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The Politics of the Korean Blockbuster: Narrating the Nation and the Spectacle of 'Glocalisation' in *2009 Lost Memories*

In 1998, the only country where *Titanic* was sunken in the box office battle was Korea. A domestically produced high-budget action film, *Shiri*, ranked top in the box office against this globally successful Hollywood blockbuster by marking the biggest box office record (over 5 million) in Korean film history. The success of *Shiri* is often compared to the battle of David and Goliath in popular discourse in Korea. Following *Shiri*, a series of so-called 'Korean blockbuster' films, such as *Phantom: The Submarine* (1999), *Joint Security Area* (2000), *Friend* (2001), *2009 Lost Memories* (2002), *Brotherhood (Taegukki)* (2003), *Silmido* (2003), *Typhoon* (2005), *The Host* (2006), and *D-War* (2007) have successively renewed domestic box office records while updating the industrial indexes of production and marketing costs. Intended to be 'big' in every aspect of film production and circulation, these self-defined blockbusters not only led the phenomenal success of Korean films in the domestic market against Hollywood imports, they facilitated the production of blockbusters as a major trend in the Korean film industry.¹ The advent of Korean blockbusters also coincided with the emergence of *Hallyu* (Korean Wave), which designates the popularity of Korean entertainment products, including cinema, K-Pop, and Television drama across the Asian market. Many Korean film critics claim that Korean

blockbusters mark a new phase of Korean cinema, the so-called 'renaissance of Korean national cinema.'

Indeed, Korean blockbusters came to the scene less than a decade after the "Korean New Wave,"² the tendency of new films and film culture during the 1980s to the 1990s, had opened up the discussion about the national cinema. In less than a decade, however, the ideal of national cinema that the Korean New Wave envisioned has gone through the significant transformation. How did Korean blockbusters revive the national cinema, if ever? The most apparent shift in this discourse of national cinema is found in the changed relation with Hollywood, the dominant global system to which Korean national cinema has been positioned as 'marginalized other.' The single word that might effectively describe the transition that the Korean blockbuster brings up is the 'Hollywoodization' of Korean cinema in terms of both film style and industrial practice. Forming part of *Hallyu*, I argue that *hollywoodized* Korean blockbusters have remapped the discourse about Korean national cinema corresponding to the changed social and cultural conditions of Korea in the late 1990s – referred to as the 'Post-IMF era'³ – which ensconced new cultural paradigm of 'globalization through localization.' This essay examines the Korean blockbuster as a 'hybrid' text of marginalized other, in Homi Bhabha's

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sense, the cinematic project that represents the contested terrain where conflicts and negotiations between diverse discourses such as nationalism, national cinema, the global and local are manifest.⁴ In particular, focusing on *2009 Lost Memories*, I attempt to investigate how the Korean blockbuster constructs the dominant and/or hidden discourse in Post-IMF Korea into an imaginary transcript through unique cinematic conventions: the narrative structure and spectacle centered on the question of national identity.⁵ Within the paradigm of the post-IMF period, it was this self-reflexive quest to search for national identity that connected the Korean blockbuster with Korean audiences whether the specific story is about the relationship between North and South Korea (*Shiri*, *JSA*, *Brotherhood*), the male friendship of local gangsters (*Friend*), or the imagined history between Korea and Japan (*2009 Lost Memories*). *2009 Lost Memories* is particularly interesting in that it narrates the 'nation' through a complex and twisted narrative structure. With a record-breaking production cost of \$8 million at the time, action packed spectacle scenes, and big stars from Korea and Japan, a science fiction drama *2009 Lost Memories* represents characteristics of the Korean blockbuster. A close look at the social and cultural context of Post-IMF Korea that conditions the project of the Korean blockbuster and the analysis of *2009 Lost Memories* will shed light on the politics of the Korean blockbuster, in particular, its ambivalent discourse of nationalism in re-defining national cinema within the paradigm of globalization.

Overall, the fundamental question that *2009 Lost Memories* raises is how to valorize the project of the Korean blockbuster that aims to globalize its national culture by way of localizing dominant Hollywood convention. Does the Korean blockbuster provide a mode of resistance or simply insinuate self-subordination? In other words, does it contribute to enriching multi-culturalism by de-homogenizing global culture⁶ or merely reaffirm the thesis of "homogenization of globalization"⁷? Furthermore, how does it complicate the longstanding debate on the binary ideologies of "cultural imperialism"⁸ and "de-westernization"⁹? I propose the very co-presence of competing ideologies of 'globalization' and 'localization' characterizes the Korean blockbuster as a unique strategy of Third World national cinema. Indeed, the Korean blockbuster defies theses of

globalization based on the binary opposition between the global and the local and instead resonates with the compromised yet proactive attempt of so-called "glocalisation"¹⁰ in cinematic language.

I. Cultural Discourse of the Korean Blockbuster: Symptoms of Post-IMF Korea

For most Koreans, the economic crisis in 1997, commonly identified as 'IMF-crisis,' was the awakening moment when the domestic economy was forced to encounter the global economy. The economic crisis after the collapse of the stock market in 1997 suddenly damaged the myth of economic achievement, which has been Korea's ultimate goal for the last fifty years of its modernization effort. The Korean economy plummeted from eleventh to last place among forty-six advanced and emerging market economies and it fell from sixth to thirty-fifth place in terms of global competitiveness ranking in 1998.¹¹ Unemployment rates soared beyond 8 percent at the peak of the crisis, and the GNP dropped sharply from \$10,543 in 1996 to \$6,750 in the same year. Many people lost their jobs, crime and suicide rates rose higher than ever before, and the lives of many middle class families were radically undermined by exacerbated economy. The so-called 'reformation of economic structure' required by the IMF (International Monetary Fund) to recover Korea out of its economic crisis and remodel it toward the standard of the world economic system has affected the everyday lives of Koreans. With the loss of economic independence by the intervention of the IMF, the collective sense of loss and failure created a new mode of cultural sensitivity. In this atmosphere, 'globalization' appeared to be an urgent agenda for Korea to confront, but it was met only with ambivalence. On one hand, globalizing Korea was touted as the only practical solution to survive and keep up with other first world metropolises. On the other hand, the increased self-awareness of Korea's inferior status as a minority within the dominant first-world economic system stirred up shared resentment against globalization.

Dramatic changes across all cultural, political, and industrial spheres in the Post-IMF Korea produced patriotic addresses from political leaders and social elites, which in turn reinforced strong patriotic or nationalistic sentiment among the

majority of Koreans. Various campaigns were promoted to emphasize unity, community, and the values of Korean culture. In the midst of this turmoil, the 'Boycott Hollywood film' campaign was one of the most notable phenomena. Many NGOs initiated and took part in the 'Boycott Hollywood film' campaign that was triggered by negotiations between Korea and the United States for the Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT), which continued into the recent controversy around the sustenance of the screen quota system and Korea-US FTA (Free Trade Agreement) in 2007. Since 1987, against the dominance of Hollywood films, Korean movies produced by small productions with low budgets, limited scale, and less technical sophistication could not stand a chance. In addition, as the U.S. government continuously pushed the South Korean government to reduce the number of days of screen quota reserved for screening domestic films or to even abolish it in exchange for the relaxation of restrictions on the U.S. automobile and mobile communication market, the fate of the Korean film industry suddenly turned into a question of the independence of national culture.

The discourse of globalization through localization, which emerged in the early 1990s, acquired a new meaning in this situation, reflecting the anxiety and ambivalent cultural discourse in Korea faced with the force of globalization. Entertainment and media industries were no exception to this flow, and the changes of industrial system around and after 1997 directly echo this cultural discourse. Being encountered and penetrated by the hegemony of the first world, the boundary of national culture seemed to be shattered and left to be redefined, although it was the very assumption of national culture as an intrinsically unitary and self-deterministic entity that was challenged. Newly acquired awareness of the permissive boundary of national culture, however, was redirected to reassure and reconfirm the 'validity of local culture' as a popular catchphrase of the time stated, 'To be essentially Korean is to be global,' the colloquial version of the ideology of glocalisation. In this context, the discourse of 'localization' quickly acquired currency as a possible alternative solution to cope with the force of globalization, which however turns out problematic considering that localization itself is the inseparable,

not oppositional, dimension of globalization. Homi K. Bhabha eloquently underlines the impossibility of fixating the boundary of national culture as "the 'locality' of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as 'other' in relation to what is outside or beyond it."¹² The Korean blockbuster was born out of this social atmosphere, embodying the Janus-faced 'liminal identity' as it internalized the dilemma of being 'inside/outside' the global system.

Unexpectedly, the transformation of the industrial system after the economic crisis turned the conditions more favorably towards the film industry at stake. As venture capital – which lost proper investment targets after the collapse of the Korean stock market – surged into the entertainment industry, the Korean film industry acquired unexpected affluence in terms of production funds. Meanwhile, big Korean conglomerate corporations actively launched their in-house divisions of entertainments and started to fund film production directly.¹³ Accordingly, the Korean film industry reshaped itself into a more competitive corporate system with the lead of newly formed big production and distribution companies such as Cinema Service and CJ. To produce the 'big blockbuster' was one way of maximizing speculative capital for bigger profits. *Shiri* –financed by Samsung entertainment – was the first successful product of this changed economic system. At the same time, the overseas market emerged as a necessary condition for the success of Korean blockbusters, which has been even more reassured with the trend of *Hallyu*. What makes this transition symptomatic in view of the subsequent development of Korean cinema is the ambivalent strategy that these newly emerged big production houses adopted. While they stood on the front against Hollywood, Korean film companies also aggressively followed the Hollywood model of transnational corporations with a desire to expand their global business across the Asian region and hopefully to the American market. From this industrial perspective, the 'internal globalization' of Korean cinema was an inevitable strategy to cope with the globalization from outside.

Sharing similar aspirations with global Hollywood, however, Korean blockbusters chose 'localization' as a practical strategy. In particular, Korean blockbusters responded to the newly

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resurrected discourse of national culture and self-consciousness about national identity with Korea-specific stories such as the division of nation (*Shiri*, *ISA*), the male friendship of local gangsters (*Friend*), an imagined history between Korea and Japan (*2009 Lost Memories*). Following the phenomenal success of two obviously nationalistic films, *Shiri* and *Joint Security Area*, these localized stories fit into and even boost nationalistic sentiment against the external force of Hollywood. Most Korean scholars agree that the Korean blockbuster is a symptomatic response to Hollywood dominance and an attempt to translate universality into particularity in a spectral dimension. For example, Korean Scholar So Young Kim surmises the advent of the Korean blockbuster as follows:

Obviously, the South Korean blockbuster is a compromise between foreign forms and local materials, a compromise itself often staged on a grand scale. This blockbuster offers both a voluntary mimicry of and imagined resistance to large Hollywood productions, playing off various logics of both identity and difference in the global culture industry. Backed by the Korean nation-state and its national culture, the South Korean blockbuster presents itself as the *cultural difference opposing the homogenizing tendencies of Hollywood*.¹⁴

Kim's view represents the typical academic discourse that applies the issue of global and the local to the interpretation of the Korean blockbuster as an attempt to diversify the 'homogenizing tendency of Hollywood.' I agree with this perspective in that the Korean blockbuster contributes to spreading cultural diversity by proving that local-specific stories could be made into a globally marketable spectacle that has long been a trademark of Hollywood. However, it is also important to note that, in this effort, the Korean blockbuster actively tunes in and amplifies the nationalistic discourse by aspiring to be another regional super power, a new 'homogenizing' agency in the Asian market, beyond the goal of maintaining local resistance. *2009 Lost Memories* represents this Janus-faced politics of the Korean blockbuster.

II. *2009 Lost Memories*: Narrating a Nation in Search of Lost memories or Desired histories

2009 Lost Memories begins with an establishing shot of the imagined landscape of Seoul as the third capital city of The Great Japanese Empire in the near future of 2009. The preceding opening montage sequence summarizes the fictional historical development within the diegetic world from 1919 to 2009, the hundred years of modern Korean history which encompasses, in reality, the colonization of Korea by Japan in 1919, liberation in 1945, the Korean War in 1950, the Seoul Olympics in 1988 and so on. In the film, however, actual historical moments are twisted following the narrative premise that Korea remains a Japanese colony until 2009. Typically, in the science fiction film, it is important to create an "imaginatively realized world"¹⁵ that is a "motivation for the nature of the fictional world, its inhabitants, and the events that happen within it, whether or not science itself is a topic or a theme."¹⁶ Furthermore, this imaginatively realized world is "indicative of the problems and issues of the sociological view on the given society."¹⁷ By adopting the generic convention of science fiction and setting the story in the 'imagined future' of Korea, *2009 Lost Memories* brings up the 'post-colonial identity' of Korea as its central narrative motivation and furthermore symptomatically responds to the cultural anxiety over the challenged national identity in Post-IMF Korea.

In this imagined future of the film, The Great Japanese Empire won World War II as an ally of the United States and nuclear bombs were never dropped in Hiroshima. Not only did Japan achieve tremendous economic and political development but also it became one of the most powerful countries in the world. A more gloomy yet significant twist reveals that most East Asian countries, including Korea, remain colonized by imperial Japan and integrated into it under the name of the 'The Greater East Asian Sphere'— a slogan that imperial Japan, according to the actual history, proclaimed in the later stage of its imperialist expansion. Over the course of this fictional history, Koreans have subordinated to Japanese rule, living in a ghetto as second rate citizens, deprived of their own native language as well as any political power. Playing off this 'what if' assumption, *2009 Lost Memories* projects the dystopian future



"In 2009, a single-person war is about to begin in Seoul, the third largest city of the Japanese Empire" (from a tagline on a poster for *2009 Lost Memories*).

that touches one of the most exacerbated and repressed traumas of modern Korean history.

The ultimate mission of the central protagonist, Sakamoto, a native Korean JBI (a special police unit of the Japanese Empire) agent, is to recover the lost memories of Korea and thus recuperate his Korean identity betraying what his job demands. Then, 'what are the lost memories of original Korean history' that Sakamoto should recover? This is the very fundamental question that *2009 Lost Memories* tweaks into the fantastic reflection of hidden desire.

Based on the assumption that the fabrication of certain moments in the past would change the future events, the film uses the narrative device of 'time travel' as a way of allowing characters to navigate across diverse historical moments, to intervene, and eventually to recover what is supposed to be the 'proper' historical progress. In order to understand the meaning of 'lost memories of legitimate historical progress,' I argue that it is crucial to consider the significance of the year 2002, the production year of the film, as an ultimate tangential point of the

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film's historiographic perspective. That is, what is lost in the diegetic world in 2009 is something *yet to come* in 2002. In other words, the complete picture of Korea that Sakamoto eventually recuperates from its distorted disgrace through his adventure is *unknown* to the Korean audience in 2002. In this sense, *2009 Lost Memories* is as much interested in presenting the 'desired (future) histories' of Korea from the perspective of 2002 as in reassessing its 'lost memories.' This collapsed representation of 'lost memories and desired histories' in *2009 Lost Memories*, in imaginary dimension, is largely tinted by the nationalistic discourse prevalent in the post-IMF period.

In the film, Korean history unfolds in two different versions depending on who the narrator is: an official history written by the Empire of Japan and the lost history pursued by the anti-government Korean resistance. If including actual history external to the film, we have three different memories of Korean history. These three versions of history diverge from one significant historical event that happened in Harbin in 1909 – Korean resistance fighter Ahn Jung-Geun's assassination attempt of Ito Hirobumi, the first Japanese Resident-General of Korea (1905-1909). This event functions as a primary scene that both the Japanese agent and Sakamoto revisit with the desire to change the direction of history based on the assumption 'what if' had Ahn's mission failed.

Firstly, according to actual historical record, as part of Koreans' liberation movement, Ahn successfully killed Ito Hirobumi, was arrested on the spot, and executed soon after. His name is known to every contemporary Korean as a symbol of nationalist spirit. Subsequent historical developments of Korea after liberation are well known to us. Then comes the second version of history – the official history of the Empire of Japan in the film – which is well represented in the film's opening establishing sequence. According to this version, Ahn's assassination attempt failed, changing the whole direction of history thereafter. As a consequence, under the leadership of Ito Hirobumi, Japan accomplished its aspiration to be one of the most powerful empires in the world although why Ito Hirobumi's survival was crucial to its successive historical development is left unexplained. To make things more complicated

and indeed interesting, this *official* history in the film is, in fact, revealed to be also the *rewritten* one by the Japanese government in 2009. The first shot of the opening montage sequence begins with the very instance of the 1909 assassination. Unlike the real situation, Ahn's attempt is aborted by another Japanese assassin, a Japanese agent who is sent from the future in time travel by the future Japanese government in 2009 that aims to change the path of history for the glory of Japan. As expected, this tampering causes chain effects, propelling history to move forward the establishment of The Great Empire of Japan, which eventually erases actual histories of both Japan and Korea. The history of Korea as once an independent country is deliberately abolished by a Japanese colonial government and forever lost even for native Koreans. This motif of the historical amnesia is one of the common conventions of science fiction films that often functions as an allegory for the dangers of repressive political power as in the film *Dark City* (1998). It is indeed the very subject of the original novel "Searching for Epitaph" (1987) upon which *2009 Lost Memories* loosely based.¹⁸

The third version of history, supposedly, the 'true' history in the diegetic world that the Korean resistance group uncovers and Sakamoto eventually succeeds in recovering reveals the problematic desire of 'rewriting' the national history. Once Sakamoto manages to stop the Japanese assassin at the primary scene in 1909 and thus sets up the historical clock right, Japan loses in World War II with atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, suffers from its aftermath as a defeated war criminal, and subsequently collapses into a powerless nation. Meanwhile, not only does Korea achieve its independence from Japan but it also accomplishes unification with North Korea in 2008. Eventually, with increased political and economic power, Korea prevails as the most powerful country in East Asia. Here, half of the lost memories of Korea are *legitimately* true to historical facts up until 2002 but the following second half of the memories are *imagined* ones. Is this picture of Korea that is recovered from historical oblivion, indeed, far different from that of The Great Empire of Japan? When two opposing agencies of the Empire of Japan and resistant Korea battle over the 'rights to narrate' a legitimate history in the

film, they are in fact fighting over the power *to dream a desired history* for their own sake. Therefore, when Sakamoto gets through the spectacular and tragic battle scenes to recover lost memories, what he actually recuperates is the Korean version of *desired histories* rather than its *lost memories*.

This cinematic narration of histories in *2009 Lost Memories* symptomatically resonates with what Korean blockbusters aim to achieve in Post-IMF Korea as a unique industrial practice. On one hand, by touching on the colonial past, one of the most traumatic experiences in modern Korean history, the film directly evoked the cultural anxiety over the potential loss of its self-independence, which at the time was even more stirred by recent experience of the IMF crisis that left a deep scar on national pride. On the other hand, the film presents the imaginary response to the rekindled ideology of nationalism in Korea after the IMF crisis through its representation of The Great Korea, which succeeds not only in protecting its national identity but also in prevailing as a regional super power in East Asia. Moreover, this image of The Great Korea in *2009 Lost Memories* precisely stands for the ideal of the Korean blockbuster to be a Korean version of Hollywood, especially based on the economic logic that justifies its role as a gatekeeper of the national economy against foreign forces (in this case, Hollywood's global corporation) as well as a missionary of Korean cultural products overseas. The widely circulated analogy of the film *Titanic* with automobile sales – the number of cars Korea should sell to match the profits that *Titanic* made globally – in the public discourse indicates that this newly touted economic logic, in fact, underlies the public support of the Korean blockbuster as a marketable cultural product, which continues to the present as seen in the recent controversy surrounding the unexpected success of *D-War*.

In this way, *2009 Lost Memories* represents a kind of “*in-between* space,” in Homi Bhabha's sense, where “narrative positions between cultures and nations, the political, the poetic and the painterly, the past and the present are negotiated.”¹⁹ It is particularly interesting that the film literally represents this ‘in-between space’ where the multi-layered conflicts and the process of negotiations ‘to narrate the proper history’ converge, through the specific visual motif of the monument of the

King Gwanggaeto the Great of Goguryeo. Indeed, the virtually created mise-en-scène of the gigantic monument in a mystified yet unspecific space presents one of those spectacular moments that the blockbuster film ostensibly aims to offer as a demonstration of its technological sophistication with the use of special effects. Narrative wise, it is the very secret entry to the past and the black hole of time travel that protagonists from both sides desperately search for. Considering the predominant sentiment of nationalism underlying the narrative of the film, it seems that the direct reference to Goguryeo is more than a convenient narrative device. Founded around the 2nd century AD, the Goguryeo dynasty occupied the largest territory in Korean history, which covered vast areas of what is currently China, reaching to Manchuria and Mongolia until it was finally unified by the Shilla dynasty in the 7th century. In the Korean popular imaginary, Goguryeo exists as a symbol of the glory of old Korea, the imagined icon of ‘the Empire of Korea,’ whose legacy is constantly brought up as something to recover. Therefore, when the film places a key access to all these twisted narrations of history within the spectacular image of an archaic and gigantic monument, the hidden desire to link the origin of the nation with the legacy of Goguryeo becomes more than *visible*. In fact, postcolonial theories have argued that seeking the origin of national culture from archaic tradition is one of the strategies of third world nationalism.²⁰ It is worthwhile to note that, in the film, the search for lost memories or desired histories finally arrives in a primordial and mythic image of the King Gwanggeto monument.

In fact, the King Gwanggeto monument has long been at the center of various historical disputes between China, Japan and Korea over the interpretation of its epitaph that describes Goguryeo's national identity, territory and thus the politics of the ancient world. Considering that the epitaph itself has been under suspicion of intentionally ‘being tampered’ by Japan, it seems to be more than a convenient choice to construct this historical maze around the King Gwanggeto monument.²¹ However cliché it may be, this strategy of *2009 Lost Memories* to rely on the nationalistic icon in its search for the national identity both in diegetic and extra-

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diegetic dimensions represents one of the many tropes that Korean blockbusters in the post-IMF period have appropriated as a way to rekindle social consciousness of Korea's post-colonial identity.

Conclusion

By replacing the present experience of Post-IMF Korea with the colonial past of Korea, *2009 Lost Memories* reinforces the allegorical function of colonial history of Korea. In this post-colonial imagination, the representation of Japanese Empire has served as an icon of ultimate enemy, which does not allow any room for negotiation or compromise and thus coerces the establishment of homogenous, pure, and unified nation as a resisting agency. In Korean blockbusters, the nation, once again, as a form of cultural elaboration, functions as "an agency of ambivalent narration that holds culture at its most productive position."²² This narrative trope of the self-reflexive historiographic writing of the nation reveals the underlying ideology of the "hybrid process of self-determinism" of Korean blockbusters.²³ The narrative and the spectacle of the imagined historical space in *2009 Lost Memories* well illustrate this hybrid tendency of Korean blockbusters that puts into play the two contradictory terms of *locality* and *universality*. On one hand, the Korean blockbuster promotes itself as a guardian of the national film industry against global Hollywood corporations by localizing national culture with newly founded content and national market. On the other hand, it serves not only to universalize the cinematic conventions of Hollywood but more significantly to supersede Hollywood through this 'intended mimicry,' thereby extending its power across East Asia. In this attempt, the Korean blockbuster provides a new mode of national cinema.

As a dominant mode of film practice, Hollywood has existed as a referential point to which or against which the idea of national cinema is mobilized. As the impact of globalization increased in the form of Hollywood domination in the 1990s, the question of national cinema has shifted from finding a national aesthetics to coping with the global market. Political consciousness and the search for national cinema that once were the driving logic of Korean New Wave gave way to the economic logic, which foregrounded the commodity value of cinema as a marketable

product in the global market. Increased sales of Korean movies overseas supported ramifications of this economic logic. Local films have increasingly won critical acclaim and become favorites at international film festivals, as in the case of director Park Chan-Wook's *Old Boy* that won Grand Prix at the Cannes film festival in 2004. South Korea's film exports jumped to \$37 million in the first half of 2004, from \$11.3 million in 2003 and \$7 million in 2000.²⁴ The Korean War spectacle *Brotherhood*, starring pan-Asian heartthrob Jang Dong-Geon, alone "grabbed a solid \$1.6 million for the first two days on June 26-27 on 286 screens, ranking second in Japan's box office behind *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*."²⁵ Along with this economic success, Hollywood, which once was the antithesis to which Korean New Wave defined its aesthetics and political stance, turned into the 'source' of styles and a market competitor. More specifically, if the Korean New Wave tried to find uniquely Korean aesthetics and adopted 'realism' as a possible solution for its political and aesthetic agenda, the Korean blockbuster imported and internalized Hollywood genre conventions such as horror, thriller, and blockbuster and rendered them into a competitive commodity form. As the 'Buy Korea' slogan represents the sentiment of the post-IMF period, the Korean blockbuster demonstrates its identity as a cultural product that represents national culture.

In this context, the Korean blockbuster's desire for establishing a competitive national film is not significantly different from that of the Korean New Wave in spite of their internal differences regarding what kind of film should do this job. Eventually, the strategy of the Korean blockbuster, the cinematic and industrial experiment to translate the cultural paradigm of 'globalization through localization' coincides with the advent of Korea as an IT-power (Information Technology) house in the global market. Indeed, the rhetoric of achieving 'Hollywood-compatible technological sophistication' for generating spectacle scenes with special effects appeared as one of the marketing strategies that the Korean blockbuster has vigorously employed. Although special effects themselves define the attraction of the blockbuster genre as a spectacle, the self-conscious emphasis on its technological achievement betrays Korean cinema's repressed complex for being inferior to the Hollywood

standard as well as its regained confidence to produce equally spectacular films.

Overall, the Korean blockbuster presents a particular example of the strategy of “glocalisation,” which supports the premise that local cultures and global cultures powerfully interact, articulate, and overlap with one another through diverse means of communication.²⁶ As Roland Robertson argues, the Korean blockbuster, in particular, exemplifies how the principle of glocalisation, “two interpenetrating processes: the universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism,” operates in the cultural dimension.²⁷ In this sense, the Korea blockbuster rather shows the advent of a new mode of national cinema that is constructed through an intricate relationship with others, beyond the binary distinction between the authentic local and the universalizing global. To some extent, the Korean blockbuster is an expression of the increased confidence of Korea as once a marginalized other that has now achieved cultural power to produce and circulate ‘big’ movies that have formerly been regarded as the exclusive domain of Hollywood. I conclude that there lies the possibility of resistance to actively appropriate hegemonic conventions and to transform them into local yet globally appealing commodity, especially for non-western national cinema.

In the end, what is at stake is an elaboration of the complex mechanism of glocalisation: what

specific values and practices – whether it be social discourse, industrial systems, or cinematic practices – constitute and intervene with the representation of national identity. For example, the premise of the “de-territorialization of the nation state” as a result of the globalization proves to be questionable in the case of the Korean blockbuster.²⁸ In a broader context, the Korean blockbuster came into being in Korea as a result of the historically specific institutional practices by which Korea has risen to the state of global center, something closer to a “global city” in Saskia Sassen’s sense or a “media capital” in Michael Curtin’s definition, illuminating how a particular process of globalization is constructed at the intersection of local, national, regional, and global levels.²⁹ When it comes to the transnational aspects of the Korean blockbuster, the force of globalization ends up reconfirming the boundary of nation-state and nationality more than ever. National culture indeed becomes increasingly relevant. Yet its position in the era of globalization oscillates between the tendency of foregrounding unification and embodying hybridity. As shown in *2009 Lost Memories*, the effort to globalize turns out to be another desperate attempt to safeguard the boundary of national identity intact. Therefore, the Korean blockbuster becomes an alternative form of globalization only in the sense that it provides diversity against the dominance of Hollywood.

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NOTES

- 1 The Korean film industry has recorded over 40 percent of the national market share at the box office since 1999. In 2001, Korean films made up 49.1 percent of the domestic box office and they have increased beyond 55 percent of the market in 2003 and 2004. Korean Film Council, *Annual Book of the Korean Film Industry: Each year from 1998-2004* (Seoul: Jibmundang, 2004).
- 2 In spite of its popular currency, this concept is problematic in the sense that its definition, characteristics and periodization are as much open to multiple interpretations as it is effective in delivering the general consensus that there was a 'new tendency' among films from the 1980s to the early 1990s. When it exactly began and ended and which film should be included or not, however, is contingent on the interpreter's diverse theoretical perspectives. For example, around 1994, several terms were coined to explain this new tendency such as "New Seoul," "New Realism," "New Korean Cinema," and "Korean New Wave." This new tendency was officially introduced as a distinct trend of films from 1980 to 1995 under the label "Korean New Wave" at the Pusan International Film Festival in 1996. The term "Korean New Wave" acquired currency at least for Korean film critics, who themselves were active participants in this trend and later became central players in Korean film culture in the 1990s.

- 3 Most recent research on Korean blockbusters shows an anonymous consensus on the importance of the “Post-IMF stage” as a crucial context for its formation. See So-Young Kim, ed., *Korean Blockbuster: Atlantis or America* (Seoul, Korea: Hyunsilmunhwa Yeongu, 2001).
- 4 Homi K. Bhabha, “Signs for Wonder,” *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); “DissemiNation: Time, Narration and the Margins of Modern Nation,” *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990).
- 5 Sung-Kyung Kim argues that the characteristic conventions of the Korean blockbuster are composed of four themes: 1) oppositional conflicts, organized in terms of, often stereotypical, binary oppositions; 2) specific settings and the sensual memories these invoke; 3) locally resonant heroes; and 4) culturally-specific values, beliefs and morality. Sung-Kyung Kim, “Renaissance of Korean National Cinema as a Terrain of Negotiation and Contention between the Global and the Local: Analyzing Two Korean Blockbusters, *Shiri* (1999) and *JSA* (2000),” unpublished manuscript.
- 6 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernism at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
- 7 Goerge Ritzer, *Expressing America: A Critique of the Global Credit Card Society* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1995) and *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1993).
- 8 Herbert Schiller, *Mass Communications and American Empire* (New York: A.M., 1969); Armand Mattelart, *Communication and Class Struggle* (New York: International General, 1979).
- 9 Chris Berry, “What’s big about the big film?: ‘De-Westernizing’ the blockbuster in Korea and China,” *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 217-229.
- 10 Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992).
- 11 Bu-Young Kim, “The Reaction against Globalization; The Case of Korean Film Industry,” MA Thesis (Seoul National University, 2000), 20; requoted in Kim, Sung-Kyung, *Ibid.*, 5.
- 12 Homi K Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 4
- 13 This transformation of the entertainment industry has continued up to the present. In 2005, telecommunication companies, such as SK telecom and Korea Telecom, emerged as major investors in the film industry. For example, in February 2005, SK telecom announced that it became the second major stock holder of Sidus HQ, one of the biggest entertainment talent agencies and production houses in South Korea. It signaled SK telecom’s entrance into the digital content business, as a strategic move toward the trend of media convergence (So-Young Kim, “Mapping the System of Korean Movie Investment and Distribution in 2005,” *Cine 21*, no. 493 (March 3, 2005), 44).
- 14 So-Young Kim, *Ibid.*, 13, 15. Emphasis added.
- 15 Vivian Sobchack, *Screening the Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (New Brunswick & New Jersey & London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 8.
- 16 Annette Kuhn, *Alien Zone 1: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema* (New York: Verso, 1990), 100.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 18 Written by Bok Geo-II, this historical (or pseudo-historical) novel depicts, what the author calls, ‘alternative history’ and the dystopian picture of Korea under the imaginary Empire of Japan. Critics have discussed that, in an allegorical way, the novel criticizes and satires the bleak realities of Korea under the long-held military dictatorship until the late 1980s.
- 19 Bhabha, *Ibid.*
- 20 Chungmoo Choi, “Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea,” *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, eds. Elaine H. Kim & Chungmoo Choi (New York: Routledge, 1998).
- 21 Ongoing conflicts between China and Korea over the historical writing of Goguryeo dynasty add one more interesting extracinemantic dimension to this issue. As China and Korea continue to debate over the territorial and cultural heritage of Goguryeo, which was in fact a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society, and claim to be a righteous successor, we see that the battle over the right to ‘narrate the nation’ goes beyond the silver screen.
- 22 Bhabha, *Ibid.*, 3.
- 23 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds), Introduction, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, 9.
- 24 Korean Film Council, *Hanguk Yeonghwa Saneop Yeongam (Annual Report of the Korean Film Industry)* (Seoul: Jibmundang, 2004).
- 25 Jong-Heon Lee, “Faces of Globalization: Filmmakers in Korea,” *United Press International*, reprinted in www.globalenvision.org, www.globalenvision.org/library/2/629 (July 06, 2004; accessed February 27, 2008).
- 26 Robertson, *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*, 69.
- 28 Appadurai, *Ibid.*, 91.
- 29 Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Michael Curtin, “Media Capitals: Cultural Geographies of Global TV,” *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, eds. Jan Olsson and Lynn Spigel (Duke University Press, 2004), 270-302.