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The South Korea Comparison

Mike Walsh

Film festivals are places of intersection between national cinemas. This year’s Melbourne International Film Festival provided the space to compare the cinemas of host Australia; and South Korea, which MIFF director James Hewison has championed so strongly and which was represented by 13 features this year.

Both countries are currently contemplating trade treaties with the US in which film and television quotas are potential bargaining chips. Both have production industries that have enjoyed crucial government support through national film commissions. However while South Korea is the success story of recent national cinema, claiming up to 49% of its domestic box office, Australian figures are in the 3 to 4% range. While Korean films are showcased in the growing number of Asian-focused festivals around the world, the conservatism of Australian filmmaking has seen it decline into insignificance at international festivals.

On the basis of what was screened at MIFF, the impressive thing about Korean cinema is the sheer range of production, from commercial genre films such as the wu xia pian swordplay of Bichunmoo and the bloody political allegory of Sympathy for Mr Vengeance, through youth cult movies (Save the Green Planet!, Resurrection of the Little Match Girl) to glossy commercial art-house studies of amour fou (Ardor and Roadmovie) to festival auteurs such as Hong Sang-soo (Turning Gate) and Lee Chang-dong (Oasis). Lee’s recent appointment as Minister of Culture in the new government signals the film industry’s ascension to a significant political force.

This variety of styles and genres in Korean filmmaking indicates a successful meshing of production and screen culture, and impressively most films at MIFF were debut features for directors. The high-level of competence of first time feature directors indicates a strongly supportive industry structure—if not the genius of the system, at least a strong professional cleverness.

By comparison, the label “emerging filmmaker” has taken on a hollow ring in Australia. It is associated with the announcement of “exciting new initiatives” and the consumption of free wine and hors d’oeuvres rather than the building of oeuvres.

Unfortunately the Australian films at MIFF revealed a national cinema that is struggling. Films such as The Rage in Placid Lake, Japanese Story, and Travelling Light stem from an industry context more at home with the theatrical values of Acting and Dialogue than with a vital knowledge of contemporary screen culture. The emphasis on development within film policy seems to be developing the mannerisms that have led Australian filmmaking down to its current state.

Whereas Korean films appealed to a vibrant, technologically savvy, viscerally sexual and violent youth culture, we got The Rage in Placid Lake, a film completely constipated by its own cleverness. Its own startlingly sexist conservatism—boys can fuck around but heroines still have to be virginal—hides beneath a cool which proclaims itself superior to both the right and the left. Style children drink martinis and frolic and are, of course, envied by the unhip straight world that they mock.

It is notable that the major Australian prizewinner from MIFF, Undead, which won the FIPRESCI critics’ award, is a low-budget genre film produced by cinephile enthusiasts without any government funding support. The critics’ citation went out of its way to signal that the film was “everything that Australian films are not supposed to be—popular and disreputable.”

Films are tangible indicators of broader production contexts, and it is worth citing two factors in explaining the differences between Australian and South Korean filmmaking. The first is the relationship of each industry to Hollywood. Korean cinema enjoys the ability to differentiate itself from Hollywood on linguistic grounds. It also has sufficiently strong corporate backing to enable it to compete with moderately budgeted entertainment films. Australian films rely much more heavily on government support, which is smaller and less tied to popular response.
Consequently, Australian cinema has a history of seeking places in the tasteful margins. The cultural capital that has accrued from the Hollywood careers of Australian actors such as Russell Crowe, Cate Blanchett et al has resulted in a national screen culture dominated by a star system that has moved offshore. As the Australian industry struggles for popular success, it is now looking to small local comedies. This is a familiar strategy in many countries. Comedies may not travel well, but if you give up on your international ambitions, you can at least limit the downside, and every so often you get a Crackerjack or The Castle.

A second set of factors concern the way that Korean cinema has grown on the back of an increasingly regional appeal. The Pusan Film Festival has quickly become one of the major sites for regional deal making through which Asian film industries have supported each other so effectively. Screensound’s recent restoration of the 1970s action film, The Man From Hong Kong, perhaps stands out here as a symbol of the path not taken. Australian post-production work on recent Hong Kong/Chinese films such as Hero and So Close provides isolated instances of the opportunities for links with regional production, rather than simply concentrating on an annual Cannes push or the vagaries of international co-productions with Europe or North America.

One conclusion that might be drawn from the Australian films at MIFF this year is that the production of dramatic feature films is beside the point in Australia. It is increasingly evident that the strength of our filmmaking is in documentary production financed by television. The optimist might look to 2003 as Year Zero, the year when we saw it wasn’t working and that we need to try something else.

Australian filmmakers and administrators need to stop pretending that they are “telling our stories”— stories in which we collectively seem to be manifestly uninterested. Let’s propose a new start, which includes going to the movies more often to see what’s emerging in countries such as South Korea.