How to Translate a Genre (with Michelle Cho)

[opening music]

00:21 **Juan Llamas-Rodriguez**: Welcome to the Global Media Cultures podcast. I am your host Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Today, we are discussing westerns, South Korean cinema, and the translation of genre. Our guest is Dr. Michelle Cho. She's an assistant professor of East Asian popular cultures and graduate faculty in Cinema Studies at the University of Toronto. She's published on Asian cinemas and Korean Wave television, video, and pop music in such venues as *Cinema Journal*, the *International Journal of Communication*, the *Korean Popular Culture Reader,* and *Asian Video Cultures*. Her first monograph is about 21st century South Korean genre cinemas and she's currently at work on a project focused on gender and fandom in Korean wave media. Michelle, welcome to the Global Media Cultures podcast.

01:08 **Michelle Cho**: Thank you, I'm honored to be here.

01:12 **JLR**: I wanna start by asking you, how did you get to focus on these research interests, why do they appeal to you, and why are they an important area to study?

01:22 **MC**: Yeah, so I started working on Korean film and media, mostly film, in the early 2000s and I was really excited by the fact that there was growing international attention being paid to South Korean film. And as a diasporic Korean-American, Korean film wasn't part of my experience growing up and so it was this kind of new area of content and cinema culture that was really exciting to me as an early graduate student. So I've been super lucky because my academic career and the kind of flowering of South Korean film and media content in global markets have sort of overlapped. So I see that as like, I don't know, an incredible stroke of good luck because my interests then seem to be shared by other people who want to be able to understand this content and understand better what's going on in a historically grounded and culturally grounded way. And so, that's really where I come in and I can provide that context. So that's really, I think, my goal as a scholar and researcher.

02:51 **JLR**: So today we're discussing your article, "Genre, Translation, and Transnational Cinema," which was published in *Cinema Journal*, Volume 54, in 2015. Can you give us a brief history of this particular article, when you began working on it,

how did the project originate, and how did the ideas change in the process of researching and then writing it?

03:14 **MC**: Sure. So this article is a piece that started off as a seminar paper first, when I was a graduate student, and then developed into a keystone of my dissertation project. Because what I was noticing at the time... I saw this film for the first time in the movie theater in Seoul, where it was playing in the summer of 2008. So like a whole, whole, lifetime ago.

[laughter]

03:54 **MC**: So I saw this movie in the theater and I was so intrigued because it is such a clear kind of reference, homage, I don't know, throwback, to *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly* by Sergio Leone. And I was like, "Why are Korean filmmakers making these films that are so citational, that are kinda pointing to their own derivated nature?" That was the mystery to me. Especially because before this, I was interested in East Asian cinema because, again, I was looking for ways of thinking about film culture outside of North America, which is where I was born and raised. And what was available to watch as a young person who was living in Chicago, like a major US city, was East Asian cinema that was circulating in the international film festival space. So these films tended to be art films that... A lot of the time critics and scholars would approach these films as quasi-ethnographic, like, "Oh, what is this foreign land? Well, why don't we watch some movies to try and figure out what that world is like?" And so, Korean cinema was again starting to get recognition from global cinephiles, but it was really conspicuously not this kind of slow art film style. It was very kinetic, very action-packed. Often, the reference points that one could pick up on were like manga, other action genre films.

06:03 **MC**: And so, the question for me was, "Why does the industry choose this strategy for promoting itself in global spaces, when the other East Asian cinemas that seem to be doing quite well in attracting audiences abroad are so, so, different aesthetically, thematically, etcetera?" So that was the question that emerged after this mind-blowing experience in the movie theater where I was like, "What did I just... What? What was that?" But it was really fun at the same time too. And so the other question that I think was raised by this theatrical experience was what is the relationship between what these South Korean filmmakers are trying to do, and these mythologies that we receive from American cinemas. What sort of American dream or imaginary is embedded in this film, which is so clearly playing off these visual and

narrative cliches, actually, that we have about the American West, or the frontier, or the heroic, I don't know, like the Lone Ranger or whatever? Yeah. [chuckle]

07:35 **JLR**: Right. So you focus on *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, and as you mentioned, it's parodying or drawing from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, Sergio Leone's, right?

07:46 **MC**: Right.

07:47 **JLR**: So they're both, in some ways, a Western.

07:49 **MC**: Yes.

07:50 **JLR**: Even if they're playing with that. And when you're detailing this, you refer to the western as the "ur-genre" or as the cinema's founding narrative.

08:01 **MC**: Yeah.

08:01 **JLR**: Could you elaborate on that, and why this is important to understand what you're talking about?

08:07 **MC**: Sure. Because the Western is very familiar to us as a story about a human subject that goes out into a hostile space and overcomes a bunch of challenges in order to domesticate the wild, it's structured as a paradigmatic romantic narrative. And so for that reason, the western offers us a good example of a transition or some bridge between the literary romantic narrative and the cinematic one. So that's I think what I was referring to there. But then I was also thinking about the fact that there are these stories about the first film. So there's the Lumière brothers, their silent... One of their first films that features a train pulling into a station, and there's a myth around the way that that experience kind of shocked cinemagoers, but... And I don't know. I don't know if we know that that's true, but in any case... [laughter]

09:31 **JLR**: Yeah. It's a myth.

09:32 **MC**: Yes. [laughter] But yeah, so one of the first films that we have an account of in a way, it sort of participates in this iconography of modern progress. The train is such a symbol of the modern, and the train was such an important mechanism for allowing a settler, colonial structure to, yeah, to colonize North America, or spaces of

frontier or wilderness. It's like, yes, you have the horse and the, I don't know, hero or whatever, but you also have trains, right?

10:18 **JLR**: Yeah, yeah.

10:19 **MC**: So that was kind of another way that I was thinking in using that phrase, the "ur-genre" or cinema's founding narrative.

10:28 **JLR**: For sure. So it's this very much tied to American ideals of expansion west and manifest destiny and all of that, but then it travels, right? It ends up traveling to Italy, to Spaghetti Western, and then Korea, and *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*.

10:50 **MC**: Yeah.

10:51 **JLR**: So then let's talk about the local context. Can you give us a brief sense... So you've mentioned there was... Most of the international fare, most of the films that were being watched by international audiences were these arthouse films, let's say.

11:07 **MC**: Right.

11:07 **JLR**: But can you give us a sense of what was happening inside South Korea? What was the film industry in the early 21st century like?

11:17 **MC**: Sure. Yeah, so a really, really important historical event and context for understanding what was happening in the film industry is the Asian financial crisis. So 1997-98, there's this currency crisis that really decimates the South Korean economy. It bounced back relatively quickly, and so by the early 2000s, there's a lot of recovery, and the country is re-stabilizing. But it was this really devastating event that... One of the unexpected or unanticipated impacts of the Asian financial crisis is that, on the minds of a lot of Korean business people, and legislators, and people in political leadership, there was always this question of, "How do we participate in globalization in a way that will prevent us from being vulnerable to this kind of crash again?" And the US has always been an important model for South Korea in its economic development, and also cultural kind of... Cultural ideas or ideologies.

12:58 **MC**: And so there was this idea that, oh, we need to develop beyond manufacturing. Beyond cars, steel, textiles, into new sectors of the economy that will help us to remain globally competitive, and I think a big part of the US's global

hegemony has to do with its ability to export its cultural products. So this is a period of time at the turn of the millennium when the attitudes that the South Korean government had towards popular culture also started to shift, 'cause in the past... I mean, South Korea is a country that went through a period of authoritarian rule after World War II, so it really didn't transition to a democratic civil society until the early '90s. And so in the past, leadership used to view popular culture as a suspicious force as something to control and regulate, so that it wouldn't cause people to get ideas that would make them disobedient or that pop culture had a potential to be subversive.

14:31 **MC**: And then here's where the transition happens, where then the culture ministry and corporate leaders start to see that actually promoting popular culture, and helping to encourage its growth and flourishing could actually be a really important economic tool for post-industrial national economic development. And so given that all of this stuff is happening and changing at this time when there isn't... There is an established film industry in South Korea that was really thinking primarily in terms of domestic audiences. They weren't really making films for export, but they had been weakened over time 'cause domestic viewers didn't really care about Korean cinema. They just wanted to watch Hollywood movies or foreign films. They were really weak and so then there wasn't this... There was a space that opened up for a bunch of new voices, young directors who had totally different ideas about what film culture should be. And they jumped in and they jumped in at the right moment when there was a lot of space for Korean cinema to be sort of reinvented in a way. So some of the most famous South Korean filmmakers that we know of today, like Bong Joon-ho, the person who made *Parasite*. He was making films as well in using popular genre forms as a way to convey his take on Korean society and culture at the time.

16:31 **JLR**: So in this context, why did genre films help the young new directors to get their foot in the door to start developing their own vision for Korean cinema? What was helpful about genre films in that sense?

16:50 **MC**: I think that genre films were appealing to young directors because they were a way to attract audiences both domestically and internationally, because generally speaking, the popular genre forms in cinema that we might be familiar with just from watching films, they are really important marketing tools, right? We almost can't avoid talking about genre when we're trying to describe a work, describe a movie to a friend or to whoever. It's such an important piece of information that sets up this set of expectations and ideas that really help to familiarize content, even if it's coming from a place or a culture that you don't really know much about.

18:01 **MC**: So I think that South Korean artists and cultural content producers have recognized the effectiveness of genre parameters for a long time. I think this is actually something that you see even in South Korean cinema from earlier periods. There were a lot of melodramas, there were a lot of action movies, and the sub-genre of the Manchurian Western that I talk about in the article, is actually this popular genre that dates from the '60s and '70s where again, Korean filmmakers were using the familiarity of the Western to make domestic... To make content for the domestic audience that would make them feel plugged into a global cinema circuit. But there was this brief period in the '80s and '90s where South Korean filmmakers were moving away from genre to make this kind of socially realist critical cinema that was concerned with exposing some of the traumatic effects of authoritarianism in the country. So that's actually the filmmaking that first drew attention from scholars of Korean cinema. They were more focused on the “New Korean cinema” of that '80s and '90s period. That didn't have the kind of popular appeal.

19:54 **JLR**: Right. So it seems that genre allowed for a number of different things. So on the one hand, if there was this push for Korean film products to also have a global appeal in some sense, to become an export, genre allows that in some way to become familiar with... For audiences who might not be in the domestic market. And then there's also the familiarity with genre tropes or genre forms that can also appeal to a variety of audiences and that filmmakers can plug into and then use that to portray their vision of society as you mentioned. In your article, you're trying to theorize... Or you're developing a theory of genre translation, essentially. Can you give us a sense of what that theory looks like? And you mention... One of the things that you talk about as a way to think about how genre becomes translated is this idea of transference as well. Could you talk to us about that?

20:58 **MC**: Yeah, definitely. The theory of genre translation that I am developing in the article is one that veers a little bit away from discussions of film adaptation and also discussions of transnational cinemas that I was influenced by and reading at the time that I was working on the piece. So maybe it helps to first outline what I was trying to distinguish my approach from before I fill in what I'm actually doing. But there was this literature on transnational genre cinemas that I encountered that really talked about... I think it was really more focused on cult cinemas or filmmakers like Tarantino and Miike Takashi, this Japanese cult filmmaker, and other international directors who were using genres like hardboiled crime, neo-noir, these really stylized forms of filmmaking and narrative to create these sexy, gritty films about urban environments.

22:44 **MC**: And the prevailing wisdom or the consensus was that these genre films that are transnational, they appeal to a pretty specific kind of global cinephile who is really into... Who's sort of like a collector, who likes to watch international cinemas through this citational lens. So loves to be able to identify, "Oh, that's a Godard reference, that's John Woo picking up on, whatever, Melville to talk about this." And so there's an extreme textuality that's really about a love of knowledge, like a collector's impulse.

23:52 **MC**: And so then what I was witnessing in South Korea was a different type of genre cinema, where these films are remarkable because they're super popular and widely viewed at home, domestic audiences really like them. And so clearly it's not just a cinephile connoisseur who loves global film who is drawn to these works. So it seemed like there was this whole audience that was being ignored in that analysis of genre films and the adaptation of genre forms across different cultural and linguistic contexts. So I was like, "Okay, that's not quite it." And then there was this scholarly literatures on adaptation, some of it coming from literary studies where you're talking about the adaptation of a canonical work and how it can be re-written or adapted to a different medium. And there was still this idea that the line of attribution has to be very clear, and that audiences are always going to be able to clearly see what has changed and have some sort of very rational response to it. That's often, I think, how adaptation studies can approach the way that a work can move across time and also across different forms. So from a story to a play, to a film, to a graphic novel or whatever, that there is this knowingness on the part of the spectator or the audience.

25:56 **MC**: And I guess that knowingness is what I... I wanted to see if there was a way to think about how genre... How narratives get translated across space and time without relying on this kind of imaginary figure of the ideal spectator or viewer who's gonna intellectualize everything that's happening, and, again, be able to catalog all of the things that are going on. And so, that's where the theory of transference comes into play. Transference is the way that a person might re-enact or repeat a certain relationship... So in the setting of the clinical relationship between a patient and their analyst, if the patient is trying to work through aspects of their past, they might unconsciously establish the same relationship that they have with someone else, with their analyst, so that transference is a kinda movement of those feelings and that experience to a different setting.

27:27 **JLR**: Right.

27:28 **MC**: So the appeal that that concept has for thinking about the way that genre works is that sometimes genre films are described as repetitive, and therefore... That's why genre works are sometimes denigrated as unoriginal. But that is precisely the appeal of genre films for a lot of viewers is that the familiarity offers the space and opportunity to re-experience sensations and feelings that are, for whatever reason, pleasurable or sometimes... I mean, I don't know, you could even say therapeutic, right?

28:15 **JLR**: Mm-hmm.

28:17 **MC**: People who love horror films because it gives them an opportunity to go through a range of very intense sensations and emotions in a safe container or a safe space would, I think say, that there is some therapeutic benefit to the genre. But so yeah, so that idea of transference, I think, is really helpful because it solves the problem of needing to imagine this ideal spectator who has this thirst for knowledge and wants to know every single reference point and every... Like a connoisseur. Transference is an experience that we have all had in some way, shape, or form because human interactions or just interactions tend to be patterned. That's how we make sense of them.

29:14 **JLR**: Yeah. And this shift in focus from, as you point out, this idealized spectator who's all-knowing and who's deriving interest in the film only by being able to capture the references, the citational references, or being able to trace adaptation from one medium to another, thinking about the transference aspect is focusing on other ways that we experience cinema, which is through sensations.

29:45 **MC**: Yes, absolutely.

29:46 **JLR**: And through the experiential part of it, too, right?

29:51 **MC**: Mm-hmm.

29:51 **JLR**: It's you don't need to know what the reference is, but be... sort of immersed or fascinated by how it's presented that that in itself has its own appeal as well, right?

30:01 **MC**: Yes.

30:04 **JLR**: And genre films are perfect for this because so many popular genres are about prioritizing sensation, whether it's the action film, the horror film. It's about creating first a sensation spectator before you get to... Before even the plot makes sense because sometimes, it doesn't make sense, right?

30:23 **MC**: Exactly.

30:24 **JLR**: And that's part of the appeal, too.

30:24 **MC**: Yes, yes.

30:26 **JLR**: So you point out, you specifically saw this idea of transference play out in *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* even though it could play out in others. But what was it about *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* that you found particularly notable in thinking through these things?

30:42 **MC**: I think that... So I was saying earlier that my first experience of this film was sort of mind-blowing because it is such a kinetic film. I guess that's how I would describe it. And then when I was talking to other people about whether they had seen it or not, they were like, "Oh, my gosh. That scene with the horror... The chase... " They would talk about the physicality of it, and that their response to it was so embodied. Like, "Oh, my gosh. That guy, he rides a horse like amazing." [chuckle] And so, it was like, okay, there's something really specific about the corporeality of this film. And the fact that I really... It was such an immersive experience and so physical, but I was like, "The narrative is secondary." I felt like, "Okay, this is a great example, a great case for trying to hone this theory of transference as genre translation or adaptation because it exhibits so well these characteristics of genre cinema that focus on the body and sensation. But then, it also is pointing to its own derivative nature and its status as an adaptation of other stuff like unoriginal. That's like the whole point is that the film is unoriginal.

32:32 **JLR**: Right, right, and it presents this contrast to the citational practice that you mentioned before, which is including the reference but expecting the viewer to get it and to derive pleasure from being an all-knowing spectator who gets it. *The Good, The Bad, the Weird* is doing the opposite, which is literally telling you, "Here are my references, here's where we're playing with." But turning that as part of the pleasure of it, of telling you everything upfront rather than assuming that you have to be a connoisseur to get it...

33:09 **MC**: Yes.

33:09 **JLR**: In some ways. Okay, so within this, let's talk about literal and figurative maps. So you dedicate a section to thinking about how *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* is making very interesting use of maps, and this is also notable because maps play a particular role in the western genre. So can you tell us more about this?

33:32 **MC**: Yeah, yeah. So in a way, there's this red herring in the film that's very central, which is this treasure map that drives a lot of the action and the narrative. It really sets everything in motion, and everyone's trying to figure out what the map... Well, so everyone assumes that they know what the map means, but then after two and a half hours, you realize, "Oh, nobody had a clue, actually." And so I really liked this idea of a map, which is a key for decoding signs and for creating this... A map and a key is a set of symbols that then is supposed to correspond to some material reality like the land.

34:34 **MC**: And so in a way, it kinda is a figure for genre itself, which is like a map for understanding what it is that you're looking at in a text and for making sense of something. So this map, again it's a red herring. It doesn't really lead to the answers that you were expecting, but it's also really powerful in this film, because when we think about frontier and what it is that man is doing to the frontier, how it gets domesticated, oftentimes it's by creating borders and boundaries, and those are the things that are being referred to on maps. So the act of mapping, the act of cartography is such an important colonial gesture, right?

35:31 **JLR**: Right.

35:31 **MC**: And so I talk about in the article, the way that the Manchurian landscape, this area of northern China that was... Or now it's a part of northern China, but it was a kind of territory that challenged the many groups of people that... Or the many national entities that tried to colonize it because it's a landscape, not unlike the American frontier or North American frontier that was inhabited by nomadic peoples for a long time, that this is the relationship between human and land that gets destroyed and erased by colonization that we need to now fix these... We need to change this landscape... We need to change this land into landscape that then we can make into a static thing, and then we can exert control over. So in a way, I think that, yeah, the film is so cleverly kinda thwarting the intention that maps and mapping aim for, which is to

take space, make it legible, readable, make it very clear in the way that it corresponds to ownership and property and boundaries, including national boundaries.

37:25 **JLR**: Yeah, yeah, I think it's a really interesting parallel that you draw between the map as a way to make sense of the territory and genre as a way to make sense of what you're watching. It gives you pointers. So it becomes an interesting parody when something like *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, takes the idea of the map and says, "What if we just make it not make sense? What if you just have all these pointers and all these directions that you think are leading somewhere, but maybe they're not leading anywhere?" And it was just the wackiness of the journey that was most exciting of all.

38:02 **MC**: Yes, yeah, yeah. And the other thing about the way that the film resolves this mystery of the treasure, 'cause they're reading this map as a treasure map the whole time, is that it might be the case that the map is readable, but you do not have the experience or ability to read it. It's readable to somebody else, you know. And so in the case of the oil that rushes out of the ground, that might make sense to an audience that, I don't know, watched a lot of *Beverly Hillbillies* or something, right? Or kinda knows this as a trope of the American frontier and mineral wealth, and doesn't get it in the space of Manchuria.

39:00 **JLR**: Right, right. Yeah, I think that's a great way of putting it. It's a map, but you might not be able... You might not be the one to be able to read it.

39:10 **MC**: To read it.

39:11 **JLR**: Yeah. How have you built on this work since its publication, or is it related to things that you're working on now?

39:21 **MC**: Yeah, so the essay is an important chapter of the book project that is looking at Korean genre films, and so I take the issue of translation and transference and sort of look at other genres and how that dynamic is working. So I look at gangster films, some horror films, and then I also look at documentary, which is kinda interesting to sort of think about documentary as a genre, that sets up a similar kind of agreement with its audience and what it's going to deliver and what formal techniques it will use to do so. So yeah, this book is a long time coming, and so it should be out soon.

40:22 **MC**: So yeah, this was a kinda keystone of the book project. And then since... Yeah, so for the last three or four years, most of my current work has looked at a different sector of the Korean culture industries, which is pop music, music videos, some television, so I'm really interested in streaming media. I'm looking at fan-produced media, vlogging, reaction videos. So the concept of genre has been really interesting for me to kinda think about this whole new world of Korean popular media that has become really ubiquitous, I think. I mean, this summer has been kinda nuts because suddenly the figure of the K-pop stan, the K-pop fan has become, like, sort of recognizable to... It's kinda like... It's still a niche, but it moves out of it a little bit so that your mom and neighbor probably have heard the phrase K-pop all of a sudden because it was featured in the media a lot this summer.

41:57 **MC**: So yeah, like this whole new arena of content, how is it also doing the thing that Korean cinema had to do in the kinda turn of the millennium period? Like so 20 years ago, how does it make itself legible? Is it legible? Yes, no, maybe. I mean, so genre is such an important and powerful framework for thinking about just how pop culture content appeals to different audiences, and so one of the features of K-pop as a musical genre, more like a transmedia phenomenon because, it's visual, it's choreographic. So it's kinetic, and it's also auditory. How does this whole kind of sector of Korean culture industries, how does it become so global?

43:00 **MC**: It cites all of these musical genres that are super recognizable. It's a mash-up always of all of these different forms of popular music, and that is how it's discussed. So in a way, Korean popular culture, Korean culture industries as an exporter of content, they've really established now, a certain brand, which is the ability to genre bend, whatever that might mean to you. The ability to take incongruent things and put them together in a way that's going to be familiar enough to people who are not from the region, but also surprising and novel enough to capture attention globally. So that combination of familiarity and novelty has really become the calling card of Korean film industry or Korean culture industries. So yeah, so I feel like, huh I was onto something. [laughter]

44:13 **JLR**: Yeah, yeah. Exactly, you were tracing it as it was emerging.

44:18 **MC**: Yeah.

44:19 **JLR**: Even though it's... And that it's establishing itself.

44:22 **MC**: Yeah.

44:22 **JLR**: As well. Yeah.

44:24 **MC**: Yeah, yeah.

44:30 **JLR**: Michelle, thank you for joining us.

44:32 **MC**: Yeah, thank you for having me. This was really fun.

[closing credits music]

40:45 **JLR**: This episode of the Global Media Cultures podcast was produced by me, and edited by Alan Yu. Opening music by Podington Bear. Closing credits music by cloud mouth. This project is supported in part by the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication at the University of Texas at Dallas.

The Global Media Cultures podcast introduces media scholarship about the world to the world. I'm Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Thank you for listening.