

SUPERNATURAL SERIALS AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE IN RECENT SOUTH KOREAN TELEVISION

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ABSTRACT

South Korean television drama often employs ghost stories as a medium for social critique, as in the series *Dokkaebi: The Lonely and Great God* (2016-17), *Let's Fight, Ghost* (2016) and *Oh My Ghost* (2015). Blending ghost story with other genres, these series foreground the plight of characters who are either ghosts or young people able to see ghosts.

Both are isolated by their liminal condition and the multiple personalities it entails, the ghosts because they cannot communicate with the living and the ghost seers because their uncanny ability has set them apart since childhood. Both lack immediate families, which further isolates them in a society with communal values centred on family. Both thus readily symbolize people marginalized because of gender, social status or restricted economic access, but also serve as a commentary on the disintegration of the family in contemporary South Korea. The viewing audience is positioned to align and empathize with ghost and/or seer in their struggles with lost identity and the quest for justice which will free the ghost from its liminal state, and is thereby implicated in a crisis of subjectivity and prompted to reflect upon its own position in society.

0. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, South Korean television drama has turned to folklore and folkloric supernatural tales as media for humour and social critique. This turn coincides with the emergence of horror as a cinematic genre in the late 1990s, but is further shaped by two factors. First, because television audiences are less easily age controlled than cinema audiences, representations that might be regarded as extreme are excluded, even though screening times are as late as 10.00 p.m. Second, as Jinhee Choi argues, Korean horror was from the outset largely shaped by *Whispering Corridors* (1998) and the other films in this series, which imbued Korean horror with a specific schema Choi defines as “a *sonyeo* (girls’) sensibility” (2010: 126). While the films are set in girls’ schools and explore the “subtle psychology” of teenage female characters, the emphasis on sensibility enables “audience engagement with characters beyond gender-bound identification” (2010: 127). Further, while the films may produce a frisson of fear by means of conventional cinematic techniques – tracking along a dim corridor and the irruption of a sudden apparition, for example – the horror is more a cognitive affect than a recoil from a visual effect. Educational and gender regimes shape and repress the lives of girls (Choi 2010: 127, Lee and Stephens 2013: 98-99), producing an existential anxiety, but the social commentary implicit in such representations readily extends to television serials in which ghosts, other “undead” entities, and characters who interact with them embody sections of society which have been excluded from well-being.

Entities that appear only in liminal or subliminal domains and effectively exist only as instantiations of schemas resonate with the schemas and scripts in the minds of viewers, those important components of the models we construct to make sense of people and things in the world (see Oatley 2003: 269). This article will examine a sub-set within what I have called “the supernatural serial”, drawing its examples from a bundle of serials broadcast on cable television between 2013 and 2017: *Who Are You?* (2013), *Ghost-Seeing Detective Cheo Yong* (2014 and 2015), *Oh My Ghost* (2015), *Let’s Fight, Ghost* (2016) and *Dokkaebi [or Goblin]: The Lonely and Great God* (2016-17). Supernatural serials may draw on a range of non-human or undead characters, but this particular sub-set has a ghost as one of the principal characters, and each blends ghost story with other genres (especially romantic comedy, bromance, school story, crime story, and culinary drama) and use this blending to foreground the

plight of characters who are marginalized and alienated from mainstream society. South Korean (henceforth Korean) television produces a vast number of serials which run for only one season in a miniseries format. The number of episodes varies between ten and twenty-four, with sixteen the most common length for serials with contemporary settings, such as those in my corpus. This compact form, in comparison with American television series, entails that Korean dramas usually have a single director and a single screenwriter, and are thus apt to be internally consistent in narrative and directing styles. Discernible shifts in either are therefore more meaningful than those in serials with multiple writers and directors.

Each serial in the sample, with the exception of *Ghost-Seeing Detective Cheo Yong*, consists of sixteen episodes, each episode of approximately one hour (*Dokkaebi* a little longer). *Ghost-Seeing Detective Cheo Yong* was originally ten episodes and, unusually, a second season, also ten episodes, was produced a year later. All the serials were made for cable television, so the potential audience is smaller than for public broadcast channels, but writers and directors will at times address it as a more discerning audience – for example, by including more intertextual and metacinematic jokes or by offering audiences viewing stances in which strong empathy with characters interacts with a more analytical perspective, or what Jason Mittell (2015: 46) terms an “operational aesthetic”. In the supernatural genre, this entails self-conscious reinventions of myth, intertextuality, and playful frame-breaking allusions, among other strategies. Because these serials blend fantasy and humour, their metacinematic strategies can seem very evident, and their popularity suggests that viewers respond positively to allusions to other works or self-reflexive comments on genre, even if they do not (yet) appreciate the impact on a work’s texture and meaning. Producers of serials on cable are also following a trend to move away from live-shoot production format towards complete or part pre-production. The benefits of pre-production are evident in *Dokkaebi* in such areas as the use of an attractive overseas setting for several sequences (in this case Quebec), high production values, sophisticated special effects, an outstanding soundtrack,¹ a stellar cast and a well-plotted narrative distinguished by the witty, dead-pan banter between the two male leads.

1 At one time, seven of the songs from the serial occupied top ten positions in the pop music charts in South Korea. This phenomenon in turn increased the interest in the serial and the size of its audience.

1. ALIENATION, LOST IDENTITY AND COMMON SCRIPTS

The appeal to audiences of the principal characters across this group of serials also lies in a common script of alienation grounded in various forms of loss of identity. The desire to recover a lost or displaced identity is a recurrent theme in South Korean TV drama, and answers to a wider concern in society and culture about the purpose of life in a seemingly hostile world. Alienation is evident in the central characters of each serial, who are ghosts or young people afflicted with an ability to see ghosts. Both kinds of character are cut off from family and the social mainstream by their condition and the multiple personalities it entails as they mentally move between worlds: the ghosts because they can seldom communicate with the living, and the ghost seers because they have either been socially ostracized since childhood due to their alterity or are unable to lead everyday normal lives because of some trauma in adulthood. All are without immediate families, which constitutes depleted subjectivity and lack of agency in a society with communal values centred on family.

Both ghosts and ghost seers thus conform to recognizable scripts. A ghost is cognitively impaired and driven by a limited range of motives and desires. The longer a ghost roams the world, the more embittered it becomes and the more apt to turn to evil, and more inclined to possess the bodies of the living. Ghostly possession occurs in most of the serials discussed here. Ghosts have usually died young and may be amnesiac (lacking memory of past identity and/or unaware of how they died), they may be suppliants, wishing to convey a message to their families or to receive a ritual burial, or they may be vengeful, bearing a grudge against the living, either because they have died violently and not been avenged or, in the case of a female, because she is a virgin ghost (*cheonyeo gwishin*), having died a virgin in a society which still determines a woman's social value by biological reproduction, childcare and home management. She is thus unable to pass on into the afterlife and persists as the most feared kind of ghost, random and vindictive in her attacks upon the living, especially young men or people enjoying the institutions of marriage and family denied to her in life. Suppliant ghost sequences are usually brief, as in several examples in *Dokkaebi*, but an exemplary extended sequence occupies a story arc that spans Episodes 3 and 4 of *Who Are You?* Jang Yeon-Hui²

2 In accordance with Korean practice, names appear as family name followed by given name, unless a cited author has adopted a different order when publishing.

has been killed by her intended mother-in-law, and her body dismembered and the hands and feet scattered. Although the rules of this serial only allow a ghost's voice to be heard by a shaman, Yeon-Hui appears several times before Yang Shi-On, who identifies her and is able to nudge the investigation in the right direction and prevent a cremation of the rest of her body under a false name.

The core of the ghost seer script is that he or she can see, hear, communicate with and even touch ghosts. This unusual ability may stem from several causes, of which three are most common: temporary possession by a spirit during childhood; descent from a parent or grandparent who is a shaman; or a near-death experience, especially involving a coma, in which the spirit leaves the body and enters the liminal space inhabited by spirits. All three have their source in long-held shamanistic beliefs and practices in Korea, even if the dramas are treating these as folk beliefs and practices. Out-of-body experiences and possession by spirits are familiar aspects of shamanism. In the course of *Who Are You?*, a young shaman, Jang Hui-Bin, is surprised as she transitions from a charlatan to a ghost seer, visited by ghosts because she is the only one who can hear them speak, and is at last enabled to offer constructive advice to her clients. While out-of-body experiences have been long recounted across the world (Greyson 2016: 394), the connection in television drama between coma and out-of-body experience is mainly a late 20th century phenomenon prompted by the emergence of resuscitation science and life-support systems. As Sam Parnia observes, medical science now indicates that death "is not so much of an absolute black and white moment but rather a 'gray zone' that may be potentially reversible for prolonged periods of time after it has begun" (2014: 76). Logically, the altered cognitive process which enables a subject to "see" ghosts might be identified in popular culture discourse as a consequence of post-resuscitation syndrome, the damage to the brain that occurs along with the return of spontaneous circulation (Parnia 2014: 77). The particular convention in TV dramas is thus a very recent development wherein shamanism meets neuroscience.

Ghost seers likewise share attributes of a common schema. They tend to be social isolates, and have spent lonely childhoods because their peers shun them through fear or contempt of their difference. Their isolation is exacerbated by the loss of their parents during early childhood. Eun-Tak (*Dokkaebi*), Bong-Pal (*Let's Fight, Ghost*), Bong-Seon (*Oh My Ghost*) and Cheo Yong (*Ghost-Seeing Detective Cheo Yong*) all share these attributes. Seers are nevertheless clever and do

well in education, and their role is normally positive: ghosts commonly want the seer to resolve unfinished business to allow them to move on into the afterlife, and the seer may begin by fearing these ghosts and subsequently become willing to help them. Underlying the relationship is the conceptual metaphor DISLOCATION IS A LOST OBJECT, which is realized by Hyeon-Ji, a wandering spirit now back in her body, when she describes ghosts as “lost, [...] hurt and broken” (*Let’s Fight*, Ep. 16: 1:00:48 ff): “[Ghosts] want to go to the other world, but they’ve lost their way and are wandering here. [...] Not all ghosts are bad. They are hurt and broken, just like us”. Such empathy may prompt the seer to form strong (even romantic) bonds with some spirits, to the extent that “ghost romance” becomes an identifiable mode, if not a genre: in *Oh My Ghost*, for example, Sun-Ae is the first real friend Bong-Seon has ever had, and the friendship works to the advantage of each – because on many occasions they share Bong-Seon’s material body, Sun-Ae becomes able to move on into the afterlife, and Bong-Seon’s career and love life begin to flourish. The viewing audience is positioned to align and empathize with ghost and/or seer in their struggles with lost identity and the ghost’s quest for the justice which will free it from its liminal state, so the audience is thereby implicated in a crisis of subjectivity and prompted to reflect upon its own position in society. Because both ghost and ghost seer are lonely and emotionally isolated, they become a narrative focus for a perceived deficiency in empathetic capacity in Korean society. In such ways liminal characters are used by writers and directors to advocate for a society that is intersubjective and altruistic.

Such thematic significances constitute intertextual linkages amongst the supernatural dramas, although these linkages are more overt in the construction of the storyworld and character typologies, which are grounded in modern adaptations of the Korean folklore which has been familiar to audiences from childhood retellings. As in the West, newly invented motifs may have comic and/or thematic functions. For example, amongst the schemas for a female ghost that appear in supernatural dramas, the virgin ghost (*cheonyeo gwishin*) is a favourite of writers and, as mentioned previously, is often represented as dangerous: In *Oh My Ghost*, however, the schema becomes a source of humour when the ghost of Shin Sun-Ae assumes her virginity is the cause of her liminality and so sets out to lose it by possessing living women and attempting to seduce men. The humour lies in both the motif of ghostly possession and an original take on the behaviour of the *cheonyeo gwishin*. A second schema which illustrates the liminal state of the ghost is the *jibak ryeong*, a ghost compelled to haunt a sin-

gle site, usually the site of her death. In *Ghost-Seeing Detective Cheo Yong*, the main female protagonist is the ghost of a murdered school-girl who is confined within a police building but discovers she can get outside if she possesses the body of Ha Seon-U, a staid and serious female detective. She can thus help solve crimes, since she can still see and speak with other ghosts, but there is also much comic confusion amongst Seon-U’s colleagues when she suddenly starts behaving like a frisky schoolgirl and demanding to visit restaurants.

2. SPECTRAL AMNESIACS, SPECTRAL INCOGNIZANTS AND POLYVALENT SELVES

A major modern variation to these three ghost schemas, which also applies to male ghosts, is that in addition to their function as sources of humour their cognitive status may be that of either a spectral amnesiac or a spectral incognizant, who does not know that she has died and cannot understand why everybody seems to be ignoring her (see Lee 2015 for an extended discussion of the two types). Briefly, a fully amnesiac ghost is unable to recall her name, her life as a human, nor the circumstances of her death, while a partly amnesiac ghost, such as Sun-Ae in *Oh My Ghost*, cannot remember her death or any events leading to it. Amnesia is often a metaphor for the repressed traumas of Korean history (Lee 2015: 127-8), while amnesiac characters are so widespread in Korean serials that, like comas, with which they are often linked, they are a narrative cliché. Supernatural serials favour spectral amnesiacs, presumably because there is a mystery to be solved and ample room for audience speculation, but also because, along with possession, amnesia is a fruitful device through which to link a character to notions of polyvalent selves (dissociative identity disorder or multiple personality disorder) as circulate in popular psychology and in film and television. A further recent development of the spectral amnesiac schema has been the *jeoseung saja* figure. A *jeoseung saja* (‘afterlife messenger’) is a traditional Korean psychopomp, who guides the spirits of the recently departed down *Hwangcheon* Road to the afterlife. Although various embellishments of the *jeoseung saja* were introduced in *Arang and the Magistrate* (2012), the most imaginative adaptations emerged in 2017 in *Dokkaebi*, *Black*, and the film *Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds*. In *Dokkaebi*, as punishment for the heinous crimes he has committed, a person is transformed into a spectral amnesiac, wiped clean of all memories but suffers the emotions of guilt. In *Arang and the Magistrate*, a *jeoseung saja*

cannot die but can utterly cease to exist; in *Dokkaebi*, once a *jeoseung saja*'s wrong-doings have been expiated he (also she in *Dokkaebi*) is returned to the cycle of birth, death and reincarnation.

As mentioned above, modern variations to ghost lore suggest some isomorphism with popular conceptions of cognition disorders referred to as dissociative identity disorder (DID), multiple personality or (non-clinically) polyvalent selves (Walker 2011: 44). Wayland Walker's lay definition of the condition is a good fit for the representation of polyvalent selves in Korean serials: "The presence of two or more distinct identities or personalities or personality states (each with its own relatively enduring pattern of perceiving, relating to and thinking about the environment and self)" (2011: 44). Polyvalence occurs either because of ghostly possession or a perception that the self has been reincarnated and past selves can be recalled. All examples involve two separate entities, and consequently the representation of multiple identities is not a popular psychoanalytic issue as in the numerous well-known Hollywood examples.³ The narrative structures of the serials in various ways emphasize polyvalence. In its simplest form, while a ghost may have a living and a post-mortem personality, it needs to some extent to recuperate subjectivity and agency in order to move on. Polyvalence seems apparent in the case of Hyeon-Ji (*Let's Fight, Ghost*), a wandering spirit whose body is still alive, but these identities are sequential rather than simultaneous. When her spirit returns to her body in Episode 11, and she awakens from her coma, she has no memory of her time spent as a ghost, and has instead become a ghost seer. In the literature about dissociative identity disorder it is claimed that dissociation erases patients' memories of their own trauma histories, so Hyeon-Ji's gradual recovery of memory, both of the cause of her injury and her experience as a quasi-ghost seems to be modelled on DID therapy. However, these premises also seem to be mocked in that the therapist assigned to her is the serial killer responsible for her original injuries.

Other playful representations of popular understandings of polyvalent selves are found in *Oh My Ghost* and *Ghost-Seeing Detective Cheo Yong*. A general convention in relation to possession is that the host's subjectivity and personality are suppressed and buried deep in the unconscious, so the personality of the ghost takes over, in much the same way as

an *alter* is presumed to take over in DID. Invasion of a body by a ghost with a much more ebullient personality than her host can produce quite different outcomes. In the culinary drama, *Oh My Ghost*, Na Bong-Seon has inherited her ghost seeing ability from her shaman grandmother, and has lived her life afflicted with introversion, fearfulness and low self-esteem, but when possessed by extroverted Shin Sun-Ae she becomes confident and outgoing. Intersubjective relations grounded in theory of mind now come into play as her at first puzzled co-workers begin to like her, treat her differently, and expect that she will consistently be her *alter*. When in Episode 5 her boss takes her to see a psychiatrist, she is diagnosed with bipolar disorder – extroverted and sexually curious when manic and the opposite when depressed. The scene reminds viewers that, as Peter Verhagen (2010: 552) remarks, Western approaches to mental health are limited and potentially destructive when applied outside the original culture. The possibility of spirit possession would not be considered, since standard psychiatry regards this notion as a cognitive delusion (Breakey 2001: 62), but this Western diagnosis is indicated as culturally alien by the doctor's uncontrollable facial spasms, which are caused by the ghost of his grandmother clinging to him and blowing on his cheek, which, only Bong-Seon can see (see Figure 1). Bong-Seon herself, when pleading with Sun-Ae to stop trying to possess her, avers that she is afraid of being possessed because of her fear that others will see her as "another person", that is, as afflicted with DID.

Different versions of polyvalence are represented in each season of *Ghost-Seeing Detective Cheo Yong*. Neither of the women possessed by schoolgirl ghost Han Na-Yeong is a ghost seer. In Season One, detective Ha Seon-U is sceptical that spirits exist and suffers distress because she cannot grasp that the frequent gaps in her memory are the product of dissociation. The notion that polyvalent selves reflect cognitive impairment prompts her to conclude that she is going mad. In contrast, her replacement character in Season Two, Jeong Ha-Yun, is open-minded about spirit possession, amused at the idea of a detective being possessed by a ghost detective, and willing to cooperate with Na-Yeong to solve crime cases. These dramas – and others – thus play with popular psychology by placing it in dialogue with traditional and emerging folklore and using this dialogue to challenge such concepts as that there is only one self in each human body. When a human is possessed by a ghost, the displacement of consciousness and subjectivity is only permanent in cases of possession by an evil ghost, where the host's subjectivity remains acutely diminished even after the ghost is destroyed. Ju

3 *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957), *Sybil* (1976), *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1977), *Voices Within: The Lives of Truddi Chase* (1990), *Frankie & Alice* (2010), *Waking Madison* (2010), *United States of Tara* (2009-2011).



FIGURE 1. *OH MY GHOST* (EPISODE 5, 32:25-33:08). TOP: THE PSYCHIATRIST'S STRANGE CONTORTIONS;
BOTTOM: BONG-SEON AND HER UNIQUE GHOST-SEER PERCEPTION OF THE SCENE.

Hye-Seong (*Let's Fight, Ghost*) is condemned to live out his life in prison, traumatized by the memory of all the people he murdered, whereas Choe Seong-Jae (*Oh My Ghost*) is depicted as suffering from retrograde amnesia and depressed by his inability to remember anything. In both cases, viewers may assume that possession by an evil spirit can be understood as a form of psychological trauma consequent upon the identity

displacement experienced. The host conforms to a common schema for a sociopath: he feels neither empathy nor emotion nor love, and his behaviour is not constrained by feelings such as fear, anxiety, remorse, or guilt.

The motif of reincarnation in *Dokkaebi* imparts an emphasis on polyvalent selves comparable to the motif of possession in the other serials. The two principal time streams,

over 900 years apart, enable a popular conception of reincarnation to thematize memory and multiplicity. Polyvalent selves emerge as characters reappear in different social and historical contexts. An analogy can thus be drawn between the appearance of these multiple states and the fragmentation of what it has meant to be Korean during Korea's tumultuous history.

3. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The distribution of major characters between ghosts, ghost seers and ordinary people promotes a common bipartite structure, in that the serials commonly consist of two story strands imbricated by theme and by the involvement of at least two of the principal characters in each other's strand. Each strand may primarily be the quest of one of these characters, but may be elaborated by sub-plots involving supporting characters. The strands eventually merge. This relatively simple structure is employed in *Oh My Ghost*, *Let's Fight*, *Ghost* and *Ghost-Seeing Detective Cheo Yong*: the ghost's quest is to discover why she has become marooned in a liminal state, and consequently gain release, while the seer's quest is to attain a state of human well-being, involving, for example, the overcoming of threats and the development of a sociable life based on intersubjective relationships, love, and a successful career. A unifying device may prove to be that the principal antagonist is revealed to be common to both strands (for example, Choe Seong-Jae in *Oh My Ghost*; Ju Hye-Seong in *Let's Fight*, *Ghost*).

Ghost-Seeing Detective Cheo Yong exemplifies the simplest structure amongst the corpus sample. The two ten-episode seasons are structured in the same way: there is a framing story arc which is established during the first two episodes and resolved in the final two episodes. Episodes 3 and 8 contain discrete stories, with some narrative or thematic links to the overarching story arc and closing segments that connect vertically to that arc or horizontally as anticipations of the next episode. The structure of *Who Are You?* is very similar: protagonist Shi-On's ghost-seeing ability is a continuing storyline, while most of the cases she solves are discrete storylines within the larger arc. In both serials these discrete episodes would still make sense if watched out of order. The three principal characters of *Ghost-Seeing Detective Cheo Yong* are the ghost seer, detective Yun Cheo-Yong, his professional partner, female detective Ha Seon-U, and teenage ghost Han Na-Yeong, the amnesiac ghost of a murdered

female high school student. Na-Yeong is both a virgin ghost and a *jibak ryeong*, unable to leave the police precinct, and is delighted when Cheo-Yong is assigned to the station and she realizes that after years of isolation someone can see and hear her. She insists on helping him solve crimes. The framing story involves an evil ghost (Yang Su-Hyeok) who was a sociopathic killer when alive and who has merged with a vengeful ghost to kill the members of a religious cult responsible for the death of the second ghost and his pregnant wife. Imbricated with this story is the mystery of Na-Yeong's death.

Supernatural serials are not just heavy in social criticism but also tend to be very intertextual, and this one is especially so because, apart from the final two episodes which wrap up the plot, each episode is developed as an example or blend of recognized genres, scripts and social themes, with the ghost-story element incorporated into the blend. Episodes 1 and 2 blend ghost, detective and hospital dramas; Episode 3 blends ghost hunters with a stalker story; Episode 4 is a school story, much indebted to *Whispering Corridors* and thematically linked with Na-Yeong's back story; Episode 5 blends a vengeful ghost story with a social realist narrative about exploited migrant workers; Episode 6 is a family story about the destructive potential of mother-son dyads; Episode 7 is the story of a sociopathic woman who is killing off her relatives by staging accidents or suicides, but is found out when the ghost of her stepdaughter, who haunts a small figurine, reveals all to Na-Yeong (the idea that material objects and personal possessions can be haunted or contain traces of human memories is widespread and forms the basis of *Who Are You?*); finally, Episode 8 is a familiar critique of the social immorality caused by collusion between the wealthy and an easily corruptible justice system. The story pivots on the gang rape and murder of a young woman, which happens frequently in Korea, in this case the perpetrators are three socially privileged men. The corrupt justice system enables them to escape without charge, while the dead girl is smeared as promiscuous. A core theme is dismissive attitudes to rape by Korean men and within the legal system. The depiction of social sickness and corruption in a dark world, and settings in sleazy clubs and dimly lit industrial basements impart a gothic or *film noir* texture to the episode and underpin its social critique.

Ghost-Seeing Detective Cheo Yong exemplifies the kind of serial in which, according to Mittell (2015: 19), plotlines are centred on series-long arcs while still offering episodic coherence and resolutions, although the second season sometimes seems to lose sight of the series-long arc. Despite its genre

blending, the predominant genre is the *whodunit*?, which not only imparts a strong impetus to the narrative but also well suits discrete episode organization and, it must be said, the practice of continuous shooting as the series is being aired. In contrast, the structure of *Dokkaebi* is more complex. First, it has few discrete micro-narratives, and so does not work on the principle of episodic coherence within a series-long arc. A relatively self-contained sequence, such as the kidnapping and rescue of Eun-Tak, may span episodes – in this example, nine minutes at the end of Episode 2 and nine minutes at the beginning of Episode 3. Second, it belongs to a genre in which modern-day events are a distant consequence of events that occurred in the past (here, 900 years previously), so instead of narrating the ghost's life before death as narrative flashbacks, as in *Oh My Ghost*, there are parallel narratives and thus an additional layer of story which involves transformation or reincarnation and thereby interrogates relationships among memory, history and experience, and asks whether the significance of experience is permanent or subject to change. The two stories of *Dokkaebi* concern four principal characters: First, Kim Shin, a human transformed into an immortal *dokkaebi* (which roughly translates as 'goblin') after his death. A capricious deity has cursed him with immortality, loneliness and the pain of witnessing and remembering the deaths of everyone he forms bonds with. He is 939 years old in Episode 1, and remembers everything he has experienced over that vast time span. Impaled by an invisible sword, he can find oblivion only if he meets "the *dokkaebi* bride", who can see and pull out the sword. Second, Wang Yeo, Kim Shin's king in the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392), was transformed into a *jeoseung saja* as punishment for his crimes – the slaughter of Kim Shin and of his sister and Wang's wife, Kim Seon, and his own subsequent suicide.⁴ Like all *jeoseung saja* he is amnesiac, with no memory of his past identity or his crimes. After having a strong affective response to a portrait of Kim Seon (which he had himself painted after her death), he confesses, "I don't have memories, only feelings. I was just incredibly sad. My heart hurt" (Episode 8: 21:28). Although he has been a psychopomp for 300 years, he has no understanding of human

culture or custom. The third, Eun-Tak, a 19-year-old school-girl, is the goblin bride. In a random act of kindness, Kim Shin had enabled her critically injured mother to cheat death and give birth to Eun-Tak, who is thus not simply human – because she should not exist at all – and sees and communicates with ghosts. Finally, Kim Seon, known as "Sunny", is a reincarnation of Kim Shin's sister. People find her very beautiful, but she is solitary and eccentric. She meets and falls in love with Saja, but their different existential statuses and their previous life history preclude a relationship.

4. HISTORICAL SERIAL, MEMORY AND TRAUMA

The broad genre of historical serial (known as *sageuk* in Korean) always has the potential to relate particular narratives to larger issues of Korea's violent history, especially when the past is overtly juxtaposed with the present. The idea of memory is thus imbricated with trauma, and both memory and trauma are recorded in the body of Kim Shin in the sword which has impaled him for 900 years. Throughout the serial there is an interplay between history from above, constituted by some form of historical record, and history from below embodied (in this drama) in objects and the body. When Eun-Tak attempts to research the history of Kim Shin, she can only learn that he was a great military leader, but she can find nothing about his death, which seems hidden from official history. An excellent exploration of the interactions of history, memory and multiple identity occurs in Episode 3 (55:07 ff.), when Saja and Sunny first meet. This sequence, and what immediately follows, also involves the audience in processes of remembering, in that it not only must recall details from the episodes so far, but must store up details which are not yet explained. Saja's attention is attracted by a street hawker selling jewellery, whom he fails to recognize as one of the two avatars of the *Samshin Halmeoni*, a triple goddess of birth and fate, who in her grandmother form previously prevented him from taking nine-year-old Eun-Tak into the afterlife. That form also emerges in this scene as an image caught in a mirror on her stand, seen only by the viewers (see Figure 2). *Samshin Halmeoni* obliquely draws his attention to an ancient ring on her stall, which again the audience should recognize as a ring worn by the queen, Kim Shin's sister, at the time of her death and heavily foregrounded in Episode 1 (02:27; 14:32). But as he is about to pick it up the ring is snatched by another hand, Sunny's. He turns to look at her

4 The character does not learn he is Wang Yeo until Episode 12, and is referred to and addressed throughout as *Jeoseung Saja*. English subtitles call him "(Grim) Reaper", although this is somewhat misleading. He is not a personification of death (perhaps more like a metonym) and only coincides with the European Grim Reaper insofar as the Grim Reaper in European mythology is often also imagined as a psychopomp. Kim Shin refers to him familiarly as *Saja* ('messenger', but also a homonym for 'lion'), and I have adopted that name herein to distinguish him from the other *jeoseung saja* who appear in the serial.



FIGURE 2. *DOKKAEBI* (EPISODE 3: 55:07 FF.): SUNNY AND SAJA DISPUTE ABOUT THE RING, OBSERVED BY SAMSHIN HALMEONI (TOP, CENTRE; BOTTOM, IN THE MIRROR).

and tears begin to fall from his eyes. It will be several episodes before it is revealed to the audience that his response to both the ring and to Sunny is prompted by a memory deeper than conscious cognition, which lies in the multiple identities of the two characters – Sunny as reincarnation of the queen, and Saja as reincarnation of her husband, the king who ordered her death.

5. *DOKKAEBI* AND OPERATIONAL AESTHETIC

Dokkaebi is an outstanding example of a supernatural serial, and develops a subtle complexity through the different existential statuses of its four main characters, its mythological inventiveness and intertextuality, its long narrative arcs, and its frequent metacinematic effects. Mittell (2015: 41) has observed that creators have responded to shifts in production and consumption of television “by creating a more

self-conscious mode of storytelling than is typically found within conventional television narration”. This “operational aesthetic” (Mittell 46) invites viewers to engage with narrative as analysts of form, whether narrative, visual or auditory. The expectation that the audience of *Dokkaebi* must negotiate its complexity in many aspects is established early on, but an excellent example is the segment mentioned above which spans the end of Episode 2 and the beginning of Episode 3. One of the funniest sequences, it is part of a sub-plot concerning Eun-Tak’s relatives which unfolds in small vignettes over Episodes 1-11. When Eun-Tak was aged nine her single mother suddenly died, and for 10 years Eun-Tak has been a Cinderella figure in the home of her abusive aunt and two feckless cousins. On her nineteenth birthday (the age of majority in South Korea) the aunt pressures her to hand over the \$150,000 from her mother’s life insurance policy. However, the bankbook has disappeared (it is later revealed that it always disappears because a ghost, a friend of Eun-Tak’s mother, has been protecting the money on Eun-Tak’s behalf), and Eun-Tak decides to run away. Two loan sharks come to threaten the aunt because she owes them money, and then kidnap Eun-Tak from school to force her to hand over the bankbook. On a deserted country road at night, their car is stopped by Kim Shin and Saja. When the gangsters try to drive forward, Kim Shin uses his magical sword to slice the car in two lengthways. Eun-Tak is thus rescued and the gangsters are left to spend two days trapped under one half of the car. While the sequence is almost discrete narratively, it performs several functions. It sketches the difficult life Eun-Tak has been leading for ten years and establishes her resilience; and it is an important step in advancing the bromance between the two men. Formally, however, its comedy largely stems from its operational aesthetic, especially its multimodal metaphorical elements. First, the car stops and the streetlights go out in sequence, accompanied by a musical soundtrack with an evenly spaced crescendo as each light is extinguished. This is a simple metaphor, narratively expressing that *something* is approaching, but also picking up the conceptual metaphor LIGHT IS GOOD, DARK IS BAD. The event is made salient by a point of view, shot-reverse shot, as the scene shows the characters in the car expressing surprise, followed by an elevated shot from behind the car of what they can see. Second, as Kim Shin and Saja approach the car in almost slow motion, wearing long black coats, there is an audio metaphor as the music on the soundtrack (“Sword of the Warrior”) repeats the same musical phrase but on a rising chromatic scale, now imparting an intensely dramatic sense of impending doom as the dark

figures approach the car. “Sword of the Warrior” is a leitmotif which earlier appeared, for example, in the climax to a battle in Episode 1, when Shin cut down the leader of an enemy army. The element of self-conscious overstatement in both visual and auditory effects draws attention to production processes and hence is a metacinematic comment on the creation of mood and affect. The fantastic bisection of the car imparts a new direction to this commentary as it introduces a sudden shift from melodrama to slapstick comedy reminiscent of TV cartoons as Eun-Tak and gangsters part company in different halves of the car, and the soundtrack absurdly shifts to Sarah Brightman’s well-known rendition of the romantic song, “Time to Say Goodbye” (“Con te partirò”). When Eun-Tak’s half of the car comes to a halt, casually held upright by Saja, the sequence introduces a game with theory of mind. Despite the centuries they have lived, and their apparent ability to hear people’s thoughts, neither Shin nor Saja is competent in theory of mind, and this lack is a rich source of comedy throughout the serial. First, as Shin takes Eun-Tak’s hand to help her from the wrecked car, he asks, “Are you hurt?”, and she is flabbergasted that it does not occur to him she has been so traumatized by the destruction of the car she is almost inarticulate. Second, a key irony is that one of Eun-Tak’s rescuers is Saja, who usually calls her “Missing Soul” and has already tried repeatedly to escort her into the afterlife; the sequence ends with Eun-Tak asking with much hesitation if she has died and whether the road they are walking along is the road to the afterlife. Meanwhile, the two men are holding a silent conversation by telepathy, at cross purposes, so when Shin suddenly shouts, “Be quiet!” Eun-Tak can only assume he is addressing her. Great power requires human insight.

The metacinematic element of the operational aesthetic is often cued by an interplay of fantasy and humour, by references to other works or by self-reflexive comments on genre. As Shin and Saja first approach the car in the sequence discussed above, one of the gangsters breaks the narrative frame by asking, “Who are these sons-of-bitches? Are they from *Men in Black*?” (see Figure 3). The question is a simple response to their visual appearance (made funnier in retrospect by the huge demand for brandname long black coats in Korean shops after the episode was screened), but audience members may enjoy the reversal of the premise of the *Men in Black* films, in which humans police non-human aliens. Further, throughout the serial the gatherings of the *jeoseung saja* constitute a running reference to the *Men in Black* films: they are dressed in black, bureaucratized and stripped of memory (“neuralized”).

A recurrent discourse about genre is attached to Saja’s addiction to daytime serials and his propensity to interpret human life on their basis – for example, when in Episode 4 (04:14 ff.) Eun-Tak delivers a bad parody of the Cinderella script as her own life story, he whispers, “I know this story. I saw the drama!”, and when in Episode 11 (08:07) Shin warns him to stay away from his sister, Saja reflects, “I know this drama. I’ve seen it a lot in the mornings”. The serial’s mythological innovations are foregrounded by Eun-Tak’s recurring connection of *dokkaebi* and brooms: in the folklore, objects often handled by people, such as brooms, may turn into *dokkaebi*. As the “*dokkaebi* bride” her destiny is to pull out the invisible sword that has impaled Shin for 900 years and thus turn him to dust. Not knowing that will be the outcome, she jokes that he will turn into a broom, so she won’t pull out the sword until she needs one. There are also simple frame-breaking jokes, as when Shin and Eun-Tak go to the cinema and watch *Train to Busan*, starring Gong Yu, the actor who plays Shin. Such allusions are a kind of fanservice, complimenting the audience for its cultural knowledge.

A variant appears in *Who Are You?* (Episode 4: 39:07), when detective Choe Mun-Sik remarks that he has been told he looks like a king in a TV drama (the actor, Kim Chang-Wan, played King Injo in *Iljima*). More complex is a moment in Episode 5 (05:30) of *Dokkaebi* when Eun-Tak muses on that evening’s events and wonders what genre they were in, “heart-pounding rom-com, strange and beautiful fantasy, or sad melodrama?”. Other serials contain compa-



FIGURE 3. *DOKKAEBI* (EPISODE 3: 14:50): MEN IN LONG BLACK COATS (KIM SHIN, LEFT; SAJA, RIGHT).



FIGURE 4. *GHOST-SEEING DETECTIVE CHEO YONG* (EPISODE 3: 02:07): FRAME-BREAKING AND EXTREME CANTING.

rable frame-breaking, self-reflexive segments. Episode 3 of *Ghost-Seeing Detective Cheo Yong*, for example, opens with a ghost-hunter script as two young men enter a murder-scene at night to film it for their ghost-hunting website, and the parody of the Syfy Channel's "supernatural reality" program *Ghost Hunters* is emphasized by their repeated requests to the audience to "like" their program, by extreme canting (about 55 degrees) of the camera (see Figure 4), and by their panic when they do encounter a ghost.

6. CONCLUSION

The supernatural serial, and in particular the sub-set involving ghosts and ghost seers, developed as a versatile and inventive genre in the second decade of the 21st century. Blending genres and leavening their narratives with humour, the serials are representations of and metaphors for social alienation grounded in various forms of loss of identity. This theme is one of the most common in Korean television drama, so the inventiveness and innovative handling of traditional folk-

lore enable original approaches to be developed from some shared scripts. A desire to establish justice and order in a society where many people are displaced or liminal is expressed in the simple metaphor of the lost property department in the police building in *Who Are You?* Yang Shi-On and her assistants catalogue the lost objects, shelve them in a large store-room, and post photographs and descriptions online. This construction of an unassuming order is then taken further when Shi-On perceives some supernatural aura pertaining to an object, followed by an encounter with a ghost and thence to an establishment of order through solving a crime. Underpinning these representations is the conceptual metaphor DISLOCATION IS A LOST OBJECT, which offers an elegant example of how depth of significance in these serials can lie in everyday concepts. The visual representation of these objects and their associated events (catalogued, stored, returned to owner, stolen, or subject of an investigation) imparts a material presence to the target domain, that is, *dislocation* or *displacement*. Both ghost and ghost seer conform to recognizable schemas of dislocation, either because of the circumstances surrounding the death of the one, or the isolating life

experiences of the other. The desired and, in these serials, generally achieved outcomes are for the ghosts to move on to their place in the afterlife and the seers to attain a state of well-being in their society.

Shared scripts and schemas that have evolved in the 21st century constitute intertextual linkages amongst the supernatural dramas, especially in the modifications of and additions to Korean folklore about supernatural beings with which audiences can be assumed to have some familiarity. Recent serials have been highly inventive in this area and innovations can be effective in thematic foregrounding against the common script or in creating humorous effects, even when, or perhaps especially when, audience members take umbrage at an apparent disregard for tradition. At the same time, innovation can also affirm traditional belief and cultural practice, as in the many examples in which the relationship of spectral amnesia and polyvalent selves serves to challenge the premises of Western psychiatry that exclude the supernatural and spiritual from concepts of mental health. Embellishments of the *jeoseung saja* figure in the second decade of the 21st century may also presage an emerging stream within supernatural narratives that develops the “*sonyeo* sensibility” identified by Jinhee Choi in tandem with new masculinities and spiritualities. The great audience popularity of the *jeoseung saja* in *Dokkaebi* and the film, *Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds*, may produce such a shift in representation. Finally, the various supernatural serials have proved flexible in their handling of common structures – series-long arcs incorporating episodic coherence and resolutions, intermingled parallel plots involving characters with differing existential statuses, and long narrative arcs which blend diverse genres.

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