

Aestheticizing Crisis: The Global Rise of South Korean Cinema

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I. Introduction

Since *Parasite*'s historic win of four Academy Awards in 2019 and *Squid Game*'s unprecedented global reach on Netflix since 2021, South Korean (hereafter Korean) cinema has reaffirmed its transnational soft power, first emerging alongside *Hallyu* (the Korean wave) at the turn of the 21st century. The triumphal narrative, however, risks obscuring a far longer and more complex cosmopolitan genealogy of Korean cinema. Korean cinema did not suddenly arrive at current aesthetic maturity or accomplish a rapid leap forward in production capacity. Instead, its global prominence is the culmination of nearly a century of creative adaptation, stylistic experimentation, and transnational negotiation. Across its turbulent history of modernization since 1945, including such major events as the Korean war, the military dictatorship lasting over two decades, and the IMF crisis in 1997, to name just a few, Korean cinema has continued to face political repression, ideological division, and economic challenges but convert these crises into unique narratives and visual forms. Thus, the seemingly surprising breakthrough of a once-Third-World national cinema should be understood as the latest stage in a long tradition of aesthetic complexity and flexibility.

Focusing on the notion of crisis as a jumpstart, this article argues that Korean cinema's most innovative works derive not from periods of stability but from moments of conflicts, that is, times of postcolonial modernization, authoritarianism and neoliberal developmentalism, rapid urbanization and democratization, and contemporary platform-driven globalization. In this tradition, crisis does not merely function as a theme but works as the generative engine of aesthetic reinvention. Faced with constraints—whether censorship, industrial

scarcity, or global competition—Korean filmmakers have turned to such aesthetic tropes as melodramatic excess, allegorical symbolism, or genre hybridity to portray contradictions that resist straightforward representation. At the same time, Korean cinema has never been culturally, not to mention geopolitically, insulated. Its key aesthetic resources have come from encounters with Japanese studio practices, Hollywood genre conventions, and streaming-era infrastructures more recently. The “K” in K-cinema, therefore, has always been constituted in dialogue with these external forces, and its creative power lies precisely in its capacity to absorb, reinterpret, and transform global influences.

Reconsidering Korean cinema in this way carries important theoretical implications. Insofar as it challenges the familiar narrative of “national cinema” built on the ideologies of the postwar nation-state, this reconsideration leads to redefining Korean cinema as a fundamentally cosmopolitan construct from the beginning. It is little wonder that the very films that appear most nationally specific often draw their stylistic forces from what Miriam Hansen calls Hollywood “global vernacular” (341), from the melodramatic conventions of the 1950s to the sleek, spectacular action-blockbusters of the 2000s. Then, Korean cinema’s global success is not a sudden rupture of national cinema tradition but the continuation of a long-lasting pattern of creative susceptibility to external pressures. In other words, its characteristic intensity in the realm of affect, visuality, and narrativity results from decades-long negotiations between the demands of national/ local reality in crisis and the reimaged possibilities of transnational/ global aestheticism.

To demonstrate my point, the remaining of the article examines the evolution of Korean cinema through a chronological framework that foregrounds how each decade transforms crisis into aesthetic power. Covering the foundational periods of the colonial era followed by the Korean War and its aftermath, Section II investigates the cosmopolitan bases of early Korean film, such as *Sweet Dream* (*Mimong*, 1936) and the Cold War melodramas of the 1950s. The melodramas, in particular, constitute a felicitous example of early cosmopolitan cinema which combined nationalist narratives, largely embodied in patriarchal characters, and westernized visual pleasures, represented by young Korean women in modern attire and hairdo and makeup. Section III explores the films of the 1960s through the 1980s, showing how authoritarian modernization, urban

precarity, and the pressure for internationalism produced new modes of films: domestic horror (e.g. *The Handmaid*, 1960), youth cynicism (e.g. *The March of Fools*, 1975), and gendered melodrama (e.g. hostess films of the 1970s and the erotic costume drama of the 1980s). Last, Section IV analyzes the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s and the blockbuster and auteur culture of the 2000s. Beginning with *Shiri* (1999), this period culminates in the latest global hits such as *Parasite* and *Squid Game*. Through the discussion of each decade and individual films, this article hopes to reveal a transnational genealogy of Korean cinema inflected by crisis and constructed via creative adaptation and global exchange.

II. Cosmopolitan Foundations: *Sweet Dream* and the Melodramas of the 1950s

This section proposes that the foundations of Korean cinema are deeply cosmopolitan, marked from the outset by colonial modernity and western aesthetics rather than by a fixed national identity. The earliest surviving Korean sound film, *Sweet Dream* (*Mimong*, 1936), is the case in point. Produced under Japanese colonial rule, this film with Japanese subtitles combines Japanese studio practices, Hollywood melodramatic conventions, and local setting and characters. It traces a modern housewife who, led astray by material and sexual temptations, leaves her husband and a young daughter, only to be deserted by her fraudulent lover and poison herself to death, beside her daughter hospitalized due to a car accident. Although the film ends with conservative moralism, its imagery revels in global modernity: department stores, Western suits, and urban leisure culture. That is, despite the ultimate punishment of the heroine narrative-wise, the film visually aestheticizes the very cosmopolitan desires it condemns. *Sweet Dream* thus anticipates a contradiction that becomes central to later Korean melodrama, the tension between nationalist narrative and the seductive foreign style. By placing cosmopolitan desire at the center of its mise-en-scène, the film shows that Korean cinema's earliest articulation of modern times, incarnated in modern womanhood, exhibits international style.

Fast-forward to the Armistice in 1953, the period of 1954 to 1959 witnessed what can be termed “the renaissance of Korean cinema,” with the number of film productions skyrocketing from a single digit in 1954 to 111 in 1959 (Byun

56). This explosive growth resulted from a confluence of factors, such as the stabilization of post-war society, the rebuilding of film studios, increased urban audiences, and the circulation of popular Hollywood styles. Tellingly, the majority of the films released in this era, approximately two-thirds in count, were melodramas. This is because, in Park Yu Hee's words, the genre of melodrama was "relatively easy to produce in developing countries lacking technology and capital" (377).¹⁾ The decade's key filmmakers, including Han Hyung-mo, Shin Sang-ok, Lee Yong-min, Yoo Hyun-mok, and Yang Joo-name, seized on this opportunity and produced a great number of important melodramas which catered to contemporary audiences' appetite for emotional intensity and modern imagery. While the melodramatic films of the latter half of the 1950s can be divided into multiple subgenres, some focusing on the emotional suffering of a poverty-stricken family and some employing melodramatic elements in a largely comic situations, the aforementioned cosmopolitan style is most conspicuous in the "woman's film" (Heywood 236): a subgenre of melodrama which foregrounds women's unique experience and perspective for the sake of its targeted consumer-audience, namely, women.

The cosmopolitan style of fifties melodrama presents itself vividly in films such as *Madame Freedom* (Han Hyung-mo, 1956), *A Female College Student's Confession* (Shin Sang-ok, 1958), *Motherhood* (Yang Joo-nam, 1959), *That Woman Is Not Guilty* (Shin Sang-ok, 1959), *3 P.M. on a Rainy Day* (Park Jong-ho, 1959) and many others. These films follow a similar scheme to varying degrees in which the clash between traditional values and the rapid modernization of Korea is contextualized in a middle-class family crisis. In these emotional dramas of generational conflict or forbidden love, nationalism and its threatening counterpart are often bifurcated along the gender line, represented by male protectors of tradition and young aspiring females who adore western/ American things.

3 P.M. on a Rainy Day serves as a supreme example. On the surface, this film appears simplistic, neatly divided into three acts: the first act traces a burgeoning romance whereby Henry Chang (Lee Min), Korean American war correspon-

1) Throughout the article, I have placed the family name first for Korean names, as in the Korean written language, and have put the given name first for Korean American names. All translations of Korean references into the English are mine.

dent, spots Sumi (Kim Ji-mi) sitting on a bench one rainy afternoon, falls in love, and takes her to the altar. In the second act, Sumi finds that her fiancé In-Kyu (Choi Moo-ryong), supposedly killed in action, is alive and returns to him. Stuck between two men both of whom persistently assert their rights for her, Sumi suddenly dies of a heart attack in the last act, begging for In-kyu's forgiveness. In this duel between the mighty America and the war-ridden Korea turned into a love triangle, Sumi's happy days with Henry in the first half of the film showcase Sumi's brilliant western dress and gracious demeanor in jazz bars, high-end clubs, an outdoor swimming pool, and an amusement park. This form of visual pleasure has been criticized as wearing the "white mask" (Roh & Yook 425), an optimistic fantasy that Korea can be part of American-style modernization. But the return of In-kyu, disillusioned and disabled, puts the brakes on this fantasy and reaffirms the grim postwar reality, painfully encapsulated in his sexual impotence.

Christina Klein calls the fifties Korean melodrama's international style "smuggling and textual poaching" (120) of Hollywood conventions. *3 PM on a Rainy Day*'s "smuggling" of classical Hollywood cinema, however, should be reassessed in the light of "revisionist adaptation" (Stam 239). This film evidently interweaves plots and scenes from *Waterloo Bridge* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1940) and *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942). Both *Waterloo Bridge* and *3 PM on a Rainy Day* begin and conclude with the male protagonist's flashback at the site where he first encounters the heroine, and share the main plot about the news of the fiancé's survival discovered too late. The love triangle in *3 PM on a Rainy Day* resembles that of *Casablanca*. Meanwhile, I would argue that by renewing clichéd Hollywood plots within the context of an international love triangle in postwar Korea, and allowing no man to own Sumi at the end, the adapted Korean melodrama complicates the original and causes the audience to rethink the 1950s world politics embedded in this impossible romance.

Klein's concept of "Cold War cosmopolitanism" envisioned in 1950s Korean melodramas merits further attention. Klein's monograph matters not simply because it is the first monograph in English devoted to the topic, but because it moves beyond narrative analysis and brings style to our attention. Klein argues that popular cultural texts about "Americans forging sympathetic bonds with Asian people through... travel, adoption, medical missionary work, and dance"

proliferated for the sake of “the ideal of US-Asian integration” (7). Calling this trend “America’s Cold War Orientalism,” superbly exemplified by *South Pacific* (Joshua Logan, 1958), Klein suggests “Cold War cosmopolitanism” as its Asian counterpart. Both a political tenet and a cultural vogue, Cold War cosmopolitanism embraced “Western-style modernization” (6) and saturated 1950s Korean cinema with the “fetishization of America” (5), exemplified by the western dance halls, beer smuggled from the American military camps in Korea, a boutique selling European cosmetics and purses. The greatest hit of the year, *Madame Freedom*, is saturated with this type of visual pleasure. Considering Sun-young’s aspiration for American goods and financial independence in *Madame Freedom*, the modern woman simultaneously symbolizes global modernity and a threat to nationalist-patriarchic cohesion.

Taken together, *Sweet Dream* and the melodramas of the 1950s show that Korean cinema’s supposedly “national” forms were cosmopolitan from their inception. These films evince that the postwar reconstruction of national cinema in the Cold War era transpired not through insular cultural imagery but through an interplay of western visual pleasures and nationalist narrative closures. Their contradictions between moral conservatism and modern spectacle, and patriarchal control and female visibility, anticipate the larger transnational patterns traced throughout later decades. The stylistic intensity often associated with contemporary Korean cinema has deep roots in this period, when filmmakers learned to encode social anxieties and geopolitical pressures into the melodramatic form of emotional excess. Thus, rather than merely constituting an early phase of postwar cinema, the 1950s established the enduring grammar through which Korean cinema mediates crisis, taking advantage of foreign styles to address local tensions in a cinematically attractive fashion.

III. Crisis as Aesthetic Engine: The 1960s through the 1980s

The period from the 1960s through the 1980s comprises a formative phase in Korean cinema. Challenging political predicaments and new international accomplishments filled the period, including the authoritarian *Yushin* regime of the seventies, the first democratic presidential election in 1987, the developmentalism of the eighties, and the international status gained from the Asian Games and the Summer Olympic Games in 1986 and 1988, respectively. No

shared genre or thematic agenda was to be found during these decades, but a structural condition confronted by filmmakers remained similar: authoritarian consolidation, accelerated industrialization, urban precarity, and ideological repression. Instead of turning away from these tensions, Korean filmmakers strived to transform crises into engines of aesthetic innovation. Because overt political criticism was prohibited or discouraged, tensions surfaced in stylized/experimental *mise-en-scène*, melodramatic excess, or genre subversion. In this sense, the cinema of the 1960s to the 1980s did not merely represent crisis, but was structurally produced by it. This section thus argues that the aesthetic diversity of the period—from domestic uncanniness to cynical realism to feminized melodrama—emerged from filmmakers’ efforts to negotiate the forces they could neither control nor ignore.

Kim Ki-young’s *The Housemaid* (1960) stands as one of the most significant works of early Korean cinema, precisely because it channels the anxieties of compressed modernization into a domestic uncanny. Made at the dawn of Park Chung Hee’s authoritarian regime, the film foregrounds the instability of the emerging middle class, whose fragile aspirations are embodied in the precarious household—and the disabled young daughter—it depicts. The family’s decision to hire a housemaid signals their upward mobility, yet their seemingly improved circumstances belie the claustrophobic domestic space and destruction, potentially implied in the young son’s tragic death at the end. As Luke O’Brien argues, the film’s “portrayal of the housemaid’s unpredictable behaviour and her manipulation of the patriarch illustrates the destabilising force of modernization” (n. pag.). Chris Berry further highlights the “monstrous figure” of the maid, viewing her as the return of the premodern repressed in contrast of the Park regime’s urgent drive for modernization” (154). Focusing on Director Kim’s expressionistic use of light and shadow, exaggerated performance, and peculiar camera movements, Berry translates this film to “the birth of K-horror” (153). All in all, *The Housemaid* demonstrates that crisis drives aesthetic excess: when politics cannot be voiced directly, it reappears through melodramatic horror, metamorphosing domestic space, a presumed haven, into a volatile site where Korea’s social anxieties erupt.

Amongst the *Yusin* regime which lasted from 1972 to 1979, until the year of the then-President Park’s assassination, Ha Gil-jong’s *The March of Fools*

(1975) captures the pervasive youth cynicism of the decade. Unlike the heightened domesticity of the 1960s, Director Ha's film turns to a looser, episodic realism that mirrors the aimlessness of the two philosophy students at Yonsei University, caught between ambition and structural impossibility. Throughout the film, the two protagonists, Byung-tae and Young-chul, wander through lecture halls, pubs, and city streets, having blind dates with female colligates and being chased by policemen for their "illegally" long hair. Their idleness, however, does not signify individual apathy but the suffocating social conditions produced by ideological rigidity of the times. Due to strict film censorship, the film is marked by instable, sometimes nonsensical, editing, including abrupt shifts in tone and insertion of seemingly unrelated shots. Han Sang Kim observes that Director Ha was "sensitive about new trends in world cinema, especially French New Wave and New American Cinema, and critical of both the existing political system and the entertainment industry" (202). Interpreting the film's cynicism and ultimate failure to form a coalition, Kim rightly argues the need to take "the identity of the filmmakers themselves—a well-educated male subject with free will" (202) into account. Rather than articulating political critique, *The March of Fools* concludes with the disillusioned Young-chul's suicide and Byung-tae's departure to the compulsory military service, thus conveying the deep sense of frustration and abandonment. Director Ha's film adds to the crisis-aesthetic tradition of Korean cinema, how youthful frustration becomes a source of formal experimentation and subtle dissent.

While youth films concentrated on the frustrations of the "male subject," the 1970s also saw the rise of the "hostess films" which highlighted the gendered consequences of rapid industrialization. For a prime example, *Yeong-ja's Heyday* (Kim Ho-sun, 1975) chronicles the descent of a rural woman who migrates to Seoul to work as a housemaid but is raped by the son of the household, becomes a bus conductor after being expelled from the house, works at a factory after losing her arm due to a car accident, and eventually lapses into prostitution, only to be "saved" at the end of the film by a disabled man and be a wife-mother. The narrative unfolds as a melodrama of continual suffering, yet beneath the personal tragedy lies a structural problem of the rural/ urban divide, the vulnerabilities of low-wage female labor, and the moral hypocrisy of a society reliant on women's service work while condemning them. Feminist scholars note that

the hostess figure—Young-ja and Kyung-ah (*Heavenly Homecoming to Stars*, Lee Jang-ho, 1974)—embodies the “gendered subaltern” of Korea’s modernization project. Although constrained by censorship and commercial formula, these films, both adapted from the novels of the same titles, generate a poignant representation of structural and gendered violence.²⁾

Hostess films also complicate the politics of spectatorship. While they expose systemic inequality, they often aestheticize or sentimentalize women’s suffering, turning exploitation into melodramatic spectacle. As Molly Hyo Kim argues, unlike Hollywood films which “portray sexually fallen women as immoral and eroticized,” hostess films focus on “their extremely selfless and inherently good natures,” leading to the tragic end of a heroine “sacrificing herself for the sake of a man, a family and/ or a nation” (455). This kind of gendered as well as hypocritical moralization entails the broader contradictions of 1970s cinema which simultaneously critiques and reproduces patriarchal norms. Nevertheless, hostess films are important insofar as they convert socioeconomic pressures on gendered modernization into cinematic forms that emotionally resonate with wide audiences. By foregrounding rural migrants and marginalized women, these films expanded the thematic and affective range of Korean cinema beyond the concerns of the middle-class male. To recapitulate, 1970s cinema did not present crisis as a singular rupture but as a structuring condition of everyday life. The melodramatic tears, cynical jokes, and suicidal frustration that characterized the seventies films yielded an innovative aesthetic response to a society developing faster than its people could fully digest.

The 1980s ushered in a new set of crises and opportunities as then-President Chun sought to promote a modern national image while managing internal tensions. Hosting the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Seoul Olympics was instrumental to unifying the nation. Through increasing media infrastructure and intensified state interest in cultural representation, the Korean people began to feel that they could be a proud part of the world. Cinema responded by adopting larger production scales and themes aligned with modernization and global visibility. Even in less political box-office hit romances, such as *Our Sweet Days of Youth* (Bae Chang-ho, 1987) and *Youth Sketch* (Lee Kyu-hyung, 1987),

2) See the two articles written by Oh Jin Gon and Roh Ji-seung for more studies on “hostess films.”

their aesthetics often reflected the longing to show a nation with an international flair. Beneath the spectacle, however, lay the exacerbating tension between the dictatorship—whose cultural manifestation lies in the infamous 3S (sex, sport, screen) policy—and the mass desire for democratization. This contradiction led to the decade's cinema with an undercurrent of ambivalence. On the one hand, films such as *The Age of Success* (Jang Sun-woo, 1988) juxtaposed images of national progress with depictions of frustration, loss, or alienation. On the other hand, the thematically and aesthetically influential films of the decade, including *Mandala* (Im Kwon-taek, 1981), *People in a Slum* (Bae Chang-ho, 1982), *Declaration of Fools* (Lee Jang-ho, 1983), *The Man with Three Coffins* (Lee Jang-ho, 1987), and many others used allegorical and/ or experimental tone and form to express tensions that could not be directly presented.

The democratization movements that culminated in the June 1987 uprising opened up the new cultural climate. While film censorship did not disappear overnight, directors could now engage more directly with social issues and delineate political tension through less coded means. However, along with the freer cultural environment comes a blow to domestic film industry. Korean filmmakers encountered massive industrial and creative pressure as Hollywood studios were first permitted direct distribution in Korea in 1988; Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* was the first film imported under this new system. This change disrupted longstanding distribution hierarchies and forced Korean cinema to confront global competition within its domestic market. Equally significant was the 1989 lifting of restrictions on overseas travel, which exposed Korean people to whole new ways of thinking, global locations and goods, and different cinematic trends. These developments collectively signaled a profound transformation of Korean cinema towards internationalization, even as it continued to struggle against the aftermath of authoritarian rule and the swift democratic transition.

Having these changes in mind, it is necessary to delve into a cluster of women-centered costume dramas of the 1980s that found success on the international festival circuit. Films such as *The Hut* (Lee Doo-yong, 1981), *Spinning: The Tales of Cruelty towards Women* (Lee Doo-yong, 1984), and *The Surrogate Woman* (Im Kwon-taek, 1987) all revolve around young heroines' physical and emotional suffering in historical settings, with the intimate camerawork graph-

ically showing scenes of rape and violence. While these films won Special Jury Prize at the Venice International Film Festival, Best Cinematography at the Chicago International Film Festival, and Volpi Cup for Best Actress at the Venice International Film Festival, respectively, their seeming critiques of Confucian-patriarchal hierarchy and female subjugation are eclipsed by their catering to the global arthouse audiences' expectation of the orientalist portrayal of women. Focusing on the subversive potential of 1980s erotic films, Yun-Jong Lee cogently argues: "Resorting to the spectacularization of Korean woman's body as the Korean peninsula and of male sexual assault of her body as symbolic of the colonization of South Korea, nationalist ero film interrogates the modernity and geopolitics of the nation" (101). While these films resonate with the nationalist longings of the masses—"minjung" in Korean—Lee nevertheless illuminates the exotic imagery of Korean women offered up to the global gaze, affirming "how patriarchal the minjung nationalist ideology is and how this leftist thought paradoxically mirrors the oppressive regime's political agenda" (101). These films thus exemplify another crisis-aesthetic pattern whereby social contradictions, internalized Orientalism in this case, are refashioned for transnational consumption.

IV. Neoliberalism, Korean New Wave, and Global K-Culture: The 1990s to the Present

The 1990s marked a turning point for Korean cinema with the advent of full democratization, neoliberal restructuring, and proliferating cultural realms. The end of strict censorship allowed filmmakers to address social issues directly, while the liberalization of Korean society fostered new forms of cultural production. Crucially, this decade also saw the first institutionalization of film culture: film studies departments were established at colleges and started to yield a generation of academically trained filmmakers and critics; film magazines such as *Cine21* and *Kino*, both first published in 1995, led to a sophisticated public discourse for cinephiles. Meanwhile, Hollywood's direct entry into the Korean market since 1988 accelerated competition, pushing domestic studios toward larger budgets, tighter narratives, and more polished production results. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997—dubbed the "IMF Crisis"—further altered industry by prompting *chaebol* conglomerates to begin investing heavily in film

production, distribution, and exhibition: the first multiplex operated by Samsung, CGV Gangbyeon, began showing films in 1998. Together, these developments professionalized the industry, diversified film education and appreciation, and extended artistic/ commercial capacity, although many filmmakers had to go through difficult times of trials and errors.

Kang Je-gyu's *Shiri* (1999) is regarded as the first Korean blockbuster. A hugely successful Hollywood-style action thriller, the film combines fast editing and an espionage narrative in which a South Korean special agent falls in love with a North Korean spy only to find her identity years later and kill her to stop the bombing of a soccer stadium. Showcasing the "ejaculative expenditure of bullets," *Shiri*, costing only 1/50th the budget of the average Hollywood blockbuster, fuses "the special-effects-driven spectacles of Hollywood blockbuster and the melodramatic sentiments of traditional Korean storytelling" (Diffrient). Kyung Hyun Kim associates the immense box-office success of *Shiri* with "the emergence of Asia's Hollywood" (270), noting that Korean cinema began to "fill the vacuum that had been created in the Asian market after the Hong Kong film industry's demise" (271). In 2001, domestic films attracted nearly half of the total audiences in Korea, one of the highest numbers of domestic film consumption in the world. *Shiri*'s success validated *chaebol*-backed investment and established the global Korean blockbuster as a viable strategy. In translating the national separation into a high-stakes thriller, Director Kang's film showed how Korean cinema could mix Hollywood-style spectacle with uniquely Korean situations. *Joint Security Area* (Park Chan-wook, 2000) was another hit production similarly facilitated by the then-President Kim's pro-North Korea approach, called "Sunshine Policy." Along with Park's film, *Shiri* paved the way for larger productions in the decade to come.

The early 2000s witnessed the emergence of the "ten-million film" (*cheonman yeonghwa*), a category of the films that reached over ten million domestic ticket sales: an extraordinary benchmark in a country of roughly fifty million people. Estimably ten-million admissions meant almost one third of the whole Korean population visited theatre, except for the very elderly citizens and young children. Ten-million films of the 2000s, such as *Silmido* (Kang Woo-suk, 2003), *Taegukgi: Brotherhood of War* (Kang Je-kyu, 2004), *The King and the Clown* (Lee Joon-ik, 2005), and *The Host* (Bong Joon-ho, 2006), demonstrated the

swift expansion of domestic spectatorship, the consolidation of a vibrant national film culture, and the library of diverse and innovative film titles befitting such fast-growing industry. As their themes ranged from painful national histories to contemporary socioeconomic affairs, their commercial success reflected not only improved production quality but also Korean audiences' desire to see their own historical, moral, and social struggles reimagined on screen. According to the theater-admission statistics site managed by the KOFIC (Korean film Council), 31 films have reached the 10 million bars so far, with only nine Hollywood blockbuster films among them.³⁾

In 2003, the same year the first ten-million film emerged, a collection of auteur-driven films gained international recognition, leading to the birth of "Korean New Wave." Represented by Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*, Bong Joon-ho's *Memories of Murder*, and Kim Jee-woon's *A Tale of Two Sisters*, this collection exhibited the versatility and sophistication of Korean cinema across thriller, (peculiarly Korean-style) crime, and psychological horror genres, respectively. In Darcy Parquet's words, when Korean filmmakers were "no longer obligated to speak for their nation or people" and were finally free to make whatever films they want, the "speed and force of the transformation" was "surprising" (3). Linking "a sense of urgency and purpose that drove them [Korean filmmakers] forward" to that of Oh Dae-su in *Oldboy* (3), Parquet celebrates the Korean new wave and its uniquely Korean as well as globally fascinating films. Along the same line, Daniel Martin highlights the transnational appeal of *A Tale of Two Sisters*, an emblem of Korean horror film, which "balanc[es] a gothic atmosphere, narrative ambiguity, psychological tension, and jump-scare" (395). By depicting "the archetypal female ghost from Korean folklore, its relationship with a tradition of 'restrained' horror, and the extent to which the film reflects a generic hybridity" (395), Director Kim's film drew attention from international film festivals, while remaining accessible through familiar genre conventions.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the rise of *Hallyu* (the Korean Wave) transformed Korea from a regional cultural presence into a global media powerhouse. Korean television dramas, such as *Winter Sonata* (2002) and *Dae Jang Geum* (2003-2004), gained tremendous popularity in East and Southeast Asia;

3) See <https://www.kobis.or.kr/kobis/business/stat/boxs/findFormerBoxOfficeList.do>.

the second generation of K-pop idols including TVXQ/ Tohoshinki, Super Junior, and many others rapidly accumulated their fan bases through catchy music and hip fashion; last but not least, Korean food and cosmetics gradually cultivated enthusiastic followings worldwide into the 2010s. This diversification of K-culture contributed to the rise of K-cinema as well. Since the 2010s, the global success of groups like BTS and BLACKPINK, the international appeal of K-beauty industries, and the broad circulation of Korean food and lifestyle content created a synergetic cultural environment in which Korean cinema has traveled as part of an intermedial and transmedia constellation. Global audiences encountering Korea through music videos, webtoons, and *mukbang* videos were increasingly predisposed to engage with Korean films. This heightened Korea's global visibility and served the exportability of cinematic narratives and genres. Thus, the birth of *Hallyu*, followed by the cluster of Korean popular content and products, collectively known as K-culture, has been instrumental to Korean cinema's international reach.⁴⁾

The global triumphs of *Parasite* (2019) and *Squid Game* (2021) represent the culmination of decades of aesthetic and industrial developments in Korean cinema. Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* has reaped over 300 awards worldwide, including four Academy Awards, *Palme d'Or* in the Cannes Film Festival, and four BAFTA Film Awards. This unprecedented success demonstrates not a sudden breakthrough but the international recognition of a long-maturing cinematic tradition. The film's immaculate production design, meticulously layered spatial metaphors, and tightly controlled tonal shifts—from the light-hearted black comedy to the ultraviolent thriller—translate Korea's entrenched class hierarchies into a universally legible cinematic language. While *Parasite*'s manyfold achievements remain significant, as I have stated elsewhere, Bong's film is truly captivating in showing the inevitable irony of contemporary filmmaking. That is, although *Parasite* is "supposedly an arthouse film about social polarization... [its] artistic value soared via the generosity of a Korean *chaebol* responsible for such polarization" (S. Kim 92). Then, the film's highly aestheticized mis-encene, rather than causing the audiences to critique social injustice, offers a plea-

4) For more studies on *Hallyu*, see Kyung Hyun Kim's *Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era*; and Kim, Unger, and Wagner's "Beyond Hallyu: Innovation, Social Critique, and Experimentation in South Korean Cinema and Television."

sure of interpretation of its countless symbols and cinematic tropes and leaves the status quo unrefuted. In this sense, *Parasite* remains “a brilliant example of a cultural ‘parasite’ living off neoliberalism” (92) to me.

Likewise, *Squid Game*, released through Netflix’s global platform, reached an unprecedented worldwide audience by deploying simple childhood games, vivid color palettes of pink and green, and emotionally charged character arcs to dramatize economic precarity and the ensuing death matches. Drawing over 111 million viewers in just 17 days, a new record substantially surpassing the prior record of *Bridgerton*’s 82 million views in 28 days, the first season of *Squid Game* has set multiple records, such as the most viewed video content on YouTube crushing the adamant 10-year reign of *Game of Thrones* (Kim & Park 455-56). The series also received critical acclaim, exemplified by one Golden Globe Award and four Screen Actors Guild Awards. What needs to be emphasized here is that *Parasite* and *Squid Game* both inherit the crisis-aesthetic strategies developed over previous decades, now amplified through transnational distribution infrastructures and synergetic connections with wider K-culture. Far from anomalies, these two works exhibit how Korean cinema continues to transform social contradictions into compelling aesthetic forms, securing its place at the forefront of global screen culture.

V. Conclusion

This article has traced the evolution of Korean cinema through a century-long practice of aestheticizing crisis. From the cosmopolitan style of *Sweet Dream* and the Cold War melodramas of the 1950s, to the domestic uncanny of *The Housemaid*, the cynical realism of *The March of Fools*, and the sentimentalized suffering of hostess films, Korean cinema has repeatedly reimagined political repression, economic upheaval, and ideological tension into aesthetic innovation. The 1980s introduced the spectacle of national display alongside democratization and international visibility. The 1990s and 2000s witnessed industrial expansion, the birth of blockbuster film, and the emergence of auteurs whose works were applauded in film festivals and global markets. The 2010s and 2020s extended these trends through transmedia/ neoliberal ecosystems and global streaming platforms. Across these transformations, the core argument persists: Korean cinema’s global prominence is not the sudden triumph of a

national film tradition, but the long-term result of a creative system that converts crisis into cinematic possibility, turning contradictions and anxieties into aesthetic power.

Yet this success raises urgent questions. As global platforms increasingly dominate the financing and distribution, the issue of capital sovereignty, namely the IP, becomes critical. Korean cinema faces a new crisis not of censorship but of extraction, where narrative ideas and cultural symbols engender enormous global profit that flows outward rather than remaining within. Another record-breaking Netflix hit based on K-culture, *KPop Demon Hunters* (Maggie Kang & Chris Appelhans, 2025), is a case in point. Although the animated feature is about K-pop, capitalizes on a plethora of Korean cultural elements, and employs talents of Korean descent in directing and music, the vast profits deriving from the film exclusively go to the film's IP holders, Netflix and Sony Pictures Animation. This film is symptomatic of Hollywood's recent trends of appropriating Asian popular culture for expanding the realm of "American culture" for bigger global profits: *XO, Kitty* (set in an international school in Seoul) and the live action version of *One Piece* (a Japanese anime classic) come to the mind. As in the case of *Squid Game*, regardless of the vivid portrayal of Korea, Korean production companies, crews, and actors are alienated from the profits generated by their labor. If Korean cinema is to sustain its creative vitality and to benefit from it, it must take this new structural asymmetry seriously. Korean cinema's past illustrates its resilience to turn crisis into innovation. Whether it can transform the current crisis of "platform imperialism" (Park, Kim & Lee 72) into a new phase of industrial and cultural sovereignty remains the crucial question for its next chapter.

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