BETWEEN INDEPENDENT CINEMA AND THE BLOCKBUSTER IN SOUTH KOREA: YEON SANG-HO'S FILMS AND THEIR RECEPTION IN SPAIN

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INTRODUCTION

"*Train to Busan* opens tomorrow in Spain after beating box office records in South Korea, seducing in Cannes, thrilling in Sitges and guaranteeing a Hollywood remake. And all thanks to a train full of undead" (Domínguez, 2017). In this way, Spanish film critics reflected the excitement and expectation generated by the release of *Train to Busan* (Busanhaeng, 2016), one of the most successful South Korean films of recent years. The most popular work of South Korean filmmaker Yeon Sang-ho was viewed as a vital lifeline that could reignite the pleasure produced by entertainment films. This is how the influential film critic Jordi Costa understood it in his review for the newspaper *El País*: "South Korea has saved independent cinema and, with it, the sacred flame of a truly unabashed Dionysian cinephilia" (Costa, 2017).

There are hardly any studies of the work of Yeon Sang-ho[1] other than narrative and aesthetic analysis, notable among which is the contextualization and review of South Korean animated cinema by Gómez Gurpegui (2015). Nonetheless, Yeon has become one of the most important directors of South Korean animation, attracting consider popular attention to the industry of a country that has always been relegated to working in the shadows of the American and Japanese productions on which both local and international audiences have been raised. Yeon is a paradigmatic case of a filmmaker whose career has always been associated with animated productions who has successfully made the leap into commercial cinema with a blockbuster like *Train to Busan*, which clearly has all the elements to become a cult film.

It is precisely this success in straddling both worlds of South Korea's film industry that makes the beginning of a professional career in a context as marginal as the 2D animation of *manhwa*[2] so remarkable. This genre, which has never received much attention locally, was relegated to providing

The Isle (Kim Ki-duk, 2000)

services to Western producers due to its low cost (Danta, 2017: 123) compared to the great international prominence enjoyed for decades by Japanese anime. Only with the success of *The King of Pigs* (Dae-gie-ui wang, 2011) was the genre able to emerge from the shadows and gain recognition for the first time as a genuine contribution to the country's culture. With its screening in Spain, this South Korean animated feature has sparked enough interest with audiences and critics in the country to warrant its recent release on DVD by Mediatres Estudio. If this interest continues, no doubt other titles from South Korea's vibrant catalogue of animated films will emerge in this format.

THE RECEPTION OF SOUTH KOREAN CINEMA IN SPAIN

South Korean cinema struggled to rise above the Asian competition in Spain during the 1990s. It entered the Spanish market via two main avenues: theatrical runs, and (especially) film festivals. Notable among the latter was the San Sebastian Film Festival, which screened its first South Korean film, *Our Twisted Hero* (Urideurui ilgeureojin yeongung, Park Jong-won, 1992), in 1993; the Sitges Film Festival, which in 1998 premiered *The Quiet Family* (Choyonghan Kajok, Kim Jee-woon, 1998); and since 1999, the Barcelona Asian Film Festival. On the other hand, only two South Korean titles had theatrical runs during those years: *Eunuch* (Naeshi, Lee Doo-yong, 1986), a film with an historical dimension that was seen by only 254 people and earned a mere €692 when it was released in May 1990 (ICAA, 2019);[3] and *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* (Dharmaga tongjoguro kan kkadalgun, Bae Yong-kyun, 1991), which, despite winning two awards at the Locarno Film Festival, sold only 923 tickets, with box office takings of just €1,300 in August 1992. After these two, nine years would have to pass before another South Korean film would be released in

Spanish theatres, in 2001: *Lies* (Gojitmal, Jang Sun-woo, 1999), an erotic drama that offered a glimpse of the changes taking place in South Korean cinema, but still receiving minimal interest from Spanish audiences. However, the release of Kim Ki-duk's emblematic work, *The Isle* (Seom, 2000), described concisely by Rodríguez Marchante as "hard to forget once you see it" (Rodríguez Marchante, 2000: 81), indisputably earned greater media attention. This film, another example of the captivating genre of Asian extreme cinema, captured the attention of audiences once again for its exoticism and distinctness and opened up the festival circuit for the filmmaker. By this historic moment, New South Korean Cinema had already gained international recognition, especially thanks to this director. Taking advantage of its release, the Spanish press decried the absence from Spanish theatres of these new trends in Asian cinema in general. As Weinrichter put it, "Eastern cinema continues to reach us in a trickle despite the torrent that has been shaking all the major festivals for more than a decade" (Weinrichter, 2001: 12). Since then, Kim Ki-duk has become the filmmaker with the biggest number of productions released in Spain to date through his presence at the San Sebastian Film Festival, and the most successful South Korean film to date is his picture *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter... and Spring* (Bom yeoreum gaeul gyeoul gyeoul geurigo bom, 2003), released in Spanish theatres in August 2004. Its box office earnings of €860,309.24 was outdone only by *The Host* (Gwoemul, Bong Joon-ho, 2006), which took €985,441.00 and earned Bong national recognition as one of South Korea's most important directors, receiving acclaim even from Spanish filmmakers.[4]

Since 2003, South Korean auteur films have lost ground to big blockbusters like *Memories of Murder* (Salinui chueok, Bong Joon-ho, 2003); *Oldboy* (Oldeuboi, Park Chan-wook, 2003) or *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (Chinjeolhan geumjassi, Park Chan-wook, 2005), which became examples serving to demonstrate the enthusiastic reaction that South Korean cinema was receiving from the media, which, as in the case of *Oldboy* (Oldeuboi, 2003), "sums up in its innovative approach why Korean cinema is turning into an unstoppable force on all international markets" (Torreiro, 2005). The arrival of genre films from South Korea, most of them understood as auteur cinema, was well received by film critics attracted to *the Other*, to their exoticism, to that ever-present "kimono effect", although few were aware that these filmmakers were already internationally recognised as part of the generation of directors who in the late 1990s called themselves *Young Sang Sidae* (the Visual Generation) (Yecies and Shim, 2011: 4) and who would later end up being referred to as the "3-8-6 generation" (filmmakers who were around thirty years old, who attended university during the 1980s and who were born in the 1960s) (Robinson, 2005; Lee, 2016: 260). The approach to these filmmakers by Spanish critics was erroneously based precisely on this exoticism, on the novelty offered by the possibility of enjoying the production of a national film industry practically unknown until then. This led to an evaluation of these films from a point of view that

Oldboy (Park Chan-wook, 2003)

was distanced and superficial, and that involved constant comparisons with Western cinema.

Since 2010, there has been a larger number of South Korean feature films released in Spain, with a balance between commercial and auteur films. Joining the filmmakers mentioned above have been other established directors such as Hong Sang-soo, Lee Chang-dong, Ryoo Seung-wan, Im Sang-soo and Youn JK, along with new filmmakers like Shim Sung-bo, Lee Sujin and July Jung. Thrillers and dramas are the most prominent genres, although since 2014, a wider variety can be observed, with the appearance of comedy, horror, action, fantasy and animation.

SINCE 2010, THERE HAS BEEN A LARGER NUMBER OF SOUTH KOREAN FEATURE FILMS RELEASED IN SPAIN

The first South Korean animated film to reach Spanish theatres during this sea-change was *RUN=DIM* (Reondim: Naeseoseu-ui Banran, Megan Han, 2002), a futuristic sci-fi adventure with an apocalyptic plot related to the protection of nature in an age of nuclear weapons and military advances. Its release in Spain in July 2004 was a risky venture by the distributor Compañía Premium de Vídeo y Tv, and it took in only €5,402.18. Ten years would have to pass before the arrival of another animated feature, this time in the context of the international South Korean film trend: *The Fake* (Saibi, Yeon Sang-ho, 2013). Mediatres Estudio acquired the rights to this film and released it in May 2014, although it ultimately only took €1,737.58 at the box office. Four months later, the children's animated feature *Leafie, A Hen Into The Wild* (Madangeul Naon Amtak, Oh Seong-yoon, 2011) would be shown for the first time, followed a year later by *The Satellite Girl and Milk Cow* (Woori-byul Il-ho-wa Ul-ruk-so, Jang Hyung-yun, 2014), after it took the award for Best Animated Film at the Sitges Film Festival and was also featured at the 13th "Muestra Syfy" festival in Madrid. Despite this exposure and a style recognisable for the clear influence of Studio Ghibli and the work of the popular Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki, both of which have a large number of followers, this film took only €290 at the box office. The last South Korean animation shown in Spain was Yeon's *Seoul Station* (Seoulyeok, 2016) and the children's film *Almost Heroes 3D* (Bling, Lee Kyung-Ho and Lee Won-Jae, 2016) in February and April 2017, respectively. In contrast to the earlier animated films and contrary to expectations, the latter achieved comparative success with box office earnings of €27,343.84.

YEON SANG-HO

The career of South Korean filmmaker Yeon Sang-ho sets him apart from other recognised auteurs due to his association with South Korea's independent market[5] from its earliest days with the little-known short film *Megalomania of D* (1997). The date of 3 November 2011 saw the release of his first animated feature, *The King of Pigs* (2011), a drama that explores school bullying, class conflict, capitalism and authoritarianism in the 1980s through the memories of its protagonists. This film, distributed on the Indiestory Inc. label, was released in only 25 cinemas in South Korea, attracting a total audience of 19,918. With a budget of $150,000, the film took only $126,812 in box office receipts, but its greatest achievement was its recognition at the Busan Film Festival, where it won three awards, along with various nominations at international festivals such as Sydney, Edinburgh and Cannes, where it became the first South Korean animated feature to be selected for the program of the Directors' Fortnight. This international exposure led to a new project for the filmmaker: the French Canadian animated series *Redakai: Conquer the Kairu* (Redakai: Cucerest Kairu, Vincent Chalvon-Demersay and David Mi-

The King of Pigs (Yeon Sang-ho, 2011)
The Fake (Yeon Sang-ho, 2013)

chel, Canal J: 2011-2012), broadcast by Clan RTVE in Spain. Yeon directed 39 of the 52 episodes between 2011 and 2013, telling the story of a fifteen-year-old boy who sets out on a quest in search of an alien source of energy.

After completing this project, Yeon would release a new feature film, *The Fake*, released in 75 South Korean cinemas on 28 November 2013 through Contents Panda, a division of Next Entertainment World. In contrast with the humble releases of his previous films, *The Fake* made its world premiere in the Vanguard section of the Toronto International Film Festival on 7 September 2013. Despite a budget that was more than double that of its predecessors ($360,000), its domestic box office figures were not much better, earning $147,632 with a total of 22,526 tickets sold. However, Yeon's international profile was consolidated with this new production, an animated thriller for adults that reveals the auteur's radical style in its portrayal of deception in a small rural town. The film would receive several awards at international niche festivals like Fantasporto, Sitges and Gijón, where it was clearly suited to the programming and, therefore, to the tastes of the audience.

Three years later, Yeon would release two more films only a month apart. *Train to Busan* was released on 20 July 2016 in 1,788 theatres, promoted as one of the big blockbusters of the year, while on 17 August, *Seoul Station* was distributed to 440 cinemas, a big release for an independent film; it would end up selling 147,031 tickets, taking in $1,022,852 in revenue. The film, whose story begins at Seoul's central railway station where a beggar shows the first signs of a strange virus, had been screened at various festivals but failed to pick up a single award. However, it found greater popularity after the success of the live-action *Train to Busan*, being promoted as an animated prequel to it during its first few days in theatres, although in narrative terms this was not strictly accurate since its story is set at a different time and features a large number of characters that do not appear in the other film. The main plot of *Train to Busan* focuses on the spread of the virus as the characters begin a train journey to Busan, in the south of the country. Both films present the figure of the zom-

Seoul Station (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016)

bie as a critique of South Korean society, whose members are portrayed as sheep with no will of their own, manipulated by the powerful as yet another consequence of capitalism. However, as on a narrative level they only share the same background and certain contextual elements, any real connection between the two is lost, undermining the idea that the second is really a prequel as such.

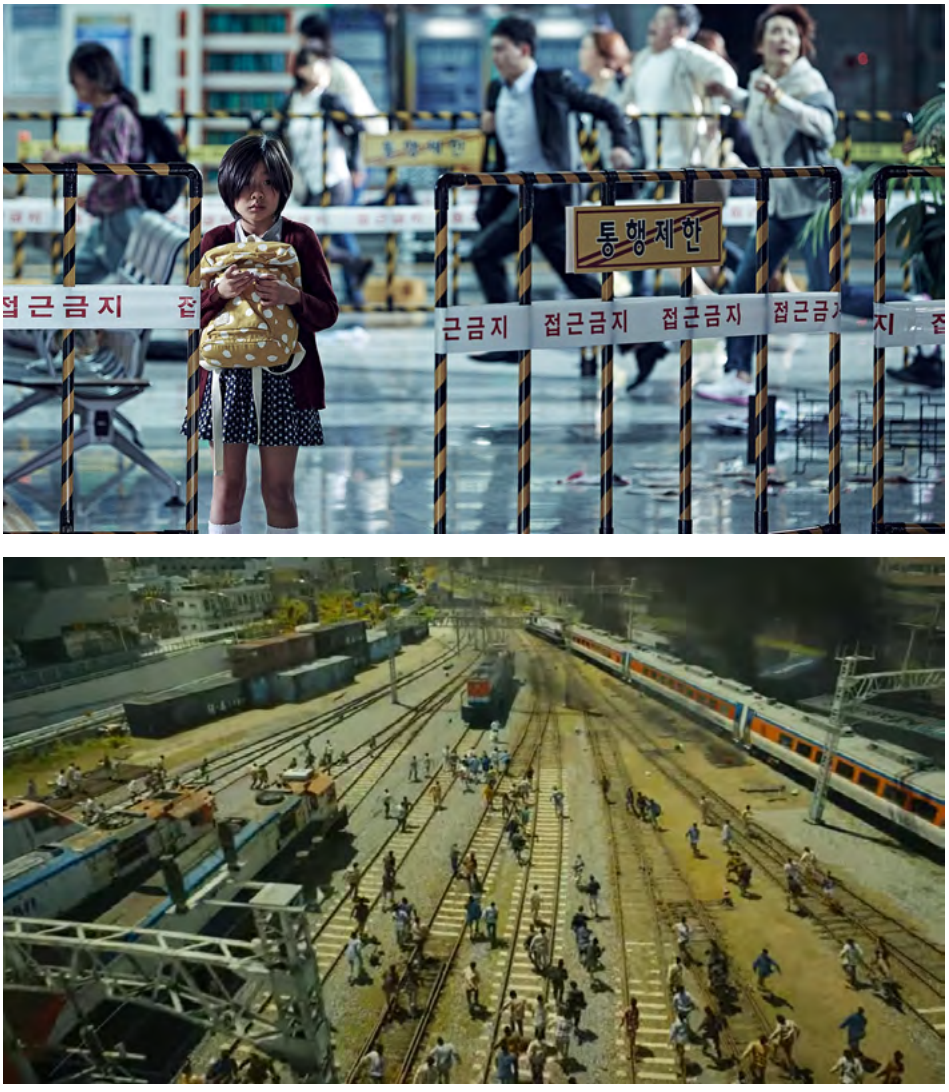
Train to Busan took in $81,992,815 with 11,567,218 tickets sold in South Korea alone, making it the country's biggest film of the year. With the support of Contents Panda the filmmaker toured the international festival circuit, this time winning 32 awards in contests such as Sitges and Toronto After Dark. However, the film's most notable achievement was to break the filmmaker into various markets in the region: in Thailand, Hong Kong, Vietnam and Singapore it became the biggest blockbuster of the year and the most successful South Korean feature film ever in these markets. "The South Korean film *Train to Busan* is as resilient as the zombies it portrays: it has pushed its way to the top of the local box office and has also become Singapore's highest grossing Korean film ever" (Yee, 2016).

The New South Korean Cinema enriched the country's traditional film genres like melodrama, while the thriller[6] gained international prominence, coming to symbolise the creation of a "quality brand"[7] that works as a lure for Western audiences. However, South Korean studios had not delved into the zombie horror genre until *Train to Busan*.[8] Its market value has resulted in an increased visibility for plots of this kind, with the effects observable even now in new productions like *Rampant* (Chang-gwol, Kim Sung-hoon, 2018), also distributed by Contents Panda, which fared much more poorly. After its release on 25 October 2018, the film earned only $11,681,278 at the local box office. On the other hand, the Netflix

series *Kingdom* (Kingdeom, Kim Seong-hoon, Netflix: 2019) generated greater excitement by winning over film critics and international audiences in just six episodes, as reflected in media reports on the series. "*Kingdom* (Netflix), the *Game of Thrones* with zombies that is sweeping the world" (Lorente, 2019) exemplifies the old habit among Spanish film critics of using comparisons to Western models to discuss a product of Eastern origin, which at the same time is exploited for its exotic appeal: "Netflix, zombies and Koreans: we need to see the series *Kingdom*" (Lamb, 2018). It should be noted that the series also caught the attention certain film critics—and therefore certain audiences—who had not yet taken an interest in minority fiction productions that already had viewers in Spain. "*Kingdom*, the zombie series that has made us watch Asian fiction series" is a headline complemented by different clichés that expose an ignorance of Asian cinema: "In the Eastern audiovisual industry they don't just make animation series, and the latest Netflix production from South Korea proves it" (Garrán, 2019).

The phenomenon generated by *Train to Busan* gave Yeon the chance to release his next feature film, *Psychokinesis* (Yeomryuk, Yeom-lyeok, 2018) on Netflix on 31 January 2018. Distancing himself from the zombie film, the director offered one of the few superhero films ever produced in his country. Indeed, South Korean studios continue to avoid this genre, viewed as its Achilles heel, as superhero films are the only Hollywood blockbusters capable of challenging local productions at the box office. There are examples of this every year, as was the case in 2018, when *Avengers: Infinity War* (Anthony and Joe Russo, 2018), *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (Peyton Reed, 2018) and *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018) were all among the top ten grossing films in South Korea.

Months later, Yeon would also announce a sequel to *Train to Busan* that would continue from where the story left off, when the virus that began to infect the population has already spread throughout the peninsula. However,



Train to Busan (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016)

Kingdom (Kim Seong-hoon, 2019)

as in *Seoul Station*, the director had already decided to work on a script with different characters. "Yeon said he would not call the new film *Train to Busan 2*. 'It's an extension of *Train to Busan*, after the virus has spread all over Korea, but the characters are not the same. It shares the same cosmovision and is a zombie action film that deals with the consequences on the peninsula of what happened in *Train to Busan*' (Noh, 2018). The fact that it is a universal narrative easily adaptable to the expectations of Western audiences resulted in a bidding war that lasted for two years for the rights to the new film, involving various international studios including Universal, Paramount, Lionsgate, Screen Gems, Gaumont and New Line. Finally, it was announced in September 2018 (Kit, 2018) that, although Gaumont had initially insisted on exclusivity, it would collaborate with New Line to make a remake in English under the direction of Malaysian-born Australian filmmaker, producer and scriptwriter James Wan.

THE CIRCULATION AND RECEPTION OF YEON SANG-HO'S FILMS IN SPAIN

Most of Yeon Sang-ho's filmography has been available to the Spanish public through its presence in cinemas, at film festivals and on VOD platforms. His first film, *The King of Pigs*, was only shown at the Sitges Film Festival, but did not have a theatrical run. The media hardly mentioned its screening at the event; film bloggers were the ones who paid it the most attention, with one remarking that "it looks like one of the most attractive offerings of the festival in the form of adult-oriented, violent animation" (Collazos, 2012). Spectators at this festival were also able to watch *The Fake*, featured as well at the Gijón Film Festival, where it won the award for best film. *Seoul Station* and *Train to Busan* also had festival screenings. Finally, despite this trajectory, his feature film *Psychokinesis* (2018) was launched directly on the Netflix platform. Thanks to these screenings, *The Fake* was the first of his films to captivate Spanish critics and audiences. The film critic Javier Ocaña (2014) expressed one of the main reasons its positive reception in *El País*: "releases of exclusively adult-oriented animated films are so unusual in our cinemas that the arrival of the Korean thriller *The Fake*, a wild dramatic thriller, must be greeted with the joy of the unexpected." The journalist Rubén Romero (2014) suggested that "*The Fake*, his second feature, confirms what was hinted at with *The King of Pigs*, that this is an auteur of consequence." Nevertheless, after Mediatres Estudio took charge of its distribution *The Fake* was only viewed by 260 spectators, grossing a mere €1,737.58.

Train to Busan, Yeon's next film to be shown in Spain, would receive considerable media attention, and enjoy a larger audience than the films mentioned above, with a total of 29,835 viewers. After its international release and its appearance at the Sitges Film Festival, the media reacted with excitement to the announcement of its arrival in Spanish theatres, even describing it as "an instant cult movie" (Martínez, 2017). Pablo G. Taboada

(2016) concludes his report on the Gijón Film Festival with a statement that sums up his experience for film buffs: "*Train to Busan* is a top quality production. It could be better, but as it is, there are things it can be forgiven for. More films like this one, please." The excitement the film generated was conveyed on social networks like Twitter, where it became one of the big audience favourites for that year's festival. A Contracorriente secured the distribution rights in Spain and it was released on 4 January 2017. National box office takings amounted to €179,390.39,[9] and in 2018 an article in the newspaper *El Mundo* identified it not only as one of the best zombie films of all time, but also, in an apparent moment of euphoria, as "one of the best Korean films that have ever reached the West" (Luchini, 2018).

Sharing the program at Sitges with *Train to Busan* was its prequel, *Seoul Station*, which would enter Spanish theatres a month later, on 14 February 2017. A Contracorriente handled the distribution again, although with very different results: only 267 tickets sold and total takings of €1,771. Overshadowed by its highly publicised sequel, considerable emphasis was placed on its more brutal and mordant tone compared to the spectacular quality of the live-action film: "crude, savage and highly emotional in intent, it is an animated film that effectively confirms the filmmaker as one of the most important names in Asian cinema" (Taboada, 2016). Yeon Sang-ho became a recognised figure in the Spanish media after the release of his most important feature films, a fact that became especially clear with the release of *Seoul Station*: "the message in no way prevents the director, Yeon Sang-ho, from demonstrating that even when he tells a story using animation he is a master playing with the conventions of the genre and creating an atmosphere of oppressive tension" (Salvà, 2017). The critics thus stressed the high quality of his work both in animation and live-action. At the same time there was a surprised recognition that the quality of the animated films was on a par with other commercial films received from South Korea. "*The King of Pigs* (2011) and *The Fake* (2013) demonstrated that the murkiness inherent in a certain kind of Korean live-action cinema was a frontier that could also be crossed by the expressive registers of animated film" (Costa, 2017).

Although most critics coincided in highlighting the source of these films as the first sign of quality,[10] applied generally to hit films at the South Korean box office and on the international festival circuit, there are also questions more specific to each film, such as the visual spectacle of the depiction of violence employed by Yeon, the social critiques that underlie each main plot, or the filmmaker's notable exploitation of the absence of animated films targeting adult audiences, which tends to cause surprise among critics more accustomed to Japanese animation. Similarly, the analysis of South Korean productions is notably more meticulous, as over the years Spanish film critics have become increasingly interested in exploring the narrative development, aesthetic treatment and symbolism underlying these films. However, the unnecessary, conformist tendencies to summarise premises, describe scenes or compare cultures have yet to be left behind.

FANDOM AND STAR SYSTEM

Yeon Sang-ho's first live-action film, *Train to Busan*, follows the usual pattern of the South Korean blockbuster in its use of a locally and regionally recognisable star system. In South Korea, these types of productions usually (although not always) follow the Hollywood genre film model while offering elements of Korean identity, thus building a hybrid product that has come to be considered a *seal of quality* of the South Korean film industry. The South Korean blockbuster could therefore be defined as a high-budget commercial product with a universal narrative fusing elements of national identity (many of them related to the country's historical memory), a recognisable star system and

THE UNNECESSARY, CONFORMIST TENDENCIES TO SUMMARISE PREMISES, DESCRIBE SCENES OR COMPARE CULTURES HAVE YET TO BE LEFT BEHIND

special effects that offer the viewer an audiovisual spectacle. These are films that are exhibited widely in domestic theatres as part of an elaborate marketing strategy and that generally turn into hits at the South Korean box office, thereby increasing their chances of being released internationally.

The director thus had some of the most popular faces in the country for his first live-action film. The actor Gong Yoo, who plays the main character, had risen to fame quickly through his role in the television series *Coffee Prince* (Keopi peurinseu 1-hojeom, Lee Yoon-jung, MBC: 2007), which earned him a niche in the genre of romantic comedy. His co-star Ma Dong-seok has appeared in numerous films that have achieved local success and have been exported to the West. In Spain, the Sitges Film Festival has screened some of his most biggest films, such as *The Good, the Bad and the Weird* (Joheunnom nabbeunnom isanghannom, Kim Jee-woon, 2008), *Nameless Gangster* (Bumchoiwaui junjaeng, Yun Jong-bin, 2012), *New World* (Sinsegye, Park Hoon-jung, 2013), *Doomsday Book* (Inlyu myeol-mang bo-go-seo, Kim Jee-woon and Yim Pil-sung, 2012), *Azooma* (Gongjeongsahoe, Lee Ji-seung, 2012), *The Outlaws* (Beom-joi-do-si, Kang Yoon-seong, 2017), *Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds* (Singwa Hamkke, Kim Yong-hwa, 2017) and *Along with the Gods: The Last 49 Days* (Singwa hamkke: Ingwa yeon, Kim Yong-hwa, 2018). These films made Ma Dong-seok a familiar face both to the spectators at this festival and to film lovers in general, and thus he and Gong Yoo were two of the film's main drawcards.

Starring in *Train to Busan* has strongly marked the careers of both actors. For Ma Dong-seok, it has meant renewed interest from Hollywood. After rejecting several projects a few years ago, the actor has now agreed to join the cast of *The Eternals* (Chloé Zhao, 2020), a new blockbuster set in the Marvel universe that is currently in the early stages of production (MacDonald, 2019). He will also star in the US remake of the South Korean film *The Gangster, the Cop, the Devil* (Akinjeon, Lee Won-tae, 2019), an action thriller that was featured at Cannes in 2019. Balboa Productions, Sylvester Stallone's company, has obtained the rights to shoot the film after completing *Rambo: Last Blood* (Adrian Grunberg, 2019) (Lee, 2019). This greater international visibility for Ma Dong-Seok has taken him away from television to focus on cinema, where he has increased his activity to between four and five films per year. His obvious success contrasts with that of Gong Yoo, who, although he has not been able to make a similar leap onto the international scene, has worked on two of South Korea's most popular projects of 2016: the television series *Goblin* (Dokkaebi, Lee Eung-bok, TVN: 2016-2017) and the blockbuster *The Age of Shadows* (Mil-jeong, Kim Jee-woon, 2016), which premiered in Spain on 27 January 2017 and achieved very modest box office earnings of €2,014.55.

Both *Train to Busan* and *Seoul Station* attracted the attention not only of film lovers who consider South Korean cinema to be a symbolic *quality brand*, but also of those with a special interest in the horror genre and the zombie movie, with *Train to Busan* turning into the latest "cinematic phenomenon from South Korea" (El cine coreano..., 2018) for audiences and the media in Spain. However, the Spanish fascination with South Korean cinema was not merely a reaction to these recent successes; rather, it is a phenomenon that has been growing since 2000 among audiences at the most prestigious film festivals in the country. This *quality brand* implies a higher level of social impact and prestige associated with identifying as a film lover set apart and even in opposition to the conventional discourse by virtue of their interest in film movements outside the mainstream.

Gong Yoo (left) and Ma Dong-seok (right) in *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016)

On the other hand, South Korea's animated productions do not appear to have produced a fandom as such, and certainly nothing comparable to what Japanese anime has enjoyed for decades. Although it is true that Yeon has brought greater visibility to the genre internationally, in Spain the director is better known for *Train to Busan*, his first live-action film. However, the attention that this film has attracted has led Spanish viewers to take more of an interest in his other work, with social networks such as Twitter being the medium chosen to express their opinions after watching his films, thereby effectively promoting his filmography by word of mouth. Curiously, viewing a film from South Korea tends to be expressed by followers as a radical experience, and as a result, if a South Korean production meets this expectation the viewer will usually seek out other titles to repeat the same sensations; conversely, if the experience of a South Korean film is not sufficiently radical, the viewer will dismiss South Korean cinema altogether.

CONCLUSIONS

Two decades after the recognition of New South Korean Cinema and its first generation of filmmakers, Spanish cinephiles[11] continue to express excitement over the latest films from South Korea. The Spanish box office welcomed Kim Ki-duk's arthouse cinema and Park Chan-wook's blockbuster amidst a tiny trickle of films that failed to reveal the full diversity of South Korean cinema. It was only in the last decade that Spain began to receive a second generation of filmmakers with a more transnational vision than their predecessors. Since then, film genres such as the thriller have underscored the quality of South Korean cinema, greater value has been accorded to auteur cinema, and Spanish audiences have had more access to traditionally independent genres.

However, South Korean animation remains a step behind, despite the fact that South Koreans have been involved in the production of highly popular animated films. The quest to cut costs

in the production of animated films has led some Western countries to resort to outsourcing and co-production of new projects in the genre; many studios have thus turned to South Korea, whose animation industry is more accessible than China's or Japan's. Examples of this include the children's films *The Outback* (Lee Kyung-ho, 2012), a co-production involving the US-based Animation Picture Company and the South Korean companies Digiart Productions and Lotte Entertainment; and *Jungle Shuffle* (Taedong Park and Mauricio de la Orta, 2014), again involving the Animation Picture Company, this time in collaboration with Mexico's Avikoo Studios and South Korea's WonderWorld Studios. Yet despite these achievements, only a few animated productions from South Korea have reached Spain, and in most cases they have been children's pictures with very modest box office takings.

The value of the reception of South Korean cinema in Spain does not lie in its massive scale, but in the activity it inspires, as consumers of South Korean cinema often communicate their experiences briefly on social networks,[12] producing a word-of-mouth effect that promotes new films to other spectators, who in turn repeat the same pattern. Although this is a slow process and tends to produce excessively polarised expectations after initial viewings, the loyalty it generates is undeniable, as it cultivates a cinephilia in constant search of far more new South Korean films than the tiny trickle actually released in Spanish theatres, an aspect that film critics have also expressed on occasions.

South Korean cinema has itself turned into a quality brand. Most film critics highlight the origin of South Korean films as a positive quality that reinforces the cinephilia that enhances the film's appeal. However, although the development of this trend in recent years reflects the assimilation of films from countries that are culturally distant from the West, comparisons with Western products in assessments of the value of South Korean films are still commonplace. Similarly, critics continue to commit errors of generalising, extending the success or failure of a given product to all Asian films as if they all formed part of a single model or pattern. This is an ongoing problem that critics in the West must try to overcome when dealing with the great diversity that exists in world cinema.

COMPARISONS WITH WESTERN PRODUCTS IN ASSESSMENTS OF THE VALUE OF SOUTH KOREAN FILMS ARE STILL COMMONPLACE

NOTES

1 Compared to the limited number of international studies on Yeon Sang-ho, South Korean academics have dedicated numerous studies to his filmography in fields apart from film studies, such as fine arts and literature.

2 The data included in this article on the box office takings and audience numbers for South Korean films in Spain have been taken from the database of the Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts (ICAA).

3 In recent years, thanks to the popularity that director Yeon Sang-ho has brought to South Korea's animation industry, there have been efforts to distance the South Korean graphic novel, or *manhwa*, from the historical influences exerted by Japanese manga in the interests of creating a distinctive brand. Authors such as Chie claim that *manhwa* can be considered "a manifestation of the diversity of manga" (Chie, 2014: 85).

4 Ten films directed by Kim Ki-duk have been released in Spain: *Bad Guy* (Nabbeun namja, 2001); *Address Unknown* (Suchwiin bulmyeong, 2001); *The Isle*; *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter... and Spring; 3-Iron* (Bin-jip, 2004); *Samaritan Girl* (Samaria, 2004); *The*

Bow (Hwal, 2005); *Time* (Shigan, 2006); *Breath* (Soom, 2007); and *Dream* (Bi-mong, 2008).

5 In South Korea, the independent film industry has little weight at the local box office. Auteur cinema, animation and documentaries have traditionally been relegated to the national festival circuit (Elena, 2004), with very few exceptions.

6 South Korean cinema proposes a reconfiguration of the genre through the kind of hybridisation characteristic of postmodern cinema. Corral (2015), in the book *Cine coreano contemporáneo (1990-2015): Entre lo excesivo y lo sublime*, explores the trend in the South Korean thriller towards a reconfiguration of the traditional models repeatedly interpreted by film genres through exclusive narrative elements that generally reflect aspects of national identity and the influences of film traditions of nearby countries, such as China, Japan or Hong Kong, giving rise to the revival of historical memory and the nostalgic gaze of the South Korean spectator.

7 Leading online magazines like *CineAsia* have stressed the importance of the thriller as an identifying mark of South Korean cinema: "[thrillers] have been a real economic wake-up call for Korean distributors who have seen their international sales increase as a result of their participation at international festivals, and not just niche festivals [...]" (CineAsia, 2011). The South Korean thriller thus constitutes a transnational *quality brand* representative of this new wave in South Korean cinema which, since the appearance of *Shiri* (Swiri, Kang Je-gyu) in 1999, has given it an innovative edge in terms of its recognition at festivals and distribution compared to other film genres like melodrama, which already had a long history both in South Korean cinema and on the festival circuit.

8 *Ignition* (Kim, 2017: 282), released in 1980, was South Korea's first zombie film. However, zombie narratives were largely forgotten until the last decade, with the genre gaining prominence thanks to titles such as *The Neighbor Zombie* (Yieutjib jombie, Hong Young-guen, Jang Youn-jung, Oh Young-doo and Ryoo Hoon, 2010), *Doomsday Book* (In-lyu myeol-mang bo-go-seo, Kim Jee-woon and Yim Pil-sung, 2012), *Mad Sad Bad* (Sin-chon-jom-bi-ma-hwa, Kim Tae-Yong, Ryoo Seung-Wan and Han Ji-Seung, 2014) *Train to Busan*, *Seoul Station*, *Rampant* and the upcoming film *The Odd Family: Zombie on Sale* (Lee Min-jae, 2019).

9 This figure falls far short of the viewing numbers for other South Korean films, such as *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter... and Spring*, which was viewed by 172,640 spectators, making it the second biggest South Korean film in Spanish film theatre history. However, its results are above the average for South Korean cinema at the Spanish box office, with examples such as *The Handmaiden* (Ah-ga-ssi, Park Chan-wook, 2016) or *Memories of Murder* (Bong Joon-ho, 2003), with 26,820 and 30,916 viewers respectively.

10 In *El País* on 26 May 2019, Boyero explained his disagreement with the position of most film critics with respect to South Korean cinema: "I remember seeing other offerings by Bong Joon-ho, like *The Host*, which was about a monster, and *Mother*, but in contrast with the love for these films professed by others in my profession, they did not make a lasting impression on me. I guess I'm odd." (Boyero, 2019). However, this tendency to highlight the origin of these films is not unique to Spain. In the magazine *El Guardián* on 13 December 2012, the Argentine journalist and researcher Daniela Kozak quoted Marcelo Alderete, the programmer of the Mar de Plata Film Festival: "Korean cinema is a commercial cinema of quality. Maybe this is partly from our Western perspective, but their films are much more innovative than the American blockbusters, in everything from the acting to the cinematographic form. And the Americans realise that Korean directors have an edge, something that they themselves have lost" (Kozak, 2012).

11 According to Pujol, cinephiles are characterised by their "obsession with the ritual of going to the cinema, the erudition that comes with reading and being familiar with film industry magazines, the knowledge shared only with other cinephiles, excluding the rest of the fans and turning into a clan" (Pujol, 2011: 99). However, Pujol adds, cinephiles possess a secrecy and an enigmatic quality as they share their hobby with a select few. With the intervention of social networks, this is no

longer the case, since cinephiles now regularly express their opinions online, either to attract other cinephiles or to increase their number of followers, which can turn them into intellectual guides. At the same time, today's Spanish cinephile no longer attaches so much importance to keeping up to date with what is showing in Spanish theatres, but rather pays greater attention to new film movements that enhance their erudition in an ever-expanding community of cinephiles.

12 This is demonstrated very clearly on the social network Twitter, where the film buffs behind influential accounts such as *Cinema Korea Blog* (@cinemakoreablog), *Oriental Paradiso* (@Orient_Paradiso) or *Cine Made in Asia* (@cinemadeinasia), among others, are constantly sharing their South Korean film viewing experiences. In this way, accounts like these engage with other film lovers, creating a community of regular consumers of such films.

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BETWEEN INDEPENDENT CINEMA AND BLOCKBUSTER IN SOUTH KOREA: YEON SANG-HO'S FILMS AND THEIR RECEPTION IN SPAIN

Abstract

Filmmaker Yeon Sang-ho is a paradigmatic case in contemporary South Korean cinema. His professional career, linked from the beginning to the independent animation industry, changed radically with the leap to commercial cinema thanks to his first live-action, *Train to Busan* (Busanhaeng, 2016). From that moment on, Yeon became one of South Korea's most famous directors, winning over critics and international audiences. In this respect, this article investigates how the films of Yeon Sang-ho have collaborated in the creation and strengthening of a *quality brand* implicit in South Korean cinema, which, in turn, is assimilated by both critics and Spanish cinephiles. For this reason, we can observe the evolution of the reception of South Korean cinema through the generalist and specialised press over the last three decades. It also analyses the global vision that it has emitted on its filmography to extract the general trends between critics and the Spanish public as part of the reception of South Korean cinema in Spain.

Key words

Yeon Sang-ho; South Korean cinema; Animation; Zombies; Reception; Spain; South Korea.

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ENTRE EL CINE INDEPENDIENTE Y EL *BLOCKBUSTER* EN COREA DEL SUR: LAS OBRAS DE YEON SANG-HO Y SU RECEPCIÓN EN ESPAÑA

Resumen

El cineasta Yeon Sang-Ho supone un caso paradigmático en el cine surcoreano contemporáneo. Su trayectoria profesional, ligada desde el inicio a la industria independiente a través de la animación, cambió radicalmente con el salto al cine comercial gracias a su primer *live-action*, *Tren a Busan* (Busanhaeng, 2016). Desde ese momento, Yeon se convirtió en uno de los directores más afamados de Corea del Sur, conquistando, a su vez, a la crítica y al público internacional. Al respecto, este artículo investiga cómo las obras de Yeon Sang-Ho han colaborado en la creación y afianzamiento de una *marca de calidad* implícita en el cine surcoreano, que, a su vez, es asimilada tanto por la crítica como por el cinéfilo español. Por ello, se pretende observar la evolución de la recepción del cine surcoreano a través de la prensa generalista y especializada a largo de estas tres últimas décadas. Asimismo, se analiza la visión global que ésta ha emitido sobre su filmografía para extraer las tendencias generales entre la crítica y el público español como parte de la recepción del cine surcoreano.

Palabras clave

Yeon Sang-Ho; Cine surcoreano; Animación; Zombis; Recepción; España; Corea del Sur.

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