

KOREAN CINEMA IN BUENOS AIRES

Notes about circulation, consumption and *mediated interculturality*¹

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As a product of globalization, Korean cinema has emerged as a rising cinematographic talent. Analysts and critics agree that this success can be attributed to an economic framework common to particular national realities. The case of *Korean Cinema* fits this description, as its development and (internal and external) strengthening took place alongside the economic growth and progressive integration of the peninsula into the international scene during the democratic transition of the 1980s.

The **assumptions** upon which this work is based revolve around the idea that film intervenes in the construction of representations and meanings and creates a space conducive to inter-cultural contact and dialogue. My **guiding hypothesis** holds that as a result of the circulation of Korean cinema in the cultural field in Buenos Aires³, local perceptions, judgments and visions of Korea and “Koreans” have begun to change.

The text is organized into the following sections: I. *Theoretical background*; II. *Historical context*; III. *Analytical discussion*; IV. *Interpretive analysis*; V. *Conclusions*. The objective is to present an overview of the presence and effects of meaning of Korean cinema in the city of Buenos Aires during the 2000s, taking into account both global and specific historical contexts.

In the **first part**, I present a series of theoretical considerations that bring the contributions of different authors on *cultural industries* up to date, and I introduce debates around the *globalization and cultural industry* aspect of film (Martín Barbero, 2003 [1987]; García Canclini, 1992; among others) and particular approaches to film as a manifestation of culture (Jameson, 1995; Sorlín, 1985; Tudor, 1974). Here I make explicit the analytical perspective I employ in my interpretation and analysis of the case study.

In the **second part**, I reconstruct a brief history of Korean film in the 20th century: its origins (1903); the retreat of the film industry during the Japanese Occupation (1910-1945); the recovery process of the 1960s and 1970s; the emergence of the *New Wave* with the democratic transition of the 1980s, and the phenomenon of *New Korean Cinema* in the late 1990s. I undertake this review in order to contextualize the arrival of Korean cinema in the City of Buenos Aires, understanding it as a consequence of a historical process that combines economic, political, social and cultural factors.

In the **third part**, I focus on different aspects of the presence of Korean cinema in the City of Buenos Aires, pursuing the following analytical lines⁴:

- a) The passages of Korean films through different local screening spaces: both alternative⁵ and commercial [an appendix is included with information on the Korean films screened from 2000 to 2010].
- b) References to dissemination channels and strategies.

¹ This paper and all citations are translated from Spanish by Shana Yael Shubs and Ruth Felder.

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³ By referring to the cultural field in Buenos Aires, I draw on the theoretical contributions of Pierre Bourdieu (2003). The author argues that modern societies are organized in historically constructed *fields* that enjoy relative autonomy, constituting an arrangement of positions and objective relationships between them.

⁴ These are the preliminary results of my post-doctoral CONICET research (in progress): “Interculturalidad y nuevos sentidos: una aproximación al arte y la cultura de Corea en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires” (“Interculturality and new meanings: An approach to the art and culture of Korea in the City of Buenos Aires”). Approved by Executive Resolution No. 329/11.

⁵ By alternative screening spaces I refer to festivals, series and exhibitions, arthouse and experimental theaters, film clubs, INCAA spaces (National Institute for Film and Audiovisual Arts, an initiative promoted by the state along with the private sector). Informal film screening spaces are also included within this category, such as educational and cultural centers, benefit societies and museums, among others.

- c) Descriptions of the cultural consumption⁶ of Korean film and of viewer profiles based on variables like generation, social class, educational and cultural level, interest in Korean culture, membership in the *Korean Studies* academic community, belonging to and/or contact with the local Korean community.

In methodological terms, the analytical discussion put forward here is mainly grounded in the following qualitative research techniques: i) *observation*, of film texts and of the logics and dynamics of consumption and consumers and networks of sociability and exchange in the different spaces of screening of Korean films⁷, and ii) *systematization, analysis and interpretation*, of “cultural texts” that function as primary sources of information about Korean cinematography and its local impact.

Some of these activities and tasks were carried out as part of the “field work” for my doctoral research: *Mujeres históricas, mujeres de ficción. Dilemas y tensiones entre tradición y modernidad en el cine surcoreano contemporáneo* (*Women of history, women of fiction. Dilemmas and tensions between tradition and modernity in contemporary South Korean cinema*).

i) I went regularly to see Korean films, and I conducted an exhaustive survey of the Korean films projected in the different screening spaces in the City of Buenos Aires.⁸

ii) I carried out a systematic review of the print media with the largest circulation in Argentina [*Clarín*, *La Nación* and *Página 12*] and of the main specialized film magazines [*El Amante/Cine*, *Haciendo Cine* and *Leer Cine - Revista de Cine y Cultura*], compiling documents about Korean cinema, including articles, notes and critiques.

iii) I analyzed digital media on Korean cinema, tracking down information and explanations about Korean cinematography from all different periods, as well as interviews with film-makers and producers, among others.

This work is currently being analyzed in further depth, broadened and complemented with interviews with key informants, organizers and participants in Korean cultural and artistic activities in our city.

The **fourth part** offers an interpretive analysis related to the importance that film takes on in processes of symbolic construction of the *other* and for intercultural dialogue. I adopt the perspective of *mediated intercultural communication* and consider that, as Rodrigo Alsina (1999) points out, the information that emerges from the media —of which cinema forms a part— plays a role in the formation of cultures, imaginaries and social stereotypes. The crux of the matter is to recognize and grant the reader/viewer subject the critical capacity to question “what is given” and naturalized by cultural and media discourses. This means stating that surplus meaning and significations derive from knowing why the media affirm what they affirm and from understanding that the affirmations they transport and transmit are not absolute truths.

The **fifth part** provides an overall review, introducing general and specific reflections on different aspects elaborated in the text.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

⁶ I understand cultural consumption as “*the set of processes of appropriation and use of products in which symbolic value prevails over use and exchange values, or where these latter are at least subordinated to the symbolic dimension*” (García Canclini, 1993: 34).

⁷ The technique of *observation* acknowledges as fundamental the participation of the researcher in the spaces of interaction, analyzing how symbolic and material contexts are reproduced as well as the conflicts and tensions produced in these spaces. For more on this research method, see: GUBER, Rosana (2001). *La observación participante*. In *La etnografía. Método, campo y reflexividad* (ch. 3). Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma.

⁸ In the activity of *seeing* the films, my *field notebooks* have played an important role, where I have kept notes not only on scenes and images as well as themes and narratives, of relevance for the objectives of my dissertation, but also notes and observations on the social, cultural and ritual practices associated with the different spaces in Buenos Aires where this cinematography is shown.

Globalization and the cultural industry of cinema

In the analysis of globalization as the “homogenization of culture”,⁹ film is conceived of from an orthodox perspective that understands the *cultural industries*¹⁰ as the commodification of art. This economicist perspective of the phenomenon overlooks the effects of meaning that film creates and the cultural and ideological conditions and consequences of its production, circulation and consumption.

Thus, I turn to the approach to *cultural industries* that —pursuing the path laid out by Cultural Studies— has been developed based on a convergence of different disciplines and theoretical perspectives.¹¹ Hall (1984) enables an understanding of film in global society when he affirms that while as a *cultural industry*, film can impose and implant —by means of selection and repetition— the definitions that most easily fall in line with dominant descriptions, as a cultural practice it is conditioned by its positioning in the cultural field shot through with historical and social struggles. Martín Barbero also offers tools for reflecting on film in his analysis of the way in which the mass scale reclaims popular culture, and, as many cultural frameworks are excluded from the modern paradigm, “they come to find expression in mass culture, in the cultural industry” (2003 [1987]: 250). Another perspective is that of García Canclini, who combines the economic and material dimension with the cultural dimension in his analysis of the phenomena of cinema (García Canclini and Roncagliolo, 1988).

However, to agree with these authors and take distance from Horkheimer and Adorno's critical characterization of the concept of *cultural industry* does not imply removing all analytical power conferred by relating two terms that had previously been considered at odds: industry and culture. Indeed, the political economy of film production can not be excluded from an exhaustive analysis of the phenomenon.¹² When the objective is to explain processes of the production, distribution/circulation/exhibition and consumption of a symbolic good in the context of cultural globalization, as is our current intention, it is decidedly necessary and relevant to speak of a *cultural industry*.¹³

My approach to Korean cinema in Buenos Aires is in line with a broader perspective that endeavors to weave together the different logics of meaning —historical, political, social, cultural and symbolic— that traverse the phenomenon of film beyond its economic and material aspects. In this sense, if what we seek is to produce a “sociology” of the Korean film industry in the City of Buenos Aires, we must ground ourselves in the “sociological theory of film”, which started to develop in the 1970s. At that time, Andrew Tudor assumed the following:

[...] sociological knowledge of film would necessarily entail a body of “true” statements about the role of this institution in society, its effects, the organizational context within which it operates, the nature, attitudes and preferences of its audience, and the interrelations between these factors and countless others. In sum, it would entail an exhaustive, intersubjectively verified, coherent and generally applicable account of the numerous social worlds of film (cf. Tudor, 1974).

Years later, historian and sociologist Pierre Sorlín reflected on the connections between capitalism and film. He discussed the need for an analysis of film as a “cultural product”, but endowed with certain

⁹ From this theoretical perspective, globalization is considered to be the maximum expression of a tendency that is inherent to the capitalist economic system to expand and to produce cultural and symbolic goods in a global market. Renato Ortiz (1997) questions the thesis of the “homogenization of culture” and puts forth the concept of *mundialization* to refer to the specific domain of culture.

¹⁰ A concept created by the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer and Adorno (1988) suggest that the *cultural industries* play an important role in homogenization through the mystification and fetishism of commodities. Nonetheless, Adorno redeems the autonomy of art in the Enlightenment period, a historical moment when art often contained political and ideological content.

¹¹ The Birmingham School criticizes the elitist nature of the art and culture that Adorno and Horkheimer represent. Authors such as Richard Hoggart, Edward Thompson and Stuart Hall discuss the need to study popular cultures and their links to tradition while still bearing in mind an analysis of power and social inequality. This theoretical perspective had a great deal of influence in Latin America in a context of debates about modernity and due to Latin America's broad diversity of cultural traditions that needed to be thought about and integrated. This topic was addressed in IADEVITO, Paula and Pablo GAVIRATI (2012). *Sentidos de lo alternativo en las industrias culturales. El cine asiático en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires*, mimeograph.

¹² For example, in the lay distinction between “commercial film” and “independent film”, there is an attempt to differentiate between those films in which the industry has a predominant influence and those that —created in film studios and by independent producers— project an author/director's original vision.

¹³ For an analysis of film discourses, in which different world visions are articulated, it is best to discard the idea of the unity of the film industry in favor of the notion grounded in the diversity of positions and perspectives that understand the “cultural” (the cinematographic) as a field of disputes over social meaning (Bajtin, (2005 [1988])).

particular traits: productive policies, distributors' policies, the "taste" of the audience, the relationship between the spectator and the film (recognition, identification, projection), among others. Hence, the "Sociology of film" he proposed is an analytical system able to account for the complex cultural and social ties associated with the different cinematographic currents.

Sorlín (1985) holds that, at the same time that film narrative reflects the economic, political and socio-cultural characteristics of a given period, it is *in itself* an interpretation, and as such, constructs and forms part of the discourses that lend meaning to that reality. Jameson (1995), too, recognizes the inherent links between film and society and the diverse and historically variable forms of this relationship.

I present below a series of notes on the history of Korean cinema, with attention to the ideological import associated with this symbolic and cultural space at each socio-historical moment. My objective is to contextualize "the case" I will then subject to analysis and interpretation.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Korean cinema: A bit of history

Despite little information and the lack of systematized data in Spanish about the history of contemporary Korean cinema, I will attempt to (re)construct an overview that will allow us to contextualize the phenomenon under observation.

An analysis of the development of the film industry in the period after the Korean War (1950-1953) brings us back to its origins (1903) and the so-called "Early Age", which lasted until 1926. Then, during the Japanese Occupation (1910-1945), there was the "Golden Era of Silent Films" (1926-1935) and the "Early Sound Era" (1935-1945). Over these years, the Japanese government implemented several disciplinary and social control mechanisms to carry out its colonial plan, and it developed a policy of *acculturation* that profoundly and directly affected the artistic and cultural field. In this context, local and foreign films were evaluated by a censorship committee that prohibited those productions that were not in line with the state ideology, reaching the extreme of destroying copies considered to be transgressors. As a consequence, Korean cinema during the Occupation came to consist mainly of melodramas, comedies and historical pro-Japanese films.

The next historical phase of Korean film, which began when the Occupation ended, was called the "Freedom Era" (1945-1950), and immediately following this period came the "North Korea-South Korea War Era" (1950-1955); in the years following the civil war, the film industry was crippled by the devastating post-war reality.¹⁴

Not until the early 1960s were there films produced by talented directors —including Im Kwon-taek— who became undisputed points of reference for Korean cinema. In addition, a set of policies to promote film started to be applied to reactivate the local film industry: the screen quota system, tax exemptions for local products and incentives sanctioned by law for the production of low-budget films, which were primarily action and horror films. The proliferation of these genres was not by chance, but rather responded to the ideological conditions imposed by a dictatorial and repressive government that sought to combine this type of film production with anti-communist propaganda.

Towards the end of the decade there were 20 (twenty) licensed film companies dedicated to national production and importing foreign films; imports, however, were regulated by the state, which censored the entry of films with ideological positions contrary to those of the political regime by imposing high taxes. Local annual production exceeded 200 (two hundred) films, and in addition to melodrama and comedy, genres such as action, suspense, science fiction and martial arts appeared. This development marked the phase of the film industry known as the "Golden Age" (1955-1973). Though film production was aimed almost exclusively at the local market, in some cases distribution reached the Asian markets. Foreign U.S. intervention played a central role in the plan to recover the national cinema and established conditions and norms for its production, circulation and consumption (Elena, 2004).

The next decade —the 1970s— was a period of retreat for the film industry, as the public's interest moved away from film toward public television. Doherty (1984) reminds us that at the time of the Park Chung-hee regime's greatest economic success —characterized by, among other things, salary increases and improved living standards— film directors not only found themselves with soaring production costs, but they

¹⁴ The division of the peninsula into North Korea and South Korea is reflected in the history of film. From here on I shall focus on the history of South Korean cinema.

also detected the “end” of the monopoly of visual entertainment, with an audience that increasingly preferred to stay at home to enjoy television programming.¹⁵

The 1980s brought with it a true revitalization of the film industry, and was thus defined as the “Age of Recovery” (1980-1996). Logics had been altered in a context characterized by the intensification of political activism and demands for democratization. In this context, small film companies emerged offering opportunities to directors to develop original and creative film projects, which they had previously not had the possibility to carry out. This is how the democratic transition gave rise to the emergence of a cinema imbued with the winds of freedom and demands for rights. This change in the conception of filmmaking was led by a generation of talented and critical filmmakers, in tune with the concerns and taste of young and more rebellious sectors of South Korean society (Hwang, 2006).

The profound process of renewal in the field of film, which reflected changes in film content and form, gave shape to the phenomenon known as *New Wave*. This development had the financial support of the *chaebols*¹⁶, which allowed local production to stabilize at more than 70 (seventy) titles per year. At the same time, this type of corporate investment created developments like the establishment of the Korean *Blockbuster* (Elena, 2004).

Nonetheless, the South Korean film industry was unable to escape entirely from the critical situation it had endured for years, which was accentuated when the government decided to lift the quota restriction for imports of foreign films in the late 1980s. This measure subjected the national cinema to the relentless advance of Hollywood, and as a result, there was a significant drop in the participation of Korean cinema in the local market, which from 33% in 1985 fell to 15.9% in 1993. Faced with this extremely discouraging situation for the Korean film industry, the group *Screen Quota Observer Group* (predecessors to the Coalition for Cultural Diversity in Moving Images) decided to resuscitate the *Screen Quota System* of 1966, which required all cinemas to screen national productions at least twice a week. In this context, the United States attempted to abolish the restrictions imposed by the system, and in response, Korean film workers chose to create an Emergency Commission to protect the industry and to resist in the name of the future of national film (Yu Gina, 2008).

In the mid-1990s, Korean cinema began to show signs of flourishing once again, which was again associated with the intervention of the *chaebols* in the spheres of production, distribution and exhibition.¹⁷ During the 1990s, a series of initiatives were developed that contributed to this revitalization¹⁸, aided by new habits of going to the cinema tied to the opening of multi-cinemas and complexes dedicated to leisure and entertainment.

These data do not reflect an isolated event, but rather a process of sustained growth, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Not only did the percentage of productions double in less than ten years, but a radical change in the conception of film became clear, which is reflected in the content and style of the new films. Hence the phenomenon of *New Korean Cinema* began to take shape, promoted by a new group of directors dedicated to the development of filmmaking along two very different lines: commercial film and auteur cinema (Cueto, 2004). Yet, looking past the differences, both currents share the objective of encouraging the return of the local public to the cinemas.

With the economic crisis of 1997¹⁹, the intervention of the *chaebols* ceased, bringing about a new negative impact for the local film industry, though this time without alarming consequences. Following the

¹⁵ The government of Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) implemented a developmentalist economic model based on the implementation of successive five-year plans designed with the objective of industrializing the country and thus establishing the necessary conditions for Korea's adaptation to modernity. In just a few years, the peninsula became a prosperous nation, which is evident in the satisfactory quality of life of the general population and in marked improvements in the educational system.

¹⁶ These are industrial classes with bases in the monopoly control of the economy. These groups made significant profits with the monopoly of light manufacturing in the 1960s and heavy manufacturing in the 1970s. Later, the *chaebols* came to control the hotels, tourism, the media and the educational institutions, among others. The government supported the development of these economic conglomerates with policies of low wages, loans and subsidies (López Aymes, 2005).

¹⁷ Samsung and Daewoo, among other powerful business conglomerates, intervened in the South Korean film industry, forming part of the production, distribution and exhibition aspects of national films.

¹⁸ The creation of NETPAC (*Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema*) in 1990, of the *Busan International Film Festival* in 1996, of *Motion Picture Promotion* (MPPC) and its successor, the *Korean Film Corporation* (KOFIC), are a few examples.

¹⁹ This profound economic crisis occurred when Kim Dae-jung became the president of South Korea (December 1997). However, he was able to quickly and successfully handle the adverse conditions, and by 1999, thanks to the restructuring of the business sector, carried out in line with IMF requirements, and the famous *Big Deal* between the government and the *chaebols*, the reactivation of the national economy was secured. Kim Dae-jung's good economic management did not transfer, however, to the political sphere; not even his Sunshine Policy of reconciliation with North Korea, presented at the Pyongyang summit, was free of controversy. In the

crisis, the renewal process was consolidated and the new generation of directors proposed a genuine revision of the classic genres, foraying into new and/or underexplored territory and incorporating the lessons and experiences gained from their artistic training abroad. Small film producers focused on the development of an independent cinema that adapted to the commercial circuit, and at the same time, little by little, they started joining international festivals organized by western countries.²⁰ This last phase of the development of South Korean cinema has been defined as the “Age of Progress” (1997 to the present).

The Korean film industry in the new millennium presents very significant indicators of growth: increased earnings; the opening of new cinemas across the country; effectively awakening a preference among the spectators for films produced nationally; and, ultimately, a doubling of exports. This domestic strengthening of film has promoted its inclusion and expansion around the world.

ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION

Korean film: Itineraries in the Buenos Aires cultural field

The penetration and circulation of Korean cinema in the Buenos Aires cultural field has taken place in the context of the phenomenon termed *Hallyu* (“Korean Wave”). South Korea began this cultural process as an essential part of its national political strategy for economic development in the 1990s, with the objective of propagating its art and culture beyond its national borders. The *Hallyu* spread to the east and south of Asia, forming a “wave” that not only extended its coverage but also deepened its impact, creating a penetration of truly Korean cultural elements in the broadest Asian market, thus consolidating its *country brand*: “... everything from food to shoe styles were included in this kind of “mania” for everything Korean” (Shim, 2006: 25).

Over the last decade, successive South Korean governments designed and implemented cultural promotion policies that—in a sustained and progressive way—were aimed at different parts of the world. Latin America was one of the destinations chosen for bringing Korean “soft power” to its maximum expression. Artistic and cultural expressions such as Korean films, literature, theater, dance, music, animations, comics, video games and soap operas thus began to arrive in the main cities of Latin America.

The City of Buenos Aires has received these artistic and cultural initiatives favorably. It is important to point out that this coincides with certain political decisions by the government of the City of Buenos Aires to lay the foundations for the construction of a national identity based on an appreciation of cultural diversity.²¹

- **Film screening spaces**

Festivals

The Buenos Aires International Festival for Independent Film (BAFICI, Buenos Aires Festival Internacional de Cine Independiente) has, since its founding in 1999, been a privileged space for the dissemination of Korean cinema in Argentina, as it was at its launch that Korean films were shown for the first time in our country. The participation of Korean films in the programming of this cultural event was maintained throughout the 2000s, and through this space, it was possible to become familiar with both the classical directors and the new producers of this cinema. The Korean feature-length films shown in this space have spanned a remarkable variety of genres: horror, action thriller, drama, comedy, etc. (see Table I in the Appendix).

Along the same lines, there are other international festivals held in our city where there has been a considerable participation of Korean cinema, especially in recent years. Some examples include the 4th *Buenos Aires Festival of Unusual Cinema* (2008) and the 7th “*Nueva Mirada*” (New Perspective)

international political sphere, Kim Dae-jung maintained good relations with the United States, Russia, China and Japan. See CUMINGS, Bruce (2004). *El lugar de Corea en el Sol. Una historia moderna*. Córdoba: Comunic-arte Ed.

²⁰ Locarno Festival (1989); Pesaro Festival (1992); Centre Georges Pompidou (October 1993-February 1994), among others.

²¹ The formulation of Laws [the Immigration Law (2003); the “Patria Grande” National Program for the Standardization of Identity Documents (2005); the National Education Law (2006)] and the organization of celebrations [Day of Action for Tolerance and Respect among Peoples; Day of Coexistence in Diversity; Day of Cultural Diversity of the Americas], which are aimed at raising awareness in Argentinean society about the respect for dignity, the preservation of collective memory and the values of plurality, against intolerance and discrimination based on reasons of ethnicity, education, culture or religion.

International Film Festival for Children and Young People, held the same year, where the animated feature-length film *Mug Travel* by Lim Ah-ron was awarded a prize (see Table I in the Appendix).

Series

Korean cinema is also screened in a large number of film series and shows that were conceived of and planned as cultural initiatives to present this cinema locally and facilitate channels of cultural exchange between Korea and Argentina. These types of screening, initiated in the late 1990s by the Korean Embassy in Argentina's Media and Dissemination Department, are today organized by the Korean Cultural Center.

Over the 2006-2010 period, there were 16 (sixteen) Korean film series organized in different artistic and cultural spaces in the City of Buenos Aires, offering Buenos Aires filmgoers films never before screened in our country. Programs have included films representative of the different phases of development of Korean film from the 1960s to the present: retrospectives of well-known classical directors, feature-length films that are part of *New Korean Film*, experimental cinema with short and medium-length films, and documentaries (see Table II in the Appendix).

Arthouse and experimental theaters

Arthouse and experimental theaters are a part of the alternative screening spaces. These cinemas screen both independent and commercial films; that is, they constitute spaces that —despite their alternative nature— do not exclude the screening of new releases.

Korean films have been screened, for example, at the MALBA²² (see Table III in the Appendix). This space brings together both independent and commercial cinema, re-releases and new releases, and includes a broad range of films with respect to origin, genre and cinematographic style. These kinds of cinemas in museums, theaters and so on are a good outlet for films from Latin America, Africa, Asia and other parts of the world that cannot find ways to join the commercial circuit or come up against difficulties related to the cost that this entails. Screenings in these spaces tend to be in packed rooms and the programming continues for weeks, or even months. The Arteplex cinema chain has the particularity of being located in different neighborhoods around the city; in contrast, the other cinemas in this category are primarily located in the downtown area.²³ In this kind of commercial art-film cinema there have also been some screenings of Korean cinema (see Table III in the Appendix.)

Commercial circuit

Slowly, and to a lesser extent than in the alternative screening spaces described above, Korean films have been appearing in the movie listings in our city. Thanks to their screening in cinemas with commercial new releases and in multi-screen complexes, Korean films have started to reach the general public (see Table IV in the Appendix).

- **Dissemination channels and strategies**

The dissemination of Korean film *series* and *shows* is largely carried out over the internet. The Korean Cultural Center in Latin America announces the programming of its series on its website and sends a monthly electronic newsletter to its contacts with details of all artistic and cultural activities it organizes, including the screening of Korean films.

Extensive internet use has multiplied the channels for dissemination. As examples, there is the creation of *virtual groups* such as the *Friends of Korean Film* and the creation of *thematic blogs* by followers and fans. Dissemination is also carried out over social networks, with *Facebook* being one of the most popular in our country and the most used by young people (Iadevito and Bavoleo, 2010).

However, we must note that the chain of dissemination developed in the virtual sphere does not end with the reproduction of information or attracting audiences for film festivals and series; rather, the existence of forums and sociability networks in these spaces of cultural concentration provides a first step to learning about Korean cultural practices and tends to be complemented, outside of the virtual world, with opportunities for debate and discussion following the screenings.

²² Other examples of alternative screening spaces for new releases and re-releases of both independent and commercial films are the Ricardo Rojas Cultural Center (a part of the University of Buenos Aires) and the Leopoldo Lugones Hall in the San Martín National Theater.

²³ Arthouse and experimental theaters in our city include the Lorange, Losuar, Lorca, Monumental and Cosmos cinemas, among others.

With respect to the dissemination of Korean film screenings in the city's *festivals* and *cinemas*, the programming is listed in the main local newspapers and in specialized film magazines. Festival programming is also listed in the catalogs distributed weeks prior to and during the events.

- **Consumption and profile of spectators**

Analysis of the presence of Korean cinema in the different screening spaces in the City of Buenos Aires over the last decade shows increasing, or at least constant and sustained, levels of participation by Korean films (see Appendix).

The increase in the screening of Korean films goes hand in hand with an increase in the number of spectators. However, as this phenomenon occurs as part of the recent transformation of cinema at the global level, associated with global strategies and actors, one consequence is an accentuation of an elitist bias: the people that go to the cinema belong to middle- to high-income social sectors.²⁴ In this context, Korean film—classified as cult cinema that primarily circulates in alternative screening spaces—is consumed by people belonging to this social stratum.

In the new screening spaces (*festivals* and *arthouse and experimental theaters*), the bulk of cultural consumption is by spectators who—due to their level of education or their type of employment—belong to middle and upper-middle sectors of society, and, as a result of their educational and cultural level, show interest in cinematographies from different parts of the world. The survey conducted by the *Cultural Industry Observatory (OIC, Observatorio de Industrias Culturales)* describes the BAFICI spectator as having the following characteristics:

[...] young, between 20 and 30 years of age, university student, professional or employee
[...] comes to BAFICI largely because the event offers access to a type of film not found in the usual programming at the cinemas (OIC, 2005).

The spectators of Korean cinema at festivals and arthouse and experimental theaters meet this description of the average spectator. However, based on the construction of specific categories for our case study here, the spectators of Korean film at the BAFICI *Festival* may be grouped in the following way: a) cinephiles that incorporate Korean cinema as a component of their erudite knowledge about global cinema; b) spectators interested in Korean film as a part of Asian consumption, who thus convert it into a symbol of *cultural distinction*²⁵; c) spectators driven by interests linked to their education and/or academic development; and d) the general public.

The spectators of Korean film in *arthouse and experimental theaters* would, in principle, comprise an audience similarly segmented. But, as many of these cinemas are part of the commercial circuit, there is a higher volume of spectators from category d), the general public, without specific interests in Korea. With respect to the generational variable, attendance is not predominantly by young, middle-class university students, and other age groups are also present (adults and seniors), as are people with different educational levels and of different social classes.

With respect to Korean *film series and shows* (which are also alternative screening spaces), the generational differentiation is opposite to that described above. The predominance of young spectators seen in *festivals* and *arthouse and experimental theaters* is here held by seniors. This does not mean that there are not occasionally some young people present, and when this occurs, they are generally spectators from categories b and c, defined above.

With respect to *commercial cinemas and multi-screen complexes*, it should be noted that, in line with the social geography of this cultural activity, these spaces are located in the northern part of the city where those with the greatest purchasing power reside. We can thus affirm that the general public that sees Korean films in these cinemas belongs mostly to the upper-middle class. However, young spectators from categories a, b and c are also present.

²⁴ Cinema was, at first, an item of consumption associated with popular sectors, and later became a democratic, economically accessible multi-class item of consumption. There are at least two explanations for the new consumption of film in Argentina: a) the *cultural industries* are subject to little or no state regulation (Miller, 2002); b) it is a flexible consumption that is rapidly curtailed in contexts of economic crises and drops in income (Getino, 2005). These observations are taken from the text by MOGUILLANSKY, Marina (2007). *El cine en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires en un contexto de transformaciones globales*. In *Las industrias culturales en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires*. Winning essays. Essay Contest. Government of the City of Buenos Aires.

²⁵ Over the last decade, a local, Buenos Aires, Argentinean and western cultural vision—charged with the ideological import of the rise in Asian and eastern consumption—has been (re)shaped, and a new *way of seeing* Korean cultural otherness has been established.

In summary, *festivals, arthouse and experimental theaters* and *series and shows* contribute to the appreciation of Korean cinema by a local, mainly young audience, which chooses to immerse itself in a film esthetic that is unconventional with respect to the parameters we are used to in the City of Buenos Aires, where Hollywood, European, Latin American and national film consumption predominates. This deeper penetration among young filmgoers can largely be explained by: a) the South Korean government's cultural promotion policies; b) the City of Buenos Aires' cultural promotion policies, aimed at the appreciation of cultural diversity; and c) the work of universities and research centers in promoting and disseminating knowledge about Korean culture and society. Thus, the cultural consumption of Korean cinema has grown and become more complex with respect to other alternative/peripheral cinematographies that have remained limited to the circle of cinephiles and film critics.

Lastly, there is also a flow of members of the Korean community circulating through the different screening spaces to *see* Korean film as a result of the need of migrant citizens to reconnect with their culture of origin.

This analytical discussion, based on observation and “direct” participation, calls upon us to reflect on the connections between film and society, and on its *effects of meaning*, drawing on theoretical contributions from different disciplines and approaches in the social sciences.

INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS

Korean film: *Mediated interculturality* in the symbolic construction of the OTHER

The global circulation of film—in accordance with the principles of the cultural industry—promotes renewed and multiple interpretations of the social world and of *cultural identities and othernesses* (Ortiz, 2000). Hence the importance and relevance of including cinematographic space as a source of knowledge about other cultures, in order to expand and increase the complexity of the channels of communication between *ourselves* and *others*.

The present case study (*Korean cinema in the City of Buenos Aires*) brings us, ultimately, back to old concerns in the field of social sciences: representations, the symbolic construction of the *other*, the issue of social ties and networks of sociability. It also brings us to one of the theoretical discussions occupying a central place in the social science agenda of recent years: *interculturality*.

The concept of *interculturality* alludes to much more than an encounter between subjects from different cultures. It is presented as a politics and an ethics that seeks to *de-construct* ethnocentrism and identity boundaries, and thus attempts to de-essentialize culture. *Interculturality*, then, is put forward as a tool for an in-depth analysis of intercultural dialogue based on recognition, horizontality and peaceful coexistence, and it establishes a division between studies of *interpersonal intercultural communication* (focused on direct contact between people) and those concerned with *mediated intercultural communication* (those forms mediated by discourses) (Iadevito, 2009).

The conceptions and perceptions that subjects develop about different cultural groups are closely tied to the information about these groups that appears in the media: print media, radio, television, etc. These media discourses, with constructed images and representations of Korea and “Koreans”, have been shaping a climate of opinion—adopted by the majority of Buenos Aires residents—based on prejudice, discrimination and xenophobia (Bialogorski and Bargman, 1996; Mera and Iadevito, 2009). As Mera points out, the media have collaborated “*in accentuating the negative categorization of the group and objectifying its characteristics, encouraging its exclusion, and, fundamentally, making a significant contribution to solidifying the wall that exists between the different cultural worlds*” (Mera, 2007: 315).

However, the circulation of the discourses and narratives of Korean cinema in the City of Buenos Aires—as a form of *mediated intercultural communication* that produces representations and symbols as well as specific conditions for dialogue between Koreans and Argentineans—constitutes a new contribution. Returning to the above discussion of the cultural industry of cinema, films constitute ideological expressions that contribute to the dissemination of a society's ideology.

In this sense, regardless of the cinematographic themes and genres, Korean films—produced in line with market criteria—tend to project a positive image of the peninsula, exalting the values of modernity, technological progress and the new lifestyle associated with social change, combined with elements of

ancestral cultural traditions.²⁶ For example, the films of *New Korean Cinema* not only offer “what is new” but also what is different, challenging the pure genres from a heterodox position that is expressed in the forms of representing and narrating South Korean society today. This dynamic and original perspective that joins modern and traditional values —nourishing an image of a recovered, reconstructed country consolidating itself as a successful economic, political and social model for the entire population— is the most recent venture in Korean cinema, subtly expressing the coexistence between “the global” and “the local”, “the artistic” and “the popular” (Iadevito, 2011).

We may say, then, that the circulation of Korean film in the City of Buenos Aires has been creating fissures and cracks of meaning in this discriminatory and stigmatizing media discourse²⁷ that has tended to homogenize “Koreans” as, in Goffman’s terms (2006 [1963]), a “deviant” social group. That is, Korean cinema —as a cultural constructor of the social reality that intervenes in the development of worldviews, social representations and imaginaries and stereotypes about *others*— has activated new perceptions, appreciations and shared visions of *Korean cultural otherness* with its own language and logic.

Discursive enunciation in film has progressively begun to dispute the negativity of the representations constructed by media discourses. The cultural and symbolic space opened locally by Korean cinema has thus promoted mutual understanding and the development of a certain perception of the *other* and of difference that, simultaneously, enables self-reflective knowledge. The meanings and significations that Korean cinema transmits about Korean culture are multiplied in its (re)localization, when spectators — as a function of their knowledge— assign a new meaning to a film based on their own experience. In other words, screened films take on a “new” import distinct from that they had before being combined with elements from the local context, in a process that García Canclini (1992) terms *cultural hybridization*.

CONCLUSIONS

General and specific reflections

The film industry became one of the artistic expressions most privileged by the cultural promotion policies of the South Korean government in the context of the popular *Hallyu* phenomenon, which not only had an economic and social impact, but also had an impact on the recovery and consolidation of the *cultural identity* of the Korean people.²⁸

Currently, Korean film productions not only portray the local in pursuit of a dynamic domestic market, but they employ “a method” that offers them the possibility of going international. As Moon Jae-cheol (2006) claims, contemporary Korean cinema has transcended the radical innovation of the *New Wave* of the 1980s. With respect to *New Korean Cinema*, the author points out that this has arisen in a context in which the force of commercialization has become inevitable. The new generation of directors [Bong Joon-ho, Hong Sang-soo, Im Sang-soo, Kim Ki-duk, Lee Chang-dong, Park Chan-wook, among others] has significantly contributed to this projection to the global scale by combining —with intelligence and insight— the language of Hollywood, Europe and Korea. Recent Korean films have transcended national borders and have thus followed a global logic.

Throughout this paper I have shown that the participation of Korean film in the City of Buenos Aires follows a developmental process marked by the sustained presence of Korean films in different screening spaces and a local audience that, though segmented, demonstrates a growing interest in this cinematography.

²⁶ Korean cinema offers a series of products that mythologize the reality imposed by the capitalist model imposed by the process of modernization. However, as the *cultural industries* tend to be somewhat more than “de-politicizing machines”, Korean films have often brought about what Ferro (1980) terms a “counter-analysis of society”, questioning the very foundations of the social mentality that sustains this globally-expanding industry. In this process, the role of the spectator is central, as it is the spectators who de-code and re-interpret the ideology disseminated by the film from their own cosmivision.

²⁷ When speaking about stigmatizing discourses, I follow the approach of Erving Goffman, who conceives of stigma management as a general feature of society. *Stigma* forms a part of a social fabric in which it is not important to refer to concrete individuals (divided into two groups), but it is rather a process involving two roles, in which each individual participates in both roles at some point in their lives. Normal and stigmatized, then, do not refer to people but to perspectives (Goffman, 2006 [1963]). If we think about it from the “Korean” point of view, “we” are the strange ones for sharing certain identity-uniting principles that are different from theirs and, consequently, undesirable.

²⁸ A *cultural identity* that seeks to rebuild itself following the controversies of the 20th century: Japanese colonization, the Cold War scenario following the internal conflict that gave rise to the War of the Two Koreas, the division of the country, the dilemmas and tensions between tradition and modernity, among others. See CUMINGS, Bruce (2004). *El lugar de Corea en el Sol. Una historia moderna*. Córdoba: Comunic-arte Ed.

This analysis also allows us to affirm with respect to my guiding hypothesis that, in terms of *effects of meaning*, the presence of Korean cinema in the Buenos Aires cultural field has contributed to a decrease in local negative judgments about Korea, its people and its local community. And that, in this process, young people in the city of Buenos Aires are playing a leading role: they are the principal consumers of this cinematography and have driven a process of (re)signification and creation of new meanings and significations around Korean *cultural otherness*. It is there, in the narrative of Korean film, where it is possible to learn about and understand the *other-world* and to thus contribute to Korean-Argentinean dialogue and exchange.

The context of *mundialization* favors the opening of these kinds of symbolic spaces that are well-suited to thinking about *mediated intercultural communication*, in which the subject-spectator has relative autonomy to differentially appropriate the discourses that circulate (Martín Barbero, 2003 [1987]).

In this way, culture emerges as the center of the arena of struggles for power, where old forms of identification reemerge and new ones develop, giving rise to a diversity of contacts and dialogues and opportunities for communication between people, social groups and cultures. Intercultural scenarios thus take shape in which the most varied forms of coexistence are established, which are localizable, as Grimson indicates, in "...daily, sometimes personal dimensions of estrangement in the face of alterity and social inequality, as well as political, group and state dimensions of recognition and equality" (2001: 16). In this context, forms of communication enable encounters between different cultural codes (though also misunderstandings and incomprehension, inherent to human communication), combining face-to-face contact with technologically mediated modes of communication.

As I have argued, film —as a language that expresses social realities and subject experiences— is constituted as one more indicator of a cultural identity as "something" in constant transformation, produced in the "making sense" of the narration and in relation to *others*. Ultimately, the identity of the *self* is never the same (Arfuch, 2002a; 2002b; Hall, 1996). Hence, contact with Korean film means much more than an encounter with certain relevant representations and meanings belonging to an *other-culture*. As a result of this encounter, furthermore, it is possible to engage in self-critique and to confront the widespread and accepted vision of the Korean-Asian as exotic, strange and unknown, with one's own perceptions, judgments and experiences. As Rodrigo Alsina claims (1999), in the new contexts of hyper-communication, *heterodoxy* becomes indispensable: no more seeing events through a single lens or measuring the culture of others (their symbolic universes) with our values and our culture.

As has been made clear in this discussion, I believe that the circulation of Korean film in the City of Buenos Aires has contributed to a broadening of the historical scope of representation shot through with local social discourses about Korea, favoring a process of greater and renewed visibility, a construction of the legitimacy of *otherness* and a bringing together of the two cultures (Korean and Argentinean/Buenos Aires) based on the particular conditions and possibilities enabled by the local context.

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