

From the Era of Melodrama to the Age of the Comedy and the Thriller: *The Simultaneous Transformations of Korean Society and Film Genre From the 1990s to the Present*

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, the genres of Korean film have been re-imagined, and the changed status of melodramas symbolizes this. Melodrama, which was a mainstream genre of Korean film for a long time, has been dissolved into a variety of emerging film genres, losing its dominance. This evolution has been commensurate with the imperative to secure distance from the emotions centered on the pathos of compassion and sympathy, and to question the period dominated by such emotions. The trajectory of Korean films in the 1990s, which began with a greater focus on romantic comedy and continued into comic action films, and the rise of thrillers in the 2000s, demonstrate this transformation. Since the 2000s Comedies and thrillers have acted as a common denominator of genre hybridization, maintaining their status as mainstream genres. This is because these two genres are most suitable for reflecting and reenacting the dynamics of Korean society and the specificity of its modernization due to the coexistence of a delayed modernity and a nascent post-modernity in Korea. In this transformation of film genres, current Korean films embody a labyrinth without an exit where the pursuit of rationality ends in failure or deepens an ironic aesthetic that calls for a contemplative form of humor regarding the coexistence of heterogeneity, contradictions, and absurdity.

Keywords: film genre, transformation, melodrama, romantic comedy, thriller, pathos, distance, question

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Why Comedy and Thrillers in Present-Day Korea?

This study examines the ways that the evolution of Korean films has reflected changes in Korean society from the 1990s to the early 2000s. Since this period is close to the present, consideration of it is important in discussing the current phase of the Korean film history. This is an effort to understand the constantly changing nature of Korean films in this period, and thus, it is necessary to examine the temporal context and evaluate issues that were current not long ago, even though not enough time has passed for a comprehensive historical review to be possible. While acknowledging this limitation, this study aims to investigate the characteristic trends of Korean films from the 1990s to the recent past and their implications, focusing on the evolution of film genres and the inflection points of these changes.

To this end, this study begins by discussing the issues and trends which are closest to us in time. When the evolution of Korean films in the 21st century is described, “genre diversification” and “genre hybridization” are generally employed as core analytical concepts. Even a cursory review of the most successful Korean films of 2018 demonstrates these tendencies.

Table 1. 2018 Box Office Hits in Korea (Rankings 1st to 20th)

Rank	Title	Genre	Rank	Title	Genre
1	Along with the Gods: The Last 49 Days	Fantasy	11	The Witch: Part 1. The Subversion	Action Thriller
2	Along With the Gods: The Two Worlds	Fantasy	12	The Accidental Detective 2: In Action	Comedy Crime Thriller
3	The Great Battle	Costume Drama Action	13	On your Wedding Day	Romantic Comedy
4	Intimate Strangers	Comedy	14	Gonjiam: Haunted Asylum	Horror Thriller
5	1987: When the Day Comes	Modern History (mystery)	15	Be With You	Melodrama
6	Believer	Crime Thriller	16	Innocent Witness	Suspense Thriller
7	The Spy Gone North	Spy Thriller	17	Detective K: Secret of the Living Dead	Costume Drama Comedy Crime Thriller

8	Dark Figure of Crime	Crime Thriller	18	Fengshui	Costume Drama
9	Default	Modern History (Mystery)	19	The Negotiation	Crime Thriller
10	Keys to the Heart	Comedy	20	The Drug King	Crime Noir Thriller

The top 2018 box office films *Along with the Gods I and II* were together the first Korean fantasy film series in history to draw a total audience of more than ten million people. Among the top 20 films, ten of them were crime, action, horror, and comedy thriller films, and five of them were comedies. Of the remaining five films, three were costume dramas, namely *The Great Battle*, *Fengshui*, and *Detective K: Secret of the Living Dead*, and two were modern history dramas, namely *1987: When the Day Comes* and *Default*. Both *1987* and *Default* relate stories that are full of tension as a result of their reliance on deduction and logic for the retelling of actual events. Although the *Along with the Gods* series is classified as fantasy, it employs the frame of a courtroom drama through which the truth of the alleged crimes is reached, and weighs the appropriate sentence for the criminal based on careful reasoning. These films show not only that thrillers have become mainstream but also that the basic elements of thrillers, namely a sense of the mysterious and a focus on a reasoning process, have become prevalent in the narrative structure of Korean films.¹ Meanwhile, as seen from the fact

1. There have been many attempts to devise a taxonomy of the mystery film genre called the “thriller.” Anglo-Saxon, French, and Latin mystery novels have been classified in terms of the ethnicity of the authors involved, and they are sometimes categorized as classical mystery novels, hard-boiled mysteries, and sociological mystery novels. Some divide them into authentic mysteries and variable mysteries. The mystery film genre is comprised of several sub-genres which have conventional genre titles. For example, the most commonly used designations are the “thriller,” the “mystery,” the “suspense film” and “film noir.” Todorov (1975), Narcejac (2003), and Reuter (2000) took a different path and categorized the mystery film according to the type of narrative involved. In aggregate, their logic suggests that the mystery narrative can be largely categorized into three types: the detective film, the crime film, and the victim-oriented suspense film. In this article, I employ the term *thriller* to encompass these three types as it is the most commonly used term for such films. In this genre, mystery, curiosity, thrills, suspense, reversal, and surprise are used as major immersive mechanisms, and to the extent that they contain suspense they are akin to horror films.

that *Extreme Job* (2019) drew an audience of more than 16 million people in the first half of 2019, comedy is still a popular film genre in Korea.

Between the 1990s and the early 2000s, the comedy and thriller genres gained significant popularity. As is widely known, melodrama was the dominant genre in Korean films until the 1980s. This phenomenon was related to the unique modernization process of Korea and its family-centric culture. However, in the 1990s, the comedy genre emerged, primarily represented by the subgenre of romantic comedy -a hybrid form made up of melodrama and comedy- and in the late 1990s, thrillers were produced. Later, since the turn of the century, both comedy and thriller elements came to undergird films of many different genres and various comedies and thrillers began to be produced. This transition stemmed from changes in the Korean film industry, which were closely associated with developments in Korean society as a whole. During this period, there was a multifaceted transformation in Korean films in terms of the way the film industry operated, its policies and systems, its workforce, and the content of the films produced. Commentators have called this period one of “transformation and media revolution” (Kim and Jeong 2001, 416), of “shift and reorganization” (M. Kim 2006, 351), and of “reconstitution” (Chung 2008, 238).

This period can be divided into two phases, from the late 1980s to the late 1990s, and from the late 1990s to the first decade of this century. In terms of the former period, the pro-democracy movement in 1987 is widely seen as the major political and economic event that gave impetus to the transition and transformation of Korean films; and in terms of the latter period the IMF financial crisis in 1998 is seen as having been equally central. It is natural and meaningful that the occurrence of these two major events, which played such major roles in the development of Korean society, and the paradigm shift of Korean films are interrelated. Modernization was originally achieved based on logical rationalism, the development of science and technology, and the industrial revolution, and capitalism and democracy are the twin offspring of modernization. Film is the art of the age of capitalism that was born and nurtured in the process of modernization, as well as a medium that symbolizes the popularization of art. Since films

are also art, changes in their content or form do not identically reflect political and economic changes. However, since films exist on the basis of technology and capital, they are more immediately influenced by and responsive to political and economic changes compared to other artforms. As a result, economic and technological considerations are essential for the production of films, and in addition public opinion and political variables must be examined in order to understand the public demand for films, which leads to the process of selection in the industry in terms of which films are produced. Film genres are formed through the development of this selection process and rise and fall depending on the results of these selections. In other words, the success of a film is a sign of the success of the industry selection process, and it leads to further production of films in the genres which have been successful. The simple fact that a certain film was viewed by a large number of people is a meaningful social phenomenon in itself. After the repetition of this success on the part of other films, a genre becomes mainstream. When the genre becomes dominant enough to change film trends, this not only brings about a cinematic transformation but may also imply a huge social or historical change.

In this context, the paradigm shift discussed above, from melodrama to comedy and thrillers, occurred because of increasing democratization.² While melodrama is a genre in which stories are developed through characters' emotional identification with the object of their attention and their consequent subjective reality, comedy and thrillers are intellect-centered genres which require two preconditions for their development, namely that the characters maintain an emotional distance and ask questions. Therefore, this genre transition implies that such emotional distance and focus on interrogating circumstances have been increasingly

2. The notion of the transition to the age of the comedy and the thriller from that of melodrama highlights the shift in the genres which make up the mainstream which has taken place. It does not mean that melodrama has disappeared and that only the comedy and the thriller have survived. However, melodrama is no longer to the fore in its own right, but rather it permeates various other genres. In comparison, the comedy and the thriller, which had previously been marginal, are now much more conspicuous, and the key elements of these two genres are constants in 21st century film.

accepted in our society since the 1990s. This transition also suggests the specificity of the modernization process on the Korean peninsula. In both the US and Japan, diverse film genres, including thrillers, had existed since the formation of these countries' film industries, and they have risen or fallen in prominence, or hybridized over time. Unlike these countries, in Korea, thrillers were unable to become mainstream from the origin of the Korean film industry in the late 1950s up until the 1980s. This was because questioning authority and performing logical reasoning were prohibited at a time when the "state of exception" was constantly promulgated due to the partition of the Korean peninsula. Since comedy is a primal genre based on laughter, comedy films were continuously produced. However, they had been regarded as low-quality films due to their emphasis on comedian-centered slapstick since the late 1950s, and barely survived. The fact that comedy emerged as a major genre in the 1990s and that the thriller genre became popular in the early 2000s indicates that the Korean film industry as well as Korean society had entered a new historical phase, and this requires further investigation.

The scholarship on genre in Korean film history begins with the study of melodrama in the late 1990s. The book *Melodrama-ran Mueut-inga?* (What is a melodrama?, 1999), whose writers include Gina Yu and ten other critics, is the most representative example of this field of study from this period. Since then, research on melodrama has continued steadily, and a book about Korean popular art history which analyzed "Sinpa" as an element of Korean melodrama was recently published (Lee 2016). This persistence of research into melodrama confirms the status of the genre, the most longstanding mainstream genre in Korean film history. The study of the horror and action genres was also prevalent at the turn of the century (Soyoung Kim 1999; Baek 2002).

Academic discourse on the thriller began in earnest in 2003 with the advent of the films *Old Boy* and *Memories of murder*. Although a feminist critique of *Tell Me Something* (1999) was published (Sun-ah Kim 2000), this single article did not lead to a broader scholarly discourse on genre at that time. In the early 2000s, the primary interests of Korean scholars were the ideological and thematic issues dealt with by *Old Boy* and *Memories of*

Murder, including the partition of Korea and a variety of social issues, and not their genre. In 2005-2006, outstanding dissertations (M. Yun 2005; Y. Kim 2006) which combined genre theory with a focus on auteurism were published, and interest in genre gradually increased. However, it was only in the 2010s that full-fledged debate on genre films began to take place. This can be said to be a trend that took hold as the thriller genre became mainstream. But there was an academic tendency to focus on social problems at the expense of genre analysis of *Chugyeokja* (The Chaser), *Akma-reul boatta* (We Saw the Devil), and of several films by Chan-wook Park and Joon Ho Bong.

Nevertheless, there is now brisk debate about the thriller genre, compared to the tepid discussion of other genres. For example, the Korean scholarship on the genre of comedy is not very comprehensive, because comedy is implicitly considered a vulgar genre and Korean film scholars do not take it seriously as an academic subject. The most prevalent strands of research on comedy has been related to the rise of romantic comedies in the 1990s and the development of the comedy genre in the 1950s and 1960s. Typical studies of the romantic comedy genre in the 1990s include those of J. Park 2005; Youn 2010; Soh Youn Kim 2014; and S. Yun 2015; among others. A common denominator is that these studies view the 1990s romantic comedy as an important inflection point in Korean film history. Meanwhile, there are studies on the formation of the comedy genre in the 1950s and 1960s, namely that of Yu 1999a; Oh 2005; S. Park 2018; and so on. The focus on these two periods reveals that the comedy genre was not to the fore in the 1970s and 1980s. This suggests again that the rise of the romantic comedy in the 1990s was of a piece with the transformation of Korean society at that time.

In brief, it is no exaggeration to say that genre research is still in its nascent stage in Korean film studies. To this point, the majority of contributions to this field has tended to focus on sporadic textual criticism or on the auteurism of some filmmakers. In other words, macroscopic approaches to genre formation and development, the interconnections between genres, and the relationship between social changes and genre

developments are still lacking,³ or are not being adopted. In this context, I would like to examine the watershed period of the 1990s and 2000s when a paradigm shift occurred in Korean film history, comprised of an evolution of the mainstream genres. I hope that this study will provide an overview of this period and help lay the foundations for a wider range of scholarly approaches to genre in the future.

Comedy: Keeping a Distance from the Past

Between the 1990s and the turn of the century, two films are commonly considered inflection points: *The Marriage Life* and *Swiri*. These films, which attracted the largest audiences in 1992 and in 1999, respectively, clearly display the innovation and core changes the Korean film industry was undergoing in the 1990s. In this regard, *The Marriage Life* is called a “high-concept film” that represents the innovation in film production in the 1990s and *Swiri* is seen as the first Korean blockbuster, which played a leading role in the revival of the Korean film industry. After the success of *The Marriage Life*, many films were thoroughly planned in the pre-production stage in response to public demand for higher quality. With the success of these films, the market share of Korean films, which had fallen to 15.9%, began to rise in 1994. After the success of *Swiri*, a more commercially-driven system like Hollywood was formally adopted in Korean film production, the concept of genre was strengthened, and the quality of films significantly improved. With audiences’ increasing interest in and support for Korean films, and the explosive increase in the number of screens caused by the spread of multiplexes, the Korean film market share finally surpassed 50%

3. It is noteworthy that researchers in *Daejung seosa jangreu yeonguhoi* (Research Society of Popular Narrative Genre) led joint research into the structure of five major genres, namely melodrama, historical fiction, mystery, comedy, and fantasy from the early 2000s to 2016. Their results have been published in five volumes which comprise a series entitled *Daejung seosa jangreu-ui modeun geot* (All about Popular Narrative Genres). This series has a well-organized bibliography of studies on Korean film genres.

and the age of the “ten million spectator film” arrived.⁴

The *Marriage Life* is a romantic comedy and *Swiri* is an action thriller. These Hollywood-style genre films began to be produced by the Korean film industry after the success of these two films. For example, *The Woman and the Man* was devised in 1992, the year when *The Marriage Life* was released. This film was planned as “a light comic (sexy) melodrama that deals with people’s thoughts and worries about love in a modern society” (Cho 2005). The phrase “romantic comedy” was only intermittently used in newspapers before the early 1990s. Even when *When Harry Met Sally*, a film that created a worldwide romantic comedy boom, was released in Korea in 1989, it was referred to as a “comic romance” or “neo-romantic” film. In 1992, the use of the phrase “romantic comedy” gradually increased, and it skyrocketed in 1995. This implies that the romantic comedy genre was in the process of being established between 1992 and 1995 after undergoing a transition period when romantic comedy was accepted as a hybrid of melodrama and comedy. Finally, romantic comedy became the most representative film genre in the 1990s. This trend can be discerned in the box office rankings in the 1990s, which were dominated by romantic comedy films. Following the success of *My Love, My Bride*, which was ranked 2nd in 1991, *The Marriage Life* and *Mister Mama* were ranked 1st and 2nd in 1992, and four romantic comedy films were ranked in the top ten in 1993, including *The Woman and the Man*, which was ranked 2nd. After reaching its peak of popularity in 1995, the year when *Dr. Bong* and *How to Top My Wife* were ranked 1st and 2nd, respectively, the popularity of romantic comedy gradually decreased until 1998. Then thriller genre began to emerge since *Swiri*.

What should not be overlooked here is that not only romantic comedy films but also comedy films in general were dominant in the 1990s. During this period, comedies in general often incorporated elements of crime or action films. *Two Cops I* and *II*, the top-ranked films in 1994 and 1996, are good examples of this trend. Including romantic comedy as a subcategory,

4. The Korean film market share surpassed 50% in 2001, and rose to 63.8% in 2006. The reduction of the screen quota to 73 days in 2007 caused a short-lived crisis in the Korean film industry, but the Korean film market share recovered to 50% in 2011 and remains at this level today. For more information on these statistics, refer to the KOFIC statistics (website).

comedy was a major film genre in Korea throughout the 1990s, during which time three or four comedy films were ranked in the top ten films every year. In this period, it also became common for non-comedy films to include comic elements. For example, *The General's Son*, an action film, contains lighthearted elements and humor, unlike other action films produced in the 1970s, and *The Road to Race Track*, a film dealing with the life of intellectuals, includes satire and mockery instead of a tragic atmosphere and seriousness, which were prevalent in the films of the 1980s. This trend reveals the popularity of certain film genres at the time to some extent. While melodrama was the dominant film genre until the 1980s, humor became a crucial element in Korean films in the 1990s, to such an extent that it can even be called the age of comedy. In the meantime, both the action and crime genres were on the rise. While the action genre, one of the mainstream genres along with melodrama, remained self-contained, crime elements were included in action and comedy films until the late 1990s.

Simply speaking, comedy is a genre that induces laughter. Since it can include anything that pursues this end, it can be mixed with or incorporated into various other genres. This makes it difficult to categorize this genre. One of the essential requirements for a film to be defined as a comedy film is that the audience should still see the comic dimension of the story at the time the credits roll. That is, comedy contains an implicit promise that laughter should last throughout the entire work and that it should not end in tragedy (Y. Park 2013b).⁵ What is essential in order to induce and sustain laughter is a distance from the object of attention. As Horace Walpole said, "The world is a tragedy to those who feel, and a comedy to those who think," and comedy is a genre that comes into play when the emotional distance which enables cool appraisal and thought is secured between the audience and the object of attention. Laughter is induced only when the audience can observe the object from a distance, thereby avoiding complete sympathy with or empathy for it. The essence of this laughter is the opposite of the essence of

5. For more information on the definition and categorization of comedy as a genre, refer to Neale and Krutnik (1990).

melodrama, which induces the maximum sympathy and empathy of the audience, thereby emphasizing the psychological reality of the situation rather than the plausibility or causal chain of the narrative. Therefore, comedy is an intellectual genre, and thus, it is the opposite of melodrama, which is the most emotional genre.

In the late 1980s when melodrama was still prevalent, films containing comic elements emerged and became popular. Not only in lighthearted films dealing with young people's lives and loves such as *Springtime of Mimi and Cheolsu* (1987), but also in a melodrama about noble and pure love such as *Our Joyful Young Days* (1987), the innocence of the main characters is expressed humorously. In addition, a film that allegorically satirizes desire in capitalist society, *The Age of Success* (1988), and a film cynically criticizes the transition from the era of enlightenment ideology of the 1980s to the era of capitalistic desire of the 1990s through the use of obscenity, *To You From Me* (1994), were also produced. Even in *The General's Son* (1990–1992), which echoes the action films of the 1970s in terms of its patriarchal worldview and resolutely macho elements, an attempt to keep a distance from the past is also found.⁶ This representation of ironic distance from the recent past coincided with the changed social atmosphere which took root from the late 1980s to the 1990s. Economic and political reorganization geared towards globalization started in earnest in the late 1980s, and a discourse produced by the new generation and a literature predicated on examining the past emerged in the post-Cold War 1990s (J. Kim et al. 2017). In the 1990s, energetic attempts to supersede the past era and to discover novelty were

6. *The General's Son* (dir. Kwon-taek Im, 1990) is reminiscent of the action films of the 1970s, while also subverting their conventions. First, the director set up a character in a boy's image that is different from a sturdy middle-aged man. Second, he depicts a realistic street in Jongno, Seoul, during the colonial period as a novel spectacle, and imbues the past with nostalgia. Third, the action in the film is realistically conveyed through understated sequencing rather than pyrotechnics. These elements of the film were made possible by the distance the film deploys from the historicity of colonial times and from the conventions of 1970s films. In addition, the humorous elements which are interspersed with action sequences also demonstrate this distance, enabling audiences to enjoy the film in a more irreverent manner, even given the film's emphasis on anti-Japanese sentiment and nationalism.

prevalent throughout society. The rise of the comedy genre came about in this atmosphere.

However, it is not enough to explain the rise of the comedy genre as the result of keeping an intellectual distance from the past or the object. Humor is the core of comedy, and it fundamentally derives from jokes that do not cause undue damage to its target. Therefore, unlike a serious treatment of a subject, humor acts as a shield when dealing with socially difficult topics and it can also broaden the range of topics that can be dealt with. The fact that in the pre-modern era the courtiers tended to use exhortation via innuendo when saying something difficult to the king implies that humor plays a role in giving more freedom to the speaker or sometimes to the listener. In the 1990s, by employing humor, films were able to talk about matters that had never been allowed to be discussed. In addition, in comedy, the range of expression is expanded through humor, and thus, it is not necessary to provide a rational solution to possible issues that are raised. While thrillers for example have the goal and duty of revealing the criminal and all the circumstances surrounding the crime, comedies can end in laughter without providing answers, as long as no one is egregiously wounded. Therefore, when unconventional and fresh discussion is necessary, only comedy is allowed to engage in it freely without the need to foster a social consensus. And when comedy is combined with romance, which has an affinity with melodrama, a distance from the existing melodrama genre is secured, and the moral scaffolding of melodrama can be replaced by a radical depiction of the issues in question through humor. In the 1990s, the romantic comedy genre was created and emerged in this context.

The rise of romantic comedy was also related to the reconceptualization of family. In the 1990s, romantic comedies depicted individualistic romance, and employed the characters' families merely as a background. In these films, most main characters live alone before marriage and form a nuclear family afterward. This suggests that romance films in the 1990s were intent on distinguishing themselves from conventional melodramas that depicted unconditional love as a moral value and emphasized the willingness to give up marriage for fidelity to family. The development of this tendency to keep a distance from tradition and the past is well shown through changes in hit

films during this period, from the melodrama *Our Joyful Young Days* in 1987 to the transitional romantic comedy *My Love, My Bride* in 1990 and finally, the romantic comedy *How to Top My Wife* in 1995. Although *Our Joyful Young Days* is a melodrama that ends in tragedy, which characterizes noble and pure love as admirable, it forms a psychological distance from the audience by making fun of the main character (played by Seong-gi Ahn), who loves only one woman throughout his entire life. In *My Love, My Bride*, love between the working husband (Joonghoon Park) and the housewife (Jinsil Choi) is portrayed in a way that shows nostalgia for the love the younger couple had. However, the duality of men is disclosed through the husband's first-person narration. In this period, male characters who would have been depicted as trustworthy in melodrama between the 1970s and the 1980s are portrayed as old-fashioned, laughable men. The loving newlywed couple in *My Love, My Bride* reappeared in *How to Top My Wife* in 1995, this time in an unhappy marriage, and such a striking change in such a short period of time shocked people. The husband who is stuck in his old ways has to kill his trendsetter wife in order to escape from her. The premise of the film is that a wife who conforms to the contradictory and unreasonable demands of the patriarch is neither conceivable nor charming, and thus it is difficult to accept her. However, it is also difficult to accept a wife who does not do so. This dilemma leads to the extreme, jocular conceit of killing the wife, as comedy is the most suitable genre through which to discuss such an intractable dilemma (Y. Park 2019).

How to Top My Wife seems to be right on the boundary line of the comedy that could be accepted in Korean society at the time. This becomes even clearer when examining whether the murder of a husband could be accepted as a joke. It is noteworthy that thriller elements are incorporated into this comedy, but this is an unavoidable choice for a film that deals with the killing of a family member. This fact implies that the overcoming of a dilemma through straightforward humor had reached its limit in this film, and required a new avenue. Thrillers construct the narrative of a crime in reverse through the investigation of an unexplained crime. This process is carried on through rational deduction on the basis of clues and evidence, with the aim of tracking down and punishing criminals. While comedy is a

genre that can freely ask questions about difficult problems through humor, thrillers clearly start out with questions and then seek the explanation for and resolution of problems. In this regard, in the film *Happy End* (1999), the murder of the wife by her husband, who loves mystery novels, is justified as a patriarchal punishment for the unfaithful wife, or as a resolution of the problem. Thrillers generally emerged with the development of global capitalism and rationalism, but cannot necessarily be said to be a genre that succeeds comedy.

That is because the comedy genre is comprised of a wide range of types, from basic forms such as slapstick and black comedy to cerebral comedies which rely on contradictions and paradoxes. Slapstick comedy in film stems from the early age of cinema, and musical comedy preceded thrillers because it was a genre that emerged with the advent of talkies. However, romantic comedies that depict issues surrounding social class and the absurdities related to the conflicts between men and women have evolved along with the thriller genre. On the other hand the black comedy, which elicits a complex form of laughter, has receded, having revealed a world of absurdity that cannot be captured by the rationality of the thriller genre. The fact that thrillers emerged after the rise of comedy in the Korean film history demonstrates that the securing of distance from the past on the part of comedy enabled clear questioning afterwards. This process of development of thriller genre in Korea reflected changes in society since the late 1990s.

The Thriller: The Genre of a Questioning Era

Swiri attracted an audience of two million people in Seoul in only nine weeks when it was released. Since its box office record broke that of *Titanic* (dir. James Cameron, 1998), *Swiri* became a known as the Korean film that surpassed a Hollywood film. That a highly entertaining spy film was premised on the serious issue of the division of the Korean peninsula was surprising to most Koreans. Films about the partition tended to be anticommunist propaganda until the 1970s. At the beginning of the post-Cold War era in the 1990s, “films of division” that emphasized the tragedy

of fratricidal war, such as *North Korean Partisan in South Korea* (1990) and *The Tae Baek Mountains* (1994), were produced. It was a new approach to focus on entertainment while dealing with a serious national issue. This attempt to deal with politically sensitive ideological issues in genre films led to the production of *JSA: Joint Security Area* (2000), giving rise to a trend in the 2000s. In these films, North Korean soldiers, who used to be depicted as enemies lacking humanity in anticommunist films, are represented as emotionally traumatized gangsters who can neither be accepted into our society nor be hated, just as is the case in *Scarface* (Y. Park 2013a). Muyoung Park (Minshik Choi) in *Swiri* and Kyungpil Oh (Kangho Song) in *JSA* are the first characters who represented this new perspective. Both of these films have a thriller structure. *Swiri* starts with the death of South Korean agents and the story develops through the discovery of the identity of the murderer. In *JSA*, two North Korean soldiers are found dead in the joint security area after gunfire at dawn, and an investigation begins, overseen by an investigator from a neutral nation. Neither this type of situation, which makes people curious about who killed the soldiers and why, nor the narrative structure, which leads to a process of logical reasoning based on factual clues, had previously been allowed in Korean films.

The thriller genre developed in the context of increasing population density and individual anonymity, a greater focus on privacy, and a rise in the crime rate caused by capitalist urbanization. The establishment of a judicial system focused on objective evidence such as fingerprints and photographs, and the development of modern science that enables the collection of objective evidence, also helped the thriller genre grow. Most of all, enlightenment rationalism, which grew out of Descartes' famous aphorism "I think, therefore I am [*Cogito, ergo sum*]," supports this genre. Thrillers consist of the process of arriving at judgments on the basis of evidence or circumstance. That is, in thrillers, people infer an unknown truth from already known facts through reasoning, and thus, intellectual distance from the object of attention and doubt are essential to the thriller genre. Thrillers did not develop for a long period of time in Korea since skepticism was frowned upon in the country. During the Cold War period, South and North Korea confronted each other on the Korean peninsula,

and military dictatorship was in place for approximately 30 years, with the nation's "state of exception" (Agamben 2005) used as a rationale. All sources of evil were attributed to North Korea, and the reasonable suspicion of corruption and irrationality was blocked on the grounds that it could benefit the enemy. In this context, most mystery films produced in the 1960s and the 1970s were anticommunist spy films, where the criminal was predetermined to be a North Korean spy. Since the strict anticommunist stricture acted as a dogma that did not allow any objection, there was no room for rational thinking. In *Last Witness*, a film based on a novel about the fall of the Yushin dictatorship, the protagonist, who is conducting an investigation by focusing on deduction and logic, commits suicide. This shows how hopeless a situation he was in. In this film, after his persistent investigation, Detective Byungho Oh (Myungjoong Ha) reveals the cartel the villain belonged to, which abetted murder, conspiracy, property extortion, and the embezzlement surrounding the daughter of a North Korean partisan and her inherited wealth. However, the film does not show the punishment of the criminals but only the victims' death, and all evil deeds are attributed to the North Korean spy. The suicide of the detective, which is rarely seen in mystery narratives around the world, demonstrates the fate of rational thinking in Korean society in the 1970s (Y. Park 2009). Therefore, it is not a coincidence that thrillers began to emerge at the beginning of the post-Cold War era. In the remake of this film released in 2001, *Black Daffodil*, Detective Oh (Jeongjae Lee) survives even after disclosing the identity of true criminal, and this shows how Korean society had changed compared to the 1970s.⁷

After the successes of *Swiri* and *JSA*, a number of thrillers, including *Public Enemy* (2002), *Memories of Murder* (2003), and *Oldboy* (2003), were produced and became box office hits. The structure or the degree of

7. *The Last Witness* was completely out of the spotlight at the time of its release due to censorship but was re-evaluated with mainstreaming of thriller genre in the 2000s, when it was restored in 2008. The discourse on the film only became active in the 2010s, when thriller genre began to be a subject of the discourse. Major articles include K. Kim 2015; Cho 2018; Kang 2018; and An 2014. published an article about the remake of *the Last Witness*.

logical reasoning on display differs in each film, but in each questions and curiosity about the mystery at hand are central. However, ultimately in each film logical reasoning still reaches its limit and fails to reveal the truth of the cases and the culprits. Ernest Mandel, who regarded the crime story as a product of capitalist society, argued that as capitalism develops, public doubts about law, order, and the state grow, and thus crime stories move not toward a rational solution but to a demonstration of the failure of rationality (Mandel 1986, 236). Considering the fact that Korean thrillers emerged at the time when the country was first incorporated into the global economy, his argument seems applicable to Korean thrillers to some extent. However, in the history of Western crime story explored by Mandel, heroes who are outside of the law such as Robin Hood become villains in the period of modern constitutionalism, and revert to being anti-heroes in the late capitalist period. The way such heroes are portrayed is different in Korean thrillers, in which problems are never solved through the democratic and constitutional principles of the collection of evidence and the engagement in logical reasoning. In Korean film history, trial scenes were filmed exclusively in order to be inserted into the climax of melodramas. Although a small number of courtroom dramas such as *Only Because You are a Woman* and courtroom comedies such as *Bedroom and Courtroom* were produced in the 1990s, the thoroughgoing courtroom drama genre was not formed until the 2010s.⁸ This is because the modern constitutionalism that emerged along with Japanese imperialism was rarely accepted as legitimate by the public. Law was not as swift or effective as one's fists, the legal system did not offer compassion unless there was a generous judge, and governmental authority based on law was the exclusive property of the elite. Hence, judicial officers tended to appeal to the emotions and the police tended to arrive at crime scenes after revenge had been exacted. It seems

8. The courtroom drama refers to the film genre in which the trial process plays a crucial role in the narrative. Representing the logical trial process based on legal formalism, Korean courtroom dramas encompass the films *Unbowed* (2011), *Silenced* (2011), *The Client* (2011), *The Attorney* (2013), and *Minority Opinion* (2015) in the 2010s. For more information on the courtroom dramas in the Korean film history, refer to Y. Park 2018, 139–189.

that *Swiri* and *JSA* are very similar in this respect, in that the weakness of the constitutional order, the justice system, and governmental authority is revealed at the end of both. However, there is one crucial difference between these films and earlier ones, as their characters continue to engage in logical reasoning until they become discouraged. Narratives that develop on the basis of enlightenment principles or rationalism are fundamentally different from stories that originally lack such a basis. Therefore, the discouragement of logical reasoning demonstrated in thrillers, including *Swiri* and *JSA*, is problematic.

In *Swiri*, the main character (Seokyu Han) catches the criminal and realizes that she is his fiancé (Yoonjin Kim). He kills her without knowing she is pregnant with his baby, which means he also murders his own child. This kind of reasoning that leads to the killing of a family member is also depicted in *Tell Me Something* (1999), *Happy End* (1999), and *Public Enemy* (2002). In *Tell Me Something* and *Public Enemy*, the father and the parents, respectively, are killed, and in *Happy End*, the wife is killed. Patricide in particular was shocking in the Korean film history. Most of all, *Tell Me Something* was radical in that the immoral father is murdered as punishment. Although the murderer Suhyeon Cha (Eunha Shim) is depicted as a psychopath in the film, her public image was far from that of a wicked woman, and this prevented the audience from viewing her as purely psychopathic. In addition, the murder of the father is justified as an appropriate punishment because he committed evil crimes which are reminiscent of the actions of Noah Cross in *Chinatown* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1974), a film which has been characterized as the “epitaph of the hard-boiled genre.” This was an almost unprecedented departure in Korean film history, its only precursors being the anticommunist films of the 1960s and the 1970s, in which the motif of the killing of the father was used to emphasize the atrocity of communism.

In 2002’s *Public Enemy*, fund manager Kyuhwan Jo (Seongjae Lee) kills his parents for money. He is portrayed as a psychopath with anger management issues. However, the logic of him murdering his parents derives from capitalistic rationality. He borrows money from his father to invest, and is set to profit immensely from it. However, his father tells

Jo to return the money to save an orphanage, which he has sponsored throughout his life, from bankruptcy. To Jo, his father's decision seems irrational. It is unacceptable for him to give up a guaranteed profit which is merely days away from fruition for the sake of unreliable emotions such as sympathy, or moral values that do not guarantee financial benefit. His line in this film, "Fund managers feel the moral responsibility only for the losses of investors" represents his moral framework.

The killing of the father in *Tell Me Something* and *Public Enemy* shows the duality of rationalism. *Tell Me Something* depicts the murder of the abusive father as justifiable as it is a refusal of patriarchal hierarchy, whereas *Public Enemy* shows a situation where existing ethics and values are questioned on the basis of capitalist rationality. The fact that such refusal and questioning results in patricide can be interpreted as the denial of a patriarchal familism that is associated with nationalism, which had been strengthened through the division of Korea after the Korean War and economic modernization. This phenomenon is an extension of the elimination of the family from the romantic comedy, and is also regarded as a reaction to conventional melodramas in which contradictions involving the family are overcome through pathos. The theme of investigation revealing the ugly face of the father continues in later films, including *Oldboy* (2003), *Blood Rain* (2005), *Hwayi: A Monster Boy* (2013), and *Dark Figure of Crime* (2018).

JSA (2000) and *Memories of Murder* (2003) follow different trajectories. Both of them are detective films, but the criminals are never arrested. *JSA* follows in the footsteps of *Last Witness* in that as the detective tracks down the criminal, witnesses are killed and thus the truth cannot be revealed. It is interesting that Major Sophie Jang (Young-ae Lee), who was in charge of investigating the case, is depicted as a female mixed-race officer of Swiss nationality. At the "military camp" where the "brotherhood cathexis" (Puwar 2004, 71) of men is strengthened and at the ceasefire line where not only South and North Korea but also the interests of powerful nations are intricately intertwined, a male detective can hardly pursue the principle of rationality. The attitude of Major Sophie Jang demonstrates this well. Her unusual instinct to pursue logic without considering any political context

at the front lines can be seen as plausible because she is a woman. However, her investigation becomes burdensome in the latter half of the film. As she delves into the truth of the case, involved parties encounter danger, and one commits suicide, unable to handle the truth. Jang continues to pursue the truth regardless of these obstacles, and this makes her seem robotic in that she only moves toward a goal in order to fulfill her mission. For example, it is a very unnatural act for her to inform Sergeant Suhyeok Lee (Byeongheon Lee) that his bullet killed North Korean soldier Woojin Jeong (Hakyun Shin) even after she witnesses the suicide of Private First Class Seongshik Nam (Taewoo Kim) and identifies a set of friendships between South and North Korean soldiers. Thus, the character of Sophie Jang should be seen as a device that adheres to objective logic rather than as a person with innate verisimilitude. However, it is indescribably desolate that the result of the rationality to which Major Jang adheres is the suicide of young people. This film thus depicts the issues raised by the division of the Korean peninsula by disclosing its tragic truth on the basis of rationality.

In *JSA*, the truth of the case which has been identified cannot be revealed, whereas in *Memories of Murder*, the police fail to arrest the criminal even when using state-of-the-art forensic equipment provided by the U.S. Instead, as a result of this failure, all “ordinary” citizens are interrogated as suspects who have allowed darkness to permeate society. By viewing events from the perspective of the detective, the audience suddenly finds itself in the role of the criminal who is being tracked down. This becomes clear in the scene where the criminal discerns the last victim, a girl. When he, up in the tree, looks down at the nurse and the school girl as if he is a hunter isolating his quarry, the camera shows what the criminal sees, making the audience feel that they are one with him. The title of this film, *Memories of Murder*, implies such immersion. By summoning the 1980s in the present day, when the past serial murders are being remembered, this film denounces the 1980s and the present simultaneously.

The ironic distance that began to figure prominently in the films of Chan-wook Park and Joon Ho Bong became the trend of Korean films in the 2000s. Irony emerged during the period when the pursuit of rationality results in the killing of one’s own father in films. This ironic distance is

a sign that right and wrong is no longer black and white in this era, and that the existing ideology or system has been collapsing in the “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000) which emerged along with neoliberalism.

The Contradictions and Irony Inherent in Rationality

According to the box office statistics of Korean films in the 2000s, comedy and thriller films were continuously ranked highly. In the early 2000s, films containing both action and comedy, so-called “gangster comedies,” dominated the box office rankings. Examples include the *My Wife is a Gangster series* (2001–2006), the *Marrying the Mafia series* (2002–2012), the *My Boss, My Hero series* (2001–2007), *Let’s Play Dharma* (2001), and *Guns & Talks* (2001). Since the turn of the century, the horizons of Korean film genres have continued to expand. The alternate history film *2009-Lost Memories* (2002) and the counterfactual history film *Hanbando* (2006) were produced, and films that played fast and loose with historical accuracy such as *Untold Scandal* (2003) and *Once Upon a Time on the Battlefield* (2003) were produced in succession, and are dubbed “fusion historical drama” or “faction.” In addition, the monster films *The Host* (2006) and *D-War* (2007), the genre parody film *The Good, The Bad, The Weird* (2008), the SF film *Snowpiercer* (2013), the zombie film *Train to Busan* (2016), and the fantasy film *Along with the Gods* (2018) were also produced and took first place at the box office in their respective years of release.

It is not easy to summarize the overall tendency in Korean films, which is still developing. However, it is clear that the standard form of films has changed. First, mystery films have become ubiquitous, and rationality is pursued in the process of solving these mysteries. Here, this concept refers to both formal and procedural rationality, which consists of a decision-making process that is based on rational and logical thinking, and purposive and substantive rationality, in which the optimal alternative is selected in light of the goals being pursued. As can be seen from the top films of the early 2000s mentioned above, this emphasis on rationality is revealed either in the form of narrative structure or in narrative content,

through the personality of the characters or narrative themes. Since a central component of thrillers is their adherence to rationality, the fact that they have become a mainstream strand of film-making indicates the contemporary emphasis on rationality in society. In addition, alternative history or faction films that have become popular since the early 2000s are similar to thrillers in that they raise questions about history and attempt to restructure it through an internally coherent logic. SF films are also similar to thrillers in that they are based on scientific reasoning about the future. Since they constitute a kind of potential future history, they are also closely related to the historical fiction that emerged in the 2000s.

Even in the melodrama genre, which has traditionally been classified as an emotional genre, a type of emotional restructuring has occurred. This is shown in the disappearance of the convention of using pathos to resolve rebellion against unconditional obligation to family, which had previously appealed to the public since the colonial period. Tropes from older films such as punishing only the husband's lover and leaving the unfaithful husband unscathed as seen in *Fooled by Love*, *Hurt by Money* and *The Cemetery under the Moon*, blaming oneself for being fooled by a man and getting pregnant as seen in *Love Me Once Again*, *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars*, choosing the incompetent husband over a young lover with a great background as seen in *To the Last Day* and *Madame Ae-ma*, all of these conventions are now considered outdated and unable to attract an audience. As shown above, since the 1990s, films have no longer followed the stereotypical narrative structure that heavily relies on familial bonds, and since the 2000s, the dissolution and reorganization of the existing family system have been commonly portrayed and reflected upon. From *Family Ties* (2006), which asks the question "what is family?" to *Miss Baek* (2018), wherein family issues are combined with those of violence and hierarchy, the development of Korean melodramas has shown how questioning and rational reasoning have been applied to melodrama.

This is also demonstrated in the establishment of the courtroom drama genre at the beginning of the 2010s. Courtroom drama, which has been a major genre in Hollywood since the 1950s, became one of the most significant genres in Korea during this period, which can be considered

a sign of modernity. In other words, it represents the fact that a high level of public awareness of legal procedures and principles has formed and logical thinking has become generalized enough for popular enjoyment of courtroom drama in the 2010s.

This dramatic change is also confirmed by the fact that the structure of Hollywood film genres were fully incorporated into the changes that were taking place in Korean films. Until the 1990s, causal narrative was de-emphasized in favor of situational pathos and thus structural integrity was often sacrificed in major genres of Korean film. Here, the sacrifice of structural integrity means that appropriate evaluations were not made in the development of narratives. In Hollywood movies, structural integrity has been elaborately stylized in light of the demands of the corporate system and the public's demands. The Hollywood style is based on a psychological principle which has taken form in a culture that epitomised modern capitalism and democracy. Therefore, the transition of Korean film genres is commensurate with the embedding of rationality in society, and with Korea's progress toward thoroughgoing democracy and capitalism as the twin pillars of modern rationalism.

However, as the capacity for rational thinking is deepened, the contradictions inherent in rationality become obvious. Since the essence of rational thinking is skepticism, constant questions are raised about the existing social order or about national division. The prevalence of mysteries in Korean films is the reflection and symbol of this social paradigm. The concept of mystery refers to a strange incident or case that is difficult to explain or understand. In thriller and horror films, mystery is a key principle that assists in the immersion of the audience in the narrative by developing events and inducing curiosity in them and deduction on their part. In his description of the boundaries of the fantastic, Todorov called mystery which can be explained by the law of reality "uncanny" and mystery which cannot "marvelous" (Todorov 1975, 41-44).

However, in the 21st century, these boundaries have become blurred, making it difficult to distinguish between the uncanny and the marvelous. *The Wailing* (2016) and *Savaha: The Sixth Finger* (2019) are good examples of this undecidability. The determination of whether a mystery is uncanny

or marvelous is based on rational reasoning and the principle of reality. But the blurring of boundaries indicates that there are many incidents that cannot be explained rationally in reality.

People often scoff at contradictions or absurdities that cannot be rationally explained. Here, scoffing is a minimalistic self-defense mechanism against unavoidable, difficult situations. In this context, comedy maintains its status as a mainstream genre along with thrillers. When the position and direction of criticism are unclear in the wake of the modern period of enlightenment, and when anger toward the outside inevitably turns in on oneself, laughing may be all one can do. People laugh in various modalities, such as the laughter of reconciliation, satire, and irony, and ironic laughter dominates this age. The title of the new romantic comedy released in 2001, *Yeobgijeogin geunyeo* (My Sassy Girl), symbolizes the era of irony. The term “Yeobgijeok” refers to the “abnormal and grotesque,” which implies that the elements of thriller and horror began to be introduced to romantic comedy in this film. In the titles of gangster comedy films such as *My Wife is a Gangster*, *Let's Play Dharma*, and *Guns & Talks*, the contradictory impulses and the elements of thrillers are shown. In these films, incompatible elements are juxtaposed, and values and a sense of inferiority which had newly spread after the IMF crisis are unevenly included. Laughter is highly useful in discussing issues which have no solutions since it has the power of encompassing uneven and contradictory matters. The continuous popularity of comedy since its mainstreaming in the 1990s implies the difficulty Korean society still faces today in terms of longstanding contradictions and dilemmas.

Conclusion

Since the 1990s, Korean film history entered a new phase. After the great success of *Seopyunje* directed by Kwontaeck Im, which attracted a million filmgoers in 1993, more people began to watch Korean films. Since the 2000s, with the innovations in the film industry and the spread of multiplexes, “the age of ten million viewers” has arrived. This can be

attributed to the globalization of capitalism, dramatic changes in the media environment and the dynamic manifestation of a problem-oriented consciousness and imagination in the post-Cold War era, after such capacities had been suppressed and corralled into the parameters of a strict capitalist-communist dichotomy in the Cold War era.

In the meantime, the genres of Korean film have been re-imagined, and the changed status of melodramas symbolizes this. Melodrama, which was a mainstream genre of Korean film for a long time, has been dissolved into a variety of emerging film genres, losing its dominance. This evolution has been commensurate with the imperative to secure distance from the emotions centered on the pathos of compassion and sympathy, and to question the period dominated by such emotions. The trajectory of Korean films in the 1990s, which began with a greater focus on romantic comedy and continued into comic action films, and the rise of thrillers in the 2000s, demonstrate this transformation.

In the 1990s, the existing concept of family, which had been the basis of melodramas, faded. Democratization and the end of the Cold War caused a shift in social attitudes. With the spread of neoliberalism, a reorganization of the economic system occurred. The transformation of the Korean film industry coincided with these changes in Korean society. Comedies and thrillers have acted as a common denominator of genre hybridization, maintaining their status as mainstream genres. This is because these two genres are most suitable for reflecting and reenacting the dynamics of Korean society and the specificity of its modernization due to the coexistence of a delayed modernity and a nascent post-modernity in Korea. In this transformation of film genres, current Korean films embody a labyrinth without an exit where the pursuit of rationality ends in failure or deepens an ironic aesthetic that calls for a contemplative form of humor regarding the coexistence of heterogeneity, contradictions, and absurdity.

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