



# Cinema as a Window on Contemporary Korea

By Tom Vick



*Marriage Story.*  
©1992 Shin Cine Communications  
Ik Young Films Co., Ltd.

## THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE NEW KOREAN CINEMA

In 1992, after decades of military rule, South Korea elected its first civilian president, Kim Young-sam. Along with the many social, political, and economic changes that accompanied the nation's shift from military to democratic rule, the Korean film industry underwent a renaissance in both popularity and artistic quality, spurred by public and corporate investment, and created by filmmakers released from decades of strict censorship that prevented them from directly addressing important issues. According to a frequently repeated anecdote, when President Kim was informed that the movie *Jurassic Park* had turned a profit equal to the export of 1.5 million Hyundai automobiles, he was inspired to provide greatly increased state support to the media and culture industries.<sup>1</sup> Prior to that, the surprising box office success of Kim Ui-seok's *Marriage Story* in 1992, which was financed in part by the corporate conglomerate Samsung, prompted other corporations to see movies as a worthwhile investment.<sup>2</sup>

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*A Single Spark.*  
©1995 Age of Planning.

Directors who suffered under censorship took advantage of this new era of free expression and increased funding to take on once forbidden topics. Jang Sun-woo, who had been imprisoned at one point for his political activities, addressed the Kwangju Massacre of May 18, 1980, during which the military brutally suppressed a pro-democratization uprising, in *A Petal* (1996). Park Kwang-su took on the plight of exploited garment workers in *A Single Spark* (1995). Im Kwon-taek's *Sopyonje*, a 1992 film about a family of itinerant *p'ansori* singers, created a new awareness of, and pride in, this cultural tradition of storytelling through song and performance as a uniquely Korean form of artistic expression. Its tremendous popularity opened up a national discussion on whether Koreans were losing touch with their cultural roots in the modern world. As historian Michael Robinson puts it, the film “represented a culmination (an ending?) of post-war angst—the smoldering resentments, grief and tragedy borne by Koreans through decades of division, political repression, and social and political turmoil.”<sup>3</sup>



*Sopyonje.* ©1992 Taehung Pictures.

The concerns listed by Robinson began to dissolve in Korea's flourishing high-tech economy and rapidly globalizing culture. Upon his inauguration in 1998, President Kim Dae-jung pledged to “actively pursue reconciliation and cooperation” with North Korea, a complete reversal of the policies of his predecessors.<sup>4</sup> By the late 1990s, Japanese consumers had developed an insatiable hunger for Korean movies, television dramas, and pop songs as the pop culture craze that became known as the Korean Wave swept across East Asia. Whereas Japan once sent troops, it now sent scores of tourists to collect souvenirs of their favorite actors and singers.

An emerging generation of filmmakers too young to have felt the full brunt of the Korean War and its lingering aftermath easily embraced these new realities, and this is



*A Petal.* ©1996 Miracin Korea.



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reflected in two of the biggest box office hits of the time: *Shiri* (1999) and *J.S.A. (Joint Security Area)* (2000).

An espionage thriller that exemplifies recent Korean cinema's penchant for blending familiar genres into new forms, Kang Je-kyu's *Shiri* was one of the first films to portray North Koreans as fully-realized human beings instead of propagandistic caricatures. Mixing elements of romance



Shiri. ©1999 Kang Je-Kyu Film Co. Ltd., Samsung Entertainment.

and melodrama into its action-adventure plot, its storyline concerns a female North Korean assassin who is planted as a "sleeper" agent in the South as part of a plot to detonate a bomb during a soccer match between the two nations. It quickly became Korea's biggest box office hit, surpassing the previous record-holder, James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), and morphing into a pop culture tidal wave that became known as "the *Shiri* syndrome."<sup>5</sup>

*Shiri* successfully used Hollywood-style popular filmmaking to address contemporary issues. A big reason for its popularity is that it can easily be interpreted to fit one's position on the North-South question. Believers in President Kim's "sunshine" policy of reconciliation with the North could point to the heroine, a brainwashed killing machine who is shown to be a tragic figure at heart, while hardliners could argue that its depiction of North Korean agents easily slipping across the border to wreak havoc illustrated the need for continued vigilance. It proved that Korean films could out-do Hollywood movies at the box office, and inaugurated a big budget, blockbuster mentality among producers that led to box office records being broken on an almost annual basis.



Joint Security Area. ©2000 CJ Entertainment.

Park Chan-wook's *Joint Security Area* goes even further in humanizing North Koreans, and achieved similar box office success. Its story of a secret friendship between squads of South Korean and North Korean soldiers stationed across the Demilitarized Zone from one another presents the soldiers as fully-rounded characters, but so conditioned by their military training that a single tragic misunderstanding can immediately make them enemies again.

The term New Korean Cinema, a term often invoked to describe the Korean film industry's rather sudden rise to domestic and international prominence, is less a moniker for a coherent artistic movement than, in the words of film scholar Julian Stringer, "the product of a variety of structural changes which ... have transformed the Korean cinema industry and the wider culture of which it is a part."<sup>6</sup> In contrast to movements like the 1980s Hong Kong New Wave, which is primarily associated with the specific genre of action movies, its main characteristic is its diversity, the way its filmmakers combine styles and genres, and incorporate influences from around the world and throughout film history.

A WINDOW ON KOREA OR A MIRROR OF THE WORLD?

This wide variety of influences makes it difficult to define the ways in which cinema provides a window onto Korean society. For contemporary Korean filmmakers, culture is global culture. Many of them are more influenced by American, European, and other Asian movies than by those of their own nation. And our perception of Korean cinema is necessarily limited by the fact that a relatively small percentage of the films produced there are distributed in the US, and the reasons why they are chosen often have less to do with what they say about Korea than with their distributors' perceptions of Americans' taste in movies. Hong Sang-soo's films, for instance, are celebrated for their ingenious use of such formal strategies as depicting the same incidents from different characters' points of view, shuffling the chronology of scenes (*Woman is the Future of Man*, 2004) and structuring plots according to mathematical principles (*Woman on the Beach*, 2006)—techniques that can readily be appreciated by cinephiles familiar with the films of directors like Alain Resnais, Michelangelo Antonioni, or Akira Kurosawa. And it can be difficult to discern how much his stories of comically



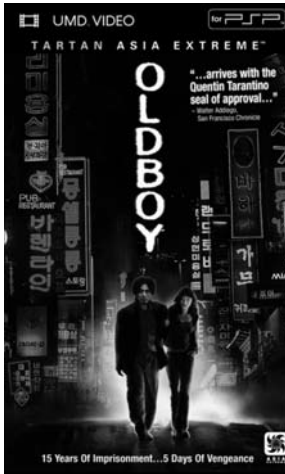
Woman is the Future of Man. ©2004 CJ Entertainment.



Woman on the Beach. ©2006 Mirovision.

hapless men bungling in and out of romantic relationships say about gender relations in Korea, or whether they reflect the plight of clueless men the world over.

## KOREAN FILM AND POPULAR CULTURE



*Oldboy*.  
©2003 Palisades Tarton.



*Samaritan Girl*.  
©2004 Kim Ki-Duk Film.



*Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring*.  
©2003 Cineclick Asia.

Kim Ki-duk and *Joint Security Area* director Park Chan-wook have both developed followings in the US and Europe because their films appeal to a sizable global fan base of cult movie aficionados targeted by companies like Tartan Video's now-defunct Asia Extreme boutique label and the midnight movie sections of film festivals. To fans of "extreme" cinema, country of origin is less important than the visceral impact. *Oldboy*, Park's hyper-violent 2003 film about a man seeking revenge on his captors after being mysteriously imprisoned for fifteen years, brought him international renown when it won a major award at the Cannes Film Festival. Kim Ki-duk's reputation as a shock auteur was established when rumors spread that a particularly disturbing scene involving fishhooks from his 2000 film *The Isle* caused "fainting spells and vomit seizures" at some screenings.<sup>7</sup>

The high visibility of films like these gave Korean cinema a reputation for being especially violent, as evidenced by Roger Ebert's comment in his review of *Oldboy* that "of the Korean films I've seen, only one . . . did not contain extraordinary sadomasochism."<sup>8</sup> Korean cinema certainly has its share of violent imagery, but judging it based solely on films like *Oldboy* and *The Isle* is akin to forming an opinion of Hollywood movies after having only seen the *Saw* movies. Furthermore, these films often mean something completely different to Korean audiences. Kim's more shocking films, such as *Bad Guy* (2001) and *Samaritan Girl* (2004), both of which deal with prostitution, might be marketed salaciously to non-Korean audiences, but at home they provoke serious debate about the treatment of women in Korean society. Kim also deliberately presented a distorted view of Korean Buddhist tradition in one of his more widely-distributed films, *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . and Spring* (2003). Although it appears to be a Buddhist fable about a monk and his acolyte, its rituals and spiritual lessons are entirely Kim's invention, and at times run completely counter to Buddhist philosophy. An ardent cinephile who wrote for film journals before becoming a director, Park belongs as much to Korean cinema as he does to the global brotherhood of film geek auteurs whose work is inspired less by reality than by a lifetime spent obsessively watching "B Movies" and cult films. This ilk is best exemplified by Quentin Tarantino (who, not coincidentally, headed the jury that gave Park his Cannes prize.)

Our view of Korean society through cinema is complicated by contemporary Korean filmmakers' existence within this worldwide web of influences and market forces. But this new reality is simply one aspect of the structural changes Stringer mentions. As difficult as it is to pin down exactly what unifies the New Korean Cinema, one key to its success is its filmmakers' penchant for addressing issues that resonate with domestic audiences through genres and styles that have universal appeal.

### NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE PAST AND PRESENT

In the early-90s dawn of the democratic era, filmmakers like Jang Sun-woo and Park Kwang-su vented their rage at the oppressiveness of the military regimes that ruled Korea from 1961 to 1988. By the 2000s, the younger generation of filmmakers was looking back at the military era from a more detached perspective. Bong Joon-ho's *Memories of Murder* (2003), for example, dramatizes the still-unsolved case of a 1980s serial killer, using a suspenseful murder-mystery plot to suggest that the oppressive and corrupt police tactics of the era of military rule allowed the killer to elude the authorities. His 2006 film *The Host* (as of this writing the highest-gross-



*The Isle*.  
©2000 CJ Entertainment.



*Bad Guy*.  
©2001 CJ Entertainment.

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*Memories of Murder*.  
©2003 CJ Entertainment.



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The Host. ©2006 Showbox.

ing movie in Korean box office history), is a thoroughly enjoyable monster movie embedded with a barbed critique of the United States' continuing military presence, which in recent years has become increasingly unpopular as the relationship between North and South thaws. By 2005, the once-feared dictator Park Chung-hee, who ruled Korea from 1961 until his assassination in 1979, was being satirized as a decadent



The The President's Last Bang. © 2005 MK Pictures.

playboy in Im Sang-soo's insouciant portrayal of his final days, *The President's Last Bang*. Korean history and tradition have also been depicted through the prism of contemporary concerns. Im Kwon-taek, who reignited appreciation for the p'ansori singing tradition in *Sopyonje*, cleverly employed it as a narrative device in *Chunhyang* (2000), a fusion of cinematic and traditional storytelling adapted from a famous folktale. Korea's second highest grossing film of all time, *The King and the Clown* (Lee Jun-ik, 2005), is a tale of gay desire set in a sixteenth century royal court.



The King and the Clown. © 2005 Cinema Service.

The rapid growth of Korea's globalized, high-tech economy in the 1990s greatly altered the Confucian tradition that historically governed family and social relationships, and many films address this collision between tradition and modernity. In Lee Jeong-hyang's *The Way Home* (2002), the bratty, video game obsessed son of an urban single mom receives an unwanted crash course in the old ways when he is sent to spend the summer in the country with his grandmother. Traditional family life completely breaks down in the three interconnected episodes of Kim Tae-yong's *Family Ties* (2006), but the characters reconstitute themselves into a new kind of family not based on blood or tradition but the bonds they have forged on their own. In Lee Chang-dong's *Secret Sunshine* (2007), the customary support systems of community and religion provide scant comfort to a grieving mother.



Dirty Carnival. © 2006 CJ Entertainment.



Whispering Corridors. © 1998 Cinema Service

Two recent gangster movies show their local roots by having the heroes' central concerns revolve around uniquely Korean familial and social obligations. In *A Dirty Carnival* (Ha Yu, 2006), a mobster struggles with his duty as the default patriarch of his family to provide for his ailing mother and two young siblings, while also honoring an obligation to an old school friend researching a film on organized crime. The stressed out mob boss in Han Jae-rim's *The Show Must Go On* (2007) works himself to the bone to realize the common middle class aspirations of buying a house in the suburbs and sending his kids to school in Canada.

Han's film touches on a widespread trend of mothers moving overseas with their children (leaving the husbands back home to pursue their careers), both so that the children can learn the English skills important in business, and to remove them from the stresses of Korea's notoriously competitive educational system.<sup>9</sup> Kim Sung-su lampoons the mania for learning English in his slapstick comedy *Please Teach Me English* (2003), but the pressures on Korean students are very real. The ghosts haunting the girls' high schools in an ongoing franchise of horror movies that includes *Whispering Corridors* (Park Ki-hyung, 1998), *Memento Mori* (Kim Tae-yung and Min Kyu-dong, 1999), *Wishing Stairs* (Yun Jae-yun, 2003), and *Voice* (Choi Equan, 2005) are only slightly scarier than the relentless demands and sadistic discipline imposed by the teachers. Jeong Jae-yun's incisive drama *Take Care of My Cat* (2001) suggests that the pressures do not end with graduation. Her portrait of a group of friends adjusting to post-high school life emphasizes how school performance and class background can dictate the course of lives.



Please Teach Me English. © 2003 Cinema Service.

**By 2007, the box office arms race set off by the *Shiri* syndrome had grown to absurd proportions, with the producers gambling huge sums in an escalating war to make the next record-breaking blockbuster.**

## THE END OF THE WAVE?

By 2007, the box office arms race set off by the *Shiri* syndrome had grown to absurd proportions, with producers gambling huge sums in an escalating war to make the next record-breaking blockbuster. “It was a strategy,” writes Shin Ki-ju, “that would eventually bring down an industry.”<sup>10</sup> Audiences detected a decline in the freewheeling creativity that once buoyed popular films, and began complaining of “repetitious drama and film plots” as the Korean wave began to wane.<sup>11</sup>



*Old Partner*.  
© 2009 Studio Neurimbo and Indie Story.

The slump has forced Korean filmmakers to be creative with much smaller budgets. The surprise hit of early 2009 was Lee Chung-ryu’s *Old Partner*, a documentary about an elderly farmer and his beloved ox that, according to *Korean Cinema Today*, a publication of the Korean Film Council, “strongly appealed to the middle age audiences by reminding them of something we lost in the past, such as nostalgia for the rural life.”<sup>12</sup> Whether or not its success truly signals a longing for a time before the fast-paced, media-saturated cultural climate that gave birth to the New Korean Cinema, remains to be seen. ■

*Editor’s Note:* Readers who are interested in in-depth reviews of *Shiri* and *J.S.A.* should examine Timothy Gleeson’s feature article on South Korean action films in *EAA*, Vol. 8, 1: 28–32.

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