

## **ANOTHER UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY: CULTURE, RECEPTION AND THE ADOPTION OF THE SCIENCE FICTION GENRE IN SOUTH KOREA**

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The global production, distribution, and consumption of interesting SF is difficult to explain on the basis of extant theories linking SF reception and production to industrialization. South Korea offers a striking example of a highly-industrialized society saturated with technosocial change, influenced by foreign SF but without more than marginally successful localization of the SF genre in literary or cinematic form. The Korean film industry's forays into the "foreign landscape" of SF over the past decade allow for alternative interpretations. Analysis of Lee Si-Myung's *2009: Lost Memories* (2002), Jeong Yun-su's *Yesterday* (2002), Jang Sun-woo's *The Resurrection of the Little Match Girl* (2002), Jang Joo-Hwan's *Save the Green Planet* (2003), Min Byung-Chun's *Natural City* (2003), and Bong Joon-Ho's *The Host* (2007), for example, reveal specific aspects of Korean culture that problematize the localization of the SF genre to a Korean setting, namely problems of generic fluency on the part of audiences and creators alike, post-colonial nationalist-historiographic concerns, anxieties of influence regarding foreign-originating genre and narrative forms, and more. A study of recent Korean SF films—primarily those which fail as specimens of the SF genre—is followed by a discussion of approaches which have resulted in the successful circumvention of cultural barriers to the localization of SF, suggesting tantalizing possibilities for the continued localization process and development of a native Korean SFnal imaginary.

Key words: SF, cinema, localization, genre, culture

### **INTRODUCTION**

Kingsley Amis reportedly quipped once that science fiction (hereafter SF) "is written by Americans and Britons, not by foreigners and women" (Stover 1973,

471), an early observation of the distribution of SF on a global scale. However problematic this joke, SF unarguably arose in the Western world and gained prominence in the English-speaking world (particularly America); yet the production and consumption of SF has spread not only dramatically but also unevenly, worldwide throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It remains unclear exactly *why* some societies readily internalize SF, producing and consuming native forms of SF in considerable amounts, while others—such as South Korea—fail to do so.

Many explanations have suggested a link between industrialization and the popularity of SF. Darko Suvin suggestively observed “its popularity in the leading industrial nations (United States, USSR, United Kingdom, Japan)” (Suvin 1979, 3); James Gunn likewise suggests such a connection in the final, “Around the World,” volume of his acclaimed *The Road to Science Fiction* anthology series, explaining the late appearance of literary SF in places like Turkey, Singapore, Chile, and Taiwan in terms of how “industrialization has come too recently to produce a literature of change” (1998, 25). Many commentators on Chinese SF—foreign and Chinese alike—have noted a surge in the consumption of (imported, Soviet) SF, contemporaneous with the mass industrialization drive within China during the 1950s (Huss 2000).

Yet, if industrialization is really the deciding factor for whether, how, and why SF takes root—or fails to do so—in a given culture, why does SF remain absolutely peripheral in South Korea? Despite being bound in China by pedagogical and political controls and the “shackles of utilitarianism” at least until the early 90s (Huss 2000), today China boasts one of the world’s largest audiences for written SF; likewise, despite India’s currently incomplete industrialization, several SF Bollywood films have been released since 2003’s *Koi Mil Gaya*, and to author Vandana Singh, India enjoys “lively science fictional traditions in several Indian languages like Bengali and Tamil and Marathi” dating back, in Bengali at least, to the late 1800s (Tan 2011). In comparison with the native SF output of long fully-industrialized/post-industrial nations such as South Korea, France, and Germany, the connection challenges the ideas of Gunn and Suvin.

South Korea’s case is especially perplexing: given the pace of industrialization and socio-technical and economic transformation experienced by Korea, Koreans ought overwhelmingly to need or desire what Gunn aptly terms a “literature of change” (17). Indeed, foreign SF—particularly American and Japanese “visual” SF (comics, film, and animation)—has significantly informed the Korean imagination: Korean SF fan websites<sup>1</sup> reveal a vast interest in media (TV, films, com-

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<sup>1</sup> Most prominently, the websites for Korea’s biggest SF fanclubs are JoySF, at <<http://www.joysf.com/>> and Mirror <<http://mirror.pe.kr/>>, as well as numerous Korean SF fan-blogs.

puter games, and other visual) and literary SF; even the South Korean government is moved occasionally to prognosticate futuristically, such as when the ROK Ministry of Information and Communication called for a robot “in every household [in Korea] by between 2015 and 2020” (Onishi 2006).

Yet the futuristic visions that dominate the popular Korean imagination are patently *foreign* visions of the future. Few Koreans write SF, and face limited opportunities for publication<sup>2</sup> and while significant translations of Western and Japanese SF have appeared over the years, Korea’s output of *original* SF across all media is tiny. Korean SF fans largely agree (and complain) that SF remains marginal in their society, especially when compared with the explosive growth of other forms of “foreign” popular culture (such as “indie” music, dance, fashion, and most other cinematic genres). Some are experimenting with ways to popularize SF in Korea.<sup>3</sup> Regardless, in South Korea locally-produced SF across all media (including cinema) retains a relatively precarious and marginal position.

It is my contention, specifically, that the “localization” (or “nativization”) of SF, to a greater degree than other cinematic genres (such as the thriller, mystery, romantic comedy, or horror film), involves unique challenges related to culture, particularly in terms of culturally-ingrained attitudes towards SF itself, national and postcolonial identity and (popular) historiography and imaginative orientation towards the past and future, and the negotiation of cultural baggage and anxieties of influence in relation to dominant cultural sources of SF today. This survey, offered from the perspective not of a specialist in Korean studies, but rather a working SF author, cannot investigate the genre as a whole, but may do so by examining films that may open up a potentially interesting form of cross-cultural interrogation.

## GENERIC FLUENCY AND SF AS A “FOREIGN LANGUAGE”

Despite SF having arrived in Korea decades ago, even today foreign—largely Anglophone and Japanese—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* (Aldiss 1973, 20–31), the work of Poe (Disch 2000, 32–56), or to earlier European utopian texts (Suvin 1979, 9) or as growing from a certain strain of ancient fantastical literature (Roberts 2005, 21–31), we

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<sup>2</sup> Especially since the unfortunate demise of the Korean-language SF magazine *Fantastique* in 2010.

<sup>3</sup> For example, according to Hong Insu, the ongoing experimental adaptation of Western literary SF texts to webtoon format, in the hope of reaching a larger audience and cultivating interest in SF (Hong 2011).

find that science fiction seems to have arisen in Western literature. Precedents in various forms of “proto-SF” such as those found in early twentieth-century Japan (Nakamura 2008, 6–7) are significant; nonetheless, the first works in Japanese, Korean, and Chinese to which “proto-” need not be attached were foreign works (often by Jules Verne) appearing as translations of adaptations.

The status of the genre in China is worth consideration: *Science Fiction World*, the most popular SF magazine in the PRC, has at times claimed a circulation of 300,000–500,000 copies per issue (Tidhar 2004, *Science Fiction World* 2008), with actual readership widely estimated at several times that number, easily making it the most widely-read (by several orders of magnitude) SF magazine in the world.<sup>4</sup> 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 2004). James Gunn’s (previously mentioned) characterization of SF as 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—connects well with the technopolitical agenda behind the popularization of SF in China, yet do not offer an explanation as to why a relatively more recent, comparable approach in Korea (to be discussed below) yielded far less popularity for SF. SF may be a literature of change, yet highly change-driven South Korea seems relatively impervious to its charms.

A second, more exacting conception of SF is offered by Darko Suvin, where-in the genre centered on the experience of “*cognitive estrangement*” (1979, 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) which eerily mirrors our own world in its essential operating principles, or suggests possible futures or plausible alternative spaces to our world.<sup>5</sup> For Suvin, horror and fantasy estrange but are not cognitive, because they are “committed to the interposition of anti-cognitive laws into the empirical environment” (8). While

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<sup>4</sup> According to the magazine’s website. These numbers dwarf the combined circulation of the world’s three most popular English-language SF print magazines, which in 2007 totaled (approximately) 60,000 or fewer copies monthly (Dozois 2008).

<sup>5</sup> 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” (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 1991, 388).

seemingly a distinction primarily of theoretical usefulness, Suvin's formulation importantly points toward the question before us: after all, Korean filmmakers have done far better with the cinematic nativization of horror and fantasy than with the SF genre.

Doubtless this relatively easier generic transplantability exists because horror and fantasy narratives—both in Hollywood and in Korean cinema—draw upon more universal elements of mythic narrative and of ghost stories, unlike the particularly modern or postmodern technological and philosophical underpinnings of SF. For example, many of the most common of popular SF tropes are strongly rooted in the specific circumstances, viewpoint, and language of European colonial and naval history and literature—the *colonizers*, not the *colonized*, and it is their culture's unexpiated sins (Disch 2000, 193)—thus, space *colonies*, alien *invasions*, and *Captain Kirk*. Additionally, the philosophical questions explored in SF tend towards the Cartesian and Platonic, i.e., particularly European philosophical concerns relatively alien to traditional Confucian philosophy.

It seems therefore that 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. As with all languages, a certain degree of “fluency” must be acquired—by creators, consumers, and perhaps a society as a whole—before it can be successfully transplanted and transformed into a local SF tradition. The remainder of this article explores the not-insignificant challenges that have affected this process specifically in Korea.

### **“KID STUFF”: FANTASY, TROPE 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: 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 2000) and Western curricula, and even the characteristic playfulness often evident in even the most accomplished and intelligent works of SF may explain this. Notably, translations of English-language SF in South Korea, such as the Idea Club series published in the 1970s, also clearly targeted children, an approach apparently endorsed officially by the Ministry of Science and Technology in 1971 (*Idea hoegwan SF*). Whatever the reason, many “non-SF people” seem to perceive the genre not as a sophisticated

literature of the imagination, but rather as a random and juvenile assortment of interchangeably “silly” or fantastical tropes contiguous to fantasy, horror, myth, or even mere cinematic special effects—a belief also broadly dominant in Korea.

There is a variety of results. Some would-be creators treat SF not as a genre of rigorously-explored ideas, but instead as a grab-bag of random narrative ingredients or tropes. Occasionally, as in films like *Tonggam* (*Ditto*, 2001) and *Siwŏrae* (*Il Mare*, 2001), such tropes are used as light garnish, providing a new (albeit shallowly-explored) twist on familiar romantic melodrama. By excluding the Suvinian *cognitive* mode, they are, despite their relative success, primarily melodramatic and at best only rudimentarily science-fictional.

Elsewhere, as in the indie films of Nam Gi-woong, such as *Taebangno esŏ maech'un badaga t'omak salbae tanghan yŏgosaeng ajik Taebangno e itta* (*Killing Machine*, 2000) and *Samgŏri musŭt'ang sonyŏ ūi ch'oebu* (*Never Belongs to Me*, 2005) the result is more like a “trope salad”: a jumbled, incoherent assortment of disconnected genre conventions lacking any discernibly intelligible pattern, narrative connection, thematic density, or SFnal resonance. Such pointless “trope salad” is common in independent film worldwide (consider Darren Aronofsky’s perplexingly-celebrated 1998 outing,  $\pi$  [*Pi*]), but one of Korea’s earliest attempts at blockbuster SF was also an unmitigated trope salad. Jang Sun-Woo’s disastrous *Sŏngnyang p'ari sonyŏ ūi chaerim* (*The Resurrection of the Little Match Girl*, 2002) is worth discussing for several reasons: because at approximately 9 billion won was, in 2002, the most expensive Korean film (SF or otherwise) ever, as well as one of three genre films that flopped massively at the Korean box office in that year (Paquet 2002, under “Resurrection of the Little Match Girl”), and one of two Korean SF flops in 2002 alone that brought the local trend of blockbuster films to a (brief) halt (Choi 2010, 32), but also because the film itself invites comparison with the American SF blockbuster *The Matrix*.

*Resurrection* makes no secret of its relationship to *The Matrix*, advertising the connection overtly: the former film, like the latter, features a virtual world setting (in *Resurrection*, a computer game) in which a beleaguered protagonist meets bizarre and iconographic, heavily-stylized allies and enemies. The struggle in the virtual world connects to the “real” world, amid action-movie battles and adrenaline-driven chases, AIs participate as characters, and even the cinematographic techniques featured in the Matrix, such as “bullet time,” are replicated in *Resurrection*.

Yet the two films differ immensely. 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 both sleeves of its signature leather trench coat. Some of the references that are wholly absent from

*Resurrection* include allusions to kung-fu films, computer gaming, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Neuromancer*, fairy tales, and *The Wizard of Oz*; these references grind against ideas cribbed from Baudrillard, Cartesian philosophy, Tibetan Buddhism, New Age religion, and (more vaguely) Philip K. Dick's paranoiac SF novels. All these references are mobilized in the interrogation of the nature of reality, a theme its many fans perceived as handled "philosophically" in the film. For example, the scene in which Morpheus confronts Neo with the "truth" about the world, giving him a choice between a Carrollian red pill and a blue pill—reality and fantasy—richly resonates with the ostensibly mind-altering drug use of Western counter-culture and its important reflection in New Wave SF, and also the works of Philip K. Dick; yet in gravity it powerfully emblemizes the film's explicit invitation to viewers seriously to consider the artificiality of consensual reality (and, implicitly, of cinematic realities). What results is a singular, bubbling stew of interconnected ideas, relatively filling and intellectually nourishing.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast with the aggressively philosophical and literary—indeed, *intellectual*—referentiality of *The Matrix*, we find *Resurrection* characterized by playful absurdity and goofily manic cartoon violence, and a complete absence of philosophical conundra, exploration of speculative conceits common in SF (and unwittingly inherent to the structure of *Resurrection* itself). The rules of the film's imaginary video game are perplexing and cruel; the fight scenes exchange the balletic violence of *The Matrix* for a bizarre, comedic ultraviolence, such as a disco-grooving shootout; contemplation on the Tao allows the protagonist to secure a superweapon in the form of a mackerel (actually a plastic toy gun). While disorder and exuberant silliness can be refreshing—in SF silliness isn't always bad!—in SF, we do comedy in a certain sort of way, generally coherent with the themes and philosophical concepts explored in the narrative, linking the silliness to the same sorts of philosophical inquiries and concepts examined in the rest of the narrative.<sup>7</sup> In the end, all we get is a *trope salad*. (Indeed, a *mackerel*-flavored trope salad.) Whether resulting from a botched attempt to mock *The Matrix*, disdain for SF, or problems in the script and direction, what remains conspicuously absent throughout is any effort to tell a coherently *intelligent* story.

This calls to mind SF author Neal Stephenson's astute observation that one of the singular characteristics of (good) SF literature and film is not only a bristling aura of an almost feral "intelligence" or intellect (Stephenson 2008), but also

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<sup>6</sup> If not necessarily of a recent vintage: after all, cinematic SF tends (as SF authors like to observe) to lag a number of decades "behind" literary SF. Little of the conceptual inquiry in *The Matrix* is new to SF readers.

<sup>7</sup> Consider the cognitive uses of silliness in Douglas Adams' *Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series, incidentally among the most widely-read foreign SF texts in Korean translation.

recalls the fact that, for cinematic SF in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, one great preoccupation has been artificial intelligence. From Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) through the haunting character of HAL in the *2001* series, all the way to *The Matrix* trilogy, AI has been a central preoccupation of SF film: how can and should human and machine intelligences interface? Ought we to build AIs? What are the risks and benefits involved? Can an AI be self-conscious, or feel love, or hate, or be considered "alive"? More symbolically, how is the nature of technological civilization transforming human nature, and how is science changing our understanding of consciousness? While such questions are central to *The Matrix*, in *Resurrection* these classic SFnal questions take a backseat to a giddy torrent of random violence: as soon as the passive *Little Match Girl* AI attains consciousness, she picks up a gun and starts shooting random people. Later, she (somehow) transforms from a digital automaton into the hero's dream babe, the perfect girlfriend, substituting melodrama for perhaps the most compelling dilemma in cinematic SF. Just as it is impossible to "improvise" jazz music by plunking on a piano—plunking random notes and chords cannot ever produce jazz music—the central problem in *Resurrection* seems to be a lack of fluency in the "language" of SF.

*Yesterday* (2002), a similarly unfortunate salad of sci-fi tropes (cloning, mutation, very vaguely-explained memory-erasure, government eugenics conspiracy), seeks to alleviate some of these problems through a method familiar in Korean SF film: using cops as "serious" protagonists. One must imagine that such a move is intended to fend off the aura of juvenility associated with SF (a tactic employed in a number of other Korean SF films, such as *2009: Lost Memories* and *Natural City*) as well as in Hollywood SF films (such as, say, *Minority Report*). Perhaps some deep, dark metaphor is explored about the division of Korea, as one violent, hostile brother (clone) seeks to kill his more controlled, heroic sibling (clone). Yet, sadly, even this brooding, turgid dressing fails to conceal the jumbled and tasteless salad beneath. Notable, also, is the irony of how the title of *Yesterday*, a futuristic SF film, references not the *future* but instead the *past*—a trend common among Korean SF films, one worth exploring.

### **ANXIETIES OF HISTORY, POSTCOLONIALITY, AND IDENTITY**

The acclaimed SF author Neal Stephenson has argued that it is less useful to talk about SF as a genre than to talk about SF-people (consumers of SF) and their modes of consumption, as compared to everyone else, whom he playfully terms "the Mundanes" (Stephenson 2008). 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 at the nexus of complex networks of interacting *experiences* by producers, consumers, and other participants?

Yet, Stephenson's more Deweyan model grants a different perspective on Suvin's (Collingwood-like) *cognitive* conception of SF as a function of the audience's expectation. That is to say, one can see SF not only as a skillful arrangement of SFnal tropes mobilized in the service of exploring an SFnal idea, but also a structure designed to demarcate how audience and creator alike interact with narrative speculation, as well as concerns in the shared culture in which the genre partakes. In essence, if SF is a sort of language (tropes) with its own unique grammar and syntax (trope-usage), it is also a *culture* and a mode of infra-cultural communication. Stephenson's colloquialism for how SF fans engaged with SFnal literature and media—"geeking out"—describes the special mode of consumption and communication used with a literature of (Suvinian) *cognitive estrangement*.

While *all* genres have specific rules and inventories of tropes and conventions, the rules governing SFnal tropes—such as time travel—are characteristically different precisely because of the *cognitive* element—the necessity and the pleasure of entertaining, both logically and even scientifically, the implications of estranging speculative conceits in the narrative. For SF audiences, this is deepened by a familiarity with earlier (canonical) extrapolations of comparable tropes and principles, often scientific in derivation.

Consider the time travel narrative. Regardless of whether the narrative is comedic (as in the *Back to the Future* franchise), suspenseful (as in *Primer*), political or didactic (as in H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*), or elegiac (as in Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder"), specific rules govern the time-travel paradigm. Paradox (the effect of causality-interference by a time traveler) can be mobilized as comedic (as in *Back to the Future*, where paradox effects are often amusing) or as a grim, looming threat (as in "A Sound of Thunder"), in competent SF, paradox is an important consideration. What is worthy of note is that such "problems" and solutions are explored in fiction precisely because some form of explanation is expected by audiences—indeed, the ludicrous introduction of a yet-more-*audacious and plausible* solution to the dilemma of paradox and causality is part of the pleasure of the time travel narrative. This playful *intellectual* co-engagement (by creator and audience) with the idea-focused core of SF's tropes is precisely the form that Suvin's *cognitive mode* takes for popular SF fandom, normally (at least today) trumping other concerns like patriotism or sentimentality.<sup>8</sup> Such a lit-

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<sup>8</sup> Hence the widely celebrated status of Tom Godwin's ferociously unsentimental story, *The Cold Equations*.

erature demands fluency from its audience and creators alike, along with open-mindedness to radical alterity—to other tomorrows, today's, and yesterdays that reveal disquieting truths about our “real” world. Another example is the alternate history subgenre, which explores alternate possible unfoldings of our world's history.

Korean cinema's handling of this simple, fundamental concept of SF—that a radical change in the past would result in an unrecognizable future, and that alternate, unrecognizable presents and futures are in and of themselves inherently worth exploring and imagining—leaves much to be desired. Consider the (unsuccessful) 2002 blockbuster titled *2009: Lost Memories* (2002). A brilliantly promising opening montage of striking images and counterfactual historical landmarks seemingly plunges viewers into an alternate history diverging from our “real history” in 1909, with the failed assassination of Itō Hirobumi. This results in Japan's (apparently prescient) 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 for viewers in 2002 featured soccer star Lee Dong-Gook playing in the “2002 FIFA World Cup Japan,” mere months before the real World Cup co-hosted by Korea and Japan—but with a Japanese flag upon his jersey, recalling real-world, colonial-era Korean athletes forced to do the same).

The film is cognitively estranging in its presentation of an uncanny vision of a modern Korea under Japanese rule, through which we watch a Korean policeman and his Japanese partner pursue a group of Korean terrorists/freedom-fighters. There is ample opportunity to take this bizarre-yet-plausible (i.e., cognitively estranging) world on its own terms, as was done in the alternate-history text that very obviously inspired the film, Bok Geo-il's *Pim'yŏng ūl ch'ajasŏ* (*In Search of an Epitaph*, 1987), which metaphorizes Korean postcolonial complexes as inescapable colonial occupation. However, the film reveals its alternate-reality as a mere sham, created by time-traveling Japanese nationalist extremists from the year 2009 in our world, using a magic Korean rock-artifact to time-travel. When history is “set right” by the protagonist (who somehow, flouting paradox, is also born in the other timeline), Korea in 2009 in the “real” world is reunified, and has become an economic superpower.

In other words, in *2009: Lost Memories*, time-travel is essentially an inert stage upon which nationalist-historiographic melodrama—of a rabidly simple-minded, self-important, and lazy sort—is turgidly played out. Consider: a *cognitive* engagement with the time-travel trope would necessitate the protagonist seriously considering how rebooting history might wipe out the existence of everyone he knows, including himself—a form of historiographic suicide-mass-murder; likewise, realistically speaking, if Japanese fanatics had a time-travel device and

sought to reset history, why would they choose the moment of 1909—a moment of importance in Korean (not Japanese) history—as the reset point? Why not send a well-equipped, machine-gun toting army to conquer Korea in 1809, or 1592, or 1009? While Itō's assassination is historically significant *to Koreans*, one imagines time-traveling Japanese nationalists choosing to rebuild world history from other moments: when planetary domination is easily feasible through time travel, Japan's lost colonial holdings (including Korea) become, realistically, small potatoes.<sup>9</sup>

Worse, the film avoids the unsettling question of what might happen if *Korean* villains discovered a means of time-travel, neatly sidestepping a host of uncomfortable questions such as how inherent to modernity colonialism may be, and the polyvalent complexities of workaday life for members of colonizing elites. 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 “freedom-fighters” and interrogating popular simplifications about the experiences of Japanese and Koreans alike during the historical colonial era through illuminating transposition; such a narrative would raise fascinating questions about mainstream Korean post-colonial identity and historiography, and about Korea's *present*, dominant (and in some cases, arguably exploitative) relationship with developing nations in Southeast Asia.

But *2009* is uninterested in alternative histories, or self-interrogation: it is concerned with rehearsing the historical victimhood-claims of the Korean ethnonational “*minjok*,” a central feature of mainstream Korean nationalist-historiography. Unfortunately, this not only promotes a past-oriented view contrary to the futuristic visions that best suit SF, but also, if Jae Hyung Ryu is correct in claiming that the narrative addresses the Korean “sense of national inferiority” (Ryu 2007, 221) and offers “vicarious healing of the trauma,” (2007, 217) through a kind of “cultural jujitsu” (2007, 157), it does so, worryingly, at the cost of addressing its own historiography critically; that is, within the *cognitive* mode. Such a refusal to reflect present challenges and dangers faced by Korea in its ongoing development forces viewers instead to consider the fantastical ossification of “real” history and of officially-approved forms of identity of victimhood, recalling what Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul calls (in the French-Canadian context) “negative nationalism” (Saul 1997, 300–302). By aggressively forcing primacy (and, perhaps, even determinism) upon our “real world” and on specific

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<sup>9</sup> But as any SF fan will point out, multiple worlds are likely to mean multiple would-be colonists, and multiple sets of would-be colonial subjects—some Japanese, some 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.

historiographies, the film's alternative history curdles into little more than a cheap, half-baked nightmare of lost imaginative opportunities.<sup>10</sup> In essence, speculative fabulation—cognitive engagement, so crucial in SF—plays second fiddle to the demands of the *minjok*-historiography, and sadly falters.

This film demonstrates what Henry H. Em asserts—that “minjok, by itself, can no longer serve as a democratic imaginary” (Em 1999, 361)—is equally applicable to the Korean SFnal imaginary: whatever its democratic uses, the ideology of *minjok*, and the past-oriented lay historiography connected with it, present serious problems for Korean SF. The genre will succeed in Korea only 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, future, or alternate present in ways that at once challenge, but do not completely alienate, Korean audiences who have internalized this same historiographic vision of the world. The key is to find a new imaginary beyond that of the Korean *minjok*, a theme to which I will return at the conclusion.

## OF INFLUENCE AND OTHER ANXIETIES

The late Thomas Disch claimed that “most sci fi [*siz*] still bears the label ‘Made in America,’ and the future represented by SF writers continues to be an American future” (Disch 2000, 2). To whatever degree this remains true, it affects not only the reception, but also the re-tooling and production, of SF in other societies. Speaking of the influence of English-language SF on her work, Francophone SF author Élisabeth Vonarburg writes that “like all non-Anglophone SF writers, I write both *with* and *against* that [i.e., English-language] 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. (in Gunn 1998, 654)

<sup>10</sup> The film *Ch'on'gun* (*Heaven's Soldiers*, 2005) offends even more egregiously. North and South Korean soldiers are transported by Halley's Comet into the days of Yi Sun-shin, and find him not an admirable Admiral, but a loser. Their comedic transformation of a regular man into a national hero skates close to being a satire on the nationalist historiographic treatment of the past in North and South alike. Yet, in the end the film never evinces enough self-awareness or apparent intelligence to carry this reading off.

Besides the aforementioned historical and cultural baggage of SF—"space colonies, alien invasions, and *Captain Kirk*"—there are the genre's roots in a peculiar history of utopian literature<sup>11</sup> 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 bound up in Korean postcolonial identity, related to both Japan and America—which happen to be the two main sources of foreign SF in Korea.

This challenge clearly manifests in *Natural City* (2003), fairly transparently a Korean remake of Ridley Scott's 1982 cyberpunk masterpiece *Blade Runner*. Initially, *Natural City* presents itself as a straightforward Koreanization of Scott's film, featuring human-like (but non-human) constructs seeking (illegally and violently) to extend their short preprogrammed lifespans, hunted by a police officer who falls in love with another beautiful female construct. The films feature similar tropes: false memory implantation, a background of commercial space travel and mining, a "cyberpunkish" dilapidated-future setting, and more.

Yet curious absences haunt *Natural City*. For example, what often profoundly strikes Koreans on first viewing *Blade Runner* is the constant, looming Asian (especially Japanese) presence in the film's futuristic Los Angeles. This foreign, exotic, and unsettling presence, tied to the rising economic power of Japan during the 1980s, is commonplace in cyberpunk SF, a simultaneously foreboding and "cool" iconography of globalization interlocked with mirrorshades and renegade AIs. Japan occupies a radically *different* space in the Korean imagination, though perhaps *in addition* to, rather than *instead* of, that found in Western cyberpunk: not just of the future (transmitted in manga and other forms), but also historical trauma. While one cannot expect Japan to be presented in a Korean film as in *Blade Runner*—the striking lack of anything remotely analogous to the Japanese presence in *Blade Runner*, and the apparent racial homogeneity of *Natural City*, remains surprising given its patent derivativeness of *Blade Runner*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See "Defining the Literary Genre of Utopia: Some Historical Semantics, Some Genology, a Proposal, and a Plea" (Suvin 1979, 37–62).

<sup>12</sup> 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, which Journalist Mark Russell, who helped prepare the English subtitles for *Natural City*, explained to me were adapted to fit the generic expectations of Anglophone SF audiences. This calls to mind not only 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" (2008, 258).

The English subtitles explain the transmigration of robotic consciousness from a robotic

Of course, it is also crucial to remember that the Asian presence in Scott's LA is symbolic of another "alien" or "other" presence: that of the "replicants" who are both deceptively *and* movingly human-like, but also touchingly so. The unambiguousness of the replicants' inhuman status in *Natural City* is a second, and much more problematic, narrative absence. In *Blade Runner* (especially in later cuts of the film), the paradox is strongly suggested that Deckard the replicant-hunter is, unknowingly, a replicant himself. His false memories, and his romance with a "female" replicant, mobilize an SFnal interrogation of Descartes' (Deckard's) dictum, "*Cogito ergo sum*," for an age of thinking machines—*Cogito ergo homo sum?* Audiences are invited to confront radical alterity: to sympathize with the replicants, to question how clear the line between human and machine intelligence might be, to wonder whether machines could deserve human status. When Deckard and his replicant lover flee together into the closing credits, this philosophical dilemma remains, destabilizing traditional conceptions of identity, sympathy, and authenticity. *Natural City* runs conversely: the cop protagonist is *emphatically* human, his (boring, obviously inhuman) robotic lover melodramatically "dies," and a mundane, stable, human-centric reality reasserts itself, playing a Ptolemaic (i.e., human-centric) refrain both less interesting and less challenging than the Copernican (human-decentering) cadence ending *Blade Runner*.

*Natural City* appears to attempt to repudiate its own SFnal elements, especially the alterity that is central to cognitive estrangement and the "change" so central to SFnal imagination—a problem it shares with *2009: Lost Memories*. Yet while *2009 ...* seems to collapse under the weight of nationalist historiography, *Natural City* apparently fumbles in order to reassert the "real," the valid, the acceptable. I cannot help but suspect that part of this insistent clinging to the "real" is related to anxieties of (foreign) generic influence, along with more generalized anxieties about the stability and primacy of postcolonial identity, the modern Korean state and its underpinning ideologies, Western-styled technocratic modernity itself—as

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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 techno-babble in Anglophone SF. But the original Korean explanation differs somewhat, as "*yōnghon tōbing*" ("soul dubbing") is achieved from android memory chips into human bodies via a miraculous "*L-punja*" ("L-molecule") located, rather vaguely, in the back of the human brain. This kind of bio-spiritual technobabble *would* likely appear outlandish in a live-action Anglophone SF film, but not in Japanese anime, where indeed similar terminology has enjoyed prominent use—see Sharalyn Orbaugh on *Kokaku kidōtai (Ghost in the Shell)* (Orbaugh 2008, 183–84) and Miri Nakamura's study of the "mechanical uncanny" (Nakamura 2008, 5–7). Thus there is a concealed Japanese presence in *Natural City*, not in Japanese figures or figuration, but the use of retransliterated forms of Japanese SF neology.

emblemized in *Natural City* by the parasitic transplantation of artificial intelligence into human bodies—and so forth which come under pressure when one is confronted with radical alterity.

Indeed, even the radical alterity of mere female agency in romance seems impossible in *Natural City*: a comparison of Ria to the female replicants in *Blade Runner* (especially Rachael) invites the question why “R” falls for her/it at all, given Ria’s utter passivity and lack of personality. Such disturbing romantic relationships—featuring human males and obviously, explicitly, and unsettlingly inhuman “artificial” women—abound in Korean SF films: see Kwak Jae-young’s Japanese-language *Cyborg Girl* (*Boku no kanojo wa saibōgu*, 2008) and the aforementioned *Resurrection of the Little Match Girl* for discomfiting comparison.

The lesser offender, by far, is Kwak’s film, which features a young man who finds himself suddenly under the protection of a cyborg woman sent from the future to ensure his safety. Despite being relatively pedestrian (it could easily have been a *sentō bisōjo* (“armored cutie”) manga), *Cyborg Girl* rises beyond what it could have been<sup>13</sup> to achieve, in some ways, a healthy break from earlier Korean SF in several ways: for example, it uniquely acknowledges the positive influence of Japanese SF—not only in its content, but also in the fact that the film was shot entirely in Japanese, and with Japanese actors. The positive and downright heroic role given to technology (the female cyborg) in the context of a radical disaster scenario is refreshing, as is its more believable, comedic treatment of the bizarreness of a “romantic relationship” with an emotionless machine. Kwak’s story actually acknowledges SFnal tropes (for example, temporal paradox), but more importantly, the film seeks creatively to react to (by providing a Northeast Asian spin on) established Western canonical SF: after all, one homage—the fact the cyborg is a “Cyberdine” model—hints at how the film is a thorough inversion of *The Terminator* (1984): the time-traveling robot is a female bodyguard instead of a male assassin; a romantic comedy aesthetic replaces a macho action-adventure approach; the male lead is a vulnerable, semi-feminized loner male, rather than a semi-masculinized woman fighting for her own survival. While not a massive commercial success, *Cyborg Girl* at least suggests that a particularly Northeast Asian aesthetic *can* be brought to bear on foreign SF tropes. Yet for examples of successful, uniquely *Korean* takes on cinematic SF, we must turn elsewhere.

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<sup>13</sup> The quip that the film’s title could be, “Yōpkijōgin kŭ saibogŭ” (or, in English, “My Sassy Droid”) was one I heard more than once: many expected Kwak’s venture into SF would be nothing more than a SFnalized retread of his 2001 smash hit *Yōpkijōgin kŭnyō* (*My Sassy Girl*). That said, the film was apparently adapted to manga form in 2008, according to *Wikipedia* (“Cyborg She”).

## THE PLEASURES OF POLITICO-HISTORICAL COGNITIVE ESTRANGEMENT: WHEN SF “GOES NATIVE” IN KOREA

The purpose of the preceding discussion was to illuminate the fact that the distribution of SF production and consumption worldwide cannot simply be linked causally to industrialization, but that cultural factors come into play, especially in how they may problematize the localization of SF. That said, the focus mainly on failures thus far may suggest—falsely—that these problems are insurmountable.

Happily, this is not the case. A few more successful examples remain for discussion, however brief. The positive examples of *Koemul* (*The Host*, 2006) and *Chigu rŭl chŏkyŏra* (*Save the Green Planet*, 2003) are interesting both in terms of shared characteristics, and specific differences. *The Host* was a massive blockbuster at home, and internationally has performed incredibly well; meanwhile, *Save the Green Planet*, despite a relatively poor performance at the Korean box office, was received very positively at festivals and critics worldwide.

Besides Korean-language titles—near-anomalous among Korean SF movies—the two films share many features. Firstly, both films are set not in the future (or past), but instead in familiar, present-day Korea. Second, many SFnal tropes are handled ironically or playfully: the monster in *The Host* is relatively small and goofy-looking, while *Save the Green Planet* constantly teases audiences with the probability that its “alien” is really just the human victim of a crazed 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) Korea’s tradition of giant monster movies, stretching back to *Uju koe’in Wangmagwi* (*Giant Space Monster Wangmagwi*, 1967).

Most strikingly, both films articulate, metaphorically, narratives about *recent* history, specifically the tribulations of the underprivileged during the Korean dictatorships, especially during the 1980s, with a river monster and a threatening alien used to represent the forces of authoritarian, corporate, and social power that abused and exploited Korea’s poorer classes very recently. While both films are about history, it becomes difficult not to see the film in radical 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 1999, 360) and their natural enemies, the repressive, exploitative elites (Korean and American alike). Thus the perennial Korean-SFnal pre-

occupation with memory moves from straightforward, monolithic nationalism: *The Host* explores the historical minefield by proxy, sending a dysfunctional family and a goofy CGI monster, while *Save the Green Earth* does so through the paranoid, twisted, but finally correct perceptions of a single victim of the period.<sup>14</sup> Another Korean SF film that engages with similar issues is the beautiful and under-praised independent SF film *Nabi* (*The Butterfly*, 2001), which movingly explores themes of ecological destruction and (voluntary) memory loss. While *Nabi* is not as directly amenable to allegorical reading as other films, it includes the hallmarks of a *minjung*-conscious film, with its focus on underprivileged, abused, and powerless individuals confronted by the business-as-usual oppression of modern technocracy, while suggesting a different take on the pain of memory, arguing that memory and suffering—memory and *minjung*—are necessarily and ineradicably linked and exploring the question of whether *forgetting* can sometimes be a way of moving forward.

The temptation to attempt to replicate the success of *The Host* must be great, but it remains to be seen whether efforts like the forthcoming *7 kwanggu* (*Sector 7*, 2011) will take into account the deeper sociopolitical resonances that gave *The Host* its enormous resonance, both in Korea and abroad (where audiences unaware of Korean political history were nonetheless attracted to its underdogs-fight-back narrative). Regardless of how well-executed the 3D monster in *Sector 7* 3D monster may be in *Sector 7*—expectations are running high—the film's value as a work of SF will be determined by its deeper resonances, and how they reflect the concerns of its audience. Indeed, the power of an imaginative, relatable allegory was demonstrated with the overtly political, and unexpectedly widely-screened<sup>15</sup>, indie SF film *Pulch'onggaek* (*The Uninvited*, 2010). Made by collaborators associated with the DCInside website (to which a dedication appears in the opening credits)<sup>16</sup>, the film suggests political sympathies similar to those of *Save*

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<sup>14</sup> A focus on the downtrodden class of society does not guarantee a successful SF film, or a successful narrative: *Ch'oninngnyŏkcha* (*Psychic*, 2010) focused on downtrodden characters but remained a rather unfortunately muddled and poorly-constructed superhero film. However, its problems had nothing to do with the cultural barriers to the successful Korean-localization of SF explored above.

<sup>15</sup> "Widely," in terms of independent films in Korea, that is. This does not necessarily reflect audience size. According to Hancinema.net, fewer than two thousand tickets were sold during the (approximately) first month of the film's release. ("The Uninvited-2010.")

<sup>16</sup> DCInside, originally a web board where Digital Cameras were discussed (hence the use of DC in the site's name) is a webpage of profound importance in Korean popular and netizen culture, and has played important roles in Korean popular culture, most profoundly in the mobilization of protesters during the anti-US beef protests that took place in Seoul during summer 2008. A place of grassroots organization; a core site of macho netizen culture and sexism; a major popularizer of all things digital; a collective Korean that fills the role played in the English-language Internet

*the Green Planet*. Its narrative—featuring a group of unemployed “losers” in Seoul abducted by a malevolent alien entity who wishes to broker their wasted time to (rich, apparently American) individuals who might better use it—is peppered with overtly political imagery (like the Korean Assembly building floating in outer space), strange pathos (as when the protagonists attempt to communicate with fellow abductees, through music), bizarre comedy (such as the linguistic-political humor of one character who is rewired by his abductor to speak only in English), and disarmingly blunt homage to Carl Sagan (both in the form of glimpses of a Korean edition of Sagan’s *Cosmos*, and in scenes reminiscent of Sagan’s popular-science TV programs near the end of the film). While *The Uninvited*’s agenda is perhaps more muddled than those of *The Host* and *Save the Green Planet*, it seems relatively devoid of any neo-*minjungism*, its unapologetic politics communicated by transparent metaphors, and its thoughtful handling of a cast of unknown, average-looking actors more than made up for the amateurism quality of the footage and CGI effects.<sup>17</sup> *The Uninvited* has, essentially, demonstrated what divides Korean cinema’s SFnal successes from its failures: the recognition that because of (and not despite) its fantastical nature, SF must be about something that actually *matters* to the filmmaker and the audience alike.

These and other examples demonstrate what a number of Korean literary SF authors have established already: that the various apparent cultural barriers to the successful Koreanization of SF are far from insurmountable, if creators are willing to (a) set aside prejudices about the genre and take it seriously enough to familiarize themselves with its workings; (b) open their imaginations (and trust the imaginations of their audiences) to explore radical alternatives thoughtfully and experimentally for the sake of the pleasure of such exploration (without emphatically reasserting the primacy of the “real world”); (c) playfully engage as diverse a palette of influences as they please—perhaps drawing on other national traditions of SF (Chinese, Indian, French, and otherwise)—and creatively working to find ways to Koreanize SF authentically; and (d) to move beyond the stifling

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by a number of influential and popular trendsetting blogs like BoingBoing and discussion/netizen web-boards like 4chan, DCInside is deserving of far more sustained and careful attention by academics seeking better to understand Korean netizen and youth culture.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in Korean SF, amateur and independent filmmakers are becoming a major force in the development of a native form of the genre. Films such as Ch’oe Min-gi’s *Ch’o’in pam toesaeyo* (*Good Night*, 2008)—which in part explores the effects of Korea’s hypercompetitive, test-score driven educational system through SFnal metaphor—is an example of the contribution made possible by imaginative independent filmmakers who, given minimal access to studio special effects, are returning the focus of Korean SF to ideas, social criticism, and wonder. See Ch’oe’s film (and other short Korean SF films) online at yoUeFO.com: [http://www.youefo.com/film/film\\_view.html?cont=film\\_view&term\\_sort=a\\_week&etc\\_sort=mov\\_counter&current\\_page=&idx=1117](http://www.youefo.com/film/film_view.html?cont=film_view&term_sort=a_week&etc_sort=mov_counter&current_page=&idx=1117).

“minjok historiography” towards other models, such as the “minjung” model that seems to have underpinned Korea’s most successful SF films to date, while also moving forward to a range of thematic preoccupations (and treatments of these thematic preoccupations) that actually *matter* to their audiences, instead of those which more doctrinaire filmmakers believe *ought* to matter to them or Koreans believe *ought* to matter to them.

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