

From Arizona to Manchuria Towards Space and Beyond: A Critical Genealogy of Cowboys in Contemporary Korean Imaginary

Yung Bin Kwak

Abstract

This paper critically traces a genealogy in which the exotic figure of the “cowboy” has been translated and transmogrified in the contemporary Korean audio-visual imaginary. We will pay attention to the implications of the “cowboy” figure’s trajectory which traveled from Arizona to Manchuria, further to outer space and beyond. “Arizona” as it was evoked in the 1955 hit song *Arizona Cowboy* was nothing less than a place of fantasy. Mediated through the devastating reality of Korea, ravaged by the Korean War only two years earlier, and President Syngman Rhee’s visit to the United States the previous year, this imaginary space recalls Michel de Certeau’s remark that understanding and writing of history reinforce “the selection between what is understandable and what must be forgotten.” This history of phantasmagoria continued from the early 1960s to the early 1970s, led by director Im Kwon-taek’s film *Farewell to the Duman River* (1962), through the “Manchuria Western” genre, which moved to “Manchuria.” After briefly rekindled with the release of Kim Ji-woon’s *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird* (2008), the genre’s short-lived vitality attempted a reboot through *Space Sweepers* (2021), dubbed the “Korean space opera.” This paper will conclude by mulling over the implications of this lineage, which not only references *Star Wars* (1977) and Japanese films set in Manchuria, but ultimately evokes the ghostly presence of *In Search of Love* (1928), a film set in Manchuria by Na Un-gyu, considered the “Father of Korean cinema.”

Biography



Yung Bin Kwak is Visiting Professor at Yonsei University's Graduate School of Communication & Arts. After receiving his PhD from the University of Iowa, USA, with a dissertation, entitled, *The Origin of Korean Trauerspiel*. He won the inaugural SeMA-Hana Critics Awards, the first national art criticism award established by the Seoul Museum of Art before he served on the jury in 2023. As an art critic and art media scholar, he conducts research on areas between contemporary cinema, audiovisual images, and contemporary art. His publications include 'Melancholic Repetition Compulsion of Mourning and Mnemosyne of Disjecta Membra: May 18, Amnesty and Aby Warburg,' 'Ancient Futures of <The More, the Better>: Obsolete New Media's 'Parallax Contemporaneity', along with IM Heung-soon Complex (2024), Korea Artist Prize 2023 (2024), Project Hashtag 2023 (2024), Ecology in Latent Space: Disasters, Generative Neural Networks, and the Non-Future (2023), Annotations for a Museum (2023), The Waves and a Garage Sale (2023), What Do Museums Connect? (2022), Hallyu-Technology-Culture (2022) Human-Media-Culture in the Age of Hyperconnectivity (2021), and Reading Blade Runner in Depth (2021).