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Master's Thesis of International Studies

Capturing Queerness in Korean Film

– Depictions of LGBTQ+ identities in South
Korean Commercial and Independent film in
the 2000s and 2010s–

한국 영화 속 퀴어 요소 포착하기:
2000년대 및 2010년대 대한민국의 상업영화와
독립영화에 나타난 성소수자 정체성 묘사방식

August 2023

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Submitting a master's thesis of
International Studies

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Abstract

Since the early 2000s queer characters and storylines have made their way into South Korean commercial film. This has been accompanied by an increase in positive, though distant, attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community in South Korea. The increased presence of queerness in Korean films begs the question of how commercial films approach queer content in a society that shows a hesitance to fully accept queerness into everyday Korean life. The limited studies on Korean Queer Cinema have analyzed the genre's growth and move to commercial film but have failed to look at what influence the latter has had on approaches to queer topics. Through analysis of the films *The King and the Clown* (*Wang ūi namja*, 2005) and *No Regret* (*Huhohaji ana*, 2006) from the 2000s and *The Handmaiden* (*Agassi*, 2016) and *Jane* (*Kkumŭi chein*, 2017) from the 2010s, I find that commercial films in both decades place queerness outside of Korean society using distancing techniques. These include commodifying queer identities, mapping homosexual identities and relationships onto heterosexual ones, and masking their queer characters and storylines with multiple plot points. The independent films in these periods approached queerness more openly, placing their queer elements directly into Korean culture and society without masking the presence of queerness. Through the comparison of commercial and independent films, it is revealed that films catering to general audiences are aware of the distance Korean viewers keep between themselves and queerness and utilize this distance in their films, reinforcing this phenomenon.

Keyword: Queer Cinema, LGBTQ+, Korean media, gender-blending, flower boy

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Chapter 1. Introduction

“Discussing Korean gay and lesbian films is like drifting in space without sunlight or oxygen.” This powerful opening statement in Jooran Lee’s 2000 article “Remembered Branches: Towards a Future of Korean Homosexual Film” sums up the lack of discourse surrounding South Korean queer film prior to the 2000s (Lee 2000, 273). In a time when the subject of homosexuality was taboo, it is not surprising that the discussion around representation of the LGBTQ+ ^① community in South Korea (hereafter, Korea) was sparse. Within the last 20 years the taboo around discussing homosexuality has weakened and the discourse around Korean queer film and other media has grown, yet there continues to be limited discourse related to Korean queer film’s place within popular film. The last two decades have seen a rise in the tolerance of homosexuality by the Korean public and an increasing number of films and television dramas depicting queer themes such as homosexual relationships and queer lives. To understand how Korean films with queer themes adapt to a larger mainstream audience, we must first understand how Korean society views the LGBTQ+ community and additionally how Queer Cinema in Korea is treated differently than other genres.

1.1. Importance of Addressing Queerness in Korean Film

For many Koreans queerness is disconnected from their own lives as they themselves are not queer nor is anyone around them. The hesitance of many queer individuals to come out has contributed to this disconnect as they do not reveal their sexuality for their own safety. Social pressures have made it difficult to discuss queerness, causing media to be the main pathway of introducing queer concepts to Koreans. Korean films that are not afraid to push social boundaries and foreign films have introduced

^① The terms Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and others, LGBTQ+, and queer will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

minority subjects to an audience which may not otherwise think about these subjects. Unfortunately, these films commonly place queerness outside of Korean society, perpetuating the misunderstanding that one cannot be Korean and queer.

Korean approaches to queer themes^② remain distant, especially for films looking to reach a larger audience. If this distance is not addressed, films will not be able to take advantage of their power as the front line of queer introductions to much of the population. Compared to television, film is a somewhat less public medium which viewers seek out themselves, allowing for it to have more freedom in its content (Kwon 2019, 98). This freedom should be used to its full potential by including minority groups which many Korean viewers have not themselves encountered. Being conscious of where queerness is placed in relation to Korean society, and thus Korean audience members, will make queer representation more effective at creating a positive view of the Korean LGBTQ+ community. While it will not solve the issue of the marginalization of Korean LGBTQ+ individuals, it will aid in diminishing these prejudices. Additional research on queerness in Korea and the narrower relation between queer visibility and Korean film, needs greater attention to highlight the avenues in which the LGBTQ+ community is introduced to Korean society at large.

1.2. Defining Queer Identities

For the sake of this argument, gayness will be defined as an individual who identifies as a male being attracted to another individual who identifies as a male while lesbianism will be defined as an individual who identifies as a female being attracted to another individual who identifies as a female. Both are dependent on individual identity rather than gender presentation or perception. Bisexuality includes those who are attracted to multiple genders and can include males and females. By using these definitions, I aim to include both those who are cis-gender and those who are

^② Queer themes refers to homosexual relationships, depictions of queer lives, and other content and elements which highlights queer culture.

transgender into the gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities. As queerness is difficult to define and its understanding varies by country, queer will be defined in this paper as falling outside of the heterosexual norms and gender binary which permeates Korean society.

This paper will focus dominantly on homosexual relationships and gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals with the fourth section delving into the queering of family relations and transgender identity. Though it would be ideal to include other issues in the LGBTQ+ community, the array of individual issues faced by each group in Korean society is far too great to be summed up in a single thesis. This is not to say that these groups are not present and discriminated against in Korean society but rather that they deserve to be looked at in greater detail than the scope of my argument allows. Literature can be found pertaining to the mental health of Korean LGBTQ+ youth (See Kim and Yang 2014) and the relation between the increased attention to the LGBTQ+ community and religious backlash (See Bong 2008, Youn 2018, Rich, Dahmer, & Eliassen 2021, Rich, Eliassen, & Einhorn 2021).

In this paper I will be making a distinction between sexuality and gender identity as two separate concepts which interact with each other. Sexuality refers to who an individual is attracted to emotionally, physically, or sexually, while gender identity refers to how one perceives and identifies oneself within the socially constructed concept of gender (Human Rights Campaign). Although many may believe that sexuality is decided by one's gender, as we are taught by heteronormative society, this is not the case and the two must be separated to be properly understood. Throughout this paper I will be dominantly focusing on the representation of sexuality in Korean mainstream film. As heteronormativity is based off the heterosexual relationships between a man and woman, I will be diving into how homosexual relationships are mapped onto heterosexual ones in a way that creates a sense of gender bending,

the mixing of gender representation^③, regardless of the actual gender identity of the individual.

1.3. Understandings of Queerness in Korea

Queerness has been a taboo topic in Korean society and many young queer individuals do not publicly come out for fear of social repercussions. The study of the LGBTQ+ community has been limited in its scope as the community itself has only recently formed in the last 50 years. The lack of visibility of the LGBTQ+ community has led to the misconception that there are a limited number of queer individuals in Korea. Studies on these communities have been lacking along with attention to the importance of LGBTQ+ rights in Korea. There has been a misunderstanding that because of the perceived limited number of queer Koreans, the infringement of their rights does not have an influential impact on the rest of Korean society. This is not true as the heteronormative approach to government has led to queer individuals being denied rights to social benefits and family building. These individuals are also put into danger due to the lack of anti-discrimination laws in Korea that would protect not only LGBTQ+ individuals in society but also in their civic duties.

Studies that investigate the Korean LGBTQ+ community have focused on the politicization of the LGBTQ+ movement in the 1990s and early 2000s as the formation of official LGBTQ+ groups was shortly before these groups began to fight for their rights (See Kwon Kim & Cho 2010 and Han 2016). English discourse on the Korean queer community has been focused more on the development of queer rights rather than the limited public spaces these individuals are seen in. There has been discourse on queer communities in the 2000s which highlight the disconnect between the steadily rising positive attitudes and presence of queer individuals and the continued denial of queer rights by the Korean government, largely contributing it to religious backlash (Rich et. al. 2021a, 629). In the last decade, this discussion has not evolved

^③ The definition of “gender blending” is expanded on in chapter 3.

much in the English literature and attempts to quell this backlash have been limited.

1.4. Changes in Public Perceptions

Multiple studies have found that there has been a gradual increase in positive views of homosexuality by the Korean public but a closer look into these studies reveals that this increase is disproportionate based on gender, age, and religious affiliation. A 1982 World Values survey indicates that 75.6% of Koreans believe homosexuality is “never justifiable” while only 3.4% stated it was (Youn 2018, 100). The percentage of those who believed homosexuality was “never justifiable” has declined from the 1980s with the number being 53% in the 1999–2004 survey and 23.9% during the 2017–2020 survey. This 52% decrease in the number of Koreans who believe homosexuality is “never justifiable” over the past 40 years may seem promising, but the 2017 to 2020 wave of the world survey also shows that only 0.3% stated it was always justifiable. Additionally, the 2017–2020 survey shows almost 80% of South Koreans indicated that they do not want a homosexual as a neighbor (Rich et. al. 2021a, 627). Looking at these statistics we can see a decrease in those who are against homosexuality does not translate into an increased number of those accepting homosexuality.

Although Koreans are reporting more positive attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community, they show a resistance to allowing same-sex love into their everyday lives. Rather than a growth in acceptance this demonstrates a rise in tolerance. The act of tolerance is choosing not to condemn LGBTQ+ individuals although one does not agree with their lifestyle and implies a kind of passive resignation (Rich et. al. 2021a, 629). In this context acceptance goes a step beyond tolerance by accepting the LGBTQ+ individual as equal and embracing their place in Korean society. The contrast between the shrinking number of those against homosexuality and continued low report of those stating homosexuality is always acceptable points to an absence of acceptance.

Those shown to be most tolerant of homosexuality in both

Korea and other parts of the world are younger women. Studies find that compared to men, women tend to have higher support of the LGBTQ+ community while education positively corresponds, and age negatively corresponds. Rich, Dahmer, and Eliassen investigate whether these trends stand true in South Korea. They find that women, younger cohorts, and those that attended college are more likely to support legislation to support LGBTQ+ rights and equality. Surprisingly, those in rural areas were marginally more supportive of legislature than their urban counterparts (Rich et. al. 2021b, 372). When it came to Protestants, age was the only significant variable, suggesting uniform opposition to legislation. Through their investigation of the trends in perceptions of LGBTQ+ in Korea, Rich, Dahmer, and Eliassen find that “South Korean Protestants are less supportive of same–sex marriage compared to Catholics, Buddhists, and those without a religious identification” (Rich et. al. 2021b, 374). This finding coincides with the multiple incidents of Christian groups pressuring the Korean government against implementing laws against discrimination.

Studies such as these pinpoint what kind of exposure can be influential in the formation of positive views on same–sex love in Korea. From these studies we can see that there is hope that with the transition of the younger generation into power the LGBTQ+ community will be granted greater protection in Korean society, but this move towards greater acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in Korea will need to be aided by increased exposure to same–sex love and normalizing it as a part of Korean society.

1.5. Understanding Queer Cinema

Queer cinema is a genre of film which challenges the Hollywood system’s stereotypical depictions of queer individuals through realistic representations of LGBTQ+ life. While early queer cinema was divided into Queer Cinema and Gay Cinema, the term “New Queer Cinema” has redefined Queer Cinema to reflect the resurgence of queer films in the 1990s which provided visibility to the presence of the queer community (Rich 1992, 18). For this paper Queer Cinema will go by a single definition which leans more

towards that of New Queer Cinema. Coined in 1992 by B. Ruby Rich, New Queer Cinema refers to queer films which outwardly challenge heteronormative aspects of everyday life and are not limited to male–male romance as is the case of Gay Cinema. New Queer Cinema falls under the broader category of Queer Cinema and is marked by its experimentation with different film styles and themes. As the definition of Queer Cinema is not clearly defined, films can be dubbed as Queer Cinema by either their creators or their viewers. It is not required that filmmakers themselves be a part of the LGBTQ+ community though many are.

The focus of Queer Cinema studies has been Eurocentric in its nature, much like queer studies, leaving a gap in the studies of queer films in Asia, especially Korea. As homosexuality as a topic has been more readily broached in the West, Western Queer Cinema studies have been able to flourish due to the development of queer communities. The larger framework and terminology of Queer Cinema studies can be applied to the Asian context but the cultural nuances, which interact with queerness, will need to be re-evaluated. There has been a lack of queer films in East Asia and especially Korea who has produced only 176 queer films between 1960 and 2022, most in the last 20 years (Lee 2022). The first officially recognized queer Korean film, *Jealousy* was released in 1960 and was followed by a sparse number of queer films being released until the 1990s. These mismatching focuses have led to limited studies on Korean Queer Cinema in English except for some studies in Korean, let alone how these themes have differed between films made on the independent circuit and those made for mainstream release.

Discourse on queer themes in Korean cinema have been focused on independent films which had little mainstream success and a few commercial films which have queer themes. Films that have been successful with a wider audience such as *The King and the Clown*, which will be analyzed later in this paper, have had their queer elements thoroughly analyzed by scholars who cite the film as a leader in queer films (See Kim & Singer 2011, Kwon 2019, and

Shin 2013). This analysis has been focused on how queerness is presented but has lacked a connection to how this representation is situated in the Korean context and how it causes audiences to view queerness.

In their paper “Three Periods of Korean Queer Cinema: Invisible, Camouflage, and Blockbuster,” Pil Ho Kim and C. Colin Singer divide queer cinema into three distinct periods, Invisible, Camouflage, and Blockbuster, to demonstrate how Korean Queer Cinema has evolved. They argue Korean queer cinema saw a social turn in the early 2000s when it transitioned from its camouflaged form of queer representation to a blockbuster style which capitalized on queerness, a claim that has been largely accepted and adopted into Korean queer cinema studies (Kim and Singer 2011, 117). This approach does well in acknowledging the popularization of films with queer themes but neglects to recognize that masking techniques were and are still very much in use. There has also been a misunderstanding that the increased presence of queer characters or themes will lead to more positive views of the LGBTQ+ community. Upon closer inspection of these blockbuster films, it is revealed that the approaches to representing queerness in film are changing to fit viewers rather than the viewers themselves changing their approach.

There has also been a focus on how queerness and entertainment have interacted. Analysis of queerness in Korean media has focused on the commodification of gay men in South Korea by young Korean fans (See Kwon 2019 and 2016). Largely led by scholar Jungmin Kwon, this analysis has contributed to the understanding of how LGBTQ+ identities can be fetishized and monetized. Kwon finds that early forms of fan interaction such as the writing of fanfiction have contributed to an increased positive approach of homosexual individuals among Korean women (Kwon 2019, 32). The popularity of Boy Love stories, stories which feature male–male relationships, among these women has led to the commodification of these storylines by larger media producers. Kwon’s analysis is dominantly focused on how these women relate

to male–male relationships and its use as a feminist tool, acknowledging the issues that come from this adoption of queerness. Unfortunately, this approach ignores how films with queer themes which have been claimed by the queer community compared to the, usually commercialized, films which use this fascination of gayness to their advantage.

1.6. Research Methodology

In this paper I will be analyzing two films from the 2000s and two films from the 2010s, one commercial film and one independent film for each period. For the 2000s I will be analyzing *The King and the Clown* (*Wang ūi namja*, 2005) and *No Regret* (*Huhohaji ana*, 2006), films which both gained success and recognition as influential queer films. For the 2010s I will be analyzing *The Handmaiden* (*Agassi*, 2016) and *Jane* (*Ggumui Jein*, 2017) films which demonstrate a changing interest in queer themes and were popularized in the commercial and independent circuit. *The King and the Clown* and *The Handmaiden* were chosen as the commercial films of focus because they include a queer theme and made at least 10 million USD in box office sales. The independent films, *No Regret* and *Jane*, were chosen because of their success in the independent film circuit and their similarities to the commercial films. Although I am not looking at the genre of queer films in particular, films were not excluded if they were intentionally labeled Queer Cinema upon their release.

Analysis will consist of narrative approaches, mise–en–scène^④, character development, and techniques used to place the story in relation to the real world. By examining these film elements, the intentions of the filmmakers and perceived reactions from audience members can be revealed. This analysis will be focused on what the elements of the film tell us about Korean society’s relationship with queerness by looking at how queerness is placed within Korean society. Films can create a sense of distance between the viewer

^④ Mise–en–scène is comprised of on–screen elements such as setting, costumes, make–up, actors, lighting, movement, and staging (Gocsik et. al 2019, 238).

and the topic of focus by placing the story outside of the realm of everyday life, making challenging subjects more palatable. The queer elements of each film will be identified and film techniques around these elements will be individually analyzed to find if they are used to remove the queerness from modern Korean life.

After individually analyzing each film, I will take a comparative approach to identify how queer elements are presented in commercial and independent films released around the same time. In doing this the nature of the queer themes will be revealed along with any possible differences in how queer themes are presented in commercial and independent film. By comparing films released around the same time with films released a decade later, I will be able to see if variations in approaches have sustained. This study aims to look at not only the differences of queer content in commercial and independent film, but also if the rise in positive views towards LGBTQ+ individuals is reflected in recent commercial and independent films.

I hypothesize that the common Korean view of LGBTQ+ elements being acceptable as equal but at a distance continues to greatly influence which films with queer themes are successful, with films that distance the queerness from the viewer being the most popular in Korea. This has made film as a form of queer representation problematic as this representation, even if accurate, shows queer people as continuing to be incompatible with Korean society. The placement of queerness outside of the Korean context has contributed to the success of films such as *The King and the Clown* and *The Handmaiden* compared to other films around the same time such as *No Regret* and *Jane*.

Chapter 2. Views on LGBTQ+ in Korea

Before understanding queer themes in Korean film, we must first understand how homosexuality fits in the larger frame of Korean society. The perspectives of LGBTQ+ communities by Koreans ultimately frames how filmmakers will approach queerness in their films depending on if they are looking to maximize viewership. Views on these communities are reproduced and reaffirmed through film, requiring an understanding of how these communities and perspectives came to be.

2.1. Queerness in Pre-modern Korea

Korean history is no stranger to homosexuality as it can be traced back to pre-modern Korea. There are records of same-sex relationships from the hwarang, an all-male youth elite warrior group, of the Silla Dynasty (75 BCE–935 BCE), to the Buddhist monasteries and temples of the Koryo Dynasty (918–1392), and into the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1910) (Shin 2013, 93). Even as Confucian influence grew, same-sex relationships were able to survive if they followed the strict ethics laid out by Confucianism and those involved did not neglect the social roles assigned to them. There were even multiple Kings throughout Korean history which records show participated in same-sex relations such as the Silla dynasty's King Hyeogong (r. 765–780) and Koryo's King Kongmin (r. 1351–1374). Although homosexuality in Korea today has been framed as a foreign concept, same-sex love has been present and practiced by various kinds of Koreans for centuries. Records of same-sex love brings forth the question of why homosexuality has become marginalized to the extent it is today.

2.2. Influences on the Shaping of Views of Homosexuality

In the modern era, views on same-sex relationships have been influenced by various elements, each creating their own challenges to the growth of acceptance in Korea. Scholars have cited Confucianism and Religion as two of the dominant influences of

negative views on homosexuality. Gahyun Youn states that “Korean society is shaped by Confucian ideologies which view homosexuality as unnatural” (Youn 2018, 100). Confucianism creates strict roles for each family member that must be followed to achieve filial piety, obedience, and conformity. This system emphasizes the need for men and women to marry and produce children, directly conflicting with homosexual relationships in which the ability to fill these gendered roles and produce offspring are complicated. Homosexual relationships do have the ability to become more acceptable in the Confucian context if the relationship adopts a heteronormative framework in which each partner takes on the role of man and woman regardless of their actual gender and conforms to broader Confucian patterns. Yet these relationships will not be seen as equivalent to heterosexual relationships (Youn 2018, 101).

While Confucianism has affected the ideas of gendered roles within the family, religion has also influenced how homosexuality is approached in South Korea. Each religion has differing doctrinal approaches to homosexuality and thus have varying influences. Protestantism is found to be the most politically active compared to other religions and Korea has seen a growing number of evangelical Protestant churches (Rich et. al. 2021b, 367). Buddhism has shown to be the most tolerant of homosexuality as it lacks doctrinal opposition and, in some branches, promotes equality regardless of sexuality. While religion and LGBTQ+ communities have a history of conflict in countries all around the world, Korean Christian groups have played a hand in preventing efforts to implement anti-discriminatory measures such as the 2007 “Anti-Discriminatory Act” which had the potential to implement social protections for LGBTQ+ individuals. As visibility of the presence of the LGBTQ+ community grows, so does opposition to these groups.

Homophobic ideas were spread further by Japanese colonization of the Korean Peninsula in the first half of the twentieth century and an influx of Western influences. Though it has its own history of same-sex love, Japan’s embrace of the West meant that Japan

adopted its homophobic views earlier than Korea. Japan's colonization of the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945 forced Japanese culture and ideology on the Korean people, including the taboo view towards same-sex relations (Kim and Singer 2011, 118). The term homosexual which is often used to refer to same-sex love is typically assigned a westernized definition. In Western scholarship homosexuality is seen as a form of identity and tends to label the individual as someone who partakes in sexual relations with only those of the same sex. This definition does not suit how pre-modern Koreans viewed same-sex relations. Participating in same-sex relations did not equate to being labeled as homosexual, nor only having relations with one sex, and thus was not directly tied to an idea that an individual would not be able to fulfill their social duties.

The influence of the Western definition creates an assumption that an individual participating in same-sex relationships will not partake in traditional heterosexual family building and thus are a danger to the growth of the community. In the modern era anti-LGBTQ+ groups voice this concern stating that with an aging population and declining birth rate, same-sex couples pose a threat to the strength of the nation (Youn 2018, 113). The influence of the Western usage has associated participating in any same-sex relation as a sign of homosexuality, reinforcing a binary approach to the very non-binary reality that is sexual identity.

2.3. History of the Korean Queer Movement

Colonial and religious influences such as these have affected not just how heterosexual individuals view the LGBTQ+ community but also how queer individuals view themselves. The queer community was largely invisible until the 1990s when the first Korean gay and lesbian groups were formed, allowing for the building of a community around queer identities. As homosexuality was considered a foreign phenomenon, there was a lack of community around those attracted to the same-sex and a belief that there were no homosexuals in Korea, meaning there was no need to create a community around or recognize these identities. That is not

to say that there was an absence of queerness in Korea as there are records and news reports of same-sex love in the colonial period and 1960s to 1980s (Kang 2020, 9).

The divide between foreign queerness and Korean queerness caused Koreans attracted to the same sex to use different terms to refer to themselves and others. “Gay” was used when referring to transgender individuals while those partaking in male-male sexual relations were called “homo” or *tongsongyonaaja* or “same-sex lover” (Kwon Kim and Cho 2010, 210). These terms had different usages, yet both contained negative associations. “Homo” considered homosexuality to be a perverted behavior that affected a limited number of people while *tongsongyonaaja* refers to same-sex love as a desire in which any individual can be tempted (Kwon Kim and Cho 2010, 210). These two concepts have conflicting perceptions of what it means to participate in same-sex relations with “homo” limiting the behavior to an exception that will not affect the greater society due to its small size, while *tongsongyonaaja* frames same-sex love as a kind of threat to society in which any person can be affected. Both have a negative impact on perceptions of queer people, framing their affections as perverse and outside the norm.

The gay and lesbian communities in Korea were first formally created in the early 1990s through the establishment of official organizations and websites where queer individuals could meet others like them and learn more about what it means to be homosexual. Through these activities they could educate themselves on issues such as HIV/AIDS and activism allowing the communities to expand and diversify quickly (Kang 2020, 12). From early on the gay and lesbian communities considered themselves separate due to their differing priorities and struggles. The first official queer group was the lesbian group, Sappho, which was formed in 1992 by an African American lesbian who worked in the U.S. military (Kwon Kim and Cho 2010, 210–211). Sappho consisted of eight individuals both gay and lesbian, four of which went on to establish Ch’odonghoe, the first gay and lesbian

organization in Korea.

The organization was short-lived as lesbian members felt they faced sexism and were treated as a lesser priority, highlighting the differing challenges faced by gay and lesbian individuals. The dismantlement of Ch'odonghoe led to the establishment of two separate groups, the men's organization Chingusai ("Between Friends") founded in February 1994 and the women's organization KiriKiri ("Amongst Ourselves") founded in November 1994 (Bong 2008, 89). Scholars have noted that there continues to be a divide in queer communities caused by the gender divide. Even the terms "gay men" and "lesbians" are telling of this gender gap as gay men are still considered men and hold the advantage given to them by a patriarchal society (Lee, 2022). As lesbians, these individuals are faced with the issues of being homosexual and female, battling prejudice from multiple angles. Gay men are also often given more attention when it comes to activism, leaving other groups to feel left behind. It is these gender issues which led to the early divide of gay and lesbian activism and gender gaps still need to be kept in mind when discussing LGBTQ+ activism today. The existence of the LGBTQ+ community does not necessarily imply that all members of this group face the same discrimination.

Around this time gay and lesbian Bulletin Board Systems began to appear online increasing the ability for queer people to interact and organize meetings while choosing whether they want to come out publicly (Kwon Kim and Cho 2010, 214). As these groups conversed on a public discussion board, they were subject to criticism and faced the possibility of being removed from the server. On June 6, 1997, a gay man, upset by the restrictions on gays and lesbians to post self-introductions on servers, opened Exzone, Korea's first gay site. Sites such as these helped form a connection between the queer community and technology as queer Koreans could build relationships around the world and learn about their queer identity.

The year 1997 was also an important year for queer activism as lesbians and gays began to publicly protest anti-homosexual

content in middle and high school textbooks. These anti-homosexual teachings were solidified with the 1997 Youth Protection Act which defined homosexuality as “socially unacceptable” (Bong 2008, 92). These public protests began with small groups who sometimes wore masks and coverings to conceal their identity but grew rapidly. Korean gays and lesbians faced the issue of being caught between the family and the state making it challenging for many individuals to come out to their families, let alone publicly.

Government level suppression spurred on these issues as on November 1st, 2001, the Ministry of Information and Communication’s (MIC) Information and Communications Ethics Committee blocked all gay and lesbian sites from youth. These government regulations justified the discrimination of same-sex couples and reinforced the idea that homosexuality was a danger to society. Views such as these are damaging to individuals in the LGBTQ+ community and LGBTQ+ youth who are blocked off from learning about their identity and prevented from having a safe space to discuss such topics. On January 10th, 2002, a LGBTQ+ activist, with the aid of the Lesbian and Gay Alliance Against Defamation and the Lawyers for Democracy, filed a lawsuit against MIC for the unconstitutional blockage of these sites (Kwon Kim and Cho 2010, 216). The lawsuit lost multiple appeals in lower courts, yet judges did not declare that MIC’s actions were within the constitution leaving ambiguity on the law’s stance on discrimination against same-sex love. While the lawsuit was lost, the protest did succeed in the removal of the anti-homosexual clause from the Youth Protection Act in 2004, demonstrating that these activists did have some form of power over their identities and civil rights. This was considered a victory by the LGBTQ+ community and demonstrated the move towards LGBTQ+ activism in the political realm.

Although Korean law does not criminalize homosexuality, discrimination against these individuals pose a threat to their health and safety. The 2001 presidential election of Kim Dae-jung raised hopes for the protection of minority groups as his campaign focused

on improving human rights and began the formation of a human rights bill. In an unfortunate turn of events the final draft of the Korean Human Rights Bill removed “sexual orientation,” “military status”, “nationality”, “language”, “ideology”, “family type”, “criminal record” and “educational background” due to pressure from Christian groups (Kwon Kim and Cho 2010, 206). This signaled a huge setback in the progression of human rights for not only the LGBTQ+ community but also many other minority groups who fell outside of the tight heteronormative patriarchal society.

In the 2010s there has been an increase in the visibility of the Korean LGBTQ+ community through increasing numbers of queer festivals and role models. As presence grows so does the demand for equality and the right to family building. Filmmakers Kim Jho Gwang-soo and Kim Sung-hwan’s rejected 2016 appeal to have their same-sex marriage recognized by the Korean government, demonstrates a desire for revisions in Korean law that define marriage as between a husband and wife. There continues to be attempts to pass an anti-discrimination bill that will not cover only sexual minorities but other discriminated groups. While religious groups were the source of the most resistance in 2007 when the first bill failed, the source of resistance now appears to come from the government itself. In an interview with *The Korean Herald*, Justice Party Representative Jang Hye-young stated “Fifteen years ago, I would’ve said backlash from religious groups is the biggest obstacle. But now it is more to do with the politicians and their force of habit” (Yim 2022). Pushes for an anti-discrimination bill continue to persist despite the changing challenges activists face.

When looking at the queer movement in Korea, geographic location plays a significant role in the progression of movements. Seoul has been the focus for many studies on queer movements but there has been a delayed participation in other Korean cities. As of 2010, 48.9% of the South Korean population lived in the Seoul Metropolitan Area, meaning that these studies represent only half of the population (Seoul Research Data Service, n.d.). The LGBTQ+ community in Busan has been recorded as being smaller and less

active as queer individuals in this region are more “shy” and “passive” than those in Seoul (Phillips and Yi 2020, 1955). The dynamics of interactions between those within and outside the LGBTQ+ community vary based on location which complicates efforts to improve queer rights. While activism in Seoul through the organization of festivals began in 2000, Busan’s first queer festival was hosted in 2017 (Phillips and Yi 2020, 1955). The focus of activism in Seoul has created a sense of activism throughout Korea, neglecting to recognize the delayed developments in other cities which may better represent the population of LGBTQ+ individuals outside of Seoul.

While it may appear that much has changed in the last 30 years, queer Koreans continue to face discrimination which impedes their lives. The Korean government has had great difficulty implementing any laws involving same-sex love, demonstrating the lack of importance placed on LGBTQ+ individuals as Korean citizens. This is not unique to the LGBTQ+ community as other marginalized groups have also been left behind, as shown by the previously mentioned revision of the Korean Human Rights Bill. The laws that have been successfully implemented act to harm these individuals. For instance, under article 92-6 of the Military Criminal Act “A person who commits anal intercourse with any person prescribed in Article 1 (1) through (3) or any other indecent act shall be punished by imprisonment with labor for not more than two years”. This poses an issue for gay men specifically as they are targeted in the wordage, and it is mandatory for Korean men to serve in the military for at least 18 months.

One of the key issues with this regulation is that it has been enforced based on hearsay and allegations which “has been used flagrantly to penalize and isolate sexual minority conscripts who already face verbal and physical abuse” (Han 2016, 6). This situation has been deemed a human rights issue and has allowed some gay men who fear for their safety to seek asylum in foreign countries. It is telling that one of the only laws involving same-sex love bars gay men from consensual relations trapping them between

their service to their country, what to many is considered a rite of passage for Korean men, and their self-identity. There has been a minor change in these regulations as on April 21st, 2022, the Supreme Court ruled that punishing same-sex relations outside of military settings is unconstitutional, yet these regulations can continue to be enforced within them.

Gay men serving in the military are not the only ones affected as the Korean government is built around the idea of the heteronormative family unit, so those outside such a family face conflict with “paying taxes, taking out mortgages, receiving inheritances, having hospital visitation rights, etc.” (Kwon Kim and Cho 2010, 222). Laws created around these family-based systems blurs the distinction between the individual and public so that self-identification is framed as a public issue. Hyun-sook Chae, the first openly lesbian candidate in Korean history, eloquently sums up this issue stating, “it became evident that it was no longer possible for gays and lesbians to stay outside the political mainstream while they were becoming objects of direct attack.” (Kwon Kim and Cho 2010, 221). It is the increased recognition of LGBTQ+ presence in Korea that itself creates the need for these groups to bind together and speak out on their rights as equals within Korean society, not outside of it. As can be seen in these issues, discrimination against the LGBTQ+ communities needs to be addressed promptly for the protection and liberty of queer individuals.

2.4. History of Korean Queer Media

The changes seen in the Korean queer community have corresponded with changes in the queer film industry. Film has been intertwined with queer individuals since the 1960s and acted as one of the only forms of queer representation in Korean society. As most Koreans do not personally know a queer person, exposure to queerness is limited and comes from literature and media. For most Koreans same-sex love has been introduced to them through U.S. Television shows and movies such as *Will & Grace* (1998–2006) and *Modern Family* (2009–2020) (Kwon 2019, 39). Though these shows expose Koreans to homosexuality and other forms of

queerness, they do so in a foreign context and thus have less effect on the general public's acceptance of homosexuality when it appears within Korean society. The move of Korean Queer Cinema into the mainstream Korean film industry is telling of the rise in consciousness of Korean LGBTQ+ communities but this integration has not been without issue. The analysis of how Korean film and media represents queerness is pertinent to understanding how Korean attitudes towards queerness are changing and how they can further be improved.

The definition and application of the term "Queer Cinema" has been widely debated by scholars making it difficult to provide a succinct definition. While some films are easier to label as Queer Cinema due to their focus on homosexual relationships or the coming out of queer characters, these themes need not be explicitly present to have a film be considered queer (Kim 2019, 64). It is not uncommon to have queer readings of films that were not initially created with any queer context in mind. For this paper, I will not be limiting my analysis to films labeled as queer upon their release as it is possible to have queer elements within a film without making them the center of the film. These can include queer background characters, queer coding of character relations, and other elements which stand outside of heteronormative thinking. While it is important to consider the intention of the director and writers of the film, one also needs to consider the meaning the audience subscribes to the film as viewers form their own queer readings of the film as they watch it. As audience members each enter a film with different backgrounds and views on life, they will get a distinct experience from the same film. Although a homogenous society, Korean viewers are subject to the same effect of having life events put emphasis on different parts of the film. For instance, a film with dual romance and political story lines may be read differently by viewers depending on which narrative they connect with more. This concept will be further expanded on in chapters 3 and 4 through individual readings of each of the films focused on in this paper.

The history of Korean queer film has been divided into three

periods by scholars Pil Ho Kim and C. Collin Singer, “according to the manner in which queer content is displayed and the reception of the films by both the government authorities and the public” (Kim and Singer 2011, 117). These periods, the Invisible Age (1976–1998), the Camouflage Age (1998–2005), the Blockbuster Age (2005–present), coincide with significant changes in the Korean film industry and socioeconomic and political climates and have aided in understanding not only the changes in Korean Queer Cinema but also the Korean film industry. Though the range of each of these eras are subject to debate, this division provides a base for understanding the changes in Korean Queer Cinema. As the Korean film industry has opened to more independent directors and topics it has influenced the reach of queer themes in film and their success.

The Invisible era is marked by films in which queer themes are laid out discreetly and invisible to the heterosexual eye (Kim and Singer 2011, 119). Filmmakers who wanted to place homosexuality at the forefront of their films were unable to because of industry and social pressures. Though these themes remained invisible, there were filmmakers pushing to represent queer individuals in film. Kim and Singer divide this movement into two legs, those who downplay LGBTQ+ identities and cultures and those who focus on cinema as an essential vehicle of cause (Kim and Singer 2011, 121). Films which had explicit homosexual themes often did not find success and discourse on such early queer films remains sparse.

Towards the end of the Invisible Age there were three large changes made in the Korean film industry which allowed for greater independence in the filmmaking process and spurred an increase in the number of films dealing with sensitive issues such as sexuality, gender, and other minorities. First, there was a lift on the freeze of exports of Korean products, expanding international theatrical and home video distribution and creating a demand for higher quality Korean films that would appeal to an international audience (Cagle 2007, 283). This meant that Korean film makers needed to not only improve their techniques but also change their approach to include topics that would resonate with those abroad along with domestic

audiences. Next, this expanded market became more open to private funding as Chaebol groups who had monopolized the film industry pulled out due to the 1997 recession, allowing for the funding of films that would have once been rejected. Finally, the establishment of the Korean Council for Performing Arts Promotions relaxed restrictions imposed by federal censorship law (Lee 2000, 279).

Prior to the establishment of the Korean Council for Performing Arts Promotions, the arch-conservative Korean Performing Arts Ethics Committee had been dismissed over a controversial decision to ban the release of Wong Kar-Wai's Hong Kong film *Happy Together* (Lee 2000, 279). The Ethics Commission worried that since Wong had many young Korean fans, his film about a young gay couple would encourage homosexuality and endanger public morals. The decision to ban *Happy Together* was met with public resistance as public opinion showed that the Commission went too far and that a liberalization of their criteria for censorship should take place.

The formation of a more relaxed system was a pivotal move for filmmakers who had been restricted in the kind of social issues they could depict in their films. It should be noted the rallying behind the release of *Happy Together* and relaxation of censorship does not indicate a larger acceptance of homosexuality within Korea as the 1997 gay and lesbian film festival was met with protest and police stated law enforcement could not sanction a gay and lesbian film festival (Lee 2000, 280). It was these events in the late 1990s which created the expansion of the Korean film industry and paved the way for films containing queer themes to be released at higher volumes and in more public settings.

Although there was a relaxation on the regulations of what kinds of films could be made, filmmakers still needed to be conscious of what kind of content would be successful and accepted by the Korean public. Kim and Singer contribute the year 1998 to the move to the Camouflage Age where queer themes were more apparent but continued to be masked in some form. Though the film

industry and government had a more relaxed approach to queerness, filmmakers continued to be cautious of homophobic conservatives and the backlash they could create. Filmmakers attempted to balance on this line by fading their queer content into the background so that it could not be so readily seen.

Kim and Singer argue that two of the most successful films to adopt camouflaging techniques were *Memento Mori* (*Yōgogoedam tubōntchae iyagi*, 1999) and *Bungee Jumping of Their Own* (*Pōnjjōmp'ūrūl hada*, 2001). *Memento Mori* is the story of a romance between two high school girls at an all-girls school and is part of the schoolgirl horror genre. The film uses typical horror tropes such as ghosts, possession, and telepathy to act as a buffer between the viewer's reality and the homosexual content of the film (Kim and Singer 2011, 123). Though the film does feature a few scenes of girls kissing, the homosexuality is not politicized at all. *Bungee Jumping of Their Own's* approach to homosexuality is interesting in that the homosexual relationship is mapped over a heterosexual one. This film tells the story of a heterosexual couple, In-u and T'ae-hui who quickly fall in love but are torn apart due to the tragic death of T'ae-hui, the female lead. Seventeen years later In-u, now a married high school teacher, finds that T'ae-hui has been reincarnated as one of his male students, Hyon-bin. The relationship featured in this film contains multiple social taboos as the romance is between a minor and adult who are also student and teacher. Given the other aspects of the relationship, homosexuality is pushed to the side and is less perverse when compared. What marks the Camouflage Age is the balance between the presence of queer themes but in such a way that they can be overlooked by those who do not wish to see them.

The Blockbuster Age began with the release of *The King and the Clown* in 2005 which has been cited by many scholars as the first queer blockbuster film. Kim and Singer argue the success of this film opened the way for many other mainstream films to include homosexual subtext within their narrative without sacrificing the appeal to a larger audience. The success of films like *The King and*

the Clown were made possible by the relaxation of the film industry which allowed for topics that were once taboo to be brought to popular media. While *The King and the Clown* was a staple in the success of films with queer themes, Kim and Singer's argument that this film had homosexuality in its forefront is debatable, as will be discussed in the coming chapter. Many of the films that found success in the Blockbuster Age continued to have a camouflaged approach, albeit in a way that showed homosexuality but kept it outside of Korean society and everyday life, offering other storylines which masked the homosexual ones.

The division of Korean Queer Cinema into three distinct periods is useful for understanding the changing approaches to queer content, though distinction fails to recognize that masking techniques continue to be used in films with queer themes. The years provided should not be taken as definite as Kim and Singer read the film *The King and the Clown*, the marker for the beginning of the Blockbuster Age, as having a more apparent queer relationship than it does. As films are subject to varying interpretation, it needs to be recognized that these periods blend, and films made in one period may better align with another. This can be seen in the move to the blockbuster age which created a divide between queer themes in commercial and independent films, splitting the path of Queer Cinema. Masking techniques are more present in commercial films compared to independent films, demonstrating the continuation of the Camouflage Age and its mixing with commercial film. Kim and Singer's approach fails to recognize that the inclusion of queer themes in commercial films was accompanied by masking techniques which made the films more comfortable for Korean audiences.

2.5. Female Fans Effect on LGBTQ+ Content

The gap between the lack of LGBTQ+ acceptance in Korean society leads to the question of why some filmmakers decided to include queer themes in their films. One of the dominant influences which led to this phenomenon was the potential market created by young females in Korea. The commodification of homosexuality,

dominantly gay sexuality, which led to the mainstreaming of queer content in films was influenced by the fandom for gay eroticism by young heterosexual Korean females. In the larger space of Korean media, K-pop had been co-opted as a queer space in the early 2000s through K-pop dance cover groups called Fan-cosplay or Fancos who were typically young women dressing as male artists and groups such as H.O.T (Shin 2018, 88). Much of this queering of Korean media took place outside of Korea as the Korean queer community was largely absent. Yet the queering of male idols became popular to young Korean women, who were typically heterosexual, through the form of fanfiction in which fans would create imagined stories featuring their idols. These idols are typically male, and stories feature erotic relationships between two male members of an idol group. Whether fanfiction has a positive or negative effect on the queer community has been debated, but this form of consumption not only introduced the idea of queerness to young women in Korea but also created a market for queer themes in media and literature which to cater to these fans.

It is precisely this group of young Korean women who pushed *The King and the Clown* to the success it reached and showed the Korean film industry that queer themes in film could be profitable. These young women are usually non-homosexual, broadminded, and financially empowered making them ideal consumers of films with queer themes (Kwon 2019, 108). Women were drawn to the beautiful young men on screen who were labeled as “flower boys.” The flower boy formula was repeated by following films which gained success such as *Antique* (Söyang koldong kwajajöm aent’ik’ü, 2008) and *A Frozen Flower* (Ssanghwajöm, 2008) (Kim and Singer 2011, 127). The opening of a potential market for queer films is a double-edged sword as it gives queer films the opportunity to be released on a wider scale and gain more success leading to the production of films containing queer themes, but which are catered to female viewers.

The inclusion of queer themes does not mean these films will contain accurate representations of the Korean queer community or

that it will lead to improved attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community. Nor can it be concluded that the Korean film industry has developed greater acceptance for queerness. Scholar Jungmin Kwon notes that because the market for these films are not actually the LGBTQ consumer, most Korean film studios have less of a problem marketing gay-themed production (Kwon 2019, 114). Successful films that have utilized queer themes and the flower boy formula have been criticized for their lack of accurate representation as they present an idealized representation of homosexuality that acts to alienate the LGBTQ community and the real-life struggles they face (Kim and Singer 2011,128).

There is also the issue that many of these young female fans reflect the greater phenomena in Korean society of being accepting of queerness in theory but not so much in their everyday lives. While Korean fandom was once a place for queer experimentation, changes in the views of what is appropriate fan behavior had placed mainstream fandom “in line with Korean society’s antiqueer, anti-homosexuality sentiments” (Shin 2018, 104). Ironically, the fans who consume a large portion of queer themed content and have made it possible for these themes to come to the forefront of popular films such as *The King and the Clown* are the same group which have played a part in dissolving queer credibility. These fans also act to show us the need for the distancing techniques adopted by filmmakers in the Camouflage Age and why it continues today. As mentioned before these fans are seen to be dominantly broad-minded and fall into the young female demographic, which is found to be most accepting of queerness, yet they show the distinction of being tolerant, not accepting, of same-sex love. It is through examining this group and their influence on the Korean film industry that it becomes apparent why the flower boy formula and idealized representation of queerness has gained popularity.

Though these young women enjoy consuming gay storylines, they often use these relationships as surrogates, placing themselves within the role of the often-androgynous gay character. It is in this way that these homosexual relationships in literature

and film have become a feminist tool rather than an LGBTQ+ one. The rise of the popularity of male–male love stories coincides with the rise of the feminist and lesbian movement. In the 2000s these groups began to work together, and Korean women began to push back against the male dominated society. With this change, the appeal of relationships in which both partners are equal increased, furthering the success of the flower boy formula and male–male romances. Unfortunately, this female liberation did not translate to films with lesbian characters which did not offer the same escapism that male–male love stories did. Rather than challenging the heterosexual elements of Korean society, these women utilized the mapping of homosexual relationships onto heterosexual relationships to take advantage of the equal social standing the male characters have. The emphasis is thus placed on the gender relations in the film rather than the sexuality.

In the following chapter I will analyze two films from the 2000s that demonstrate the effect of these distancing techniques in the beginning of the Camouflage Age and early part of the gay and lesbian movements, *The King and the Clown* which gained popular success with the Korean public and *No Regret* which was renowned in the queer community.

Chapter 3. Films of the Early 2000s

This chapter will analyze and compare the approach of two films released in the mid-2000s through the examination of film and story techniques and relating them to the Korean approach to queerness. This analysis will look at how these films took differing approaches to the representation and placement of homosexuality in relation to the viewer. First, I will be looking at the widely successful 2005 film *The King and the Clown* and its utilization of the flower boy formula and distancing techniques. This analysis will be followed by a look at the 2006 film *No Regret* which saw less commercial success but has earned high praise from the LGBTQ+ community and critics. Finally, I will examine how these films fit into the larger issue of homosexuality in Korea.

3.1. *The King and the Clown* (2005)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the film *The King and the Clown* has been credited as one of the most influential films in the transition of queer themes from independent to mainstream film due to its domestic success, despite featuring a homosexual love triangle. Initially released in 313 theaters, the film brought in over ten million audience members, making it the highest-ranking film of its time and the 11th highest ranking Korean film today (Korean Film Council, n.d.a). *The King and the Clown* is based on the 2000 play entitled “Yi” that was inspired by a short passage in The Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty which mentions a jester by the name of Kong-gil who gave critical advice to King Yŏnsan (1476–1506) (Shin 2013, 94). While the play features characters based on real historical figures, the homosexual storyline was added into the play and later altered for the film. Though *The King and the Clown* has been credited as opening the door for queer cinema to be mainstreamed, its approach to homosexuality is vague and reflects the hesitance of Korean filmmakers and audiences in the 2000s to accept homosexuality fully into the Korean context. Homosexual representation remained successful in mainstream film if it was not

directly connected to the viewer.

The King and the Clown follows the lives of two clowns, Kong-gil and Chang-saeng, in an entertainment troupe in sixteenth century Chosŏn Dynasty. The two perform acrobatic skills and comedic skits where Kong-gil commonly plays a female character with Chang-saeng playing his male counterpart. On the side Kong-gil is a prostitute to support the two. After Chang-saeng gets into a violent altercation upon opposing Kong-gil servicing their employer, the two move to Seoul where they eventually form a troupe with fellow performers. After performing a skit where they make fun of the mad King Yŏnsan, the troupe are appointed as court jesters for the King who becomes infatuated with Kong-gil and the feminine characters he plays. The palace ministers anger the King by expressing their disagreement with the decision to house jesters, citing it as wasteful.

The King's infatuation and continuous requests to meet Kong-gil enrages the King's concubine Nok-su and concerns Chang-saeng. The King continues to grow increasingly involved with the troupe's performances, causing strain between him and the ministers who begin to plan to overthrow him. This strain comes to a peak when the troupe is asked by Cheo-sun^⑤, the King's eunuch, to perform a play which exposes the queen dowager's political plot that led to the death of the king's mother years before. After a failed attempt by Nok-su to extort Kong-gil, Chang-saeng takes the blame and is blinded for insulting the King. The film ends with the heartbroken Kong-gil and now blind Chang-saeng performing one last tightrope act as a rebellion storms the palace to overthrow the King.

3.1.1. Distance Through Time

While homosexual elements are present in the film, they are presented in a way in which the average viewer with little connection to homosexuality will not notice them. The film uses

^⑤ Cheo-sun is the name of the character played by Jang Hang-seon. Not to be confused with the Korean dynasty "Chosŏn." For clarity's sake I will be using the alternative spelling "Cheo-sun" when referring to the character.

various distancing techniques to make the viewer more comfortable and accepting of these homosexual elements. One of the most notable distancing elements is the period the film is set in, 15th century Chosŏn dynasty. As mentioned in the previous section, homosexuality in the pre-modern era was not unheard of and the actual King Yeonsan's reputation as a mad king makes the homosexual content less shocking. Homosexuality is placed outside of modern Korea so domestic audiences will not directly connect the homosexual elements to their personal lives. Although the story takes place in Korea, it is set in the past which creates a sense of distance similar to if the film was set in a foreign country.

The characters themselves are also placed outside of not only modern Korean society but also Chosŏn society. The three main characters of the film are all outsiders in one way or another and do not resemble the everyday citizen, as is true for most successful film protagonists. Kong-gil and Chang-saeng are clowns, one of which does not fit the typical image of a man and one who is strongly rebelling against authority. The King is outside of society due to his status as ruler but even then, he is placed outside of what is expected as a king with his desires for lavish events and entertainment and reputation as being mad. It is because of this madness that his attraction to someone of the same sex is excused. Each character who is involved in the homosexual love triangle is not someone who audiences would easily relate to and thus homosexuality will continue to be placed outside of Korean society even though the film itself takes place in Korea. This is a double-edged sword as queer Korean viewers who identify the queer elements will not relate to these characters nor will there be a desire to claim these characters as queer representation.

3.1.2. Homosexuality as a B Plot

The issues of how this film approaches queerness is intertwined with its story telling technique. It is common, if not standard, for films to have at least two plots, an A plot which is the focus of the film and a B plot which operates in the background and

often intertwines with the A plot. In the case of *The King and the Clown* there are two main plot lines, one that follows the King, Kong-gil, and Chang-saeng's relationships and one that follows the political turmoil that ensues upon the appointment of the court jesters and the King's growing madness. Though the film follows Kong-gil and Chang-saeng, with an emphasis on Kong-gil, one cannot solidly state that the love triangle is the A plot while the political aspects are set aside as the B plot. When summarizing the film many scholars have chosen to exclude the political story line in favor of that of the love triangle.

There has also been debate around whether *The King and the Clown* features a homosexual relationship as the film lacks onscreen intimacy and the relationship between Kong-gil and Chang-saeng can be read as platonic though these arguments too are flawed. While I would argue that the homosexuality is not going to be apparent to all viewers and thus the film's position as one of the most influential films in introducing queerness is debatable, to say the film has no homosexual content ignores the reality that homosexuality does not need to be hypersexualized to be present in media. This argument also ignores the film's Korean title *Wang ūi namja* (King's man), which better points to the film's homosexual storyline. The English title "The King and the Clown" has no implied romantic relationship but the Korean title has an implication of possession which is usually tied to romantic relationships.

The King and the Clown can be read differently by viewers depending on their background. As scholar Jeeyoung Shin notes "female viewers in their teens and early to mid-twenties tended to focus on the Kong-gil-centered melodrama; people in their late twenties through their forties were more likely to see the film as a story of political subversion centered around Chang-saeng; and those over fifty were mostly oblivious to the gay subplot and read the film as a political court drama focused on King Yōnsan and his loyal eunuch, [Cheo-sun]" (Shin 2013, 97). The film offers multiple readings to fit the viewer's tastes. To argue that the main plot of the film is homosexual love when it is possible to move that

element to the background, disregards the readings of viewers that are formed by their own individual experiences and priorities. Online reviews of the film reflect this as reviews dominantly focus on the production quality of the film or the beauty of Lee Joon-ki who plays Kong-gil (Naver, n.d.a). Comments who did mention the queer elements of the film were split, either giving the film very high ratings or low ratings. The lack of reviews that mention the queer elements points to these being easily ignored or not sparking discourse between everyday viewers.

3.1.3. Use of the Flower Boy Formula

It has been noted that *The King and the Clown*'s success led to the release of more films containing LGBTQ+ themes by mainstream Korean media companies who followed the flower boy formula (Kwon 2019, 97). The flower boy formula has been used by television and film to appeal to young female audiences by using conventionally beautiful young men as leading characters. The term "flower boy" has been used in a variety of social contexts to describe men, usually young, who have a soft attractive appearance and are well mannered and fashionable. The term has been utilized in popular culture with dramas titled *Flower Boy Ramen Shop* (*Ggotminam Ramyeongage*, 2011) and *Flower Boy Next Door* (*Iutjip Kkonminam*, 2013). In these shows, flower boys are shown as being attractive men who can be confused as being gay, playing into the stereotype of gay men, but end up being straight. The term flower boy became formularized to bring in young female audiences by advertising the films casting of these beautiful men. It was in fact the introduction of the flower boy formula in a setting outside of modern Korean society, i.e., in historical times, which made the concept and film so successful.

3.1.4. Skewing of Gender

The film goes to great lengths to portray Kong-gil as a type of transgender character who, regardless of his identification as a male, fits more into the role of a female. From the beginning of the film Kong-gil is introduced as transcending gender boundaries as

he dresses as a woman in the first performance, even going as far as to wear a mask depicting a female face. Kong-gil is consistently in a state of gender blending^⑥ where regardless of his identification as a male he is confused as or compared to a woman. In a scene when Nok-su finds Kong-gil and the King in the King's quarters, Nok-su says "What if he's really a girl? His voice, his gestures. Not even eunuchs can have the same finesse" and proceeds to forcibly strip Kong-gil to prove he is a man (Lee 2005, 1:17:15). It is in this scene that we see the tension created by the presence of effeminate men such as Kong-gil who create greater competition for females in gaining men's attention. This dynamic of beautiful young men creating unreachable beauty standards for women is realistic as there are records of young men playing women in Europe and Asia who would be seen more beautiful than cis-females and thus create the issue of some women seeing these men as competition.

The dynamic between Nok-su and Kong-gil demonstrates the way men can better fit the feminine model. Nok-su is aggressive and attempts to seduce the King multiple times and fails while Kong-gil, who better falls into the expected role of a feminine, quiet, and gentle individual, gains the attention of the King. It is interesting that regardless of his sexual identity, Kong-gil continues to be placed into a female role that he does not seem to desire to be in, because of his quiet tempered nature. It is through this that we can see that personal sexual identity is less influential in shaping how one is viewed than the roles in which one plays.

The King and the Clown's vague approach to queerness is highlighted by how the film differs from the original play source. The largest differences come in how the main characters Kong-gil and Chang-saeng are presented and involving Chang-saeng in the

^⑥ Rather than "gender bending" which refers to the conscious state of dressing and acting as the opposite sex, I use the term "gender blending" coined by scholar Aaron Devor, formally Holly Devor (Devor 1989, viii). This term is distinguished by individuals who identify their gender to match their sexual status but mix gender role patterns which come from both sexes in a way which makes others mistake them for another gender.

love triangle. In the play Kong-gil is a strong character who takes pride in his power over the king, while in the film Kong-gil is feminized and fits more into the stereotypical image of the effeminate gay man (Shin 2013, 95). Chang-saeng goes from the quiet secondary character seen in the play to an outspoken masculine character who rebels against authority. Throughout the film Kong-gil relies on Chang-saeng for protection and when Chang-saeng is not present, he is shown as submissive and completely defenseless against physical and verbal abuses. The feminization of Kong-gil contrasts the aggressiveness of one of the only female characters present, Nok-su, who is antagonistic and manipulative.

It need be noted, contrary to what one may believe, these changes do not create a more obvious homosexual storyline. In fact, it is these changes which demonstrate the film's ambiguous approaches toward homosexuality compared to the play which takes a more direct approach (Shin 2013, 94). In the play, the love triangle is between King Yönsan, Kong-gil, and the female concubine Nok-su with the homosexual elements of the King and Kong-gil's relationship emphasized. The shift of this love triangle to include Chang-saeng and not Nok-su does not act to improve the homosexual element but rather take away from it. Though the love triangle is between three men, Kong-gil's feminization places him in a female position, nullifying the homosexual elements to make the story that of two men fighting over an effeminate man rather than a man and woman fighting for a man's affections.

3.1.5. Questioning the Presence of Homosexuality

The homosexual storyline has been denied by some as Kong-gil's gender blending causes him to resemble a transgender person and the King and Chang-saeng's emotions are argued to be towards his femininity (Kwon 2019, 130). This argument is limiting to queerness as the relationship remains outside the conventional heterosexual dynamics that dominate Korean society. When approached at a surface level the film seems to increase the

homosexual dynamic of this story, but closer examination reveals that presenting Kong-gil as equal to a female character distances the homosexuality more than the original dynamic. This also capitalizes on the flower boy formula further by creating an environment in which female viewers will be able to place themselves in Kong-gil's situation and into a relationship which does not possess a gender hierarchy. In terms of societal expectations, the presentation of the characters in the film adaptation continues to be in line with the heterosexual attraction of a male and female love triangle.

This ambiguity is furthered by the vague relationship between Kong-gil and Chang-saeng which is presented as neither overtly homosexual nor definitively platonic. Throughout the film there are little to no scenes in which one is without the other. Even when physically absent the weight of the other is on their minds. As Kong-gil is performing with a paper lantern in the kings' quarters, he depicts moments with Chang-saeng, bringing him into the scene when he is otherwise absent. The same is done for the limited number of scenes that feature only Chang-saeng. When Chang-saeng is imprisoned after being blinded, it is the first time he appears to be without Kong-gil, but it is soon revealed that Kong-gil is standing on a balcony above him watching as he retells a story about them. Even when alone the characters mention each other, demonstrating their deep bond.

The queer elements of Kong-gil and Chang-saeng's relationship are the most prominent in the multiple performances they put on throughout the film. In each performance, Kong-gil plays a female character and Chang-saeng plays his lover or someone attempting to gain his affections. These scenes are then played out again when Kong-gil puts on a puppet show for the King the first night he is called to him (Lee 2005, 57:49). The puppets resemble the characters played by Kong-gil and Chang-saeng and are used to act out Kong-gil's fantasies between the two. The King takes over this fantasy by taking the male doll and acting out the scene with Kong-gil, a dynamic we see being played out in their

real life. The tenderness between Chang-saeng and Kong-gil in their real life is demonstrated directly after this when Chang-saeng caringly covers Kong-gil as he sleeps. Taken alone this act does not seem like much but queer viewers will be able to see the tender moment shared between the two and read its queer implications. Even the Korean title of the film suggests a love triangle as the king in “The King’s man” can refer to King Yönsan or Chang-saeng who frequently takes on the identity of the king in his performances (Shin 2013, 93). The film continuously acts out male and female relationships through live performances and puppet shows which feature Chang-saeng and Kong-gil, creating the connection between the two characters and a heterosexual couple, further driven home by Kong-gil’s connection to femininity.

3.1.6. Acknowledgment of Queerness

Ironically, the parts of the film that are openly explicit about homosexuality place it in a negative light and only appear to justify negative attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community in Korea. Towards the end of the film Chang-saeng confronts Kong-gil accusing him of sleeping with the King to obtain a nicer lifestyle. Later as he blindly performs on the tightrope, he accuses the King of running out of women and moving on to boys. All the explicit references to homosexual acts between Kong-gil and the King are said out of disgust and jealousy from Chang-saeng and Nok-su. Though this may have been the approach to outward homosexuality by the masses in the Chosön Dynasty, it also reflects the attitudes of a substantial portion of modern-day Korean society. People with prejudice against queerness will not see the hidden homosexual elements and instead view these comments as the message of the film. The combination of the film’s masking of queer elements and the addition of these lines creates the issue of the film coming off as anti-homosexual if taken in the wrong light.

I offer this reading of the film which can be interpreted by a viewer with an anti-homosexual perspective. Kong-gil is an emasculated man who is propositioned and kissed by a mad king

after being presented as a woman during his performances. In the end, both characters are perceived to be killed at the end or at least receive an assumed unhappy ending. The characters who partake in homosexual relations are those who already show deviant behavior. When the film is viewed in this way the homosexual acts are punished and reinforced as wrong. Jeeyoung Shin connects the film's ambiguous approach to the representation of homosexuality as a part of the "culturally hybrid formation" that the film takes on to balance the diversity of Korean audiences (Shin 2013, 106). The attempt by the Korean film industry to combine homosexuality and Korean society into this kind of hybrid fails to recognize the presence of queer Koreans who already live in Korean society. Shin notes this is a reoccurring issue in Korean film in which gayness is placed outside of the family but rarely is it placed in an alternative gay community (Shin 2013, 92). The contradictions in representing homosexuality but in a way that was palatable to Koreans (i.e., placed outside of Korean society) creates the issue of reenforcing negative views while covering up positive ones.

3.2. *No Regret* (2006)

Released in 2006 on eight screens, *No Regret* gained 42,029 admissions during its time in theaters (Korean Film Council, n.d.b). Compared to the number of screens this shockingly large number of admissions speaks to the film's popularity. *No Regret* has been praised for demanding recognition of homosexuality while balancing between the commercial and independent film worlds (Kim and Singer 2011, 128–129). While Korean queer films before this time showed hesitation in displaying homosexuality, *No Regret* has a confident approach to its characters sexual identities.

No Regret follows the story of Su-min, a young male who after being forced to leave his orphanage upon turning eighteen, moves to Seoul. There he works as a factory worker, dishwasher, and driver for drunk people. Upon losing his job at a factory, Su-min hesitantly gains employment at a host bar. The owner of the bar is reluctant to hire Su-min as openly gay workers tend to enter relationships with customers and leave. Su-min believes this will

not happen to him until Chae-min, a previous client from his time as a driver who had come onto him and the son of his former employer at the factory, visits the bar. Chae-min continues to make advances at Su-min who rejects and threatens him repeatedly not to come back to the bar.

After several weeks Su-min gives in and the two begin a romantic relationship. Chae-min's mother learns of their relationship and pushes Chae-min to marry a woman he had been reluctantly seeing to save their family image. After meeting Chae-min's fiancé at his home, Su-min tries to confront Chae-min but is ignored, eventually returning to his job at the host club which he had left while in a relationship with Chae-min. After a confrontation with Su-min at his work, Chae-min confesses to his fiancé that he is in love with Su-min and attempts to find him. Upset from being rejected by Chae-min, Su-min, and his co-worker, who is angry over being previously swindled by his girlfriend, plot to kidnap and bury Chae-min alive. At the grave site Su-min is unable to go through with the plan and is attacked by his co-worker. Chae-min carries Su-min to the car which then crashes into a wooden pole. At dawn, the two wake-up as a police officer arrives and they silently reconcile.

3.2.1. Reclaiming Heteronormative Tropes and Revealing Queer Realities

No Regret takes an interesting approach to the popular melodrama genre which was favored by Korean audiences in the 2000s. During its theatrical release, the film was labeled as a “queer melodrama” in promotions and by press. Until the last portion of the film, which takes a dark turn when Chae-min is kidnapped, the film follows the typical form of an interclass melodrama which would be familiar to Korean audiences (Chung and Diffrient 2021, 94). Regardless of the characters being of the same sex, the film uses popular tropes such as the rich man chasing after someone much poorer and being continuously rejected. The film capitalizes on moments that have been seen in many popular dramas such as Su-min carrying Chae-min on his back after he has been beaten up.

Interestingly, the film challenges the heterosexual framework these tropes have typically been used with by mirroring this scene with a later scene of Chae-min carrying Su-min on his back after his failed attempt to bury Chae-min alive. By showing two versions of this trope the film offers little room for the viewer to associate either Chae-min or Su-min as being the “female” in the relationship.

It should be noted that although this film uses familiar tropes from heterosexual love stories, it does so in a way that demonstrates that homosexual relationships are not too different from heterosexual ones. Rather than just assigning the roles of male and female to characters that align with ideas of masculinity and femininity, these moments challenge the concept of who is in the roles of protector and protected and that these dynamics can change in a relationship.

No Regret shows little reluctance to represent male-male relationships and the struggles gay men face when expressing their sexuality. Unlike *The King and the Clown*, *No Regret* does not feature a prominent B plot which attempts to overshadow the homosexual A plot, nor does it try to map either male character onto a female model. From the first shot of the film, which features two naked men swimming in a river, the film does not hesitate to display the male body and play with homoerotic concepts. Within the first ten minutes of the film the audience learns of Su-min’s homosexuality and the film does not attempt to mask it throughout the rest of the film. The film is unafraid to show the reality of life as a gay Korean man and works to make the viewer see the uncomfortable realities with which they must deal.

The second scene of the film models this uncomfortableness as Su-min comes home from work and is asked multiple probing questions about his sexuality (Lee-Song 2006, 6:44). His friend states he needs to be with a woman, as though that is the cause of his gayness, and asks if Su-min has slept with a man. Su-min is visually uncomfortable with this conversation and the audience, much like Su-min, are unable to avoid this uncomfortable moment.

Immediately the film puts the viewer in a place of discomfort, and they are faced with questions and comments which many real-life gay men frequently face. This sets the tone for the film and tells the viewer that this film will not make any attempts to cover its queer themes.

3.2.2. Queer Spaces in Korean Life

No Regret continues to place queerness in the Korean context through showing queer spaces in Korea. The film is not as palatable to the average Korean viewer because it displays queer communities within everyday life in a way that Korean viewers can relate to. As previously mentioned, Koreans have shown that homosexuality is more acceptable than it once was, but many Koreans continue to be hesitant to have homosexuals as neighbors.

The main characters in *No Regret* are average Korean men who face the same struggles as many others who live in Seoul. Although it can be argued that Su-min is not average due to his employment at a hostess bar, the employment struggles faced by those in Seoul and the story of someone who moves to Seoul for a better life and is forced to do whatever it takes to survive and earn money is not a foreign concept in modern Korea. Chae-min's character shows another struggle felt by many Koreans in that he struggles between his responsibility as a son and his self-identity. Shin notes that Korean films that deal with queer themes do so in a space outside of the family, but an alternative queer space is not provided, unlike in western films (Shin 2013, 91). Though he wants to please his parents, he must sacrifice a part of himself to do so and grapples with how to handle that.

Even the background characters show various parts of Korean life in which viewers may relate but do so while partaking in work at a host bar in which they have sexual relations other males. This relatability and setting is grounded in reality and may make it difficult for some viewers to process the queer spaces that are represented in the film. It is in the host bar where these gay Korean men have created their own space where they can meet and

converse. Unfortunately, this alternative queer space is also a place in which men come to pay for secretive intimate relations with these men, demonstrating that the bar remains a secretive and somewhat shameful space to engage in homosexual relations.

3.2.3. Balancing Ideal Images

No Regret also offers an idealized approach to Korean society's views on homosexuality. Chae-min's mother acknowledges his identity as a gay man which speaks to the social progression of recent generations yet asks him to marry his fiancée so the family can save their social image. While Chae-min continues to struggle between family and individual responsibilities, his family is more concerned by his marital status. It has also been noted that Su-min's colleagues and those at the orphanage are not deterred by Su-min's open homosexuality (Kwon 2019, 138). In this way the film plays into the fantasy of a Korean society in which sexual identity can be freely expressed. This idealism can either be an escape for queer viewers or make the content more difficult to relate to.

The idealized image of open sexuality identity is limited by the presence of self-hatred seen in the interactions between Su-min and Chae-min at the beginning of their relationship. After their first-time having intercourse, before beginning their relationship, Su-min calls Chae-min disgusting and after the second time Su-min again calls Chae-min disgusting and degrades their sexual activities. Here the film criticizes the self-hatred that queer individuals have formed from societies teachings of homosexuality as abnormal and confronts them (Chung & Diffrient 2021, 95). It is in these moments that we see Su-min's resistance to his own sexual preferences and the views placed on them are voiced out by those involved. The resistance comes from a place of self-loathing in Su-min who is resisting falling in love with a client who is paying for sexual acts, making it unclear if the remarks are coming from the homosexual elements of the relations or other factors. Through the voicing of these thoughts Su-min can work past these

blockades and accept Chae-min as his partner.

The discussed elements of *No Regret* act together to normalize homosexuality in the Korean context, showing the characters as a part of Korean society instead of outside of it. Besides Su-min's resistance during his sexual acts with Chae-min, the film presents homosexuality as natural and on par with heterosexuality. Men freely come to the host bar to partake in same-sex relations and freely enter relationships with other men. The combination of characters who reflect everyday people in Korea and the contemporary setting creates a film in which viewers will be able to relate to the gay male characters. This can do one of two things: gay Korean men can relate to this film and claim it as their own, or heterosexual audiences who are not familiar with queerness in the Korean context can become uncomfortable with this display of queerness within Korean society and deny it.

3.3. Differing Approaches in *The King and the Clown* and *No Regret*

Comparisons between *The King and the Clown* and *No Regret* have been explored by multiple scholars as these films were released a year apart and share similarities in their capitalization of female viewership and homosexual love storylines. What these comparisons frequently lack is the recognition of what these differing approaches tell us about the audiences these films are catered to. While *The King and the Clown* found commercial success which earned it its place as a frequently cited influence, *No Regret* saw less success in the commercial circuit but its popularity among queer viewers and critics has made it an influential film in Korean queer cinema history. *No Regret* had 42,029 total admissions, less than 0.5% of the admissions seen for *The King and the Clown* (Korean Film Council, n.d.b). Both films have been credited as influential films and cover similar elements of male homosexuality yet saw vastly different viewership and took markedly different approaches to homosexuality.

There are multiple factors which can influence this difference in viewership such as the large gap in the number of screens the film

was released onto, the promotion of each film before release, the quality of production, and their target audience. *The King and the Clown* was given an advantage in viewership. This is seen in the number of screens *The King and the Clown*, and *No Regret* were released on, 313 and 8 respectively and the budgets of these films, *The King and the Clown* having a budget of \$3.5 million USD and *No Regret* having a budget of \$100,000 USD. Although both films were distributed by CJ Entertainment, *No Regret's* status as an independent film meant it did not have the same opportunity for viewership and thus comparing the films on viewership alone does not give credit to the success *No Regret* gained.

Both films have been praised for their writing and directing thus stating their difference in success is due to their quality would be an invalid argument. It is their target audience and the freedom around production that comes with it which mark the films differing approaches to homosexuality. As *The King and the Clown* was created to be widely released, the production team needed to create a film which would appeal to the Korean masses and thus needed to consider the way Koreans approach queerness. In this way *No Regret* was at an advantage as it was produced as an indie film meaning that there is inherently a more flexible approach to taboo content. Indie films are not constrained in attempting to appeal to large audiences and queer cinema has historically been intertwined with independent cinema because of this freedom. It is with these differences in mind that we compare these two films.

3.3.1. Influences Behind the Screen

Where *The King and the Clown* frames homosexuality as outside of the norm, *No Regret* offers a realist approach that demonstrates the struggles queer Koreans face. This difference can be partially attributed to the directors' individual identities. When analyzing films, we must keep in mind the context in which the film was made and those involved in the production process. It is unfortunately common for films to have a disproportionate number of queer representations on screen and behind the scenes. Although

The King and the Clown features queer characters, the actors portraying these characters present as heterosexual as does the director Lee Joon-ik^⑦. This is important to keep in mind as those in the creative process have likely not experienced the struggles queer Koreans face daily.

Lee was inspired by the play “Yi” and changed elements of it which made the homosexual themes harder to pinpoint. He has been reluctant to define the film as homosexual and has stated that the homosexuality in the film is more in line with the classical Korean view of homosexuality as a practice rather than a preference or fate (Onishi 2006). In contrast Lee-song Hee-il, the director of *No Regret*, has a history of being a LGBTQ+ activist and has come out as openly gay himself (Chung & Diffrient 2021, 85). Lee-Song’s identity as a queer creator means that he is intimately familiar with the experiences of gay men in Korea. The two directors have very different approaches to the homosexual elements of their films which stems from their own identity and relation to queerness.

Their openness to labeling their film as a queer film is also instrumental in analyzing the approach to queerness in each film as the context of Korea in the 2000s means that creating a film featuring a homosexual relationship will bring the unavoidable discussion of this content. It is interesting how these two films show the contrasting images of homosexuality throughout Korean history. Set in historical times, *The King and the Clown* shows homosexuality in Korean terms. Male groups who have been historically documented to take part in same-sex relations do so, but these actions do not define their identity. Unfortunately, the film’s portrayal of Kong-gil as dominantly feminine takes away from this aspect as it reinforces the stereotype associated with the effeminate gay man. *No Regret* contrasts this type of practice by demonstrating the newer westernized version of homosexuality in modern Korea where being in a same-sex relationship comes with

^⑦ It has not been explicitly stated that Lee Joon-gi, Kam Woo-sung, and Jeong Jin-yeong are homosexual or queer.

the label of being homosexual. These differing approaches to male homosexuality are formed by the directors' identities and where they were trying to place their characters in relation to the period of the film.

3.3.2. Discretion of Homosexual Presence

As mentioned in the previous chapter, queerness is most comfortable to many Koreans in a foreign context so placing it directly into Korean everyday life will not appeal to audience members. This leads to *No Regret* having less of a chance of success in the commercial film sphere where it will be too provocative for viewers. *The King and the Clown* gains more success in its subtle approach for this reason. Being set in the past and featuring characters who are outside of normal society allows for some distance to be placed between the audience and the queer elements. Though exposure to queer themes and people through film will aid the improvement of positive attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community, the kind of exposure is critical as brash exposure can cause those already adverse to queerness to double down on their prejudice and make matters worse.

Where *The King and the Clown* features one onscreen kiss, which is nonconsensual, *No Regret* contains multiple moments of male-male intimacy and even has two explicit scenes between Su-min and Chae-min. It can be argued that the presence of these intimate scenes could contribute to the film's limitation on wide scale release, yet the popularity of erotic films in the 1970s and 1980s and the later success of *The Handmaiden*, expanded on in chapter 4, points to the sexual elements of these films being socially acceptable. *No Regret* does not attempt to hide its intimacy or display it as a shameful act.

Online reviews of these films reflect the effect of portraying a more obvious homosexual relationship. While reviews of *The King and the Clown* do not mention the queer themes, reviews of *No Regret* are largely about the queer aspects of the film. Some positive reviews are telling of the continued dichotomy of Korean

LGBTQ+ acceptance. In July of 2013, an online viewer wrote “A movie that broke all misconceptions I had of homosexuality. They are just two people who love each other. Now I just accept gay people for who they are, because love is love. It’s not wrong, just different. The actors are also fantastic. I don’t know how they endured it” (Naver, 2013). While this reviewer claims that they have overcome their prejudice, their final comment implies that they believe it would have been difficult for the actors to play out the homosexual scenes. This last comment negates the message that homosexuality is not wrong as it is something that must be endured. These reviews also showed a trend in viewers stating they enjoyed the film although they are not queer themselves, revealing a misconception that one must be queer to consume and enjoy content with queer themes. Reviews by the public reflect a kind of hidden disconnection from queerness in which they can acknowledge it but need to clarify that they are not queer themselves. *The King and the Clown*’s ambiguous approach to its homosexual relationship and *No Regret* direct display of homosexual romance change how viewers approach the film and queerness.

3.4. Issues in Representation of Male Queerness

As filmmakers need to consider the target audience of their films and prevent widespread backlash when discussing taboo topics such as queerness, the creation of films like *The King and the Clown* provide insight into the views of homosexuality in Korea while also reinforcing those ideas. For instance, the aforementioned flower boy formula that is capitalized on in *The King and the Clown* connects the homosexual love triangle to a familiar heterosexual framework, allowing Korean viewers who have never encountered a homosexual relationship to recognize that they are like heterosexual ones. It also creates the issue of reinforcing ideas that homosexual men must be feminine in some sort of way or that homosexual men are all attracted to feminine individuals.

The image of the beautiful gay man that has been perpetuated by these kinds of films has been criticized for alienating parts of the

LGBTQ+ communities as many actual gay men do not fall into this category (Chung & Diffrient 2021, 99). While the representation of queer individuals through film is important as it introduces many Koreans to queerness, representing an idealized form of the queer individual does little to aid in the acceptance of queerness into everyday life. The issues of stereotypical images of what it means to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or other identities can already be seen in LGBTQ+ communities who cast aside their peers because of socially constructed prejudice against those not fitting into the image of certain identities. The representation that is being presented should account for these issues by avoiding these idealized forms of what it means to be queer.

Films featuring male–male relationships, regardless of how these relationships are presented, also run the risk of falling victim to female fetishization or often cater to it to gain a wider audience. Though it can be argued that any representation is better than no representation, who is connecting with these characters and stories needs to be considered to see if the representation is effective at all. Scholar Jungmin Kwon notes that the viewers who most connect with these male–male relationships are young females who are being catered to. The commercialization of fan culture in Korea has led to the marginalization of gay men through representing them how female fans want rather than how the gay men themselves want (Kwon 2019, 101). In this way a film can contain gay men but not represent them.

Trends of catering to female viewers, or simply heterosexual viewers, can be seen throughout popular films of the 2000s that feature queer themes such as *Antique* (*Söyang goltongyang gwajajöm aent'ik'üs*, 2008) and *A Frozen Flower* (*Ssanghwajöm*, 2008) who reached success using similar tactics. An additional layer to the issue of audience is that many queer individuals may feel uncomfortable viewing these films in fear of being outed. It is difficult for filmmakers to obtain a large number of admissions while also catering to the queer viewer since the size of these audiences are unknown and many hope to remain that way. To critically

analyze the representation in these films we need to look at who these films are being made for and who is claiming them as their own. This leads to the explanation of why *The King and the Clown* was able to find mainstream success with young female audiences while *No Regret* was more popular in the queer community.

In the following chapter I will be analyzing two films from the 2010s, *The Handmaiden* (2016) and *Jane* (2016), which feature alternative approaches to queerness in the Korean context. These films demonstrate a move towards representing queer individuals who are outside of the beautiful gay man category that had been the focus of Korean film in the 2000s. Through the analysis of these films, we will be able to see how other identities in the LBGTQ+ community are approached in a way which maintains the distance between the film and the viewer.

Chapter 4. Films of the 2010s

Whereas *The King and the Clown* and *No Regret* capitalized on the popularity of gay men in Korean media, films containing queer elements in the late 2010s take a different approach, presenting varying individuals in the LGBTQ+ community and questioning what qualifies as queerness and family in Korean society. In this section I will look at two films from the late 2010s, *The Handmaiden* (2016) and *Jane* (2017), which focus on the concepts of a queer family, lesbianism, and transgender identity. First, I will do an individual analysis of each film that will be followed by a comparison of the two films' approaches to queerness.

These films demonstrate what Scholar Ungsan Kim calls “the critical social turn” of Korean cinema. Kim uses a broader definition of queerness that goes beyond the identities of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender, including those going against the heteronormative aspects of society (Kim 2018, 92). This broader definition includes those challenging the male led family structure that has dominated Korean society, such as those desiring same-sex marriage or mixed households. The critical social turn is reflected in the changes in Korean queer film as they moved from focusing on male-male relationships to other forms of sexual identity and the “intimate relations that bind various social others together” (Kim 2018, 91).

The change in the subjects being broached by Korean queer cinema reflect the overall Korean LGBTQ+ communities' growth and desire for rights to family building. The same year *The Handmaiden* was released, a South Korean court rejected a court case which asked for recognition of same-sex marriage under Korean law. While other countries were passing bills to acknowledge same-sex marriage and assist in family building, South Korea continued to deny equal rights to LGBTQ+ individuals and cut off their access to family based social benefits. Although unable to legally form families, households which do not fit the

heteronormative form set out by Confucianism are present in Korea and commonly contain LGBTQ+ individuals. The definition of what it means to be queer is ever expanding in Korean society and thus the definition of Korean queer cinema must expand with it beyond the coming out stories which marked Korean queer cinema in the twentieth century (Chung & Diffrient 2021, 96). Both *The Handmaiden* and *Jane* explore this extended boundary of queerness and found family.

4.1. *The Handmaiden* (2016)

The Handmaiden, directed by Park Chan-wook, offers a complex non-linear storyline taking place in three acts. Based on the novel *Fingersmith* by Welsh novelist Sarah Waters, the film gained popularity with domestic and international audiences. Released onto 1,171 screens, the film had 4.2 million admissions domestically (Korean Film Council, n.d.c). While the original novel takes place in Victorian-era Britain, Park adopted the story line to take place in Japanese occupied Korea in the 1930s.

Set in Japanese-occupied Korea, *The Handmaiden* tells the story of a conman going by the alias “Count Fujiwara,” who hires a female pickpocket named Sook-hee to help him seduce a Japanese heiress named Lady Hideko so he can marry her and have her committed to an asylum to steal her inheritance. Sook-hee becomes her maid and is tasked with encouraging Hideko to marry the conman. Her main job is to help Hideko prepare to read erotic novels for her Uncle Kouzuki’s guests. Kouzuki is a Korean man who assisted the Japanese in taking over Korea in return for wealth, which he uses to collect and forge rare books.

After a bad reading session, Hideko asks Sook-hee to sleep next to her and the two have intercourse. Sook-hee states she is going to help Hideko prepare for married life and teach her how to please a male lover. Although showing some reluctance to the plan, Sook-hee urges Hideko to marry Fujiwara after Hideko tells her she loves someone who is not him. Hideko and the count elope and cash out her inheritance. Upon arriving at the asylum, it is revealed that Hideko and Fujiwara had been working together and Sook-hee

is committed to the asylum under Hideko's name.

The second act begins with flashbacks of Hideko's uncle teaching her to read explicit pornography from an early age. Her aunt hangs herself after being psychologically and physically abused, leaving Hideko to take the role of reading explicit scenes during her uncle's book auctions. Hideko later learns that her uncle had hanged her aunt after she had attempted to run away. When Fujiwara meets Hideko after assisting her uncle in making forgeries, he realizes he will not be able to seduce her and decides to include her in the plan to elope and split the inheritance. Fujiwara gives Hideko a vial of opium to commit suicide if she is taken to her uncle's basement again, where it has been implied horrific events take place.

Hideko asks him to hire a maid to commit to the asylum in her place but upon spending time with Sook-hee, Hideko falls in love with her. An extended scene of Sook-hee and Hideko making love in the first act is shown. After her failed confession Hideko attempts to hang herself but is saved by Sook-hee who confesses she was trying to swindle Hideko. The two reveal their deception and Hideko helps the illiterate Sook-hee write to her family, creating a plot to get the two women away from the men who have been using them. Upon learning about the books Hideko has been forced to read and the aggressive sexual acts they depict, Sook-hee destroys the library.

The third and final act begins with Hideko and the count leaving Sook-hee at the asylum. Fujiwara asks Hideko to marry him as Sook-hee this time and reveals that the real Sook-hee will soon be dead. Sook-hee's friend sets fire to the asylum, breaking Sook-hee out. Hideko, pretending to seduce Fujiwara, puts the opium he had given her into his wine, causing him to pass out so she can take the cashed-out inheritance and run. Together Sook-hee and Hideko disguise themselves and plan to flee to Shanghai, China. Kouzuki, Hideko's uncle, kidnaps Fujiwara after Hideko sends him a letter describing the count's deception and Kouzuki proceeds to torture Fujiwara in the basement using his book making materials. Kouzuki presses the count for sexual information on Hideko but is

told a made-up story about them consummating their marriage. Fujiwara asks to smoke a cigarette which turns out to be laced with mercury. The toxic smoke produced by the burning cigarette kills them both. The film ends with Sook-hee and Hideko on a ship to China making love once again.

4.1.1. Historical Distancing

Much like *The King and the Clown*, *The Handmaiden* uses its historical setting to displace the viewer and create a distance between them and the queer content while using characters who are placed outside of society. The Japanese colonial period of the early twentieth century is a familiar topic to Koreans today as tensions between South Korea and Japan remain 77 years after the end of Japanese colonization. The film's setting is vastly different from the free Korea that is known today, turning it and its storyline into more of a historical tale. In this framing, lesbian relationships are not directly connected to the everyday viewer. The political and cultural tensions that were present during this time also contribute to making the relationship of these women less impactful. Their story is framed within the larger story of the struggle of balancing between Japanese and Korean culture and identity. This is best seen in Hideko who dresses in the Western influenced Japanese style but prefers to speak Korean with Sook-hee, likely attributed to the graphic reading she does being in Japanese. The story focuses on them, but they are ultimately a smaller part of this historical period, something we are reminded of by Hideko's uncle's involvement in handing over his country to Japan. Kouzuki, her uncle, acts as a representation of the ideal colonial subject as he has completely adopted a Japanese identity. Even the house where Hideko and her uncle live is a mixture of Japanese and Western architecture (Rhee 2020, 118). His presence in the film is a reminder of the attempt to replace Korean culture and practices with Japanese ones during Japanese colonization. While the colonization of Korea is not at the forefront of the film, it is constantly looming and reminding viewers of Korea's bleak past.

The context of the film being placed in the Japanese colonial period is significant as it was during this time that anti-homosexual thinking was reinforced in Korean society and there was a rise in interest in erotic-grotesque books and images, which typically commodified female sexuality (Rhee 2020, 117). The Japanese influence of heteronormativity contributes to the oppression of the women and Sook-hee taking on a male role to fit the expectations of the time. Both Kouzuki and Count Fujiwara show dominance over Hideko and Sook-hee through abusive actions and sexual advances. Although it is never shown, it is implied that Hideko is abused by her uncle and if she were to stay with Fujiwara, he would sexually abuse her, as seen after they are married. Sook-hee is also pushed around by Fujiwara but can take back her power by taking his place through a relationship with Hideko. These men's aggression and belief in their power over women appears to stem from their frequent consumption of pornographic literature. The images in these erotic books depict graphic sex scenes, dominantly involving women. This along with the disciplined way Hideko is asked to read out the scenes, almost as if to maximize the sensuality, demonstrates how women are commodified through these texts. Women are given no agency and seen as a source of male pleasure, removing the possibility for a sexual dynamic with only one gender.

4.1.2. Gender Frameworks

Similar to the gender mapping seen in *The King and the Clown*, Sook-hee is portrayed as being the "male" in the relationship, creating a heteronormative framework where the lesbian relationship is placed. The first intimate encounter between the women is done under the premise of Sook-hee teaching Hideko how to please Fujiwara once they are married. Her association with masculinity is emphasized by her aggressive nature and Hideko's contrasting overly feminine appearance and docile, yet cold, nature. Throughout the film Sook-hee is the one who goes against the men directly and is the one who ends up destroying the library containing the oppressive literature. In this way a "male" presence

is introduced into a space constructed to have an absence of males. Lesbians face an intersectionality where they are not only non-heterosexual but also female, creating unique struggles that are undermined by placing the relationship in a heterosexual framework. These women exist in a society that is dominated by males yet live in an individual sphere in which men are absent.

Sook-hee's relation to masculinity and the male role can be read differently depending on if one is focusing on feminism or lesbianism. Sook-hee playing the male role becomes her way of challenging the patriarchy, undermining the need for men in her relationships and social spaces. The gender mapping on Sook-hee offers a unique dynamic as male roles are introduced to the female-centered relationship yet at the same time Sook-hee's co-option of the roles removes the necessity to include men. From a lesbian standpoint the relationship is problemated by heteronormative structures, but from a feminist perspective women reclaim these roles. The film introduces Sook-hee as a kind of male stand-in that can create a more familiar relationship structure for Korean viewers, as was also true in *The King and the Clown*.

4.1.3. Feminist or Lesbian

Although *The Handmaiden* features a lesbian couple, its content is approached in a way that is more feminist in nature rather than representing lesbian identities, bringing attention to queer women in a format which is more familiar, yet still contested. It need be noted that lesbian activism and feminist activism, while both focusing on women and influenced by the oppression of women in society, are two separate movements who can have clashing goals. Where feminism is concerned with challenging patriarchy, lesbian activism, like LGBTQ+ activism, is concerned with the heteronormative aspects of society and the rights of women in same-sex relations. These two branches of the women's movement have overlapping agendas but must be recognized as two separate movements.

To understand how the film is feminist rather than lesbian leaning, one must first understand how the feminist and lesbian

movements in Korea interact and view each other. Unlike in the United States where the feminist movement stemmed from women's need for rights, the Korean feminist movement was developed as an academic subject to be studied, possibly limiting the movements range of interest (Park–Kim et. al 2007,179). The United States case allowed for lesbians who were fighting for their own rights to share a common goal with the feminist movement. In the Korean case the two movements have seen little overlap in their approaches to increasing rights. The feminist movement has been dominantly concerned with fighting against gender roles and sexual violence against women. These issues put the focus onto heterosexual relationships, leaving little room for lesbians (Park–Kim et. al 2007, 182). This led to the women's rights movement being considered distinct from that of lesbians and spurred on a reluctance to form a connection between the two. Regardless of the overlap in issues faced by queer and heterosexual women, feminist issues were framed as heterosexual issues that could only be solved by heterosexual women (Park et al. 2007, 177).

The divide in these movements is made larger due to homophobia within the feminist movement. Feminist activists have been reluctant to work with queer women as some activists have stated they could not work with lesbians (Park–Kim et. al 2007, 169). Being a feminist does not mean that one cannot also hold homophobic ideologies. The Korean feminist movement has fallen victim to the heterosexual framework that dominates Korean society, leading feminist activists to view lesbians as a homogenous “sexual minority” with issues that lie outside of those of feminists. Reluctance of feminists to collaborate with the lesbian activists have led to feminist groups estranging themselves from feminist groups all together. Scholar Eun Jung Kwon–Lee suggests two paths for lesbian activists, continuing to build solidarity with feminist groups or build their own movement independent of feminist groups which will form different plans of actions to achieve the same goal (Park et. al 2007, 185). The decision of which path lesbian activists will take will be dependent on minimizing the divide between them and

feminists who are anti-LGBTQ+.

That is not to say that there is a solid divide between who is a feminist activist and who is a lesbian activist. There are women who identify as both female and lesbian who participate in activism. In fact, it was the presence of members of Kirikiri, the lesbian rights movement group, in Women's Studies and feminist activist groups which led to feminist taking an interest in lesbian rights organizations (Park-Kim et. al 2007, 171). The relationship between these groups is not black and white as both groups face oppression under the patriarchy. Approaches to dismantling the male dominated society can come from either or both movements. Their separation stemmed from their groups developing independently and lesbians attempt to shield themselves from harassment. This has come in the form of harassment from anti-LGBTQ women activists in lesbian bars and other safe spaces (Jones 2020, 275). To protect their safety, lesbian activists have been more conscious of the visibility they put on the movement and which groups they interact with. The division between the two activist groups creates the appearance that one is either a feminist or lesbian activist when in reality the goals that both groups fight for are similar, such as the dismantling of the patriarchy and reduction of sexual violence. Because of the misunderstanding of the intricacies of the relationship between these movements goals and approaches to achieving them, attempts to show lesbian liberalization may lean more towards a heterosexual feminist approach. As of the late 2000s, lesbian and feminist groups have begun to work together more providing hope for these two groups to be recognized as complementary rather than opposing movements.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, lesbians faced oppression not only as queer women but also within the LGBTQ+ community where they felt their concerns came second to gay men. Lesbian activists worked independently for much of the 1990s and 2000s because of their identity as both women and queer minorities. This independence has made it difficult for not only the movement but

also the lesbian identity to be recognized. The lack of recognition of the intersectionality lesbians face comes through in *The Handmaiden*. The author of *Fingersmith*, who identifies as a lesbian, has stated “I’m writing with a clear lesbian agenda in the novels” (Lo 2006). Despite this, the lesbian representation in the film adaptation is lacking due to the voyeuristic scenes of intimacy between the two female characters and the way these women rebel against their male oppressors.

Ultimately the lesbian aspects of the film are pushed back in favor of a feminist narrative although the original novel was written by a lesbian woman and the film was directed by a man. This is reflective of Korean society where feminism, while declining in popularity, has gained more public attention than lesbian activism or even LGBTQ+ activism. Scholar Suk-Koo Rhee argues that “Park places the issue of the erotic-grotesque culture of colonial Korea and its commodification of female sexuality at the center of his film” (Rhee 2020, 117). In this way lesbianism is made into a B plot. The oppression of both women by the men in their lives is readily apparent but the aspects of their lesbian relationship and lesbianism as an identity is not. *The Handmaiden* takes a historical approach to homosexuality in that it is not framed as an identity but rather as an activity one partakes in. While one approach to sexuality is not necessarily better than the other, the idea of homosexuality as being an autonomous alterable, can be damaging to the representation of homosexuality in a society where neither definition of the concept is fully understood nor accepted. The relationship between the two women appears to be led by physical desire and their lesbianism is framed as coming from the abuse they faced from the men around them. By creating a relationship based on two women who are rebelling against the male dominating their life, the film creates the issue of presenting lesbianism as an identity one adopts due to abuse or an aversion to men.

4.1.4. Distancing Through Intimacy

Both the feminist and lesbian activist aspects of *The*

Handmaiden are undermined by the three intimate scenes between Sook-*hee* and Hideko. The film takes a voyeuristic approach in these films, displaying the female body in pleasure in long shots which do little to add to the overall story. Though included with good intentions, the execution of the intimate scenes ultimately reduces the legitimacy of the female same-sex relationship as it creates a fetishization of this relationship by male viewers (Shin 2019, 7). These elements put emphasis on the way women's bodies are commodified, while the film ironically commodifies them itself. The angles used in the cinematography point to a fetishistic representation of lesbian sexuality which caters to men. The camera stays in Sook-*hee*'s point of view with its continuous focus on Hideko. With the scene beginning with Sook-*hee* putting herself into the place of the man Hideko will marry, male viewers are able to take on the identity of Sook-*hee* and place themselves in her role. This offers an interesting spin on the fangirl approach of the early 2000s in which they placed themselves into male relationships but carries with it the same issue of using homosexual relations for heterosexual fetishism. Though Waters, the author of the original text, came out as a lesbian herself, the film adaptation is told by a male director, adding into the story unconscious male views.

This contrasts with the way the film approaches the nude male body. While the female body is repeatedly shown in pleasure, the male body is shown being inflicted with pain. This can be seen in the scene of Hideko's reading where the male audience listens to her read about males being whipped in a sexual manner and the listeners imagine themselves in the scenario (Park 2016, 1:24:20). Men are continuously shown as being impotent while women are not. Initially it is Hideko who is on the receiving end of the whipping but the scene cuts to a close-up of Hideko reading as she begins acting out the whipping. The scene quite literally reverses the roles of who has power as the action takes place. Male bodies are further seen when Fujiwara is being drugged by Hideo and again when he is being tortured in Kouzuki's basement. Though the female characters are being mentally tormented by those around them, the

female body is only shown in pleasure. It need also be noted that throughout the film more of the female body is showcased compared to the male body. Waters states *Fingersmith* “was about finding space for women to be with each other away from prying eyes” yet ironically the film takes a voyeuristic approach to these moments of intimacy which would have benefitted from a more nuanced approach (Armitstead 2017). By associating the nude female body with pleasure and arousal, it is commodified while the male body is not, as it is shown in pain. A voyeuristic approach makes the content easier to consume as it removes the recognition of lesbians as a struggling minority group by making them a product to be consumed.

These intimate scenes also act as an additional, though minimal, distancing technique that adds a shock value which distracts the viewer from the lesbian elements and frames these moments as more of a spectacle than a mode for a social message. Part of the reason the film contains a high number of erotic scenes is due to the attempt to create a visual translation of the eroticism present in the novel (Shin 2019, 12). The formation of Sook-hee and Hideko’s relationship is shown through their physical interactions which are marked by high levels of sexual tension. When Sook-hee treats Hideko’s tooth pain while she bathes, a mundane medicinal action is given sexual context through long gazes and slow movements between the two (Park 2016, 21:30). Extreme close-ups of Hideko’s naked chest, Sook-hee licking her own lips, and Hideko’s rubbing of Sook-hee’s elbow create a sense of eroticism, setting the tone for the two’s future interactions. Shocking scenes cause viewers to approach the film differently, especially if these scenes are sexual in nature. Rather than viewing these films as containing social commentary, they are consumed purely as entertainment.

These shocking scenes are not limited to the interactions between the two women as multiple books from Kouzuki’s collection of aggressive pornography are shown throughout the film along with male fantasies of being whipped for pleasure during Hideko’s

reading sessions. The violence of the film escalates most at the end as Fujiwara's fingers are removed while he is being tortured by Kouzuki. By providing scenes that are shocking in their brazen showing of intimacy and violence, the film removes the viewer from the story. Viewers will be likely to remove themselves completely from the film's context due to discomfort, or in the more intimate scenes they may wish to take the place of one of the characters, not to relate with them but rather for personal pleasure.

4.1.5. Queering of Family

Neither Sook-*hee* nor Hideko have conventional families and the absence of a supportive family structure is what led them to form a family together. Sook-*hee* is an orphan who has been taken in by a group of swindlers while Hideko is under her abusive uncle's care. The families that these women are brought into are corrupt, with Sook-*hee*'s selling infants, and Hideko's being torn apart by the death of her aunt. These families are queered in that they do not follow the heteronormative structure of the father, mother, and two children which is idealized in Korea.

The film goes a step further in that these women are without a family or a country, leaving them without a solid societal base with which to form a family. Through these families the viewer is first introduced to the changing households which were enforced by the Japanese. Households were changed to be based on small family units rather than lineage, gradually altering and limiting what was considered a family (Lim, 2019, 6). The abusive family structure Sook-*hee* and Hideko find themselves in is undesirable and the women seek to form a family unit of their own composed of just the two of them. While the formation of a queer family is difficult to interpret, the queering of families due to Japanese colonization is not an unfamiliar concept to modern day Korea which is experiencing a declining birthrate and influx of mixed families. By placing a queer version of family into a context Koreans are familiar with, the unconventional family unit is brought back into Korean society but the colonial setting places it in a context which is

separate from modern day.

4.1.6. Audiences of Lesbian Films

Films featuring lesbian themes are significant in that they cater to a group of women who have likely been unable to connect to the male–male love stories which dominated the queer film in the 2000s. While these male–male romance films could be used by women as a means of placing themselves into a relationship where both parties are equal to both each other and society, this effect may not have been possible for many lesbians. Early Korean lesbian films such as *Ascetic* (1976) and *Memento Mori* (1999) offer some representation of lesbianism in the Korean context, but the lesbian elements of these films remain largely invisible, making it difficult for lesbian women to claim these films as their own. Lesbian films have also been connected to a sexual approach. *Ascetic* was made as racy as possible due to the heavy censorship of the time, but these explicit elements did not directly translate to more apparent representation (Kim and Singer 2011, 120)[®]. This can also be said for *The Handmaiden*. Multiple low rated reviews of *The Handmaiden* explicitly mention that the film leaned more towards pornography than cinema. Though these reviews can be influenced by a bias against the lesbian elements as noted by a one–star review which simply stated, “Lesbian film” (Naver c). Increased explicit scenes could have added to the aversion to the film for lesbian women and other viewers.

4.2. *Jane* (2017)

Directed by Cho Hyun–hoon, *Jane* was released on 86 screens, gaining 25,110 admissions domestically (Korean Film Council, n.d.d). The film focuses on the isolation of a young girl named So–hyun and her journey to find community. The Korean title *Kkum–ui Je–in* (Jane of Dream) alluded to the dreams one has when they sleep and the dreams one hopes for (Cho 2016, 1:14).

[®] Films which have successfully explored lesbian sexuality include the Canadian films *When Night is Falling* (1995) and *High Art* (1998) (Gillotti 2005, 42).

Jane depicts the life of a young runaway and her attempts to find a family. The film begins with a narration by So-hyun describing how she has recently been abandoned by her boyfriend Jung-ho in the middle of the night while staying in a motel. The scene cuts to So-hyun sitting with a group of people who show annoyance at her retelling this story. The camera reveals a foot hanging out of a suitcase behind the groups before cutting to them burying something in the woods. Back at the hotel after attempting to kill herself by cutting her wrists, So-hyun is saved and taken in by a transgender woman named Jane. Together with three other young adults, So-hyun joins Jane's family who refer to Jane as mom. Throughout the first part of the film, we are introduced to the dynamic between this family and how Jane teaches them to care for each other. Though she cares for her children, Jane herself is struggling with anorexia and the loss of Jung-ho, So-hyun's former boyfriend, who she worked with and referred to as her lover. After a failed attempt to cut her wrists, Jane jumps from a second story window and is found dead by So-hyun. The group of kids bury Jane in a shallow grave in the woods before going their separate ways.

So-hyun then joins another family led by an abusive man who they refer to as dad. He hits So-hyun and accuses her of stealing money. When a new member named Ji-su joins the family, So-hyun discovers she has a secret job and is saving up money to rent a room for her and her younger sister. So-hyun promises to keep Ji-su's job and money a secret and the two become close. After Ji-su is accused of stealing money from the family, she says her and So-hyun are leaving, though she previously denied So-hyun's request to live with her. The dad locks Ji-su into a room and it is implied that she is sexually abused by men paying the dad, as had been done to him by his mother. Two of the family members who are close to Ji-su attempt to kill the dad and are thrown out of the family. After Ji-su attempts to escape through the window, So-hyun looks out as she did when Jane died and Ji-su is brought back to the house wrapped in a blanket. The group is shown sitting

around the house in the scene from the beginning of the film and it is revealed it was Ji-su who they had buried in the woods. When the dad tries to split up the money Ji-su had been saving, So-hyun attacks him and one of the family members hits the dad with a shovel multiple times. They burn his dead body in a trash pile and So-hyun is once again left on her own. She reminisces about her time with Jane and Jane's message of how life is horrible but there are good moments which make it worth living.

4.2.1. Transgender Visibility

The transgender elements of *Jane* can be difficult to see as although the film is titled "Jane," her character is only present for about 40 minutes of screentime total. It is unclear whether Jane is an actual person or if she has been made up by So-hyun who is desperately looking for a family. Jane acts as a kind of mother figure to So-hyun but also seems to be struggling with similar issues. Both Jane and So-hyun are upset over Jung-ho leaving and attempt to kill themselves, with Jane succeeding. In this way Jane can be seen not only as an illusion made up for comfort but also one which plays out So-hyun's desire to no longer live. The ambiguity of whether Jane is real or not is problematic because transgender representation in Korean film is limited so to have an ambiguous transgender character is less meaningful. It is possible that this element of the film can be seen as an analogy for transgender individuals feeling as though they themselves are not real as they are pressured to hide their true identities. Jane's limited presence in the film makes it difficult to identify the nuances of her character.

The presence of a transgender character at all speaks to the changes in queer representation in the Korean queer film circuit. Jane's identity as a transgender woman is only alluded to twice in the film, both when she is telling So-hyun about how others put an identity on her because of what kind of genitalia she has rather than how she presents. This contrasts how in *The King and the Clown* the opposite is true, regardless of his identity as a man, Kong-gil is likened to a woman. The film does not put Jane's transgender

identity at the forefront of the film but rather takes it as being natural. Though transgender, the emphasis is on Jane as the head of an unconventional household rather than her gender identity. Jane as a transgender character will not go unnoticed by many Korean viewers as cross-dressing and drag performance are not unheard of in entertainment. The popularity of musicals such as *Kinky Boots* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* allude to a growing, though still stereotyped, and limited awareness of this practice. As being transgender and participating in drag are quite different, it needs to be noted that an acceptance of one does not mean an acceptance of the other. While Korean viewers may recognize Jane as not being a cis woman, they may not accept this as an indication of being transgender.

Jane's transgender identity is emphasized through the use of cinematic techniques. The lighting throughout the film is consciously used to highlight the characters yet Jane is continuously given a softer light than others. This speaks not only of Jane's gentle nature but also makes her appear more feminine. The first time the viewer sees Jane, she is shown standing in the doorway as So-hyun answers the door (Cho 2017, 4:26). A soft light shines on her, blurring her in a way reminiscent of early Hollywood in which females were given a softer light to appear more feminine. From this first look, Jane is framed as a kind of classic beauty with her neatly done makeup and wardrobe. The gentle framing around Jane also adds to So-hyun's gentle dream-like approach to Jane. The attention Jane gains is demonstrated through the different lighting used on her which frames her differently from the other women in the film.

Along with the differing lighting approaches, Jane is also continuously shown wearing sophisticated dresses and coats which give off a kind of high-class appearance. Jane is always shown in a feminine manner with her tidy appearance and caring nature. Her confidence in her identity is reflected in her attention-grabbing outfits and the way she walks and interacts with others. While she seems confident it seems as though she is struggling still as her

health begins to deteriorate. Even as Jane's health begins to deteriorate due to her presumed eating disorder, she keeps her appearance clean and fashionable. This femininity is highlighted by So-hyun's style which commonly comprises of sweatshirts and pants. In this way Jane follows the heteronormative appearance expectations of women more than the cis women in the film.

Reviewers of the film rarely mention Jane as a transgender character and instead focus on her as a caretaker. Jane's role as a source of comfort is recognized in online reviews such as "A movie that reminds me of Jane I also want to be comforted by Jane" (Naver 2017a). Another online review states "The last 10 minutes... Thanks to those 10 minutes, I have the courage to live this miserable life", recognizing the hope Jane brings (Naver 2017b). Comments like these demonstrate the relatability of a story about the alienation of youth and attempts to build a family in trying times but offer little regarding the recognition that there are transgender elements present in the film. Viewers show a connection to Jane and her speech at the end of the film which highlights the value of the good moments in a terrible life that gives someone a reason to keep going. In moments such as these Jane is a relatable character who offers comfort and her place as a transgender individual is placed in the background.

4.2.2. Approaches to Queerness in *Jane*

Jane takes a subtle approach that breaches two topics that must be examined in Korean society, transgender identity, and alternative family structures, but in a way that is productive. The presence of a transgender character complicates the approach to queer themes as Korea has a more hostile attitude towards transgender individuals than gay, lesbian, and other sexual minorities. *Jane* offers a relaxed approach to a subject that at the time was gaining renewed resistance. In 2020, three years after *Jane*'s release, students at Sookmyung Women's University opposed the enrollment of a transgender student, leading to the student foregoing enrollment (Cho 2022, 180). While young female

Koreans show the most acceptance for homosexuality, this does not appear to be the case for transgender individuals who remain marginalized by society.

Were *Jane* to take a louder approach to Jane's transgender identity, making it the forefront of the film, rather than aiding in the formation of positive views of these individuals, it could have acted to re-enforce biases against them. Since the subject of transgender identity is not discussed as much in Korea, nor as accepted, it needs to take a different approach than homosexual storylines. By making the queering of the family structure a focal point, transgender identities can be introduced in association with issues that Koreans outside of the LGBTQ+ community also experience, making them more relatable. Not only does this approach make this unfamiliar terrain accessible to Korean audiences, but it does so in a way that rather than masking Jane, places her as a source of comfort.

An issue with this subtle approach is that the transgender aspect of Jane's character is almost too subtle. The presence of a transgender character, one that we are not even sure exists, is not enough to spark debate on the human rights issues that these individuals face. It is here that we teeter on the line of how much representation is needed to make a change, a debate that cannot be covered in the span of one paper. The independent status of *Jane* gives it more leeway to express the harsh reality of LGBTQ+ individuals in Korea, yet it is this freedom that causes the film's storytelling techniques to make it difficult to recognize the transgender presence. Reception of the film has been positive with the overall critique that *Jane* is too subtle in its content which is lost. Online reviews point to the theme of the film being taken as that of the sad life of a young girl who finds comfort in Jane. Whether it would benefit the film to explicitly point to Jane's transgender identity is questionable as transgender identity is ultimately up to the discretion of the individual and does not need to be put on display. One must grapple with the question of if transgender presence in Korean society needs to be recognized to secure their

rights or will placing attention on these individuals and politicizing their identity in film act to alienate them further, creating an idea that these people must live publicly.

4.2.3. Redefining Family

This film challenges what it means to be a family in Korean society and which roles are played by who. In So-hyun's first family with Jane there lacks a male-breadwinner as Jane, a transgender woman, is the sole head of the household. Jane's transgender identity has a possibility to be problematic as her being born as a male can be read as the household still holding a male head, but I argue that Jane being transgender should be read as a symbol of the move of the male head of the household to the female head of the house. Regardless of her sex at birth, Jane takes on the role of mother for the children she takes in. Jane's experience as both a man and a woman puts her in a place where she can transcend the given gender roles of the conventional Korean household. Though it is unclear whether Jane is a figment of So-hyun's imagination or a real person in her life, regardless Jane provides the most stable example of a household that So-hyun encounters. Korean society is facing undeniable changes to its family dynamic as the birth rate continues to fall and economic and housing concerns prevent many from attempting to establish a "normal" family structure. As the number of mixed families rises so does the need to recognize these families.

4.2.4. Unconventional Characters as Outside of Society

Those who are a part of unconventional families are shown as being outside of the norm. Jane is the first to be shown as being eccentric, offering a cigarette to a dog and stealing multiple trivial items. The alienation of characters in the film is intentional. Queerness' relation to the theme of the effects of alienation make it difficult to decidedly say that this is being used as a distancing technique as is the case for *The Handmaiden*. Due to its recognition and emphasis on the state of alienation each character is in and the way it negatively impacts the way they are treated by society, the

estrangement of the characters in *Jane* brings the viewers closer to experiences of the characters rather than distancing them. The setting of the film in the modern day adds to this by showing these young people struggling in places that are familiar to the average viewer.

Where the film fails in making these characters relatable is that while Cho wanted to look at the impact of alienation on young people rather than showing the causes, neglecting to show how these people found themselves in their situation distances their struggles (Bechervaise 2016). It is commonly misconstrued that those who find themselves homeless, in poverty, or in times of hardship do so because of their own actions. By failing to provide any sort of background for how these young people became runaways, aside from the loose inference about So-hyun's mother dying, Cho puts assigning these reasons into the viewers hands. Viewers will attribute the characters' runaway status to being of their own volition without recognizing the reality that parental abuse or neglect can lead to youth becoming runaways. As viewers are not given examples of the ways in which youth end up in these unconventional families, Cho puts too much faith in his audience to make difficult connections which may be easier covered with the excuse of deviant adolescent behavior. The character who has the most apparent reason to form a family outside of the norm is Jane who as a transgender woman is unable to have a marriage or family that is recognized by Korean law. This is where the film offers the most discourse on LGBTQ+ rights in Korea where these individuals are forced to the outskirts of society and must reinvent what it means to be part of a family in Korean society.

4.3. Comparison of *The Handmaiden* and *Jane*

The Handmaiden and *Jane* are both limited in the effectiveness of their representation of LGBTQ+ identities. *The Handmaiden* offers a more apparent but voyeuristic representation of lesbian women, while *Jane* takes a subtle but realistic approach to transgender individuals. These limits are influenced by both films exploring the concept of queering of familial bonds and their target

audience which causes them to have differing approaches to queerness. Analyzing these two films reveals that even if the representation of both films is lacking, they still differ in how queerness is related to Korean society.

Where these two films are similar is their approach to the queering of familiar bonds. None of the families shown in *The Handmaiden* and *Jane* reflect the idealized heteronormative household in present day Korea. The films focus on women redefining their place in society and building families regardless of social and political restrictions. *The Handmaiden* has a feminist centered approach while *Jane* has a subtle approach to queer identity which normalizes Jane's female identity. Analysis of these films reveal a shift in thinking about the boundaries of queerness and the relation between family building and the LGBTQ+ community. Not only is the relationship between the LGBTQ+ characters emphasized but so is their relationships with those around them. The queer characters are a part of unconventional families, whether they be good like Jane's or bad like Hideko's, which at the end of the day have the same basic functions and care of other family structures.

Both films place their queer elements as the B plot, opting instead to place their attention on the unconventional households outside of the commonly understood definition of LGBTQ+ that is present in Korean society. The way this is done in each film influences how queerness is presented as either natural or not. In *The Handmaiden* lesbianism is placed as secondary to the feminist message and is framed as deriving from anti-male sentiment. In contrast, *Jane* places Jane's transgender identity as outside of the main narrative but does so while continuing to present being transgender as natural. Though both films could benefit from focusing more on the queer elements in their A plot, they approach these background elements differently, affecting how they are received. With the change in what kinds of queer individuals are being represented, the presence of queer themes has become hazy to viewers with a limited knowledge of queer culture.

Analysis of the films *The Handmaiden* and *Jane*, reveals that queer themes in Korean films have shifted from being dominantly about gay men to focusing on groups within the LGBTQ+ community that are commonly given less attention. Unfortunately, this shift has not meant that the distancing and masking techniques used by filmmakers have lessened. Films that cater to a larger audience, like *The Handmaiden*, continue to place queerness outside of modern Korean society and treat it as a spectacle. Smaller films, like *Jane*, which have gained success in the queer cinema circuit have queer elements that can be lost in the exploration of the formation of family bonds. This neglects to address the issues of individual identities in the LGBTQ+ community which are the base of the human rights campaigns for these groups, issues which must first be addressed to improve LGBTQ+ rights.

The change in the approaches of family are explored in various films of the 2010s beyond the two examined here, including *A Girl at My Door* (Dohui-ya, 2014), *All About My Father* (Yokjeong-i hwalhwal, 2015) and *The Bacchus Lady* (Jugyeojuneun yeoja, 2016) (Kim 2018, 90). The increase in positive attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community along with the growing popularity of Queer festivals, and the accompanying protests against them, have led to a greater visibility of the presence of these individuals in Korea. The attention to the restrictions placed on queer individuals have coincided with the move to films about the intersection between questioning what it means to be a family in Korea and the LGBTQ+ community.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have analyzed how Korean commercial films have reflected and reinforced the disconnect between Korean society and queerness through distancing the two, as opposed to independent films which offer a higher quality of representation through showing LGBTQ+ individuals in Korean society and the realities that they face. By analyzing a commercial and independent film from both the 2000s and 2010s, one can see that the increased visibility of queer themes in commercial film does not correlate to an increase in the representation of these individuals in the Korean context.

5.1. Changes from the 2000s to the 2010s

The films looked at in this paper demonstrate the changing interests of filmmakers dealing with queer themes. During the early 2000s films with queer themes were dominated by male–male romances but in the mid to late 2010s the content of these films expanded to explore the lives of other identities in the LGBTQ+ community. In both the 2000s and 2010s the subjects of commercial films are in line with independent queer film, the interest in gay romances in *The King and the Clown* and *No Regret* and the queering of familiar ties in *The Handmaiden* and *Jane*. Where the two kinds of films differ is in how they approach queerness in relation to Korean society.

The commercial films which I have analyzed in this paper, *The King and the Clown* and *The Handmaiden*, both use various techniques to distance queerness from Korean society despite the changing interests and eleven years between releases. This demonstrates that although there has been a change in attitudes towards LGBTQ+ communities in Korea, commercial film is still concerned with presenting everyday Koreans as distinct from queer individuals and putting these individuals into a heterosexual framework. *The King and the Clown* maps its love triangle onto a heteronormative relationship model and places its main character

Kong-gil into a feminine role. Through these means the film puts the homosexual relationship into a place where it can be questioned. *The Handmaiden* takes on a feminist approach which covers the lesbian representation along with portraying its intimate scenes through a male lens, undermining the queer elements. Commercial films have continued to present queerness as being outside of Korean society, perpetuating the idea that being Korean and queer are not compatible. This reflects the overall hesitance in Korea to fully accept queerness into Korean culture and society.

The independent films continue to show Korean LGBTQ+ individuals in society, even if it is confined to the queer spaces, they have made for themselves. These films commonly present queerness in modern day Korea, demonstrating what it is like to be both Korean and queer. For many Korean audiences, these films may not be attractive due to their overt display of the repression the LGBTQ+ community faces daily. Queerness is normalized in a way in which anyone in Korea could be a part of the LGBTQ+ community, something which studies have shown Koreans are not comfortable with. It is because of their independent status that these films can enjoy more freedom but ultimately do not gain larger success. While commercial films display what kind of values are present and accepted in Korean society, independent film acts as a voice for minority communities to show their presence.

The disconnect between the success of queer themes in the independent circuit and commercial ones comes from the larger issue of what commercial filmmakers find marketable. Rather than being concerned with how queer individuals are represented, commercial films are more concerned with whether the presence of these queer themes will aid in sales. The taboo that exists around queerness in Korea limits the number of queer characters being introduced in film and thus the amount of representation. For representation on the commercial circuit to increase the larger taboo around queerness in Korea will need to be addressed.

5.2. Future Approaches of Filmmakers

As the frontline of LGBTQ+ introduction in Korea, Korean films

must consciously work to integrate queer identities into Korean society. The presence of queer elements in foreign films will work to introduce queer cultures to Korean audiences but they do not act to introduce it as an identity that Koreans themselves have. This applies not only to Korean films as foreign films are not exempt from having poor representation either and they themselves should aim for improvement in that sector. Filmmakers who choose to use queer characters need to be cognizant of their portrayals, avoiding the use of these characters as abnormal or punchlines.

The first step that can be taken is to create commercialized films which place queer identity into the modern Korean context. When using distancing techniques, films need to do so in moderation. Film directors need to integrate more challenges to Korean thinking to normalize LGBTQ+ individuals in Korean society, rather than continuing to depict them outside of it. The process of increasing the positive views of the LGBTQ+ community in Korea will be slow and a forceful approach will have the opposite effect, increasing aversion to queer identities. Though the representation of queer individuals has increased since the early 2000s, commercial cinema needs to be held at a higher standard. Admittedly it is difficult to balance the line of showing the reality of LGBTQ+ discrimination and hardship and showing that they are everyday people who are not that different from other Koreans. This is becoming more possible with the increasing attention given to LGBTQ+ festivals and communities. Increased presence in films can show these individuals as everyday people who are not a threat to Korean morals. Having an increase of presence in real life and in film can work together to normalize the existence of queer elements in the Korean context.

Due to the nature of commercial film, it will be extremely difficult to end the commodification of queer identities, especially gay ones, as it has shown to boost the sales of films. This dubious capitalization does act to increase the representation of queer individuals, but it does so at their expense by mapping relationships onto a heterosexual framework and taking a voyeuristic approach.

Commercial films which attempt to capitalize on the young female audience who enjoy male–male romance will need to use caution not to cater only to these viewers but keep in mind that they are depicting gay male viewers too. As of now these ideal situations are made difficult by the homophobia and prejudice that is ingrained in Korean Society.

Film itself is not a powerful enough tool to single handedly change the view of LGBTQ+ individuals in Korea. Issues with discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community continue to be influenced by the lack of legal protections and anti–LGBTQ+ actions of religious groups. Until these influences are addressed, film will only play a minor role in the bettering of views of LGBTQ+ in Korea. Meaningful change will need to come from changes in laws which protect and recognize queer individuals and unions. Films with queer themes can familiarize Koreans with the LGBTQ+ community, but without changes to social and legal realms this familiarity will be wasted. Additionally, films with queer themes will be limited in their influence as those adamantly against queerness will not view films that openly show queer individuals. Rather than an impactful tool of change, in the present day, film will work more effectively as a tool to measure how Korean viewers interact with queer content and in turn, how they view queerness in Korean society.

5.3. Academic Significance

The analysis of queer themes in film is beneficial to the study of Korean society and culture because of its ability to reveal the disconnect between how Koreans express their views of LGBTQ+ individuals as a concept compared to how they respond to these individuals when they are presented in Korean society. The study of these films reveals how both filmmakers and commercial companies approach queerness and how general audiences receive it. There continues to be a limited amount of research on queer film in Korea, neglecting the information that can be gained from analyzing what elements are present in popular commercial films and what are not.

Neglecting to study Korean films with queer themes, including those both in and outside of the Queer film circuit, creates a hole in Korean Studies. Current studies rely on self-reported responses from Koreans which will reflect how they theoretically approach LGBTQ+ individuals rather than how they respond to queerness when they are faced with it. While these kinds of responses are likely to correspond with real-life reactions for those with stronger opinions on the subject, those who find themselves accepting of queerness without having encountered it may have more positive responses in their self-reported answers than in their real-life encounters.

As this study looks at only four films in the last twenty years, future research needs to take a deeper dive into queer themes in other forms of media such as television to analyze if this pattern holds true in the realm of television. As queer themes have grown in Korean film the same has been true for Korean television dramas. Since these dramas will be aired to a large audience, the techniques used to approach queerness may differ. Dramas containing queer themes such as *Coffee Prince* (*K'ŏp'ip'ürinsŭ Ihojŏm*, 2007), *Personal Taste* (*Kaeinŭi ch'wihyang*, 2010), *Cheese in the Trap* (*Ch'ijŭindŏt'ūraep*, 2016) and *Itaewon Class* (*It'aewŏn k'ŭllassŭ*, 2020) suggest that television series are approached with a more apparent queer presence and thus calls for its own analysis. This subject becomes even more relevant with the rise of streaming platforms which have allowed smaller filmmakers to branch out to short series which are available to a wide array of audiences.

For the LGBTQ+ communities to have meaningful growth and be accepted by the larger Korean population, films, television, and other media will need to be analyzed and held accountable as a means of introduction to these communities. These forms of introduction will aid larger changes at social and governmental levels. Until Korean queerness is accepted, the LGBTQ+ movement in Korea will be hindered and the struggle for acceptance that is currently seen will continue.

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Abstract

2000년대 초반부터 퀴어 등장인물과 플롯은 한국 상업영화계에 진출하였다. 이에 따라 자국 내 LGBTQ+ 커뮤니티에 대한, 여전한 거리감은 있지만, 긍정적인 태도로의 변화가 이루어졌다. 한국 영화 내에서 늘어난 퀴어의 존재감은 현재까지 일상 속의 성소수자에게 거리감을 두는 한국 사회에서 상업 영화가 퀴어를 어떻게 다루는지에 대한 질문을 던진다. 한국 퀴어 영화들에 대한 제한적인 연구는 장르의 성장과 상업성으로의 이동에 대해 이루어졌지만 상업 영화가 성소수자들에게 어떤 영향을 미쳤는지는 살펴보지 못했다. 2000년대의 영화인 왕의 남자와 후회하지 않아, 그리고 2010년의 영화인 아가씨와 꿈의 제인을 통해, 두 시대의 상업 영화 모두 퀴어를 거리두기 기법을 사용해 한국 사회의 밖에 존재하는 것으로 그려냈다고 주장한다. 여기에는 예를 들어 퀴어 정체성을 상품화한다거나, 동성애 관계를 이성적인 관계의 규율에 맞춰서 그려낸 다든지, 퀴어 등장인물을 여러 플롯 라인을 통해 가리는 행동들이 존재한다. 반대로 이 시기의 독립영화들은 퀴어 요소를 현재 사회와 문화에 배치하면서 보다 더 직접적으로 퀴어 요소들을 다루었다. 상업영화와 독립영화들의 비교를 통해 대중을 위한 영화들은 관객이 본인과 퀴어 사이의 거리감을 두고 있음을 인지하고 이 거리를 영화에 활용하고 있음을 알 수 있으며, 그로 인해 이런 현상을 강화하고 있다.