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The New Wave of Korean Cinema

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Prohlášení:

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Matěj Steer

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Anotace

Bakalářská práce se zabývá historií korejského filmu na pozadí socio-politických změn. Za pomocí historického kontextu přiblížuje vnější i vnitřní vlivy které utvářely jeho vývoj. Text shrne dobu japonské okupace, korejské války a turbulentní období druhé poloviny dvacátých let za účelem hlubšího porozumění jaký vliv tyto události měly na korejskou společnost, a filmy které v těchto dobách vznikly. Prozkoumává také přelom tisíciletí a změny které měly za výsledek popularitu kterou Korea zažívá dnes. Za pomocí interpretací představených filmů také analyzuje vztah korejské společností s vlastní historií a jak se tato dynamika skrze desetiletí měnila. Kombinací těchto faktorů se pokouší dosáhnout komplexnější představy o fungování soudobé korejské kinematografie.

Klíčová slova: korejské dějiny; dějiny filmu; kulturní dějiny Korey.

Annotation

This bachelor's thesis deals with the history of Korean cinema against the background of socio-political changes. With the help of the historical context, it describes the external and internal influences that shaped its development. The text summarizes the period of the Japanese occupation, the Korean War and the turbulent period of the second half of the twenties in order to gain a deeper understanding of the impact these events had on Korean society, and the films that were created during these times. It then explores the turn of the millennium and the changes that resulted in the popularity that Korea experiences today. It also analyzes Korean Society's relationship with its own history and how this dynamic has changed over the decades through interpretations of the films presented. By combining these factors, it achieves a more comprehensive idea of the functioning of contemporary Korean cinema.

Keywords: Korean history; film history; cultural history of Korea.

Contents

Introduction

In the last two decades, Korean cinema has found itself enjoying increasingly higher popularity. It has become recognized and respected for its ability to deliver high-quality, thematically rich motion pictures that have captivated audiences across the globe. Korean films have become synonymous with critical acclaim as well as delivering unique feeling experiences that cannot be found anywhere else. Their continued efforts in doing so have recently paid off with Bong Jong-hoo's *Parasite*, which won several awards at the 2019 Academy Awards, including the category of Best Picture, Best International Feature Film, Best Director and Best Original Screenplay. As such, it is the first non-English speaking film to win Best Picture. But what is the key to Korean cinemas success and how did such an industry come to exist? The answers lie in the turbulent historical events that shaped Korea into the nation it is today. As the everchanging and often unstable socio-political climate that Korea endured over the past century is something that deeply effected its film industry as well. In this work, I will chronicle Korea's relationship with film and detail its journey starting at the beginning of the twentieth century up until *Parasite's* release. In doing so, I hope to develop a deeper understanding of the events that shaped the industry. I also hope to uncover why the socio-political themes that Korean output is known for are such a prevalent topic. Through a selection of films, I will analyze the changing relationship that Korea has had with its own history while using this historical context as a window for interpretation. Exploring the inner space of the Korean film industry and the forces influencing its development, while interpreting the works that it produced, will aid me in unveiling a broader view. A view that will offer a fuller comprehension of the path that led Korean film to such heights.

1. The first appearance of film in Korea and the Japanese colonial period (1897-1945)

In his book *Contemporary Korean Cinema*, Hyangjin Lee starts off with describing that with the collapse of the seclusionist Choson dynasty in 1897 Korean borders opened up and a new market became available to western companies. Viewed as an unexplored new market with high profit potential, many western goods came flooding into the Korea. Among them the first motion pictures. Used as a propaganda tool, they were used to win over economic and political favors with Koreans, showing them the prosperity and wealth of western cultures, they could be viewed as a form of cultural imperialism. First introduced to the public in 1903, films were viewed as a rare curiosity rather than an art form. With more and more western films coming in a market started to grow. A market dominated by imported western releases, backed by the Japanese colonial government. Attempts by Koreans themselves to produce their own films were mostly unsuccessful. Producing a motion picture required a strong financial backbone along with ties in the economic and social infrastructure of the time. Trying to creatively operate in an environment ruled by the Western – Japanese alliance became almost impossible. A fact that is reflected in the attempts to identify the first "true" Korean film. (Hyangjin Lee, 2000, 16-19) In Lee's words:

"Film historians are faced with several questions as to how to decide on what was the first Korean film. Factors to consider include, among others, when the film was produced and when it was premiered, whether it was shown to a special audience: who financed its making: and who directed it." - (Hyangjin Lee, 2000, 19)

He then continues that *Righteous Revenge* (Kim Tosan, 1919) is considered by many to be the starting point of Korean cinema. Not a feature film as such, being a "kino drama", a stage play with auxiliary motion pictures. Directed by Korean director Kim Tosan and released in 1919 it showed everyday life without any societal and historical context, being mainly interested in a personal story about a child taking revenge against its evil stepmother. Viewed as the first Korean feature film, *The Plighted Love under the Moon* (Yun Paengnam, 1923) was released in 1923. Written and directed by Yun Paengnam and funded by the Japanese government as part of their propaganda program. Made mandatory by the government, all Koreans had to attend a screening of the film, this and

the films pro colonial message were efforts to instill obedience in their colonial subjects. Released twelve years later, *The Tale of Chyunhyang* (Yi Myongo, 1935) is notable for being the first sound motion picture directed by a Korean. Its release resulted in a more systematic and structured approach to film production. Attempting film production was a costly endeavor and many companies were too small with not enough capital. Even if a movie became a financial hit, it was almost guaranteed not to make its money back. The demanding financial requirements along with heavy censorship of any film shot in Korean, meant many production companies shut down after producing only one feature. (Hyangjin Lee, 2000, 20-21)

Diving further into Lee's survey of this period, he details that by this point Korean audiences were used to foreign films, with the preference and demand growing higher than ever. 1925 saw a staggering amount of releases ranging in the thousands, but only eight of them were Korean. The market was almost completely monopolized by films imported from America and to a lesser degree the UK and France. With the ever-increasing demand many commercial theaters were built, by 1935 an estimated thirty-nine theaters were open all over the country, with nearly 8 million Koreans attending their screenings, a figure which totaled nearly a third of the country. Over the whole period of Japanese rule, about sixty production companies were established, producing about a hundred and sixty films all together. Many of them closing down after producing only one film, the ones lucky enough to not to meet this fate can be counted on one hand. Korean filmmakers had no choice but to rely on Japanese investors, their money and technology. With the Japanese having such a tight hold on the industry the possibility of a systemic and self-sustaining native film industry was not a possibility. (Hyangjin Lee, 2000, 21-22)

According to Lee, material restrictions weren't the only thing stalling the development of the Korean film industry. Viewed mainly as a propaganda tool, all film production and distribution was carefully watched by the Japanese. Passed in 1922 the Entertainment and Theaters regulations allowed the colonial government to heavily censor any elements that they found undesirable. Over the four decades of their rule these regulations went through numerous revisions, getting harsher and more rigid each time. In their efforts to completely root out any semblance of Korean identity all Korean films were censored twice as heavily, and by the early forties every Korean movie released was recorded and titled in Japanese. This coincided with the banning of all film distribution, the only films

allowed were either from Japan, or from the allied Germany and Italy. (Hyangjin Lee, 2000, 22-23)

Following the books thorough close-up of such a difficult period and considering the harsh political and economic environment, as described by lee, it is quite surprising that an impressive 160 Korean films were produced during the colonial period. Based on their thematic texture and subject matter they can be categorized into melodramas, nationalistic films, tendency films, literary films, and pro Japanese propaganda. Of these five categories melodramas were the most common. Worth mentioning and majorly departing from the melodrama trend was *Arirang* (Na Woon-gyu, 1926), as it was the first Korean film to take an anti-Japanese stance, starting off the nationalistic resistance genre. Focusing on the importance of national independence, it tried to awaken political awareness in its viewers. The colonial government did not take kindly to the films message, cutting out large chunks of the film. After its premiere the film became a national sensation, inspiring many filmmakers to follow a similar filmmaking path. Na himself directed many more nationalistic films and has been described as an *"exemplary anti-Japanese, nationalist filmmaker",* even though he directed pro-Japanese movies in his later years. *Arirang* and many of his nationalistic films were a financial success, boosting Korean cinema at the time. His works are viewed as a turning point for the industry, show Korean filmmakers that a self-sufficient national film industry had potential, if given the right opportunity. Motivated by the message and success of *Arirang* many filmmakers tried their hand at creating their own film with a socio-political message of national independence, among them the first of the so-called *tendency* films appeared. (Hyangjin Lee, 2000, 25-28),(Darcy Paquet, 2007, nestr.)

In summary, the colonial period was a time full of hardship for Korea and its people. With decades of oppression and systematic destruction of the Korean spirit and identity, with film being used as one of the tools to do so. Sensing the power that film can have the colonial government used it as a powerful tool to control the masses. However, it also became a tool of resistance. Aspiring directors used it as a means to fight back and enforce the Korean spirit. Film was used both as tool of oppression and as an answer to it, although in a limited capacity. It is here we can see the birth of one of Korean cinemas most defining features, its strong socio-political message.

2. Post liberation period and the runway to the Golden age (1945–1961)

2.1 *Hoorah! For Freedom* (1945-1950)

Continuing in Hyangjin Lee's assessment of Korean film history, the post liberation years brought about a time of political chaos and uncertainty that effected the entire nation and also the film industry, as he describes:

"In South Korea, conflicts among various political factions created all kinds of hindrances to establishing a powerful government through a democratic process. the political disruptions we're also accompanied by social economic disorder. The film community could not remain immune from these problems." - (Hyangjin Lee, 2000, 46)

He also comments that although the American military government terminated the censorship and regulation systems put in place by the Japanese, they ultimately did so only to replace it with their own restrictive system as well as heavy promotion of American imported features that dominated the theaters. Lee further divulges that despite this, the domestic scene slowly attempted to find its footing. (Hynagjin Lee, 2000, 47-48) Reading the Post Liberation Period section on the Korean Culture Blog website by author Kalbi, reveals that national pride, patriotism, and themes of liberation became the thematic pillars of many pictures released during this period. The most famous of which being *Hoorah! For freedom* (Chi Un-gys, 1946), which is not important only for its crystallization of the period's cultural mood but also for being one of only a handful of films to survive the Korean War. (Darcy Parquet, 2007, nestr.), (Kalbi, 2015, nestr.)

Set in August of 1945 only a few days before the liberation, it follows Choi, a revolutionary who will stop at nothing to liberate his country, seeing it as his purpose, as something he owes to the people of Korea. Choi acts as a personification of Korea, being pursued by the Japanese, beaten down, and shot, but victorious in the end. With one character going as far as saying, as Choi is recovering in hospital *"If we save Choi, we save all of Korea"*. The film has a "slice of life" feel to it at times as we see Choi engage in his revolutionary activities, but we also see him study, sleep, and engage in pseudo intellectual patriotic conversations. The conversation is filled with nationalistic sentiments and philosophical thoughts surrounding the topic of revolution, reckless

sacrifice, and what effects, if any, do riots have on the functioning of society. Choi is a stone-headed patriot who has only one goal in his life, to liberate his country. In his own words *"I will do anything for my love" and "my love is Korea"*. It is mainly through him that the nationalistic overtones permeating the film come into play, however there is an interesting interaction that he has with one of the female characters that rescues him from a Japanese policeman, where he asks, *"Who are you?"* and she replies, *"I'm Korean"*.

There is nothing especially subtle about the films message, but I don't feel that it is trying to be. The opening starts with triumphant music and some text saying, *"Let us look back on the bloody traces left behind by the revered patriots who gave their lives for our people"*. The film is a celebration of the endurance of the Korean spirit, which even after decades of oppression and attempted annihilation, never gave up. It is a celebration of Korea's freedom and a somewhat indulgent look at the days before the liberation. The fact that such a strong anti-Japanese story could be told via film must have been a triumph in itself. So even if the message and ultimate goal of the film is heavy handed it is completely understandable given its historical context. The film serves as a fascinating and important cultural artifact that takes place in a transitional period of Korean history. It is a window into the thinking of the post-liberation and prewar era where spirits were high and the doom on the horizon was a distant yet looming cataclysm.

2.2 Surviving a cataclysm and building a better future (1950–1961)

The Korean war presents one of the most destructive conflicts in human history. Not only did it leave a burnt-out hellscape in its wake, with almost all of Korea's major cities destroyed on both sides, but it also contributed to an unfathomable loss of life. It was an unrelenting, gluttonous colossus that didn't stop until it burned itself out. It also marks a pivotal moment in Korean history and society. With the decision to divide the country into two, American and Russian forces had started a range of domino effects that eventually led to this destructive conflict. The Korean War serves as a definitive stamp on this decision, effectively confirming that the geographical and societal schism between the two countries had become too wide and that Korea's future was that of a divided nation. A fact that carries within itself tremendous amounts of sadness to this day. Taking all of this into consideration it may be surprising to find out that even during these hellish times the Korean film industry found a way to keep running and to lay the foundation for

what would be known as one of several golden ages of Korean cinema, as described in Yeon-soo Kwak's article "Sowing seeds for Korean boom in the 1950's" on TheKoreaTimes website. (Kwak Yeon-soo, 2020, nestr.)

Breaking out in 1950 the Korean war swept the entire peninsula, leaving very little but hellfire in its wake. With basically all of the infrastructure blown to smithereens there weren't many places that could be considered safe, with only a few areas not being chewed up by fighting. Further readings of Yeon-soo's article reveal that one of the cities fortunate enough not to be a combat zone was the city of Busan, which also served as the capital for a period. Granting some sense of safety from the gnawing teeth of the surrounding conflict, it gave shelter to waves of refugees. Many of these refugees being filmmakers, it was here that the industry continued to grow. Cinema served a dual purpose during this period. One was capturing the war in newsreels and documentaries and the second being that of entertainment and comfort. (Kwak Yeon-soo, TheKoreaTimes) Kwak provides the following quatation:

"After the Korean War broke out, film production grew stagnant in all regions but Busan because it remained as an unoccupied territory," - Wee Gyeong-hae, a professor at Chonnam National University, said during a symposium hosted by Korean Film Archive, Oct. 24.

As described in Kilbi's 1950's section in his K-Movie Series, Korea saw a period of rebuilding, technological advancements, and urbanization after the active conflict ended. This state of rejuvenation also applied to the film industry. Thanks to the help of foreign aid programmes that provided Korea with film equipment and new technologies, the industry gained an incredible amount of momentum. (Kalbi, 2015, nestr.) This coincides with Parquet's and Lee's description of the period, with them describing that propelling this sense of momentum even further was the government's support in the matter. In an effort to promote and encourage the film industry Sygman Rhee, the president at the time, elevated all tax from film production and rewarded the production of quality films. This resulted in a steady increase in film production each year, with the year 1959 seeing hundreds of releases. (Darcy Parquet, 2007, nestr.), (Hynagjin Lee, 2000, 48) Kilbi also notes that directors started exploring new genres such as horror, action, and gangster films, among many others. Film also saw rapid growth on the technological side with 35 mm stock and color film making their first appearances. (Kalbi, 2015, nestr.) Judging

from the periods description by the authors mentioned above it would appear the industry saw both artistic and technological growth, creating a foundation for what Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim describe as one of the Golden Ages of Korean Cinema. (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, 2016, 19)

3. The golden age of the 1960s (1961–1970)

3.1 General Park Chung-Hee and his golden order

The 1960 s were another turbulent decade for Korea, with a major shift occurring at the beginning of it. This shift would change the governmental and societal structure and as a result the film industry as well. As described by Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim in their book The Changing face of Korean Cinema: 1960 to 2015, General Park Chung Hee orchestrated and executed a successful military coup on the 16 of May 1961, turning Korea into a military government, and after a few years into the Third Republic. (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, 2016, 19) Hyangjin Lee describes Park's rule as heavily anticommunist while aggressively pursuing an export-centric mindset, widening the gap between social classes even more. His government also enforced the Motion Picture Law, which heavily constricted all aspects of film production. Every production was evaluated on the way it portrayed the newly established societal structure, with all depictions of societal and economical struggle being banned, stripping away one of Korean Cinema's most important characteristics, social commentary. (Hynagjin Lee, 2000, 49) In many ways the film industry saw a return to the days of Japanese colonial rule, with total governmental control over the industry. Yecies and Shim confirm this, commenting that seemingly overnight the film industry went from an artistically flourishing environment to a governmental propaganda monopoly. With films fitting into the categories of “soft” and “hard” propaganda. (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, 2016, 20)

Kalbi notes that the whole industry saw a total restructuring with the amount of domestic production companies going from 76 to 16 within the span of a single year. (Kalbi, 2015, nestr.) In their in-depth analysis, Yeacies and Shim explain that production quotas were put in place and importing films became incredibly expensive thanks to import tax. Leading to only a select few conglomerates being able to produce and import films, creating a “golden order” of film producers. Film production became a prestige hustle, with the aim being a studio system akin to Hollywood but with a dictatorial edge. To incentivize domestic film production a reward system was put in place. Depending on the number of films produced, access to imported films would be allowed. This led to a burst of so-called “import quickies”. Lee describes them as films of low artistic quality with no real audience in mind, made with the sole purpose of getting access to foreign films,

which were incredibly lucrative. This system was later abandoned in 1973. (Hynagjin Lee,2000, 50) Diving deeper into Shim's and Yeacies' examination it is interesting to note that even with all these restrictions and limits in place the industry continued on an upward trajectory, in terms of quantity that is, in part thanks to Shin Sang-ok who could be viewed as the top figure of the "golden order". His partnership with Park Chung Hee and his contacts in high places, both domestic and foreign, made him the main face of Korean cinema at the time. (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, 2016, 21-27) Their assessment of calling this period a "Golden age" is best encapsulated in the following quote:

"...President Park Chung Hee, whose all-controlling regime forced film producers to develop a range of survival strategies. A small but powerful cartel of producers, represented by leading filmmaker Shin Sang-ok—revered and reviled in equal measure—formed alliances with a larger cohort of quasi-illegal independent producers, thus—against all the odds—enabling Korean cinema to achieve a golden age of productivity. "
– (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, 2016, 19)

3.1.2 *Rice*

Director and release: Shing Sang-ok, 1963

After viewing *Rice,* it is no wonder that Yiecies and Shim chose to label it as a prototypical endorsement film. Directed by Shin Sang-ok and used as part of Park Hung-hee's presidential campaign, it can be firmly placed in the slot of "soft propaganda". Following a group of farmers who try to bring fertility and prosperity to their land, it is an endorsement of Park's regime and his promises of rural development and eradication of poverty. (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, 2016, 27) The film sees Yong, a war veteran, return to his childhood village only to find it desolate and poverty-stricken. After the death of his father, he vows to bring prosperity and wealth to his family and the whole village. He plans on doing this by diverting water from a nearby river to the fields surrounding the village, having to burrow a tunnel through a mountain wall in the process. On his journey he encounters lazy government workers and scheming neighbors before being supported by the new helpful military government that provides him with the tools necessary to complete his dream.

In some ways *Rice* could be viewed as a typical story about a man returning to his village only to find a hostile and unwelcoming place, completely unrecognizable from where he once grew up. Seeing this he vows to fight the affliction affecting his village and make it a better place. What separates *Rice* from this typical construction is the affliction that Yong has to face. Not being confronted with drugs or crime but rather the current regime as well as the land surrounding him. It is a story about men overcoming both political and geographical obstacles in an effort to achieve what they believe. Similar to the main protagonist of *Hoorah! For Freedom* Yong is shown as dedicated to his cause with nothing being able to stop him in his pursuit. Even while encountering corrupt officials, who represent Sygman Rhees ineffectual government, and scheming neighbors that represent Korea's traditionalist tendencies, he doesn't back down and is set on achieving his vision, even if it means working himself to death. He is shown as trapped in an old and unsupportive regime that doesn't understand his needs, with even some of his fellow countrymen being stuck in the past, adhering to local traditions that prevent them from helping Yong. It is only thanks to Park's new regime that he is able to achieve his goal, with the military not only bringing supplies but also dynamite.

Yong's quest of digging a tunnel through a mountain can be seen as a metaphor of chipping away at something old and stuck in place, something that stands in the way of progress and prosperity. His journey through the tunnel showing that even if something is seemingly impossible, it can be achieved with the right mindset and dedication. Yong and his friends dig most of the tunnel themselves with only the last piece of rock being blown away by the military's dynamite, letting the water, and, in this metaphor, prosperity, flood the rice fields and bring progress to Yong's village. It is a calculated and pandering message about the willpower and dedication of the Korean people. One that feels disingenuous and purposely designed for Park's presidential campaign, with Yecies and Shim noting that the opening statement *"based on a true story"* fails to mention that the farmers were ultimately unsuccessful in their real-life attempt. The film was a massive success and so was Park's campaign. With the film's success and Park as president, Shin Sang-ok had secured a safe place as the head of the industry, producing many more "soft propaganda" movies. (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, 2016, 30)

3.1.3 Existence as an *Aimless Bullet*

Director and release: Yu Hyun-mok, 1961

Repeatedly cited as the “best Korean film of all time”, *Aimless Bullet* represents the intellectual and more artistically minded side of the industry. Released in 1961 and directed by auteur filmmaker Yu Hyun-mok it serves as a critique of post war society, showing a darker side to life in Korea. Produced and released a few months before Parks military takeover, the film was able to be free in its artistic construction and social commentary. Fitting the auteur theory of film, Yu Hyun mon weaved in many of his world views while incorporating elements of Italian neo-realism and German expressionism. While the film was unsuccessful upon its original release, popular mainly among intellectuals of the time, it would go on to achieve the status as one of Korea's most prized titles. Yu himself would go on to become Korea's leading arthouse filmmaker largely thanks to the reputation of *Aimless Bullet*. (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim,2016,42-46)

“Among all Korean directors, Yu Hyun-mok best fits the auteur model because of the “signature” he left on his films. Yu developed his distinctive style by combining realist, expressionist, and modernist elements, creating an “aesthetics of devastation” through his exploration of the human condition in an age of despair.” - (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim,2016,43)

The film follows a family of North Korean refugees living in what is known as Liberation Village, a district of Seoul established after the Liberation and inhabited mainly by North Korean runaways. Living in a rundown shack, we see each of the family members trying to survive in these harsh times while bringing financial stability to their family. Cheol-ho works as an accounting clerk, his brother Yeong-ho is an injured war veteran who can’t find his place in post war society, and their sister Myeong-suk gives herself up to prostitution after being rejected by the man she loves. Running into hardship at seemingly every step, the siblings are shown as driven by desperation, trapped in a struggling existence with seemingly no way out. The whole film has a bleak outlook on life with even its seemingly positive aspects, such as love, turning into miserable affairs. For example, the younger brother Yeong-ho falls in love with an acquaintance from his past, and after much courtship they spend the night together. Finally considering himself lucky he excitedly returns to the home of his love the next day, only to find out that she had

been flung off a roof top by a neighbor/stalker. This sense of ever-present dread is best reflected in the film's most infamous scene, which also serves as the film's ending. Receiving a call at work, Cheol-ho finds out that his brother has robbed a bank and is currently in jail, after going to see him at the police station he returns home only to find out that his wife is in hospital giving birth to their third child. Upon reaching the hospital he is greeted with the news that his wife has died due to complications during childbirth. Being at his wits end he finally decides to go to the dentist so that he can remove the rotten tooth that has been bothering him for the duration of the film. Bleeding profusely and feeling lightheaded he orders a taxi. Upon being asked where he wants to nd, he cannot decide and keeps changing his mind between Liberation Village, the hospital, and the police station. After a series of out of focus shots the taxi driver sighs and says "*Such an aimless bullet, not knowing where to go"*

The film is unrelenting in its bleak depiction of a joyless life, one that is full of sorrow and hopelessness. Cheol-ho, the head of the family, is shown as a good worker and all-round decent person, having a respectable job and giving all of his money to his pregnant wife. But even this isn't enough, his wife is malnourished, and his son takes a job delivering newspapers instead of going to school. Having to support a family of seven, Cheol-ho can't afford to go to the dentist and get his aching tooth removed. Following the thematic strings put in place as well as the line "*people have become nothing but burdens to each other nowadays",* Cheol-hos toothache can be seen as representing the omnipresent pressure of having to support a family while facing poverty in a dismantled society. His aching tooth is something that keeps on bothering him and something he refuses to have removed, even though he would be better off. He only decides to get it removed after his family falls apart and existence itself becomes unbearable. The concept of existence being so unbearable that it breaks a person's mind can be seen in Choel-hos' mother, who is bedridden and heard screaming a single phrase throughout the whole film.

"In their bleak weatherboard hut, the grandmother lies sick in bed, crying out deliriously, "Let's go; let's go". While not specifying any particular destination, and unable to go anywhere herself, the sick old woman symbolizes a nation that is profoundly lost and struggling to find a way out of its troubles"

After finally getting his tooth removed and unable to decide where to go, Cheol-ho is heard saying the same phrase as his mother. This time however symbolizing that the

person himself is lost. Worn down by society and stripped of his loved ones, he is someone who has lost all purpose and direction, a lost soul trapped in a lost society, an aimless bullet.

Comparing *Aimless Bullet* and *Rice* it is clear that they occupy themselves with completely different goals. While they both portray a dysfunctional and unsupportive society it is done for different reasons. *Rice* does so to shine a divine light on Park and his regime which vowed to eliminate the wrongdoings of the past while *Aimless Bullet* is concerned with highlighting real social issues that won't be magically washed away overnight. *Rice* serves as a celebration of Korea's endurance while *Aimless Bullet* is a deep dive into the frustrating, oppressive void that was life in Korea's lower classes. One is a fictionalized series of real-life events made to sell a political narrative, the other an authentic-feeling observation of social realities of the time. This difference in approach also applies to their artistic construction. *Rice* is a conventional, commercial product, designed to be as approachable as possible, both in its subject matter and in its filmmaking. The message of the film is clear and as a whole it serves as a simple and readable text with no real room for misinterpretation. *Aimless Bullet* is an audiovisual expression of emotional distress conveyed through undefined lines that take time and effort to read, it is a work of art. And while it is also occupied with delivering a message, it is a message that is woven into its subtext, thematic threads, and artistic construction. The lighting, the mood, and experimental nature create an artistic hedge maze through which the viewer must navigate to reach a conclusion. As described by Yecies and Shim, it is not surprising that the film proved popular only with intellectuals at the time of its release, it is a window into society, one that most people probably weren't interested in seeing. (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, 2016, 48). Highlighting these two films demonstrates the power struggle of the 1960s. With the commercial and government backed film being a successful feature while the artistically driven expression of frustration was not.

4. The downward spiral and The Visual Age (1970–1979)

The result of ever tightening and increasing restrictions, the 1970s serve as Korean cinema's dark period. Darcy Paquet and Kalbi both describe it as a decade of prolonged depression with dwindling audience participation, the closing of many cinemas and declining profits. (Darcy Paquet, 2007, nestr.), (Kalbi, 2015, nestr.) Lee himself casts blame on the *Yushin* (renovation) revisions established in 1973, that operated on many of the same principles as during the Japanese colonial period and made the film industry an even more sterile and utilitarian place. (Hynagjin Lee, 2000, 51) Both Kalbi and Yecies and Shim echo this further outlining that in their efforts to support the domestic film industry and repel the growing interest of Hollywood in South Korea the government established the Korean Motion Picture Promotion Corporation, a nonprofit organization that would keep watch over all aspects of the industry. These intentions ended up back firing as the already frustrated industry couldn't breathe under the heavy weight of the government's ideology. The film industry found itself in a financial and artistic lowpiont. The growing inflation as well as heavy artistic restrictions meant that many filmmakers ended up working for the government as propaganda workers. Even Shin Sang-ok, who could be considered as the leader of the golden age, found his films receiving uneven financial success, with his more artistic endeavors being cut entirely. Being an advocate for free expression and the importance of artistically minded cinema Yu Hyun-mok almost quit the industry entirely, venting his frustration as publicly as possible. Many if not most of the directors who tried to get their career started found them ending as suddenly as they began. (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, 2016, 107-108, 127-128), (Kalbi, 2015, nestr.) Rising from this hostile environment and successfully navigating its restrictive geography, was the group of film enthusiasts that would become known as "The Visual Age". Yecies and Shim describe:

"One group of budding filmmakers in their thirties, calling themselves the "Visual Age" (aka Young Sang Shi Dae) and utilizing the British Free Cinema and the French New Wave (Nouvelle Vague) movements as models, created a manifesto distancing them from their predecessors. Despite—or perhaps because of—the lack of freedom of expression

and the limited aesthetic and narrative models available, these aspiring filmmakers found creative new spaces for thinking about the form, style, and purpose of cinema." - (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, 2016, 128)

Separating themselves from the rest of the industry and injecting new blood into its veins, they acted as a group of aspiring directors, film critics, and cinephiles, coming together at meetings discussing new films and advancements in technology, as well as foreign cinema. These meetings acted as film education centers, exposing many to the wonders of film and diverse options that lay beyond Korea's borders. Many members attending these meetings would go on to be influential figures in the industry in the following decades. Thanks to their focus on arthouse filmmaking within a restrictive ruleset and having a finger on the bleeding edge of fresh new ideas, they were able to rejuvenate the industry while it was in its most worn out and tired state. (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, 2016, 128-129)

4.1 Youthful energy in *Heavenly Homecomin to Stars*

Director and release: Lee Jang-ho, 1974

According to Yecies and Shim, one of the characteristic traits of The Visual Age was their ability to capture the essence and prevailing mood of youth culture at the time. Many of the groups' members grew up during the post liberation era and as such were accustomed to a freer and more individualistic lifestyle. This generation was considerably more "westernized", having their tastes developed through American pop songs, Hollywood movies, and western clothing. This was a far cry from the previous generation's military uniforms and philosophy books. All of this individualistic energy as well as westernized sensibilities would find their way into the group's features, creating something that felt fresh and hip. Adapting many of Korea's bestsellers, the group found major success in appealing to Korea's youth, creating a phenomenon and counterculture in the process. And although this movement was short lived, many of its main figures would go on to influence the industry in the decades to come. One of these being Lee Jang-ho, a figure whose impact on the world of Korean film cannot be underestimated. Directing both commercial and arthouse features, his skill and talent expanded the borders of quality filmmaking during the restrictive period of the 1970s. Embodying the groups freedom-yearning, humanistic, and experimental, anti-standardization approach with a nihilistic

edge, his influence and mentoring would guide many filmmakers of the Korean New Wave. Acting as a key link in the transformation of Korean Cinema, his inspirational nature would only continue to grow over the course of his storied career, a career started off the back of his breakout success *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* in 1974. (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, 2016, 128-130, 138)

Based on Choi In-ho's novel of the same name, *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* follows the story of Mun-ho and Gyeong-a, a young couple, and their troubles in dealing with Gyeong-a's tortured past. Before meeting Mun-ho, Gyeong-a had three other relationships. All of which were vacuous and absent of love, with her male counterparts being in love only with her body, leading to an abusive dynamic. Unable to handle her trauma, and emotionally scarred, she drowns her sorrow in alcohol. Seeing the downward spiral that she is in, Mun-ho also decides to leave her. This decision sends Gyeong-a over the edge, as she becomes a prostitute before eventually overdosing on pills, killing herself in a snowy field. The film ends with Mun-ho scattering her ashes in a river with the text *"goodbye Gyeong-a"* appearing before the closing credits. The film depicts a society obsessed with materialism, with emotion and spirituality falling to the wayside. Gyeong-a represents someone who is unable to find her place in a rapidly expanding world, getting lost in the changing infrastructure. She is desired for her body, viewed as something to be used and thrown away, with one of her ex-lovers calling her a "thing". It is a clear comment on the role that women serve in this new, industrialized world. The once idealistic and naïve girl turns into a jaded, depressed, alcohol drenched wreck, who uses her attractive body to get by, while destroying her soul and dignity in the process. Worn out by society and its inhabitants she decides to end her own life, with the snowy field where she does so, perfectly encapsulating what existence must feel like to someone with such a journey through life, being vast and empty, filled only with freezing snow.

Even while dealing with such heavy topics the film does exhibit a somewhat bouncy and energetic quality, at the beginning at least. With its energetic editing, inventive shots, and prominent use of music, there is a clear presence of western-style filmmaking, making for a more familiar-feeling film. This modern westernized approach to filmmaking as well as the film's overtones of bursting sexuality lend a palpable sense of youthfulness to the film, before becoming more serious and melancholic. It is no wonder the film proved to be such a hit with the younger crowd. It encapsulates both the wonderous process of discovering one's sexuality while also displaying what happens when sexual desires turn

into abuse as well as the crushing frustration of living as an idyllic youth in a restrictive and seemingly empty society. The sense of youth is best captured in Gyeong-a's line *"I either sleep or go the mall"* when asked by Mun-ho what she does all day, Mun-ho himself being a struggling artist who loiters around all day. He is a womanizing drunk, who is diagnosed with a STD at the beginning of the film. Interpreting his character can prove to be slightly problematic as he is shown to be genuinely caring about Gyeong-a, giving her shelter, and questioning her about her drinking. Over the course of the movie, we see him transform into a better person, giving up drinking and starting to work as a teacher. Through their relationship he becomes a stable individual, leaving his loitering past behind, showing the benefits that a healthy and loving relationship can have. However, it is ultimately his decision to leave that sends Gyeong-a into her final spiral. It is also something that he cannot be blamed for, as Gyeong-a must face her demons alone. If anything, his purpose in the film may be exactly that, showing that everyone can turn their life around.

Closing out their chapter on this period of Korean film, Shim and Yecies comment that the movie's success as well as the growing interest in the youth culture movement did not sit well with the authoritarian government. The movements emphasis on individuality and liberalism as well as The Visual Age's westernized ideals of freedom and equality were of an incompatible nature with the rigid structure of the nationalistic and economy-focused government. The regime imprisoned hundreds of entertainers such as actors, comedians, and directors, effectively ending the youth movement. Many were arrested under the guise of "purification of society" or imprisoned for smoking marijuana, or "happy smoke" as it was known at the time. The liberalism movement came to an end and was labeled as a "youth menace" while being labeled "decadent", "anti-social", and "anti-national". Lee Jang-ho was among those arrested. Being incarcerated for a number of years he nearly gave up on directing. It was only thanks to the assassination of Park Chung Hee in 1979 and the new military governments lifting of previous restrictions that he was able to return to directing in 1980, contributing to the ripples that would eventually start the New Wave of Korean cinema. (Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, 2016, 133-134)

5. The tick before the boom (1979 – present)

5.1 The tick (1979-1988)

In the nineteen eighties there was a continuation of the turbulent trend of the previous decades. Starting off with the establishment of a new military government, this time headed by Chun Doo-hwan, and ending with the democratization of the constitution, the decade saw an abandonment of old social structures with Korea opening up to the rest of the world, both economically and socially. After the assassination of Park Chung-hee in 1979 hopes for democratization were high. Serving as president at the time, Choi Kyu-hah pushed for democratic elections and a new constitution. Before being able to realize his promises he was overthrown by Chun Doo-hwan's successful military coup. Chun Doo hwan's rule saw a quick return to a military dictatorship akin to the previous two decades. This resulted in a wave of protests, many of them held by students on school grounds, the most infamous of these being the Gwangju uprising, which saw hundreds of students, civilians, and police officers clash and ultimately lose their lives. (Darcy Paquet, 2009, 6-9), (Hyangjin Lee, 2000, 52), (Michael Robinson, 2005, 23)

"The college student mass and their leaders are generally credited with leading the successful democratisation movement that peaked in 1987. In this summer of 1987, demonstrating students and Wildcat labor strikes were joined in a series of massive citizen demonstrations by what had heretofore being a quintessential urban middle class the demonstrations forced the government to announce a number of important reforms, including: a new election law providing for direct presidential elections: Guarantees for a 3 freer press: And provisions for the election of local officials and other serious concessions" – (Michael Robinson, Chi-Yun Shin amd Julian Stringer ed., 2005, 24)

The cry for democracy as well as frequent union strikes continued throughout Chun Doo-hwan's rule. With tensions finally bubbling over after a series of intense, cross-country protests, Doo-hwan was forced to step down and Roh Tae-woo became president in 1987. (Darcy Paquet, 2009, 18-20)

While the political side of the country remained turbulent as ever, the film industry saw itself in the midst of a mild rebirth. With revisions pertaining to film, including a relaxation of censorship, making the industry a less hostile place for new talent. With the naming of Roh Tae-woo as president, further restrictions were lifted. Governmental censorship saw an even bigger decrease, the licensing system was abandoned, and Korea opened up to Hollywood, allowing it to open branch offices and screen as many films as desired. With all of these factors in mind the industry became a less restrictive place. Directors and producers were no longer required to obtain a license, leading to an influx of independent films. Film as a whole became a more attractive medium. This increased interest in film as an artform found its way into filmmaking itself. Titled as the New Wave of Korean film, a new generation of filmmakers appeared on the scene. Viewing film as a means to reflect and possibly change the face of society, these aspiring directors and producers were socially aware and unafraid of depicting the troubles plaguing Korean society. (Darcy Paquet, 2009, 21-22, 28, 48), (Hyangjin Lee, 2000, 53-54)

However, even with its partly rejuvenated status, the domestic scene found itself facing low admissions and was generally viewed as a "lesser" market. Not helping in this issue was the lifting of the foreign film tax. With international films no longer hidden behind a massive paywall, they soon found themselves dominating the Korean film market, with the screen quota, requiring that only Korean films be screened for a certain amount of days, as a savior keeping domestic film in theaters. Helping keep the domestic industry afloat were conglomerates, also known as *chaebol.* Functioning as Korea's financial elite, their new interest in film helped finance many film productions in exchange for home video rights, giving the industry a much-needed financial injection. The doubled edged sword of a freer market proved to be a bit problematic for the struggling industry. With Korea's modernization and intellectual and economic growth the country found itself trying to break out from the cage of its past. This attitude also extended to the film industry. With new, fresh ideas, genres, and concepts appearing on screen. Even with its best effort however, it found itself paying the debts of decades of harmful industry management that had left the industry with no real legs to stand on, effectively forcing it to rebuild from scratch. The one major positive of this period was the growing international recognition that Korean film was gaining, its films receiving increasing acclaim at international film festivals, the global eye was starting to turn and recognize the quality of Korean output. (Kalbi, 2015, nestr.), (Darcy Paquet, 2009, 45, 51, 54-55)

5.2.1 The man with three coffins

Director and release: Lee Jang-ho, 1988

Directed by Lee Jang-ho and released in 1988 the film follows Sun-Seok, a widower on his journey to scatter his dead wife's ashes in her hometown. On his journey he encounters three other women who look identical to his deceased lover, two of which die after their encounter with Sun-Seok . By the end of the film, while reaching his destination, he is labeled as a man with three metaphorical coffins by a third look alike, who herself is transporting an old man to the same destination. After the old man is taken away by his son's lackeys, Sun Seok and the third doppelganger decide to travel to Soul together. In comparison to Lee Jang-ho's previously mentioned *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars, The Man with Three Coffins* is a far more mature meditation on the state of Korea as a nation and on life as a whole. While they both portray a man scattering the ashes of a woman he once loved, the symbolism of this gesture plays a significantly different role in each film. Mun-ho is tasked by Gyeong-a to scatter her in a river because she has no family and no home, she is someone who has no place in society and no place to rest. Mun-ho, who has moved on with his life and found his place as an art teacher, does so out of respect for his ex-lover and as a solemn goodbye to someone unable to adapt to a changing world. Sun Seok on the other hand knows the hometown of his dead wife but it is a place he physically cannot reach as it lies in the demilitarized zone separating South Korea from the North. Even when he finally does come as close as he possibly can as he scatters the ashes he is reminded that it is not only his wife that has left him but also half the country as well. The scattering of ashes in this sense could be seen as both for Sun Seok's wife and the other half of Korea, as it is now a completely different entity, and the notion of a unified Korea might as well be dead.

The two films both deal with characters unable to find a "home" but whereas *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* deals with it in a metaphorical sense, *The Man with Three Coffins* deals with the crushing reality of not being able to return to one's birthplace as it has since become a part of a different country. These heavy themes of separation are an integral pillar to the film's story. Sun Seok is grief stricken, separated from his wife, and struggling to cope. National separation plays a significant role in the film's themes and serves as an undercurrent throughout. Sun Seok's wife could be seen as representing unified Korea

itself, with the three doppelgangers serving as shadows of the country's past. Signaling that while things might look similar or even identical on the surface, they are very much different under closer inspection. With the first two identical woman dying, both of which are prostitutes, embodying the feeling of a “used” Korea that is manipulated by others before being tossed away and dying, showing that Korea as a country has indeed changed despite what it might look like from the outside. Following this metaphor to its conclusion, Sun Seok’s decision to join the third doppelganger and travel to Soul after he has scattered the ashes could be seen as some sort of acceptance that Korea will continue as a divided nation. While this sentiment probably wasn’t shared by the majority of the populace, it seemed to be accepted by the director.

Analyzing the film on its filmmaking approach it is clear that Lee Jang-ho was interested in constructing an unconventionally told story. While the premise and overall narrative is simple it is told through a series of overlapping flashbacks, lending the film a unique structure. The film as a whole has a dream-like quality to it, with scenes seemingly having no correlation to each other, acting as a series of random loosely connected memories. Adding to this feeling is the film's unusual color pallet. The whole picture is soaked in pinks, reds, and oranges, making the story feel like a hazy, trip induced, trance. The viewing itself can often feel akin to a trance with long and spacious shots that are bleeding with color and atmosphere. An element that seems to be intentional, given the film's other thematic pillar of traditional Korean shamanism and reincarnation. With all of these thematic elements, it is no wonder the film is a melancholic and somewhat depressing affair. The youthful and bouncy energy of *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* is replaced with a somber, droning stillness. Shots are often long and lingering with little movement, and while the film does include a prominent use of music, the score serves to underline saddening gloominess pulsating throughout the film. All of the above-mentioned elements coalesce into a unique whole that is bleeding with style. It is a film interested in pushing storytelling techniques and playing around with conventional filmmaking methods. The unorthodox execution of a simple story and its crystal-clear vision in providing a rich visual experience as well as thematic threads that are masterfully woven into every aspect of the film's body make it a real stand out. It is a “filmmakers” film, and one that could not have been produced in any previous decade. As its themes of a divided Korea, spiritual Korean heritage, and unapologetic arthouse filmmaking wouldn’t have been tolerated by any of the previous regimes. The film's existence marks a clear shift to

a more artistically driven industry, one that is free to explore complex societal and personal issues while wrapping them in a visually striking package, all of which are features often atributed to the “New wave” of Korean Cinema. While the film can come off as despondent, I do feel that the message of the film is ultimately positive. Engaging in its esoteric shamanistic beliefs of reincarnation, that foretell that even though Korea has died many times and will die many more times to come, it will be reincarnated each time with a new chance of life and hopefully prosperity. A message that proved to be more than true in the coming years.

5.2 The Boom (1988-present)

Describing the boom of the Korean film industry in a simple and effective way could prove (and has proven) to be a somewhat problematic endeavor. Functioning as an intricate web of financial restructuring, global economic expansion, and gaining of a social maturity and confidence, the so-called “boom” saw Korea go from a culturally submissive underdog to an exporting titan and pop culture sensation. Korea's new identity as a prominent cultural colossus as well as one of the economic superpowers of the modern era would carry it into the twenty-first century with a newfound sense of national pride, all while flourishing under the unintrusive touch of a democratic government. However, as detailed by Paquet and Kalbi alike, these successes weren’t achieved overnight, and the nation would first have to suffer a financial crisis through which it would develop a new series of survival and expansion strategies that would help it achieve the high status that it holds today. By the late nineties Korea found itself in midst of financial chaos with mounting foreign debt, plummeting stocks and currency value, and bankruptcy numbers raging in the tens of thousands. Even Korea's financial elite, the *cheabol,* couldn’t withstand the growing monetary downturn the country was facing, as much as one third of the largest companies had collapsed under the weight of unpaid debt ranging in the tens of millions. This had a severe effect on the financing of the movie industry. With many of the major players either gone or not able to offer monetary support, the number of domestic features saw a steady decline during this period. (Kalbi, 2015, nestr.), (Darcy Paquet, 2009, 61-62)

Logic would dictate that the prevailing mood of the industry would be of an anxious panic. Surprisingly enough that wasn’t the case, even though domestic productions were at their lowest since the nineteen fifties when it came to quantity, financial gains were on

a steady rise, leading to an overall positive spirit within the industry. Contributing to the air of optimism was the side effect of the currency crash which meant that imported films became far more expensive and not a worthy investment. Domestic production budgets on the other hand remained the same and were seen as a lesser risk. The film industry continued to become sharper and more articulated, with film education becoming more available and focused on providing an educational system that taught technical skills as well as artistic expansion. This resulted in an influx of technically competent young directors who were commercially viable while also having their own artistic stamp. (Darcy Paquet, 2009, 61, 67-68)

"The shift from an apprentice-based system of film training to more formal education in film schools helped to create a higher level of technical expertise among deputy directors and cinematographers. It also gave film school graduates the opportunity to showcase their talent through short films. Producers as well as directors looking for capable assistants, began to attend short film festivals and public screenings of graduation films from KAFA or the Korean National University of Arts in order to scout talent. It was the steady production of new filmmaking talent that allowed Korea to turn out an eye-opening number of debut directors each year." - (Darcy Paquet, 2009, 68)

The injection of new talent would prove to be the life saver the industry needed in order to resurrect itself. Many of Korea's top talent appeared during this period, leading to a number of successful blockbuster-type movies that broke financial records and properly reignited the interest in domestic cinema. The success of the younger generation of filmmakers can be attributed to a few things. Firstly, complete freedom in artistic expression and subject matter. Secondly, these young filmmakers were avid cinephiles and film literate, leading to movies that were articulate in the language of film and actively trying to push the boundaries of filmmaking and storytelling techniques. Thirdly, they represented a generation unburdened by Korea's traumatic past and as such didn't feel the need to project that burden into their films, with each film being for a specific audience and not having to speak to the "whole of Korea". Not to say that that these films didn't explore Korea's past and societal issues, they did so but in new and creative ways. Having accepted the past and free from governmental censorship they were able to use elements from Korean history as a springboard to launch their narratives rather than in taking center stage. This went hand in hand with embracing genre elements and being "allowed" to interpret Korean history through the lens of horror, action, and other such

genres. This new playfulness and genre embrace made for a more appealing product, especially for younger viewers which represent most of Korea's theater going audience. (Darcy Paquet, 2009, 65-66)

With governmental support rather than intrusion, the Korean domestic scene was able to become a 'proper' industry that could also expand beyond the border. Korea's heavy emphasis on globalization started to pay off with international recognition skyrocketing during this period with Korean films enjoying high popularity all across the globe, even Hong Kong and Japan. This newly found fascination with Korean culture was further amplified by the star power of Korean celebrities, who became the face of this new cultural wave titled *hallyu*, and as such an overnight sensation. It would be this hunger for Korean culture that would propel it into becoming an exporting juggernaut. Korean Film, television and music were all in high demand and the country itself became a frequented tourist destination. The *hallyu* wave would continue into the late 2000s where it wouldn't so much end but rather reach its peak and stabilize. Korean film has since proven that it wasn't a flash in a pan but something with staying power and real merit. Receiving numerous awards, forging international co-productions as well as enjoying unparalleled critical acclaim, it is clear that while the ravaging sensation of the *hallyu* wave might be over, Korean output is still a force to be reckoned with. (Darcy Paquet, 2009, 102-105, 110-115) (Kalbi, 2015, nestr.)

"...the era that had passed was unique in Korean film history standing out for its combination of new talent, risk taking, rapid change and quickly rising ambitions. An entirely new filmmaking community had emerged in those years, and refashion public perceptions of local cinema. Korean film had also moved from the fringes of world cinema to become an influential contributor to Asian cultural currents and the mainstay on the International Festival circuit. Not so much a renewal, the process might be better described as a rebirth. Korean cinema had entered the 21st century with a new identity." – (Darcy Paquet, 2009, 115)

6. Interpreting Korean History and the Korean Wave

Looking back in retrospect and skimming the history of an entire nation it is easy to construct a narrative and insert one's own interpretation. If I were to do so in relation to this work, it would be the narrative of survival. The history of Korean film is intrinsically tied with Korea's status as an oppressed nation. The Japanese colonial period served as an introduction to the new medium of film and was immediately used as a means for propaganda. With decades of attempts to systematically abolish the Korean spirit it is fascinating that film served both as a tool to achieve such a goal and as a form of defense, with film being one of the few outlets where Koreans could vent their frustrations and inject their own Korean stamp, although in a heavily censored state. Moving to the second part of the century, film served in much the same way, as a defense and attempted commentary on the restrictive regime.

Since its inception the Korean film industry had found itself fighting an uphill battle, with some larger body or other looming over it and calling the shots. There was no real space to grow as the industry was always a heavily controlled and restricted place. Considering this, it is fascinating that throughout the decades there always has been one. Even in the dark age of the 1970s the industry still produced and released some exceptional work. It is a miracle and testament to Korea's dedication to the art of filmmaking that even when struggling as a nation the industry did not go out of business. The aim of this work and the selected films was to show that the Korean film industry didn't magically sprout from the ground overnight, it was a slow and painful process, one that took decades. The films selected illustrate that Korea's film output was worth paying attention to long before the international cinephile audience declared as much. They also display the cornerstone of Korean cinema, social commentary, with each film depicting a different societal mood and problem. The years of oppression are something that is key to Korean cinema with film acting as a sort of 'filter' through which all the frustration, sadness, and anger could be vented. All of these pent-up emotions found themselves trickling down and creating a rich bedrock that colored the entire industry once the „New Wave" hit.

The pinning down and describing the so-called "New Wave" is a problem in itself, as depending on different sources, the movement started and ended at different times. I like to view it as one of several waves that appeared on the path to Korea's democratization

and that helped the country forge a new identity. It is a link in a larger chain of social and economic shifts that let Korea finally breathe and ruminate on its traumatic past with the lifting of its taboo status signifying a major turn. Embracing its turbulent past, rather than trying to distance itself from it, went hand in hand with forging a new identity. That which was once sensitive, is now part of a larger cultural and historical heritage. Something that can be freely interpreted and explored, something that can be woven into an artistic medium and something that is specifically and uniquely Korean.

6.1 Adapting with a vengeance

Throughout the decades there was also another enemy, one that proved instrumental in the domestic scene's revival and ultimate success, Hollywood. Since their introduction at the beginning of the previous century, Hollywood films proved to be an incredibly successful type of cultural export. Western culture as a whole served as a constant source of fascination, one that would prove to be problematic for the struggling industry. Korea's relationship with Hollywood represents an interesting dynamic, with the domestic industry trying to replicate the Hollywood studio system while at the same time trying to repel the ever-expanding empire that Hollywood was building. Throughout the twentieth century American movies represented the hottest cultural commodity and found themselves overtaking domestic productions at nearly every turn. As descibed by Paquet, it was only thanks to governments heavy investments, import regulations, and the screen quota established in the nineteen seventies that prevented foreign films from overtaking the industry completely. By the late nineties, with a now globalization-minded Korea, all of the above-mentioned regulations were either dismissed or heavily altered. This led to a wave of protest from film industry workers who feared for the domestic scene now that all regulations for foreign films were lifted. (Darcy Pauet,2009,70) Essentially driven into a corner the industry had two choices either adapt or perish. The release of *Shinri* and *Jra,* both of which I will discuss later, show that the industry chose to adapt, and that it adapted with a vengeance.

Not being able to compete with the spectacle of Hollywood blockbusters, the industry instead analyzed what made them so appealing and how it could replicate that appeal. Leading to a string of western style blockbusters that started the *hallyu* wave. These blockbusters had western sensibilities while discussing themes unique to Korea, all wrapped in an action spectacle. This I feel is the ultimate appeal of Korean film today and

why it has such staying power. Modern Korean films have embraced Hollywood-style production, while feeling free to discuss heavy topics of both contemporary and historical Korea, being unafraid to explore such topics in a genre framework. Combining these elements creates a sort of "cultural super product", one that is easily accessible and understandable thanks to its conventional filmmaking techniques, one that serves as a window into the problems and inner workings of a foreign culture while delivering a smooth and refined genre experience. This creates a package appealing both to domestic viewers, who see topics and themes pertaining to them wrapped in an enjoyable and exciting viewing package, and also to a foreign audience that is able to understand and keep up with the movie while witnessing something new and interesting. Korea's current status as top dog when it comes to commercially viable, quality films is the result of an often unstable and unwelcoming industry that forced creative minds to change and adapt their output. Creating films was a fight for survival and as such required quality products that would set a high bar, both critically and commercially. Whether it was the Japanese, the military government, or Hollywood, it was the industry's ability to shift and adapt that meant its ultimate survival on the domestic scene, and after Korea's opening up, on a global scale.

7. *Shiri* and *JSA*: National division within a blockbuster frame

In the following chapter I will analyze the films Shiri and JSA. As described by Paquet, they are the first films to fully embrace the status of a "blockbuster" in its marketing, budget, casting as well as narrative and presentational stylings. They represent a major turning point in Korean cinema, becoming the most profitable domestic films of their time, jumpstarting the path on which Korean cinema finds itself today. They can also be credited with starting the *Hallyu* wave, with both features being popular not only in Korea, but the whole of Asia (Paquet, 2009, 72-75). While notable for their financial accomplishments and phenomenon trend setting, they also demonstrated one of Korean cinema's strongest aspects. That being the ability to replicate western filmmaking and storytelling techniques while interpreting issues unique to Korea. In the case of Shiri and JSA, it would be the issue of national division.

7.1 *Shiri*

Director and release: Kang Je-gyu, 1999

Within the first few scenes of Shiri's opening sequence, it is immediately clear what type of film it will be. The overly dramatic staging, use of slow motion and focus on gunplay signal that the viewer is about to witness a high octane ride full of action and suspense, one that is specifically from the late nineteen nineties. Comparing Shiri with the previously mentioned films, the jump in visual energy is as astounding as it is immediately noticeable. While it might seem odd to introduce the film through its visuals, I would consider the films style as one of its most striking features. It is clear that much thought and research went into the film's visual construction, as it acts as a perfect encompassing and crystallization of action filmmaking techniques throughout the late eighties and nineties, with the filmmakers unabashedly borrowing from Hong Kong action cinema as well as many western action spectacles. Every aspect of the film's presentation seems to be carefully calculated and put in place to deliver an exhilarating, edge of the seat experience. An experience that is familiar it its iconography, evoking the works of John Woo, James Cameron and James McTiernan. All the while recontextualizing them and transplanting them into a Korean setting. This sort of "genre

scanning" extends to the film's plot, with sci-fi like technology including seamless face transplants and futuristic weapons of mass destruction, love affairs that end in a double-cross, and even the films action climax which takes place at a football stadium. All of these genre staples are effortlessly laid out like chess pieces, with the filmmakers knowing exactly which piece to use at what time. What separates Shiri from a vapid action-flick and prevents it from being a shallow regurgitation of genre conventions is the fact that all of the abovementioned elements are in service of an engaging and thoughtful script.

The story follows two special agents, Jang and Jung, trying to catch a notorious North Korean sniper. While doing so they uncover a sinister plot to assassinate the leaders of both South and North Korea using a newly developed explosive liquid dubbed CTX. Reviewing the plot on its premise it is derivative, delivering a "cops vs terrorists" narrative that is so popular within the action genre. What elevates this basic storyline is the film's use of genre framework to explore the themes of nation division and reunification. Partway through the film it is revealed that Hee, the North Korean sniper, is part of a rogue group titled the 8th Division that plan on assassinating leaders of both Koreas, whom they describe as corrupt politicians. They believe that doing so will wipe away the 50-year-old debt of separating the country and speed up the unification process, with the division's slogan being "for the unification !". It serves as a genuinely interesting and unexpected twist that the film's main antagonists aren't interested in personal gain, but are fueled by nationalistic sentiments, acting out of pain caused by Koreas societal split. Portraying and acknowledging that the anxiety of Korea's split is mutual on both sides. Also interesting is the idea of a subsection of the Korean population that flat out refuse to choose between the North and the South, choosing to immigrate or in this case take matters into their own hands, a concept also explored in JSA.

"Although the North Korean special forces were depicted as ruthless killing machines, the film allowed viewers a glimpse into their perspective, most famously in a monologue delivered by Choi Min-sik (How can you, who grew up eating coke and hamburgers, understand that your brothers in the north are starving?)," - (Darcy Paquet, 2009, 72)

The theme of separation is also present in other aspects of the films story, mainly through its surprisingly endearing use of fish, that serves both narrative and thematic purpose. On the narrative side of things fish are used as living camouflage to hide eavesdropping devices in the special agent's headquarters. Thematically they serve a much more

interesting purpose. Firstly, there is the name of the film itself, Shiri, reference to an indigenous type of fish only found in Korea. The films main antagonist gives a hint using a metaphor involving these fish when asked what his goal is "*Do you know the fish called Shiri? It is an indigenous fish living in the crystal streams. Though they are separated with the country divided, someday they will reunite in the same stream".* Secondly there are numerous references to Kissing Gourami a type of fish who partner up for life and who die willingly if their partner dies before them. The films use of fish to extend the metaphors of separation and deep emotional bonds is surprisingly endearing given the story's conclusion. In the films main twist, it is revealed that Jang's fiancée is actually Hee, the North Korean sniper. Having assumed a new identity, as Hyun, and undergone a face transplant she now runs a fish store, it is also revealed that she was the one who planted the eavesdropping device and supplied the fish to the agent's headquarters. Having found out the truth, Jung is gunned down and Jang must do all he can to stop the groups plan to blow up the football stadium. He is successful in neutralizing the threat, with only Hee herself remaining he has no other choice but to shoot her. Though Jung has succeeded in terms of a classical action narrative, he has lost everything that is dear to him. It is a bleak ending, with Jung losing his partner, shooting his fiancée and the country still being divided, it is an ending where no one wins. The 8th division's cause for unification ended up robbing a man of everything he had. Leaving him as a Kissing Gourami without its other half, a statement that is also true for Korea itself. Tieng up the films themes is a scene where Jung is questioned about Hee and their relationship. After being asked if he ever suspected anything he answers, "Hyun and Hee are completely different" , "The reality of a separated Korea turned her into a hydra", someone who has two personalities in the same body. The symbolism of which pertains to the painful reality of living in a divided nation, unable to choose which one of the two sides to side with. It also pertains to Korea itself, viewing it as a singular entity divided in two, while acknowledging that each side is completely different but still part of the same body.

Shiri biggest success lies in its ability to perfectly replicate stylings of popular action cinema, while managing to mix in themes and narrative decisions that are specifically Korean. Delivering something that is familiar in its construction but unique in its execution. . The films sense of melodrama and melancholia that reach its peak in the films ending, lend the film a unique feel, one that separates it from the films it's that inspired it. In any other action film, the 8th division's goal would be to stop the unification, so that

even when the hero loses everything, he does so to protect something that will bring happiness and prosperity, leading to an ultimately happy ending. Here it is the direct opposite, he sacrifices everything just for things to stay the same. Eluding to delicate balance and lays between the two countries. This emotionally unsatisfying ending isn't often seen in the action genre, as it undermines the power fantasy and grounds the bombast and spectacle, it is however something typical for Korean cinema. Reflecting the somber and melancholic mood that Korean society carries within itself to this day. As mentioned above the film was an incredible success drawing in domestic and foreign viewers alike. Shiri's financial success would later be topped by *JSA*, which not only continued in further developing of the "Korean Blockbuster" but would also present the issue of national division in a completely different way.

7.2 *JSA*

Director and release: Park Chan-wook, 2000

Joint security area released in 2000 and a tells the story of a young investigator trying to unravel a mystery surrounding the killing of several North Korean officers the in the middle of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between South and North Korea. acting as a murder mystery the film liberally uses flashbacks to explore its characters and the events leading up to the murder. The film utilizes this technique to show us multiple versions of the events that transpired depending on those who tell it. It is only at the end that all of the pieces come together, and the film's true intentions are revealed. Starting out as a procedural story it is only about halfway through that the films emotional and saddening elements come into play. through a series of flashbacks, it is revealed that the soldiers guarding the bridge between the South and the North became friends and visited each other every night. The relationship and bond that these four soldiers develop serves as the films emotional center. We see the relationship develop from that of opposing indifference to a brotherly bond. It is also here where the film's structure helps to heighten the films emotional effectiveness.

The film begins with several shots of the shootout, we as the audience are then shown the aftermath of said shootout through the eyes of the investigator. seeing the grisly results helps to heighten the tension once we find out that those involved in the shootout were friends. A fact that is revealed in a lengthy flashback, that chronicles the events that led to the soldiers crossing paths. Depicting the development of this unusual friendship is

crucial in magnifying the films emotional resonance. As it helps the viewer connect to the characters and as a result, makes the reveal of what actually happened all the more tragic. It may seem trivial to go in such detail regarding the film's structure, but I believe that it is the films hidden weapon that disarms the viewer before delivering a gut punch of an ending, one that is equal parts unexpected as it is devastating. The final shot of the movie being a master class in powerful storytelling, that ties together both the film's structure as well as emotional narrative. Similar to how Shiri knew when and where to place Its action chess pieces, JSA is similarly effective when it comes unraveling it's mystery and emotional beats, creating a moving and genuinely effective piece of fiction.

The film story about soldiers on opposing sides forming a friendship, going as far as calling other brother emphasizes the humanity in North Korean soldiers. Showing that they are also human, beings with interests and dreams that are also frustrated with the nation's division hoping that one day the border between the two countries will cease to exist. The soldiers themselves are not villainized, as the film targets generals on both sides instead. Critiquing army hierarchy and psychology, as well as the militaries approach to individuality. The fact that the North Koreans are portrayed as individuals and not as soulless machines or drones in a hive mind is a huge leap forward in acknowledging that while they are functioning in a system and a society that may seem alien, they are still human. It also serves to show that people of different societal persuasion can still form meaningful relationships. In one of the film's most effective scenes, we see the friends taking a photograph, unable to fit into the frame they hunch over and squeeze tighter together obscuring the photographs of both nations leaders that are behind them on the wall. It is a visual metaphor encapsulating the film's theme of friendship overcoming both geographical and social political obstacles. Even though I wouldn't call it an outright antiwar feature, one of the films goals is the questioning of the validity of war and its surrounding politics.

Once the young investigator finds out the reality of the situation, she vows to tell no one. As she herself has been dismissed from the case following the revelation that her father was a North Korean general who decided to immigrate after the end of the Korean War. The survivors of the shootout as well as the investigator know that revealing the truth is something that neither side would accept. Each side has its own version with the South being convinced it was a kidnapping that ended up in a shootout while the soldier was trying to escape and the north Believing that the South Korean soldier attacked their base.

The fact that neither of these versions are true and that the real situation escalated because of a commanding officer wondering in on the group while they were playing cards is irrelevant, if the real story came out, the surviving members would be labeled as traitors. Their friendship is something that has to be kept a secret it is also something that gets most of them killed with one dying during the shootout and the two South Korean soldiers both committing suicide. One successfully and the other one ending up in a coma. As it is only one of the four friends it's still alive but the end of the film. The dynamic of their friendship is encapsulated by the film's last frame, that being of a photograph taken on the dividing line that separates the North from the South with all of the members being in the photograph but each at their stations and seemingly indifferent to one another.

It is fascinating to see in what aspects these two films continue on from *The Man with Three Coffins*. Even though they are stylistically completely different, with *The Man with Three Coffins* being an art-house trip, *Shiri* delivering a love letter to action cinema and *JSA* functioning as a Spielberg-esque war-drama, I would place them on the same thematic path. Each film serving as a step-in interpreting and navigating the reality of Korea's division. The Man with Three Coffins accepts that Korea will continue on as a divided nation, and through its themes of reincarnation looks forward to the future, while laying the "old" Korea to rest. *Shiri* acknowledges that anxiety about the split still rests on both sides of the border, and it makes the "villains" of the film more empathetic by having them be driven by the same nationalistic thoughts as many other Koreans. Even though they are still shown to be killing people and generally going too far, their cause is made out to be sympathetic. JSA then directly continues this path by humanizing North Korean soldiers and showing that in many aspects they are no different from their South Korean brothers. The fact that both Shiri and JSA use the world "brother" to describe their counterparts helps one to understand through what angle this issue is interpreted.

All three films present Korea's split through the window of emotional hardship. A widower unable to scatter his dead wife's ashes, a man losing his fiancée and four friends nearly losing their lives for forming a brotherly bond. In each of these films the split affects the characters on an emotional level, it is something that deeply affects their lives and leaves them scarred. I believe this reflects the engrained pain that the split has caused, I also believe that is why this pain is portrayed through the use of passed away wives, fish that mate for life and brothers. It would also explain why the nations division is such a prevailing a ubiquitous topic, as it is something that affects society on an emotionally

basis. *JSA* expresses its frustration over the fact that political reasons are to blame for the continued animosity the opposing countries carry towards each other. It shows that the surrounding ideological construct is something that fades away in the face of human relationships. The characters have to literally walk over a bridge to go see their friends, and once they do, it is a source joy. I would consider *JSA* the most effective in showing how frustrating Korea's split really is. The situation is best described by Michael Robinson's chapter in the book *New Korean Cinema*:

"The situation which North and South Korea states currently divide the peninsula, each claiming to be the legitimate political expression of the Korean people, is an artifact of the Cold War and bipolar world order that has only recently faded away. The artificial division of Korea lies directly across the fault lines of this global rift enforced by the mutual antagonism of the United States and Soviet Union in the aftermath of World War II. Furthermore, this division was hardened by the catastrophic Korean War (1950-1953). The war desolated both Koreas. It left a legacy of separated families, millions of deaths, atrocities on both sides, the physical destruction of Seoul in the South, the virtual leveling of the north by US bombing, and psychologically traumatized several generations of Koreans. As a result, both Koreas rebuilt their societies in an atmosphere of security paranoia…" - (Mark Robinson; Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer ed., 2005, 16)

Taking Robinsons point of view and combining it with the interpreted films, paints a sad picture. It also explains the mindset of thinking about Korea as one entity split into two, rather than two neighboring countries that share a peninsula.

8. A film by Bong Joon-ho

Bong Joon-ho has become a prevailing figure in the Korean film industry, with many successful features and the winning of the 2019 Academy Awards in numerous categories some may argue that he is currently the face of Korean cinema. When describing his role in the industry Paquet states that Bong, along with others like Park Chan-wook, were able to deliver unique films infused with an individual sense of character, making for some of the most memorable films of recent years. All he while still being able to work and succeed in the mainstream framework. (Darcy Paquet, 2009, 94) He then expands on this while discussing the success of Bong's *Memories of Murder* (2003) detailing that it:

"…established Bong as a leading filmmaker, but also demonstrated the commercial potential of such highly individualistic, director-oriented films. Soon local journalists were proclaiming 'well-made' (transliterated from English) to be the newest industry buzzword. Kim So-hui (2004) editor of film magazine Cine21, described 'well made' in this context as a commercial feature that makes use of defined genres and the star system but, which contains both a distinctive directorial style and commentary on social issues." – (Darcy Paquet, 2009, 95)

By analyzing the two films presented in this chapter I hope to showcase Bong's ability to tell stories of differing genres and thematic preoccupations. One of which pertains to Korea's past and the other to Korea's present troubles. I also hope to uncover the secret behind *Parasite's* success, and in what ways it differs from Bong's previous works.

8.1 *The Host* and anti-colonial sentiments through the lens of a creature feature

Director and release: Bong Joon-ho, 2006

The Host presents an unconventional mix of drama, horror and humor, luring viewers in under the guise of a simple "creature feature" it is anything but, delivering a blend of overlapping tones and thematic elements that make for a far more rewarding viewing experience instead. The basic premise follows a family trying to rescue their youngest member from the clutches of a fish-like creature that has emerged from the Han River

and started terrorizing the surrounding area. The monster's rampage leads to a section of Soul becoming a quarantine zone through which the family must navigate if they are to rescue their kidnaped relative. Not contempt with delivering only a monster film, Bong packs this simple narrative with his views on colonialism and foreign intervention policies. Views that are immediately apparent from the films first scene. In it we see an American officer ordering a Korean subordinate to dispose of large quantities of Reagent bottles containing harmful chemicals . The reasoning of which being that they are covered in dust, which the American officer hates. The Korean subordinate's objections are shut down and he is shown pouring the chemicals into a sink. While it is never explicitly stated that monster is a result of this irresponsible behavior, it is heavily implied. The scene as a whole can be seen as a comment on foreign powers behaving recklessly and not caring about the consequences of their actions, while stationed in what they view as a lesser country. Taking place in a morgue, the opening frame is covered in a wide shot, establishing the geography of the room as well as the distance between the two characters. The divide that separates them representing not only physical space but also their power gap. The American officer speaks in a reassuring calm tone while the Korean assistant is unsure, only managing to get a few words in before being interrupted. While confronting his superior and noting that the sink leads into the Han River he is told to be "broad minded", and eventually straight out ordered to carry out the deed. Unable to disobey a higher authority he does so. Being forced to commit something he disagrees with, knowing the consequences that could follow. Taking orders from a foreign figure while in his own country, orders that may actively harm his people. All because of something as unsignificant as a layer of dust. Such a scenario is not unique only to Korea, as dominant forces in positions of power tricking or ordering their subjects to commit atrocities against their own people is something found throughout history.

The film's open critique of America is continued in the movies use of news clips, in which the presenters are seen lamenting the deaths of American soldiers or reporting on a soldier that broke his arm while in combat. Even though numerous Koreans lost their lives they are never mentioned on the news, one could interpret this as a poke directed towards the mindset that American lives are more valuable than those of others. The film's themes and political views are best represented by the monster itself. Being the product of reckless behavior by a foreign power, it is something that America created and now cannot contain. Criticizing its trend of intervening in foreign events that only serve to

exacerbate the issues they were trying to solve in the first place. Clearly referencing Korea's past experiences with the USA, the American military are shown as putting up fences, while acting and looking stern, all the while actually not achieving any results. They create a quarantine zone, separating Soul in two while generating more chaos and confusion. They also pit Koreans against each other when informing the populace that the monster carries a highly infectious virus. One of the main characters is presumed to be carrying this virus and as such is hunted not only by the Americans, but also his fellow countrymen, thanks to a bounty upon his head. Evoking Korea's past, the city is divided, its citizens pitted against each other and prosecuted. Both the Americans and the Korean military government control the population. All under the guise of protecting Korean society and its people. It is interesting to see that American powers and Koreas own military are put together, both depicted as oppressors. Eluding to the similarity of Americas occupation as well as the military regimes that strangled the country for decades.

The virus itself is revealed to be a lie, one made to be used as a scare tactic to invoke panic in the populace. This reveal recontextualizes most of the characters trails, as all the hardship in their attempted rescue is arbitrary and unnecessary. In their effort to control the population the governing powers started a chain of events that lead to persecution, societal division and towards the end of the film, demonstrations. Much like the creature the powers above created something that they cannot contain. The creature itself can be seen representing a number of things, but if I would to pin it down to one thing, it would be Korea's turbulent past. It is an uncontrollable entity that comes seemingly out of nowhere only to cause inconceivable damage and loss of life. The films unfavorable depiction of the US and Korean government as well as the creature can be seen as references to restrictive and ineffectual governmental bodies that suffocated Korea for many decades with the creature acting as a manifestation of these regimes, terrorizing society ,snatching people at random moments and separating families from their children. The film even evokes images of the democratization protests of the nineteen eighties, with streets filled with smoke, people holding cardboard signs and hurling Molotov cocktails. Interestingly enough, Darcy Paquet states the family could be seen as representing different periods in Korean history, in his words:

"Each character may also be seen as representing a different decade of Korean history: Hee -bong (Byun Hee-bong), the 1960s patriarch who struggled to raise his family amidst

poverty: Gang-du (Song Kang-ho), who appears mentally affected by the traumas of the 1970s: Nam-il (Park Hae-il), a cocktail throwing veteran of the 1980s student movement, currently drunk and unemployed: Nam-joo (Bae Doo-na), an amateur competitive archer of the subsequent generation who seems unable to realize her significant potential: and the industrious and level headed Hyun Seo (Ko A-sung), a middle school student representing the 2000s who is captured by the monster at the start of the film." - (Darcy Paquet, 2009,106-107)

Borrowing from Paquet's theory, it could be seen as commenting that Korea's past troubles are something that effect each generation with even the youngest member unable to escape from the shadows of the past, as it is her that is snatched away. As is the case with many genre films, the ideological underpinnings on which the story stands can be noted and interpreted or completely ignored. Divorcing the film from its thematic aspects highlights one of its biggest success'. The ability in delivering a commercially appealing product while containing culturally specific content.

8.2 The upper floor: *Parasite*

Director and release: Bong Joon-hoo, 2019

Once again directed by Bong Joon-hoo, Parasite arrived in theaters in 2019 and quickly became something of a cultural phenomenon. Wining several prizes at that year's Academy Awards it has garnered unprecedented commercial and critical acclaim since, with critics calling it one of the best films of the twenty-first century. But what has caused Parasite to receive such a warm reception, what is the secret to its global appeal ? Excluding the obvious response that it is well written, directed and acted, I believe that the answer might be simpler that it would initially seem. Taking place in contemporary Korea, the story follows the Kim family as they start employment for the wealthy Park estate. Being unemployed at the beginning of the film, they sabotage each of the Park's old employees and take their place. They do so while pretending to be unaffiliated with one another, recommending their family members on the basis that they are schoolmates or ex-employees of distant relatives. About half-way through the film, having fully assimilated the Park family, the Kim's start facing the consequences of their actions as a secret regarding the Park's house is revealed. With their charade falling apart and threatened to be exposed, they turn to desperate measures, leading to the story's memorable ending. The films plot about a family trying to escape poverty, working in a house designed by a famous architect while living in one of Korea's sub-basement flats, is simple yet effective thanks to layered social commentary as well as a engaging viewing experience. I believe that the films approachability is one the key aspects in its appeal.

Out of all the films mention in this work I would consider Parasite to be the one with the lowest barrier to entry. Even when comparing it to The Host, it is a more approachable experience. The Host being a genre piece already excludes a large percentage of potential viewers as it features fantastical elements, violence and an overall construction that some may find unappealing. It also mixes horror, comedy and drama in unconventional ways. Creating a tonal field that certain viewers may have trouble navigating. The films heavy investment in exploring the relationship between Korea and the USA also creates more obstacles, as it is a film interested in its themes rather than delivering a monster spectacle. The Host is an acclaimed piece of Korean fiction; however, it is acclaimed for being unconventional and thus not typically appealing. It has several "walls" the viewer can choose to climb in order to fully enjoy the movie. Despite this, it still delivers something

that a wide variety of people can enjoy. Showcasing that Bong Joon-ho understands the balance of commercially viable cinema and niche, genre filmmaking. *Parasite* leans into the former and as a result reaches a far larger audience. Bong's previous experiences on *Snowpiercer (2013)* and *Okja (2017)*, both of which are American co-productions, have seemingly helped him in understanding how to break further through the culture barrier and create something that speaks a universal language more fluently than his previous works. Having not only watched American films, but now actively being a part of them.

This more accessible approach manifests in a number of ways in the films story. Firstly, it introduces its main characters through symbols of universal understanding. WIFI, What's App, pizza boxes are all things that not only Americans, but also most other viewers will recognize. This use of popular iconography and brands is further incorporated once the story shifts to the Park family house, with Indians, Teepees, Scouts and Mercedes Benz. Secondly, the films use of English can be seen as an effort to slightly easy the tension of the language barrier. With several references to American locations like San-Francisco and Illinois and lines like *"Is that ok with you ?"* said in English. Although all the above-mentioned elements also serve a thematic purpose, a thing I will go into later, they ease the viewer into the films story as they are greeted with things they recognize and can understand, visually and verbally. The use of these elements as easing-in tools is further accented by the fact that they are most prominent in the films first half.

On the whole I also feel that the films narrative of class struggle and pursuit of financial stability is universal to any capitalist society and as such is far more relatable. As it isn't an issue specific to Korea, but something that troubles most of the planet. It is a story than transcends culture and language . The film having a more relatable struggle makes the characters themselves more relatable, a thing that is also helped by seeing them contend with everyday problems that everyone can identify with. Having the introductory scene be a desperate search for a wi-fi signal is something that every young person can latch onto. Deepening the familiarity with the characters even further is decision to have the two youngest members of the Kim family be given anglicized names. Even though they are introduced with their "proper" Korean names, they are given the names Mr. Kevin and Jessica once they start working for the Park family. Thought this is once again done for thematic reasons, it is also tied in with the effort to deliver an easily accessible viewing experience. Mr. Kevin and Jessica can be now used as reference points for people unfamiliar with Korean naming conventions. Being able to refer to Mr. Kim as "Jessica's

father" instead of Ki-Taek leads to a less confusing watch. The naming of the families themselves also seems to be deliberately simplified, as Park and Lee, are both understandable and easily remembered, as well as being fairly common.

Taking all this into consideration it is evident that much attention was given to make the film as approachable as possible. It is a piece of fiction that can be fully enjoyed without knowing anything about Korea and its history. It is devoid of the need for context in this sense as anybody living in a modern-day capitalist society is able to understand the socio economical background the film is portraying. They are also able to slot in their own context as its compatible with that of the film's narrative. The post-boom films mentioned in previous chapters delivered excellently constructed features that on the one hand didn't require further knowledge of the socio-political context the film was commenting on. However, being versed in that context greatly enriched the thematic texture and overall message the film was trying to convey. Producing highly appealing, commercially viable movies that attract domestic and foreign audiences is what Korea has become respected for. They are however respected as "Korean movies" that portray Korean people having "Korean problems". They offer something completely different wrapped in a familiar package, that serves as an easily openable window. One that offers a partial view on the country's trials and tribulations. I believe that is why topics such as Korea's national division are so prevalent in high budget productions. As it is both something Korea is still recovering from, and something it is known for. It doesn't need in-depth explanation , the knowledge of the split itself is enough for the viewer not to get lost under films thematic umbrella. It is a delicate balance, one that the Korean film industry has mastered over the past two decades.

Parasite manages to completely side-step all of this by telling a story pertaining to current problems, ones that plague most of the human population. Knowing the situation of Korea's current struggle when it comes to class desperation and wealth disparity definitely strengthens the films overall veracity, but it does so in a much lesser degree than in the previously mentioned films. This is thanks to the film offering the chance to make the viewer project themselves onto the characters and story. Many if not most viewers outside Korea have no frame of reference of the emotional trauma caused by the Korean war and its historical ramifications, as a result there is no room for self-insertion as it isn't something pertaining to them. *Parasite* gains the upper hand in this sense as its themes and story are something that many people can see themselves in. These I believe

are the reasons for Parasite's globe encompassing splash. It is an easily accessible and watchable piece of cinematic storytelling as it occupies itself with not only current "Korean problems" but issues pertaining to the whole of society. This is reflected in its overwhelmingly positive reception. Winning best picture at the Academy Awards was the push over the edge the film needed to become such a phenomenon. The fact that the movie won the all-round "best picture" award and not "best foreign film" points to story's ability to speak to all audiences, as it is no longer a Korean film but simply a film. While these may seem like semantics, I believe that this shift in *Parasite's* reception and perception is instrumental in analyzing the film's success. It may also be assumed that the film sacrifices its Korean identity in order to appeal to the global mainstream, a fact that couldn't be further from the truth.

Analyzing the films thematic threads is most effectively done by determining what each of the two families represent. Starting out with the Kim family, they are unemployed at the start of the film. Living in a sub-basement apartment, their living conditions are reflective of their social status. They have to look up in order to see street level, being below and out of sight from most other people. Occupying a space partially underground they are shown folding pizza boxes to make a few pennies while being surrounded by stink bugs. However, once they are given the opportunity, they are all shown to be skilled in their respective field. Mr. Kevin is a good English teacher, Jessica is skilled in photoshop and art tutoring, Mr. Kim is an excellent driver and Mrs. Kim a efficient housemaid. Their living situation and unemployment status at the start of the film seem to be the result of the societal employment structure more than their own incompetence. They represent the percentage of Korea's population that is unable to find employment despite their skills and education. Unable to navigate the job market and discriminated because of their social status. Given the opportunity to side-step this unwelcoming structure and being employed on the basis of a recommendation they can harness their unique skills an prove to be good workers. This ties in with the naming of the film, and who it is actually referring to. Even though they obtain their jobs through morally debatable means, they are not leeching of the Park family, at the beginning at least. The carry out the job they have been assigned and get compensated. The tasks assigned to them are things the Park family are unable to do or are happy to pay someone to do it for them. It is a fair dynamic, a symbiosis. Only when the Park family leave for a camping trip and the Kim's take advantage of their empty house, sleeping in the living room and

drinking expensive alcohol, does the dynamic shift to something parasitic. When the Park's unexpectedly return early from their camping trip because of heavy rain, the Kim's are forced to sneak out of the estate and return to their sub-basement apartment. Only to find in completely flooded by the torrential rain. Once the Kim's decide to cross the line and leech off the Parks, is when everything turns on them. They are forced both out of their working home as well as their apartment. They are washed away in the rain like parasites being flushed out by an organism defending itself. The parasite has been found and destroyed, no longer serving a symbiotic function.

The Park family represent the direct opposite of the Kim's. They are incredibly wealthy and living in architect designed house that is full of space, perched up high above the Kim's sub-basement apartment. Having amassed such wealth thanks to Mr. Parks company, Mrs. Park is unemployed and cares for the children at home. Filling in the trophy house-wife trope, she is attractive while being fairly incompetent. Unable to cook and accomplish basic housework, she is described as being *"young and simple"* by one of the characters. The Parks represent Korea's financial elite, a family that can live their life peacefully without worrying about every-day survival. Their children have rooms bigger that the entirety of the Kim's apartment. They occupy a three-layered space, with two floors and a basement. Whereas the Kim's only occupy one that is partially underground. They also represent a family that has fully embraced globalization. Mr. Park owns a company developing mapping technology, one that is shipped to America, as shown in an article with the headline *"Nathan Park hits Central Park"*. He has amassed his wealth thanks to exporting his technology overseas, eluding to Korea's prominent role as a technology-savvy exporting giant. The globalization theme continues in the films use of cultural import. The Park's son is an avid Native American fanatic. As such he is seen wearing traditional Native American headgear, shooting a bow and arrow as well as having a Teepee. All of which have been imported from America. They are also shown as embracing foreign pass-time activities, with their son attending the Scouts and the whole family going on a camping trip. They are a fully Americanized family, as accented by the want for their daughter to be fluent in English, giving the Kim children English aliases and Mrs. Kim using English phrases. She herself can be seen as a product of an Americanized capitalist society, as she has no job, real responsibilities and is shown to fall asleep during the day while the housemaid takes care of the house. A thing often seen depicted through American reality shows.

The clash of these two families can be seen as a comment regarding Korea's current status as a capitalist, globalized society. With the family taking active part in the globalization process being wealthy, while skilled "regular workers" are faced with near poverty. This is extended through the films comment on social class. As people in lower classes are forced to fight for scraps while the elite revel in their lavish lifestyles. And although the Parks are not villainized , they are shown as out of touch with regular people and tolerating the Kims as long as they stay *"in line"*. This lined is crossed with the Kims having a distinctive smell, one that is a result of their living situation. Once again, a comment on the class rift separating the two families. I would say that this is most accented in the differing impact the massive rainstorm has on the two families. The Parks are unaffected by it, with it being nothing more than in inconvenience that ruined their camping trip. Living high up, they slept through the whole night , with even their son managing to fall asleep in his Teepee that he has set up in the garden. Once they wake up, the rain is gone, and the sun is shining, their lives continue on its normal path. Leading them to organize a birthday party for their son. This is in stark contrast to the Kim's, who lose everything and are sheltered in a gym along with other survivors. Once the rain stops their lives are in ruins as the only material wealth they had got destroyed in the flood. The situation is best described thus: the rain forces the Parks to go back home while the Kim's are forced out of it. They are then called in to assist with the party, that leads to the films unexpectedly violent finale.

Partway through the film, while the Parks are on their camping trip, it is revealed that there is a hidden sub-section in the house's basement. Hidden behind a cupboard and made accessible by the previous housemaid, it is also revealed that her husband has been secretly living in this hidden compartment for the past four years. Through a series of events the Kim family find themselves fighting the wife and husband duo and eventually tying them up in in the hidden sub-section. During the films finale the husband manages to escape, pommel Mr. Kevin with a stone and stab Jessica in the chest. He himself is then impaled on a hot dog spike. Seeing his daughter collapse and gushing blood, Mr. Kim rushes to her side only to be ordered to throw the car keys to Mr. Park who is trying to escape. The keys land under the impaled husband and as Mr. Park stretches out to grab them, he covers his nose as the impaled husband is emitting the same smell as the Kims. Seeing this Mr. Kim grabs a knife and stabs his former employer, killing him at his son's birthday party. Realizing what he has done he flees from the party and escapes into the

hidden sub-section, where he is hidden, but also trapped. Going upstairs to get supplies only when the new owners of the house are away. Unaware of the hidden subsection, they are oblivious to Mr. Kim's presence in their home. He is feeding of someone without their knowledge. Thus, becoming a fully-fledged parasite.

The film's title can be seen as referring to two things, both of which pertain to living in a capitalist structure. Firstly, it could be interpreted through the character of Mr. Kim. Unable to navigate the capitalist structure and pitted against other members in his social class he lashes out against someone who is higher in the capitalist hierarchy, someone who is partially to blame for the desperation he is facing. Driven to desperate actions he is someone who can't escape the stigma around his social class. It is something that follows him, in this case literary, like a smell. Unable to contend with all this, he chooses the life of a barricaded of hermit, who leeches of someone who won't even notice that they are being stolen from, as they are enveloped in resources. He becomes a parasite as it is the easiest solution. Secondly, the parasite might be capitalism itself. Draining the life force out of its subjects and exploiting the inbuilt hardwiring of survival that each of us possess. The husband living in the hidden subsection is seen worshipping Mr. Park as he is the embodiment of capitalism, wealthy and attractive. He is also someone housing this uninvited guest. The husband is both driven out of society and then saved by the current social structure. It is Ironic then that he is killed with a hot dog spike, which itself a is a capitalist product. Without driving this metaphor too far into the ground his entire boy is pierced by the representation of the social structure he was trying to escape from. These two interpretations go hand in hand, capitalism breeds parasites as it is itself is a parasite.

Attention should also be given to the film's technical construction. Viewing the black and white version leads to certain scenes strongly evoking *Aimless Bullet*. Not surprising given both films themes and depictions of poverty ridden streets. It also highlights the film subtle horror elements, such as the husband peeking out of the hidden sub-section, which is a scene that is particularly effective thanks to this color scheme. Also effective is the sequence in which the Kims must descend down to their apartment while being bombarded with torrential rain. The films altered color scheme helps to articulate the family's descent into a claustrophobic, flooded hellscape. It is during this sequence that Bong's horror proclivities are accented the most. The film effortlessly transitions from a tone that is darkly humorous to pure existential dread. As the claustrophobic streets filled

narrow stairways and telephone cables begin to get soaked in unending tirade of piercing rain, the reality of the Kims living situation is brought to the forefront. Their small apartment is completely flooded, becoming a trench through which, they must navigate to save at least some of their belongings. The shot of Jessica siting on a toilet in their flooded bathroom, smoking a cigarette while the toilet spews out black water is as haunting as it is effective in portraying the existential hardship of living in such a space.

The films direction in general is well considered , with the film feeling like a guided tour. An exhibition that shows that Korea is also struggling with the same problems as the rest of the world. It does so while offering something that is welcoming to complete welcomers of foreign film, being purposely designed to be as easily approachable as possible, while still having a rich thematic undercurrent that will attract fans of Korean cinema. In some ways the film almost feels like its making fun of the cinephile, interpretation heavy discourse surrounding Korean cinema, with Mr. Kevin repeatedly saying the phrase *"This is so metaphorical"*. The film seems to be aware of Korea's status as a critical daring, mainly among cinema buffs. It also seems to want to shake the status of Korean films only being for cinephiles using the methods mentioned above. I would not call this a dilution but rather a further tweaking of the Korean formula. As mentioned in a previous chapter, the art of adaptation is one of Korean cinemas defining traits, one that has ensured its survival. In many ways the journey of Korean cinema mirrors that of the films characters. Ascending from a restrictive and utilitarian basement, that is easily flooded and unnoticed by most people, to a sun-soaked, thoughtfully built estate that is a source of wonderment and want. *Parasite's* success and securing of several Academy Awards signify that the industry has reached the top floor. Bathing in the warmth of the international spotlight, it has been afforded a piece of land on which it can build and present its unique real-estate. What started out as a struggling domestic scene, with no real room to expand and form its own identity is now a globally recognized juggernaut with its own stylings and traits. It is internationally acclaimed and respected, reaching casual and dedicated audiences alike. The question then being, what's next ?

Conclusion

Concluding this work, I like to think of Korean Cinema's development as a journey. A journey of struggle and survival, embracement and emancipation. Chronicling the industries history as well Korea's hardships over the past century has helped me to understand the influences that have shaped Korea and its film industry. Being the subject of decades of cultural and societal oppression has led to a severely traumatized society. One that was up until recently unable to cope with its turbulent past as the restrictive regime holding it in its grasp considered it a taboo topic. It has also showed me that the film industry was a heavily controlled space, used as a propaganda tool by political bodies. With each of its aspects from pre-production, filming and distribution being subjugated under the watchful eye of the current regime. It was unable to expand and organically grow as it was tied to the country's unstable political nature. Its inability to fully take root was further expand by the prevailing popularity of imported Hollywood movies. As such, it is commendable that the industry endured such harsh conditions and managed to survive. Analyzing the films presented showcases that there has always been a need to interpret Korea's socio-political troubles through an artistic medium. Both *Aimless Bullet* and *Rice* illustrate the two differing roles that film has served through out Korean history. *Rice* acts as piece of endorsement propaganda that serves to legitimize the new, forcefully established military regime. *Aimless Bullet* on the other hand functions as an artistic interpretation of post-war Korean society, one that aims to reflect its troubles through the lens of artistic construction. Film acted both as a means of cultural oppression and as a defense against it. I believe that Korea's inability to fully ruminate and interpret its problematic history was one of the main reasons in preventing it from embracing it. As the years of pent-up frustration, anger and sadness created a societal powder keg of repressed emotions. One that exploded when given the chance during the democratization of Korean in the nineteen nineties. As such, it is not surprising that once given the opportunity, film was used as a form of emancipation from Korea's historical shackles. Having at least partially embraced the events that have shaped it, the industry was able to harness the veracity of said events and weave it into an artistic medium. Presenting them in a unique fashion not only to Korean audiences that are able to relive and reinterpret their own history, but also to foreign viewers who are given an opportunity of witnessing the inner workings and history of a different culture.

Korea's relationship with America, specifically Hollywood, is interesting to say the least. With America being the first to introduce the medium of film in Korea and planting the insatiable lust for Hollywood movies, it can be seen as the progenitor of Korean Cinema as well as its biggest enemy. With the power struggle between them raging for decades. Ironically enough, it is thanks to Hollywood that Korean film managed to survive and become such a phenomenon. As the embracement of its filmmaking and storytelling techniques saved the industry from collapsing. *Parasite* completes the circle in this sense, as it has earned numerous American awards on American soil. Signifying that the struggle is official over, and the two industries can coexist as Korea finds itself in the same position as Hollywood, exporting its cultural goods all over the globe. In many ways the story of Korea and its film industry is incredibly human. Surviving its traumatic past, it has managed to embrace it and harness the emotional residue left in its wake. It has also learned from past mistakes and used them to build a stronger, better self. One that is able to flourish and enjoy its newly found freedom. There is also the issue of Korea's national division. A tragedy that is so deeply rooted in emotional and nationalistic pain that navigating it has proven to be quite difficult. However, as *The Man with Three Coffins*, *Shiri* and *JSA* show, there has been a clear shift in perception when it comes to North Korea and its people. It is an ongoing process of cultural and societal adjustment, one that will take many more generations to come. On the whole the current success the industry is enjoying can be credited to decades of growing pains and a constant need to adapt. This has resulted in a flexible and mature industry that is able to fully engage with the unique creative voices fueling it. And while Korea's current status as a technological and cultural exporting giant, may lead to the assumption that has always been the case. A dive into Korean history reveals that the opposite is the case. As the saying goes, Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither was the Korean film industry.

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