embodying the digital

New Korean Cinema and Transnational Genre, 1999-2009

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----------------------------------------------------------------1895----------------------Birth of Cinema
1900s          Attractions
----------------------------------------------------------------1902------------------A Trip to the Moon
1910s          Narrative 1: Continuity Editing
1920s          Narrative 2: Classical Film Forms / Montage Theories
----------------------------------------------------------------1917------------------Tanizaki 'Pure Film'
----------------------------------------------------------------1924-----------------------------------Aelita
----------------------------------------------------------------1924----------------Epstein 'Photogénie'
1930s          Sound                              ←→         Radio & Telecommunications
----------------------------------------------------------------1932------------------FP1 Doesn't Answer
1940s          Color & Plasticity
----------------------------------------------------------------1938---Imamura, 'Cartoon Film Theory'
----------------------------------------------------------------1940-------Eisenstein, 'Notes on Disney'
----------------------------------------------------------------1941----------------------Princess Iron Fan
1955-65        Expanded Film Form & Genre   ←→         Television
----------------------------------------------------------------1958-----------Invention for Destruction
----------------------------------------------------------------1960--------------------------Silent Star
----------------------------------------------------------------1965---Sontag 'Imagination of Disaster'
1965-1975      New Waves
----------------------------------------------------------------1972----------------------------------Solaris
1980s          Global Waves 1                   ←→         Video
----------------------------------------------------------------1986------------------Peking Opera Blues
1990s          Global Waves 2                   ←→         Video to Digital
----------------------------------------------------------------1995-----------------The Ghost in the Shell
----------------------------------------------------------------1996-----------------------------Moebius
2000s          Global Waves 3                   ←→         Digital
----------------------------------------------------------------2006----------------------------The Host
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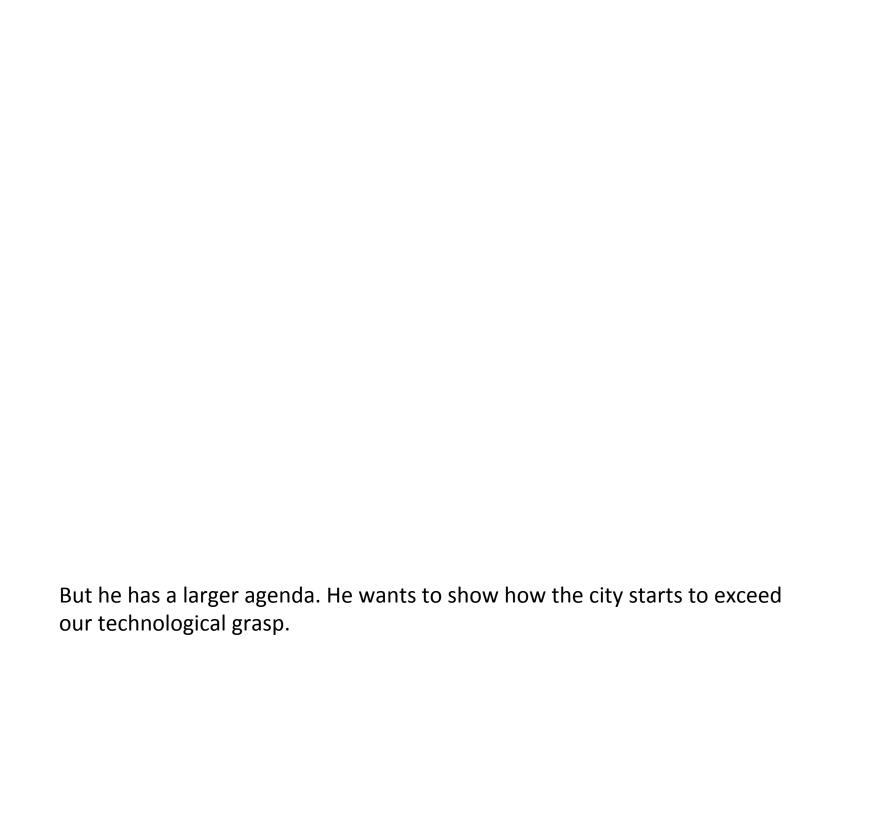THE CITY IS A MEDIUM (Worksheet 9)

In "The City is a Medium" (first published in 1988), Friedrich Kittler looks at how cities, like media, "record, transmit, and process information."

He proposes a major shift in emphasis — from recording to processing.

He feels that prior accounts of the city as a medium (Lewis Mumford) have focused too much on how cities record and transmit information, in order to preserve a humanist vision of the city.

Kittler will focus on how processing information comes to take precedence over recording and transmitting information.

He first considers how "processing elements" of the city enter into our terminology for information networks: gates, ports, built-in memory, and formatting (traffic and addresses).

But he has a larger agenda. He wants to show how the city starts to exceed our technological grasp.

On the one hand, it is no longer possible to stand over and above the city, to see it all and thus understand it all.

On the one hand, it is no longer possible to stand over and above the city, to see it all and thus understand it all:

"Since cities no longer lie within the panopticon of the cathedral or castle and can no longer be enclosed by walls or fortifications, a network made up of intersecting networks dissects and connects the city — in particular its fringes, peripheries, and tangents. Regardless of whether these networks transmit information (telephone, radio, television) or energy (water supply, electricity, highway), they all represent forms of information (if only because every modern energy flow requires a parallel control network)."

On the other hand, the relations between the various networks in the city cannot be flattened in a single layer: "A city, likewise, is not a flattenable graph. In a city, networks overlap upon other networks."

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As such, while we might try to understand and control the networks, one by one, or in bundles, we cannot understand and control all the relations arising between them. The city exceeds the human, taking on a degree of organizational autonomy.

Simply put, there is an "imperceptible dimension" that remains autonomous of human intervention.

Kittler's paradigm — the city is a medium — is well suited to *The Ghost in the Shell* and *Moebius*, for these two films strive to address an imperceptible dimension of the city, albeit in very different ways and for different reasons.

We also see in *Moebius* how some of the techniques associated with the time-image may be used to produce a puzzle effect, an enigma.

Gustavo Mosquera, *Moebius* (1996; Argentina)

GENRE: MONSTER MOVIE

GENRE: MONSTER MOVIE

There are many kinds of monsters in movies.

Monsters range along a spectrum from the interactive monster (human or humanoid) to the non-interactive (non-human) monster.

The scale or magnitude often affects our sense of whether humans can communicate or interact with them.

Oversized monsters, due to their non-human scale, tend to evoke natural disasters in which communication seems to become impossible.

Monsters on a more human scale create a sense that some sort of communication may be possible.

But it is a matter of degree, of a spectrum, rather than clearly demarcated categories. The question always arises: what kind of communication is possible?

Joon Ho Bong, *Gwoemul* (The Host, 2006; Korea)

GENRE: MONSTER MOVIE

Monsters are often read allegorically, as allegories of social, political, and technological crises.

Joseph Jeon writes, for instance: "The monster of *The Host* indeed offers a complex allegory of the complexities of U.S. hegemony in Korea."

What is allegory?

Jeon gives a somewhat torturous definition: "These… forms are allegorical in the sense that they foreground their rhetorical orientation and frustrated relationship to their supposed referents. Paul de Man famously called attention to this aspect of allegory: in his account, allegory rejects the nostalgia for reference in symbolism and instead repeatedly gestures toward, while simultaneously eliding, 'an unreachable anteriority.' As opposed to the symbol, the allegory always calls attention to itself as a linguistic operation."

What does this mean?

Simply put, monsters do not represent crisis; they embody and enact it.

Put another way, they are embodied mind-games — excessively enigmatic.

GENRE: MONSTER MOVIE

Allegory of what? Embodiment of what crisis?

GENRE: MONSTER MOVIE

Embodiment of multiple crises

Technological crisis
    dangers of science
    human technological hubris
    environmental crisis
    biological crisis

Social crisis
    family
    social relations

Urban crisis
    city infrastructure
    waste
    urban hygiene
    imperceptible dimension

Geopolitical crisis
    American military in South Korea

Economic crisis
    Asian financial crisis (1997-98)
    IMF bailout
    American economic hegemony

Cinematic crisis
    digital technologies
    genre

Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, "Neoliberal Forms: CGI, Algorithm, and Hegemony in Korea's IMF."

"Of course, the key allegorical figure in the film is the monster itself…. "

"…the monster both allegorizes and occasions US military force: US military mismanagement is the monster's literal origin, but recognition of this irony leads not to correction but instead to an even more irresponsible American decision."

"As Hsu points out: the film 'turns out to be an allegory not just of U.S. military occupation but also of neoliberal market reforms.'"

"One of the most brilliant suggestions of *The Host*, however, is the radical overlap of the two allegories, reflecting an awareness of the history of US hegemony in which neoliberal market economics complements rather than opposes neoconservative military aggression."

Jeon also sees *The Host* in terms of an allegory of the digital, which is how he links the use of CGI in the film to "the violence of speculative digital capital."

Thus, "these CGI monsters help to make visible the invisible forces that work behind the scenes of everyday life in an age of financialization."

The Host attempts "to make visible not only the apparatus that drives cinematic representation today but also the radical complicities and genealogies of digital representation that cinema shares with contemporary military and financial technologies."

In other words, in the CGI monster, military and financial technologies are inextricably entangled with digital cinema technologies.

"...the digital monster is revealed as the monstrous digital..."

I want to build on Jeon's insights about the entanglement of digital cinema technologies, finance capital, and U.S. hegemony in *The Host*. We can expand on and refine his account by considering three things.

The History of New Korean Cinema

The ILM Effect

The Communicative Function of Genre

NEW KOREAN CINEMA

NEW KOREAN CINEMA

Reference:

Darcy Paquet, "The Korean Film Industry: 1992 to the Present," in *The New Korean Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 32-50.

NEW KOREAN CINEMA

By 2001, South Korea possessed one of the strongest commercial industries in the world outside of the United States or India, with local cinema accounting for 45 to 50 percent of overall ticket sales, and individual films outperforming even the biggest Hollywood films.

How did this boom happen?

Note:
Commercial cinema refers to the ability of films to recoup their budget — large or small — at the box-office or through other means such as video or international sales.

NEW KOREAN CINEMA

In 1985, the Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEAA) issued a strong complaint to the South Korean government with regard to the country's various restrictions on film imports and, after subsequent negotiations between the two governments, a Korea-US Film Agreement was signed later that year.

…the number of foreign films imported into Korea each year jumped almost tenfold, from twenty-seven in 1985 to 264 in 1989.

…the revision also paved the way for Hollywood Studios to set up their own branch offices within Korea.

NEW KOREAN CINEMA

By 1992, the Hollywood branch offices had not only taken over a significant share of the local market but they had brought about changes to the distribution system which left Korean film companies in a state of crisis.

Hollywood branch offices… were pioneering nationwide direct distribution in which a Seoul office would bypass regional distributors and book films directly into theatres across the nation.

Gradually, regional distributors lost their influence and sources of revenue and, by 1992, it was clear that South Korea was becoming a single market.

NEW KOREAN CINEMA

In response, a new generation of producers worked with financing from Korean *chaebol* such as Samsung and Daewoo to produce so-called 'planned films.'

NEW KOREAN CINEMA

The *chaebol*'s decision to enter the film industry was influenced by several factors, particularly the video market. Three of the largest *chaebol* —Samsung, Daewoo, and LG — not only manufactured VCRs for domestic and international markets, but also operated video divisions to provide content for this lucrative industry.

The *chaebol* succeeded in creating powerful, vertically integrated film companies that could control the making and exploitation of a film from the pre-production and financing stage through production, distribution, exhibition and its release in ancillary markets such as video and cable television.

NEW KOREAN CINEMA

[A]lthough major companies… would all be gone from the industry by 1999, the changes they brought about would remain in place long after their departure.

The first notable effect… was a rise in budgets.

In their preference for using well-known actors as a means of reducing a project's risk, the *chaebol* also magnified the influence of the local star system.

The *chaebol* generally preferred clearly specified genres, believing them to have a better chance of box office success.

The most influential (and beneficial) aspect of the *chaebol*'s business activities, however, was their investment in local infrastructure.

The vertically integrated structure… also served as a model for the major companies of the future.

NEW KOREAN CINEMA

The planned film essentially involved pre-selecting a target audience and marketing strategy, and using a long period of script development to improve chances of success at the box office.

Planned films also introduced market surveys into Korean filmmaking. [and] film promotion, pre-release marketing, and market analysis.

Although the concept of the planned film was never universally adopted throughout the industry, it exerted a strong influence on filmmaking until the adoption of a producer system which more closely resembled that of Hollywood in the mid-1990s.

NEW KOREAN CINEMA

The *chaebol*'s exit from the film industry in the late 1990s is often interpreted as a side-effect of the financial crisis that swept much of Asian in 1997. South Korea... was forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund and others for a $58 billion rescue package.

Roughly simultaneous to the *chaebol*'s withdrawal was the appearance of another major source of film finance in venture-capital companies.

The business activities of venture-capital companies formed a stark contrast to those of the *chaebol*. Most avoided investing in movie theaters, cable television and other film-related businesses, instead focusing solely on film finance. Generally they remained as minority investors rather than funding a film's entire budget, preferring to spread their investment in a portfolio of titles.

They were less inclined to become directly involved in the film-making process.

NEW KOREAN CINEMA

In the years following 1999 when Korean cinema entered its boom period, venture capital emerged as the film industry's primary source of production finance. What began as a steady stream of investment turned into a torrent by 2001, when more and more venture capitalists invested in films, lured by the success of local hits… and rumours that cinema could guarantee double-digit returns.

NEW KOREAN CINEMA

From 1999, Korean cinema has experienced a commercial boom that harkens back to its Golden Age of the 1950s and 1960s.

[T]he rapid development of its infrastructure remains a highly unusual case in world cinema. Very few countries around the world possess so many local film companies of the size and strength of those in Korea. The power such companies wield in their home market allows local film-makers to reap many of the advantages of the industry's rapid development where, in other countries, Hollywood branch offices might benefit the most.

THE ILM EFFECT

ILM EFFECT

Julie Turnock:

"ILM [Industrial Lights and Magic] veritably invented our contemporary notion of photorealism, not only in special effects, but in the cinema and moving image capture realms more broadly."

ILM EFFECT

She looks at how "rather than modeling its looks on the 'real' or phenomenal world, special effects' digital techniques imitate the look of photography."

FX do not strive to look like any kind of photography but specifically to look as if the scenes had been photographed in the style of "poetic docurealism" characteristic of New Hollywood 1970s cinema, which renounced "studio-bound slick professionalism and instead call attention to the fact that what was in front of the camera was being filmed."
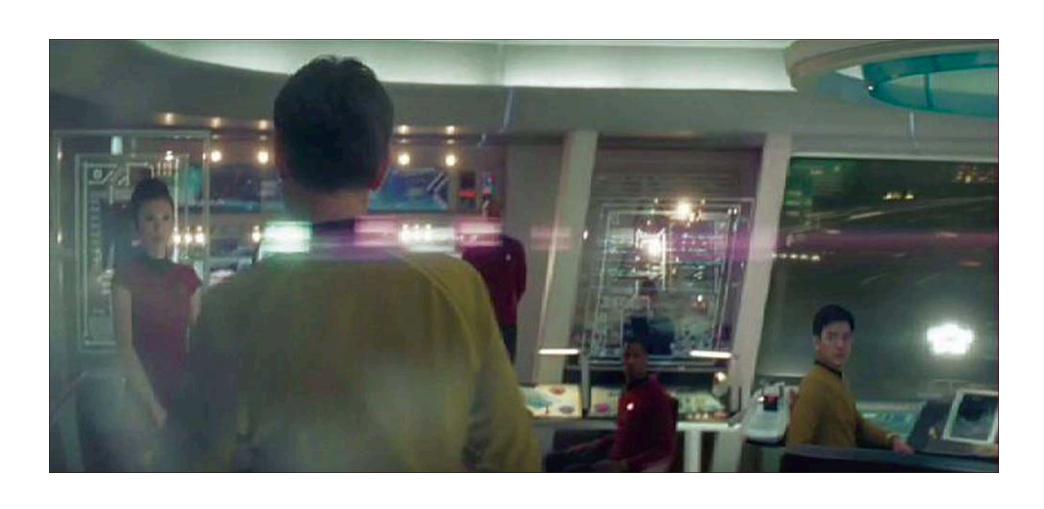
ILM EFFECT

"…rather than modeling its looks on the 'real' or phenomenal world, special effects' digital techniques imitate the look of photography."

"…in contemporary digital effects, filmmakers hearken back to an earlier era more closely associated with the integrity of the photographic image: to the 1970s, and specifically to 1970s materialist docurealism…"

New Hollywood 1970s cinema renounced "studio-bound slick professionalism and instead call attention to the fact that what was in front of the camera was being filmed."

In other words, this "poetic docurealism" aimed to produce films that looked as if they had been filmed a documentary way, as if actually captured by film photography.

ILM EFFECT

Turnock calls attention to a series of effects.

J. J. Abrams's *Star Trek (2009)*

Terrence Malick's *Badlands (1973)*

George Lucas's *Star Wars (1977).*

1970's cinematography, as seen, for example, in Hal Ashby's *Harold and Maude* (1971)

Steven Spielberg's *Munich (2005)*

In *Iron Man (2008),* visual cues trick the eye into perceiving both live action and computer-generated content as similarly realistic.

ILM EFFECT

In sum, Turnock calls attention to a series of effects.

    —gleam in the eye
    —lens flare
    —virtual handheld cameras
    —roughened look of surfaces
    —hard directional sunlight
    —a muted color palette

ILM EFFECT

What are some of the consequences of the dominance of the ILM version?

1. Hegemony of a style

"Recognizing ILM's aesthetic dominance also points up the question of what special effects stylistic possibilities ILM has foreclosed. The success of *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters*, and other special effects driven late 1970s films meant, for a brief period, a proliferation of effects styles and approaches."

"There are several examples of foreclosed possibilities: *Altered States* (1980) and its sustained representation of trippy mind states; *Xanadu* (1980) and its colorful representation of heighted emotionality via music; *Flash Gordon*'s (1980) vibrant, op art comic book graphics; *Clash of the Titans* and its endearingly creaky traditional stop motion animation; and *Tron* (1982), which dared to actually imagine what computer generated imagery would look like if a computer had its way. These styles, all alternative approaches to special effects aesthetics that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, enjoyed brief vogues, but were effectively crushed by the overwhelming success of early 1980s."

ILM EFFECT

What are some of the consequences of the dominance of the ILM version?

2. Special effects dictate cinematic style

"Instead of requiring special effects to match the live-action cinematography, as was the case with *Star Wars*, the priority eventually reversed."

"With the greater economic importance of the special effects driven blockbuster, the live action cinematography is now conceived and executed (and in many cases also animated) to match the special effects considerations – as was certainly the case at ILM with the *Star Wars* prequels."

ILM EFFECT

What are some of the consequences of the dominance of the ILM version?

3. Truth-effects

"The association with special effects photorealism, combined with the poetic docureal cinematography, produce a credible world where Spielberg's version of history is true, because it looks and feels true. This look is as true as *Badlands* (1973), to be sure, but perversely, also as true as *Iron Man*."

"Lastly, it should give us pause that the marks of 1970s cinematography meant to disrupt a classical sense of seamless realism are entirely absorbed into a mental schema invoking photorealism, and moreover, signaling the truth."

THE HOST & THE ILM EFFECT

The monster in *The Host* may be characterized as an ILM monster.

New Zealand's Weta Workshop is credited with the "creature scannable maquette molding and casting."

John Cox's Creature Workshop (also New Zealand) with animatronics.

But above all, The Orphanage, a now-defunct visual effects studio in San Francisco, that provide visual effects and animation.

Former ILM employees founded The Orphanage as a studio to provide ILM-style effects at lower cost.

THE HOST & THE ILM EFFECT

The Host is unusual in that it shows a lot of its ILM-style monster.

To what extent do you think that its overall audiovisual style is subordinated to the ILM ideal of "poetic docurealism" of 1970s New Hollywood Cinema?

To what extent to do think the film can make us aware of this subordination to this ideal?

THE HOST & THE ILM EFFECT

Would we interpret the ILM-style monster in *The Host* differently if we acknowledged the non-American sources of the 1970s ideal of poetic docurealism?

What if that ideal is actually pirated from Eastern Block SF movies or retooled from Japanese cinema?

Does considering the complex cinematic lineages implicit in 1970s Hollywood poetic docurealism alter how we read this monster allegory?

Put another way, the CGI monster may be read as an allegory of American hegemony, instead of a representation of American dominance.

THE HOST & THE COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION OF GENRE

Moine argues that considering the communicative function of genres will provide us a way to move beyond the limitations of the models based on productive and repressive functions.

When we look at the history of the New Korean Cinema, we see how genre plays a productive function.

When we look at the ideological implications of monster in *The Host*, we see how it might serve a repressive function.

What would it mean to look at *The Host* in terms of the communicative function of genre?

Jeon seems to be heading in this direction insofar as he emphasizes the inherent multiplicity and hybridity of the monster.

THE HOST & THE COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION OF GENRE

1. Genre is hybrid. Every genre contains multiple genres.

    SF may contain such genres as —

            horror

            fantastic

            action / adventure

            suspense

            comedy

            romance

            voyage (quest and/or conquest)

            documentary

            social realism

            cinema of ideas

Jeon seems to be heading in the direction of the communicative function of genre insofar as he emphasizes the inherent multiplicity and hybridity of the monster.

THE HOST & THE COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION OF GENRE

What strands of genre run through *The Host*?

THE HOST & THE COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION OF GENRE

2. Genres' codes can thus be pirated, repurposed, mashed…. across 'national' cinemas.

The monster in *The Host* is at once Korean, American, and Japanese, to name the obvious.

THE HOST & THE COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION OF GENRE

3. Genres thus encourage audience participation and activity well beyond 'national cinema' — although we might keep Moine's observation in mind that this may be both a good thing and bad thing.

After all, audiences are not all equal in relation to the film, even if the film somehow brings diverse audiences together.

This 'inequality' problem became thematized in a series of 'geopolitical monster' movies around the same time as *The Host.*

2009

2010

2011