Korean New Wave

The Korean New Wave generally refers to the art cinema produced in South Korea starting in the late 1980s as the country liberalized after several decades of dictatorship and restrictions on free expression. Some scholars (e.g., Paquet) make a distinction between a Korean New Wave, which ran from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, and a Korean New Cinema that begins around the 1997 economic crisis. There were precedents to these new cinemas, especially in the veteran Im Kwon-Taek’s earlier shift from genre to art film in works like *Mandala* (1981), which was one of the first Korean works presented at European film festivals. Im’s later films like *Sopyonje* (1993) and *Taebaek Sanmaek* (*The Taebaek Mountains*, 1994) were in some ways exemplary of the New Wave, as they avoided generic melodrama to offer a serious look back on the country’s traumatic history, often revisiting history through narratives centred on women as symbols of the nation. It was younger directors, however, ones who were frequently involved in dissent against the waning dictatorship, who formed the core of the new cinema. Their efforts were supported not only by the gradual relaxation of censorship after 1988, but also by changes in film policy, which enabled production by independent producers. Directors such as Park Kwang-su (*Chilsuwa Mansu* [*Chilsu and Mansu*, 1988]) Jang Sun-woo (*Umukbaemi eui sarang* [*The Lovers of Woomook-Baemi*, 1989]), and Chung Ji-young (*Hayan jeonjaeng* [*White Badge*, 1992]) primarily pursued a realist cinema that, as Kyung Hyun Kim has argued, regularly dealt with masculinity: its crisis and how to reconstruct it after the traumas of dictatorship. Documentary also came into its own with such politically conscious works as Kim Dong-won’s *Sanggyedong ollimpik* (*Sanggeydong Olympics,* 1987) and Byun Young-joo’s *Najeun moksori* [The Murmering, 1995). New investments from the Korean *chaebol* conglomerates helped support the new cinema, as did the rise in cinephilia and the concomitant founding of domestic film festivals such as Pusan.

The period around the financial crisis of 1997, however, marked a shift in cinematic output. Censorship of films was ruled unconstitutional in 1996, and while the *chaebol* distanced themselves from cinema after the crisis, the national government filled the void with a variety of measures to promote the national cinema and further the “Korean Wave” (*hallyu*) that eventually made South Korean pop culture an international phenomenon. In the world of film there emerged, on the one hand, a blockbuster cinema exemplified by such hits as *Swiri* (*Shiri*, Kang Je-gyu, 1998) and *Joint Security Area* (Park Chan-wook, 2000) that brought the domestic product nearly in line with the long dominant imports; and on the other, a new group of auteurs like Lee Chang-dong (*Pakha Satang* [*Peppermint Candy*, 1999]), Kim Ki-duk (*Bin-jip* [*3-iron*, 2004]), Hong Sang-soo (*Daijiga umule pajinnal* [*The Day a Pig Fell into the Well*, 1996]), Kim Jee-woon (*Joyonghan Gajok* [*The Quiet Family*, 1998]) and Bong Joon-ho (*Goemul* [*The Host*, 2006]) who evinced irony more than the seriousness of the New Wave directors. Being more personal than national, they mixed genres as well as the popular and the artistic while achieving major successes on the international film circuit.

References and further reading:

Kim, K. H. (2005) *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Lee, H. (2000), *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Paquet, D. (2009) *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves*, London: Wallflower.

Shin, C.-Y.; Stringer, J. (2005) *New Korean Cinema*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Paratextual materials:

The Korean Film Archive has made available some of these films on YouTube:

Taebaek Mountains

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAXBFl03saY>

*Sopyonje*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-MOMTUcVEc>

Chilsu and Mansu

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cmtZ4XYz7E>

Aaron Gerow

Yale University