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The Good, The Bad, and the Generic:
Translation and Transference in East Asian Westerns

As the blue sky that fills the opening frame of The Good, the Bad, and the Weird, Korean auteur Kim Ji-woon’s 2008 “kimchi Western,” gives way to a panning shot of the arid desert landscape, viewers are given a literal bird’s eye view of the scene. A hawk, from whose perspective we’re seeing this space, swoops down to steal a carcass off a set of railroad tracks and narrowly avoids the speeding train that abruptly enters the frame, announcing the human drama that will follow. Takashi Miike also enlists the visual motif of the bird of prey to frame the confrontation of man and nature in the bizarre, theatrical prologue to Sukiyaki Western Django (no need to append a representative “flavor,” since Miike spells it out in the film’s title). This device is familiar to fans of the Western, the genre that has arguably most relied on archetypes, stock characters, and the romantic hypothesis that human impulses are, like nature, savage and elemental. In many ways, both Kim and Miike’s films deliver on the genre’s implicit promises, yet their very fidelity to genre conventions also underscores their otherness. For, these films transpose the Western, spatially, ideologically, and culturally: in the case of Kim’s film, to colonial Manchuria in the 1930’s, and in Miike’s, to a hybridized space, where cinematic visualizations of feudal Japan and the 19th century American West coexist, not so much in competition, but like two overlaid transparencies.

This essay offers a theoretical perspective on genre’s role in producing grids of intelligibility crucial to cultural translation by arguing that generic conventions function in these recent “Asian Westerns” as a staging ground for transference—an engagement that offers a new approach to cultural translation. I would like to suggest that, in these films, genre citation is both a source of inspiration for themes, plot points, or characters and a set of constraints which makes possible the act of addressing an audience that is not yet stably formed, an audience that emerges out of self-consciously ethnic and nationalist structures of identification, yet simultaneously disavows and exceeds them. This essay develops an anti-hermeneutics of genre to underscore the contexts of reception and circulation that serve both as the condition of possibility for these films and as a crucial factor in envisioning the transnational as an analytic category.

First, though, I’d like to provide some context for the term transference and the model of translation that it offers. While it might seem incongruous to bring psychoanalysis, a theory of subjectivity focused on the structural conditions for the formation of the individual ego, to bear on an analysis of the Western, which seems to jettison interiority or psychological depth in favor of predetermined character dynamics, narratives, and motifs, I would like to suggest that theory,
and in particular, the work of analyst and theorist Jean Laplanche, provides conceptual touchstones for exploring the question of genre and cultural translation in these films that go beyond some of the limitations of existing discussions of transnational film, especially those that aim to track the movement of influence across particular national boundaries or works. While genealogical studies can be helpful and illuminating, I find that these critiques sometimes run the risk of reducing transnational cinema and global screen cultures to an epiphenomenon of globalization, in all its unevenness, fueled by “fan-boys” and cosmopolitan cinephiles.

Thus, I hope to elaborate the concepts by which I will establish my reading of Miike and Kim’s films in the following theoretical excursus. Laplanche revises the Freudian schema by replacing the concept of interpretation with that of translation as the center of his theory and practice of psychoanalysis. In so doing, he not only de-emphasizes the interpretive agency of the analyst, but also posits a model of translation that could be said to take place in every instance of human interaction, informing human creativity in all of its diverse forms. Laplanche explains that he prefers the linguistic metaphor, translation, over interpretation, because it indicates something of the specificity of a message or an address:

Interpretation may mean that you interpret some factual situation. Translation means that there is no factual situation that can be translated. If something is translated, it’s already a message. That means, you can only translate what has already been put in communication, or made as a communication.2

In this context, translation does not denote a relation of mimicry or mirroring between an original and its copy, but rather, a communicative situation in which a message that consists of known and unknown (because unconscious) elements is registered and assimilated by a receiver, always in provisional form and always incompletely. Crucial to the operation of translation is the dynamic of transference, in which the subject assimilates the message according to her own unconscious desires and wishes. The subject engages in a motivated act of translation in the face of an enigmatic message.

For Laplanche and others, the work of translation might be succinctly put as the registration and management of difference, whether in the conventional sense of linguistic translation or translation between orders of signification, as in the example of the transposition of unconscious to conscious intelligibility. Thus, when Steve Neale writes that “difference is absolutely essential to the economy of genre,” he underscores the historical, intertextual, and intercultural processes of translation by which genre frames the engagement between films and audiences.3 Genre is built out of a dialectics of sameness and difference. Though genres are designated by virtue of an identified paradigm, which is then transported or transposed, as we all know, exemplarity relies less on the work’s inherent qualities than on the practices and criteria of judgment applied to the work. As such, genre is itself always engaged in a process of translation and retranslation and is a vehicle of transference.

According to Laplanche, “the fundamental dimension of transference is the relation to the enigma of the other.”4 What is enigmatic about the other? In Laplanche’s view, the message of the other (and we could think of the other here as anything exclusive of the individual psyche) is necessarily enigmatic because it contains elements of the other’s unconscious (notably, this is beyond intention or volition, but rather, a structural dimension). Laplanche goes on to relate transference and the domain of culture; he writes: “the principal site of transference, ‘ordinary’ transference, before, beyond, or after analysis, would be the multiple relation to the cultural, to creation or, more precisely, to the cultural message.”5

It’s to the cultural message that I would now like to turn and thus return our attention to Kim’s and Miike’s films. Given the problematic status of the genre object—its unlocalizability in either production, reception, or film text, and its inherent malleability and historicity, I would argue that the generic framework of these films, their generic discursivity, is a key dimension of their enigmatic cultural message. As you may have noticed already, both of these films explicitly cite other films in their titles; The Good, the Bad, and the Weird, is a
rip off of Sergio Leone’s *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, and *Sukiyaki Western Django* indexes Sergio Corbucci’s *Django*. Leone and Corbucci’s films already present a translated and transnational form of the American Western. Other intertextual references abound in these films, too (notably, in *Sukiyaki Western Django*, Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* and Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* films). Indeed, Tarantino makes a cameo appearance in the role of misogynist cowboy narrator in *Sukiyaki Western Django*.

I want to underscore the fact that my juxtaposition of Miike and Kim’s films is not intended to suggest that the two films are the same or interchangeable. They are very distinct, in fact, stylistically and ideologically. However, the point of commonality that I’d like to turn to in two key scenes is that they both include figures of the enigma (though very different) and they both traffic in an excessive symbolism that both evokes and evacuates the possibility of identification and intelligibility in terms of ethnicity and nation and that illustrates the operation of transference as cultural translation.

In the climactic standoff scene from *The Good, The Bad, and The Weird*, the three principal characters, who have been fighting each other, a band of Central Asian nomads, and the Japanese imperial army for possession of a mysterious treasure map, finally arrive at the location of the hoped-for Qing dynasty treasure. They engage in a shoot-out, though each has slightly different motivations: the Bad, a bandit named Park Chang-yi, is motivated by revenge (his sole desire is to kill the Weird, Yoon Tae-goo), Yoon just wants the treasure, while the Good, Park Do-won, is a bounty hunter who wants the cash rewards for turning in the two outlaws and also wouldn’t mind handing the treasure over to the Korean independence fighters who often enlist his aid.

The three-way gunfight is in many ways a restaging of the stand-off in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, but with a lot more blood and a curiously ambivalent ending. The scene builds suspense, as the camera spins in the middle of the circle formed by the three men. Who will prevail? After an impossibly drawn out gun battle, all three men have fallen and a geyser of oil erupts from the field behind them. Breathing with difficulty, Yoon Tae-goo, the Weird, pulls the tattered map out one last time, wondering if he’s come to the right spot, and then a gust of wind tears the map from his fingers into the oblivion of the endless desert. The oilfield, the catalyst for the entire chain of events constituting the film, confounds Yoon Tae-goo and cannot be bound to an assimilable meaning for him. The missing treasure, not missing because it was not found, but rather, because it is invisible (illegible) to its seekers, creates a hole in the narrative into which also falls the Korean nationalist subplot to thwart the advance of the Japanese imperial army, but also creates a space of transference—the audience knows what is impossible to know inside the diegetic space—we know black gold when we see it!

In another climactic fight-to-the-death, the gunfighter hero and the head of the Genji clan present *Tsukiyaki Western Django*’s final confrontation between the cinematic traditions of the samurai film and the Western. A fresh canvas of snow blankets the scene, throwing its actors into clear relief, as Yoshitsune, the Genji leader, forgoes his pistol in favor of his samurai sword, and rushes towards the gunman. The gunman, who remains nameless but whose backstory has revealed that he is the product of a Genji/Heike union—a figure of miscegenation—defeats Yoshitsune with the miniature pistol he keeps literally up his sleeve. As he shoots the Genji samurai in the forehead, blood spatters on the snow behind him, forming a grotesque image of the Japanese flag. Whether the message of the film is about dismantling the myth of racial purity is impossible to determine, as the film’s large measures of parody and pastiche become indistinguishable.

A more arresting enigma in this scene is the figure of the Indian, which often featured in American Westerns both as villain and noble savage. The Indian in Miike’s film is definitely of the noble variety, but what is particularly mysterious in this scene is the way that he frames the fight; his presence as observer is extraneous and inexplicable, yet the two fighters seem to acknowledge his role as a silent force authenticating or refereeing their match. A final enigmatic dimension of this scene, and indeed of the entire film, is the use of English by non-English speaking actors, the effect of which is a persistent defamiliarization, an
awkwardness which highlights the transposition of genre while also interrupting the coherence of the narrative. Samurai, gunslinger, Native American—all combine for an effect of strategic overdetermination, exceeding mere pastiche, and rendering any claims of cultural specificity inaccurate precisely through the use of culturally specific signifiers.

The point I would like to conclude with, here, is that the two scenes I’ve presented stage translation through transference against the ground of genre form. Or to put it a different way, film, as a facet of “culture,” addresses a cultural message to the viewer, the translation of which cannot but be attempted, but which is bound to be inconclusive. This message, as a mode of address, is not directly transmitted, but can only be translated, retranslated, and retransmitted, and always retaining its core element of enigma. The semantic elements of the films, their characters, settings, and mise-en-scène, which mark their engagement with genre, cannot fully contain or encompass the communicative force of these films, especially in their mode of address to viewers of varied positions and perspectives. One could argue that the appeal of these films lies in their novelty and in the pleasure that arises from the recognition of intertextuality or parody, and I would agree; such a reading is itself a form of retranslation. However, this is not the same as saying that the pleasure of recognition among an informed, cinephilic audience constitutes the raison d’être of transnational film. Conceptualizing transnational cinema and the transnational itself in terms of transference allows an openness of meaning in the continuing relay of message and translation, and I hope to have gestured towards an approach to transnational cinema that neither relies on a fantasy of post-national identity nor resigns itself to the trenchant demands of national identification.

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NOTES

1 c.f. David Desser, “Global Noir: Genre Film in the Age of Transnationalism” in Film Genre Reader III, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 516-536.
3 Stephen Neale, Genre (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 50.
5 Ibid.
6 Coincidentally, perhaps, both of these spaghetti Westerns were released in 1966.