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# Novel Genres or Generic Novels: Considering Korean Movies Adapted from Amateur Internet Novels

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NOVEL GENRES OR GENERIC NOVELS:  
CONSIDERING KOREAN MOVIES ADAPTED FROM AMATEUR INTERNET  
NOVELS

A Thesis Presented  
by  
KYOUNG-LAE KANG

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Introduction

It is possible to see that, for the past several decades, rapid developments in technologies, culture, and economic relations have persistently helped introduce industrial and socio-cultural changes within media environments. Film industries in general have changed their practices and products in order to survive. One reflection of this tendency is in the instability of the once seemingly stable concept of ‘genre.’ Since the 1980s, film industries around the world have increasingly tended toward genre-bending (both genre-mixing and subdividing). Although comments on the generic transformation in American film appeared since the 1960s (Cawelti, 1979, pp. 244-245), a current trend in generic transformation differs in that it is occurring across all generic conventions (Collins, pp. 276-277). Often challenging the public notion of genre or genre films<sup>1</sup>, or even scholarly definition of the assumption on the term genre,<sup>2</sup> the film industry has increasingly more experimental attempts in recent years. One of the most conspicuous examples of this trend may be the current enthusiasm for reality-based (or reality-evoking) TV programming or various modes of mixes

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<sup>1</sup> Berry-Flint (1999) points out that “the public usage of genre as a set of convention or grouping of films” (p. 22). This can be understood as a simple descriptive definition of the textual nature of genre.

<sup>2</sup> Staiger (1997) argues the past debates on genre have constantly shown “the impossibility of the assumption that genre is a pure or unalloyed set of conventions or rules” (pp. 185-186).

between documentary and feature films; another attempt goes beyond the boundary between different media, generating a new generic format, just as in the case of filmic adaptations from video and computer games, or cartoons. This tendency is not unique to Hollywood, of course, and similar tensions have occurred around global film industries.<sup>3</sup>

The film industry in South Korea has not been an exception to this adaptive tendency in commercial filmmaking. The sudden appearance of a number of recent films that are commonly grouped together may be an interesting case. Among the special features of this group is the distinction of having been adapted from online, amateur novels that have been dialogically co-constructed between young writers and young readers, an uncommon form of transmedia adaptation.

The first such youth-oriented film, *My Sassy Girl*<sup>4</sup> (Dir. Jae-Yong Kwak, 2001), is arguably the best example of this trend and worth considering along these lines. In addition to being generally well regarded by film critics, it was also extremely popular by Korean standards. As the second highest grossing film of 2001 (and one of the top ten grossing films in Korean film history as of 2001), it is not difficult to see how *My Sassy Girl* could encourage such enthusiastic rhetoric. Described by audiences and critics as an entirely new form of filmmaking, its popular

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<sup>3</sup> In the same line of idea, Fredric Jameson (1992) discusses about this as 'post generic genre films.'

<sup>4</sup> *Yopkichoguin Kuyo* in Korean.



image as the start of a radical disjuncture in Korean filmmaking is virtually unanimous.

As mentioned, several films sharing a similar adaptation procedure have since been released, and more are in production. Considering that these films, although the difference among individual movies have become increasingly larger, some core similarities are constant. Given that they all share a primary reliance on the described idiosyncratic cultural expectation and characteristic features in film texts, this study will examine the validity of claiming a new genre, by grouping these films together as a new mode of genre (or at least sub-genre) and investigate the characteristic features and implications. Since the first appearance of 2001, more than a dozen films and several TV soap operas have come out through this adaptation procedure usually taking on loosely romantic and comedic tone. This group of films includes *My Tutor Friend* (2002, Dir. Lee Jae Hyung, a romantic comedy, which deals with confrontations and love between a college girl tutor and her wealthy good-looking student), *Ssagagi, My Honey* (2004, Dir. Sin Dong Yup, a romantic comedy, which touches on an ordinary high school girl. She meets a rich and handsome boy by chance, and enters into a relationship of love with him through trivial episodes), *The Guy* (2004, Dir. Lee Hwan Kyung), *The Desire Their Own* (2004, Dir. Kim Tae Kyun, a romance which depicts a teenager's love with two boys. The girl falls in love with

her brother without knowing this). *A Cat in a Rooftop Room* (2003, a popular TV soap opera) etc.

However, beyond this and other catchy labels, other aspects remain underexamined. For example, to what extent can this be considered a disjuncture in Korean filmmaking? If it is indeed a new form, why did it emerge now and why was it so popular? Are these developments worthy of celebration from a critical perspective? Can this even be called a new genre? Motivated by these and other questions, this research project will attempt to examine this recent trend of youth-oriented transmedia adaptation through the use of a multipartite conceptualization of genre. It will focus on one exemplary case to examine how the productions and successes of films in this group have been generated through a complicated and tightly interwoven interplay among industry, text and its audiences.

In order to appreciate the distinctive features and to understand the cultural significance of the surprising popularity of this group of films, this project will examine how current genericity works and intersects socio-cultural and political implications through its numerous and unexamined pattern mixing process. While industrial production and promotion reflect the way producers incorporated the imagined sensibilities and desires of the audiences, an ever-increasing number of texts has been blurring the boundaries between generic or representational conventions, and

audiences accumulatively exposed to experimental texts and changing in their perceptions and tastes have enabled this generic transformation trend in the Korean entertainment industry.

There are good reasons to question an attempt to discuss these films as a new genre. For example, if a genre is defined by features of the text, it is possible to see these films as working within already existing genre conventions. In marketing materials, these filmic adaptations of Internet novels were commercially labeled as romantic comedy or teen films, and they share some aspects in common with these two genres. As a genre, “romantic comedy” is a label that “derives their identity from their concern with love and courtship” (Shumway, 1991, p. 396). The “teen film” label is based on “the ages of the films’ characters, and the thematic concerns are directly connected to specific notions of different youth behaviors and styles” (Shary, 2002, p. 492). Thus, it is even reasonable to see this as a combination of two existing genres.

However, as I will discuss in more detail later, the determination of a genre label can originate for other reasons. Indeed, the most unique feature that underlines each of the films in this group of films is not textual. After all, another important way for the labeling of a genre is filmmaking practice in production (which also can be conceived of as a cultural practice). Examples of these generic classifications are

“spaghetti westerns” (westerns which were filmed in Italy, usually on very low budgets) or “B-movies” (lower budget movies with less popular stars intended to be shown as second film during studio period), and “blockbusters” (very large budget or very large profits). In the case of this present group of films, the adaptation of novels written by amateur authors and published on the Internet is the important characteristic.

Furthermore, this unique relationship with amateur authors and texts is part of the appeal to audiences. Studios exploit both textual and intertextual potential from the original story and proactively attempt to nourish the audiences’ enthusiasm for identification with the characters as well as the authors. To be sure, filmic adaptations from literatures have always served to transfer the inherent “taste or sensibility in the original stories” onto the screen (Hayward, pp. 7-8). Especially in this case study, the production companies and critics have proactively brought the unique filmmaking practice to the forefront of their strategic discourses in shaping the narrative images of the films ending up with heated debates on this filmmaking practice over a couple years. A closer look reveals that the discourses are primarily focused on the uniqueness of the original medium of Internet and the original writer as an untrained teenager or youth, which together is somehow responsible for a conspicuously different mode of narration style and narrative structure in film texts. Significant here

is that all of these discursive endeavors crucially contributed to generate distinctive expectations on the reception as well as production of these films.

It is important to stress the concept of authorship throughout this study.

Literary adaptations for films have been a long-lasting production practice. However,

these films are distinctive from other adaptations because of several reasons

connected to this type of author, and the relationship between the writer and audiences.

First, the original stories were written by ordinary teenagers, who are in the same age

as the main target viewers of the films. Secondly, they do not usually have any

training or previous experience in writing novels, and are considered amateurs by

their readers. Thirdly, the stories were posted online thus the readers could easily

attach their own comments on the author's website or send emails to the author.

Fourthly, teenage fans who might not discuss "real" books in person or online often

created or joined fan clubs devoted to the discussion of the amateur author's work. All

of these features allowed the readers to establish certain affinities to the main

characters, plotline, and the author prior to viewing the films. These established

affinities are more activated through marketing and promotional discourses, and

easily brought together into generating the ultimate meaning of filmic adaptations

during the reception process.

This intimate connection between the writer and audiences in these films lets

us interrogate the concept of authorship in filmmaking. To date, the basic feature of a film's author has been generally described as a person, who is in the central position of producing meaning of the entire film. In this sense, the credit usually goes to film directors or screen writers (see Sarris, 1962). However, because of recent developments in the scholarly understanding of the relationship between an author and the text over the past years, the meaning of a text is not determined by a single person of author, but through convergence (or negotiation) among all relevant agents and corresponding discourses (Foucault, 1987, pp. 124-142). In the same vein, the authorship in film also can be given to whoever stands in central positions to produce the discursive meaning of a film text, including screenwriters, film directors, or even stars (Naremore, 1999, p. 19). It is not difficult to see that the unique role of the author in this group of films can fit the definition of author connected to meaning-making, in addition to the definition linked to stardom, since these authors become celebrities before the release of their film adaptations. One of the hopes of this study is that it will address the specific ways these new relationships among writer, audiences, and industry complicate the concept of authorship.

### *My Sassy Girl as an Ideal Case*

Although the general question is on the production and reception of a group of films, I believe that the space and time limitations on this project will not permit a

comprehensive analysis of the entire group. In order to produce a more thorough depth, the present study will focus only on the first adaptation, *My Sassy Girl*. Using *My Sassy Girl*, as a case study is also justified because it provides the strongest illustration of the relationships between the author, text, and audience. It continues to be the most commercially successful and well-recognized film of this group among audiences, and provoked more reactions from audiences than any other adaptations did. In addition, the two later films, adapted from very popular online novels written by a teenage girl, are included because they have elicited many polemical filmic assessments and cultural commentaries. By discussing and comparing the textual features and public discourses surrounding these films together, this study expects to manifest the textual and intertextual features of this “genre.”

Apart from the dramatic-sounding characterization, this film’s features may seem to share too many similar features with other quirky romantic comedies to deserve special attention. The story centers around the main character of Gyunwoo (played by Tae-hyun Cha), a shy, passive young man who lives with his family in the suburbs of Seoul, Korea. One night he meets an attractive girl (only referred to as “the girl,” and played by Ji-hyun Jeon) in the subway who is extremely drunk. Because she calls him ‘honey’ right before passing out, Gyunwoo is mistaken by other subway passengers to be her boyfriend and is told to take care of her. Although Gyunwoo feels

frustrated with this situation, being somewhat softhearted, he takes care of her and finds himself beginning to like her. After this encounter, the movie shows the course that they gradually develop into an unusual relationship of love. At the same time, there are atypical elements as well. Just as the rather unusual episode of the first encounter implies, their love story is quite different from those of others. In almost every episode, the girl takes a spiteful action and forces Gyunwoo to submit to her will. For instance, Gyunwoo is pushed into a lake so that she can measure the depth of the lake. He is also ordered to switch his comfortable shoes for her high heels and forced to run after her. In many scenes he is physically beaten by the girl and the action is shown in dramatic close-ups. These episodes of mental and physical bullying dominate the first 3/4 of the film until Gyungwoo meets the girl's father and is told he must not meet her again. From here on, the movie turns into a melodrama full of sentimentality containing the course of their break-up and unusual reunion.

To a few critics, the main failure was that the narrative of *My Sassy Girl* does not convey that much of novelty or novel components. From the conventional view of genre, some have considered this film as merely a quirky combination of romantic comedy, slapstick comedy, dark satire, and melodrama. Some critics pointed out that the attempt of genre mixing itself was not very successful, since it left the entire film with an uneven narrative structure; an overall lack in coherence and plausibility of



events, and a failure to create an authentic emotional build-up, narrative progression and causality were among the complaints. In the same vein, film critics often pinpointed flaws such as the way the film tends to simply follow the original, sketchy characterizations and narrative shell of the amateur source, and the way generic clichés are used to flesh them out (Chung, H. 2003).

However, complaints such as these were minority and uninfluential voices.

First, *My Sassy Girl* was immediately and surprisingly popular in the theaters. Most of its tremendous commercial success was due to a large number of teenaged viewers who went to the theater to watch *My Sassy Girl* more than once (Hwang, H & Lee, Y. 2001) and they tended to praise the film as a satisfactory portrayal of their own lives. Beyond ticket sales, celebratory industrial and public discourses praising the arrival of a new production practice dominated over other discourses, and the idea of adapting popular Internet novels became something more than a one-time aberration. Since 1999, the year that *ShinCine*, the film production company of *My Sassy Girl* first announced its plan to adapt a popular Internet novel for a film (March, 1999), considerable amounts of public discussion among critics erupted around this filmmaking practice. Some critics, of course, expressed pleasant surprise with the commercial success of *My Sassy Girl* and celebrated its positive influence within the

Korean film industry<sup>5</sup>(Hwang, H. & Lee, Y. 2001). Certain group of critics even declared this type of film production and films as having an emancipatory or authentic nature: since the stories are based on the Internet novel written by ordinary teenagers, they can be regarded as straightforward expressions of teenagers' voices, which, until the arrival of these films, have largely been marginalized or limited within mainstream culture. As an extension of this argument, some critics came to declare these films as 'the manifestation of teenagers' own sensibility or desire'. Furthermore, what was seen as the deficient narrative structure of *My Sassy Girl* became reinterpreted as a new mode of narrative, which is especially pertinent to the expression of teenagers' culture or reality (Chung, H. 2003). In the end, the interest of critics was matched by the interest of the film industry, and several producers rushed to duplicate the successful formula of *My Sassy Girl*. About ten films were made through imitative production processes and released within the first three years alone.

## Literature Review

### The Lens of Genre

These multiple and intertwined components of the film's production and reception suggest that a complex and comprehensive approach is necessary for a

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<sup>5</sup> *My Sassy Girl* drew almost five million theatre viewers (KOFIC, 2004) in attendance in the domestic market and obtained great popularity in several foreign markets such as China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Eventually its copyright was sold to Hollywood, and the remake version is scheduled to be released in 2006.

meaningful analysis. One general approach that offers possibilities is that of ‘genericity’<sup>6</sup>. To begin, the term genre has been used to categorize films according to their similarity and difference in visual style and narrative patterns since the medium’s inception (Hayward, 2000, p. 165). The early film genres and genre criticism were derived from older cultural arenas such as literature and theatre. As in these fields, the early film genre critics examined the generic world and recorded characteristic codes and conventions in it (Berry-Flint, 1999, p. 28; Gledhill, 2000, p. 223). Although there are simplistic clichés based on early work with genre and genre theory, genre has evolved to become a useful and productive conceptual tool in film studies. Depending on one’s definition of genre, “genre can provide the conceptual space where such questions can be pursued. In this space issues of text and aesthetics intersect with those of industry and institution, history and society, culture and audiences”(Gledhill, 2000, p. 222).

Since the 1960s, genre study began to extend beyond the early descriptive and categorizing-based understanding and stressed socio-historical meanings and functions of repetitive formulas. As the first step, some attempted to interpret how visual conventions in a genre film convey specific meanings in relation to its social and cultural contexts (McArthur 1972; Buscombe, 1995 etc. as cited in Berry-Flint,

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<sup>6</sup> Here, I use the term ‘genericity’ following the way Collins (2002) defines it. He states that the term encompasses an overall tendency in genre films as well as genres in general (p. 277).

1999).

Later, the generic study adopted structuralist perspective. Representatives are borrowed from Vladimir Propp's conception of "narrative as a set of oppositions" on the one hand, and Levi-Strauss' structuralist reading of myth on the other (Gledhill, 2000, p. 222; Hayward, 2000, pp. 168-169). Thus, genre films became viewed as a structure of differential meaning, and its functions within the larger social context were highlighted. Also, this structuralist approach interpreted that genres function to offer to its audiences specific repetitive narrative patterns, and thereby effectively promote "a feeling of unity or harmony," which help temporarily resolve "tensions of cultural and social paradoxes." In this sense, genre was often described as "cultural ritual" or "secularized myths of modern societies" (Schatz 1981, Berry-Flint, 1999).

Focusing on the function of generic patterns, other film critics argued that generic conventions in Hollywood films as a representative cinematic institution serve to address its audiences in a position of textually inscribed subjectivity and in doing so impose dominant ideological meanings on audiences (Berry-Flint, 1999). In this sense, Judith Hess Wright (2003/1974) argued that, as products of the capitalist culture industry, genre films present simplified versions of resolutions and "assist in the maintenance of the existing political structure" (pp. 42-50).

More recently, film scholars argued generic formulas and genres have multiple layers of tension and contradictions in a single text, and they invite audiences to negotiate the polysemy (Berry-Flint, 1999, p. 37). Here the meanings are constituted socially and historically through accumulative and multifaceted manifestations “in a wide variety of media, narrative structures and aesthetic forms” (Gledhill, 2000, p. 354). Thus, genre became viewed as a site for interplay among generic conventions and relevant socio-cultural discourses and practices.

To be sure, some may question the validity of even attempting to group films together by a concept such as genre. Janet Staiger (2003) points out that the use of genre as a categorizing tool has many problems and several authors have systematically demonstrated the flaws. Tudor (1973, as cited in Staiger), for example, has identified four methods of grouping films: idealist (comparison to a model film), empiricist (determining the defining features), a priori (an a priori declaration of characteristics), and social convention (using cultural expectations). However, each contains its own inadequacies. Staiger suggests that Tudor and “most film scholars know these theoretical shortcomings of genre study, and then just forge ahead anyway” (Staiger, 2003, p. 187). This is because, Staiger argues, it is practical to “simply live with the inconsistencies in method and ‘deficiencies’ in the objects of analysis for the sake of what might be learned from textual comparison (Staiger,

p.187).

### Genre from Multiple Perspective

The foundation for a multifaceted view of genre begins with a set of fundamental concepts. A genre may be understood as a composition of three elemental concepts. Above all, a genre contains repetitive visual and narrative patterns which are consistently visible within generic 'corpus' and dissimilar to those in other genres. For instance, a melodrama is characterized as full of sentimentality and following a tragic development emphasizing on the virtue of sacrificing in domestic life, whereas a romantic comedy draws on a controversy between a couple with comic touch mostly leading a marriage in the end.

Also, exclusive generic patterns and their meanings in a genre film need to be shared among filmmakers and audiences in the courses of their production and consumption. This sharing of meanings becomes enabled through the concepts of generic 'expectation' and 'verisimilitude'. In other words, repetitive usage of exclusive generic conventions renders audiences a certain expectation about the narrative universe, which enables audiences to easily anticipate the narrative universe and to accept events and occurrences on the screen as feasible. One of the often taken examples for this concept may be a scene of a film where an actor bursts into an unmotivated song; if audiences are aware that the film is a Musical, they are likely to

consider those scenes necessary for the entire narrative development and make a sense of the scenes (Neale, 2003/1990, p. 161; Altman, 1999, pp. 152-156).

In the meantime, genres not only repeat the same patterns but also make some additions or subtractions to the existing generic repertoires. Sometimes, a genre film transgresses the boundary of existing genres while it extends the repertoire by borrowing some elements from other genres. Stressing this feature of genre, Neale (2003/1990) characterizes genres as being “in play” not “replayed” (p. 171).

At large, film industry plays an initial generative role in generic transformation by way of making a slight change on existing generic conventions. Here, a generic expectation operates through a tight interaction between filmmakers and audiences (McArthur, 1972). Thus, a generic change eventually occurs when it effectively grabs a certain mass sensibility which is already embedded among audiences (Gledhill, 2000, pp. 235, 238). Viewed from this point, the change in a genre and society go together, intersecting with each other in an unpredictable but inevitable mode.

Focusing on this interplay between industry, text and audiences, Berry-Flint (1999) maintains that genre is “socially organized sets of relations which regulate certain texts” (p.41). This is because established generic meanings involve the course of production and consumption. In other words, generic conventions and meanings

are not only reinforced (newly proposed) by film industry but also sustained through consent of viewers (Ibid). In the following section, the means by which these tripartite agents (film industry, text and audiences) operate and intersect surrounding the concept of genre will be discussed. Also, it will be explored as to how the nature and function of these agents have changed and serve to make new format of generic formats including my case study.

### Genre – Industry

Looking at genre as an industrial consequence can be very productive. The film industry has constantly influenced generic formulas through making an addition to an existing generic corpus and selecting from the repertoire of generic elements available at any one point in time (Neale, 2003/1990, pp. 171-173). However, most people have considered that film industry merely utilize existing generic conventions without any changes in both formulas and meanings.

Recently, film scholars began to acknowledge the role of film industry in defining genre categories and its meanings (Neale, 2003/1990; Altman, 1999). Above all film industry is eager to adopt previously successful models in filmmaking. Also, they pursue to catch up with audiences' ever-changing taste, which leads new emergences or disappearances of certain generic repertoires. In doing so, film industry plays a generative role in shaping a new generic formula (Altman, 1999, pp. 62-67).



Film industry also affects on generic conventions and their usages in the course of marketing films. While a film company promotes a new film, the company usually constructs a “narrative image” of the film, which delivers its audiences an anticipatory picture of the film text (Neale, 2003/1990, p. 163). Here this presented expectation plays a significant role not only in attracting audiences to the theatre but also in leading audiences to understand or anticipate the film text in a certain direction.

Finally, film industry can transfigure genres through its modes of generic labeling on a film. In fact, the industry has attempted to render a more inclusive or strategic labeling to new films so as to ensure interest for a maximum audience range (Altman, 1999, pp, 9, 50-68). Once a labeling is approved from audiences, the group of films with the same label comes to be understood as a genre, which offers audiences a specific expectations and meanings. For example, if a new type of feature film becomes labeled a “documentary” and considered under the same label among audiences, the movie is likely to be read as a more educational or informative, authentic, and socially engaged text beside the evaluation on the text itself (Murray, 2004, p. 42). In recent film industry, new generic labeling has become a more popular practice. This is because film industry attempts to proactively utilize existing cultural products or limited number of established generic conventions, instead of newly inventing formulas (Collins, 2002, pp. 276-277; Marshall, 2002, p. 69).

## Genre – text

Genres structure an individual text through incorporating conventional formulas and giving established expectation systems to viewers. Also, a film text contains different degrees of inventive components. If a film sticks to traditional generic formulas, the text may easily fall into a given generic category. On contrary, if a movie contains more elements that complicate established generic conventions, the text is hard to be categorized in established genres. Rather, the text is polysemic and evokes many different types of expectations from its viewers.

Considering this relation between a genre and a text, a discussion on a new generic format may be made on the following three dimensions. First, generic changes can be read from distinctive features in plot structure and spectacle in comparison with relevant older genres. The movie *My Sassy Girl* in this sense may be seen in relation with following genres: romantic comedy, slapstick or melodrama. Roughly stated, romantic comedy deals with conflicts between male and female stars. In more detail, Rowe (1995) contends “romantic comedy treats the social difference that impedes community as a matter of sexual difference, and so it builds the feminine into both the construction and the resolution of narrative conflict” (p. 47). With this respect, the movie *My Sassy Girl* is compatible with this genre.

However, the difference between *My Sassy Girl* and romantic comedy arises

from other aspects. Namely, whereas the stars' performances in romantic comedy contain a high degree of narrative motivation and thus are tied to demands of character and narrative development, the characters' behaviors in *My Sassy Girl* does not manifest a clear tendency to elicit the entire story. Rather the story abundantly uses physical gag and consistently emphasizes its nonverbal nature, the very central means by which the film elicits audiences laugh. In regard to these features in a film, Page (1984) points out as belonging to slapstick (cited in Jenkins & Karnick, 1995, p. 108).

Also, the changes in its formats associate the meanings of film, which can extend to larger socio-cultural implication or ideological issues. In fact, the meaning of a genre as well as a genre-bending can often lead a cultural implication in opposition to each its archetypal genres. Comedy can be an example to this controversy. In more details, comedy has been assumed to render audiences a momentary liberation by way of allowing audiences to experience activities which are tabooed and always outside social norms (Rowe, 1995, p. 43). In this regard, comedy is evaluated as subversive to dominant conservatism. However, it is also criticized for the same features. Namely, this momentary liberation cannot give any alternative, and thus make people remain within the frame of existing social values (Jenkins & Karnick, 1995, p. 270).

Recent emergences of atypical components in familiar generic format also arouse similar effects in its meanings and audiences' readings. Feminist film studies reveal that the portrayals of women such as "too big, loud laughing or violent" frequently appear on screen. These features are ideologically subversive in that they deviate from traditional stereotypes. However, these women are often ridiculed in narrative, and sent back into a reaffirmed patriarchal social order (Probyn, 1997, p. 130). In this project, the movie *My Sassy Girl* will be discussed in consideration of the issues of social implications, ideological issues, and ambivalence issues discussed in previous studies.

#### Genre – Audience

Genre is a crucial factor in the course of consuming a film text. When spectators go to the theater, a generic label helps them anticipate and make intelligible the events and components on screen (Neale, 1990). In this sense, genre functions to render audiences a 'preferred reading' in viewing a film.

If a generic format is quite new and thus audiences do not possess any stable expectation system of that genre, audiences' readings of the text are likely to proceed into various directions. This is why some authentic or creative works, which do not show distinctive generic forms are often evaluated as 'controversial' (Fiske, p. 111).

In particular, today films tend to be more open to its textual meanings. This is

because films are increasingly hybridized and made through various experimental filmmaking practices, which do not allow audiences to easily read the texts in connection with previously established generic formats.

Rather, the meaning of film text increasingly relates to intertextual elements.

First, film industry attempts to more proactively utilize intertextuality so as to effectively deliver narrative images of their products through various vehicles. Then, the narrative images provide proper direction to read a given text. Next, frequent borrowing from other cultural artifacts in filmmaking naturally results in reliance on intertextual reading of a film. For example, recent movie adaptations from computer games or other cultural artifacts are also conducted from this interest of the film industry. Namely, they do not only borrow original narrative but also bring to the film the audiences' taste and sensibility tied to the original work.<sup>7</sup> Third, today's audiences have changed in their comprehension of media text. In particular, they have been accumulatively exposed to hybrid generic formats, which have persisted for more than a decade. Thus, audiences can easily identify parody components or properly read the grain of those genres.

### Research Questions

This study is generally interested in the question of whether this recent trend

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<sup>7</sup> In this regard, Susan Hayward (2000) states that film adaptation utilizes audiences' predilection and tastes within the original text (pp. 7-8).

of Korean filmmaking, as represented by the film *My Sassy Girl*, can be seen as a disjuncture in Korean popular film. This is explored through the use of a tripartite model of genre: genre as industrial product, genre as textual product, and genre as audience product. Thus, three sub-questions will be addressed in the process:

**Q1: Do the industrial processes and practices suggest a radical departure that constitutes a new genre or form?**

I hope to investigate how film producers intentionally perform to shape this format as well as how film critics as an influential group of film-viewers drive this production trend in specific directions. This is based on the idea that producers partially respond to the expectations of an imagined audience.

**Q2: Do the textual/semiotic features, particularly with respect to narrative or ideological markers, suggest a new genre or form?**

This study also includes questions about the socio-cultural significances embedded in the text: what the popularity of the text suggests about ‘mass unconsciousness.’ This question will seek its answer by rereading the text from two representative perspectives on genre: genre as social myth and ideology and as a potential source of audiences’ pleasure.

**Q3: Do the responses of its audiences, particularly with respect to the notion of pleasure, suggest a new genre or form?**

In other words, how do audiences get pleasure through this text and what implications are suggested by this relationship. In addition to showing audience responses actively contributing to the discourse surrounding the categorization of a new genre, I will attempt to elucidate what are the intertextual particularities in these sort of films, especially in relation to current generic transformation tendency and the culture of teenagers in contemporary Korea that help make these films pleasurable to teen audiences.

Methods

In order to address the questions proposed, a number of different research methods will be involved. In general, due to the distinct nature of each perspective involved, different methods will be applied to each sub-question. The relationship between the conditions of production and genre transformation will be explored with a political economic analysis. I will discuss economic structures, historical developments, social relations, and surrounding discourses of producers (directors, writers, producers, marketers). The main source material for these discourses will be press announcements of the film company as well as several published interviews with the film producer/director, main actor/actress, and the writer in relation to the

production of the text and the narrative image of the film, *My Sassy Girl*. In addition, I will include public comments by film critics and media scholars as secondary resources. In doing so, I will primarily utilize available articles published in several Korean cinema magazines as well as other press if required. My investigation using the esthetic approach to genre will involve textual analysis. I will analyze imagery, narrative, and filmic techniques as they connect to the larger social and cultural contexts. This will also include a consideration of ideological implications. This will be focused on which sort of components can be composed to shape a certain reality; this will be processed in comparison with the conventional codes derived from the traditional reality genres.

The study of online audience discourse is inspired by the audience-focused approach to genre. Online discussions about both the original text and the films will be analyzed for confirmation of their pleasure and their perceptions of the films' significances. For this, I will rely on the comments posted by fans on websites featuring discussions about both the original online novel and the adapted film. In doing so, this study will attempt to mainly shed light on the results of industrial and text analyses. In more details, this study will focus on how reception is constituted through industrial and critics' discourses, and how the observed textual features contribute to elicit audiences' pleasure. Furthermore, this study will consider how



audiences are influenced by prior interactions with the original stories or affiliations to the fan clubs of the writers in negotiating the meaning of the film texts. In doing so, this study expects to investigate which sort of relationship or affinities, if any, audiences form with the films and affect on the reception process.

## CHAPTER II

### INDUSTRIAL BACKGROUND

#### Global Generic Trend

Once genre films are understood from their process-like nature, generic transformation and mutual transgression between different genres are most feasible practices in the development of film industry. In this regard, film scholars have pointed out that as early as in the 1960s, when Hollywood had just passed its Golden age, film genres began showing a clear tendency in interpenetrating through the once separated boundaries (Cawelti, 1979). Namely, each film has constantly added new visual and plot components to its old generic form, and sometimes transgresses other generic boundaries, which ends up with a new category of genre or relabeled ones. Furthermore, today all of genre films almost always tend to engage in specific transformation across genres and thus do not any more remain within a specific genre, which ultimately generate a challenge to the very conception of 'genre' or 'the function of genre' (Collins, 2002).

This full-scale generic transformation was in part triggered by the conspicuous reshaping in representation techniques and audience competencies followed by a whole range of technological developments and corresponding uses of them for the past two decades or so. During the 1980s and 1990s, the rapid

introduction and popularization of new media technologies such as cable television, VCR and CD video allowed audiences to easily store and access media images while increasing the overall volume of media content. As a consequence, multiple different representational modes came to coexist, resulting in an exponential increase in image stock (Collins, 2002), which often causes our media environment to be called a 'media-saturated milieu' (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, pp.177-179). Moreover, recent digital technologies allow both the faster accessing and greater manipulability over the stocked images, and thus this image stock enters into the perpetual circulation and recirculation, generating multiple new combinations of representational modes and significations (Collins, 2002, pp. 278-289).

On the other hand, the increased manipulability and easy accessibility transfigure audience competency or cultural literacy toward the (media) image. For contemporary audiences, who have been exposed to enormous media images in their daily lives, media images increasingly come to take on an object-like nature; audiences are more often invited to the process of interaction with media images (physically as well as figuratively) (Morley, 1995, pp. 170-173; Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, pp.70-71). In so doing, audiences learn how to facilitate both the accumulated cultural memories and their own life experiences all together. This change may be applicable to audiences' comprehensiveness of narrative structure. As

such, audiences do not “cling to” the idea of a tightly interwoven “linear narrative structure” any longer (Marshall, 2002; Kinder, 2002); instead, they enjoy themselves by recognizing implicated intertextual (visual or narrative) clues and appreciating newly enriched meanings in a media text.

Thus, considerable parts of industrial attempts are able to catch up with the change in audiences’ taste and competences as well as to obtain benefit from the development in media technology. In other words, the media industry does not only attempt to invent new contents for interactive media technologies, but also proactively to facilitate all relevant intertextuality which spreads over any given cultural product of their own. A good example may be the popularization of MTV programs, which are merely a rapid montage of fragments and debris stripped from all of existing entertainment conventions, but are designed for audiences to enjoy in easily recognizing certain components and reading embedded intertextual meanings. The intensified genre-bending trend in contemporary film industry can be read from this viewpoint. Namely, filmmakers treat the past as “a superstore for picking and mixing” and take inspiration from critical as well as studio categories, so that the whole process of film production seems to “spiral out of control transgressing over all once drawn boundaries including genres” (general or sub-genres as well) (Gledhill, 2000; Collins, 2002).

The endeavor to encourage audiences to use intertextual pleasure does not remain in the production process. Industry constantly promotes and invokes the process of production to audiences, so that viewers apply the pleasure from other parts while they are enjoying a film. Widespread success of “reality-based programs” in recent years can be considered from these two viewpoints alike: first, these programs are mixture “between factual program and fiction” (Friedman, 2002, p. 6); second, they persistently refer to audiences’ real lives or what has been represented as real through the endeavor of media industry to use available intertextual storage surrounding audiences.

Moreover, this industrial practice to facilitating relevant intertextuality became more popular when acknowledged as a good means not only to more easily anticipate target audiences’ taste but also to effectively circulate established popular cultural references within previous formats. In particular, with the concentrative tendency in media ownership that has continuously progressed through the late 1990s, media industry has focused on possible mode of combining or transgressing between different media formats or content (Marshall, 2002, p. 70). Lately, the film industry witnessed the success of movie adaptations from video or computer games as well as cartoons, which were mainly targeted to youth audiences.

## Korean Film Liberalization and Development

Although film was introduced to Korea as early as in 1903, due to historical and political particularities, Korean cinema did not fully develop until the late 1980s with the exception of a brief “Golden Age” from the 1950s to early 1960s (Kim, 1996). In particular, government interruption was a crucial factor in the stunted development of Korean cinema. The colonial Japanese government and the later military governments completely controlled the film industry by means of rigid regulations and censorship, which delayed the industry’s growth.

During the late 1980s and mid 1990s, however, Korean cinema faced turning points in all political, economical, and cultural aspects, which eventually affected the industry’s growth and developments. The 1980s can be characterized by governmental moves away from involvement. First, the military dictatorship retreated after its thirty year’s rule in 1989. Importantly, this retreat brought about relaxations of many previous censorships and rigid regulations in the Korean film industry (Kim, 1996). A second factor was the influence of global market. Until 1987, Korean media law had maintained a stipulation that only domestic film companies could import and distribute foreign movies in the Korean film market. In 1988, US forced the Korean government to permit Hollywood studios to distribute films directly to Korean market. As a result, this opening of the domestic market greatly impacted the Korean film

industry, which led “many local film imports to shut down their business” on the one hand, and “Hollywood films to occupy the local market reaching 80 percent of market share in 1994, from 53 percent in 1987” on the other (Shim, 2006, p. 31).

During the 1990s, the government seemed to recognize the necessity for a more active support, and it expressed this through a more protectionist cultural policy and its promotion of the local cultural industry. Acknowledging the profitable potential of cultural industry, the Korean government established the Cultural Industry Bureau in 1994, which helped the Korean film industry equipped as more competitive system. This governmental promotion had lasted throughout the 1990s (Shim, 2006, pp. 31-32). In 1995, the Motion Picture Promotion Law came into effect. This new media law, unlike the previous ones only focusing on limitations and censorship, primarily helped diversify and improve the content and quality of the local media (Kwon, N. et. al, 2002, pp. 59-60). Furthermore, the government’s protectionist agenda included permitting the massive, multinational corporations, the *cheobols*, to enter the film industry. Although these big capital groups retreated after a short time period, they eventually contributed the Korean film industry to be more competitive and profitable by way of bringing their capital and management skills to the film industry (Shim, pp, 32-33; Paquet, pp. 4-5).

Other, less obvious factors included the entry of large numbers of talented

and well trained professionals into the film industry in the mid 1990s. These new, young individuals helped introduce more competitive management skills and filmmaking techniques into the Korean film industry, which also based the radical improvement in its content and commercial success in Korean films of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Shim, p. 33; Paquet, p. 5).

In summary, the Korean cinema had been rapidly gaining in experience through these dramatic events of the relatively short time period of the 1990s. All of these elements—Hollywood’s pressure, aggravated situations in the domestic economy, governmental regulation and promotion, and the introduction of local capital and talented people – were important. In the end, the industry achieved tangible success in the market. A Korean action movie *Shiri* in 1999 is frequently mentioned as a marker of this success (Shim, 2006). After the success of this film, the industry had been heading toward further flourishing throughout the next decade.

### Market Structure and Demand in the years from 1999 to 2001<sup>8</sup>

#### Changes in Korean Audiences

The improvement in production techniques and ultimate commercial success of Korean film was accompanied by an increase in the number of moviegoers.

According to annual statistics issued by Korean Film Council (KOFIC), Korean

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<sup>8</sup> The time period was set in consideration of the years *My Sassy Girl* was initially designed (1999) and released (July 27, 2001).



moviegoers had constantly increased in number since the year 1996, and the typical Korean consumer was reported to go to the theatre 1.9 times a year on average. The absolute moviegoer numbers also increased, and the number of 2001 increased by 19.9 percent from that of 2000<sup>9</sup> (KOFIC, 2001).

Such increase in overall number of audiences can be seen to be connected to the emergence of new audience groups. First, the age spectrum of moviegoers has been ever broadened. While moviegoers had been since believed to be only young women in their twenties, recent researches showed that main moviegoers also include more various demographic groups such as male university students, women in their thirties, and even men in their thirties (KOFIC, 2001). Some researchers claim that this broadening of the audience group has relevance to the improvement of Korean film. Put another way, diversified themes and styles in Korean films encouraged the public to visit the theatre, including even those who seldom used to watch movies in public. For example, *Joint Security Area (Gongdong Gyungbi Guyeok JSA)*, Dir. ChanWook Park, 2000, dealing with the issue of North and South Korean relation, 2000), and *Friend (Chingu)*, Dir. KyungTaek Kwak, 2001, a tale about friendship among local gangsters), all of which drew more than 5 million attendances. Interestingly, a large portion of their audiences was composed of middle aged men,

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<sup>9</sup> the number of moviegoers for three months of 2001 was estimated as 25.5million while that of 2000 as 21,3million (KOFIC, 2001)

who were over their thirties, and ended up reaching up to 20 % of the entire theatre admissions respectively (Kim, E. 2001).

The total size of audiences also grew as spectators' attitudes towards the Korean films have improved. Until the late 1980s or early 1990s, Korean films had been considered as possessing low quality among Korean film viewers. However, as Korean films have achieved rapid commercial success and obvious improvement in overall quality over the past decade, Koreans have developed a strong attachment to domestic films. According to an annual KOFIC survey, public opinions of Korean films have been rapidly improving over the last few years. In 49.8 percent of respondents said they preferred Korean films from 26.4 percent in the previous year of 2000 (see the table below). Besides the rate of increase, these figures are also remarkable because Korean films overtook Hollywood films in popularity.<sup>10</sup>

[Preference on films with different nationalities (KOFIC, 2004)]

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	Mean
Korean films	21.6	26.4	49.8	54.0	52.1	40.78
Hollywood	54.2	50.8	39.6	31.1	36.2	41.98
Europe films	2.5	2.5	2.8	2.9	3.1	2.76
Hong Kong	5.7	5.0	2.7	1.2	2.8	3.48

As the market for Korean films increased in size, it also changed in demographic composition. Moviegoers became younger. While average filmgoers up

<sup>10</sup> This preference of domestic films has continuously increased during a recent couple of years, reaching its peak with the commercial success of two Korean blockbusters, *Silmido* (Dir. Woosuk Kang, 2004) and *Taegyeukki* (Dir. Jekyu Kang, 2004).

until the 1990s were women in their late twenties, they were now 19 to 23 year old men and women as well. Although women between 24 and 29 years of age remained an important group, they were now considered the second most frequently watching group. In addition, the film industry was surprised by the emergence of teenagers (from 14 to 18 years old), and male college students as important parts of a new movie-going public (KOFIC, 2000).

No doubt, Korean filmmakers responded to this change in the composition of the audience by paying more attention to younger viewers as an underexploited market with the potential for large profits. This attention was justifiable for a few reasons. First, this age group had shown a steady increase in their frequency of theatre-going over the past several years. For the year 2000 alone, younger viewers were reported to have visited theaters a total of 4.3 film viewings a year, 1.5 more times than the previous year (KOFIC, 2000). Compared to the average film viewer in Korea who saw 1.7 films a year as of 2000, this pattern of growth was noteworthy for the domestic industry. Secondly, these younger viewers have already demonstrated themselves as a leading consumer category in other media such as pop music. The sudden explosive emergence of *obppabudae* (fan clubs for a singer or a music band) among teenagers in the early 1990s is evidence of this trend. Thirdly, the spread of multiplex theaters, which started in 1998, made target marketing easier and more

logical. Containing several screens within one building, multiplex theaters can reduce film companies' financial risks, which encourages them to make films in various formats and themes in order to cater to different audience groups at the same time (Shary, 2002).

### Production Structure and Generic Trend

In light of the rapid growth and reshaping of its market, the Korean film industry has attempted to diversify and revitalize its efforts at capturing particular audiences. Among such endeavors, the industry increased its longstanding efforts to “catch up” with global trends, especially the tactics of market segmentations and genre-bending.

Perhaps the first obvious example is *Shiri* (Dir. Jaekyu Kang, 1999), a mixture of action, political film, and melodramatic modality (good and evil, a love triangle) (Min, 2003, p. 171). This film attracted a considerable number of spectators (about 5.8 million attendance), and owing to this commercial success, became considered as the starting point of a Korean film renaissance (Shim, p. 33). Other conspicuous examples include *The Quiet Family* (Dir. Ji-Woon Kim, 1998), a mixture of horror, action, and comedy, *Christmas in August* (Dir. Jin-ho Lee, 1998), a melodrama as a local rendition of restrained emotional excess and evaporated tragic pathos.

Later on, the industry also brought together conventions from other Asian countries and unique elements of Korean culture to create a new genre format. The stylish *Nowhere to Hide* (*Injung Sajung Bolgut Eopda*, Dir. Myungse Lee, 1999), is a good example of a genre blend of formalism and realism as well as Hollywood action and Hong Kong action film (Min, 2003, p. 171). *Untold Scandal* (Dir. Jaeyong Lee, 2003), an adaptation of the French novel 'Les Liaisons Dangereuses,' is also an eye-catching example, in that it brought together the ruthless plot ingredients from the original novel into a different spatiotemporal context of 17th Century Korea. Despite this unusual combination of Korean historical film and French romance novel, the film maintains typical narrative progress of classic Hollywood melodrama and comedy.

Of course, the intentions and estimations of producers about the impact of generic transformations on target audiences, are sometimes inaccurate. However, intentions and assumptions are often erroneous. A recent film, *Volcano High* (Dir. Taekyun Kim, 2001), is a good example of a more daring experimentation with generic transformations which had obvious potential at drawing different parts of the youth audience. The film was a combination of cartoonish iconographies, rapid MTV-style editing, choreographed fight scenes, slapstick, and heavy irony, all of which are set against a high school backdrop. Although it was hoped that *Volcano High* would

capture the teen audience in Korea, it made a stronger impression in the United States.

While it had very modest sales in Korea, American director Quentin Tarantino

recommended it and it was purchased for broadcast by MTV.

*My Sassy Girl: from the Internet to film*

Production Company *ShinCine*

As mentioned above, the Korean film industry entered a transition period as it became freed from long-lasting governmental controls, and faced increasing competition from Hollywood starting in the late 1980s. Such changes forced domestic film companies to recognize and adapt to the realities of a more competitive marketplace. While some companies struggled, others succeeded through different strategies. In 1988, the production company *ShinCine* was founded in these market conditions and positioned itself as an innovative company. According to its official website, “*ShinCine* first introduced the concept of film producing to the Korean cinema in 1988 and has grown with a great competency in producing and marketing..... The company, mainly focusing on commercial films, always has taken a lead in inventing new contents in the Korean cinema” (ShinCine Website).

This approach to filmmaking can be largely attributed to Shin Chul, the founder of the company. From the beginning of the company, he focused considerable resources and efforts on the goal of understanding the audiences’ constantly changing

tastes. To do this, he commissioned numerous diverse survey and interview studies to gauge the characteristics of a particular audience category's lifestyle and preferences.

Although this was not a novel approach by Hollywood standards, it had been unprecedented in the Korean film industry at that time (Shin, Y. 2001).

*Marriage Story* (Dir. Euseok Kim, 1992), a big commercial success attracting about 520,000 number of attendance in Seoul alone, is representative of such strategic producing. The film was well evaluated for two reasons: above all, it was the first Korean romantic comedy dealing with a young couple's conflicts arisen from their marriage with a light, comic touch. The film was quite eye-catching considering most Korean films of the time had only focused on portraying women's sufferings from historical and economic realities in a melancholic and tragic tone. Second, such change in film representation seemed to reflect "changing gender relationship" in the new generation which began in the early 1990s. In particular, such elements in the film text were intentionally designed based on sociological studies and repetitive surveys, which were presented to sample groups of target audience populations for many months (Cho, 1997; Shin, 2001).

After the success of this film, Shin Chul had made several films through a similar process including *Ginkgo Bed* (*Eunhang Namu Chimdae*, Dir. Jeakyu Kang, 1996; 452,580 attendances in Seoul), *The Letter* (*Pyunji*, Dir. Jungkook Lee, 1997;

770,000 attendances in Seoul), *The Promise* (Yoojin Kim, 1998; 730,000 attendances in Seoul), all of which drew a considerable number of admissions at the record of the time. Through the success of these films, both producer and company *ShinCine* have earned a reputation for being able to precisely read and exploit changing perceptions or lifestyles of contemporary audiences (Shin 2001). Generic transformation could be seen as an important economic strategy of *ShinCine* before *My Sassy Girl* became a project of the corporation.

#### The Genesis of *My Sassy Girl*

The origins of the story material for *My Sassy Girl* is an interesting story itself and is connected to the rise of the Internet use in Korea. According to the 1998 statistical yearbook issued by the Korean Ministry of Information and Communication, public use of Internet technology began spreading in 1996. Although the technology grew in popularity, the main users were confined to the few who were previously acquainted to computer technology (some professionals or computer majors, youngsters who were used to computer games) until DSL (Digital Subscriber Line) technology was introduced at the end of the decade when the mobile phone company *Hanaro* first started the DSL service in 1999 (“KT Focus” 2002).

A recent mechanical engineering graduate named Hosik Kim was one of such early Internet users. Like many of his peers, he enjoyed reading postings on *humor*



*gessipan* or electronic bulletin boards which were very popular, and on which users posted various comical anecdotes, gags, or sometimes social commentaries. One day in 1999, he posted a brief story based upon his own experiences with his ex-girl friend. Very surprisingly, he received over one hundred emails from anonymous readers in less than one hour. He went on to post the complete story in 51 separate installments between 1999 and 2000, with each installment attracting more than 10 thousand readers per episode, which was an impressive number of audiences considering that the Internet technology was still in its infancy at that time (“A Best Couple” 2001). In the end, such explosive popularity drew the attention of book publishers, and it was published in book format in 2000 (Wee, J. 2001).

In retrospect, it seems that the logic of adapting an Internet novel to film was clear to several Korean major film producers for several reasons. First, because main readers of the Internet novels belong to the same age group with main moviegoer group, that is, teenagers or those in their early twenties (Mihee Kim of the Fun & Happiness Film). Second, whereas current research about target audiences merely provided demographic data, such as sex, age, address, preferred genre, etc, Internet novels offered detailed information about their tastes and lifestyles in concrete terms (Jongyoon Noh of the Sidus Entertainment). Third, the Internet novels would help to lower filmmaking costs especially in the process of designing items and writings.

Considering investments were being radically reduced in the current film industry, adapting Internet novels gave many advantages in keep overall budgets under control (Youngdae Kim of the Geo Entertainment). Fourth, thematic materials or characters were already proven as having potentials to be popular on the Internet (Jaewon Choi of the IPictures) (Lee, Y. 2003).

Indeed, *ShinCine* was quick to see the potential of an Internet novel for a film adaptation, because it fit all of these rationales. After a period of time, the success of the Internet novel *My Sassy Girl* came to the attention of the producer Shin Chul, who was mindful of the Korean cinema market and production situation of that time. The rapid growth of youngsters as a significant group of consumers for culture industry in general, and lack of proper markets to target them in cinema. Eventually, *ShinCine* purchased announced their innovative plan to adapt a popular Internet novel to film in 2001 March (*ShinCine* official website)

### Selling *My Sassy Girl*

The imagination of target audiences was also a central component of the production process. Besides astute casting choices (clean-cut and charismatic lead actors), several decisions suggest that the idea of a prepared target audience guided the production and marketing of the film. First, producers decided to maintain the original structure and aspects of the Internet novel under the consideration that it was

a well known story and utilized potential cultural references from its target audience. Second, the company hired Jae Yong Kwak for screenwriting and directing the film, who was well-known for his previous commercial success, *A Drawing in a Rainy Day* (1987), a melodrama targeted to teenagers. Through the selection of this screenwriter and director, the overall contour of the film has been predetermined as a combination of melodrama and youth film.

The shaping of the marketing image of *My Sassy Girl* was also done with this young audience in mind. The marketing company *Cinema Service* employed marketing strategies were quite new for the Korean market, and specially tailored for this film and younger viewers as well. First, the company made use of the identification that the audience had with the writer of the novel. To do this, Cinema Service continuously highlighted the unique process of adaptation from an Internet novel, and the fact that it was written by a young amateur writer. In doing so, the company expected to elicit affinities from audiences and utilize existing cultural ideas, particularly ideas about creativity and individual success. Second, it took advantage of the new medium of the Internet as a site for marketing. Such a decision was successful because the Internet was already an important means for audiences to choose movies at that time.<sup>11</sup> Thanks to such marketing activities, many online fans

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<sup>11</sup> Moviegoers are surveyed to respond that they use the Internet as the second most means, which take up to 19.3% of the whole vehicle. This percentage was a considerable growth from the 10.2% in 1999 survey and only a few points smaller than TV as the then most frequent means (KOFIC, 2001).

showed enthusiasm for this movie even before it came out and rushed to the theatre right after its release (Han, 2001)

## CHAPTER III

### *MY SASSY GIRL* FROM A GENERIC PERSPECTIVE

As mentioned earlier *My Sassy Girl* was labeled a romantic comedy or drama for the purpose of marketing. However, the film has several features that complicate its categorization within either genre. In this chapter, I explore generic features and meanings of the film. In doing so, I will especially focus on two specific aspects. First, I determine which generic conventions are being borrowed from each relevant genre? Secondly, I assess how they are mobilized in this film. That is, which distinctive features and meanings, if any, are generated through such hybrid process? This exploration will primarily rely on comparison and contrast between this film and five existing generic conventions.

#### Teen Film

The first recognizable genre is the teen film. The term “teen film” as a recent invention of film studies causes difficulty in its definitional meaning and practical use. To begin, there are several different generic terms in use to indicate films in any association with the age group of youth or teenagers. Examples include “teen film,” “youth picture,” “teenager movie,” “teenpic,” and “juve movie,” etc. Here these terms often merely relates to ‘age-relatedness’ instead of any specific thematic motifs or conventions. Put another way, all these generic terms indicate films dealing with

teenagers' concerns and life experiences, or catering to teenagers' tastes. In sum, "teen films" can be defined as a film in which the ages of the films' protagonists are teenagers or young adults, and the thematic concerns or materials are directly connected to distinctive youth behavior and styles (Shary, 2002, p. 493). Teen films have existed in almost any period of film history, and in particular thrived in 1960s Hollywood productions. At that time these films usually dealt with the issues of school life, peer, family, or romantic relationships, and delinquency, etc. In doing so, they often depicted youngsters' "desire to escape from their life," to "venture into an unknown world" (Ibid, p. 492).

As compared to this Hollywood trend, the Korean cinema witnessed a handful of equivalents to teen films only starting in the mid 1980s. Called "high teen films," these Korean teen films contained the topics of school life, relationships, first love and identity formation. Among these, *Mimi and Chulsoo's Love Sketch* (*Mimi-wa Chulsoo-ui chungchun sketch*, Dir. Gyuhjung Lee, 1987, romantic melodrama), *Hangbok-eun Sungjeoksun-i Anijanayo* (Dir. Wuseok Kang, 1989, school film), *A Drawing in a Rainy Day* (Dir. Jaeyong Kwak, 1989) are representative. After a short time of popularity among youngsters, however this 'high teen films' disappeared, and was replaced by a dearth of films for teenagers in Korea throughout the 1990s even

when the domestic film industry was rapidly thriving.<sup>12</sup> Recent filmic adaptations from Internet novels including *My Sassy Girl* is a delayed return of this teen film tradition. Namely, the film *My Sassy Girl* shares many characteristics in common with the generic category of teen films. Above all, the film's two main characters are college students in Korea, and the narrative universe is filled with miscellaneous happenings centering around the main characters. Secondly, its thematic materials consist of components that directly arouse age-based sensibilities: its settings are full of common places for current Korean youngsters (e.g. cheap pubs, a fast food restaurant, a modern-style café, an ordinary college campus and lecture rooms, several subway stations and a body of water all labeled by their actual names); events and situations represented in the film are a dramatized version of current youngsters' common life experiences that they can easily recognize (e.g. a mischievous scheme for skipping a class, a freakish parody of a classic Korean novel titled 'Sonagi,' and the act of going to a dance party in school uniform, etc); the film dialogues are completely composed of popular teenager slang. Here, the use of teenager slang is meaningful since it has become explosively popular and thus settled down as a significant cultural marker among teenagers.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> There was virtually no conspicuous example of this sort, until 1997 when the film *Beat* (Dir. Sungsoo Kim) was released.

<sup>13</sup> Here, teenager slang refers to recent Korean youngsters' distinctive usage of the language. It stemmed from recent youngsters' tendency in breaking the standard written language grammar, and freely adapting spoken language rules into writings, improvising often simplified and graphitized modes. Also, due to the influence of technology and other cultures, the use of 'emoticon' is also

Despite these suggested similarities, *My Sassy Girl* also shows differences from other teen films. This distinctiveness mainly arises from its narrative peculiarities and representation mode. Whereas previous teen films are usually confined within the generic mode (often a combination of romance and comedy), *My Sassy Girl* borrows additional generic conventions from several different genres. In doing so, it is noteworthy that this film takes easily recognizable and stereotyped generic components from each genre, and through this, it successfully positions its protagonists in the middle of more dramatic impact.<sup>14</sup>

### Slapstick Comedy

The main characters in this film are a young college student, named Gyunwoo (male protagonist, presumed as the writer himself of the original story, played by Tae-Hyun Cha), and his girlfriend, only known as ‘the girl’ (played by Ji-Hyun Jeon). The main story unfolds along with this couple’s encounter and developing love. As compared to other love stories, however, their relationship is quite unlike those of others.

To begin, both of them are depicted in a frame of reversed gender stereotypes. The male protagonist is seen in a feminized (and often infantile) frame. The first

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included among these popular modes of Korean teenager slang.

<sup>14</sup> This “riding on previously established genres” (Willis, S. as cited in Collins 2002) for their own fantasy has also been pointed out as a recent trend in Teen film. For more discussion about this, see Shary, 2002, p. 55.



sequence clearly shows such image of him. In there, he is sitting in a photo shop and his face is seen through a camera lens. Over the scene appears an old photo, one from his early days. In there, he is dressed like a baby girl. Then, his voice is narrated from the offscreen, “my parent wanted to have a daughter when expecting me, thus raised me like a girl. Because of their influence, I thought I was a girl until turning seven.”

In contrast, the girl’s image is hyperactive (and sometimes aggressive) frame. Her first appearance is in the scene of their first encounter at a subway. At first glimpse, she does not look different from heroines in other films. She is young and attractive but extremely drunk. However, soon after that opening shot, she performs differently from typical roles given to female protagonists. She finds a young man in a seat with an old man standing in front of him and threatens him with violence for not offering the old man his seat. At that very moment, she hits the young man’s head (captured in a close-up). Such excessive behavior from her is accompanied by another in the next scene when she vomits over an old man’s head right before she passes out.

Seen from these described two sequences, the reversed gender role in this film is not an object for serious consideration. Rather, it is constantly very exaggerated and framed comically. Through this, the characters’ relationship comes to appear absurd, nonsensical, or non-feasible and serves as a backdrop for comical episodes pervaded throughout the film.

In particular, the film primarily utilizes physical violence for these comical situations. Thus, Gyunwoo is constantly beaten by the girl. Moreover, the girl takes spiteful actions and pushes Gyunwoo into embarrassing situations to prove his love for her. For instance, he is forced to walk into a lake so that she can measure the depth of a lake. He is also ordered to switch his comfortable sneakers for her high heels and forced to run after her. Such mental and physical bullying of her dominates three quarters of the film.

Because of this persistent dependence on wacky episodes and physicality for eliciting audiences' laughter, this film can be said to greatly rely on the generic conventions of slapstick comedy, which can be characterized as humor aroused by "physical gags and nonverbal gestures, often emphatic, violent, and embarrassing gestures"(Page, 2000, cited in Crafton, p. 108). The film also borrows appropriate representational devices from the slapstick genre, which are manifest in both actors' exaggerated facial expressions or movements, camera movements, or background sound and music. For example, her punches are always quickly and accurately flying towards Gyunwoo's face. His swift escapes are always vivid and rhythmical. He is also often depicted as crippled (carrying her on his back) or waddling (running in ill-fitting women's high heels). Focused on these two actors, the camera constantly sweeps into their frequent chases, freezes at her blows in his face, and playful music

always accompanies such mischievous moments.

Then, which functions do these slapstick components perform in this film? To date, film scholars have pointed out that slapstick comedy “serves for a desire to break free from restraints, to challenge authorities, and to negate the logical order” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 217). In doing so, they usually claim relevance between the pleasure from the genre, and ‘civilization process’ or an infant’s entry into the social order. Put another way, slapstick mainly represents “a desire for a momentary return into the pre-social, or an infant’s refusal against the entry into the social” (Ibid, pp. 217-221). The exhilarating and energetic mood *My Sassy Girl* creates can be seen as an extension of these generic features of slapstick. In this sense, these slapstick components are to deliver young viewers a sense of momentary liberation from rigid control in daily life as well as challenge the social order into which they are about to enter.

#### Gyunwoo, The Clown

In slapstick comedy, there is almost always a position for a clown, who is represented as “an outsider, a liminal figure, or a transient.” At the same time, the word, clown signifies a “clot of conflicting meanings and associations” thus an existence who continuously “calls into questions the stability and coherence of normal cultural categories” (all cited from Jenkins, 1992, p. 224).

This ambivalence of the clown is frequently utilized in a slapstick comedy. In this sense, a comedy begins by plunging a clown into a new social order that differs from the previous one. The clown is barely adjusted to the new order, yet as a “liminal, transient figure,” does not show a long-term commitment. By virtue of such liminal status, however, the clown can freely question and challenge the preexisting order and authorities (Jenkins, 1992, p.224).

In *My Sassy Girl*, Gyunwoo, the male hero is positioned as a clown. At the beginning, he is set to be infantilized and feminized, as well as adolescent. In the encounter with ‘the girl,’ this position becomes more emphasized (actual reversal in conventional gender roles). Yet this plot device serves to highlight his liminal position in the narrative. Thus he is granted anarchistic energies to challenge authorities and transcend (by force but eventually with joy) the established social orders. However, since he is merely in a “transitional state” before the entry into another “successive social position” (his adolescence), when he finally matures into a full-fledged adult and is entitled as a member of the social order, his challenge comes to terminate and the anarchistic energy dissipates.

#### The Girl, “The Mother Lacking Nothing”<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, Gyunwoo’s anarchistic performances are always

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<sup>15</sup> Studlar (1995) explains that the female figure in a man’s masochistic fantasy is no longer a substitute for the hidden father, rather a mother ‘lacking nothing’ (p. 15)

juxtaposed with the girl's constant assaults on him. In other words, he is constantly beaten by the girl whenever he goes into an anarchistic situation, and as a result gets pleasure from it. Seen as such, what function do the girl's blows perform in this film? Does this have any relevance with the male character's desire? Gyunwoo's pleasure, in the relationship with her, accepts masochism as a good place to begin. In his reinterpretation of masochism, Gilles Deleuze contends that masochism corresponds to one of the preoedipal stages in the development, and thus masochism posits the mother (instead of father's law) as "the primary determinant" (Studlar, 1995, p. 15). In this sense, the mother is placed simultaneously as "an object for love" and "a controlling agent." Here it is phenomenal that such ambivalent status of the mother evokes "a need for suffering" from an infant because the infant possesses no other means in order to retain "the mother's love but to turn to self-punitive, masochistic maneuvers" (Studlar, p. 15, p. 200).

When Gyunwoo is thrown out of his familiar world into the anarchistic pleasure, the girl is not positioned only as a loving object but also the mother 'lacking nothing.' This is how she becomes capable of allying herself with him in the disavowal of the social order (through his anarchic performances). However, her role as the primary determinant is merely momentary, which will only last while he passes through the transitional stage, and end the moment he enters (or returns) into the

social order.

### Melodrama

While the narrative unfolds in such a chain of exhilarating and anarchistic episodes, another plotline is being juxtaposed following a familiar linear structure until it reaches a narrative device of an oppositional force: the male hero meets the girl's father and is told not to meet her again. From then on, the movie loses all hilarious moods, and takes a sudden melodramatic turn into sequences full of sentimentality.<sup>16</sup> The sequences are mostly associated with their break-up. Some sequences are suddenly romanticized, which make its viewers fret about their break-up. For example, one day the girl calls Gyunwoo and asks him to bring a rose to her class just as in an old fashioned romantic movie where a boy confesses love to a girl. Other sequences highlights that it is close to their break-up, which only ends up showing how much the two of them love each other. While the girl is absent, the male hero attempts to give her fiancé tips on how to love her. After Gyunwoo leaves the meeting, the girl follows looking for him.

The sentimental mood however culminates in a scene when they bury a time capsule on top of mountain so as to make their break-up a good memory to revisit in

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<sup>16</sup> Considering the term melodrama is flexible and thus sometimes regarded as “a mode, an imagination or genre” (McHugh, p. 23), its use needs to be clarified. Here, “melodramatic” is used as somewhat broad meaning. It refers to characteristics such as “excess of affect (the overdrawn, overmarked)” and “excess of plot (strange, almost unbelievable twists, coincidences, connections, and chance meetings)” (Refer to Abelmann, p. 45).

the future. She then sends him to the peak of a neighboring mountain. At the moment he reaches the peak, the camera focuses on the girl standing on top of mountain. With melancholic music rising, the camera zooms closer to her face. Suddenly, she loudly sobs, "I am sorry, I cannot but leave you." As her desperate confession elevates the melancholic mood, the camera sweeps back to the empty space separating them and shows the Gyunwoo waving his hands unaware of her decision. Since her voice cannot reach him as she reveals that their break-up is an inevitable fate, it remains a private confession to the audience. When camera captures her again, her eyes are in tears conveying a full screen of sorrow to its viewers.

As such, the story, through such melodramatic plot devices elicits emotional pathos from its viewers who gain an insider's knowledge of the main characters' break-up from an intimate and privileged perspective. In particular, the film presents legitimate reasons for her 'sassy' behaviors, namely that the girl's ex-boyfriend passed away right before she met Gyunwoo. Her deep sorrow and sense of guilty is the source of her unusual behaviors. It is significant that the revelation of this excuse suddenly reframes the girl's behaviors, which once appeared as sassy, exhilarating, and liberating, now reveal themselves as simply deviant, abnormal, needing discipline, thus, her deviant behaviors cannot go undisciplined. Although the breakup is imposed by the girl as an act of love, within the tragic frame up to this point, it serves as a

punishment of her transgressiveness.

Nevertheless such explanations about her sassiness enable audiences to understand her, and thus leave her “innocent.” This ascertainment of her innocence enables audiences to give sympathy to and side with the characters, which convey them a feeling of sadness. What is at stake here is that the text, through this emotional pathos and sympathy, naturally conveys a retrieved morality of patriarchal order to its viewers. In this regard, Linda Williams (1998) asserts as follows:

Melodrama... seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action.” Thus, “character and action are construed within emotional and moral registers, rather than those of psychology or realism; spectators side with and feel sympathy for virtuous victims who confront forces larger than they are; the narrative is above all constructed to reveal innocence, whether the character possessing that innocence is saved or lost (p. 42, as cited in McHugh, 2005, p. 23).

As it turns out, in *My Sassy Girl* this melodramatic tone lasts for a while, but not permanently. With the sorrowful pathos and the remaining yearning for reunion, it is important that melodrama presents audiences with a certain morality (especially as a retrieval of the existing social order). Peter Brooks (1976) summarizes this function of melodrama as follows:

Melodrama is indeed typically, not only a moralistic drama but the drama of morality;



it strives to find, to articulate, to demonstrate, to “prove” the existence of a moral universe which, though put into question, masked by villainy and perversions of judgment, does exist and can be made to assert its presence and its categorical force among men(p. 20).

### Romance

The melodrama, however, does not last. A fade-out marks the end of such sentimentality, and the film resumes in a different tone. A camera speedily follows Gyunwoo’s changed life after the break-up. He stopped his mischievous acts and prepares for his future (to enter into the social order). Shortly after, his status and material achievements are also shown when it is revealed that he has successfully sold a screenplay to a film company (which is yet another autobiographical element from the original novel), and when he enters the final scene, he is clearly different in appearance and behavior. Wearing a black suit, his appearance is no longer that of an outsider or mischievous adolescent, but a full-fledged adult member of society.

The final sequence takes place at a restaurant. The girl is meeting a middle-aged lady, who is her late boyfriend’s mother. A camera captures the girl in a close-up: her appearance has also changed dramatically. She is dressed up, speaks softly, and behaves with proper manners. When the camera sweeps up, the Gyunwoo, the remade hero, walks in from behind her. He has come to meet his aunt who, as it turns out, is

also the mother of the girl's late boy friend. In the last scene, the hero and heroine are smiling each other, and as the camera sweeps down, we see they are holding hands.

Now, this is a story of a fated romantic love that has finally come to fruition.

It is noteworthy that through this final reunion sequence, the prior anarchistic acts of the two main characters are completely overturned. Namely, such exhilarating disorder loses its carnivalesque tone, and is suddenly turned into a "chain of mere social conflicts that tested the couple and delayed their inevitable union" (Rowe, p. 47). In this sense, the anarchistic performances merely remain as a state of momentary transition and 'festivity' to celebrate their passage into the established order just as in other slapstick comedies (For such slapstick characteristics, see Jenkins, p. 237). This momentary festivity becomes attained by the generic components that allow the lead characters to retreat from the ordinary world, where their union seems impossible, to a "magical" place apart from everyday life (Rowe, p. 47).

Eventually, when the couple returns, their (re)union signifies the solution of conflicts, entering into the established order through transitional passage, reaffirmation of heterosexual love or the Symbolic order. In this sense, this film follows the path of a romantic comedy that Tomas Schartz (1981) called as 'rites of integration' as reaffirmation of social order and value (p.35).

Meanwhile, it needs to be reminded that such course of integration leaves the

girl's rebellion unfulfilled, and forces her to "accept the terms of heterosexuality," or to (re)enter into the Oedipal passage to femininity (see Rowe, p. 51).

### Generic Mixture

Seen from the generic conventions and implications suggested, the film *My Sassy Girl* despite its combination of several different generic formats seems to preserve classic generic rules. Namely, it maintains archetypal thus even clichéd visual and narrative motifs from each genre. On the semantic level the movie appears to bring and to have different (or contradictory) generic implications encounter each other just as in the contradiction between libratory anarchism in slapstick, and regulation by the social order in romantic comedy, youth and adult, a possibility of new femininity and patriarchal order, tragic fate and comic closing, etc. Yet the overall narrative ends up tracing to a universal narrative structure in this sort of feature films, i.e. the Oedipal passage and its successful entry into the father's law. In this sense, it can be regarded as a typical generic mixture with some transformed components available at that time, but the entire structure converges on the original styles and messages.

Despite the movie appears to contain typical generic conventions, its entire structure is (or at least perceived) apart from a typical romantic comedy or drama. This is because it is different in narrative progress and character developments as

compared to typical narrative films. According to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (1979), a narrative can be defined as “a chain of events where cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space.” In particular, the components of causality and time are central to a narrative (p. 65), through this, spectators can make sense of a narrative. However, the narrative structure in *My Sassy Girl* does not seem to fit in this definition.

As a matter of fact, the movie has been often commented not to show proper narrative progress or linear development (Chung, H. 2003). This evaluation mainly results from a flaw in character build-up and proper displacement of plot devices, which are major means to achieve such cause-effect in a narrative. In the movie, character traits seem to be confined to a few necessary ones, such as their appearance, age, a couple of habits (drinking, shouting, fighting, etc), but no specific concerns or interests, skills are presented in advance. What is worse, the movie constantly improvises its characters' traits in the middle of the narrative, right before the moment the trait should contribute to make up an event. As such, the characters are not well-developed and the narrative of the film mainly rests on coincidences simply enumerating small episodes and spectacles.

Also, its plot development fails to provide proper establishment to its viewers. After the start, the movie is just fully filled with mischievous episodes and audiences

cannot realize what they expect to happen until the narrative reaches their break-up which is very close to the end of the story. Even worse, the movie suddenly rushes towards their reunion, and all components in the movie change to achieve this goal. In doing so, it seems impossible its audiences guess at causal or temporary relations among these events. In the end, the film fails to convey any coherent narrative or plausibility. Here, if it is reminded that most narrative films have rested on this plausibility or 'verisimilitude' and, through this, safely conveyed their (explicit or implicit) meanings to its audiences within a closed, reality-like narrative universe, this is the reason that the seemingly stereotypical plot structure of the movie would not perform its original functions as in classical ones any longer.

Interestingly, this seemingly functional failure in basic narrative elements of *My Sassy Girl* echoes some new media scholars' commentary on recent shifts in representation generic modes. Namely, they point out that contemporary films often deviate from classical representation norms, which are in particular manifest in recent pervaded mixtures between different genres or preexisting images.

Here, the individual fragments came to serve a different function through these unprecedented combinations. Whereas a collection of fragments once delivered a combined meaning or parody, these fragments only function to indicate the genre itself, or from which genre it was taken. For example, a segment borrowed from a

famous Western only delivers 'being involvedness' of Western by way of reminding its audiences of a specific sequences they already saw (Collins, 2002; Hayward, 2000). Put another way, audiences bring their previous experiences and understanding of the genre of the Western to the present viewing, and thus quickly grasp what exactly the film attempts to deliver.

Meanwhile, by virtue of the looseness of narrative structure, this film also brings and combines together other popular cultural references in its body. The sectors sometimes come from a few other genres such as "action genre" (her scenario sequence, *Bicheon Mulim Aega*), "science fiction," or other times some easily recognizable soap operas (theme park sequence), a successful commercial (the girl dancing at a party, etc.), or specifically age-related media conventions including video/computer games (another scenario sequence, *Demolition Man*) or cartoon.

Overall, this film, through its free borrowing from various genres and contents, allows many different or sometimes contradictory values to coexist in one single text. Yet a loose narrative of the film delays the meaning of these components to converge on one point. As a consequence, the film narrative became to leave its meaning open to influences by any discursive activities or other cultural contexts.

## CHAPTER IV

### SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPLICATION & READING PROCESS

In this chapter, this study investigates how audiences respond to the film on both conventional changes and implications, and what pleasure they get from. This study especially focuses any influences of relevant discursive and social contexts over the process of readings. Thus, the first section discusses current teenagers' lifestyles and their socio-cultural contexts and then the second section will study audiences' consumption in consideration of intertextual implications.

#### The Emergence of Teen Culture and New Generation

Some scholars and cultural critics in Korea explain that the public emergence of 'teen culture' in Korea was triggered by a hip hop music band named *Seo Tae Ji and Kids* in 1992 (Lee, 2004; Shim, 2006, p. 36). Although it was the first attempt as a music band for youngsters in Korea, the band drew an explosive popularity and was later positioned as a legendary status among teenagers. Through such enthusiasm among teenagers, the domestic cultural industry discovered the group of teenagers as a sizable potential market. In this way, 'Teen culture' in Korea came to maintain a strong tie with culture industry since the 1990s.

The teen culture also has grown with an unusual enthusiasm for "new generation" discourse. The start of the discourse was with the then government's

declaration of a “new” era in 1993. Once this catchphrase provoked lots of enthusiasm among the Korean public, the word “new” rushed to be picked up for many areas such as “new Korea,” “new economy,” “new intellects,” etc. The “new generation” discourses emerged within this mood and quickly stimulated the public through a sizable journalistic and academic works (Korean Press Foundation [KPF], 2000, p. 17). For instance, a book published in 1993 in a title of *new generation, Do whatever you want* (Song, J. et. al., 1993) first announced the existence of new generation, and highlighted their distinctiveness (i.e., the book referred to youngsters as “Orange Tribe,” which became a famous marker for new generation in a few subsequent years). After all it evoked a cultural sensation in Korean society. Later on, discourses on youngsters have increased which led youngsters to stand in the middle of cultural focus. The mushrooming of various different names for young people such as X-generation, N-generation, P-generation, R-generation, etc. (Lee, D. 2004, pp. 135-136) proves such heated interest on youngsters of the society.

### Youth Lifestyles

Then who are the agents of so-called ‘teen culture’ or ‘new generation discourses’ in the cultural focus of current Korea?<sup>17</sup> And what characteristics do they

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<sup>17</sup> In sociology, “a ‘lifestyle’ is the way a person (or a group) lives. This includes patterns of social relations, consumption, entertainment, and dress. A lifestyle typically also reflects an individual's attitudes, values or worldview” (lifestyle, wikipedia). For discussion on youth lifestyle, this study refers to Joseph Plummer’s (1974) lifestyle criteria, which consist of four categories of activity, interest,



possess? Considering there are various delimitations of youngster age group, (in the case of the ‘new generation’ discourse, they broadly define the age group somewhere from teens to forties, Yoo, S. 2000, pp. 17-33, while in the discourse of ‘N-generation,’ this age range lowers from thirteen to twenty, Lee, D. 2004, p. 146), this study will mainly focus on youngsters whose ages range from 15 to 23 (or a little older ) as of the year 2001 and thus correspond to the main moviegoer group for *My Sassy Girl*.

The people in this age group were born in Korea during the time period of 1977 to 1985. Thus, they spent some significant social changes and enjoyed a certain benefit from its development. First, Korean economy has rapidly developed since 1970s especially recording its GNI (per capita) from \$1,009 in 1977, to \$ 5,185 in 1989, and again to \$11,380 in 1996 (Yoo, 2000, pp. 34-35). Second, the Korean political environment drastically changed from the retreat of long-lasting military dictatorship in 1989, to recent regimes proactively promoting culture industry. Third, they have grown in the period of relatively rich media environments in Korea. This is because the media technologies rapidly spread in Korean society during the last two

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opinion, demographic features (p. 34 cited in Yoo, 2000 and with a slight transformation of my own). Followings are detailed components of each category:

Activity	Interest	Attitude	Demographic Features
Job	Family	Self	Age
Hobbies, Sports	Occupation	Social issues	Education,
Entertainment	Community	Politics, Economics	Income
Community Activities	Leisure, Media	Education	Family members
Shopping	Fashion, Food	Future, Culture	Occupation

decades. For example, about 50% of households had a set of color TV in 1985, but 100% in 1994. In the case of personal computer, 40% of households had one in 1989, and the percentage had increased by 10% each year. Moreover, about 10% of Koreans used the Internet technology in 1999, and the number steeply increased up to 56% in 2001. In particular, a large portion of the entire Internet user groups were youngsters, i.e., 38.1% of them were in their twenties, and 33.0% in the age of seven to nineteen (Yoo, 2000, pp. 36- 44). Fourth, the society has also been under a long-lasting influence of capitalist consumerism and globalization process.

Seen from these socio-economical changes of Korea, the people in the suggested age group are the one who have grown within relatively liberal, economically wealthy, culturally growing social atmosphere. Also, they have grown in a multimedia environment.

#### Cultural Orientation & Media Generation

In regard to current youngsters' lifestyles, recent sociological studies have presented they have some distinctive features in main interests, preferred activities and values. Referring to several major studies on youngsters during the past decade, their characteristics can be generally summarized as follows: youngsters showed a strong tendency of individualism and consumerism, an active pursuit for pleasure (Lim, 1995, Kim, 1994, Cho & Yoon, 2000, Park, 1995, all as cited in Yoo, 2000, pp.

21-25). In an extension of these tendencies, most research showed youngsters weighed more value on leisure over their work, on their own success over communal interests (Kim 1994, as cited in Yoo, 2000).

Youngsters' preferred activities echo such interests of them described above. Namely, they enjoy cultural activities more than any other age group of population such as movie-going, theatre-going, sport-watching etc (Lee, 1995 as cited in Yoo, 2000) as well as shopping (Yoon, 2000 as cited in Yoo, 2000). A recent study showed this tendency of youngsters through an intriguing question: what do you want to do with \$10 right now? The respondents (206 of people who are in their twenties and early thirties) answered to go drinking beer (27%), to go to the movie (22.5%), to purchase books (15.8%), to eat out (14.3%), etc. (Yoo, 2000, pp. 92-93).

In addition, youngsters possess various types of media and spend lots of time in using them. The above study questioned how often they do activities in the following items on a monthly basis. Youngsters answered, besides conversing with their family (13.7 frequencies), studying (9.1) and meeting friends (5.3), to spend most of time doing some activities on the Internet (more than 30.0). These include to research on the Internet (9.2), do Internet games (5.3), visit Internet communities (2.1), chat online (1.5), post writings online (2.6), and work on their own homepages (2.0) (Yoo, 2000, pp. 90-91).

The statistics also shows that using the Internet became one of major leisure activities for youngsters, as are the case with other types of media consumption. In this regard, current Korean youngsters' often reported enthusiasm for movie-viewing would be a good example. Their enthusiasm often let them called 'maniac,' i.e., they go to the theatre five times a year on average and collect DVDs, download movies, burn CDs (Yoo, 2000).

#### Self Confidence & Discontent with Current Politics and Economy

In the meantime, youngsters were studied to possess relatively positive opinions in their self esteems and future, by way of answering such questionnaires as 'I have many friends,' 'I have confidence in success,' etc. (Yoo, 2000, p. 96).

However, many studies have shown youngsters have a tendency to challenge traditional authorities and values. In this regard, the quoted study reports that current youngsters expressed strong distrust in politics and other social structural issues (Ibid, p. 96-97, 191-192). For example, most youngsters negatively responded about the statement items such as 'the court system is fairly run in Korea.' Also, they were questioned "what issues should be dealt with in priority?" and highly marked in the following order: the issue of political instability (14.8%), inflation (12.3%), economic depression (12.3%), unemployment (10.8%).

Such youngsters' distrust in politics and discontent in economy are likely to

have relevance with the country's economic crisis during 1997. During this period, youngsters had to face a severe employment market situation, which made their future more uncertain. According to a Korean National Statistical Office [KNSO] report, the unemployment rate had remained 3.5 % over the past thirty years but it radically increased up to 10.6% during the IMF crisis from 1997 to 1999. Even after the country declared it overcame the crisis in 1999, however, this high unemployment rate especially for youngsters (new employees) had maintained as 7% (Korean National Statistical Office, 2004).

As another factor for this orientation of youngsters, the instability of political sector can be mentioned of that time. During the year of 1999 to 2001, President Kim already had fallen into the state of 'lame duck.' (Yoo, 2000). Of course, these social and economic situations influenced youngsters' lifestyle, which again oozed out in a form of their own culture and values.

### Consuming *My Sassy Girl*

In this section, I will discuss how audiences read and make meaning of the film. In doing so, I referred to audiences' responses which were available on the Internet during the period of this study (fall 2004 to spring 2006). The complete reliance on these online source for audience analysis was based on the fact that about 95% of Korean youngsters (whose ages range from six to twenty nine) use the

Internet as of the year 2003 (Dept. of Communication and Information, 2003) and audiences for filmic adaptations from Internet novels mostly belong to this group of people(KOFIC, 2001).

### Attitude to Generic Hybridity and Fragmentation

The first obvious response from audiences would be some complaints that the film possesses an incomplete or poorly-woven narrative. They thought such narrative does not appear attractive or real since it constantly blocked them from full immersion into screen reality the film offered (Chung, H. 2003). The following audience's response shows her awareness of distinctive generic conventions and discontent with the mode of their combination.

“This film attempted to mix melo and comedy a bit, but it does not seem like either genre. It would be better if it consists of only melodramatic ingredients with a small bit of comedy... it was also slapstick but tried to touch audiences at the end... which only annoyed me. (“I would rather take a nap at home” biteme 2001-08-18, as cited Cho, 2004).

For others, however such narrative irregularities are not so problematic. They asserted that this narrative, against backdrop of thematic materials from daily lives, appears to even more resemble real life experiences. The following excerpt is an example to show audiences' different responses to this form of narrative. However,

this film does not provoke only laughter. Gyunwoo, who heals *yopgi*-girl... I found it very sad and serious. The film also has a happy ending. It contains a true love story with a relish of comedy. Does anybody know a guy like Gyunwoo? I wish there lived a guy like him. I heard this film was based on a real life experience... I feel sorry for Gyunwoo... it was very fun.” (~~~jhrhdwn2001-08-07 as cited in Cho, 2004)

Here the audience does not seem to expect the verisimilitude of narrative. Rather, she enjoys the irregularities. Namely, she freely fills the sketch narrative with her own experiences or wishes, and in doing so, comes to immerse into a more exciting version of her own narrative universe. In this regard, some new media scholars claim that a narrative which consists of a basic structure and sketchy characters more easily invites audiences to fill in empty spots and voluntarily unfold the whole story for their own sake, and thus tends to more fit to engender a sense of agency or participation from its audiences (Marshall, pp. 73-74).

#### “My Own Story”

However, most responses to the film related to audiences’ affinities with it. The affinity above all stems from its being the first filmic adaptation of Internet novel. In fact, some audiences manifest their affinities have grown from reading the original story. The following response provides an example:

It was about 3 years ago. At that time, people could only get an access to the Internet

via phone. A writer named Kim Ho Sik had posted an online serial novel titled *My Sassy Girl*, which was based on his own experience. Of course, it got a considerable popularity. Thanks to unimaginable but very cute, wacky (*yopgi*) behaviors of the girl as well as a touching storyline, the novel ended up being published in a book..... about 2 weeks ago...being released in a film version. Since I read the novel and found it a fun and touching, I expected a lot from the movie. I anticipated this film would also touch me, in particular as a person, who does not have a girl friend...”(teduree 2001. 08. 26)

In addition, other textual components of the film evoke a sense of realism from its audiences, which are familiar settings and thematic materials similar to youngsters’ life experiences. The ascertainment of familiar socio-cultural references allows audiences to get more easily empathized with the narrative, and in the end conceive of even fictionalized aspects of the film ‘realistic.’ This is congruent with what media researchers have claimed that a perception of realism often occurs through audiences’ sharing a similar social milieu or similar personal difficulties with characters in their favorite programs (Ross & Nightingale, 2003, p. 129). The following response can be an example of such ‘empirical’ or ‘psychological realism.’(Ang, 1985).

“Cha Tae-Hyun (Gyunwoo), whom I have considered as a shameless fellow, Jeon Ji-



Hyun (yopgirl), who seems both innocent and sexy, these two are an example of pleasant couples that we can easily encounter around us. Do I know any person just like them around me? I consider myself as just exactly one of those, for sure!” (“*My Sassy Girl: A Sassy Girl* comes to watch it alone! curru77 2001-08-25, as cited in Cho, 2004)

### *Yopgi* Culture & Overturns of Daily Life

The word *yopgi*, as in its title, is pervasive in the film. Also, the film constantly describes her physical violence or mental bullying in a term of *yopgi*. In fact, most slapstick codes in *My Sassy Girl* are similarly articulated. In this sense, the meaning of the word must influence audiences’ reading of the film text. Then what is the meaning of the word *yopgi*?

The word originally means a tendency of showing a strong interest in things or events ‘abnormal’ ‘grotesque’ or ‘bizarre.’ In addition, it was only used to indicate something extreme or negative such as crimes or delinquencies. Around the end of 20th century, the word began rapidly circulated centering around youngsters in Korea. The first emergence as this trend associated with some grotesque collections on the Internet by a small number of netizens. They usually contained photographs or short video clips showing bizarre and gross happenings or sometimes brutal crimes (e.g. suicide or excrements, etc) (Yoon, 2003).

Later, the word became to arouse an explosive popularity<sup>18</sup>. While it gets more circulated, its meaning came to widen and convey contradictory meanings simultaneously. For example, it refers to either 'light' or 'heavy,' or both 'absurd' 'nonsense' (*DooSan* Great Encyclopedia) and 'original' 'provocative.' In particular, such contradiction oozes out through its comic and vivid representations of absurd but wacky situations as a form of challenge to established authorities or overturns of familiar daily routines or rules.

For more clarification of what this cultural phenomenon means, let us take an example. An animation character named *yopgi toggi* (*Mashimaro*) may be one of the most popular versions of such *yopgi* culture. The character *Mashimaro* is a tiny, white and cuddly rabbit. It appears so cute and innocent. A scene is shown, in which a big-bodied bear sitting on the grass and having lunch. The cute rabbit walks in with tiny little steps approaching the bear. The rabbit avoids eye contacts and just starts to eat the bear's lunch without a hesitation. Of course, the bear got upset and snarls at the rabbit. Now, the story was just about to turn into a familiar sad retreat of the weak. At the very moment, however, the 'poor' rabbit simply takes out an empty beer bottle and then hit it in his head. The situation became suddenly overturned. The bear, scared of the rabbit's threat, is now peeling off the skin of all apples to feed the rabbit. In the

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<sup>18</sup> In this regard, a report shows that the word *yopgi* emerged as one of top three search words in 2001, and had as many as 3,622 relevant websites searched through an Internet search engine as of April, 2001 (*yopgi! Let's play!* 2001).

final scene, the bear is sobbing after the rabbit ate all of his lunch (refer to <http://www.mashimaro.co.kr/>).

Likewise, the character *Massimaro* is literally identical to the image of the girl in *My Sassy Girl*. In this light, audiences' amusement at the sight of the girl's behaviors and subsequent *yopgi* situations is likely to be reinterpreted in relation to broader socio-cultural contexts, which bases *yopgi* culture.

According to some sociologists, youngsters' pleasure from *yopgi* culture is a reflection of current chaotic states in Korean politics and economy. As described above, the current youngsters were in a state of insecurity from an economic recess and subsequent unclear future. However, they still maintained a positive opinion about their success. *Yopgi* culture arises from this contradiction between their present and future as subversion against established orders, yet does not seem feasible since it is a mere rebellion by way of original and comical imaginations.<sup>19</sup>

#### Ambivalent Readings in the Issue of Gender Role

Another type of frequent comments from audiences is about the girl's deviant behaviors. Some audiences showed a positive response as follows:

“She has something special indeed. I think her charm is exactly what people called

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<sup>19</sup> This argument can be also supported by a recent survey that 90 percent of respondents (composed of high school students) found *yopgi* culture enjoyable since such artifacts provide them with opportunities to experience some infeasible desire (cited in “*yopgi!* Let's play!” 2001)

yopgi... Her charm arises from her active agency unlike in other traditional films. In this film, the girl is not passive or submissive... She plays a leading role in the relationship with Gyunwoo at which I felt a lot amused... Reflected on these facts, most scenes in the movie are very pleasantly comic and *yopgi*-like to me. (cinekid7, 2001-08-10 as cited in Cho, 2004)

On the contrary, many spectators said the movie let them down. They usually pinpointed the final sequence, when the girl's character suddenly turns into a typical female stereotype. One person called 'clubbm' wrote, "yopgi-girl has a reason to be yopgi-like(?)?!!! It's ridiculous...In fact, yopgi-girl is an ideal type for men... Isn't it?" (cited in Cho, 2004).

Here, what is at stake is that audiences do not reject her deviancy from stereotypes as a new trial. Rather they show regrets that the movie did not go further, which may serve as an indicator of current youngsters' change in gender perception. In general the change has gradually progressed in gender roles during the past century. As more women come to participate in various social sectors, the boundaries between gender roles have weakened slowly, and in turn affected on people's perception of femininity and masculinity (Rohlinger, 2002, as cited in Lee, K. & Lee, W. 2004, p. 9). This is not an exception to Korean society. In particular, the Korean society, as one which traditionally maintained Confucian values, shows some complexities in the

change. Some sociologists pointed out that the current form of masculinity in Korea is commingled with some features derived from agricultural society, others from industrial one. This is because a man's image still maintains authoritarian, idealistic values, yet it also newly takes on logical, responsible images to protect women and support their family (Cho, 1999, cited in Lee K & Lee, W., 2004, p.9). Recently, a new feature of masculinity began to pervade centering around media, i.e. an image of man, who fixes himself and enjoys his life. This image was yet paralleled by an image of a man of success or reputation (Lee, K & Lee, W., 2004, pp. 9-12).

Given the fact that the distinctive among youngsters means a reflection of change in a society, these changes in Korean society can be said to be more manifest among youngsters. Recently, a survey was conducted towards unmarried men in their twenties. It showed 73% of respondents answered they would be willing to be a housekeeper if his future wife would be successful in her career (Shin, 2000).

This coexistence of traditional and new values in youngsters' perception of gender role is also seen in young audiences' responses to *My Sassy Girl*. Some female viewers responded that they found pleasure in the girl's reversed gender role as well as the girl's remaining within the boundary of traditional gender role. A girl with the online name of curru77 said, "I enjoyed witnessing Cha Tae Hyun (Gyunwoo) gets beaten and favored the way of Jeon's love. In fact, she taught me a lot about how to

maintain a sound relationship with a boy friend... In addition to fun, I was touched by how they take care of each other (the scene of their break-up at a train station)...I couldn't help but cry loudly in a dark theatre..." (cited in Cho, 2004). "Another girl named diebyelie wrote, "I was charmed by the girl. She is very energetic and active... ..Also, I loved this film as it reached the scene of break-up at the train station and again on the mountain. The scenes were so touching that I loudly cried in a theatre... The most valuable thing is the happy ending of their love at the end." (cited in Cho, 2004).

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

This study was an attempt to explore the recent trend of Korean filmmaking or film adaptations of Internet novels. To this end, the concept of genre was used as a conceptual lens to examine the industrial, textual, and audience aspects of this phenomenon. As a representative case for this category of filmic practice, *My Sassy Girl* proved to be an interesting site for analytical purposes and yielded many pieces of information. Altogether, these pieces produce a complex, multidimensional picture of a developing mode of film production.

The political economic context of this film reminds us of industrial motives behind generic transformations. Within a consideration of global trends regarding genre-bending, the historical development and recent market changes in Korean film industry was discussed. The filmic adaptation can be seen as emerging in a liberalized media environment and more effective film production system in recent Korea. In particular, the filmmaking practice was designed in consideration of recent film market situation such as market growth for young audiences, which is a common adaptive activity for a film company and industry. In practice, however, this filmmaking is innovative in that its producing is an unprecedented trial and also it is enabled on a basis of rapid growth of Internet culture among Korean teenagers and

young adults.

From a generic perspective, the textual characteristics of the film *My Sassy Girl* are also important. Here, the question was asked whether the film contains any manifest generic conventions or distinctive implications. To do this, the analysis referred back to established conventions and meanings from several canonical genres. By way of comparing and contrasting between existing generic norms and the generic features of the film, this study concluded the film borrowed typical conventions and motifs from several genres, and thus allows various conflicting values to coexist in one film text. Furthermore, this study claimed the meaning of the film is relatively open due to discussed irregularities in the narrative structure.

Finally, as an investigation into the remaining traces of audience discourses reveals, audiences respond directly in relation to the generic specificities and implication of the film text. As such, audiences were involved in discussions responding to generic hybrid formats differently, and in particular, they as a group of young audiences to well adapt this new format of narrative. Also, young audiences showed a strong affinity with the film text, which in many parts associates with audiences' knowledge about the original story and the writer. In particular, such established affinity with writers enabled audiences to see as if the film text is their own story. Besides these textual and discursive components, audiences' reading was



also influenced by their own lifestyles, such as *yopgi* culture and other changes in their perceptions.

When taken together, these separate analyses reveal that complicated picture of the aspects involved in the emergence of a new filmmaking practice. In this specific case, commercial imperatives and strategies met creative innovation to produce a hybridized form that was consumed by an audience well informed by genre specific practices and forms. Furthermore, although it was not a goal of this project, the evidence suggests that it is possible to label this a new genre. In some ways, it meets each of the different definitions of a genre.

Of course, this project has several limitations due to the amount of time, space, and resources available within a masters thesis. For example, this project will not be able to question the validity of genre as a discursive concept. This project will also not be able to carefully examine all examples of this new form, not will it be able to make any findings across different forms or genres. Instead, this project is meant as an early investigation into a larger picture of filmmaking in Korea (with all of its components) through a close examination of one exceptional case.

Overall, in this study, I hoped to be able to illuminate some aspects of the filmmaking process that have helped produced the phenomenon of amateur-inspired transmedia adaptation. I believe this project will make a contribution to this

underexamined with this interesting example. I also believe this project will contribute to the literature by confirming the usefulness of using a genre-centered approach to the study of cultural change.

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