

Korean cinema attacks!  
Will Canada strike next?

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SEOUL - Last summer, a monster attacked South Korea. It was big and green and it trashed everything in its path. It came in the form of a movie called Gwoemul, which finally gets a Canadian theatrical release this week under its English name, The Host.

Directed by Bong Joon-ho, the film was to be feared from its conception. Bong garnered a reputation as a Korean filmmaker to watch based on his 2003 hit, Memories of Murder, which put a Korean spin on the serial-killer thriller. For his version of the mega-monster movie, he recruited two of the heaviest hitters in the special-effects business: New Zealand-based WETA Workshop, which created the beasts in the Lord of the Rings trilogy, and The Orphanage, which finessed Frank Miller's Sin City from page to screen. Thus armed, Bong took the film to Cannes, where it had critics puzzled over whether to praise it as a classic creature movie in the Godzilla vein or a detailed study of dysfunctional family dynamics.

Korean audiences didn't care much either way. When the film was finally released in South Korea on July 27, 2006, they flocked to see it, annihilating the Korean box-office record for an opening weekend release. Within three months, the film had become the all-time Korean box-office champ, and over a quarter of the country's population had bought a ticket for it.

Its appeal is no great mystery: Bong mixes blockbuster-style thrills with sly comedy, an auteur's visual flair and quirky characterizations to create a film that is by turns exhilarating, scary and charmingly self-effacing. Put simply, it's an all-around great popcorn flick.

"The monster looks very realistic," says Han Seng-pyo, an 11-year old student in Jeju City, South Korea. "But I also like the characters."

"It's basically a story about a family finding each other," says Shim Ji-ho, another Jeju student. "So it's good to see with either your family or your friends."

There, may, however be more to it than plain old fun. On the surface, The Host is a romp--but this monster has teeth. For all its quotation of big-budget Western blockbusters, the film is shot through with a sharp critique of the American military presence in Korea. The monster itself is a potent metaphor; some of the film's bluntest scenes come right at the beginning, when we see an unhinged American doctor order heaps of toxic chemicals to be poured down a drain feeding into the Han River, causing the mutation of the beast. The scene is pointedly based on an event that occurred in 2000, when U.S. military doctor Albert McFarland allegedly ordered 480 bottles of formaldehyde dumped into the Han.

The incident is only one among many that have resulted in mixed feelings about the U.S. influence in Korea-- witness the protests sparked by the impending free trade deal between the two countries. On top of that, the U.S. film industry has recently pressured the Korean government to cut screen quotas that have contributed significantly to the domestic success of Korean-made films, in order to make more room for Hollywood products like 300 -- which, as of last week, stood atop the South Korean box office.

"There's an aspect of national pride with respect to The Host, with [Bong] taking on a genre that is more associated with big-budget Hollywood productions or the Japanese industry," says Anthony Leong, author of Korean Cinema: The New Hong Kong. "Korean audiences like to support this type of thing."

However, it wouldn't be fair to Korean cinema to chalk up The Host's success strictly to politics. As Leong points out, Korea's film industry has evolved over the past few years into a world-class entity, able to successfully blend thoughtful filmmaking with mainstream appeal -- a cinematic holy grail that Canada's film industry continue to search for.

"One of the key drivers of the Korean box office has been films with mainstream appeal," says Leong. "For years, big-budget Hollywood films dominated the Korean box office and conditioned audiences to their high production values. Korean filmmakers couldn't really compete with the limited funding and infrastructure they were working with in the '70s and '80s --a situation similar to the one in Canada right now.

Leong says changes in the funding structure of Korean films -- for example, investment from chaebols (big, family-run Korean corporations such as Samsung) and from private citizens via online portals (so-called "netizen funds") -- have now made it possible for Korean filmmakers like Bong to compete with Hollywood, even given reduced screen quotas.

If The Host has a lesson for Canada, it may be that, instead of whining about being bullied by our deep-pocketed southern neighbours, Canadian filmmakers should bite back by finding sources of funding that don't depend on the whims of bureaucrats. Because no matter how daunting The Host's gooey ghoul may be, it has nothing on the horrifying red-tape tentacles of Telefilm.

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