

**PRODUCTION CULTURE IN A NETWORKED ERA:
THE RISE OF KOREAN WEB DRAMAS**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation research explores the evolving production culture of Korean web dramas through a production studies lens, focusing on how and why this unique media form has emerged and transformed in the context of global digital media shifts. This research examines how two forces that permeate Korean production culture—the Korean Wave and the rise of global streaming platforms, such as Netflix—have impacted the Korean media industry and the production culture of web dramas that emerged and developed within these dynamics. It assumes this as a complex space where innovation, constraints, and negotiations among various constituents surrounding web dramas are intertwined, focusing on the process and conditions of their cultural production and practice.

Through ethnographic fieldwork at two production sites and interviews with 30 industry professionals, this study examines how cultural practices, aesthetic decisions, and notions of imagined audiences influence the production culture of web dramas in a rapidly evolving industry environment. This dissertation posits that web dramas represent a distinct genre and art form while simultaneously serving as a complex nexus where industrial, cultural, economic, aesthetic, and individual interests struggle over the construction of what we see and hear in web dramas, negotiating each party's own understanding of the imagined audience.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Web Series in a Networked Era

The media industry is currently experiencing a great transformation. Traditional mass media, often referred to as legacy media, are facing considerable challenges, prompting professionals within this sector to adapt in order to survive amid this rapid evolution. This transformation, which has intensified over the past decade, impacts all stages of media production, distribution, and consumption. Newspapers have transitioned from print to online formats (Usher, 2014), evolving from a platform primarily featuring text and images to one that encompasses video and virtual/augmented reality experiences (Palmer, 2020). Similarly, radio professionals are increasingly pivotal in the realm of podcasting (Berry, 2016; Bottomley, 2015). Television and film industries are also undergoing substantial changes with the rise of internet distribution platforms (Lobato, 2019; Healy, 2022; Burgess & Green, 2018). A new media landscape has emerged in this networked era.

The media industry in South Korea (hereafter Korea) has been experiencing drastic changes since the mid-2010s. The dominance of legacy media, particularly television and film, is gradually diminishing, while the impact of new media, including social media and over-the-top (hereafter OTT, online streaming services) platforms, is on the rise. A pivotal moment in this evolution occurred with the entry of Netflix, the global Internet TV network, into the Korean market in 2016, which presented a considerable challenge to local broadcasters facing declining profits and diminishing market share. In

response to this competitive threat, traditional media companies have initiated various OTT platforms through partnerships and mergers with leading telecommunications and information technology firms. The landscape became even more competitive with the subsequent arrival of global streaming services such as Apple TV Plus and Disney Plus, which were launched in Korea in November 2021, further intensifying the market dynamics. These shifts in the media sector have led to a notable change in media content consumption habits; audiences are moving away from scheduled broadcasts and theatrical viewings and purchasing video on demand (VOD) via Internet Protocol television (IPTV) toward subscription-based streaming services. This transition appears to have accelerated, particularly during the pandemic, which has drastically reduced theater revenues while boosting OTT sales.

This dissertation seeks to examine the web series that has emerged as a new genre and art form amid this great transformation. Web series is a genre of digital entertainment, which is a series of episodic content, whether scripted or non-scripted, designed for online release that began in the United States in the mid-1990s (Monaghan, 2017: 83). This period coincides with the time when audiences began to use digital technologies to 'assert their control over cultural flows' (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008, p. 9). Web series have been seen as a new type of online video format that has garnered attention for its capacity to contain diverse voices from the independent scene and counterculture, and have reflected innovative aesthetic approaches from their inception to the present by increasing choice, flexibility, mobility, and greater diversity of representation (Healy, 2022; Christian, 2014). Christian (2018) further argues that the concept of open television, which encompasses web series, has catalyzed a new era of

television innovation across three interconnected dimensions: "(1) creative expression supported by free labor, (2) diversity in representation, through self-representation and fan-led development, and (3) flexibility in development and marketing" (pp. 13-14). The newly emerged media environment shakes up the closed structure of the legacy media and expands its perimeter, thereby reshaping the possibilities of its operation as an alternative media.

However, the voices of Korean web series production sites show a significant gap in these academic discussions. Professionals working in the Korean web series production industry argue that the Korean web series is a commercial genre that inherits the conventions of television broadcasting, led by professionals working in the existing media industry, rather than a venue for alternative and diverse aesthetic experiments attempted by the audience. They assert that the Korean web series, which was imported to Korea in early 2010 and later transformed into a web drama during the phenomenon of the Korean Wave, exhibits significant distinctions when compared to the development of web series in the United States. Initial aesthetic experiments attempted in web series were substantially diminished due to industrial progression in Korea and the genre classification of web dramas. Consequently, these productions appear to function primarily as vehicles for the interests of various stakeholders. To borrow Meehan's expression, the current state of the Korean web series cultural production reflects a disruption in the balance that should exist between commodity and creative artistry, leading to an overemphasis on their value as commercial products (Meehan, 1986).

This dissertation problematizes the gap between this theoretical perspective and the voices gathered from fieldwork within Korean web drama production sites. It seeks to

examine the underlying dynamics and reasons for the transformation occurring in this area. Additionally, the dissertation aims to identify the theoretical concepts that are necessary for understanding these changes. Furthermore, through this discussion and analysis, this dissertation aims to explore the possibility of expanding media production studies through globalization and digitalization in this networked era. In the shift from legacy media to a platform-oriented new media environment, specifically, Internet and digitally distributed content (Lotz, 2017, 2022), the studies about the production culture of web dramas can provide valuable insights into the characteristics of new media and this great transformation. In addition, within the context of the Korean Wave, the web drama production site is not only a battlefield where the power relationships and struggles of various members are revealed but also offers an excellent opportunity to investigate how they imagine transnational audiences, considering that web dramas are receiving industrial spotlight as a new growth engine of the Korean wave.

What Is a Web Drama?

The emergence of online video content formats known as web series has gained significant traction in the United States since the mid-1990s, and this trend made its way to Korea in early 2010. In the early days, web series in Korea were introduced in several innovative forms, such as indie sitcoms, mobile movies, snack dramas, and branded films by various media professionals, such as television and film production companies and advertising agencies. In 2013, the term "web drama" was coined by NAVER (naver.com), Korea's largest portal site, aiming to establish a presence in this evolving landscape.¹

¹ In 2012, Naver launched Naver TV, a video streaming service. Unlike YouTube, where anyone could upload videos, it had a limited structure, where only vetted production companies could upload content. Naver TV developed web dramas and web

Since then, Korean web series, which have been predominantly distributed through various channels, have concentrated on the Naver platform to maximize viewership. This focus has facilitated direct comparisons between different works and, combined with Naver's selective screening process for content registration, it has arguably influenced the genre characteristics of early web dramas. This eventually led to the emergence of a socially constructed norm called web drama, which was later organized and recognized as "a short story intended for screening on the web or mobile environment, not on TV or in a theater" in the media and related papers (Kang, 2023, 2021; Kim, 2015; Ko, 2015). In this dissertation, web dramas are defined as serialized online video content consisting of short episodes, typically ranging from 5 to 15 minutes, and no longer than 30 minutes per episode.² The production costs for web dramas are generally estimated at \$10,000 to \$20,000 per episode, with the total cost for an entire series ranging between \$100,000 and \$300,000 (Kim, 2015).

The web drama industry has experienced significant growth since its inception in 2013 and has garnered considerable attention as a novel business model and a driving force behind the Korean Wave. The annual production figures for web dramas rose from 23 in 2014 to 67 in 2015, with over 100 productions by 2017. A key factor in this industry's expansion has been the migration of several production professionals from broadcasting networks or large production companies to small production companies, startups, or K-pop entertainment agencies. In the initial phase, the growth of the web

entertainment subgenres by borrowing the organizational division of broadcasting stations into dramas, entertainment, and current affairs.

² The purpose of clarifying the boundaries of web dramas here is to distinguish them from the definition of media reports and related studies surrounding web dramas that refer to all Internet-distributed television content as web dramas. Unlike web dramas that are distributed online in short form with low budget, these original series distributed on OTT platforms or broadcast channels (although they have something in common in that they have a fictionalized story structure) are series of 8-20 episodes, each one hour long, with a big budget. Consequently, these two formats exhibit notable differences in scale and form.

drama industry was primarily driven by two factors: (1) startups seeking to diversify their revenue streams by creating video content based on web novels and webtoons for which they hold intellectual property (hereafter IP) rights, and (2) K-pop entertainment agencies aiming to leverage the established fanbase of their artists for generating profit and promotional purposes. These companies expanded by attracting broadcasting experts, collaborating with other production entities, and engaging in mergers.

"Our company has a strong advantage because we already own artist IP. This means we can skip complicated contracts for model rights. We create content specifically for fandom, a clear consumer group, which helps guarantee our return on investment. Additionally, the original content we make effectively promotes our artists, even when we focus on benefits beyond profits" (Producer Lee, personal communication, May 2016).

The web drama industry rapidly accelerated its growth around 2015, bolstered by the entry of media businesses such as broadcast and cable networks. Major broadcast networks in Korea, including KBS, MBC, and SBS, established specialized planning teams or subsidiaries dedicated to the production and distribution of web dramas, utilizing their existing production resources and expertise (Baik, 2015; Cho, 2016). Cable and media operators like CJ ENM (which launched Studio DIA TV in March 2014) and JTBC (which introduced Lululala Story Lab in March 2019) also ventured into this market by developing online content production companies. These companies further distinguished themselves from smaller production firms by simultaneously releasing web dramas on OTT platforms and airing them on their respective television channels.

The web drama industry once again underwent a significant transformation in 2016, with Netflix entering the Korean market. As various global streaming services, led by Netflix, entered the Korean market, mergers and acquisitions of various OTT platforms that had been growing locally to compete with them have accelerated. The

competition among these OTT platforms to attract paid subscribers has intensified, resulting in a heightened demand for compelling video content. Consequently, this environment has created favorable conditions for web drama production companies. Several Internet-distributed television services have emerged in Korea to compete in the streaming market. Notable examples include Wavve, launched in 2019 through a joint venture of three major Korean national broadcasters; Tving, which began operations in 2020 as a collaboration between Naver and JTBC, spearheaded by CJ ENM; and Coupang Play, also launched in 2020 and operated by Coupang (Jin, 2023, p. 108; Noh, 2022). With the rise of such diverse platforms, interest in web dramas, which are advantageous in attracting viewers in their teens and twenties with relatively low investment costs, has grown. Moreover, aggressive investments by global OTT entities, particularly Netflix, seeking to secure original content, have led to a notable increase in merger activity between large production companies that require a diverse lineup and smaller production companies that have distinguished themselves in the web drama market. Collaborations between these two categories of companies have also become more prevalent (Jin, 2022; Park, 2022; Um, 2022). Prominent production companies, which initially focused on casting emerging actors and actresses who gained recognition through web dramas, are now broadening their efforts to encompass production companies and their teams. For instance, Naeun Lee, known for creating web dramas such as <Secret Crushes> (2016) and <Falling in Love> (2019), was subsequently appointed as the writer for <Our Beloved Summer> (2021), released on Netflix. Additionally, actors Dong-Hee Kim, Seung-Ho Shin, and Ye-Eun Shin, who garnered attention through the web drama <A-teens> (2018), were cast in lead and supporting

roles in Netflix's <Extracurricular> (2020) and <DP> (2021), among other television series.

Great Transformation

The emergence of Korean web dramas is intricately linked to the significant transformation of the Korean media industry, which began to gain momentum in the mid-2010s. Of course, this turn is still in progress, evolving at every moment, so it is unstable, unpredictable, and, for now, still unknowable (Lotz, 2022, pp.5-6; Burgess & Green, 2009). Nonetheless, in contrast to the traditional mass media era, it is evident that three key factors have facilitated this transition: (1) the emergence of a networked society, (2) the rise of global streaming networks, and (3) the shift in viewing environments towards mobile media.

The Emergence of a Networked Society

The first cause is the emergence of a networked society. The development of information technology and digital technology represented by the Internet has led to a network society with political, economic, social, and cultural characteristics different from the Fordist society represented by mass production and mass consumption. The Fordist society, characterized by a disciplined system utilizing bureaucratic control through large organizations and vertical hierarchies, standardization and uniformity of production, and chaotic surveillance and control, was further strengthened through the mass media's single and one-sided message delivery (van Dijk, 2012). In contrast, the network society aims for diversification and autonomy by breaking away from the rules of control and surveillance through horizontal network connections and free

communication methods of various entities utilizing them. Castells (1996) elaborated on the network society as a society in which capital, labor, people, knowledge, and information are connected through computer networks. Moreover, he tracked how forms of accumulation, including goods, services, capital, and labor, changed as information and knowledge flowed in real-time through electronic networks on a global scale. Capital, information knowledge, and labor flow as one across the geographical boundaries of the nation-state, leading to the weakening of the nation-state. Furthermore, he claims that in this globalization process, a 'network state' (as a decentralized, non-hierarchical, and comprised of complex networks) eventually emerges through the restructuring of knowledge and power.

The network symbolized as the web, where various contents are connected through hyperlinks, has expanded to connect people since the advent of social media and mobile communication devices. Now, individual users have begun to form the basic unit of the network society. With the development of broadband, they are connected in real-time, gradually reducing the time difference between online and offline. This goes beyond the national level of modernity that emphasizes the use of mass media (Hall, 1992) and also means a transition to a participatory culture of individuals (Jenkins, 2009; Shirky, 2008). This networked society made possible the transition from the era of TV as traditional mass media with structured and linear programming to the era of platforms as new media with new horizontal and non-linear programming.

The Emergence of Global Internet TV Networks

The second and most significant cause is the emergence of global Internet TV networks such as Netflix. Starting with Netflix in 2016, global OTT platforms that conduct Internet distribution worldwide have entered the Korean market one after another and are quickly dominating it. At the end of 2021, there were approximately 5 million paid subscription members for Netflix in Korea, ranking first in the industry (Byun, 2022; Layton, 2022). One-tenth of the Korean population (about 51.6 million) has a paid subscription. However, an immense influence lies in the production sector because Netflix subsidizes production costs 4 to 5 times higher than investors to Korean production companies. In addition, there is less interference. Netflix, which started investing in the Korean production industry through <Okja> (2017), <Stranger> (2017), and <Mr. Sunshine> (2018), invested 460 million dollars in 2021 alone to produce 15 original programs. Netflix Korea is increasing its investment yearly, announcing the production of 25 original series in 2022 and 34 in 2023. In January 2022, Netflix Korea said in an interview with the media that "the amount invested in Korean content so far has exceeded 1 trillion won (835 million dollars), and more than 130 works have been introduced overseas through Netflix for the first time" (Kim, 2022). In addition, Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos announced in an interview with the media in April 2023 that Netflix would invest 2.5 billion dollars in Korea over the next four years (Liang & Hoskins, 2023).

Producers in Korea estimate that Netflix's production cost per episode is 1.7-2.5 million dollars, 4-5 times higher than the production cost of 0.3- 0.5 million dollars per episode of Korean TV series. This is also slightly higher than the average production cost

of Korean films. For example, the total production cost of <Kingdom: Season 1> (2019) is known to be 16.7 million dollars (Lee, 2019). The entire production cost of <Squid Game> (2021) is 21.4 million dollars, and the investment cost per episode is 2.38 million dollars (Shaw, 2021). Of course, these production costs are significantly lower than those of Netflix's <Stranger Things> (2016-2025) and <The Crown> (2016-2023), which cost 8 million dollars and 13 million dollars per episode, respectively. However, this is still high compared to other TV series and films in Korea. This aggressive investment and the difference in production scale have caused the production works to be concentrated on Netflix. Scripts for TV series produced in Korea have made it their top priority to be selected by Netflix. A higher-level league that is different from the TV production environment was created.

In addition, to catch up with Netflix's dominance, legacy media and other OTT platforms are significantly increasing their investment in production costs to secure production companies and their shows. In particular, global OTT platforms, including Disney Plus, which newly entered the Korean market in 2021, are racing to invest "actively and on a large scale" in producing Korean content (Jang, 2021). Wavve, another OTT platform, plans to invest 1 trillion won (835 million dollars) by 2025. Tving also announced it would invest 200 billion won (167 million dollars) in 2022 to produce about 20 contents (Kim, 2022). This intensification of production competition led to an increase in overall TV series production costs.

As Netflix's industrial dominance strengthens, voices of concern about this situation are simultaneously growing. Netflix's current situation is no different from the concern of cultural imperialism; it will cause economic, political, and cultural

dependence due to global domination by U.S.-based transnational media companies (Boyd-Barrett, 2015; McChesney, 1999). Park, Kim, and Lee (2023) asserted that while Netflix provided a new opportunity for Korean broadcasting, it also led to the ambivalent result of dependence on foreign capital. Furthermore, they pointed out that Netflix strategically uses the Korean Wave to strengthen its market dominance. Reviewing ownership of IP rights, especially during Netflix's original production and licensing contract process, they claimed that this concentration phenomenon, which could be called platform imperialism (Jin, 2015), would further intensify due to the asymmetric relationship between Global (or the United States) and Korea. In this context, Davis (2023) revealed that Netflix is strengthening its global monopoly as a media platform through various strategies, "vertical integration, supra-national expansion at a scale that creates barriers to entry for competitors, avoidance of fiduciary accountability to regulators, and the employment of user data as the raw material on which growth depends" (p.1154), in the process of advancing into various countries, pointing out this as 'Netflix imperialism.'

In addition, dissatisfaction with Netflix's revenue share for box office hits is growing, especially among film production and distribution companies and the IPTV industry. In exchange for IP rights and exclusive worldwide distribution rights, Netflix pays 110-115% of the total production cost. From the perspective of broadcast production companies that had received only 70-80% of production costs as distribution fees from TV channels, the emergence of Netflix, which guaranteed stable profits despite more enormous production costs, was a solution to the structural problems of the industry. However, in the revenue share of film or IPTV, where more tremendous box office

success leads to greater profits, Netflix's distribution contract is only accepted as an alternative way because it has low risk but leads to relatively small profits. In addition, it is pointed out that most of the benefits of the accelerated increase in production costs since the advent of Netflix are concentrated on key staff (above the line), such as lead actors/actresses, directors, and writers, and are not having a significant impact on improving the treatment of staff (below the line). As seen from the death of Geun-hee Go, an art team member during the production of <Kingdom: Season 1>, many staff members are still working in poor conditions. At the same time, it is suspected that the success stories of actors, directors, and writers covered intensively through the media operate as a myth and are used to conceal labor exploitation in the relatively minor web drama industry.

However, despite these concerns, Netflix's entry into Korea also served as an opportunity for the Korean production scene. Not only does it guarantee the large-scale production cost, which is larger than the production cost, but the freedom of production is significantly increased because there is no interference with the work. This freedom of expression is guaranteed because (1) since Netflix is distributed through the Internet, there are far fewer restrictions on the deliberation and regulations that were previously applied to broadcasting and film³, and also (2) unlike structured and linear broadcast programming, Netflix has a structure in which viewing is determined through the audience's choices (although it is under the influence of platform recommendations)⁴.

³ In Korea, videos on OTT platforms are subject to relatively autonomous review standards that apply to the telecommunications and video industries rather than the strict broadcasting laws that apply to broadcasts and films.

⁴ Netflix introduces its corporate culture on its recruitment web page and states that it follows the following principles when controversy arises regarding artistic expression: "We support the artistic expression of the creators we choose to work with; we program for a diversity of audiences and tastes; and we let viewers decide what is appropriate for them, versus having Netflix censor specific artists or voices" (jobs.netflix.com/culture). Following these principles, Netflix has ignored requests from Islamic countries to ban content related to homosexuality in their countries and requests from the British government to notify that <The Crown> is a fictional story, not fact. However, as can be inferred from cases where the English title of a work

In this situation, Korean producers working with Netflix could experiment with greater freedom than before in the subject matter or format of the story. Stories that could not be produced in broadcasts due to violence or sensationalism, such as zombies, monsters, and juvenile sex crimes, were produced. Eun-hee Kim, the writer of <Kingdom>, said, "If it were not with Netflix, the production itself would have been impossible." Also, unlike TV series, which were strictly scheduled for 60 minutes per episode and 16 episodes in total, there were no restrictions on the running time per episode or the number of episodes in a season, so new attempts were made in the story's structure. This freedom of production and the fact that production is completed before the broadcast begins, so there is no need to rush production due to the broadcast date attracted film producers who were reluctant to produce TV series. Representative examples include director Dong-hyuk Hwang, who created <Squid Game> (2021), and director Sang-ho Yeon of <Train to Busan> (2016), who created the Netflix original <Hell Bound> (2021). Television and film production professionals, who were separated, crossed boundaries and gathered at the OTT production site. This exchange of professionals is causing changes in the conventional production grammar and style of films and broadcasts.

In addition, the advent of Netflix created room for bold choices in casting, in addition to the diversity of subject matter or format of the story. In the case of broadcasts where indirect advertising (PPL) or advertising revenue is vital in a situation where competition for viewership ratings is fierce, casting a few well-known actors/actresses is

produced in Korea under the title <Suriname> was changed to <Narco-Saints>, or the comedy show <Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj> was canceled in Saudi Arabia, one may suspect that the fundamental principle that takes precedence over the previously mentioned principles is the company's pursuit of profit.

essential for the success of the work, but in the case of Netflix, where production costs are guaranteed, bolder casting than before has become possible. There are more auditions for new actors/actresses because they can focus on the quality of the work (and only on casting suitable for each role) rather than relying on the actor's fame for success. For this reason, Korean production experts and actors/actresses are all heading to Netflix, regardless of whether they are involved in television or film. Its strengths include guaranteed production costs, global distribution, seasonal production, diverse story topics and freedom of production, and emphasis on quality rather than the reputation of actors/actresses.

However, the most significant impact of Netflix on the Korean production scene is that it has changed the producers' imaginations about audiences. Considering that globalization is not a direct experience but rather constitutes an individual's imagination of being connected to the world through local (Appadurai, 1996; Darling-Wolf, 2015), it is suspected that the emergence of Netflix had a significant impact on their imagination of the transnational audience of the Korean Wave. Before the advent of Netflix, many producers and media outlets analyzed the reasons for the popularity of the Korean Wave. They attributed the popularity of Korean TV series in East Asia mainly to romantic love stories represented by several well-known actors/actresses. This was further strengthened after the record-breaking success of <Winter Sonata> (2002) in Japan. However, citing love stories as a factor in the success of the Korean Wave is overlooking the structural problems of Korean TV series production. In order to reduce the burden of production costs after the failure, the Korean TV series production field had a practice of producing only 40-50% of the entire series before starting the air. After observing the initial viewers

' reaction, the broadcasting company decided to produce the latter part. This production practice led to frequent accidents, such as broadcast delays due to insufficient production time due to script writing delays and problems coordinating the schedules of actors/actresses and filming staff. In this situation, the love story was a strategic choice to shorten production time with low production costs, such as long breathing, slow rhythm, and emphasis on emotions. This has been understood as an aesthetic choice in Korean TV series. What was created out of necessity due to time constraints turned into a kind of box office formula as it achieved unexpected success in the East Asian market.

This interpretation has changed due to two aspects after the advent of Netflix. First, Netflix required that production of all series be completed before distribution. This, combined with the previously mentioned increase in production freedom, created an environment where producers could strongly unleash their voices. This resulted in increased works with a solid critical awareness of the problems facing Korean (and capitalist) societies, such as social polarization and neoliberalism. There has been an increase in the number of works that borrow the form of genre and directly point out the sharp points of conflict felt by members of society. Second, Netflix made global distribution possible, which was previously done through individual contracts with broadcasting stations in each country, simultaneously worldwide through Internet distribution. These reinforced certain types of viewing behavior: Watching videos with subtitles or dubbing, which were not preferred by English-speaking viewers, as can be seen in box office hits such as <Narcos> (2015-2017) and <Money Heist> (2017-2021). Netflix's distribution way of simultaneous worldwide broadcasting has been a great boon to the production of video content in non-English-speaking countries, breaking down the

boundaries of the cultural industry that were divided by language region, albeit to a small extent. Video content consumed strictly for domestic consumption (selling overseas was almost an unexpected bonus for them) became products that could be exported worldwide after the advent of Netflix. In this process, the country's production system, which required low production costs, was accepted as an advantage. In the case of Korean Netflix originals produced amidst these changes, it was primarily Netflix's localization strategy to attract subscribers in the Korean-speaking world (Lobato, 2019). At the same time, this gave rise to Korean production professionals imagining a different type of transnational audience than the Korean Wave because it was distributed simultaneously to the global through subtitles and dubbing. These production processes, strategically selected by Netflix for their efficiency, flexibility, and diversity, combined with Netflix's localization and transnational strategies, forced Korean producers to reimagine transnational audiences.

The Transition of the Viewing Environment into Mobile Media

2016 was the first year when media use on smartphones surpassed TV in Korean society. According to the Korea Communications Commission report (2016), the proportion of smartphones as an essential medium in daily life was 46.4%, exceeding the importance of TV, 44.1%, for the first time. Moreover, the gap is getting bigger every year. In addition, the younger the age, the faster this difference appears. Since then, with broadband expansion, video viewing on mobile devices has become faster and more accessible, and the Korean media industry is rapidly reorganizing towards mobile. Instead of watching TV, people are watching YouTube on their smartphones. Web

dramas have grown into content receiving attention amid these changes in the media environment. If OTT platforms like Netflix invented binge-watching, the mobile environment would create short-form content. Short, fast, and simple (uncut) stories that can be easily viewed anytime, anywhere have attracted attention. This is contrary to the fact that as the viewers of TV content shift towards the middle-aged, TV series' content and video rhythm are also structured to suit them. Those in their 10s and 20s, who had an antipathy that TV was something only older people could watch, were enthusiastic about this fast-rhythm short-form content. Production companies developed a new genre for those in their 10s and 20s who watched on mobile. In addition, this tendency is further strengthened by changes in media platforms centered on short-form content, such as YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels, and TikTok, which are rapidly following these trends.

This shift to mobile has significantly impacted the production aesthetics of web dramas in at least the following five aspects. First, it does not follow the traditional narrative structure. Instead, a strategic arrangement is used in the intro to capture and immerse the viewer's attention. Also, the narration is frequently used to develop and compress the story quickly. Second, close-up shots are more actively used than full shots. As viewing through a mobile device is assumed, using too wide full shots for background depiction should be avoided as much as possible. Instead, close-up shots that emphasize the actors' facial expressions or direct gestures are preferred. Through this, viewers can easily understand the character's psychological state with only a short scene. Third, direct and exaggerated acting and effects are preferred. To be quickly immersed in the story without special devices or lengthy explanations, it deals directly with episodes focusing on a few actors. In addition, the subject is clearly defined through direct manifestation

through lines rather than expressed metaphorically through metaphors or symbols. Fourth, Korean subtitles are provided. This means that viewers should be able to understand the story even if they watch in a noisy place without earphones. Lastly, they are active in casting members of K-pop groups as key actors or casting new actors who have yet to gain experience but have potential. Due to the rise in production costs, in the case of films and TV series, they prefer proven actors with guaranteed box office success. However, in the case of web dramas with a relatively easy pre-production period and a small production cost, there is much room to hire K-pop members or newbie actors who want to grow as actors. This is because, in the case of K-pop group members, a certain amount of box office success is guaranteed with the help of fandom. In addition, new actors with easy schedule adjustments are preferred due to the nature of web dramas produced in a season system. In this way, the aesthetics of web dramas are created by insiders at the production site, utilizing and developing the limitations and possibilities of web dramas.

Why Web Drama Now?

The voices within the industry regarding recent changes in the Korean media industry discussed above lead to the statement of this dissertation: The primary argument posited herein is that changes in Korea's media industry, accelerated by global OTT platforms, with the struggles of professionals to survive in them, are leading to the unique transformation of Korean web series, which have emerged as a new genre and new media. The Korean media industry is transitioning swiftly from traditional legacy media to OTT platforms, with global entities entering the market and intensifying competition, thereby significantly impacting the production sector. The adaptations required to

navigate these shifts have led to the advent of web dramas, reflecting the aspirations of various stakeholders within the industry. In response to these changes, web dramas have emerged as a new art form suited to the situation and conditions, and as a social formation that continues to change relationships. As the media landscape in Korea continues to transform at a rapid pace, web dramas are consistently redefining their construction through ongoing negotiation and conflict among diverse interests.

It is noteworthy that while industry expectations for web dramas have been established over the last decade, academic research on this subject remains relatively sparse, particularly regarding production aspects. Since 2015, when the proliferation of web drama productions commenced, research in Korea has largely been categorized into three domains: reception, text, and distribution. First, reception studies were conducted to know the motives and behaviors of users of web dramas as new media appeared (Jung, 2016; Park, Ban, & Park, 2015). Second, studies on genre and narrative characteristics through text analysis were attempted (Jun, 2015; Kim & Jang, 2015; Kim & Kang, 2016; Ryu, 2018; Tae, 2020). Third, research on the distribution through marketing strategies of newly emerged platforms was conducted (Cha & Sung, 2019; Kim & Nam, 2015). On the other hand, there are relatively few studies on the production side of web dramas (as is the case with web series and TV studies). In addition, some studies that emphasize the production aspect are still insufficient, such as only affirming the possibility of newly emerged web dramas in the industrial context (Jang & Song, 2017). In particular, in the case of English-speaking research that focuses on web dramas in the magnetic field of the Korean Wave, it remains at the level of (1) introducing web dramas that emerged as a new cultural phenomenon in Korea (Kang, 2023, 2017) or (2) analyzing the discourse

surrounding web dramas through the analysis of text and related secondary articles in Korea (Kang, 2021; Lee & Zhang, 2021). Consequently, current studies related to web dramas, which have evolved as a significant phenomenon in the Korean media industry, tend to exhibit an intellectual bias toward audience-centered research or remain exploratory in nature, requiring further examination. There is an urgent need for theoretical attempts from the perspective of production studies to overcome this theoretical bias and bridge the gap between academia and industry.

From the perspective of production studies, this dissertation raises the following overarching question: How and why did the current web drama production culture become like it is now? In addressing this question, this dissertation presents a case study of the production of a web drama, complemented by ethnographic accounts that examine the various forces surrounding the production process and the conditions of cultural practice. By analyzing a series of negotiation processes where specific actions of individuals are supported, rejected, or mediated as shared experiences at the production site, this study aims to illuminate facets of their identities as cultural practitioners and the overarching production culture. Furthermore, this dissertation is an exploratory study of web dramas as a newly emerging art form through the lens of the production culture that is created. To achieve this, this dissertation gathers the voices of various people surrounding the production site and examines how they create relationships and cultural practices. By exploring this creative process ethnographically, a fuller picture of how cultural practices of mediation and confrontation are negotiated by various members in and around the web drama production site, providing a sense of how social relationships shape the production process. This includes an analysis of aesthetic choices to overcome

constraints and limitations in the process of suggestions, mediation, and decisions of various members in production. Moreover, with the influence of the Korean Wave and the possibility of simultaneous global distribution, producers' imaginations of transnational audiences tend to change gradually and become more apparent simultaneously. This imagination also affects the content and production style of the work because media production is a nexus where institutional interests and media artists' creative interests struggle over the construction of meaning based on each party's own understanding of the imagined audience. Therefore, this dissertation offers a theoretical attempt to (1) problematize the production site, the text, and the imagined audience as the place of the members' struggle for meaning in the production process of the web drama and (2) analyze not only the various social relationships inside and outside these spaces, but also the differences, contradictions, and conflicts that exist in their negotiation process. This dissertation raises the following three specific research questions:

- (1) In the production process of a web drama, which types of cultural practices are accepted as legitimate, and which are regulated, constrained, or prohibited?
- (2) What aesthetic characteristics are inherent to web dramas, and how are they constructed throughout the production process?
- (3) How does each creator involved in web drama production imagine their audience, and how can their imagined audience be interpreted?

This dissertation, designed to provide an ethnographic account of the production culture of web dramas, is significant in the following three areas: First, it can offer meaningful insights into the rapidly evolving media landscape in Korea. The production culture of web dramas was constructed while transitioning from the era of mass media

dominated by broadcasting and film to the networked age represented by the global OTT platforms. It is suspected that the production culture of web dramas is closely linked to large-scale and big-budget projects, such as Netflix originals produced in Korea.

Therefore, understanding and analyzing the various forces that shape the formation of web drama production culture can provide valuable insight into how the Korean media industry is changing. Second, it will help us understand the mobile culture that is newly emerging in the networked era. Web dramas are short-length video content focused on teenagers and are a new area that the existing video industry could not cover. This is creating a new mobile culture in the network era along with short-form videos (such as YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels, and TikTok) and YouTube videos, which are being conceptualized as participatory culture or amateur video. Lastly, this hopes to confirm the usefulness of the perspective of production studies and expand its scope. The producer's perspective approach to Korean Wave research can be presented as a complementary perspective to the flow of Korean Wave research focused on audience research.

Furthermore, this looks at the possibility of expanding the scope of production studies through the imagined audience, which is understood as the producer's imagination of the audience through text.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Trend in Cultural Production Studies

The revival of interest in production studies that began in the late 2000s is creating various trends in response to the rapid development of media technology and the massive changes in the media environment during the same period. According to a study by Holt and Perren (2019), which outlines media industry studies over the past decade, recent trends in media industry studies can be divided into the following four categories: (1) Creative labor and media labor, (2) digital distribution, (3) platform and algorithm culture, and (4) research on infrastructure. As the first category and the most active research field, creative labor is an area of interest for studies that emphasize autonomy and flexibility and analyze the ambivalence of labor. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) argue that the term 'creative' gives a kind of optical illusion effect that misunderstands the field of media production as post-industrial. In reality, it is no different from labor in the industrial era. As a result, many individuals who participate in media production suffer from unfair working conditions, which are characteristic of the creative industry. For this reason, several studies reintroduced the Marxist point of view in the digital media era. These studies often look at the problems of labor exploitation and surplus labor that arise along with the expansion of social media platforms and the problems of newly emerging occupations from a critical point of view (Fuchs, 2014; Scholz, 2013; Meehan & Wasko, 2013). The second category, digital distribution, is the study of global media circulation and distribution, which is being developed through various case studies such as Netflix

(Lobato, 2019) and YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2018). In the digital media ecosystem, the digital distribution that coincides with a network does not simply intervene with producers and audiences but manages the relationship between them. Therefore, it is also necessary to remember that distribution in the digital media era plays a decisive role in determining the flow of the sharing economy and media, not just a mediating role (Perren, 2013). The third category is platform and algorithm research. Platforms are growing their influence to the extent that they are called the 'platformization of media.' Platformization is "the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of media industries and production practices" (Nieborg & Poell, 2019, p.85). In other words, digital platforms, which once only played a marginal role compared to significant media producers, are now changing the aspect of the entire ecosystem beyond increasing their influence. Nevertheless, the term 'platform' is still used in a very vague and multi-layered sense. As Gillespie (2010) points out, the term 'platform' is used both materially and metaphorically. For this reason, when a media product or service passes through a platform, it is often viewed as reinforcing social, cultural, and political interaction. However, in this case, the interaction is firmly coordinated or orchestrated by the media industry and producers (Nieborg et al., 2020). In other words, a platform is externally regarded as a material structure to which technology is applied. However, at the same time, it is a logical operation method for achieving the purpose of capitalism and a social construct with political implications. For this reason, Morris (2015) emphasizes the need to face up to the fact that the platform is not a fixed object but a research object constantly in flux. The fourth category, infrastructure studies,

has developed with an interdisciplinary connection with platform research (Plantin et al., 2016). In other words, infrastructure studies have emerged in which the subject of platform research and the subject of technology research overlap to some extent. However, unlike platform research, which focuses on platforms' industrial utility and effects, these studies focus on materials and networks surrounding platforms and technologies (Helmond, 2015; Plantin et al., 2016). In other words, it is a study interested in what infrastructure is as a complex technological system, where it is located, and who operates it.

These four research trends that stand out in the accumulated media industry research to date are mainly focused on new technologies and media environmental changes that emerged during the same period. As categories such as creative labor, digital distribution, platform and algorithm, and infrastructure studies suggest, these were all academic projects aimed at providing an understanding of the rapidly changing media environment, keeping pace with the pace of rapidly developing contemporary technologies. These studies have enriched the field of production studies by drawing attention to important issues such as labor instability in the creative industries, the transformative impact of digital platforms on media distribution, and the hidden workings of algorithms and technological infrastructures.

However, at the same time, it is also pointed out that the interest of these latest production studies, as these categories clearly show, has increasingly been focused on the structural and technical elements of media systems, which has consequently weakened the academic interest in the producers themselves as the subjects of production. What is particularly concerning is that studies focusing on the development and change of these

technologies are suspected of portraying producers as passive subjects reacting to technology and the environment rather than active producers. The lived experiences of producers, their struggles for autonomy, and their cultural negotiations, which were the essence of production studies, are rendered meaningless under the comprehensive analysis of digital systems. This research bias raises concerns that it will reinforce blind worship of innovation while ignoring the social and material conditions in which production occurs. There was an implicit agreement that production studies in the traditional mass media era focused on the professional activities and production processes of professionals within media organizations. However, in the current environment where the distinction between producers and audiences has collapsed and the concept of ‘media’ itself has evolved to encompass various dimensions of phenomena, the term ‘production’ research itself is bound to be controversial. In this context, this dissertation calls for the reinstatement of active producers who seem to have been marginalized in production research.

Theoretical Resources for Production Studies

Individuals and Organizations

Producers were originally at the center of production studies. Especially, from the 1950s to the early 1980s, media professionals emerged as a significant focus of research within traditional mass communication studies. These individuals, characterized by their specialized skills and capacity to create messages and symbols, were recognized as both “professional communicators” and “individual interpreters” (Carey, 1969, pp. 27–28).

The former category tends to maintain an objective distance from the narratives they present, while the latter focuses on crafting stories that are both meaningful and accessible to their intended audiences. This characterization positioned them as active agents capable of mediating between elite societal groups and media audiences. Of course, the achievements of mass communication research in the early 1950s and 1960s showed the limitation of focusing only on the effect of the message rather than on the producer within Lasswell's (1948) schema of the communication process: Who? Says What? In What Channel? To Whom? and With What Effect? However, as the gatekeeper study (White, 1950) shows, early studies at the time presented a view of news as a product of negotiations between reporters and news desks. In addition, the interest in producers, which was raised fragmentally and intermittently during this process (See Breed, 1955; Blumler, 1969), later grew into an interest in conflicts between individuals and organizations in the 1970s and 1980s, which led to the exploration of the decision-making process and its power in the production process (analysis of routines or practices) (Elliott, 1972; Epstein, 1973; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978).

This concern with the conflict between individuals and organizations was further elaborated through the perspective of media sociology in the 1970s and 1980s, which was influenced by structuralism. They focused on the production process that had been overlooked until then, analyzed the mechanisms of social control surrounding media products, and focused on individual resistance to it. It is an attempt to explore the interactions between entities involved in the production process at the organizational level and the impact they have on the results (Berkowitz & Liu, 2016, p.68). They

analyzed the daily routines of the established media system and asked whether these were bureaucratic routines or cultural practices.

They did not miss the issue of ‘media and power’ and paid attention to the hierarchical order and production of meaning that is actually implemented through the interaction of subjects, (for example, in the case of a media company, external pressure (political power, advertisers, lobbyists, PR, etc.) and internal competition and conflict) in the production process (Gitlin, 1980). A representative example would be the study by Epstein (1973), who argued that it was more important to find the economic logic of the broadcasting environment (broadcast time, programming, deadlines, cost control, ratings maintenance, etc.) that was imposed on the three major networks in the United States at the time, which had already entered a full-fledged commercial competition system, rather than issues of external control or ideology. This also applies to the study of Sigelman (1973), which focused on the competitive logic within the American newspaper organization (e.g., the competitive relationship between reporters, new methods of hiring journalists, etc.), and the study of Cantor (1971), which revealed that in the television production process, the existence of the second audience, meaning the executives or production staff of the studio or network broadcasting station, is a much more important criterion for decision-making and action than the first audience, the viewers. They questioned the operation of power over existing interests in individuals and organizations, and sought to dismantle the relationships that had become entrenched due to the practices and institutions created in the process.

Political Economy and Cultural Studies Approach

A second theoretical tradition that remains relevant in production studies is the political economic approach, which focuses on the material conditions and power relations that shape media and cultural industries. They examine questions such as who owns the means of production, how labor is organized, and how economic necessity affects production and distribution. Mosco (1996, p. 25) introduces political economy as “the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources.” In the political economy perspective, cultural production is not simply an act of expression, but a contested terrain of class, ideology, and institutional power, and that therefore, as McChesney (2008, p. 12) argues, Political economy seeks to "relate communication systems and practices to the larger structure of society and to the dynamics of capitalist development.” A political economy perspective situates media and culture within broader systems of capital, labor, and ownership, examining how media production is affected by market forces, corporate interests, and power imbalances. They also link cultural production to larger ideological and political structures, showing how media industries reproduce dominant values and serve hegemonic interests.

The intellectual tradition that production studies most heavily relies on is cultural studies, which has taken popular culture as its main research subject. The cultural studies perspective is essential to the study of cultural production because it emphasizes the role of meaning, identity, and representation in the production and distribution of media. They focus on how cultural texts are produced within specific social and ideological contexts. They examine how power, history, and life experiences shape how media is produced and

interpreted, and they recognize cultural production as a space of expression and struggle. Couldry (2004, p. 117) states that in cultural studies, production is “not just as an economic or institutional process, but as a site where meanings are negotiated and cultural norms are reproduced or contested.” Cultural studies explore how narratives are reinforced or contested through production practices, and ask us to think about whose stories are told, how, and why. This highlights the importance of cultural production as a site of negotiation, a place where power is exercised, identities are constructed, and social change can potentially occur. Furthermore, the cultural studies perspective demands that the scope of cultural production be expanded to include popular culture, subculture, and everyday lives, and that it focus on the formation of meaning there, the reception and interpretation of the audience, and the everyday practices of media consumption. They analyze how producers engage with texts and how these texts are interpreted in social and political contexts. In particular, they emphasize the audience's active role in interpreting and reconstructing media text.

Alienation of Producers

These major intellectual perspectives of production studies discussed above have provided theoretical frameworks for analyzing how media are created, distributed, and consumed over the past several decades, each from a different perspective. Political economy has contributed to production studies by emphasizing structural power, ownership, and labor relations, while cultural studies has contributed to production studies by exploring identity, meaning, and representation. Hesmondhalgh (2010, P.276) goes even further here by suggesting that these two seemingly opposing theoretical

traditions may find room for reconciliation in production studies, saying, “Cultural studies and political economy of media have often been presented in opposition, but both share a commitment to understanding power, inequality, and the meanings of cultural production.”

However, these two useful theoretical traditions in production studies have weakened scholarly interest in producers in the production process by either directing attention to industries, structures, and macro-systems or by emphasizing the interpretive activity of recipients. Political economy has provided excellent analysis of issues such as the concentration of media ownership, labor exploitation, and the commodification of culture, but it tends to simplify the complexity of production by defining it primarily in terms of economic determinism. Here, producers are often depicted as subjects trapped in a rigid system of profit-seeking logic, and their room for exercising subjectivity or creativity is considered limited. From this perspective, the producer is merely a part of a gigantic machine called capital. Cultural studies has also focused on issues of identity, discourse, and representation within cultural production, but has placed greater emphasis on the consumption and interpretation of media texts by active audiences. Even when the context of production is acknowledged, there is a tendency to focus on institutional ideology or symbolic meaning rather than the experiences, motivations, or working conditions of producers.

The alienation of producers in this production studies is also found in media sociology, which attempts to analyze the production process through the relationship between individuals and organizations. They focused on efforts to dismantle the fixed relationships between practices and institutions, individuals and structures through

concepts such as media and power (Gitlin, 1980) and strategic ritual (Tuchman, 1978), but they alienated the production process by standardizing it and making the producers within it passive through excessive emphasis on organization and practice. Whether it is a production site that is carried out by conventional practices or a production site as an ideological apparatus and a process of constructing ideological meaning and representation, producers are assumed to be passive beings who conform to the discipline of such sites.

The problem is that the alienation of producers from these production sites ultimately nullifies the creative and pluralistic uses that the medium can have and, furthermore, the alternative and emancipatory functions of the medium. The theoretical contribution of this dissertation lies here: I call for the reinstatement of producers who have been excluded from production studies and argue that the primary goal of production studies should be to reveal the process of negotiation and mediation, opposition, conflict, compromise, and contradiction that they engage in in the production process. Moreover, I propose an imagined audience as the site of these producers' struggles.

Imagined Audience

Every form of mediated communication has intended or imagined audiences in mind (Litt, 2012). Authors imagine their audiences when writing novels (Ong, 1975), and producers of mass media also consider their audiences when developing their narratives (Matthew, 2008). The imagined audience is considered to be the producer's mental construct and the counterpart of their communication; "they may or may not align with

the actual audience" (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 122). Producers have always imagined an audience beyond the medium. In particular, the mass media, which communicate simultaneously (or almost simultaneously) with an unspecified number of people without actually meeting them in person, rather than through individual face-to-face communication, have made us think about the imagined audience called the mass. The mass is closer to a constructed object than an actual object. Mass media were not created because the public was already there, but rather because mass media created the public (who engage with such media on a daily basis). Schudson (2011) also says, "The news media do not find and respond to an existing audience; they create one" (p. 162). The audience is formed around the specific media product that makes it exist. The audience exists only as a construction based on the producers' and institutions' needs and justifications, not on objective observation (Ang, 1991; Ettema & Whitney, 1994; Turow, 1997, 2005; Turow & Draper, 2014).

Imagined audiences are important in production studies because the imagination of the audience is closely linked to the choices and actions of producers (Goffman, 1959; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Sumpter, 2009). Goffman (1959) once said that an individual's self-performance regulates his or her behavior on stage according to the actions and responses of the audience he or she perceives. Berkenkotter (1981) also stated that when creators produce a work, they have 'audience awareness' to identify the target audience that will read or view it. After deciding on a topic for their writing, writers imagine and understand their audience and change their style and strategy to suit them. They constantly revise their work by asking themselves the questions that readers would ask. Producers need to identify specifically who their audiences are for their content to be

effectively delivered to them (McQuail, 1965). Especially in cases where multiple collective actions are involved, such as broadcast production, the imagination of the production staff about the audience competes with each other and participates in the production process as an aesthetic choice. Producers constantly suggest intended cultural meanings to imagined audiences through the aesthetic elements of sound and image. At the same time, the production site should be understood as a nexus where the creative interests of the producers, expressed through suggestions, and the institutional interests of the media industry, through the power of capitalist calculations, struggle over the construction of meaning based on each party's own understanding of the imagined audience. In this sense, the imagined audience is a place of struggle and competition for meaning-making among those surrounding the production site, and a link that connects media aesthetics to the social, cultural, and political-economic macro context. Above all, it is a theoretical attempt to bring producers who have been alienated from the production process as passive producers back to the center of analysis and request their restoration as active producers.

Web Dramas and Global Media Studies

Although the production of web dramas occurs within the geographical and linguistic boundaries of a nation-state, this is also an area of global media studies in that reception occurs transnationally due to the development of digital media and the influence of the Korean Wave. Many producers are imagining overseas audiences through the Korean Wave during the production process, which is suspected to be reflected in various production processes. In addition, this trend is even more apparent at Netflix's

production site, where a significant portion of the web drama production staff is located. Simultaneous distribution worldwide forced producers to imagine a global audience immediately and intensely. This may be because Netflix is driving such transnational interconnectedness so firmly. As Netflix's dominance in the global streaming market grows, concerns about cultural imperialism, which will lead to economic, political, and cultural dependence due to global domination by U.S.-based transnational media companies, are growing again (Davis, 2023; Park, 2023). The export of Western cultural products is not simply a pursuit of economic profit but also contributes to standardizing and homogenizing the diverse cultures of the periphery regions to their standards through a unilateral and unbalanced flow of Western social and cultural values to other countries (Schiller, 1976; Boyd-Barrett, 2015; McChesney, 1999; Sinclair, 1992). In particular, as transnational corporations actively increase their influence and build their empires across the entire global sphere, this should be recognized as another form of cultural imperialism (McChesney, 2001; Negri & Hardt, 2000). This argument developed into platform imperialism with the emergence of transnational IT/media companies such as Google, YouTube, and Netflix. Platform imperialism is an asymmetrical relationship of interdependence between a few Western countries and many non-Western countries, characterized by unequal technological exchanges and capital flows, which triggers the cultural domination of U.S.-based digital platforms (Jin, 2015)

However, these concerns about cultural homogenization reveal their limitations in the following three aspects (Kraidy, 2005). First, the concept of culture in cultural imperialism is propagated as fixed, essential, and related to the concept of nation-state. In other words, rather than thinking that culture is composed of heterogeneous and diverse

power relationships, culture is regarded as a unified entity that finds its origin and essence. Second, their ideological rigidity and bipolar thinking are pointed out. With the expansion of globalization, the unilateral flow of information and culture no longer exists. Therefore, the world can no longer be divided into the dichotomous concepts of center and periphery, dominant and dominated. The new global cultural economy has a more complex structure than conceptualizing the world as a dichotomy of core and periphery and explaining it as a unilateral flow (Appadurai, 1996). Third, cultural imperialism ignored the activeness of local audiences of the culture in the process of cultural adoption. In other words, the possibility of peripheral cultures independently appropriating and translating cultural inflow from outside has been underestimated. They actively and selectively consume cultural media products produced in the West and have the transformative ability to adapt and localize their meaning as needed (Ang, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Curran & Park, 2000).

Pointing out these limitations, a new perspective called cultural globalization or cultural hybrids emerged as an alternative, emphasizing that when the culture of a specific country spreads to another region, it is transformed while interacting with the culture of that region. In other words, in the process of cultural globalization, global and local elements are mixed, and internal and external attributes become mixed. It provides a cultural experience that is a mixture of tradition and modernity in time and the West and the non-West in space. Therefore, they view globalization not as standardization or homogenization but as a window for cultural mixing. In other words, it is interpreted as hybridization, where two cultures mix and coexist while pushing and pulling each other.

This is understood in terms of mixing with other people and/or other regions and in terms of interconnectedness (Hannerz, 1996, p.17).

In this way, global interactions surrounding media are summarized in the tension between cultural homogenization and heterogenization. Amidst this theoretical tension, many Korean Wave studies actively used the Korean Wave - the popularity of Korean cultural contents in East Asian countries as a transcultural phenomenon over the past 20 years - as an example to reveal the limitations of the homogenization model based on modernity and totality: Globalization (Kuotsu, 2013; Hogarth, 2013), glocalization (Peichi, 2013; Jin, 2011), transculturality (Jin, 2016; Huang, 2011) and cultural hybridity (Jin & Ryoo, 2014; Jin, 2011; Ryoo, 2009). However, there is room to see Korea as a semi-periphery (Wallerstein, 1979, p.97) and closer to a strategic product of modified Western imperialism. While avoiding direct and overt conflict with the West, Western modernity, transformed in Korean style, is widely penetrating the Asian region in the form of the Korean Wave. Especially considering the nature of capital seeking higher profits, the strategy of global OTT platforms to strengthen production in Korea may be interpreted as an extension of imperialism beyond a simple localization strategy or an attempt to undermine cultural diversity as neoliberal homogenization. What is clear is that attempts to attribute the cause of cultural domination or subordination to external enemies appear to be nothing more than theoretical laziness. This is because transnational cultural flows have both imperialistic elements and elements of hybridization as cultural globalization. In this context, Garcia-Canclini (2005) acknowledges the reality that the globalization of capital acts as a force to eliminate unproductive cultural production and

weaken peripheral cultures but that within it, actors can pioneer new interconnections between networks and cultures that will strengthen social creativity.

Amidst these theoretical tensions, this dissertation examines the imagined transnational audience of professionals at the production site of a web drama. It examines how their imaginations collide, mediate, and negotiate during production. Just as a map does not point to a concrete reality but instead reflects the desires and representations of the society and group to which the map maker belongs, globalization is also considered a concept that needs to be thought of at a theoretical level, as an imagined discursive formation surrounding social relations and processes within that reality, rather than an empirical term referring to a specific reality (See Appadurai, 1996; Darling-Wolf, 2015; Garcia-Canclini, 2014). Furthermore, their imagined audiences are in a situation where the power of the modern nation-state that reinforced cultural homogeneity has weakened, and global culture such as Netflix directly encounters the local; it is no longer a confrontation between the global and the local, but it can be a newly formed hybrid culture between them. Therefore, this imaginary space is a space of transnational capital but also a place where struggles and competitions over the meaning of insiders always unfold (Appadurai, 1996; Hall, 1997). Therefore, the more important point is who the subject is trying to overcome the boundary within it and how that subject can achieve democratic, popular, and emancipatory possibilities through the competition of hybridity. Garcia-Canclini (2005, p.xxix) claims that hybridization must be elevated beyond a description concept to an explanatory level to ask which direction hybridization goes and how it works. In this context, he requests to pay more attention to the process of hybridization (realized as contextual and dynamic; and thinking in terms of “provisional

and transitory” (p.xxx)) where conflict, compromise, and negotiation occur between them.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This dissertation offers an ethnographic account of the production culture surrounding Korean web drama. It seeks to elucidate the various differences, contradictions, and conflicts that arise among production professionals, their cultural practices, and the negotiation processes within the production environment of web drama. By following the entire process, from planning to pre-production, production, post-production, and distribution, this dissertation aims to gather and articulate the diverse perspectives of those involved at each stage. This chapter examines the methodological framework of ethnography within the context of media production studies and how it informs this dissertation by outlining the application of multi-sited ethnography, discussing the researcher's positionality within this framework, and providing details about fieldwork and data collection.

Media Production Studies and Ethnography

Since the emergence of mass media, numerous empirical studies have tried to explain the meaning of production in the industries and organizations where actual media production occurs and in the regular courses and routine situations of their lives. This research trend believes that media production cannot be understood through controlled environments such as laboratories or through text analysis and focuses on going into the actual media production field, seeing the specific actions of producers, and listening to their voices. This was an attempt by researchers to obtain denser and richer data from the

field, even if this challenges the traditional social science objective of detaching from subjective perceptions based on human experience in favor of a strictly objective understanding of individuals and society. A series of attempts to explain the characteristics of media production at a contextual level have employed ethnography as a primary methodological approach, enabling research to be conducted within the production environment itself.

Media production studies centered on newsrooms in the 1970s, called the first wave of media sociology (Cottle, 2000) or the golden age, used ethnography as their primary research method (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978; Epstein, 1973; Fishman, 1980; Golding & Elliott, 1979; Schlesinger, 1978). This is a method in which the researcher directly enters the news production site and observes and describes the cultural environment and occupational field in which reporters produce news, called newsroom studies or newsroom ethnographies (Stonbely, 2015). Also, many pioneering works in media production, starting from field studies of Rosten (1937, 1941) on Hollywood in the 1930s and ethnographic research of Powdermaker (1951) on Hollywood industry in the late 1940s, and ending with Cantor (1971), Elliott (1972), and Gitlin (1983)'s study on television producers and production processes, are the results of in-depth interviews and participatory observations. These were based on an academic project to look into the inside of the production site, which remains a kind of black box that is difficult for outsiders to see and gain a holistic understanding of the media production process through various forces acting in it. The studies conducted at the time following this academic goal focused on the production process and observed how producers interacted during the work process, highlighting the constraints and limitations in each decision-

making process (Berkowitz & Liu, 2016, p.68). In other words, it is an exploration of the decision-making process and its authority (power) in the text production process and is loosely organized into how consultation and mediation between organizations and individuals work. Schlesinger (1978, 1980), who studied the workings of the newsroom organization through observation of the daily routine of the BBC newsroom from 1971 to 1976, later reflected that these works were a kind of demystification strategy to examine how the claims of news objectivity and professionalism that journalists held up as sacred norms were structured and maintained by investigating how decisions were made within the organization (Schlesinger, 2016, pp. 21-22).

Production studies during this period were conducted using the typical field research method. Researchers went into production sites, observed their practices heuristically in as natural a situation as possible for a specific period, described vivid experiences, and interpreted them. Ethnographic studies based on this tradition of realist epistemology were a process in which the researcher eventually became an expert/authority in the industry through field research. In order to secure the objectivity, reliability, and validity of the data collected through their own observations, they adopted a descriptive style that eliminated the presence of researchers in the field as much as possible and maintained a certain distance from the research subjects. The researchers are also trying to find their own academic differentiation through longer-term field research. Cottle (2000, 2007) asserted that participant observation is still essential in media production studies for the following three reasons. First, this methodology approaches the realm of media production, which is usually invisible, and subverts this invisibility through analysis and interpretation. Second, through this, researchers can prevent

problems of inference, that is, incorrect explanations based solely on reading specific media texts, and can also supplement or correct speculative and comprehensive theoretical claims that have been made so far. Third, it reveals the contingent properties of cultural production and allows us to observe and understand the dynamics of its inherent properties.

Methodological Turn in Production Studies

As a social science, traditional ethnographic research that has attempted to find objective knowledge or general laws of society or culture has faced an enormous challenge by Geertz (1973, p. 5), who has advocated "interpretive research to find meaning" since the mid-1980s, and the following huge epistemological challenge named the crisis of representation (Clifford, 1983; Clifford & Marcus, 1986). At the same time, as media culture continues to rapidly mix and segment due to global phenomena and the wave of informatization, the deterritorialization of fields to study this has accelerated. This has led to methodological concerns about whether traditional ethnography can adequately grasp the cultural context of current media production (Murphy, 2011, 1999; Murphy & Kradiy, 2003).

The criticism of the knowledge production system, called the crisis of representation, and the resulting epistemological turn called for a reexamination of the relationship between the text and the author and the relationship between the observer and the observed in ethnography. By raising questions about the authority of researchers who convey the cultural experiences of others and revealing their political meaning, it exposed that efforts to objectify through distancing are no different from attempts to hide ethnography's exploitative perspective on others (Murphy, 2011, p. 381). In order to re-

establish the relationship between the observer and the observed, ethnography later reexamined the concept of epistemological validity in field research, rejected the scientificization of research subjects, and used various forms of dialogic and experimental writing. This brought into the problematization of the privileged position of ethnographers and meant a shift from totalizing accounts of society and culture to a partial and situational understanding. In other words, ethnographic research is viewed as an outcome that reflects the researcher's subjectivity and identity in the local landscape, rather than an objective activity. Therefore, self-reflection emerged as an important methodological issue (Bryman, 2004).

At the same time, globalization and networked society due to the rapid development of new transportation and communication technologies have called for a redefinition of the field by making the distance and boundaries between home and the village unclear. 'True' fieldwork, which required distance, boundaries, and immersion (time), is now shaking at its foundation, the village. The instantaneous movement of labor, capital, and information (that is taking place globally) makes it so that a specific culture can no longer be said to be a shared lifestyle or symbolic system of people living in a specific region. The field that crosses the dichotomy between local and global does not exist as is but has been reterritorialized (or reinvented) into something newly constructed socially, politically, culturally, and historically (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Murphy & Kraidy, 2003). This theoretical reconsideration of the concepts of space and place in ethnography enabled the construction of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995). Multi-sited ethnography requires (1) an approach through dialogue with local people to understand the culture, (2) an attitude of bifocality required to recognize the connection

between various phenomena that were previously thought to be separate, and (3) suggesting alternative possibilities that can be detected in the field as juxtapositions (Marcus, 1999).

In order to fully reveal the complexity and dynamics of the web drama production culture based on ethnographic turns, at the same time, in order to respond to Darling-Wolf's call for a 'thicker description' (2003, 2015), this dissertation conducts native ethnography following a multi-sited approach (Collins & Gallinat, 2010; Murphy & Kraidy, 2008; Marcus, 1995). The production site of web dramas, which emerged as a response to changes in the Korean broadcasting and film production scene, is not a different cultural experience for a researcher who was born in Korea and has worked as a member of the production team by producing documentaries at the Korean broadcasting (MBC) and film production company since 2004. This is because, for the researcher, this is not a story of another culture but rather his own story. This methodological detour, called native ethnography, or "ethnographic self as resource" (Collins & Gallinat, 2010), has many valuable aspects in those researchers familiar with the culture can use their own direct (professional) experiences and cases as research data (Munnik, 2016; Paterson & Zoellner, 2010). In other words, this dissertation will be carried out based on shared local knowledge and long personal field experience (Alasuutari, 1999, pp. 6-8). This initiative, characterized as native ethnography, aims to politically liberate itself from the concerns of exoticizing the subjects of observation that are often associated with traditional ethnographic approaches. Simultaneously, it strives to reduce the distance between the researcher and the research subjects, fostering a more respectful and insightful engagement. Nightingale (2008) contends that active exchange between the researcher

and the research subject is essential because the observer's one-sided perspective limits the understanding of observation. In the process, new knowledge is achieved through discussion and negotiation of limited information reproduced between the researcher and the research subject through their respective cultural backgrounds. Therefore, this ethnographic approach has the advantage of not only allowing the researcher to approach the field as a kind of insider with an understanding of the language and local culture but also allowing the researcher to understand the local culture more deeply (Jacobs-Huey, 2002). However, this does not mean that researchers can be equated with insiders. Instead, it would be more accurate to say that they move between identities as both insiders and outsiders of their own culture, depending on the situations and contexts encountered in the field (Kuwayama, 2003). Therefore, this dissertation acknowledges the fact that the researcher's identity, such as gender, age, and social status, influences the research (Kim, 2005, 2006), and the researcher's identity (male in his early 40s, Korean filmmaker from outside, international students who studied documentary production in the United States, doctoral students) will reveal how they compete and are accepted in the newly formed social order in the field and relationships with members of the field. For this reason, to study the production culture of web dramas, this dissertation uses a methodology not to go there and analyze them but to *return* there and imagine and understand *within* them (Geertz, 1973).

In addition, although this dissertation starts from one production site, it adopts a multi-sited approach to follow the people encountered in the field to understand the various forces penetrating there (Marcus, 1995). While strategically following the production process of a particular web drama, the objective is to unveil "the detectable

system-awareness in the everyday consciousness and actions of subjects' lives" within the context of the production site (Marcus, 1995, p. 111). It cannot be separated from Korea's production culture, which is changing due to the crisis in mass media, such as broadcasting and film, the emergence of new global/local media platforms, and the professional workforce that is changing to survive the changes. The present scenario, characterized by increasingly blurred and disappearing boundaries within the field, allows for more fluid interactions. Since the production site as the constructed concept sometimes exists on a monitor in the coffee shop or an office without conversation (Zelizer, 2004; Ryfe, 2016), this dissertation strategically chose to follow people across the site rather than the physical space. More broadly, this dissertation attempts to be both a multi-site and a trans-local study because the goal is not to understand one local but rather to study the circulation of various cultural meanings, objects, and identities across that local in dispersed time and space.

Therefore, this dissertation does not claim its findings are objective truths that anyone should accept. Instead, it intends to show how the researcher's thoughts are intertwined with contemporary social and cultural phenomena and how those phenomena are understood. The text created as a result of these efforts should not be understood as an independent final product derived from the results of field research but as a part of an undetermined field work that must be read, re-read, interpreted, and reinterpreted. Through this, it is expected that readers who have lived in a social and cultural environment similar to the researcher's will be able to find parts they sympathize with. The others who lived in different environments will be able to gain a broader

understanding of society and culture through the stories of people who lived in the same era and society differently.

Materials: Participant Observations and Interviews

This dissertation presents a production study of new media industries, employing methods derived from empirical ethnographies and case studies to examine how media practitioners navigate this evolving landscape. In this project, participant observation and interviews are a large part of the field materials. Five months of in-person fieldwork were conducted in Korea between April 2024 and September 2024. Additionally, five pilot interviews performed in January and April 2016 served as pre-investigation data for this dissertation and have been incorporated into the analysis. The content from these pilot interviews has been reconstructed into Cases A and C, which will be discussed in detail later. These interviews are particularly valuable as they provide insights into the early development of web dramas, as well as the period prior to the substantial influence of global online streaming platforms, such as Netflix. Furthermore, this research aims to investigate the cultural shifts in web drama production that have occurred over this considerable timeframe.

The focus of this participant observation research was Project F of WN, a notable web drama production company based in Seoul, Korea. This web drama, consisting of four episodes, each spanning 6 to 8 minutes, was released on YouTube at a weekly interval, commencing on August 23, 2024. The production period for this work was approximately one month, from July to August 2024, and filming took place for three days in early August. The participant observation took place throughout the entire process, including the planning stage, pre-production, production, and post-production,

culminating in the online release of the work. The observations and discussions primarily centered on Producer Kim, a female producer in her late 20s, who undertook multiple roles as the project's director, producer, writer, and editor. Notably, she independently managed the scenario development process following the planning phase, as well as the editing process post-filming. The only external input required was approval from the Chief Producer. During the three days of filming, nine production staff members and four actors were present, and emphasis was placed on closely observing their production processes.

Participant observation was conducted on the production process of Project D at a small web drama production company, referred to as Company BB. This project represents the third season of a web drama that commenced in November 2023. Season 3 consists of a total of six episodes, each approximately 20 minutes in duration. The production took place over the course of a month in April 2024, with one episode being released weekly on YouTube, starting on April 30, 2024. At the request of the production company, limited participant observation was undertaken, which included two planning meetings and two of the four filming sessions. The footage captured during the second observation session accounted for four out of the six episodes. In terms of the pre-production phase, the producer independently developed the initial scenario, which was later confirmed by the executive producer. Notably, for Project D, which adopts a scripted vlog format, the script was finalized through collaborative planning meetings with the actors involved. Additionally, compared to Project F, which employed a filming crew consisting of nine members, Project D was produced by a smaller team comprising five actors and one producer.

The researcher assisted in the overall production process for both projects, transparently communicating his identity as a researcher and the intention to utilize conversations and observations for research purposes. It is important to acknowledge that the presence of researchers may have introduced a degree of discomfort among the production team. In the context of Korean society, where social hierarchies related to age are pronounced, the researcher, in his 40s, likely seemed distant from the younger team members in their 20s and 30s. To foster a sense of integration within the production environment, the researcher drew upon his identity shaped by various factors, including his gender, age, and social status, as well as his extensive experience in documentary filmmaking in both Korea and the U.S. His academic background in documentary filmmaking and his professional experiences at a broadcasting company, MBC, in Korea served to enhance his credibility. This shared context was expected to pique the interest of the production staff and facilitate dialogue regarding the production processes in both the U.S. and Korea. By engaging with the team as a consultant on high-budget projects, about which they expressed curiosity, the researcher was able to become friends with many of the production staff and engaged in "deep hanging out" with them (Geertz, 2001, p. 107).

In order to understand how expectations for big-budget productions, such as Korean broadcasting television series production, the Korean Wave, and aggressive production investments by global OTT platforms, intersect with the production culture of web dramas, this study juxtaposes interviews with industry experts. The interview participants, each with diverse professional backgrounds, were introduced and connected through media practitioners at the web drama production site. Participants were classified

based on their experience: specifically, those who have worked on web dramas, those with experience in high-budget projects like broadcast television series or films, and those who have collaborated with global OTT platforms, including Netflix Originals. Additional interviews were carried out to address any gaps identified using these criteria. These interviews were primarily conducted one-on-one with 25 industry professionals, including directors, writers, producers, and executive producers. A semi-structured questionnaire was utilized for each interview, with durations ranging from 30 to 120 minutes. In addition to the 25 interviews, five preliminary pilot interviews conducted in 2016 were also included in the analysis.

In media industry research and production studies, interviews with industry experts are considered one of the most effective research methodologies. Bruun (2016, pp. 134-135) posits that these elite interviews, while primarily offering valuable insights into the "inner workings of the media" through the perspectives of "exclusive informants," necessitate careful methodological consideration due to the inherent asymmetrical power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee. To address this imbalance, this dissertation employs a "study sideways" (Ortner, 2010, pp. 222-223). To this end, the interviewee's answers were actively discussed in a shared manner by comparing them to the researcher's production experiences in the United States, and a relationship of mutual cooperation was developed through a shared interest with the information provider in the crisis of the media industry.

CHAPTER 4

PRODUCTION CULTURE OF WEB DRAMAS

Prologue: The Production of Web Dramas

Project A

In 2013, production company DE, a well-established mid-sized entity, received a \$150,000 commission to produce a promotional video for Gunsan City, Jeollabuk-do. The primary objective of this initiative was to highlight the region's appeal to both domestic and international audiences, particularly in countries such as China and Japan, thereby stimulating tourism. However, each year, various regions compete to create promotional videos that effectively attract tourists and promote their respective policies, raising ongoing questions regarding their efficacy. In this competitive landscape, DE proposed a novel approach by suggesting the production of web dramas, which were gaining traction at the time. Alongside the contracted promotional video, the production company intended to create a web drama set in Gunsan City to enhance its promotional impact. This endeavor became known as Project A.

The year 2013 heralded the onset of web drama production in Korea, often referred to as social network drama, mobile drama, or music drama. One notable example from this period is <Love in Memory> (2013), a branded content film developed by Gauri Communication in collaboration with Apollo Pictures for the online promotion of Kyobo Life Insurance. The initiative employed engaging storytelling techniques to build and bolster the brand's value, capturing the attention of companies eager for adequate

online brand exposure. As a result, production companies recognized new opportunities in this field. Yeo, the executive producer at DE, identified the key motivation for entering the web drama sector: the potential for international market exports through the acquisition of intellectual property (IP). Traditionally, when production companies created television series, the copyright resided with the broadcasting network, which often excluded production companies from international revenue. For these production companies, web dramas offered a promising avenue to retain IP ownership, allowing them to maximize profits in overseas markets.

With the vision of positioning itself advantageously in this emerging market, the company invested \$200,000 in the production of Project A. To ensure quality and success, they assembled a dedicated production team with extensive experience in television series production, led by Director Lee. Director Lee co-directed a prominent Korean scripted series aired on KBS, Korea's national broadcaster. This series was particularly notable for being translated into 69 languages and reaching audiences in 183 countries in 2009.

Gunsan City benefited from the promotional opportunities provided by this collaboration without bearing the production costs; scenic locations, including Haemanggul Cave, Wolmyeong Park, Eunpa Lake Park, and the Chae Man-sik Literature Museum, were utilized as backdrops for the project. Producer Park, who oversaw the production, noted a significant promotional effect, exemplified by the creation of a tourism product inspired by the travel route taken by the two main characters throughout the narrative.

The cast featured Choi, a promising rookie actor, and Kim, a member of the K-pop girl group DS who was also pursuing an acting career. This casting decision was influenced by the entertainment agency's desire to showcase her potential as an actress, as well as the production company's strategic intent to enhance appeal for international markets. Following two weeks of filming, the web drama was structured into five episodes, each approximately 15 minutes in length. It premiered in November 2013 on Naver TV and various social media platforms, achieving further reach through export to Japan via the streaming site GyaO in July 2014.

Project B

Executive producer Lee worked as a producer at various production companies before establishing his own company, WN. He produced a variety of programs, ranging from documentaries to television series and entertainment programs. Having worked in the broadcasting industry for a long time, he says he realized that “the methods by which production companies ultimately generate revenue from broadcasters are very limited.” The competition is getting fiercer as the number of production companies increases compared to the number of programming slots. The advertising market is increasingly shifting online. In this situation, the reality that broadcasting stations are just grateful for not cutting production costs made him decide that “there is no more growth in the broadcasting industry.” In these challenging circumstances, executive producer Lee observed the rise of social media such as Facebook and YouTube in 2015 and, alongside several colleagues, established a production company focused on creating mobile content tailored for social media. Although his initial vision centered on a media content

production company driven by creators, he came to recognize that pursuing a multi-channel network (MCN) model would likely limit the production company to functioning merely as an agency. He also noted the inherent risks in relying on individual creators; should a popular creator depart, it could hinder the company's operation.

Consequently, Lee and the founding members resolved to focus on creating and distributing original works instead of solely managing creators. They initially underestimated the revenue potential from social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook, which operate primarily on an advertising model, believing these platforms would ultimately face decline due to fierce competition. They concluded that the key to thriving in the current media landscape lay in developing a suite of original works that could evolve into intellectual properties (IPs) for sale. For them, Facebook and YouTube served merely as promotional tools for their content, and their vision included a global expansion of their original creations. As such, they adopted the motto "content franchise for the new generation," positioning themselves not as a channel entity but rather as a studio dedicated to producing and selling mobile media content for audiences aged 10 to 20.

Project B, one of the company's early successes, was initiated by Director N. Lee. At the time, she was in her mid-20s and had a background as an intern with a web content team at a previous production company. Her career began with hands-on experience as an assistant marketer at a production company. When two producers proposed the establishment of an online production company, they encouraged her to join them, offering her the opportunity to create media content in a new environment. The problem is that she does not know how to edit or edit at all. The executive producer, Lee, who was

planning to shoot a series of very short 15-second films about exciting moments, hired her to write the script and direct, and found a college sophomore majoring in photography to help with the filming. So, she produced her first work, Project E (2016), with 15 episodes, and released it as seven videos. Her colleague commented when she first saw the work, “It does not look like a college student’s video assignment, but it does not look like it was made by a professional either.”

Following this initial success, Director N. Lee proposed that her next project would be a story about 'unrequited love,' where true feelings, different from what is said outwardly, are revealed through narration. She recalls that the executive producer, who had hoped to produce a short series, put it on hold at the time, saying that the idea was too limited for a series. However, she was attached to this project and thought there was a lot to talk about unrequited love alone, so she quickly wrote four scripts, each around two minutes long, and presented them the following day, ultimately receiving approval to produce the four episodes. The total production cost for this new venture amounted to \$1,500. This was the beginning of Project B.

The two cases presented illustrate how Korean web dramas originate from the initial planning stages. Both executive producers recognized the untapped potential of web dramas and actively sought to develop projects within this emerging medium. While the strategies employed by the two companies differ, their ultimate objective remains consistent: the maximization of profit. This observation contrasts with American web series, which often reflect the perspectives of independent artists pursuing creative autonomy, unencumbered by corporate influences on their work and distribution (Christian, 2018, p.63). This chapter delves into the cultural practices of individuals

involved in the Korean web drama production landscape, which has experienced significant transformation. Drawing from diverse perspectives gathered from the production environment, particularly in relation to the two web dramas discussed, the analysis aims to explore how various stakeholders perceive and construct web dramas. Furthermore, it seeks to understand the cultural practices that are legitimized and embraced during the production process and those that are restricted, constrained, or prohibited.

Web Drama as an Industry

Assemblage of Web Drama

Cultural production is typically viewed as a process whereby artists cultivate their ideas and generate artistic products of notable value. This activity is often considered unique, distinct from general product manufacturing, and is frequently perceived as possessing superior value compared to other forms of labor. It is even regarded as a form of resistance to capitalism in specific contexts. However, during interactions with professionals at web drama production sites, it has become evident that web dramas are an industry focused on generating profit for various stakeholders. This perspective aligns with the assertions of certain scholars who argue that the cultural industry is a significant sector through which a variety of capitalists accrue substantial profits from cultural products (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Ryan, 1992; Murdock & Golding, 1974; Garham, 1979).

Even for movies, isn't it CJ, which has a distribution network, that brings in directors and makes and sells movies? A broadcasting station is an organization that must come up with a conclusion that contributes to the

broadcasting station's profit structure, no matter what experiments it does. Whether it is a one-hour entertainment show or something else, no matter how new it is, it is an industry that must eventually be allocated 24-hour programming time and aims for a certain percentage of viewership coverage. The same goes for web dramas. (Producer Choi, personal communication, April 2016).

The revenue model of web dramas is ultimately branded content centered on corporate marketing. As a result, there are many cases where the content takes the form that suppliers or advertisers want (Producer Min, personal communication, June 2024).

It is noteworthy that many industry professionals regard web dramas as fundamentally profit-driven enterprises rather than as expressions of popular art. While these web dramas are often released online at no cost to viewers, they represent a new artistic form and genre that is underpinned by an economic logic aimed at profit generation. However, the emphasis on web dramas as an industry also highlights the paradox that the profit structure associated with this form of media remains somewhat ambiguous. Director/Producer Go, of KBS, the national broadcaster, remarked on the significant potential of web dramas, stating, “Web dramas represent a remarkable development in which production companies create scripted series and deliver them directly to audiences without the constraints of traditional broadcasting schedules.” However, he also noted, “The primary challenge that has hindered the growth of web dramas into a sustainable content market over the past decade is the absence of a stable profit structure” (Director/Producer Go, personal communication, August 2024). The difficulty in recouping production costs arises from the current model, where works are released on social media platforms such as YouTube or Facebook, as well as media portals like Naver or Daum. Revenue generated from advertisements relies on view

counts, which, at an estimated rate of 0.1-0.2 cents per view, often falls short of covering production expenses, except in cases of exceptional success. The majority of production companies that participated in this study reported view counts ranging from 1 to 2 million for their web dramas, which are insufficient for recoupment. Consequently, some production companies are exploring alternative revenue streams through paid subscription models or pay-per-view options on their own platforms; however, the path forward is not straightforward. Ultimately, production companies often compensate for inadequate production funding through sponsorships from businesses or public institutions or by generating advertising revenue through product placement (PPL), similar to the strategies employed in traditional television productions.

Despite not offering substantial profit margins, web dramas have garnered significant interest from various stakeholders, including production companies, K-pop entertainment agencies, corporations, public institutions, and other investors. Heightened expectations for the potential impact and success of web dramas within the industry drive this attention.

It is not important whether profits are generated immediately from the influence of social media or if a few thousand dollars are received from the portal. Suppose a low-budget, destructive story is created through social media. In that case, it is seen as a potential expansion plan to develop a feature film and turn it into a blockbuster (Producer Choi, personal communication, April 2016).

Production companies anticipated that owning the intellectual property (IP) for their creative works would facilitate long-term benefits despite the absence of immediate profits. This ownership would enable the progression to feature-length productions,

international distribution, and a range of copyright-related ventures. Even though the Korean Wave confirmed the potential of Korean television series in overseas markets, IP ownership was an important incentive for production companies who had watched for decades as IPs were transferred to broadcasting stations in exchange for broadcast scheduling⁵. In the case of Project A, the production company made concerted efforts to acquire IP for web dramas through strategic investments. Executive Producer Yeo reflected on the competitive landscape at the time, noting, "Portal sites such as Naver and Daum were aggressively driving user engagement through video content, and with the government's policy supporting the development of the web drama sector, alongside the proactive initiatives of existing broadcasters, the web drama industry was experiencing rapid growth" (Personal communication, June 2024). Coupled with the expansion of online streaming services in Japan, China, Taiwan, and Thailand, there has been a marked increase in demand for media content. Yeo believed that by producing high-quality content in this favorable market, the potential for profitability could significantly exceed production costs. Therefore, securing IP was paramount; ownership by the production company, rather than the platform, allows for greater control in harvesting profits. A pivotal factor in this endeavor is the potential for overseas distribution sales; however, there are additional opportunities to create secondary revenue streams through initiatives such as the sale of the original soundtrack, the development of merchandise, and the creation of webtoons based on the original narratives. To optimize the export of web dramas, production companies have been exploring various strategies from the outset of production. A key illustration of this approach is the casting of K-pop artists, who have

⁵ The relationship between production companies and broadcasters, centered on IP ownership, is explained in more detail in the beginning of Chapter 6.

substantial recognition among international audiences, in prominent roles. Producer Park, who oversees the export of Project A to Japan, highlighted this strategy, stating, "The involvement of Korean wave celebrities, who are well-established singers in the Japanese market, played a crucial role in our export success" (Personal communication, June 2024).

From the perspective of entertainment agencies, web dramas present a strategic opportunity to assess the acting potential of K-pop artists who have undergone extensive training and investment. These individuals receive acting instruction during their trainee period in preparation for stage performances, making their transition to acting less daunting than securing roles in traditional television shows or films. As stated by Producer Lee of SM Entertainment, "Given our support throughout their nearly decade-long training, it was only natural to evaluate their potential as actors or actresses following their retirement from performing" (Producer Lee, personal communication, May 2024). In light of the rigorous competition within the industry, the average active career span for K-pop artists is notably short, typically around five years. This reality compels agencies to proactively facilitate their artists' transitions into acting roles (Jung, 2023). Of course, in the past, although some singers were cast in leading roles in television series based on their popularity, many faced backlash due to perceived deficiencies in acting ability.

Additionally, as production costs for television series have risen, production companies have increasingly favored safer, more conventional casting choices, leading to a decline in experimental casting attempts over time. Producer Lee (personal communication, May 2024) said, "In TV series, there is a noticeable trend of actors older

than the characters' ages playing the roles because they want to continue using actors who have already been proven." As a result, roles typically intended for individuals in their early 20s are increasingly being filled by actors in their mid-to-late 20s or even in their 30s. As the pool of young, emerging actors diminishes in large-scale projects, the transition for K-pop artists into acting is becoming more complex. The executive producer of Project D's production company, BB, Yang (personal communication, April 2024), was a casting director before the company was founded, offered an alternative perspective, highlighting that while opportunities for emerging celebrities were once limited, the expansion of platforms—from web dramas to Netflix and various broadcasting networks—has made it increasingly challenging for individuals to differentiate themselves in a crowded market. Historically, actors often launched their careers through independent films or theater; however, the rise in available channels for newcomers has intensified competition. Both producers underscored the growing importance of a robust filmography that showcases an actor's abilities to succeed in large-scale projects. For agencies seeking to evaluate the potential of their K-pop artists as actors, web dramas serve as a valuable tool, functioning both as a portfolio and as training grounds for castings in large-scale projects.

They feel burdened about starting their acting careers in a serious TV series. Although the financial compensation and filming environment are not comparable to a TV series, web dramas are preferred because they have the advantage of being able to start without any burden if they consider acting experience important (Producer Lee, personal communication, May 2024)

Web dramas present several advantages for K-pop artists seeking to transition into acting, offering a valuable foundation for the development of their acting careers. Firstly, the filming timelines for web dramas are typically shorter than those for traditional television series. This condensed schedule is particularly beneficial for K-pop artists, who often have demanding commitments as performers, allowing them to manage their time efficiently. Secondly, web dramas tend to impose fewer pressures on actors. Many web dramas depict characters that are teenagers, aligning closely with the age of the performers. This creates a relatively relaxed atmosphere on set, coupled with shorter-acting durations, making it more accessible for individuals exploring their acting abilities for the first time compared to conventional TV series. Lastly, the primary demographic for web dramas consists of teenagers, which aligns well with the interests of K-pop fans. Web drama producers actively seek K-pop artists who can captivate this audience, and web dramas provide an effective platform for these individuals to broaden their fan base. Additionally, even if a performer's acting skills are still developing, their participation can still deliver entertainment value for their existing fans, thereby encouraging investment from entertainment agencies in web drama production.

For this reason, in 2015, when web drama production began in earnest, K-pop artists were frequently cast in leading roles across a majority of these productions. Notable early successes in this genre, which garnered over 10 million views by March 2016, include: <Falling for Challenge> (22,065,649 views), <EXO NEXT DOOR> (19,389,662 views), <I Order You> (15,513,529 views), <We Broke Up> (11,527,903 views), and <Splash Splash Love> (10,441,968 views). These productions prominently featured well-known K-pop artists as lead actors. This casting trend can also be

confirmed in the web drama rankings based on the number of views collected during the same timeframe. Furthermore, major entertainment agencies have actively engaged in the production of web dramas, whether through self-production or partnerships. For instance, SM Entertainment produced <EXO Next Door> (2015), featuring its K-pop boy bands, while JYP Entertainment's <Dream Knight> (2015) and FNC Entertainment's <Click Your Heart> (2016) serve as significant examples of agency involvement in this sphere. The active engagement in producing web dramas can be attributed to the significant promotional benefits gained through online platforms, which effectively reach audiences across Asia, including Korea, China, Japan, Thailand, and Taiwan. This expansive reach has proven to outweigh the associated production costs. From the perspective of these agencies, web dramas provide an avenue for K-pop artists to debut in acting roles or enhance their acting experience. Simultaneously, production companies benefit from the ability to cast these artists at a comparatively low cost while capitalizing on their established fandoms in international markets, ultimately enhancing their export potential.

From the agency's perspective, if they can promote their celebrity through a web drama, they can spend a lot of money on production costs. They think that if they produce the content themselves, they can best showcase their celebrity's charm, so it is better than any other form of promotion (Producer Park, personal communication, April 2016)

Companies, local governments, and various agencies have actively embraced web dramas as a strategic tool for effective online promotion. Many organizations have recognized that web dramas can play a crucial role in shaping their desired brand image, often proving more effective than traditional advertisements aimed at increasing brand awareness. Consequently, there has been a marked increase in companies' production of

web dramas. Notable examples include Samsung's promotional series such as <Infinite Power> (2013), <A Better Tomorrow> (2014), <Falling for Challenge> (2015), and <Be Positive> (2016), as well as Lotte Duty-Free's <7 First Kisses> (2016) and <Secret Queen Makers> (2018).

This innovative approach transcends conventional advertising methods that merely showcase products or services. Instead, brand information is seamlessly woven into the narrative from the early planning stages, diminishing viewer resistance to advertising while enhancing the overall brand image. Furthermore, local governments aiming to promote regional brand stories, attractions, and unique offerings to attract tourists and invigorate the local economy, along with various governmental agencies focused on promoting policy initiatives, have also engaged in the production of web dramas. These endeavors have been facilitated by the fact that web dramas, being distributed online, encounter fewer regulatory constraints than traditional television series. This environment allows for natural brand integration without the interruptions commonly associated with product placement in television programming. As producer Kim of the Marketing team at production company WN noted, "Once viewers become fans of web dramas, they tend to easily accept even overt product placements." Additionally, the positive reception of special edition episodes designed to amplify advertising impact indicates that as web dramas gain popularity, audiences are increasingly receptive to advertisements featuring beloved characters (Producer Kim, personal communication, August 2024).

Web dramas are most often produced for promotional purposes. K-pop singers, governments, and companies are all entering the publicity tool

market. It is not easy to secure production costs solely through web drama distribution; therefore, many web dramas are likely to have a specific purpose (Producer Park, personal communication, April 2016).

Web dramas produced with investment from companies or public institutions, which are often supported by sponsorship, must split their short broadcast time to insert advertisements, making it difficult to expect value beyond the advertisements. It is unfortunate that many producers are unable to produce web dramas without investment from companies or institutions (Executive producer Kim, personal communication, June 2024).

The production site for web dramas represents a complex interplay of various stakeholders, each with distinct objectives and expectations. This environment serves as a dynamic nexus of competition and negotiation, where the aspirations and motivations of directors, producers, and actors converge from the initial planning phase. Various interests are often in conflict, particularly among production companies, entertainment agencies, and capitals. Despite the absence of a straightforward profit model, entertainment agencies have been proactively engaging in the production of web dramas to explore the potential for their artists to transition into acting roles. Likewise, public institutions seek to leverage web dramas to promote their policies and regional initiatives, while companies utilize this medium to enhance brand visibility and product promotion through branded content. Furthermore, an underlying power dynamic exists between platform companies, which strive to attract and retain users through compelling web dramas, and traditional broadcasters aiming to penetrate this evolving media landscape. Within this assemblage, production companies produce web dramas and secure IPs and expect to increase profits through overseas exports because they saw the potential of Korean series for overseas markets.

Production Efficiency

As the web drama industry has evolved, significant discussions have been prompted regarding the scale of these productions. In light of the unclear profit model, production companies have expressed concerns about establishing appropriate production costs for web dramas. The rising production expenses have posed challenges in terms of financial recovery, leading companies to implement strategies aimed at cost reduction. These discussions were further intensified by the diplomatic tensions between Korea and China surrounding the deployment of the THAAD missile in 2017, which resulted in a comprehensive ban on the export of Korean cultural products to the Chinese market, an occurrence referred to as the Hallyu Ban. This action eliminated a crucial overseas market that had previously played an integral role in the revenue framework reliant on international exports.

Project A represents DE's inaugural venture into web drama production. Executive Producer Yeo (Personal communication, June 2024) stated, "From the production of the first web drama, we started with overseas export in mind." To achieve this goal, "we assembled a staff featuring a famous director and extensive production experience." This belief stemmed from the understanding that high-quality work is essential for success in overseas export markets.

The project encountered challenges in recovering its production costs, even with distribution in Japan. Executive Producer Yeo (Personal communication, June 2024) noted, "One of the contributing factors to the increased production expenses was our difficulty in aligning the production scale between television series and web dramas on

set.” He referenced the inaugural scene of Episode 1 as a case in point, where the female protagonist exits the train station in a full shot of the exterior. To achieve smooth camera movements, the director utilized a track and dolly for this scene, intending to engage viewers through the camera movement. However, in the cut that was actually used, the camera movement was too subtle. It was at a level where it would not have been a problem, even if it was simply replaced with a fixed frame. The two-week shooting site included the main filming crew and specialized filming crews, such as track dollies and jib cranes. The internal evaluation was that these production costs used to secure stable camera movements were not actively utilized in the actual work. The collaborative production practice of TV series filming crews working together as a team led to this special filming. Of course, this attempt was a common practice in the production process of existing TV series, and it did not significantly impact the overall production cost of the TV series, so it was carried out routinely. However, in the case of web dramas with small production costs, the economic feasibility of this aesthetic choice had to be considered. Producer Park (Personal communication, June 2024), who handled the project on-site, pointed out that this specialized equipment was not necessary for the development of the story but rather “used more to emphasize their expertise to those who frequented the filming site.”

As it was the first web drama production, there were many trials and errors; however, in the end, the production cost of this work was approximately \$ 200,000 for five episodes of 15 minutes each. After that, the production company produced 12 more web dramas and gradually reduced production costs to achieve a profit from the web dramas. It was also an inevitable choice where overseas exports to the Chinese market

were blocked. They primarily produced campaign web dramas for public institutions, receiving the campaign execution cost of \$ 20,000-\$ 30,000 that had been previously allocated to these institutions in the form of sponsorship. Of course, the IP was to belong to the production company. They reduced labor costs by forming a production team within the company and allowing them to gain production experience. Scenes that required bright lighting were changed to outdoor shooting on a clear day, and efforts were made to minimize the time required for filming setup by reducing the number of shots involving dolly and jib cranes. This ultimately resulted in a decrease in the number of filming sessions, which in turn led to a reduction in production costs. The optimal production scale for the web drama was determined through trial and error.

On the other hand, Executive Producer Lee of production company WN, which produced Project B, even entrusted the production of web dramas to young creators in their 20s who had no production experience. This approach stems from the belief that creators who are contemporaneous with the target audience can craft narratives that resonate more deeply, fostering emotional solidarity and empathy between the creators and viewers. Instead, he limited the production budget to those who had no or insufficient production experience and allowed them to produce only within that limit. The most important thing for the production team to evaluate after the production of WN Production company was whether the production budget had been exceeded.

The first thing I did was to limit the budget. I considered a structure where I would set up sections, such as \$10,000, \$50,000, \$100,000, and \$300,000, and increment the budget step by step. Only those who passed that threshold would produce good works. In fact, weren't there many failures? Nevertheless, even if you fail, there is no burden. It is like not earning \$30,000. If you tell a friend who can barely make a \$10,000 or

\$50,000 product to create a \$300,000 product, they will not be able to do it. He does not have the know-how. However, in that situation, if he calls in a professional, such as a cinematographer or lighting expert, then they will ignore him. Then, he will not be able to make it even better (Executive Producer Lee, Personal communication, July 2024).

He recommended producing small-scale web dramas with low production costs to overcome the creators' lack of experience. By doing so, he reduced the risk by entrusting larger-scale projects to those who gained production experience and achieved good results. He pointed out that it could be dangerous for a small production company to focus its production costs on one work and create one really good big work. Instead, he explained that having various people create different mobile content, even if the scale is small, is a more effective way to reduce risk.

Digital content is a low-risk, low-return genre. That is why we had to set production costs efficiently. The reason we continue production is because we can completely own the IP (Executive Producer Lee, Personal communication, July 2024).

The focus on production efficiency allowed for prompt decision-making on the production site. This approach stems from a deliberate choice to maintain flexible standards regarding the quality of web dramas. This may be seen as an inevitable choice for leaders who have to manage production with those who have little production experience, but it highlights an important principle: web dramas do not have to be bound by the traditional mold of films or TV series.

Creating premium content is an endeavor that demands unique skills and expertise. Each genre—films, TV series, and entertainment shows—carries its own distinct aesthetics, which deserve to be honored. While

there may be a gap between filmmakers and YouTube creators, we recognize the value in all forms of content. As a content creation company, we embrace the opportunity to produce engaging TV series with artistic merit. It is important to strike a balance; an overwhelming obsession with our work, similar to that of traditional directors and writers, could limit our potential (Executive Producer Lee, Personal communication, July 2024).

He calls web dramas digital content. He differentiates them from premium content or works such as films or TV series. In the case of films or TV series, there is a visual/narrative structure, and through this, the visual aesthetic is evaluated as important, but it is different in web dramas. He even went so far as to say that if web drama creators were obsessed with the perfection of their work, it would have been a threat to the company. He emphasized that maintaining the efficiency of web dramas is more important than being obsessed with the perfection of the work. In fact, WN Production Company's early works seem to lack professional perfection. However, despite such a lack of perfection, the experience of achieving box office success with over 100 million views must have given him confidence in this choice.

His attitude toward the completeness of this web drama is in stark contrast to Project A, which emphasized the quality of the work for overseas export. The production company of Project A, which had consistently supplied programs to broadcasting stations and met the professional standards they demanded, invested significant effort and hard work into producing its first web drama. This is because they imagined that the only thing that had changed was the platform on which their work was distributed, that the viewers who watch Korean dramas would be the same, and that their standards would be the same. That is why they established the production based on the budget for a one-hour TV show, following traditional TV broadcast standards. On the other hand, Project B

imagined its audience in a completely different way. They specifically targeted the 18- to 25-year-old age group. This was the age range of the main viewers collected through previous works distributed through social media. Instead of imagining whether the audience will like the work, they explain that they first create it with a small production cost, observe the reaction, and then reflect on it to decide on the future development or direction of the work. Director Lim (Personal communication, July 2024) said, "In any case, to create a business, consumers must like the content," and "If consumers continue to engage with this content, we will produce goods based on it, form partnerships with other domestic channels, or pursue overseas expansion."

However, this does not mean that they had little desire or expectation for overseas exports. It was simply because they developed an export model that could circumvent their lack of expertise. Director Heo (Personal communication, July 2024) said, "In the case of overseas exports, there are not many cases where the videos we produced are broadcast as is in that country." This means that a localization process is needed to adapt the story to their own culture and atmosphere.

The labor cost of one person in our company is 1/50th or 1/10th of the cost of hiring an experienced and famous writer. So, we increase the number of turns. The production cost is the same. For the time and production cost of a big project that costs tens of millions of dollars, we can make 100. That is better (Executive Producer Lee, Personal communication, July 2024).

We strategically start somewhere between videos made by the general public and videos made by professionals. Instead of finishing the series before releasing it, we produced a few episodes and released them on YouTube and Facebook to gauge people's reactions. We analyze comments, participation, and viewership graphs to try slightly different things. If viewership drops at the beginning of the video, we delete the opening video (Director Kim, Personal communication, July 2024).

They chose to create a diverse range of content, even if it meant sacrificing some of the quality and professionalism of their work. This is because they valued efficiency over perfection. Since they could not predict which work would be chosen by viewers, they gave anyone with an idea a chance, regardless of the creator's career, and ensured that it was produced quickly and frequently with low production costs. It is a method of responding quickly to viewers' responses to the work and continuing to invest in verified content as a result. It means organizing what the creator in charge suggests, developing it, and, if it is successful, then adding more professional team members. Their philosophy on this web drama is clearly revealed in the planning and development process of Project B. As previously explained, Project B, the second project of Director N Lee, who had no production experience, was a case where production was possible because the production cost was low. The reason the executive producer hesitated to produce it was not because of her lack of production experience but rather because the story seemed to lack the potential for expansion. All of the production company WN's web dramas were required to be planned from the planning stage so that the story could continue for 2-3 seasons. This is because they thought that the continuous expansion of the story would continue to attract users to their platform. They were unsure about the work, so instead of pre-producing the entire first season, they produced only four episodes to gauge the viewers' reactions. In the case of Project B, Director N Lee was responsible for all processes, from directing to editing, alone in Season 1. However, in Season 2, which followed less than a month after the end of Season 1, a professional production team was formed to work on it. That is why many viewers in the comment section recommend starting from season 2.

This diversification strategy is evaluated as a practical approach that leverages the characteristics of web dramas, enabling quick production with a small budget.

They are willing to sacrifice some of their expertise and polish in order to increase the opportunities to try new things quickly. Their strategic approach, which relies on efficiency, appears to be an effort to reduce the inherent uncertainty of the media industry, but it is also interpreted as a means to overcome their immature production capabilities. However, at the same time, executive producer Lee also said the opposite, saying that the production of web dramas in the form of branded films is increasing, and at the same time, the proportion of overseas sales is increasing to 30-40% of total sales, so there are concerns about the professionalism of the work. The aesthetic standards of the work were a problem in persuading investors. For that reason, production company WN acquired two large TV series production companies in succession in 2021 and 2022.

As previously discussed, the web drama industry is continually evolving as a cultural phenomenon driven by the pursuit of profit and production efficiency. This analysis aligns with the perception that mass media is, above all, an industrial and economic organization that produces and distributes products (Murdock & Graham, 1974, pp. 205-206). Adorno and Horkheimer (1979) had earlier argued that all cultural products are produced and distributed with the primary purpose of maximizing profits through rationalized organizational procedures. They defined the cultural industry as a “factory assembly line,” no different from a company that produces consumer goods, and revealed a “synthetic and planned method of manufacturing products” (1979, 163). The cultural industry operates in a way that commodifies and standardizes art. In particular, Adorno (1989) further developed this discussion of rational standardization, analyzing

that cultural production is carried out by commercial motives that make recipients imprint it in their minds and purchase it in the form of a commodity. It means that works of art cannot exist independently from commerce and industry. Therefore, from their perspective, the production of Korean web dramas will be interpreted as a mechanical activity that operates through commercial profits and social manipulation. However, if we move this macroscopic perspective as an industry to the microscopic perspective where everyday life takes place, a different analysis is possible. This is because the production of web dramas is an industry that operates to pursue profits, but at the same time, it is also a creative human activity that creates new stories every day.

Web Dramas as a Venue for New Attempts

Experiments with New Stories and Formats

As we worked through the challenges of developing the Web drama, I reflected on the concept of a "lily story" (girls' love), something I had not considered before. I admit I am not deeply familiar with this genre, but something compelling about the idea sparked my interest. Creating a lily story for a national broadcast or cable channel would undoubtedly be a huge challenge, and I understand how daunting that can seem. However, when it comes to web drama, I see it as a unique and wonderful opportunity that I really cannot overlook. It feels important to embrace this chance and explore the possibilities it offers (Director Yoon, Personal communication, April 2016).

Project C, released at the end of 2015, was a web drama about teenagers' lesbian relationships that garnered significant attention at the time. Director Yoon of this work recalled the first meeting, in which the producer Choi requested media content specializing in mobile networks. To launch a new production company specializing in

mobile content, the producer needed to demonstrate that they were creating the idealized Web drama to maximize the strengths of mobile platforms. Director Yoon remembered that they had keenly discussed the mobile platform's peculiarities and the audience's viewing behavior.

We thought about the behavioral patterns of viewers on mobile devices and decided to make short stories of 2-3 minutes if possible. Additionally, since we were unsure that viewers would binge-watch from the first episode, we agreed to focus on the characters and the emotions of the moment rather than creating a dramatic narrative of their romance (Director Yoon, Personal communication, April 2016).

They anticipate that viewers of mobile content struggle to maintain a steady focus for an extended period. They imagined their audience would not watch the series sequentially from beginning to end. The director intentionally chose a lily story to plan a production focusing on the moment's situation, atmosphere, emotions, and characters rather than the narrative structure. Furthermore, the choice of a lily story, an unconventional subject matter, can be seen as a strategic move to achieve artistic quality and topicality in a situation where the production company needed media attention simultaneously with the web release. Behind it all, the director's belief that he wanted to make his voice heard through this work took root.

This is the principle. There are numerous ways to overcome societal taboos and barriers to diversity, like a meaningful queer film. You can fight it, or you can hide and pretend not to know. I thought that one way would be to enjoy it as if there were no barriers. Of course, you cannot pretend not to know that something is clearly there, but I thought that if you ideologically tease it, wouldn't the barriers become meaningless? (Director Yoon, Personal communication, April 2016).

However, the director's choice to utilize the sentiment of fan fiction, which existed as a subculture, was a burden to the producer, who had to worry about the industrial achievement of the work. Especially in the situation of starting a mobile content production company targeting teenagers, it would have been natural to worry about what would happen if this material was viewed negatively by other viewers. However, at the time, most web dramas were casting K-pop stars as the main characters. Some of them were using the group love stories of male K-pop stars, which were a subculture of the existing fandom, as a story code (yaoi) to attract existing fans as solid web drama viewers, which was getting a good response from the market. Hence, the director's argument gained strength. In the end, they followed the director's opinion and produced a lily story as a web drama.

On the other hand, Project D began with the planning of the production company executive producer, who had just confirmed the market potential of BL (Boys' Love) web dramas focusing on male romance. Executive producer Shin, who worked as a music producer at a large entertainment agency before becoming independent, co-produced an 8-episode scripted series based on the famous BL novel <Semantic Error> (2022) with the large TV series production company Raemon Rain, which was a box office hit. This work, which was aired on the Korean internet streaming platform, showcased the surprise of BL, a genre often considered minor, taking first place in the domestic OTT rankings. Following the success of this previous work, Executive producer Shin announced plans for a BL web drama on a smaller scale but with a higher level of sexual content. Executive producer Shin (Personal communication, April 2024) judged that "while there is a relatively strong fandom, there is a lack of professional video supply that can satisfy

their demand." Most BL content is provided as novels or webtoons, so the success of BL movies or dramas that are produced intermittently is guaranteed. Additionally, he noted that he was able to make an active investment because the demand for Korean BL content is increasing in Southeast Asian markets, including Thailand.

Project D (2023-2025) featured four to six men, including a K-pop singer, models, and actors, and produced a web drama that documented their daily lives in a vlog format through a camera. Of course, this vlog is not real, but a virtual fake documentary with a script featuring a frame-like structure where viewers watch both the vlog and the filming of the vlog through two cameras: the vlog camera, held by the actors, and the director's camera. The director Wo said that from the beginning, they wanted to make the viewers feel like this was real and not acting by having the actors use characters that reflected their real names and careers. He said they wanted to maximize the viewers' excitement by including high-level romance scenes, including kissing and exposure scenes between the handsome male actors (Director Wo, Personal communication, April 2024).

These two web dramas are examples of expanding web drama stories' diversity. However, their intentions and assemblages for utilizing the emotions of fan fiction, which existed as a subculture, differ. This is because their perspectives and expectations for web dramas are different. In particular, the audience imagined by the two producers seems to be different in many ways. For the creators of Project C, the target audience is envisioned as active viewers who actively control their mobile devices and have a strong sense of social awareness. On the other hand, although a stronger fandom is expected for Project D, their imagined audiences are considered to have a reduced possibility of resistant reading of this text. Nevertheless, these two web dramas have, as a result, simultaneously

expanded the diversity of web drama material on the surface. The choice of this unconventional material, homosexuality, may be considered as 'pseudo-individuality' from the perspective of Adorno (1967, 123), but it can be seen as a manifestation of the production site's desire to try something new. The background that made this new attempt possible is the small and flexible decision-making process of web dramas.

In large companies, you must persuade various stakeholders, and there are likely to be many barriers to achieving genuinely innovative creativity. I have seen many cases where truly creative ideas are not realized and ultimately discouraged. Especially for web content, it is important to see reactions through various attempts. But I thought that such attempts would not work in that group (Producer Min, Personal communication, May 2024).

She argues that legacy media's organized and conventional production practices hinder web dramas' production. The production of legacy media is carried out through the collaboration of various experts at each stage. In this process, advice and intervention in the form of suggestions from many people occur, and this is implemented as work. As Becker (1982, p. x) articulated, "the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized by their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of artworks that the art world is noted for." She pointed out that in this process, the freshness that existed in the initial planning stage often disappears and that there is a tendency for conventional production. This consciousness is commonly found among those who emerged from the legacy media industry and declared themselves as specialized mobile content production companies. In the case of mobile content, such as web dramas, it is essential to try diverse and fast options, as users can see an immediate response. Director Lim of production company WN also made a similar comment.

Director Lim (Personal communication, July 2024) said, "When many people gather for a meeting, the person at the top will end up making the decision." The problem here is that "older executives do not know the target audience of web dramas, teenagers." To overcome this, they employ a rapid production strategy with a limited budget and closely monitor the response. Director Kim (Personal communication, July 2024) said, "The 18-24 age group that we consider the main viewers of web dramas are sensitive to trends, and they change quickly, so we need to be able to follow them," and "Web dramas take a relatively short time to plan, produce, and edit compared to regular TV series, so they are more advantageous in responding sensitively to trends."

Web dramas have the advantage of being able to respond flexibly and quickly to market conditions through small-scale production, and this appears to be a factor that allows for new attempts in the production field. Director Yoon (Personal communication, April 2016) stated that in the case of web dramas, "it is possible to produce even without a perfect scenario" and that he "often picks up the camera and makes it impulsively with only a little planning and notes." Perhaps it is because, as a creator with an obsession for always creating something new, he hopes that scenes created by chance will be woven into a single narrative and produce an unexpected result. This seemingly irresponsible production way is impossible in a TV series production site where a large number of staff members must produce a result of a certain length and quality within a limited time and budget. The director of Project D, Wo (Personal communication, April 2024), also voiced, "Due to the nature of the vlog genre, we do not do detailed script work," and "We discuss the situations with the actors and develop the story together." In particular, since each couple has a live broadcast of about 50 minutes every week, it is impossible to write

a script for all the content. Many parts of the story utilize the actors' actual appearances and daily lives. So, there was no script at the actors' audition site. Rather than watching them act according to the script, they focused more on understanding the actors' history and personality. The director attempted to incorporate this into the script and the characters. In addition, the actors shared their personal histories with each other or created them together through imagination, so they developed the characters' personal histories before filming and actively utilized them on set. These web drama characteristics have enabled inexperienced production staff to enter this industry. Producers must consistently demonstrate their effectiveness and engage in various endeavors to highlight unique strengths that distinguish their work. However, the creation of entirely original content poses its own difficulties; innovative attempts may not always yield successful results. Consequently, many producers tend to gravitate toward what may be described as familiar originality, leveraging established prototypes in which they have confidence. Collaborating with new talent is often the easiest way to achieve this. In web dramas, the initial investment decisions are frequently streamlined, making it easier for emerging talents to explore new concepts. Unlike the traditional film and television markets, where significant capital investment relies heavily on the reputations of writers, directors, and actors for financial recovery, web dramas can be launched based solely on the strength and originality of the storyline. This approach also opens the door to hiring individuals with limited production experience.

These newcomers to the production scene created results in their own way.

Project B's director, N Lee (Personal communication, July 2024) articulated, "I never learned how to write a script," and initially, "I did not know how to divide the scenes and

assign them numbers, or how to indicate narrative symbols.” She stated that, as both a writer and a director, she had to write the script in a way that was easy for her to read. Additionally, this was possible because only two actors and one cinematographer had to communicate on-site. She said, “I studied scriptwriting on my own to communicate with the increased production staff in the seasons that were produced later.” The web drama production site trained new personnel who had no experience.

However, some people are concerned that such a small-scale organization presents a less favorable environment for the growth of new directors and producers. In the case of web dramas, the short production period makes it challenging to consider one's decisions. This effect is more pronounced since there are relatively more new directors with limited experience. Executive producer Yeo (Personal communication, June 2024) of DE, the production company behind Project A, states, "Since the director is often a rookie with little experience and often lacks a production team to support the director, the influence will be felt more strongly." He says that especially in the case of representatives who give feedback on their opinions when they are not sure about their own ideas, they are cautious about whether the feedback intended to be helpful will end up overshadowing their creativity and originality, as they have over a dozen years of experience in the broadcasting and film production fields where they hope to work.

The point at which each person's differing thoughts on web dramas were most clearly revealed was the issue of the work's appropriate running time and the story structure that followed. For production companies that had to adhere to a set running time in order to follow the linear programming schedule, the emergence of non-linear online platforms that can freely adjust the length prompted them to reconsider the length of the

video that was appropriate for the story (Lotz, 2017). Producer Park of KR Productions claimed that the formula that content consumed on mobile devices must be short is not necessarily true. When he worked with advertising agencies, producer Park (Personal communication, April 2016) stated, "Since they are a place that creates 15 or 30-second content, there was a fear that web dramas that were too long would not be watched." The length was decided internally through discussion and was initially set at 5 minutes; however, the first episode was produced at 11 minutes. The number of views and the reaction were the lowest for the last episode, which was the shortest at 6 minutes. He argued that in order for an episode to have a narrative structure of introduction, development, turn, and conclusion, it should be at least 10 minutes long. He asserts that "just because you reduce the length from 11 minutes does not mean it feels short," and "the key is how to get people to immerse themselves."

The director, Yoon, of Project C also believes that a certain amount of time is needed to tell a story. Director Yoon (Personal communication, April 2016) described, "At first, I wanted to make a one-minute web drama," but adjusted it because he thought that while this length is enough to depict everyday life, it is not enough to tell a story and conflict. However, Project C was produced with a target length of 2-3 minutes due to the producer's strong will. Producer Choi thought that viewers would switch channels if it were longer than that. Producer Choi (Personal communication, April 2016) stated, "Of course, if the story is long, we have no choice but to let it go, but if possible, I asked him to finish the story within 2-3 minutes" and in order to achieve this, Producer Choi articulated, "I even gave up advertising," which was considered the only revenue source

for web dramas at the time⁶. Many producers on-site also made similar claims: Viewers no longer watch scripted series (dramas) for an hour in a mobile environment.

Viewers empathize with the descriptions, follow the narrative, and sympathize with the main characters. However, this web drama's biggest weakness is that it lacks a narrative that engages the viewer. Although short and fast production techniques are the trend, I believe that to increase fan loyalty, we need to focus more on the narrative that unfolds when people meet (Director Yoon, Personal communication, April 2016).

Director Yoon fragmented the story to follow the producer's request and structured the series by focusing on the characters and the emotions of the moment. The actual Project C they created was about 3 to 8 minutes long. It is a significant reduction compared to his previous works, which were about 15 minutes long. He stated that even if the story was fragmented, there were parts that inevitably became longer in order to focus on the situation, atmosphere, emotions, and characters of the moment and that he was thinking about a storytelling method optimized for web dramas (Yoon, personal communication, May 2016). Narration is primarily used to efficiently convey the main character's situation within a brief period of time. This ultimately simplifies the plot of the story, allowing viewers to grasp the reality quickly. Ultimately, it is a point of deep concern for directors and writers who must create an engaging story, separate from or in tandem with the commercial success of the work.

⁶ The reason he was able to make such unconventional decisions was that he had already received a significant amount of investment from the IT industry to start as a mobile content development company and platform rather than an individual web drama. Because of this, he was able to produce without receiving production support from corporations or entertainment agencies and was relatively less influenced by capital. Their experimental attempts can be viewed as a temporary phenomenon caused by the capital vacuum in the early stages of industry formation. However, they also reveal the significant influence capital has on their aesthetic achievements.

Nevertheless, more importantly, web dramas are now filling the narrative space that has been lost. Grand narratives are still the responsibility of old media, but in a reality where small comedies and small ironies are too difficult to produce as films or TV, web dramas have the potential and meaning (Yoon, personal communication, June 2024).

Expansion of Production

The most significant change brought about by web dramas is that they continue to expand the scope of production in the traditional sense in many places. Production in video production has so far been narrowly defined as the specific practices and locations of filmmaking or broadly as the intellectual and physical work necessary to complete it (Christian, 2018, p. 68). This production process, which was generally divided into pre-production, production, and post-production, considered distribution, where the work meets the audience, as the final stage (Zettle, 2002). The distribution process of existing legacy media involved marketing activities aimed at achieving box office success, such as promoting the work through pre-release screenings and press interviews after completion and engaging with the audience through theater talkbacks after release. It is recognized as the area of promotion and marketing, where the most money is spent during the film production stage (35-40% of total production cost), and it is also the area that has been analyzed from a socio-cultural perspective most recently, since the emergence of the creative industry (Kerrigan, 2017, p. 11). However, web dramas distributed through the Internet are different in that they actively utilize their affordance to build and strengthen the viewers' fandom. This approach, as predicted by Jenkins (2005), is driving significant transformations in media production and consumption.

(Leaving comments) is to get ideas and have fun through two-way communication with viewers. I get ideas and modify the series based on the reactions. To have fun with viewers, I often have competitions to see who can leave a comment with a funnier meme (Producer Kwon, personal communication, July 2024).

After the web drama is released on an online platform, the producer in charge begins managing the comments in their comment section. For viewers who watch web dramas on mobile devices, this is because they leave comments while watching the video. For them, comments are a valuable means of directly checking the viewers' reactions to the work and thus reflecting their feedback on the next production. For Project B, one person was in charge of planning, directing, and writing, as well as writing comments after the web dramas were released. Director N Lee (Personal communication, July 2024) stated that this work was invaluable in determining what people liked. These comments directly shaped the idea of the audience she imagined. On the other hand, writer Kim (Personal communication, July 2024) said that she was not significantly influenced by comments. However, her comment that viewers will like what she likes shows that she internalizes the influences around her and projects them onto the imagined audience. In this sense, the act of commenting for them is a form of production in a new sense.

I tend to check all the comments, likes, and views. I want to make things that people like. I like to be sympathized with. Why are there so few (views)? Will this get more views? I worry about this and that. As I write and direct, I often experience self-doubt while writing. Can you film this? Is it not that greedy? Should I not make concessions? Is this fun? Would you like to see it? The pain on set is also my share, so I must clean up my mess. I write the script thinking that if it is something I want to see, many people will see it, too. Even if it seems like I am writing it loosely, I have an attachment to it and read it repeatedly, revising it as needed. That is why I suffer. (Director N Lee, personal communication, July 2024).

Rather than setting a target audience, I tell my story. If I tell my story and the target likes it, I become a new standard. If I focus on my scenario and tell my story, I believe there will be 20-somethings who will sympathize with me since I am in my 20s anyway (Writer Kim, personal communication, July 2024).

When I worked as a production director/producer, it was difficult to sense people's reactions. There were few ways to gauge reactions to programs other than objective indicators like viewer ratings. However, web dramas are different. People leave feedback directly in the comments on YouTube, Facebook, and other platforms. It is fun to produce a web drama while reflecting on the feedback (Director Lim, personal communication, July 2024).

Comments do not simply express appreciation for work, but directly influence the story development of the work, breaking down the boundaries between production and consumption. Of course, in the production process of Korean TV series, there were often cases where the final story of the TV series changed due to the influence of reactions from online viewer bulletin boards or phone calls to the office. This was a characteristic of Korea's TV series, which employed a unique mode of production: the latter half of the series was produced simultaneously with its airing. These, along with the evaluations of their colleagues, had a significant influence on how they envisioned their audience. However, in the case of web dramas produced on a small scale and released on a seasonal basis, the reactions to viewers' comments are characterized as being more immediate and more precise. Producer Lim gave an example, "The male sub-actor who was the female protagonist's lover's friend in Season 1 was made the main couple in Season 2 at the request of fans," and "It was more popular because it was a couple that reflected their opinions" (Director Lim, personal communication, July 2024). The fandom is growing the character.

For web drama producers, the comment section is more than just a place for communication. Director Lim (Personal communication, July 2024) stated, "Teenage viewers consume not only web dramas but also comments as alternative content," emphasizing to the production team, "Make a video that gets many comments." For them, managing the comment section meant more than just replying to comments and displaying the funniest ones at the top. The idea is to make writing and reading comments a form of play. The aim is to foster an environment where viewers can enjoy writing and reading comments as a form of interaction. To this end, they strategically select and use wording that resonates with viewers from the planning and scriptwriting stages of the web drama. When communicating with them, they emphasize using words and language that are suitable for the target viewers' age range. Those who had accumulated such experience created and provided a new version of the comment video, which displays these comments at the bottom of the video once enough comments were collected, starting in 2020, during the pandemic. They provide a new type of video that viewers can enjoy, featuring interesting comment texts displayed at the bottom of the video, which were previously scattered in the comment section. These efforts work by strengthening their fandom, allowing viewers to enjoy the community rather than just watching the videos.

Web drama producers are going beyond creating a video to creating a story universe. Web drama production companies have been competing to bring characters out of their work during the pandemic. They created Instagram accounts using the characters' names from web drama and began posting their photos and videos. This is because not only the viewers but also the producers and actors were young and had no difficulty

creating photos and videos of the characters in the work and communicating through them. Moreover, YouTube vlogs documenting the daily lives of couples from the web dramas further expanded audience interaction. On various social media platforms, protagonists assumed identities as their respective characters, conducting live broadcasts in character. These characters operated both as performers and content creators, fostering a playful atmosphere for the audience. Characters that jumped out of web dramas created a new story universe by crossing various platforms. Producers, actors, and viewers interacted within a shared narrative framework, engaging in role-play while distinguishing between their identities as performers and characters—those who met on various platforms communicated based on their worldviews and enjoyed this role-playing. The actor and the character in the web drama are the same person, but they have different story universes, so pretending not to know and thinking of them as different people is a kind of fun.

This new story universe is a collaborative space where producers, actors, and viewers all come together. Director Lim (Personal communication, July 2024) explained the case of the Yeon Yechan couple from <Real: Time: Love> (2020), as the moment he saw the potential of such a space. Due to their popularity in web dramas, they also filmed various additional promotional videos in formats such as 'What is in My Bag,' which was popular on YouTube at the time, as well as YouTube Live broadcasts. There was a moment during a live broadcast where the lead actress, who was taking Q&A with viewers, confused her real-life appearance with the fact that she had a younger sibling in the web drama. She said that she did not have a younger sibling while answering viewers' questions. Then, there was a moment when fans who had participated in the live

broadcast left comments reminding her of the 8-year-old younger brother who existed in the web drama and admonished her to come to her senses. The actress herself was confused, but the audience was already accustomed to the story unfolding according to that worldview. Since then, the actress and fans have enjoyed seeing each other in different contexts, such as fan signing events, and checking which character and which world they are in. Although the video was filmed to generate revenue through advertising, fans created different assemblages within the space and found enjoyment in them by pursuing overlaps between the fictional universe and the real-life personas of actors.

In Project D, the movement of fans crossing the space of reality and story is also observed. The producer of Project D created a monetization model based on the active viewing behavior of the fandom. They have also been communicating with their fans through periodic live broadcasts in addition to airing web dramas. The narratives of the couples created in the web drama are being shared with viewers outside of the web drama, creating a new story. Due to the popularity of these live broadcasts, they will hold weekly live broadcasts exclusively for paid members starting in September 2024. They created a revenue model by providing behind-the-scenes footage and live broadcasts that allow fans to create their own narratives in paid territories.

This web drama, which was directed as if it were capturing everyday life using the vlog format, incorporates many aspects of the actors' real personalities and stories into the work despite having a script. This is because a significant portion of the script is often created through their improvisational ad-libs, with only the situation set up. These are mainly required when communicating with viewers as a character and leading a live

broadcast. This mode of production exploited the actors' fear of being fixated on their own image. That is why one of the actors, feeling burdened by the fandom that accepts this worldview as real despite it being fiction, intentionally revealed during a live broadcast that he was dating women through a dating app, drawing resentment from fans. It is said that they have ruined the space of fandom where fans enjoy creating their own stories. In addition, during live broadcasts, it is often seen that people criticize actors who were popular in the previous season but then left the web drama and were cast in other films, hiding the fact that they appeared in Project D in their public filmography or refraining from mentioning it. To them, the behavior of these actors felt like the characters they had developed were growing up and denying themselves.

The boundaries between production and consumption in today's web drama production scene are becoming blurred, and it seems to be mutating into a different dimension of production. Producers have to do more work to build the worldview of a web drama after it is released, and viewers are actively seeking out behind-the-scenes clips and information related to the web drama, thereby strengthening their fandom. Instagram accounts displaying various fan art and fan-made videos created by fans also began to appear one after another. They also venture beyond the world of web dramas and explore other platforms to discover the real-life versions of the actors, enjoying the moments where the two worldviews intersect. In previous legacy media, the moment a work was completed and released, it was metaphorically considered to leave the director's arms, but in the case of web dramas, the second half begins from the moment it is released. This goes beyond the level of non-linear platforms that simply allow users to decide what to watch (self-schedule) and the time to watch it (time shift). Instead, it

seems closer to a participatory culture, defined as "a culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and distribution of new content" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 290). In particular, the production and consumption of comment-edited videos, the story universe, various behind-the-scenes videos, and fan art created by fans that have appeared since the pandemic are interpreted as examples of transmedia storytelling, as mentioned by Jenkins. Consumers experience fragments of a story across multiple media platforms, share them with others, and sometimes discuss them, thereby fully experiencing a fragmented narrative. Producers are no longer simply creating videos; they are building a single worldview across multiple platforms, and audiences are actively engaging rather than simply watching. Following the emergence of active audiences, the emergence of active producers has come about.

Conclusion

In order to understand the production culture of web dramas, this chapter looked at the cases of four different web dramas and examined whether various members surrounding web dramas have different expectations about web dramas and what kind of arrangements they form. In a situation where a clear monetization model has not been developed, web dramas have been primarily driven by the desire of production companies to develop and own IPs. Web dramas have proliferated, combining the promotional goals of K-pop singers and new actors who want to participate in overseas markets or big-budget projects. This was also driven by active investment from companies and public institutions that confirmed the effective promotional effects in online spaces. Web dramas have established themselves as a unique media industry. This newly formed web drama assemblage took on different formations depending on each

member's different expectations for the web drama. For Project A, the production was based on high-budget expertise targeting the global market, following the model of existing broadcast TV series, while for Project B, the strategy was to develop the project through low-budget experiments by a young production team with little experience. For Project B, rather than focusing on creating perfect, high-quality work, the approach was to efficiently and flexibly create a number of small-scale works and observe viewers' reactions to them. It showed a willingness to take risks and experiment with new creators and original storytelling. The different expectations for web dramas from these two projects have created different production cultures. However, what is clearer is that web dramas work for the benefit of the members surrounding them.

However, when we shift our focus from a macro-level examination of the industry to the micro-level interactions occurring at the production site, we can observe diverse dynamics that challenge the dominance of universalized and standardized capital. As the examples of Projects C and D demonstrate, web dramas served as spaces for creative innovation and participatory storytelling, allowing new and marginalized voices to explore unconventional topics such as LGBTQ+ relationships. Web drama producers have taken advantage of viewers' mobile-centric viewing habits by composing short, emotional scenes into loose narratives and engaging with fans through comments, live streaming, and various social media platforms. Through this, web drama producers created a more expansive story universe with fans. The boundaries between production, reception, and text were no longer clear. They were creating an immersive ecosystem where the narrative worldview of web dramas and the worldview of reality collide, and the narrative continues across platforms. In this way, while Korean web dramas have

developed as an industry dominated by the logic of capital, they have also created new forms of storytelling in the digital media environment through the creativity and pleasure of various members within it.

CHAPTER 5

PRODUCTION AESTHETICS OF WEB DRAMAS

Understanding the Aesthetics of Production

All artistic activities are carried out through the cooperation of many people; the pattern formed through these cooperative activities is what we call the art world (Becker, 1982, pp. 1-39). In other words, the art world is the product of the complex intertwining of intentions and actions of all those involved in artistic activities, including resource distributors, artists, critics, and distributors. Such cooperative links are bound to exist in any work and always take the form of a division of labor. What is noteworthy here is that conventions are born in the process of division of labor. Conventions, which encompass all genres of art such as music, painting, and photography, serve as guidelines and standards, providing a framework for dimensions, length, size, shape, and other aspects, thereby enhancing the efficiency of work not only in the present age but also for future generations.

These creations of conventions and specific formulas were also evident in the formation of Hollywood's classic film style. Bordwell and Thomson (1985, pp. 3-11) examined the industrial and aesthetic aspects of Hollywood films produced between 1927 and 1960, considering how the unique style of classic Hollywood films was created within a cooperative and division of labor production system. They say that the style of a film is a complex system in which specific forces are intertwined and realized within the active interaction of its members. In other words, the 'stereotyped products' that are repeatedly produced within the mass production system cannot help but adhere to

existing conventions and dominant styles, affecting aesthetic aspects such as narrative, camera techniques, editing, and sound, ultimately creating a distinct style. In addition, the conventions created in this way have a way of demanding things from the audience, and the audience also already has certain expectations about the film through the conventionalized schema. The classic Hollywood film style formed through this process went beyond film and influenced the television industry, defining Hollywood's own aesthetic style. Ultimately, Hollywood's production practices, which were focused on economic efficiency, led to the development of Hollywood's distinctive production style.

In this manner, media production is conducted in a specific order. This order is a set of disciplines that can be created, destroyed, and transformed by their own power. The set of disciplines that appear in the production process naturally permeate and are exercised in the form of production practices by institutions such as broadcasters or production companies. These stabilized rules exist in the form of power within the framework of institutions and practices. This power floats freely around the production staff, objectifying individuals and naturally leading the staff's behavior in a certain direction. In this context, this chapter argues that the look and sound of web dramas are shaped by various forces surrounding production practices. In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of this matter, it is essential to consider the various conditions and processes that influence aesthetic practices and production. Rather than analyzing the aesthetic elements that appear on the screen, this attempt seeks to understand the production aesthetic of the creators who generate the images that exist behind the text. The process by which cultural products, including web dramas, are produced and circulated is far more complex than we might think, and in reality, the

process is far from mechanical. This is a social process in which cultural factors, such as values, beliefs, and ideas of various subjects or actors involved in the process, interact in a complex manner. This interaction is never smooth or soft and is full of competition, conflict, and confrontation. In this context, this chapter attempts to theorize the production aesthetics through participant observation of a web drama production site and the various voices collected during the process. What are the production aesthetic codes shared by web drama creators? What are they accepting as conventions? What is the imagined audience implied by these production practices? Through these questions, this chapter argues that the production aesthetic of web dramas serves as an ideological apparatus that deeply engages with the interpretation of the visual text and its audiences.

Conventional Production Aesthetics and Professionalism

Project F

August 6, 2024. This is the second of three scheduled filming dates. The bright sunlight streaming through the window was necessary for the filming concept, so I had been checking the weather forecast for several days in advance. Fortunately, the weather was clear. The staff's call time is 7 a.m., and the actors' call time is 8 a.m. The filming location is a coffee shop on the outskirts of Gyeonggi-do, so we had to start moving early in the morning to meet the call time. The problem is that there are quite a few things to film today. It accounts for nearly half of the entire series. Even based on the timetable I received last night, it is a forced march with filming scheduled until 2 a.m. Nine sequences had to be filmed in a single location, featuring different actors, camera angles,

and positions. Five sequences need to be filmed during the day, but if we cannot finish them all due to location sponsorship issues, we will have to continue filming the following day. In the worst-case scenario, we could be filming for over 24 hours. Fortunately, most of the filming today will be indoors with air conditioning, so we do not have to worry as much about the heat.

The camera crew was already there when we arrived at the filming location. The director and cinematographer discussed camera settings and the actors' movements. Since most of the sequences were conversation scenes between male and female actors, the discussion centered on how to make them look different each time. Although both the director and the cinematographer had extensive experience as assistants, they did not seem to express their opinions strongly because they lacked production experience as directors.

Actors A and B arrived at the filming location at 8:00 a.m. After completing their hair and makeup and changing into costumes, they began filming around 9:00 a.m. The clear weather and large windows lit the screen brightly as if a filter had been used. Instead, we had to worry about the difference between the afternoon sun setting on the other side of the building and the reduced amount of light. Ultimately, it was a battle of speed.

The lighting team's call time was 4 p.m., but they arrived around 9 a.m. when filming began. The lighting director mentioned he came out to help since he had nothing to do at home. The producer said that she could not pay more because the production budget was tight and asked them to go and rest, but the lighting director whined that he would just buy them lunch and hang around the filming crew. In Korean production

practices, where decisions about the sound and lighting teams are typically left to the cinematographer, it was a choice that allowed the weakest member of the production team to make a decision. He offered considerable assistance to the camera team and requested the cinematographer to collaborate with him on the next project as well. Ultimately, most daytime scenes were directed with the help of a lighting director, which directly impacted the quality of the footage.

The filming proceeded more smoothly than anticipated. Because most of the staff had previously collaborated in other locations, the primary issue identified was the lack of directing experience. They were rookie actors with only one or two minor roles to their credit, so their awkward performances and numerous retakes were expected. Their daily rate of \$250, paid for three days and totaling \$750, reflected this reality. Fortunately, as filming progressed, the actors' performances became more natural. The assistant director also made more effort to leave a positive impression on them. Although they are newcomers now, they likely understand this connection could be beneficial if even one of them gains fame in the future.

The director and cinematographer communicated continuously throughout the filming process, but no major disagreements occurred. This was because the director and the filming crew had established shared references in advance and agreed on the desired visual style. Additionally, they had similar ideas and criteria about what constituted good visuals for the scenarios being implemented. These shared criteria served as important guidelines that shaped their aesthetic choices and the composition of their work.

A small mistake by the cameraman in charge of the second camera was discovered early in the shoot. Due to the considerable amount of filming and significant

use of natural light planned for the day, an additional camera was deployed compared to the previous day. Concerns arose that production costs would increase if filming could not be completed within the designated time frame due to time and space limitations. Given that most of the filming revolved around the dialogue between the two main characters, using a second camera may have seemed like an obvious solution. Cinematographer Woo was responsible for the A camera, while assistant cameraman Yoon, who had no field experience, took charge of the B camera. Although Yoon was a beginner without prior on-site experience, he had some production knowledge from college and demonstrated a talent for filming, which is why he was assigned the task. Additionally, Cinematographer Woo was able to oversee both cameras and check the angles simultaneously.

The issue arose early in the filming process. Cinematographer Woo called in cameraman Yoon after five cuts had already been completed. The problem was that Yoon held the tripod lever without removing his hand from the camera, even after pressing the record button. He kept his hand on the tripod lever to quickly correct deviations from the initially agreed-upon frame caused by the actor's movements during the performance. As a result, the footage turned out slightly shaky. Since about an hour of filming had already passed, it was burdensome to consider re-filming. After reviewing the footage, cinematographer Woo scolded his assistant, saying, "After pressing the record button, you must remove your hand from the camera. When the camera moves, the intention must be clear." He noted that this type of subtle shaking would be considered a mistake. The director attempted to reassure Woo by suggesting that this level of shaking seemed

acceptable and could be sufficiently corrected in post-production. After this brief disturbance, filming continued without any significant issues.

The more significant problem arose in the afternoon when the feared scenario occurred. Due to a slight delay in shooting, there was not enough light for the last daytime scene. Although the story is set in the early evening, this scene features the male protagonist confessing his unrequited love to the female protagonist, requiring ample light and sparkling bokeh behind her. Even with filters added in post-production through color correction, no one could guarantee that the brightness would be as originally intended. The director, producer, and cinematographer deliberated on whether to postpone the shoot until the following day. At that moment, the lighting director requested some time to address the issue. The lighting team proceeded to set up hard lights at a high angle outside the building, as it was challenging to achieve the desired backlight using standard soft lights. Ultimately, the scene was filmed as planned. Compared to the previous scenes, the lighting and contrast appeared somewhat artificial; however, there was an internal consensus that it effectively conveyed the emotional difference of the male protagonist, who was rejected after confessing his unrequited love.

Feeding the nearly 12-person production crew was also a problem. According to the contract, meals and transportation expenses are included in the wages. However, if the producer did not provide dinner during a long and challenging shoot like today, it was obvious that the staff would be resentful. The lunch boxes and snacks prepared by other team producers who came to support the production had already been empty for a long time. Fortunately, a restaurant nearby was within the price range, so the staff split into

two shifts and ate together. It was also a significant advantage that the filming location was a coffee shop.

Filming concluded at 1 a.m., slightly ahead of the scheduled 2 a.m. Everyone was busy moving around, eager to finish filming quickly and head home to rest. The actress appeared visibly tired from the continuous shooting since the morning. However, fortunately, it was not a significant issue, as the scene involved her expressing concern for her boyfriend, who was busy and unreachable. I finished organizing around 2 a.m. and got into the car, with the next call time set for 11 hours later at 1 p.m.

This intense three-day shoot resulted in four episodes, each lasting 4 to 6 minutes, after two weeks of post-production. Uploaded to YouTube, the work has garnered between 200,000 and 400,000 views as of March 2025. While this is not a bad outcome, there are still regrets, especially when compared to the success of the series' predecessor, Project B, which aired for over three and a half seasons from 2016 to 2017. The disappointment stems from this project launching when the previous series was experiencing a resurgence in popularity, making it even more regrettable. In April and May 2024, tvN's <Lovely Runner> (2024) became a hit, causing audiences to recall past works featuring Byun, the male lead, with Project B being a standout example. Fortunately, one episode out of the four was created as part of a government public service campaign, resulting in \$20,000 allocated for the campaign's publicity. However, Manager Kim from the advertising team expressed regret, stating, "Internally, our goal was to secure advertising orders based on the popularity of the first four episodes and to produce two or three additional seasons starting at the end of October, but ultimately, that plan fell through."

This work was a reboot project of Project B (2016-2017), an early hit by production company WN, which was mentioned as an example in the previous chapter. For that reason, whether to continue the long-take filming that has been a key aesthetic feature of seasons 1-3 of this series was also a significant issue at the planning stage. The long take filming that Project B attempted, in which one episode was filmed in a single take without any cuts, was a new and unprecedented endeavor, even in the emerging web drama genre. Ironically, however, they claim that this aesthetic attempt to transcend existing conventions was an unintended success.

Executive Producer Lee noted that Director N Lee faced challenges during the production of Project B due to her lack of directing experience, particularly during the initial filming of Project E, which was her first project. As a rookie director with no prior production experience, she was tasked with conducting her first shoot alongside two new actors and a cinematographer who was only in his sophomore year of college. Concerned about the difficulties the inexperienced production team might encounter, Executive Producer Lee reached out to an experienced CGI team leader, who was overseeing post-production at the time, and requested their assistance. Although the shoot involved a relatively simple scenario—a brief conversation between the two actors—the experience proved to be difficult for everyone, even more so than the producer had anticipated. The primary issue stemmed from the director's lack of a clear shot composition in her mind, which led to extensive time and effort being spent on editing the final 15-second video.

The second project, referred to as Project B, emerged from her efforts to address the challenges encountered in her first project. Executive Producer Lee mentioned that he introduced her to the concept of the Spielberg Oner, which is a lengthy single-take shot,

prior to filming. Instead of relying on conventional shot/reverse-shot dialogue exchanges, this approach emphasized that a single shot can convey an entire story through careful attention to rhythm, blocking, and the actors' movements. He remarked, "The director lacked experience in directing, so she was unsure which angles to shoot and how to edit. Instead, she simply left the camera stationary and filmed, which created a unique feel." He added, "That is why the one-take shot was developed—because she could not direct."

When I started working on Season 1, I had no experience directing on set. I had never studied filmmaking and was unfamiliar with the editing process. However, since the project was initially intended to be very small, my seniors encouraged me to take on the responsibility, which I decided to do. While searching for ways to minimize editing, I encountered the one-take technique. Each episode was around two minutes long, so I felt it would be unnecessary to cut the scene. Additionally, I observed that documentaries often film in one continuous take to follow characters closely, which creates a greater sense of immersion for the audience. This realization inspired me to adopt the one-take filming style (Director N Lee, personal communication, July 2024).

In film production, long takes are strategically used by directors to enhance the sense of presence, realism, and sustained tension in the footage, giving the impression that the scene has been represented as is without editing. It helps "create a particularly credible illusion of witnessing an unfolding diegetic *reality* through its maintenance of continuous time and contiguous space" (MacDowell, 2017, p. 148). However, because the length of the extended cuts increases the number of things to consider and control during filming, it is a less efficient filming method. An actor, Jo, who appeared in Project B, said, "No matter how well you acted or how well you empathized with the scene, if there was noise or someone made an NG, we had to start over again." Another actress, Yang, said, "Since we filmed everything in one take, there were many times when I had

to react spontaneously." For this reason, "I used my real name for the role in the web drama, and my personality was reflected a lot in the character's personality." In this way, the fact that the creators of Project B attempted an aesthetic that deviated from existing production practices was not a choice based on any principle or standard, but rather a choice based on the production conditions and circumstances at the time. To be more precise, it was a result of an effort to overcome the production conditions and conditions of the time.

The aesthetic decisions made in the process of overcoming the realistic production conditions they faced received unexpected responses and were strengthened as aesthetic characteristics of this work over the seasons. Chief producer Jeong (Personal communication, July 2024) stated, "After later research, we discovered that viewers were distracted by the moments when the video cut changed, causing them to leave the show." She added, "To maintain immersion, we intentionally used one-take footage in the other seasons as well." Moreover, these aesthetic experiments were highlighted in media interviews as a distinctive feature of web dramas, setting them apart from traditional broadcast series. Producer Kim explained, "At that time, web dramas produced by established production companies did not differ much from TV dramas in visual techniques; they simply reduced the story volume and shortened the running time." He continued, "This particular work broke the convention that 'the cut must change each time the narrator changes,' approaching viewers as something fresh by developing a single story that fostered immersion."

Initially, I did not intend to film everything in one take. However, after trying it a couple of times and seeing that people enjoyed it, I thought it

could become a distinct format. So, I filmed the entire first season in one take. This approach became somewhat of a trademark, which I continued in seasons two and three. As the story evolved and became more complex, I encountered several challenges. The limitation of moving within a single space constrained my directing choices (Director N Lee, personal communication, July 2024).

The aesthetic approaches taken in the Project B were modified during its reboot, known as Project F. Initially, Project B featured only two characters conversing in a single location with minimal movement. However, as the season progressed, the number of characters increased, leading to more complex relationships. Ultimately, they filmed the scene with six actors interacting and moving together within the same space in one continuous take. As the use of gimbal shooting became more frequent due to the increased camera movements, the resulting unstable frames began to detract from the narrative's focus. What was once considered a successful aesthetic experimentation at the start of the season gradually undermined the overall visual quality of the work. Director J. Kim, who joined the production company WN as a fan of Project B, identified the filming techniques as the primary issue with the original Project B during the reboot process. While watching this work, she wondered why it could not have been filmed better. Director J. Kim emphasized that the story of unrequited love, which reveals the main character's inner thoughts through narration, remains relevant even after seven years. Nevertheless, as this was a reboot, she considered new directions, one of which was to create aesthetic differentiation. She clearly stated in the production plan her intention to employ "filming techniques that enhance emotional immersion, such as close-up shots to convey detailed emotions, instead of relying solely on the one-take technique."

The new production team carefully crafted the dialogue scenes between the two characters in line with industry conventions. Unlike the inexperienced production crew from previous seasons, the key staff for this project had significant experience, with most members, including the director and cinematographer, having over five years in the field. Although much of this experience was at the assistant level, their production skills were outstanding. This marked the director's third film as a director and was the cinematographer's debut in that position. Notably, one episode of the series was produced as a branded film, for which advertising fees were paid. This made it essential for the video to maintain a professional look. Producer M. Kim (Personal communication, August 2024) commented, "If an advertiser claims that the work falls below their expectations after production, there is no established standard for judging the quality of the work, leaving us with no room to argue. Naturally, we have to be concerned about the advertiser's opinion." However, the director J Kim predicted that advertisers would not have high standards because they knew that this project was a web drama, and that if it was a box office success, it would not be a big problem. Ultimately, it seemed that the director was more focused on pleasing her fans than on satisfying the advertisers.

When filming a series that has a famous predecessor, opinions among fans can vary greatly. Some may call for changes, while others insist on strictly adhering to the established style. As a director, my priority is to create a filming approach that aligns with the story being told (Director J Kim, personal communication, August 2024).

I aimed to minimize changes in camera positioning as much as possible. My goal was to capture the characters authentically, showcasing their appearances without any distractions. Therefore, I sought to avoid anything that might detract from the actors' faces and performances. The key consideration for me was the size of the shots; I needed to ensure that the actors' faces were clearly visible to effectively convey their emotional

expressions. This focus led me to prioritize finding the appropriate shot sizes (Cinematographer Woo, personal communication, August 2024).

The filming was quite conventional. The dialogue scene, consisting of shots and reverse shots, was composed of familiar screens with a mix of full shots, over-the-shoulder shots, and close-up shots. Even a tiny mistake with the second camera noted earlier became a significant issue. The final product was so intricate and polished that even the slightest camera shake in certain scenes was easily noticeable. Unlike the previous series, no camera movement interrupted the narrative, and the overall aesthetic resembled that of a television broadcast or film. Cinematographer Woo mentioned that he worked hard to ensure the film did not appear amateurish, as he believed that was essential to showcase his expertise.

In the past, the quality of video was predominantly determined by the filming equipment used. ENG and 6mm cameras were often used together on location, making it obvious which produced better-quality footage. However, we now live in an era where films can be shot using iPhones. When viewing the final footage, it can be difficult to distinguish between professional and amateur work based solely on screen quality (Cinematographer Woo, personal communication, August 2024).

He states that securing the professionalism of a cinematographer in technical aspects has become impossible due to the automatic and natural implementation of depth of field and focus movement in most cameras. Previously, the expertise of producers, particularly cinematographers, was ensured by their affiliations with professional organizations and the technical resources they utilized. The associations of cinematographers or broadcasting stations provided a guarantee of their professionalism, while the quality of the equipment they used further validated their skills. However, with

the advancement of digital technology, there is no longer any equipment that is exclusively available to professionals. Independent producers, who do not belong to any organization, must demonstrate a deeper understanding of conventional production practices to prove their expertise in their work.

On the other hand, the expertise of the lighting director was emphasized in relation to production efficiency. Lighting needs to be reinstalled every time the camera position and angle change to achieve the director's intention of making the actor look attractive.

However, the lighting setup did not require any special attempts or experiments. Given the constraints of limited time and space, the lighting director was required to execute the lighting efficiently, and he composed the lighting by adding a little more emphasis to the backlight in addition to the conventional flat lighting. For him, conventions were a source of efficiency. Also, in the last daytime shooting, the lighting director's choice and suggestions also received support from the production team in terms of efficiency. In a situation where filming could have been extended by one more day, he proposed an aesthetic choice based on his experience at a previous production site to overcome the situation that could have caused production delays.

In contrast to their pursuit of professionalism, these production members' modus operandi is exploitative in the process of materializing their passion as labor. The lighting director, who must be selected by the cinematographer and production director, volunteers for unpaid labor, and the staff below him must follow his choices. The daily wage of \$150 for the youngest staff members was less than the minimum wage, considering their working hours. The web drama production site, which used to

emphasize young producers' fresh perspectives and new experiments, has degenerated into a low-wage labor site. This exact mechanism of exploitation is also found among head-level (above-the-line) staff. They, too, are dreaming of a higher league, a big-budget project based on their experience in the field. This seems similar to how meritocracy and entrepreneurship operate in the Silicon Valley tech scene as mythologized success stories to conceal the discrimination, fill the gaps, and embrace the absurdities (Marwick, 2013).

Of course, this observation cannot be generalized to mean that professionals in the production field of web dramas are increasingly using conventional aesthetics to secure their own expertise. However, efforts to preserve the professionalism of one's own field have been carried out similarly in other adjacent fields. In journalism studies, Singer (2015) uses the professional norm of accountability, often translated as "transparency," to illuminate "journalism's ideological commitment to control, rooted in an institutional instinct toward protecting legitimacy and boundaries" in the context of the weakening boundaries between experts and non-experts in the rise of social and entrepreneurial journalism (p. 32). Also, in film studies, LaRocco (2018) argues that by emphasizing the hierarchy between film look and video look according to cultural values, the revolutionary potential of video has been mythologized and ideologicalized. In this context, this chapter argues that the aesthetic choices made at production sites are not based on the arbitrary decisions of the producers but rather are formed by the various forces they face in the conditions and situations they face, and emphasizes the necessity and potential of studies on production aesthetics.

The aesthetic style of Project F, developed through discussions between the cinematographer and the director, aims to emphasize professionalism and efficiency by

adhering to conventional production aesthetics. While the cinematographer's dedication to quality might seem to contradict executive producer Lee's point about the importance of production efficiency discussed in the previous chapter, it is clear that the production team's extensive experience allows them to operate effectively within established norms. Efficiency is a crucial value in this industry, which is why the crew supported the lighting director's decisions to prevent delays during filming. Additionally, the cinematographer's pursuit of perfection was understood by the team, especially as they prepared for a presentation to advertisers and began their filmography for a big-budget project. This work serves as a portfolio for everyone involved, helping them to gain recognition and eventually secure roles in larger productions. Much like the past practice of creating short films to demonstrate talent and attract contracts with major film companies or broadcasting networks, web dramas now act as calling cards and audience-tested pilots that can significantly enhance professional careers in the post-broadcast television era (Christian, 2018, 2014; Ryan, Healy, and Cunningham, 2022).

Aesthetics of Web Dramas

In the editing room, Director J. Kim emphasized the importance of being "intuitive and short at all costs." She noted that if the cut is even slightly longer than necessary, viewers are likely to abandon it. To achieve this, a significant number of close-up shots were incorporated, and the lengths of the cuts were meticulously trimmed.

One of the most noticeable aspects was the rhythm of the edited footage. While I felt there should have been space to convey the feelings of unrequited love, her editing style was quite fast-paced. The actor's voice often coincided precisely with a cut, leaving

no moments of silence. Most of the cuts lasted only 2 to 3 seconds, with some insert cuts lasting less than 2 seconds.

If the pacing drags even a little, viewers will quickly lose interest. They are always ready to hit the 5-second skip button, so the editing must be faster than that. It is a battle of timing (Director J. Kim, personal communication, August 2024).

The broadcaster's famous maxim of creating content that is easy for viewers to understand, even if they are only watching briefly, felt foreign to her. She seems to believe that only immediate and fast-paced stories could survive in today's media landscape. To her, editing appeared to be a tactic for maintaining interest through a quick tempo, rather than conveying emotions through rhythm and timing. In an environment where viewers can replay content or skip ahead by 5 or 10 seconds, showing enough cuts was perceived as unnecessarily extending the length of the cuts. She argued that viewers have become more active than ever in deciding what to watch and how to engage with the content.

Second, since the viewership of a video is determined within the first five seconds, the narrative structure needed to be designed with this in mind during editing. The classic story structure of introduction, development, climax, and conclusion was not considered. It had to grab the viewers' attention from the first scene. It is crucial to understand that these initial five seconds can convey the message even without sound. Many viewers, especially in mobile environments, often watch videos with the sound off. When deciding whether to watch a video on YouTube's home screen, they base their choice on the thumbnail image, title, and preview that plays silently. To accommodate

this, all dialogues were processed as subtitles, and the narration was displayed in various locations with distinct fonts for clarity. The key consideration during the editing process was not just the cuts, but more importantly, the selection of the title and thumbnail image. Director J Kim stated, "YouTube's analytics tab shows the CTR (click-through rate)," and "whether it piques viewers' curiosity and whether it looks good on mobile devices are important criteria." That is why, in selecting shots, close-up shots that look good on a small screen rather than a large screen were actively utilized. While the title was considered the most important factor from the planning stage, special care was also taken when editing the thumbnail photo. Words were rephrased to resonate with teenagers, ensuring they were engaging and attention-grabbing. Research on web dramas has consistently highlighted specific characteristics. It is emphasized that web dramas are primarily viewed in mobile environments. According to Kang (2024, p. 38), viewers watch these dramas in noisy outdoor settings on small screens. She identifies three key characteristics of web dramas: First, they have short and concise storylines. Second, they tackle everyday topics that viewers can easily relate to. Lastly, they feature fast pacing, which eliminates unnecessary scenes and subplots.

The aesthetic characteristics of web dramas are deeply influenced by the conditions of production, the production process itself, and the context in which these works are created. Just as immediacy served as a guiding principle for other aesthetic choices in the editing process of web dramas, all aesthetic elements constituting a text are formed and shaped by various disciplines surrounding the production practice. This can be seen in the same context as Williams (1982), who viewed culture not simply as an ideological superstructure but as the material condition of social existence itself.

Consequently, it is imperative to examine the relationship between text and institution when analyzing and interpreting films, as within the text lies a reflection of contextual social structures, meanings, and situations that make narratives and aesthetic elements meaningful. In light of these points, production aesthetics is an essential field of study that delves into the power and intentions behind the production codes and conventions of video production rather than simply analyzing audiovisual elements.

Conclusion

This chapter was planned to emphasize the need for an exploration of production aesthetics in order to understand the production culture of web dramas and to present one example of this. The various aesthetic choices that are understood as the result of negotiation among the production team members are, in fact, formed by various forces and production conditions encountered during the production process rather than by individual creative choices, as in the case of Project B. In this sense, production aesthetics is not simply about analyzing what we see and hear on screen, but rather an effort to understand how and why the various choices that construct a text are made within a particular production environment.

As can be seen from the case of the editing process of Project F, the aesthetic style of a work is greatly influenced by the imagined audience by the creator. For example, director J Kim edited based on the assumption that audiences would quickly skip or give up on the video, which led to fast-paced editing, immediate narrative appeal, and an emphasis on visual appeal in thumbnails and titles. She imagines her audience as more active than ever before, with mobile devices in hand, actively determining their viewing

behavior and the mode in which it occurs. That is why she values immediacy, empathy, and clarity over traditional storytelling structures. This imagined audience as active mobile users is also shared on other web drama production sites and has become established as an aesthetic characteristic of web dramas.

On the set of Project F, a more contradictory and complex imagination of the audience was formed. The creators meticulously followed the aesthetic choices conventionally used in existing films and broadcasts. Their aesthetic choices in keeping with these production conventions worked in a way that reinforced the professionalism and efficiency of the producers, and it resonated with advertisers' calculated expectations and producers' aspirations for the higher league. The aesthetic decisions they made were the result of the aspirations and power relations of the production team, but it was camouflaged with the imagination that the camera's movements would interfere with the audience's authentic appreciation.

CHAPTER 6

KOREAN WAVE, NETFLIX, AND WEB DRAMAS

This chapter examines the relationship between two interrelated transnational phenomena (Korean Wave and global streaming services) and Korean production culture. It discusses the paths these two lines take through the production culture of web dramas. To this end, Section 1 examines the relationship between production companies and broadcasters surrounding the Korean Wave and analyzes how the production culture and mode of production for Korean TV series have been produced and shaped in the process. I examine the environment and conditions of cultural production that are naturally accepted and taken for granted in the production site and how these have changed through expectations and imaginations called the Korean Wave. Section 2 investigates the impact of the emergence of global streaming services, such as Netflix, on Korean TV series production culture through interviews with key producers surrounding the production site. Through this, Section 3 attempts to ask and clarify the question of what influence the Korean TV series production culture, as a specific assemblage through which the two lines above the pass, has on the production culture of web dramas.

Industrialization of Korean TV Series and the Korean Wave

Emergence of the Mode of Production for Korean TV Series

Since the 1990s, when Korean broadcasting began to flourish, the most essential players in the industry have been outsourced production companies. The emergence of

outsourced production companies in the broadcasting industry's history began in 1991, following the government's policy on outsourcing broadcasting program production (Ju, 2017; Yoo, 2017; Moon, 2011). In line with the government's intention to foster independent production companies and thereby revitalize the broadcasting production industry, a certain percentage of broadcast programs produced by outsourced production companies rather than broadcasting companies themselves are required to be broadcast. This policy, which has been consistently expanded, has resulted in a mandatory outsourcing production ratio that initially stood at 3% in the early 1990s when the policy was implemented, but expanded to 35% by the mid-2000s (Kwon, 2013).

Notably, many outsourced production companies have previously employed staff from broadcast entities such as KBS and MBC for program production. As a result of implementing this policy, a significant number of existing production personnel have transitioned to production companies, leading to the formation of informal relationships between existing broadcasting stations and companies run or produced by former broadcasting station employees. This has led to unfair subcontracting transactions in the process of obtaining program production orders. In the process, the practice of outsourced production companies relying on the broadcasting station's facilities and personnel to produce programs has become established (Choi, 2010; Kwon, 2007). This practice was particularly evident in the production of TV series (drama), which required relatively high production costs. Before the comprehensive programming channels were launched in 2011, existing broadcasters were not allowed to engage in sponsorships or indirect advertising. On the other hand, outsourced production companies were relatively free from these regulations. Therefore, when broadcasting stations outsourced TV series

production to production companies, they could produce the TV series at a lower production cost, taking into account the production company's sponsorship and indirect advertising revenue. At that time, broadcasting stations invested 80-90% of the total production cost, provided they owned the copyright to the work and arranged the programming themselves (Choi, 2010). The production company must cover the remaining shortfall through additional resources, such as sponsorships or indirect advertising, including product placement (hereafter referred to as PPL). Even with the increase in the number of production companies and the resulting intensified competition, the burden of production costs on broadcasters decreased to 60-70% in the 2010s (Gu, 2013). In a situation where the advertising market is regulated by the government, and advertising revenue is not guaranteed based on viewer ratings, broadcasters who have to invest a lot of production costs in advance have actively utilized the outsourcing production system to reduce the risks. Also, from the broadcasting station's perspective, it was more advantageous to secure competitive writers and scripts from production companies, program based on them, and support production with the broadcasting station's human resources and equipment rather than producing underdeveloped stories in-house due to the pressure of the programming schedule. For this reason, at the time, in order for a work to be recognized as an outsourced production, the contracts for the production staff, including producers, writers, and film crews, were made by the production company, but in the case of the director and cinematographer in charge of the overall production, they were dispatched from the broadcasting station. In addition, production companies that were burdened by insufficient production costs often received support from broadcasting stations for all post-production work, including expensive

filming equipment, sound, music, dubbing, mixing, VCR editing, computer-generated imagery (CGI), color correction, and subtitles. Ultimately, although it appeared to be outsourcing production on the surface, the broadcasting company retained control over the work and the accompanying superior position (Kwon, 2007; Park, 2002).

Broadcasters capitalized on this power differential to develop a distinctive mode of production for Korean TV series. This does not mean that production of the entire series is completed before the series airs. By the time the first episode is released, only about 30% of the entire series has been produced, and the direction of the rest of the story is adjusted based on the viewers' reactions at the beginning of the series. Until the early 2010s, it was a common practice to proceed with work through verbal agreements rather than writing contracts. A written contract with the broadcaster was only possible after the first two episodes had aired (Roh, 2017, p.545). If a TV series becomes a hit, broadcasters may adjust their programming strategies, such as adding more episodes or increasing the episode length, to gain an advantage in ratings competition with their competitors and maximize advertising revenue. This is because the number of advertisements before and after a program is determined in proportion to its running time. On the other hand, if the initial ratings and viewer response are not good, the writer may change the direction of the story while observing the viewers' response, or if the viewer ratings are seriously low for episodes 4 to 6, the broadcaster may decide to end the show early in order to recover the production costs of episodes that have not yet been filmed. This unique Korean mode of production for TV series was unilaterally unreasonable for the production company, but it was also an inevitable choice for the production company, which had to fill the remaining 30-40% with indirect advertising (PPL), excluding the

broadcasting fee that accounts for 60-70% of the total production cost. After producing the first few episodes, the second half had to be left behind in order to attract advertising while it was airing. This is also why the more popular the TV series, the more PPLs there were in the latter half of the series.

This scheduling-centric production practice, designed to protect the profits of broadcasters and production companies in an uncertain environment where no one knew whether the TV series would succeed or fail, was a significant burden on the production site. Especially as the series progressed, the problem of insufficient production schedules inevitably arose as production was rushed to meet the air date. As time went on, the script was not a completed book but rather a scene-by-scene script (a page) that appeared on the production site, resulting in a production site that was pressed for time. This is why there are many scenes in the latter half of the Korean TV series where the main character couples go on dates at night. It was an aesthetic choice by the producers to overcome the limited production situation under tight schedules. Most Korean TV series tend to converge on love stories between main characters as the series progresses, with less movement from the actors and a slower rhythm on screen, making filming relatively easy. Moreover, behind it all, there is the murderous schedule of actors and staff trying to complete the work by any means necessary.

Korean Wave That Has Expanded the Scale of the Industry

The balance of power in the production industry, which comprises broadcasting stations, production companies, and entertainment agencies, was disrupted by the popularity of Korean TV series in Asian markets, including Japan and China, which

began in earnest in the early 2000s, known as the Korean Wave. Starting with the unexpected success of <Winter Sonata>, which aired in Korea in 2002, in Japan, and the record-breaking success of <Jewel in the Palace>, which finished airing in 2003, in Asian markets including China, broadcasters who saw the potential for profit-making in the Asian market began to devote themselves in earnest to exporting TV series (Kim, 2023).

Even as late as 2002, when KBS's <Winter Sonata> was considered the signal flare for the Korean Wave, Korean broadcasters had given no consideration to overseas markets. At that time, overseas exports of video content were primarily conducted by local broadcasters targeting Korean residents abroad. In the 1980s and 1990s, as the number of broadcasting channels increased in many Asian countries, there were instances of importing and broadcasting programs from neighboring countries as a way to reduce the programming burden. However, the primary targets were American and Japanese programs. When the Asian financial crisis broke out in 1997, exports of Korean TV series, priced at one-tenth the cost of the most popular Japanese programs, began to focus on Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. This trend expanded to Japan in a chain reaction. However, since it was a market expansion process armed with low prices, it did not receive much attention within Korean broadcasting companies (Kim, 2024). Producer Yoon (personal communication, August 2024), who worked as a broadcaster from the late 1980s to the early 2010s, said, “Before Winter Sonata, no one within the broadcasting station talked about exporting dramas,” and “All production costs had to be recovered through domestic broadcasting, and if additional profits were made by exporting overseas, it was perceived as a small bonus.”

However, after witnessing the record-breaking success of <Winter Sonata> (2002) and <Jewel in the Palace> (2003) in the Japanese and Southeast Asian markets, production companies began to imagine audiences beyond their borders for the first time. In particular, when the TV series became successful in Japan, they saw the potential for various industrial opportunities to arise by utilizing the fandom of a single TV series. Even before that, it was entirely possible to imagine holding fan signing events and selling souvenirs using a star system, such as 'Yon-Sama'. However, going a step further, it was revealed that all elements of the TV series could be turned into products, such as developing a travel product to Namiseom, the filming location of the TV series, selling the OST as an album, and re-creating the script and DVD as new products. This is the first time we have seen how the 'cultural industry' utilizes TV series can be transformed (Shim, 2008). Producer Yoon (personal communication, August 2024) said, “Winter Sonata’s success in Japan made producers at the time reconsider what it meant for Korean dramas to sell overseas,” and that is why he went on to say, “Winter Sonata is what industrialized Korean dramas.”

A case that clearly illustrates the industry's expectations during the Korean Wave era is <The Legend>, which aired in 2007. <The Legend>, which started with the promise of “From now on, we will create a profitable Korean Wave” by casting Bae, who created the Yon-Sama craze in Japan after <Winter Sonata>, as the lead actor, showed a production scale that was on a different level from existing TV series. Initially estimated to be \$30,000,000, the production cost was ten times the typical production cost of a TV series at the time, ranging from \$3,000,000 to \$4,000,000. Rather than relying on the existing method of receiving a significant portion of production costs from broadcasting

stations, they raised production costs by attracting investment from domestic and foreign financial capital, listing the company for production on the stock market, or establishing a private equity fund. The total production cost of <The Legend>, a 24-episode series, was \$40,600,000, which is unprecedented, even considering the 3-year production period. Considering that in the Korean advertising market where advertising rates are regulated by the Korea Broadcast Advertising Corporation (KOBACO), the maximum advertising revenue a single program could earn per episode was around \$400,000 at the time, <The Legend>, which had a production cost of \$1,700,000 per episode, was an attempt that went beyond the scale of the Korean broadcasting industry⁷.

MBC, which aired this TV series at the time, traded the broadcasting rights in Korea with the production company, Kim Jong-Hak Production, for \$4,100,000. Unlike previous cases where broadcasters acquired the copyright to a work in exchange for broadcasting, this was the first case where only domestic broadcasting rights were traded. In an interview with the press at the time, SSD CEO Kim, the investment and distribution company for <The Legend>, said, “<Winter Sonata>, which is called a success story of the Korean Wave, actually sold all of its copyrights, including TV broadcast rights, to a Japanese broadcasting station at a very low price,” and “If it is sold at a fair price to

⁷ Each episode of <The Legend> earned \$427,000 through broadcast advertising at the time of its broadcast, which was the highest revenue a single program could generate at the time. At the time, the unit price for a 15-second commercial for <The Legend> was \$15,255. Since there were 28 commercials before and after each 70-minute episode, it is calculated that the broadcasting company earned \$427,000 in advertising revenue for each broadcast.

countries like Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, there will be no problem in making a profit.⁸” (Moon, 2017).

In this way, the popularity of the Korean Wave, which began after the release of <Winter Sonata> (2002), rapidly expanded the size of the Korean broadcasting industry. The production cost per episode, which was less than \$100,000 in the early 2000s before the Korean Wave took hold, increased significantly to \$300,000 around 2010. In addition, following the success of <My Love from the Star> (2013-2014) in the Chinese market, direct investment from Chinese capital increased significantly, and production costs rose again to \$500,000 (Roh, 2023, p.27). A particularly notable point is the increase in the number of production companies. The number of production companies reported to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism increased more than eightfold from 108 in 1998 to 851 in 2007 (Kim & Jung, 2009). Following the success of <Winter Sonata> (2002), production companies have proliferated in anticipation of the Korean Wave's impact. This increased the scale of the industry and attempted qualitative development, but at the same time, competition became more intense.

As competition for broadcast programming intensifies, costs at the planning stage have increased significantly. To secure programming, production companies submitted a plan, along with a script for a TV series of up to four episodes, a list of cast members, and a list of production staff to broadcasters. At this time, since the probability of the plan being accepted increased when famous actors, writers, or directors participated,

⁸ Contrary to the expectations of these investors, <The Legend> ended as a failure, with a cumulative sales of \$21,300,000, not even recovering half of its production cost. This failure led to the suicide of Kim Jong-Hak, who was a star producer at the time, in 2017.

production companies made advance payments to them. Casting several actors who are particularly popular in the Japanese market was considered a decisive factor in the investment decision. Their rarity and added value were fully reflected in the increased appearance fees of the actors. The problem is that if the production is not arranged, this cost becomes a loss for the production company. In particular, in a situation where actors' appearance fees and writers' manuscript fees have risen sharply due to the influence of the Korean Wave, only large production companies that can withstand the burden of this planning stage have survived (Roh, 2012).

In this context, Kwon (2015) divides the structure of Korean TV series production into three periods: the first period, up until 1990, when there was no outsourcing at all; the second period, from 1991 to the early 2000s, when outsourcing became systematized; and the third period, after 2002, when the Korean Wave swept through Asian markets including Japan and China. Furthermore, after the mid-2010s, when global OTTs such as Netflix emerged and the crisis in broadcasting began, significant changes were observed again.

The Emergence of Global Capital and Changes in Production Culture

The Korean broadcasting industry has expanded rapidly in size as the influence of the Korean Wave has continued to grow. However, as the industry grew in size, the unfair production reality between broadcasters and production companies also became apparent. This is because the value of exclusivity derived from the scarcity characteristic of linear broadcasting has also increased. In this situation, global OTTs that have begun

aggressively investing in Korea's production industry have once again brought about significant changes to Korea's production landscape.

Polarization Due To Increased Production Costs

The emergence of global streaming services such as Netflix and Disney Plus has had the most significant impact on Korea's cultural industry by increasing the scale of production costs. As of 2016, when Netflix entered the Korean market, the average production cost per TV series episode was \$400,000-\$600,000. Considering that the maximum advertising revenue per episode was about \$1,000,000, this was close to the maximum that a broadcaster could invest if it did not consider overseas exports. Netflix, which initially invested only in advance purchasing online distribution rights, aggressively jumped into investing in and producing Netflix originals, starting with <Kingdom> (2019). The production cost of <Kingdom> per episode was around \$2,000,000, the largest in the Korean television industry.

The ripple effect that Netflix has created is so significant that it has become a 'Netflix or not' issue. Netflix has sucked in more than all the legacy media and all the native OTTs combined. Since performance is measured directly in the world, the best scripts are unconditionally shown to Netflix first, making it more difficult to meet with Netflix executives. In the past, if I gave them a script, they would look at it and give me a response right away, but now it takes 4 or 5 months or more to get feedback (Executive producer Lee, personal communication, August 2024).

The number of productions that Netflix Korea considers each year is around 15. However, he explains that there are over 2,000 works that want that spot. The competition is getting fiercer. Since the film industry has shrunk significantly following

the pandemic, many projects have turned to Netflix. Following broadcasters, even domestic OTTs are reducing production due to worsening management, so this Netflix-focused phenomenon is expected to continue for a while.

As Netflix's market dominance as a global capital grows, concerns about it are also growing louder. Netflix, which is strengthening its market dominance in the East Asian market by riding the Korean Wave, is not only playing a role in distributing local cultural productions around the world, but also playing the role of an imperialist in dominating local cultural production and thereby reinforcing America's dominant role (Jin, 2023, 2015; Park et al., 2023; Davis. 2023, 2021). This perspective, called platform imperialism or Netflix imperialism, is concerned that the Korean Wave is being used as a tool for the US market dominance hegemony, while also pointing out various cases where traditions were lost in the process of transplanting US capital, as happened in the Arab world (Kraidy, 2010).

As global capital's dominance over local cultural production grew, various problems arose. The most significant direct hit was on the legacy media that had previously held hegemony over the industry. As competition among production companies intensified, the paychecks of popular actors and writers increased significantly, and this increase in production costs and competition was passed on to other local broadcasters and OTTs as a burden on production costs. Furthermore, as the media environment shifted to focus on OTT, increased media competition led to a decline in broadcaster viewership, and the advertising market also rapidly moved online, resulting in a double whammy of shrinking. This ultimately led broadcasters to reduce the number of TV series they scheduled. The viewership ratings for Monday-Tuesday TV series on

the three major broadcasting companies have fallen below double digits for KBS and SBS since 2014 and for MBC since 2015 (Park & Park, 2019). Eventually, in 2019, MBC, which was the first of the three terrestrial broadcasters to introduce the Monday-Tuesday TV series system, starting with the TV series <Century Guest> in March 1980, discontinued its Monday-Tuesday TV series scheduling after 40 years. Furthermore, in 2021, the Wednesday-Thursday TV series was abolished. They said that it was impossible to schedule them when they were losing millions of dollars (hundreds of millions of won) every time they were produced. SBS also discontinued Wednesday-Thursday dramas after <Secret Boutique> in November 2019 and will discontinue Monday-Tuesday dramas in 2023. KBS also discontinued Monday-Tuesday dramas after <Nokdu Flower> in 2019 and Wednesday-Thursday dramas in 2021, resulting in irregular programming and hiatuses.

The increasingly rigid reality of broadcast production has led to conservative investment and planning. Moreover, as significant advertising demands shifted from TV to online, advertising scheduling became difficult. It is now becoming increasingly complex to secure sufficient profits by producing traditionally. By casting Korean Wave celebrities and achieving success in overseas markets, it is possible to generate high profits that were previously unattainable. However, this comes at the cost of increased production costs, and there is no guarantee that the work will be successful. The number of TV series and films being produced has decreased, and casting has become increasingly focused on proven actors. The problem is that as the number of broadcast programs decreases and the number of TV series produced declines, actors, filming staff, and others are facing a job crisis. The situation became increasingly difficult for small

and medium-sized production companies that were unable to participate in this competition. Polarization among production companies is becoming increasingly severe, and dependence on global capital is also increasing. Then, the argument began to emerge that the Korean content industry is inherently a place where it is difficult to survive solely on the domestic market. In a situation where production costs are rising and overseas exports are essential to recovering production costs, the emergence of Netflix has lowered the entry barriers to overseas exports while also creating limits to growth.

Competition has become somewhat more intense. Is it because of the emergence of OTT that opportunities have opened up? I do not know about this. Although OTT has many positive effects, are there not many production companies, producers, and creators who feel deprived as opportunities and capital flow to actors, directors, and proven creators who are doing well in the market? (Executive producer Han, personal communication, August 2024).

They do not move by feeling. It is a logic of calculation. They are conservative, saying they will only invest in works that can survive the competition. As a result, the people who will go into it have become obvious, as have the writers, actors, and directors. The number of people who will participate in the production has become small. They have created their own league (Writer Kim, personal communication, July 2024).

Reorganization of Industry

Transnational corporations that exercise dominance and cultural power in the Korean market through their substantial capital power are profoundly influencing various aspects of production and consumption, extending beyond mere market dominance. The most striking thing is that it has broken down the barriers between film and television production staff. Before global media capital entered Korea, the production areas for

films and broadcasting were quite strongly divided due to differences in production costs and production culture. In the case of broadcasting, many details had to be omitted because production had to be completed quickly within a short period, and there was considerable pressure from production companies to excessively include elements that could be successful at the box office or on PPL in the work, in order to recover production costs. Additionally, to maximize the number of advertisements, filming or editing that exceeded or was insufficient for the set running time also presented an obstacle for film personnel entering the broadcasting industry. However, as profitability in film production has declined year after year, the number of films produced has decreased. Meanwhile, the emergence of Netflix and the production competition from local OTTs has led to a significant increase in the production of blockbusters, resulting in a rapid rise in the number of film industry personnel entering the TV series industry.

At first, the cinematographer arrived on the drama set, and with him, the lighting and grip teams also came. Then, when the art team started coming in, the quality increased to another level, and there have been more instances of film directors taking on directing roles during the coronavirus pandemic (Executive producer Yun, personal communication, June 2024).

In the case of Netflix Korea's original series <Extracurricular> (2020), which was filmed from April to August 2019, producer Kim Jin-min from MBC was in charge of directing. However, the prominent staff members, including cinematographers, lighting directors, and art directors, were those with experience on film sets. In the case of <Kingdom>, which was Netflix Korea's first original series, all the staff members except the writer had previously worked on films with director Kim Seong-Hun. The exceptional circumstances of the pandemic that occurred during the same period further accelerated

the breakdown of boundaries between films and broadcasting. It was at this time that directors such as Hwang Dong-hyeok of <Squid Game>, Yoon Jong-bin of <Suriname>, Han Jun-hee of <DP>, and Cho Ui-seok of <The Delivery Man> moved from films to Netflix. Additionally, as films scheduled for theatrical release were unable to be shown in theaters, they decided to release them on Netflix. <Time to Hunt>, <Call>, <Cha In-pyo>, and <Space Sweepers> were released on Netflix. As theaters collapsed, film production companies also jumped into the content IP business. In this industry, dominated by existing large broadcasting production companies, new entrants either joined the established studios or expanded in size through mergers and acquisitions to enhance their competitiveness. As competition among production companies intensified, large studios emerged one after another, and polarization grew further.

However, more impactful than these noticeable changes was the fact that TV series producers realized that, with the arrival of foreign capital, a different kind of industry was possible than what had previously been achieved with broadcasters.

I really thought that it could be made like this. In the past, if the production cost of a broadcasting drama was 100, they would receive about 60% to 70%. Therefore, the production company must find a PPL, sell it overseas, and share the profits with the broadcaster. It is not that this structure itself is terrible, but because of this structure, advertisements have to be sold, overseas sales have to be done, and PPL has to be sought, so in the end, the (TV series) main character has to be someone who fits these three elements and is commercially suitable. It is essential to understand the type of story it is, but the casting was primarily focused on a select group of actors who fit these three commercial elements. I lived my life thinking that all dramas should be made that way... almost 25 years. But that was not the case (Executive producer Yun, personal communication, June 2024).

In the past, I would keep cutting this and that, and I would habitually keep cutting it to somehow fit the lineup. However, I no longer have to do

that... If I think that is the point that made me want to do this work in the first place, then it is right to keep it as much as possible (Executive producer Yeo, personal communication, June 2024).

They explained that in order to broadcast a planned work, the broadcasting station would meet with the production company only if certain conditions were met, such as the script for up to four episodes, casting, and the director. However, Executive producer Yun revealed that in the early days, Netflix only had scripts for two episodes out of a total of 10, and the meeting was successful. She said that when she had meetings about hiring new actors or requesting changes to the story, “I felt like the broadcasting companies were judging me, but when working with companies like Google or Netflix, I felt like they respected my career and judgment.” Executive producer Yeo also noted a significant difference in attitudes toward works and production companies between existing Korean broadcasting and Netflix. He said, “In the case of broadcasting, those who decide on channel programming are usually the first to be credited as Chief Producers. Even in the early 2000s, production companies would often handle everything from casting to not listing their names in the credits. Another Executive producer, Kim, who was on set in the 90s, added, “At the time, the concept of PD (Producer/Director) existed only at broadcasting companies, and even when outsourced production companies used the title or position of producer, they were concerned about what the broadcasting company thought.” The hierarchy between broadcasters and production companies was clear. On the other hand, Netflix did not request their name to be credited.

The producers often expressed that when discussing a new project, the biggest challenge was that the broadcasters holding the programming rights would unconditionally cut the budget, often contrary to what had been agreed upon beforehand.

As a result, they had to rely on various PPLs and sponsorships to compensate for the reduced budget. The workload increased due to broadcasters' requests for script revisions and edits aimed at improving ratings, leaving workers vulnerable to safety accidents amid tight schedules. Complaints about this production environment have been ongoing since the 1990s, yet conditions have not improved (Roh, 2015). In this context, global capital, which provided adequate production funding and rational discussions for local producers, was viewed as an alternative to the oppressive practices of broadcasters.

Unlimited Freedom of Creation

Producers who have worked with Netflix commonly say they are eager to hear their stories. At the Netflix Asia lineup unveiling event held in Singapore in November 2018, Kingdom director Kim Sung-hoon even said, “Netflix has given Korean producers infinite creative freedom.” In an interview with another media outlet, he also said, “From the moment we started filming until the very end, Netflix kept their promise that they would ‘not impose sanctions or burdens,’” and explained, “I think they provided such extraordinary support because we were a ‘latecomer.’” He said that when he received feedback while working on the script, he never received a request to “do it this way,” but rather something like “this is how it is perceived in Western culture”(Yoo, 2019). Writers and producers who have worked with Netflix say that their strength lies in the freedom they offer, allowing creators to work without restrictions on material and format.

What was good about Netflix was that it did not really focus on the name value of writers or directors. It was possible to make a drama with such a groundbreaking plan and take the risk of casting newcomers. After that, I tried to break the existing prejudices and stereotypes when planning. I

think this is what changed the most (Writer N Lee, personal communication, July 2024).

In the case of broadcasting, there is a standard production cost, so if you allocate production costs to 1 and 2 episodes, you will have to tighten your budget later, and there are situations where you have no choice but to abandon a story you really want to tell. However, Netflix has the advantage of not having to limit the writer's imagination because it approves requests for a necessary budget, regardless of whether the scale is large or the scenes are difficult to film (Executive producer Park, personal communication, July 2024).

Netflix's principle of guaranteeing maximum freedom to creators based on its strong financial power has led many producers to Netflix. The flexible format compared to broadcast TV series also contributed to this. They cited the fact that, above all, a variety of stories were created. TV is inherently a public medium. That is why we cannot ignore the public aspect. According to Article 7 of the Broadcast Review Regulations, "Broadcasts must not harm the ethical awareness and healthy emotions of the people." Naturally, there are bound to be limitations in the choice of TV series material or story. Prior to the industry's shift towards OTT platforms, the majority of TV series were predominantly categorized as either melodramas or romantic comedies, often varying only in the occupations and backgrounds of the main characters. This approach represented the most viable option for creators working within the confines of publicity and the realities of Korean production. The limitations in terms of time, format, planning, and resources were significant. In light of these constraints, there has been a persistent demand for innovative narratives across diverse genres. In contrast, global OTT platforms offer greater freedom from these restrictions, allowing for a more authentic representation of stories. As a result, the subject matter has expanded in diversity, and the methods of expression have become increasingly flexible.

Works like <Extracurricular> were already widely known in the industry, but they could not be shown on public broadcasting. From the creator's perspective, there is a great deal of freedom (Executive producer Han, personal communication, August 2024).

This increased freedom of production for producers also extended to the casting of new writers and actors. In particular, the fact that the length and format of the work were free was a great help in hiring new writers. In the case of broadcast dramas, the absolute length of the series is often substantial, ranging from 16 to 50 episodes, making the writer's ability extremely important.

I did 16 episodes unconditionally. According to the business structure, you need to complete 20 episodes to achieve a certain level of profit. However, writing 16 or 20 stories is not easy, so it is ultimately too complex for a new writer to debut (Executive producer Yun, personal communication, June 2024).

As the story format changed, there was room for new attempts. As the length and number of episodes decreased, it was thought that even a rookie could try it. As the story changed, the format changed, and so on, the entire industry changed. In the context of casting, there is a notable distinction between global OTT platforms and traditional broadcasting. For broadcasting, a primary consideration is the preference of advertisers, which often leads producers to favor actors with substantial recognition. Conversely, global OTT platforms, which cater to international audiences, prioritize the suitability of the actor for the specific character in the production. Executive producer Park observed that Netflix does not impose requirements regarding actors' status or their ability to assist with copyright matters. Instead, their focus is on identifying the actor who best embodies

the character's image. Moreover, the relatively extended production timelines associated with OTT content provide an opportunity to explore and cast emerging talent. In contrast, the tight schedules of broadcast dramas can make it challenging to assign roles to less well-known actors, as this can be a source of concern for both parties involved. The longer pre-production period characteristic of OTT projects allows ample time to discover and evaluate new actors. Additionally, since these productions are distributed internationally with subtitles or dubbing, there is a valuable mechanism in place that can mitigate the visibility of any potential discomfort in the performances of new actors, thereby fostering an environment conducive to innovative casting choices.

The Changing Face of Imagined Transnational Audiences

The emergence of global OTT has changed producers' imaginations about transnational audiences. Those who first became aware of the inmates outside the borders of the nation-state through <Winter Sonata> wanted to know who they were and what they liked. As director Yoon Seok-ho revealed in an interview with the press, he had not anticipated its popularity in Japan at all. He also said, "There was not a single scene that was included with Japanese fans in mind" (Sim, 2007, p. 417). Many studies conducted to understand this unexpected popularity of <Winter Sonata> overseas have commonly cited the actor Bae, the story of pure and fateful love, and the visual beauty and OST that captured it (Kang, 2024, p.18; Lee, 2023; Ju & Lee, 2015). They analyze that <Winter Sonata> played a role in evoking the latent longing for first love among middle-aged Japanese women in their 40s and 50s who were forced to endure and had a hard time. The purity that is like fate, that even if they die and are reborn, they will love again like the

first time, became an emotional escape for them. It is claimed to be a significant reason for the success of Korean TV series overseas (Ju & Lee, 2015, p.323). This analysis of the transnational audience who likes Korean TV series has been circulated among various producers and reproduced in multiple works. Producer Yoon (personal communication, August 2024) also emphasized the importance of an attractive character, saying, "The artificial story setting and the actress's lisp gave rise to many parodies and was made into a joke, but Bae's smile and affection survived." In fact, casting popular Korean stars in Japan as actors in later dramas was cited as the most significant factor in the success of the dramas. These producers' thoughts about overseas viewers are directly transplanted into the initial imagined audience of web dramas that emerged after 2013. Korean TV series abroad are perceived as melodramas (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008). These assumptions were further solidified by the success of <My Love from the Star> (2013-2014) in China.

However, with the advent of global streaming services like Netflix and Disney Plus, producers are starting to imagine something a little differently. As it was simultaneously delivered to over 190 countries around the world through subtitles and dubbing, the producers' imagination of the audience, which had been relatively firmly territorialized by language and national boundaries, began to collapse quickly. The changing distribution method allowed creators to imagine a global audience for the first time. Director Kim Seong-hoon of <Kingdom>, Netflix's first original content, said, "It is a drama that I constantly thought about what people in different cultures and different regions would think of it," with the idea that it would be a platform that could meet viewers from all over the world at once. The audience he imagined had already crossed the borders of Korea, Japan, and China. He expressed concern about overseas viewers'

understanding of Korea's traditional background and situation and revealed that from the scriptwriting stage, he shared with Netflix what he understood from a Western perspective. He emphasized that "this content is only to the extent that it is viewed this way in the West or other cultures, and it is not a request to do this" (Kim, 2018). Of course, these may not have limited the director's intentions. However, it can be inferred that this feedback, which was in the form of suggestions, directly influenced the director's own imagination about the transnational audiences. Actor Ryu also said, "Elements such as hunger and greed for power will be relatable to viewers around the world, transcending time and space constraints," and revealed that he placed importance on the sympathy of viewers around the world (Kim, 2018). They emphasized universal stories that could appeal to a global audience and imagined the audience as a universal public.

Meanwhile, a growing number of producers are starting to envision their audiences as individualized rather than mass audiences via global streaming services. They saw Netflix as a personalized medium with non-linearity, where individuals decide what to watch (self-schedule) and when to watch (time shift), rather than a linear programming format like TV. They thought that since this is not a medium that everyone sees but a place where people who want to see gather, it would be okay for me to make the story I want to tell more powerful.

(Since Netflix came into being) The stories and items have changed a lot. In the past, there were rules that had to be followed when making dramas. Broadcast dramas are content that everyone wants. However, on the OTT platform, we go towards the target that we set. As a result, there are many items that we can do. I think that is the most significant change (Executive producer Yun, personal communication, June 2024).

Her imagination led her to create a Netflix original with the first full-length manuscript by a new writer, casting all the main characters as new actors. The story was so racy that it immediately became controversial, and it was a story that could not be planned for broadcast. In fact, a number of works that have become a hot topic on Netflix - <Squid Game>, <Kingdom>, <Hellbound>, <All of Us Are Dead>, <Extracurricular>, etc. - were not in the melodrama or romantic comedy genre that overseas viewers had expected from Korean dramas. A variety of genres have emerged in Korean TV series. Of course, these new attempts that break away from existing conventions may have been in line with Netflix's desire to show a different side from existing Korean broadcasting, and it could also be interpreted that they were possible because this was the early days of the industry in which Netflix was seeking to expand its market in Asia through Korean media content. However, what is clear is that the producers imagined a different audience from that of conventional television viewers. These producers, who imagined individualized, active audiences with self-choice, poured out stories they had not been able to tell in the Korean production environment. These are grouped together as works that raise social critical voices, and this has been cited as a reason for the success of the new wave of K-dramas (Lee, 2021). However, although the material of these stories is diverse and the level of expression is high, the theme of the story that is ultimately intended to be told converges on universal themes seen in basic humanizing dramas such as humanity, love, and emphasis on community. The identity of the work is secured through where the story takes place rather than what the story is about. There are visual variations in characters and situations, but ultimately, there is a suspicion that they are imagining a universal audience. With the advent of global streaming services, producers began to imagine

global audiences as universal audiences but also as individualized audiences. These two seemingly contradictory imaginaries of recipients are driving changes in the rewriting style of Korean production culture that creates stories that are both local and universal.

Web Dramas and Imagined Audiences

Web dramas first emerged as an opportunity for struggling production companies. In the early 2010s, when web dramas first appeared, expectations for the success of the Korean Wave were high, and the polarization of the production industry was deepening due to the burden of higher production costs and fiercer competition for broadcast programming. For production companies that, except for a few large ones, were unable to own IPs, web dramas were the first experience of creating a story of their own choosing, owning it, and selling it overseas, from the perspective of production companies that always had to be selected by broadcasters.

In that sense, the production culture of web dramas was created by producers' desire for the Korean Wave and is being modified by it. The popularity of Korean TV series in East Asian markets since the early 2000s has shown broadcasters, production companies, and entertainment agencies that they can make other profits in overseas markets. Broadcasters began competing to export their TV series, and entertainment agencies began to promote their K-pop singers overseas. However, production companies that did not own the IP of their works in exchange for broadcast scheduling did not share in the profits of the Korean Wave. Rather, they had to bear the burden of increased production costs due to the popularity of the Korean Wave. Web dramas resulted from

these production companies' desire to enter the Korean Wave market by owning their own IP.

For this reason, early web dramas copied the success formula of TV series that dreamed of Korean wave success. The idea was to cast celebrities already popular in overseas markets and produce a love story with them as the main characters (Oh, 2018; Yu, 2014; Lee et al., 2014). The only difference is that unlike broadcasting, which targets viewers in their 20s to 50s, web dramas are based on the assumption that teenagers watch them on mobile devices (Kang, 2024, p.38). As web dramas began to attract industrial attention, companies and public institutions continued to invest for promotional purposes, and entertainment agencies also began to cast their K-pop singers in web dramas actively. This is because we can see the potential of K-pop singers as actors, and their challenges interact well with the fandom as a narrative.

Clearly, the anticipation of the Korean Wave drove the initial growth of web dramas. For production companies that had been forced to watch the success of Korean TV series overseas, this was a new market where they could directly profit by owning the IP. In particular, the period when web dramas appeared was when <The Heirs> (2013) and <My Love from the Star> (2013-2014) were successively prosperous in the Chinese market, and Chinese capital began to appear in large numbers in the production industry in order to take the lead in Korean TV series (Moon, 2021). In addition, as the Chinese paid online video streaming market was growing rapidly during the same period, rosy predictions emerged that web dramas would enter the Chinese market and create a new Korean Wave, raising producers' expectations. In the case of China, web dramas have been gaining attention as a new market in a situation where TV series have been exported

through online distribution from early on due to reasons such as broadcast deliberation and foreign currency quotas (Chung, 2014). Until just before the THAAD ban, Chinese online streaming platforms such as iQiyi, Youku-Tudou, and Tencent, which had confirmed the success of Korean dramas in China, grew rapidly by aggressively increasing investments in web drama production companies to secure Korean IPs.

When we founded our company, our first overseas market was China. The initial investor was the Huayi Brothers from China. We distributed our IPs to Tencent through them, but then suddenly, the THAAD ban came, so the only other option was Japan. It is a big market because the population and income are significant. The Japanese market is so big that even if we capture just 30%, it will be bigger than the Korean market. Even now, most of the overseas distribution sales come from Japan. Distribution accounts for 30% to 40% of our company's total sales, half of which is in Japan (Executive producer Lee, personal communication, July 2024).

(Those powerful Korean) Broadcasting dramas are not being sold in China right now. There are too many screening regulations, so it is not easy right now. But the demand is definitely there. The Chinese market is bigger than the North American film market and is growing by 40% annually, so endless possibilities exist (Executive producer Park, personal communication, April 2016).

During this period, production companies actively imagined a transnational audience. The problem is that they did not know what the transnational audience liked. As in the previous example, Project A, the first priority was to make it well. They believed that if they were well-received by Korean viewers, they would also be well-received overseas. At the same time, strategies from previously successful Korean dramas were actively utilized. The fact that they cast K-pop singers who are already popular overseas as actors in a love story that has become representative of Korean dramas due to Korea's unique mode of production called the live filming system shows

that the imagination of their transnational audience is not much different from the audience of existing broadcast dramas.

However, exporting web dramas overseas was not as easy as production companies thought. The Chinese market was closed due to the THAAD ban in 2017 when the industry was in its early stages. The Japanese market, which was found as an alternative, was not easy either. Since they mainly made package deals, only a few large production companies with a large number of works were able to break through distribution channels to Japan. In addition, it did not do well at the box office in Japan as expected. It was a crisis again.

Global streaming platforms emerged as a beacon of hope for those in crisis. Starting with Netflix in 2016, global streaming services such as Disney Plus, Amazon Prime, and Apple have accelerated their entry into Korea, and their direct investment and production have expanded. In response, streaming platforms in Korea have also strengthened investment in production, creating a market situation that is favorable to production companies. While large production companies are lining up for global platforms like Netflix, small and medium-sized production companies, including web drama production companies, are actively producing mid-form series for other domestic platforms. Web drama production company WN was also active in producing these mid-form series. To this end, WN acquired two drama production companies in succession in 2021 and 2022, thereby enhancing its feature-length production capabilities. As a result, many works such as <BITCH X RICH> (2023, 10 episodes, Wavve, Netflix), 'Cheongdam International High School', ' <Bo-ra! Deborah> (2023, 14 episodes, TVING, Netflix, Prime video), ' <A Love So Beautiful> (2020, 24 episodes, Kakao TV, Netflix),

etc. have been released on global streaming platforms including Netflix. Now, while continuing to produce web dramas, they are also producing mid-form and long-form series for global and domestic streaming platforms.

As mentioned earlier, the emergence of global OTT platforms has significantly changed the Korean production industry. It broke down the power relations centered around broadcasters and polarized existing production companies into upper and lower leagues. And this stratification of the production industry seems to work as a form of self-improvement for media practitioners in the web drama production field.

Finally, an interesting point is that the web drama was distributed through YouTube. Although it is a global platform, many web drama production companies say that there is no major problem with overseas exports because it is relatively firmly territorialized by language. However, in the case of Project D, which went through the BL fandom, it was distributed with subtitles in eight languages, including Korean.

Conclusion

This chapter examined two external factors that significantly impacted the formation and development of the production culture of web dramas. The emergence of the Korean Wave and global streaming platforms has permeated Korean production culture and stratified production companies, and this change has directly impacted the production culture of web dramas.

The unequal balance of power between broadcasters and production companies, which had been formed since the emergence of production companies, became more severe with the emergence of the Korean Wave. Broadcasters developed a mode of

production for Korean TV series that may seem unfair to production companies based on their programming rights, and this imbalance grew in scale through the Korean Wave. The Korean Wave, which began in the early 2000s with the popularity of Korean TV series overseas, starting with <Winter Sonata>, has led producers to imagine transnational audiences beyond national borders, and the industry has also become more competitive. At the same time, the scale of production has grown. However, the benefits of this industry growth have been concentrated only in broadcasters that own IP. Web dramas emerged as an opportunity for production companies that had been left out of the Korean Wave. Production companies that dreamed of exporting web dramas overseas applied the same formula of star casting and melodrama that is believed to have led to the success of the Korean Wave. However, it was an inevitable result of the mode of production for Korean TV series.

However, their aspirations for overseas audiences were shaken again in the mid-2010s, especially with the emergence of global streaming services led by Netflix. Netflix's massive financial resources and promise of creative freedom have created an enormous rift in the power relations between traditional broadcasters and production companies, changing the conventional mode of production. Production values have increased, new genres and storytelling formats have emerged, and barriers between film and television professionals have collapsed. While this has opened up creative opportunities and allowed for riskier and more diverse content, it has also created competition, driving up costs and creating a crisis for local broadcasters. The polarization of production companies due to this increase in scale presented an opportunity for large production companies that were able to produce with global capital. However, it also

resulted in fewer opportunities for small production companies that were excluded from the game.

The production culture of web dramas was formed and is still being shaped by these two external forces. Web dramas emerged as a response from small production companies seeking to enter the Korean Wave market by developing and owning their own IP. Initially, it followed the successful formula of the Korean Wave, but the advent of global streaming platforms is once again changing the assemblage of the relationship. While some web drama production companies are creating new opportunities through various global and local platforms, it is also true that many production companies are being left out of this process.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The Politics of Web Dramas

The media landscape in Korea has experienced a significant transformation over the past decade, indicating a continuous evolution. The traditional influence of mass media—including newspapers, television, and film—which once operated within distinct national boundaries, has notably diminished. We are now entering a new era characterized by individualized and ubiquitous media, often referred to as micro media. This shift is largely driven by mobile devices and global streaming services that provide access from virtually anywhere. The Korean broadcasting sector, historically dominated by major entities such as KBS, MBC, and SBS, is navigating a new era in broadcasting. It faces fierce competition from global streaming platforms like Netflix and Disney plus. As demonstrated in the preceding chapter, the production of commissioned titles by international capital in Korea has significantly transformed the local production landscape. This shift has begun to address the previously imbalanced dynamics between existing broadcasters and production companies, leading to increased production costs and scale. Furthermore, the power once held by broadcasters, which had been dominant due to TV's linear programming, particularly in the investment and distribution phases, has also diminished. On the other hand, production companies have been able to experiment with various content and form options thanks to the emergence of online distribution platforms with non-linear programming and the influence of relatively

autonomous online deliberation. This evolution has resulted in a contraction of the television advertising market while simultaneously fostering the growth of the online advertising sector, culminating in the emergence of a new advertising market focused on online and mobile platforms.

Recent transformations in Korea's media industry have significantly influenced the trajectory of the Korean Wave. The traditional model of exporting television programs through contracts with individual countries and broadcasters is transitioning towards immediate dissemination via global streaming platforms. This shift was catalyzed by the unexpected success of the drama <Winter Sonata> in Japan, coinciding with government initiatives aimed at enhancing the export of cultural industries. As a result, broadcasters have gained confidence in the profitability of exporting television series, leading to increased production and export activities. However, exporting Korean television series, which are typically produced under the country's distinctive live filming model, presents challenges, particularly when negotiating contracts with broadcasters in various countries. Issues such as translation and subtitling, unauthorized distribution, and diplomatic tensions have hindered successful exports and box office performance. Notably, the enforcement of the THAAD ban has restricted exports to the Chinese market, highlighting the importance of emerging global streaming services. These platforms have rapidly established themselves as a new model for the international export of television series. As can be seen in the case of <Squid Game>, it is difficult to deny the fact that global streaming services such as Netflix, which operate across national borders, have played a significant role in spreading Korean popular culture, such as TV series and films that were popular in Asian countries, more widely throughout the world. However,

what is more important to note is that they have caused local producers to envision transnational audiences differently, and this is altering the power relations and production culture within the field.

This dissertation posits that web dramas have been at the center of these changes. At the core of this evolution lies a growing imperative among production companies, which have historically been marginalized in the Korean Wave, to seek opportunities to export their IP on an international scale. This desire is further intensified by K-pop entertainment agencies' objectives to cultivate idol singers as actors, thereby enhancing their profit potential. Therefore, early web dramas largely followed the image of transnational audiences that existed in the minds of producers of traditional television series, which were created to target the Korean Wave. The conventional aesthetic choice of a melodrama featuring a celebrity, which was inevitably chosen because it was produced under a unique mode of production called live filming, but which is also considered a characteristic of existing Korean television series, was repeated in web dramas as well. However, a notable distinction is the demographic shift in viewership, with the primary audience now becoming teenagers. This shift has primarily resulted from the transition from renowned Korean Wave actors to K-pop artists, with most viewers opting to engage with web dramas on mobile devices, allowing for a more streamlined production scale. Furthermore, the envisioned audience primarily consists of dedicated fans of the K-pop singers featured in these web dramas, which significantly contributes to their enthusiastic reception and commercial success within the context of fandom dynamics. The swift ascent of interest in web dramas as an emerging genre and artistic form has consequently led to the formation of early web dramas, driven by the

involvement of business companies, local governments, and public institutions eager to promote their brands and initiatives effectively.

In the current landscape, various stakeholders within the web drama production sector are cultivating distinct production cultures to navigate Korea's rapidly evolving media environment, which is significantly influenced by the rise of global OTT platforms. Substantial investments from international streaming services, which often exceed traditional television series production costs by tenfold, have transformed the industry. This shift has resulted in a reconfiguration of production companies, leading to a polarization between large firms that engage with global capital and smaller entities that do not. In response to these changes, broadcasters and cable networks have adopted a strategy of selection and concentration, opting to scale up the size of their productions and reduce the overall number of programs. Consequently, smaller production companies have become increasingly marginalized within the programming landscape, yet they are now at the forefront of developing the web drama production culture.

The previous chapters have examined the characteristics of web dramas, highlighting their relatively low production costs and the immediacy with which audience reactions can be gauged. This unique environment has allowed for significant experimentation with narrative content and formats. For instance, topics such as homosexuality, which are often difficult to address within traditional Korean broadcasting, have found a platform in web dramas. Moreover, innovative techniques, such as filming entire episodes in a single long take, have been embraced. In addition, productions have demonstrated a commitment to engaging inexperienced actors and crew members, further contributing to a diverse creative landscape. Given the varying

expectations surrounding web dramas, distinct production cultures have emerged for each project. These qualities illustrate that web dramas foster an environment where diversity is celebrated, creative freedom is prioritized, and novel approaches are encouraged.

Reflections and Suggestions

This dissertation aims to provide an ethnographic account of the production culture surrounding web dramas. It is important to acknowledge that the perspective of a researcher interpreting the observed and collected data cannot claim complete objectivity or authority. Therefore, the findings should not be generalized. The results presented are merely a partial observation rather than a definitive or finalized product. It is closer to a subjective and personal interpretation, and so it should be understood as an unstructured part of field research that needs to be read, reread, interpreted, and reinterpreted (Marcus & Fisher, 1986). Instead of moving away from a systematic and holistic understanding of web dramas, this dissertation endeavors to articulate fragmented moments of the present, informed by the researcher's positionality, in as rich and thick a manner as possible. If there is any part that fails, it is entirely a problem with the researcher's writing. That is why the researcher must be the subject of observation and reflection.

The unique experience of a researcher who has studied filmmaking in the United States and has a background in broadcasting and film production in Korea and the United States served as a valuable asset in gaining access to web drama production sites. However, this same background presented challenges in establishing rapport with younger producers in their 20s and early 30s. The researcher often found himself at a similar or older age compared to their supervisors and executive producers, which may

have created a barrier to collaboration. Additionally, the presence of an outsider observing the production site for research purposes may have been perceived as a form of surveillance. This is why there are fewer voices from below the line, those in junior positions, and more from above the line, executive producers and directors. It is no coincidence that research results vary depending on who researchers primarily work with within the field. As a result, I acknowledge that the research methodology, which focused on native ethnography and the ethnographic self as resources, has limitations by placing the researcher between Korea and the United States, between the researcher and the producer.

In this context, much of what the researcher collected was what the producers on-site wanted to show to the outside world. In fact, for some interviewees, a significant portion of the collected material overlapped with what they had previously said in lectures given elsewhere or in interviews given in the media. This is the point where one begins to suspect that, instead of inviting outsider into their production site, they only tell the stories they want to tell. And this self-censorship is equally evident in the observer as in the subject of observation. Elliott (1972), who went into the field to examine the production process of British television series in the early 1970s, confessed that he was deeply troubled by the obsession that he had to produce work that would make producers agree with the results of his research. It is very likely that this was a matter of the 'tacit agreement' required to admit researchers into their workplaces. This study also focused on collecting voices from within the field to understand the production culture of web dramas, but it should be noted that it was not free from the expectations of those on the production site.

Finally, this dissertation acknowledges its inherent limitations in fully addressing the ongoing transformations within the industry. Over the past decade, the Korean media landscape has experienced unprecedented changes. Understanding these shifts is often challenging and, at times, seemingly impossible. In reality, academic research on contemporary production culture, which is tied to digital cultural production, is in a situation where it is too busy chasing after newly developed technologies without sufficient deliberation and discussion on each new medium. However, it is crucial that we do not defer our efforts to comprehend this swiftly changing phenomenon; failing to engage with it, despite the difficulties, may result in the oversight of valuable insights that emerge during periods of transition. While this dissertation may have lots of limitations, I would like to take this opportunity to underscore the importance and relevance of this study at this juncture.

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