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K-drama popularization as social and cultural trends reflected modern European society

Аннотация: Представленная статья направлена на изучение причин популярности корейского кинематографа среди европейской аудитории в 2019-2021 гг. С этой целью рассматриваются три наиболее рейтинговых в указанные годы примера корейского кино: фильм “Паразиты” (2019 г.) режиссера Пон Чжун Хо, сериал “Игра в Кальмара” (2021 г.) режиссера Хван Дон Хёк и сериала “Зов ада” (2021 г.) режиссера Ён Сан Хо. В ходе исследования подвергаются анализу стереотипы, сложившиеся вокруг корейского кино, а также выделяются его отличительные черты, которые объясняются с точки зрения культурных и экономических особенностей страны. Кроме того, на основе описанного тренда анализируются психологические потребности зрителей из северного и центрального европейского региона, побудившие их к просмотру кино. В ходе исследования использованы методы ситуационного и культурологического анализа, при этом данные для последнего собраны в ходе изучения научных публикаций, статистических данных и публикаций в медиа. Как итог, в статье опровергается представление о жанре мелодрамы как залога популярности корейского кинематографа в европейской среде. Вместо этого в качестве такового утверждается роль насилия, причины которого кроются в экономических проблемах.

Ключевые слова: современное корейское кино, особенности насилия, экономическая ситуация, популярность в северной и центральной Европе, “Паразиты”, “Игра в кальмара”, “Зов ада”.

Abstract: This paper examines the trend of Korean cinematography rising in popularity within European audiences in 2019-2021 years. By examining three recently most popular South-Korean films and serials (*Parasite* by Bong Joon-ho, *Squid Game* by Hwang Dong-hyuk and *Hellbound* by Yeon Sang-ho), the reasons why K-dramas gained recognition in non-Asian world are studied. The process includes challenging the stereotypes about Korean cinematography, figuring out its distinguishing features, explaining correlations between features distinguished and cultural specificities and, finally, analyzing European (I refer to North and Western Europe region) psychological needs based on mainstream cinematography trends. There are two major research strategies: three case studies and culture lenses. The data from culture lenses have been collected due to published reports, statistics and media articles. This report refutes the pattern of naivete and platonic love depicted in mostly spread K-dramas as a key to success but state naturally depicted violence (particularly caused by economic problems) as so.

Keywords: K-drama, violence features, popularization among Northern and Western Europe, economic situation, *Parasite*, *Squid Game*, *Hellbound*.

Introduction

In recent years, it has been raising attention towards Korean drama also known as K-drama.

In this case, this research tries to find an answer and summarize data about two main points. Firstly, it studies why violence has become the new cultural tie point between Korean and Northern and Central (called by some geographers Western) European society. Secondly, the research finds interconnections between recent Europeans’

film and serial preferences and their psychological processes showing daily-life habits and thinking patterns.

As it is known, the kinds of films people are watching can reflect their hidden needs, moods or intentions. Therefore, studying the reasons for such high interest in particular cases and finding new coherence will be helpful for exploring necessities of some groups (in this case, the Northern and Western European one).

Here are three cases which can prove the trend mentioned.

In 2020 South-Korean film *Parasite* produced by *Bong Joon-ho* became the first non-English film which won the 92nd Academy Award for Best Picture. It won Best Director nomination, Best Original Screenplay nomination and Best International Feature Film nomination as well. Moreover, *Parasite* was awarded the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film, Palme d'Or in Cannes Film Festival, and the BAFTA Award for Best Film Not in the English Language.

The other series is called *Squid Game* and created by South-Korean director Hwang Dong-hyuk. By the middle of October 2021, it was watched by 142 million households on Netflix streaming platform [12]. Netflix doesn't release data about each country, but what can be said certainly is that there are 15 out of 19 countries in Northern and Western Europe (including Iceland, Austria, United Kingdom, Germany, France, Switzerland, Latvia, Lithuania etc.) where the serial mentioned took the leadership position due to watching ratings. In some countries, for instance, in the UK, *Squid Game* took top-1 place for three weeks from 27.09 2021 till 11.10.2021. If we take the average numbers, it can be concluded that around 25 million people in this region were interested in this serial [7].

Finally, in November 2021 another Korean serial *Hellbound* by Yeon Sang-ho broke into the Netflix top of first position within 24-hour time after release. On the peak of its popularity on streaming service *Hellbound* held its position in tops in 14 countries out of 19 in the region mentioned before [7].

Through studying these cases, particularly the social problems depicted, particulars of depicting violence and level of these films/serials' popularity in different

countries in Northern and Western Europe, the understanding of social moods especially in terms of economic prosperity can be reached.

Background of K-drama popularity and the particulars of problem studied

The phenomenon of Korean cinematography's popularity among Western society is not new. The notion called Hallyu started to spread in 2004. It was used by the New York Times - to describe part of the national rebranding, translated as "the Korean wave." [10, c. 159-160]. Reasons for great interest lay in different genres. For instance, during the last decade mass audiences were acquainted with it thanks to melodramas and historical dramas. [13, c. 221]. But in recent years films and serials which are more highly recognized and awarded relate to the drama genre according to cases studied.

Therefore, two main differences could be distinguished.

Firstly, films and serials mentioned raise problems which are social but tightly related to the economic sphere. They are social inequality, capitalistic profit-chasing concept, inner moral conflicts.

In *Parasite* the first well-noticeable conflict between rich Park and Poor Kim, but between poor Kim and Moon-gwang with her husband. Characters are leading with greediness and the idea of capitalistic society: "we never have enough". That is what "can man do of man to profit (not survive)" [6].

In *Squid Game* characters are faked by freedom of choice. At the same time, the whole game, as does capitalism, is based on fortuity, but leading by the idea of choice players start to chase only their own goals forgetting about humanism [11].

In *Hellbound* society is completely separated into those who are afraid of Hell demons' appearing and those who are inspired by the chance of someone else's death (The New Truth - religious organization). Cults can be produced really quickly, making people think others' death is righteous.

The kind of violence all characters are facing lies predominantly in their nature, so even small provocation from society or a shadow of goods that can be possibly gotten is enough.

Secondly, a few words should be said about how the level of violence and the notion of violence itself in *Parasite*, *Squid Game* and *Hellbound* is estimated. According to the criteria of the Motion Picture Association (MPA) film rating system, established in the US, *Parasites* can be rated with R rating, *Squid Game* and *Hellbound* with NC-17 rating. R rating is used for describing inappropriate language, not detailed violence (for instance, blood, murders and cold weapons) and nudity scene, while NC-17 for marking films also with inappropriate language, detailed nudity and detailed violence scenes. Speaking about violence not only psychological abuse or other indirect ways of giving pressure are implied. In *Parasite* there are 4 murders depicted, In *Hellbound* around 13 in details and in *Squid Game* - more than 450.

Why does Korean cinematography depict violence?

Trying to answer the question why Korean and European societies have become visibly interconnected through violence shown in films, it is important to share the idea that violence so as does love can be treated as a universal communication language. The main reason is that without additional tools (for example, speech) moods and intentions of a violator can be understood by all participants of the communication process. However, Korean filmmakers and European cinemagoers apply different reasons to face it.

To begin with, a few words should be told about how particularly Korean films grab film-goer attention. Some specifically Asian features are distinguished. In this case, violence performs as an effective tool for popularity from both economic and cultural point of view.

Firstly, an economic point of view can be studied. Disadvantages of capitalistic Korean society described before are festered by general economic problems of Korea. For instance, in 2020 the sum of debts of all households in the country equals 100% of its GDP [4]. In this case, the most understandable way to emphasize the disadvantages of a system is to show their whole ugliness through the violence it releases.

Secondly, Korean cinematic production was under governmental control for almost its entire history. The relief of censorship happened at the beginning of 1990-s, after the changing in Constitutional Law. This causes the raisins of sense, depicted violence. After the long limits of cinema production Korean filmmakers don't hesitate to bring new aggression frames into European cinematography. The statement about censorship relief was made far before the 1990s, in 1984. In that time tendency just started to go into power. Thomas Doherty [3, c. 850] attributed the reasons for success of the other two films of that time: "new freedom to display generous portions of female flesh and their aggressive, exploitative advertising campaigns". Without drawing into details and speaking just about the general concept of making more unacceptable phenomena to be depicted thanks to a sense of freedom this explanation is still valuable.

However, censorship is not the only reason which lead the Korean directors to depict violence in unexpected and untraditional ways for European audiences. For instance, unlike European, Korean morality except the idea of reveal. Some history matters, one of which is the confrontation with North Korea, also play an important role. [14].

These features as reasons for success face criticism as well because they are studied as 'external'. According to J. Parc and H.-C. Moon, the main reason for Hallyu popularization is based on the *generalized double diamond (GDD) model*, which refers basically to rational calculations rather than echoes psychological intentions of societies. However, it is assumed as well that this model cannot cover all points while talking about cultural products. [9, c.131-132]. That is why it is still relevant to study other cultural features of new Korean culture, such as filtered Western values and democratization [8].

To sum up this part, on the one hand, Korean cinematography depicts violence in a more realistic way because of their own cultural background of censorship, strict control over the cinematography, other morality, and painful historical conflicts. At the same time, supported with problems of domestic economic policy, they are trying

to hyperbolize its reasons, what is shown in the *Squid Game* and consequences, as in *Parasites*.

Why do European viewers watch Korean films depicting violence?

Now the second research question can be examined. The violent film watching usually awakens complex emotions such as horror, disgust, relief and catharsis. Moreover, viewers can predict what emotion spectrum they are supposed to feel after watching a particular genre film. The question is what psychological and society process in general reflects the willingness to watch films or serials with detailed violence scenes.

As case-films were produced partly as a reaction to the economic situation in Korea to demonstrate its weak points and disadvantages (see description of *Parasite* and *Squid Game* above), the reasons for their popularity in European society can be also found in economic motives. It is vital to emphasize that popularity reasons are much wider and include more complicated reasons. However, this report is focusing on exploration of violence phenomena particularly from the angle of situation in economics, because in cases studied it is shown as a main reason which causes violence.

Northern and Central Europe, according to the World Inequality Lab, have achieved significant results in the process of restraining the income inequality between citizens in comparison with other regions and continents worldwide. Nevertheless, growth in Europe has also been unequal: “between 1980 and 2017, the average income of the top 1% of the richest Europeans has grown twice as fast as that of the bottom 50%” [2, c. 1].

Therefore, motives for watching violent films (serials) can be distinguished into three parts according to the economic situation in the countries even inside the region studied.

So, on the other hand, European society finds a reflection of the problems they face by themselves. This explanation is suitable for countries with a comparatively low average national income in the region (from €20,000 to €30,000 while the highest is above €60,000), and post-tax-at-risk-of-poverty rate around 18% while the lowest is

8%. For instance, this is suitable for countries such as Latvia and Lithuania [2, c. 2, 6]. There are social inequality or disadvantages of capitalism as a society structure, which were mentioned in the case of *Parasite* and *Squid Game*. The violence societies face in these films and serials is rather similar to one they have to face daily, so watching such films shows their eagerness to fix their own problems and gives the illusion of control over the situation. The violence depicted is greater than real one, so it leads to the experiencing of horror, disgust or other 'strong' from biological side of view emotions. Neil Martin, referring in his report to Kavin provides the explanation of such stimulation: "Imagined horror provides entry to the made-up world where fears are heightened but can be mastered ... it accesses a core of fears we may share as humans, such as the fear of being attacked in the dark ... it provides a way to conceptualize, give shape to and deal with the evil and frightening" [5].

But on the other hand, the region studied also includes countries with low levels of social inequality and high average national incomes such as Luxembourg, Netherlands, Sweden or Switzerland [2, c. 2 -7]. In these countries, average national income is between €60,000 and €45,000 while the post-tax-at-risk-of-poverty rate is not higher than 12%. Not facing violence triggered by social problems, the audience while watching care about the problems of other societies. So, here the eagerness to watch the violence is connected with the concept of sympathy toward people with lower living standards. It is proved that a person is supposed to feel sympathy for a character who was wrongly put under fantasy aggression [1, c. 222-226].

The third probable reason connected with emotions' simulation is more controversial. There is a point of view that through experiencing guilt or anxiety "by providing an opportunity for hostility catharsis" [1, c. 220] after watching films the likelihood of overt aggression in real life is decreased. However, this theory is not strongly supported by all the researchers. Another point of view states that "the angered individual will experience a cathartic relief of internal tension only to the extent that he believes that the anger instigator... is aggressively injured by himself

or some acceptable substitute” [1, c. 219]. In other words, if people are angry while watching the film they won't feel catharsis because they won't sympathize with the protagonist. However, this reaction cannot be linked with the economical conditions in the country, as an emotional predisposition toward feeling catharsis is badly predictable according to wealth level.

Conclusion

Popularity of K-drama within European viewers in recent years is a complicated phenomena influenced by multiple social and cultural processes. However, basing on cases of recent most popular K-drama films such as *Parasite* (2019) by Bong Joon-ho, *Squid Game*(2021) by Hwang Dong-hyuk and *Hellbound* (2021) by Yeon Sang-ho naturally depicted violence as a key common feature can be distinguished. At the same time, struggles caused by economical conditions plays the main role in a process of popularization of violent Korean films (serials) withing Northern and Western European society. From the point of view of film-makers, it represents current problems in the Korean economy, and, therefore, some lifestyle particularities of citizens. However, violence is also a result of tragic history, censorship and morality which were not the purpose of studying in this report but still cannot be excluded. As for European viewers, looking on the emotional spectrum which they are highly likely to experience, the reasons why Europeans decided to watch Korean films (serials) depicting both disadvantages of the capitalistic model they are aware of and violence were studied.

Taking into account the fact that viewers can basically predict what emotions they are going to feel after particular film watching, the economical environment in the country they are living in can be in general described. Based on this information, some motives for watching films or serials mentioned to experience either relief from horror and disgust or sympathy or catarsis can be named.

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