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Sliding through genres: The Slippery Structure in South Korean films

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the genre mixing strategies of a number of salient South Korean genre films from the New Korean Cinema and argues that these films present an innovative approach to genre hybridity. By examining the use of abrupt genre shifts in films such as *The Host*, *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, *My Sassy Girl*, *Failan* and *Save the Green Planet*!, it is argued that while scholars have shown that the practice of genre mixing is usually done by preserving a certain consistency throughout the film, these South Korean films not only shift genres but follow this shift with a change in tone; thus creating a unique phenomenon that will be referred to here as 'The Slippery Structure'. This practice creates a shift in the film's attitude towards its subject matter midway through the film, resulting in an inconsistency that demands the spectator to re-adjust their expectations. The discussion of this Slippery Structure presents a novel way of understanding generic classification in relation to a film's tone, and points to a new way of thinking about cinematic experience; both defying as well as expanding upon the conventional perception of hybrid genres and genre-bending in cinema.

KEYWORDS

Hybridity; genre studies; South Korean Cinema; cinematic tone; genre-bending; cinematic experience

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After a short black and white prologue, where we are introduced to a Chinese immigrant (Cecilia Cheung) arriving in Korea, *Failan* (*Pairan*, Song Hae-sung 2001) reveals itself as a realistic *Jopok* (Korean Mafia) film depicting the daily, unglamorous life of an insignificant Korean Mafia soldier. Kang-jae (Choi Min-sik) is a low-life *kkangpae* (gangster) who tries to do well by his boss and impress some younger members of his gang in order to receive the respect his age should already afford him. As a gang member of organized crime, Kang-jae does not invest his time in complex sophisticated bank or casino robberies, nor does he undertake dangerous smugglings. His main occupation in the film is selling porn videos and collecting debts and protection money from an old lady who owns a small grocery store in the neighborhood. During the first 40 minutes *Failan* keeps its rough realistic style using location shooting, natural acting style, and focusing its narrative on dull everyday events. But then the cops arrive at Kang-jae's apartment and inform him that his wife has passed away due to a fatal illness. Kang-jae never knew his wife and the spectator has

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not yet had any mention of her. We then discover his wife was a Chinese immigrant worker that his criminal organization set him up with so she could receive a working-residence visa in exchange for a large sum of money. Kang-jae now has to travel to the town where his wife passed away in order to sign some legal documents. On his way there he receives a sincere and over-romantic love letter from his deceased wife. Suddenly, *Failan* turns into a sentimental melodrama about Kang-jae and his wife Failan's missed opportunity for love, describing how they almost met several times but missed each other by a split second, as the conventions of melodrama would dictate (Williams 1998; Paquet 2007). Midway through the film, this tough *Jopok* movie is in effect turned upside down. Did something go wrong? Did the filmmakers take two different films and just edited them together? Is this a temporary slip? Will the film soon get back to where it left off – back to being a rough mafia story? No, it does no such thing.

This paper will focus on the identification and definition of a subversive approach to genre that can be found in *Failan*, as well as in other South Korean genre films made between 1999 and 2006, years scholars have identified as being associated with the New Korean Cinema and the rise of the Korean Blockbuster (Shim 2006; Shin and Stringer 2007; Choi 2010). This approach to genre may also appear in other newer productions, but after watching a considerable number of South Korean films I have discerned the distinct appearance of this phenomenon in the following films from within that period: *Failan*, *My Sassy Girl* (*Yeopgijeogin Geunyeo*, Kwak Jae-yong 2001), *Save The Green Planet*! (*Jigureul jikyeora*!, Jang Joon-hwan 2003), *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (*Welkeom tu dongmakgol*, Park Kwang-hyun 2005) and *The Host* (*Gwoemul*, Bong Joon-ho 2006). These films are all genre films that were made by different directors (all male), written by different scriptwriters, belong to different genres and to the best of my knowledge have nothing in common. Except they all seem to be part of a similar and unique phenomenon – they all employ a similar strategy for mixing genres that will be referred to in this paper as The Slippery Structure.

Researchers repeatedly point to unusual generic approaches in Asian Cinema, exploring the ways in which Asian Cinema in general, and South Korean Cinema in particular, have been merging genres and creating genre hybrids (Davis 1996, 6; Paquet 2000; Diffrient 2003; Stringer 2005; Leong 2006; Choi 2010). Moreover, hybridity has been noted as one of the central features of the new South Korean global culture (Shin 2005; Shim 2006). Having said that, genre hybridity is not a unique South Korean or Asian practice, and in fact appears internationally. Therefore there is not anything avant-garde or radical about mixing a mafia movie with melodrama, or making a horror comedy film. Films have been mixing genres since the days of classic Hollywood and this practice has become even more salient in recent years (Altman 1999). It is easy to find romantic comedies mixed with action flicks such as *Mr. And Mrs. Smith* (Doug Liman 2005) and *Knight and Day* (James Mangold 2010), or even disaster films with romantic melodrama like *Titanic* (James Cameron 1997). Mixing genres is perceived as a way of refreshing old formulas in order to surprise spectators and spark their curiosity, and has been used as a strategy to appeal to a broader audience (Moine 2008). Nevertheless, even a hybrid genre movie can be highly pre-defined and in a sense formulaic.

Rick Altman points out the multidimensionality of scenes in Hollywood cinema that allow for a certain type of scene to easily fit into multiple genres. Thanks to what he calls multifocality, one cinematic moment can be simultaneously attributed to different

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genres (1999, 137). In addition, because generic association may also be suggested by semantic cues (e.g. iconography, settings, characters and imagery), the mixing of genres can be done by easily introducing or implying the semantics of one genre in the syntax (e.g. theme, politics, structure) of another, thus creating a complex result that harmoniously integrates different genres (1999). As previously mentioned, the mixing of genres is not a new phenomena, studios have long been mixing genres to market their films to broader target audiences, while simultaneously avoiding labeling and naming genres in films that could alienate certain audiences (1999, 128). These strategies show how Hollywood mixes genres by creating the notion of a consistent and harmonious tone that dissimulates the integration of diverse and even contending genres, creating a somewhat uniform and smooth experience. Altman stresses that our understanding of genre has been mainly influenced by the way critics and film theory have described it – focusing on the discursive aspect of generic identification. Moreover, critics and film theory tend to define genre by highlighting dominant genres while overlooking the phenomena of genre mixing, thus creating a general tendency in audiences to do the same (141). He also notes that

> (t)he accepted treatment of Hollywood classical narrative as linear, temporally ordered and clearly motivated, for example, predisposes viewers to experience films as unified around the familiar structure of a single genre. The use of generic terms condensing multiple generic components into a single designator dissimulates or even represses recognition of genre mixing. (142)

In conclusion, studio strategies, along with film criticism and film consumption seem to carry out the same tendency to refer to films that mix elements from various genres in a manner that dissimulates or blurs the recognition of the mixing and encourages a harmonious, consistent and multidimensional experience. For this reason, no matter what the product of mixing genres in a film turns out to be it seems that the most important feature is that a film must preserve a sense of unity. A film could be defined as a mixture of action and romance, disaster and romance or Mafia and comedy, however this mixture must always result in a balanced product that does not drastically change the main tone of the film and as a result does not undermine the experiential expectation the film establishes through the mix of genres. Even if novel (by way of an original genre combination), the experiential ground is always clear, balanced and consistent. In contrast to this, *Failan* and its South Korean previously mentioned counterparts are distinct and subversive in that their genre mixing results in an inconsistency in the film's tone. The result of this aesthetic strategy is not the creation of a new genre hybrid, but a film in which two or more different genres are combined while also remaining separate and distinct. As we shall see, what is really challenged with this type of generic approach is the film's tonal consistency.

Tonal consistency

Although several scholars and critics use the term 'tone' when discussing film, almost no research on the significance of the term itself exists in film theory, nor does a conceptualization of it appear in the field of film studies.[1] Pye (2007) noticed this anomaly and took upon himself the endeavor of discussing and conceptualizing tone. He defines tone as 'the ways in which the film addresses its spectator and implicitly invites us to understand its attitude to its material and the stylistic register it employs' (7). Showing

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how tone implicitly appears through style and dramatization, Pye stresses the important role tone plays in films, by orienting both the spectator and the critic:

> We seem, more often than not, to respond almost instinctively to the various elements in a film's opening that in combination signal its tone – part of the complex but seemingly automatic process which enables us to understand the kind of film we are watching and how it wants us to take it. When these habitual processes are disturbed, as they sometimes are when we watch films from a culture other than our own, or when a film makes it difficult immediately to say what kind of thing it is, it can be an uncomfortable or disorientating experience. And even movies that seem to establish their tone straightforwardly can hold all sorts of tonal surprises in store. (7)[2]

Pye argues that tone helps spectators understand how to experience a film, in the sense that it enables one to interpret a situation as comic, dramatic, gritty, light, ironic, suspenseful or humoristic. For example, in her book *Hitchcock*: *Suspense*, *Humour and Tone*, Susan Smith argues that two of the main tones in Hitchcock's films are 'suspense' and 'humor' (2000). Although Smith's study is uncommon in its mention of film tone, she does not invest in defining the term and refers to it simply as 'the kinds of attitudes and feelings we deem to be embodied in a film's stance towards its narrative subject matter' (vii). It could be said then, that the suspenseful tone in a film allows for the subject matter of the film to be interpreted as suspenseful, as opposed to melodramatic or light for example. According to both Smith and Pye the ways in which spectators interpret and experience a film are conditioned by their ability to understand and recognize its tone (Pye 2007). Pye goes on to discern two main dimensions of tone, dominant or systematic and local or variable. He identifies the dominant/systematic dimension also as 'mood', arguing that it signals the nature of the film's world and how the film intends to treat both it and the spectator. He proposes that this mood or systematic tone establishes a consistent emotional orientation towards the text. This idea of consistency and congruency provides a kind of 'guide track through the spectator's experience of the film' (23). Pye further suggests that the systematic tone is not narrow and monolithic but may have a number of dimensions and pervasive emotional orientations, like humor and suspense. He suggests that by delineating the initial and dominant attitude of the film towards its own material, the complex systematic tone is 'intimately linked to apprehension of a fictional mode and/or genre' (23). Namely, tone influences the definition and the comprehension of the genre of a specific film. The local and variable dimension of tone relates to small variations in tone that can occur throughout the film, shifting it from comedic, to melodramatic, to suspenseful, etc. This local or variable tone is implied throughout the film by 'the nature of the film's world, the choice and treatment of narrative events and the various ways these are "framed" by the film's formal strategies and coloured by the mood initially established' (28). The mood or systematic tone generates a sense of consistency and at the same time allows for local variations in tone that are influenced and interact with the systematic-dominant tone. This is why even in the practice of genre mixing there is a preservation of a tonal consistency defined by the systematic tone implied at the film's opening, functioning as a track guide for the emotional interpretation of the film's attitude towards its subject matter. As suggested in the example of *Failan*, the South Korean films in this study not only shift local tones, but undermine the systematic tone, thus shifting the genre as well and creating a tonal inconsistency that is not standard in mainstream genre cinema. When compared to other strategies of genre mixing, The

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Slippery Structure that characterizes the South Korean films discussed in this paper stands out in its abrupt shifts of genre and tone – which take place without suitable preparation and without preserving the tonal consistency of the film. As a result, there is an unexpected change in the nature of the film, leading to an instability, discomfort and disorientation regarding the attitude of the film towards its own subject matter and towards the spectator (Pye 2007).

The Slippery Structure in Korean cinema

Leong (2006) and Paquet (2000) have both discussed generic manifestations in South Korean Cinema, but focused mainly on a phenomenon they call genre-bending.[3] Leong argues that a film like *My Sassy Girl* 'is a genre-bending exercise that throws in elements of the teen comedy, the traditional melodramatic romance, and even some genre parody and blends them into a unique cinematic experience that defies categorization' (Leong 2006, 50). Paquet, on the other hand, focuses on other South Korean films such as *Shiri* (*Swili*, Kang Je-gyu 1999) and *The Quiet Family* (*Joyonghan Gajok*, Kim Jee-woon 1998), stating that these films bend one genre's conventions by mixing it with other genres (2000). This discourse on 'hybridity', 'mixing' and 'bending', misses the fact that South Korean Cinema is actually exhibiting two clearly different – yet not sufficiently distinguished – approaches to generic hybridity. Genre-bending, as the above mentioned researchers and film critics suggest, manifests in the expansion of generic limits. While the proposed generic Slippery Structure manifests not just in abrupt genre shifting but also in tonal inconsistencies. Genre-bending challenges generic conventions, expanding the definition of a specific genre by mixing it with another, thus creating a new kind of experience. This practice is part of a global phenomenon – easily detectable in Hollywood genre cinema (Berliner 2001), as well as in some of the Hong Kong action films of the 1980s and 1990s (Bordwell 2011). As noted, this practice only challenges the spectator's experience to a certain limit, since such films tend to preserve their systematic tone by using a narrative and stylistic strategy that dissimulates genre mixing. Genre-bending has provided some interesting and creative results and may prove to be a suitable description of the strategies of South Korean films such as *Shiri* (mixing action and melodrama) and *The Quiet Family* (mixing horror and comedy); however, after taking a closer look at *My Sassy Girl*'s approach to generic mixing I want to argue that we are in fact no longer dealing with genre-bending. As with the case of *Failan*, this Slapstick/Rom-Com/melodrama/action flick actually adopts the proposed Slippery Structure.

My Sassy Girl tells the story of a relationship between a boy named Gyeon-woo (played by Cha Tae-hyun) and an nameless girl (portrayed by Jun Ji-hyun). The first part of the film evolves as a slapstick comedy enhanced by a Rom-Com premise. When the boy and girl meet the girl is repeatedly seen beating the boy, creating comedic slapstick violence that is somewhat crude but funny. Throughout the film small shifts in tone are apparent, adding moments of sadness and melodrama to the romantic comedy's systematic tone. These melodramatic emotional moments are short and then abruptly shift back again to the comedy, sometimes even bringing a sudden break to the melodramatic interlude. It could be said that *My Sassy Girl* preserves a consistent tone that strongly tends to the comedic mood, while momentarily swinging back and forth to melodramatic scenes, presenting a complex, non-monotonous and rich experience. An example of this sort of shift

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can be seen in the scene where the boy gives a flower to the girl during her piano concert. The scene, directed in a romantic and sentimental tone, rapidly cuts to a new energetic and comedic sequence where the two are shown out partying at a club. Another example can be found in the melodramatic scene at the subway station where they are looking for each other in despair, but when they finally meet the girl suddenly punches Gyeon-woo in the face, abruptly breaking the melodramatic tone and returning to the slapstick comedy in a heartbeat. Due to their abruptness, these shifts could be said to have a kind of a slippery character. However, they could also be considered to be within the acceptable limits of conventional genre mixing and tone shifting because the film rapidly returns to its comedic dominant tone guiding the spectator back to the expected overall tone of the film experience. The difference between this kind of relatively slight shift in local tone and the more radical systematic shift of The Slippery Structure resides in the last section of the film, when the two main characters decide to split-up. This part of the film begins with a scene in which the characters are at a train station, and once again a very serious and melodramatic tone is adopted. They say goodbye, Gyeon-woo boards the train and the girl starts running after it while sad music plays in the background as the camera pulls away from her in synchrony with the train. The scene recreates the melodramatic cliché of the separation between two lovers with a very sentimental tone. Suddenly the girl decides to get on the train to follow her lover, but at the same time Gyeon-woo, without noticing the girl's actions, decides to jump off the train to stay with her. Gyeon-woo lands on his face and the result is supposed to be another slapstick humorous moment, where Gyeon-woo reprises the comical physical suffering that is the base for most of the jokes throughout the film. But in this new context the comic moment loses its humor and is engulfed by the melodramatic mood. The tone now drastically changes, for the first time the comedic variant does not break the melodramatic tone. Thus the film's attitude towards its own material changes substantially and the physical comedy is overthrown by the melodrama and even surpassed by it. The spectator is encouraged to interpret the 'joke' in a new way, in line with a new tone that is different from that presented throughout the film. It is at this moment that *My Sassy Girl* shifts the genre together with its dominant tone, from Comedy to Melodrama. This time the comedic tone is not reintroduced as in previous scenes; the film now creates a slip that challenges the spectator to experience a moment, supposedly similar to those seen before, but this time with a tone that no longer fits their expectations.

An unexpected sudden change of the systematic tone challenges and changes the very substance of the filmic moment. Following this scene, the coolness and sassiness of the film is suddenly replaced with a melodramatic mood for the last 20 minutes of the film. The crude satiric comedy does not return and the audience finds itself dealing with a whole new dominant tone, one that tells the heartbreaking and (im)possible love story of the two tormented protagonists. This sudden change raises some doubts as to whether this might actually be a parody of melodrama; just as it was somewhat parodying romantic comedy throughout first half of the film, it is plausible that once the film turned melodramatic the parodic tone was meant to be preserved. However the film's tone remains serious and the film has now turned into a pure romantic melodrama. *My Sassy Girl* does not only expand or bend a generic form by mixing different genres together, it also presents a sudden and sharp change in the film's tone, proposing a much more radical challenge. This generic shift from comedy to melodrama creates a tonal

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inconsistency that demands the spectator to 'maintain the balance', so to speak, and rapidly adapt to the changing systematic tone of the film in order to preserve their involvement with the story. In effect the spectator is required to reinterpret the film's attitude towards its subject matter and re-arrange their generic and tonal expectations of it.

As in *My Sassy Girl* and *Failan*, a few other South Korean films have also been found to subvert their tonal consistency in this way. They break the tone and turn the filmic experience upside down midway through the film. As a result, a situation that at the beginning of the film was taken lightly and humorously suddenly becomes serious and hurtful, turning the film into a somewhat confusing experience that demands re-interpretation. Such a similar kind of shift can be found in *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, a film set during the Korean War that tells the story of three soldiers from the North and two from the South, who arrive at an isolated village somewhere in the mountains. The first few minutes of the film are overly dramatic, with some moments even reminiscent of the realistic style used in such films as *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg 1997). But about half an hour into the film a grenade is mistakenly thrown into a storeroom full of corn and explodes. The corn kernels turn into popcorn that fly in every direction, falling from the skies like snowflakes. The result is both comical and poetic at the same time. This comic scene comes as a complete surprise and forms a strong contrast to the tone of the film established thus far. While there were some minor poetic and comic moments during the first 30 minutes of the film, in this instance the tone has been completely subverted. Instead of a realistic war drama with some poetic touches, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* becomes a comedy based on a series of implausible situations.

The Slippery Structure and its moral implications

The most extreme example of a Slippery Structure can be found in the film *Save the Green Planet*!. Approximately every 20 minutes the film's tone is turned upside down. The spectator is not only required to rapidly adapt to sudden changes, but once adapted they quickly find themselves facing yet another change in tone and genre. *Save the Green Planet*! tells the story of Byeong-gu (Shin Ha-kyun), a man in his twenties who believes the CEO of an important *jaebeol* (conglomerate) is actually an alien leader who came to earth to experiment on humans and then destroy the planet. The hero kidnaps the CEO (Baek Yoon-sik), binds him to a chair in his basement and begins to torture him in order to extract information regarding his evil plan and thus save humanity. The film starts as a humorous sci-fi action comedy, with the kidnapping scene stressing its absurdity through exaggerated cartoonish music, animated titles and comical acting. About 15 minutes into the film the torture begins with the same cartoonish humorous tone, but then the camera turns to shoot the torturer and his sidekick from behind, pulling out slowly while the realistic soundtrack heightens the CEO's cries of pain mixed with the troubling sound of bees buzzing. The film, now taking on a darker and more serious tone, returns to the location of the kidnapping and introduces the story of a solitary detective (Lee Jae-yong) who sets off to investigate the incident. A few moments after we hear the detective claim that the kidnapper is mentally ill and dangerous, the film shifts back to a comical cartoonish fantasy of the hero having superpowers and beating up a bully, only to then quickly shift back to a serious, dark tone, typical of a horror film, where we find ourselves back in the basement, in a close-up shot of the hero under chiaroscuro lighting

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preparing himself to continue the torture of the CEO. The film begins by shifting from an absurd sci-fi comedy to a serious and dark police drama, and then again to a comedy, and then to a psychological horror film. All this in just the first 25 minutes of the film. Time and again the film continues to shift its tone and genre from serious to humorous, from horror to drama, from melodramatic kitsch to thriller, from fantasy back to a serious detective investigation, to parody, and then back again. This tonal rollercoaster encompasses many different moods and genres and binds them into one unique work. If we tried to define its genre, the result might have been something along the lines of a horror comedy sci-fi superhero melodrama that is also a social coming of age detective film and a psychological thriller. Having said that, even if the film pays homage to different works from different styles, directors and genres, it also differs from what tends to be called a Pastiche (Jameson 1991; Dyer 2006). In contrast to a Pastiche, the film's references and homages are not blended together into a uniform eclectic style, but rather form a wild, disjointed, uneven and eclectic experience. The genres themselves are not mixed together but arrive in turn, one after the other, not blending or bending but replacing one another. These constant sudden shifts have the spectator confront the same situation, of one character torturing the other, but each time with a new attitude or tone. At the beginning of the film we are encouraged to interpret the attitude of the film towards its own material as comical-satirical, and then as serious and frightening. The different genres call for different cinematic styles that generate varied tonal approaches. But as we can now see, tone does not just set the emotion but also the moral positioning of the film. These sudden shifts in genre and tone create an emotional disorientation that does not allow for a consistent way of relating to the situations depicted, thus creating a moral gap. If at the beginning we are encouraged to laugh at the absurd situation portrayed, we are then made to feel horrified at the same situation, as the character we previously identified as the hero of the movie suddenly becomes a psychopathic torturer and killer. A few minutes later the film changes its style once again, this time encouraging the spectator to again see the character as more of a hero, and then as victim, and then again as a dangerous psychopath. Therefore, the most radical consequence of The Slippery Structure is that the difference in tone creates not only a disorienting experience, as suggested by Pye (2007), but also, and more significantly, a moral disorientation. Since the film is constantly shifting in regards to its attitude towards its own subject matter, it is difficult to pinpoint what the film's and its spectator's moral position towards the material is supposed to be. This way *Save the Green Planet*! exposes the real potential of a slippery generic structure. While the Godardian Jump-cut released mainstream cinema from a need for conservative continuity or invisible editing, The Slippery Structure frees filmmaking from a tendency towards a somewhat structured consistent filmic tone, allowing genre cinema a more complex structure that might bring with it different and complex moral results.

In this context, to better understand The Slippery Structure and its contradictory, complex implications, it is worth exploring Korea's biggest blockbuster from 2006, Bong Joon-ho's *The Host*. This film tells the story of a family that owns a small food joint at the shore of the Han River. This dysfunctional family includes a grandfather, his two sons, a daughter, and a grand-daughter from his eldest son. His wife is not present and the mother of the child, having left her husband, is absent as well. One day after a monster attacks the shores of the Han River and devours the little girl, the family unites to fight back. It could be argued that *The Host* positions itself on a blurry line between

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genre-bending and The Slippery Structure strategies. It is a horror film that bends generic expectations by mixing horror with comedy and family drama. On the one hand, *The Host* manages to preserve a relatively consistent and mainly parodic tone, however it also purposefully subverts and undermines the ground it has established by suddenly changing its mood and making it difficult to understand whether a moment is truly being taken seriously or whether the film is in fact making fun of it. This small but surprising shift in gears shakes the experiential ground and demands a readjustment to the new and ambiguous tone of the film. There are several examples of this strategy, but the most blatant appears in the first third of the film, when the monster's first attack seemingly causes the death of the family's young grand-daughter. The monster devours the girl and then, in a dramatic action-horror scene, disappears into the Han River. Director Bong follows this intense scene with what looks like the communal mourning for the girl and the other victims of the monster's attack. But this scene is in fact directed as a humorous parody. Characters cry in a humorous tone and the authorities that come to alert the characters of an imposed quarantine, are presented as clumsy and absurd. The film undermines the horror and shock created in the previous scene of the monster attack and creates a new attitude towards the film's world, now parodic and humorous. Did the film really re-organize itself as a parody after the dramatic event or was the previous monster scene also a parody? This change of tone and genre reappears in the film in other scenes as well, in what can be called 'experiential slips'.

The Slippery Structure of *The Host* seems less extreme than the one in *Save the Green Planet*!. It could be noted that as the film goes on, the slippery characteristic of the film paradoxically becomes the unifying tone that arranges the film experience. Namely, it could be argued that *The Host* manages to turn the subtle experiential slippage that characterizes it into a somewhat consistent tone.[4] The case of *The Host* raises the question of the difference between tone and genre. What is it that changes? What creates the experiential slip in a film? Is it the genre that changes or is it the tone? Moreover, how are the two connected?

It would seem that in the scene of *The Host*, where all the characters are crying because of the presumed death of the young girl, it is the genre that shifts where parody now replaces horror. Yet, from the opening scene of the film the work already established itself as a hybrid genre that mixes parody with horror. The opening scene in the lab where the American scientist tells the Korean assistant to throw toxic waste into the Han River is at the same time both parody and horror. The subtle line between the two genres is blurred thanks to director Bong's ability to add an ironic touch to real dramatic moments. In this way, from its very beginning *The Host* defines a tone that seeks to balance between the two modes or genres. This is why it is not accurate to claim that genre is what has shifted in the film. In the case of hybrid genres, or 'bended' genres, it is acceptable to have some scenes that are closer to one genre and others that relate more to another. Thus, if the hybrid genre has already been established from the beginning, we can assume an acceptable shift in tone between the very genres that the hybrid consists of without challenging the mood of the film. In this kind of genre-bending film, a slight shift in genre (parody taking over the horror-parody mix) would supposedly still be within the acceptable limits of hybridization. Such a shift would constitute a local tonal variation within the limits of the film's systematic tone. However, the shift in the scene in which the family is in mourning is not slight but both drastic and profound. It would

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seem that this is not a local tonal variation, nor a change of genre, but a shift in the dominant systematic tone. During the sequence where the monster attacks for the first time, the film gradually becomes more and more horrific and serious in tone. This gradual shift guides the spectator from one tone to another without drastically changing the attitude of the film towards its subject and thus does not compromise the emotional involvement and avoids a 'slippery' change. In contrast, at the beginning of the next scene, where the family is now in mourning, the change in tone is very sudden. Instead of capitalizing on the horror and drama that was established in the previous scene, *The Host* returns unexpectedly to a parodic tone, creating the experiential slip that defines The Slippery Structure. In this scene, which should be a moment full of horror and sadness, the parody is played to its fullest. This is not a subtle touch, and instead generates a disorientation regarding the very nature and definition of the film being watched.

The analysis of this sequence of *The Host* reveals that a change in tone might bring with it a change in genre, and such a change in genre might also facilitate a change in tone. This essentially points to the interconnectedness of tone and genre, defining and re-defining each other. When we think about a 'sad comedy' or a 'light drama' we begin to understand that generic classification is not enough to understand what 'type' a certain film is. What defines the filmic experience, among other things, is actually the combination of genre and tone. This is why when tone is drastically changed, the experiential basis of the film changes with it generating a slippery moment. The slip, or shift in tone often brings with it a generic shift as well, because the very foundation of what defined the film has been altered by the slip. This is also the case in the South Korean films previously discussed. A change in genre without a change in tone might not constitute a slip, and as such might not demand from the spectator to emotionally re-interpret the film's attitude towards its subject matter. Conversely, a sudden change in tone might influence the definition of the genre and create the experiential slip that defines The Slippery Structure.[5] Therefore, in addition to the 'generic contract' (Grant [1986] 2012, 134), we can now also suggest a *tonal contract* between the film and its spectator. A tonal contract that The Slippery Structure betrays, resulting in an unexpected and challenging film experience.

The Slippery Structure as Korean

While trying not to fall into an essentialist view of national identity and national cinema, it is interesting to look at the possible connection between The Slippery Structure and South Korean national identity. In particular, why this slippery strategy tends to appear in films of the New Korean Cinema. As Choi claimed, the study of national cinema should be a tool for analyzing films but not a way to define the essence of a certain culture or nationality (2006). Defining The Slippery Structure as essentially Korean or exclusively belonging to Korean cinema would fail to recognize the complexities and diversities of both Korean national cinema and Korean culture and society. Having said that, it is interesting to investigate whether there is some correspondence between this unusual tendency towards adopting a slippery generic structure in some of the prominent South Korean genre films over the past 15 years, and the culture within which these films were produced. In other words, can some of the characteristics we tend to identify as 'Korean' add another level of meaning to the aesthetic phenomenon of The Slippery Structure?

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It is important to stress that The Slippery Structure is not an inherently Korean aesthetic strategy – it does not even appear in most Korean films. In this paper I chose to highlight the manifestation of this strategy despite its very limited appearance in only a few Korean films. However, to my understanding this strategy is so unique and fascinating that it opens the door to further research and thought, both within Genre and South Korean Cinema studies. In this sense, if we are interested in searching for a connection between this unusual tendency toward a Slippery Structure and South Korean society and culture, we might start by referring to the concept of *compressed modernity* coined and developed by Chang (2010). Chang proposes a complex conceptual tool for understanding and analyzing Korean society's rapid modernization and transformation, noting that since the 1960s South Koreans 'have successfully condensed what Westerners had experienced socially, politically, and above all economically for over two centuries into an experience of less than half a century' (5). Chang claims this process gave place to a specific kind of modernity that he explains by differentiating two axes that interact with each other: the axe of time/space and the axe of condensation/compression. It is beyond the aim of this paper to detail the complexities of Chang's conceptual tool, but for the purposes of this paper – and at the risk of generalizing – Chang's main point stresses the idea that South Korean modernity has resulted in the compression and condensation of time and space. The condensation of time and space can be understood as the transition through different eras (from agricultural to industrial) and spaces (indigenous spaces to spaces heavily influenced by elements of Western and foreign cultures), in an abridged and rapid manner; creating swift changes that South Koreans were required to adapt to. Alternatively, the compression of time and space can be understood as the simultaneous co-existence of colliding elements of time and of space: the phenomena of intense competition, collision, disjointing, articulation and compounding between different eras (simultaneously traditional, modern and postmodern) and places (foreign/global/multinational elements with indigenous elements). The result of these rapid transitions and contesting encounters between different eras and places defines South Korean society's experience of compressed modernity (6–7). Examining The Slippery Structure through the concept of compressed modernity allows us to understand how these ideas fostered by Chang can help to add meaning to this unique way of mixing genres. On the one hand, fast and condensed shifts between tones and genres exist in a single film, while on the other hand, there is a compression of different tones and genres (competition, collision, disjointing, articulation and compounding tones and genres) that coexist in the films. The tones and genres are in a sense mixed, but at the same time appear disjointed and in contention. The shifts from horror to comedy or from melodrama to slapstick are condensed rather than mixed together in the traditional style of genre mixing, and coexisting in the film within a state of compression.

Finally, the excessive change in the attitude of a film towards its own material results in an evasive, inconstant, slippery experiential ground that demands the spectator to rapidly adapt to this new type of compressed experience that the film now presents. The spectator must know how to maneuver through the different experiences in order to 'slide' through them. They need to be prepared to accept and embrace the abrupt and sudden changes from comedy to drama, from romance to horror and action, while preserving the experiential equilibrium so as not to 'slip' away from the movie. One could hypothesize that the rollercoaster experience of compressed and condensed modernity

in Korean society finds its expression in a very unique conception of narrative and tone as inconsistent elements that are repeatedly subverted and overturned on an emotional level. In other words, The Slippery Structure in South Korean Cinema can be thought of as a compressed generic structure functioning as a cinematic manifestation of South Korean compressed modernity.

Films such as *The Host*, *Save the Green Planet*!, *My Sassy Girl*, *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, *Failan* and probably others, indicate that the subversion of genre conventions in South Korean Cinema have much more to offer film studies than previously thought. A thorough study of the exponents of the slippery generic structure could lead the way to a new understanding of hybridity to include not only the mixing of genres but also the fluid and unmixed compressed coexistence of opposing and even contradictory conceptions, tones and genres. Moreover, The Slippery Structure underscores the importance of the concept of tone in film studies in general and in genre studies in particular. To date this concept has not been contemplated enough and might be essential to the understanding of how genres manifest in specific cinematic works.

In conclusion, The Slippery Structure strategy suggests that films in general – mainly those within the commercial realm – do not necessarily have to be perceived and defined exclusively as homogenous, uniform or consistent works, but can instead potentially be understood as an inconsistent, shifting and compressed experience that force us to re-think our position towards the movie as well as towards ourselves, as inconsistent entities in an ever changing world.

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Notes

1. In this sense it is interesting to notice Bordwell and Thompson's *Film Art* (2008), a book that systematically defines and introduces elements of film language. The authors use the concept of tone several times when analyzing films (extensively in their discussion of *A Movie* by Bruce Conner in pages 365–370). But in contrast to other concepts that appear in the book, the concept of 'tone' is never defined or explained. It does not even appear in the glossary of terms at the end of the book.
2. Although this article analyzes South Korean films from the point of view of a western author, I am not interested in the cultural misunderstandings this gap might entail. I am also not interested in audience research in order to establish the actual response from different viewers to the different films. What I analyze is the textual traits that pose a certain challenge. The way the text relates to itself and its potential spectator. In Pye's words, I am not focusing on the cultural differences but on the ways a film makes it difficult to say what kind of thing it is.
3. Interestingly, some scholars use the term 'bending' in connection to other Asian cinemas in a different context. Darrell Davis, for example claims that Japanese cinema 'bends' the language of classical Western cinema in order to accommodate it to Japanese cultural needs (1996, 6). In this sense, the term 'bending' becomes associated with the hybridization that the Asian culture is going through in its encounter/collision with Western culture. In this context, to 'bend' a genre could also come to mean to create a cultural hybrid.
4. Director Bong is also fond of physical slips in his films; once in a while one of the characters physically falls, slides or slips; possibly as a metaphor for the instability of their lives, but also of the filmic experience. In this sense, it is possible to see how Bong turns this idea of 'slippery' into an authorial characteristic that gives the film a certain consistent logic.
5. For example, in his book *Planet Hong Kong*, Bordwell indicates several times that both Kung-fu and action films from Hong Kong have a tendency toward momentary shifts in tone. In this case, however, the tonal shift does not lead to a change of genre (2011) and further research is needed to argue the presence of 'a slip'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Pablo Utin is the author of the books *The New Israeli Cinema*: *Conversations with Filmmakers* (Resling, 2008); Orson Welles (Ministry of Education, 2010); *The New Violence in Israeli Cinema* (Asia Publishers, Forthcoming, 2016); *A Requiem for Peace*: *The Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Israeli Cinema* (Safra Publishers, Forthcoming, 2016); He is the co-editor of the booklet *The Transparent Look*: *Filmmakers on the cinema of Eitan Green* (TAU, 2008) [All of them in Hebrew].

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