

Romance in the Recent Past

Our Beloved Summer and *First Love* in the Ecology of Netflix Global Programming

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Abstract

This article offers a reflection on two recent romance series offered by Netflix: *Our Beloved Summer* (2021) from Korea and *First Love* (2022) from Japan. Both series were seen as successes for their local industries, and a review of their production histories as well as their place within a broader Netflix programming ecology highlights the strategies Netflix is taking with its increased investment in the drama production industries of both nations. Importantly, both series also share a temporality in their romance storytelling, one that moves between a youthful, recent past and a lackluster, adult present. Though the texts are not necessarily adjacently marked in the Netflix interface itself, both series present key similarities that hint at a winning narrative formula. Drawing on key scholarly literature on popular romance and modernity, I argue that while the temporality of “romance in the recent past” might not necessarily be marked as a working microgenre in the Netflix algorithm, it certainly presents as a transnationally translatable storytelling mode that narrativizes, entertains, and consoles audiences coming from similar experiences of modernity.

Keywords: Netflix; Korean drama; Japanese television; romance; East Asian popular culture; *hallyu*

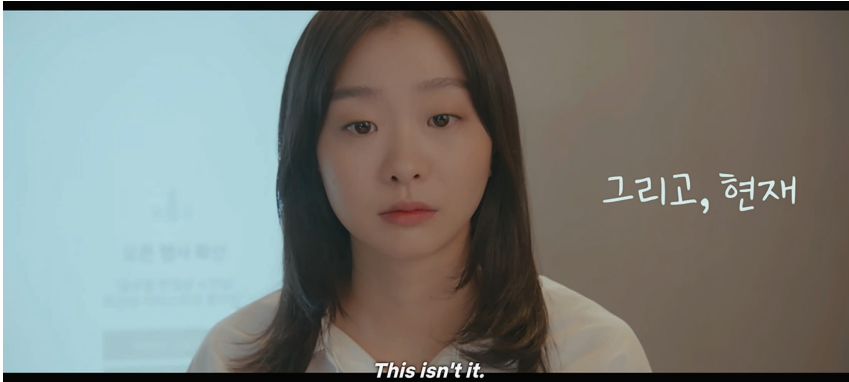


Figure 1: Our introduction to the adult Yeon-su's life.

Source: Netflix, *Our Beloved Summer* (2021–2022), episode 1.

When we first meet Yeon-su (Kim Da-mi) as an adult in *Our Beloved Summer* (2021–2022), she is zoning out in a meeting, thinking to herself over voice-over: “This isn’t it. This isn’t the life I thought I’d live” (figure 1). In the opening fifteen minutes of the series, we learn that Yeon-su was once the top-ranking student at her high school. Now working in public relations, she faces dismissive resistance from a prospective client. As the meeting continues to go astray, Yeon-su resumes, “Getting looked down on like this was never part of my plan.” Functioning as a moment of introduction to her less-than-satisfactory adult life, this scene and Yeon-su’s other workplace tribulations are, eventually, weaved into a longer romance tale between Yeon-su and her high school first love, Ung (Choi Woo-shik). From within this longer temporality, this scene of disappointment is but a momentary lapse. Across the series, the rekindling of Yeon-su and Ung’s youthful romance will, seemingly, resolve all ills.

Moving between a youthful past and an adult present, this temporality is not unique to *Our Beloved Summer*, nor to Korean drama. In a less comedic and more tragic register, the Japanese Netflix original *First Love* (2022) also narrates the rekindling of romance between two former high school sweethearts. More wistful and less expectant, we first meet the adult Yae



Figure 2: Our introduction to the adult Yae's life.

Source: Netflix, *First Love* (2022), episode 1.

(Hikari Mitsushima) as a taxi driver in the busy streets of Minami, reflecting on her life as the streets become dark and rainy as she drives. Intercut with memories from her sunny high school years, we know something has gone wrong for Yae as she asks at the end of her monologic introduction to the series, “What would my life be like if I had not met you?” More comes in the way between Yae and Haramuchi (Takeru Satoh) in *First Love* when they meet again by chance in adulthood: Yae is both a mother and a divorcee while Haramuchi suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and is in a relationship with another woman. Nonetheless, they too will come to find happiness together by the end of the series.

Beyond the televisual universes of Korea and Japan, there are many transnationally popular texts that also feature this same temporal structure. From Sinophone cinemas, we have the 2011 Taiwanese film *You Are the Apple of My Eye* to a suite of like films from Thailand, including a sleeper hit also titled *First Love* (2010). In the art cinema realm, we have *Past Lives* (2023), where this temporality is also weaved across a story of Korean–Canadian–American migration. Across these films, boys and girls fall in love for the first time in youth, destined to separate, and then to reconnect in adulthood in a world that has dramatically changed. In this sense, a

structure of feeling that sets aside certain affects to a past youth and others to an adult present seemingly exceeds form, genre, and nation. Yet it also is worth examining this storytelling modality in its more specific place in a new landscape of over-the-top (OTT) storytelling. *Our Beloved Summer* and *First Love* were both successes for Netflix in an ever-increasingly transnational popular culture.

Netflix has intensified its investment into both Korea and Japan as sites of production following successful experiences with the platform's first Korean original series *Kingdom* (2019) and the viral hit *Squid Game* (2021). Some scholarship has highlighted the novelty of productions like *Kingdom*, *Squid Game*, and tvN's *Crash Landing on You* (2019–2020) as indicative of the transformative potential of OTT intervention into the Korean drama production landscape,¹ tempered with cautions of both industry disempowerment and cultural imperialism.² Stephany Noh, as summarized by An Ji-yoon, for example, demonstrates that “not only have . . . global investor financiers elevated budgets to unprecedented levels, but more crucially, they have diversified contents by investing in genres that were rarely produced as television series in Korean broadcasting history.”³ Yet what this paper hopes to stress in focusing on two more commonplace or straightforwardly “generic” iterations of contemporary Korean and Japanese drama is that the

1. See Taeyoung Kim, “Cultural Politics of Netflix in Local Contexts: A Case of the Korean Media Industries,” *Media, Culture & Society* 44, no. 8 (2022): 1508–22; Hyun Jung Stephany Noh, “Romantic Blockbusters: The Co-Commissioning of Korean Network-Developed K-Dramas as ‘Netflix Originals,’” *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 14, no. 2 (2022): 98–111; Geon-Cheol Shin and Mark D. Whitaker, “*Squid Game* Between Global OTT Services,” in *The Korean Wave in a Post-Pandemic World* (Springer), 527–59.
2. See Dal Yong Jin, “Netflix’s Effects on the Korean Wave: Power Relations Between Local Cultural Industries and Global OTT Platforms,” *Asian Journal of Communication* 33, no. 5 (2023): 452–69; Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, “Kingdom Cultures: Zombie Growth and Netflix Korea,” *International Journal of Communication* (online) 17 (2023): 7058; Ji Hoon Park, Kristin April Kim and Yongsuk Lee, “Netflix and Platform Imperialism: How Netflix Alters the Ecology of the Korean TV Drama Industry,” *International Journal of Communication* (online) 17 (2023): 72.
3. Ji-yoon An, “K-Drama 2.0: Updating Tropes with Intertextuality and Cinematic Visuals in *Crash Landing on You*,” *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 14, no. 2 (2022): 131–32.

platform is not only interested in transformative, zeitgeist series from the Korean context and beyond but also in series that work to its distinctive and more widely encompassing programming imperative: to retain subscribers with anticipated tastes.

Two Stories of Netflix in Asia: A Production Background to *Our Beloved Summer* and *First Love*

First aired on Korean television on the major broadcasting station SBS, *Our Beloved Summer* was simultaneously released on Netflix for streaming. Though the show achieved lukewarm domestic viewership ratings as measured by Nielsen Korea,⁴ the show performed well on subscription service, appearing in the official Netflix top ten for over ten weeks in nine countries and for shorter periods in many more.⁵ The positive results of the series was subject to some Korean news coverage, especially in reference to the emerging inadequacy of domestic viewership ratings for measuring the popularity of Korean dramas in the OTT era.⁶ Though it is unclear the extent to which Netflix contributed to the up-front production costs of the series, Netflix's

4. Boram Kim, "‘Our Beloved Summer’ Is All About Life of 20s: Screenwriter," Yonhap News Agency, January 27, 2022, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220127010100315>.

5. "Our Beloved Summer TOP 10," Flix Patrol, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://flixpatrol.com/title/our-beloved-summer/top10/>.

6. See "Geu hae ulineun, OTT SNS jeomlyeong" [*Our Beloved Summer* takes over OTT and SNS], Sports Donga, January 13, 2022, <https://sports.donga.com/ent/article/all/20220112/111218891/3>; "Nespeul oljineol'anieodo dwae . . . geuhae ulineun'e geullobeol simkung iyuneun meonitudei" [It doesn't have to be a 'Netflix Original'. . . The reason why 'That Year We' struck global hearts], Money Today, January 5, 2022, <https://lomaensu.com/mtview.php?no=2022010409520486821>; "Choe usig ♥ gim dami ajjil lomaensu . . . neibeoga deulamaleul? webtundo anine?" [Choi Woo-sik ♥ Kim Da-mi dizzying romance . . . Naver does dramas? It's not even a webtoon?], News 1, December 27, 2021, <https://www.news1.kr/articles/?4532815>.

international distribution of the series has featured heavily in both local and international discussions.

Before filming, *Our Beloved Summer* was billed in the Korean press as Naver Webtoon subsidiary Studio N's first original production, penned by then-twenty-eight-year-old emerging writer Lee Na-eun.⁷ In response to the show's international success, Lee commented, "*Our Beloved Summer* uses very common and mundane episodes, and dialogue that we can see and hear around us. I think this mediocrity resonates with people around the world."⁸ Though the story world of *Our Beloved Summer* maintains a sense of ordinariness, perhaps especially in comparison to adjacent blockbuster romances,⁹ aspects of *Our Beloved Summer's* production were far from mundane. With an existing reputation for producing televisual remakes from Naver's webtoon library, Studio N's proud investment in *Our Beloved Summer* as its first original drama also involved a novel strategy: the simultaneous release of an accompanying webtoon that further detailed the high school lives of the show's two main characters, to be enjoyed alongside the series and available in multiple languages. Aside from significant conceptual investment from the studio, the series also featured many emerging and established Korean talents already in the international limelight, including rising stars Kim Da-mi and Choi Woo-shik as the series' leads.

First Love, by contrast, is a Netflix original in the true sense of the word.¹⁰ Created and produced by Netflix Studios with C&I Entertainment, the series was written and directed by Yuri Kanchiku, who was introduced prior to the show's release as one of three next-generation directors from

7. "Choeusig, gimdami, gimseongcheol, nojeong-ui kaeseting, 'geu hae ulineun' cheong chun lain-eob wanseong" [Casting of Choi Woo-sik, Kim Da-mi, Kim Seong-cheol, and Noh Jeong-ui Completes the youth lineup for *Our Beloved Summer*], Break News, July 8, 2021, <https://m.breaknews.com/819268>.

8. Boram Kim, "'Our Beloved Summer' Is All about Life of 20s."

9. Hyun Jung Stephany Noh, "Romantic Blockbusters," 98–111.

10. Jacob Robinson, "The Four Types of Netflix Originals," What's on Netflix, November 9, 2018, <https://www.whats-on-netflix.com/news/the-four-types-of-netflix-originals/>.

Japan.¹¹ Netflix's success with original drama production in Korea has not only intensified investments in Korea to the sum of US\$2.5 billion in 2023,¹² but also in Japan alongside its already established efforts to intensify original anime production in the country. Of this move toward Japan, Minyoung Kim, Netflix vice president of content for Asia, stated, "There has never been more global curiosity and love for Japanese culture—and with that interest, there is so much potential for Japan's entertainment industry to regain momentum."¹³ The lack of competitiveness of Japanese dramas gestured toward here has been accounted for by David Humphrey, who has attributed the relative failure of Japanese dramas in the streaming era to a set of local, infrastructural issues that instigated a "split between the dramas consumed domestically and those most typically exported abroad for distribution via streaming."¹⁴ Netflix's move toward Japan has become more intensive as an intervention against this context. Alongside extensive platform-based marketing of the series, Netflix also featured the show in several events in Tokyo, including the *Netflix Festival Japan 2021*¹⁵ and at the pop-up event *Only on Netflix* in 2023.¹⁶

Though achieving less widespread transnational popularity than *Our Beloved Summer*, *First Love* has been heralded as a sign of growing global

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11. "Meet Three Next-Generation Creators From Japan Whose Netflix Projects Are Bringing Them to the World Stage," Netflix, September 25, 2022, <https://about.netflix.com/en/news/meet-three-next-generation-creators-from-japan-whose-netflix-projects-are>.
 12. Sohee Kim, "Here's How Netflix Is Betting \$2.5 Billion on South Korea as K-Drama Mania Grows," *Time*, June 22, 2023, <https://time.com/6289170/netflix-invests-south-korea-content-k-dramas/>.
 13. Patrick Brzeski, "Why Japan Is on the Precipice of a Content Boom," *Hollywood Reporter*, December 19, 2023, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/japan-content-boom-1235753598/>.
 14. David Humphrey, "Japanese Dramas and the Streaming Success Story that Wasn't: How Industry Practices and IP Shape Japan's Access to Global Streaming," *Global Storytelling* 3, no. 1 (2023): 64.
 15. "Netflix Bets Big on Japanese Content and Creators with Growing Slate Across Both Anime & Live Action," Netflix, November 9, 2021, <https://about.netflix.com/en/news/netflix-festival-japan-2021>.
 16. "Netflix Celebrates Japanese Fans with 'Only on Netflix' Pop-Up Event," Netflix, May 20, 2023, <https://about.netflix.com/en/news/only-on-netflix-japan-2023>.

success for Japan.¹⁷ The series was in the official Netflix top ten in Japan for sixteen weeks while it also experienced longer term success in Hong Kong and Taiwan.¹⁸ Important to understanding the success of the series is the series' strategic conception and development, inspired by the hit music of early 2000s teen star Hikaru Utada. *First Love*, the Netflix series, shares its name with the 1999 hit song and album by the then sixteen-year-old Utada, which has since sold a total of ten million units worldwide as Japan's best-selling album of all time.¹⁹ Following the geography of Utada's 2024 *Science Fiction* Asia tour, we see a correlation between Utada's musical popularity and the reception of *First Love*. Outside of her many shows in Japan, Utada will also travel to Hong Kong and Taiwan, where *First Love*, the series, was also noticeably well received.²⁰ The strategy for developing *First Love*, one can surmise, was to lean into both a local and transnational nostalgia.

Overall, however, though *Our Beloved Summer* and *First Love* arise from different production contexts, both series strategically adapt a commonplace or "mundane" aesthetic that narrates an "ordinary romance" across a nostalgic, recent past contrasted with a disappointing, modern present. Both series also demonstrate how this recognizable narrative structure is reconfigured in newly mediated ways. In both cases, each series aimed at capturing a wider audience, partially in their partnerships with Netflix but also in other aspects. *Our Beloved Summer* was expanded into a concurrent webtoon while *First Love's* entire concept was heavily embedded in the now nostalgic pop music of Hikaru Utada.

17. Mark Schilling, "Netflix's 'First Love' Is Sign of Growing Global Success for Japan Series Content," *Variety*, December 6, 2022, <https://variety.com/2022/global/news/netflix-first-love-japan-1235452674/>.

18. "First Love TOP 10," *Flix Patrol*, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://flixpatrol.com/title/first-love/top10/>.

19. Matthew Hernon, "Hikaru Utada Releases First Love | On This Day in Japan," *Tokyo Weekender*, March 10, 2024, <https://www.tokyoweekender.com/entertainment/music/hikaru-utada-releases-first-love-on-this-day-in-japan/>.

20. "Hikaru Utada New Tour Dates in Asia," *Music Press Asia*, April 24, 2024, <https://www.musicpressasia.com/2024/04/24/hikaru-utada-new-tour-dates-in-asia/>.

Romance, Asia, Netflix: Global Programming and Changing Television Production Logics

The success of *Our Beloved Summer* and *First Love* is only one small part of a story of Netflix's expansion in the region, though this article will argue it exemplifies an important aspect to Netflix's global programming strategy in and from Asia. Since its more modest efforts at international expansion across 2010–2015, the platform declared itself global in 2016, a year after its establishment in Japan and in the same year that the platform reached Korea. Now operating in over 190 countries, Netflix's remarkable expansion has already been subject to notable scholarly attention, including in at least two scholarly monographs.²¹ The scale and specificity to which Netflix has transformed local and regional televisual cultures at the level of both consumption and production is vast and everchanging.

Netflix's initial launches as a consumer subscription-video-on-demand (SVOD) service in the highly saturated local media markets of Japan and Korea progressed more modestly than in other parts of the world,²² such as in the comparatively spectacular case of Australia.²³ Even today, both Japan and Korea continue to boast robust local media industries and popular cultures, and both countries were also earlier adopters of OTT media prior to the arrival of Netflix and other international competitors. Jennifer M. Kang, for example, notes that foreign streaming services only managed to achieve greater presence in the domestic Korean market among local competitors

21. See Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York University Press, 2019); Marieke Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-invention of Television* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

22. Anthony Fung and Georgia Chik, "Netflix, the Digital West in Asia: New Models, Challenges and Collaborations," In *Media in Asia: Global, Digital, Gendered and Mobile*, ed. Youna Kim (Routledge, 2022), 41–52.

23. See Tim Dwyer, Yongwoon Shim, Heejin Lee, and Jonathon Hutchinson, "Comparing Digital Media Industries in South Korea and Australia: The Case of Netflix Take-Up," *International Journal of Communication* (online) 12 (2018): 4553–72; Turner Graeme, "Netflix and the Reconfiguration of the Australian Television Market," *Media Industries* 5, no. 2 (2018): 129–42.

around 2019 following the successful product differentiation of the Netflix historical zombie-horror series *Kingdom*.²⁴ In Japan, as Yu-Kei Tse argues, local content has historically been strongly preferred, reflected in Netflix's early strategy for a much higher level of local content in its Japanese catalogue, though this too was not initially competitive.²⁵

Besides the allure of domestic consumers, however, both countries have also increasingly become significant to the platform's overall global expansion strategy as sites of production.²⁶ These outward-facing visions of Korea and Japan, as consumable export brands rather than domestic markets, is as important to the platform today as the local markets of each country. In rare glimpses of Netflix's internal data, the statistics are staggering. In his 2023 visit to Korea, Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos reported that 60 percent of Netflix users had watched Korean content²⁷ while the *Hollywood Reporter* revealed that more than half of Netflix users had watched a Japanese anime on the service.²⁸ In the same 2023 visit, Sarandos additionally remarked that 90 percent of K-romance viewing now came from outside Korea.²⁹ Thus while the generic innovation of Netflix original series such as *Kingdom* and *Squid Game* are credited with allowing the platform greater market access

24. Jennifer M. Kang, "Not Just Netflix: Interventions of Korea's Domestic Streamers," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 27, no. 1 (2024): 29.

25. Yu-Kei Tse, "Black Ships? Locating Netflix in Taiwan and Japan," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 59, no. 3 (2020): 146.

26. Amanda D. Lotz, "In Between the Global and the Local: Mapping the Geographies of Netflix as a Multinational Service," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (2021): 199.

27. Soomee Park, "Netflix's Ted Sarandos Touts the 'Power of Korean Storytelling,' Says K-Content Views Are Up Sixfold," *Hollywood Reporter*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/netflix-ted-sarandos-korean-content-success-challenges-1235521499/>.

28. Patrick Brzeski, "Netflix's Head of Anime Says Half of Global Subscribers Watch Japanese Animation, Bullish on Growth (Exclusive)," *Hollywood Reporter*, April 3, 2022, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/netflix-anime-koheibara-interview-1235124676/>.

29. Park, "Netflix's Ted Sarandos Touts the 'Power of Korean Storytelling.'"

in the domestic market and beyond, core genres, such as romance, are also significant to Netflix's ongoing global operations.

Major scholars in television and Netflix studies have thus far often insisted on the richer analysis provided by location-specific approaches to the platform. Ramon Lobato has, for example, influentially argued that "it is now more accurate to describe Netflix as a series of national services linked through a common platform architecture"³⁰ while Lobato and Amanda D. Lotz have together argued that "to make any claim about Netflix requires locating it in a particular place."³¹ Yet Lotz has also argued that there are limitations to the national case approach, as "they fail to engage the service's simultaneous multinational dimensions that profoundly distinguish its peculiarities as a single multinational video service."³² In considering the reach of Korean and Japanese drama on the platform, it is important not only that titles have transnational reach in specific, national locations but that cross-border reach is anticipated by Netflix in coproduction and licensing agreements that grant the platform their desired international rights for distribution.³³

Netflix's stories, then, are developed and pursued with a different, potentially new transnational frame in mind. As Graeme Turner has argued, "The customisation of consumption that marks the new environment changes everything; while the choices being made are certainly organised around the demands and patterns of everyday life, this is 'not necessarily a shared everyday life,'"³⁴ as had been central to earlier understandings of

30. Ramon Lobato, "Rethinking International TV Flows Research in the Age of Netflix," *Television & New Media* 19, no. 3 (2018): 245.

31. Ramon Lobato and Amanda D. Lotz, "Imagining Global Video: The Challenge of Netflix," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 59, no. 3 (2020): 132.

32. Lotz, "In Between the Global and the Local," 197.

33. Lotz, 201.

34. Graeme Turner, "Approaching the Cultures of Use: Netflix, Disruption and the Audience," *Critical Studies in Television* 14, no. 2 (2019): 227–28.

television.³⁵ Turner stresses here a focus on “cultures of use”³⁶ in examining new regimes of consumption, where he argues, “There is more to be done in terms of finding ways to describe and understand the cultures of use that have developed around the multiple options now available to consumers.”³⁷ While Turner is gesturing toward new forms of audience research beyond the purview of this essay, the key point remains the same: the rise of OTT services has changed how audiences consume television, shifting the televisual audience beyond the national frame that it has most often existed in. The shift to OTT television has also changed how producers, including new actors such as Netflix, have imagined its audience(s).

Importantly, as it currently stands, Netflix’s programming strategy remains distinctive in the SVOD market in comparison to its competitors. As Lotz has argued, “Rather than trying to aggregate a nation-bound audience that can be sold to advertisers who conceive of audiences aggregated in national clumps, Netflix targets subscribers based on tastes and sensibilities that are often *not sufficiently popular* to be addressed by services aiming for a national ‘mass’ audience.”³⁸ The subscriber uptake of Netflix, then, depends not only on the attraction of series that “everybody is watching” but that the platform will meet a subscriber’s more individuated tastes. To achieve this, Netflix’s algorithm works through proprietary taste communities, which, Jane Shattuc argues, “drive what Netflix chooses to produce.”³⁹ More specifically with regards to Korean content, Sojeong Park and Seok-kyeong Hong note that “what is noticeable among [Netflix] viewership is that they do not necessarily gravitate toward recent releases. . . . Other factors, including

35. Raymond Williams, *Raymond Williams on Television: Selected Writings* (Routledge, 2011); Anna Cristina Pertierra and Graeme Turner, *Locating Television: Zones of Consumption* (Routledge, 2013).

36. Turner, “Approaching the Cultures of Use,” 222.

37. Turner, 226.

38. Lotz, “In Between the Global and the Local,” 207, emphasis added.

39. Jane Shattuc, “Netflix, Inc. and Online Television,” in *A Companion to Television*, ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 150.

genre and story, matter much more to them when selecting content.”⁴⁰ If Netflix can provide a reliable stream of relevant content to its viewers, regardless of a series’ capacity for truly mass appeal, they are likely to succeed in reaching their financial goal of subscriber retention. Novelty matters less than availability.

How does Netflix’s programming strategy change the landscape of television production, then? Other scholars have highlighted how OTT delivery, SVODs, and Netflix have altered the paradigms for Korean drama production, with many focusing on the blockbuster success of *Crash Landing on You*. Telling the romance between a female *chaebol* heiress-entrepreneur and a North Korean army captain, An Ji-yoon, has demonstrated how the text adapted traditional tropes of earlier K-dramas to reflect more contemporary, transnational values, including a postfeminist outlook on romance.⁴¹ An also demonstrated how the series drew on a strategy from earlier South Korean blockbuster cinema by using its elevated budget to engage with the representation of Korean history as a means for product differentiation.⁴² Hyun Jung Stephany Noh describes *Crash Landing on You* as a romantic blockbuster to this effect and has argued, “Co-commission contracts for K-dramas maintained the legacy of the serialized romantic television experience and also facilitated the development of production into spectacular blockbuster experiences on a grand visual scale made possible by the larger production budgets that the international investor provided.”⁴³

Though *Crash Landing on You* can be considered, as Noh argues, a new form of romantic blockbuster facilitated by Netflix, both scholars also highlight the staple nature of romance genres to Netflix and OTT storytelling overall. An argues that “romances remain a strong and staple component”⁴⁴

40. Sojeong Park and Seok-kyeong Hong, “Reshaping Hallyu: Global Reception of South Korean Content on Netflix,” *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 6959.

41. An, “K-Drama 2.0,” 131.

42. An, 133–34.

43. Hyun Jung Stephany Noh, “Romantic Blockbusters,” 99.

44. An, “K-Drama 2.0,” 132.

while Noh argues that “shows co-commissioned by Korean broadcasters and Netflix have continued to foreground the romance theme for which K-drama is internationally known while conforming to the prevailing guidelines for standards and practices.”⁴⁵ It is here that I want to locate the success as well as the textual conventions of *Our Beloved Summer* and, adjacently, *First Love*. Though Netflix has driven the production of new romantic blockbusters, “mundane” or ordinary stories of romance, represented by series like *Our Beloved Summer* and *First Love*, remain important to Netflix’s overall operations as it works to meet more individualized consumer tastes.

Our Beloved Summer and *First Love*: A Preliminary Map of Their Place in Netflix Ecology

In attempting to localize both series within a Netflix ecology, it is important to recognize the multiple algorithms at play in Netflix’s algorithmic recommender system, as Olivia Khoo has detailed, which works from both content-based filtering and collaborative filtering algorithms that take into account both individual data and larger trends among Netflix’s global users.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, how the recommender system actually functions, in each instance, remains opaque, and this too has been subject to criticism in terms of audience autonomy by Khoo.⁴⁷ In order to attempt to reach some image of *Our Beloved Summer* and *First Love* within Netflix’s ecology of programming, I have worked with my interface of the platform in Australia. Here *Our Beloved Summer* is marked in the following genres: “Korean,” “TV Comedies,” and “Romantic TV Comedies” and described as, “Intimate” and “Romantic.” The “More like this” feature returns a variety of

45. Noh, “Romantic Blockbusters,” 107.

46. Oliva Khoo, “Picturing Diversity: Netflix’s Inclusion Strategy and the Netflix Recommender Algorithm (NRA),” *Television & New Media* 24, no. 3 (2023): 283.

47. Khoo, “Picturing Diversity,” 291.

Korean romance dramas and romantic comedy TV series, the first five, as of writing in 2024, being: *Business Proposal* (2022), *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* (2021), *Shooting Stars* (2022), *Doctor Slump* (2024), and *Twenty Five Twenty One* (2022), with only one of these, *Shooting Stars*, not carrying the Netflix affiliation logo.

First Love is marked in the following genres in my interface for the series: “Romantic TV dramas,” “TV Dramas,” and “Japanese” and described as “Swoonworthy,” “Heartfelt,” and “Feel Good.” The top six series under the “More like this” section, at the time of first writing (January–February 2024), included the recent addition *An Incurable Case of Love* (Japan, 2020), *Why Didn't I Tell You a Million Times?* (Japan, 2023), *Doctor Slump* (as above), *I Will Be Your Bloom* (Japan, 2022), *Call Me Chihiro* (film, Japan, 2023), and *Love like the Falling Petals* (film, Japan, 2022), the latter two films being Netflix originals. The first two series, *An Incurable Case of Love* and *Why Didn't I Tell You a Million Times*, also star Takeru Satoh, who plays the adult Harumichi Namiki in *First Love*. Of note, across the “More like this” section of both series is the recommendation for *Doctor Slump*, a Netflix-branded new release at the time from JTBC. Labelled as a “Medical TV Show” before “Romantic TV Drama,” the series also traces the coming of age of two high school rivals into their careers as “brilliant doctors” in adulthood.

The primary marking of *Our Beloved Summer* as belonging in the “Korean” genre speaks to the legibility of the “Koreanness” of Korean drama in the Netflix landscape as a marker of taste. Here, a Korean drama is assumed to have specific characteristics that will be legible and enjoyable specifically for its Koreanness in transnational taste communities. Though the “More like this” recommendations for *First Love* also primarily (though not exclusively) recommend adjacent texts from Japan, the text is pitched first as a “Romantic TV Drama” and “TV Drama” before it is marked, generically, as “Japanese.” Certainly “Korean” drama currently travels further as a category, as evidenced by the reach of *Our Beloved Summer* into the top ten lists of countries beyond Asia. In contrast, *First Love* primarily experienced

significant success in Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, as discussed prior. Nonetheless, with its impressive availability of dubbing and subtitles, fifteen dubbed audio tracks and thirty-three subtitle tracks available for selection, Netflix's imagined audience for *First Love* speaks either to and or both industrial conditions (more available translators of Japanese to other languages) and expectations (expectations of broader viewership for the series than *hallyu* fans of Korean dramas).

There is a sense, from a review of the texts within the platform interface, that what matters most currently, or is at least most readable from the interface, in terms of the projected taste community, is a broader genre of romance—which could be comedic or “heartfelt,” “swoonworthy” or “intimate,” but if coming from Korea, marked as such in a primary way where a strictly modern-day comedy of errors, as in *Business Proposal*, would be a logical subsequent series to watch following *Our Beloved Summer*, a series that brings with it a more nostalgic timbre. Nonetheless, we should not stop here at the nation. The broadly “romance” and broadly “Korean” labels function well enough currently, but we can assume the platform is continuing in a process of refining its productions, and its algorithms, to meet sharper perceived audiences and taste communities as they continue to grow as consumers with the platform.

Returning to Lotz, Netflix's distinctive programming strategy has been tailored toward subscriber bases, not necessarily national, that have tastes and sensibilities that might not be sufficiently popular enough to be addressed by services aimed at a mass audience. Of course, the cluster of stories mentioned at the beginning of this article, from Korean and Japanese televisual drama to Sinophone, Thai, and American cinemas, were all well received in their national contexts but also beyond them. In considering the two texts at the center of this article, *First Love* was designed to have nostalgic transnational resonance through its musical associations, but so, too, in explicit ways, was *Our Beloved Summer*: each episode title of the series a throwback to a romance or coming-of-age film classic, such as episode 3—a reference to the American teen film *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999)—and episode

4—a reference to the Taiwanese romance mentioned earlier, *You Are the Apple of My Eye*. Though certainly perhaps oriented toward a local Korean audience, cited films from the series' episode titles come from the cinemas of India, Italy, France, Japan, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States; that is, from a transnational screen culture certainly also accessible to a wider audience. This overall pitch toward a transnationally accessible feeling of nostalgia, as marked by shared popular cultural artefacts, is indeed, what I want to argue here, the more particular appeal of a romance narrative structured between a recent youthful past and a more realistic adult present of both series.

The Transnational Appeal of Romance in the Recent Past: A Sufficiently Popular Narrative of Modernity

Even prior to the emergence of OTT television and SVOD services, Korean and Japanese popular cultures already enjoyed a transnational reception and were studied as such,⁴⁸ with Korean drama and K-pop indicative of Korean *hallyu*⁴⁹ and anime and earlier Japanese trendy dramas⁵⁰ as examples of pop culture Japan.⁵¹ More specifically, Korean and Japanese television dramas have enjoyed parallel histories of transnational success, especially across the

48. Younghan Cho, "Historicizing East Asian Pop Culture," in *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Popular Culture*, ed. Eva Tsai, Chris Berry, and Koichi Iwabuchi (Routledge, 2016), 13–23.

49. Sangjoon Lee, "A Decade of Hallyu Scholarship: Toward a New Direction in Hallyu 2.0," in *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, ed. Sangjoon Lee and Abe Markus Normes (University of Michigan Press, 2015), 1–28.

50. Koichi Iwabuchi, "Becoming 'Culturally Proximate': The A/Scent of Japanese Idol Dramas in Taiwan," in *Asian Media Productions*, ed. Brian Moeran (Curzon Press, 2001), 54–74.

51. Matthew Allen and Rumi Sakamoto, *Japanese Popular Culture in the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2014); Daniel White, *Administering Affect: Pop-Culture Japan and the Politics of Anxiety* (Stanford University Press, 2022).

East Asian popular cultural sphere.⁵² Some scholars have focused on the reasons for Netflix's move into Korean drama as tapping into this history. While arguing that "the entry of international SVODs into the Korean broadcasting industry since 2016 has altered the genres, quality, and sheer scale of K-drama," Ji-yoon An also stresses that "romance stories have been the crux of Korean televisual storytelling"⁵³ overall. Dal Yong Jin argues that "Netflix is riding the Korean Wave, its most significant investments have been in television dramas, focusing on melodramas, in an attempt to enter the Asian markets."⁵⁴

Earlier studies of the pre-OTT SVOD Japanese trendy dramas and *hallyu* Korean dramas often focused on ideas of cultural proximity and distance. Chua Beng Huat described the transnational popular cultural sphere as a "non-consensual force field [featuring] the highly uneven flows of Japanese and Korean products entering Pop Culture China,"⁵⁵ where audiences came to "apparently view each other in the terms of a fixed reference: a linear temporality on the single dimension of capitalist, consumerism-driven modernity."⁵⁶ With relation to the earlier Japanese trendy dramas, Koichi Iwabuchi also articulated the popularity of the genre as it circulated within a "transnational zone of cultural affinity."⁵⁷ In both Chua and Iwabuchi's texts, there is a sense that the presence of both similarity and difference between audience and foreign texts were crucial to the popularity of both. Yet Japanese trendy dramas have since lost mass transnational popularity, so, as Humphrey has argued, "the success of Japanese dramas abroad during [those] years in fact casts doubt on the capacity of the cultural hypothesis to

52. Beng Huat Chua, *Structure, Audience and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture* (Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

53. An, "K-Drama 2.0," 132.

54. Jin, "Netflix's Effects on the Korean Wave," 463.

55. Chua, *Structure, Audience and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture*, 89.

56. Chua, 99.

57. Koichi Iwabuchi, *Feeling Asian Modernities: Transnational Consumption of Japanese TV Dramas* (Hong Kong University Press 2004), 305.

fully explain the difficulties Japanese dramas face [today].”⁵⁸ That is, a cultural argument about Japaneseness or a lack thereof, or Asianness or a lack thereof, is insufficient in accounting for the rise and fall of the trendy drama genre across borders.

In terms of *Our Beloved Summer* and *First Love*, though the initial access point of each series in the Netflix interface may be the nation, the “Korean” or “Japanese” labels on the Netflix interface, the desire of a viewer to continue watching and to continue finding more series, and watching and re-watching those, derives, I argue, from something else: a something else in which nations like Korea and Japan may have competitive advantage in representing but do not have sole possession of the domain of representation/representability. Aside from a sometimes-shared horizon of texts, there is something more fundamental about the romance genre and its mediations of time, and the telling of a romance that moves between a youthful past and adult present in particular, that speak to a shared though not necessarily equal horizon of experience with modernity. Modernity is understood here, following Catherine Driscoll, as “the emergence of a secularized human-centered world shaped by the scientific revolution, modern democracy, and the Industrial Revolution”⁵⁹ that, following Anthony Giddens, produces a shared set of orientations toward production, organized by the nation-state and through systematic capitalist production.⁶⁰ In discursive terms, following Giddens, “modernity is a post-traditional order, but not one in which the sureties of tradition and habit have been replaced by the certitude of rational knowledge.”⁶¹ In a world of rapid technological and social change proliferated by the rational and capitalistic logic of modernity, we are always losing something: the films memorialized in the episode titles of *Our Beloved Summer*, the hit songs of the teenage Hikaru Utada from 1999. The

58. Humphrey, “Japanese Dramas and the Streaming Success Story that Wasn’t,” 38.

59. Catherine Driscoll, *Modernist Cultural Studies* (University Press of Florida, 2010), 6.

60. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Wiley, 2013), 174.

61. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Polity, 2013), 2–3.

temporal structure that energizes both *Our Beloved Summer* and *First Love* is one in which we can take an object of memory (a first love), soon to be lost or at risk of loss, with us into our futures.

In his seminal essay on romance, Fredric Jameson argued that the secular romance that emerged in European modernity transformed magical narratives of good versus evil of traditional folktales into a new sociohistorically relevant form. The clarity of good versus evil of earlier modes were replaced by stories that narrated the conflict between “two independent psychological ‘instances,’” or characters, and, importantly for romance in the recent past, “the interiorization of that struggle between two worlds.”⁶² In narrating the transition towards nascent capitalism and its effects in changing ways of life, “romance as a form thus expresses a transitional moment, yet one of a very special type: its contemporaries must feel their society torn between past and future in such a way that the alternatives are grasped as hostile but somehow unrelated worlds.”⁶³ The previously certain codes of good and evil are forgone for feelings of unease and uncertainty. As Giddens has argued in a parallel reflection, romantic love also emerges with modernity, transforming earlier narrations of fleeting *amour passion* into a more permanent form of involvement between subjects.⁶⁴ Here, steadfast commitment between two lovers becomes an attractive narrative outcome and cultural value in a world energized by capitalist modernity and its correlate, rational knowledge and doubt, and the unceasing proliferation of the new: newer, better products and newer and better forms of production.

In an article on “Third-World Literature” that has perhaps dated poorly,⁶⁵ Jameson argued, however, that, in contrast to the developed and

62. Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text* 15 (1986): 145.

63. Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” 158

64. Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Polity Press, 2013), 39.

65. For critical discussion of this text within the field, see Lorna Burns, “Postcolonial Singularity and a World Literature Yet-to-Come,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 20, no. 4 (2015): 243–59; Qin Wang, “Fredric Jameson’s ‘Third-World Literature’

“fully” modern first world nations and their Western realist and modernist perspectives,⁶⁶ which Jameson even admitted at the time that his thesis was grossly oversimplified, “all third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as . . . national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel”⁶⁷. Though there is a need to caution against the interpretation of any engagement with Jameson’s ideas as a suggestion that Korean, Japanese, or indeed any non-Western forms of romance are somehow teleologically less modern than their Western counterparts, there is something to be said about a regionally shared temporal experience of modernity, in East Asia and beyond, that speaks to the successful transnational reception of series like *Our Beloved Summer* and *First Love*. When Jameson’s reflections on “third-world literature” appeared in 1986, South Korea was still presided over by a de facto dictatorship in its Fifth Republic. Regional neighbor Taiwan was similarly placed under military authoritarian rule while China had only just begun opening its economy to the world. While Jameson’s writing on third world literature sits oddly against the context of an advanced capitalist Japan in the 1980s, the essay certainly predates the emergence of Korea, alongside Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan, as the Four “Asian Tiger” economies, which had in the 1990s achieved industrial modernization at a “miraculous” pace.

The short temporal distance in the transformation of society from a “traditional,” “premodern” form to one of advanced, modern capitalism has been described, in the Korean context, and to a lesser extent the Japanese, Taiwanese, and Chinese contexts,⁶⁸ as an experience of compressed

and ‘National Allegory’: A Defense,” *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 7, no. 4, (2013): 654–71; Neil Lazarus, “Fredric Jameson on ‘Third-World Literature’: A Defence,” in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 89–113.

66. Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” 69

67. Jameson.

68. Emiko Ochiai describes the Japanese case as an experience of “semi-compressed modernity.” See Emiko Ochiai, “Leaving the West, Rejoining the East? Gender and Family in Japan’s Semi-Compressed Modernity,” *International Journal of Sociology* 29, no. 3 (2014):

modernity. The concept, elaborated extensively by Chang Kyung-Sup in the field of sociology, is defined as “a civilizational condition in which economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner in respect to both time and space, and in which the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements leads to the construction and reconstruction of a highly complex and fluid social system.”⁶⁹ With regard to the Korean context, Chang’s 2010 book uses the concept of compressed modernity to articulate “the unique tendency of perpetually reinforcing a family-centered social order,”⁷⁰ where “normative judgments on the social rationality and/or the efficiency of familist order have never vanished.”⁷¹ Compressed modernities are experienced in societies in which traditional values and formations are not fully revised by “the principle of radical doubt”⁷² that modernity is supposed to institutionalize or has historically institutionalized in other contexts.

Chang further details that these experiences of compressed modernity are experienced contiguously to a wider context of “the second modern” or the ‘high modern’ period of a world-risk society, where nations of a compressed modern experience, in their later arrival to modernity, “become subjected to risks of radicalized reflexivity largely due to their political and/or economic subordination to advanced nations and global actors (such as transnational business) or as a result of their own efforts at learning or

209–28. Yun-Tzu Chang, Eric Fong, and Pei-Chia Lan also use the concept to discuss Taiwan. See Yun-Yzu Chang and Eric Fong, “Compressed Modernity in Taiwan: Fathers as the Sole Influencers on National Identity,” *China Quarterly* 256 (2023): 992–1017; and Pei-Chia Lan, “Compressed Modernity and Glocal Entanglement: The Contested Transformation of Parenting Discourses in Postwar Taiwan,” *Current Sociology* 62, no. 4 (2014): 531–49. For a discussion of South China in terms of compressed modernity, see Eric Kit-wai Ma, “Compressed Modernity in South China,” *Global Media and Communication* 8, no. 3 (2012): 289–308.

69. Kyung-Sup Chang, “The Second Modern Condition? Compressed Modernity as Internalized Reflexive Cosmopolitization,” *British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 3 (2010): 446.

70. Kyung-Sup Chang, *South Korea Under Compressed Modernity: Familial Political Economy in Transition* (Routledge, 2010), 1.

71. Chang, *South Korea Under Compressed Modernity*.

72. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 2–3.

seeking assistance and cooperation from them”⁷³. In terms of popular culture and representation, nations with a compressed experience of modernity are more reflexive in their reflections on both modernity and tradition due to their closer memory of distance from a “premodern” time, as well as to the newly arrived capitalist modernity, perhaps producing in Jameson’s work a visibility of “national allegory.” With or without the nation, this reflexivity is noticeable in the nostalgic timbre of many popular cultural forms and genres from the East and Southeast Asian region, particularly in the form of the romance as has been mapped in this essay. In *First Love*, this is achieved in setting the youth of Yae and Haramuki in a rural town⁷⁴ rather than in the metropolises of Tokyo or Osaka. In *Our Beloved Summer* too there is a temporal as well as geographical distance between the worlds in which Yeon-su and Ung grew up in to the place where they live and work as adults.

In thinking back to these series in terms of Netflix’s global programming strategy, Chang further notes that “second modern societies [like Korea] constitutes an overwhelming majority of nations in the world.”⁷⁵ This is important in Netflix’s current period of expansion, where it is no longer only targeting uptake in advanced capitalist societies but in regions and economies of greater industrial and cultural diversity. Korean and Japanese experiences of modernity as compressed and the narration of this experience in the paradigmatic form of the romance that moves between a youthful past and adult present, has the potential for special transnational resonance across differing national contexts, which may form part of this “second modern” group of societies. As has been detailed by Lisa Leung in an earlier study, “Audience reception studies on Korean dramas assert that Asian audiences read into Korean dramas as more ‘Asian’ than the Japanese

73. Chang, “The Second Modern Condition?,” 448.

74. The temporal distance of the “rural” to modernity is discussed in Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Chatto & Windus, 1973); and Catherine Driscoll, “Subjects of Distance: The Modernity of the Australian Country Girl,” *Cultural Studies* 27, no. 2 (2013): 186–206.

75. Chang, “The Second Modern Condition?,” 449.

media while confirming the ‘cultural proximity’ argument”⁷⁶ whereby they are able to “represent a ‘dual’ subjectivity that both subverts the hegemonic, colonizing Western version and offers an alternative image of modernity.”⁷⁷ This perhaps continues with *Our Beloved Summer* while *First Love’s* move to generate nostalgia of a similar kind, in its representation of a rural Japan, offers the same kinds of pleasures.

I want to further argue that while this temporal form might have special resonance to audiences in “second modern” societies, it equally can resonate with all societies in proximity to modernity. That is, one does not have to have an experience of compressed modernity to enjoy the pleasures of romances that plot a story on feelings of nostalgic loss. With its ever-changing impulse to newness, modernity puts past loves—youth and pop stars and technologies—at threat of disappearance in advanced capitalist nations as much as in “second modern” ones. In an essay on Korean cinema around the IMF crisis period (1997–2001), David Martin-Jones articulated the contours of a hybrid film genre that blended time-travel, melodrama, and romance. Also referring to Korea’s compressed modernity, Martin-Jones argued that the “conjoining of melodrama with time travel enabled a decompression, an exploration, and ultimately a sense of mourning for the recent past. Simultaneously, their romantic storylines posited the possibility of economic rejuvenation through the continuation of a particular, conservative gender politics that developed under compressed modernity.”⁷⁸ Though contexts like Korea and Japan may serve as better settings for the representation of compressed modernity, the sense of mourning made available by a temporal gap between a recent past and the present, as well

76. Lisa Leung, “Mediating Asian Modernities: The Lessons of Korean Dramas,” in *The Soft Power of the Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS and Drama*, ed. Youna Kim (Routledge, 2021), 185.

77. Lisa Leung, “Mediating Asian Modernities,” 187.

78. David Martin-Jones, “Decompressing Modernity: South Korean Time Travel Narratives and the IMF Crisis,” *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 4 (2007): 54.

as the feeling of hope generated by romantic fulfilment (under conservative conditions), are available to all living in the uncertain, world-risk society.

What I want to argue here is that while *Our Beloved Summer* and *First Love* may currently sit and circulate in separate though likely overlapping taste communities within Netflix's algorithmic recommender system, both shows take up and present a broader narrative structure of romance that has the capacity to speak to multiple audiences that share an experience of living under the conditions of modernity. The popular romance is a generic form proper to modernity. Jameson makes the further argument here that we can draw from both semantic and structural forms of genre analysis an aspect of a genre that constitutes its *mode*, where the generic mode is not bound to conventions of a given age (semantic) nor indissolubly linked to a given type of verbal or textual artifact (syntactic).⁷⁹ The generic mode is what "persists as a temptation and a mode of expression across a whole range of historical periods, seeing to offer itself, if only intermittently, as a formal possibility which can be revived and renewed."⁸⁰ In this sense, though Netflix may proliferate ever more microgenres and taste communities to meet its audience's desires for individualized and personal content, it remains that the platform can satisfy its audiences through the reiteration of a particular mode of expression: that of the nostalgic romance, in the case of this article.

Conclusion

New bodies of research on Netflix have been fascinated with the platform's algorithmic properties and the functioning of the platform through proprietary taste communities and microgenres, which have also proven somewhat elusive to scholars. In some instances, the coming of OTT services has brought new forms of innovation to televisual storytelling, which may relate

79. Jameson, "Magical Narratives," 142.

80. Jameson.

to the shifting of audiences and that effect on production, yet at its heart, Netflix's television programming, like any other for-profit media company, is made to entertain. One of the key modes of storytelling still popular with audiences in contexts characterized by capitalist modernity is that of the romance and, even more specifically, of romances that work with a temporality between a recent past and the present. This mode of storytelling has been popular in the East Asian popular cultural spheres for many years preceding the proliferation of OTT storytelling, yet these repeated and repeatable stories offer reiterations of a common structure of feeling that remains a mainstay of popular television. The world is changing much faster than we can handle, and stories of steadfast first love offer some solace in this ever-changing environment.