



"The Host," a monster fable with an eco-conscious twist from Korean director Bong Joon-ho, is part of the MFA's Korean Film Festival. (Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts)

## The Seoul of a new cinema at the MFA

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By Damon Smith, Globe Correspondent | January 21, 2007

Call it the Seoul effect: Since the late '90s, Koreans have been flocking to theaters in record numbers, exhibiting a cinephilic zeal for sassy romantic comedies, art-mangled horror flicks, and Hollywood-style action-thrillers made right in their own backyard.

At the same time, iconoclastic writer-directors such as Park Chan-wook ("Lady Vengeance"), Hong Sang-soo ("Turning Gate"), and Kim Ki-duk ("Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . and Spring") have become fixtures on the international festival circuit, earning the admiration of foreign audiences and helping to stoke the renaissance of their country's commercial film industry. With such a flowering of creativity on the Korean peninsula, Boston moviegoers should rejoice that we finally have an annual program devoted to its best and brightest offerings.

From Wednesday through Jan. 28, the Museum of Fine Arts is presenting its inaugural Korean Film Festival, a hodgepodge of recent box-office hits, arthouse fare, and miscellaneous shorts that will give newcomers a crash course in the visceral and volatile visions available from the Republic of Korea, while leaving devotees of East Asian film culture with at least a few off-kilter oddities to boast of seeing before anyone else.

Case in point: Bong Joon-ho's "The Host," a monster fable with an eco-conscious twist, and the ticket-chomping leviathan of the current round up.

Referencing an entire lineage of creature features from "Godzilla" to "Aliens," but subverting our expectations every step of the way, Bong's horror drama is built around the odyssey of a misfit family, led by elderly candy-and-squid salesman Hie-bong. A few years after a US Army scientist pollutes the Han River (hey, somebody has to be the villain), a humongous gilled mutant -- first seen hanging menacingly from a bridge in broad daylight -- bolts from the water and devours a horde of sunbathers. Hie-bong's witless son, Kang-du, battles the amphibial behemoth with a signpost, only to watch it scoop up his young daughter, Hyun-seo, and plunge back into the murky river.

Unfortunately, Kang-du's contact with the bi-pedal thing-fish has the government panicked about the outbreak of a deadly virus, so he is quarantined with the rest of his grieving, confused family, including brother Nam-il, a bitter corporate zero, and sister Nam-ju, a failed archery champion. Needless to say, the clan escapes to retrieve Hyun-seo from the malicious creature's body-strewn hideout in a city sewer.

With state-of-the-art effects by The Orphanage ("Star Wars: The Phantom Menace") and an ingenious blending of suspense and physical comedy -- not to mention numerous subplots and visual touches that evoke real-world anxieties about SARS, bio-warfare, torture, eco-disaster, rogue science, gung-ho US militancy, and Korea's own history of bloody political protests -- "The Host" is a hugely entertaining spectacle. A Hollywood remake is already in the works, but don't expect anything as complex or riveting as this thick-finned family flick, or as garishly anti-Spielbergian as Bong's haunting final reel.

Before "The Host" came along, Lee Jun-ik's extravagant period drama "The King and the Clown" was the highest-grossing film in Korean history. Set in 1506, during the Chosun dynasty, it tells the true story of two bawdy jesters,

charismatic Jang-sang and his gay lover Gong-gil, who are arrested for mocking King Yonsan, a tyrant increasingly out of favor with his own ministers. Their audacity pleases His Majesty, as does Gong-gil's fair skin, and he gives the troupe a berth in his palace. As the king's excesses grow, heads begin to roll, and the clowns find themselves mired in court intrigue.

Banned in China for its risqué repartee and homoerotic themes, "King" is a grittier film than its Hong Kong echo, "Farewell, My Concubine," especially with its earthy characters and trick bag of shots; it's also more focused on the tense, same-sex love triangle than Chen Kaige's historical epic. Anchored by robust performances, "King" is an enthralling movie that harkens back as much to Shakespeare and commedia dell'arte as to Korea's own cultural traditions.

Currently one of Korea's most fondly regarded auteurs, Hong Sang-soo is represented here by "Woman Is the Future of Man" and "Woman on the Beach." The former is a minimal drama concerned, like most of Hong's oeuvre, with anomie, sexual disconnection, and the outer reaches of interpersonal misunderstanding. Two 30-something male friends, married art professor Mung-ho and struggling filmmaker Hyeon-gon, meet up for the first time in years. Reminiscing about a girl they once knew, Seon-hwa -- an aspiring artist who now works as a bar manager -- they decide to pay her a visit.

Hong, an exacting filmmaker with a knack for on-set spontaneity, handles this seemingly banal scenario with aplomb, leading us into the past via two flashbacks, then gently nudging his characters, both feckless, self-gratifying masculine egotists, to their encounter with Seon-hwa, a remarkably changed woman. As always, the journey is marked by awkward, slightly hostile exchanges, and one embarrassing drunken interlude in which, reportedly, the actors are as inebriated as they seem. In his quiet, lucid way, Hong makes these men -- clueless cads though they might be -- poignant figures of human failing.

Less interesting is Bae Chang-ho's sentimental "Road," about an aging, itinerant blacksmith, Tae-seok, who encounters a young woman, Shin-yeong, with a troubling connection to his past. As their stories of woe emerge, this low-key tale of betrayal and anguish set in 1970s rural Korea takes a redemptive turn. Distress also figures into "If You Were Me: Anima Vision," a grab bag of mixed-quality animated shorts funded by Korea's National Human Rights Commission. Ranging from saccharine to surreal, these fanciful squibs address conformity, racism, and even the ostracization of young mine victims.

Finally, body issues also afflict the lovestruck protagonists of Kim Ki-duk's "Time," another chapter in the self-taught director's now decade-long cycle of artful provocations. "Sorry for always having the same boring face," Seh-hee tells Ji-woo, her boyfriend of two years, after she notices him checking out other girls. Embarrassed by her public histrionics (think Douglas Sirk or Bette Davis), and tortured by a negative self-perception, Seh-hee disappears one day without a word. Six months later, she re-enters Ji-woo's lonely life. Only now, thanks to a reluctant cosmetic surgeon, she has an entirely new face, and calls herself See-hee. Poor Ji-woo has no idea this attractive flirt is his ex, and when she begins testing his loyalty, old tensions surface.

Opening with gruesome imagery of actual cosmetic surgeries, this disturbing parable of feminine insecurity is a misogynist melodrama masquerading as a bourgeois romance. For those who know Kim only as the Oscar-nominated director of "Spring, Summer," a mandala-like fable of Buddhist redemption, "Time" offers a different kind of eternal return: that of gender conflict, played out again and again in the pedestrian confines of a coffeehouse and at an erotic sculpture park by the sea. To his credit, Kim confronts us with a psychosexual truism of male-female relations taken to its extreme, and then introduces a role reversal that challenges us to call his bluff.

Can "Time" heal all wounds? Probably not, when it comes to Kim's tarnished reputation in Korea, where his violent films have offended almost everybody, but it's a creepy and fascinating twist on our obsession with beauty nevertheless.

Damon Smith can be reached at [damon.g.smith@gmail.com](mailto:damon.g.smith@gmail.com). ■