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K-Drama Meets the Undead

The Hybrid Form of *Newtopia* (2025)

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ABSTRACT

Title: K-Drama Meets the Undead: The Hybrid Form of *Newtopia* (2025)

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Summary:

This essay examines how *Newtopia* (2025) blends horror and romantic comedy within the stylistic and narrative framework of a Korean drama. Through close attention to tone, pacing, and recurring genre markers, the study explores how the series reworks zombie conventions to fit the emotional and cultural expectations of K-drama storytelling. By tracing how these genres intersect and shift across the series, the analysis considers what this hybrid form reveals about *Newtopia's* approach to genre mixing.

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1. Introduction

“Who died and made you fucking king of the zombies?”

- Ed (Nick Frost) in *Shaun of the Dead* (2004)

1.1 Background

The zombie genre has long served as a productive site for exploring societal anxieties, emotional trauma, and the boundaries of genre itself. In recent years, Korean screen culture has reimagined the zombie figure through transnational aesthetics and hybridised genre frameworks, culminating in works like *Newtopia* (2025), a romantic comedy series set amid a zombie apocalypse.

Korean zombie narratives have gained international attention through works such as *Train to Busan* (2016), *Kingdom* (2019), and *All of Us Are Dead* (2022), each of which adapts global zombie conventions¹ to local cultural contexts. These productions often combine horror with themes of family, community, and social responsibility, reflecting both universal fears and specifically Korean concerns. The zombie figure becomes a flexible genre device, one that can be reworked across cultural boundaries and narrative traditions. The rise of streaming platforms has further encouraged experimentation with genre hybridity that can reach bigger audiences, allowing creators to merge horror with comedy, romance, fantasy and more. Rather than treating the undead solely as horrific creatures, series such as *Newtopia* uses them as a vehicle for genre play, creating a culturally specific hybrid that negotiates between global zombie tropes and Korean storytelling traditions.

Personally, as a viewer, *Newtopia* initially appeared to offer a familiar blend of Korean zombie horror and light-hearted K-drama comedy, but its early episodes suggested a tonal mix that were difficult to comprehend as likable. Yet as the series progressed, the hybrid form began to cohere in unexpected ways, gradually transforming what first appeared disjointed into a compelling and engaging viewing experience. This shift rooted curiosity in me, which then became this essay. Upon rewatching the series, it became increasingly clearer what had been the reason for my initial dislike and how it grew into great enjoyment upon analysing its intention.

1.2 Purpose and Research question

This study investigates how *Newtopia* (2025) merges horror conventions with romantic comedy within the narrative and emotional framework of a Korean drama. Through close analysis of selected scenes and sequences, the essay traces how the series reshapes familiar zombie conventions to align with the affective rhythms, narrative traditions, and melodramatic structures central to K-drama storytelling. Grounded in genre and horror theory, alongside broader transnational and cultural analyses of Korean media, the project approaches hybridity as a dynamic negotiation between global genre forms and local televisual customs.

Research question: How does *Newtopia* (2025) merge horror conventions with romantic comedy within the framework of a Korean drama?

To answer the research question, the analysis is divided into three sub questions:

- ❖ How are established zombie conventions adapted or transformed to fit within the narrative and emotional framework of a K-drama rom-com?

¹ For term definition, see page 23, Definition of Terms (5.2). Words often repeated and/or are significant to the essay will most likely be defined in this section.

- ❖ How do horror, rom-com, and melodrama interact within a single narrative, and what effects do these tonal shifts have on the viewer's engagement with the hybrid form?
- ❖ How do global genre flows shape the way *Newtopia's* genre blend acts?

1.3 Material

The material chosen for this analysis is the 2025 South Korean series *Newtopia*, a romantic comedy set during a zombie outbreak. The series is adapted from Han Sang-woon's novel *Influenza* (2012) and was released on Coupang Play in South Korea, with international distribution through Prime Video. Directed by Yoon Sung-hyun and starring Park Jeong-min and Kim Jisoo, the show combines elements of horror, fantasy, romance, and comedy during a zombie apocalypse.

Set in Seoul, the narrative follows Lee Jae-yoon, a soldier completing his compulsory military service, and Kang Young-joo, an engineer, as they attempt to find each other during the chaos of a zombie epidemic. Across its episodes, the series depicts the disruption of everyday life, the challenges of survival, and the intrusion of the undead into ordinary routines. Following their parallel journeys as they attempt to reconnect with limited communication, it becomes evidently clear to each of them just how important they are to each other.

1.4 Delimitations

This study is delimited to a close reading analysis of *Newtopia* (2025), with a focus on how the series blends horror and romantic comedy conventions within the broader framework of a Korean drama. The analysis concentrates on the narrative and stylistic features visible within the televised text itself. While examples are drawn from across the series, they are selected for their relevance to the research question rather than for their representativeness of every episode or plot development. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive account of the entire series, but to examine moments that most clearly illuminate how genre elements interact on screen.

The study does not extend to production contexts, industrial motivations, or behind-the-scenes decision-making, nor does it incorporate audience reception, fan discourse, or social media responses. These areas fall outside the scope of the present analysis, which is concerned primarily with how genre conventions are presented, combined, and signalled within the series itself. Similarly, the study does not attempt a comparative analysis with other Korean dramas or global zombie narratives, although brief references may be made where they help clarify how *Newtopia* shapes its hybrid identity. This delimitation ensures that the thesis remains focused on how *Newtopia* constructs a culturally specific hybrid genre form, rather than attempting to account for all possible dimensions of zombie media or Korean television.

1.5 Previous research

Previous research on genre/hybrid genre

Thomas Sobchack's *Genre Film: A Classical Experience* (1975) frames genre as a modern form of ritual storytelling, where repetition provides audiences with familiar emotional patterns. Judith Hess Wright's *Genre Films and the Status Quo* (1974) takes a more critical stance, suggesting that these patterns ultimately reinforce dominant social values.

In the hybrid genre research, Christine Gledhill's *Rethinking Genre* (1985) argues that categories are fluid and continually reshaped through cultural negotiation, making hybridisation an

inherent feature of genre's instability. Jason Mittell's *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (2004) develops this view by treating genre as a cultural practice shaped by industry and audience expectations, showing how mixed forms emerge through creative and industrial strategies.

Previous research on the zombie genre

Scholars have traced the zombie's evolution from Haitian folklore² to George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), where the undead shifted from colonial anxieties to metaphors of consumerism and social collapse. Since the early 2000s, research has described a "zombie renaissance," with works highlighting how the figure reflects fears of contagion, terrorism, and global crisis. Kyle Bishop's *American Zombie Gothic* (2010) emphasizes zombies as cultural barometers of disconnection and breakdown, while Robert Wonser and David Boyns in *Between the Living and the Dead* (2016) link zombie cinema to pandemic anxieties and social risk.

More recent studies focus on the transnational circulation of zombie narratives, showing how the genre adapts across cultural contexts. Florian Krautkrämer's *Mobilizing the Undead* (2019) examines the zombie's shifting discourse of otherness³, while Todd Platts' *Producing the American Zombie Film* (2014) situates the genre within broader sociological and industrial frameworks.

Previous research on transnational cinema

Transnational cinema studies are relevant to the study because they offer a way to understand how screen texts develop within global circulation rather than within fixed national boundaries. This perspective helps explain why hybrid forms emerge and how productions adapt internationally familiar genres to local narrative priorities. Scholars in this field have shown how globalisation reshapes film and television, challenging the idea that screen media can be understood solely through national categories. Andrew Higson's *The Concept of National Cinema* (1989) was foundational in questioning the limits of national frameworks and opening space for approaches that consider cross-border circulation, industrial exchange, and cultural negotiation.

Within Korean contexts, scholars have examined how the industry negotiates global influences while retaining cultural specificity. Hyangjin Lee's *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics* (2000) is a comprehensive study that examines how Korean cinema engages with questions of ideology, culture, and national identity.

² One of the most noted works on zombies in Haitian folklore is *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* (1988) by Wade Davis where he provides an ethnographic overview of the Haitian *zombi*, exploring its roots in Vodou belief, social control, and colonial history.

³ *Otherness* here refers to the zombie's role as a symbolic figure for those marked as socially, culturally, or politically outside the norm.

2. Theory and Method

2.1 Theory

The theoretical framework for this study is shaped directly by the demands of the research question, which examines how *Newtopia* (2025) merges horror and romantic comedy conventions within the structure of a Korean drama. Because this involves analysing how different genres interact, how horror elements are transformed, and how these processes unfold within a culturally specific form, the study draws on three complementary areas of theory.

Genre theory provides the conceptual tools for understanding how conventions from horror and romantic comedy can be combined, adapted, or reorganised; horror theory offers a vocabulary for analysing how fear, tension, and suspense are reshaped to fit the emotional rhythms of a K-drama; and scholarship on Korean screen cultures situates these transformations within the narrative, affective, and stylistic traditions of Korean television. Together, these perspectives support the research question and its sub-questions by clarifying what is being merged, how it is being reworked, and how these processes relate to broader patterns in Korean dramas. Other theoretical texts may be drawn upon where useful, but these areas form the primary foundation for the analysis that follows.

2.1.1 Genre Theory

Genre theory provides the analytical foundation for understanding how *Newtopia* brings together conventions from horror and romantic comedy. This study draws on approaches that view genre as a flexible⁴ and evolving system rather than a fixed set of categories. In this context, Rick Altman's discussion of genre as a combination of recurring elements and organising structures, outlined in *Film/Genre* (1999), and Steve Neale's emphasis on repetition and variation in *Genre and Hollywood* (2000), offer useful frameworks for thinking about how genres shift when placed in new configurations. Both texts contribute to a broader understanding of how familiar conventions can be reorganised, adapted, or blended. Reorganisation occurs when familiar structures are shifted or reordered, altering the expected trajectory of a genre. Adaptation modifies a convention so it takes on a different function within a changed tone, setting, or narrative purpose. Blending brings together conventions from multiple genres, allowing them to interact and reshape one another within the same text. Taken together, these processes underline that genre is continually in motion, reshaped each time its conventions are reused in new configurations.

2.1.2 Horror Theory

To address the horror dimension of the series, the study draws on Noël Carroll's philosophical account of the genre in his work *The Philosophy of Horror: or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990). Carroll's framework is valuable not because *Newtopia* adheres strictly to classical horror conventions, but because it provides an understanding for how horror elements function when they are displaced, softened, or recontextualized within other narratives. Carroll's emphasis on the emotional structure of horror – its reliance on suspense, tension, and the interplay between attraction and repulsion – offers insight into how *Newtopia* modulates these effects to fit the tonal expectations of a Korean drama. For instance, suspense can arise not only from imminent threat but from delayed revelation, withheld information, or the anticipation of a character's emotional response; tension may be generated through framing or pacing rather than explicit violence; and moments of attraction and repulsion can be redirected toward curiosity, empathy, or humour rather than fear. His work also helps clarify how the

⁴ Examples of genre flexibility can be seen across film and television. In *Get Out* (2017), horror conventions are reorganised around social satire, shifting the genre's usual focus from supernatural threat to racial tension. In *Her* (2013), the romantic genre is adapted to a speculative setting, altering how intimacy and connection function within the narrative.

zombie, as a globally recognizable figure, can be reconfigured to serve narrative purposes beyond fear, including comedy, intimacy, and emotional bonding.

2.1.3 Transnational Theory

While transnational studies are not central to the study, understanding *Newtopia's* hybrid form requires a framework that accounts for how screen texts develop within global circulation. Transnational cinema studies offer this perspective by emphasising that media forms are shaped through ongoing exchanges. *Concepts of transnational cinema: towards a critical transnationalism in film studies* (2010) by Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim is used for this as their approach to transnationalism highlights that when genres travel, they are not simply adopted but reshaped according to local cultural and industrial priorities. This perspective supports the present analysis by offering a way to understand *Newtopia's* form on a broader scale, however, while Higbee and Lim emphasise political, industrial, and postcolonial dimensions of transnational exchange, this study applies their framework at the level of narrative form, focusing on how genre conventions are adapted rather than on the institutional conditions of their production. A brief look at Korean screen history helps contextualise this negotiation. Kyung Hyun Kim's writing on the Korean Wave in *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era* (2011) is used to compliment how Korean media has long absorbed global influences while maintaining distinctive dominant interests.

2.2 Method

2.2.1 Organization of Scenes

The analysis employs a close-reading method, focusing on how selected scenes in *Newtopia* (2025) articulate the interaction between horror, romantic comedy, and Korean drama conventions. Rather than attempting to cover the entire series exhaustively, the study concentrates on scenes where genre hybridity is most clearly foregrounded and formally significant. Close reading is particularly suited to this task because genre blending in *Newtopia* often operates through subtle shifts in tone, framing, performance, and visual detail – elements that require attention to the fine-grained texture of individual moments rather than broad quantitative or thematic mapping.

In practice, the method is applied by examining how specific formal choices – such as camera movement, sound design, pacing, and character positioning – signal or complicate generic expectations within each scene. This involves tracing how these elements work together to produce tonal shifts, highlight contrasts between the protagonists' experiences, or reframe familiar conventions within the series' hybrid structure.

The scenes chosen for analysis come from different points across the series and were selected because they foreground distinct aspects of *Newtopia's* genre hybridity as they exemplify key moments in which the series negotiates tonal shifts, reworks global genre materials, or foregrounds emotional and relational dynamics typical of Korean drama. Rather than following episode order or dividing the material into fixed segments, the study focuses on moments where the interaction between horror, romantic comedy, and K-drama melodrama becomes especially visible or on scenes that explicitly lend the best example for the subject being analysed.

Because *Newtopia* follows two protagonists whose experiences unfold simultaneously, the outbreak is presented through parallel narrative threads that intersect across the series. To make these threads analytically legible, the essay discusses Jae-yoon's and Young-joo's scenes separately, even when they occur at the same diegetic moment. This allows for a clearer view of how each character's emotional trajectory, spatial environment, and tonal framing contribute differently to the series' hybrid form. For instance, as will be discussed in section 3.2, the scenes spanning the end of episode one and

the beginning of episode two introduce the outbreak through two contrasting perspectives – Young-joo navigating the chaos outside and Jae-yoon confined within the tower. Although these moments unfold simultaneously, the series renders them through distinct stylistic and affective registers, making separate analysis necessary for understanding how genre cues operate for each protagonist.

The decision to draw on scenes from across the entire series rather than focusing on a small cluster is grounded in the nature of *Newtopia*'s genre construction. While key moments – such as the outbreak introduction or the protagonists' reunion – offer concentrated examples of genre blending, the series' hybrid form is not limited to isolated set-pieces. Instead, it develops cumulatively across episodes, shaped by recurring tropes, shifting tonal balances, and the ongoing interplay between horror, romantic comedy, and melodrama. Limiting the analysis to only one or two scenes would risk repeating the same examples and overlooking how hybrid strategies evolve over time. Therefore, the study chooses to examine multiple scenes distributed throughout the narrative to more accurately trace the genre hybridity. These scenes do not encompass the full scope of the series, but they highlight where the merging of horror and Korean romantic comedy are the most concentrated.

2.2.2 Organization of Sub-Questions

The analysis is structured around three sub-questions that translate the theoretical discussion of genre hybridity into concrete analytical steps. Each sub-question isolates a different aspect of how genres interact within *Newtopia*, with the first establishing the core framework for examining how the series reshapes familiar conventions. The subsequent questions extend this inquiry by tracing how multiple genres operate together within the narrative and by considering how the resulting hybrid form functions within broader patterns of circulation. Especially sub-questions 3.1 and 3.2 build on genre theory (2.1.1) and horror theory (2.1.2) while transnational studies (2.1.3) are used in 3.3 to broaden the scope of the research question.

The first sub-question, *how are established zombie conventions adapted or transformed to fit within the narrative and emotional framework of a K-drama rom-com?* (3.1) examines how zombie and horror tropes are introduced and framed within the series, establishing the initial terms through which genre expectations are set and signalling the stylistic and tonal cues that shape the viewer's understanding of the narrative world. This forms the largest part of the analysis because it provides the foundation for understanding *Newtopia*'s hybrid form. The remaining sub-questions function as complementary inquiries, extending and refining the insights developed here so that the broader implications of the series' genre blending can be fully articulated.

The second sub-question, *how do horror, rom-com, and melodrama interact within a single narrative, and what effects do these tonal shifts have on the viewer's engagement with the hybrid form?* (3.2) explores how these horror elements are reworked to align with the rhythms, emotional beats, and character dynamics characteristic of K-drama romance. This involves tracing how moments of fear or tension are adapted, softened, or reframed so that they can coexist with comedic timing, melodramatic pacing, and romantic development.

Finally, the third sub-question, *how do global genre flows shape the way Newtopia's genre blend acts?* (3.3) broadens the scope of analysis by considering how the series' hybrid form operates within both its Korean production context and its wider transnational circulation. This part of the analysis explores whether *Newtopia*'s combination of horror and romantic comedy works to challenge established conventions in Korean television or whether it ultimately reinforces familiar patterns. It also evaluates whether the series' blending of genres signal a meaningful shift in contemporary practice or functions as a strategic reworking of recognisable elements for both domestic and international audiences.

3. Analysis

When we watch film or television, we rarely pause to ask what “genre” means. Instead, we feel its presence in the rhythms of a story: the suspense that builds in horror, the playful misunderstandings of romantic comedy, the slow burn of melodrama. Genre works less as a label than as a set of expectations, shaping how audiences anticipate events and how industries design stories to meet those anticipations. In this sense, genre is not simply a way of organizing titles on a streaming platform but a cultural logic that structures both narrative form and audience response.

Hybrid genres emerge when conventions from distinct traditions are fused into new forms. It is the combination of two or more genres, often producing works that cut across categories and attract broader audiences. The hybridity of *Newtopia* did not naturally emerge in a vacuum. Korean dramas, as most global media today, have become quite productive sites for experimentation. A few to mention as examples could be the horror and romance blend in *Hotel Del Luna* (2019); the psychological thriller mixed with creature horror in *Sweet Home* (2020); or perhaps *Are You Human?* (2018) which creates a story of sci-fi, melodrama and mystery. This is mentioning only a few but it shows how genre hybridity in K-dramas is not an anomaly but part of a larger trend of playful recombination. *Newtopia* merges zombie horror and romantic comedy conventions within the framework of a Korean drama, producing a hybrid form that both plays with and unsettles audience expectations. Zombies, long tied to images of contagion and fear, are reimagined here to move in step with the rhythms of K-dramas.

3.1 Reworking Zombie Conventions for K-Drama Rom-Coms

Zombie narratives typically rely on acceleration and spectacle: outbreaks erupt without warning, danger escalates rapidly, and characters are propelled into immediate survival mode. While these familiar conventions are present in *Newtopia*, they are not permitted to drive the story in a straightforward way. Instead, the expected momentum of horror is deliberately slowed, redirected through the emotional and relational pacing associated with K-drama rom-coms. Moments that would traditionally trigger panic or decisive action are reframed through hesitation, awkwardness, or comedic misalignment. The result is a reworking of zombie conventions in which fear does not arrive as an automatic response; it is most often replaced by uncertainty or confusion. This shift marks the first step in transforming a globally recognisable horror template into something shaped by the tonal and narrative priorities of Korean television drama.

The opening sequence of *Newtopia* immediately establishes the series’ playful yet unsettling tonal register. It begins with an aerial shot over a neighborhood park and initially reads as light and almost whimsical: shadows dart across the ground in what seems like carefree movement, accompanied by the buoyant intrusion of non-diegetic mariachi-style music that overwhelms the ordinary diegetic city ambience. Only gradually do the nearly drowned-out growls and screams reveal that the figures below are not playing but fleeing. As the camera sinks closer to the pavement, the shadows converge, moving with a choreography that borders on playful until a sudden tearing sound and a spray of shadowy “blood” puncture the illusion. It is a moment that encapsulates the series’ approach to horror – it is present, but continually reframed through stylization, humour, and tonal dissonance.

This signals in a way, how *Newtopia* will handle conventions of the zombie genre within its own Korean based space. Rather than leaning into dread, the show treats horror as something that can be bent, softened, or even made playful, aligning it with the emotional rhythms of the rom-com. This, for example, becomes especially clear when examining how *Newtopia* handles one of the most recognizable structures in both zombie as well as horror storytelling: the ensemble group that

gradually thins as the narrative progresses. In classical zombie cinema,⁵ the ensemble serves both narrative and affective functions; it provides a cross-section of society, creates opportunities for conflict and cooperation, and, crucially, offers a mechanism for escalating dread as characters are picked off one by one. As Noël Carroll notes in *The Philosophy of Horror*, horror depends on the steady intensification of threat, and suspense is a central narrative element in which horror thrives (Carroll, 1990; 128). The shrinking ensemble is one of the genre's most efficient tools for producing that rising sense of vulnerability which registers as suspense. Yet *Newtopia* reworks this trope through the sensibilities of the K-drama rom-com. While the series retains the basic structure of a group navigating an outbreak, the emotional emphasis shifts away from the spectacle of loss and toward the relational dynamics that form and reform within the group. Instead of using character deaths to heighten terror, the show uses the ensemble to foreground bonds, tensions, and moments of connection that align more closely with the rhythms of romantic comedy than with the nihilism – the position that life has no inherent meaning, value or purpose – typical of zombie horror.

This is particularly noticeable in Jae-yoon's group, whose larger size allows the series to thin out peripheral characters early on while gradually consolidating a smaller, more stable ensemble. The initial outbreak claims many of the "extras," especially in moments where hesitation in front of a familiar, newly turned face supplants the ruthless survival instincts typical of zombie horror. Once this preliminary thinning has taken place, the series' character priorities shift. Jae-joon's group has simply been thinned out to the main ensemble group. During a chaotic sequence, Jae-joon's group unintentionally splits up, dispersing into different hotel rooms. In one room, the decor – towel swans and rose petals – casts Oh Soo-jeong (Hong Seo-hui) and Corporal Kwak Gye-young (Bin Chan-uk) in an awkwardly romantic setting that both characters visibly register. Later, as they continue to hide, Gye-young passes Soo-jeong a note with his Instagram handle, and the two promise to survive so they can go on a date. While it's not uncommon for romantic feelings to occur within a surviving group, the series here never attempts to use this newfound love between the two side characters to propel the story in any direction or create any kind of conflict. It is simply there, most likely as a side couple, not uncommon within the romance genre.

The early thinning of the group also creates space for new interpersonal dynamics to surface. The characters bond, creating a new kind of ensemble group where, from this point on, deaths become more honorable than arbitrary. *Newtopia* focuses closely on each main character, but within Jae-joon's group, a family is being formed – an echo of Korean cultural values around loyalty, kinship, and community. This is also where the series begins to rework other well-known zombie tropes: the hidden bite and the emergence of an internal antagonist. This instance appears with Sergeant Kim Young-Man, whose concealed bite is revealed to the audience but never weaponized against the group. In classical zombie narratives, a hidden bite typically functions as a ticking time bomb, generating suspense or betrayal within the ensemble.⁶ Instead, *Newtopia* redirects the trope toward sacrifice. Before the bite can endanger anyone, Young-Man uses his final moments to send Arron Park to safety with the last vest for their improvised zipline escape. The expected narrative beat – that the concealed infection will erupt into chaos – is replaced by an act of self-erasure that the group only understands too late, when Young-Man watches them from the third floor. Hidden bites have been used for sacrifice in other zombie media as well, for instance, in the Filipino film *Block Z* (Red, 2020) where the father deliberately stays behind to keep the rest safe. *Newtopia* never shows when

⁵ Classic zombie films such as *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978; Snyder, 2004) use the ensemble structure: a group forms, tensions rise, and members die off one by one. By contrast, films like *28 Days Later* (Boyle, 2002) begins with a lone protagonist, then adds a small, shifting group, but it does not use the "thinning ensemble" structure as a central narrative engine.

More examples of classic conventions found in zombie narratives can be found in Definition of Terms (5.2)

⁶ Think Karen Cooper in *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968) or Roger respective Luda in *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978; Snyder, 2004).

Young-Man was bitten, suggesting that the ensemble mechanism is at work here: a character must exit, but the exit is shaped by the emotional bonds the narrative has already established.

But Young-Man does not exit alone. After Young-Man's sacrifice, Kyung-sik quietly slips away from the group – not to betray them, but to give the zombified Young-Man a final act of mercy. The series initially frames him as a possible antagonist, hinting at self-preservation when he wants to shoot Arron Park after seeing his bite⁷ and later locks him out of the hotel room during the split up sequence. This "... signals that the humans are in danger of fighting among themselves when they can least afford to," as Carroll similarly notes when he speaks of the upstairs/basement argument in *Night of the Living Dead* (Carroll, 1990; 141). The situations are not the same, but the implication is. It's to create suspense and draw the viewer in as we build up the expectations for an inevitable confrontation that eventually does not happen.

Instead of escalating into the kind of internal conflict typical of zombie horror, his story resolves in a moment of grief and loyalty. Kyung-sik lures the zombified Young-Man outside with a car horn, points his gun at him as Young-Man slowly crawls towards him, and – after a flashback that reveals how Young-Man had taken him in like a son – shoots him through tears. The camera holds still as Kyung-sik turns away and disappears into the mist. Rather than using him to fracture the ensemble, the series transforms the "internal antagonist" trope into a quiet, mournful farewell shaped by affection and obligation.

The series' reworking of zombie conventions also peek through in moments where horror's expected affective trajectory is interrupted by the emotional logic of the rom-com. A key example occurs in the subway sequence leading to Jae-yoon and Young-joo's reunion. The scene begins with familiar zombie-horror elements – darkened corridors, disorienting echoes, and the threat of attack – but these cues are gradually redirected toward an emotional payoff rather than a violent climax. Their attempts to locate one another unfold not through frantic action but through calling, near-silence, and the intrusion of soft, hopeful non-diegetic music. Even the brief moment of misrecognition, in which Young-joo mistakes a zombie for Jae-yoon, functions less as a shock designed to escalate dread and more as a temporary disruption before the scene resolves into a restrained, carefully paced reunion. Instead of the cathartic embrace typical of Western zombie cinema, the pair approach one another slowly, almost cautiously, in a manner consistent with conventions of emotional buildup and relational delicacy in Korean cinema.

In Korean contexts, zombie tropes such as the sudden spread of infection, the desperate struggle to survive, and the looming collapse of social order are not discarded but absorbed into a storytelling tradition that privileges family bonds, social hierarchies, and collective responsibility. What emerges is a rhythm that feels distinct from the relentless urgency of many Western zombie films, as the genre is reshaped through the conventions of melodrama and the cultural weight of kinship. Yeon Sang-ho's *Train to Busan* is perhaps the clearest example of how infection becomes inseparable from family duty. The father's race to protect his daughter is not simply a survival plot but a melodramatic arc of reconciliation, where the zombie outbreak dramatizes the fragility of parental responsibility. The horror of contagion is doubled by the fear of failing in one's role within the family, and the spectacle of the undead is constantly refracted through the lens of obligation. Similarly, *Kingdom* situates the zombie threat within the structures of monarchy and Confucian hierarchy. The spread of infection destabilizes political order, but the narrative is equally concerned with questions of legitimacy, succession, and the responsibilities of rulers to their subjects. The apocalypse here is not

⁷ For reference, Arron Park was bitten earlier, and after drowning out his last moments in alcohol, he later wakes up hungover and decides to attempt surviving only for the zombies to completely ignore him. It is also separately discovered by Young-joo's group that alcohol present in the blood prevents the turning temporarily. Therefore, Jae-yoon's group were apprehensive about killing Arron Park and so he survives until the season finale.

only biological but institutional, a collapse of authority that forces characters to renegotiate their place within rigid social structures.

But, if *Train to Busan* ties the zombie outbreak to the emotional weight of parental duty, and *Kingdom* links contagion to the responsibilities of monarchy and Confucian hierarchy, *Newtopia* shifts the focus to the pressures that shape modern romantic relationships. The series begins not with a stable couple disrupted by disaster, but with a relationship already strained by Jae-yoon's military service and Young-joo's uncertainty about whether their future together is secure enough to justify waiting. These everyday pressures form the backdrop against which the outbreak erupts. *Newtopia* situates its romantic rupture within the broader anxieties of delayed adulthood, compulsory service, and unstable futures. Rather than creating new tensions, the apocalypse exposes the unresolved question of whether the couple's bond can survive obligations that existed long before the first infection. Once survival becomes the central concern, the narrative shifts from breakup to pursuit: the zombie crisis forces both characters to reconsider what their relationship means when the stakes are no longer emotional hesitation but literal life and death.

Films like *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and *Warm Bodies* (2013) also playfully merge horror with comedy or romance. Yet these Western examples tend to treat hybridity as a tonal twist applied to an otherwise familiar apocalypse. The zombie outbreak remains the central engine of the plot, and the comedic or romantic elements orbit around it, offering relief or contrast without fundamentally altering the genre's underlying momentum. The Korean approach operates differently. Instead of using humor or affection to decorate the catastrophe, it reorganizes the hierarchy of plotline priorities: the outbreak becomes one thread among many, often secondary to interpersonal dynamics, conflicts, or slow-burn romantic setups such as Oh Soo-jeong and Kwak Gye-young love story. This shift doesn't dilute the zombie trope so much as reposition it.

A similar dynamic can be seen in the Korean drama *Happiness* (2021), which also reframes an infection-driven crisis as only one component within a broader tale concerned with social tensions, neighbourly conflict, and a developing romantic relationship. Like that series, this hybrid approach does not eliminate the zombie trope but redistributes its narrative weight, allowing it to coexist with – and at times recede behind – the emotional and interpersonal concerns that structure a contemporary Korean story. This makes it clear that *Newtopia* adapts the zombie trope to the rom-com framework to explore the anxieties modern couples in Korea often face.

3.2 Balancing Fear, Humor, and Melodrama in Hybrid Storytelling

The introduction of horror elements initially feels somewhat off-beat when set against the relational cadence of the drama. The sudden intrusion of zombies and outbreak imagery contrasts sharply with the slower, emotionally charged tempo established earlier. Despite the very first scene confirming that we are watching a type of horror, it is easily forgotten as the episode progresses in the style of a K-drama. At the end of the first episode, the horror reappears to remind us of what we're watching. The example presented here will be scenes stretching from the end of episode one to the beginning of episode two.

The first clear sign that the dormant horror is about to break back into the narrative comes during Young-joo's perspective when she is being driven home by her coworker and sunbae,⁸ Seo Jin-wook, just after listening to Jae-yoon's voicemail accepting the breakup she'd initiated. The scene is staged with all the familiar cues of a conventional K-drama moment: Jin-wook speaks gently, offering support and the promise of being there for her, the camera moves in for a soft close-up, and the mellow radio music underscores what is, from his perspective, essentially a confession. Yet the

⁸ "Sunbae" A Korean term referring to someone who is senior in age, experience, or institutional position (such as at school or work).

emotional tone is undercut by Young-joo's expression – not flattered or moved, but awkward, confused, and clearly preoccupied. Her “Right. Sure... Okay” lands with the kind of hesitant discomfort that signals she is not participating in the romantic framing the scene tries to impose.

Just as this quietness settles in, the rhythm is violently interrupted. As the car rolls forward through the intersection, a man suddenly hurls himself onto the windshield, his body slamming against the glass with a force that shatters the softness of the moment. Young-joo hyperventilates in shock, and the camera cuts to a grotesquely intimate close-up of the man's dislodged eyeball now stuck to her neck. The tonal shift is immediate and brutal – the scene snaps from near-confession to horror without transition, as if the narrative has been yanked off its emotional track. The episode then cuts back to the tower, where Jae-yoon and the hotel guests witness a plane plummeting from the sky.

This kind of abrupt tonal whiplash is not simply a stylistic flourish but a defining feature of hybrid genre construction. As Steve Neale argues, genres operate through “repetition and difference,” maintaining recognizable conventions while introducing variations that reshape how those conventions function (Neale, 2000; 208). *Newtopia* uses horror elements to repeat familiar zombie tropes, but their placement within the pacing and emotional logic of a K-drama produces a markedly different effect. Instead of building dread through steady escalation, the series allows horror to erupt into moments structured for melodrama or character development, creating a rhythm of interruption rather than immersion.

Jae-yoon's experience inside the tower occurs parallel to Young-joo and uses similar tactics when introducing the danger to the characters as well as the audience, but it offers more breathing room to note the hybridisation. After witnessing the plane swerve off course and crash, Jae-yoon and In-ho hurry into an elevator, belatedly realizing they should take action. Chief Manager Arron Park joins them, and after some light bickering and an abrupt emergency stop, the elevator doors slide open onto a hallway in complete disarray. A man stands with his back to them, clutching his neck before blood suddenly sprays out, sending the group stumbling backward. The camera pulls out to reveal guests sprinting down the corridor in panic, only to turn and run the opposite direction as a zombie barrels after them.

The scene then leans into classic horror⁹ imagery with a bloody hand slamming between the elevator doors to keep them from closing, but the tone shifts the moment the series' main intro music kicks in, which can be read as less than serious. The man blocking the doors is revealed to have a chunk of his cheek missing, yet the musical cue reframes the moment as oddly comedic rather than terrifying. Arron Park attempts to speak calmly to the injured guest, who promptly collapses, causing the elevator doors to repeatedly close on his head. The music disappears, the beat is momentarily off-kilter, almost too abrupt to register as humor, but it quickly settles into a darkly comic rhythm.

Once the group exits the elevator, they stand in the open pathways of the hotel, watching chaos unfold around them – zombies tumbling from upper floors, guests screaming and scattering. Yet their own reactions remain muted, more confused than frightened.

What follows in the tower sequence reinforces how *Newtopia* continually repositions horror within a framework shaped by melodrama and comedy rather than allowing it to dominate. The group's muted reactions – more bafflement than terror – signal that the series is not interested in cultivating the immersive dread expected of zombie media. The result is a scene that looks like horror but behaves according to a different set of narrative priorities. The series keeps the visual markers of horror intact, yet their placement within the scene follows the relational and rhythmic priorities of a K-drama – a syntactic shift in the sense Altman describes, where meaning comes from arrangement rather than elements alone (Altman, 1999; 89). The undead tumbling from upper floors, the blood spray, the frantic guests – all the familiar markers of the genre are present, yet the characters'

⁹ More examples of classic conventions occurring in the horror genre can be found in Definition of Terms (5.2)

responses and the tonal framing refuse to align with the expected affective register. The viewer is left in a state of tonal uncertainty, unsure whether to read the moment as frightening, absurd, or simply chaotic.

This dissonance is striking because it unsettles the viewer's expectations: the horror genre usually demands acceleration, escalation, and a tightening of tension, while K-dramas often rely on pauses, comedic timing, and character-driven beats that stretch or interrupt momentum. When these rhythms collide, the effect is jarring, almost as if the narrative briefly slips out of sync with itself. Yet this off-beat quality is precisely what draws attention to the mechanics of hybridity. The clash between genres isn't smoothed over but made visible, prompting the audience to navigate two different modes of engagement at once – the adrenaline of horror and the more playful, timing-sensitive pacing of the K-drama. But, what may feel off-beat at first – the collision of horror's urgency with melodrama's slower rhythms – ultimately reveals itself as the hallmark of hybridity.

3.3 Transnational Influences on *Newtopia's* Genre Blend

Discussions of Korean television's global circulation frequently return to the question of how local productions negotiate internationally recognisable genre forms, a process that, as Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim suggest in *Concepts of transnational cinema: towards a critical transnationalism in film studies* (2010), is shaped by the broader dynamics of transnational exchange (Higbee & Lim, 2010; 18). Having already established hybridity as a central mechanism in this negotiation, it is useful here to situate *Newtopia* within a broader transnational pattern. Comparable cases across world cinema illustrate how this process operates: among them, well known examples would be *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000); Ang Lee blends Chinese martial art traditions – also known as wuxia – with western cinematic aesthetics resulting in a local genre becoming globally accessible. From director Jean-Pierre Jeunet came *Amélie (Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain)* (2001) which combined global romantic comedy tropes with the French surrealist style and local cultural markers. And returning to the zombie theme, one of the most famous franchises within the undead community, the post apocalyptic horror success that was *28 Days Later* (2002) steeped into specifically British anxieties, and instead of using the traditional “undead”, the film uses the term “infected” for the humans succumbed under the virus. This choice in itself blends horror with pandemic discourse, transforming the zombie figure into a metaphor for contagion, social collapse, and the fragility of modern infrastructures. As recent work on transnational cinema notes,¹⁰ films and television series increasingly act as cultural bridges, reshaping familiar conventions to resonate with diverse audiences.

As Higbee and Lim also note in their discussion of transnational cinema, cross-border media flows are not simply exchanges of genre or style but negotiations shaped by cultural context and uneven global dynamics. Introducing their idea of “critical transnationalism” (Higbee & Lim, 2010; 10) at this point clarifies the shift from global examples to *Newtopia* itself: hybrid forms emerge through the ways local industries adapt circulating conventions rather than reproducing them wholesale. Using a series outside the zombie genre as an example, *Squid Game* (2021), demonstrates how Korean television often reframes global genre structures through relational and ethical concerns, a strategy that contributed to its extraordinary international success. Although *Squid Game* is not a horror series, its survival narrative is shaped by distinctly Korean anxieties about debt, precarity, and social inequality. The spectacle of death is inseparable from the testing of solidarity, betrayal, and collective responsibility. Its worldwide success underscores how Korean television expertly uses genre frameworks not to reproduce global formulas but to explore local social and emotional tensions.

¹⁰ Works such as *Cultural bridges in film: evolving perspectives of transnational cinema* (2025) by Mona Shaddad Siraj Al-Maliki which further delves into the topic.

Newtopia's hybridization appears less like an anomaly here and more like a continuation of a broader Korean strategy of genre adaptation. What distinguishes the series is not the presence of hybridity itself, but the specific emotional register it privileges. Korean television has long developed a narrative style that is emotionally expressive, tonally flexible, and comfortable blending the everyday with the extraordinary. *Newtopia* offers a glimpse into the expected feeling of a K-drama by introducing the viewer to a seemingly (not considering the opening sequence) normal drama with the first episode, but also in the extended flashback during episode three that recounts how the main couple first came together during their university years upon working at the same shop. This sequence is staged in a recognisably classic K-drama¹¹ register: soft lighting, warm colour palettes, gentle musical cues, and a focus on small, emotionally charged gestures rather than plot advancement.¹²

The flashback pauses the forward momentum of the zombie narrative and temporarily suspends the hybrid form, returning the viewer to a mode of storytelling deeply rooted in Korean melodramatic and romantic-comedy traditions. Its placement within the series is significant. It's not introduced early, rather, we first get to know Jae-yoon and Young-joo through their break-up, then it introduces how even their beginning hadn't been the smoothest either. But, in this way, the sequence functions as an anchoring device: it reinforces the centrality of romance and emotional continuity, ensuring that the hybridisation of horror and romantic comedy remains coherent within the broader expectations of a Korean drama.

Korean television has long been shaped by broader political and cultural currents, and shifts in policy and industry regulation have opened space for experimentation with genre. Since the late 1990s, the South Korean government has actively supported the cultural industries as part of the "Hallyu" (Korean Wave) strategy,¹³ framing media exports as both soft power and economic growth. This policy emphasis encouraged producers to innovate with forms that could appeal to domestic audiences while also circulating internationally. As Kyung Hyun Kim argues in *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era* (2011), the Korean Wave is not simply a matter of exporting familiar genres but of reconfiguring them to resonate across cultural boundaries (Kim, 2011; 10). As he speaks of directors like Bong Joon-ho, Park Chan-wook and Kim Jee-woon, Kim clarifies that:

"By fully embracing Hollywood, rather than rejecting it, their works display hybridity that equally engages both national identity and global aesthetics, art and commercialism, conformity and subversion, and narrative coherence and stylistic flair." (Kim, 2011; 13)

In other words, Kim suggests that these filmmakers succeed not by distancing themselves from global cinematic norms, but by absorbing and transforming them. Their films feel familiar enough to travel internationally, yet distinct enough to express specifically Korean concerns, creating a hybrid mode. Hybridity becomes a strategy of circulation: by blending horror, comedy, melodrama, etc, the media can speak simultaneously to all desired audiences.

In television, this tendency has been reinforced by deregulation of broadcasting in the 1990s and 2000s, which created a more competitive media environment and pushed networks to differentiate their programming.¹⁴ Hybrid genres became one way to attract diverse audiences. While hybridization has become a broader feature of contemporary Korean television, the recent prominence of zombie narratives reflects a more specific set of developments within the Korean media landscape. The genre's expansion is closely tied to a shift in how Korean creators and audiences engage with

¹¹ More examples of recognisable classic features of the K-Drama genre can be found in Definition of Terms (5.2)

¹² Youna Kim's *Korean Media in a Digital Cosmopolitan World* (2016) identifies K-drama's "aesthetic of intimacy," marked by soft lighting, warm colour palettes, and emotionally expressive close-ups.

¹³ Martin Roll's article, *Korean Wave (Hallyu) – The Rise of Korea's Cultural Economy & Pop Culture* offers more of an overview of Hallyu's development.

¹⁴ Shim & Jin, *Transformation and Development of the Korean Broadcasting Media* (2007).

cross-border forms, as well as to the growing visibility of Korean content on international platforms. A major catalyst for the zombie genre specifically was the unexpected impact of *Train to Busan* which released in 2016. Scholars such as Keith B. Wagner¹⁵ have connected the rise of Korean zombie media in the mid-2010s to broader political anxieties, particularly those surrounding the 2014 Sewol Ferry disaster and declining public trust in state institutions. *Train to Busan* – released amid these tensions – reflects concerns about governmental failure, neoliberal pressures, and the vulnerability of ordinary citizens. The film's success opened space for further experimentation, encouraging producers to explore the zombie figure not only as a source of spectacle but as a flexible metaphor for contemporary anxieties. Subsequent works such as *Kingdom* and *All of Us Are Dead* reinforced this trajectory, showing how the genre could accommodate themes of inequality, institutional breakdown, and collective vulnerability while maintaining strong export potential.

Korean television today operates in a space where domestic melodramatic traditions intersect with internationally mobile genres such as zombie horror, and this intersection actively shapes how hybrid forms are constructed. The series' negotiation between these modes is therefore not simply a matter of creative experimentation but a response to the pressures and opportunities created by its global visibility. Zombie conventions arrive already encoded with international expectations, while the K-drama rom-com has become a worldwide recognised form; *Newtopia*'s task is to reconcile these frameworks in ways that remain meaningful to both local and transnational audiences. As established, this transnational positioning affects how the horror elements behave. Zombies, outbreaks, and threat imagery are recognizable to viewers worldwide, but *Newtopia* does not deploy them according to Western horror's conventions of dread or escalation. As noted in the majority of the examples used, horror becomes a flexible resource: it provides spectacle and global legibility, but its narrative purpose is redirected toward intimacy, humour, and emotional revelation. The romantic-comedy components are shaped by this same transnational negotiation. Rom-com conventions are familiar across cultures, but in *Newtopia* they gain a distinctive texture from their placement within a zombie narrative.

The series draws on familiar K-drama conventions: slow-building emotional arcs, humour used to diffuse tension, and a focus on relational development over plot-driven escalation. These features anchor the series firmly within established Korean televisual practice, suggesting a reinforcement of genre norms rather than a radical departure from them. The series adopts these horror elements not to replicate Western-style dread, but to rework them into emotional and comedic rhythms. Altman's semantic–syntactic distinction helps clarify how *Newtopia*'s hybridisation operates (Altman, 1999; 221). Semantically, the series draws on recognisable horror elements – zombies, infection, threat – but these motifs are reorganised syntactically to align with the emotional and relational priorities typical of K-dramas. This shift in narrative function shows how the series absorbs cross-border familiar horror materials and reshapes them through local storytelling logics, a process consistent with transnational patterns of adaptation and reinterpretation.

Newtopia also occupies an ambivalent position. On one hand, it relies heavily on established conventions: the outbreak as metaphor for emotional rupture, the slow-burn pacing of romantic tension, and the comedic undercutting of horror through awkwardness or exaggeration. These devices are familiar within both global zombie cinema and Korean serial melodrama, suggesting that the series recombines rather than invents genre components. On the other hand, *Newtopia* also destabilizes the expected rhythm of horror by consistently redirecting moments of threat toward emotional or relational payoff. Instead of escalating dread, the series fractures pacing, allowing melodramatic excess to spill across genres. The series does not create new tropes, but it does alter the narrative function of existing ones, which is precisely where syntactic innovation occurs. In doing so, *Newtopia* absorbs transnational genre flows and reorients them through Korean storytelling priorities.

¹⁵ *Train to Busan (2016): Glocalization, Korean Zombies, and a Man-Made Neoliberal Disaster (2019)*

4. Conclusions

4.1 Summary and Final Discussion

It should be noted that visually, *Newtopia* is no less frightening than other K-dramas like it. The zombies themselves are rendered with the same high production value that has come to define the Korean zombie tradition: contorted bodies, erratic movements, and the familiar palette of pallid skin, bloodied mouths, and jerking, along with unnatural speed. In still frames, or judged purely on makeup and prosthetics, *Newtopia* effortlessly aligns with the aesthetic established by *Train to Busan*, *Kingdom*, and *All of Us Are Dead*. The horror is fully present at the level of image. What distinguishes the series, however, is not a visual softening but, as now established, a tonal one. Through its use of buoyant or comedic musical cues, brisk editing rhythms, and moments of choreographed chaos that border on slapstick, the show continually reframes these frightening visuals so that they register less as sources of dread and more as components of a playful, genre-bending atmosphere. Scenes such as Young-Yoo's very first time being chased by a zombie targeting her specifically initially presents the zombie as genuinely frightening, letting out an alien-like snarl, only for that threat to be undercut once it suddenly drops to all fours, paired with the already less than serious music playing in the background as it scuttles after its victim.

Horror elements are consistently softened and stylized so that they can coexist with romantic tension and melodramatic pacing. One of the most striking techniques is the deliberate clash between horror and comedy, which produces a rhythm that feels unstable or off pace. Zombies appear with grotesque exaggeration, but their menace is quickly undercut by slapstick humor, awkward timing, or absurd spectacle. This tonal discordance interrupts the sustained dread that horror conventionally relies upon, creating instead a fractured rhythm where fear cannot fully settle.

This instability becomes clearer when read through Noël Carroll's account of horror-comedy.¹⁶ Carroll argues that horror and comedy pull the viewer in opposite emotional directions: horror depends on a deepening immersion in dread, while comedy works through sudden shifts, ruptures, and releases. When these modes collide, neither can fully dominate; the emotional ground becomes unstable (Carroll, 1999; 147). *Newtopia* leans into precisely this tension. By allowing comedic beats to erupt in the middle of violent or grotesque moments – or letting horror intrude abruptly into scenes shaped by melodramatic pacing – the series continually unsettles the viewer's expectations. The result is not a dilution of horror but a deliberate destabilization of its usual trajectory, opening space for other tonal registers to surface where dread would typically accumulate.

It reinforces the emotional and relational priorities of Korean television, but it challenges the syntactic expectations of zombie horror by consistently subordinating dread to melodramatic and romantic structures. Rather than treating horror and romantic comedy as separate strands, the show allows them to interact in ways that feel consistent with the emotional pacing of a Korean drama. What becomes clear is that the series relies on the K-drama's established storytelling habits – its focus on character relationships, its rhythm of tension and release, and its preference for emotional clarity – to integrate material that might otherwise pull in different directions. Across the episodes, horror elements are used less to sustain fear and more to introduce disruptions that characters must navigate together. These disruptions create opportunities for humour, friction, and intimacy, which are then developed through the rom-com mode. The result is a pattern where horror sets events in motion, but the emotional consequences of those events are handled through the logic of the K-drama. This dynamic gives the series a sense of cohesion even as it moves between genres.

¹⁶ This is not an account from *The Philosophy of Horror* but of a later essay published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* named *Horror and Humour* (1999;145-160)).

At the same time, the romantic-comedy components gain a different texture when shaped by the presence of the uncanny.¹⁷ Situations that would normally be played purely for charm or lightness acquire an added layer of tension or unpredictability, which the show uses to deepen character interactions. The hybridisation is not simply additive; each genre element subtly alters how the other functions. What emerges from this discussion is a picture of a series that treats hybridity as an organising principle rather than a novelty. *Newtopia* uses the flexibility of the K-drama form to stabilise shifts in tone, allowing horror and romantic comedy to coexist without competing for narrative control.

To summarise, this study set out to examine how *Newtopia* (2025) merges horror conventions with romantic comedy within the framework of a Korean drama. The analysis has led to the conclusion that the series achieves this hybridisation by allowing the structural and affective logic of the K-drama to govern how both genres function. Rather than balancing horror and rom-com as competing modes, *Newtopia* reorganises each through the priorities of Korean storytelling, producing a hybrid form that is emotionally driven, tonally flexible, and globally legible.

In response to the first sub-question – how established zombie conventions are adapted to fit a K-drama rom-com framework – the series transforms horror motifs into narrative catalysts rather than sources of sustained fear. Zombie encounters initiate misunderstandings, force characters into proximity, and expose emotional vulnerabilities. These moments generate comedic beats and romantic openings, demonstrating that horror is repurposed to serve the emotional and relational rhythms central to the rom-com tradition.

The second sub-question asked how horror, rom-com, and melodrama interact within a single narrative and how these tonal shifts shape viewer engagement. The findings indicate that the K-drama format enables these genres to coexist without dissonance. Romantic-comedy elements actively reshape the meaning of the monstrous, turning zombies into figures that produce awkwardness, banter, or emotional revelation rather than terror. Melodramatic pacing, ensemble dynamics, and episodic structure provide a stable container for these shifts, allowing the series to move fluidly between tension, humour, and sentiment without undermining coherence.

Finally, the third sub-question considered how global genre flows shape *Newtopia*'s hybrid form. The analysis shows that the series draws on internationally recognisable zombie conventions but reconfigures them through the emotional and narrative priorities of Korean television. Global horror motifs provide a shared vocabulary that makes the series immediately legible to international viewers, while the K-drama framework determines how these motifs are used, softened, or redirected. In this way, global genre flows supply the materials, but it is the local televisual logic that determines their function, resulting in a hybrid form shaped by both international and Korean circulation. Overall, *Newtopia* merges horror and romantic comedy not by splitting the difference between them, but by reorganizing both through the affective and narrative conventions of the Korean drama. Horror supplies tension and spectacle; romantic comedy supplies tone and character logic; the K-drama form mediates between them, ensuring that neither dominates. The result is a hybrid that feels playful rather than parodic, emotionally driven rather than purely genre-driven, and distinctly shaped by the transnational flexibility of contemporary Korean television.

¹⁷ “Uncanny” A term describing the unsettling effect produced when something appears simultaneously familiar and strange, creating a disturbance in one’s sense of what is normal or securely known; often associated with blurred boundaries between the human and non-human, the animate and inanimate, or the real and imagined.

4.2 Concluding Reflections and Further Research

Reflecting on *Newtopia*'s hybrid form ultimately reveals how much genre is shaped not only by narrative ingredients but by the cultural and emotional logics that arrange them. What initially appears to be a playful collision of zombies and romance gradually emerges as a more deliberate reorientation of genre priorities, one that foregrounds tension, hesitation, and emotional pacing over the escalating dread typically associated with horror. In that sense, *Newtopia* demonstrates how Korean television continues to absorb global genres without being subsumed by them; the series adopts the semantic markers of zombie horror but reorganizes their narrative function to align with the affective rhythms of the K-drama tradition. This reorganization is subtle rather than radical, but it is precisely in these subtle shifts – in the slowing of urgency, the softening of threat, the redirection of fear into intimacy – that the series finds its distinctive voice. The hybrid form becomes less a novelty than a way of thinking about how genres evolve when they travel, and how local storytelling practices can reshape global conventions from within.

For further research, *Newtopia* could be compared with other Korean hybrid dramas that similarly blend horror with romance or melodrama such as *Happiness* to deepen the understanding of how it appears when the horror to melodrama ratio looks different. As this essay did not delve deep into *Newtopia*'s visual strategies, further research might explore how the series' use of lighting, spatial composition, and visual metaphor reinforces or complicates its hybridization of horror and romance.

Additional work could also draw on theoretical frameworks from *Zombie Theory: A Reader* (2017) to explore how the series participates in wider discourses on contagion, intimacy, or social precarity. Concepts such as the “relational zombie,” the undead as a metaphor for emotional stagnation, or the collapse of social boundaries could deepen the understanding of how *Newtopia* mobilizes the zombie figure within a romantic narrative.

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5.2 Definition of terms

Conventions: refers to familiar patterns, features, or expectations associated with a particular genre, including recurring themes, character types, structures, or stylistic choices that audiences learn to recognize.

Genre Hybridity: refers to the blending of conventions, tones, and narrative strategies from two or more genres to create a work that does not fit neatly into a single category. Instead of following one established set of expectations, a hybrid work draws on multiple genre traditions at once, combining their themes, structures, emotional rhythms, or visual styles, to produce a mix.

K-Drama (Korean Television Drama): refers to South Korean television dramas known for their distinctive storytelling style, strong character focus, and emotionally expressive tone. The term covers a wide range of genres and formats, but is generally used to describe Korean TV dramas that share a recognizable narrative sensibility, regardless of theme or subject matter.

Tone/Tonal quality: refers to the emotional and atmospheric character of a scene or narrative, shaped through elements such as lighting, pacing, dialogue, music, and visual style. Tone influences how the audience experiences the story – whether a moment feels tense, humorous, melancholic, hopeful, or unsettling – and is especially significant in horror, where shifts in tonal mood can heighten fear, create contrast, or complicate genre expectations.

Transnational Cinema: refers to films and television that are created, funded, or circulated across multiple countries, drawing on influences, talent, and audiences that extend beyond a single national context. It highlights how contemporary screen media moves through global networks – mixing

cultural styles, production practices, and storytelling traditions – and shows how cinema today is shaped as much by international exchange as by any one nation’s industry or identity.

Classic Conventions in some mentioned Genres¹⁸:

Horror conventions: Common elements include *monstrosity*, which channels cultural anxieties through figures that disrupt social or bodily boundaries, and the *uncanny*, where the familiar becomes strange and unsettling. *Suspense* frequently emerges through pacing and strategic withholding of information, while *isolation* can intensify vulnerability by placing characters in environments where safety feels out of reach. *Body horror* may appear through depictions of physical distortion or violation, amplifying fears tied to the fragility of the human form.

Zombie conventions: *Resource scarcity* often shapes the stakes of survival, forcing characters into difficult choices about food, shelter, and safety. *Group conflict* is another common feature, as tensions within survivor groups can become as threatening as the undead themselves. Many stories depict makeshift or temporary communities that form in the aftermath of collapse, raising questions about trust, cooperation, and governance. *Moral boundaries* frequently shift as characters navigate a world where ordinary ethical rules no longer apply, and the “*bite rule*” introduces a sense of tragic inevitability by marking infection as irreversible.

K-drama conventions: Classic K-dramas often rely on conventions that shape both narrative rhythm and emotional engagement in distinctive ways. Episodes frequently build around carefully timed reveals, where withheld information or past connections gradually come to light and reframe character relationships. Characterisation tends to emphasise emotional sincerity, with scenes structured to highlight small gestures, internal conflict, and moments of quiet vulnerability. Many series also make use of recurring relational patterns – such as slow-burn attraction, shifting alliances, or the re-emergence of figures from the past – that sustain tension across long story arcs. Visual and musical cues play a central role, guiding the viewer’s emotional response through repeated motifs, tonal shifts, and stylised framing.

¹⁸ The conventions listed here represent only a small selection of those associated with the genres discussed. Many additional conventions exist, and the examples included serve solely to illustrate the kinds of patterns that may appear, rather than elements that are examined in detail in this essay.