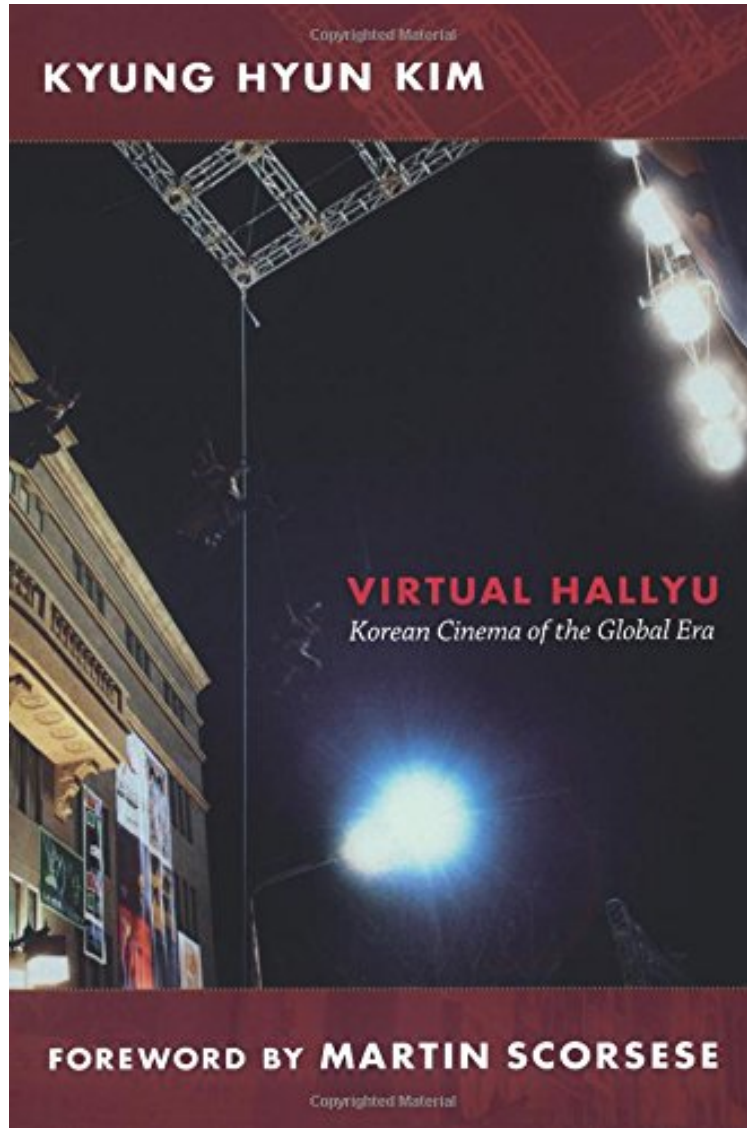


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Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era

Kyung Hyun Kim

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#1320127 in Books imusti 2011-10-10 2011-10-10Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 9.25 x .69 x 6.131, .80
#File Name: 0822351013280 pagesDuke University Press | File size: 61.Mb

Kyung Hyun Kim : Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era:

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A Vital Resource for Hallyu ScholarsBy Sherri L. Ter MolenKyung Hyun Kim's (2011) Virtual Hallyu is an essential academic work for anyone studying South Korean cinema. For Kim, the virtual means both "that which is endowed by the modernist discourse of the virtuous, or full of potential, and that which is suggested by the postmodern term 'virtual reality,' which is hardly real" (p. 28). Relying on this double lens,

he examines films such as Im Kwon-taek's *Sopyonje* and Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*, and he offers a chance to think about the ways in which Korean films have presented ideas and symbols that have challenged "national boundaries" (pp. 5-6). He concludes that South Korean cinema hasn't achieved a postcolonial and/or post-Cold War identity, and he suggests that filmmakers should return to Korea's past to tell the stories of marginalized characters such as slaves and eunuchs to unravel Korea's Utopian history and "the corporate capitalist system" (p. 212). Kim's concepts are complex, and they need a lot of unpacking. Therefore, this book is not for the casual Hallyu fan, but it is sure to provoke interesting discussions and to spawn robust scholarship from those who dare to wrestle with Kim's intellectual thinking.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Korean Cinema in Search of a New Master Narrative

By Etienne RPKorean cinema occupies a peculiar place in relation to hallyu. In a way, Korean movies were the harbingers of the Korean wave. They were the first Korean cultural productions to attract foreign recognition in international film festivals; they carved a global niche that was distinct from Hollywood movies or other Asian productions; and they emphasized distinctive aspects such as violence, romance, or geopolitical tensions. Cinema was the cultural medium through which Korea sought to establish itself as a new global standard. And yet K-movies are not considered part of hallyu the way K-drama, K-pop and even K-cuisine have now become. Only a handful of movies (*Shiri*, *JSA*, *My Sassy Girl*) came to be seen as representative of the Korean wave, while other movies and moviemakers were perceived through the more traditional categories of film critique: national cinema, auteurship, movie genres, visual aesthetics, and narrative analysis. Korean cinema in many ways set the condition for hallyu's expansion by inducing a shift in foreign perceptions of Korea. The country came to be seen as the producer of a different brand of modernity, distinct from Japan's or China's globalized cultures. Its movies were not only cheap imitation movies known collectively as Copywood; they were original productions in their own right. In addition, Korea's movie industry demonstrated that critical and commercial success were not always incompatible: commercially successful movies could get critical acclaim, and art movies lauded by critics could also get a significant presence at the box office. This success was due in no small part to the existence of a corps of movie critics and a roster of movie publications that made commenting on recent movies a legitimate intellectual pursuit in Korea and beyond.

Kyung Hyun Kim played an important role in this reevaluation of Korea cinema. The back cover blurb on *Virtual Hallyu* describes him as not just the most important Anglophone critic of South Korean cinema but a key figure in film and cultural studies generally. In his first book on *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (which I reviewed on this website), he established the label of New Korean Cinema by focusing on movies produced in the 1980s and 1990s. His thesis was that Korea at the time was a post-traumatic society: men had to overcome their masculinity crisis by resorting to masochism and to sadism and by denying women's agency. In his latest book, he concentrates on movies produced during the next decade, end 1990s to end-2000s, which follow a different master plot. According to Kyung Hyun Kim, Korea has managed to untie itself from the narrative of post-crisis recovery and male failure that dominated Korean movies in the preceding period. Male hysteria no longer provides the dominant theme in more recent productions, and female characters are no longer reduced to the twin roles of the mother and the whore. The themes and characters have become more diverse and cannot be subsumed under a single heading. He nonetheless proposes the two categories of hallyu and of the virtual to define Korean cinema in this new age of commercial success and global expansion. More than the commercial expansion of Korean productions abroad, hallyu refers here to a new sense of national consciousness that arose in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis and culminated with the stellar performance of the national soccer team in the 2002 World Cup tournament. It is synonymous with a nation reconciled with itself and basking in its newly acquired global status. Pride and affluence characterized the new Korea that had been able to overcome the masculinity crisis diagnosed in the previous period. This self-consciousness translated in box-office figures: Korea is one of those rare countries where domestic movies consistently outperform Hollywood productions. And yet the author diagnoses a disconnect between the success of Korean films at home and abroad. Films like *April Snow*, which was specifically designed for the Japanese market, flopped badly in Korea, whereas domestic blockbusters such as *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* failed to reach a global audience. In addition, Kyung Hyun Kim sees hallyu as a phenomenon limited in time: based on box office figures, he heralds its demise by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. After Korean film exports earned a record \$75 million in 2005, there was an enormous decline, with only \$24.5 million reported in 2006 and \$12 million in 2007. For the author, this sudden decline in the popularity of the Korean wave since 2007 is just as inexplicable as its emergence. Of course, a plausible explanation is that there was simply a shortage of lucrative and attractive Korean blockbusters to please Asian tastes during that year and the next. The film industry is one of the most unpredictable in the world, and even critics cannot forecast future hits and flops. Kyung Hyun Kim borrows the concept of the virtual from Gilles Deleuze and his twin books *Analysis of the Movement-Image* and *The Time-Image*. Like Deleuze, he considers movies to be thought-experiments: in this sense, thinking about cinema is inseparable from making it. Through a century-long transformation, we have come to understand ourselves individually and socially through spatial and temporal articulations that were first advanced in movies. Nothing illustrates more the interdependence between philosophy and film-making than the category of the virtual. Virtuality refers here to a kind of being-in-the-world that increasingly eschews reality in favor of escapist pursuits and fictitious worlds. As the author notes, the high-speed Internet boom

that took place in Korea after the late 1990s ironically meant that Korea's urban youth rarely needed to venture beyond their schools, homes, and offices. If they did choose to go outdoors, it was to the theater. The virtual complicates the question of what is real and what is unreal. Despite our perception of film as the art form that most closely approximates reality, movies are pure fiction, akin to the simulacra that Baudrillard defines as images without models. Unlike the image, the virtual no longer dwells on the difference between the way things appear and the way they really are. In the virtual world, neither the opposition between true and false nor the one between reality and imagination can be resolved. Cinema itself is built on a technology of virtuality: the projection of twenty-four frames per second is perceived as continuous time and movement by our synapses. With the integration of computer graphics, the virtual has taken a whole new dimension, and the advent of virtual reality promises an era of unlimited possibilities. Everything that can be dreamed, imagined, or conceived, can be put on screen. Special effects and computer-generated graphics allowed Korean movie-makers to expand back in time, as with *saguk* or historical dramas, or forward to the future as with science-fiction movies. With the help of CG-generated images, directors were able to recreate images from the Chosun Dynasty period or to project their viewers into imaginary worlds. Deleuze's use of the term virtual refers to something that is not only a thing of the past, but of a past that coexists with the present and also of a truth that coexists with the false. Similarly, the movie *Lost Memories* (2002) presents a virtual future in which Japanese occupation of Korea has continued into the twenty-first century, mixing memories of a colonial past and imaginaries of an uncertain present. The fascination with the colonial past was also rekindled by the rediscovery of old movies from the 1930s and 1940s that were thought to be lost but had been preserved in the film archives of Soviet Russia and Communist China. The films covered in *Virtual Hallyu* more or less correspond to the period when the democratic party led by presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun was in power. During that decade, South Korea established itself as a full democracy as well as one of the most economically successful and technologically advanced countries in the world. Kyung Hyun Kim sees a correlation between the liberal policies pursued by these two presidents and the rise of hallyu. The state favored the expression of artistic sensibilities and adopted policies deemed favorable to the creative industries. Lee Chang-dong, an art-movie director, became the minister of culture, tourism, and sports in the Roh Moo-hyun cabinet. Most notably, the Sunshine Policy of peaceful coexistence and cooperation with North Korea, initiated by Kim Dae-jung and continued by his successor, allowed for a more nuanced view of the Communist neighbor country. If *Kang Che-gyus Shiri* (1999) was the last film to rely on a Cold War dichotomy to produce a ruthless North Korean villain and to attempt to reclaim South Korean male agency through the destruction of a North Korean femme fatale, *Park Chan-wooks JSA: Joint Security Area* (2000) was the first film to defuse the stereotype of North Koreans as South Korea's belligerent Other. Other films addressed the taboos of national history: *Im Kwon-Taeks The Taebaek Mountains* (1993) depicts the period of guerrilla warfare and civil strife in the Jeolla Province before the start of the Korean war, whereas *The Presidents Last Bang* (2005) and *The Presidents Barber* (2004) concentrate on the controversial figure of President Park Chung-Hee, the first one as tragedy, the second as farce. Movies are shaped by market forces as much as by the political zeitgeist. In the late 1990s, the Korean industry started again to blossom, and showed an impressive success in the domestic market. Korean films enjoyed an average market share of 54 percent over the following decade, with record peaks of 60-65 percent. Last but not least, the Korean film production continued to earn many prestigious awards at top international film festivals, making Korean culture increasingly attractive. This happened in the context of limited subsidies by the state and increased free-market access of US film-makers in Korean distribution. If anything, increased competition between US and Korean films induced the Korean cinema industry to create more attractive and lucrative movies than foreign films. Big industrial groups or chaebols, expecting high returns of investment, expanded their power by acquiring individual theaters and creating multiplexes and theater franchises. They invested in the production of genre movies previously considered as the preserve of the American movie industry: Westerns (*The Good, the Bad, the Weird*), science fiction (*The Host*), eco-disaster stories (*Tidal Wave*), urban disaster thrillers (*The Tower*), and heroic fantasy (*Jeon Woo-chi: The Taoist Wizard*). Film-makers challenged conventional boundaries and they mixed established genres to create a hybrid repertoire of multi-genre movies: comic-family-melodrama-monster (*Bong Joon-hos The Host*), erotic-horror-crime mystery (*Park Chan-wooks Oldboy*), or comic-romantic-womens tearjerker (*Lee Chang-dongs Secret Sunshine*). It is this recombinatory power of Korean cinema that foreign audiences found most attractive. For Kyung Hyun Kim, the role of the film critic is to unveil the latent meanings beneath the apparent surface of a movie. The message of a movie is made clear only when one confronts it to the other works of an auteur, or when one places it in a series that defines a genre, a historical sequence, or the broader tradition of a national cinema. His analysis is consistent with the discourse of political modernism, founded on the holy trinity of Saussure's semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Althusserian Marxism. Words like postmodernism, postcolonialism, late capitalism, and neoliberalism pepper the text and give it a radical cachet. For the author, none of the films produced in the period were radical enough; they only tinkered with the system, and provided imaginary solutions to real problems. As he concludes, not only is Korea still scarred and traumatized by its colonial era and the Cold War, but given the continuing US military presence and occasional threats of war from North Korea it has yet to claim a true postcolonial and post-Cold War identity. Curiously, although his previous book was all about masculinity and gender roles, he does not address the issue of gender in *Virtual Hallyu*. The

resolution of Korea's masculinity crisis didn't lead to a more balanced repartition of roles between men and women, and none of the directors listed in the book are female. In this era marked by the end of history and the advent of postmodern identities, Korean cinema has yet to find its new master narrative.

[T]his fine book . . . enlarges our vision of one of the great national cinematic flowerings of the last decade. Martin Scorsese, from the foreword In the late 1990s, South Korean film and other cultural products, broadly known as hallyu (Korean wave), gained unprecedented international popularity. Korean films earned an all-time high of \$60.3 million in Japan in 2005, and they outperformed their Hollywood competitors at Korean box offices. In *Virtual Hallyu*, Kyung Hyun Kim reflects on the precariousness of Korean cinema's success over the past decade. Arguing that state film policies and socioeconomic factors cannot fully explain cinema's true potentiality, Kim draws on Deleuze's concept of the virtual according to which past and present and truth and falsehood coexist to analyze the temporal anxieties and cinematic ironies embedded in screen figures such as a made-in-the-USA aquatic monster (*The Host*), a postmodern Chosun-era wizard (Jeon Woo-chi), a schizo man-child (*Oasis*), a weepy North Korean terrorist (*Typhoon*), a salary man turned vengeful fighting machine (*Oldboy*), and a sick nationalist (the repatriated colonial-era film *Spring of Korean Peninsula*). Kim maintains that the full significance of hallyu can only be understood by exposing the implicit and explicit ideologies of pro-nationalism and capitalism that, along with Korea's ambiguous post-democratization and neoliberalism, are etched against the celluloid surfaces.

A highly informative and imaginative account of the multifaceted powers of virtuality that make up the unique phenomenon of Korean cinema in the early twenty-first century. Rey Chow, author of *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films*