

Orientalism and the Fantasy of Brotherhood in South Korean Cinema's North Korean Action Hero Films

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【Abstract】

In the past decade there have been several popular South Korean action genre films that focus on North Korean spies or government agents. In these films, the North Korean protagonist has superhuman physical strength and combat capacity, as well as a kind of purity of ideology and integrity, while his Southern counterpart is older, wiser, and with more human frailties. I call this category of action sub-genre films North Korean action hero films. In this essay I argue that such films reflect the cultural unconscious of South Korea's Orientalist fantasy about North Korean masculinity (and society), which especially manifests in the films' plot as an intense focus on the North Korean action hero's perfect, strong body, combined with a nod towards the ultimate superiority of his Southern counterpart. Further, the paper shows the centrality of biopolitics in the films' plot, as both regimes subject the protagonists to neoliberal practices in order to intervene and manage their bodies and futures. The two protagonists often bond, in fact, via their anti-neoliberal characteristics. The paper will then conclude by examining the current South Korean action genre cinema in light of its use of female characters and diegetic time.

【key words】

South Korean action genre cinema, North Korean action heroes, Orientalism, Neoliberalism, Biopolitics, Gender

Introduction

In the past decade South Korean cinema has produced several popular action genre films that focus on North Korean spies or government agents. These films, featuring male protagonists from each side of the national divide, depict the

North Korean protagonist as not only brilliant but also having an almost superhuman physical strength and combat capacity, while portraying his Southern counterpart as older, wiser, and with more human frailties and weaknesses. The North Korean figure also shows a kind of purity of ideology and integrity missing in the more world-weary Southern protagonist. Further, the films typically show that the two characters, initially constructed as enemies of each other, may have different sensibilities and personalities, but both are in fact patriots doing their best to prevent or revert a disaster that will have serious consequences, perhaps for the entire peninsula. I will call this category of action sub-genre films North Korean action hero films.

In this essay I argue that South Korean cinema's North Korean action hero films released in the last decade reflect the cultural unconscious of the nation's Orientalist fantasy about North Korean masculinity (and society), which especially manifests in the films' plot as an intense focus on the North Korean action hero's perfect, strong body, combined with the depiction of the ultimate superiority of his Southern counterpart. My aim is to expand the notion of Orientalism as a way to discuss the power differential between the South and North, which is assumed and represented in the films.¹ The genre's films insert human warmth into the ultra-masculine protagonists through the use of female characters and by hinting at a bromance between the North and South Korean male protagonists. Further, I attempt to show the centrality of biopolitics in the films' plot, as both regimes of South and North subject the protagonists to neoliberal practices in order to intervene and manage their bodies and futures. Finally, I will conclude with a brief examination of the current South Korean action genre cinema in light of the use of female characters and diegetic time. In the following discussion I focus on four film texts, which are some of the most popular examples of this film genre and also contain the typical narrative elements mentioned above; the director Jang Hun (Chang Hun)'s *Secret Reunion* (hereafter *Reunion*, 2010), Weon Sin-yeon (Wôn Sin-yôn)'s *The Suspect* (hereafter *Suspect*, 2013), Ryoo Seung-wan (Ryu Sûng-wan)'s *The Berlin File* (hereafter *Berlin*, 2013), and Kim Seong-hun (Kim Sông-hun)'s *Confidential Assignment* (hereafter *Confidential*, 2017).

Flirting with Bromance

The North Korean action hero films typically feature grim plot lines and brutal combat scenes befitting the genre. But they also contain moments of levity, which come from an unexpected source. As mentioned earlier, one might best describe the relationship between the two male leads in the North Korean action hero films, which present a kind of buddy narrative, as bromance. It is a parody of heterosexual romance, different from camp or homosexual romance narrative, not least because bromance is a part of heteronormative storytelling and that the humor of their situation in the narrative stems from the audience's knowledge of the heterosexuality of two "bros" who play out a quasi-romantic scenario. The heterosexual orientation of the two protagonists and their "real," female love interests, however, leaves no room for any non-heteronormative storytelling. As John Alberti argues in his study of Hollywood bromance films, "By appearing to simultaneously challenge and reinforce traditional constructions of gender binarity and masculine centrality, the bromance as a narrative genre equally invokes both parody and realism, both broad comic exaggeration and appeals to realism and verisimilitude, a generic instability that registers in the confused and mixed critical reactions to these movies" (Alberti 2013, 27). What is interesting in these Korean action films is the tension between the two "romantic" relationships, and how such juxtaposition is connected to different genres we glimpse at in each narrative, such as the action thriller, melodrama, and family drama.

The two protagonists of *Reunion* Lee and Song meet as a South Korean secret agent and a North Korean spy, but when Lee loses his job and sets up business hunting down runaway foreign wives, he recruits Song to work and live with him. When they begin to live together, each man believes the other doesn't know his true identity and spies on the other man. But the two soon discover that they have much in common, not the least of which is their "soft heart and human approach" to resolve volatile situations. The depiction of Song as a decent family man emphasizes the family drama conventions the film uses (such as his longing to be with his family and the sacrifice he makes in order to save his family) to make the North Korean character sympathetic. It further heightens this effect by juxtaposing Song, the good, kind-hearted spy, against a ruthless, evil spy, "Shadow," who is a brutal killing machine that seems to embody certain stereotypes of North Korea, captured in words like public execution and secret re-education camps.

It is noted that the “homoerotic current in buddy narratives, where the close bonding of men traveling in, working on, or escaping to the frontier, be it the West or in space, gives way to implied sexual expressions of that bond, crossing over into what culture still views as the final frontier” (Cohan 2012, 240). Instead of the wild West or space, North Korean action hero films show that the physical and psychological isolation that the two male protagonists suffer in the midst of bustling cities due to their shared secrets and peculiar circumstances, constitute the frontier.

Against this setting that isolates the protagonists, the depiction of the emotional bonding between them flirt with homoeroticism, but only goes so far as to humorously hint at it, as the sexual politics of the domestic audience most likely would not tolerate any kind of actual homoerotic relationship between the protagonists in mainstream action genre films. Instead, the dangerous hints at homoeroticism get sublimated as a depiction of a pseudo-family making, and the two male leads become older and younger “brothers,” always with the Southern man as the older brother who helps or guides the younger man from North. For instance, in *Reunion* Lee, the South Korean protagonist, invites Song, the North Korean protagonist, to live with him. He also wants Song to call him an older brother as they spend time working side-by-side chasing runaway wives in Lee’s car (another isolated “frontier” space), spend the holidays together, and even collectively perform the ancestor worship rituals during Korea’s most significant holiday, Ch’usôk or Fall Harvest. This particular sequence not only symbolically confirms their pseudo-familial relationship, but also emphasizes their commonality as ethnic Koreans.

According to Steven Cohan (2012), buddy action films are parodies in which “homoeroticized masculinity, of men whose intimacy ... gives rise to expression of their “feelings.” That eruption of suppressed emotionality, the counter current of the “hard” masculinity of the buddy action film,” briefly upsets the status quo of the predictable genre storytelling (242). In the North Korean action hero films, however, the “eruption of suppressed emotionality” continues to justify and structure the films’ plot, which typically shows the two former enemies bonding and rescuing each other.

Such moment comes up in *Reunion* as the two protagonists sleep next to each other for the first time, after having gone through the emotional bonding experience of commemorating their respective dead parents. This sequence breaks

down the barrier between the two characters who no longer assess each other with suspicion and distrust. It is also notable that the original Korean title, “sworn brothers,” clearly indicates the nature of the relationship that the two protagonists will eventually build with each other, which points to the family drama aspect of the film while affirming the homoerotic possibilities of the two characters’ emotional bonding and physical closeness as untenable. If Hollywood bromance “approaches the challenge of masculine obsolescence in the romantic comedy from the unlikely direction of the male buddy movie and derives conflicts over heterosexual bonding from what are seen as the most fundamental conflicts surround homosocial bonding,” Korean action films’ narrative inclusion of bromance avoids any serious considerations of traditional masculinity or narrative possibilities of homosexual relationships by simply falling back on the culturally familiar construction of relationship between close strangers as family, or “brothers” (Alberti, 34).

Anti-Neoliberal Characters

The emotional bond and affinity between the two male protagonists that the North Korean action hero films depict actually stem from the characters’ unwillingness to compromise themselves according to the whims of the neoliberal culture that surrounds them. Their rigidity is thus another expression of their integrity, and the protagonists suffer from this character trait in their dealings with the larger organization, be it the South Korean society-at-large or their workplace, such as the government security agency. The protagonists’ rigidity also manifests as an old-fashioned masculinity, and the genre’s films unironically reaffirm their heterosexuality and their devotion to family. But the world no longer operates according to ideologies and principles, if it ever did. It is a world of commerce, exchange, and flexibility, in which people can take on and discard principles as easily as putting on a hat. In this vein, *Confidential* shows a criminal who says that there is no right or left wing in his world, but only the rich and the poor.

Berlin depicts Chông, a South Korean government agent, as staunchly anti-Communist. As the film opens, he is being pushed out from the government security agency he has been working in for decades because he is a relic from the Cold War, someone whom his colleagues regard as old-fashioned and difficult to work with. As the narrative progresses, the characters Chông and P’yo, a North

Korean agent, find that they have a sense of mission and commitment in common, which allows the two men to share an understanding even though they are enemies.

In addition, this genre's films also often depict how the North Korean regime abandons the action hero, and the same is true of his South Korean counterpart, a plot element which further brings the characters closer. Such similarities of circumstance show the ways in which this genre's film narratives construct the characters as different from, and even oppositional to, their regime or nation-state, in order to bring about the reconciliation and cooperation between the two protagonists who are *good* (faithful, honourable, and steadfast), while their regimes or their representatives are *bad* (opportunistic, unprincipled, and greedy). As a result, the audience can easily suspend their disbelief as the plot presents a narrative turn when former enemies bond and help each other. Not surprisingly, *Reunion* ends happily as the two protagonists reunite with their respective families. The fantasy ending, however, is made slightly more realistic because one might realize that the reason why the two characters reconnect on the plane bound for London is that it is only in a third country that people from South and North can happily coexist as equals.

Confidential depicts two policemen from South and North Korea, Kang and Rim, respectively. Kang's boss assigns him to work with and spy on Rim, who ostensibly travels to South as part of the security team for the North Korean good will representatives. Kang soon discovers that Rim in fact came to Seoul to pursue his former colleague Ch'a who has gone rogue and fled to South Korea after stealing the valuable copper plates. It turns out that the North has been secretly using them to print high quality counterfeit American bills to mitigate the regime's lack of foreign currency. In the process of stealing the plates, the same man also killed Rim's colleagues and wife who, unbeknownst to him, was pregnant at the time. United by their sense of mission and shared family values, Kang and Rim help each other, and as it is often true in other films of this subgenre, they save each other's lives. And Rim, like other North Korean action heroes, never forsakes the people of North nor the honour of his republic.

Confidential heavily relies on family drama conventions by depicting the two protagonists who easily begin to bond as a result of realizing that the other man also has the burden of being the patriarchal head of a family, who must protect their women and children. The narrative constructs Rim as a new member of Kang's family when the older man takes Rim home to keep a better eye on

him. However, the family accepts him as one of their own and Rim begins to feel close to them. He also inherits Kang's jacket when he ruins his own after a combat with Ch'a and his gang. They are now brothers who sleep in the same room and share clothes. As a result of the uneven mixing of the spy action spectacle with family drama, the film's last act actually looks like a chaotic family drama interspersed by explosive action and violence. In this last act, Rim risks everything in order to save his new "family" when Ch'a holds Kang and his family hostage to get the copper plates back from Rim. As expected, the film has a happy ending that exhibits the restoration of the status quo (the South and North are yet to unite, for example) that the family drama genre typically features, as a hallmark of its conservative narrative convention.

The North Korean action hero films' investment in human values that go against neoliberal calculations of maximum profit, especially through North Korean protagonists who seem quaintly oblivious to their own suffering or sacrifice in the face of greater value (such as a rescue of women and children, revenge for their family, or restoration of their own honor), something that is emphatically not calculatable in monetary terms, indicates a South Korean nostalgia for how things used to be, or at least, how its popular cinema imagines they used to be (Kang 2018, 54-55). In this way, the desire these film narratives express about the restoration of human values indicates a longing for an unspecified golden past, associated with the protagonists, but especially with North Korean figures. In the next section, I will show how such cultural desire we see in these popular genre films is connected to South Korea's Orientalist gaze upon its North Korean Other.

The Orientalist Gaze upon the Northern Other

The cultural unconscious behind the popularity of North Korean action hero films featuring South Korean heartthrob action stars as North Koreans/protagonists is a prurient fascination with South Korea's backward Other, the brethren up north, and his cultural, linguistic, and even physical difference from the Westernized South Korean self. In short, the nature of this fascination towards South Korea's Northern Other is Orientalist. Here, it should be noted that the racial difference, which is a central element in Said's articulation of Orientalism, is not a part of my reformulation. Rather, I focus on the physical and cultural differences between

the South and North that these films emphasize through their protagonists.

Edward Said's classical study *Orientalism* (1978) explicates the titular phenomenon's dehumanizing effects;

In a sense the limitations of Orientalism are, ... , the limitations that follow upon disregarding, essentializing, denuding the humanity of another culture, people, or geographical region. But Orientalism has taken a further step than that: it views the Orient as something whose existence is not only displayed but has remained fixed in time and place for the West (108).

In the North Korean action hero films the eternal, unchanging quality in the Other (the North Korean male) is in the realm of the human body, the plane of the physical, as virtually all other aspects of North Korea seem alien and thus alienating to the audience.

The narrative of *Confidential* uses the South Korean policeman Kang's family, consisting of his young daughter, wife, and her sister, to humanize him and to juxtapose his manhood against that of the handsome, physically fit, and brave North Korean policeman, Rim. Compared to the younger man from North, Kang is more world-weary and willing to compromise. There is an inevitable focus on the supremely conditioned physicality of the North Korean action hero in this film as in other films of this genre.

The North Korean male body is the site where the visual and the socio-cultural intersect, and the North Korean protagonist becomes the object of South Korean action cinema's Orientalist gaze. Hence gender and the visual reinforce each other in these films to structure the narrative. Unlike in most popular genre cinema, female characters in these films are not a part of the narrative that the dominant scopical regime builds, as the body that the films invite the audience to voyeuristically gaze at is that of the male protagonist who plays a North Korean. Such focus on the body of the Other is connected to the South Korean Orientalist cultural unconscious.

The North Korean action hero films subtly, and sometimes, not so subtly hint at South Korean superiority. Interestingly enough, it is through the focus on the physicality of the North Korean protagonist that the film's reflection of the state's attitude gets emphasized. In a similar vein, Martin Fradley (2004) points out that the top-grossing Hollywood action films are "outlets for strategically masochistic/narcissistic white male fantasies of being beaten. As such, it is perhaps safest to posit that only

those secure enough and assured of their continued hegemonic centrality that can afford to play so regularly and so melodramatically with ‘epic’ fantasies and mournfully paranoid delusions of disempowerment, displacement and degradation” (250). Though there is no racial element in this genre films’ formulation of the South versus North masculinities in contest, one can easily see how North Korean action hero films similarly construct the male fantasies for South Korean audiences, who can laugh ironically at the seeming perfection of the North Korean character, all the while recognizing that it is only on the plane of the physical strength and beauty.

Perhaps the North Korean action heroes’ physical strength and perfection, as well as their manly mannerisms and characterization as men of few words and reliable protectors of their women and children, reflect the South Korean male nostalgia for those qualities that they feel they have lost (Kim 2017, 315-324). In this way, the films perhaps unwittingly reveal a characteristic of the action film genre that Yvonne Tasker (1993) discusses in her essay, “Dumb Movies for Dumb People” (230). She writes that “Hollywood action cinema” tends to construct the “male body as spectacle,” and that there is an “awareness of masculinity as performance.” All four films I examine in this essay depict a particular kind of masculinity as performed by tough young men, whom the narratives construct as men that went through difficult physical training and death-defying tests. The quality of their masculinity as performance also comes out in a clear relief against the backdrop of not only their women and children that they must protect, but also juxtaposed against their Southern counterparts in each narrative, men who seem more like white collar workers than action film heroes.

And this, too, makes sense in that such film depiction of the North Korean Other has little to do with the reality of the Other, but reflects the state of the ones who create the image, the producers and consumers of South Korean popular cultural products such as popular genre cinema. For instance, Kim Ch’ông-gang points out that the Korean War films of the 1960s do not represent the enemy in any specific way lest the audience feels sympathy for the Communist enemies if the films emphasize their humanity. On the other hand, it may see them as admirably manly if the films show them as violent savages. Thus, in order to represent South Korean soldiers as more masculine, the 1960s’ Korean War films do not show strong enemies, either. For our discussion, such cinematic history points to a continuity in how South Korean cinema depicts the enemy Other (98). As Said (1978) puts it, “Orientalism responded more to the culture that produced it than to its putative

object,” which the subject of the Orientalist storytelling also created (22). As Orientalist narratives were meant for the West’s consumption, so is the North Korean action cinema’s Orientalist fantasy about the North; regardless of the object’s reality, the fantasy is created by South Koreans for their own consumption.

The contradiction in this particular kind of Orientalism is that the image of the Other is not feminized, but rather, super-masculine. Yet this super-masculine Other needs (a South Korean’s) help to survive in the new world, i.e., any place outside of North Korea. He is both naïve and backward. The narratives clearly show the power differential between the North Korean agent and his Southern counterpart, who asserts his superiority as the older and wiser man against the North Korean agent/protagonist despite the other’s physical perfection and superhuman combat skills, because these tough North Korean action heroes can’t seem to survive very well in South Korea.² This type of depiction paints the South Korean agents more realistically, while the North Korean protagonists appear to fit a certain mold of an unrealistic masculinist fantasy.

Films such as *Berlin* and *Reunion* show that the South Korean government agents are superior to their North Korean counterpart because they can choose to be humane and make their own decisions, rather than mechanically follow the government organization’s order. Therefore, even though the North Korean agents are depicted as intelligent and equipped with superhuman physical power and fight skills, they are inferior to South Korean agents or characters in the end. And the superiority of the Southern men in these films reflects the superiority of the South Korean system that allows room for such freedom (Song and Baek 2014, 279). Through this subtle illustration of the unequal relationship between the government agents or military figures of South and North, who come to represent South and North Korea, the films mythologize the superiority and humanity of South by extension (283).

In addition, the focus on the perfect, beautiful body of the North Korean Other is actually not something new. We can trace it back to the old South Korean anti-Communist movies of the 1970s. It appears that the recent films either wittingly or unwittingly follow this pattern of imagining the North Korean or communist Other, a practice located in South Korea’s cultural production of the Cold War era. The main difference between then and now is the gender of the spy/North Korean protagonist, as the anti-Communist films from the 1970s often focused on beautiful female spies (Jun 2017, 74-76; Lee 2015, 381-382). Not surprisingly

such female figure, who embodies the wrong, dangerous ideology and seductive feminine charms provided a fascinating object of the gaze for the South Korean popular imagination in the context of the Cold War. The recurring motif of South Korea's Other, located both inside and outside of its territory, across the Cold War and post-Cold War divide, reveals South Korean cultural narratives' deep roots, of their investment, in stereotyping and representing the communist Other in particular ways.

Neoliberalism and Biopolitics in the Film Narratives

The narratives of the four films I examine here present a bleak vision of contemporary neoliberal South Korea in which ideology or patriotism seemingly no longer matters, though the powers that be still use such rhetoric. Others see those who still have such ideals, or worse, those who openly show their adherence to those ideals, as relics of the Cold War era and losers whose rigidity hampers their success. The key to thriving in the current neoliberal era is flexibility and pursuit of maximum financial gain at whatever the human cost.

Interestingly, the films I study here depict those who support the political status quo as evil. The two male leads from South and North in each film are, in the end, only a small part of the great machinery that enables the two countries to continue their tense coexistence, by maintaining the Division System (Paik 1995, 8-26).³ Those who are operating the Division System are also the faceless larger forces of the neoliberal cultural logic of today's South Korea and the repressive North Korean regime, and they use and discard people without a moment's hesitation. The more abject and precarious someone's situation in life, the easier this process gets, as the plot lines of all four films I discuss here reflect. North Korean action hero films show, in other words, that the South Korean government agents use and abuse North Korean defectors and other informants (they are the precariats in the narratives), taking advantage of the other's powerless and isolated situation in South Korea, while North Korean government exploits their people with threats and violence. The films also reveal that South Korea is a sub-empire deeply implicated in the global collision of economic and political interests; a villain arranges to sell the North Korean copper plates to the Chinese Triad in *Confidential*, and in *Berlin* a North Korean agent deals with a Russian middleman

to sell arms to Arabs, which the Israeli Mossad intercepts.

Another important change in these recent North Korean action hero films from earlier decades' films made before 2010 about North Korean spies and government agents, is that the characters are no longer motivated by patriotism but by money. The narratives often show how South Koreans, faithful practitioners of neoliberalism, assign difficult, or perhaps even impossible, missions to those who are socio-economically inferior, i.e., subcontractors. Subcontractors are the backbone of South Korea's neoliberal economy, and as it was done in the past to the laborers who fuelled the developmentalist economy during the military dictatorship of Park Chung Hee for example, those who hire the subcontractors in contemporary South Korea exploit their labour and belittle their humanity. Reflecting such reality beyond the big screen, there have been studies of these films that focus on the socio-cultural aspect of the South-North relations they depict, and even one film review that discusses the North Korean hero of *Berlin* as a salary man figure, arguing that the film reaches beyond the purview of a simple spy movie to offer reflections on the neoliberal South Korean situation, in which people live with the anxiety and the resulting exhaustion of knowing that no one is permanently employed, that anyone can be replaced at any time (Cheong 2013, 148-149).

The idea that the regime/system/employer can easily abandon or replace everyone is in fact rooted in the biopolitics of the socio-economic landscape of the twenty-first century South Korea. And the North Korean regime, or its fictional representatives in the films I discuss in this essay, also practice what Michel Foucault originally termed biopolitics (1978, 139-140). The plot of the genre's films often reflect that both regimes have structures of power that easily lend themselves to biopolitical control of the population, and that though they may not realize it, the people living in this situation in South and North Korea are equal at least in this regard.

Further, *Berlin* and other North Korean action hero films reveal that in fact both South and North Korean states also practice what Achille Mbembe names necropolitics (2003, 11-40). Both regimes routinely demand death of those who serve the country, or are employed by the country, though this demand is always couched in terms of honor. *Berlin* shows how the North regime, represented in the film by P'yo's high-ranking colleagues, allow P'yo and his wife to die by framing them, and also how the South regime, represented by the National Information Service (NIS), do the same to Chông by not supporting him in his mission.

Foucault posits that that the "old power of death that symbolized sovereign

power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life” (139-140). The administration and management of bodies manifest especially clearly in the plot lines focusing on assassins, military figures, and government security agents whose lives belong to and depend on the sovereign state in a stark manner. For instance, *Suspect* presents the story of Chi, a North Korean defector falsely accused of murdering his benefactor, a wealthy and influential businessman named Park, the night before the latter was scheduled to meet with North Korean representatives to supposedly hand over a secret weapon. The South Korean government believes the “gift” is a chemical weapons formula. A South Korean Special Forces captain, Min, gets assigned the task of arresting Chi and recovering the formula. The two men have a history, an incident in which Chi could have killed Min but chose to let him live, leading to Min’s deep resentment of the other man. The incident also results in Min’s demotion from a decorated Special Forces captain to an instructor at a training academy for the Forces.

The incident, represented on screen through a flashback sequence, shows the audience that although he seems like a relentless machine or a killer robot, Chi does not kill unless he has to, while revealing Min as a professional soldier who would rather die than face humiliation and loss of reputation. Through this flashback audience also finds out that even though Chi works in the South as a substitute driver ferrying drunk people home in their own cars, he is in fact a trained assassin from the most elite North Korean military unit. Realizing that he is framed for Park’s murder, Chi goes on the run, simultaneously searching for the real killer and also the man responsible for killing his own family, a former friend from North. During this ordeal, a documentary filmmaker named Ch’ôe, a rare female character in this genre of films who is not helpless nor a mother or wife of the male protagonist, helps him and alerts Min that Kim, the man who assigned him the task of capturing Chi, wanted Park’s secret formula and that he actually orchestrated the whole chain of events out of greed.

The plot of *Suspect* thus illustrates how the bodies and lives of characters like Chi and Min are utterly vulnerable to the whims and sudden changes in the sovereign state, whether it is South or North Korean. As the two regimes, or their representatives who execute the state power, change their tactics to deal with the fluctuating, complex relationship with the other, the lives of characters such as Chi and Min are first managed for their use value, then abandoned through the administration of the bodies, now constituted as dangerous because they bear witness

to the corruption and greed of those who represent the state.

Women Slow Things Down

In this last section I examine female characters in the North Korean action hero film genre, as their fictional depiction reveals much about the current cultural moment beyond the big screen in South Korea. I will attempt to do so with a focus on a specific narrative element, pacing, or diegetic temporality.

Symptomatic of the conservative turn of gender relations since 2010 in South Korea, the North Korean action hero films notably feature very few female characters, almost depicting a world consisting mostly of men. And it is also revealing that both narratively and visually women slow down the pacing of these action films, whose genre hallmark is, partly, speed. The breathless pacing of *Suspect*, for instance, that had been moving from one combat or chase scene to the next, slows down as the camera captures the lyrical moment when the protagonist Chi reminisces about his wife. In his memory, she is young, beautiful, and pregnant with their first child. Tragically, she gives birth and gets killed before he ever gets to see his child. When the film shows Chi's wife the usually dark and chaotic colour palette changes to pastel and green colours, suggesting a different life and reality. In this film the North regime discards the protagonist Chi and others like him when Kim Jong-il dies and the regime gets a new leader. Although he has done nothing wrong, the regime sends him to the secret concentration camps. But he escapes using his superhuman strength and indomitable will to find his family, only to discover that none other than his old comrade and friend from the same Special Forces unit killed his wife and daughter. In the last surprise twist, the film ends with a long take that shows Chi finally reuniting with his young daughter who survived and was sold to a Chinese slave camp. The use of this single long take signals another slowing down of the narrative time. Action films rarely use long takes, and *Suspect* emphatically uses it here in the last few minutes of its narrative to heighten the emotional impact of the father-daughter reunion.

In such sequences the narrative function of women and children characters become important. And ironically, it is also in these moments that the audience realizes how they have been functioning in the films' narrative mostly as an absence, as the narratives' empty center that is allocated almost no diegetic time. They are

rarely actual characters, only signifiers and plot devices that move the narrative forward. For instance, the villain in *Confidential* kidnaps Kang's family and the film's third act begins when Rim runs to rescue them, saying that he doesn't want to lose anyone else in his life, showing that he now considers all of them his family. These moments are dramatic examples of how the North Korean action hero films use female characters to slow down the narrative time on screen, gain audience sympathy for their male avengers, and insert human qualities to the action hero. But in the sense that these female characters remain one-dimensional, brief plot points that conveniently and economically provide justification for the protagonists' explosive anger and violence to avenge their womenfolk and children, the narrative denies the female characters of their humanity. The women and children of this genre films remain in the background as an afterthought to the main narratives about the male protagonists, which then resume their propulsive, frenetic move to provide the thrilling storytelling and visuals that are characteristic of the action film genre.

The genre's films typically suggest that women are the heroes' foils and a kind of backdrop to the main narrative, in the way that bell hooks uses the term in her famous essay, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." hooks takes the example of black female characters whose narrative role is to humanize and soften black men on screen (1992, 115-131). Though race is not part of the question in the films I discuss here, women in these narratives function similarly, to humanize and soften the male protagonists for the audience. The psychological depth and a realistic character development are mostly missing in the portrayal of the North Korean action hero but for his connection with the central female character he wants to save, such as his girlfriend, wife, or daughter. And yet, in themselves the female characters do not possess a fully-fleshed out character that shows their humanity or individuality.

Suspect presents a perfect example. Seemingly invincible and capable of mind-boggling acts of violence and destruction, the protagonist seems like a killer robot at first, unhampered by ethical concerns or morality. However he seems quite human, even romantic and tender, when the film shows his life with his young wife through flashbacks. Female characters such as Chi's wife are often killed off early on in the film, then all but forgotten in the narrative afterwards so that it requires an effort to remember their presence. *Confidential's* treatment of the protagonist Rim's wife repeats this pattern. And in *Reunion* Song sends Lee plane tickets to visit his family in England. The film ends as Lee discovers

that Song is on the same flight with his wife and young daughter, whom he (and the audience) knew existed from an earlier scene. Even though Song ostensibly became a killer to save his family in North Korea, we see his family only in this brief moment in the film. This effort to recall the female characters constructs a different kind of non-racialized “oppositional gaze” and a critical look the audience should remember and practice, which theorists such as bell hooks have written about.

The serious lack of meaningful female characters in popular genre films, such as the North Korean action hero films, reflect reality (albeit with distortions). What they reflect tell us much about South Korean contemporary life. Rey Chow (1991) writes that “in a time of massive social transformations, the collapse of tradition would find its most moving representations in the figures of those who are traditionally the most oppressed” (170). In their depictions of the seemingly oppressed figure of the North Korean male protagonists, these popular genre films unwittingly reveal that the truly oppressed figures are actually female characters, by using them as plot devices.

Conclusion

Shiri, a 1999 big-budget spy action thriller film directed by Kang Je-gyu (Kang Che-gyu), presents a prototypical narrative that features some of the above-mentioned narrative elements. The film broke new grounds with its massive scale and use of advanced computer graphics-driven special effects that rival those of Hollywood action movies, and became a huge box office success, and it opened the era of Korean blockbuster cinema. The narratives of this particular film genre also depict the two protagonists as living a kind of parallel lives, emphasizing some important similarities that set them apart from their colleagues and showing their empathy and affinity with each other. This narrative element leads to a sequence of bromance, in which a parody of heterosexual romance unfolds through a montage, following the formulaic conventions of romantic comedies. The director Park Chan-wook (Pak Ch’an-uk)’s film *JSA: Joint Security Area* from 2000 is the first to include this element in its plot. *JSA* also showcases an important feature we see in North Korean action hero films, which is the quasi-familial connection between the two male protagonists who form a brotherly relationship, hinting at family drama genre characteristics. It is also notable that in this sub-genre

films the North Korean counterpart is more ethical, ideologically pure, younger, and better looking. After a decade of such film examples, the physically perfect North Korean action hero is a kind of a Korean cinema cliché by now.

In this essay I have examined South Korean action genre films from the past decade that share important similarities of themes, plot elements and motifs, such as two male protagonists from the divided Koreas who eventually form a brotherhood. I call this group of action sub-genre movies North Korean action hero films, and argue that they reveal the cultural unconscious of South Korea's Orientalist fantasy about North Korean masculinity, and the unequal brotherhood between the two protagonists who represent South and North of the national division. In addition, I posit that such fantasy about South Korea's Northern Other manifests through the camera gaze trained voyeuristically on the male action stars' perfect, seemingly invincible bodies, as well through the repeated suggestion of the South Korean system/protagonists' superiority. The films gain the audience sympathy for the characters and achieve the suspension of disbelief through a use of the bromance and family drama genre conventions. It is noteworthy that the films I examine in this paper portray the two protagonists from South and North Korea as men of integrity, who struggle against the network of neoliberal systems that surround them, which enforce biopolitical and necropolitical controls that impact the characters' lives and futures. While I lack the space here to fully consider this last point, in the end, however, the North Korean Action hero films reveal, perhaps unwittingly, their conservative cultural outlook in the genre's tendency to restore the status quo, especially in the ways in which these films use female characters as plot devices and as the narratives' empty center, who receive little screen time and development.

Notes

1. A reviewer for this article provided an insight that the 1950's post Korean War films also contain the trope of pitting South and North Korea in order to represent South as the democratic, ideal nation. While this is entirely true, this essay does not discuss the era's anti-Communist films as they feature heterosexual romance narratives between, typically, female North Korean spies and South Korean secret agents or soldiers.

2. It is interesting to note that South and North held the first summit in twelve years in recent months, and the dynamic of the younger North Korean leader meeting his older South Korean counterpart played out in real life.

3. The renowned public intellectual Paik Nak-chung argues that the national division benefits both regimes of the divided Korea, as it's about the self and the enemy Other and its manufactured sense of national defense crisis make the people of the regimes invest in or agree with the status quo. The situation may be changing, however, as the two leaders have met twice in a short amount of time and the mood is quickly changing from hostility to cooperation and reconciliation even as I write this.

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