The AFKN nexus: US military broadcasting and New Korean Cinema

ABSTRACT
This article explores the unintended cinematic consequences of America’s military presence in South Korea. It traces the history and programming of Armed Forces Korea Network-TV (AFKN-TV), the US military television network, and shows how the network functioned as a major channel for the flow of Hollywood and other commercial genre films into Korea during the 1970s and 1980s. AFKN had a large ‘shadow audience’ of young Koreans during these years for whom it offered an alternative media culture to that of the repressive Park and Chun regimes. This article argues that AFKN may have helped shape the development decades later of the genre-centred New Korean Cinema by providing its viewers – among them future directors Bong Joon-ho and Kim Jee-woon – with lessons in the language and logic of genre film-making.

INTRODUCTION
The transnational has in recent years become one of the most productive ideas in cinema scholarship, with an abundance of articles, books and even a journal devoted to exploring film in ways that seek to transcend the limitations of the national cinema model. Within Asian cinema studies, this has often entailed reading films in relation to transnational populations (e.g. diaspora),
political and cultural entities (e.g. greater China), styles and genres (e.g. the action film) and capitalist modes of production. As a cultural historian of America’s Cold War encounters with Asia, I come at the question of transnational cinema from a slightly different perspective. I want to focus attention on the cinematic consequences of America’s military expansion into Asia during the Cold War.

The US military is a powerful agent of globalization, a world-spanning institution that facilitates transnational flows not only of American power, but also of people, technologies, capital, cultural forms, styles and more. Between 1950 and 2000, there have been 27.3 million US military billets outside the United States (with ‘billet’ defined as one service person for one year), which translates into an average of 535,000 soldiers stationed abroad each year for half a century. About 54 countries, primarily in Europe and Asia, have hosted a thousand or more US troops (Kane 2006: 2). Korea has been host to the third-largest deployment of US troops, following Germany and Japan. US Department of Defense records show that 326,863 troops were deployed in South Korea at the end of the war in 1953. This number dropped to between 50,000 and 60,000 in the 1960s and 1970s, was further reduced to an average of 40,000 in the 1980s and 35,000 in the 1990s (Kane 2006: 8). This military presence has been highly visible, with the US Eighth Army headquarters located on a 630-acre base in downtown Seoul and other bases located in or near major cities, including Pusan, Incheon and Taegu. In these and other cities and towns, American soldiers were a common part of the urban scene and American foods and military C-rations widely available in black markets (Abelmann and Lie 1995: 62).

While scholars such as Katherine Moon (1997), Ji-yeon Yuh (2002) and Roald Maliangkay (2006) have begun to explore the social and musical impacts of the bases, I am interested in the role that this military presence has played in the historical development of Korean cinema. In a recent meditation on transnational cinema as a critical concept, Chris Berry wrote of the need to pay greater attention to the specifics of transnational media flows and to explore how cultural ‘flow occurs in particular channels, in particular directions and in particular ways’ (2010: 123). He also urged scholars to think beyond capitalism when considering the transnational forces that shape cinema. It is well known that Korean cinema has been shaped in decisive ways by Hollywood’s influence. I want to sharpen our understanding of that process by calling attention to the diversity of channels through which Hollywood films have entered into Korea’s film culture. I want to suggest that the US military created a major, non-market-driven channel for the flow of genre films into Korea during the 1970s and 1980s, and that the institutional nature of this flow helped shape the development of the New Korean Cinema.

Film historians are beginning to explore how the US military presence shaped the early development of Korean cinema from the late 1940s through the early 1960s. Sometimes the US military played a direct and repressive role, as when the US occupation government suppressed the activities of leftist film-making after the liberation from Japanese colonialism in 1945. In other ways the US military and State Department agencies played a more productive role. The US Army 502nd Unit and its successor, the US Information Service (USIS), hired many Koreans to work on newsreels and educational and propaganda films (Korean Film Archive 2003: 155; Armstrong 2003). Film historian Han Sang Kim describes the USIS as ‘a kind of training camp for Korean filmmakers’ (2011). Directors and technicians were educated in the use of
up-to-date technology and the conventions of classical Hollywood narration, and often received material support, in the form of salary, film stock and equipment, that enabled them to make their own films. Major directors of Golden Age cinema such as Kim Ki-young launched their careers under the auspices of the USIS. As Yi Hyo-in and Chung Chong Hwa have written, ‘the development of Korean film history in the 1950s overlapped with the development of films that were made for the U.S. military’ (2003: 155).

The opening scene of Bong Joon-ho’s Gwoemul/The Host (Bong 2006) slyly invites us to think about the influence of the US military presence on Korean cinema today. It is a scene of both ‘violence’ and ‘desire’, to use the terms that sociologist Shunya Yoshima uses to characterize the contradictory attitude among Japanese people towards the US military bases in that country (Yoshimi 2003). According to Yoshimi, many Japanese resent military bases to the extent that they are associated with violence against them and with violations of Japanese sovereignty, but they also desire the popular culture and consumer lifestyle that these same bases have helped produce. We can see some of this same dynamic in Bong’s film. The Host opens with a prologue that explains the creation of a monster that will grow up to terrorize Seoul. The setting is the morgue at the Yongsan Garrison in Seoul, headquarters of the Eighth Army and thus of the entire US military presence in Korea, and it shows an American mortician ordering his Korean assistant to dump gallons of toxic formaldehyde down the drain and into the Han River. This scene is imbued with violence: the poisoning of the public waterways, the destruction that the monster will wreak when it emerges out of this poisoned water, and the coercive relationship between the American military boss and his Korean employee. Bong drew upon a real-life episode from 2000 that was widely publicized in the Korean press at the time (GI Korea 2008). Other episodes in the film, including the massive street demonstrations, the use of the chemical weapon Agent Yellow, and the endangering and death of a schoolgirl, likewise carry echoes of highly publicized controversies involving the US military and violence against Koreans (Straub 2009). In building his film around such scenes Bong drew on the social history of anti-American sentiment, which had erupted most recently in the late 1990s and early 2000s in protests against the US military.

However, the setting of this prologue on the Yongsan Garrison also embodies the ‘desire’ side of Yoshimi’s formulation and invites us to see traces of a hidden cultural history of the US military presence in Korea. The Yongsan Garrison is also home to the Armed Forces Korea Network (AFKN), which is the TV network run by the US Department of Defense and aimed at US service people stationed throughout Korea. Through AFKN, the US Department of Defense has functioned as a major distributor of American popular culture in Korea. Bong Joon-ho was a devoted fan of AFKN; as a child he spent many hours watching cartoons, soap operas and movies, and he has spoken often about how important the network was to his film education (Lim 2005: 19). Like many young people in his generation, he was enamoured of American popular culture, and AFKN was his preferred means of accessing the mother lode of what he desired. So in setting the prologue to his monster movie at the Yongsan Garrison, Bong is gesturing towards two aspects of the US military presence in Korea: both a social history of Korean resentment against the perceived violence that these bases embodied, and a cultural history of a widespread desire for, and consumption of, American popular culture.

Bong was not alone in watching AFKN and its effects on Korean popular culture were widespread. As a child in the 1970s fellow director Kim Jee-woon
was a fan of AFKN radio, which kept him abreast of trends in popular music (Kim 2008a: 102–03). Heavy metal rockers and jazz musicians have reported taking inspiration from the music they heard on AFKN radio (Mayer 2001; Han 2010). A cartoonist who draws a strip about Major League Baseball in a quasi-Japanese style has said he became a fan of the American sport while watching it on AFKN as a child (Anon 2004a), as did the ‘top power hitter hands down’ in Korean baseball history, whose high school coach made him watch AFKN to study the American style of play (Anon 2002). Korean snowboarders apparently watched it to learn shredding techniques (Oh 2009), and a TV celebrity host who covers ‘hip culture’ and writes a fashion column for Bazaar magazine has described himself as a ‘love child of pop and AFKN’ (Kim 2003). What is interesting here is that the cultural effects of AFKN sometimes took years to become visible, as the culture consumed by children found echoes in their cultural production as adults.

In highlighting Bong’s relationship to AFKN, I propose to read the network as a kind of successor institution to the 502nd Unit and USIS in the 1940s and 1950s. I think that like these two other US government agencies, AFKN functioned as a kind of ‘training camp’ for Korean film-makers, although in a very different way. It was an American military institution that functioned inadvertently as a Korean educational institution, teaching young Koreans how to think in cinematic ways. AFKN was an important part of Korea’s film culture in the 1970s and 1980s, when the cohort of commercial auteurs led by Bong Joon-ho, Park Chan-wook and Kim Jee-woon were growing up. These directors are often characterized as a generation of cinephiles or film fanatics with an omnivorous appetite for all kinds of films, ‘from Hollywood genre films to European art films to B movies’ (Kim 2007b: 21, 2008a, 2008b: 16). AFKN was a major channel through which Hollywood and other commercial films flowed into Korea during the years when these directors were growing up and voraciously consuming films. Much of the education that AFKN offered to young Korean proto-film-makers like Bong involved the lessons of genre. Many critics have noted that genre has been absolutely central to the aesthetics of the New Korean Cinema and is what distinguishes this generation of film-makers most decisively from their immediate predecessors, who embraced a realist aesthetic as a mark of their artistic and political commitments. Critics have also observed that Korean cinema does not have any unique genres of its own akin to Chinese cinema’s martial arts film: all the genres in the industry’s repertoire have been imported and localized (Jung 2009: 43). AFKN may have offered not just instruction in the norms of specific genres, but more broadly an education in how genre works as a generalizable film language, a flexible logic of repetition and variation, and hybridization. This is to say that the remarkable facility with genre that is one mark of this generation of film-makers may be at least in part an unintended consequence of the US military presence in Korea. That this facility with genre has been key to the commercial resurgence of the Korean film industry and its largely successful competition with Hollywood may be one of the more pleasing ironies of America’s Cold War military expansion into Asia.

For American studies scholars, genre has often served as one productive way to connect films to their specific historical moments. Genre functions here as a gateway to history, a window onto the larger material, ideological and cultural realities that can exert a shaping force on cinema. Richard Slotkin’s (1992) work on the western, for example, reads the evolution of that genre in relation to changes in American social and political ideologies and foreign policy.
commitments over the course of the twentieth century. The relationship between genre and history that I am suggesting here is somewhat different. I think we might be seeing traces of the US military presence in Korea not just in the way that contemporary directors make certain kinds of genre films, but rather in the fact that they are so adept with the language of genre more generally. We can perhaps see a cultural legacy of those hundreds of thousands of American military personnel in Korean directors’ facility with genre as a system for making meaning.

AFKN HISTORY

The Armed Forces Radio and Television Service (AFRTS) is a worldwide broadcast network created by the US Department of Defense. Its mission is to provide military commanders with a direct means of communication to soldiers stationed around the world, and to maintain morale by providing entertainment and news to US military personnel, their dependents and civilian employees stationed on military bases. The Armed Forces Radio Service was launched during World War II to serve soldiers stationed in Europe and the Pacific. At the end of hostilities, it quickly proved its value as a Cold War institution. In 1947 it began producing programmes such as ‘Anti-Communism’ that instructed American soldiers in the evils of the Soviet Union and imagined what would happen if communism took over the fictional town of Springfield, USA. During the Soviet blockade of Berlin in 1948, round-the-clock radio broadcasts from within the city were taken as evidence of America’s political commitment to protect Berlin and western Europe more generally, and provided a homing signal for US airlift pilots. Television broadcasts began in 1953 as a means of retaining skilled servicemen (and their families) stationed at an isolated Strategic Air Command base in Maine, which was home to long-range bombers that could drop nuclear weapons anywhere in the world. As the Cold War continued and the US built military bases and fought wars around the world, the system of radio and TV networks expanded apace (Department of Defense 1993, n.d.; Christman 1992; Priscaro 1962; Karpinsky 1982; ImjinScout n.d.; Cornelison 2010).

AFKN was launched in the early weeks of the Korean War, in the wake of MacArthur’s landing at Incheon (Department of Defense 1993: 74).1 Throughout the war the US Eighth Army operated nine mobile AFKN radio stations, which assumed fixed locations after the armistice. AFKN introduced television broadcasting in 1957, four years before the launch of the first full-scale Korean TV station, and its 400-watt transmitter atop Mount Nam San in Seoul served a twenty-mile radius (Kang and Kim 1994).2 (From this point on, unless specified otherwise, ‘AFKN’ will refer to the TV network only.) By 1963 the network consisted of sixteen radio stations and six TV stations located on military bases throughout the country, making it the largest of the military’s three Pacific networks.3 AFKN initially broadcast only a few hours a day, increasing to 70 hours a week by the 1970s, mostly from late afternoon to midnight. In 1983 it began receiving programming via a Department of Defense satellite, which increased programming to 132 hours weekly, including 24-hour broadcasting on weekends, and allowed for real-time broadcasts of some shows from the United States (Kang and Morgan 1988). In 2001, the network changed its name from AFKN to AFN-K, as part of system-wide rebranding, although it is still called AFKN by many (Department of Defense 1993).
The major American TV networks, syndicators and Hollywood studios provided most of the programming for AFKN at little or no cost, and neither AFRTS nor any of the Armed Forces Networks, which all received the same programming, were allowed to alter the shows in any way. Some additional programming was produced by AFRTS itself, by the individual military branches, by the AFKN network and by individual stations in Korea. In the 1970s, for instance, about ten hours out of a total 70 hours of broadcast time were locally produced in Seoul. AFRTS removed all commercial advertising, which was replaced with public service announcements relevant to military personnel. Most of AFKN’s programming was similar in terms of content and schedule to what was broadcast on the commercial American networks. In 1975, for example, typical weekday programming began in the early afternoon with game shows (Let’s Make a Deal, 1963–1977), soap operas (General Hospital, 1963–) and children’s shows (Electric Company, 1971–1977). The evening featured news and family-oriented series (Partridge Family, 1970–1974) and at night, more adult series (Police Woman, 1974–1978), a movie and a late-night talk show (Tonight Show, 1962–). On Saturdays, additional hours were filled with cartoons, sports, and more movies and serials. In 1985 weekday programming began at 6 a.m. with the Today show (1952–) and concluded in the early morning hours with a movie (Stars and Stripes 1970–1989; Department of Defense 1993; ImjinScout n.d.; Karpinsky 1982; Kim et al. 1994).

KOREAN SHADOW AUDIENCE

AFKN was unique among all the Armed Forces Networks for having a very large ‘shadow audience’ of local viewers. From its inception in 1957, AFKN’s over-the-air broadcasts were available to all Koreans who had a TV and lived within range of a transmitter. This was because Korea, unlike other countries with large US military populations, uses the same NTSC broadcasting system as does the United States, and the transmitters are located on bases in major urban areas. AFKN schedules were published in Korean-language newspapers and TV guides, and for many Koreans it functioned as just one of the Korean networks, even though it was run by a foreign military power and broadcast in a foreign language. The existence of the Korean shadow audience for AFKN had been well known since broadcasts began. An editorial in the Korean Republic newspaper in 1957, for instance, celebrated the imminent arrival of AFKN-TV for its economic benefits, predicting that the Korean electronics industry would grow as Koreans purchased TVs in order to watch the network (Priscaro 1962: 93–95). And indeed, in 1961, Koreans already owned 5000 TV sets, more than twice as many as were owned by Americans in Korea (Priscaro 1962: 95). Although no one knows the exact size and demographic makeup of this shadow audience, it most likely consisted of middle-class, urban and educated Koreans – people who spoke some English or aspired to do so, who were curious about the world beyond Korea or who aspired to keep abreast of trends in American popular culture. Surveys from the 1980s show that AFKN was particularly popular among young Koreans, with several showing that more than 80 per cent of college students watched on a regular basis and that its popularity increased over the course of the decade (Choi 1989). In 2000 AFKN estimated that about 25 million people lived within range of transmitters and could potentially receive broadcasts (Cornelison 2010). (The AFN affiliate in Japan, which also uses the NTSC...
broadcasting system, has had a much smaller Japanese shadow audience because US bases are not located in major population centres.) AFKN was expressly forbidden from addressing this shadow audience, however, since its mission – and thus its ability to get programming at extremely low costs – was restricted to informing and entertaining American troops.

Given the size of this shadow audience, AFKN functioned as a major distributor of American film and television in Korea. And because of AFKN’s status as a military broadcasting system, it largely fell between the regulatory cracks of both the market and the state. Because AFKN was aimed at American citizens rather than Koreans, it was not considered to be an instrument of propaganda or cultural diplomacy, which meant that Washington did not produce or select AFKN’s content to match its diplomatic interests or to project a certain set of ideas about ‘America’. And because it was not a commercial distributor operating in the Korean private sector, the Korean government and private media companies were, for the most part, not able to censor or select AFKN’s content. This meant that AFKN by and large distributed commercial American content that was neither screened by Washington nor regulated by Koreans (with a few exceptions, discussed below).

AFKN’s easy accessibility, combined with its lack of oversight by Koreans, meant that the network generated a fair amount of anxiety about cultural imperialism among Korean intellectuals. This was especially so during the early 1980s, when AFKN’s increased broadcasting hours coincided with a rise in anti-American sentiment following the Kwangju massacre (Kang and Morgan 1988). Academic reception studies of AFKN done during this same period, however, concluded that ‘hypodermic models of cultural imperialism are inadequate’ to explain AFKN’s cultural effect, and hypothesized that ‘increased nationalism and anti-Americanism’ may in fact be one consequence of the increased consumption of American media (Kang and Morgan 1988). According to Jeonghwa Choi, most concerns centred on depictions of sex and violence, the conflict with Korean social values, and charges of cultural corruption and erosion of Korea’s cultural sovereignty. These anxieties eased a bit as AFKN moved to a UHF channel in the mid-1990s (Kim 2008b). Korean viewers began to lose access around 2000 when AFKN moved from terrestrial broadcasts to cable and satellite service (Cornelison 2010), and they lost it altogether in 2007 when AFKN was removed from the basic Korean cable line-up (Korean cable operators had been including AFKN in the package they sold to their customers, which violated the non-commercial licensing arrangements that US media companies had with the Department of Defense) (Flack 2007).

AFKN has always been an American TV network. But if we think in terms of consumption, rather than production or ownership or control, perhaps it makes sense to think about AFKN as in some sense a Korean institution that was used by the shadow audience in ways quite different from the ways it was used by its target audience. Because even though the Korean shadow audience and Americans in Korea were watching the same shows, the meanings they derived from programming were often very different.

**SPECTATORSHIP**

The Korean position of spectatorship differed significantly from that of AFKN’s target American audiences, in large part because of language: AFKN broadcast almost exclusively in English, with no dubbing or subtitles. This meant that for
many Koreans, the network functioned as an educational institution. Many Koreans used it to learn English, with private English-language institutes incorporating AFKN into their lesson plans and individuals using it for basic instruction at home. AFKN offered an opportunity to learn colloquial English as it was actually spoken by American people, rather than the somewhat more formal language used in textbooks and school classrooms (Kang and Morgan 1988; Cornelison 2010). The ability to speak at least some English had real economic and status value for Koreans, given that English-language tests were required to get into the best universities and to get a job at a top chaebol (Choi 1989: 110). Members of the shadow audience had other motivations, as well, for watching AFKN in the 1970s and 1980s. Journalist Kim Ji-soo has written that many Koreans treated AFKN as an ‘outlet to the outside world’ at a time when the government restricted access to the world beyond Korea; the free flow of cultural content on AFKN, he wrote, gave ‘our imagination some room’ (Kim 2008b). For still others, AFKN enabled them to acquire valuable forms of cultural capital. AFKN was especially appealing to children and teens who sought to distinguish themselves from their peers by becoming familiar with esoteric and ‘cool’ aspects of American popular culture (Choi 2011). Jeonghwa Choi contends that AFKN functioned as a ‘school of journalism’ for Korean broadcasters, who paid careful attention to AFKN programmes and emulated its formats (1988: 56).

Bong Joon-ho, according to the narrative that he tells about his intellectual and creative development, was an unusually committed member of AFKN’s shadow audience during the 1970s and 1980s. In interviews Bong has described a childhood and adolescence spent in front of the TV. He watched Clutch Cargo cartoons (Booth, 1959) on Saturday mornings; General Hospital (1963–) in the afternoon; TV dramas like Starsky and Hutch (1975–1979) in the evenings; and lots of movies late at night and into the early morning (Bong 2010). As a child he kept detailed schedules of AFKN’s weekly film broadcasts and, according to Jung Ji-youn, ‘he succeeded in watching nearly all of them’ (2009: 182). While plenty of his friends watched AFKN sometimes, Bong describes himself as actively seeking out things that held little attraction for his peers. Only one or two of his fellow students in a class of 50, he said, would be familiar with the shows that he watched as a boy, like Tom and Jerry cartoons or Hollywood B-movies. The network’s military identity did not give him pause, since the US military was part of his everyday experience. As a child, and before moving to Seoul, Bong lived in Taegu, which was home to a large US military base, where he saw American soldiers regularly on the streets and he and his friends loved to eat C-rations that were smuggled out of the PX and re-sold in Korean markets. It was not until he was in college, Bong (2010) says, that he began to think critically about this large foreign military and cultural presence.

In some ways Bong’s position of spectatorship overlapped with that of the target audience. The US military in Korea, of course, was staffed largely by young men and Bong has described his motivation for watching AFKN in decidedly gendered terms. Like many young American men, Bong enjoyed watching R-rated movies and often stayed up late in the hopes of catching some erotically charged encounter, a kiss or embrace or perhaps something more – scenes that were not available on Korean networks. This linkage of film and TV with sexuality is also visible on the pages of Stars and Stripes, the US military newspaper, which in the 1970s frequently published pin-up photos of scantily clad women alongside the TV, radio and movie schedules.
While the target American audience sought the familiar culture of home, however, Bong sought escape from his national media environment. Korean movies and TV had little appeal for Bong, since he thought them to be of inferior quality. He also sought to escape the strict censorship and dreary propaganda that were ubiquitous on Korean TV in the 1970s and 1980s (Bong 2010). President Park Chung-hee began regulating Korean media and popular culture in the early 1960s, with the heaviest restrictions accompanying his declaration of martial law in 1972. The regime used the media to promote the Yushin constitution, national security issues and the threat from North Korea. TV networks were prohibited from airing shows that implied any criticism of the government or treated North Korea positively. Representations of the human body, sex and violence were all restricted, as were other subject matters that would not be acceptable in polite company or that might exert a bad influence on children and youth. The hours of entertainment programming were reduced and censors vetted all programmes, including imported American shows, before and after broadcast. The cultural and educational programming that displaced entertainment shows was often barely disguised propaganda, and even entertainment shows were pressured to carry anti-communist themes that legitimated Park’s emergency rule (Kang and Kim 1999: 113; Kim et al. 1994). American movies were frequently shown, but often so heavily censored that viewers had to piece together the films’ meaning (Jung 2009: 183). According to Sunwoo Nam, South Korea in the 1970s had ‘one of the most controlled media situations outside the Communist world’ (1978: 53–54). In the 1980s the Chun regime eased up on some of these regulations, even as it brought all commercial broadcasting under government control, but Korean television would not be totally free of authoritarian regulation until the transition to democracy in the early 1990s. Among mainstream media outlets, then, only AFKN was free of Korean government interference and control.

For young people, watching AFKN in the 1970s and 1980s might have thus entailed a political motivation as well as a cultural one. It was perhaps a way of making a small, private gesture against the authoritarian Park and Chun regimes, a way of refusing to be constrained and limited by their dense network of political and media controls. AFKN carried news reports from the major US broadcast and cable networks and thus offered a valuable outsider’s perspective on Korean political events. For instance, when the dissident and future president Kim Dae Jung returned to Seoul from exile in 1985, the Korean networks did not cover the event but many people were able to watch his return on AFKN (Burgess 1986). So for young Koreans, watching AFKN had something of an exotic and transgressive quality, exactly the opposite of the comforting familiarity it aimed to deliver to its target audience of Americans.

AFKN was officially free of American censorship, and the network was not allowed to alter its commercial programmes in any way. But like all US military networks with shadow audiences, it received an annual list of ‘host nation sensitivities’ from the local US embassy, which were issues that the host nation might find objectionable and that networks were encouraged to treat carefully (Department of Defense 1993: 102–03). In the early 1960s, for instance, AFKN avoided broadcasting ‘anything of a derogatory nature dealing with Orientals’, racist depictions of American minorities (which might furnish material for communist propaganda), and any programmes that might ‘prolong bitterness’ between Koreans and Japanese (Priscaro 1962: 57). Wally
According to Wally Cornelison, who worked at AFKN as an active duty Air Force serviceman in 1972–1973, AFKN staff would screen episodes of *M*A*S*H* for Korean employees before broadcast and pull any that they found offensive. News reports produced locally by AFKN staffers did experience some censorship during the 1970s and 1980s in their reporting on North Korea, the riots following the assassination of Park Chung-hee in 1979 and the Kwangju uprising in 1980 (Christman 1992: 147–48). And in 1983, an NBC newsfeed that referred to the Seoul government as ‘repressive’ was replaced with a different network’s coverage (Department of Defense 1993: 102). Korea was ‘particularly sensitive to criticism’ from foreign media, which meant that, according to chronicler Trent Chrisman, AFKN was ‘probably more closely “guided” … than any other’ of the military networks (Department of Defense 1993: 102; Christman 1992: 147). While the removal of any TV show because of host nation sensitivities was rare, the network did pull three episodes of the 1988 British Thames TV series, *Korea: The Unknown War* that dealt with the 1980 coup and the Kwangju massacre (Cornelison 2010).

While many Koreans watched AFKN to learn English, Bong has described the network as an important part of his cinema education. AFKN was not Bong’s only film school, of course. He attended the Korean Academy of Film Arts, where he describes himself as having pursued an analytical approach to film. He studied film very ‘self consciously, with a clear intention to study different genres and styles of films’. He focused his attention on the ‘important genres and directors, mostly the father figures of Asian film’, like Shohei Imamura, Akira Kurosawa, Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-hsien. Bong also undertook some of his film education outside the academy, in part by obsessively collecting the films of Kim Ki-young on VHS, from whom he learned lessons about artistic integrity and personal vision (Bong 2010).

This formal education built on, and activated, the very informal education of his childhood. Bong did not speak English as a child, which meant that he could not understand most of the dialogue in the movies he watched on AFKN. This language barrier shaped his education in crucial ways. In contrast to his education at college, Bong has described the film education he received from AFKN not as an intellectual experience, but as an emotional and bodily one based on ‘pleasure’ and feeling. Watching AFKN was a physical phenomenon: it was fun, and he felt the effects of watching in his body as laughter, excitement and fear. Most importantly, AFKN offered a distinctly cinematic training. Blocked from full linguistic access to the films, he absorbed the visuals, the uses of cinematic form, the basic conventions of narrative construction and the varying styles. He describes this extra-linguistic mode of reception through bodily metaphors: ‘Hollywood films have almost become part of myself and my consciousness’, and they have ‘soaked through like water through my pores’ (Bong 2010).

The language barrier, and thus the incomplete transmission of the films’ narrative register, opened up a crucial space for creativity. As Bong was absorbing these films, he was also translating them into something new. ‘I totally could not understand the dialogue’, he told me laughingly, ‘but I stuck to the images and I imagined my own narrative’ (Bong 2010). For Bong,
the flow of meaning from film to viewer was never direct and complete: there was always a gap created by this untranslated language. And this gap constituted the very heart of Bong’s experience of spectatorship. This obstacle to full comprehension – the incomplete nature, as it were, of the films as he experienced them – became a spur to his own creative production. By filling in the gaps he created and consumed a slightly different film than the one made by American producers. (Even the consumption of American films shown on Korean TV stimulated Bong’s imagination, in that he often had to fill in the narrative chasms left by government censors.) Bong’s consumption of American media was thus a highly mediated and imaginative process, in which his uniquely Korean spectatorial position shaped the flow of textual meaning. Bong captures this position in an anecdote he tells about watching AFKN on a scavenged TV: hiding the small black and white set under his desk, the adolescent Bong used a magnifying glass to project a larger image on his wall, first turning the TV upside down so that the projected image would be right-side up (Jung 2009: 182–83). This image of a youthful Bong immersing himself in AFKN’s visual world, manipulating the images and weaving his own stories around them, can serve as a metaphor for his, and perhaps other commercial auteurs’, relationship to the military network. AFKN provided a stream of cinematic material that these future directors could draw on to create their own unique, and distinctly Korean, stories.

Bong’s spectatorship of AFKN invites us to rethink the dynamics of transnational cultural flows more generally, in part because his experiences were not unique. As Zhiwei Xiao has discovered, most Chinese audiences in Republican China (1911–1949) also watched Hollywood films without fully understanding the dialogue. Imported films were rarely subtitled in their entirety and most Chinese did not understand English well enough to follow the dialogue completely. This language barrier, according to Xiao, often reshaped the films’ meanings in accordance with local political and cultural contexts, as a host of intermediaries – from benshi-like live narrators to distributors, exhibitors and reviewers – stepped in to render these texts intelligible for Chinese viewers, often altering the films’ original meaning in the process. More recently, Yu Hua, one of contemporary China’s most successful novelists, has described his discovery of western culture in terms remarkably similar to Bong’s. As an adolescent during the Cultural Revolution, Yu became enamoured of so-called ‘poisonous weeds’, works of banned literature that circulated clandestinely (2011: 37). These texts passed through so many hands that they lost dozens of pages in the process. Like Bong, Yu desired these ‘headless, tailless novels’ for the glimpses they offered into a wider world, and he likewise sought out scenes of erotic titillation that affected him bodily, leaving him ‘anxious and fearful’ and with his ‘heart in [his] mouth’ (Yu 2011: 43). At the same time, his encounters with these incomplete texts stimulated his own ‘creative tendencies’. Frustrated by the narrative gaps, he writes, ‘I began to think up endings for myself’: ‘Every night when I went to bed and turned off the light, my eyes would blink as I entered the world of imagination, creating endings to those stories that stirred me so deeply that tears would run down my face’ (Yu 2011). These ‘truncated’ novels, he realized years later, served as ‘good training for things to come’ (Yu 2011: 42). Even western books with intact pages were consumed in a highly mediated fashion. When a manuscript of a Dumas novel fell temporarily into his hands, Yu and a friend frenziedly copied it word-for-word, only to have to read it aloud to each other under a street lamp in the middle of the night because each one’s crabbed script was illegible to the other; only much later
did he realize the manuscript was already of an abridged version. Truly, this is a scene of transnational cultural consumption as convoluted as that of Bong watching AFKN via an upside-down TV and a magnifying glass.

Bong’s and Yu’s experiences, along with those of early twentieth-century Chinese moviegoers, suggest a need to recognize the ways in which transnational cultural flows often come up against obstacles. Languages are un- or mis-translated, meanings are opaque, texts are incomplete and intermediaries unavoidable. The frictions generated by a text’s encounters with these obstacles, in turn, can sometimes spark creativity, as cross-cultural consumption becomes an active process of imaginatively filling in gaps and compensating for the amputations of meaning sustained in transit.

AFKN’S PROGRAMMING

So what exactly was Bong watching on AFKN during the 1970s and 1980s? And what might he have learned? A review of AFKN’s programme schedule from the 1970s and 1980s reveals several broad themes.

First, AFKN broadcast a lot of movies. The number of films broadcast each week varied from year to year: for much of the 1970s and early 1980s, they were showing about four to eight films spread throughout the week. In the mid-1980s, after the increase in broadcasting hours enabled by satellite transmission of programming, it was up to ten movies per week. AFKN thus offered an immersion in films. Most of them were Hollywood studio films, independent productions and made-for-TV movies. Many of the movies were quite old, with some dating back to the 1930s. This is because the American media companies that owned the rights to movies and TV would not give programmes to AFRTS at cost if they could earn a profit selling them abroad commercially themselves. And AFRTS’ budget did not allow it to buy a lot of new movies at market prices. As the author of one institutional history put it,

The only movies available for American Forces Television showing are those that were not designed by the producers for overseas distribution and these with price tags within the AFRTS budget. In simple terms, there is enough money to purchase one old movie or six old, old movies each week. And it is better programming to show six different movies one time each than one movie six times a week.

(AFRTS was also subject to the studios’ block booking practice, which meant that a number of less-desirable pictures were typically bundled with one popular film. Such an abundance of films, from such a range of time periods, offered many opportunities for Bong to absorb the classical and post-classical conventions of cinematography, editing, narrative structure and character development that we find in his own films.

Second, AFKN’s film programming consisted overwhelmingly of genre films. Specifically, the kinds of genres that would most likely appeal to the target audience of young American men: westerns, crime movies, film noir, science fiction, horror, action, spy movies, monster movies, comedies and thrillers. This emphasis on genre tended to trump the emphasis on Hollywood. AFKN showed quite a few foreign films, but they were almost always genre films: Italian spaghetti westerns, giallo films and sword-and-sandal pictures; Hammer Horror films from the United Kingdom; Godzilla
movies from Japan; martial arts films from Hong Kong and Taiwan; and lots of European co-productions of action, crime and espionage films. There were very few movies that could be classified as a European or Asian art film. There were some but not a lot of women’s pictures, female-centred melodramas, wedding comedies and the like. Romances tended to feature bombshells like Marilyn Monroe or Jayne Mansfield, and the musicals that were broadcast often starred Elvis Presley. There were some family movies, which no doubt appealed to the young dependents of service people. And in the late-night time slots there were R-rated films and even a few flagged for ‘adult’ content. Across genres, certain settings and themes recurred frequently, presumably because they were of interest to military personnel stationed abroad. These include military settings, characters and story lines; foreign locations, especially in Asia and Europe; and international political storylines, such as espionage and terrorism. By the mid-1980s, made-for-TV movies and miniseries became more common, replacing some of the older and more obscure studio-era films. And because AFKN went so deep into a select number of genres, it aired a lot of genre hybrids. Films like *Killdozer* (London, 1974), a made-for-TV horror/sci-fi/war picture set on a Pacific Island during World War II about an earth moving machine that runs amok. Or *Fatal Games* (Elliott, 1984), a mash-up of sports, horror and high school films that revolves around a mad javelin thrower who kills teen female athletes, often when they are naked in the locker room. Or *Francis in the Haunted House* (Lamont, 1956), a horror-comedy hybrid featuring a talking mule. Or *Silent Sentence* (Spangler, 1974), a slasher-western about the serial murder of prostitutes.

There is nothing like spending your youth watching hundreds of genre films on TV to teach you how genre works: the deep structure of repetition and variation; the composition of films out of familiar bits and pieces put together in new ways; the realization that genres are transnational entities, sharing conventions across national borders; and the lesson that genre films are often Frankenstein-like hybrids. Bong Joon-ho, Park Chan-wook, Kim Jee-woon, and other commercial directors today display a deep and creative understanding of how genre works – a kind of facility with genre that can only be achieved by watching lots and lots of genre films.

Bong surely learned about genre by immersing himself in the deep reservoirs of genre film that AFKN made available. He makes films in the same genres that were popular on AFKN (crime stories, a monster movie) and he is famously fond of genre hybrids. His films are full of bits and pieces from many different genres, combined into what he calls a ‘schizophrenic’ style that at one moment gestures towards Hammer horror and at another towards noir (Lim 2005: 19). More profoundly, he absorbed the language of genre as a vehicle for telling his own stories in his own idiosyncratic style. Bong works with genres without being confined by them. Critic James Bell, for instance, has noted Bong’s ease in ‘riffing on genre conventions and audience expectations but never relying on them – and, more often than not, going way beyond them’ (2010). Bong himself insists that he does not make genre films; ‘To be honest with you’, he says, ‘I don’t really have a concept of genres’ as something distinct from the language of film more generally. Having grown up watching American genre films’, he says, ‘I soaked these Western films through my skin’ and they have become ‘embedded in my body, so when I make films now I don’t think about genres, how my films would fit into [them] or how I want to challenge conventions’ (Bong 2010). What this
suggests is that the conventions have been so thoroughly absorbed that they have become the default language of his storytelling – even when he is telling an intensely Korean story.

Kim Jee-woon was also a member of AFKN’s shadow audience who relished its bounty.

I think that the 1970s were the renaissance of American film and the high-water mark for Korean popular culture. I feel like I drank in so much incredibly diverse cultural holy water during that period of cultural renaissance. It was also interesting how I absorbed most of the blessings of that renaissance through television. Popular songs, which played the leading role in popular culture at that time, as well as the pop chart programs that came out every day on AFKN (Armed Forces Korea Network) radio, comedy shows, countless films [...]. And I experienced everything through television.

(Kim 2008a: 102–03)

Certain genres had a ‘heart stopping’ appeal for Kim and he has spoken eloquently of the power of those ‘moments in a Sergio Leone film, moments of irresistible, somehow unexplainable but incredibly wondrous fascination, like the expressionless face of Clint Eastwood or Lee Van Cleef’ (Kim 2008a: 136). It is these ‘moments of pleasure’ – these ‘genre moments’ – that, according to critic Kim Hyung-seok, Kim’s films seek to reproduce. Like Bong, Kim uses the Lego pieces of a genre in a creative rather than formulaic way: he wants to ‘avoid becoming buried in genre conventions’ and to instead use ‘conventions in a critical way’ (Kim 2008a: 79). Park Chan-wook has spoken similarly of his own relationship to genre: ‘I don’t make genre films, but I don’t completely escape from them either’ (Kim 2007b: 97).

I want to read Bong Joon-ho’s highly mediated spectatorship of AFKN as a metaphor for these directors’ relationship to Hollywood-derived genres more generally. These directors are deeply engaged with the conventions of genres, but always at a certain remove. They treat a given genre as a source of inspiration and a reservoir of moments and gestures, rather than as confining system to be entered into more or less respectfully. Like the adolescent Bong, they rework the images the genre provides them and make up their own stories to go along with them. Throughout this process of selective appropriation and indigenization, they reinvent the genres in question in distinctly Korean ways.

Third, AFKN showed a lot of what might be called marginal films. Although it showed plenty of classical Hollywood films, like John Ford westerns and Hitchcock’s crime films and psychological thrillers, it also showed a lot of bottom-of-the-barrel genre films: low-budget films, B-movies, exploitation films and films made by poverty row studios like Republic and Monogram Pictures. Movies like *A Woman for All Men* (Marks, 1975), an R-rated picture starring sexploitation starlet Judith Brown and marketed with the tag line ‘She’s too much woman for any one man’. Or *Thomasine and Bushrod* (Parks, 1974), a blaxploitation version of Bonnie and Clyde, in which the thieves steal from ‘the man’ and give to Mexicans, Indians and poor whites. Or *Moonchild* (Adney, 1974), an existential horror film about a young man who becomes trapped in an inn full of murderous characters, which was made as a student film in 1971 and released theatrically a few years later. Bong saw John Carpenter’s 1974 *Dark Star*, a pot-headed sci-fi parody made for less
than $100,000 and originally shot on 16mm, a film which he had forgotten until he encountered it in a class on western cinema in film school.

AFKN played the same role for Bong, and likely for other New Korean Cinema directors, that the Video Archive rental store famously played for Quentin Tarantino, to whom these directors are often compared. Korea had its own video stores, of course, but they did not become widespread until the 1990s (Chang 1993). In the 1970s and 1980s it was AFKN that served as the most easily accessible ‘archive’ for low budget, marginal and esoteric genre cinema from Hollywood and other commercial industries. Perhaps today’s serial murderers, vampire priests and bank-clerks-turned-professional wrestlers are extending some of the conventions of the marginal cinema that was so widely available on AFKN.


This body of films has been central to the development of the New Korean Cinema as a whole. Critic Kim Young-jin has suggested that Park Chan-wook’s ‘style and predilections are reminiscent of the movies of the New Hollywood generation’, directors like Scorsese and Coppola who ‘made genre films’ but ‘renovated the traditions with a style inspired by European art films’ and in the process ‘infused a spirit of rebellion’ into mainstream commercial cinema (Kim 2007b: 21–22). Kim Jee-woon has been effusive about his love of 1970s cinema and popular culture, describing a show he saw on Korean TV at the end of the decade:

They showed a popular cultural documentary in two parts, called ‘The Fun and Exciting 1970s.’ It was a program that was made by an American broadcasting station, and it was a popular culture documentary of such vast scale that it had to be split up into two parts and broadcast that way. All of the American pop culture icons who had dominated the 1970s appeared, and the content was an exciting and entertaining look back at the 1970s. It was a bold effort to encompass all of the American pop artists, actors, directors, producers and TV programs of the 1970s, and it was enough to have me enraptured. One of the parts that touched me the most was a short but powerful part about Bruce Lee, who was the biggest star to me, the biggest star in Asia, at the time. I was moved see Bruce Lee being treated on par with John Belushi and Steve McQueen, and for me, like the title of the program, the 1970s...
were always a wonderful and exciting time. It’s like a treasure chest of memories for me, when I had maybe the most dynamic experience of the most diverse popular culture.

(2008a: 102–03)

For Kim, the 1970s was a culturally rich period that he has sought to evoke in several of his films, including *The Foul King* (2000) and *The Good, The Bad, and The Weird* (2008).

Hollywood films of the 1970s stand as a model for the kind of intellectually and aesthetically substantive commercial films that have resurrected the Korean film industry. Like Hollywood’s commercial auteurs before them, Bong and Park and their peers merge classical Hollywood genre conventions with European art film aesthetics, use crime stories as a means for exploring psychological depths and illuminating social realities, and rework genre’s superficially conservative framework to ask critical questions about history, society, power and memory. Their films work on multiple levels: as works of art, as an evening’s entertainment and sometimes as social critique. Like Francis Ford Coppola’s *Godfather I and II* (1972, 1974), quite a few New Korean Films have been able to find that fine balance between blockbuster and art. They have figured out how to make films that scratch the often-contradictory itch for pleasure and substance.

All of this programming – and thus the education that AFKN offered a generation of bright, young proto-film-makers – was shaped by its specific nature as a US military institution.

AFKN was of course not the only source for American films during the 1970s and 1980s. ‘Hollywood films and classics were a common part of Korean society when I was growing up’, says Bong Joon-ho (Bong 2010; Im 1986; Chung 2005). Like AFKN, the Korean networks showed a lot of older classical Hollywood films, in dubbed versions, and for similar financial reasons: they were inexpensive and they were what was available, given that foreign TV broadcasters could purchase films only after they had exhausted the American theatrical, video and cable markets (Im 1985). There was some overlap in the programming of films on AFKN and the Korean networks, both in terms of general types of films (classical Hollywood, westerns, TV mini-series) and specific titles (*The Horse Soldiers*, Ford, 1959; *Play Misty for Me*, Eastwood, 1971; *The French Connection*, Friedkin, 1971). But even if the titles were similar, the cultural aura surrounding the films was different. The dubbing and subtitling, which was often of poor quality, made them more accessible, but also less exotic and thus unable to deliver the same kind of cultural capital that watching AFKN provided (Im 1986). The films on Korean TV were subject to two rounds of vetting, first by the TV networks, which sought films that would not offend Korean moral or cultural sensibilities (Im 1985), and then by government censors, who cut out scenes of a sexual, violent or sometimes political nature, sometimes making it ‘difficult for the audience to understand the plot’ (Im 1986; Jung 2009: 183). There were also differences in programming. Korean TV networks tended to show more prestige pictures, such as Oscar nominated films, films by major directors and films featuring big stars. The programming was also not quite as skewed towards a young male viewer’s tastes, which meant they showed more films that could be classified as women’s pictures, such as women-centred melodramas (*Now, Voyager*, Rapper, 1942), romantic musicals (*Swing Time*, Stevens, 1936) and comedies of remarriage (*The Awful Truth*, McCarey, 1937). They did not show
anywhere near the volume of marginal films that AFKN did: the B-pictures, the crazy genre hybrids, the Poverty Row films, and so on. They also did not show the volume of movies that AFKN did (Choi 1989: 53). In the 1970s, for instance, the networks typically broadcast American movies on the weekends, with each network showing one film; but the time slots frequently coincided, which made it possible to watch only one film in its entirety on each night. And finally, they did not carry the sheer volume of other American programming in which the films were embedded. In the early 1960s Korean networks carried up to 40% foreign programming, but that number declined steadily over the years, to about 20% in the 1970s, and less than 10% by the mid-1980s (Kim et al. 1994: 129; Shin 1988). AFKN was thus a distinct venue: it offered more movies, more genre films, more ‘masculine’ movies, more marginal films, more uncensored movies, and a wider portal onto American media and culture more generally.

Hollywood films also played in Korean movie theatres in the 1970s and 1980s. But until 1986, import quotas and the lack of direct distribution by Hollywood studios limited their numbers, with only about 30 films imported each year between 1962 and 1988, far fewer than could be seen on AFKN in a single month (Kim 2007a; Paquet 2009: 35). And like on Korean network TV, these films tended to be bigger budget ‘prestige’ pictures: Bong recalls seeing films like *Shane* (Stevens, 1953), *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, 1939), *Bridge on the River Kwai* (Lean, 1957), *Lawrence of Arabia* (Lean, 1962), *Ben Hur* (Wyler, 1959), *Sound of Music* (Wise, 1965) and *Dr. Zhivago* (Lean, 1965) in the theatre. Other popular foreign films, primarily Hong Kong martial arts, were also available in theatres.

**CONCLUSION**

AFKN is an example of some kind of irony, a testament to the unintended consequences of the global projection of American military power. The official mission of AFKN was to help maintain US military hegemony in Korea by boosting the morale of American soldiers. But one of the indirect consequences of its presence was the eventual rise of a commercial cinema that was capable of competing with Hollywood and reclaiming a large share of Korea’s domestic film market back from American media companies.

AFKN was a significant component of Korea’s film culture during the 1970s and 1980s. It served as one of the major pathways through which Hollywood and other commercial cinemas entered into Korea. It was not the exclusive distributor of foreign cinema, of course: foreign films could be found in commercial theatres, on Korean TV networks, at foreign cultural centres’ cinemathques and in film clubs at elite universities. But AFKN did occupy a unique niche among all these institutions: it was free, uncensored, inside the home, and it offered both a volume of films and an allure that none of these other institutions could match. AFKN provided a rich compost in which the imagination of young Koreans could take root, and the education that it provided bore fruit decades later in the genre-bending, smart, commercial films of Bong Joon-ho and his peers. AFKN was a crucial part of Bong’s education, and, I think, more generally of his generation of directors. Genre has been absolutely central to the New Korean Cinema, and AFKN offered, if nothing else, a solid education in how genre works.

Crucially, the education that AFKN made possible must be seen in relation to the lack of knowledge in the 1970s and 1980s about Korea’s own
9. According to Im Young, Korean TV networks showed only twenty Korean films in 1986, down from 70 in 1985. He attributes this to a number of factors, including the small number of Korean films available, the poor condition of many of the films that did exist and Korean film's lack of appeal for audiences.

rich film history. These directors were free to learn from and embrace other cinema histories because, as Kim Young-jin has said of Park Chan-wook, he had ‘no tradition in his father’s generation to obey or disobey’ (2007b: 21). They simply did not have the opportunity to immerse themselves in Korea’s own rich tradition of well-made, genre-based commercial cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, which included family melodramas, romantic comedies, war films, spy films and even the occasional musical. Bong Joon-ho, for instance, says he has never seen Madame Freedom (Han, 1956). That the director of the most commercially successful film of the New Korean Cinema era has never seen the most commercially successful film of the Golden Age era is quite remarkable. In fact, he reports that he has seen very few films from the 1950s at all, and he rarely cites any Korean film-makers other than Kim Ki-young when he speaks of his influences and inspirations. Many of the films from this era were simply not available during the 1970s and 1980s: prints were lost or damaged, few archives existed to collect and preserve them, repertory theatres that might have screened existing films were not common, and some films and directors considered politically suspect were intentionally kept out of general circulation. Some films of this era did screen on Korean TV, but not often or regularly (Im 1986). What Bong has seen, and what he references when talking about his own films and Korean classics like The Housemaid (Kim, 1960), are a great many American films (Bong 2009).

AFKN filled a gap in Korea’s film culture in the 1970s and 1980s, offering up one kind of film tradition when the more local one was not readily available. Making AFKN visible as a part of Korean film culture allows us to see more clearly the extent to which Korean cinema has not developed in linear fashion: the directors of the early 2000s are not, in any simple way, the heirs to the directors of the 1950s and 1960s. The domestic and geopolitics of the Cold War intervened, creating new channels for the flow of certain kinds of genre films into Korea and stimulating the imaginations of the young, not yet directors of the New Korean Cinema.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Earlier versions of this article were presented as part of the Korean CineMedia and the Transnational conference organized by JungBong Choi at New York University and also at The (Unending) Korean War conference at New York University, the American Studies programme at the University of Notre Dame and the Society for Cinema and Media Studies annual conference. This work was supported by the Academy of Korean Studies Grant funded by the Korean Government (MEST) (AKS-2010-DZZ-114). This article has benefitted from the help of a number of individuals. Bong Joon-ho graciously agreed to be interviewed, and Dima Mironenko-Hubbs helpfully arranged it. Henry Em and Erika Doss kindly invited me to present my ideas before thoughtful audiences. Wally Cornelison, JungBong Choi, Han Sang Kim and Hye Seung Chung generously shared their personal and professional experiences with AFKN. Eun Kyung DuBois provided excellent research and translation services. Seung-hwan Shin, Han Sang Kim and Ian Condry pointed me towards valuable sources.

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Journal of Japanese & Korean Cinema

ISSN 1756-4905 | Online ISSN 1756-4913
2 issues per volume | Volume 2, 2010

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