Agnieszka Kiejziewicz

RMIT University Vietnam
ORCID 0000-0003-2546-6360

Sensibilities of the digital era. New media and future technologies in K-drama subgenre narratives

Shane Denson and Julia Leyda in the introduction to the *Post-Cinema. Theorizing 21st-Century Film* draw the picture of the new sensibility created by the 21-st century media. They observe that the landscape of post-cinema (which can be expanded into post-television and post-serialized narratives) "is a summative or synoptic notion of a special sort, one that allows for internal variety while focusing attention on the cumulative impact of the newer media" (Denson & Leyda, eds., 2016, pp. 1–2). It is not surprising that the shape of the digital, convergent audiovisuality, related to distribution, reception, or interaction, penetrates the patterns of genre narratives and appears on the screen as a cinematic motif per-se. Well-established cyberpunk, discursive post-cyberpunk, and emerging solarpunk aesthetics have already had a solid representation across the world's cinematographies. Transgressing the science-fiction and its sub-genres, the technological discourses on post-bodies, virtual presence, or existence shaped by modernization successfully pervade such genres as drama (i.e., *After Yang*, 2021, dir. Kogonada) or comedy (i.e., *BigBug*, 2022, dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet).

New media and future technologies are also successfully incorporated into narrative patterns of Korean dramas (consequently abbreviated as K-dramas

in this paper)[1], resulting in the emergence of several sub-genres (i.e., futuristic K-drama or time travel K-drama). One of the main features of K-drama is its hybridity and pop cosmopolitanism, which underline the combination of "fantasy and unique cultural and structural elements" (Lee, 2018, p. 370). In this context, technology is an exciting landscape, a futuristic background for passionate affairs. Even though technology and technological thinking dominate the shape of the narratives analyzed in this paper, it cannot be forgotten that the central theme of K-dramas is "romance, highlighting the value of true love manifested by the ways of innocent sensibility, which are often seen as rare and unrealistic conditions in our tough world and complex reality" (Ju, 2020, p. 30). The lack of violence and extreme behavior in K-dramas results in the depictions of futuristic development derived from a dystopian, cyberpunkish mood. Instead, the technology in this TV genre is shown as an invention influencing social values, creating generation gaps, or promising new means of communication (Ju, 2020, p. 31). It can be stated that the way of presenting technological development in K-drama is related to new experiences, emotional reactions, and possibilities of finding new relationships.

Moreover, the shape of the chosen technologies in K-dramas is related to the transnational potential of this genre, successfully built by streaming services, with Netflix and Amazon Prime in the lead. The approach to the futuristic imaginary tends to be universal and easily transferrable to other cultural grounds. As Ju observes,

> "[…] the international popularity of soap operas on television not only testifies to the genre's ability to explore specific properties associated with cultural sentiment in narratives but also its capacity to vary those narratives with pluralistic, local symbolic narratives at the same time. This allows the easy translatability of many different soap operas, of multinational origins, in transnational contexts" (Ju, 2020, p. 28).

Following Ju's findings, it can be realized that KK-dramas do not pretend to invent new futuristic technologies to amaze the viewers. Instead, this genre successfully combines the inspirations taken from popular SF with K-dramas'

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[1] For the clarity of this paper, it is necessary to provide a consistent definition of Korean dramas. As Ji-yoon An observes, "For decades, K-drama was almost synonymous with romance, referring to its customary narrative of some fated yet twisted love story between a kind, poor female and her 'true love' (a rich man) […]. The recent diversification of K-drama contents has sparked questions about the future of K-drama, prompting journalists to comment that K-drama is finally moving away from its prototypical sub-genre, the 'Cinderella story'." (An, 2022, p. 2). Nowadays, K-dramas are no longer exclusively connected to TV distribution, while they are produced and released by streaming platforms, such as Netflix. However, respecting the history of this genre, the researchers often underline its TV-related genesis.

narrative patterns. The presented technologies are well-known to the audience familiar with popular culture and, at the same time, easily acceptable by those mainly interested in the emotional cargo of the story.

Acknowledging the growing popularity of K-drama locally in Asia and among Western viewers, this article investigates the ways of perceiving new technologies and new media through the lenses of K-dramas. To offer a cross-section of examples necessary for building a comparative approach to the issue, I will analyze three popular titles, distinguishable by their approach to technological themes. The TV series featured in this article were chosen according to their high ratings and international availability – all mentioned K-dramas had their premiere on Korean TV and then, again, on Netflix. The first analyzed series is *Crash Landing on You* (*Sarang-ui bulsichak*, 2019–2020, dir. Lee Jeong-Hyo), a widely appreciated title focused on North-South Korea cross-border love. To be together, the characters must fight the social and political conditions, searching for the final escape from the surveillance. Even though the new technologies are not the central theme of *Crash Landing*, this example features technology as a powerful means of communication and force, allowing the characters to maintain their relationship. Here, technological development is an indicator differentiating the two worlds and underlining social differences between North and South Korea, thus asking about the new normality and alternative history.

Furthermore, I will focus on two dramas depicting futuristic imagination related to chosen technological achievements. The first one, *My Holo Love* (*Na Hollo Geudae*, 2020, dir. Lee Sang-yeob), features augmented reality holographic glasses, allowing to contact with the AI hologram boy. The creators redefine the approach to representations of AI in TV series, accepting the emotional development of the artificial self as highly possible and desirable. The last example of the technology-focused K-drama covered in this article is *Memories of the Alhambra* (*Alhambeura Gungjeonui Chueok*, 2018, dir. Ahn Gil-ho), underlining the topic of techno-orientalism in the context of AR (Augmented Reality) MMORPG games.

This article aims to provide insight into the development of the SF tropes in K-dramas, pointing out the correlation between the technological discourses, narrative modifications, and the viewers' expectations. The dynamic development of K-drama subgenres indicates that the generic love story is no longer sufficient. There is a need for exciting surroundings transgressing the notions of probability and drifting into the fantastic or futuristic worlds. Focusing on the serialized representations of technological development, I will analyze how K-drama anticipates the future and creates a new spectre of cultural sensibilities.

The Messenger App will save our love

The popularity of *Crash Landing on You*, first shown on tvN channel in South Korea and later delivered to a worldwide audience through Netflix, resulted in the number of academic articles dedicated to this title. The core observations of the research papers revolve around international relations and alternative politics, underlining "contrasts of socialism and capitalism, simplicity and sophistication, militarism and consumption" (Epstein and Green, 2020, p. 4). Other authors, such as Sihombing and Dellavia, described the viewers' responses to the uniqueness of setting the romance on the most protected border in the world (See: Sihombing and Dellavia, 2021).

The 16-episode series focuses on the eventful relationship between a young and beautiful entrepreneur, the cosmetics company owner Yoon Se-ri (Son Ye-jin), and Ri Jeong-hyeok (Hyun Bin), who is the captain of the North Korean army. Those two accidentally meet when Se-ri goes paragliding and is blown to the Demilitarized Zone by a tornado. Captain Ri finds the woman in the forest and, constantly fighting with his inner feeling of correctness, decides to help her return home instead of reporting her to the authorities. Se-ri starts living in his house undercover, pretending to be the captain's fiancée who returned from a political mission in South Korea, thus explaining her foreign look and accent this way. Before the feeling between those two can fully grow and be admitted by both sides, Captain Ri and Se-ri face numerous unsuccessful attempts to send the woman back safely to South Korea. Their story is marked by break-ups and happy returns, dangerous encounters with North Korean spies, and murderous attempts of Se-ri's siblings to deprive her of the family legacy.

Epstein and Green observed that even though *Crash Landing on You* "invokes many formulae of South Korean dramas, it also offers a detailed portrait of North Korea and, as such, is a crucial text for evaluating ongoing change in South Korean popular representations of its neighbour" (Epstein and Green, 2020, p. 1). The plot of this series is delivered in a way to create constant comparisons between two lands. The mirrored characters and situations underline the differences in technological and social development. The serialized North Korean surrounding is designed to fascinate the viewers with an old-fashioned way of living. The social manners, kimchi cooking, or unfashionable clothes create nostalgia for the rural surrounding, long-forgotten tastes of simple dishes, and a sense of community. In the perception of Se-ri, North Korea is not a purely antagonistic country. Instead, it functions as a history museum, where the woman, representing the Other, or the outsider's gaze, can discover simple life deprived of luxuries. Mysterious North Korea teaches Se-ri about family values, friendship,

and cooperation, while South Korea is shown as shaped by aggressive capitalism, leaving no space for sentiments and truthfulness. Based on the revised look at the two countries, this simple opposition allows steering the viewers' sensibilities. Jeong-hyeok, connected to the North side, is a vessel of family values and nostalgia, pointed out as the ideal partner from the beginning.

One of the most significant aspects of *Crash Landing*'s narrative is the opposition between the technologically developed South and the rural, underdeveloped North. The South Korean solutions, even as simple as stable electrification, not mentioning cell phones with Internet connections, are unknown to the Northern characters or perceived as technological novelties from South Korean soap operas. However, it should be clarified that the actual technological advancement of North Korea was undermined for narrative purposes in the series. As Youna Kim indicates, quoting the articles from *Wired* (Pugliese, 2015) and *38 North* (Williams, 2017), around 2015–2017, there were "3.5 million computers and 5 million tablets in the country. […] nationwide Intranet is freely offered to those with access to a computer and includes a search engine, an email program, a variety of homepages, and news about the country's leader. North Korean tablets were produced around 2015, providing basic apps such as a camera, gallery and browser" (Kim, ed., 2019, p. 9). In *Crash Landing*, the background characters seem surprised about the existence of the mentioned technologies. Even Jeong-hyeok, who, as a high-ranked captain, has access to the government's web, approaches the modern solutions with awe, manifesting a lack of awareness of the free Internet's principles.

Discussing the depictions of new technologies in *Crash Landing,* it is worth pointing out the auto-thematic references in this K-drama. When Se-ri appears in the North Korean village, and it becomes evident that she will stay longer, the group of the most trustworthy soldiers serving under Captain Ri is designated to take care (and watch) the woman in the absence of their leader. Se-ri quickly learns that one of the soldiers, Kim Joo Muk (Yoo Soo Bin), is a fan of K-dramas. He illegally binge-watches his favorite series. Soon, his deep love of Hallyu culture naturally makes the man an interpreter of Se-ri's customs, modernized language, and expectations. In *Crash Landing*, K-drama is depicted as a source of cultural knowledge or a platform allowing cross-cultural exchange. Soldier Kim Joo Muk represents the entire generation of North Korean youths and housewives who discovered the Southern TV series, considering them a window to modernity. As Youna Kim observes, the popularity of K-dramas in North Korea was noted in the viewership reports, authenticating the viewership practices that the series comments. The researcher points out that "North Korean defectors

generally acknowledge that nearly all of their friends living inside the country have consumed South Korean popular culture, or that a majority of North Koreans have secretly watched South Korean drama or film at least once, indicating that exposure to the outside culture is not just limited to escapees from North Korea" (Kim, ed., 2019, p. 7).

More auto-referencing and discursive themes appear in the following episodes of *Crash Landing*, showing that the production takes an active stance in commenting on the dynamics of media changes in both countries. For example, being a celebrity and a director of a cosmetics company in South Korea, Se-ri is constantly surrounded by cameras, gossips, and social media news covering her every step. When she appears in North Korea, the action becomes divided into two parts, and the viewer gets flashes from Se-ri's home country, following the media panic. On the other hand, media-silenced North Korea provides Se-ri with the opportunity of feeling how it is to live without being recognized by social media followers. At the same time, the woman's family and co-workers in South Korea try to manage the anxiety of the media, fans, and stockholders, who acknowledged Se-ri's disappearance. The culmination point of the media upheaval is the organization of the woman's funeral by her family, which, even though the body was not found, plans to destroy Se-ri's media presence by flooding social media with information about her death.

According to the above, it is visible that the main aim of this K-drama is to allow the viewer to discover the differences between the two countries through the projection-identification process. Looking at North Korea, the viewer is taken back to pre-new media times, perceiving the underdeveloped world as pre-technological Skansen. However, the lack of media buzz and technological advancement is presented as an advantage in developing relationships, spending time together, and being a community. When the sudden plot twist brings the North Korean characters to South Korea, the process of discovering begins from scratch – this time, the viewer, following Ri Jeong-hyeok and his team, looks at the modern world from a perception of a child.

The discourse about the influence of technology in *Crash Landing* is complemented by the observation of the role of media in creating social interactions. It can be pointed out that every ground-breaking encounter of the characters is initiated or, at least, influenced by a different kind of medium. From the retrospective sequences, the viewer learns that Ri Jeong-hyeok and Se-ri had met before the day of the accident. However, back then, they were unaware of their spiritual connection and could not foresee future events. The first meeting occurred when captain Ri studied in Switzerland to become a famous pianist. One retrospective

sequence shows Se-ri traveling through this country, searching for consolation after several personal and work failures. While passing the pier of a charming little town, the woman hears memorable piano music, which she cannot further associate with any known composer (even though she has access to every possible media-tracking application). It turns out that it was Jeong-hyeok playing, waiting for the shipment of his piano, as he prepared to move back to North Korea after the death of his brother. The meaningful song, composed by captain Ri, was played by him only once in his life – when Se-ri was listening to it. The music becomes a message and a vehicle of the characters' emotions. The mentioned scene brings to mind Walter Ong's perception of the meaning of sound: "Sight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer. Vision dissects, as Merleau-Ponty has observed (1961). Vision comes to a human being from one direction at a time: to look at a room or a landscape, I must move my eyes around from one part to another. When I hear, however, I gather sound simultaneously from every direction at once: I am at the center of my auditory world, which envelopes me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence […]" (Ong, 2002, p. 70). In this context, the romanticization of the first encounter between Se-ri and Jeong-hyeok is based solely on the power of the lack of sight. It leaves space for spiritual connection and imagination – even though the characters, for a long time, will not associate this moment with their first meeting.

This first encounter establishes the relationship between the characters, which, from the beginning, is dependent on the convergence of the old and new media. Because of the developmental gap between the North and South, simple solutions in South Korea are considered by the inhabitants of the North as future technologies. They discover them with awe, learn them, and associate them with bright possibilities. For instance, cell phones and applications are the most essential and reoccurring technology in *Crash Landing*. However, in the perception of North Korean characters, personal cell phones are unnecessary and even dangerous – associated with anti-governmental propaganda. The only distant forms of communication available for the Northerners are landline phones installed exclusively in the houses of more prominent citizens. Captain Ri and his team are aware of the constant surveillance, so the most reliable form of communication for them is still a word spoken face to face in a secluded place. When Se-ri discovers how to live in the North Korean village, she needs to get used to the fact that her smartphone is useless. Captain Ri lets her use the landline phone, but only in an emergency – which results in a series of comic-relief moments when the woman calls him to ask for trivial matters. However, the characters switch places when Se-ri finally returns to South Korea, and Jeong-hyeok follows her.

Captain Ri and his fellow soldiers need to learn a dynamic of "civil inattention" (Marling, 2008, p. 39). They must dive into the world of smartphones, applications, and distant communication, which means losing focus on their immediate surroundings and thinking more spatially.

The appearance of smartphones often changes the flow of the narrative events in *Crash Landing*. The devices ring in crucial moments, bringing the attention of dangerous pursuers or transferring messages of the highest importance. The smartphone also saves the impossible, distant relationship between Se-ri and Jeong-hyeok. When the captain is forced to return to his country, and the possibility of a future meeting with his lover is very vague, the man discovers the function of sending delayed messages in the Messenger application. Before he leaves, Jeong-hyeok programs a bunch of notes and voice recordings, which he assigns to special dates (i.e., Se-ri's birthday). When he disappears to North Korea and disconnects from his social media accounts, Se-ri keeps receiving warm, loving notes. Even though the communication is one-sided, Jeong-hyeok seems present, and Se-ri, who is used to this form of building relationships, can pretend that the captain is next to her.

Analyzing the characteristics of mobile phones as narrative tropes, William Marling underlined that introducing this technology on the screen provides new possibilities for drama (Marling, 2008, p. 39). He writes that "The mobile phone is a field of action, we see now, as well as a necessity that rules us, but it had not until now been lifted to our hermeneutic regard. An object at once stolen, bought, and sold in the *banlieux* of all large cities, not to mention the precincts of eBay, the mobile phone is now narrative trope" (Marling, 2008, p. 43). Except for the potential for breaking down barriers of any kind – social, economic, time and space differences – the smartphone becomes "central to the characters' emotions" (Marling, 2008, p. 42). The researcher observes that the smartphone inherited the attributes and dramatic solutions connected with the landline from the beginning of the cinema. Indeed, *Crash Landing* perfectly shows the transformation gap between two types of telephones, applying media to the local context, thus considering them as a crucial trope in creating the discourse about modernization.

The last issue related to new media presence in *Crash Landing* is surveillance observation. The presentation of North Korea as a panoptic prison is a well-established trope in cinema, so the scenes depicting the characters checking bugged hotel room appliances or being eavesdropped by the agents function as cultural references, underlining the lack of freedom of speech. However, the comparison with the South shows that the individual is never free, and the South also has

its surveillance methods, including self-surveillance. When Captain Ri illegally stays in the South and pretends to be Se-ri's bodyguard, he has a lot of free time to spend, so he plays MMORPG games on his hostess's computer. When Se-ri realizes that Ri's fascination, related to the fact that he has never played computer games before, can become an addiction, she applies parenting control to the computer and ends Ri's games adventures. Unconsciously, she uses the same solution as Ri's home country, censoring her lover's online activities. The computer game serves as another comparison between the two lands, introducing the reflection upon media presence, remote observation, and virtual entertainment. In *Crash Landing*, digital games are associated with exclusive entertainment for the inhabitants of the South. The virtual match serves as a social violence control tool, allowing the men to focus on the adventures instead of fighting in real life, as the series implies. As the Northerners have already excelled in war strategies, they only need to familiarize themselves with hardware because the game's principles are understandable. Se-ri, engaged in her work-related activities and not having enough time for virtual entertainment, serves as a censor, taking care of her guests' well-being.

Crash Landing's central theme is cross-border relationship overcoming cultural, social, and political difficulties. However, the comparative presentation of the technologies on both sides of the divided country is the power influencing all interactions and events. There is an ongoing debate on portraying North Korea in *Crash Landing* and the probability of such an image. Researchers, such as Sihombing and Dellavia, discuss the media framing of this production and compare it to the testimonies of North Koreans. The reoccurring observation coming from this research shows that there appear to be some inconsistencies emerging from the principles of the narrative-building process. Still, the overall depiction of technological advancement accurately underlines cultural differences, as the authors summarize (Sihombing and Dellavia, 2021, pp. 123–124).

Dating the holo boy

My Holo Love (*Na Hollo Geudae*, dir. Lee Sang-yeob), released by Netflix as the first Korean original series of the year 2020 (Kang, 2019), presents the story of a unique love triangle in which one of the characters is an AI hologram boy named Holo (Yoon Hyun-min). Through the unusual set of events, he becomes friends with So-yeon (Ko Sung-hee) – a young woman working in a company designing fashionable glasses. The protagonist suffers from prosopagnosia – she is face-blind, which results in the inability to recognize the faces of co-workers, friends, or family members. So-yeon's problem stems from her traumatic past,

when, as a child, she witnessed a murder. Suffering from shyness, the woman distances herself from society. Holo becomes the first "person" that helps her to open up. The third main character in the drama is Nan-do (also played by Yoon Hyun-min). He is Holo's developer and talented programmer who hides his identity because of the unsolved crime case from the past. Nan-do and his sister, who officially acts as the chief of the company, designed Holo in the likeness of the programmer, pretending that Nan-do is just a fashion model cooperating with the company. Even from the short introduction presented above, it is visible that the story revolves around identity, recognition, and searching for the true self. The similarity between Holo and Nan-do's appearances and So-yeon's face-blindness provides a high potential for identity-change gags and comic relief interludes.

Technology plays a central role in *My Holo Love*, providing various possible narrative solutions to the love story between a human and AI. Summarizing the sources of ideas for the series in the interview for "The Korea Times," Ryu Yong-jae, the screenwriter, indicated that he got inspired by the performance of AlphaGo, an AI Go player created by Google DeepMind. In 2016, for the first time in history, the virtual player defeated a human – Go master Lee Se-dol (Kwak 2020). So that, in his scenario, Ryu wanted to connect the love story with a deeper insight into the concept of AI's capabilities to understand humans' emotions. The first main issue introduced in the series revolves around AI development and social reception, including the depictions of marketing solutions. The second discourse in *My Holo Love* focuses on the broader problematics of representations of AI, here depicted as the holographic presence. This narrative solution seems natural to the characters, who accept that the "thinking" AI has been developed in the form of holo-glasses, not, for example, an integrated computer system. Finally, the third discourse is about the implementation of the hologram – its visibility and scope of possible interactions with the user. All mentioned discourses permeate each other, so in the following paragraphs, I will present their chosen aspects, considering the relationships between humans and AI as the main point of reference.

The technological solutions depicted in *My Holo Love* focus on a user experience and the attempts to develop fully interactive, engaging augmented reality. The blend of 'the real' and 'the virtual' is achieved by providing the user with the constant presence of an AI-driven hologram. It should be added that the hologram can also alter the perception of the viewer's surroundings (if watched through the holo-glasses). This way, Holo can show So-yeon the tropical beach or other calming, beautiful views, just staying on the roof of her building. The

significant point is that no dangers connected to the altered perceptions are underlined (such as the possibility of falling from the roof if forgetting about the illusion). Following the narrative genre patterns of K-drama, the creators emphasize the positive character of the presence of the holo-lover, omitting the discourse of dangers unrelated to the main plotline.

The depiction of holo-AI in this series follows the well-established patterns of AI and augmented reality representations in SF films and TV series, such as *Star Trek*, *Star Wars,* or *Iron Man* (Hawkinson 2022). It is also worth mentioning that augmented reality glasses are not a novelty on screen, starting from the thrilling *They Live* (1988) by John Carpenter. Similar to Carpenter's dystopian narrative, the audience of *My Holo Love* observes the holo-presence from the first- and third-person view, looking through the same glasses as the main character. Following So-yeon's actions, the viewer discovers new functionalities of the Holo, such as the work assistant function, navigation through the city, or even manipulation of the surrounding (for example, changing the traffic lights). The mentioned possibilities of the holo-AI present a well-developed, almost omnipotent product that can simultaneously help the user and cause addiction. However, the series' creators focus only on a 'good' side of Holo, leaving dystopian discourses behind. In *My Holo Love,* the evil component is created by greedy people, and Holo remains an innocent, platonic imagination of a perfect lover.

Moreover, the hologram boy is presented as a symbol of the ephemerality of memory. The genesis of the invention, slowly discovered by the viewer, can be traced back to Nan-do's mother, a brilliant IT programmer. She created the first primitive version of AI as a virtual companion to her emotionally distanced son. At some point, Holo became the only carrier of accurate memory about Nan-do's mother, who died as a victim of an unsolved crime. On the other hand, Holo (and, analogically, Nan-do) becomes the only person whose face is recognized by So-yeon – whose memory was also inflicted by the trauma. Tim Kreider, in his article dedicated to the canonical film *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001, dir. Steven Spielberg), observed that the AI appearance creates a technological simulacrum, which helps in replacing the lost ones with the ersatz memories and emotions (Kreider, 2002, pp. 33–35). This Freudian observation highlighting the role of unconsciousness can also refer to Holo, who provides his owners with a replacement for missing interactions with others, alone not having the memories. It is significant that during the course of action, Holo often loses and regains access to his personality-defining database. When he returns to the customized state, the bond between the AI and So-yeon is at risk, and the relationship's future depends on the woman. It is her to decide if she wants to fight for the recovery

of his virtual hard drive, thus feeling better with the knowledge that he "remembers" past experiences with her. She could also accept the empty shell of a customized Holo and teach him to be her friend again. At some point, So-yeon must also choose between an idealized holo-lover, who can guess all her needs, and a real boy, Nan-do – impulsive, secretive, and impatient. Even though, according to the principles of K-drama, the real boy symbolizes 'normality' and should have been chosen immediately, the simulation of a relationship has been the most attractive solution for So-yeon for a long time.

It cannot be forgotten, though, that according to the K-drama genre conventions, the focus is dedicated to the slow development of the relationship with AI. The main difficulty the characters face relates to Holo's bodiless, ephemeral presence. In fact, it is the only obstacle leading So-yeon to choose a human lover – Nan-do. It is worth underlining that the artificial humans with AI brains in such titles as *Blade Runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott) or *Ghost in the Shell* (1995–2015) could be touched and positioned in spatiotemporal categories. Even in cult *Blade Runner 2049* (2017, dir. Denis Villeneuve), the holographic lover's image is superimposed on the woman's body. The presence of the artificial body or a real body covered by a hologram makes the illusion of a human simpler to maintain, contrary to *My Holo Love*, where the lover constantly reminds of his virtuality. Because of the lack of sensual connection, the holo-love is finally not enough for So-yeon. Even if the spiritual concept of innocent touchless love is forced at the beginning of the narrative, the woman soon realizes that corporeality is a significant component of the relationship. She transfers her interests to Nan-do, who is often depicted as a worse version of Holo. Therefore, the concept of a virtual body cannot win with the "traditional" sensual pleasures, even if adjustable to a lover's needs. In this case, *My Holo Love* does not feature a revolutionary approach to virtuality. Instead, the narrative pattern follows the K-drama general convention of showing novelties and transgressions as temporary solutions. Because K-dramas promote a traditional approach to social contacts based on Confucian values (Lee, 2018, p. 370), if something transgresses tradition, it must be tamed to restore the primary order. The romantic relationship with an incorporeal AI has to end because it does not comply with the rules of society.

However, in the background of this love story, a gripping narrative solution appears, expanding the notions of the K-drama genre. The plot of the last two episodes of *My Holo Love* focuses less on the emotional struggles of the characters and more on the social and technological revolution. Suddenly, through the decision of a new owner of GIO Lab, which produced Holo, the holo-glasses are introduced to mass-selling. Thousands of people can buy the product and inter-

act with Holo, changing his appearance or even gender and fitting the experience to their needs, thanks to new functionalities. The depiction of a dynamic social and technological revolution underlines the issue of surveillance that was overlooked in the previous episodes. Here the viewer observes how corporate actions influence humans' emotions and how fast technology can change the world. The users act weirdly on the streets, immersed in the virtual world – talk loudly, ignore real people, and, most importantly, transmit everything they see to the corporate servers. It can be observed that *My Holo Love* takes an active stance and comments on how easy it is to change the stream of events through one technological solution. In the final scene of the series, the viewer discovers that after the convoluted fight for power among the investors, GIO Lab is finally in the hands of Nan-do, his sister, and So-yeon, who becomes a new representative. However, learning from the experience and trying to prevent the destructive influence of technology on society, the new team cancels the Holo project. The users can no longer order AR glasses, and the company is using established solutions for developing hologram-based distant communication tools. The Holo-boy disappears from the shop shelves and the users' memories. Following the K-drama patterns, order is restored, and the transgressive idea of love between a human and AI does not spread.

My Holo Love is one of the first K-dramas using the well-known cyberpunk motif of AI developing emotions. Holo-boy learns how to decipher human feelings, which leads him to establish his own dreams about having a partner. All in all, it turns out that artificial Holo can only be a matchmaker for So-yeon and Nan-do, and his feelings are considered unequal to those manifested by humans.

Techno-oriental dreams of the future

Memories of the Alhambra is among the titles searching for brave genre connections and solutions for developing K-drama patterns. Classified as an SF action romance, this production focuses on the possibilities of introducing an Augmented Reality (AR) game to a broader audience. Featuring medieval Granada (and Asian countries in further episodes), the game allows for impersonating a warrior. The player can engage in fighting, defeating enemies, or developing skills. The product's novelty lies in the augmentation of the fictional narrative on the actual place and time. The location of the action of *Memories* is not coincidental – the scriptwriter of the series, Song Jae-Jung, started working on the story while visiting Granada. However, her inspiration was also connected to the emerging trend of setting Asian TV productions in European contexts and aesthetics. Such titles as *The Legend of the Blue Sea* (*Pooreun Badaui Junsul*,

2016–2017; filmed in Greece), *The Package* (*Deo Paekiji*, 2017; filmed in France) or Japanese *Magi: The Tensho Boys' Embassy* (*MAGI Tensho Keno Shonen Shisetsu*, 2019; filmed in Italy), show the Asian characters in a new surrounding and situations, at the same time stating a perfect product placement strategy. The atmosphere of idealized, romantic European countries became an easy solution to the viewers' growing need for novelty.

Analyzing the Asian TV series inspired by the European setting, it is already visible that K-dramas, Japanese series, and serialized productions from other Asia-Pacific region countries are built upon the stated set of rules, depending on the genre(s) and origin. For example, Asian costume dramas, such as *Magi*, often focus on deconstructing and retelling historical events. They provide a refreshed, pop-cultural version of the past through the reinvention of the characters and their actions.

In opposition to the mentioned costume dramas, *Memories* refers to the past perceived as a virtual imaginary, which can be entered and left at any time. The action of this series starts when a twice-divorced wealthy CEO of the IT company, Jin-woo Yoo (Hyun Bin), comes to Granada to test the innovative AR game. Featuring AR characteristics, the game got implemented on the map of an actual city, providing the augmentation of medieval scenarios and scenography, thus mixing reality with a virtual experience. The player could enter the game through a set of special lenses. However, the game is in its beta version, still bugged, and unprepared to open the servers to the public. Foreseeing the trends, Jin-woo knows that if this product succeeds, he will be the owner of the most prosperous entertainment business worldwide. That is why the man decides to take a sudden trip to Granada after receiving a mysterious call from a young, independent developer, Se-joo Jung (Chanyeol). Se-joo is the game's inventor and co-owner, who spent years programming the AR surrounding and inventing the storyline. It is soon revealed that after contacting Jin-woo and desperately trying to sell the beta version of the game, Se-joo has disappeared. When Jin-woo arrives in Granada, tempted by the possibility of buying a revolutionary product, he rents a room in an old hostel Bonita, run by Se-joo's sister, Hee-joo Jung (Lee Chae-yoon). Those two get connected by the common aim of finding Se-joo, and, following the K-drama principles, they soon fall in love.

This series provides the connection between K-drama and SF, featuring the process of creating a parallel universe based on "exoticism as a specific narrative device" (Rubio De Olazabal, 2020, p. 54). The game world in *Memories* is based on the users' nostalgia for iconic historical periods, orientalized and depicted

in the form of scenography, costumes, and manners of the NPCs[2]. Describing the dynamic plot of the series, De Olazabal pointed out that "in every corner, laneway and public square, Nasrid warriors or Castilian soldiers appear, ready to fight; objects and weapons can be found, and perilous missions are undertaken" (Rubio De Olazabal, 2020, p. 55). As the series tells the story of the prototype game that is still in beta version[3] under development, there is no consistent narrative that the characters/players follow. Instead, most encounters in the virtual world feature fighting scenes in medieval scenery.

Granada, with its long and vivid history, becomes a place of techno-oriental dreams about experiencing palpable history in the mentioned K-drama. The Alhambra Palace, which was listed as UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984, is a subject of collective social memory, supported by poems following the "spiritual urbanism" trend (i.e., *Granada la bella* by Ángel Ganivet, 19th cent.) and symbolic Andalusian identity (Alcantud, 2012, pp. 179–180). Focusing on the postmodern period of Alhambra's existence, Alcantud points out mass tourism as one of the biggest dangers and catalysts of change for the monument's shape. Removing the farm workers that cultivated their gardens in Alhambra for ages and, finally, moving out all inhabitants of the Palace's surrounding, changed a living city into an open-air museum (Alcantud, 2012, p. 183). The problem of using Alhambra as a background for the AR game is related to the non-existence of post-colonial discourse regarding this monument. Alcantud, being deeply committed to research on the preservation of this historical site, wrote, "[…] due to the weakness of multiculturalist reading, yet to find a path of its own, and because of the absence of a »Saidi« discourse about the Alhambra as an Orientalist construct, the old aesthetic interpretations of romantic origins that praise common places such as an incarnation of the »Islamic paradise« still prevail. The works that use the aestheticism typical of the Alhambra are most of the time not really transcendental books, with synthetic brief texts and magnificent photos that address the matter from the »magical« point of view" (Alcantud, 2012, p. 185). This exact way of looking at Alhambra has been featured in *Memories*. It can be visible in many details, such as the shape of NPCs Nasrid warriors appearing in the game or the design of the user's experience. Even though the real Alhambra is perfectly preserved, the game adds extra layouts to the surrounding, improving the modernized parts of the city and providing a medieval look to chosen interiors.

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[2] NPC – a non-player character in a virtual game. NPC abbreviation refers to all characters in the game designed according to their function and a defined role.

[3] A test version of a game or software before the official release.

The narrative and mood of *Memories* can be related to several resources that inspired the creators. Among the most visible connections, it is worth adding that *Memories of the Alhambra* is also a novel by American author Nash Candelaria. This book, published in 1977 and considered one of the famous examples of Chicano literature, has some common points with the K-drama of the same title. The book describes the inner states and the search for the identity of José Rafa, the main character of the work (Shirley, 1979, p. 100). Rafa is lost between reality and dream, unable to look at the outside world without analyzing his inner experiences. The blurred boundaries between the game and reality in the K-drama, as well as the focus on the main character's struggle, resemble the search for balance between reality and the dream world in Candelaria's novel.

Memories of the Alhambra series is centered on the motif of virtual reality influencing the existence of the characters. In his publication dedicated to this narrative, Rubio De Olazabal focuses on the ludic nature of the series, pointing out the connections between virtual reality and a playable, fictional world (Rubio De Olazabal, 2020, p. 55). He observes that the ludic-cultural appropriation of Granada as the AR playground perfectly corresponds with the illusionary character of K-dramas, as "[…] play is appropriation, expression, and a personal affair" (Rubio De Olazabal, 2020, p. 58). Olazabal perceives *Memories* as a dialogue between modern and medieval-virtual culture. The mixed aesthetics, values, and scenarios connect history, technology, and nostalgia, depicting Granada "as a superimposition of worlds potentially leading to a dark world" (Rubio De Olazabal, 2020, p. 62). Indeed, next to the development of the future game platform, the series focuses on the issue of virtual immortality and the possibility of becoming a computer construct after death. When Jin-woo starts testing the game right after arriving in Granada, he discovers that the programmer Se-joo tried to sell the game to Hyung-seok Cha (Hoon Park) earlier that day. The first potential buyer is Jin-woo's rival, who stole his ex-wife and left the company they ran together for years. Jin-woo quickly learns that Hyung-seok has also been testing the game in Granada, owning another set of AR lenses. When the rivals meet, they discover that the game allows them to duel or form alliances. Even though they decide to become enemies in the virtual world, the first in-game meeting ends with Jin-woo's retreat. However, the second one leads to an epic and meaningful duel. Thinking that they are under the game laws, which means that every wound disappears after logging out from the game world, and the death is only symbolic, Jin-woo strikes a deadly punch and kills Hyung-seok. To his surprise, the man dies for real of a heart attack and suddenly returns to a game as a bodiless avatar. Hyung-seok loses his emotions, even the ability to speak, becoming a virtual ghost that hunts his rival. From this moment, Jin-woo's reality is intangibly connected with the

game, as the virtual menace appears to him even after logging out. Therefore, the man believes that if he dies in the game, he dies in reality.

The virtual presence and mysterious transcendence of the character to the game world resemble the well-known discussion of the body's boundaries in the cyberpunk literary and audiovisual genre. Similarly to cult hacker Dixie Flatline from William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*, the characters from *Memories* lose the sense of the boundaries between real and virtual. However, while in the cyberpunk narratives the ideal association with the immaterial world is desirable by many, in the mentioned K-drama, the transcendence into the game is considered as an unexpected bug that allows the game to kill players and resurrect them as NPCs. This issue leads to the problematics of the connection between game time and corporeality. As Rubio De Olazabal points out, the action in *Memories* bases on repetition, as in a traditional video game (Rubio De Olazabal, 2020, pp. 62–63). Hyung-seok continuously tries to kill Jin-woo, appearing in different places and times, thus constantly recreating the first duel. The virtual alter-ego is trapped in the wish for bloodthirst revenge on his (accidental) killer. To break the loop and win the game, Jin-woo must complete a particular, high-level quest based on repairing the bug. As it can be observed, the blurred boundary between the worlds and constant fighting with multiple enemies to level up quickly (so-called "grinding" in gamers' jargon) leads the characters to partial rejection of moral values (Lavocat, 2019, p. 288; Rubio De Olazabal, 2020, pp. 62–63). The self-development and "leveling" (increasing the character's level in the game) in *Memories* is reached by killing the enemies in the most brutal ways. According to this, a significant feature distinguishing this drama from the rest of the genre can be observed. Jin-woo considers love and new relationship as the additional component to the mystery he solves. The protagonist is less engaged than the characters from other dramas mentioned in this article, focused on survival more than searching for intimacy with Hee-joo. The narrative in *Memories* highlights the adventure component more than romantic interactions, showing the K-drama development's turn. The rule of the dominance of love story is no longer of the highest importance when it comes to innovative narrative solutions that may help sell the drama to a broader audience.

Memories of the Alhambra successfully connects science fiction and adventure tropes, providing new narrative solutions. It is significant that following the aesthetics of techno-oriental presentation, this drama pushes romanticism to the background, focusing on the depictions of the game world. The high production values, special effects, and descriptions of futuristic gadgets provide insight into the possible genre changes.

Conclusion

K-drama is an evolving genre designed to attract viewers' attention through novelty. The technological tropes presented in this article involve the younger audience and provide fresh narrative solutions; however, they are also part of the selling mechanisms, often related to product placement. The process of creating K-dramas is based on constant research and anticipation of market tendencies related to public expectations. It includes choosing the trending actors, such as Hyun Bin and Son Ye-jin, who guaranteed the success of *Crash Landing on You*, or foreseeing the popularity of traveling locations for the following year. Introducing the technological themes in K-dramas is one of the promotional solutions of high impact on SF fans, gamers, and those who refrain from watching regular dramas.

The list of SF K-dramas is constantly developing, featuring such titles as *SF8* (*Eseuepeueit*, 2020, dir. Min Kyu-dong), *Alice* (*Aelliseu*, 2020, dir. Baek Soo-chan), or *Sisyphus: The Myth* (*Sijipeuseu: the myth*, 2021, dir. Jin Hyuk). Those and other similar titles offer exciting ways of interpreting technology in the context of societal changes. However, it cannot be forgotten that the main objective of K-drama is to depict love, and this component has to be underlined as a primary narrative concern. Even though such series as *Memories of Alhambra* experiment with the genre and minimize the importance of the characters' relationships, the K-drama's formula still consists of several elements that must be included in the narrative. Analyzing the variations of the K-dramas produced every year, it can be assumed that the traditional narrative about love in the daily surrounding will slowly fade away, giving space to genre and sub-genre hybrids of K-drama and SF, thriller, or even light horror (such as *Strangers From Hell* or *Kingdom*).

On the other hand, innovative and engaging depictions of technological tropes provide an interesting commentary about society and social concerns. In recent years, K-drama mainly shows how modernization influences the approach to romance, taking an active stance against transgressing the tradition. However, the references to the significance of technology in daily existence and the depictions of modern solutions as supportive of forming relationships show that the K-drama creators want to follow the changes. In this case, the technology in K-dramas is not only related to science fiction motifs but also contextualizes the viewer's direct experiences.

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Abstract

The presented article provides insight into the development of the SF tropes in K-dramas, pointing out the correlation between the technological discourses, narrative modifications, and the viewers' expectations. The author focuses on three chosen titles – *Crash Landing on You* (*Sarang-ui bulsichak*), *My Holo Love* (*Na Hollo Geudae*), and *Memories of the Alhambra* (*Alhambeura Gungjeonui Chueok*) – which underline the differences between technological narratives in K-dramas. The dynamic development of K-drama subgenres indicates that the generic love story has to be accompanied by additional elements, building engaging and memorable background. There is a need for exciting surroundings transgressing the notions of probability and drifting into the fantastic or futuristic worlds. Focusing on the serialized representations of technological development, the author analyzes how K-drama anticipates the future and creates a new specter of cultural sensibilities.

Key words: K-drama, Artificial intelligence, serialized subgenres, SF tropes, future worlds

Słowa kluczowe: k-drama, sztuczna inteligencja, serialowe subgatunki, tropy Science Fiction, światy przyszłości