
   - Blogs I follow
   - Posts on social media
   - Advertisements I saw
   - Other

2. How important are each of the following in terms of your decision to try a Korean drama? (Five-point Likert scale from not important to very important)
   - Actors I like
   - An interesting story description
   - Genres I like
   - Director or writer I like
   - Recommendations from friends or family
   - Interesting previews, trailers or promotional images
   - Articles or reviews of the Korean dramas

3. How likely are you to watch Korean Dramas in the following genres? (Five-point Likert scale from will not watch to very likely)
   - Action/Adventure
   - Comedy
   - Crime/Mystery/ Thriller
   - Drama
   - Fantasy/Sci-Fi
   - Historical
   - Horror
   - Melodrama
   - Romance
   - Romantic Comedy

   The survey was also tested before launch. An annotated version of the full survey can be found in Appendix 2.


Limitations

Because of the reliance on convenience sampling rather than a probability-based sampling methodology, these results may not be emblematic of the entire audience. The three frames (posting in forums, social media, and personal network) were designed to mitigate some of the bias, however given that the survey was fielded online, viewers who watch Korean dramas via broadcast, cable, or satellite or do not engage with Korean dramas online are less likely to be represented. Additionally, the survey was in English which precluded non-English speakers who either speak Korean (but who do not reside in South Korea) or watch the dramas subtitled into their native language.

Genre Definitions

Genres are difficult to define as they mean different things to different people. Academics, distributors, producers, and audiences often work off different frameworks to define how movies and television content should be categorized (Altman 1999). As this survey was answered by a population familiar with Korean dramas, their understanding of genre is likely impacted by their experience the subgenres of Korean dramas. The hybridity of the Korean dramas in terms of iconography, narrative structure, and themes—as discussed in chapter two—also suggests that Korean drama subgenres bear a resemblance to Hollywood movie genres. To that end, simplified definitions of genre are provided to assist with understanding the survey results. These definitions rely on descriptions of Korean drama subgenres provided by the moderators of Dramabeans.com, Javabeans and Girlfriday, in their 2013 book, Why Do Dramas Do That. Genre definitions are also sourced from guidelines provided by IMDb.com, a U.S.-based online database for film and television production information. IMDb’s genre definitions
are provided because IMDb is an industry recognized film and television production data company and their definitions attempt to standardize genre definitions in such a way that genre categories are mutually exclusive.

- **Action/Adventure**: Contains “numerous scenes where action is spectacular and usually destructive,” as well as “inter-related scenes of characters participating in hazardous or exciting experiences for a specific goal” (“Genre” 2019).

- **Comedy**: “Virtually all scenes should contain characters participating in humorous or comedic experiences.” (“Genre” 2019).

- **Crime/Mystery/Thriller**: Contains “inter-related scenes of characters participating, aiding, abetting, and/or planning criminal behavior or experiences usually for an illicit goal” and “characters endeavoring to widen their knowledge of anything pertaining to themselves or others.” The “narrative…is sensational or suspenseful” (“Genre” 2019).

- **Drama**: Contains “characters portrayed to effect a serious narrative” (“Genre” 2019).

- **Fantasy/Sci-Fi Fantasy** Contains “scenes of characters portrayed to effect a magical and/or mystical narrative” or “the entire background for the setting of the narrative, should be based on speculative scientific discoveries or developments, environmental changes, space travel, or life on other planets” (“Genre 2019”).

- **Historical**: The “primary focus is on real-life events of historical significance featuring real-life characters (allowing for some artistic license)” (“Genre 2019”) A popular historical subgenre of Korean dramas are the sageuk dramas which “explore time periods as far back as a couple thousand years, or…set as recently as late Joseon,” 1910⁴ (“Javabeans and Girlfriday 2013, 245).

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⁴ The Joseon dynasty that ruled the Korean peninsula until the Japanese occupation in 1910.
• **Horror:** Contains “scenes of characters effecting a terrifying and/or repugnant narrative” (“Genre 2019”).

• **Melodrama:** “Stories that are designed to engage pathos, emotion, sentimentality” (Javabeans and Girlfriday 2013, 269) and tell serious narratives in an excessive style (“Genre” 2019).

• **Romance:** Contains “scenes of a character and their personal life with emphasis on emotional attachment or involvement with other characters, especially those characterized by a high level of purity and devotion” (“Genre” 2019). In Korean dramas, romance is often bound up in ideas of fate and “souls destined to be together” (Javabeans and Girlfriday 2013, 881).

• **Romantic Comedy:** Contains light-hearted comedic scenes of romance. In Korean dramas, “The meet-cute gets the couple off on the wrong foot, spurs a round or twenty of bickering, develops into courtship that leads to angst and probable separation, and resolves into eventual reunion” (Javabeans and Girlfriday 2013, 153).

It should be noted, that all genre definitions are subjective. Film and television texts exhibit multiple genres and the view that one genre is dominant may differ from person to person. Survey respondents were not provided with genre definitions. These definitions are supplied to guide the discussion of the survey results and should not be considered either prescriptive or pure. A more thorough discussion of genre can be found in Chapter 2: I Know This Story: Hybridized Genre Conventions in Korean Dramas.
Survey Sample Demographics

There were 178 responses of which 158 satisfied the target population criteria. The respondents to the Korean drama survey came from six continents with a little under half coming from North America. As expected, almost all respondents indicated the language they were most fluent in was English at 75%. Only 5% of respondents said they spoke Korean, however 40% indicated they spoke a little Korean. 68% of respondents indicated that they spoke two or more languages at an intermediate level or higher, suggesting that the audience for Korean dramas is open to learning about other cultures. Over half of respondents were under the age of 40, with a minimum age of 18 and the oldest respondent 85. The average age of survey respondents was 30. Finally, the sample is overwhelmingly women at 94%. Previous studies have indicated that women are the major consumers of Korean dramas outside of Korea (Orsini 2018).

Figure 1: Respondent Nationality
Survey Results

The Genre Hypothesis

I tested the hypothesis that genre was the most important factor in deciding what Korean dramas to watch using three statistical techniques: frequency analysis, a paired sample T-test, and a bivariate analysis to determine Pearson correlation. The frequency analysis looks at the percentage of respondents who indicated genre was “Very important” in deciding which Korean dramas to watch compared to other factors which previous research identified as being correlated with audience behavior. The T-test compares strength of the genre preference against other factors to see if it is more important to a statistically significant degree. The question, “How important are each of the following in terms of your decision to try a Korean drama?” was asked using a five-point Likert scale. In a paired samples T-test, the value of each respondent’s answer for the importance of genre was subtracted from their valuation of the other factors. The differences for each respondent are averaged and compared to zero. Finally, the Pearson
correlation indicates how genre preferences relate to other factors that may drive viewing decisions as well as respondent preferences for particular genres. Genre preferences were also asked on a five-point Likert scales. Each factor was compared against each other as well as against each genre preference to see if an increase in one variable saw an increase (or decrease) in the other variable to a statistically significant degree.

**Frequency Analysis**

In Austin’s survey of movie-goers, both frequent and occasional movie theater attendees rated plot as the most important factor followed by genre. Similarly, the highest percentage of respondents to the Korean drama survey said an interesting story description was the most important factor in choosing which Korean drama to watch. Genre was the second most important factor followed closely by actors. These three factors are in line with past studies on how audiences make decisions on film (Austin 1981).

The prominence of “interesting story,” however, does not negate the genre hypothesis. Genre language is often incorporated into story descriptions or narrative structures may contain tropes frequently found in genres. The least important factor was directors and writers, which may reflect the distance between non-Korean viewers and the Korean television industry. Austin’s study found that “Friend’s comments” on a movie was the third most important factor, followed by trailers and previews (Austin 1981, 47). Viewers of Korean dramas, however, prioritize actors much more highly.
When asked what genres they preferred, survey respondents overwhelmingly selected romantic comedy as the genre they were most likely to watch. The genre respondents were least likely to watch was horror. Melodrama, which the Korea Creative Culture Agency (KOCCA) said was the second most preferred genre of U.S. respondents at 12%, scored similarly in this survey with 14% of respondents saying they were very likely to watch. However, this result came second to last out of all genres, with only horror falling shorter.
With the related genres of romance and drama ranking significantly higher than melodrama, the low rating respondents gave melodrama may be due to a social bias. Melodrama has pejorative connotations and is often associated with tears and false or mawkish sentimentality. In South Korea, the term *makjang* carries a similar derogatory connotation to soapiness, in which “a stylistic, tonal, or narrative element…is provocative, and dramatic to the point of excess” (Dramabeans and Girlfriday 2013, 285). This definition overlaps with melodrama, however the makjang sensibility is characterized by an absurdity and a paradoxical over-reliance on clichés for shock value. The clichés are too over-played to be shocking and viewers often find the stories frustrating. The association of melodrama with implausible plot twists and simplistic characterizations may impact how respondents rank this genre in
comparison to genres that are more respected. Viewers outside of South Korea may view the melodrama genre negatively even as their viewing behaviors contradict this valuation.

**Paired Samples T-Test**

The view that genre is very important in selecting new Korean dramas had a statistically significant relationship to all other selection factors surveyed. An interesting story description had a higher mean than genre, but they were still positively correlated categories. Outside of the importance of an interesting story description, this supports the hypothesis that genre is the most important factor in selecting which dramas viewers watch.

**Table 3: Genre Paired Samples T-Test**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genres I like</th>
<th>Pair 2</th>
<th>Pair 1 Mean</th>
<th>Pair 2 Mean</th>
<th>Difference Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Director or writer I like</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations from friends or family</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles or reviews of the Korean dramas</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting previews, trailers or promotional images</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors I like</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An interesting story description</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pearson Correlation

There is a statistically significant relationship between respondents who rate genre as very important in deciding which Korean dramas to watch and respondents who selected they were likely to watch melodrama. However, the negative Pearson correlation suggests an inverse relationship wherein respondents who pick dramas based on genre were unlikely to watch melodramas. Respondents who found genre an important factor were not associated with other genre categories at a statistically significant level.

Table 4: Genre Bivariate Correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How important are each of the following in terms of your decision to try a new Korean Drama?</th>
<th>Genres</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genres I like</td>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime/Mystery/ Thriller</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action/Adventure</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy/Sci-Fi</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic Comedy</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horror</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melodrama</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey respondents displayed overlapping genre preferences. For instance, respondents who enjoyed romance and romantic comedy were statistically correlated with respondents who stipulated a strong preference for comedy and drama. Respondents who were action adventure fans were statistically more likely to enjoy comedy, crime/mystery/thriller, and horror. Drama fans were positively associated with melodrama, romance, and romantic comedy fans and
fantasy-sci-fi fans were positively correlated with historical and horror fans, but negatively correlated with melodrama fans. These genre clusters could be indicative of where genre mixing is happening in Korean dramas. A trend in fantasy-sageuk fusion dramas (Javabeans and Girlfriday) could explain the association between the genres of fantasy and historical. Horror genres have often relied on fantastical or speculative elements to drive their narratives and were even combined in d’Astous et al’s 2007 study of associations between particular genres and national cinemas. Further, the lack of clarity around the difference between melodrama and drama is suggested by a strong Pearson correlation of 0.48 between the two genres with a p-value of 0.00.

Other Key Drivers of Viewing Behavior

The nature of contra-flow, which bypasses dominant distribution business models, may explain the lower rating for recommendations from friends and family compared to Austin’s study of movie-goers. However, while friends and family recommendations were not valued as much as story, genre, or actors, respondents did indicate that their personal network was still responsible for bringing their attention to the Korean dramas. 42% of respondents said they learned about a show they watched in the past year from friends or family.

Additionally, in contra-flow, mediascapes can move separately from finacescapes and in this case separately from legal frameworks. In countries where Korean dramas were not licensed for broadcast, but were instead distributed illegally through the internet, audiences were outside of traditional marketing channels. In the United States, the rise of legal corporate SVoD services such as Viki, Dramafever, and Netflix changed this. Once Korean dramas were legal and could be monetized, corporate actors were incentivized to create advertising materials geared toward a
non-Korean audience. However, the survey supports the view that advertisements still play a less significant role in how respondents selected the Korean dramas they watched in the last year. Only 27% of respondents said an interesting preview, trailer or promotional image was very important in their decision to try a new Korean drama and only 16% of respondents said that an advertisement drew their attention to a Korean drama they watched in the last year. Further, an ordinary least square (OLS) regression found no statistically significant relationship between respondents who watch Korean dramas on a paid internet streaming service (a dichotomous variable) and respondents who are likely to watch dramas based on interesting previews, trailers or promotional images (continuous variable on a five-point Likert scale). This suggests that even when Korean drama viewers are integrated into industrial practice, the promotional material available on these platforms are not the primary driver of behavior.

However, 40% of respondents said that they were made aware of a show they watched in the last year by their internet streaming platform. These platforms routinely use images and trailers, story descriptions, and even genre in their presentation of media content. This suggests that platforms themselves may be becoming more important sources for information about different Korean drama titles. A connection between an interesting story—the most important factor in choosing a new Korean drama—and promotional materials is supported by the survey data, which finds a Pearson correlation of 0.22 at p-value of 0.01.
Of the remaining factors respondents rated for importance in selecting a Korean drama, respondents who highly valued actors had a Pearson correlation of 0.25 with respondents who highly rated directors and writers at a p-value of 0.00. Interesting story description—in addition to being correlated with marketing materials—was correlated with recommendations from friends and family (Pearson correlation 0.20) at a p-value of 0.01. Both previews and friends and family are likely to include story descriptions. Articles and reviews were most strongly correlated with a high regard for directors and writers at a p-value of 0.00 and a Pearson correlation of 0.38. This may be because articles and reviews are most likely to contain information about the people making the media. Articles and reviews often situate a media text within a particular writer or director’s body of work, whereas more image driven advertising will focus more attention on actors.
Other factors in selecting a Korean drama were linked with specific genre preferences. Respondents who enjoy romance were strongly associated with picking Korean dramas based on "Actors I like." This suggests that star power is an important factor in the romance genre and that Korean drama audiences enjoy seeing favorite actors fall in love. Respondents who strongly enjoyed fantasy and sci-fi were highly correlated with "An interesting story description." This is suggestive of the conceptual nature of the fantasy and sci-fi genre. Action adventure and comedy were both connected with "Recommendations from friends and family." Horror, melodrama, romance, and romantic comedy—all more affective genres—were correlated with "Interesting previews, trailers or promotional images." Finally, fans of action and adventure were negatively associated with articles and reviews. Further studies could investigate whether there is bias within the critical community against action adventure stories in Korean dramas which may explain this result.

Table 5: Selected Bivariate Correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How important are each of the following in terms of your decision to try a new Korean Drama?</th>
<th>Genres</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actors I like</td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An interesting story description</td>
<td>Fantasy/Sci-Fi</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations from friends or family</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action/Adventure</td>
<td>Action/Adventure</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting previews, trailers or promotional images</td>
<td>Romantic Comedy</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Horror</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Melodrama</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles or reviews of the Korean dramas</td>
<td>Action/Adventure</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Korean Drama Viewing Platforms

Approximately three-quarters of respondents watch Korean dramas on an online platform. 46% of respondents chose “Other” with many respondents who selected this option stating they watched on YouTube and other websites that did not provide legal access to subtitled Korean dramas. Korean drama viewing is a subculture activity, with a fragmented audience rather than a mainstream phenomenon. Respondents primarily watch over the internet which may deemphasize the social factors such as the views of critics and friends and family.

Figure 6: How Respondents Watch Korean Dramas

Figure 7: Respondent SVoD Services
Finally, an OLS regression found no statistically significant relationship between respondents who value genre and respondents who use SVoD services. This rejects the notion that the presence of genre information and use of genre as an organizing mechanism on interfaces (Netflix and Viki), is correlated with a predilection to choose Korean dramas based on genre. In this analysis, the dependent variable was genre preference, which was asked on a five-point Likert scales. The independent variables were the dichotomous questions which asked respondents if they watched Korean dramas on six different SVoD platforms.

Table 6: Genre OLS Regression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which services do you watch Korean Dramas on? (Please select all that apply)</td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>43.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netflix</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hulu</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amazon Prime Video</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viki</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kocowa</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dependent Variable: How important are each of the following in terms of your decision to try a Korean drama?...Genres I like

Korean Drama Survey Key Takeaways

Overall, strong trends in genre preferences are indicated by this survey. Romance and romantic comedy were particularly popular among survey respondents. There were clear trends in genre preferences, even without definitions of genres provided, suggesting a shared understanding that these subgenres are distinct categories. The correlation of genre preferences found in the bivariate analysis, however, suggest areas where viewers are unclear of how to distinguish the two genres or of a prevalence of genre mixing. The lack of clarity may be the
result of cultural biases, a trend toward disuse of certain genre terminology, or of a redefinition of genre categories as a result of fusion in generic conventions.

The importance of the genre, even when respondents are watching outside of their culture and language, supports the hypothesis that genre can be easily recognized and understood in Korean dramas. Patterns in storytelling, narrative, and iconography were readily recognized by non-Korean viewers and were assimilated into models by which they categorized and valued content. This suggests the strong salience of the genre frame in the circulation of media texts on a global level.
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS

Genre as Cultural Bridge

The combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies allows for an interrogation of both the text of Korean dramas and audience viewing behavior. The qualitative method of close reading supports the finding that hybridized genres from the United States, China, and Japan are present in Korean dramas through their use of formal artistic techniques and thematic preoccupations. This is complimented by the quantitative survey which suggests that these subgenres are not only recognizable to the non-Korean audience, but extremely important in driving audience behavior.

The close reading found that all five dramas assessed rely heavily on a melodramatic structure, even when they were classified by distributors and critics as belonging to different subgenres. Melodrama is an affective framework that repositions the world in simple terms of right and wrong. Villains are easy to spot, and audiences feel an emotional connection to heroes through their sympathy with their desperate situations. Moreover, musical cues and strong emotional performances convey additional levels of meaning that do not rely on dialogue or a detailed knowledge of South Korean cultural or industrial practices. In this way, there is a universalizing aspect to melodrama which makes it simple to understand even for viewers who speak different languages and come from very different cultures.

Mixed into the melodramatic mode are hybridized versions of other genre traditions. These mixtures create the subgenres of Korean dramas which carry with them different audience expectations and valuations. Genre elements do not present themselves in exactly the same way as they do in Hollywood cinema and television, nor in the cinema and television practices of other national culture industries. Instead, they are hybridized in South Korea in line with post
colonialist theory wherein the area of encounter creates something new which carries signifiers from both cultures.

The presence of genre iconography, conventions and narrative tropes helps establish what narrative pay-offs are expected from the story. For example, comical cues and reflexive humor when applied to heterosexual relationships move *Because This Life Is Our First Life* into the realm of romantic comedy. Melodramatic themes and modes of excess are still in place, but the show is able to more fully critique patriarchal institutions, particularly marriage, by focusing the story on the negotiation of gender roles between two people who do not comply to expected gendered behavior. In a similar fashion, *Healer, Signal,* and *Moon Lovers* are able to use genre conventions to frame their stories. *Healer* critiques ideas of heroism in the action adventure genre, *Signal* explores corruption in the detective genre, and *Moon Lovers* engages patriarchal class structures and fate in the historical genre. During an interview with a group of people not familiar with Korean dramas, short clips from all five shows analyzed during the close reading, were shown. After watching about five minutes of each show with no subtitles, the group was able to hypothesize which genre each show fell into. These designations matched the subgenre definitions indicated by Korean drama platforms and reviewers. Though this finding is exploratory, the ease with which non-Korean viewers are able access genre within these shows is supported by the survey of Korean drama viewers. Korean drama audiences highly valued genre categories in making decisions and showed clear trends in genre preferences, which suggests that the presence of genre iconography, tropes, and themes in central to their enjoyment of these texts.

Genre was considered very important by nearly half of all survey participants and nearly 60% of survey participants said they were very likely to watch a romantic comedy. The
prominence of genre amongst a list of factors in selecting a Korean drama suggests that the presence of these elements create expectations for Korean drama audiences about the type of story they are about to watch.

Interestingly, even with melodrama as the operative mode, the melodrama genre was valued to a lesser degree by survey respondents. The disjuncture between respondent taste preferences and the findings of the close readings could be the result of a couple different factors. First, the prevalence of melodrama across all Korean dramas may in fact make it less significant as a way to differentiated and categorize Korean dramas. Second, melodrama’s connotation of excess of emotionality and historic association of melodrama with so-called “weepies” (Altman 1999, 128) may have skewed audience ideas of melodrama themes. Serious social issues may be considered the realm of drama despite a long history of being the domain of melodrama. Or third, the negative connotations of the term melodrama are a source of bias that impacted viewer responses. The higher rating for drama over melodrama supports this hypothesis. Given the high rating of romance—which was second only to the romantic comedy—melodramas which emphasize a romantic storyline may still be highly valued by Korean drama audiences. Romance plays a prevalent role in three of the five Korean dramas I selected for this analysis and romantic storylines are extremely common across all subgenres in Korean dramas (Dramabeans and Girlfriday 2013, 236). Further, survey respondents who picked dramas based on stars were positively correlated with enjoyment of the romance genre, suggesting that the Korean-ness of stars and their presentation of idealized love is an important aspect of the Korean drama’s international appeal.

Historically, theories of cultural proximity were discussed to explain why countries such as China and Japan enjoy Korean dramas. These theories looked at ideas of shared Confucian
values and cultural ideas of family or the depiction of romance that was less sexualized than in the West. The underlying theory was that audiences are more likely to enjoy things that are familiar. This line of thought is shared by marketers and consumer behavior researchers who argue that for a media product to be successful, it should be matched to people who are conversant with that media. Hixson’s 2005 study of movie goers in particular found that if customers already know they like a genre, they are more likely to seek that genre out when making viewer decisions. Both these models stress that familiarity is key.

This study of Korean dramas supports that the familiar thing in these media texts may not be value driven, but the use of well-known formalist artistic practices, narrative structures, symbolically rich iconography. Genre patterns and conventions are salient within Korean dramas and act as a bridge to audience engagement and enjoyment.

**Further Research**

The Korean drama survey only indicates what respondents believed their motivations were in selecting Korean dramas. Additional research into favorite dramas of Non-Korean fans over a period of time may provide greater insight into what subgenres are most popular and the importance of star power across global markets.

Moreover, Korean ideologies are packaged within the familiar iconography. Future studies could conduct research into the salience of these value systems for viewers outside the sphere for cultural proximity, such as Europe, the United States, and South America. For example, stars were considered very important by 42 percent of respondents. Additional surveys or qualitative interviews may suggest new dimensions for the appeal of “Korean-ness” that expands current discourse around Confucian values and colonialist gaze (Iwabuchi 2013). There
are certainly other questions which impact why viewers enjoy Korean dramas, such as depictions of families, values, and ideas associated with representation and identity. Further research into the affective appeal of these genres—as conducted through a uses and gratifications framework—may be able to provide further insight into the why Korean drama viewers enjoy Korean dramas and how they relate these affective or cognitive gratifications with their understanding of genre categories.

Another promising area for future research includes a gender study of the presentations of femininity within these texts. The genres of romantic comedy and romance were by far the most popular genres with survey respondents. Further, the five Korean dramas analyzed were at once vehicles for heterosexual women’s fantasy, but also perpetuated harmful stereotypes. The repeated presentation of victimization removes the agency from the women characters and propagates a narrative where only men can effect change. Therefore, happiness is inevitably linked to successfully attracting a husband. The simplistic character types of melodrama also limit the understanding of how to be a “good woman” to a patriarchal framework that values youth, innocence, and inexperience. Despite these limitations, Korean dramas are predominately watched and written by women. A uses and gratifications analysis could similarly address how these ideologies are received by audiences.
## APPENDIX 1: DRAMA CODING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Show</th>
<th>% of Votes</th>
<th>Genre (Viki)</th>
<th>IMDB</th>
<th>Dramabeans</th>
<th>Soompi</th>
<th>Final Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td><em>My Mister</em></td>
<td>7.43%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Drama, Family</td>
<td>Romance melodrama</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Melodrama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td><em>Healer</em></td>
<td>13.80%</td>
<td><strong>Action</strong> Adventure, Drama,</td>
<td><strong>Action</strong>, Comedy, Crime</td>
<td>part action movie, part suspense thriller, part mystery, and part spy caper</td>
<td>action romance</td>
<td>Action &amp; Adventure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td><em>Because This is My First Life</em></td>
<td>11.28%</td>
<td><strong>Romance</strong></td>
<td><strong>Comedy</strong>, Drama, Romance</td>
<td>Cohabitation romantic comedy</td>
<td>romantic-comedy</td>
<td>Romantic Comedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td><em>Signal</em></td>
<td>7.57%</td>
<td>Sci-Fi &amp; Fantasy, Thriller &amp;</td>
<td><strong>Crime</strong>, Drama, Fantasy</td>
<td>Paranormal police drama</td>
<td><strong>mystery</strong> fantasy drama</td>
<td>Crime/ Mystery/ Detective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td><em>Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo</em></td>
<td>24.90%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Drama, Fantasy, <strong>History</strong></td>
<td>time-slip fusion <strong>sageuk</strong></td>
<td><strong>historical</strong> fantasy drama</td>
<td>Historical/ Sageuk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*My Mister*


Healer


Because This Life is My First


Signal


Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo


APPENDIX 2: KOREAN DRAMA SURVEY ANNOTATIONS

Survey text and questions are indicated by italics. All other text is explanation and analysis of the survey design.

- **Korean Dramas**, often called K-Dramas, are scripted television miniseries usually between 16 to 20 episodes. They usually run for only one season and tell a complete story. Korean Dramas have been licensed for distribution on broadcast television, cable, and satellite. They are also available through the internet and are available for purchase in physical formats like DVDs. Subtitles and audio dubs allow Korean dramas to be understood by people who do not speak Korean.

- If you watch Korean Dramas, you are invited to take part in this brief 17 question survey. Questions will focus on what things about Korean Dramas make you more likely to watch.

  - Click To Proceed to the Survey

- A couple questions to make sure this survey is right for you.

1. Do you watch Korean Dramas?
   - Yes
   - No

2. Do you live in Korea?
   - Yes, I live in Korea
   - No

3. Thinking about the Korean Dramas you have seen recently, have you watched a Korean Drama in the last 12 months? (Dramas do not have to be viewed in their entirety. One episode is enough for a Korean Drama to be countable.)
   - Yes, I have watched a Korean Drama in the last 12 months
   - No

These three gating questions were used to make sure respondents were part of the target population. Respondents must live outside of Korea and have watched a Korean drama in the last twelve months. Respondents who did not satisfy these questions did not proceed to the survey and their data was excluded.

4. How many different Korean Dramas have you seen in the past month?
(Dramas do not have to be viewed in their entirety. One episode is enough for a Korean Drama to be countable.)

- None
- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11 or more
- Do not know

Question 4 was adapted from a Gallup/USA Today poll conducted in December 2012:

How many movies have you seen in the past month, including at a theater, at home, or elsewhere? (Gallup/USA Today Poll, Dec, 2012)

A similar question was included in Bruce Austin’s 1979 study, “Film Attendance: Why College Students Chose to See Their Most Recent Films.” The question allowed Allen to differentiate between frequent movie goers and occasional movie goers.

5. During the past year, did you watch a Korean drama in any of the following ways? (Please select all that apply.) [Randomize order]

- Watching on DVD
- On a cable or satellite channel either watched at the time of broadcast or recorded for later
- A paid internet streaming service like Hulu, Netflix or Roku that brings you Korean dramas over your television or computer
- Other: ________________________________

The options in Question 5 were adapted from the Gallup/USA Today poll:

If you had to choose, which would you say is your most preferred way to watch television programs you are interested in seeing--watching shows at the time they are broadcast on the network, recording shows and watching at a later time, streaming shows over the Internet, or watching on DVD (digital video disc)?

- Watching shows at the time they are broadcast on the network
- Recording shows and watching at a later time
- Streaming shows over the Internet
- Watching on DVD
- Don't know (Source: Gallup/USA Today Poll, Dec, 2012)
Respondents to the Korean Drama survey were asked to limit their selection to viewing habits in the past year to ensure data was recent. An “Other” option was provided because Korean dramas are often available outside of formal licensing agreements online, such as bootleg versions.

Respondents from other countries also have other methods of watching Korean dramas.

6. Which services do you watch Korean Dramas on? (select all that apply) [Randomize order of responses]
   - Netflix
   - Hulu
   - Amazon Prime Video
   - Viki
   - Kocowa
   - Other paid internet streaming service (please list):

Question 6 was only asked if the respondent indicated they watched Korean dramas on a paid internet streaming service. Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, Viki and Kocowa are popular SVoD services in the United States that provide Korean dramas. Viki is a global entertainment company owned by Japanese Rakuten and specializes in licensing programming from East Asia. Kocowa is South Korean owned and is a joint venture between South Korea’s three big broadcast networks: KBS, MBC, SBS. Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime are U.S.-based companies that carry international content and have global businesses of varying scales.

Questions about how viewers watch were included to provide insight into how viewers value Korean dramas. DVDs and pay television require monetary investment from viewers. Additionally, platforms advertise the content they offer within their platform in order to retain their customers.

7. Thinking about Korean dramas you have watched in the last year, who or what drew your attention to those programs? (Please select all that apply) [Randomize order of responses]
   - Recommendations from friends or family
Articles on Korean entertainment news websites
- Internet streaming service platforms (like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video or Viki)
- Blogs I follow
- Posts on social media
- Advertisements I saw
- Other

Question 7 updated of a question from Bruce Allen’s survey:

Who or what drew your attention to last film you attended?
- Word-of-mouth
- Theme/content
- Actor/actress
- TV advertisement
- Reviews
- Other (Allen 1981, 46).

The Korean drama survey expanded possible sources of knowledge to include news websites, internet streaming services, blogs and social media. This question was included to help understand how viewers access information about Korean dramas. Some of these distribution models provide more information on the Korean television industry than others, so viewers might value different features of a Korean drama depending on where they get their information.

8. How important are each of the following in terms of your decision to try a Korean drama? [Randomize order of features]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Not too important</th>
<th>Not important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actors I like</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An interesting story description</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genres I like</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 8 was a simplified version of Bruce Allen’s 28 variables which he hypothesized influenced audience behavior. Bruce Allen’s article describes his 28 variables as falling into eight buckets: (1) “production personnel,” inclusive of directors, actors, and screenwriters; (2) “production elements,” inclusive of music and cinematography; (3) Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating; (4) advertising, such as trailers, ads in newspapers and magazines; (5) critical reviews; (6) “interpersonal influence” from friends and parents; (7) “perception of film content,” such as plot and genre; and (8) “other,” for instance winning an Academy Award (Allen 1981, 44). Some of these criteria were excluded, such as MPAA rating, because they do not apply to Korean dramas. Some criteria were also been asked separately because of the amount of literature around their importance, such as genres and trailers (Austin 1981, d’Astous et. al 2007, Hixson 2005, Finsterwalter et. al 2012). Additionally, language from the Gallup/USA Today poll was adapted for categories that overlapped:

How important are each of the following in terms of your decision about which movies to see—very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not important at all [Don’t know].

- How about...the previews or trailers for the movies?
- How about...recommendations from friends?
- How about...articles or reviews of the movie?
• How about...the cast of actors who appear in the movie?
• The Likert style responses were also similar to the Gallup USA/Today poll. (Source: Gallup/USA Today Poll, Dec, 2012)

9. How likely are you to watch Korean Dramas in the following genres? [Randomize order of genres]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Very Likely</th>
<th>Somewhat Likely</th>
<th>Maybe</th>
<th>Unlikely</th>
<th>Will not watch</th>
<th>No Opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action/Adventure</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
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Question 9 attempts to deepen understanding on which genres Korean drama viewers enjoy most. Thomas Hixson’s survey of genre preferences included action/adventure, romance, family/children, drama, comedy, and horror/science-fiction (Hixon 2005, 220). Family/children were not included as Korean dramas do not specifically target children. Horror was also not combined with sci-fi as many Korean dramas are more likely to combine those genres with melodrama or romantic comedy rather than each other. The popularity of the “Ro-Co” genre within Korea justifies adding the romantic comedy category (Javabeans and Girfriday 2013; Yonhap 2017). Although drama and melodrama can be difficult to distinguish, melodrama as a
genre is often disparaged for being simplistic, overly emotional. Therefore, both categories were included to see if there is meaningful difference in how respondents rate these genres. The historical genre was added as Ju indicated that television buyers in some countries particularly value historical Korean dramas (Ju 2014, 46). Finally, a crime/mystery/thriller genre was added to capture police procedurals, detective shows, and organized crime—all of which are perennial subgenres of television dramas worldwide (Turnbell 2014). Again, a Likert-type scale was used in a battery format to encourage, but not require, respondents to rank their answers. This question also goes after question nine so that respondents were not primed to consider genre as an important factor before being asked to consider a range of possible factors in choosing a new Korean drama.

- A few last questions for statistical purposes only.

10. What is your year of birth?

   ❏

11. What is your gender?
   ❏ Man
   ❏ Woman
   ❏ Other

12. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
   ❏ Less than high school
   ❏ High school graduate (Grade 12 with diploma or GED certificate)
   ❏ Some college
   ❏ 2-year degree
   ❏ 4-year degree
   ❏ Professional degree
   ❏ Doctorate

13. What is your nationality? (please select country of nationality). [Drop down provided by Qualtrics]
14. Do you speak Korean?

- A little
- Yes
- No

15. Which language do you speak more fluently? (intermediate level or higher)?

16. How many languages do you speak (intermediate level or higher)?

- 1
- 2 or more

17. Which language do you speak more fluently? [Only asked if respondent selected 2 or more]

- English
- Spanish
- Mandarin Chinese
- Korean
- Arabic
- French
- Russian
- Other

The question “what is your age?” has been modified to year of birth as some countries count age differently. Rather than biological sex, the next question asked how respondents identify in terms of gender. Question 12 is adapted from the Pew Center Core Trends Survey:

What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- Less than high school (Grades 1-8 or no formal schooling)
- High school incomplete (Grades 9-11 or Grade 12 with NO diploma)
- High school graduate (Grade 12 with diploma or GED certificate)
- Some college, no degree (includes some community college)
- Two-year associate degree from a college or university
- Four-year college or university degree/Bachelor’s degree (e.g., BS, BA, AB)
- Some postgraduate or professional schooling, no postgraduate degree (e.g. some graduate school)
- Postgraduate or professional degree, including master’s, doctorate, medical or law degree (e.g., MA, MS, PhD, MD, JD)
- Don’t know (Source: Pew Research Center Core Trends Survey January, 2018).

Question 14 was included to understand what countries respondents are from, as the survey was not limited to respondents in the United States. Question 15 on the ability to speak Korean was included to help determine if viewers are relying on subtitles or if the majority of respondents are already familiar with Korean language and culture. Language was taken from the National Opinion research Center General Society Survey:


Finally, question 17 seeks to understand if the audience for Korean dramas has a more globalized worldview. d’Astous et. al’s study, “The Effects of Country-Genre Congruence on the Evaluation on Movies” included measures to on “openness to foreign cultures” (2007, 48). An interest in learning a second language at an advanced level indicates greater openness to foreign cultures.
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