Article

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Bong Joon-ho, Cinephilia and Post-1990s New Korean Cinema

Bong Joon-ho

February 9, 2020 was truly a historic night at the Oscars. Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*/Gisaeng-chung (2019) won four Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, Best International Feature Film and Best Original Screenplay, thus concluding a highly successful global award season. Its sweep at the 92nd Academy Awards signified the first non-English language film to win the coveted award of Best Picture; and quite surprisingly, the first South Korean film ever to have been nominated in any category at the Oscars in its century old cinema history. For the author, who has been teaching contemporary Korean cinema as a standalone undergraduate course from 2014 onwards at an American film school, and thereafter in India, the recognition was long-overdue, and a perplexing, and frustratingly lengthy wait had ended at long last. An underrated, overlooked film industry had finally stepped out of the shadows of more established and internationally celebrated cinemas of Japan, Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. It may be argued that South Korean cinema (or K-Cinema) had been overshadowed by K-Pop (epitomized by the BTS phenomenon and its fanatic 'A.R.M.Y' fandom), and the much-loved television dramas, popularly known as K-dramas, although due to the 'Hallyu' wave,[1] Korean popular culture was not entirely unknown in various multicultural American cities of Los Angeles, Chicago and New York, and to its millennial and Gen Z populations that are voracious consumers of East Asian pop culture.

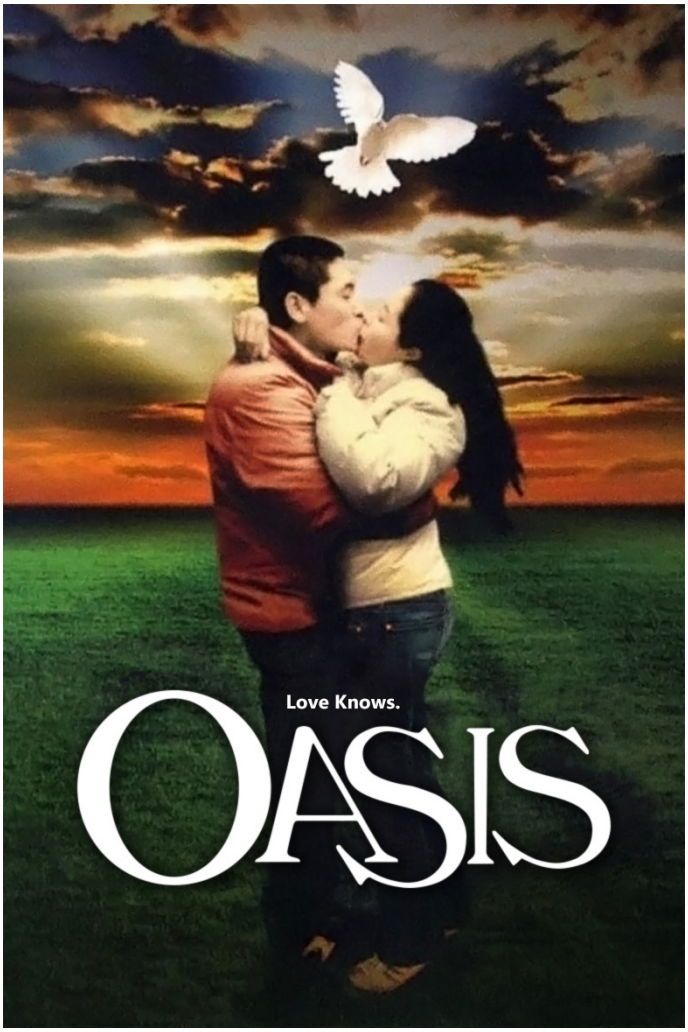
Multiple cinephilias were invoked and celebrated on this momentous occasion. It is particularly noteworthy that Miky Lee, vice-chair and scion of the mighty South Korean conglomerate (aka *chaebol*) CJ Group, and executive producer of *Parasite*, made it a point to thank the South Korean film audience for pushing them: "I really, really, really want to thank our Korean film audience, all moviegoers whose [sic] been really supporting all our

movies and never hesitated to give a straightforward opinion on what they feel like their movies and that made us really never be able to be complacent and keep pushing the directors, the creators, keep pushing the envelopes and without you, our Korean film audience, we are not here…" Considered the grandmother of South Korean entertainment, Lee "built the country's first movie multiplex, invested in DreamWorks and has since grown a diverse, $4.1 billion entertainment empire that helped launch a generation of filmmakers including Bong Joon Ho" (Sun, Hollywood Reporter). She drew attention to one of the most distinctive and significant aspects of Korean cinema of the last two decades – a cine-literate, youth-driven audience, bred on non-linear narrative based, interactive video gaming culture, who demanded diverse, edgy, provocative film content that consistently challenged, if not exceeded, their expectations and fed their insatiable desire for cutting edge, technically sophisticated film narratives featuring high production values and unpredictable plot points, described by eminent scholar of Korean Cinema, Jinhee Choi as "the well-made film" in her ground-breaking 2010 book *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs*. It would be remiss not to mention producer Lee's own cinephilia. In Bong Joon-ho's words (henceforth Bong), "Vice chair Lee herself is a huge fan of film, TV and music […] She's a true cinephile who's watched so many films and managed to bring over that fanatic passion to the world of business." According to her: "I used to carry DVDs and go to Warners, Universal, Fox, anybody I had a chance with, and pitch Korean film, Korean film, Korean film…" and that persistence paid rich dividends on Oscar night (Sun, Hollywood Reporter).

Parasite

Typical of auteurs, Bong, a graduate of the prestigious Korean Academy of Film Arts (KAFA), established in 1984 by the Korean Film Council as a cradle for highly trained and creative professionals, is a self-proclaimed cinephile and an avid student of film history. In his childhood, and as a youth obsessed with movies, he watched American cinema and 'B' genre movies at night when his family was asleep on the American Forces Korea Network, the U.S. military's television channel that was broadcast for American troops stationed in bases across South Korea, including Daegu, Bong's birthplace (Klein 2008: 877). Therefore, it came as no surprise when, on winning the Academy Award for Best Director, he graciously gestured towards two of his co-nominees in the audience, two masters of filmmaking, Martin Scorsese, whose films Bong had grown up admiring, and Quentin Tarantino, who had over the years played a catalytic role in popularising East Asian Cinema, and specifically Korean Cinema, among niche North American audiences and film schools. In 2007, Scorsese had founded the World Cinema Project whose mission was to "expand the horizons of moviegoers everywhere…to preserve and present marginalized and infre-

quently screened films from regions generally ill equipped to preserve their own cinema history" (DVD back cover). One such restoration project undertaken was the 1960s classic Golden Age film, by the legendary South Korean filmmaker Kim Ki-young (1921-98), titled *The Housemaid* (and released by the exclusive Blu-ray/DVD label Criterion Collection) whose visual and narrative influences on *Parasite* Bong repeatedly mentions in interviews, and is a reason for its recently released black and white version.



Oasis (2002)

Much like his illustrious American compatriot, Tarantino too played his part in the promotion of Korean cinema overseas – under his aegis as chairperson of the Grand Jury Prize at the 2004 Cannes International Film Festival, Bong's close friend and New Wave contemporary, Park Chan-wook was awarded the Grand Prix for *Oldboy* (2003) which became a crucial turning point in the history of contemporary Korean Cinema. The film would subsequently become a cult classic with a devoted international following, and labelled, rather problematically, as "Extreme Cinema" by the UK based distribution company, Tartan. In the years thereafter, Tarantino would share the stage with Bong in an hour-long Open Talk session at the 2013 Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) simply because Tarantino had been "blown away" by Bong's disaster monster movie *The Host* (2006) and wanted to meet him. BIFF is East Asia's most high-profile international film festival that has successfully launched and showcased the burgeoning careers of many New Wave filmmakers, better known as the "386 Generation," that included Lee Chang-dong, Hong Sang-soo, Park Chan-wook, Kim Ki-duk, Kim Jee-woon and Bong Joon-ho. They had all begun their directorial careers when they were in their 30s, attended college in the turbulent 1980s, and were born in the 1960s, hence the acronym '386.' According to a news report in *Meniscus* magazine, Tarantino had made the following prescient observation: "I felt that of all the filmmakers out there that I've seen in the last 20 (sic) years, Bong has that thing that '70s [Steven] Spielberg had where he can do many different types of stories. But no matter the type of story, there's always this level of comedy and entertainment that is there" (Chan 2013). How ironic in hindsight because it could so easily have been a comment on *Parasite*, the film that seven years later would deny Tarantino his first Academy Awards for Best Director and Best Picture!

From the mid-1990s onwards, K-cinema was regularly setting international film festival and art-house circuits ablaze and winning major awards. In 2002, the "National Director," Im Kwon-taek, one of South Korea's most respected and prolific filmmakers with more than a hundred films to his name, was awarded Best Director for the period biopic

Chihwaseon/*Painted Fire* at the Cannes Film Festival. The prolific art-house auteur and festival favourite, Hong Sang-soo won the Cannes Prix Un Certain Regard for *Hahaha* in 2010, besides being the recipient of major awards over the years at the Locarno, Rotterdam, Seattle, San Sebastian, Singapore and Tokyo International Film Festivals. Lee Chang-dong, who served as South Korea's Minister of Culture and Tourism from 2003 to 2004, won major festival awards that included the Silver Lion for Best Director and Fipresci International Critics' Prize at the 2002 Venice Film Festival for the remarkable *Oasis* (2002), and the Best Screenplay Award at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival for *Poetry*. In October 2006, Lee was awarded with the Chevalier (Knight) order of the Legion d'Honneur (Legion of Honor) by the French government for «his contribution to maintaining the screen quota to promote cultural diversity as a cultural minister." He also won the award for Achievement in Directing at the 4th Asia Pacific Screen Awards in 2017, Jury Grand Prize at the 2018 Asia Pacific Screen Awards, Best Director and Lifetime Achievement Award at the 13th Asian Film Awards in 2019. His latest film, *Burning* (2018), a psychological thriller which could be interpreted as a precursor to *Parasite* in terms of its thematic content of scathing critique of capitalism and class-based discrimination, became the first Korean film to make it to the 91st Academy Awards' final nine-film shortlist for Best Foreign Language Film. *Burning* also won the Fipresci International Critics' Prize at the 71st Cannes Film Festival, Best Foreign Language Film in Los Angeles Film Critics Association, and Best Foreign Language Film in Toronto Film Critics Association. The polarizing and idiosyncratic films of Kim Ki-duk won numerous accolades, namely, the Golden Lion at 69th Venice International Film Festival for *Pietà* (2012), the Silver Lion for Best Director at 61st Venice International Film Festival for *Empty Houses/3-Iron* (2004), the Silver Bear for Best Director at 54th Berlin International Film Festival for *Samaria*/*Samaritan Girl* (2004) and the Un Certain Regard prize at 2011 Cannes Film Festival for *Arirang* (2011).

The Isle (2000)

Therefore, contemporary South Korean cinema was already a force to reckon with among niche audiences that comprised of festival filmgoers, critics, scholars and cinephiles (especially of East Asian cinema), film school majors, and transnational horror and cult fans. For instance, those who voraciously devoured Takashi Mike developed a taste for Kim Ki-duk's sadomasochistic, minimalist film, *The Isle* (2000), and Park Chan-wook's critically acclaimed yet polarizing Vengeance Trilogy (comprising of *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, Old Boy and Sympathy for Lady*

Vengeance) and his subsequent supernatural horror flick, *Thirst* (2009), routinely damned by mainstream film press as "nihilistic" for its unapologetic, seemingly gratuitous, visceral violence; lack of faith in humanity and Christian values; and depiction of human perversions. In 2008, film scholar Christina Klein observed that she had chosen to write on the South Korean film industry because it was, "…after Hollywood, perhaps the most important in the world today. Over the last decade it has engineered an unparalleled commercial resurgence, producing a steady stream of popular and critically acclaimed films that have overturned Hollywood's decades-long domination of Korea's screens. As a result, Korea has become a beacon for film industry executives from around the world who are eager to reduce Hollywood's economic presence in their own markets. Bong Joon-ho's films have played a vital role in the industry's rebirth: *Memories of Murder* out-earned all Hollywood imports in 2003…while *The Host* [was] the highest-grossing movie ever released in Korea, foreign or domestic, and was seen by more than a quarter of the country's population" (872). However, it is *Parasite's* recognition by the Academy of Motion Pictures, Arts and Sciences that has officially announced the arrival of South Korean Cinema on the global stage for mainstream Euro-American audiences who may struggle to "…overcome the one-inch tall barrier of subtitles" that Bong wittily alluded to in his speech whilst accepting the Golden Globe award for Best Foreign-Language Film on January 5, 2020.

This baffling delay in recognition of a consistently dynamic industry was more than twenty years in the making, and can be traced to the post-1990s New Wave that encouraged the emergence of "commercial auteurism" (Jung 2008: 9) of prodigiously talented filmmakers such as Bong Joon-ho onto the international scene as it transformed an insular national film industry into a global cinematic powerhouse. This sense of an industry finally getting its just deserts is reflected in the congratulatory tweet posted by Darcy Paquet, eminent film critic, author, and English subtitler of *Parasite*: "I hope that all Korean filmmakers can share in this moment and be proud, because it's the tremendous hard work and professionalism of the industry as a whole that makes a movie like PARASITE (sic) possible" (2020). Yet in 1986 when the Motion Picture Law (MPL)[2] was amended to grant direct distribution to Hollywood majors (20th Century Fox in 1988, Warner Bros. Pictures in 1989, Columbia in 1990, and Disney in 1993), allowing them to set up offices within Korea, thus shaking up the *Chungmuro* (Korea's film district located in the capital city of Seoul), the industry found itself struggling for survival. The resultant industrial restructuring and modernization that was embarked upon as a result of globalization and domestic competition from Hollywood majors saved them from being decimated. This remarkable recovery was a testament to the resilience of the Korean people who, throughout their tortured history, had been able to find the inner courage and determination to surmount tremendous adversities and national traumas (invasions, warfare, Japanese colonialism, nuclear strikes,

Memories of Murder (2003)

cross-border insurgency, military dictatorships), and to rise like the proverbial phoenix from the ashes.

The strategy to revitalize the local in-

dustry in response to the onslaught of Hollywood imports involved maintaining the Screen Quota System, that had been instituted at part of the MPL in the '60s, which mandated that for a fixed number of days annually (146 days at the time), Korean films had to be screened in cinema halls irrespective of their box-office performance. This contentious protectionist policy proved crucial in turning the tide in favor of the indigenous industry, although the number of days was reduced in 2006 under extreme pressure from Hollywood companies. The industrial restructuring also involved attracting new capital funding from powerful *chaebols* or conglomerates that are typically large, family-controlled conglomerates of South Korea characterized by strong ties with government agencies. This led to the rise of Korean media conglomerates, or the corporatization of the film industry. Samsung, one of South Korea's five major conglomerates, was the first of the *chaebols* to enter the film industry, establishing the Samsung Entertainment Group in 1995. The following year saw the establishment of CJ Entertainment & Media (CJ E&M), the media branch of CJ Corporation (*Cheil Jedang*), Korea's largest food manufacturer. It continues to be the most influential corporate entity in the Korean entertainment and mass media sector, and has financed and distributed four of Bong Joon-ho's films — *Memories of Murder*, *Mother*, *Snowpiercer* (2013) and now *Parasite*. The socio-economic crisis of the mid-1990s witnessed a series of major corporate bankruptcies in South Korea (including those of Kia Automobile, Hando Steel) and the currency crisis in the South Asian region destabilized the Korean economy. In 1997, the Korean government filed for national economic bankruptcy, and asked the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for fifty-five billion dollars. The IMF bailout entailed drastic budget cuts, higher interest rates and increased taxation, and ultimately reduced economic growth (Choi 2010: 15-30). Post 1997/8 IMF crisis, the second phase of the industrial recovery saw the entry of new investors in the form of venture capitalists (Ilshin Investment Company, Kookmin and Mirae Venture Capital). The process of conglomeration and financial support from venture capitalists marked the birth of Korean Blockbusters, prompting dramatic expansion in production costs (Ibid).

Insect Woman (1972)

1999 was a turning point in the renaissance of the Korean film industry, with a rise in the box-office performance of local movies. Kang Je-gyu's 1999 spy thriller, *Shiri*, the first Korean global blockbuster, triggered a commercial boom that led to the miraculous recovery of the *Chungmuro*. The then-highest grossing and most expensive Korean film, it broke box-office records previously held by *Titanic* (1997), and sparked a cultural phenomenon known as the *Shiri* Syndrome. Newspaper headlines such as the following - "To overcome the dominance of America, help Shiri beat Titanic" - were strategically placed to exhort domestic audiences, who were still recovering from the indignities of the IMF crisis, to support a local film by appealing to their patriotic sentiments. It became their national duty to support *Shiri* which was co-produced by Samsung, and featured cutting edge visual effects and stunts reminiscent of a Hollywood-style action film, while imbued with Korean melodrama, essential for an Asian audience, and addressed local North-South Korean issues. It represented a cultural hybridity of the global and the local that struck a chord with South Koreans who were enjoying the creative freedom that accompanied a nation

(and its artistes) that had newly transitioned from decades of authoritarianism to a fledgling democracy.

Corporatization lead to the standardization of film production; greater transparency in accounting, cost-cutting and professionalism in conforming to film schedules and budgets; and the emergence of new production companies, many of which were owned by filmmakers themselves (Park Chan-wook's Moho Films, Kim Jee-woon's Grim Films, Kang Je-gyu's MK Pictures etc.) which gave them more creative control and greater artistic freedom to protect their unique authorial voices. It also introduced a vertically integrated system to the Korean film industry which meant that the three main sectors of filmmaking - production, distribution and exhibition - were controlled by the same entities, reminiscent of the Hollywood studio era. Film exhibition expanded exponentially in the wake of the multiplex boom led by CGV (1988), a co-venture among CJ, Hong Kong's Golden Harvest & Australia's Village Roadshow, which is currently the largest K-multiplex chain. New marketing strategies such as revival of midnight screenings, increase in multiplex theatre screens, and renovation of old theatres were adopted. There was the emergence of major Korean distributors, namely, CJ Entertainment, Cinema Service (now a CJ E&M subsidiary), Showbox (established in 2002 and owned by Orion, a food company), and Mirovision with the goal of selling Korean movies overseas (Choi 2010: 15-30).

What were some of the hallmarks of New Korean Cinema that were evident in the auteurism of Bong and his '386' peers? Draconian censorship instituted by authoritarian regimes of the past was eased in the 1990s giving rise to films that openly critiqued historical events and blunders committed by military dictators and politicians (*Peppermint Candy*, *The President's Last Bang*, *Taegukgi*, *Memories of Murder* et al.); the persistent North-South tensions and cross-border aggressions (*Shiri*, *Joint Security Area*, *Welcome to Dongmakgol*); the continued US military presence on South Korean soil (*The Host*); and directly addressed social issues such as the ever-widening class divide and the hierarchical nature of Korean society (that the 'family tragicomedy' *Parasite* brilliantly complicates); the brutal elitist education system, peer pressure and bullying, and the social outcasts who are excluded from the *chaebol*/corporate culture of conspicuous consumption and greed (*Take Care of My Cat*, *Attack the Gas Station*, *Beat*). Contentious motifs with provocative political subtexts invoking "the dark structural violence of the military dictatorship in 1980s" (Jung 2010: 11) were a recurring preoccupation in the oeuvre of Bong. Stirred by political activism in his university days, he had participated in anti-government, pro-democracy uprising of June 1987, and later in 1990, in a Korean Teacher's Union demonstration where he was arrested for violating the law on assembly for which he was jailed for a month at Yeongdeungpo after which he was released with a suspended sentence on the condition that he immediately joined the military. This life-altering experience inspired the characterizations and coarse language spoken by detectives in *Memories of Murder*, arguably his finest film, based on South Korea's first unsolved serial killings in the small town of Hwaseong, near Seoul. As Bong recounts, "In the Yeongdeungpo detention centre, there were seven of us living together in the same room for one month. It was a truly diverse group, people you'd expect in the family operating the store in *The Host*. Besides me, the people there were all in for an assortment of petty crimes. I marveled (sic) at their gift for coarse speech, and from their standpoint, I was a marvel as a university student. Over the month I was there, we talked about all sorts of things. The stories they told me were about lower-class life or dirty jokes, things I could never experience or imagine. Maybe 90% of

it was exaggerated, but it was just so enjoyable in itself. The line in *Memories of Murder*, where Detective JO (sic) Yong-gu asks PARK (sic) Du-man if the male and female university students who go to membership training (A form of university orientation) all sleep together in one room and have sex indiscriminately, that was something I actually heard from one of the petty criminals there with me when I was in the detention center. The images of the people I met in my university days, doing agricultural work or at the detention center, are the characters who have appeared in my films so far" (Jung 2008:189). Thus, for Bong, the Scorsese quotation "the personal is the most creative" (Sunder 2020) which he cited on stage to rapturous applause whilst receiving the Academy Award for Best Director, certainly resonates through his filmmaking process, and is a testament of his deep cinephilia.

The New Wave saw the emergence of genre-mixing, genre-blending tendencies articulated in high school teen horror films (*Whispering Corridors* franchise, Ahn Byun-ki's *Bunshinsaba*), youth films (Kwak Kyung-taek's 2001 *Friend*, *Once Upon a Time in High School*), gangster (*Nowhere to Hide*, *Green Fish*, *A Bittersweet Life*) and gangster comedies (*Hi Dharma!*, *Married to the Mafia*, *My Wife is a Gangster*), horror-sci-fi (*Save the Green Planet*), romantic comedies (*My Sassy Girl*, *My Tutor Friend*) and Korean blockbusters that were instrumental in the resurrection of the film industry. Epitomising an interplay of local and global dynamics in terms of aesthetics, narrative structure, themes, and visual effects, *Shiri* triggered one of the most profitable genres of the New Wave, resulting in box-office successes of K-blockbusters such as *Joint Security Area* (2000), *Friend* (2001), *Silmido* (2003) and *Taegukgi* (2004) that touched upon North-South unification, the humanization of, and empathy for the "Other," and many other sensitive, even historically taboo, subject matter. Swift changes in mood from hilarity to melancholia without narrative cues challenged mainstream Euro-American audiences bred of Hollywood blockbusters, an aspect that my undergraduate students would

The Wailing (2016)

regularly notice and highlight in our discussions.

Melodramas, expressive of the national mood of *Han* (a complex emotion of sadness, resentment, anger and desire for justice) considered a characteristic of Korean culture, were a staple – a catch-all, master genre and style within which every sub-genre could be situated - romance, gangster (aka *japok*), comedy, horror, thriller et al. Eminent critic of Korean cinema and author Darcy Paquet believed that Hur Jin-ho's 1998 minimalist melodrama *Christmas in August* "served as one of the first films to push for an aesthetic renewal in the industry" (Gatewood 2007: 51). Horror melodramas set in high schools,

whose primary target audiences were young school girls, imbued with a *sonyeo* (girl's) sensibility (Choi 2010: 124) in the *Whispering Corridors* franchise were characteristic of this renaissance. The national fascination with horror melodramas could be traced to "Mr. Monster" Kim Ki-young's atmospheric horror dramas *The Housemaid*, *Insect Woman* (1972) and *Io Island* (*Iodo*, 1977), the latter having influenced Bong to such an extent that it was included in Bong's retrospective held at New York's Lincoln Centre from January 7-14, 2020 (https://www.filmlinc.org/films/io-island/). Hollywood soon took notice of this rich, diverse and prolific film industry and purchased remake rights to *My Sassy Girl* which was sold to Dream Works; *Old Boy* was remade, rather disastrously, by Spike Lee in 2013, exactly a decade after the original was produced; *Hi Dharma!* was sold to MGM, whilst a remake of Kim Jee-woon's psychological horror *A Tale of Two Sisters* resulted in *The Uninvited* which was released in 2009 to mixed reviews.

Over the next decade and a half, after the New Wave ebbed away, the industry continued to produce a dazzling array of edgy, diverse, intellectually stimulating, visually stunning films. These include one of the highest grossing Korean films of all time, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, a 2014 South Korean epic action-war film directed and co-written by Kim Han-min; Na Hong-jin's critically acclaimed, supernatural horror *The Wailing* (2016), distributed in the U.S. by Well Go USA; Yeon Sang-ho's zombie horror hit film, *Train to Busan* (2016), which was on limited theatrical release in India; Park Chan-wook's BAFTA-winning, erotic psychological thriller *The Handmaiden* (2016); and the slow-burning yet explosive *Burning* from New Wave master Lee Chang-dong. However, as Paquet (2017) points out in a *Sight and Sound* issue, female filmmakers have also been making a mark, although it is an uphill battle in a patriarchal industry dominated by powerful male filmmakers. For instance, Yim Soon-rye's 2008 *Forever the Moment*, Park Chan-ok's haunting *Paju* (2009), Lee Hyun-joo's old-school relationship story *Our Love Story* (2016), and Lee Kyoung-mi, whose startling second feature *The Truth Beneath*, about a politician's wife whose daughter goes missing, beat *The Handmaiden* and *The Wailing* to win Best Director at the 2016 Korean Association of Film Critics Awards (but was overlooked by the world's major film festivals). For all the aforementioned reasons elaborated upon, any sense of indignation or incredulity at the fact that a South Korean film could sweep the Oscars is greatly misplaced (as a few feature articles and editorials in the Indian media seem to suggest); instead it is indicative of a lack of awareness and appreciation of the global trends in world cinema. Now that South Korean cinema has arrived on the global stage for mainstream audiences, one hopes that more Korean cinema courses shall be taught at educational institutions, film schools and cultural centers, and that the Academy shall continue to broaden its horizon and champion excellence in the cinematic arts, irrespective of nationality, language, geography (and gender!). Otherwise, the Oscars shall revert to being, in Bong's damning words, "very local" (Choe, New York Times).

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Endnotes

"Hallyu" is a term originally coined in mid-1999 by Beijing journalists who were surprised by China's growing appetite for South Korean cultural exports. It more generally refers to the craze for Korean popular culture (music, cinema and television dramas) that has spread like a wave across East Asia, especially in Japan.

The Motion Picture Law (MPL) was instituted in 1962 by the then dictator Park Chung-hee to consolidate and centralize the film industry, thereby bringing it directly under his control for censorship purposes. It is known as the "Film Promotion Law" from July 1996. The Screen Quota mandate has been enforced since 1967 (Choi 2010).

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