

Salvaging Futurity: Newtro-Punk Epistemics in *Space Sweepers*

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Abstract: This essay proposes “newtro-punk” as a framework for understanding the Korean science fiction film *Space Sweepers* (2021) and its intervention into speculative fiction’s colonial genealogy. Newtro (Nyt’üro), a portmanteau of “new” and “retro,” focuses not nostalgic recreation but critical reinterpretation of past aesthetic forms to recuperate the visual vocabulary of colonial modernity and developmental hardship. Where silkpunk recovers pre-colonial material cultures, newtro-punk engages the traumatic textures of modernity itself, transforming worn surfaces produced under colonial extraction into speculative resources. Through analysis of the film’s remediation and citational practice, linguistic reappropriation, characterization of marginal subjectivity, and typographic aesthetics, this essay demonstrates how *Space Sweepers* enacts epistemic reappropriation by way of aesthetics, contesting established frameworks regarding what counts as properly futuristic through strategies that enact alternative valuations rather than merely arguing for them. The newtro-punk wager positions worn textures and vernacular particularity as legitimate materials for imagining futurity, demonstrating that futures imagined from positions of precarity possess validity equal to those imagined from positions of power.

Keywords: newtro-punk, Korean science fiction, techno-Orientalism, *Space Sweepers*, epistemics, speculative fiction

1. Introduction: Colonial Genealogies and Speculative Futures

The history of South Korean science fiction comprises a complex nexus of media, evolving alongside but also against the colonial dictate of science-technology (*kwahak kisul*)—a compound term systematically promoted as state-led initiative on industrial development, the direct legacy of Japan’s colonial rule and the compressed development that followed. The very

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term *kwahak* bears the imprint of this transmission: Kim Sönggün shows how the neologism was first coined in Meiji Japan, approximating the German *Wissenschaft* as encompassing all academic knowledge (Zur & Hanscom, 2018, p. 214). At the turn of the twentieth century, science and philosophy remained intertwined under the broader rubric of *hangmun* (general knowledge); their separation occurred only in the dictionaries of the 1910s, as each became “a category that reflected a specialization of fields and the attachment of value as both Western and normative” (Zur & Hanscom, 2018, p. 215). The colonial genealogy of Korean science fiction is thus inscribed at the level of terminology itself, the very words through which scientific modernity became thinkable, bearing traces of imperial transmission.

If science fiction remains inseparable from what Heidegger (1977) termed *Gestell*, as in the world as calculable “standing-reserve” awaiting instrumental appropriation (p. 20), its colonial genealogy becomes all the more conspicuous. For John Rieder (2008), “that colonialism is a significant historical context for early science fiction is not an extravagant one” (p. 3); he notes that the late nineteenth century, the period of most fervid imperialist expansion, was also the formative moment for the genre’s crystallization (p. 4). Given that Korean engagements with *kwahak kisul* cannot be disentangled from this inheritance, the present essay turns toward speculative fiction as its operative framework: what Marek Oziewicz (2017) defines as a “fuzzy set super category” encompassing genres that “depart from imitating consensus reality.” Distinct from science fiction’s reliance upon technoscientific extrapolation, speculative fiction encompasses fantasy, horror, alternate history, and their myriad hybrids, enabling imaginative practices that need not genuflect before the altar of linear progress. Speculative fiction thus names not only a genre but an epistemological insurgency, committed to the disavowal of the mimetic imperatives undergirding both literary realism and classical science fiction’s techno-utopian teleologies.

Such reconceptualization proves particularly generative in the Korean context, wherein speculative modes have long circulated in tension with the dominant realist tradition. Sunyoung Park (2018) demonstrates that Korean science fiction has been “indebted as much to politics and social engagement as to science” (p. 349), with historical convulsions generating rather than foreclosing speculative imaginaries—from alternate colonial histories to feminist cyberfictions interrogating the patriarchal scaffolding of *kwahak kisul*. While speculative literature remained peripheral under critical realism’s reign from the 1970s through the 1990s (Park, 2006, pp. 166, 186), film and animation sustained quirky imaginaries: *Bulgasari* (1962), Korea’s first kaiju film; *Yongary, Monster from the Deep* (1967), the first Korean film to receive widespread American distribution; *Robot Taekwon V* (1976), simultaneously spectacle and anti-communist propaganda. Meanwhile, comics media cultivated hybrid aesthetics: following the 1988 launch of the girls’ comic magazine *Renaissance* (*Reunesangseu*), *sunjeong manhwa* expanded beyond conventional romance to embrace fantasy, science fiction, and historical fiction (Kim, 2023, p. 14). Concurrently, PC communication services (*PC t’ongsin*) spawned online fandom clubs instrumental in domestic science fiction’s boom, as critical realism lost its countercultural dominance (Park, 2018, p. 357).

“Speculative fiction’s recent breakthrough into mainstream culture proves all the more remarkable given that, as Ji-Eun Lee (2023) observes, ‘science fiction was perceived less as a literary genre than as educational material for boys, something that would instill nationalistic ambition’ (p. 26). The contemporary boom is distinguished by its demographic character: ‘led

by women writers and a new generation of women readers who are known as “young feminists” (Lee, 2023, p. 26), with bestselling authors Kim Bo-young, Chung Se-rang, and Kim Choyeop recasting the genre as vehicle for radical imagination (p. 27)."

Korean cinema presents an interesting dialectic wherein tensions between anxieties of influence and subversions of *kwahak kisul* produce what Andrew Ross (1989) might call campy awareness (p. 222). What distinguishes this emergent body of work is what Sang-Keun Yoo (2023) designates as ‘Newtrospection’: Korean speculative fiction’s ‘persistent interest in the past and history’ renders the genre ‘predominantly retrospective’ rather than solely future-oriented (p. 18). This dual temporal gaze—‘rewriting history from the perspective of present-day insights and imagining the future informed by the lessons of the past and present’—constitutes Korean SF’s distinctive epistemic signature (Yoo, 2023, p. 19).

Space Sweepers (2021), in this light, warrants particular scrutiny for how it sublates the hegemony of *kwahak kisul* through the “newtro” aesthetic. Newtro (뉴트로), a portmanteau of “new” and “retro” that emerged around 2018, names an orientation toward the past that differs fundamentally from Western retro aesthetics – a distinction I will theorize more fully in Section 5. For now, it suffices to note that Korean newtro deliberately recuperates the visual vocabulary of colonial modernity and postwar hardship: typefaces, packaging designs, and material textures from the Japanese occupation through developmental authoritarianism, reframing what was stigmatized as *ch’onseureoun* (countrified) as a site of cultural identity. As Choi Ji-hye observes, newtro “stems not from nostalgic emotions but a thirst for originality” (as cited in Song, 2019). Recent scholarship identifies this as “vicarious nostalgia” through which younger generations claim ownership over history they never experienced (Kim, K. W., 2020, p. 170). Director Jo Sung-hee’s production design effectively manifests this sensibility. The Victory’s “rust stains, dangling wires, corrugated plastic and prefab corridors,” its world possessing “enough tactility and truthiness to pass muster” (Johnson, 2021), encode a specifically Korean relationship to technological futurity wherein precarity becomes the experiential ground for alternative futures.

In consideration of the above backdrop, this essay proposes “newtro-punk” as a framework for understanding *Space Sweepers*’ intervention into science fiction’s colonial genealogy as the genre undergoes the process of self-reckoning as the site for reappropriation rather than a direct mirror of colonial desires. The “-punk” suffix is essential, for it carries significance beyond mere stylistic designation. Cyberpunk’s techno-Orientalist portrayals of the imagined “East,” for instance, reproduce what Morley and Robins (1995) identify as a representational logic wherein the association of technology with Asianness “serves to reinforce the image of a culture that is cold, impersonal and machine-like, an authoritarian culture lacking emotional connection to the rest of the world” (p. 168). Within such framings, non-Western populations are rendered as atmospheric texture—dehumanized components of the *mise-en-scène* rather than subjects possessed of interiority or agency.

Steampunk meanwhile, despite aesthetic innovations, has been critiqued for its adherence to “the problem-spaces of Euro-modernity” and questioned as to whether the genre is “condemned to limit itself to a western-technocratic teleology” incapable of critically engaging colonial pasts (Mills & Hondroudakis, 2018). Indeed, Bruce Sterling characterizes steampunk as “funereal theater,” a pageant that “selectively pumps some life into the parts of the past that

can excite us, such as the dandified gear of aristocrats, peculiar brass gadgets,” while the genre’s nostalgic investments tend to repress the violence and exploitation undergirding Victorian modernity (Sterling, 2008).

Against such traditions, Ken Liu’s “silkpunk” offers technology aesthetic grounded in East Asian material cultures (such as bamboo, shells, coral, paper, and silk) with “-punk” functioning as “rebellion, resistance, re-appropriation and rejuvenation of tradition” (Liu, n.d.). In acknowledgement of Liu’s effort toward reappropriative generic reengineering, Emily Xueni Jin (2022) positions silkpunk as “cosmopolitan style of writing that erases preestablished narrative boundaries and provides an alternative to our current idea of Westerncentric modernity.”

Where silkpunk recovers pre-colonial material cultures however, newtro-punk engages the traumatic textures of modernity itself, recuperating worn surfaces produced under colonial extraction and developmental compression. The distinction proves crucial: silkpunk imagines what technology might have looked like had colonialism never interrupted Asian trajectories whereas newtro-punk confronts the scars colonialism actually left and transforms them into speculative resources. Victory’s rusty corridors and crew’s worn-out outfits constitute badges of survivorship rather than serving as markers of civilizational lag. Newtro-punk’s stigmata derive not from voluntary marginality but from historical conditions of colonial subjugation, and as such, to inhabit these worn textures is to transmute historical wound into epistemic resource. This turn accomplishes what Sunyoung Park (2020) theorizes as the postcolonial potential of Korean SF: deploying “SF tropes and conventions to perform subversive strategies of mimicry, parody, and irony” that enable writers to “speculate back” by “returning the imperial gaze with an effect of critical mimicry” and to “imagine themselves out of the default perception of them and their nation as the alien and conquerable other” (p. 58)—not by recovering a pre-colonial past untouched by Western modernity, but by inhabiting modernity’s detritus as the very ground of speculative possibility.

2. Citational Practice and the Sinpa Mode

Originally slated for summer 2020 theatrical release but repeatedly postponed due to COVID-19, the *Space Sweeper* was acquired by Netflix for exclusive global distribution. Within its first 28 days, the film garnered over 26 million household viewers, debuting #1 in 16 countries and maintaining top-10 status in 80 countries (Dong, 2021; “Korea’s Netflix Blockbuster,” 2021). Netflix’s 2015-2020 \$700 million investment in Korean content had emphasized genre programming deviating from romance-themed melodrama: *Kingdom* (2019), *Sweet Home* (2020), *Squid Game* (2021) privileged horror, dark fantasy, and survival thriller formats. Yoon and Lee (2025) observe that “the narrative of ‘survival’ was prominent” across these productions, “whether the series contained zombies or supernatural monsters, conflicts between the rich and the poor, or personal debts” – a marked departure from romance-centered conventions.

Within this context, *Space Sweepers* represented a doubly marginal proposition. SF historically struggled domestically, while the \$24 billion won budget demanded uncertain box office performance. The cautionary example of *Alienoid* (2022), which became “one of the

biggest flops of 2022” opening at \$5.19 million against a \$25 million budget (Frater, 2024), underscores this very risk. Streaming success suggests Netflix acquisition transformed potential theatrical disappointment into global phenomenon, the film’s relocation carrying epistemic weight in considering how Korean speculative production circulates within transnational media flows. Reception dynamics echo earlier Netflix Korean originals wherein international audiences responded to material distinctiveness. *Kingdom*’s *gat* (traditional horsehair hats) generated considerable social media discourse; Twitter users praised the series as being “about zombies and fancy hats” and “such buzz has fueled sales of the hats on Amazon.com,” where sellers created dedicated pages for “Korean Drama Kingdom Hat Chosun Dynasty Traditional Hats” (Yoon, 2019). International audiences unfamiliar with Korean historical drama conventions fixated on tangible materiality differing from Korean viewers’ attention to archaic dialect.

Critical reception, however, proved ambivalent. Comparisons to *Firefly* (2020), *Cowboy Bebop* (1998), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), and *Planetes* (2003) proliferated across English-language criticism, with Cinema Escapist characterizing the production as “a jumble of narrative and aesthetic tropes that seem generated by a Silicon Valley AI trained with a dataset of K-drama, anime, and Western hits” (Yam, 2021). IGN captured prevailing consensus by observing that “even as [the film is] a concoction of various familiar sci-fi tropes, they’ve been reassembled with verve and passion enough to sand down any cynicism” (Hasan, 2021). Yet dismissing *Space Sweepers* as merely derivative misses how its citational practice operates epistemically, and how the assembly of familiar tropes produces not repetition but recontextualization. Fredric Jameson (1991) famously critiqued postmodern pastiche as “blank parody,” symptomatic of “the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way” (pp. 17, 19). Yet newtro-punk’s recycling of retrofuturist aesthetics resists this diagnosis: rather than cannibalizing dead styles in service of depthless nostalgia, it mobilizes historical forms to articulate present precarity and imagine alternative futures. *Space Sweepers*’ citational density participates in this logic while inflecting it through specifically Korean coordinates that transform pastiche into something closer to what Henry Louis Gates Jr. theorized as ‘Signifyin(g)’—a practice wherein ‘repetition, with a signal difference, is fundamental’ to black rhetorical revision (2014, p. 56).

Interestingly, the film’s most fundamental structural template derives not from science fiction antecedents but from L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), signaled through Kot-nim’s code name “Dorothy.” Where Dorothy Gale awakens in Kansas having dreamt her adventure, Kot-nim settles with her newfound family to transform the Oz template from escapist fantasy into found family romance. This structural borrowing operates more as grounds for productive tension than concealment: as Henry Littlefield influentially argued, Baum’s children’s classic was itself “a children’s story with a symbolic allegory implicit within its story line and characterizations,” offering “a Midwesterner’s vibrant and ironic portrait of this country as it entered the twentieth century” (1964, p. 50). That allegorical scaffolding, rooted in American Populist economics and frontier mythology, becomes the armature for a Korean narrative whose thematic preoccupations (precarious labor, corporate extraction, and found kinship under conditions of displacement) resonate differently when articulated through characters navigating the debris fields of a ruined Earth.

The film's citational practice extends to specific visual homages situating *Space Sweepers* within space opera's genealogy. A zero-gravity sequence depicting a floating pen directly invokes Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), positioning the film within serious space cinema even as its narrative draws upon populist entertainments. More distinctively Korean is a gambling sequence parodying the hwatu card game scenes from Choi Dong-hoon's *Tazza: The High Rollers* (2006). By incorporating hwatu (which is itself a colonial remnant) within a space opera set in 2092, *Space Sweepers* performs a specifically reappropriative, Korean intertextual gesture. Even aboard a ramshackle debris collector, Koreans still gather around the distinctive cards that have organized gambling sociality since Japan introduced hanafuda during the colonial period, subsequently transformed through Korean appropriation into the distinctive hwatu deck with rule sets unknown in Japan. The fact that the film cites both Kubrick's floating pen and *Tazza*'s hwatu captures something essential about its positioning: simultaneous aspiration toward membership in the global canon and assertion of irreducibly Korean cultural specificity. This dual citational register, toward Western SF legitimacy and Korean vernacular tradition, constitutes the crux of the film's newtro-punk operation, not choosing between cosmopolitan genre and local particularity but inhabiting both simultaneously to make derivativeness itself a mode of cultural assertion.

If the film's citational practice operates through accumulation and recontextualization, its emotional register demands separate consideration, for *Space Sweepers* processes social critique not through detached irony but through the affective intensities of Korean melodramatic tradition. The arch villain James Sullivan's motivations appear forced...

The arch villain James Sullivan's motivations appear forced, his genocidal scheme so totalizing in misanthropy that it paradoxically evacuates itself of dramatic weight. In this light, it could be said that Sullivan remains a placeholder for corporate evil rather than a figure whose pathology commands attention. This emptiness at the narrative's antagonistic center stands in marked contrast to the crew members' backstories, each encoding specific experiences of precarity that collectively map the film's dystopian social landscape. Tae-ho, the former UTS commander demoted to debris collection after losing his adopted daughter, embodies the temporal bind of precarious work wherein labor forecloses what labor ostensibly enables. Captain Jang meanwhile carries the survivor's guilt of someone whose righteous action produced catastrophic consequences. Tiger Park maintains gruff exterior concealing unexpected moral complexity, and Bubs, saving for a skin graft enabling her desired gender presentation, embodies what Karen Han describes as transgender representation that 'simply is,' observing that this naturalness 'feels like one small step for transgender representation and, arguably, a giant one for blockbuster filmmaking from any nation.' The asymmetry between Sullivan's abstraction and the crew's particularity illuminates the film's epistemic orientation, for investment flows toward the marginal and precarious while draining from the powerful and wealthy. Where Sullivan's villainy derives from genre template, the crew's characterization emerges from the tattered textures of lived precarity that newtro-punk claims as its aesthetic and ethical ground.

The emotional register through which *Space Sweepers* processes this social critique is also of note, for it belongs to the category of *sinpa*, a Korean melodramatic mode whose roots extend to early twentieth-century theatrical forms adapted from Japanese *shinpa* drama but whose contemporary manifestations have evolved into a distinctively Korean affective vocabulary.

Drawing on foundational *sinpa* scholarship, Kim Gong-sook characterizes this mode as rooted in “self-torture and self-pity” emerging when characters submit to oppressive worlds, expressing suffering through “excessive tears” that function as collective catharsis to evoke what Korean aesthetics terms *cheuk-eunji-sim*, or compassionate pity, in response to economic and social injustice (2025, p. 22).

Elements such as Tae-ho’s story of the lost daughter and the accumulated debts preventing his search, the photograph carried as talisman belong to *sinpa*’s repertoire of sacrificial pathos. Director Jo acknowledged that some viewers found this melodramatic dimension “forceful,” a criticism he accepted while maintaining that such emotional content “was necessary in our movie” (“‘Space Sweepers’ Director,” 2021). The connection between *sinpa* and capitalism critique however represents a particularly Korean narrative specialization, rendering economic precarity legible through affective intensity in ways finding no direct equivalent in Hollywood’s emotional vocabularies.

Sinpa’s intervention within *Space Sweepers* accomplishes more than emotional intensification, in this regard, as it fundamentally reorients the space opera’s gravitational center away from imperial adventure toward values resisting reduction to individual heroism or national triumph. The space opera emerged from and has consistently reproduced Western imperialism’s ideological coordinates, its narratives of exploration and conquest transposing frontier mythology into interstellar registers. E.E. “Doc” Smith’s *Skylark of Space* (1915-1921), *Flash Gordon* (1934), and *Buck Rogers* (1929) established templates wherein white protagonists extend civilizational reach into cosmic frontiers, alien others serving as figures for the racialized others of terrestrial colonial encounter. To this, Patricia Kerslake says, “the great galactic empires of SF are frequently based on the metaphoric extrapolation of both physical imperial history and the philosophy of imperialism,” taking “the material and intellectual resemblances of the past” and experimenting “with them in new environments” (2007, pp. 49–50). *Space Sweepers*’ *sinpa* sensibility however disrupts this structure by shifting emotional weight from conquest to care, from expansion to protection. The Victory’s crew does not seek to explore strange new worlds; instead, they seek merely to survive, pay debts, find lost family, and afford medical procedures aligning bodies with identities. When they act heroically, motivation derives not from abstract commitment to humanity but attachment to the specific child they have come to love, the particular relationships of care formed among them.

The question of what distinguishes Korean *sinpa* from Hollywood’s “touching moments” proves theoretically consequential, illuminating disparate assumptions about selfhood, relationality, and narrative resolution. Hollywood’s deployment of sacrificial pathos typically operates within what Linda Williams identifies as melodrama’s promise “that virtue and truth can be achieved in private individuals and individual heroic acts rather than, as Eisenstein wanted, in revolution and change” (1998, p. 74). Yondu’s death in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017) for example enables Peter Quill to resolve abandonment trauma and understand he was loved all along, achieving closure that positions him for continued heroic adventures. The emotional payoff flows toward Peter: Yondu’s sacrifice generates meaning insofar as it completes something in the survivor. Korean *sinpa* structures its affective economy on the other hand around what could be called sacrificial dispossession, wherethrough emotional weight falls upon the act of giving rather than what the recipient gains. The father in *Train to Busan* does not die so that his daughter might achieve psychological integration; instead, he dies

because his capacity for self-sacrifice constitutes the only meaningful action available, the transformation of selfishness into selflessness representing not a gift but a final becoming. This distinction maps onto divergent philosophical anthropologies: Hollywood's therapeutic pathos assumes a fundamentally autonomous self whose relations serve self-actualization, while *sinpa*'s sacrificial dispossession assumes what feminist philosophers have theorized as relational autonomy as in selfhood constituted through rather than prior to bonds with others (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000, p. 4).

3. Linguistic Reappropriation and Multilingual Futurity

The challenge facing Korean media producers engaging global audiences involves reconceptualizing difference itself, moving from differential value based on which languages and cultures occupy positions within implicitly hierarchical arrangements toward value-neutral diversity, wherein multiple linguistic and cultural practices coexist without presumption of relative worth. This shift carries epistemic implications, for Bakhtin (1981) emphasizes that language is always “stratified... into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, ‘professional’ and ‘generic’ languages, [and] languages of generations” and that every utterance participates in this living heteroglossia (pp. 272–273). When speculative narratives imagine future linguistic landscapes, they necessarily take positions on which languages will have survived, thrived, or achieved dominance. The semiotic choices involved in representing multilingual futures thus constitute epistemic claims about the trajectory of linguistic hegemony itself.

Space Sweepers' opening debris scramble sequence presents multiple languages on genuinely equal footing, cacophony of competing crews shouting in Korean, Mandarin, Russian, Spanish, and Nigerian Pidgin creating an auditory landscape in which no single tongue dominates. The universal translation mechanism that enables this polyglot communication extends beyond Western European languages to encompass linguistic traditions typically marginalized in Hollywood's gestures toward diversity. English appears within this multilingual field as one language among others rather than as unmarked universal medium; characters code-switch pragmatically based on the interlocutor rather than defaulting to English as *lingua franca*. The film's heteroglossia, with characters speaking Korean, English, French, and other languages via translation devices, marks a departure from Hollywood's normative assumptions. As critic Karen Han observed, the film is “one of the rare space operas that doesn't posit that English has somehow become a universal language” (2021). Director Jo explicitly designed this multilingual world to accommodate Korean protagonists, noting his focus on ensuring “audiences don't feel thrown off by Korean characters speaking Korean in an unfamiliar setting” and his desire to represent “ordinary Korean people” navigating interstellar spaces rather than “Hollywood heroes who wear suits that give them powers” (M. Kang, 2020). This representational choice responds to a form of “linguistic imperialism,” which “presupposes an overarching structure of asymmetrical, unequal exchange, where language dominance dovetails with economic, political and other types of dominance” and “entails unequal resource allocation and communicative rights between people defined in terms of their competence in specific languages” (Phillipson, 2009, p. 2).

By refusing English's default status as tongue of futurity, *Space Sweepers* mounts semiotic intervention against naturalization of Anglophone hegemony within speculative fiction.

Visual text aboard the Victory also carries weight apparent through comparison with Western speculative narratives' deployment of Asian writing systems. As Greta Aiyu Niu (2008) argues, such deployments constitute "techno-Orientalism," a practice of ascribing, erasing, or disavowing relationships between technology and Asian peoples and subjects (p. 74). Films from *Blade Runner* (1982) to *Cloud Atlas* (2012) have rendered Korean and Japanese characters as exotic set dressing—signifiers of technological alienation whose semantic content matters less than visual otherness, Asian writing functioning as atmosphere rather than communicative register. The semiotic operation treats Asian typography as what Barthes (1957/1972) termed "myth": a second-order signifying system that empties the original sign of denotative content, appropriating form while substituting new connotations of alienation and dystopian futurity (pp. 113, 117). Section 5 will examine specific instances of this practice in detail; for now, it suffices to note that against this tradition, the hangul name "승리" emblazoned on Victory's hull operates through a fundamentally different semiotic logic. Here, Korean text appears not as exotic decoration for Western protagonists but as natural linguistic expression of Korean characters in Korean production—a reappropriation of the very gesture that Western SF has used to render Asian writing systems strange. The specific typographic character of this text—its antiquarian style, material weathering, and relationship to Korean industrial signage traditions—warrants extended analysis, to which I will return.

The Victory crew's unself-conscious use of Korean in cosmopolitan contexts also represents significant departure from the anxious linguistic positioning characterizing much non-Anglophone science- and even speculative fiction. For decades, filmmakers working outside Hollywood faced an implicit choice: either set narratives in explicitly local contexts where non-English dialogue would be naturalistically motivated, or adopt English to signal participation in the international genre conversation, tacitly accepting the language's hegemonic status as unmarked tongue of futurity. This dilemma reflects what Bourdieu (1991) theorizes as the linguistic market, a space in which "linguistic exchanges are also relations of symbolic power" and where the value accorded to particular speech forms depends on the power relations structuring the market (pp. 55–56). Korean SF productions prior to *Space Sweepers* often navigated this market rather awkwardly, the need to signal generic competence landing in tension with linguistic naturalism. Director Jo's decision to have Korean characters speak Korean while navigating interstellar space, powered by diegetic translation technology rendering such particularity globally intelligible, alleviates this anxiety of influence. The film thus demonstrates that Korean can function as the language of space opera protagonists without requiring either explanatory apparatus or code-switching to English for dramatic emphasis, which is an assertion of linguistic parity with epistemic consequences for how audiences imagine the future's linguistic landscape.

Sullivan's characterization bears additional weight within this framework. The villain speaks English with distinctly British accent, Richard Armitage's voice carrying what Bourdieu might term the "symbolic capital" of received pronunciation – the residual authority of empire encoded in phonemic precision. This convergence of villainy with British English, particularly in a narrative concerned with corporate exploitation, invites reading as deliberate semiotic

choice. Sullivan embodies not only generic corporate evil but specifically the legacy of Anglophone imperial hegemony, his clipped English contrasting with the polyglot vitality of the debris-collecting underclass. Whether the film fully succeeds in linguistic egalitarianism admits qualification (given how English remains the language of institutional authority, Spanish associates with underground economy), the attempt still distinguishes *Space Sweepers* from predecessors pursuing sophistication in one domain while reproducing problematic conventions in others.

4. Characterization and the Epistemics of Marginal Subjectivity

The distribution of narrative investment across *Space Sweepers*' ensemble also encodes an epistemic claim about where meaning resides within speculative futurity. While each crew member struggles with their very own demons, the succinctness with which backgrounds are sketched accentuates rather than diminishes the liveness of their anguish. With Tae-ho as partial exception, pasts are gestured toward instead of being expounded upon through seemingly mundane moments and objects that cumulatively construct an "affective economy," a circulation of emotional intensity accruing value through repetition and association rather than explicit declaration (Ahmed, 2004, p. 120). This gestural characterization invites audiences to construct interiority from surface evidence, incompleteness generating imaginative investment that fuller backstory might foreclose.

The treatment of gender is of particular note, as it sets the film apart from both mainstream Korean media and dominant science fiction traditions to gesture a localized alignment with the speculative alternative. Bubs, the sole nonhuman crew member, is the very instantiation of this unprecedented positioning. Voiced by widely known actor Yoo Hae-jin and designed as combat robot, Bubs displays features traditionally marked as masculine: military origin, weapon proficiency, physical imposingness, deep voice. It is also worth noting that the original Korean appellation for Bubs, "Öptongi," refers to a found baby whose misfortunate fate in abandonment has traditionally been appropriated to signal an unexpected yet welcome auspice for the adoptive family. Bubs is completely open about her (a prefix of deliberate choice on my part, the reason for which to be made apparent in what's to follow) preferences otherwise, which the crew takes in stride – not as gender-blind indifference but as natural acceptance requiring no special comment. In contrast, canonical science fiction narratives (especially those of Anglo- or European origin) more often than not imbue nonhuman characters with aspirations to cross categorical boundaries with the Pinocchio complex: the desire to become "real," which is to say, human. From Spielberg's *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) to the *Bicentennial Man* (1999) and *Blade Runner 2049*, this tradition persists without failure, which speculative narratives of more self-aware nature often quip on as seen in Ada's scathing retort in *After Yang* (2021): "That's such a human thing to ask, isn't it? You always assume other beings would want to be human" (Kogonada, 2022, 01:13:48).

Bubs, in contrast, departs this trajectory with striking consistency. At no point does she express desire to be human, and her mechanical nature appears entirely untroubling to her self-conception. Even Yoo Hae-jin's distinctly male (and even "chuffy" as some might put it, as the actor's signature persona) voice as the default condition of her acoustic interface with the world

doesn't seem to be cause for concern in her self-positioning. What she does want, saving wages throughout the narrative, is human skin, not to pass as human but to freely adopt identificatory markers of femininity – to apply makeup registering on organic-appearing surface, to realize the aesthetic sensibility that she already cultivates within mechanical constraints irrespective of the social constructs and substrate-specificity that position her otherwise. The crucial moment of recognition arrives through seemingly innocent address: when Dorothy calls her “*unni*” (older sister), Bub's evident pleasure registers delight at having been seen according to how she experiences herself. The child's address bypasses adult machinery of gender policing, routing recognition through a figure whose innocence insulates the gesture from controversy. When Bubs eventually acquires her desired human-appearing form (played by Kim Hyang-gi), she retains Yoo Hae-jin's voice yet none of the crew members registers this as strange, representation of trans embodiment refusing the demand for categorical coherence governing both fictional and actual responses to gender variance.

Kim Tae-ri's Captain Jang presents another dimension of the film's engagement with gender, operating through understatement rather than emphasis. Captain Jang's competence simply is; it requires neither demonstration nor justification, neither origin story explaining how a woman came to occupy this position nor ongoing proof that she deserves to remain there. The designation “strong female lead” has become both ubiquitous and problematic, positioning male performance as benchmark against which female achievement is measured. Captain Jang, however, largely escapes this trap. No scene positions her as having to prove herself to skeptical subordinates; no flashback details struggles through which she earned authority. Her backstory concerns vendetta against Sullivan and guilt over lost comrades, not her gender's relationship to professional trajectory. The contrast between Bub's visible difference and Captain Jang's unremarked authority illuminates the film's layered approach, for one makes visible what has been excluded, the other renders unremarkable what has been marked as exceptional.

The contrast between Bubs's visible difference and Captain Jang's unremarked authority illuminates the film's layered approach, for one makes visible what has been excluded, the other renders unremarkable what has been marked as exceptional. Yet the crew's composition includes a third mode of belonging that resists both strategies.

Tiger Park's characterization departs from the found family pattern in ways rendering him paradoxically compelling precisely because he lacks the sentimental justification grounding his crewmates' belonging. His backstory, that of a former drug lord sentenced to death on Earth since escaped to space, provides reason for presence but not emotional warrant. Tiger Park has no lost child to mourn, no massacred crew to avenge, no redemption arc to complete. He is simply there, gruff and capable and inexplicably loyal. This absence might be read as characterization failure, yet it might equally be valued as departure from emotional calculus governing found family membership. Tiger Park belongs, not because he has suffered sufficiently but because he has chosen to be there and others have likewise chosen to accept him, his belonging grounded in practice rather than credential.

The figure of Dorothy (Kkonnnimi), whose presence is also worthy of mention, occupies peculiar position within *Space Sweepers*' network of recognition and care. Her ontological status shifts throughout narrative in ways initially registering as deterioration before resolving into transcendence. The film's treatment of human/nonhuman boundary crossings reveals moral hierarchy organized around agency and orientation. Dorothy's nanotechnological capacities,

which exceed typical human parameters, remain in service of the normative human values of connection, care, and protection whereas Sullivan (who serves as a foil to her transhuman capacity) has transcended toward isolation, extended existence severing bonds connecting him to ordinary human concerns. The film thus positions human-becoming-nonhuman as acceptable when maintaining orientation toward *humane* community, catastrophic when abandoning such orientation – the framework resonating with *sinpa* values wherein self-sacrifice for others constitutes highest good. The found family forming around Dorothy, protecting her from Sullivan while accepting Bub's self-presentation and incorporating Tiger Park's unexplained loyalty, models community organized around ethical practice rather than categorical membership. This redistribution of epistemic investment from center to margin, the powerful to the precarious, constitutes newtro-punk's ethical claim as well as its aesthetic signature.

5. Newtro-Punk Typography and Material Reappropriation

The preceding analysis has traced newtro-punk's operations through narrative structure, emotional register, linguistic practice, and characterization. Yet the framework finds its most concentrated material expression in a domain that might initially appear peripheral: typography. The preceding analysis has traced newtro-punk's operations through narrative structure, emotional register, linguistic practice, and characterization. Yet the framework finds its most concentrated material expression in a domain that might initially appear peripheral: typography. The hangul “승리” introduced earlier as counter-semiotic practice now demands closer attention to its specifically typographic dimensions – for the font constitutes perhaps the film's most distilled expression of newtro-punk epistemology, a form of reappropriation that operates by owning and thereby recontextualizing that which has been designated dilapidated.

The font of the spaceship Victory (Sŭngni), as mentioned earlier but worth revisiting in further depth, constitutes perhaps the film's most concentrated expression of newtro-punk epistemology – a form of reappropriation that operates by owning and thereby recontextualizing that which has been designated dilapidated. Antiquarian font is a signature aesthetic within techno-Orientalist imaginaries, serving as stark contrast to the sleek futurity of prestige neighborhoods and its cold, corporate aesthetic in its usual habitat of what Raymond Chandler famously characterized as the “mean [back] streets” (Chandler, 1944, p. 59) where the (undesirable human) detritus reside. To understand the significance of *Space Sweepers*' typographic choices, we must first examine the techno-Orientalist conventions against which they operate. Two examples, one kitschy and the other elegiac, illustrate the range of this semiotic regime.

Cloud Atlas (2012) is the first case to examine. The typeface appearing on clone protein rations – the rounded, vaguely retro hangul reading “Pinu” (soap) – was not an existing Korean font but a custom typeface created specifically for the production by German designer Henning Brehm, later commercially released as “VLNL Kimchi” and marketed, with unintentional irony, as suitable for “Korean fast food restaurants” (VetteLetters, 2012). The font's very name encapsulates the Orientalist reduction at work: “Kimchi,” the single Korean cultural referent presumed legible to Western audiences, becomes shorthand for an entire typographic tradition, much as “Wonton” or “Chop Suey” fonts have long signified generic “Asian-ness” in Western

graphic design. That a Western designer created a faux-Korean typeface to signify dystopian corporatism, its rounded forms evoking midcentury commercial signage while masking the biotechnological horror of fabricant cannibalism, and then named it after fermented cabbage, crystallizes techno-Orientalism's semiotic operation. The packaging's retro aesthetic concealing biotechnological horror compounds the irony, for the antiquated font masks cutting-edge atrocity, nostalgic warmth belying the commodity cycle wherein clones consume their predecessors' liquefied remains. As Roh, Huang, and Niu (2015) argue, such deployments imagine Asian cultural materials in 'hypo- or hypertechnological terms,' participating in a 'premodern-hypermodern dynamic' that positions Asia as simultaneously behind and ahead of the Western present (pp. 1–2). Korean visual culture is thus rendered as atmospheric texture by non-Korean creators for non-Korean audiences, the semantic content of hangul subordinated to its function as marker of alienated futurity, the complexity of Korean typographic history collapsed into a single culinary stereotype.

Blade Runner 2049 (2017) meanwhile deploys Korean typography through a related yet distinct techno-Orientalist operation. The hangul characters visible on weathered signage throughout the film's irradiated Las Vegas, most prominently "Haengun" (fortune) flickering above the abandoned casino where Deckard hides, are also not existing Korean typefaces but custom lettering created by the production's art department. According to *The Art and Soul of Blade Runner 2049*, the design team added "Japanese and Korean lettering" to the Vintage Casino & Hotel set to evoke a cosmopolitan tourist destination now reduced to radioactive ruin, though no specific typeface is credited (Lapointe, 2017). The visual lineage, however, is unmistakable: the letterforms derive from 1960s–1980s Korean industrial typography, the bold, rectilinear strokes characteristic of what Korean designers term *gonggeopnyong godik-che* (industrial gothic) – the neon signage and theater marquees that proliferated in Seoul's commercial districts during the compressed modernization of the Park Chung-hee era. This typographic style, itself bearing traces of Japanese Showa-era modernist influence transmitted through colonial and postcolonial channels, becomes in Villeneuve's film a signifier of civilizational decay. Where such typography once announced the aspirational futurity of a developing nation, *Blade Runner 2049* repositions it as archaeological remnant; the faded Korean characters, their edges softened by simulated weathering and luminosity dimmed to suggest decades of abandonment, are legible only as evidence of what the future has left behind. If *Cloud Atlas*'s "VLNL Kimchi" renders Korean typography as kitschy dystopian atmosphere created by Western designers who name their typeface after fermented cabbage, *Blade Runner 2049* renders it elegiac, a tombstone marking Asia's absorption into and eventual obsolescence within Western technological modernity. In neither case does Korean text signify as living language.

These examples, conspicuous but by no means isolated, establish the semiotic regime against which *Space Sweepers* operates. Where Western productions deploy Korean typography as exotic decoration or civilizational ruin, the Korean film positions hangul through an entirely different operation—one in which Korean designers draw upon Korean typographic history to imagine Korean futures. The film's graphic design, including the ending title sequence, was created by Seoul-based studio Undesigned Museum, and the typography operates through a deliberate dual register that encapsulates the newtro-punk sensibility

(Undesigned Museum, 2021). The promotional logo “승리호” employs a slanted, angular sans-serif evocative of 1980s–1990s Korean “techno gothic” – the bold, italicized display typefaces that adorned *Robot Taekwon V* posters, arcade game cabinets, and VHS action film packaging during Korea’s late-industrial digital gaming era. This typographic lineage connects the film not to “Western” science fiction traditions but to a specifically Korean genealogy of popular genre aesthetics, one in which futurity was already being imagined in hangul before Netflix budgets made such imagination globally visible.

More significant still is the hand-painted “승리” (Victory) emblazoned on the ship’s hull – brush-lettered characters whose uneven stroke weights, visible bristle marks, and weathered paint evoke the *seonmyeong* (船名, ship naming) tradition of 1960s–1980s Korean maritime and industrial signage. During the developmental decades, cargo ships, fishing vessels, trucks, and factory walls bore names like “○○ho,” “○○Sangsa” (~), and “○○Unsu,” hand-painted by dockworkers and sign painters using pragmatic lettering that announced ownership and function without pretense to aesthetic sophistication. This was the typography of compressed modernization’s working class, the visual vocabulary of the *ch’onseureoun* that developmental ideology would later teach Koreans to find embarrassing. By transposing this humble signage tradition onto a spaceship hull, complete with chipped paint, rust stains, and a *taegeukgi* positioned nearby, *Space Sweepers* accomplishes a temporal suture that neither *Cloud Atlas* nor *Blade Runner 2049* could attempt: the recuperation of Korean industrial typography not as exotic atmosphere or civilizational ruin but as living heritage, a material trace connecting the precarious laborers of 2092 to the precarious laborers of 1972. Victory’s triumph over fancier competitors in the debris-snatching race, in this regard, elevates its junk status to what Sianne Ngai (2012) might call “interesting”—an aesthetic of circulation concerned with “difference in the form of information” (p. 1). Set against sleek corporate vessels, the antiquarian font sidesteps competition on terms that would render it beautiful by established standards, operating orthogonally to metrics by which other ships might be evaluated.

This orthogonal logic extends to labor itself. Lauren Berlant (2011) defines cruel optimism as a relation wherein “the object/scene of desire is itself an obstacle to fulfilling the very wants that bring people to it” (p. 227); each successful salvage holds out the promise of debt repayment, yet structural conditions ensure such promises can never be fulfilled through legitimate means. Remarkably, the futility of their exploits seems more inconvenience than crushing defeat; brushing disappointment aside, they exhibit clear awareness of being players in a rigged game while refusing to succumb to despair, a stance that echoes Camus’s (1942/1955) absurd hero, for whom “the lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory” (p. 121). Yet Bubs’s acquisition of her desired female body punctures the absurdist reading by demonstrating that genuine self-actualization remains possible within rigged systems. Typography and narrative thus converge, both asserting that worn surfaces, devalued forms, and marginal positions need not preclude flourishing.

This act of reclamation—the insistence that worn textures constitute resources rather than obstacles—is precisely what newtro names as aesthetic orientation. Yet the term requires theoretical disambiguation from its apparent cognate.

“Retro” aesthetics operate through what Svetlana Boym (2007) identifies as restorative nostalgia, which “stresses *nostos* (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home” and “does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition.” Such orientations risk what Jameson (1991) critiques as treating the past as “a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum,” characteristic of “a society bereft of all historicity” (pp. 17–18). Western retro recovers the old *because it was good*—midcentury modern furniture, vinyl records, vintage automobiles—longing for what has been superseded by inferior replacements.

Newtro operates through entirely different logic. The gesture is not “this was good and we have lost it” but rather “this is considered bad and we will take it anyway.” Newtro reclaims the old *precisely as old*, taking what dominant taste regimes have consigned to the outmoded, unfashionable, and *ch’onseureoun*, asserting its value not despite but *through* perceived obsolescence.

The political stakes become clearer when newtro is situated within Korea’s particular relationship to modernity. The developmental ideology driving compressed industrialization positioned newness as unambiguous good; this temporal orientation generated systematic devaluation of the old as shameful, reminders of conditions the nation was striving to transcend. The *ch’onseureoun* names precisely this shame: the embarrassment of the provincial that developmental ideology encouraged Koreans to feel toward their own recent past. Song (2009) demonstrates how neoliberal welfare society promoted “governable subjects” by discriminating between “deserving” welfare citizens—those deemed employable and self-sufficient—and the “undeserving” (p. xi). Newtro’s reclamation of *ch’onseureoun* forms enacts temporal reconciliation, acceptance of the past not as shameful prehistory but as resource for contemporary identity formation. The newtro font condenses broader arguments about cultural agency into typographic form, namely those that are fundamentally epistemic. Who determines what counts as appropriately futuristic? The techno-Orientalist answer positions Western aesthetic norms as universal standards; *Space Sweepers*’ newtro typography refuses this positioning not through explicit argument but through enacted demonstration.

6. Conclusion: Epistemic Reappropriation by Way of Aesthetics

Space Sweepers may not be what one might call a masterpiece. The plot’s fragmentation, the villain’s thinness, and reliance on familiar genre conventions militate against such elevated designation. Yet the film marks a significant turn in Korean science fiction media, one wherein cumulative details signal departure from longstanding anxieties of influence constraining Korean speculative production under the dictate of the *kwahak kisul* paradigm. What renders *Space Sweepers* significant is not transcendence of genre limitation but the confidence with which it inhabits generic space, the self-assurance permitting Korean cultural coordinates to organize blockbuster spectacle without apology.

This essay has traced newtro-punk’s epistemic operations across four registers. Through citational practice, I claim that *Space Sweepers* establishes derivativeness itself as mode of cultural assertion, not choosing between cosmopolitan genre and local particularity but inhabiting both simultaneously. In its linguistic reappropriation, the film refuses English’s

default status as tongue of futurity while positioning Korean text not as exotic decoration but as natural expression of Korean subjects. With its characterization, the film distributes epistemic weight toward the marginal and precarious, modeling community organized around ethical practice rather than categorical membership. Last but not least, in its embodied aesthetics, Victory's antiquarian font condenses arguments about cultural agency into typographic form, asserting that evaluative frameworks positioning such forms as unfashionable need not be accepted as given.

The framework proposed throughout, that of promoting newtro-punk as distinctively Korean intervention into speculative fiction genealogy, names orientation rather than essence. What characterizes said orientation is epistemic reappropriation by way of aesthetics: contestation of established knowledge frameworks regarding what counts as properly futuristic, properly valuable, properly Korean through aesthetic strategies that enact alternative valuations rather than merely arguing for them. The font of 승리호 does not make an argument about typographic legitimacy, but instead simply appears, its presence asserting that vintage Hangul belongs on a spaceship hull. Bub's feminine presentation does not argue for transgender acceptance; it simply exists, the crew's acknowledgment modeling a social environment where such existence requires no justification. Captain Jang's authority, meanwhile, does not prove female capability; it simply operates.

The critical intervention newtro-punk offers is fundamentally epistemic. The demonstration that the criteria determining what counts as futuristic are themselves culturally situated and therefore contestable. This is not the claim that Korean design can be futuristic too, a claim that would leave intact the evaluative frameworks against which Korean production measures itself, but rather the more radical assertion that such frameworks possess no privileged access to futurity, that they represent sedimented preferences of particular cultural authorities rather than neutral aesthetic achievement. *Space Sweepers* enacts "strong objectivity," to draw on Sandra Harding's (1993) conceptualization, demonstrating that "a maximally critical study" of social relations "can be done only from the perspective of those whose lives have been marginalized" (p. 69). By positioning worn textures and vintage typography as legitimate materials for imagining futurity, the film makes visible the situated character of aesthetic norms presenting themselves as universal.

The Victory and its crew are themselves junk who salvages objects categorized on the same symbolic register as themselves, living as inhabitants of a junk economy designed to ensure perpetual precarity. Their triumph lies not in escaping these conditions but in making them habitable, carving out space for connection and care within arrangements that would seem to foreclose such possibilities. I present newtro-punk as the very appellation for this mode of inhabitation, highlighting the refusal to accept that damaged conditions preclude flourishing based on the insistence that the old and discarded might yet prove valuable to those willing to see them otherwise. In the debris field of inherited genre, colonial trauma, and evaluative hierarchy, something worth keeping has been salvaged, an image of Korean futurity that is neither derivative repetition nor anxious demonstration of capability but simply itself, offered without apology to whoever might find it interesting. The epistemological stakes extend beyond Korean cultural production to the broader question of how marginalized subjects might inhabit inherited forms, not by transcending them or rejecting them but by assembling them differently,

insisting that worn textures constitute resources rather than obstacles and demonstrating that futures imagined from positions of precarity possess validity equal to futures imagined from positions of power. This is the newtro-punk wager – and *Space Sweepers*, for all its limitations, has painted it where it cannot be erased: on a hull that was never meant to be beautiful, in a language that was never meant to signify the future, for an audience that was never promised one.

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