

Virtual Hallyu: Korean Cinema of the Global Era. By KYUNG HYUN KIM. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011. xviii, 255 pp. \$89.95 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

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When one turns to the most recent of phenomena, there are a number of pitfalls one can undergo simply because one does not have the benefit of the passage of time or a large archive of readings as a starting point. This is one of many reasons why Kyung Hyun Kim's *Virtual Hallyu*, which addresses the last decade of South Korean cinema, is such an impressive work. The book is timely without being trite or merely fashionable and it contains a number of significant theoretical and local insights into the global present without being uselessly obscure to the general reader. Kim's incisive close readings of widely known South Korean productions (*The Host*, *Old Boy*, *Secret Sunshine*, etc.), as well as the potential to discover new titles, make the book a pleasure to read and to revisit for those inside, outside, or in between Korean studies.

Kim admits that his title's reference to *hallyu* (Korean Wave) is ironic. He relegates himself to cinema and addresses, with notable exceptions, the prominent "auteurs" who play a quantitatively small but qualitatively significant role in exported South Korean media (Im Kwon-Taek, Hong Sang-soo, Lee Chang-dong, Bong Jun-ho, Park Chan-wook, etc.). Although he does not make the argument explicitly, the implied advantage of treating the works of these prominent filmmakers is that they deal more complexly and self-reflexively with the aesthetic and historical problem of the virtual that he sees as underpinning *hallyu*, a claim that would be challenged by those who find equal food for thought in supposedly "less artistic" productions (e.g., genre films, television, and popular music). It is perhaps through the study of these other media, and the ways that the "auteurs" themselves are embedded in them, that the more macrosocial and macroeconomic effects of *hallyu* could come to light, but Kim is more concerned with understanding contemporary cinema's relation to time and history than with attempting an exhaustive empirical study of the many facets of the so-called "*hallyu*."

Kim's reading of the rediscovered colonial period film *Spring of Korean Peninsula* (1941) as an element in the contemporary South Korean cultural scene, his juxtaposition of Hong Sang-soo's cinematic landscapes with those of the 1930s modernist poet Yi Sang, and his analysis of the way that films like *The President's Barber* (2004) and *The President's Last Bang* (2005) play with long repeated images of Park Chung Hee's dictatorship all point back to one of the book's central claims about recent visual culture: "the boundary between 'the way things are remembered' and the 'way things really were' has been crossed through the massive repository of images collected over the past decade" (p. 5). This perspective seems to fling us into an eternal present in which images of any place or time can circulate and connect with other images without us being able to pinpoint the historical causality or deep historical

structure that determines these relations (and indeed this may be one consequence of the Bergsonian notion of memory that Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of the virtual took up). However, through his constructive interpretations and his own use of images, Kim is clearly not siding with randomness or nihilism in relation to historical consciousness, but rather remains consistent throughout in his appropriation of Deleuze's philosophy of time, in which "difference and repetition in the virtual ground the movement of actualization, of differentiation as creation."¹

In more mundane disciplinary terms, Kim opens up a new space with this attention to the virtual. This space is somewhere between a formalist film analysis that, in its extreme version, brackets all questions of history and consciousness as somehow exterior to "cinema itself," and area studies, which tend to seek meaning in national history or national culture, taken as extra-textual and substantial entities merely reflected in textual objects. Because the question of how to do film and media studies and area studies simultaneously remains an open one, this theoretical intervention alone makes *Virtual Hallyu* important reading.

At times Kim seems to conflate the virtual idea undergoing actualization with South Korean national subjectivity and he sees South Korean cinema's innovative experimentation with the virtual as one of its national "virtues." Some readers might look for a more complete break from national cinema and more attention to the processes of appropriating, translating, and playing with cinematic convention and cinematic language (which is another way of thinking of the actualization of the virtual). However, it is perhaps more useful to see that less nation-centered approach as one of many modes of analysis that is simply better sought elsewhere. This reader appreciated the effect of concreteness created by Kim's juxtaposition of national historical depth with the contemporary aesthetic problem of the virtual. As he lays out in his introduction, those seeking a more general or regional picture of the many facets of *hallyu*, or a text that sits more comfortably within either film studies or Korean studies, have other options. His unique approach of taking up the "virtual potential" of South Korean films and experimenting with how they can transform our sense of the present global moment has produced a text that is convincing in general theoretical terms and intricate in its detail.

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¹Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 212.