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Contemporary Korean identity: from cinematic representations to identity processes in
Korean society, culture, and politics
Part I:

Epilogue, a new beginning

Alternative contextual definitions of
Korean cinema

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Alternative contextual definitions of Korean cinema

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To my younger brother Corné Yong-ho

제발 이제 그 날을 슬퍼 말아줘

That day was so sad please don't think about it from now

이제 다시 함께 해

From now let us get together again

우리 영원히

Us forever

–피아 (Pia) – *Gloomy Sunday*

斷片

A fragment

바람뿐이더라. 밤허고 서리하고 나혼자 뿐이더라.

Nothing but the wind. Nothing but the night, and frost, and myself alone.

거러가자, 거러가보자, 좋게 푸른 하늘속에 내피어 익는 가. 능금같이

익는가. 능금같이 익어서는 떠러지는가.

Let me walk, walk on, is my blood ripening in the pure blue sky as apples ripen?

As apples ripen and drop?

오 – 그 아름다운날은... 내일인가. 모렌가. 내명년인가.

Will tomorrow be that marvelous day? The day after that? Or the year after next?

–未堂 (미당. Midang)/서정주 (Seo Jeong-joo/So Chong-ju)

Han is a characteristic feeling of the Korean people. (...) Some have compared it to the Japanese word ourami, meaning hate or vengeance, but that's quite absurd.

(...) The Japanese word ourami evokes images of the sword and the seeds of militarism, (...), for whom [Japanese] vengeance is a virtue. (...) the Japanese word ourami is completely different from the Korean word Han. (...) Han is an expression of the complex feeling which embraces both sadness and hope. (...) In the present, we accept it; in the future, we will overcome it.

–Pak Gyong-ni/Park Kyong-ni

[Syuzhet] is the story's dynamics, (...)

–Yuri Tynianov

Great novels are always a little more intelligent than their authors.

–Milan Kundera

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Preface

This Master thesis has been in my head for many years. The whole research project evolved in my mind all that time, sometimes taking new shapes, then adding something, or taking out elements; but somehow, I never got around to writing it down. That is until now, for so far it is possible. This thesis will not be able to contain the entire project, but only the start. Still, I'm glad that I at least have set the whole project in motion. I enjoyed the whole process of brainstorming and writing.

It's the culmination of a long period of immersion in Korean cinema. I first encountered Korean films at international film festivals and later I would have access to all kinds of Korean films through DVD internet stores. Sometimes they made me laugh, others made me cry, but they were always of special interest to me as they were a window to the Korean culture, one I never knew.

Being adopted from Korea to the Netherlands doesn't give you many opportunities to learn about your birth country. In contrary to Japanese and Chinese culture, Korean culture was rarely represented in the Netherlands. Korean cinema on DVD finally did give me the opportunity to see and learn about Korea, and it hooked me for – I feel confident to say this – the rest of my life.

I have to thank two persons in particular; without them I simply wouldn't have been able to complete the thesis. First, I have to thank my thesis supervisor Drs. Clara Pafort-Overduin, soon to be Dr. Clara Pafort-Overduin. For her knowledge and all the kindness she has shown to me, often going to great lengths to help me, thank you.

I can't forget my younger brother Corné Yong-ho Splinters, who was burdened with many tasks - often requested at the last moment – like taking care of registrations and the proper paperwork while I am in Seoul, South Korea. It is a nice coincidence that he was visiting me in Seoul while I wrote this thesis.

Finally, I'd like to express my gratitude to many other people – even though I don't know them. I'd like to thank the people in the Korean film industry, whatever their function or task, for their entertaining and/or challenging insight into the Korean culture; my gratitude, and I look forward to your next films.

창호, Seoul, August 2007

Romanization

For the romanization of Korean, I will use the official Revised Romanization of Korean. It replaced the McCune-Reischauer system in 1984 in South Korea. There has been criticism that the Revised Romanization does not adequately represent the right pronunciation. It seems to be a somewhat redundant argument as also the McCune-Reischauer is bound by prior knowledge of the system to pronounce the romanized words correctly.

The Revised Romanization of Korean does however succeed in removing uncommon symbols from its romanization, making it perhaps favorable.

Koreans are usually a little creative when romanizing their names (I'm guilty myself), but I will also use the Revised Romanization of Korean to romanize Korean names. I will make exceptions for important figures whose names are romanized in a standard way, for example former South Korean president Kim Dae Jung. I'll use the Korean order for names, which means that the family name is written first.

Introduction

This thesis will be part of what I intend to be a greater research project. This first part will initiate the project by first establishing the validity of Korean cinema as a representation of Korean culture, society and politics.

At the same time, this thesis will be autonomous as an analysis to find more appropriate approaches towards Korean cinema. It will be done in the context of Korean culture in order to do justice to the films on their own terms.

The main question of this thesis will therefore be: how are Korean films intertwined with Korean culture and what insight provides this interplay between cinematic representations and culture?

I feel the need for new ideas to define each individual national or cultural cinema. Non-mainstream film cultures are too easily described in terms of a dominant film culture which can not adequately define another film culture. The canonized film culture is namely just as specific as any other film culture.

This is not an argument about defining differences between film cultures which undoubtedly have many similarities. I merely believe that a film culture can best be understood in its own context. By attempting this, interpretation, understanding and knowledge about the culture and its cinema will be more rich and colorful. My approach is specific to Korean cinema and other film cultures may require

their own alternative and specific methods.

The end objective of the overarching project – a combination of several interlinked research projects - will be to research the main question of the entire project: how can Korea's contemporary identity – or identity process – be understood in relation to its modern history?

First I will further elaborate on the entire project to provide a better background for this thesis. From there, I will contemplate how this thesis/phase is part of the entire project. Then I will become more specific by elucidating this thesis' main question, methods and objectives. This will be followed by a brief explanation about the structure of this thesis. In the end I want to justify the motivation behind this research project, but on a more general basis.

The overarching project will be about contemporary identity forming processes in Korea. From my observations and theories, I feel a strong sense of a new Korean identity being created. This comes from the Korean people themselves and I'm most interested in analyzing the processes involved and how it relates to Korea's modern history.

I will use these hypotheses for developing my research. First hypothesis: The Korean identity did not originate from Korean people themselves during the modernization period. The troublesome Korean identity is also illustrated by the fact that there are two very different Koreas and both claim to be the authentic Korea.

The Korean identity during the modernization period was enforced by various parties; first by the Japanese occupiers, then by the South Korean leaders with

strong bonds to the US – which resulted in the eradication of the political left, even though Korea was overwhelmingly socialistic (Eckert et al 338) – and finally by military dictators who went to extremes to define South Korea’s identity as opposite of the ‘enemy’ North Korea to justify their military brutality as a necessity.

From this premise I will analyze the hypothesis that contemporary South Korean identity is being recreated by Koreans themselves. This has various manifestations, like in the image change of Korean products, international sports achievements, attitudes, economics, politics, and society, to name a few.

Important representations are in my opinion cultural expressions and cinema is instrumental. Korean films dominate the domestic market. It is one of the very few global markets where national films outperform Hollywood films. Clearly, Koreans care about their cinema. It’s also mostly a young Koreans’ medium and the new identity process is being initiated and formed by younger generations of Koreans.

I will regard cinema as a reflection of the society in which it is made and of the subjects discussed in society (Lee 1-2). “The degree of consistency of interest in and veneration of popular memory and its manifestation in Korean cinema is striking.”

For Michel Foucault, popular memory exists only within the realm of discourse, (...), it exists in conversations, cultural forms, personal relations, the structure and appearances of places “in relation to ideologies which work to establish a consensus view of both the past and the forms of personal experience which are significant and memorable.”

(Min, Joo, and Kwak 3)

I will not debate whether, how or when Korea was modern and is now entering or has entered postmodernity. I'm interested in the processes that influenced Korea during its modernization, and nowadays what I shall refer to as postmodern processes. Whether this defined or defines Korea as modern or postmodern is not of concern to this project. Rather, its main focus is the process of identity formation.

Recap: the identity process during the modernization of Korea was what I recognize as enforced and not the Korean people's own identity.

The postmodern processes – not the claim of a postmodern Korea, or not – are the deconstruction of 'meta-narratives' and 'myths'. Personally – without elaborating too much – I doubt that postmodernism is a constitutive state, but more of a transformative phenomenon. This is where I think its power and usefulness lie and that's how I intend to use postmodern theory: as useful tools to analyze and deconstruct, to give a fresh and alternative angle on the things we know or think we know.

It's the use of these postmodern tools in Korean society, culture and politics that rework the Korean people's identity into a creation of their own. Another hypothesis is that Koreans don't recognize it as postmodern critiques or are not aware of the process.

Recognizing it as postmodern deconstruction is not what is important, as it's mostly a theoretical and academic tool for analyzing and defining the process. However, being aware of the process is what I will posit as crucial for future

developments. Only when they become aware of the situation, can Koreans fully control and shape it, and deal with a tragic past.

In this thesis I will start by looking into this past to explore how it can be used to gain insight. I will do this with the important concept of ‘han’.¹ I hypothesize that it is the channeling of this han that is crucial to overcome the past, perhaps in a positive way.

I previously mentioned the importance of Korean cinema in Korean culture. An analysis of representations in Korean cinema will be a starting point and connection to the real world.

A brief survey shows the deconstruction of the meta-narratives: religion, patriarchy, international adoption, national identity, traditional families, and politics. I will base this on a mix of popular and independent cinema.

The following summary of theories is meant only to be a brief overview, therefore I will not elaborate on details. They are not part of this thesis, but I feel the necessity to quickly establish a brief glimpse of the future direction of the project to better understand it and, therefore, better place this thesis in the appropriate context. Once again, this is not a theoretical framework, only a short overview without any elaboration or argumentation.

Key paradigms will be Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘discourse’ in relation to ‘power and knowledge’, and his ‘genealogy’. Recognizing discourses, how people with power created these discourses of knowledge, and how they generate

¹ I will not explain ‘han’ here as I merely mention it to show a red line through the entire project and establish the link between this thesis and the overarching project. Han will be later explained in chapter 2, paragraph 2.1.

resistance, has been most influential and will be instrumental in the final stages of the entire project. Foucault's discourses will be used in combination with other postmodern tools.

For the deconstruction of (Christian/catholic) religion, I will use independent films which regularly critically analyze religion. It will be combined with Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, Charles Darwin's theory about evolution, and Freud's critique of Christianity.

First, I feel that I should make a disclaimer. Using Nietzsche's theories doesn't mean I endorse ideas about the 'superhuman' (Übermensch) or the way his 'will to power' has become known. Certainly, I don't have any sympathy or understanding for Nazism. I do believe that it's unfair to blame Nietzsche for this horrendous history.

Nietzsche didn't know any superhuman and thought that the closest to a superhuman was Johann Wolfgang Goethe, a kind well-mannered man who was not physically imposing; however he was dedicated to and passionate about his art, and that was what defined the superhuman and raised him above the regular people who would never elevate themselves from an unfruitful life. Goethe was far from what Nazis defined as superhuman and I do not believe that it is necessary to include their definition.

Just as I believe Nietzsche has been misinterpreted or simply abused for justifying unjustifiable acts and ideologies by people who might not even have understood Nietzsche's theories, Darwin has also been the victim of such grave misunderstandings or misuse of his landmark theory. Where Darwin researched and found evidence for evolutionary processes which allowed the most adaptable

species to survive, it has been abused by others in ‘social Darwinism’. Social Darwinism’s was an attempt to implement a natural theory in a theory about society. They believed that certain races or higher classes are superior to others and that it was justified by Darwinism. However, Darwinism does not give supportive arguments for discrimination and racism.

The last disclaimer I make concerns Freud. The inclusion will be about his theory about the infantilism of (Christian) religion, not about his psychoanalysis theory. I do realize that these three men are not postmodern thinkers, but rather the ‘fathers’ of postmodernism and I will use them in combination with postmodern theories.

The postmodern thinkers I will include are Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard. A disclaimer is not needed here, but I think it’s better to quickly say that they didn’t argue that any reading of a text is correct, like right-wing conservatives simplistically claim. What Derrida made clear is that there is no one right dogmatic reading, a most welcome deconstruction of meta-narratives and myths. It makes you more open-minded and acceptable instead of being dogmatic.

Baudrillard didn’t downplay war; he made it clear that he thought it was a most degrading event. His critique of the Gulf War was that it was fully orchestrated and that the war had become a ‘hyper reality’, meaning that the orchestrated and mediatized war had become ‘better’ than the real war, more spectacular and CNN showing a single rocket attack over and over again, completely distorted the real sense of the war.

Derrida’s deconstruction and Baudrillard’s concept of hyper reality will be influential instruments in analyzing the processes in contemporary Korean society.

In this thesis, cinema will be a bridge between theory and practice. To justify this thinking, I will first establish the link between cinema and culture, politics, and society. This thesis will therefore be a crucial stepping stone towards the end objective. Without the embedding of cinema in Korean culture, I can't continue to claim that representations in Korean cinema are valuable insights and starting points of understanding Korean society, culture and politics; in order to analyze the hypotheses about postmodern processes deconstructing the myths and meta-narratives from the modernization period while creating their own identity.

This thesis will initiate the project by linking Korean cinema as a direct expression of Korean culture, society and politics. Also, I will concern myself with current processes within cinema. I defined the present as a time of change and redefinition.

To achieve this, I will first try to distance myself from the over-simplification of classifying Korean cinema as a mixture of genres. This kind of classification has no intrinsic value as it says nothing about a Korean film, except that it doesn't fit the dominant mold.

What is necessary for this project is to analyze Korean film in its own unique context. A structural analysis is desirable as a structural concept might connect Korean films culturally. This structural analysis will be based on Korean cultural defining concepts. This way it will establish the intertwining of Korean cinema with its society, culture and politics. Moreover, it will provide insight to understand Korean cinema from its own cultural perspective and context.

After the establishment of the link, the defining cultural element will shed a new light on Korean cinema and at the same time Korean cinema will provide a new angle from which to understand Korean culture.

I spoke before about postmodern processes and tools and just now about structuralism. I do not wish to engage in a debate about which paradigm is right or wrong, good or bad, but I will simply use both since both have useful theories and tools to analyze and understand. It is the interplay between the two paradigms which I believe will be the most valuable, and not wasting useful opportunities by discarding one for another.

I will first start out in chapter 1 by defining genres and structures and why in the case of Korean cinema it is desirable to go beyond the generalization process almost inherent to genres.

Next will be the elaboration on structuralism and Russian Formalism's discourses on narrative structures. From the debate between the various schools of thought, I will extract focus points which will be incorporated in the structural analysis of Korean films.

At first, in chapter 2, the theory will be a general approach to defining Korean film structure. I will propose a concept I refer to as the 'han-narrative'. I will elaborate on the concept of han and how it is suitable for the structural approach to understand Korean cinema.

Next, I will become more specific through a case-study in chapter 3. For the case-study I will use the ten most popular Korean films and apply my theory of the han-narrative to those films.

With the results of the specific analyses I will re-evaluate, specify and revise my theory of the han-narrative in chapter four.

A conclusion will follow and finally an epilogue, which will foreshadow the remaining parts of the overarching research project, perhaps revised on the basis of the results of this analysis.

With this research I hope to contribute to the existing research on Korean cinema and culture by closely linking representations in Korean cinema with Korean cultural discourses and practices. By grounding my own research in existing research on Korean cinema and culture, I hope to add new insight to the academic body of research on Korea.

Also, I hope this research will be an addition to the research on structuralism and postmodernity in cinema, how media represent cultural identity, the workings of ideology in cultural texts, and the linking of cinema with the culture wherein it has been made.

The objective is to gain a better understanding and definition of cinema to gain greater insight in representations and ideology in South Korean cinema, and to place it in its cultural context.

Korea is still relatively unknown to the world. The knowledge about Korea is usually “misinformed stereotypes” or “outdated information” (Min, Joo, and Kwak 1). This is also true for South Korean Cinema. Lately South Korean cinema has made great progress. Domestic movies in South Korea generate more box-office revenue than the domestic movies of the United Kingdom, France and Japan in their home markets (181). It is one of the few markets in which the

national cinema has a greater market share than Hollywood movies. Besides popular blockbusters, South Korea also produces critically acclaimed art movies which win major prizes at major international film festivals (Kim 54). So, domestic movies are an important cultural expression in South Korea (Min, Joo, and Kwak 1). Still, South Korean cinema is understudied.

1. Structure versus genre

This chapter is part of the elucidation of why I chose cinema as a starting point for an analysis of Korean society, culture and politics. I will start by approaching it from a structural viewpoint.

As I pointed out before, rather than choosing sides between structuralism and post-structuralism², I will use both for my thesis; I believe that the interplay between the two paradigms could be more valuable than an analysis from one perspective alone.

In this chapter I will start out by explaining why I want to make a distinction between genres and narrative structure. From then I will discuss the academic debates on narrative structures in cinema, in order to distill concepts and a method for my analysis.

The analysis will be general at first without going into specific details. My claim that these aspects are instrumental to understanding Korean cinema are necessary to continue with a more specific case-study which – I hope – will result in a method to define Korean cinema in a structural way and to provide more valuable insight, which is necessary for further research, and will shed light on the

² Technically, post-structuralism is a part of postmodernism, but it's usually used interchangeably with postmodernism. Postmodernism is often called post-structuralism in the US. I will in general refer to postmodernism, the technical correct term and the standard name in Europe.

main question of this thesis.

When dealing with Korean cinema, a Korean film is often seen as a fusion of genres. This explanation may be helpful when discussing Korean film or explaining film to someone unfamiliar to Korean cinema, however, it's merely a classification and it doesn't really say much about Korean cinema. I will propose a different approach for analyzing Korean cinema to gain better insight to Korean cinema, and which will be better suited for the purpose of this project.

As a consequence of this research, it may be useful to further expand this kind of approach to other national and/or cultural specific cinemas. This doesn't necessarily have to be from a structural angle, or be an all encompassing definitive discourse applicable to all or most films. Each cinema culture will have its own door to enter a world of rich and original cultural expressions with its own flavor.

For better understanding, film academics should perhaps analyze a film on its own terms, meaning in the context of the culture of its construction rather than classifying it in an outdated binary system which inherently holds a dominant signifier, even though it is unfounded.

1.1 Film genres

A film genre is based on tacit conventions which allow the film audience to know what to expect (Bordwell and Thompson 53). Therefore, it is also used by the film industry when making a film and to advertise the films (Hayward 166).

Scholars view genres as not being static. There are variations, but a genre has defining aspects which are “intuitively shared by audience and filmmaker” and are easily recognized (Bordwell and Thompson 52).

The familiarity – despite some variations – defines the film genre, and helps the viewer to easily navigate through the story and to anticipate what will happen (53-54).

Different countries can have a specific genre unique to that culture (51). However, I claim that most film genres are by default defined by the dominant Hollywood genre conventions.

1.2 Structure

My claim that Hollywood genres dominate definitions of genres leads to the problem that when describing a Korean film as a fusion of genres, the Hollywood genre/film is dominant and the Korean film – along with any other national cinema – is deviant, and defined in terms of one particular film culture/industry, in this case Hollywood.

This can be convenient, but it is not the ideal way to approach a country's domestic cinema when you try to place the cinema within the context of its culture. In this case it's necessary to understand it from the perspective of the indigenous culture, like the anthropological method 'ethnographic research' is based on field work in order to understand the culture on its own terms and not to define it differently from some artificially deposited dominant culture.

I also want to propose the concept to mainly define Korean cinema in a structural sense, rather than attempting to analyze 'Korean genres'. I will attempt to explain why I think that Korean cinema's essence is a particular structure from here on, and will let go of genre.

Structuralism and Russian Formalism were the main influences on the 'film narrative theory' or 'narratology'. This narrative film analysis seeks to go beyond the 'natural' relationships between the story and the characters to study the cultural expressions in the narrative system. This approach recognizes an underlying system under the unfolded storyline and the system expresses cultural associations (Stam, Burgoyne, and Flitterman-Lewis 69).

The Russian Formalists' concept of 'fabula' and 'syuzhet' further defines these two levels in a narrative. Victor Shklovsky first formulated the concept and described fabula as a "pattern of relationships between characters and the pattern of actions as they unfold in chronological order". Viewers link events together, constructing a causal and temporal story (70-71).

The syuzhet distorts the logical storyline with cinematic devices as 'in medias res' and parallel plots. The filmmaker is able to artistically alter the "causal-

chronological order of events” (71). Non-linear structures – manipulating the temporal information flow - are often seen in cinema nowadays and director David Lynch is notorious for throwing logic plot development out of the window.

There was a debate between theorists about the relationship between fabula and syuzhet and the main opinions came from Shklovsky and Juri Tynianov. It revolved around the narrative structure question about whether a film is defined by the unfolding story or by the “stylistic manipulations of space and time”. Central was the concept of syuzhet and two different opinions were voiced.

Eikhenbaum argued that film narrative was essentially the sum of the actions and events displayed. Shklovsky, also, saw the fabula as the basis for the film narrative. The actions in the story are the “core structure” (72).

However, Tynianov thought that fabula was merely a construction by the viewer who is interested in creating a story. Tynianov argued that the best films are the ones without fabula and are defined by syuzhet. He saw cinema as having a “jumping nature” and compared it to verse rather than prose. He didn’t see shots as a sequence to tell a story. The shots in a film, he argued, replace and influence each other. Those films which concentrated on style were more interesting than the ones pronouncing fabula (72-73).

In the 1970s, the influential Claude Lévi-Strauss championed the semantic approach. Semantics attempt to go below the surface level to find the deeper hidden ‘myth’, hidden by the events on the surface level. He analyzed the ‘logical structures’ of the represented binary oppositions and often focused on Westerns to analyze the myth towards American Indians. Will Wright – influenced by Lévi-Strauss – found in Western movies a deep structure of binary oppositions which

formed a consistent myth. It reinforced social concepts and didn't challenge the existing social standards (76-77).

Lévi-Strauss was criticized for ignoring the importance of the plot of a film, only focusing on the deeper-hidden myth instead. Wright formulated his critique by saying that the myth should not only be understood in the context of binary structures, but also in its narrative structure “to understand the social meaning of a myth” (77).

Vladimir Propp voiced a similar complaint about Lévi-Strauss' method, criticizing the removal of the plot's temporal causality in favor of focusing on hidden semantic messages in binary oppositions. Propp favored a syntactical approach and thought that the importance lies in the temporal structuring of the plot.

Propp analyzed the causal plot development in Russian folk tales. The Proppian model recognized 'functions' within the tales. These functions consistently appeared in all these Russian wondertales and at the same moment in the plot, like the introduction of the hero or a specific action by the villain. Propp pointed out thirty-one functions, but depending on the folktale some could be left out (80).

Propp even theorized that there was a universal underlying structure for any medium. David Bordwell refuted this claim:

Morphological analyses have failed through distortion, omission, unconstrained associations, and theoretical inadequacy. There is at present no sound reason to conclude that films share an underlying structure with folktales, or that film studies' version of Propp's method can reveal

the structure underlying a narrative film.

(81)

In his narrative study, Bordwell re-evaluated fabula and syuzhet and explicitly linked them by saying that syuzhet functions as the presenter of the fabula. The presentation may be straightforward or in a complicated manner (73-74).

Both fabula and syuzhet are part of a film's narrative and often related to each other. What is more important is who is defining the objective, a spectator or academic. People attending cinemas on the weekend for leisure will usually mostly concern themselves with the fabula, the story.

The objective of my project is to attempt to gain insight into the cultural importance of and representations in Korean cinema, not to provide an analysis of individual stories. I hope to find a more adequate concept of Korean cinema than, for example, calling it a fusion of (Hollywood) genres.

Therefore, in my analysis the stylistic aspects of syuzhet will be more important than fabula. I will depart from Bordwell's idea that the syuzhet's main function is to present fabula and encompass Tynianov's concept to judge syuzhet as an autonomous element.

However, the structuring of the story will be important, but Propp's syntactical method will come closer than the fabula concept. Unlike Propp, I won't regard this as a universal and medium crossing standard, but as specific of one particular culture, in this case the Korean culture.

The semantic analysis of the myths below the surface of a film will be

incorporated in the overarching project, at a later stage and with the help of Roland Barthes' semiotic model 'denotation/connotation' to read a 'text'. I will, therefore, omit Lévi-Strauss' semantic approach in the present thesis.

2. Structure in Korean cinema

A quick glance at popular films in South Korea shows a diverse list, including comedies, monster films, historic dramas, and action films. These films share with (most) other Korean films a peculiar facet: no matter the type of film or outset, they will incorporate a (melo) dramatic act towards the end. This is one of the major contributors to the fact that people tend to define Korean cinema as eclectic borrowings or a fusion of genres.

I will argue instead that a fundamental principle defines Korean cinema in a structural way. In order to do this I will first introduce the Korean concept of ‘han’³.

2.1 Han, the defining element

Han is a very common word in Korean and has multiple uses and meanings. South Koreans call their land ‘Hanguk’⁴ themselves. ‘guk’ means ‘country’ and ‘Han’

³ ‘한’. By some also written as ‘haan’. Seo Nam-dong gives detailed elaboration of han in *Minjoong Theology* (1983).

⁴ Hanguk

refers here to the Han kingdoms in Korea’s ancient past. In Seoul flows the popular Han River and ‘han’ can be found everywhere in names (people’s names, company or shop names, etc.).

Clarifying which han I’m using here will not eliminate the confusion, as this concept of han is emotional and specific to Koreans. The complexity of han makes it difficult to define.

The Sino-Korean word haan [han] is an ideograph evoking a picture of a tree whose roots are laid deep under the earth. So haan [han] is used to describe the heart of a person or people who has (have) endured or is (are) enduring an affliction, but the pains, wounds, and scars are not always apparent or visible because they are the kinds that occur deep within the essence, core being, or heart of the person.

(Min, Joo, and Han 8)

Han is the result of repeated experiences of “multilayered sufferings” accumulated within a person’s heart and becoming feelings of lament and regret, or inconsolability in the heart or mind. This is both a collective and an individual manifestation (8).

Seo Nam-dong recognized several causes for the feeling of han. He named the numerous foreign invasions, tyrannical rulers, Confucianism’s strict rules including discrimination against women, and slave systems in the past (7-8). Poverty – at times extreme poverty - is another contributing element that crystallized in han, regularly related to foreign aggression.

One of the more recent influences has been the Japanese colonization of Korea which ceased at the end of WW II in 1945. August 15, 1945 – Japan’s surrender –

was met with great happiness and hope by the Korean people after forty years of Japanese rule. However, Korea had become divided in several ideological and political factions during Japanese occupation and the withdrawal of Japan only led to other foreign powers to step into domestic affairs. Korea's geopolitical position always attracted great interest from foreign powers. The turmoil in post-WW II would eventually lead to a “devastating civil war” (Eckert et al 327).

However, Korea has known a long history of foreign aggression and invasions which left the peninsula devastated time and again, including The Korean War of 1592-1598 incited by the Japanese ruler Toyotomi Hideyoshi (Elison 25). The Japanese Priest Keinen could only compare the war with hell (33), as he witnessed the atrocities against men, women and children by the Japanese warriors, including collecting people's noses to bring back to Japan (29). The same accounts in Japanese text regard those feats as heroic without remorse (26).

This war is often mockingly called the ‘pottery-war’, as the Japanese became interested in Korean pottery and tea ceremonies during this period. They forcefully moved entire Korean pottery villages to Japan, which included the kidnapping of pottery makers and their families. It is the sad beginning of the famed reputation of Japanese pottery and Japanese pottery being more famous and renowned than the Korean equivalent may be a form of han

Moreover, the division of the country has been a major source of hardship. Many families were suddenly unable to see their relatives and many political consequences led to the Korean War.

Han can manifest itself in many forms. The long history of suffering from slavery, brutal foreign invaders, political oppression, and exploitation led to an

unconscious form of solidarity carried in the heart. But it can also lead to negative expressions like bitterness and resentment (9).

Han can also be active and/or individual. It can be visible through a “restless inner rage”, or it can be complex and hidden within an individual. Another form is rage and vengeance (9).

Han has been an essential component of many social movements (9). The Korean people formed a collective based on shared suffering and protested the political injustice and exploitation of the people while facing a violent and armed police and/or military.

Han can turn into a dynamic energy when it is eventually manifested visibly and it can be destructive or constructive towards oneself or others. Han “is both emotion and energy” (8).

Min Eungjun, Joo Jinsook, and Kwak Han Ju note that han is an important theme in Korean arts like film (8). However, in this part I will not look at themes in Korean cinema. I will argue that han constructs and even defines Korean cinema in a structural sense.

Because of the complexity and difficulty of defining han, the emotional expressive qualities of film makes cinema the perfect channel to express han in a way that’s unexplainable when trying to concretely define the phenomenon.

I will call this structure ‘han-narrative’. It is han that defines Korean films. Korean cinema deals with many topics and is influenced by many factors; however, han constitutes Korean films, more than story, visual qualities, politics, or any other aspect. Han is the pivotal element.

While Han adds a specific element to the structure of Korean films, it doesn’t

dictate the structure. Therefore it allows a great deal of freedom and makes it suitable for a great range of films, but still binds the films culturally.

Any kind of Korean film incorporates a (melo) dramatic act in the finale of the film. This can be subtle or sometimes it may seem completely enforced upon the story - depending on the type of film and the filmmaker's qualities - especially from a foreigner's perspective.

This required element is far from Propp's system of functions which completely dominated the order and the events of the Russian folktale. Instead, it's one single element which leaves more than enough space for experiments, creativity and giving each film its own distinct flavor.

The element – the incorporation of a dramatic act to express han, regardless of the type of film – is itself not fully definable, but it allows – just like the whole structure – for the same experimental, creative and coloring qualities.

Therefore, Tynianov's concept of syuzhet is integral to the han-narrative. It is a structure of freedom and it's manifested in multiple forms. The most obvious forms are the so-called genres. These Korean films' outset has the trademarks of a specific genre, but still it is culturally linked to other Korean films as it is not a film of a genre, but incorporated in the han-narrative.

There are obviously many Korean filmmakers who use the – unwritten and perhaps unconsciously – flexible han-narrative for creative and experimental processes. Some of those audacious Korean filmmakers are Lee Myung-se and Park Chan-wook.

Han-narrative is therefore an overarching structure, but unrestricting and free-flowing, while at the same time collectively identifying a wide range of diverse

films as culturally Korean because the defining element is a single act in the final stages of the narrative. This dramatic act is a culmination of the deep-rooted han in Korean culture. An emotion inside which is often not even visible or definable, but effectively expressed through culture and the cultural form of cinema is well-suited for conveying this emotion while - at the same time - it defines and identifies Korean cinema collectively, in a way that han is also a collective manifestation, as well as it can be individual, allowing for the creative freedom necessary to allow the han-narrative to be inventive and therefore adaptive to whatever needs to sustain this han-narrative.

The han-narrative is therefore a structure of syuzhet that allows great freedom with one defining element: the employment of the expression of han in one of its various forms.

3. Han-narrative and contemporary Korean cinema

After analyzing and defining the structure of Korean films as the concept which I named han-narrative, I will now continue to investigate this han-narrative to further establish its importance in Korean cinema and its link with society, culture and politics which is crucial for my research in the following stages.

The establishment of the han-narrative in Korean cinema must be researched on a wide scale. Korean cinema consists of a great variety of films from low-budget experimental films to big-budget blockbusters. In my opinion, those independent, non-mainstream or experimental films are equally important. However, for this research, I believe that it's better to start with the more popular films. These films are representative of Korean film because they have been seen by a large portion of the Korean people.

In this section I will attempt a case-study of the han-narrative. I will structurally analyze the ten most popular contemporary Korean films. I will focus on the freedom of the han-structure, the incorporation of the han-structure and possible evolutions in the han-structure.

The following questions will be central to the case-study: are the films connected through the han-narrative? How is the han-narrative incorporated and

how does the han-narrative lend a shared Korean cultural identity to these films?

The ten most popular films in cinema attendance numbers are all contemporary films, part of the latest renaissance in Korean cinema, named ‘hallyu’⁵ (‘Korean Wave’).

1. THE HOST (괴물 GWEMOOL. 2006)
2. KING AND THE CLOWN (왕의 남자 WANGUI NAMJA. 2005)
3. TAE-GUK-GI (태극기 휘날리며 2004)
4. SILMIDO (실미도 2003)
5. FRIEND (친구 CHINGOO. 2001)
6. JOINT SECURITY AREA/JSA (공동경비구역
GONGDONGGYEONGBIGOOYEOK JSA. 2000)
7. SHIRI (쉬리 1999)
8. WELCOME TO DONGMAKGOL (웰컴 투 동막골 2005)
9. MEMORIES OF MURDER (살인의 추억 SARINUI CHOO-EOK. 2003)
10. MY SASSY GIRL (엽기적인 그녀 YEOPGIJEOKIN GEUNYEO. 2001)

My approach will be to analyze the films in order of the year they were released,

⁵ Hallyu consists of ‘han’ and ‘ryoo’ (ryu). As the result of phonetic assimilations – a common element of the Korean language – han (ending with an ‘n’) together with ryoo (starting with a ‘r’) becomes ‘hallyoo’ (hallyu). Han stands for Korea(n). It is named hallyu/Korean Wave as it also ‘sweeps over’ other countries, though mostly Asian countries. Hallyu consists of multiple Korean entertainment forms, most notably, cinema, television drama and pop music.

starting with the oldest film in the top ten list. The analyses will focus on the structure of the film, but explanations of the story will be necessary for a greater understanding.

3.1 SHIRI

SHIRI is a fast-paced action film about two South Korean agents who are trying to track down a North Korean sniper. The film starts with brutal action scenes in North Korea - at night and in heavy rain - of elite soldiers being trained.

It then moves to the modern South Korean city Seoul – basking in sunlight – where the film continues with chases, assassinations and explosions. At the same time we are introduced to the entangled main characters.

The North Korean female soldier who distinguished herself in the horror of the North Korean training program is now an elusive sniper operating in Seoul. She is always filmed from a distance and wearing sunglasses; she's untouchable. She expertly assassinates in cold blood South Korean top figures in politics and science.

The two special agents on her case are powerless; they are always one step behind, while she is always knowledgeable of highly classified information.

The two agents are more than colleagues, they are also friends. They are complemented by the girlfriend of one of them. The agent and the woman are clearly in love, but the woman is also very fond of his friend. The friend is not

interested in having a girlfriend anymore as he is still not over the last girlfriend, someone special who disappeared.

Situations become more serious when a unit of North Koreans infiltrate the South and the endgame nears, but the South Korean special agents are still in the dark.

The intertwinement of these characters sets up the dramatic end where the focus is on people torn inside between loyalties, love and politics. The action is there, but a closer look reveals that it plays second fiddle and is mostly the condition that allows the drama to take center stage in what at first seemed a fast-paced and feebly plotted action film.

The action is purely entertainment while the heart of the film is the drama, slowly built up and finally revealed as the film's true heart in the finale. What these characters carry is a lifetime of suffering and confusion, but there is more, as they do not merely carry their own wounds, but they also carry the burden of the country's dramatic history.

The film is about the division of Korea and it questions the leaders' real willingness to solve the issue and to reunite, and it is about the heavy impact that political division has on the Korean people. The individuals transcend into a metaphor for the whole nation.

The triangle of the two agents (also friends) and the woman is disrupted when the woman turns out to be the North Korean sniper who is linked to the cell of North Korean infiltrators who are trying to reunite Korea by eliminating both the North and South Korean leaders.

The woman is the girlfriend of the past whom the other man cannot forget. She

also has affection for him, but she had to leave and have plastic surgery in order to change her identity and maintain her cover.

From then on, the sniper – who we now know is also the sweet girlfriend – is no longer untouchable when she gets wounded; she's now human.

Director Gang Je-gyoo⁶ cleverly deploys various stylistic techniques. The Syuzhet of the film incorporates abrupt contrasts in the visuals. The North Korean sniper is first filmed from afar which contributes to her unfamiliarity and elusiveness, but later when the viewer knows who the sniper really is, she is filmed more closely, more intimately.

The same happens in the beginning when the film paints a stark and depressive picture of North Korea and suddenly switches to South Korea, represented through scenes of a modern and bright Seoul.

These contrasts intensify the han. The North Korean situation becomes even bleaker than an individual impression of North Korea could ever be. When it becomes known that the girlfriend is the sniper, her complexity is highly dramatized by her sudden vulnerability.

Referring to the division of Korea and questions about who is guilty or responsible for the Korean War, the two close friends fall out and start to operate individually. They even start to mistrust one other and try to set each other up. Their solo actions lead to the death of one of them, but they make up before he takes his last breath, and he sends the other on the right track to solve the case.

The han-narrative allows the film to be entertainment in the form of an action film. The han-narrative is incorporated by slowly building up the characters and

⁶ 강제규 Kang Je-gyu

their complicated relationships. These impossible intertwinements set in motion the crucial element of the han-narrative, the change from the action to an ending focused on drama. In this case, the drama on a personal level is surpassed to represent the collective side of han.

This collective han surfaces in the narrative of the two friends. Their fall out leads to grave errors. This metaphor doesn't point fingers at who is guilty for the Korean War or division. Even best friends can in certain circumstances mistrust each other with dramatic results. What one does next and what learns as a result is what matters most. However, within a han-narrative, one learns at a high price. The han doesn't disappear when things come to an end or when situations are solved; it remains and continues to accumulate.

The collectiveness of this kind of han is further pronounced through the portrayal of the North Koreans. The leader of the North Korean unit is not a power obsessed man. He and his members are operating individually. The North Koreans are suffering and dying of hunger. The politicians have no urgency to solve the problems.

The North Korean unit's objective is only to help the North Korean people, to end their despair. They know that they themselves will die in their attempt. The North Korean soldiers believe that the only way to help the desperate North Koreans is to force the unification of the two Koreas.

That's why they want to kill both the North and South Korean leaders. The fact that both must be eliminated stresses that their reasons are not political. It is about cultural kinship and the han they feel is unbearable because it's the collective han of all North Koreans.

After the film has come to a dramatic and unhappy end, the film even further distances itself from its original concept of fast-paced action. In an epilogue we are shown a peaceful clinic near the sea. The surviving protagonist hopes to find answers there about the woman whom he loved, but never truly knew.

While looking out over the sea whose continuous ebbs and flows make time insignificant and its water cleanses the wounds, the film shifts from being a metaphor for the nation to a personal level. Han can be collective or individual, positive or negative, and in the epilogue it has become individual and the pain is lessened by focusing on happy memories; balancing the negative side of han in the dramatic finale, the side of greater powers at work.

3.2 JOINT SECURITY AREA/JSA

JOINT SECURITY AREA/JSA portrays the friendship between two North Korean and two South Korean soldiers at the 38th parallel, the dividing line of Korea. The film is a drama that revolves around how the friends ended up in a shooting accident on the Northern side of the demarcation line.

A South Korean sergeant finds himself alone and ends up standing on a landmine in the border area between North and South Korea. Although he is mistrusting of the North Korean sergeant who happens to come along, he is saved by him. Later they turn out to be right across from each other in watch posts on each side of the demarcation line.

Even though they seem to be worlds away, the sergeants are in a stone throw's distance of each other and connected by a bridge. The South Korean sergeant realizes that he never thanked the North Korean sergeant for saving his life. He writes a thank you letter and throws it attached to a stone to the other side. This action has great implications.

An exchange of letters begins and the companion of the North Korean sergeant joins in. He is a joker and says his southern counterpart should come over to visit. The South Korean actually takes his invitation seriously and crosses the bridge.

When they decide that it becomes too dangerous to continue these visits, the North Korean and South Korean friends have one final meeting. Because it is the last time they will see each other, they keep postponing their goodbyes. Eventually, a North Korean officer discovers them and an explosive situation emerges. Soldiers fall and the incident will continue to claim more casualties long after the incident.

The film's structure sets it up as a mystery film about the unraveling of the shooting accident. However, the film soon concentrates on how the North and South Korean soldiers became friends, and why they are friends. Most of the story is about the portrayal of this natural, but at the same time impossible friendship.

The South Korean sergeant asks his older North Korean counterpart if he can call him 'hyeong' (older brother)⁷. The North Korean jokes that it sounds good after only hearing comrade. This functions as the establishment of a shared culture, but at the same time hints at the political dividedness, a simple but effective indicator of the presence of han and the effects it will have later on.

⁷ Koreans prefer to call someone close who is older: older brother, older sister, aunt, uncle, etc.

The set-up – what really happened that night of the shooting incident – surfaces later in the film and it executes the han-narrative with a dramatic and sad end.

Director Pak Chan-wook⁸ uses flashbacks to tell the story. The flashbacks are an analogue to the division of Korea. It is part of Korean history, which is complex and difficult to understand.

The syuzhet choice of using flashbacks is here a structural device, but more so a metaphorical technique. Earlier I pointed out that the film is not so much about unraveling a puzzle, but more about the portrayal of friendship between so-called enemies and the dethroning of the myth of the artificial border between them. It establishes han, built up over a long period, which later becomes visible.

In the present time, individuals struggle with their own guilt, but it's again embedded in the nation's collective han, like in SHIRI, an effect of the division of the peninsula. In the end we witness how the four friends became involved in a shooting accident. It is an outside force which initiates the tragic event, in the form of a North Korean officer who happens to walk in on them.

The mystery is solved in the end, but the truth can never be revealed because of the politics involved. The North Korean sergeant is asked if he can forgive his South Korean friends for firing at them and killing his – and their – friend. He answers that if the same situation had occurred on the Southern side of the border, he would have fired first.

This scene is completely unnecessary to the plot, but confirms again that there is neither a guilty nor innocent party in the incident. The scene is unneeded since

⁸ 박찬욱 Park Chan-wook

the answer has already been given in many subtle ways.

The collective side of han means that nobody is better than another. It is shared – or a burden – among all Korean, regardless of which side of the border they live. The film strikes a delicate balance between the two parties. Each side consists of a leading figure and one follower. They share all kinds of traits and interests.

The portrayal of the North Koreans may tip the scale in favor of the North Koreans. The excellent Song Gang-ho and Sin Ha-gyoon⁹ – two of Korea’s finest and daring actors – may make just as valuable an impression of North Koreans as do stereotypical portrayals in the news.

JOINT SECURITY AREA/JSA became the first South Korean film to be officially shown in North Korea. Pyongyang requested the film because the North Koreans were not simply portrayed as bad, but as sympathetic, humorous, warm and brave (Gluck).

In a pattern similar to SHIRI, the film doesn’t end tragically in a doomed friendship, but it includes an epilogue. The epilogue steps back in time through a flashback from the political context and returns to a friendship from happier times.

Sadly, regardless of the personal level of the epilogue, the friendship between two North Korean soldiers and two South Korean soldiers can never escape the references to a grander scale.

⁹ 송강호 (Song Kang-ho) and 신하균 (Shin Ha-kyun)

3.3 *FRIEND*

FRIEND spans many years to tell a story of crime involving a group of friends from childhood through adulthood. The two closest friends will be responsible for the dramatic and tragic end of the han-structure.

The group of childhood friends has a clear hierarchy and recognizable archetypes: the leader, his loyal right hand, the joker, the intellectual, and the normal person. This broad inclusion seems to refer to society. It is also society that leads the two best friends into a life of crime when they refuse to obey the tyrannical teacher and leave school, or have to sustain a family without a father, or as the only way out of a futureless life.

The friends are inseparable from elementary to high school. In high school the group starts to disintegrate. Around this time the group members' individual differences start to make their marks and all must find their own path.

The two main characters are the leader and his right-hand man who follows him without question. The two will also become separated. The right hand notices that despite his loyalty, the leader often seems to make judgments in favor of the other friends.

In the end it's about these two childhood best friends who eventually went their own ways and now are charged with the task of eliminating each other as they belong to rival criminal organizations.

The han-narrative, here, is defined by han in a societal sense. People who missed out on the good life turn to crime and must pay for it in the end. However,

they don't just have to pay, they must go through hell first, killing their long time best friend, even though they fell out recently.

Unlike the collective manifestation of han in the two previous films, here the han is expressed as a personal rage, consuming not only the characters themselves, but also their environment. This han is often associated with Korean crime films, the one without a positive side and it also leads to one's own downfall.

The method of syuzhet director Gwak Gyeong-taek¹⁰ consists of several aspects. The lighting gives the film a somehow bleak atmosphere and matches the tough characters of the two criminals. It also makes clear that the other friends don't belong in that world; they fail to match the dark qualities caused by the lighting.

Another stylistic choice is the contrast of the two halves of the film. The friends are inseparable in the beginning, challenging each other, fighting together and having fun together. In the end they have all lost each other and the two closest friends are burdened with the task of killing each other. Han in this film is clearly individual. Even people with such close friends are eventually bound to walk alone.

Once again, FRIEND also continues with an epilogue. We go back to when they were just kids. They float in the sea while they tell each other hard-to-believe stories. The essence of this epilogue is that the two best friends who ended up fighting each other were always backing each other up, always on each other's side.

This time they are far away from society in a deep and vast sea. They are still

¹⁰ 곽경택 Kwak Kyung-taek

young and innocent and can still believe that the world is just how they think it is: just them together.

3.4 MY SASSY GIRL

MY SASSY GIRL seems to be a comedy about a boy who falls in love with a dominating girl. The jokes come mainly from the reversal of gender roles with the male character hesitatingly giving in to the whims of the girl who always tells him what to do.

MY SASSY GIRL is typical for the Korean film that has elements of comedy, but is also culturally bound to the han-narrative. This type of film starts out as a comedy, but in the second part turns into a drama.

A boy pulls back a drunk girl who is on the edge of the subway platform just before a subway comes in. Later the girl calls him honey and people think they are a couple. He can't convince them that they are not and is socially pressured into taking care of the now unconscious girl.

From then on the girl is in his life. She can be sweet sometimes, but usually she is bossy. Still, the two grow closer and a romance blooms.

The film becomes a drama with the girl all of a sudden having a whole history of pain because the boyfriend she loved passed away. She decides that she's not ready to let go of her deceased boyfriend and the two split up.

Years later when she has made her peace with the past and wants to meet the

boy again, she can no longer reach him because his phone number has changed.

In MY SASSY GIRL – like in most Korean comedies, the contrast is greater than in other kinds of films – somehow abrupt, but it is pulled off for a great deal thanks to the two lead actors. Jeon Ji-hyeon and Cha Tae-hyeon¹¹ were able to divert the attention from the plot change to a focus on the characters' han through energetic and charming performances.

The first part of the film didn't concern itself much with character development, but used the role reversal of stereotypes for humor-filled scenes. In the second part the film suddenly replaces the jokes with drama to explain the girl's changing behavior. Now instead of bossing the young man around, the young woman cries.

The sad events in her life left wounds in her heart, invisible on the outside. The han she feels is personal, but unlike in FRIEND, it's not an inner rage. The young woman feels sorrow and loss. She also has to deal with guilt which makes it impossible for her to become more serious in the relationship. She even feels so much guilt and confusion that she must break off the relationship, deciding she must first try to come clean and make amends with the ghost in her past that still haunts her.

Of course, the two main characters are in love and should be together. But when the girl has worked things out, years have passed. She never knew where her boyfriend's house was and his phone number has changed. Tears flow again as she realizes that she has probably lost him forever. The need to work out past events leads to an accumulation of han.

The girl has an obsession with time traveling. The syuzhet is formed through

¹¹ 전지현 (Jeon) and 차태현 (Cha).

the recurrent insertions of fantasy stories of the girl in the future or in the past.

The girl's han makes her long to be in another time, away from the inner pain she feels in the present.

As pointed out earlier, the han-narrative is an overarching structure and encompasses many variations of film. The necessary adaptability and freedom from the han-narrative is shown here as *MY SASSY GIRL* does not end in misery, but makes a full circle to end happily.

In the beginning the male protagonist - again - avoided meeting his aunt. In the end of the film he finally gives in and meets her, and it turns out that all that time his aunt wanted to introduce him to a girl, who happens to be the girl he's in love with. In the end the tears of sadness have changed to tears of happiness when the two are unexpectedly reunited.

The film also has an epilogue, but a very minor one, a short fragment of the two having fun in the earlier comedic part of the film.

3.5 MEMORIES OF MURDER

MEMORIES OF MURDER is based on true events and depicts two policemen's hunt for a serial killer. A modern detective from Seoul goes down to the countryside to assist in an investigation. He frequently collides with a local detective who knows nothing about modern methods of investigation and research.

The film about the search for a serial murderer is complex and focuses more on

the dynamics between the Seoul detective and the country detective. It's also done in a humorous way mostly because of the country detective's impulsive behavior and his only method for investigation seems to be to follow his gut feeling.

The film explores the clashes between two characters who represent two different worlds, one modern and one traditional. They have to cooperate in order to catch the killer, and they slowly reconcile their differences.

The growing friendship of the two protagonists allows the han-narrative to change its pace in a dramatic and frustrating finale. Now we no longer concentrate on the dynamics between the two men, but the main focus is now on catching the killer. The two men are united in a hunt for the unknown enemy. The pace picks up as more data is collected and pieces of the puzzle start to fall in place.

However, they fail. Evidence – and gut feelings – all point towards one man. The chase is on and finally he is captured, but a modern scientific method allows the man to go free. The result of a blood test doesn't match the crime and the man smugly walks away from the two highly frustrated detectives who are both on the verge of a break-down.

The film is another example of han - even though the film is based on real events and therefore the killer can't be caught – the filmmaker chose to focus on extreme frustration and anger of the policemen. More specifically, the Seoul detective loses himself completely. He always had confidence in modern methods, but now he doesn't anymore. Instead he is convinced by his feelings and decides that the man is guilty.

This outburst seems to hide more than just the frustration of not having caught the killer. There is also another influence on his han, depicted as a modern life

which at that moment comes crashing down.

The syuzhet is formed through a sharp contrast of the village and its people, who are peculiar and not particularly intelligent. On the other hand, the Seoul detective is fully modern. The end shows that even modern times and advances cannot hide one's inner han.

MEMORIES OF MURDER includes an epilogue which goes into the future. The country detective is now a salesman in a modern environment. He wears a suit and eats breakfast with his family in a modern apartment with modern electronic devices.

While on the road he decides to take a detour and stops by one of the crime scenes of the past. He takes a look around and a child shows up wondering why he is looking at this unusual place along a minor road in a mostly deserted area. The child tells the man that just before him another man was also looking around the same place. Of course the other man is gone and remains illusive. The han will be carried on, even though times have changed.

3.6 SILMIDO

SILMIDO, like MEMORIES OF MURDER, is also based on true events. In this film, a group of convicts are given a chance to redeem themselves if they successfully assassinate the North Korean leader. This is South Korea's response to a North Korean attempt to assassinate the South Korean president.

Most of the movie portrays the group of men being prepared in a military boot camp. The political overtones are reduced to background filling. The film concentrates on the relations between the men, how they form a hierarchy, their bonding, military drilling, and the establishment of various kinds of characters in this unusual outfit.

Even though the film's flirtation with political themes becomes more prominent towards the end, the group dynamics between the convicts-turned-soldiers remains prominent. The outfit never goes to North Korea, because their mission is cancelled.

Within the han-narrative, the film combines the theme of male bonding with political themes for a tragic ending. Instead of serving their country the ex-convicts find themselves being hunted by their government again. The men decide to stay together and kidnap a bus. When there is no way out anymore – they are fully surrounded by the military – they let the bus passengers go and decide to die together rather than to go back to prison. They commit suicide by blowing themselves up with handgrenades.

It's like a defeat against han, they can not escape it and they become victims of a negative kind of han, self-destructive and violent.

Still, the film treats the men like heroes, as if it can understand the han raging inside those men and because of that cannot blame the men for their actions.

SILMIDO also doesn't stop there, but continues with an epilogue. The South Korean president is brought a couple of files about various topics, including the file containing the account of the men's ordeal. The president – at that time a military dictator – takes a glance at the files, puts a couple of them aside, and

those files are eventually left unread and stored in an archive.

A text appears on screen about how the government tried to erase the account of the men who were willing to go on a suicide mission for their country, but that history hasn't forgotten them.

This text symbolizes more than the tale of those men. It's an expression of collective han. During those terrifying years of oppression by military dictators, many people disappeared and were never heard of again, or came back with scars on their body, but had much bigger scars on their souls. The men are symbolic of all the other people who were silenced.

3.7 TAE-GUK-GI

TAE-GUK-GI is about two brothers during the Korean War. The film starts with a prologue set in the present when a grandfather is notified that they found his dead body. He realizes that it must be his older brother whose destiny has been unknown since the Korean War.

The film goes back in time to the period after liberation from the Japanese and before the outbreak of the Korean War. The film establishes an incomplete, but happy family.

The mother runs a modest restaurant. The oldest son is a hardworking shoemaker whose goal is to send his younger brother to college. The older brother is engaged and his future wife helps his mother at the restaurant.

Soon the war breaks out and the focus turns to the Korean War and how it affects the relationship between the two brothers. The older brother continues to be protective of his younger brother and volunteers for the most dangerous assignments, so that his younger brother will be discharged from the military based on the excellence of his brother.

The older brother's actions lead to a fall-out as the younger brother doesn't want his older brother to take unnecessary risks. The younger brother eventually becomes angered by the continued protectiveness of his older brother.

The Korean War has been divisive in many ways and symbolically the brothers become physically separated. When the older brother reaches his younger brother again, he thinks that his younger brother has died. In a place full of unrecognizable corpses, he finds the belongings of his younger brother. He becomes fully embittered and enraged and joins the North Koreans, becoming a relentless fighter on their side, beyond any kind of reason.

However, a greater drama is to come. In the end the two brothers encounter each other on the battlefield, but the older brother is too mentally unstable to recognize his younger brother as he fiercely attacks the South Korean troops. When the younger brother is finally able to somehow make his brother recognize him, it's too late. They are now on different sides, even though they are closely related. In the battle they are separated again for the final time.

Korean drama structures incorporate the han-narrative, but because of the freedom it allows, different approaches are possible. Where films of other cultures often end positively, this Korean film is dominated by han until the end. The han here is personal and becomes manifested in the two brothers in different ways.

The two brothers also represent the collective han of Koreans in relation to the Korean War.

The film's prelude naturally leads to an epilogue back to the present. The younger brother – now an old man – witnesses with his granddaughter the recovery of his older brother's body. Han followed the younger brother until his old age.

3.8 WELCOME TO DONGMAKGOL

WELCOME TO DONGMAKGOL is a comedy and – like TAE-GUK-GI – is about the Korean War. The absurdity of the war becomes painfully clear when the different parties involved come together in a remote village where time stands still and the villagers have no idea of the raging war or the concept of weapons.

Two units, one North Korean and one South Korean, battle each other. Only few survive on each side and both retreat. Somehow they both end up in the same village, Dongmakgol. An American military pilot crashes nearby and the villagers also treat his wounds.

The villagers are kind but naïve and have no idea of what is going on outside their village. Everything has remained unchanged inside the village for a long time.

At first the North and South Koreans continue their standoff which leads to the destruction of the village's storehouse leaving the villagers with no food for the

winter. The two sides cease arguing and cooperate to help the villagers with working the land and storing supplies.

The Americans believe that their pilot has been captured by the enemy. They send a rescue team and plan to bomb the village after they secure the American pilot. When the Korean troops learn of the plan, the American pilot is sent to tell the Americans that there is no enemy in the village, and that they need to call off the bombing. Everybody knows he will never be in time.

The North and South Koreans work together to set up a decoy for the bombers. The plan is successful, but the North and South Koreans soldiers die in the bombing. They smile because they know they saved the village in a joint effort.

The film successfully establishes the ridicule of war and the unity between the two Koreas. The film could easily have a happy end, but instead incorporates the han-narrative. The North and South Korean soldiers are forced to sacrifice their lives. Here, the collective han resurfaces: collective mistakes will haunt people for a long time.

WELCOME TO DONGMAKGOL is no exception in the list and finishes with an epilogue. The epilogue is shown in a dream-like manner, going back in time when all sides lived peacefully together in the village, even for a short time until outside forces destroyed their momentary happiness.

3.9 KING AND THE CLOWN

KING AND THE CLOWN is situated in Korea's ancient past and features a gay love

story between two male entertainers who go to a big city to perform in the streets. They become successful and push their luck by satirizing the king. Naturally, they are arrested and end up in front of the king himself.

From here on the film becomes a political court intrigue. The entertainers are given one last chance: if they can make the king laugh, they will be allowed to live; if they fail they will lose their lives. The two succeed, but are forced to stay at the court for an extended time as the king has become interested in the feminine male entertainer. At the same time they are used by parties who struggle for power within the court, so, they end up with political enemies who want them dead.

The king's fickleness is necessary for the han-narrative to take its course. The two entertainers fall out of the king's favor and the masculine male entertainer is even tortured for insulting the king. Still, he refuses to remain silent.

The feminine male entertainer tries to persuade the masculine male entertainer to stop angering the king by being defiant and instead save his own life, but his efforts are in vain. The two join in the end to perform one last act together, defying the king and the bureaucrats in power for the last time.

Even though the film has many references to greater societal problems and the end also contains a form of collective han, it is also a very personal kind of han. The collectiveness is the suffering that the entertainers and other common people have suffered at the hands of the elite and by their indifference. Their final performance is not for an audience, but for themselves. Therefore, the scene is primarily the expression of a personal han in a creative and defying way.

The film concludes with an epilogue similar to WELCOME TO DONGMAKGOL and has a dream-like quality. We go back in time and see the entertainers joyously

walking outside in nature while making music and jokes.

3.10 THE HOST

THE HOST is the latest record-breaking blockbuster in South Korea and is an unusual film since it's a Korean monster film. Monster films have not been popular and were rarely made in Korea before THE HOST.

Extreme toxic waste is dumped by the US military into the Han River in Seoul. The toxic waste causes one of the Han River's inhabitants to mutate into a giant grotesque monster with an appetite for humans.

The main characters belong to a dysfunctional family - a father, a daughter, two sons and a granddaughter. The father and his good-for-nothing son run a small shop along the Han River. The daughter is an Olympic archer and the other son is an unemployed former student activist. The granddaughter is a high school student.

The granddaughter becomes one of the monster's victims. It turns out that she has survived, but is stuck in a sewer where the monster lives. The police and military have closed down the banks of the Han River. The family outmaneuvers them in order to start their quest to retrieve their youngest family member from the monster.

The girl has company from another victim of the monster, a young homeless

boy who lost his older brother because of the monster. She takes the boy – a few years her junior – under her wing, protecting him from the monster and searching for a way out.

Instead of a happy ending in which the monster is defeated and the victims are rescued, the film employs the han-narrative. The family defeats the monster, but the girl cannot be saved in time.

The causes for han are numerous in this film: Korea's own military and police forces, foreign military, and inadequate parents and dysfunctional families. The film's narrative is full of allusions to Korean society, politics and history.

The inclusion of a former student activist who demonstrated against and clashed with the oppressive forces of military dictators clearly refers to Korea's military past. The portrayal is more effectively represented because the military assumes a dominant role in the film.

The former student activist is portrayed jokingly. He is embittered, enraged and without a job, but in this film, all these aspects are understood in the context of a han originated while people suffered under military dictatorships.

Just like the other films, THE HOST includes an epilogue. The father died in his battle against the monster. Now the son, who was the father to the girl, is running the shop alone at the bank of the Han River. The epilogue takes us further into the future. The homeless boy, who used to have trouble finding enough to eat with his brother, survived and was taken in by the father of the girl. The boy has found a new life and the two enjoy a sumptuous meal at home.

4. Han-narrative revised

I first needed to establish in my research whether my theory of the han-narrative could hold up in practice, through a case study. All the described popular Korean films do in fact employ the han-narrative. The han-narrative is not specific or coercive. The ten films show ample individual qualities while being culturally connected through the han-narrative.

The films vary greatly from a romantic comedy to a war film, and from a historic drama to a monster film. They are also distinguished from each other in their uses of syuzhet. Director Pak Chan-wook situates *JOINT SECURITY AREA/JSA* in the present, but the film is mostly told in the past through lengthy flashbacks.

At times, the syuzhet is not completely satisfying. The comedy *MY SASSY GIRL* becomes disconnected when it too abruptly turns into a drama without properly laying a foundation in the first half of the film. In this case, the actors allow you to neglect or fail to notice the film's shortcomings. However, for this analysis it is important that the film executes the han-narrative and even goes to great lengths to accomplish it.

This thesis does not judge Korea's most popular films on film technical qualities. The view that *MY SASSY GIRL* and *SHIRI* – two random examples – are flawed in their structure may be a personal opinion, but this is not the basis for how the films are judged by the viewers. These films clearly have other unique

qualities, but it's the way the han-narrative is used – even if it's the source of the flaws – which plays a major role in the film's popularity.

The defining element of the han-narrative is the development towards the end, an expression of han. Han is a dramatic and often tragic concept represented in the han-narrative. Sometimes it fits the plot more naturally, like in dramas. However, dramas don't naturally incorporate a han-narrative. Dramas can easily have happy endings. Korean dramas consistently distinguish themselves from most dramatic films with the han-narrative.

The other films – even though they may seem totally different – also employ the han-narrative in favor of other alternatives and possibilities. I therefore argue that the defining element of Korean cinema is the inclusion of the expression of han, something what I term the han-narrative. This han-narrative is a free-flowing structure that is the basis of a variety of Korean films that situates them in a Korean cultural context.

In my opinion, this way of approaching Korean films – as embedded in the Korean culture – may prove far more valuable than defining them in terms of other culture's definitions, as genres do.

The analysis also shows how all these different films operate distinguishable syuzhet techniques suitable for the film – or kind of film – which the han-narrative allows, even encourages. The stylistic choices are to a great extent also the result of the choices of individual filmmakers.

The han-narrative's importance is pronounced by the central role han plays in these films. Han is not one of the many elements in the film, but rather a required element. Moreover, it is always situated near the end of the narrative. Therefore,

narratives work towards the employment of han.

We can not overlook another common facet shared by the analyzed films. The epilogue is not a new phenomenon and it's not particular to Korean cinema. The consistent inclusion of this stylistic technique in the syuzhet is remarkable. This project is not concerned with pinpointing the exact extent of this phenomenon or when it started.

These analyzed films are all contemporary films and are the ten most popular Korean films. These films show a new revision in the han-narrative. However it may not be correct to call their portrayal a revision because the han-narrative is not rigidly structured and therefore always evolutionary.

Yet, there is a sort of revision, making this phenomenon a particular kind of han-narrative, but not the 'new han-narrative'. When further analyzing Korean films one may come across more specific han-narratives applicable to a particular kind of Korean films under certain circumstances or in certain times.

The current process in the han-narrative is the importance of the epilogue. The inclusion of an epilogue has been used in roughly two methods: past or future.

The past epilogue is an analogue to han. Han is a long process rooted in the past. A past epilogue also reaches back in time. The future epilogue is similar. Even though we are presently farther in time, we are experiencing a time from before. An example can be found in SHIRI when the epilogue's essence is sharing memories of a loved one who passed away, and getting to know that person better in the present by looking back.

Still, I want to argue that these epilogues symbolize a new future. Han is rooted

in the past, just as many of Korea's contemporary culture, society and politics is connected with its past; most notably with the modern history of Japanese exploitation, the Korean War, and the continued division of the country and families.

The epilogues all express better times and hope. The ghosts from the past should be dealt with for a new start. Dealing with mistakes and problems from the past may equal going back in time wiser in order to avoid making the same mistakes again.

This new and specific development in the han-narrative is what I call the 'han-genealogy'. The epilogue creates a new start and can at the same time go back in time. The structure of the film no longer has a clear beginning, middle and end because of the syuzhet, the inclusion of the epilogue.

The 'genealogy' is borrowed from Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. They argued for a new form of history writing, the genealogy. They were critical of conventional history because it's written by the people who won a struggle for power. Those in power write history. Such history is distorted and often tends to marginalize certain people. History presents a linear line, never wavering. Genealogies don't assume that history is linear and causal. Also, they seek to write the history from the perspective of the ones who were left out or marginalized (Foucault 139).

Korean cinema is popular among the people and it often deals with marginalized people who were left out of history. It often deals with its (modern) history and challenges the official accounts of what happened in the past.

By the inclusion of epilogue, the films' structures are without a clear beginning,

middle and end. The epilogue allows the audience to travel in time, allowing the story either to begin again or continue. Having no clear end, you may rewrite the created space that goes beyond the ending of the film.

The contemporary films described employ a han-narrative which can be better defined as han-genealogy. Han-genealogy is still the han-narrative, but a specific manifestation of it.

Another specific trait of the han-genealogy is isolation from the rest of the world or society in the epilogue. The young men in *FRIEND* are far away at sea, not at all concerned about floating far from the coast. They even seem more at ease because they are far from others.

In *SHIRI* the surviving agent comes to a cliff and shares memories with one other person, they both share memories of someone they loved or cared for.

JOINT SECURITY AREA/JSA does not seem to be as reclusive as the other films, but in fact is more exclusive than the other epilogues. The four friends are on duty at Panmoonjeom.¹² Soldiers of both sides are present, as well tourists. Still, the photo that is taken manages to only capture the four friends, even though two each are on different sides of the line as well. The photo creates a secluded space in the middle of a crowded area and defies the demarcation line that separates them and their countries as well.

KING AND THE CLOWN's epilogue is between broad and empty fields. *THE HOST* takes place in the characters' living quarters at the bank of a deserted Han River in the winter. We stay in the remote village in *WELCOME TO DONGMAKGOL*. *MY SASSY GIRL* makes a brief flash back to the fantasy of the two protagonists.

¹² Often romanized as Panmunjom.

MEMORIES OF MURDER epilogue ends on a mostly deserted road. TAE-GUK-GI is in a more or less secluded place, but because of the recovering activities there are several people at work. Even so, the man is reclusive because he is far away from the others in his memories that take him back in time.

We've seen different variations of han expressed in films and often there has been a strong sense of a collective form of han. The collective han in combination with the individual han in the epilogue creates a dynamism which continues to add significance to the han-genealogy and empowers it as a definition of a contemporary variation.

Its significance lies in the collectivity of han as expressed in the main story which links with collective han in Korean society, and indirectly also refers to the cultural link between the Korean films through the han-narrative. The individual aspect in the epilogue doesn't negate the collectiveness, but it allows for change and innovation.

The previously recognized elements like hope and new beginnings as portrayed through the epilogue are complemented through a specific syuzhet of pronouncing an individual world. The characters are never alone, so, han is not purely individual. Rather the portrayal of han in epilogues leaves room for individual creations and choices, together with the people one chooses.

In future studies, these new dynamisms expressed in the han-narrative will be essential. The han-narrative will be used as an analogy of society in which new identities are created on ones own terms. It will be a break from the – what I argue to be – enforced identities of a modern Korea.

Conclusion

As a first step in a greater project, I have analyzed Korean films from a structural perspective. I believed that the emotional quality called han is culturally essential and is a greater influence on cultural expressions than other Korean elements in culture, society or politics.

I combined han with structural focus points such as syuzhet and Propp's structural analysis of the Russian folktale. I chose the autonomous concept of Syuzhet from Tynianov over Bordwell's idea of the Syuzhet as being the presenter of fabula. I also departed from Propp's rigid system of functions and his claim that there is a universal structure for various media.

Instead I chose to approach the Korean film structure from an overarching, but free-flowing structure determined by one single aspect: the incorporation and expression of han. This element provides freedom and stimulates creativity in filmmaking while at the same time making it possible to link most Korean films together culturally. I also theorized that the han-narrative specific to Korean cinema.

Han is a complex and difficult concept to explain. It may simply be called a deep inner sorrow or pain which has its roots in a long history of suffering, exploitation, poverty, foreign aggression, and/or suppression. Because han is an

emotion, cinema is well suited for conveying such a complex, but defining and pivotal emotion.

After establishing this theory, I employed it in a case-study. I analyzed the ten most popular Korean films in a structural framework of syuzhet and an open narrative with only the execution of the expression of a form of han as its sole requirement: the han-narrative.

All ten films showed great variety in subject matter and syuzhet. However, even though they distinguished themselves stylistically and covered a broad array of topics, they all worked towards the expression of han. Even films with less crafted storylines such as *MY SASSY GIRL* employ the han-narrative. I therefore argue that the han-narrative is a culturally binding and defining structure that is specific to Korean cinema.

Because the expression of han takes place near the end of a film, narratives throughout the film work towards that goal. It is not a mere inclusion of an aspect. This accentuates the pivotal role han plays in Korean cinema.

There is not one kind of han, but various kinds, personal and collective, which can have many different causes. Han can be expressed in different ways, in a creative and positive way or in a negative, and even violent way.

The new factor in the han-narrative was the structural similarity in the syuzhet as all the ten films include an epilogue. While there are some differences in the epilogues, there are also many consistencies. The epilogues often go back in time to a happier moment or ruminate about the past if the epilogue is situated in the future.

This is what I argued was a variation of the han-narrative, which can occur in a

specific time or under certain circumstances; the films are culturally linked and can therefore share such defining elements, and at the same time the inherit freedom in the han-narrative allows the inclusion of such variation, creativity or deviation.

I used the term han-genealogy to describe this idea and stressed that it doesn't replace the han-narrative, but it is a specific manifestation within the han-narrative. The epilogue transforms the narrative into an open structure, without a clear beginning, middle or end. The epilogue can be seen as an end, a new beginning or a return to anywhere in the middle.

The term genealogy is used in reference to Nietzsche's and Foucault's alternative history which they called genealogy. History is created linearly, going in a certain direction or towards a goal. Histories are written by the victors, those in power. The powerful can therefore create a history which excludes or marginalizes others. Genealogy takes the viewpoint of the marginalized or excluded and it doesn't create a linear history.

Like Nietzsche's and Foucault's genealogy, the han-genealogy discards linearity and Korean cinema often treads upon historical issues which have been marginalized by those who ruled Korea. This creates a form of popular memory, outside history, often siding with the people who boldly defied the powerful.

Epilogue

In this epilogue, I will contemplate on the results of this thesis and how they influence the following parts of the overarching research project. I will start with how it influences the next step in the process and from there the implications for the entire project.

The han-narrative is an essential structural approach to Korean films and it encompasses a great variety of Korean films which makes it representative. This establishes a valuable and direct interplay between Korean cinema and Korean culture, important for further research utilizing Korean cinema as the starting point for providing insight into Korean society, culture and politics.

The next step will be to include independent cinema into the analysis through a case-study with independent films to explore the applicability of the han-narrative to those films.

Another factor flowing from this thesis is the question whether independent films also belong to this specific group of films employing the han-genealogy or if they have their own deviations within the han-narrative. Are portrayals of han-genealogy culturally linked and in what way? Or are the portrayals a result of individual creative phenomena?

It will be interesting to study how independent films will structurally compare to popular films. The main question will be whether or not independent and popular films are all culturally linked; and if so, how? Or how do the two types of films differ in their cultural linkages?

After research on independent film has been done and the answers to the above questions have been formulated, we will have balanced insight into representations of societal, cultural and political matters: popular themes in Korean society from popular films and more underground and perhaps more serious issues from independent cinema.

A quick glance forward shows possible links between popular and independent Korean cinema. *THE HOST* represents family in a different light. It is not the dominant traditional patriarchal form of family, but an alternative family. It even incorporates the adoption of a non-family member, an anomaly in a society obsessed with blood-lines. Independent cinema also frequently tackles the concept of family in Korean society, deconstructing the dominant traditional patriarchal manifestation.

At this stage we will analyze the films with the help of the han-narrative on its contents and its representations. New theoretical frameworks will be implemented and combined, like Roland Barthes' 'denotation/connotation' semiotic method for analyzing a 'text'.

The end goal of the research is to analyze the process of revising the Korean identity. The found issues and representations will finally be analyzed with

postmodern tools and theories to study the deconstructions of meta-narratives and myths.

The process in the han-narrative is encompassing and therefore needs to be recognized. I named it han-genealogy and redefined it in the light of the han-narrative. This process of the han-genealogy should be a researched analogue to processes in society. The han-genealogy is strongly indicated to be a symptom of the postmodern processes in Korean society. More of such noteworthy and defining facets should arise in the following way: the inclusion should further define the research in a more constructive way, while at the same time being surprising and permissive of insights which could take this research project in unexpected directions.

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