



Film Reviews

MONSTER AND EMPIRE:

Bong Joon-ho's *The Host* (2006) and the Question of Anti-Americanism

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From the kinetic espionage blockbuster *Shiri* (1999) to the brutal combat film *Tae Guk Gi: The Brotherhood of War* (2004), several of the most high-profile box-office hits in South Korea have failed to garner commercial success or critical attention in the United States. Instead, the works of international festival favorites Kim Ki-duk (director of *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . and Spring* [2003] and *3-Iron* [2004]) and Park Chan-wook (of *Oldboy* [2003] fame) remain the most widely praised examples of Korean auteurism. One notable exception to what appears to be an American indifference to Korean blockbusters is the unprecedented widespread interest generated by the highest-grossing South Korean film of all time, director Bong Joon-ho's 2006 monster movie *The Host*, which garnered 13 million admissions in a country of approximately 49 million.

It is not surprising that this particular film drew the attention of American audiences over a raft of other Korean blockbusters, which thematize inter-Korean relations and national division and which spill over with excessively melodramatic premises and culturally-specific political allusions. The latter elements might be alienating or confusing to non-

Korean audiences, many of whom are unfamiliar with the tragic touchstones of modern Korean history. By contrast, as both a black comedy and an ecological disaster movie featuring a monstrously large amphibian wreaking havoc along the Han River in Seoul as well as a dysfunctional family unit struggling to remain intact amidst the attacks, *The Host* mixes a variety of stylistic flourishes and narrative conventions drawn from Hollywood genre films, from Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) to Jonathan Dayton's *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006). Moreover, not since director Bae Chang-ho's *Deep Blue Night* (1985)—the highest-grossing domestic film of the 1980s, one that depicts the disillusionment of illegal immigrants in Los Angeles—has a contemporary Korean motion picture so prominently featured Americans and evoked an idea of what “America” is (or, rather, what many Koreans might believe America to be, drawing on concepts traditionally linked to its globally disseminated national character).

The film not only won accolades but also aroused controversy in South Korea as well as the United States, but for very different reasons. At home, debates sprang up around the issue of market diversification, since this special effects-driven blockbuster was saturation-released by Showbox Entertainment in a record number of theaters (and was shown on 620 screens, forty percent of the total number in South Korea). Several industry personnel and movie critics voiced concern about the possible negative effects such distribution strategies might have on Korean film culture, with the survival of small, art-house films (including those of Kim Ki-duk and Hong Sang-soo, darlings of European and U.S. cinephiles) being uncertain. Following its stateside premiere at the AFI Fest in Los Angeles in November 2006, *The Host* was likewise criticized on the other side of the Pacific by a few critics and bloggers, not because it was perceived to be “monopolizing” Korean screens but, rather, due to its alleged anti-American content.

Supporting evidence for this anti-American allegation can be found in the film's prologue scene, set six years prior to the narrative's time period, in the United States Forces Korea



Figure 1: A mutant creature created by the U.S. military's environmental crime in The Host (2006)

(USFK) Headquarters in Yongsan (located in central Seoul). The incident depicted in this opening scene is based on a true environmental crime committed in 2000 by Albert McFarland, an American mortician-USFK employee. In February of that year, McFarland forced his Korean underling, against the latter's protest, to dump 480 large bottles of past-its-prime formaldehyde down a drain leading to the Han River. McFarland ended up as headline fodder and landed in a Korean court, where he was given a two-year suspended sentence. The U.S. military's protection of McFarland (who retained his job at USFK despite the scandal) and the mortician's dismissive attitude toward the country's court system demonstrated by his absence from the first trial (he only showed up for the appeal) further enraged Korean citizens. In a manner that recalls the original 1954 Japanese monster movie *Godzilla* (*Gojira*, directed by Ishiro Honda), Americans are depicted as being responsible for unleashing a giant, mutated animal on an unsuspecting populace, destroying—if only by proxy—the lives of innocent Asian civilians. While the radioactive Japanese monster *Gojira* is awakened as a result of the American H-bomb test, in *The Host* the enormous catfish-lizard—a fearsome carnivore that feeds on human flesh—emerges out of the Han River, which has been contaminated by toxic embalming chemicals originating from the U.S. Army base.



Figure 2: A sinister, distorted face of U.S. technological imperialism

Even if the first American character to appear in *The Host* is based on a real person (McFarland), one can reasonably argue that the film does indeed feature grossly caricatured representations that—in their excessiveness—exceed the requirements of genre storytelling, including a cross-eyed mad scientist who, halfway through the story, tampers with the quarantined Korean protagonist’s brain under the pretext of finding a virus spread by the mutant. Perhaps most heavy-handed is Bong’s inclusion of a sinister conspiracy plot involving the U.S. military, which spreads false rumors about a virus and sprays toxic chemicals (not so subtly named “Agent Yellow”) alongside the Han River so as to cover up its own culpability. The United States government is portrayed as an irresponsible, puppet-string-pulling imperial power that unilaterally interferes with South Korea’s domestic affairs and determines the fate of ordinary citizens during *their* time of national crisis. It is even suggested, near the end of the film, that the U.S. military is (mis)using Koreans as scientific test subjects. That scene shows “Agent Yellow” being dumped onto a group of demonstrating citizens who have gathered along the river to protest the U.S. deployment of chemicals and whose biological response (bleeding from their ears and noses) is closely monitored by American scientists in protective suits. This plotline, tracing the U.S. government’s pursuit of its own national interests under false pretenses, offers

up a thinly veiled political satire on the American invasion of WMD-free Iraq.

In order to fathom just how insidiously deep the so-called “anti-Americanism” of the film seeps into the pores of certain thin-skinned reviewers, it is necessary to contextualize its themes within the larger history of Korean-American relations. Although limited space prevents a thorough assessment of this topic, it benefits us to at least survey a few pivotal events that had detrimental effects on many Koreans’ perception of the United States government and military. The first American betrayal of Korea took place in July 1905, when President Theodore Roosevelt sanctioned the Japanese control of Korea in exchange for the U.S.’s monopoly in the Philippines (through the Taft-Katsura Memorandum). After nearly four decades of apathy toward Korean affairs, the East Asian country had resurfaced onto the map of American foreign policy by the time the Truman administration proposed to the leaders of the Soviet Union an arbitrary division of the peninsula on the eve of the Japanese surrender in August 1945. The ostensible purpose of the division was to disarm the Japanese in the two separate occupational zones, but the real reason was America’s fear about losing Korea altogether to Soviet influence. The subsequent failure of the Joint Soviet-American Commission to reach an agreement on the question of reunification led to the 1948 establishment of two separate, ideologically opposing regimes (the Republic of Korea in the south and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in the north) following three-year American military rule of the southern half of the peninsula. As the Cold War historian Bruce Cumings puts it, the Republic of Korea was “more an American creation than any other postwar regime in Asia . . . [and the United States] is the country that has defined South Korea’s existence since 1945” (Preface xxvi, xxix).

The most common interaction between Americans and Koreans since 1945 has been that between U.S. military personnel and their local subordinates. In Hollywood’s Korean War films (such as Samuel Fuller’s *The Steel Helmet* [1951] and Douglas

Sirk's *Battle Hymn* [1957]) and the long-running CBS dramedy *M*A*S*H* (1972–1983), American military personnel are often represented as benevolent saviors of South Korean men, women, and children. What is omitted in this self-congratulatory representation is the darker side of South Korea's protectors. In fact, in several contemporary South Korean films set during the war (such as *Silver Stallion* [1990] and *Spring in My Hometown* [1998]), American G.I.s are portrayed negatively as rapists, womanizers, or even killers. The rape or sexual exploitation of Korean women by American soldiers during and after the war is a recurring theme in Resistance literature and the New Wave cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, which benefited from relaxed political censorship in the wake of partial democratization in the late 1980s. One real-life case in particular—the brutal rape and murder of a bar woman, Yun Kum-i, by Private Kenneth Markle in 1992—sparked nationwide rage and protests against U.S. military. More recently, an explosion of nationalistic rage reoccurred after two fourteen-year-old Korean schoolgirls had been killed by a U.S. military minesweeping vehicle in June 2002 and the two American soldiers responsible for the accident were acquitted of negligent homicide charges by a lenient military jury (under the State of Forces Agreement [SOFA], U.S. soldiers stationed in South Korea are immune from criminal prosecution in Korean courts).

The director of *The Host*, Bong Joon-ho, attended college between 1988 and 1992 in a transitional period when many democratic reforms were being introduced, gradually putting a halt to three-decade-long military dictatorships and giving way to new civil rule. As a Sociology major attending Yonsei University and as a student activist, Bong viewed U.S. military hegemony in South Korea critically, adopting a jaundiced position informed by events of the recent past, including the Kwangju Uprising of May 1980 (a massacre of an estimated 2,000 revolting citizens in the city of Kwangju by Chun Doo Hwan's military regime). More than any other, that event is responsible for the rise of anti-Americanism in South Korea, due largely to the U.S. government's alleged backing of Chun's

operation (on the grounds that General John Wickham Jr., U.S. Commander of the Joint Forces, authorized the release of some ROK Army units under his control for the crackdown in Kwangju). As a film director, Bong has a more personal reason to be resentful of U.S. cultural imperialism, despite his professed infatuation with Hollywood cinema since childhood. As of July 2006, the same month that *The Host* was released, the Screen Quota system—a domestic film protection policy which required exhibitors to show local films 146 days a year—was halved, unleashing fierce protests within the Korean film industry and among civic groups as the Korean government succumbed to Washington’s ongoing “free trade” pressure (to protect Hollywood’s interests in the tenth largest market for American movies).

Regardless of this circumstantial evidence pointing to anti-American biases, *The Host* is a nuanced film whose ideological stance is not a simplistic jeremiad or one-note song, in the way that many Hollywood blockbusters and television shows are (examples range from Michael Bay’s *Armageddon* [1998] to the Fox ticking-clock series *24* [2001–2010], in which middle-class white male protagonists serve as saviors of the entire communities and even the nation/world). Bong’s film features unlikely heroes, focusing on the misadventures of the dysfunctional Park clan. At the head of the family is the habitually melodramatic grandfather, a survivor of the Korean War who lived through decades of military authoritarianism, and who attempts to solve crises by resorting to “old-school” (anachronistic) methods, including bribery. Nam-il is a hard-drinking former student activist, whose revolutionary fervor has morphed into a general disillusionment with Seoul’s materialistic society. His sister, Nam-joo, is an Olympic Bronze medalist, a professional archer whose boyish femininity does not adhere to conservative gender ideals. Completing the clan is Hyun-seo, a thirteen-year old girl, and Gwang-du, her father, a dim-witted snack vendor who plies his trade along the riverside and who initially seems to have no purpose in life beyond eating and sleeping. His paternal instincts are awakened, however,



Figure 3: The spoofed heroism of a self-aggrandizing American protector, Donald

when his precocious child is grabbed by the monster and deposited into a sewer where she is stored, like human prey, for later feasting.

Although the United States' military-industrial complex remains a kind of spectral background presence in *The Host*, the film satirizes various functions of Korean society—its government, its police, its media outlets, its corporate-run health care providers, and even its political activists and civil groups—all of whom are equally ineffectual, untrustworthy, and bumbling during a time of crisis. It is noteworthy that Bong strategically places a minor yet sympathetic American character into the fray: Donald, who bravely fights off the monstrous creature (with the help of Gwang-du) and manages to save a few Koreans trapped in a trailer. But this positive American image registers as a spoof of sorts, tweaking Hollywood's self-aggrandizing proclivity to depict white male rescuers in Third World contexts. Bong's quiet yet acute cynicism about South Korea's own submissive attitude toward its neocolonial master is seen in an onscreen television news report in the midpoint of the film, lionizing the heroism of Donald (who subsequently dies after losing his arm) with no mention of Gwang-du, the working-class hero who has equally contributed to the dangerous mission.

In his August 11, 2006, interview with the Korean newspaper *Chosun Daily*, Bong Joon-ho posed a provocative question: “If Hollywood can constantly depict other nations as villains, then why can’t the U.S. become the object of satire in the films of other nations?” Rhetorical though it might be, his inquiry assumes legitimacy in light of persistent negative stereotypes of Koreans on the big and small screen, from ruthless North Korean communists in John Frankenheimer’s *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and superstitious farmers in numerous *M*A*S*H* episodes to rude, mercenary Korean American merchants in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and Amy Sherman-Palladino’s *Gilmore Girls* (2000–07). In his November 1, 2006, interview with *The Los Angeles Times*, Bong further defended his film by stating, “The movie makes many comments on the U.S. presence in Korea but I think U.S. audiences will actually enjoy it . . . After all, my movie is just entertainment, fun. It’s about a monster. And the political message is very soft, especially compared with your own movies, like *Fahrenheit 9/11*” (Wallace).

Despite Bong’s modesty, *The Host* is not simply popcorn entertainment but a clever sociopolitical satire disguised as a Hollywood-style monster movie (complete with CGI-effects supplied by the San Francisco-based company Orphanage). One of the funniest scenes in the film occurs after the first monster attack, when a public funeral is held for family members of victims and the Parks—grandfather, father, uncle, and aunt—mistakenly believe that Hyun-seo has been killed by the monster (at this point, both the family and the audience are led to believe that the girl is dead). A high-angle shot captures the writhing bodies of the four bereaved adults, who cry hysterically and roll around uncontrollably on the floor. When I screened *The Host* at a Korean film festival at Hamilton College a few years ago, an audience member approached me after the projection to ask if this scene of absurd humor represented a typical Korean sentiment. At that moment I realized that what this film satirizes is not only the greed of U.S. imperialism and the impotency of the Korean government as well as its law



Figure 4: A high-angle shot of exaggerated bereavement mocks the emotional excess of Korean melodrama.

enforcement agents, but also the excessive sentimentality associated with melodrama, a genre which often alienates my students. In another scene, one set at night in the food shack where the Parks rest after a futile attempt to find the monster, the old patriarch tells a tearful story of his youth, a time of poverty and hardship, to his indifferent adult children, who are seen dozing off in comic (non)reaction shots. His tale is the kind that overtly conjures up the Korean national sentiment of *han*—the deep-rooted sadness deriving from prolonged injustice and oppression. The old man's story provides a meta-narrative of Korean melodrama, one that would be familiar to viewers of veteran director Im Kwon-Taek's *Gilsottum* (1985) and *Sopyonje* (1993). South Korean cinema has indeed come a long way since the release of those films, arriving at a point where filmmakers are now able to reflect upon the medium's history in a critical fashion.

Debating whether or not *The Host* is anti-American is in some ways an imperialistic approach, one that necessitates unpacking the Korean text from a U.S.-centric perspective. When one pays closer attention to the underlying messages and themes of Bong's film, both the reptile monster (the invader) and the American empire (the official defender) turn out to

be Hitchcockian McGuffins designed to distract the audience's attention from deeper collective anxieties, doubts, and contradictions of a young civil democracy in the shadows of its not-so-distant authoritarian past.

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