

MADE FOR SITGES? THE RECEPTION OF THE SOUTH KOREAN THRILLER IN SPAIN THROUGH A CASE STUDY OF THE SITGES FILM FESTIVAL

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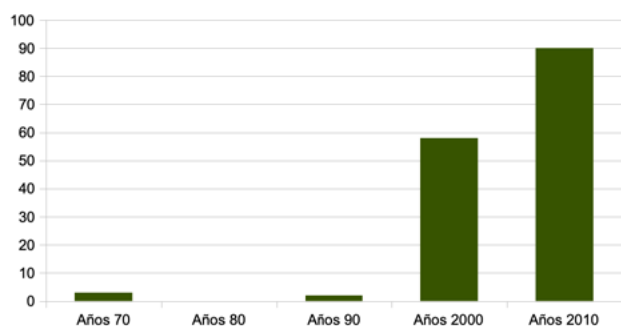
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Prior to the year 2000, a total of five Korean films had been screened at the Sitges International Fantasy Film Festival of Catalonia. Since that year, counting up to the most recent edition of the festival in 2018, 148 Korean films have been featured.¹ The exponential growth revealed in these figures on its own constitutes evidence that the boom in New Korean Cinema (Kim, 2011: 24)—defined as that generation of young filmmakers who emerged from the crisis in the South Korean film

industry of the 1990s and began at the end of that decade to make highly successful films that blended the unique qualities of Korean culture with a global visual culture—had a direct impact on the programming of the various sections of the festival. The pictures defined by theorists like Darcy Paquet (2009: 71) and festival programmers like Sitges deputy director Mike Hostench² as the manifesto-films of the movement, *Shiri* (Swiri, Kang Je-gyu, 1999) and *Joint Security Area* (Gongdong gyeongbi guyeok JSA, Park Chan-wook, 2000), were released in commercial theatres in Spain and gave international visibility to a national film industry that had been overlooked in the West in general and at the Sitges Festival (among many other venues) in particular, as the figures cited above confirm.

A brief chronology reveals the transformation that took place in the context of the festival at the time these two films were released, and in the years immediately thereafter. In the last years

Number of South Korean films screened at the Sitges Festival by decade



of the 1990s, two Korean films were featured in the Festival's Official Section: in 1998, *The Quiet Family* (Choyonghan kajok, Kim Jee-woon, 1998), and in 1999, *The Soul Guardians* (Toemarak, Park Kwang-chun, 1998). In the year 2001, Sitges hosted its first retrospective ever of a South Korean filmmaker: Kim Ki-duk, taking advantage of the success of *The Isle* (Seom, Kim Ki-duk, 2000) the year before. In 2003, *A Tale of Two Sisters* (Janghwa, Hongryeon, Kim Jee-woon, 2003) was featured in the festival's Official Section and *Memories of Murder* (Salinui chueok, Bong Joon-ho, 2003) in the Orient Express section. A year later, in 2004, Park Chan-wook won the Best Film award for *Old Boy* (Oldeuboi, Park Chan-wook, 2003) and received the honorary Màquina del Temps award five years later, in 2009. Since these early key dates, South Korean cinema at the Sitges Festival has progressed in a very short period of time from visibility to hypervisibility, as reflected by some indisputable figures: in its 2014 edition a total of 16 South Korean films were featured in different sections of the festival (although none of them were included in the Official Section), while in several other editions (2005, 2008, 2012 and 2016) anywhere between 3 and 5 South Korean films competed in the Official Section.

SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, SOUTH KOREAN CINEMA AT THE SITGES FESTIVAL HAS PROGRESSED IN A VERY SHORT PERIOD OF TIME FROM VISIBILITY TO HYPERVISIBILITY

These figures clearly confirm the South Korean boom that concerns us here and also reflect the discovery and subsequent familiarisation in the West with a number of peripheral film industries (Elena, 1999: 13). At the turn of the new millennium, these new Asian cinema movements,

representing lesser known film industries such as those of Hong Kong, Taiwan or the Republic of Korea itself (Margirier & Gimenez, 2012: 36), burst onto the film festival circuit first, and then into commercial theatres in many Western countries, the DVD market and, more recently, Video on Demand (VOD) platforms. The impact of South Korean cinema on the Sitges Festival thus needs to be considered in the context of a broader development. In this sense, we should not be surprised that the Korean film boom coincided with the creation in 2001 of a new section in the Sitges Festival's program, Orient Express, featuring productions not only from the Republic of Korea but from the whole Asian continent, although it was established when New Korean Cinema in particular was taking the world by storm. Spanish critics acknowledged this transformation in their coverage of Sitges in the years immediately after so-called "Asian cinema" had made its presence felt at the festival. For example, in an article for the newspaper *La Vanguardia* in 2003, Marino Rodríguez suggested that "Eastern cinema will dominate the next Sitges Festival" (Rodríguez, 2003), while Quim Casas, writing for the film journal *Dirigido Por...* in 2005, argued that "Eastern cinema continues to gain ground at Sitges. *A Bittersweet Life* (Dalkomhan insaeng, Kim Jee-woon, 2005) is another concentrated exercise in violence and sadism in the *yakuza* world" (Casas, 2005: 7).

As noted above, New Korean Cinema was received at Sitges in the conceptual context of *Asian* and/or *Eastern* cinema. In other words, it appeared initially as part of a global transcultural phenomenon (Kuwahara, 2014: 27; Hye & Diffrient, 2015: 44) characteristic of the contemporary context and of post-modern creative processes. This is why, for example, most theoretical approaches to South Korean cinema in Spain have focused mainly, on the one hand, on the question of film genres (Cueto & Palacios, 2007; Cagiga, 2015), and on the other, on what could be described as a more auteurial dimension, based on the aesthetic

connections between some of the poetics of South Korean cinema and certain aesthetic patterns of modernity (Font, 2012: 231). However, to accept of this theory we must: a) disregard certain contexts and paratexts (Genette, 1987) in both the production and reception of the films; and b) ignore the imaginaries of each country (both South Korea and Spain), eliding nuances and encouraging a homogenisation of all imagery of Asian origin. This problem raises the first question for our study: beyond market dynamics and distribution based on geopolitical strategies (Acciari & Menarini, 2014: 12), are there any thematic and aesthetic patterns of New Korean Cinema which, leaving aside the global conceptualisation of “Asia”, might explain the presence and positive reception of Korean films at the Sitges Festival? Or to put it another way: can the idiosyncratic or paratextual characteristics of a film festival like Sitges contribute to the acceptance in Spain of films from a country like South Korea?

To answer these questions, we need to analyse South Korean imagery in order to reflect on the effect that the paratextual system of a film festival like Sitges may have had on the reception and interpretation of New Korean Cinema. There have been various studies conducted in different countries of the generic role that film festivals have played as “industry nodes” (Iordanova, 2015: 9) and of the impact they have had on cinema historiography (Di Chiara & Re, 2011: 131). In Spain, some scholars (Codó, 2008: 171) have studied how Spanish critics have received and interpreted the imagery of Korean cinema. However, there has not been any detailed analysis to date on the role that Spanish film festivals, exhibitions and public cultural institutions have played in promoting South Korean films with Spanish audiences as well as critics and the indus-

try. The analysis of these transcultural dynamics from a local perspective brings to light a number of nuances that expose the ways in which certain films have been received, as well as the sometimes unexpected convergences between different cultural traditions and imaginaries.

Taking the above considerations into account, the main objective of this article is to use the Sitges Festival as a case study to analyse one of the most important gateways to Spanish film screens for South Korean cinema.³ Our hypothesis is that the festival has certain identifying characteristics—structural and audience-based—that have enabled it to act as a vast container to position, catalogue and promote a series of South Korean films whose mark of identity has very often been their *unclassifiable* nature. Based on Gérard Genette’s notion of “paratext” (“the paratext is for us the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers” [Gen-

ette, 1987: 7]), we will attempt to explain the role that the Sitges Festival has played as a place of transition and transaction—between films and spectators—that has ultimately influenced the process of reception of New Korean Cinema. In

CAN THE IDIOSYNCRATIC OR PARATEXTUAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A FILM FESTIVAL LIKE SITGES CONTRIBUTE TO THE ACCEPTANCE IN SPAIN OF FILMS FROM A COUNTRY LIKE SOUTH KOREA?

this way, the paratextual system that frames the Sitges Festival’s cultural proposal to the film industry has facilitated the classification of certain films which, without their association with the festival, either would have been assimilated and homogenised into the concept of “Asian cinema” or would have had very limited commercial theatre runs. Since 2006 nearly 50% of the South Korean films that have been released commercially in Spain were screened previously at the festival,⁴ effectively confirming the idea posited by Thomas Elsaesser regarding festivals as gateways to distribution: “considered as a global network, the

festival circuit constitutes the exhibition dates of most independent films in the first-run venues of the world market, where they can gather the cultural capital and critical prowess necessary to subsequently enter the national or local exhibition markets on the strength of their accumulated festival successes" (Elsaesser, 2005: 87).

With the aim of focusing our argument as clearly as possible, we have decided to concentrate our analysis on the reception of the film genre that has been featured most prominently at the Sitges Festival since 2001: the South Korean thriller. To this end, we will first explore the evolution of the festival since the emergence of New Korean Cinema; then, taking as our corpus the most important South Korean thrillers that have been included in the festival's programming, we will identify and describe their key thematic and aesthetic elements; and finally, we will compare our findings with both the reception of the films by critics and the tropes that have served to consolidate the faithful community of fans identified by the Sitges Festival (Sitges, 2017: 12).

THE SITGES "PARATEXT" AS A STARTING POINT

A wide range of interesting studies have applied the theories of Gérard Genette on literary paratext to the realm of cinema. Some of these have become landmark works, such as Robert Stam's *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (1985), or Nicole Janin-Foucher's *Du générique au mot FIN: Le paratexte dans les œuvres de F. Truffaut et de J.-L. Godard* (1989). Other more recent studies have offered new analytical perspectives on films based on filmic (sub) products like movie trailers (Georg Stanitzek, 2005: 35; Hediger, 2006: 102) or DVD bonus features (Atkinson, 2014: 19) and the influence they can have on the final interpretation of the larger text. For our case study, we take Genette's concept to shed light on the identifying features of the Sit-

ges Festival that have determined how New Korean Cinema has been received. It is our contention, based both on interviews and on an analysis of the festival's film catalogues, that the paratextual system that determines the reception of the Korean thriller is founded on factors that fall under four different categories: programming, structure, aesthetics and themes.

To understand the first two categories—programming and structure—it is necessary to return again to 2001, the year when Ángel Sala took over as the festival's director. "When I presented the project I proposed two things above all: that Sitges was to be essentially a fantasy film festival, and that a significant part of it was to be dedicated to Asian cinema,"⁵ notes Sala. This intention to give a bigger presence to Asian films was made a reality with the aforementioned creation in 2001 of the Orient Express section, which would change its name over the years that followed (in some editions it was called Casa Àsia or Focus Àsia). Orient Express is one of the first examples of how New Korean Cinema would contribute to the modification of the programming structure of the Sitges Festival in the first decades of the twenty-first century. In the introduction to the new Orient Express section in the festival catalogue for that year, Sala remarks that one of the reasons for the creation of the section was "to present and enjoy new creators from Korea, with Kim Ki-duk leading the pack" (Sala, 2001). The South Korean cinema boom in the context of the festival would thus be marked by big names and by the notion of *auteurism*, an idea that ties in with the portrait that Darcy Paquet offers of the South Korean films made at the turn of the millennium, when he speaks of a new generation of directors, particularly Bong Joon-ho, Park Chan-wook, Kim Ki-duk and Kim Jee-woon (Heredero, 2014: 31).

There is one last factor that can explain these structural changes to the festival, as described by Sala himself. There was at that time a very interesting state of affairs in the marketplace, with a

number of Spanish distributors purchasing large quantities of Asian films. In the case of South Korea we can see how the financial renaissance of its film industry after the crisis of the 1990s, underpinned by the progressive internationalisation of the first Korean blockbusters (Paquet, 2009: 61), had an impact on the Spanish market, and more specifically on the Sitges Festival.

The Orient Express section as such disappeared in 2015, as it was turned into an award covering multiple sections. A year earlier, in 2014, coinciding with the last edition of Focus Àsia, a new section dedicated exclusively to the thriller was created, named Órbita. The thriller genre has always been prominent at the festival, but it never had a section of its own before and its presence in a fantasy film festival had always been controversial.⁶ South Korean cinema has had a privileged place in the new section (as many as fourteen films from the country have been exhibited in just four editions), which, of course, is dedicated to one of the predominant genres of New Korean Cinema (Cueto & Palacios, 2007: 173).

The above clearly shows, on the one hand, that the question of *auteurship* is one of the defining criteria for the presentation of South Korean films at the Sitges Festival. The transversal nature of the Orient Express in its original conception had the figure of the *auteur* as its unifying theme, allowing festival audiences to group together a set of poetics which, although many of them are conceived from the perspective of film genre (thriller, horror, fantasy), are still largely defined by their particular aesthetic features. However, the progressive transformations to the structure of the festival reflect the evolution of the audience's attitude towards these images; with the increased familiarity with and normalisation of Korean cinema—along with other Asian films—the decision was made to give a central role to the thriller. Thus, in little more than a decade, South Korean cinema went from being introduced to Sitges in the context of a more *auteurial* perspective to be-

ing viewed through a more specialised, genre-focused lens. In a festival dedicated to fantasy cinema, it was decided to launch the Órbita section to make room, as Sala himself suggests, “for films that would otherwise not have had a place at Sitges.” Moreover, of equal importance to the purpose of our analysis, the Festival's move towards embracing the thriller coincided with the rise of the contemporary Spanish thriller or, as it has been called in some studies, the Spanish quality thriller (Camporesi & Fernández, 2018: 198). In our view, this coincidence not only explains the familiarity with (and positive attitude towards) the thriller among Sitges audiences during this period, but also hints at some shared influences between South Korean and Spanish cinema, as will be discussed below.

THE TONE: VENGEANCE AND LITURGIES OF VIOLENCE

In his definition and exploration of the notion of “paratext”, Gerard Genette (1987) establishes two categories: “peritext” and “epitext”. The latter, which refers to texts included immediately before or after a work that are used by an author to talk about the main text, can serve to explain how the South Korean thriller has been effectively tailor-made for the Sitges Festival. In the last few decades, through its programming Sitges has consolidated a series of ideas that its audiences have internalised completely as identifying features of the festival: depictions of violence, and self-conscious distancing from such depictions. Sitges' audiences know that at the festival they will encounter images that push against moral boundaries, and they also know that much of the violence depicted will be experienced in a detached way: laughter, applause, and booing are some of the audience reactions to many of the violent images. For example, an article on a Spanish website dedicated to the horror genre, *Aullidos.com*, makes reference to “screams, applause and whistling

provoked by the splattering of blood on screen.” This is a trend that began in the 1980s and turned into a tradition that the illustrator Guillem Dols portrayed in a comic strip for the festival journal (Dols, 2017), which depicted how from the opening credits audiences at Sitges applaud even the most violent scenes. In relation to this phenomenon, Thomas Elsaesser makes a distinction between the notions of festivals as a carnival and of festivals as a ceremony: “The audience is more active if one thinks of film festivals as a carnival, more passive when one compares them to ceremonies. [...] Some film festivals include fans and encourage the presence of the public” (Elsaesser, 2005: 13). This “film festival as carnival” classification, a key feature of the “paratext” of Sitges, is what acts as a “threshold” (Genette, 1997: 11) between the images belonging to a very distinct culture and imaginary on the one hand and the regular festival participant on the other.

For the new edition of the Blu-ray of *Memoires of Murder*, the critic Quim Casas wrote that “perhaps one of the things that fascinate us most about certain films from South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Thailand or Japan is the distance we are faced with when we watch them; a distance that is cultural, linguistic, semantic, and emotional” (Casas, 2019). In the case of South Korean films of the early twenty-first century, we are similarly faced with this sense of unfamiliarity provoked by cultural distance (Hye & Diffrient, 2015: 18; Stringer & Shin, 2005: 52). The key to the strangeness of the films of the great Korean auteurs who were featured at the festival at the beginning of the twenty-first century is their dissonance in tone, underpinned by two focal points of interest: the way that the violence is depicted, and the indiscriminate mixture of black humour, ordinary cultural customs, drama and intrigue.

For the first of these, the depiction of violence, Kim Ki-duk’s *The Isle* offers some good material for our study. The film was screened at Sitges in

the year 2000, after appearing at the Venice Film Festival, where the fainting of a spectator in reaction to one of the film’s scenes created quite a stir among audiences and critics about the exhibition of the Korean filmmaker’s work. Two key images in the film are quite literally excruciating: a baited fishhook tied to a fishing rod which the male protagonist inserts into his mouth, and the same baited hook tied with fishing line to a boat which the female protagonist inserts into her vagina. In a setting tinged with fantasy—the floating houses where the protagonists live (and hide) produce a dreamlike effect throughout the film—the deepest drives of the subconscious are expressed: sex and suicide, pain and pleasure, are presented to us as two sides of the same coin. As a result, in the context and rhythm of bucolic harmony, the images of self-harm presented by Kim Ki-duk elicit a profound emotional shock; the dialectic between images of beauty and images that are unbearable to watch was a source of fascination for audiences and critics. The Sitges Festival—with its sections like Midnight X-Treme, where extreme violence is depicted in a detached and often parodic manner in early morning screenings—found in *The Isle* a film which, despite certain references to the work of Nagisa Oshima, for example, seemed to push the boundaries of violent depiction even further. Yet it is also a depiction which, as Roberto Cueto suggests, seems to be fully “rooted in South Korean society (or at least the imaginary that much Korean cinema is importing to the rest of the world)” (Cueto, 2007: 73).

“I want to create a world that exists outside the boundaries of morality and common sense” (qtd in Sánchez-Navarro, 2001: 33). With this assertion of Kim Ki-duk’s, Jordi Sánchez-Navarro opens his article for the festival catalogue published for the Sitges retrospective of the South Korean filmmaker’s work. The quote highlights one of the basic themes of New Korean Cinema: the question of morality. The South Korean films screened at different festivals at the beginning of the year

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2000 began to attract attention for their blunt depictions of violence (among other things), often challenging the critical conception of morality in their mise-en-scene. This is why the exhibition of *The Isle* at Sitges opened a new possibility for the representation of violence that explores both its ambiguity and its meaning.

To cite another example, in his review for *Fotogramas*, Antonio Trashorras pointed precisely to the question of tone in relation to *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (Chinjeolhan geumjassi, Park Chan-wook, 2005): “at the very moment that the rhythm sinks to its lowest level, the film strikes us with all its borderline moral aridity; twenty minutes of a simply suicidal tonal (and ideological) risk, as thought-provoking as it is horrifying” (Trashorras, 2005: 181). Indeed, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* contains a moment that proves as brutal as it is self-reflexive, when the protagonist brings together the families of the children murdered by the man she has just captured and plays them a series of videos that show their children crying and suffering at the moment of their deaths. After viewing them,

these devastated spectators will discuss the consequences of the images with patent indifference, before proceeding to torture the murderer.

The scene of the videos represents an attempt to depict the viewing of violence, an exercise that is not so different from that of the film’s spectators when they are faced with the images, often frontal and explicit, offered by Park. The filmmaker is clearly aware of the boundaries he is crossing: as we watch one of the videos, the camera moves slightly away from the girl who is about to be hanged to focus on the killer’s action of pulling the rope; in *Old Boy*, in one of the most brutal scenes in the film, there is a similar movement when one of the characters is about to cut his own tongue and the camera shifts slightly to focus on the handle of the scissors and the fingers squeezing it.

The video viewing scene centres precisely on the question of watching violence, but it does so by means of visual rhyming. The television

Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (Park Chan-wook, 2005)



screen shows the killer pulling at the rope tied to the foot of a chair on which the girl stands with a noose around her neck; he pulls the rope, the chair falls, and immediately we cut to a shot of another chair falling over, as one of the girl's relatives watching the video collapses to the floor in agony. In his review of the première of *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, Javier Ocaña concluded that "Chan-wook is much more interested in aesthetics than ethics." Both Ocaña and Trashorras thus point to the intersection between beauty and atrocity—*gorgeous*, *elegant* and *beautiful* are some of the adjectives they use—and to the filmmaker's taste for stylisation, reflected in the abundance of music, the incisive use of the Steadicam, the extreme close-ups and the gaze to camera. In fact, the question of the coexistence of the beautiful and the cruel was already pointed out in an article written by Sánchez-Navarro in 2001 about Kim Ki-duk's work: "the boundary between the beautiful and the heinous, the acceptable and the unacceptable, is blurred in the pure space of passion."

The question of limits in the depiction of violence is one of the constants in the reviews and analyses written in those years on the films of the great Korean auteurs featured at the festival. In 2005, Trashorras described the film as "provocative beyond the limits marked by ethical prudence." The way the new South Korean filmmakers push the ethical boundaries of the depiction of violence is a point of recurrent discussion at a festival like Sitges, with its dedication to the thriller and horror genres. The shock with which these films were initially received would die down over time, while the filmmakers themselves gradually shifted away from the cruellest version of their poetics.

In the scene from *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* cited above of the family members viewing the videos of the murdered children, Park includes another gaze at a small screen: a girl looking through a camera monitor at a kitten playing with a rattle. This moment—between the tenderness and innocence of the tiny creature and the aggressiveness of the rest of the scene—is

Old Boy (Park Chan-wook, 2003)



an example of the listless quality that many critics refer to in relation to New Korean Cinema. This ties in with the second point of interest: the mixture of black humour and drama.

The opening scenes of another film featured at Sitges, *I Saw the Devil* (Ang-ma-reul bo-at-da, Kim Jee-woon, 2010), encapsulate the observations of the previous paragraph. The beginning of this film evokes the imaginary of the psycho-thriller when a woman—the protagonist's wife—is kidnapped and murdered by a psychopath who attacks her in the middle of the night on a snowy rural highway while she is waiting by the roadside for a tow-truck for her broken-down car. Some visual hints of the dismemberment of her body place the spectator in a state of tension, as this thriller moves into territory of the terror genre, bordering on a slasher film. However, the tone changes completely in the sequence that immediately follows this one, showing the search and discovery of the woman's body by police. This sequence begins with the film's first *Lynchian* allusion (the random discovery of an ear in the middle of nowhere by some children), and then presents us with one of the classical images of the genre: a crowd of police officers scouring the terrain in search of the body. At the same time, we see the murdered woman's father and husband arrive on the scene where the police are investi-

gating. Thriller and drama are thus intertwined. But it is at this moment that there is a total dislocation in the tone of the film, as the discovery of the woman's head turns into a veritable pantomime characteristic of slapstick comedy. The news of the head's discovery brings all the police officers to the area, as well as the media and curious locals; chaos takes over the scene, and while officers slip and slide in the water at the riverside, the head, initially placed in a box (in a clear allusion to the ending of *Seven* [David Fincher, 1995]), ends up falling on the ground and rolling along the riverbank until it stops right in front of the woman's father and husband, who will then plot their revenge. Kim Jee-woon's approach clearly hints at a criticism of the media (and of humankind in general) and its fascination with death, but at the same time, that which according to the principles of the genre should be the dramatic moment par excellence, the trigger for the protagonist's subsequent revenge and mental derangement, turns into a compendium of ridiculous and grotesque situations that from the outset give a darker hue to a film which, inevitably, explores the descent into hell of the human soul.

When discussing such scenes, so paradigmatic and characteristic of the Korean thriller, it is telling that many Spanish critics often use terms re-

lated to the Spanish literary style of *esperpento* to describe these changes of tone at the bleakest moments of the narrative. Some critics, as Jordi Costa suggests with reference to *Memories of Murder*, even went as far as identifying "features of Spanish developmentalist comedy" in the South Korean film. Costa notes: "There were some critics who invoked some perplexing references in order to position the film's incursions into humour-related



Memories of Murder (Bong Joon-ho, 2003)

territory: the elements of comedy in *Memories of Murder* are so intrinsic to the film's intentionally hyperrealist fabric that such allusions seem completely out of place" (Costa, 2005: 184). Costa's astute reflection reinforces the everyday realism that often characterises the contemporary South Korean thriller, while at the same time revealing that some Sitges viewers and critics—in reaction to the bewilderment provoked by the tone of certain scenes—resort to references drawn from the Spanish imaginary to describe them.

In one of the scenes in *Memories of Murder*, Bong Joon-hoo presents a frontal shot of two of the police officers who are investigating a series of killings, while they eat noodles and watch television smiling with a young man they have arrested at their side. The shot could be a perfectly mundane scene if it were not for the sideways pan made by the camera to reveal the other side of the room, and the interrogation table where the young man will be questioned. This shot exemplifies the dissonance proposed by Bong Joon-ho in a film that mixes everyday life, black humour and violence. The group of police officers, obsessed with closing a case which, as occurs in *Zodiac* (David Fincher, 2007), will remain unsolved, seem so completely disoriented as to be comic, while at the same time engaging in some appallingly violent methods. In an article on Korean film noir, Roberto Cueto notes that "the humorous treatment of the world of thuggery and street crime is common in Korean films, often combined with scenes of extreme violence" (Cueto, 2005: 76). Meanwhile, the critic José Enrique Monterde, in his review of Bong's film at the time of its release, refers to the films of its director in terms of their "particular sense of (black? Korean? Surreal?) humour"

and of "a comic quality that is not always easy to digest" (Monterde, 2004).

Bong adds one last element to his particular mix of tones and genres: a critical perspective on his country's recent history. *Memories of Murder* is set in 1986 and revolves around a series of unsolved crimes that were committed at a time when the country was in a state of upheaval, with demonstrations and protests against the dictatorship in power at that time, which would collapse only one year later. In other words, it takes place during a period of crisis, in a rugged rural setting: dry, wide open spaces with ochre and yellowish tones. This setting seems at first to be a mere narrative frame, but gradually it is revealed to be the axis on which much of the film's discourse turns. In one scene, the police cannot go out on patrol to prevent another killing because all the units are tied up with the political unrest; in another, government repression leads to one of the murders. Little by little the film thus paints a portrait of the darker side of South Korea under the dictatorship, revealing the terror in broad daylight, the horror in the everyday.

"When I saw *Memories of Murder* I said to myself: 'How cool is this? They aren't the least bit ashamed to be Korean, to make genre films by constructing plots related to their recent past.' I think it would be good to do something like this

Marshland (Alberto Rodríguez, 2014)



in Spain. Just now Alberto Rodríguez has done it with *Marshland* (*La isla mínima*, Alberto Rodríguez, 2014)” (Estrada & Yáñez, 2014). These are the words of Carlos Vermut, director of *Magical Girl* (2014) and a regular at the Sitges Festival, both as a filmmaker and a spectator. Vermut, one of the representatives of the so-called Other Spanish Cinema (Heredero, 2016), thus pointed out the influence of films like *Memories of Murder*. The connection between *Marshland* and Bong Joon-hoo’s film is clear and has even been noted by Alberto Rodríguez himself (Montoya, 2014). Both films take place in the 1980s, in a period of transition from dictatorship to democracy, set in a real historical moment that gradually becomes a central focus. Both feature a pair of police officers who air their differences, both offer an ending as open as the historical moment they portray, and both are set in a markedly dry and rugged landscape, which becomes as much a protagonist of the film as the characters themselves. This connection highlights another of the focal points of many South Korean thrillers featured at the Sitges Festival in the last two decades: their interest in delving into the most complex corners of their country’s history.

In short, the different examples of New Korean Cinema exhibited at Sitges have all depended on at least one of these three key elements. The first is the question of *auteurship*, clearly represented by filmmakers like Park Chan-wook, Kim Jee-woon, Kim Ki-duk, Bong Jon-hoo, and more recently, Na Hong-jin. The second, associated with our starting hypothesis, is the question of genres: essentially the thriller, the horror, and the fantasy film. These last two genres form part of the festival’s identity; in 2009, with Ángel Sala as its director, the word “*fantàstic*” was reintroduced to the festival’s name (having been removed in 1997), while the “horror” label (*terror* in Catalan) had been included in the name until 1982. Quite apart from the question of the festival’s name, these two have historically been the predominant genres at Sitges. The case of the thriller is thus rather more

unique, because, although it is not included in the official conception of the festival, it has been gaining prominence. Moreover, it is a genre that Spanish audiences have associated with Korean cinema (Cueto & Palacios, 2007: 174). At the same time, the Korean films exhibited at Sitges have been closely associated with the thriller genre, to such an extent that the festival has contributed to the creation of a particular image for Korean cinema. This leads us to some possible answers to two of the questions we posed at the beginning of this article: the recent shift towards the thriller genre in Korean cinema explains its presence at the festival and, above all, the mediation of Sitges, with its predisposition towards the genre, has led to the entry of Asian films into Spanish theatres, to the point of developing an image of New Korean Cinema that is intrinsically linked to thriller forms and storylines. The third element is the discourse on the state of the country itself, either through a portrait of society—*The Host* (Gwoemul, Bong Joon-ho, 2006), *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (Boksuneun naui geot, Park Chan-wook, 2002) or, more recently, *Train to Busan* (Busanhaeng, Yeon Sang-ho, 2016)—or its history, either through stories about the conflict with North Korea or, more recently, the Japanese occupation of Korea—*The Tiger: An Old Hunter’s Tale* (Daeho, Park Hoon-jung, 2015) *The Age of Shadows* (Mil-jeong, Kim Jee-woon, 2016), *The Battleship Island* (Gunham-do, Ryoo Seung-wan, 2017), *The Spy Gone North* (Gongjak, Yun Jong-bin, 2018), or *Assassination* (Amsal, Choi Dong-hoon, 2015). In this last case we can trace a line back to the two foundational films of New Korean Cinema, as both *Shiri* and *Joint Security Area* tell stories revolving around the conflict between the two Koreas.

CONCLUSIONS

In the process of reception of New Korean Cinema in Spain, the Sitges Festival has promoted a number of elements that have enabled Spanish audien-

ces to identify a common style in a group of films which, beyond auteurist and classical generic patterns, are difficult to classify. The depiction of violence, the use of black and surreal humour and the incorporation of the country's history into the Korean thriller are the elements that the paratextual system of the Sitges Festival has developed over the past two decades. On the one hand, the transformations to the structure of the festival, such as the creation of the Orient Express and Órbita sections, have given greater prominence to South Korean films in general, and more specifically to South Korean thrillers, turning the thriller into a genre that is practically inseparable from Korean cinema. On the other, the taste and fascination for films in which the depiction of violence plays a central role has reinforced the association of Korean films with a cinema of provocative images that have a huge visual impact. In a certain way, this overview of the most recent historiography of the festival has revealed that New Korean Cinema has contributed to shape—both directly and indirectly—the structure of the festival itself, just as the festival has played an essential role in adapting the taste of Spanish audiences to New Korean Cinema. ■

NOTES

- 1 These data are taken from the catalogues of the Sitges Festival since 1981. To quantify the South Korean films prior to this date (1967-1980), we relied on editions of the festival journal, its respective programs and the festival's online archives. In this calculation we haven't taken into account films screened in Brigadoon, created in 1986 as an independent section with its own programming. We believe it relevant to the purpose of our study to consider the quantitative aspects associated with a single programming criterion.
- 2 All the statements by Mike Hostench—deputy director of the Sitges Festival and specialist in South Korean cinema— cited in this article come from an interview conducted specifically for this research on 9 May 2019.
- 3 Also in Catalonia, specifically in Barcelona, the BAFF (Barcelona Asian Film Festival) was launched in 1998. Moreover, festivals like the San Sebastián Film Festival played a key role in the introduction of certain Korean filmmakers to Spanish film exhibition circuits: the most notable example is Bong Joon-ho, whose first films were screened there, beginning in 2000 with *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (Flandermat, Bong Joon-ho, 2000).
- 4 This percentage was determined by comparing the catalogues of the Sitges Festival with the database of films rated by the Ministry of Culture and Sport.
- 5 All the statements by Ángel Sala—director of the Sitges Festival since 2001— cited in this article come from an interview conducted by phone specifically for this research on 20 June 2019.
- 6 This is reflected, for example, in the book for the festival's 50th anniversary, when it discusses the reception of a violent thriller like *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* (VV. AA., 2017: 141).

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MADE FOR SITGES? THE RECEPTION OF THE SOUTH KOREAN THRILLER IN SPAIN THROUGH THE CASE STUDY OF THE SITGES FILM FESTIVAL

Abstract

The New Korean Cinema has a direct translation into the programming and structure of the Sitges Film Festival since its emergence in the late nineties. The figures show how in a very short period of time Korean cinematography acquires a progressive visibility until reaching unsuspected levels. For its part, the Sitges Film Festival finds in Korean cinematography unclassifiable images that allow it to explore some of the tropes characteristic of its identity: the taste for cinematographic genre, the representation of violence from heterodox perspectives and, finally, the black humor as a distancing mechanism. Our starting hypothesis is that all these elements condition the reception process of the New Korean Cinema, building a certain paratext that will have a strong influence on the reception process of this cinematography. To make our argument, we first address what and how the evolution of the contest has been since the beginning of the movement; second, we take as a corpus of analysis the most relevant South Korean thrillers that have been part of the program of the contest in order to determine and define its thematic and aesthetic axes; and in the third and last place, we compare these results with the reception of the films both by the critics and with those tropes from which the identity that defines the Sitges Film Festival has been sedimented.

Key words

New Korean Cinema; Sitges Film Festival; Thriller, Violence; Paratext.

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¿MADE FOR SITGES? LA RECEPCIÓN DEL THRILLER SURCOREANO EN ESPAÑA A TRAVÉS DEL ESTUDIO DE CASO DEL FESTIVAL DE SITGES

Resumen

El Nuevo Cine Coreano tiene una traslación directa en la programación y estructura del Festival de Sitges desde su eclosión a finales de los años noventa. Las cifras ponen en evidencia cómo en un período muy breve de tiempo la cinematografía coreana adquiere una progresiva visibilidad hasta llegar a cotas insospechadas. Por su parte, el Festival de Sitges encuentra en la cinematografía coreana unas imágenes inclasificables que le permiten explorar algunos de los tropos característicos de su identidad: el gusto por el género, la representación de la violencia desde perspectivas heterodoxas y, finalmente, el humor negro como mecanismo de distanciamiento. Nuestra hipótesis de partida es que todos estos elementos condicionan el proceso de recepción del Nuevo Cine Coreano, construyendo un determinado paratexto que tendrá una fuerte influencia en el proceso de recepción de esta cinematografía. Para realizar nuestra argumentación, abordamos, en primer lugar, cuál y cómo ha sido la evolución del certamen desde el inicio del movimiento; en segundo lugar, tomamos como corpus de análisis los *thrillers* surcoreanos más relevantes que han formado parte de la programación del certamen para así poder determinar y definir sus ejes temáticos y estéticos; y, en tercer y último lugar, cotejamos estos resultados con la recepción de los films tanto por parte de la crítica como con aquellos tropos a partir de los cuales se ha sedimentado la identidad que define el Festival de Sitges.

Palabras clave

Nuevo Cine Coreano; Festival de Sitges; *Thriller*; Violencia; Paratexto.

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