



KYUNG HYUN KIM

VIRTUAL HALLYU

Korean Cinema of the Global Era

FOREWORD BY MARTIN SCORSESE

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To all filmmakers, critics, teachers, festival programmers, cinephiles, and policymakers—who helped make Korean cinema during the first decade of the 2000s a globally recognized phenomenon.

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FOREWORD

Martin Scorsese

To find a filmmaker or group of filmmakers with a new approach to film language, new answers to the question of what a movie *is* and what it *can* be . . . it's one of the most rewarding aspects of movie culture. The pictures coming out of Iran and Taiwan in the 1990s, for example, required an adjustment. I remember watching them for the first time, seeing that they were urgent, passionately made, and I quickly understood that I would have to let the pictures themselves guide me, teach me their grammar, show me the way to their secrets, *and* to the cultural experiences and givens shared by the different filmmakers.

The great Korean cinema of the late 90s and the 2000s crept up on me, slowly and without warning. Hong Sang-soo's *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* was a deceptively unassuming picture, made with great assurance. The narrative was intricate, but not in a manner that drew attention to itself—it was only as the movie unfolded that you came to understand how complex it was. The settings seemed banal, the concerns of the characters life-size, the focus uncomfortably intimate. The film left me unsettled—what had I just *seen*?

I was intrigued. I saw some pictures by another Korean filmmaker named Bong Joon-ho—a completely different approach, more overtly comic in his first feature, *Barking Dogs Never Bite*, but the comedy was savage and merciless. In *Memories of Murder* and *The Host*, I saw a clear link to American genre filmmaking, but it was interpreted and felt in a completely new way. *The Host* was fun, complex, rich, and panoramic, but in its own way it was just as troubling as the Hong film.

Park Chan-wook's *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, like his subsequent pictures *Lady Vengeance* and *Old Boy*, seemed to come out of a different strain in genre filmmaking—American drive-in movies, J-horror, Shaw Brothers martial arts epics. But the violence and action and chaos became expressive instruments, and the films were as ferocious as a great Eric Clapton guitar solo. But lingering in the background was that same unease and melancholy that I recognized in the other pictures.

The unease and melancholy took front and center in Lee Chang-dong's *Green Fish* and *Peppermint Candy*. These pictures were designed as ambitious portrayals of an entire society filtered through the experience of a few characters, devoted to giving you the *texture* of life, the dreams and the cold hard realities, the habits and prejudices, the different ways of living.

As the years went by, I realized that I was slowly becoming absorbed in Korean cinema and its development, and I became more absorbed with each new picture from these directors and others, like *The President's Last Bang* by Im Sang-soo, *Camel(s)* by Park Ki-young, *Breathless* by Yang Ik-joon, *Never Forever* by Gina Kim, and *Jealousy Is My Middle Name* by Park Chan-ok, an extremely subtle and emotionally complex film; and then in older pictures by filmmakers like Im Kwon-Taek, Park Kwang-su, and the late, great Kim Ki-young. I was actually introduced to *The Housemaid*, one of Kim's most disturbing pictures, by the author of this book, and it became one of the first restorations undertaken by The World Cinema Foundation when it was formed in 2007.

Following these films and filmmakers over the years has shown me just how vital a role cinema can play in the life of a culture, no matter how "challenging" the movies are considered, how much or how little money they make, how large or small a public they find either inside or outside the country. The categories that many resort to when they judge movies nowadays—"entertaining" vs. "difficult," "fast-paced" vs. "slow moving," "short" vs. "long," "fun" vs. "art"—have very little to do with the movies themselves or how they affect viewers who come to them with an open mind. The films of Hong, Lee, Bong, Park, and their fellow filmmakers speak of, to, and from their culture, sometimes critically but never indifferently or disinterestedly—for that reason, they are genuine cultural ambassadors.

Kyung Hyun knows this. He knows that vital works of art *never* sit easily within the society they come out of. And he helps to explain, in this fine book, how the give and take between those filmmakers and their country actually functions. He enlarges our vision of one of the great national cinematic flowerings of the last decade.

PREFACE

Immediately after the release of Kim Jee-woon's *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (*Choün nom, nappün nom, isanghan nom*) in July 2008, I had a chance to talk to its producer, Choi Jae-won. This Korean macaroni Western about three outlaws, set in colonial Manchuria during the 1930s, had just opened in theaters throughout South Korea. On its opening day, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* occupied 949 of the country's approximately 2,000 screens and was on its way to selling over seven million tickets (for a gross of over \$43 million). That would not break the box office record set two summers earlier by Bong Joon-ho's *The Host* (*Koemul*), which had sold a whopping 13.19 million tickets on 620 screens.¹ But selling seven million tickets for *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* was, I thought, not a small feat considering that South Korea has a population of only forty-nine million.² Everywhere you went in Korea that summer, you heard the film's theme song, a remake of the Animals' "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," blaring on the radio and saw ads for the movie whizzing by on buses. The faces of the film's three main actors—Song Kang-ho, Jung Woo-sung, and Lee Byung-hun, who played three outlaw gunmen—looped endlessly on various television commercials selling notebook computers and credit cards. Yet this summer blockbuster hit—a pastiche of global appropriations and reappropriations, in particular Sergio Leone's 1966 *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* and Lee Man-hŭi's 1971 local Manchurian Western *Cut the Chain* (*Soesasül ūl kkŭ-nŏra*)—had, according to Choi, "failed to overwhelm the BEP [break-even point]." Choi bemoaned the film's lackluster returns: "How is it possible that the bestselling summer blockbuster of the year cannot even break even?" To his dismay, I retorted, "Wasn't the movie shot almost entirely in Korean?" At a time when the novelty of hallyu (the wave of Korean exports in popular music, film, and television dramas) had waned, I thought that mainstream audiences outside Korea would be very unlikely to go see a Korean-language film, which prominently featured the comic gags of local star Song Kang-ho and consequently was largely incomprehensible to viewers beyond a hard-core constituency.



1 Poster for *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*.

Only about eighty million people, worldwide, speak Korean, and this figure includes twenty million North Koreans, who cannot legally consume South Korea's cultural products. Even though the live action films made in South Korea at the peak of the hallyu era generally delivered the high visual production value and spectacle that the market demanded, they were largely dependent on wit derived from the unique and ironic use of the Korean language.³ Beyond the Korean Peninsula, only the small Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture in the northeastern region of China uses Korean as the official language. Though *han'gŭl*, the Korean alphabet, is a uniquely efficient writing system made up of fourteen consonants and ten vowels, Korean is considered a difficult language⁴ and is largely inaccessible to nonnative speakers. Despite the popularity of hallyu in China, Japan, Vietnam, and other neighboring countries over the past decade, fluent speakers of Korean are still difficult to find beyond Korean diasporic communities. When hallyu finally began showing signs of stagnation in Japan in 2006, films with expensive price tags — such as *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, starring two of Korea's brightest hallyu stars, Jung Woo-sung and Lee Byung-hun — were unable to immediately find buyers in Japan, previously the biggest importer of hallyu products. By 2007, Korean film export sales to Japan had sputtered to a dismal \$ 3.3 million, about the

same as in the pre-hallyu days, merely two years after Korean film exports to Japan had hit a record \$ 60.3 million.

Things got even worse for *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*. Piracy had caused the collapse of the market for ancillary products (DVD rentals and sales, view on demand, and television broadcast rights) in Korea, and the film could not make any substantial profit in these secondary markets. Also, in 2009, after having a difficult time finding a Japanese distributor, *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird* finally opened in Japan—only to flop badly. Therefore, the film's investors—who had put up \$25 million, including \$18 million for production and approximately \$5 million for advertising—earned less than \$20 million after splitting the gross local theatrical proceeds of \$43 million with distributors and theaters. Almost all of the proceeds came from the Korean box office. *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, Korea's bestselling film in 2008, which outsold even Hollywood competitors such as *Kung Fu Panda* and *Mama Mia* by a two-to-one ratio, unfortunately found itself in the loss column. Although the price of producing and publicizing a blockbuster film had climbed from \$2 million in 1999 (*Shiri*) to \$25 million in 2008 (*The Good, the Bad, the Weird*), the demand for these products had actually shrunk.

By calling this book *Virtual Hallyu*, I hoped to achieve an ironic effect. Though cinema did play a critical part in hallyu, most recent scholarship on the Korean wave of exports typically places K-drama and K-pop at hallyu's fulcrum. By designating the Korean cinema of the past decade as "virtual"—which intriguingly etches the signifiers "artificial" and "spectral" over its original meaning of "truthful" and "potential"—I wanted to remind readers that cinema's modernist ambitions played a subconscious, if not unconscious, role in hallyu's proliferation. Though hallyu is more familiar through popular films like Kwak Jae-yong's *My Sassy Girl* (*Yöpki jök in künyö*, 2002) and Yi Chae-han's *A Moment to Remember* (*Nae maum sok üi chiukae*, 2004), these productions failed to establish an aesthetic standard in the local film culture the way the films of Bong Joon-ho, Park Chan-wook, Hong Sang-soo, or Lee Chang-dong did throughout the 2000s. *Virtual Hallyu*, consequently, is a reflection of *both* the modernist ambition to engage cinema as a technological tool that could challenge language and literature as the principal mode of creative expression *and* the post-modern failure to extend cinema's power beyond populist entertainment.⁵ Throughout the book, I evaluate how Korean cinema during this period included not only independently produced, anti-establishment *tayangsöng*

(diverse) films made possible by subsidies from the Korean Film Council (KOFIC), but also a sizable film industry with annual box office sales of \$1 billion (1.15 trillion won in 2010), led by several *chaeböl* groups such as CJ, Lotte, and Tongyang (Showbox), which cultivated a culture of near total disregard for the modernist productions featured in film festivals.⁶ The “virtual” that I invoke in these pages is consequently both a celebration and a mourning of the nascent blossoming of Korean modernity in a global age that has sought to nip it in the bud and to transform it into a postmodern production.

Specifically, this book celebrates and mourns the supersized Korean cinema produced during the days of hallyu. I began teaching Korean film in 1996 at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and I now teach it at the University of California, Irvine. Every year, in spite of my familiarity with Korean film texts, I am confronted with the unfamiliar, with its attendant requirements for renewed identification and negotiation. Writing this book during the hallyu period was like being inside a house that was constantly being refurbished. Korean cinema in many ways engineered hallyu, which in a real sense revealed a shift—however fleeting—in the American perception of Korea, thus rendering possible a magical and virtual identity for myself as well. Although I have now written two books and innumerable numbers of articles on Korean film, I am still unsure how to answer the following questions: Did the Korean films produced during the first decade of the twenty-first century constitute a countercinema that, even at a subconscious level, sought to resist American cultural hegemony? Or was it primarily a cinema that effectively danced to the tunes of Hollywood, which always requires an Asian sidekick: Akira Kurosawa in the 1970s, John Woo and Tsui Hark in the 1980s and the 1990s, and Park Chan-wook in the 2000s?

“We cannot tell from the mere taste of wheat who grew it” is one of Marx’s mottos that still remains in vogue.⁷ After all, a capitalist product is evaluated by how well it can camouflage who the real producers are (for example, Third World sweatshop labor). And if a hallyu comedy can provide just as good a chuckle as an American film for only a fraction of the distribution fee that Hollywood studios charge, is there even a need to check the tag at the back of the neck or (in this case) sit around until the end credits roll in order to identify the country of origin? Most films made during the hallyu era, including those of Park Chan-wook, Bong Joon-ho, and even

Hong Sang-soo (inspired by the works of Luis Buñuel, Robert Bresson, and Eric Rohmer), did not completely depart from the stereotypical image that made-in-Korea cultural products had previously established—cheap imitation films collectively known as “Copywood,” essentially no different from the inferior counterfeit products that imitate designer clothes for only a fraction of the price of the original. During the writing of my previous book and this one, and the producing of three feature-length films over the past ten years (*Invisible Light* in 2003, *Never Forever* in 2006, and the remake of *The Housemaid* in 2010), I was consequently plagued by the following assertion: Korean cinema is just another name for a late-capitalist cultural revolution that unseated Hong Kong in a rotating chair, but will soon inevitably be gobbled up and spat out by Hollywood when its replacement is found. It is not a genuine national cinema that could be a model for other nations because of the uncreative way it uses the universal language of Hollywood while neglecting the local history and experiences that contribute to its effect and pathos.⁸ And yet. And yet. If postmodern mimicry of Hollywood is something no national cinema or media industry of the twenty-first century can avoid, shouldn’t the success of the Korean cinema of the past decade be perceived as the best exemplary vision of a national cinema of our time? I also remain convinced that Korean cinema’s critical and commercial achievements over the last ten years amounted to substantially more than just a handful of actors who generated tens of thousands of obsessive fans in neighboring countries, overused buzzwords fraught with nationalist (*sijang jomyuryul*, or domestic market share) and capitalist (*sonik punkijŏm*, or break-even point) overtones, or a handful of titles that were sold for remake adaptation rights in Hollywood. The made-in-Korea content and style over the past decade, however short-lived, did have an impulsive natural spontaneity that created a cross-cultural appeal in a region still grieving over the atrocities Japan had committed against China and Korea during World War II that happened seventy years earlier. This is the reason I dedicate this book to all the people—filmmakers, critics, teachers, festival programmers, cinephiles, and liberal policymakers—who helped make Korean cinema during the first decade of the 2000s a globally recognized phenomenon.

I wish to gratefully acknowledge the help of the Korea Foundation, which provided me with an Advanced Research Grant that made possible a leave from teaching from January to December of 2008. The Korean

Film Archive and its then director Cho Sun-hee, with her colleagues Cho Jung-hyung and Chung Chong-hwa, made me feel welcome at the archive during a six-month stay in Seoul in 2008. My parents, Byung Kon Kim and Yeon-sup Lee, also provided home-cooked meals, a comfortable bed, and emotional support each time I flew to Korea for research, to deliver talks, and to teach. A timely grant from the Academy of Korean Studies, “Curriculum Development for Teaching Contemporary Cultural Topics in Korean Studies” allowed me to complete this manuscript in 2010–11. The Humanities Center at the University of California at Irvine provided further research funds for travel and other miscellaneous expenses. My department chairs, Ted Fowler (former) and Martin Huang (present), and my dean Vicki Ruiz, allowed me to concentrate on my research; had it not been for their forbearance, this book could not have been written in a timely manner. Mindy Haekyung Han and Francine Shapiro Jeffrey, who work in the department’s front office, patiently accommodated most of my many unreasonable requests. David E. James has been an amazing intellectual inspiration since I started my graduate work at the University of Southern California (USC) in 1992. Nancy Abelman, Rey Chow, Carter Eckert, and Kim U-chang have guided my studies since I left USC, and I am grateful to have them as mentors. Dudley Andrew, Charles Armstrong, Youngmin Choe, Kyeong-Hee Choi, Steven Chung, James Fujii, Takashi Fujitani, Alex and Mieke Gelley, Kelly Jeong, Jonathan M. Hall, Earl Jackson Jr., Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, Kyu Hyun Kim, Soyoung Kim, Aaron Magnan-Park, Hyangjin Lee, Sohl Lee, Young-Jun Lee, Walter K. Lew, Akira Lippit, Anne McKnight, Albert Park, Hyunseon Park, Sunyoung Park, Michael Raine, James Steintrager, Bert Scruggs, Serk-bae Suh, and Rei Terada were all wonderful colleagues who brought me joy and relief during an often tedious and forlorn process of writing and editing. Writing essays in Korean and communicating some of my ideas to Korean readers also helped me to form the main ideas behind this book. In this regard, I thank my Korean colleagues in the fields of film, literary, and cultural criticism who have tirelessly listened to me babble about Korean films over the years: Baek Moon-im, Chung Sung-il, Han Suk-jeong, Huh Moon-young, Hwang Ho-duk, Hwang Jong-yeon, Kim Hang, Kim Young-jin, Lee Young-jae, and Seo Young-chae. Many filmmakers—including Choi Dong-hoon, E J-yong, Hong Sang-soo, Im Chan-sang, Im Kwon-Taek, Jang Sun-woo, Gina Kim, Lee Chang-dong, Park Kwang-su, and Martin Scorsese—were also great companions. And they offered unique insights that could not

be simply gotten from websites. As in my first book, I tried my best here to analyze their wonderful films after sometimes countless viewings, but I know that my discussions will never match the rigor and labor with which they were created. Dear friends Sunyoung Lee and Michelle Cho, as proofreaders, and Jeanne Ferris, as copyeditor, offered many thoughtful insights while scrupulously going through what must have been a book with which they could not easily agree. Sohl Lee provided last minute help with indexing. I was given opportunities to discuss various sections of this book at the following institutions: Columbia University, Dong-A University (Pusan, Korea), Duke University, Hanyang University (Seoul, Korea), Harvard University, the Korean National University of Arts (Seoul, Korea), the University of Iowa, Lincoln Center's Film Society, the University of Minnesota (Twin Cities), Oberlin College (my alma mater), the University of Rochester, the Smithsonian Institution's Freer and Sackler Galleries, Stanford University, UC Berkeley, UC Davis, the University of Southern California, the University of Texas (Austin), the University of Washington (Seattle), and Yonsei University (Seoul, Korea). In spite of my flaws and shortcomings, the generous organizers, patient audiences, and their constructive feedback made this book infinitely better. Last but not least, Courtney Berger, my fabulous editor at Duke University Press, and her associate Christine Choi, made the entire process a painless one.

Portions of chapter 1 were derived from an early work, "The Blockbuster Auteur in the Age of *Hallyu*: Bong Joon-ho," which was published in *Hallyu: Korean Media Influence in Asia and Beyond*, edited by Do Hyun Kim, 181–201 (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2011). Portions of chapter 5 appeared, in different forms, as "Turning Gate" in *Film Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (summer 2004): 35–41; "The Awkward Traveller in *Turning Gate*," in *New Korean Cinema*, edited by Chi-yun Shin and Julian Stringer, 170–79 (New York University Press, 2005); and "Death, Eroticism, and Virtual Nationalism in the Films of Hong Sangsoo," in *Azalea: Journal of Korean Literature and Culture* 3 (2010): 135–69. An earlier version of chapter 7 was published as "'Tell the Kitchen That There's too much *Buchu* in the Dumpling': Reading Park Chan-wook's 'Unknowable' *Oldboy*," in *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema*, edited by Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, 179–98 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

Korean names in this manuscript are transliterated according to Korean standards, with the surname first. Most libraries and Korean studies scholars in the United States conform to the romanization system that is known

as the McCune-Reischauer system. I have attempted to use that romanization system for Korean names, terms, and titles, except for those names that have their own divergent orthography, especially in English-language subtitles. I have also retained the preferred names of certain directors whose works have been released in the United States, such as Hong Sang-soo (Hong Sang-su in the standard romanization), Park Chan-wook (Pak Ch'an-uk), and Im Kwon-Taek (Im Kwon-t'aek).

Virtual Hallyu

Something odd and unexpected took place during the last *fin de siècle*: South Korean cultural products that had previously attracted very little interest beyond Korea and the Korean diasporic communities scattered around the world suddenly became “cool.” The worldwide appetite for Korean cultural content from the late 1990s to 2007 or 2008 was impressive. Korean television dramas, films, music, fashion, and even cuisine—all marketed under the banner of hallyu (韓流) or the “Korean wave”—became wildly popular in areas such as the Pacific Rim and western China. Several Korean stars past their primes in their homeland emerged as overnight sensations in Japan;¹ an entire floor of a glitzy Beijing shopping center was redone according to a hallyu theme;² and remote rural locales in Korea, long forgotten by even those who lived nearby, became tourist attractions.³ Even academics began to take notice. First came an avalanche of English-language books on the subject of the New Korean Cinema during the first few years of the twenty-first century,⁴ followed almost immediately by several anthologies and special volumes written mostly by media and communications scholars on the success of Korean TV dramas all across Asia.⁵ “Hallyu,” a term coined by Chinese journalists in the late 1990s that punned the pronunciation of two characters for Korea (韓) and wave (流) with another compound expression, “cold current” (寒流), rapidly became a household and critical academic term, particularly in East and Southeast Asia.⁶

Box Office Rules

Aided by the intensification of the media's globalization, Korea's 1980s democratization movement and subsequent status as the best-wired nation in the world,⁷ and the strengthened pan-Asian consciousness resulting from the 1997 Asian economic crisis, hallyu started its surge in the years immediately after the Asian economic crisis hit Korea. Its popularity caught the new liberal Korean government of Kim Dae-jung by sur-

prise. The Korean wave arguably began to ripple when Kang Che-gyu's *Shiri* (1999), a spy thriller exploiting Korea's North-South division, miraculously reached the top of Japan's box office in January 2000. *Shiri* was not only the first Korean film to reach the top in Japan, it was the first to crack the top ten. This film predated the massive success of the Korean television drama *Winter Sonata* (*Kyöul yōnga*) by four years and eventually grossed more than \$10 million in Japan alone. *Shiri*, which cost only \$2 million to make, eventually became one of the most profitable Korean films ever. Park Chan-wook's *JSA: Joint Security Area* (2000) and Kwak Jae-yong's *My Sassy Girl* (*Yōpgijōk in kŭnyō*, 2001)—both of which also preceded *Winter Sonata* and the runaway popularity of its middle-aged heartthrob, Bae Yong-jun—succeeded *Shiri* as successes in Japan.⁸

Following the success of *Shiri* and *JSA*, two stories that pivoted around North Korean terrorists and soldiers and the Cold War division of the peninsula between the Communist North and the Capitalist South, Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003), *My Sassy Girl*, Yi Chae-han's *A Moment to Remember* (*Nae maŭm sok ūi chiukae*, 2004), and Hur Jin-ho's *April Snow* (*Oech'ul*, 2005) achieved overseas box office success and drove the pan-Asian appetite for the hallyu in the early years of the century. These films featured easily digestible plotlines and hallyu stars like Jeon Ji-hyun and Bae Yong-jun. However, by the end of the decade, the Asian public quickly lost interest in these films. As I stated in the preface, not even *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*—an expensive blockbuster Western featuring some of the best-known pan-Asian stars—could save hallyu from its rapid decline in cinema. This sudden decline in the popularity of the Korean wave since 2007 is just as inexplicable as its emergence. Perhaps Edward Said put it best: “Why do wigs, lace collars, and high buckled shoes appear, then disappear, over a period of decades?”⁹ Even the most comprehensive answer to this question may not be satisfying, because history itself is written and reconstructed by people who tend to assign meanings to past events that “acquire objective validity only *after* the assignments are made [Said's emphasis].”¹⁰

By the time the Korean government had begun spending millions of dollars in public funds to effectively protect, subsidize the production of, and market hallyu, overseas interest in the phenomenon had already dwindled.¹¹ The heavy reliance on a Cold War theme derived from Korea's division, coupled with the Korean film industry's failure to develop multilingual content or an international star system—or to expand its roster of

stars beyond a couple of actors—ended up limiting the potential of Korean film and television products, eventually precipitating hallyu's demise. So serious was the downward spiral of hallyu in 2009 that Hallyuwood, a \$250 million complex in Koyang (adjacent to Seoul)—slated to open in 2013 with a theme park, hotel, and media facilities—changed its name to Korea World from one that was quickly losing cultural cachet. Many construction projects eventually halted completely because of delinquent payments and lawsuits over breach of contracts between the city and the developers.¹² Furthermore, the conservative government led by President Lee Myung-bak began in 2008 to pursue policies in cinema that attempted to close off many of the paths to success that the Korean film industry had been following during the liberal government rule that lasted from 1998 to 2007.¹³

The popularity of hallyu coincided with the ten-year period during which two liberal presidents, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, presided over the country before conservatives retook control of the presidency in 2007's landslide election. It would be a mistake to deny any kinship between hallyu and the liberal sociopolitical mood that fostered it. However, just as increased government subsidies around 2005 could not slow hallyu's rapid decline, attempting to explain a body of work that essentially relied on creative aesthetic expressions by examining state policies and socioeconomic factors alone would not yield satisfying results. It would be an exaggeration to elevate hallyu to the pantheon of celebrated aesthetic movements such as the modernist literature that blossomed in Paris during the early part of the twentieth century, or the Italian neorealist cinema of the period after the Second World War. Nonetheless, hallyu's legitimate place in history can be discovered only when we ask how it stylistically and thematically addressed "values that belong to a bourgeois world on the wane," to borrow a phrase from Terry Eagleton.¹⁴

Precisely what values would be on the wane in a country that had never gone through the kind of indigenous industrial revolution and modernization processes experienced by the West or Japan? If new kinds of aesthetic movements take form in opposition to preexisting establishments, what images and icons gave a sense of coherent identity to what we now know as hallyu, and to the Korean cinema that played such a crucial part in it? And if modernism can be described as a mixture of mourning and revolt directed against the waning national bourgeoisie, can hallyu be described as being motivated by postmodernism, an aesthetic sensibility that celebrates newly minted moneyed classes of dubious origins as well as the re-

vival of conservative neoliberal values? Hallyu was and perhaps still is a cultural phenomenon that collapses the gap between modernism, an aesthetic auteurist revolt against both the waning nationalist (*minjok-juŭi*) forces and authoritarian (*kwŏnŭi-juŭi*) legacies that drove Korea throughout much of the latter part of the twentieth century, and postmodernism, typified by lavishly produced multi-genre pan-Asian blockbusters targeting pan-Asian audiences—for example, the television series *Taejanggŭm* (*Jewel in the Palace*) or a monster film like *The Host*.

Though scholarship on hallyu has proliferated in the past few years, even in English language, most of the essays featured in special volumes and anthologies on hallyu have placed an excessive emphasis on data that range from numbers of foreign tourists to various annual figures from the entertainment industry, as well as quotes from random pan-Asian consumers of hallyu products and contents.¹⁵ What is largely absent thus far from hallyu scholarship is a critical engagement with the question of how and why the viewer processes new screen figures such as the proto-feminist Chosun-era female doctor Jang-geum from *Taejanggŭm* or the monster (half fish, half dragon) that lives in the River Han from *The Host* as embodiments of modern, hybrid, and even global desires. Textual discussions of forms that express the global era's anxieties are imperative in order to assert hallyu's role in the protonationalist, neoliberal enterprise. Not atypical, for instance, is a point raised by Doobo Shim, who—while attempting to debunk the notion of “globalization” as either an outgrowth of “cultural imperialism” or “workings of the project of modernity”—flatly dismisses what he calls the “from modernity to postmodernity; from capitalism to late capitalism” argument made by Marxist literary critics. Shim states that “political economists critique this notion by arguing that the conflation of modernity with capitalism is wrong,” before adding that “the notion of globalization as an outcome of modernity . . . tends to provide an aura of ‘inevitability’ to the rise of neoliberalism and concentrated corporate control (and hypercommercialization) of the media in the present era.”¹⁶ In other words, according to Shim, Marxist critics such as David Harvey and Fredric Jameson have misled us, making us think that modernity—or modernism—is not only a capitalist invention but also an affirmation of inescapable neoliberalism or total corporate control. Such positions by media studies scholars on modernist literary or film theory tend to reduce any serious attempt to disentangle the ideological complexities of textual matters to supercilious and overdetermined articulations of

trenchant Marxist principles.¹⁷ Though I am in agreement with many communications scholars that various hallyu entertainment contents, media, and art have engineered intercultural flows in and out of Asia, and have thereby constituted hybrid persuasions and forms that are neither authentically Korean nor appropriations of Hollywood pastiche, I remain wary of a scholarship that completely avoids analyzing the forms, structures, and ideals of hallyu. Screen subjects, whether in film or on television, are products of fantastic, elusive, and even erratic identifications; a cultural critic's function is to unveil the latent meanings beneath the sometimes seemingly placid, conservative or liberal textual surfaces. Though it is tempting to dismiss all hallyu products, including blockbuster films, as necessary ideological affirmations of laissez-faire values, that dismissal would only accept the totalizing claims made by *both* Marxist critics and media scholars. Therefore, this book proposes to explain how contemporary Korean cinema, caught between the conflicting interests of the modernist affection for the sublime induced by the auteur cinema and its postmodern invalidation necessitated by chaeböl-driven multiplex market forces, continues to negotiate with both real and monstrous cinematic representations of what I am calling virtual hallyu.

Virtual Hallyu allows us to think about Korean cinema over the past decade in the midst of: (1) the faltering of grand ideologies—such as democracy, socialism, and antiglobalization—that gave way to parochial nationalism, local product consumerist protection, and Internet activism; (2) the reduction of the image, removing any impression, metaphor, or allegory of socially symbolic acts; (3) the meaninglessness of the distinction between realism, modernism, and postmodernism, since they simply cannot provide anything new in the critical methodologies of visual cultures given that—as I will explain below—the boundary between “the way things are remembered” and the “way things really were” has been crossed through the massive repository of images collected over the past decade; and (4), as mentioned above, the blurring of the boundaries between Hollywood and the generic conventions of non-Hollywood products that have generated hybrid, mutating, transnational forms of every kind of genre possible in Korean cinema, including Westerns, eco-disaster, and science fiction once very specific to American cinematic mythologies.

In other words, this book is an attempt to think about how recent cinema in South Korea has produced subjects that extend far beyond standard models of semiotics or Cold War political allegories. Some of the figures

to be analyzed are: the monster that pops out of the River Han (*The Host*); a schizophrenic Korean doctor during the Japanese colonial period (*Epitaph*); an impulsive pimp servicing an aging dictator (*President's Last Bang*); decadent libertine intellectuals (*Woman Is the Future of Man*); a schizo man who refuses to grow up (*Oasis*); and a salary man as vengeful fighting machine (*Oldboy*). By invoking a unique yet centripetal quality with appeal beyond the national, these protagonists escape from the particular brands of sublimity or affect (for instance, torn flags, women's tears, youthful revolt, or religious themes) that had served as metonyms of national spirit. In analyzing these figures, I insist that these recent films challenge traditional boundaries: urban versus provincial, nationalists versus collaborators, and Communist North versus capitalist South.

Virtual-Actual

Yi Sang's "Lingering Impressions of a Mountain Village" bears witness to the "relentless defamiliarization of the familiar" and the critical role the landscape plays in that process:

They say there are roe deer and wild boar over there on P'albong Mountain. And some even say they've seen a "bear" that comes down to catch crayfish in the gully where they used to hold rituals to pray for rain. I continually suffer from the *delusion* [my emphasis] that these animals, which I have only seen in zoos, have not been captured from these mountains and put in zoos, but rather have been taken from zoos and put in these mountains. When night falls, just as men retire to their chambers, P'albong disappears into the lacquer-black, moonless night.¹⁸

As early as 1935, Yi Sang, the young, ailing poet who had never before lived outside Seoul, had found full expression of his interiority by bringing a new mode of landscape into being. Both the nocturnal disappearing act performed by P'albong Mountain and Yi Sang's imagining that animals have been placed in these mountains after being taken from a zoo play pivotal roles in reconstructing an indelible image of the threatened P'albong. The irony here is that bears can no longer be spotted in Korea's mountains, and the only way wild bears could be restored would be to take them from a zoo and place them in the mountains. In other words, Yi's 1935 "delusion" has become today's nightmarish reality. By stripping the awe from wild

animals, he forces the mountain to lose its novelty. Mountain P'albong, which he later compares to the Paramount Pictures logo¹⁹ can no longer sustain the image of infinity, divinity, and unpredictable wildlife. Consequently, the intensity of the rural landscape's sublimity also immeasurably decreases. What Yi calls modern "delusion" lays bare the foundation on which the virtual-actual subjects, following the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, come into being.

If modern writing—as evidenced here by Yi Sang, who writes about the impending horror of disappearing mountains and wildlife—presented the opening of the unconscious by first figuring a virtual system of possibilities through language, cinema in the era of late capitalism has further expanded this condition of possibilities through figurations of elements that are beyond the field of representation in literature. "Virtual-actual" is the concept through which Deleuze sought to move visual theory, especially film theory, beyond the representational.

In this regard, Deleuze's theories about "virtual" and "actual" become even more intriguing. Consistent with his other concepts, what Deleuze does is to unhook the virtual from its classic configuration of an ontological entity split between truth and falsehood, remapping it instead within a terrain somewhere between a creative process and something already created. Surely, the virtual technically distinguishes itself from the actual by being the constituent, whereas the actual is positioned as the constituted. But rest assured—the virtual alone does not mean much without the actual, and vice versa. In this regard, the virtual is consistent with other key concepts of Deleuze—such as the anti-Oedipal schizo, the nomad, and the body-without-organs—that aim to question the stability of "fixed truth" and seek to problematize how truth in the traditional Western metaphysics has evolved through the putative neutrality of image. This is precisely the reason why he ambitiously took up the question of cinema in his two volumes, *Cinema 1: Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: Time-Image*. Since the present is always a fleeting peak composed of multilayered sheets of the past and can never be fully grasped without the past, while the past can never completely sever itself from the present, the virtual is always realized within a fragment of memory that is both solid and transient. So, from this perspective, however faithful a representation of history might be to its origin, it can never be permanently situated within the domain of the nonvirtual. The difference between the way things are remembered