

Another Undiscovered Country: An Analysis of the Effects of Culture on the Reception and Adoption of the Science Fiction Genre in South Korea Through The Examination of 21st Century Korean SF Cinema

by Gord Sellar

Kingsley Amis reportedly quipped once that science fiction (SF) "is written by Americans and Britons, not by foreigners and women" (Stover 471). However true this was during the first half of the twentieth century¹, things have changed dramatically, at least in terms of gender—but somewhat less dramatically in terms of the worldwide distribution of SF production and consumption. The reasons why some societies readily take to SF, while others do not, remain unclear, despite assumptions evident in various theoretical writings on SF. In 1979, Darko Suvin offered this description of the then-apparent range of SF's global distribution in terms of consumption (and, implicitly, authorship):

there are strong indications that its popularity in the leading industrial nations (United States, USSR, United Kingdom, Japan) has risen sharply over the last 100 years, despite all the local and short-range fluctuations. (3)

Suvin here clearly links industrialization with popular interest in SF. James Gunn also does so in his introduction to the final "Around the World" volume of his acclaimed *The Road to Science Fiction* anthology series, noting of the literary SF traditions in places like Turkey, Singapore, Chile, and Taiwan that "often industrialization has come too recently to produce a literature of change" (25). Many commentators on the development of SF in China—foreign and Chinese alike—have noted a surge in (imported, Soviet) SF contemporaneous to the mass industrialization of China in the 1950s (Huss).

But is industrialization really the deciding factor for whether, how, and why SF takes root—or fails to do so—in different global popular cultures? The example of China is illustrative: though SF proliferated in the 1950s, it did so as a pedagogical tool and remained bound by the "shackles of utilitarianism" until the early 90s (Huss). Likewise, other fully-industrialized nations—including South Korea, but also France and Germany—even now sustain disproportionately small amounts of original SF creation and consumption, compared to the Anglophone world. Meanwhile, in an incompletely industrialized India, cinematic SF has recently begun to take off.² Clearly, a one-dimensional approach to explaining the global distribution of SF is insufficient.

In the case of South Korea, the unparalleled rapidity of industrialization (and attendant social and technological change) would suggest that if any society had a need or desire for what Gunn aptly terms a "literature of change" (17) to speak to its current circumstances and future prospects, it would be South Korea.³ Indeed, foreign SF—particularly American and Japanese "media" SF—has had an impact on the Korean imagination: even the South Korean government has been inspired by it, for example in the widely (indeed, globally) discussed announcement of the Ministry of Information and Communication's plan to put a robot in every household by 2013.

Although a number of Korean SF films have been released, and print SF currently seems to be enjoying a renaissance of sorts in Korea⁴, Korean SF fans largely agree that the genre remains marginal in their society, especially when compared to the explosive growth of other forms of "foreign" popular culture such as independent music, dancing, fashion, other film genres, and so on. For some reason, the status of SF in South Korea remains relatively precarious and marginal.

Korean SF websites⁵ reveal a vast interest in media (TV, films, computer games, and other

1 Mary Wollstonecraft-Shelley's *Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus* may well be the inaugural SF novel, but the vast majority of pulp-era and so-called "Golden Age" SF was written by, and marketed to, young anglophone males.

2 Fantasy has long been popular in Indian film, but since the first Indian SF movie, *Koi Mil Gaya* (2003), a number of SF-genre films featuring scientists and superheroes have been released.

3 Indeed, skill-sets for writing SF, professional futurism, and planning for technocratic societies arguably overlap, so that understanding the status of SF in Korea may indeed have a rather urgent importance.

4 The relatively recent founding of the *Omelas* SF imprint helmed by influential editor/critic Park Sang Jun, a recent flurry of SF anthologies and original novels by Korean authors, and the ongoing success of the print speculative fiction/fan culture magazine *Fantastique* all bode well for Korean literary SF today.

5 Most prominently, the website for Korea's biggest SF fanclub, JoySF, at <<http://www.joysf.com/>>.

visual) forms of SF in addition to literature. Because films are such a powerful popularizer of the genre, are readily accessible (especially to me!), and tend more closely to reflect the interests of young SF-consuming fans—especially in Korea, where SF fandom is generally younger than in the West—examination of various (successful and unsuccessful) Korean SF films can yield insights regarding unique challenges involved in Koreanizing the SF genre, particularly in terms of national and postcolonial identity and (popular) historiography, commonplace attitudes towards realism and fantasy, and imaginative orientation towards the past and future. This survey, offered from the perspective not of a specialist in Korean studies, but rather as a working SF author, cannot investigate the genre as a whole, but it may open up a potentially interesting form of cross-cultural interrogation.

Defining SF

To define is to exclude. Thus it is crucial to identify explicitly the process of definition and exclusion, especially for something so tenuous and problematic as a literary genre. Two definitions are of use for this study (with a third to come later).

James Gunn's (previously mentioned) characterization of SF is a starting point. SF is indeed a "literature of change"—implicitly, of *technological* or *scientific* change (and the social change it catalyzes), with the implied realization that such change is *ongoing*, and certain to continue into an increasingly different, or alien, future. Even clarified in this way, Gunn's definition remains insufficient: by this standard, even Dickens' *Dombey and Son* (with its nightmarish description of the first locomotives) and Korean novels like Yang Kwija's *Wonmidong Saramdeul* and *Nanjangi ka ssoa ollin chagŭn kong* by Cho Se-hŭi would qualify as SF because of their handling of modern, industrialization-driven change. Clearly, this definition is incomplete.

A second, more exacting definition is offered in Darko Suvin's seminal *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. Suvin argues that SF is a literature of "*cognitive estrangement*" (7); that is, a literature that at once *estranges* the reader by being set in a world that absolutely is not our present world, yet invites a *cognitive*—logical, reasoned, and even scientific—mode of interaction with that fictional world and events within it—because of its representation of a plausible world operating by the same essential rules as our world, or similarly coherent ones, and imaginatively located in our future or some other plausible alternative space.⁶ Horror and fantasy are also literatures of *estrangement*, but are not for Suvin *cognitive*, because they are "committed to the interposition of anti-cognitive laws into the empirical environment" (8). Purposefully breaking the known rules of the world, horror and fantasy works suspend such *cognitive* readings.

Suvin's definition is problematic for several reasons, including the fact that he excludes several immensely popular SF sub-genres such as "space opera," which he dismisses as a retrogression to the also anti-*cognitive* mythic or fairy-tale mode (7-9). However tenable this assessment may be in theory, space opera is in practice a major subgenre of SF and cannot be ignored, especially in discussions of global reception and transmission of the genre. But Suvin's framework nonetheless is handy precisely *because* it simultaneously isolates SF from genres such as horror and fantasy with which SF is often conflated in consumer culture (in Korea and in the Anglophone world alike), while making possible an interrogation of *why* foreign forms of those latter genres have thus far been retooled (or "Koreanized") much more successfully than SF.

It is important to note momentarily that the reception of foreign SF in Korea appears somewhat unconstrained by these, after all, arbitrary generic categories. Discussions among Korean SF fans occasionally run the full gamut of speculative fiction in a single exchange,⁷ which suggests that Suvin's definition of SF is probably, on one level, insufficient for the more generalized study of global SF including those societies where SF is not only a literature of change, but a literature of foreign, overtly Western change, a genre to be adapted to local literary traditions.

6 Or as Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. puts it, SF is "a mode of awareness, a complex hesitation about the relationship between imaginary conceptions and historical reality unfolding into the future" (388).

7 One recent example was a seminar by JoySF fan club organizer Bae Yoon Ho, who presented a taxonomy of fantastical "species" that included elves, orcs, and trolls (high fantasy creatures); zergs (from the popular computer game *Starcraft*); Hollywood franchise critters like *Predator* series; and classic SF creatures like androids and cyborgs. Fascinatingly, they were all classified in terms of morphological and other proximity to humans, rather than along lines of literary genre likelier to be used in Western SF creature-taxonomies. (Bae.)

Nevertheless, for the purposes of a survey of the Korean context, where a long tradition of mythic and fairy-tale narratives exists, and where fantasy and horror have achieved relatively wider success, this taxonomy usefully focuses on strictly science-fictional materials. Thus borderline films such as *Hwasango (Volcano High, 2001)* and *Arahan jangjung daejakjeon (Arahan, 2004)* have been excluded, perhaps to be addressed elsewhere in relation to the wider Korean reception, appropriation, and adaptation of various forms of speculative fiction.⁸

Generic Fluency and SF as a "Foreign Language"

Despite SF having arrived in Korea decades ago, even today foreign—largely Anglophone—SF in translation dominates the literary and cinematic options for Korean consumers. Whether we trace the origins of SF to Mary Wollstonecraft-Shelley's *Frankenstein* as does Brian Aldiss (20-31), to Poe's works as does Disch (32-56), or to European utopian literature as does Suvin (9), we find that science fiction is originally a Western literary phenomenon. Precedents in various forms of "proto-SF" such as those found early twentieth-century Japan (Nakamura 6-7) are significant, but nonetheless, the first works in Japanese, Korean, and Chinese to which "proto-" need not be attached were foreign works appearing in translation.

The status of the genre in China is worth consideration: *Science Fiction World*, the most popular SF magazine in the PRC, claims a circulation of between 300,000-500,000 copies per issue (Science Fiction World), with actual readership widely estimated at several times that number, easily making it the most widely read SF magazine in the world (by several orders of magnitude).⁹ Yet even with such wide circulation, the genre seems to be undergoing relatively slow adaptation. Chinese-American SF author William F. Wu commented that the local SF he read during a trip to China in 1983 was reminiscent "of the SF written and published in the U.S. from the 1920s to the 1940s," and that roughly two decades later it seemed similar to American SF of the 1950s (Tidhar).

The Hollywood approach to depicting mythic fantasy and ghost stories appears relatively easily transplantable, probably because the supernatural concepts central to them are far more universal than the technological concepts central to SF. Indeed, even the most mundane roots of many SF tropes are strongly tied to the specific circumstances and language of European colonial and naval history and literature, and its unexpiated sins (Disch 193)—thus space *colonies*, alien *invasions*, and *Captain Kirk*. It seems SF is at least a doubly "acquired language": its foreign tropes and mode of *cognitive estrangement*, along with its attendant (foreign) cultural baggage, must both be absorbed and retooled locally for the coherent transplantation of SF. It seems not unlikely that SF, and that differing cultures and histories, could mutually pose special problems for translation and adaptation of SF to new cultural contexts and the acquisition of "fluency" in the language of SF for consumers and creators alike. The remainder of this paper will explore examples of such problems in detail.

"Kid Stuff": Fantasy, Tropic Salad Syndrome, and Suvin's *Cognitive Mode*

One common uninformed response to SF—noted by SF fans and scholars worldwide—is to see it as either "merely escapist" or juvenile; in any case, as something not to be "taken seriously."

Explanations abound: SF was for a time marketed at juvenile audiences, after all, and though it has moved on, to the uninitiated, the genre's mode of *estrangement* may obscure its *cognitive* elements. Likewise, the past pedagogical use of SF, as in Chinese (Huss) and Western curricula, and even the characteristic playfulness often evident in even the most accomplished and intelligent works of SF may explain this.

Whatever the reason, many "non-SF people," as we sometimes call them—seem to perceive the genre not as a sophisticated literature of the imagination, but rather as a random assortment of interchangeably "silly" or fantastical tropes contiguous to fantasy, horror, myth, or even mere cinematic special effects.

There are a variety of results. Some would-be creators simply embrace this view, and treat SF

8 "Speculative fiction," (also abbreviated SF), encompasses fantastical and science-fictional genres appealing to the same general audience as science fiction: horror, fantasy, science-fiction, *daikajju*, superheroes, etc.

9 According to the numbers reported on the magazine's website. For the sake of comparison, these numbers alone are several multiples of the *combined* circulation of the world's three most popular anglophone SF print magazines, which in 2007 totaled (approximately) 60,000 or fewer copies monthly (Dozois).

not as a genre of rigorously-explored ideas, but instead as a grab-bag of random narrative ingredients. Occasionally, as in films like *Donggam* (*Ditto*, 2001) and *Siwora* (*Il Mare*, also 2001), such tropes are employed to provide a new (shallowly-explored) twist on familiar romantic melodrama. By excluding the cognitive mode, they are, at best, only technically science-fictional. Elsewhere, as in the films of Nam Gi-woong, such as *Daehakno-yeseo maechoon-hadaka tomaksalhae danghan yeogosaeng ajik Daehakno-ye Issda* (*Killing Machine*, 2000) and *Samgeori Museutang Sonyeoeui Choehu* (*Never Belongs to Me*, 2005) the result is more like a "trope salad": a jumbled assortment of disconnected genre conventions lacking any discernibly intelligible pattern. Cyborgs with penis-guns stalk the streets alongside chimerical gangsters and schoolteachers, whilst sorceresses and Gernsbackian mad scientists plot in secret.

Probably the costliest trope salad Korea has ever produced is Jang Sun-Woo's *Sungnyangpali sonyeoui jaerim* (*The Resurrection of the Little Match Girl*, 2002). This disastrous film is worth discussing for several reasons: because its budget of approximately nine billion won was in 2002 supposedly the most expensive Korean film (SF or otherwise) yet made, as well as one of three genre films that flopped massively at the Korean box office in that year (Paquet); in that some of its central problems are, unfortunately, quite familiar from Western genre cinema; and that, finally, it is one of very few pre-2006 Korean SF films that was overtly science-fictional (SFnal), but featured civilians characters, rather than soldiers or police officers.

A panoply of superficial resemblances advertise that the Hollywood blockbuster *The Matrix* was an overt inspiration for *Resurrection...*: the story transpires in a virtual world (in this case, a computer game) in which a beleaguered protagonist meets bizarre and heavily stylized allies and enemies of an almost iconographic nature—a transsexual biker, a stylish hoodlum gang, and so forth; the struggle in the virtual world connects to the real world, and Hollywood-style battles and chases abound. Even cinematographic techniques featured in the *Matrix*, such as "bullet time," are utilized.

Yet the differences between the two films are immense. For example, despite being unabashedly "pulp" on a deep level—a film as much about spectacle as about substance—*The Matrix* wears intellectual and literary references prominently on its sleeve (and its signature leather trench coat, as well): references to kung-fu films, computer gaming, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Neuromancer*, fairy tales, and *The Wizard of Oz* grind against ideas cribbed from Baudrillard, Tibetan Buddhism, New Age religion, and the paranoia found in the works of Philip K. Dick, all in the service of interrogating the nature of reality, a theme its many fans perceived as handled philosophically in the film. The rather scene where Morpheus confronts Neo with the "truth" about the world, giving him a choice between a red pill and a blue pill—reality and fantasy—richly resonates with the ostensibly mind-altering drug use of Western counter-culture and its reflection in SF, especially in the works of Philip K. Dick, yet in its gravity it is also powerfully emblematic of how the film explicitly invites viewers seriously to consider the artificial constructedness of consensual reality.

Such aggressively philosophical and literary—indeed, *intellectual*—referentiality is mostly absent in *Resurrection...* and in its place, we find playful absurdity and goofily manic violence. The rules of the imaginary video game setting are perplexing and cruel and the fight scenes oscillate between comedy and ultraviolence. Contemplation on the Tao allows the protagonist to secure a superweapon in the form of a fish (which is actually a plastic toy gun). While disorder and silliness can be refreshingly exuberant—in SF silliness is not always a bad thing!—in the end, all we get is a *trope salad*. (Indeed, a *mackerel*-flavored trope salad.) Whether this mess is the result of a botched attempt at ironic response to *The Matrix*, or an artifact of the director's avant-garde background, script problems, or a lack of familiarity with (or blatant disregard of) SF is unclear.

Either way, what remains conspicuously absent throughout is any effort to tell an intelligent story. Neal Stephenson has very astutely noted that one of the singular characteristics of (good) SF literature and film is an apparent intelligence (Stephenson). A comparison of the actors and the characterization they present is illustrative. In *The Matrix*, as in many SF movies, a number of actors—specifically Laurence Fishburne, Carrie-Ann Moss, and Hugo Weaving—radiate an aura of bristling, almost feral, intellect.¹⁰ Whether performing wirework kung-fu feats in a virtual *dojo*, pretending to be trapped inside a computer system, narrating the history of a robotic takeover of the Earth, or performing other ridiculous and bizarre actions, there is in *The Matrix* a gravity and respect

10 For an extended discussion of the aesthetic importance of "intelligence" in SF films, see Stephenson (2008).

for the ideas and tropes within the film, regardless of how bizarrely or playfully they are presented.

In contrast, even the most interesting character in *Resurrection...* (the transsexual/lesbian biker warrior Lara, named after *Tomb Raider* video game character Lara Croft) behaves absurdly, dancing prominently in a night club where she has gone to fight gangsters who almost killed her moments before—exchanging the "balletic" violence of *The Matrix* for "discotheque" violence. And while the question of what kind of intelligence a self-conscious AI would have is central to *The Matrix*, in *Resurrection...* the classic questions of SF—Can an AI be self-conscious? Can a computer program feel love, or hate? Is an AI's "life" valuable?—take a backseat to a giddy torrent of random violence when the passive Little Match Girl program picks up a gun and starts shooting random people. In the end, she has (somehow) transformed from a digital automaton into the hero's dream girl. The meaty, deeply SFnal questions of how a computer program could do so are passed over completely.

This jumbling of shallowly-explored borrowed tropes—or, again, *trope salad*—is reminiscent of nothing so much as the stuff that authors who have never read SF crank out when the fancy strikes them to explore genre a little bit. It's a bit like playing jazz on a bagpipe: it can be done, but only as a curiosity, and it is extremely unlikely to produce *good* jazz, even if you're a great bagpiper.

Yesterday, while it also suffers from the trope salad syndrome, is a relatively more intelligent (and somewhat more accomplished) film, and is worth mentioning here primarily because of the means by which it avoids those pitfalls, since those means are relatively common in Korean SF. *Yesterday* injects its SFnal content into a cop film. Of course, the use of police officers, soldiers, spies, or similar protagonists in Western SF, especially films, is a grand tradition that includes many of the most famous modern SF films, from *Blade Runner* (1982) to *A Scanner Darkly* (2006). The use of such protagonists in *Yesterday*—as well as in *2009: Lost Memories*, *Natural City*, and several other Korean SF films¹¹ effectively necessitates a kind of gravity that fends off the risk of these films being interpreted as juvenile; however, this technique does not fend off the danger of trope salad, and *Yesterday* especially falls victim to the syndrome. A question that SF authors are often asked about whatever they're working on is, "What's it about?" In the dialect of SF-talk, what this question often really means is, "What is the SFnal conceit of the story?" The answer usually does not concern the characters and their emotions—unless the character is an AI—or any of the other things that mainstream fiction is "about," not because those things don't matter in SF—they certainly do—but because the most interesting element in any SF work is that core speculative notion which finds its expression in the story as a whole.

What is *Yesterday* "about"? It's about a South Korean government conspiracy to create super-spies back in the 1990s, using kidnapped children who were genetically altered. And then cloned. And then mutated. Oh, and then their memories were erased (incompletely, as it turns out). And they're psychogenetically programmed... er, somehow. (The explanations are *exceedingly* vague.) Cloning can be a powerful visual image in a film, of course, but normally only if identical clones appear onscreen. Perhaps there is some deep, dark metaphor about the division of Korea enacted in how one violent, hostile brother (clone) seeks to kill his more controlled, heroic sibling (clone). But what we see onscreen in *Yesterday* is a lot of brooding, a few simultaneous headaches that telegraph the big secret of the film almost from the beginning, and a muddled salad of genetic engineering, cloning, brainwashing, and mind control tropes without any apparent attempt to explain how all this was possible a decade ago. That said, this kind of muddling is not unheard of in Hollywood: many passable SF films muddle this way, too. Great ones, however, never do.

Notable, also, is the irony of how the title of *Yesterday*, a futuristic SF film, references not the future but instead the past. The large majority of Korean SF films—successful or otherwise—curiously seem less ardently concerned with the future than with the past (or *a* past), and with memories.

Anxieties of History, Postcoloniality, and Identity

Recently, acclaimed SF author Neal Stephenson argued that it is less useful to talk about SF as a genre in itself than to talk about SF-people (consumers of SF) and their modes of consumption, as compared

¹¹ *Save the Green Planet* is also a police storie, though the protagonist is the criminal; soldiers and police figure as major antagonistic figures in *The Host*, and are the heroes of the time travel fantasy *Heaven's Soldiers*.

to everyone else, whom he playfully terms "the Mundanes" (Stephenson). This reformulation is reminiscent of the old clash between aestheticians R.G. Collingwood and John Dewey over the following question: are works of art crafted expressions of individual inspiration, or artifacts inextricably embedded in complex networks of interacting *experiences* by producers, consumers, and other participants?

Stephenson's more Deweyan model problematizes Suvin's more Collingwood-like definition of SF as a *genre*, but also grants a different perspective on Suvin's *cognitive* component SF as a function of the audience's expectation. That is to say, SF is not just a grab-bag of tropes, but an intelligent and creative handling of those tropes in a way mutually understood by audience and creator alike. In essence, SF is a sort of language (tropes) with its own unique grammar and syntax (tropic usage). Stephenson's colloquialism for how SF fans engaged with SFnal literature and media—"geeking out"—describes the special mode of consumption adapted to a literature of (Suvinian) *cognitive estrangement*.

Of course, *all* genres have specific rules and inventories of tropes, many of them simply conventional. (For example, in a romance, couples must fight and break up before discovering that they love one another truly. In American horror films, sex prefigures gruesome death.) But the rules governing SFnal tropes—such as time travel—are different in character precisely because of the *cognitive* element—the necessity and the pleasure of entertaining, both logically and even scientifically, the implications of whatever estranging principle is introduced into a narrative. Often, what makes SF films good or bad to an SF fan is not the acting or the special effects, but how imaginatively and plausibly the *cognitive* component is engaged for any given trope, in reference to all previous engagements in the genre.

Take, for example, the trope of time travel. It can be utilized comedically, as in the *Back to the Future* franchise; as the central focus of a thriller, as in *Primer*; politically and didactically, as in H.G. Wells' inaugural time-travel novel *The Time Machine*; or even as a vehicle for a dinosaur-hunting adventure, as in the dreadful—but reasonably SFnal—*A Sound of Thunder*. But rules govern the time-travel trope. One of them is the problem of paradox; for example, the grandfather paradox, which can be summarized thus: a man travels back in time, and kills his grandfather, cutting off the family line early. Thus the killer cannot be born, and he erases himself from history, meaning he cannot travel back in time to kill his grandfather... which means that he is born, and can go back to kill his grandfather after all... (except...). This paradox loop is actually rooted in the very basic (classical physics) notion of causality. SF fans (most of them) consider time travel physically impossible; the pleasure of a time-travel story, however, is found in consideration of how plausibly the creator negotiates what *would* be realistic considerations if time travel *were*, indeed, practicable.

Space does not permit a listing of the considerable range of fictional solutions for the grandfather paradox, or of the many other tropes that exist in SF, but what is worthy of notice is that so many "problems" and solutions exist precisely because some form of explanation is expected by audiences, for whom the playful introduction of a yet-more-audacious *and* plausible solution is part of the pleasure of SF. This playful *intellectual* co-engagement (by creator and audience) with SFnal tropes contained is precisely the form that Suvin's *cognitive mode* takes in the everyday practices of creating and consuming SF. For knowledgeable SF audiences, this often trumps other concerns such as patriotism or sentimentality.¹² And that SF audiences must be knowledgeable is a given: like creators, consumers must be equipped with the readerly habit and canonical knowledge to approach these tropes in the Suvinian cognitive mode.

This, indeed, may explain the substantial problems with *2009: Lost Memories*, as well as its generally positive reception in South Korea. Through a series of vivid, powerful images, the brilliantly promising opening montage plunges viewers into an alternate history with the timeline divergence occurring in 1909, with the failure of Ahn Jung-geun to assassinate Itō Hirobumi. This (somehow) results in Japan's alliance with the USA in World War II and the uninterrupted continuation of Japanese colonial rule in Korea until 2009. (Perhaps the most arresting image in the series at the time of release featured of contemporary soccer star Lee Dong-Gook playing with a Japanese flag upon his jersey—reminiscent of real-world Korean athletes forced to do the same, such as Sohn Kee-chung—in the "2002 FIFA World Cup Japan," mere months before the real World Cup

12 Hence the widely celebrated status of Tom Godwin's ferociously unsentimental story, "The Cold Equations."

was co-hosted in Korea and Japan). Unfortunately, the eventual payoff that follows this montage is weak.

It doesn't seem so at first. Despite relatively turgid action scenes and a barely futuristic setting (videophones are one uninspired exception), the film delivers powerful estrangement, at least for Korean viewers: neon Japanese signs glimmer above the streets of Seoul, the dialog is mostly in Japanese, and Korean culture is largely absent. Anxieties about colonial history are interestingly explored by mapping colonial experience onto this *unheimliche* world, sometimes quite movingly as Sakamoto—a Korean JBI officer—and his Japanese partner track a mysterious group of Korean "terrorists" (or, for Korean audiences, "freedom-fighters") called the "Furei-senjin." Had the story truly been an alternate history—if this bizarre-yet-possible world had been taken on its own terms¹³—then it could have been a far more engaging film about history, identity, and more.

This promise collapses when it is revealed that this world is not, strictly speaking, an alternate history—a world where things simply took another direction—but the creation of time-traveling Japanese nationalist extremist conspirators from the year 2009 in *our* world, complete with the standard cheap-and-easy futurism of a (somehow) united and (somehow) economically superpower-status Korea. To top it all off, Sakamoto actually existed in the other, non-colonized timeline. How he managed to avoid erasure via the grandfather paradox is unexplained (surely his chances of existing in both timelines would be slim), because, and this is the real problem, film handles time-travel is not *cognitively*, but rather as fantasy... and as rabidly simplistic, self-important fantasy at that.

For a non-SF reader, this may require some unpacking. Imagine that you are a member of a Japanese right-wing extremist faction with access to a time-travel device. What would you do? Would you radically alter the flow of history if doing so (per the grandfather paradox and resultant butterfly effect) were likely to erase you from existence? Would this constraint alter your actions, necessitate more subtle changes, or cause you to enact some other means of ensuring your eventual birth? Likewise, if the universe somehow self-corrected and obviated the grandfather paradox, say because travel was into the past of some *alternate* world, might you not intervene in not one historical event but instead preempt them all by forming a well-equipped private army to send into the distant past (say, a thousand years ago) and colonize the entire planet in perpetuity? As historically significant as Itō's assassination is *to Koreans*, it is difficult to imagine time-traveling Japanese nationalists choosing to rebuild world history from that moment. When you easily can conquer (and plunder and rule) a whole world (or many parallel worlds), Japan's historical colonial holdings (including Korea) are, realistically, just small potatoes.¹⁴

Furthermore, the film avoids the unsettling question of what might happen if *Korean* scientists discovered the means to time-travel, probably because it leads directly to a host of other uncomfortable questions such as how inherent to modernity colonialism may be and the polyvalent complexities of living as an workaday member of a colonizing elite. It is tantalizing to imagine the story of a Korean (or Thai) *KBI* officer in a Koreanized Southeast Asian colony, investigating a group of local "terrorists" equivalent to the film's Furei-senjin and interrogating popular simplifications about the experiences of Japanese and Koreans alike during the historical colonial era through illuminating reversal, raising fascinating questions about commonplace Korean postcolonial identity and historiography, and about Korea's *present*, dominant relationship to developing nations in Asia.

Jae Won Ryu argues that this narrative addresses the Korean "sense of national inferiority" (221) and offers "vicarious healing of the trauma," (217) through a kind of "cultural jujitsu" (157). Perhaps this is true, but the film does so, worryingly, at the cost of addressing its own historiography critically, that is, within the cognitive mode, and may perhaps thereby simply restate commonplace attitudes about the nature of *real*, *historical* traumas—to participate not in a literature of change, a literature that reflects present challenges and dangers faced by a Korea barreling full steam ahead into the future, but instead in the imaginative and fantastical ossification of history and an identity of victimhood into what Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul calls (in the French-Canadian context)

13 Perhaps Bok Geo-il's alternate history novel, *Bimeongeul Chajaseo (Looking for an Epitaph)*, the acknowledged inspiration for this movie, does so? As it has not been translated into English, I cannot say.

14 But as any SF fan will point out, multiple worlds is likely to mean multiple would-be colonists, some of them by necessity Korean, some Japanese-Korean, some Ugandan, some bright purple with seven arms, and so forth. Nationalist historiography and political correctness both go straight out the window in the cognitive mode.

"negative nationalism" (*Reflections*, 300-302). By aggressively forcing primacy (and, perhaps, even determinism) upon our real world and on specific political stances, the film's alternative history curdles into little more than a shadowy, half-baked nightmare of lost imaginative opportunities.

2009: *Lost Memories* is not even the most outrageous offender in this use of time travel: in the comedy *Cheon Gun (Heaven's Soldiers)*, a group of North and South Korean soldiers (somehow) collaborating on nuclear weapons research are (somehow) carried to the past by Halley's Comet. A brief flirtation with the butterfly effect aside, one is tempted to read it as a wicked satire of revisionist historiography as the characters proceed to save legendary admiral Yi Sun Shin from a slovenly depression and groom him for heroism, until finally Yi, confronting quarreling North and South Korean soldiers, reprimands them for fighting despite their *gateun minjok* (shared ethnopolitical identity). That Yi speaks modern Korean is absurd enough—though perhaps acceptable for dramatic purposes in a comedy—but that he recites modern Korean ideology¹⁵ is downright inane. Any attempt at *cognitive* reading of leaves one with the frustrated impression that Yi is merely a mouthpiece for whatever flavor of nationalist historiography the filmmaker, Min Joon-ki, likes best, and the reliance on fantasy to express it inspires little confidence in the message or historical understanding underlying it.¹⁶

These two films seem to demonstrate that what Henry H. Em asserts—that "minjok, by itself, can no longer serve as a democratic imaginary" (361)—is equally applicable to the Korean SFnal imaginary: whatever its democratic uses, the ideology of *minjok* and the lay historiography connected with it present serious problems for Korean SF. The genre will succeed only in Korea by finding a way of exploring recurrent concerns like the past and memory loss figuratively, or in terms of the future, or by taking the risk to boldly go into the social/political minefield of the *authentically alien* past. If a *cognitive* interrogation of the past is too much to ask for in SF—a genre well-known for sneaking bold political critique under the establishment's radar by pretending inoffensive escapism—one must wonder about its prospects in the history classroom.

Of Influence and Other Anxieties

The late Thomas Disch claimed that "most sci fi (sic) still bears the label 'Made in America,' and the future represented by SF writers continues to be an American future" (2). To the degree that this remains true, how does this impact upon not only the reception, but also the retooling and production, of SF in non-Anglophone societies? On the subject of the influence of Anglo-Saxon SF on her work, French-language SF author Élisabeth Vonarburg writes that "like all non-Anglophones SF writers, I write both *with* and *against* that [ie. Anglophone] SF..." and that while this is common to all writers in all genres and times,

...non-Anglophone SF writers have a more ambiguous, more ambivalent take on this; it goes deeper, it is more serious, the stakes (our own sense of identity...) are higher: not only do we write with and against a whole corpus of texts... but also with and against a whole culture—history, ideologies, phantasms, places--that is not our own native culture. (654)

Besides the historical and cultural baggage of SF mentioned above—"space *colonies*, alien *invasions*, and *Captain Kirk*"—there are the genre's roots in a peculiar history of utopian literature¹⁷ and utopian experiments, and in the experience of membership in colonizing and/or hegemonic superpowers (central, rather than peripheral nations like Korea and Canada). For Korean SF, therefore, these anxieties of influence could well be doubly problematic, since they will naturally interact with other anxieties, which are bound up in Korean postcolonial identity and exist in relation to both Japan and America, the two sources of most foreign SF in Korea (literary and media alike).

This challenge clearly manifests in *Natural City* (2003). A comparison between this film and the one to which it is most obviously indebted—Ridley Scott's cyberpunk masterpiece *Blade Runner* (1982)—is illuminating. Initially, *Natural City* presents itself as a straightforward Koreanization of

15 As Henry H. Em notes, the word "*minjok*" did not even enter the Korean language until the late 1890s (337).

16 If, for example, Min's titular soldiers had, perchance, stumbled into a battle between Baekje and Silla, into whose mouth might have been clumsily inserted that word, *minjok*?

17 See "Defining the Literary Genre of Utopia: Some Historical Semantics, Some Genology, a Proposal, and a Plea" (Suvin 37-62).

Blade Runner. Both films feature stories about human-like (but nonhuman) constructs seeking (illegally and violently) to extend their preprogrammed short lifespans, and both films focus on a police officer battling them while also falling in love with a beautiful female construct. The films feature similar tropes: false memory implantation, commercial space travel and mining, a "cyberpunk" a dilapidated-future setting, and more.

Yet what often strikes Koreans most profoundly on their first viewing of *Blade Runner* is what also seems thoroughly absent from *Natural City*: the constant, looming presence of Japan. This presence in *Blade Runner* and is commonplace throughout cyberpunk sub-genre narratives generally, a simultaneously foreboding and "cool" iconography interlocked with mirrorshades and renegade AIs. Clearly, Japan occupies a radically different space in the Korean imagination, though perhaps *in addition* to, rather than *instead* of, that found Western cyberpunk: images not just of the future (transmitted in manga and other forms, as well as in the futurist rhetoric of global economic development), but also of a traumatic past. Nonetheless, the striking lack of a Japanese presence—or indeed *any* foreign presence—is surprising in a film so patently derivative of *Blade Runner*.

In fact, a fascinating trace of Japanese presences remains throughout *Natural City*. It is in the movie's technobabble—that is, the pseudo-scientific blabber (common to all blockbuster SF) used to explain futuristic technologies or phenomena. This is not reflected in the English subtitles, however; the divergences are revealing.¹⁸ The English subtitles explain the transmigration of robotic consciousness from a robotic body to a human one in terms of uploading "memories" from android memory chips into special cells in the "L-region" of the brain, located behind the cerebellum, which are, "remarkably... compatible with" androids' "memory" data archives—ridiculous, yes, but passably consistent with technobabble in Anglophone SF. But the original Korean explanation differs somewhat, as "*yeonghon deobing*" ("soul dubbing") is achieved from android memory chips into human bodies via a miraculous "L-bunja" ("L-molecule") located, rather vaguely, in the back of the brain. While the theme of the "spiritual" status has persisted in SF since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus*, this particular quasi-religious, unscientific form of technobabble would appear absolutely outlandish in a live-action Anglophone SF film like *Natural City*.

Not so, however, in *Japanese* anime, where indeed similar terminology has enjoyed prominent use. Indeed, Sharalyn Orbaugh points out how the similar English word *ghost* is used to refer to "memories, consciousness, and self-identity" in a female cyborg feature in the Japanese manga/anime franchise *Kōkaku kidōtai* (*Ghost in the Shell*) (183-84), among other films. Indeed, Miri Nakamura's study of Yumeno Kyusaku's *Dogura Magura* (1935) reveals that long before foreign literary SF had truly arrived in Japan, what she calls "'the mechanical uncanny'—the mode that blurs the line between what is perceived as natural and what is perceived as artificial" was being explored by Japanese proto-SF and popular automata experimentation (5-7), roughly contemporaneously to Karel Čapek coinage of the word "robot" in his 1921 play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*. The Japanese presence in *Natural City*, perhaps elusive at first glance, exists not in references to any imagined or metaphorical Japan, but instead in material use of Japanese SF tropes.¹⁹

A second absence in *Natural City* is perhaps a more profound one. In *Blade Runner* (especially the later re-cuts of the film), it is strongly hinted that the cop hunting the "replicants" (essentially androids), unknowingly, is also a replicant himself. His false memories, and his romance with a "female" replicant, eventually amount to an SFnal interrogation of Descartes' dictum, "*Cogito ergo sum*," for an age of thinking machines. *Cogito ergo homo sum?* Are replicants "human"? Are modern humans replicant-like? If not, how and why? When the cop and his replicant lover flee together into the closing credits, this dilemma remains, destabilizing traditional understandings of identity and the world. *Natural City* ends precisely oppositely: the cop is *emphatically* human, his robotic lover "dies," and a mundane, stable, human-centric reality reasserts itself, playing a Ptolemaic

18 Journalist Mark Russell, who helped prepare the English subtitles for *Natural City*, recounted to me how it was decided to adapt the technobabble from the Korean original, as direct translations would not fit the generic expectations of Anglophone SF audiences. This calls to mind both Tatsumi Takayuki's linkage of capitalist interests to the practice of "soft translation," but also his vindication of it as helping to "explore and promote the soft power of global science fiction" (258).

19 A similar observation could be made of the much more comfortable and illuminating use of Japanese anime tropes in the Korean animation *Wonderful Days*.

(ie. human-centric) refrain much less interesting and challenging than the Copernican cadence of *Blade Runner*.

Because of this repudiation of the "change" that Gunn places as central to SFnal literature, and not merely because of its unfaithfulness as an adaptation of *Blade Runner*, *Natural City* concludes unsatisfyingly, and one cannot help but wonder once again to what degree this urgent return to the "real" is related to anxieties of generic influence, as well as to more generalized anxieties about the stability and primacy of postcolonial identity, the modern Korean state, and so forth.

The Pleasures of Historical Estrangement: When SF "Goes Native" in Korea

Happily, there are more successful examples to discuss, as well. The positive examples of *Gwoemul (The Host)* and *Jigureul Jikyeora (Save the Green Planet)* are interesting both in terms of what they commonly share and why these differences resulted in greater success. *The Host* was a massive blockbuster at home, and internationally has performed incredibly well, garnering more interest from genre fans abroad than any other Korean SF film; meanwhile, *Save the Green Planet*, despite a relatively poor performance at the Korean box office, was received very positively at festivals abroad and among film critics.

Besides Korean-language titles—almost an anomaly among Korean SF movies, the two films share many commonalities. Firstly, both films are set not in the future (or past), but instead in familiar, modern-day Korea. Second, many SFnal tropes are handled ironically or playfully: the monster in *The Host* is relatively small, and relatively goofy, while *Save the Green Planet* constantly teases audiences with the probability that the film's "alien" is really just a human being, and his kidnapper and torturer is a madman. Both films draw deeply upon the cinematic horror genre, as well as other genres well-established in Korean cinema (such as comedy, thriller, family melodrama, and satire). *The Host* also seems to draw upon (and react to) the long history of Korean giant monster movies, stretching back to *Ujugoe-in Wangmagwi (Giant Space Monster Wangmagwi, 1967)*.

Most strikingly, both films articulate, metaphorically, narratives about *recent* history. *Save the Green Planet* tells the story of a man who feels his life has been destroyed by the rich, powerful CEO (or incognito extraterrestrial boss) of a large chemical company during the politically charged backdrop of the turbulent 1980s. Even more strikingly, *The Host* is a forceful cinematic critique of the negative effects of modern industrialization on the poor: realizing how easily the film's monster can be read as the hidden, voracious dark side of the "Miracle on the Han River," with its underworldly wanderings and wanton consumption of people and the future (as symbolized as children), it becomes difficult not to see the film in political/historical terms—specifically, those of Sin Ch'aeho's concept of "minjung revolution," with lines drawn not between Korea and America, but between the "wretched majority—exploited, beaten, starved, lulled into subservience and obedience" (Em 360) and their natural enemies, the repressive, exploitative elites (Korean and American alike). *The Host* explores the historical minefield by proxy, sending a dysfunctional family and a goofy CGI monster as its vanguard and thereby performing what could be called, following Ryu's terminology, a kind of "historiographic jujitsu."

These and other examples²⁰, demonstrate that the various cultural barriers to the successful Koreanization of SF are far from insurmountable. Upcoming projects show promise: next year's prequel to *The Host* will focus on still more recent history, set during the (politically controversial) revivification of the Cheonggyecheon stream, and director Kwak Jae-Yong, in the upcoming *Boku no kanojo wa saibôgu (Cyborg keunyeo/Cyborg She, 2008)* has embraced the SFnal influence of Japanese manga and anime so profoundly that he has made a Japanese SF film—with a Japanese script and actors, full of familiar Japanese SFnal tropes—fused with more conventional aspects of Korean melodrama. Whether these films, with *The Host* and *Save the Green Planet*, reflect an increasingly successful transplantation of media SF and other to Korean soil remains to be seen. Cross-cultural study of Korean SF literature, ranging from the early work of Bok Geo-il to more recent writing by authors such as Lee Young-Su (better known as "Djuna"), and of Korean SF in other media such as comics, will also help illuminate this line of inquiry.

²⁰ Such as the independent SF film *Nabi (The Butterfly)*, 2001, which movingly explores themes of ecological destruction and (voluntary) memory loss, and the eco-holocaust animation *Wonderful Days* (2003).

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