

Transnational Film Remaking and Destabilized Meanings: *Reading Kim Jee-woon's The Good, the Bad, the Weird*

Hyung-Sook LEE

Abstract

Transnational remakes are created in a complex web of intertextual relations surrounded by diverse discursive influences. These specific production conditions often complicate the process of interpreting such films and reaching any definitive meanings. Kim Jee-woon's The Good, the Bad, the Weird (2008) is a Korean transnational remake film that challenges signification as such. Simultaneously styling itself after Sergio Leone's The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (1966) and Lee Man-hee's Break Up the Chain (1971), the film asks us to reconsider widely accepted notions of genre and film remakes. Probing this hybrid film's entangled layers of meaning, I argue that for a transnational remake such as this, different intertextual influences along with extratextual discourses constantly disturb the production of any cathartic meaning. These factors constantly affect the textual elements to be decontextualized and recontextualized in the course of interpretation, and the production of meaning itself is constantly destabilized and decentered.

Keywords: Kim Jee-woon, Lee Man-hee, Sergio Leone, transnational remakes, Manchurian Western, Spaghetti Western, intertextuality, McGuffin

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Hyung-Sook LEE is an associate professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Ewha Womans University. Email: hslee08@ewha.ac.kr.

Introduction

In the Goblin Market brawl scene in Kim Jee-woon's *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (*Joeun nom, nappeun nom, isanghan nom*, 2008), Do-won, the protagonist, wearing a wide-brimmed cowboy hat and a long coat, swings between buildings on a single rope like Zorro. Considering that the film is a remake of Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Western, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), he is supposed to resemble his predecessor, Blondie. At this specific moment, however, he more strongly reminds us of the globally popular, fictional Spanish hero who was particularly skilled at sword fighting and swinging on a rope. To some, this action sequence may seem to salute other global cultural icons such as Tarzan or even Spider-Man.¹ Others may see this scene as a typical example in which the director "denaturalizes" familiar visual tropes of the Western by "weirding" them simply with "matter out of place" (Chung and Diffrient 2015, 118). Regardless of the origin and the intention of the specific iconography and the structure of the action, the scene conjures up various other films, leading to divergent directions of interpretation among different groups of audiences, and generating multiple possibilities of meanings.

Moreover, the multiplicities of meanings are not applicable to this scene alone. In fact, the complex texture of the entire film, a texture woven by genre, the practice of remaking, and diverse cultural discourses offers multiple layers of reading. The reading or decoding process poses a question regarding how the simultaneous operation of genre and the layered traces of other works affect the understanding of the film, or any films of a similar sort. Does the situation make reading the intention of the filmmakers or interpreting the work more challenging? Or does it facilitate it? This paper investigates Kim's Western film with these initial queries, and discusses how meanings are generated at the juncture of textual practices of film remaking and genre revision centering on *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*.

Kim Jee-woon has a special place in the Korean film industry as an

1. I appreciate Dr. Horace Jeffery Hodges for suggesting Do-Won's resemblance to Spider-Man in this specific scene.

experimental genre filmmaker and one who hardly ever repeats himself. *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* is a Korean-style Western, often called an *Oriental Western* or *Kimchi Western* by the media and by the director himself. Such a labeling calls attention to the well-travelled nature of the Western genre itself as well as the innately American identity of this cultural form. The Western is *always already* an American film genre. Unlike other genres, the Western, by providing “a national myth and global icon,” is a “cornerstone of American identity” (Kitses 1998, 16). The romanticized founding stories of the nation and the images of heroic American men helped “define the very nature of the American character,” and also contributed toward “rationaliz[ing] central aspects of American domestic and foreign policy” (Berg 2000, 213). Although the Western is a quintessential American genre, it is ironically one of the most widely adapted genres in other national film industries. There are so many films produced outside the United States that share or imitate the thematic and formal components of this genre. The Spaghetti Western, produced in Italy in the 1960s to the 1970s, is the most well-known derivative. Germany’s *Winnetou* films, the Danish Western or the Hungarian Western are lesser known but important parts of the Euro-Western ring.² In Asia, the Japanese film industry had another variation called the *Sukiyaki Western* in the 1960s (Tom Mes, as cited in Hunt [2011, 102]), and during the same period the Korean counterpart made Western-style films set in China’s Manchurian region, thus called the *Manchurian Western*.

Kim’s film follows the tradition of this Manchurian Western genre, which has been almost forgotten by Korean audiences for decades. However, it does not simply revive the nostalgic form with new outfits, but remakes Westerns from two different countries. *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* is a remake both of a Korean Manchurian Western, *Break Up the Chain* (1971),³ directed by Lee Man-hee, and as mentioned above, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, the third installment of Leone’s iconic Spaghetti Western series, the *Dollars Trilogy*.⁴ In this chain of remakes, the issue of interpretation or

2. For more diverse global Western films, see Miller and Van Riper (2014).

3. The original title is *Soesaseul-eul kkeuneora*.

4. The *Dollars Trilogy* is also called the *Man-With-No-Name Trilogy*, and includes as well *Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and *For a Few Dollars More* (1965).

translation initially posed by the foreign genre's transplantation into a new Korean context is further complicated by the dual layers of originals of different nationalities. I direct my attention to this transnational aspect of remaking in this film, especially keeping in mind that it has been a prevalent practice surrounding Asian film industries for almost two decades now. How are the traces of the two different originals arranged in the new text? Which earlier sources would it resemble more? Other than being one of those stylish experiments of postmodern pastiche, would the remade text deliver any stimulating cultural meanings? How would different audience groups react to the film?

To date, several scholarly works examined this film from diverse perspectives, to include, the Western genre's cross-cultural translatability and generic variation (Cho 2015); the film's revisionist portrayal of earlier similar genre films and the history of Japanese occupation (Chung and Diffrient 2015); the hybrid nature of the film itself and Manchuria as a fictional and historical space (Hunt 2011), and so on. Influenced and instigated by such earlier discussions, this paper turns its focus in yet another direction—the imbricated layers of interpretation in a transnational remake and the instability of the textual meanings derived from it. The meanings and cultural significance of a remake are generated primarily through the dynamics of audience members' degrees of familiarity with different parts of the text, the new text's own aesthetic completeness, and the cultural discourses surrounding the production of the old and new texts, and so on. How, then, do these intra-, inter-, and extra-textual factors operate in the production of a film's meaning? Do they simultaneously affect an audience's understanding of a film at the same level, generating all composite meanings at a certain textual moment, or is there any emulation among meanings? I argue that for a transnational film remake, different intertextual influences along with the extratextual discourses constantly disturb the production of any definite textual meanings. These factors continuously affect the textual elements to be decontextualized and again recontextualized in the course of interpretation, and the production of meaning itself becomes a destabilized process with multiple possibilities.

To elucidate this, this paper first discusses the audience's dependence on the *original* for their initial guidance in discerning meaning in a remake, but the ways in which the creative history of Kim's film questions the authority of those originals. The analysis then elaborates on how different audience groups have uneven degrees of recognition of the intertextual references in the remade film, and questions whether an all-inclusive compendious meaning of a film is possible in such a situation. The final part of the paper delves further into the ways in which the social discourses surrounding the production of the film affect the diverging of meanings. I read the production of the film especially in the contexts of the trend of Hallyu and the debates over China's Northeast Project, and discuss how such social environments ultimately contribute to the impossibility of any definite meanings. Through this analysis, I suggest that the destabilized condition of interpretation and signification is structurally imbedded in the nature of transnational film remaking and is an essential quality of it, and *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* is an exemplary case of such a category that demonstrates the challenging process of navigating meanings.

Film Remaking and the Myth of the Original

The history of film remaking is almost as long as that of cinema itself. Earlier cases of remakes were largely driven by economic imperatives, but film history reveals diverse reasons, sometimes linked to cultural politics as well. Due to the frequency of the practice, as Rüdiger Heinze and Lucia Krämer indicate, the noun *remake* is now almost considered a cinematic category, whereas the term *remaking* can refer to wider practices of recreation in diverse spheres (Heinze and Krämer 2015, 11). Although a film remake can easily be understood as a derivative form, a copy, and eventually subordinate secondary material to the original work, Thomas Leitch suggests that a deeper observation into the relationship between a remake and its original reveals more complex aspects:

Conventional wisdom assumes that the original film was outstanding—otherwise why bother to remake it at all?—yet the remake is better still—otherwise why not simply watch the original, or watch it again? ... The fundamental rhetorical problem of remakes is to mediate between two apparently irreconcilable claims: that the remake is *just like* its model, and that it's better.⁵ (Leitch 2001, 44)

This is the dilemma of a remake. It has to look like its original but also has to be different to validate its own existence. In this dubious and dual relationship between the original and the remake, the original is the center of the meaning, guiding the audience where to start their interpretation of the remade film. Scholarly discussions of the remake also assume comparative terms. Leitch distinguishes the homage and “true remake.” The primary purpose of homage is to “pay tribute to an earlier film rather than usurp its place of honor” (Leitch 2001, 47). The true remake, on the other hand, seeks to replace the older one with a new version since it “admires its original so much it wants to annihilate it” (Leitch 2001, 49–50). While such definitions assume that the remade film makes its connection to the original source obvious, Michael B. Druxman indicates that this is not always the case by distinguishing “acknowledged” and “unacknowledged” remakes. While the audience is informed of the original source in acknowledged remakes, they are “deliberately uninformed” in unacknowledged ones (Druxman [1975], as cited in Greenberg [1998, 126]). All these discussions make one certain—you cannot think about remakes without comparing them to their original film sources.

Constantine Verevis points out that the identification of a source of a remake can “secure the former version as a kind of fixity,” and the remake is evaluated against such fixed precursors (Verevis 2006, 28). He insinuates that the remake finds its value by being aligned with its precursors, the canon. In this way, the original functions as *anchorage* to produce meanings for the remake. Roland Barthes, in his discussion of an advertisement, introduces this concept in relation to the linguistic message accompanying

5. Italics in the original.

the image. He says that all images are “polysemous” and imply a “floating chain” of signifieds underlying their signifiers. And the linguistic text, the caption, similar to an anchorage, “directs the reader through the signifieds of the image.”⁶ In this process, the text “remote-controls” the reader toward a “meaning chosen in advance” (Barthes 1977, 39–40). As a milestone in the hermeneutic exploration, the status of the anchorage must be stable and its direction definite. This idea of a relationship between the advertising image and its caption is very useful for understanding the analogous situation of the film remake and its originals. Just like the caption of the advertisement, the originals of the film remake function as anchorage, guiding the way toward meaning. It provides the basic interpretive frame through which to speculate why a certain remake is produced and how it has to be viewed.

However, as David Wills says, “there can never be a simple original uncomplicated by the structure of the remake” (Wills 1998, 157), and the history involved in the remaking of *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* questions the function of the original as a stable and definite anchorage in an interpretation. In fact, the search for the originals of this film exemplifies the convoluted journey of determining the roots of a film. As mentioned earlier, this film has not one, but two originals, which aspect already predicts divergent passageways in understanding the film. *Break Up the Chain* imitates or appropriates *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. It was widespread practice at that time for Korean genre films to plagiarize famous foreign films without revealing their sources. This film is also one of those unacknowledged remakes, but with quite meaningful *localizing* effects that give the film itself its own unique cultural value, as recognized by later critics.

Since Lee’s *Break Up the Chain* is based on Leone’s *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, and Kim’s film is based on both, there seems to be no problem in calling Leone’s film the ultimate original of Kim’s film. However, the 1966 Italian film itself is linked to a tangled history in regard to identifying its original, albeit tangentially. The main character of the 1966 film actually *originates* in the first film of the trilogy of which *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* forms the final part. Therefore, this film is considered to exist within

6. Italics in the original.

the ambit of the first film's influence, beginning with the constant tripartite character structure. And this first film, *Fistful of Dollars* (1964), was involved in legal disputes concerning its plagiarism of yet another film, a very well-known case in film history. Immediately after the release of *Fistful of Dollars* in Italy, Japanese director Akira Kurosawa and Toho film Company sued Leone and his collaborators, accusing Leone of copying Kurosawa's own *Yojimbo* (1961). *Yojimbo* is Kurosawa's samurai film set in 19th-century Japan. The film was a big box-office success in Japan, and earned its main actor Toshiro Mifune a Best Actor Award at the Venice International Film Festival. Christopher Frayling's semi-biography of Leone reveals that at least the director was very well acquainted with the film, although he introduces conflicting anecdotes regarding whether Leone intentionally plagiarized *Yojimbo* or was simply deceived by the producers who had not obtained the legal remake rights to the Japanese film (Frayling 2012, 125, 147–148). Regardless, it was an unavoidable fact that Leone's film was very similar to Kurosawa's. The case was eventually settled by the Italian filmmaker and producers paying 15 percent of the film's worldwide receipts and offering partial distribution rights in East Asia to their Japanese counterparts (Frayling 2012, 149).

However, this controversy over the original source of *Fistful of Dollars* does not end there. Film scholar David Desser contended that Kurosawa's own film borrowed from an American noir novel, Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (Desser 1983, 33), a view widely shared in the Western film circuit. But Frayling's findings compromise this putative *Yojimbo-Red Harvest* connection. Frayling reveals how, during the initial legal case with Kurosawa, Leone's side prepared a counter-argument insisting that *Yojimbo* originated from an 18th-century Italian play by Carlo Goldoni, *The Servant of Two Masters* (*Arlecchino servitore di due padrone* in Italian) (Frayling 2012, 148–149). While neither these claims seem to have been addressed by Kurosawa himself, Charles Silver claims that the only acknowledged source for *Yojimbo* by its director is the Hollywood film, *Glass Key*, itself an adaptation of Hammett's novel of the same name.⁷

7. See Silver (blog).

With the two directors having passed away, this controversy will likely remain unresolved. However, this situation illuminates how identifying the ultimate original would not have been possible even with the directors' own admissions of their sources. With such countless possibilities of similar stories unexpectedly existing at different times and places, the case of finding the *originals* for Leone's film only reveals how insecure the status of the original is in the discourse of the film remake. Unlike our belief that the identification of the original will direct and stabilize the meanings of a film remake, these episodes about Leone's film illustrate, conversely, that such originals can distract and diffuse the meanings of a remake. And history of remakes behind Leone's *Fistful of Dollars*, through its manifold connection with the Korean film, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, makes us rethink the function of the originals in the interpretation of this latter film.

Multiple Addresses and Instability of Meanings

As was seen in the previous section, the search for the original or the textual roots of a remake is no simple process. There can always be unknown or little known textual relations that only come to be revealed later. However, this does not necessarily mean that the original is unimportant in the discourse of the remake. Rather, it expands our consideration to factors other than the original that still participate crucially in producing meanings in relation to the remake. Another important factor, in this sense, is the audience that is viewing, and eventually generating meanings of, a film. This section will therefore examine how different groups of audiences connect themselves to the diverse intertextual clues of *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*. Leo Braudy says that the remake summons up "both the internal and external history of film in its relation to past films and past audiences," and also indicates that "to remake is to want to reread" (Braudy 1998, 327, 332). This stance emphasizes the central position of the spectator in the textual construction of a remake, and the fact that the remake essentially relates both to its past and present audiences. In this regard, film remaking always implies a "double temporality

of continuity and change” (Heinze and Krämer 2015, 12).⁸

Here I turn my attention to the interestingly different ways in which Kim introduced his film to domestic and foreign audiences, respectively. At the release of the film, the director intentionally provides uneven information regarding the originals to the different groups of audiences. In his numerous interviews in Korea, Kim named both Lee’s and Leone’s films as the originals of his film, but constantly emphasized that his film was a direct homage to Lee’s film rather than Leone’s.⁹ When he introduced his film to the overseas media, however, he hardly mentioned Lee’s film. In his official press conference at the 61st Cannes International Film Festival, where he presented *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* at the out-of-competition screening, Kim named Leone’s Spaghetti Westerns along with several American Western titles as having influenced him. Consequently, major English entertainment media also mentioned the Italian film as the only primary source of influence for Kim’s film (Elley 2008; Rapold 2010).¹⁰ Perhaps Kim thought there was no need to mention Lee’s *Break Up the Chain* since hardly any foreign audiences would know of it, not to mention that Lee’s film was itself a copy of Leone’s work. Whatever the intention of the director, different information given to different audience groups inevitably gives rise to divergent meanings for the film. And this confusion might be especially pronounced among those familiar with the existence of both originals. These are the spectators truly in a position to approach this transnational film.

This way of promoting the film was possible because the director knew that audience members’ access to the source materials varied. His tactic sheds light on the fact that for transnational remakes, an audience’s cultural distribution¹¹ is as important a factor as its temporal distribution in variegating the film’s meanings. In other words, transnational remakes operate not only at the intersection of multiple temporalities but of multiple cultural spaces. In the case of *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, it is quite

8. Italics in the original.

9. *Movieweek* interview as cited in Choe (2008, 183).

10. See Festival de Cannes (website).

11. This is often linked with geographical distribution.

obvious that the filmmaker's main consideration was to reach diverse audiences across cultures as well as across generations. Therefore, his film brings up memories of both Lee's and Leone's films to which domestic and foreign audiences can connect at different levels.

The first original, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* is a globally popular Spaghetti Western film. By the time the popularity of the Western genre had waned in America, the production of the Western moved to Europe, especially Italy and Spain, largely for the purpose of reducing production costs. The mountainous areas of those countries also provided suitable geographical stand-ins for the American western landscape. Although the active production of Euro-Westerns began in the late 1950s, it was Leone's *Fistful of Dollars*, with its unexpected success, that reignited the second heyday of this genre. The collaboration between Leone and Clint Eastwood, then only an aspiring TV actor who landed the part only because others had rejected it, made history, and continued until they completed the third film of the saga, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*.

The film's storyline is set along the American-Mexican border during the American Civil War. Three bounty hunters, Blondie (the Good), Angel Eyes (the Bad), and Tuco (the Ugly) are each searching for the \$200,000 cash box buried somewhere in a public cemetery. Each having only a partial clue to the whereabouts of the cash, they all have their share of cooperation and betrayal in their hunt for the treasure. Despite the film's title, however, there is no clear moral distinction between the three characters save perhaps that the Bad is more relentless and brutal in his pursuit. Such moral ambiguity is one of the major aspects differentiating Leone's films from other classical Hollywood Westerns, with their popularization of unequivocally moral messages.

Fistful of Dollars and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* were released in Korea in 1966 and 1969, respectively. The Western films were actively imported into Korea after national liberation in 1945 when Korea came under the trusteeship of the United States, and this led in turn to the appearance of some Western features in Korean films starting from the 1960s. The enormous box-office success of *Fistful of Dollars* became the turning point at which Korean filmmakers began to more eagerly produce Korean-style Westerns. Since most of these films deal with

stories of independence movement activists in Manchuria during the Japanese occupation (1910–1945), they have retrospectively been dubbed Manchurian Westerns by critics.¹²

Manchuria, currently part of China's northeast, borders the Korean Peninsula and was an important locale for events in ancient Korean history. It is here that the ancient kingdoms of Goguryeo and Balhae were located. Particularly from the 19th century and into the Japanese occupation period, historical numbers of Koreans migrated into this area. These included voluntary migrants fleeing harsh living conditions in Korea, as well as forced migrants, sent there by the Japanese colonial government to populate Japan's puppet state of Manchukuo. Yet another group was composed of Korean nationalists who carried out the nation's independence movement from this area. Therefore, for numerous reasons, this place is often thought of by Koreans as the "cradle of the nation" (An 2010, 41).

Break Up the Chain was an exemplary Manchurian Western film modeled on *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. The story also features three men, only this time in pursuit of a Tibetan Buddha statuette on which a secret list of Korean independence fighters is inscribed. Cheol-su is a bounty hunter helping the Korean fighters find the statuette; Dal-geon is a double agent between Korea and Japan; Tae-ho, a bandit, follows the trail of the statue for its monetary value. In the course of their pursuit, however, the latter two somehow change their minds and all three come to help the Korean fighters obtain the statuette. The three seem to start out respectively as either the Good, the Bad, or the Ugly, but all of them end up as morally good characters by becoming patriots. Thus far, this film seems to be like any other film of the period, faithfully following the government's requirement that a film's role be that of edifying the public. However, the film's ending suddenly deviates from this when the three, seemingly

12. The genre name "Manchurian Western" was first coined by filmmaker and writer Oh Seung-wook and appears in his memoir, *Hanguk aekshyeon yeonghwa* (Korean Action Cinema) (Oh 2003, 43). The term became widely adopted by Korean scholars and cultural critics. During the 1960s, these films were usually called *Daeryungmul* (continental genre). For the history of the import of Western films and the emergence of the Manchurian Western, I refer to Park (2008, 8–25) and Oh (2003, 41–54).

born-again patriots, nonchalantly go their own ways after their mission is completed. They helped the nationalists but do not seem to care much about serving the nation or the nationalistic cause any further, connoting cynicism over political schisms and people's sacrifices to them. This is a dramatic difference from the majority of contemporary films, just as its own original, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, displayed a different moral sensibility from classic Hollywood Westerns.

Some 37 years later, Kim Jee-woon made his remake based on both these films. In terms of a storyline, Kim's film very closely follows *Break Up the Chain*, revolving around the Korean independence movement. The three Korean bounty hunters/bandits are looking for a map that is supposed to lead to a treasure from the Qing dynasty hidden somewhere in the middle of Manchuria. Park Do-won works for the independence activists, whereas Park Chang-yi is a Korean collaborator with Japan—the Good and the Bad, respectively. An interesting difference from the previous two films is that Yoon Tae-gu is designated as the Weird, not the Ugly. In a way, he is similar to the previous Ugly characters in following the map simply for money. But by refusing to call Tae-gu the Ugly, the film seems to question what is uglier about his predecessors in earlier films relative to the other protagonists. Throughout the film, Tae-gu is portrayed as “comic relief or a foil to the other character's seriousness” (Cho 2015, 56). He behaves ludicrously and has a simple dream to live as a farmer. Yet, he turns out to be the most heinous and legendary bandit, Finger Fiend, who had some time previously cut off Chang-yi's finger. Chang-yi seeks revenge on him.

As was mentioned earlier, the director surely demarcates the audiences into different groups based on their knowledge of these originals and uses different tactics to address them. Such dual addresses are materialized in the array of the film's intertextual clues. To connect with global audiences who remember Leone's films, Kim arranged numerous quotations from them. Some of the prominent features include the Bad character killing his own employer. Just like Angel Eyes, who kills both his target and his employer—the one who had ordered him to kill the initial target—to collect money from both, Chang-yi kills his employer, a traitor to Korea, and steals his bag of diamonds. The scenes where Do-won ties up and drags Tae-gu around

in the middle of a desert, or where he tells Tae-gu to dig alone in the desert to find the treasure, recreate similar scenes from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. The real-life absence of the middle finger of actor Lee Van Cleef (Angel Eyes) is interestingly narrativised into Chang-yi's loss of his finger to Tae-gu. Of course, the three-party Mexican standoff sequence toward the conclusion of Kim's film also pays tribute to the famous ending of the 1966 film. There are even scenes referencing the earlier two films of Leone's trilogy. The scene where Chang-yi keeps shooting at Tae-gu's hat so that he cannot escape the three-party duel cites a similar scene in *For a Few Dollars More*, while Tae-gu's survival of the shooting thanks to the steel panel hidden inside his jacket reminds us of the similar trick used in *Fistful of Dollars*.



Figure 1 (left) and Figure 2 (right). Van Cleef's absent finger narrativised into Chang-yi's lack of one.

Source: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment (Figure 1) and CJ Entertainment (Figure 2).

While these scenes invoke nostalgic moments of cultural reminiscence over Leone's films for wider global audiences, the Korean audience will also respond to scenes reminding them of Lee's 1971 film. In fact, the entire plot structure in which three men search for an object that is related to the Korean independence movement in Manchuria clearly shows a direct linkage between the 2008 and 1971 films. In addition, the saloon in the middle of a desert where Tae-gu meets a self-proclaimed nationalist/opium vendor parodies the one run by undercover independence activists in the earlier film. One of the central officials of the Korean activists being

a woman is also the same in both films.¹³ The director himself has said that Tae-gu's riding a motorbike rather than a horse is modelled on Tae-ho's vehicle in *Break Up the Chain*.

Such textual similarities of the remake to its originals are usually thought to indicate a "stabilized and limited" intertextual structure, providing audiences a "point of origin" (Verevis 2006, 21). However, I ask one important fact to be noted—people momentarily think about films other than the one being watched when they recognize such intertextual references. The references tend to distract the viewers. What Laurent Jenny explains about the intertextual reading further questions the "stabilized" understanding of the remake:

Each intertextual reference is the site of an alternative: either one keeps reading, seeing the reference as nothing more than one fragment among others, an integral part of the text's syntagmatics; or one returns to the original text, resorting to a kind of intellectual anamnesis whereby the intertextual reference appears as a "displaced" paradigmatic element issuing from a syntagmatic axis that has been forgotten. (as cited in Iampolski [1998, 30])

When the audience of a remake encounter familiar intertextual references from other sources, they will be briefly pulled away from the linear procession of the narrative of the film being watched, to be transported to the realm of other texts. At this moment of recognition, the specific intertextual elements are decontextualized from the current film, and function singularly as clues to summon the textual and cultural memory of the original. Mikhail Iampolski, in his discussion of the intertextuality of the quote, says that a textual fragment that cannot find a "weighty enough motivation" for its existence from the logic of the text becomes an "anomaly." Borrowing Michael Riffaterre's discussion, he further explains that the textual anomaly "violates the calm of mimesis," and where mimesis is violated, we begin to see "vigorous traces of semiosis," and the "birth of

13. The scenes of this female character in the 2008 film are completely deleted in the international version.

meaning.” According to him, the quote “violates the link between sign and objective reality. ... orienting the sign toward another text rather than a thing” (Iampolski 1998, 30). A film remake’s intertextual references to their predecessors similarly violate the supposedly transparent mimesis of the film text. They disturb the solidity of the remade text during the interpretation of the film and point to multiple possibilities of meanings rather than fixing them. The meaning is destabilized and decentered. Iampolski suggests that the reader’s efforts to recover the quote’s motivation by drawing on other texts and codes would imbue the text with additional meanings and the mimesis would be restored (Iampolski 1998, 31). I, however, doubt whether the violated mimesis would be easily recovered. The place of the quote or intertextual references would consistently bring up other texts. It will be permanently perceived as the place of disturbed meaning.

This instability of meaning is enhanced when the film is a transnational remake such as *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, in which multiple originals with different cultural backgrounds are involved. In this case, the decontextualized reading happens on multiple levels, further dividing the audiences into different spectatorial positions. Unless you are confirmed to know all the possible intertextual history of the remade text, a near impossibility, you will have only partial meaning, never being able to claim to know the *whole*. The identification of the originals therefore rather unsettles than solidifies the meaning of a transnational film remake. The textual structure of *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* and the differentiated tactics of addressing different audience groups suggest how meanings are multiplied in a destabilized condition for transnational film remakes.

Transnational Remaking, Social Discourses, and Chasing the McGuffin

As seen earlier, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* includes diverse intertextual puzzles from their multi-layered originals so that both domestic and foreign audiences can connect to the film more closely, yet at different levels. Such a remake eventually leads to the question of why the director recreated the film at that specific moment around 2008. What Robert Stam explains

about the close relationship between inter-medial film adaptation and the production period provides an insight into answering the question regarding intra-medial film remakes as well:

Since adaptations engage the discursive energies of their time, they become a barometer of the ideological trends circulating during the moment of production. Each re-creation of a novel for the cinema unmasks facets not only of the novel and its period and culture of origin, but also of the time and culture of the adaption. (Stam 2005, 45)

Stam elucidates that adaptation is a “work of reaccentuation whereby a source work is reinterpreted through new grids and discourses,” and continues that in revealing aspects of the source text, each grid also “reveals something about the ambivalent discourse on the moment of reaccentuation” (Stam 2005, 45). This idea expands our views on film recreation beyond simply focusing on the original sources, to looking at the discourses of the production period. Such an approach highlights the fact that the demand for the film recreation may come out of cultural and discursive necessity as well as for industrial and commercial reasons. The observation of the remake both in its relation to the film’s production period as well as the past can enrich our understanding of the film.

I pay attention here to two cultural and social situations as defining the “moment of reaccentuation” of the production of *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* and as providing new “grids and discourses” in the interpretation of the film. These are the growing ambition of Korean filmmakers for the larger global market, and newly emerging territorial debates between Korea and China. When the film was produced, Korean popular culture had been riding on its successful wave of *Hallyu*, exporting dramas, films, and especially K-pop to growing overseas markets. Especially in the field of cinema, Korean artists achieved more fruitful results than ever in the 2000s, garnering numerous awards at the major international film festivals at Cannes, Venice, and Berlin.¹⁴ Obviously, in such a period any ambitious

14. During the several years leading up to 2008, directors Im Kwon-taek, Park Chan-wook, Lee Chang-dong, and actress Jeon Do-yeon won prestigious awards at the Cannes and the

Korean film artists would aspire to reach wider global audiences, and the industry was ready to support them. Kim's decision to remake one of the most globally popular Western films surely must have derived from the desire to prove his ability to communicate in more universal generic language of cinema and to correspond with a variety of audiences. We can also assume that the production of *Sukiyaki Western Django* (2007), a remake of a Spaghetti Western film by Japan's Miike Dakashii, or *Dachimawa Lee* (2008), a parodic Manchurian Western film by Korea's Ryu Seung-wan, might have had some cross-fertilizing effect with the making of Kim's film.

While Hallyu and the growing recognition of Korean filmmakers in the global film circuit might serve as one of the justifications for the Spaghetti Western axis in the coordinate of Spaghetti-Manchurian Western of Kim's film, another facet of the social environment at that time seems to provide another explanation for the Manchurian-Western axis. I find that the production of *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* can also be understood in the context of the increasing interest in Manchuria in the social discourses of Korea at that time. This film was produced in the middle of the heated debates over China's so-called Northeast Project. In addition to the ongoing diplomatic disputes over the sovereignty of Dokdo between Korea and Japan, this newly emerging territorial tension between Korea and China rekindled the nationalistic sensibilities and interests linked to the land and history of Manchuria among Korean people.

The Northeast Project is a Chinese government-directed research project activated in the early 2000s. Yoon Hwytak explains that it was motivated by changes in the political climate of the Korean Peninsula, the need to stress a Chinese historical identity among ethnic minorities, and the intention to deny the historical connections between the Korean Peninsula and China's northeast region (Yoon 2005, 158-159). The core ideas of this project claim that all ethnic societies that have existed within modern Chinese territory are "Chinese nations," and the "dynasties established by them are of Chinese origin" (Yoon 2005, 145-146). According to this theory, the history of Goguryeo and Balhae also belong to that of China, not of

Venice International Film Festivals.

Korea. To the Korean people, this is an “invented, inflated historical point of view” exploited and promulgated by the Chinese government to serve the needs of the “here and now” (Yoon 2005, 146). In the political, cultural, and academic realms of Korea, this situation provoked renewed interests in ancient Korean history and its related territory, especially Manchuria. The production of *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* fittingly coincides with such social currents.

If the film was born at the intersection of these two cultural and social discourses, how, then, does this situation affect its interpretation? The previous section examined the different intertextual references unevenly addressing different audience groups, and destabilizing meanings. What if a single textual moment induces potentially multiple interpretations? Iampolski questions whether intertextuality opens up new signifying perspectives and new meanings or whether it generates “such a complex superimposition of meanings as to finally annihilate the possibility of a final meaning” (Iampolski 1998, 28). A couple of aspects from Kim’s film seem to pose such a dilemma of signification.

The first is the landscape. The film incessantly shows scenes of people traversing the vast desert by train, motorbike, car, and horseback. The landscape is a key narrative element in any Western film. Its significance comes from the genre’s origin, the American frontier and its history, which is a narrative about establishing *civilization* by occupying and nurturing nature, the land. Actually, the representation of wide-open landscapes, the staple of the Western genre, was hardly available for Manchurian Western films in the 1960s and 1970s. Korea’s geography rarely offers locations suitable for typical Western scenery. The government’s regulations on overseas travel for Korean citizens at that time as well as limited budgets worked as obstacles to any foreign location shooting.¹⁵ With these limitations, all that filmmakers could do was to best simulate the Manchurian landscape shooting in some remote areas of Korea. As Chung and Diffrient observe, such a representational strategy can be conceptually perceived as “intraregional Orientalism” that

15. The regulation on overseas travel was partially lifted in the early 1980s and completely removed in 1989.

resembles the “typical Hollywood mode of depicting the East as a culturally nonspecific, interchangeable geography of alterity” (Chung and Diffrient 2015, 105). The irony of such a reductive strategy is that it is self-inflicted Orientalism, compelled by the natural and social limitations by which the Korean film industry was bound during the period.

In this sense, the filmmakers of *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, who had more ambitions and better production conditions than ever before, by shooting most of the scenes in China’s desert area, seem to have fulfilled the creative wish not granted to earlier filmmakers. Nearly assuming the *authenticity* of picturing Manchuria, the entire film parades the scenes of the vast desert land where the characters chase one another. The most impressive scene is the final long shot of the film, in which Tae-gu, the Weird, rides his motorbike off into the boundless Manchurian desert alone. For most audiences, this scene may remind them of the frontier space in numerous Western films, where a lonely stagecoach runs along, a typical signifier of the budding civilization in an uncultivated and empty land. For the Korean audience, conscious of the real-life territorial controversies over the past Manchurian area, however, the *unoccupied* vast landscape in the ending shot may also conjure up the image of the lost land of Korea’s ancient kingdoms as well as the historical sites of the Korean independence movement at the turn of the 20th century. This is the moment where all these non-diegetic meanings are superimposed on the landscape, in which process, the scene is decontextualized from the diegetic reality as a place where Tae-gu is riding his motorbike, and is reinterpreted through the real-life cultural and social discourses of the film’s production. At the same time, the diverged discursive implications proposed by the global cultural memory and the Korean people’s historical memory tend to constantly emulate and eclipse the other, depending upon the sociocultural experiences of the viewer.

For this film, there is one more factor that further destabilizes the meaning of the landscape. Most of the shooting of the film actually took place not in the real Manchurian area that is now the northeast part of China, but in the Dunhuang area, located in a northwestern portion of China. The current northeast region of China has been transformed into

agricultural districts and is quite different from the barren desert land of the historical imagination of the Korean people. The landscape of Manchuria in the nation's collective memory is forever lost. Although the film's shooting location in the real Chinese desert area produces a more convincing portrayal of Manchuria in the past compared to the 1971 film, it turns out to be another simulacrum, only a better version than the earlier one.

The futility of a search for any definite or fixed meaning suggested by this film is insinuated in another scene where Tae-gu is hunted by everybody in the middle of the desert. At the climactic chase scene toward the end of the film, an array of characters—including Do-won, Chang-yi, multiethnic bandits, and the Japanese Imperial Army—is pursuing Tae-gu for his map in the vast Manchurian desert. On an iconographic level, this part of the film represents a quintessential Western action sequence. On a hermeneutic level, however, in going after Tae-gu, all the characters in the film are seen to be literally and metaphorically chasing *the Weird*. Outrunning and defeating other pursuers, the three protagonists finally arrive at the map's destination, and there have a final duel, in which, just as in the 1966 Spaghetti Western film, only the Bad perishes.

The solemn sequence then turns into an absurdist drama when the wounded characters do not recognize the treasure that is right in front of them. The treasure was an oil reserve in the middle of the desert, where obviously the process of excavation has long ceased. Since Korea possesses no oil reserves, their ignorance about their incredible discovery roughly suits the period, but is unfortunate nonetheless. Seeing the small squirt of black fluid from the ground, a disappointed Tae-gu says to himself, "What the hell is that? ... Did I come to the wrong place?" After such a long journey and many sacrifices, the chase itself comes to nothing, an absurdity. Eventually, everybody's passionate chase after the "nothingness" turns into weirdness, nullifying any attempt to find any cathartic meaning. Tae-gu lets the wind carry the useless map away in the dust. With this scene, the film's final messages in relation to the social and historical discourses surrounding it become ambiguous. Michelle Cho indicates the "non-correspondence" between the map and the space here. The map as the film's "incomprehensible object of desire" does not allow the space to which it

refers to be decoded (Cho 2015, 62). The treasure map initiates the actions of the characters and motivates the entire narrative to unfold, but eventually eludes any final meanings and disappears into the abyss of the diegesis. It is a typical McGuffin. A McGuffin is a narrative device that Alfred Hitchcock popularized in his films. Characters are following the McGuffin since it seems to be “of vital importance” to the story, and yet it is “of no importance whatever” (Truffaut and Scott 1985, 138). It is an “irrelevant object” and “nothing at all” around which the action turns (Dolar 1992, 44). McGuffins therefore “signify only that they signify, they signify the signification as such,” and in fulfilling this function, “the actual content is entirely insignificant.” The object that operates as the McGuffin itself is a “vanishing point, an empty space” (Dolar 1992, 45). The meaning of the McGuffin is either open to any possibility or has no meaning at all in the first place. Nothing is sure and the McGuffin remains a perennial enigma.



Figure 3 (left) and Figure 4 (right). The Chasers, the Weird (Figure 3), and nothingness (Figure 4)

Source: CJ Entertainment.

Such is the function of the treasure map in this film. By disappearing in the middle of the dust, it refuses to attain an expected goal of meaning. And I find that the meaning of a transnational film remake such as *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* itself operates in a very similar way. The transnational film remake also betrays the apparently obvious and *already defined* path of meaning and diverges in unexpected ways. Partly due to audiences’ uneven accessibility to the intertextual sources and due to different discourses surrounding the film, at the end of the interpretive process, no meaning seems guaranteed a primary

position. The goal of interpretation is to find meaning but the interpretation of a transnational remake can only generate multiple possibilities of meanings, constantly destabilized and disturbed by other alternatives. Eventually the individual meanings become less significant than the act of interpretation itself. The process of reading a transnational film remake is aporetic and the meaning is undecidable. The Korean-style Western film, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, guides us to rethink the relationship between transnational remakes and the interpretive process, as such.

Conclusion

The emergence of Asian film industries, including that of Korea, as influential cultural forces in the global market since the late 20th century has opened the path to unforeseen collaborations between regional and global film industries. Especially Hollywood's frequent remaking of Asian films in the early 2000s tend to be looked at suspiciously and to be scrutinized within the frame of cultural imperialism. One quite insightful observation of such a case is Bliss Cua Lim's discussion of Hollywood's remaking of Asian horror films. She sees such practices of Hollywood as "deracinating acts of cultural appropriation," through which the industry tries to "erase or at least neutralize" the foreignness of the Asian originals (Lim 2009, 216–217).¹⁶

This paper looks at an opposite case, an Asian film industry's remaking of a globally influential Western film, and tries to see what happens when a deracination of a film happens in a reversed way. Although Leone's film *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* is not necessarily a Hollywood film, its enormous international popularity based on the utility of the Hollywood Western genre and its star power, certainly places it in the *global* position as opposed to its Korean remake's *regional* and *local* one. The Korean remake, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, however, reveals possibly a more complicated cultural agenda than simply appropriating a global film into a more familiar format because of

16. I appreciate the suggestion of an anonymous reviewer for bringing up Lim's article in relation to this discussion.

its linkage to another original, the Korean Manchurian Western, *Break Up the Chain*. This paper traces the ways that meanings are produced at the intertextual juncture of these three films, and tries to determine whether the process of interpretation and producing meaning in this case points at a certain quality of transnational film remaking itself.

Among film remakes, transnational remakes especially are engaged in a more complex web of intertextual relations surrounded by more diverse discursive influences than other remakes, and hence involve a more complicated process of interpretation. *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* is a good example of such a transnational remake that challenges signification. An analysis of this film indicates that the identification of a remake's originals does not always provide an anchorage of meaning, but can further complicate the puzzle of signification. Audiences' uneven accessibility to these source materials and their different discursive experiences sometimes destabilize and decenter meanings rather than solidify them. Just like the McGuffin that propels the characters' actions but disappears before any goal is reached, a transnational remake also initiates the signifying process but does not conclude it. In the end, what remains important is more the act of interpretation itself. The interpretation of transnational film remakes becomes an aporetic experience, as such. This is a new way to understand films originating from other films. Compounded at the intersection of various intertextual, cultural, industrial, and historical relations, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* offers an interesting text, the reading of which ushers us to a new perspective offering insights into understanding the film remake in general and the transnational remake in particular.

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