

## **A Comparative Research on the Asian Blockbuster(s) and Multiplex in Asia:**

### **A Holistic Approach to the Film Industry, Text and Cinemagoing**

#### **Introduction**

Since the emergence of the Hollywood blockbuster with the release of *Jaws* (Dir. Spielberg, Steven, 1975) which is a key characteristic of “New Hollywood”, the blockbuster has been understood as Hollywood’s strategy for reimbursing the massive scale of production costs and to maximize profit not only in the domestic but also the global market. The blockbuster as a production trend explicitly reveals the key features of contemporary popular film in terms of industry, text and cinemagoing practice, and becomes a universal production trend that proves that the local film industry is becoming systematically industrialized following the model of the Hollywood film industry. Hollywood blockbusters are widely branded in such a way so as to transform film from a cultural to economic object resulting in many academic disciplines, such as film studies, sociology, literature, and cultural studies paying less attention to the blockbuster through adopting the perspective of it as a cultural object. The lack of academic research on the blockbuster causes failures in understanding the key features of contemporary popular film at industrial as well as textual levels, and, more importantly, audiences’ pleasure from the blockbuster. In this sense, at a fundamental level, my research project aims to reclaim the “blockbuster” as a research topic for academic disciplines via a more cultural perspective that includes industry, text and cinemagoing practices in a holistic attempt that avoids the narrow-minded view in which the blockbuster is a mere byproduct of the industrialization of the film industry.

Apart from the Hollywood blockbuster in itself, local and regional blockbusters may contain another dimension of power struggle among the local, the regional and the global. The local film industry has struggled to secure its space and market against the dominance of Hollywood for a long time, and subsequently identifies itself in relation to the generalized Other, Hollywood, and regional film may find its location in-between in the dynamic relationship between the local and the global. Given these multi-layered relationships among the local, the regional and the global, the blockbuster would be one lens to trace dynamism and contradictions amongst the three. Many local blockbusters initially demonstrate the confidence of local film industries in terms of the size of the domestic market and industrial capacity, but later tend to target the regional market with more provincial castings and cinematic imaginations. Although local blockbusters may still be able to maintain the designation of “local” blockbuster within regional levels in comparison to the generalized Other due to its limit of distribution networks compared to Hollywood’s industrial system, once local blockbusters manage to be distributed at a global level, they acquire a new label which is often not that of blockbuster, but of B-grade international film. On the other hand, the rise of local and regional blockbusters produces many film stars with a strong ticket-selling power in local and regional markets, and this brings a new phenomenon

in which the Hollywood blockbuster increasingly casts more local and regional actors to appeal to the global market. In this sense, using the blockbuster as a key feature of contemporary popular cinema, I hope to follow the trajectories of the blockbuster(s) in the three layered dynamisms of popular cinemas. As a Korean academic who has been specifically researched the Korean blockbuster, the research starts from the cases of the latter and searches for the possibility of Asian blockbusters. By adopting comparative perspective, this research will not remain only in the case study of Korean blockbuster, but rather expand its research scope to other local film industries, namely India and China, in order to move towards the possibility of regional blockbuster.

### **Korean Blockbuster and Cinemagoing Practice in Korea: A Brief Summary**

The Korean blockbuster emerged with the release of *Shiri* (Dir. Kang, Jae-gyu, 1999) and its unprecedented popularity in the domestic market. In its various press releases and posters, *Shiri* proudly claims to be the “first Korean blockbuster” implying that it should be received on the same level as the Hollywood blockbuster in terms of spectacle and image yet with the added aspect of local uniqueness in its storyline, in this case the division of the two Koreas. Subsequent Korean blockbusters such as *Joint Security Area* (Dir. Park, Chan-wook, 2000), *Silmido* (Dir. Kang, Woo-seok, 2004) and *Tagukki* (Dir. Kang, Jae-gyu, 2004) tend to share many similarities with *Shiri* in terms of their textual level especially their mimicking of the Hollywood spectacle with local storylines often embedded in the tragic situation of the two Koreas. In other words, the success of so-called “Korean blockbusters” has led to the production of a certain generic grammar and textual similarities, and allows local audiences to map the Korean blockbuster in her/his phenomenological understanding.

The rise of the Korean blockbuster coincides with the rapid increase of the multiplex in South Korea. The first multiplex, CGV Gangbyeon, was built in 1998 with 11 screens and the second, Mega Box, opened with 16 screens and 4336 seats in 2000 being the largest in Asia.<sup>1</sup> According to the statistics of the Korean Film Council, the proportion of multiplex to the number of cinemas is 78.0% and the ratio of multiplex to screen numbers is 91.8%. 94.9% of cinema audiences watched a film in a multiplex in 2009<sup>2</sup>. In 2011, subsequently, 98.1% of the total audience watched a film in a multiplex. Theatre going decreased from 305 in 2009 to 292 in 2011, but the number of screens remained at a similar level. This suggests that small single screen theatres closed down and multiplexes retained their number of screens<sup>3</sup>. Given that in the brief 15 years history of the multiplex, it has to be said that the number and power of multiplexes has skyrocketed and it is difficult to talk about contemporary Korean cinema without referring to this phenomenon. Interestingly enough, three major film production companies, CJ(CJ Entertainment-CGV), Lotte(Lette Entertainment-Lotte Cinema), Orion(Showbox-Megabox), manage

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<sup>1</sup> Ban, Hyunjung (2008) cited in Kim, Sung Kyung (2011) ‘Beyond Globalization, Regionalization and Nationalism: Political Economy of Korean Film Industry in the Age of Neoliberalism’, *Democratic Society and Policy Research*, 19:71~93 (in Korean)

<sup>2</sup> 2009 Annual Statistic Data of Korean Film industry provided by Korean Film Council, [www.kofic.gov.kr](http://www.kofic.gov.kr)

<sup>3</sup> 2011 Annual Statistic Data of Korean Film industry provided by Korean Film Council, [www.kofic.gov.kr](http://www.kofic.gov.kr); The tendency of the rapidly increasing number of screens seems to have stopped since 2011 suggesting that the multiplex has become saturated in Korea.

a vertical integration from production, distribution and exhibition following the model of 'New Hollywood' and this system provides a more stable industrial condition for the Korean film industry to produce big budget films as it can secure at least a certain level of financial stability. As the blockbuster needs at least a stable production-distribution-exhibition linkage to reimburse its massive production cost, the multiplex and its close connection to production and distribution companies, or even vertical integration of the three parties, are prerequisite for the emergence of the local blockbuster. In this sense, the multiplex in Seoul apparently gained an important role in its success as the pioneer of the Korean blockbuster, *Shiri*, and the boom of the multiplex in Korea is one of the most important industrial factors behind the popularity of the Korean blockbuster in local markets.

Furthermore the rapid increase of the multiplex has had an apparent influence on film texts and the film seems to be incorporating the new industrial structure into its text accordingly. Increased numbers of big budget films have been widely released in the market in accordance with the distribution pipeline to multiplexes, with low budget and artistic films struggling to secure screens. In particular, the Hollywood blockbuster has made enormous efforts to *entertain* audiences with more outstanding and glamorous images of spectacle, and by doing this becomes increasingly bigger in terms of budget, scale, spectacle image, setting etc. However, interestingly, the Hollywood blockbuster has never become as popular as local blockbusters in the Korean domestic market. Here the point is that the importance of the text and the cultural value of film are revisited. If cinemagoing becomes a mere spatial practice or blended leisure activity in the age of the multiplex, then bigger blockbusters from Hollywood with more well-established vertical integration, especially the worldwide pipeline of distribution, should have a better opportunity of attracting mass audiences, yet local blockbusters have apparently received better levels than the textual and industrial model of the Hollywood blockbuster. For example, both *Silmido* (2004) and *Tagguki* (2003) achieved more than ten million ticket sales and other Korean blockbusters, *the Host* (2006), *Haewundae* (2009), and *The Thieves* (2012) managed to sell over ten million tickets<sup>4</sup>, but none of the Hollywood blockbusters in Korean film history have managed to reach similar levels. I would argue that this difference between local and Hollywood blockbusters should be recognized in terms of the "reading competency" of local audiences and "cultural impenetrability".<sup>5</sup> Local audiences must possess a better reading competency for interpreting local cultural products as they tend to have more chances and channels to approach local cultural products. In this sense, local audiences would gain comfort and pleasure from a storyline that has cultural resonance, familiar characters and locally embedded cultural meanings and values as in the local blockbuster. That is, Korean audiences would be more attracted to the Korean blockbuster because of its locally specific stories such as the division of the two Koreas (*Shiri*, *JSA*, *Silmido* and *Tagguki*), the issue of anti-Americanism sentiment in South Korea (*the Host*), familiar settings and landscape (*Haewundae*), and local film stars (*the Thieves*) rather than their mimicking of Hollywood's generic image of spectacle. Furthermore, the audience does not simply remain as 'the mass', but is open to become 'the popular' by constantly negotiating the text through

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<sup>4</sup> Ten million ticket sales is a rather unrealistic figure as the total population of South Korean is just less than fifty million.

<sup>5</sup> S.V. Srinivas uses the concept of 'cultural impenetrability' in his project paper on the release of *the Host* in India. He argues that the failure of *the Host* in Indian box office shows the cinema as a cultural object which may be impenetrable to other markets (S.V. Srinivas, 2008, [www.cscs.res.in](http://www.cscs.res.in))

their cultural resources and understandings<sup>6</sup>. That is, audiences are always actively engaged with the film, and local blockbusters would provide more opportunities for audience to negotiate the text with their everyday lives.

On the other hand, the change in cinemagoing practice brought about by multiplex needs to be carefully unpacked. When the single screen cinema hall dominated from the 1960s up to the middle of 1990s in Korea,<sup>7</sup> the main purpose of going to the cinema hall was known to be solely *to watch a film* as people tended to first decide what film they want to watch and then choose the cinema hall where the chosen film was to be screened. That is, cinemagoing used to have the very clear aim of 'watching a film'. However, in the age of the multiplex, the cinemagoing practice has changed in a way that people tend to go to multiplex without choosing any particular film beforehand. People are likely to go to a multiplex often located within a shopping mall to enjoy various leisure activities in a one-stop system. In other words, cinemagoing practice is *less* involved in watching a particular film, but includes various other dimensions such as the spatial experience of the mall and urbanism, conveyer belt-like leisure activity, and safer and secured spaces for family life. However, I hope to argue that cinemagoing never has been solely about 'watching a film' and has always been involved in other meanings and symbols such as a cultural practice. For example, in the 1960s, buying a cinema ticket in a Korean context signified modern experiences distinct from the poverty and harsh reality of everyday life, as well as youth cultural practices including the huge fandom of a few Korean film stars. Most working class individuals were willing to spend relatively high amounts not only for the film itself, but also the entire experience of travelling to a cinema that was usually located in the city centre, going into a relatively modern building and seeing other audiences and film stars there. Therefore, it has to be argued that cinemagoing practice has been historically reconstructed with different experiences and meanings, and the change in cinemagoing practice in the multiplex age may not completely rely on the significance of the film itself, but rather the whole range of meanings and experiences attached to cinemagoing practice which have been reconstituted based on the change in infrastructures from cinema hall to multiplex.

As I have explained briefly above, the rise of the local blockbuster is more or less a social and cultural phenomenon that involves industry, text and cinemagoing. In this sense, we could raise the questions as follows: what textual factors allow local audiences to achieve "reading competency"? To what extent does the multiplex boom and changing cinemagoing practice influence the textual characteristics of the Korean blockbuster? How do local audiences understand and define the characteristics of local

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<sup>6</sup> In British cultural studies tradition, so-called culturalists especially Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson emphasize the dynamic power of working class people and understand the popular culture as a domain of struggle and negotiation. Subsequently, several well-known cultural studies scholars such as Ang Ien and Janice Radway argue for the resistance of audiences and suggest the concept of 'active reading' in popular culture. In addition, Stuart Hall argues for the dynamic mechanism between text and reading via the concepts of 'decoding' and 'encoding'.

<sup>7</sup> During 1960s and 1970s, Korean cinema enjoyed unprecedented popularity in the domestic market, and the average number of cinema going in the 1960s was over 8 times per a year so that this time was called 'the golden age of Korean cinema'. The popularity of Korean cinema dramatically dropped from the late 1970s. From 1980s to the beginning of 1990s, Korean cinema was received very badly in domestic markets, but this time is also very well known as the "Korean New Wave" which shows artistic development of the cinema with realistic film languages.

blockbusters? Do they have different expectations towards local blockbusters distinguished from those of Hollywood? How does the local audience experience cinemagoing practice in a multiplex? Bearing these questions in mind, this project aims to investigate local blockbusters through a holistic approach and to search for the possibility of the regional blockbuster (cinema) within the nexus of the local, the regional and the global.

### **Fieldtrip in India:**

My fieldtrip in India was conducted from 18<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> of December 2012 in both Mumbai and Bangalore. It started by interviewing people in the Bollywood film industry, such as film festival organizers and film magazine editors from 19<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> of December to acquire basic information about the film industry. I also looked at various studios, cinema halls, and multiplexes in Mumbai. In Bangalore, I met several academics, film critics, and lawyers in cultural policy to discuss my research and to receive their views on Indian cinema, especially the Indian blockbuster in relation to the current boom of multiplex and changing cinemagoing practices among Indian audiences. Of course, I also looked around various cinema halls as well as multiplexes to gain an empirical sense of cinemagoing practice in India. It has to be said that such a short trip in India is certainly not enough to capture the whole picture of contemporary Indian cinema. Honestly speaking, even many Indian academics confess that they have been struggling to understand Indian cinema fully, composed of mainly four cinemas based on vernacular languages, Tollywood, Mollywood, Kollywood, and Bollywood, because of its wide diversity as well as the veiled basic information about the industry. This might be resulting from the long-standing history of the Indian film industry's links to the black market and the evolution of multi-channels of profit windows including multiple tiers of screen, music, DVD, satellite etc. However, the fieldtrip provide a good starting point to develop my research with a more comparative perspective and helped me in expanding my research to other local film industries starting with the Indian film industry, and later plans to include the Chinese film industry as a future project. More importantly, experiencing Indian cinema in this short visit could help me in applying the Indian case and its implications to research the Korean case in the wider context of Asian cinema in terms of the generic characteristics of local blockbusters, the role of the multiplex and the changing of cinemagoing practices that will be discussed further in the next sections.

### **Bollywood Blockbuster and Cinemagoing Practices**

The Indian film industry is decentralized in each region. However, Hindi-language films made in Mumbai, known as 'Bollywood', are probably the most widely viewed both in India and worldwide. That is the reason why I visited Mumbai to explore how the Bollywood film industry works and the current situation of Bollywood cinema since the widespread presence of multiplexes in Mumbai and across India. When I asked my interviewees in Mumbai about the Bollywood film industry, neither could manage to give accurate figures or information about the industry. This is partly due to the long tradition of the Indian film industry that has been composed of large numbers of small and independent

operators. Their ways of operating film production, distribution and exhibition are often badly organized with the dispersal of working capital and assets, and this invites the 'general assumption that many productions are simply money-laundering vehicles for independent financiers'<sup>8</sup>. However, the introduction of the multiplex has transformed the industry at a structural level, and even some people from within the industry argue that the history of Indian cinema should be distinguished by the moment the multiplex was introduced. That is, the multiplex represents a form of signal to Indian cinema becoming a systematic film industry as opposed to a 'disorganised' informal industry. It is also interesting that the operation of the five major multiplex chains, PVR Cinema Ltd, Adlabs Films Ltd, Shringar Cinemas Ltd, INOX Leisure Ltd and Fun Multiplex Pvt., are the first national exhibition chains that surpass the divisions of the four regional cinemas. More interestingly, the five multiplex chains expand their business to other sectors of the film industry especially production and distribution and seem to be heading to a vertical integration model<sup>9</sup>.



However, it seems that Indian cinema is still very much diverse and the ways the industry operates are by and large not structurally organized to any significant extent in terms of their inner mechanism. For example, the distribution network is limited by region and there are different distributors operating depending on mediums such as satellite, TV, DVD, video, internet streaming, etc. Film production companies tends to sell copyrights to different distributors before even making a film and then later hand the screening right in cinema to film distributors in each region. Distributors then start to work out whether this particular film should be shown in A, B and C circuits within the city (sometimes the film is simultaneously shown in all three circuits) and they also make a plan on how to distribute the film in the city as well as countryside, commonly categorized as major metros (Bangalore, Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata), the 'second-tier' such as Panaji and Baroda and the 'third-tier' cities. In this sense, each case would have different strategies or tactics to be released in India so that it is almost impossible to understand the structure of production, distribution and exhibition even in recent years. According to my interviewees, all acknowledge the changes brought about by multiplex in India film industry, but the ground breaking shift to a systematic film industry based on vertical integration still has a long way to go. Big cities called

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<sup>8</sup> Antique (2009) 'Leisure Capital in the New Economy: the Rapid Rise of the Multiplex in India', *Contemporary South Asia*, 17:2, p. 124

<sup>9</sup> Antique (2009) *ibid*, p.128

the first tier city have started to experience industrial and structural changes since the arrival of the multiplex, but the remainder still rely on traditional methods of releasing films.

In interview Raghavendra argues that there is a clear shift in Hindi film that creates the distinction between two types of films since the 2000s; the first is “Anglophonic” film; the other is “non-Anglophonic” film<sup>10</sup>. As a film studies scholar focusing on mainly film text, he argues that Anglophonic film delivers new elements in Hindi films such as the idea of aspiration, the demise of melodrama, and the strong ideology of consumerism replacing the strong morality that Hindi film had been delivering for a long time. Although he makes no clear connection between the shift in text and industrial change, it seems to be right to argue that Hindi film has been going through a new stage brought about by the emergence of middle class, more or less English speaking people, and increasing urbanization. In other words, new middle class people bring with them a strong need for new types of Hindi film in combination with the new urban experience of multiplex cinemagoing in. Indian audiences used to watch a film in a cinema no matter what class other cinemagoers belonged to (there are various types of tickets with different gate depending on classes). Given the long history of colonialism and class society, going to the cinema might be one of the first “classless” experience or even the experience of “citizenship” for Indian audience<sup>11</sup>. However, in recent years, the increasing numbers of the Indian middle class are willing to pay more than three times the price of a single screen cinema hall ticket<sup>12</sup> to be in a multiplex as well as for watching different types of film. Subsequently, film production needs to consider these new needs of the middle class and come up with ‘Anglophonic’ films, in Raghavendra’s term, which would be more suitable for the multiplex environment. This new environment brings with it another change in Indian cinema related to the ways that the commercial success of a film is defined. The number of days in screen or the number of full-audience days in screen used to be main yardsticks to confirm market response, but in recent years the total turnover of the film has become the means of checking how the film is received in the market. It shows that the importance of other profit windows is increased massively and screening in cinema may become a small part of the film’s overall turnover. However, it could be also possible to argue that film production is more willing to accommodate the middle class taste in film as multiplexes apparently make more turnovers due to the high ticket price.

Let me move to the terminology of the Indian blockbuster. Other interviewees argue that the distinction between the multiplex type of film and traditional- or single screen- type of film exists, but so-called the Indian blockbuster is about the ambition to break the distinction and to appeal to a mass audience. For example, *Dabang 1*<sup>13</sup> (Dir. Abhinav Kashyap, 2010) starring Salman Khan claims to be an ‘Indian blockbuster’ that actually appealed not only to English speaking audiences in multiplexes, but

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<sup>10</sup> He takes Salman Khan as a figure for “non-Anglophonic” film. He argues that most big stars in Bollywood are part of “Anglophonic” films, but Salman Khan using his troublemaker persona makes a few films which are not English speaking with strong sentiment for non-Anglophonic populations.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Lawrence Liang from the Alternative Law Forum. See also Liang (2005) and S.V. Srinivas (2000a & 200b)

<sup>12</sup> I paid 70 rupee for a single screen cinema hall, but the ticket price of multiplex (PVR in Mumbai) in daytime during weekdays is 300 rupee. Multiplexes provide different prices for weekend and for more luxurious seats (e.g. golden class) and specialized cinema such as 3D and 4D effects.

<sup>13</sup> When I visited Mumbai for fieldwork, *Dabang 2* (Dir. Arbaaz Khan, 2012) was just released and received fairly well in the first week of its release.

also non-English speaking audiences in traditional single screen theatres. *Dabang 1* produced in Hindi with big Bollywood stars was appealing to working class audiences; and the release of *Dabang 1* in multiplexes attracted many middle class audiences as well<sup>14</sup>. Coming to the terminology of the “Indian blockbuster”, it seems that to define “Indian blockbusters” in terms of textual and industrial levels is almost impossible given the characteristics of Indian cinema. Raghavendra argues that the blockbuster is not about text or industry, but refers to the “intention” to target for “mass profit”. Because of this, so-called the Indian blockbuster has a strong star element as the star’s guarantee often reaches to 30% of the total production cost so that the film can focus on ‘mass profit’ in order to recoup its big budget. In this sense, the terminology of the blockbuster in India is used for defining the market result of a film rather than its specific textual and industrial characteristics. In this sense, other interviewees agree with the importance of using the terminology ‘blockbuster’ in a more locally reflected way. One interviewee even argues that ‘blockbuster’ may not be a good framework to understand the big budget Indian cinema as some key characteristics of ‘blockbuster’ stemming from Hollywood do not fit into the Indian case. It might be reasonable to accept this claim as the Indian film industry does not seem to follow the Hollywood vertical integration model and the Bollywood star is rather too dominated by its own persona in big budget films compared to Hollywood. In addition, the phenomenology of Indian audiences towards Indian blockbusters may not be consistent as the Indian audience is relatively too heterogeneous because of diverse language, religion, class, and traditional norms including the caste system.

Another interesting area I have found in India is the cinemagoing practice among Indian audiences. Cinemagoing practices from cinema hall to multiplex have been well researched by various scholars with different views such as class and caste systems, urbanism, public and social space, architecture, and symbolic meaning using semiological perspectives<sup>15</sup>. These works admit that cinemagoing practices involve various dimensions such as modernity, political struggle, and economic value as well as watching a film itself. In this sense, cinemagoing practices emerge as more complex sites of society, culture, politics, and economy, and the dynamic interrelationship among the elements is historically reconstructed over time. If so, do the rise of the multiplex and the gradual decline of the cinema hall change the meaning of cinemagoing practice at all in the context of India? I would suggest mainly two changes in the time of the transition from cinema hall to multiplex in India.

Firstly, I have recognized the numbers of single screen cinema halls located in the centre of the two cities (Mumbai and Bangalore) are being demolished. This is partly because of the fact that A or B circuit cinemas hardly make profits from screening due to the increases in estate price and running costs<sup>16</sup>. Urbanisation and centralization regenerate cities and cinema halls mostly owned on an individual basis are being turned into malls, apartments, hospitals etc. The closing down of cinema halls signifies not only the changing nature of film exhibition but also, more importantly, the loss of cinemagoing rituals

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<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, the fieldtrip did not manage to get the detailed reasons why multiplexes chose *Dabang 1* to be widely screened. This should be investigated in the future.

<sup>15</sup> See Liang (2005), S.V. Srinivas(2000a, 2000b), Anthique (2009), Anthique and Hill (2010), Srinivas (2010), Rao(2007), Rajadhyaksah (2000), and Barthes, R(1986)

<sup>16</sup> Interview with academics in Bangalore

that have clearly been important factors in defining the characteristics of Indian cinema. For example, in cinema halls film audiences used to celebrate the release of a film with flowered signposts and colorful flags; audiences placed flower garlands on film stars' posters; and audiences also made various events depending on how many days a film was to be screened (e.g. silver jubilee, golden jubilee etc.) again with flowers and flags. That is, cinemagoing practice includes the characteristics of ritual that functioned to reinforce values and norms and to define identity. In this sense, the ritualistic behavior related to cinemagoing practice in India might have a linkage to Bollywood film's inclusion of strong morality and value. Film text and cinemagoing practice, in this sense, work together and are intertwined with one another. However, since the decline of single screen cinema halls in India, people tend to lose their rituals in cinemagoing which they have participated in for a long time. What are the consequences of this loss of ritual? This needs to be further researched.



Secondly, interestingly, almost all multiplexes have a security gate and guards to monitor audiences, and this clearly constructs a symbolic boundary between those who can gain entry to the multiplex and those who cannot. Most of multiplex audiences are middle class and mostly English speaking and it seems that the multiplex has become a public space for a certain class where they can feel more secure and identify themselves by seeing people from similar social positions. Although security guards do not check audiences in a very strict manner, ordinary Indian audiences would not feel comfortable when attempting to enter the cinema. Or even they manage to get into a cinema then they are required to behave like others. In this sense, going to the multiplex implies performing middle class'ness'. In addition, most of multiplexes are located within big shopping malls and therefore the multiplex blends with consumeristic space so that picking up a particular film becomes similar to buying a product in the mall. Participation and ritualistic values of cinemagoing practice fade away in multiplex environments.



Subsequently, Indian cinema loses the space for its diverse ritualistic features. Here possibly new types of Bollywood, whether Anglophonic or not as Raghavendra argues, could find room to become emerged and current textual changes in Indian cinema need to be elaborated in this context.

### Learning from Indian: Seeking for the possibility of the Asian blockbuster

As I have briefly discussed above, Indian cinema shares similarities as well as differences with Korean cinema. It seems that Indian cinema has rather distinctive industrial trajectories and direction and whether it will head towards a systematized industry similar to Hollywood and other local film industries or not is still unclear. However, the change in exhibition is visible and should bring some further changes to the industry. The rise of the middle class and urbanization are also important factors to be considered in this discussion. It might be true that the Korean cinema industry managed to transform itself within a short space of time due to its relatively small scale compared with India resulting in the rather interesting case of the Korean blockbuster. Given the comparative perspective of the two cinemas, however, I have come to several findings that might open a new scope for my future research.

First of all, the local blockbuster is seemingly a product of the mixture of generalized “Other”, Hollywood, and local conditions. Local conditions, for example class in India and the division of the two Koreas, has a great impact on local blockbusters in many ways. Of course, here I understand that Hollywood is neither unified object, nor American film industry. Rather, Hollywood might refer to a metaphor evoking a “set of expectations” that target the global market with high production quality<sup>17</sup>. In this sense, the emergence of local blockbuster is closely related to a local desire to become ‘the global’. Local blockbusters use local ingredients (story, character, star, settings, language) in rather exaggerated ways to claim that locality could become ‘the global’. That is, stereotypically “local” ingredients are represented and filled in the space of “local” that shows its desire to become a “blockbuster” which is almost equivalent to “Hollywood”. Bourdieu’s influential analysis of class might have an interesting implication here. Local blockbusters, like the middle class, could refer to the “aspiration” to become Hollywood, of which it is a follower and admirer. On the other hand, the Hollywood blockbuster seeks

<sup>17</sup> Foroohar, R., Seno, A., and Theil, S.(2002) ‘Hurray for Globowood’, *Newsweek International*, May 27: 51

for rarity (or creativity in the film studies sense) in the way the higher class would do. Followers cannot catch up as the front runner would run harder in order not to be caught up and, more importantly, the existence of a follower itself makes the frontrunners special. This will probably be the dynamic of the relationship between the local and the global, and the local and Hollywood blockbuster. If so, isn't there any possibility for local blockbuster to go beyond the relationship between the local and the global?

Korean blockbusters up to 2004 were caught up in the nexus of the local and the global, but the new possibility always emerges with surprise. One film called *The Host* (2006) changed the whole generic formula of Korean blockbusters, and audiences' understanding of the Korean blockbuster became diversified. *The Host* is the second most popular film in Korean film history with thirteen million ticket sales<sup>18</sup>. At the textual level, *the Host* betrays most of textual formulas of Korean as well as Hollywood blockbusters<sup>19</sup>; for example, the monster appears within first 10 minutes of the film; the monster comes up in daytime and open space (a riverside park), the girl who is kidnapped is killed in the end; the humour code is strangely mixed with suspense; sensitive social issues intermingle within the storyline. In addition, more importantly, this film is the first Korean blockbuster that does not deal with the issue of the confrontation of the two Koreas, and it causes many Korean audiences to transform their understanding of the Korean blockbuster. It is *the Host* that produces ambivalent characters that do not completely belong to either the Korean or Hollywood blockbuster. After the release of *the Host*, fewer films laid claim to being 'Korean blockbusters. The ambivalence in the Korean blockbuster brings more colors to Korean big budget films and introduces several sub-genres with distinctive and creative local characteristics such as action, disaster, historical epic style, and war blockbuster. That is, the trajectory of Korean blockbuster shows how the "aspiration" of local cinema becomes a driving force to enrich its inner features.

Another direction of the local blockbuster would be its possible stretch towards regional blockbuster. If *the Host* blurs the distinction between the local and the global with its textual features, another interesting change I notice is the rise of a regional cinematic imagination in recent Korean blockbusters. Since *the Host*, several Korean blockbusters attempted to reflect the scale of Asia in terms of settings, characters and story, none of them were received very well. However, *the Thieves* (Dir. Choi, Dong-Hoon, 2012) managed to become the first to accrue box-office sales of fourteen million tickets. The film shows various locations, Seoul and Busan (Korea), Hongkong, Taipei (Taiwan), Singapore, and Macao as well as actors from several Asian countries, Hongkong, Taiwan, and, of course, Korea. Languages in the film also vary from Korean, Cantonese, Japanese, and English. The film was sold to Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, Hong Kong and China and plans are made for its release in the US and Canada in 2013. From the beginning, the film targets to Asian markets and the cinematic imagination of Asia in the film reflects the interconnectedness of locals within Asia. However, despite the cinematic imagination of Asia, production and distribution operated more or less at a national level. A Korean major production company, Showbox (with Megabox multiplex chain), invests production costs and uses its own

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<sup>18</sup> This record is based on the 2012 Annual Statistic Data of Korean Film industry provided by Korean Film Council, [www.kofic.gov.kr](http://www.kofic.gov.kr); A new film, *Berlin* (Dir. Ryu, Seung Wan, 2013), has just released in Korea, and it breaks all records of ticket sales so far. It seems that *Berlin* will become the first in ticket sales among Korean blockbusters.

<sup>19</sup> I will not go further on the textual analysis of the *Host* in this paper due to the limit of space.

distribution pipeline. For distributing in Asian countries, Showbox sells a copyright to local distributors. Even though the film contains so much transnational and Asian elements, the film is not produced and distributed in a transnational way. However, I believe that this film could be a stepping stone for further change. The huge success of *the Thieves* may invite more attempts to produce films which could be more transnational across Asia. However, I have to admit that the possibility of a regional level of cinematic imagination may have significant obstacles. As Chua argues, analysis of Asian popular culture needs to consider 'the uneven presence of the different locations in production, distribution, and conception'<sup>20</sup>. Different and unequal positions in production, distribution and consumption, makes it difficult to imagine a 'regional blockbuster'. It could be possible that more vibrant transnational cooperation within Asia might be able to *produce* more regional films, but different and unequal distribution and consumption would keep the uneven cultural geography in Asia. Despite of this, I still believe that the importance of the regional blockbuster should be discussed in terms of its role of bringing more dynamism into the nexus between the local and the global. Regional blockbusters (specifically Asian blockbusters) would have the power to dislocate the mechanism in which the local blockbuster identifies itself via the perspective of Hollywood. This is why we need to talk about the regional and Asia in particular in the context of film. Of course, we all agree that Asia as a region does not exist as a homogenous entity, and the Asian blockbuster does not mean to represent essentialized characteristics of the region. Rather Asia would provide an alternative epistemological ground to confront the Western-dominated discourses of the local and the global. In other words, bringing 'Asia/Third World as method' would 'multiply frames of reference and sites for identification'<sup>21</sup>. Then the last research questions might come up here. If we need the regional cinema and we will be able to produce it, what *should* it be? This question will be remained unanswered for the future project.

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<sup>20</sup> Chua, Beng Huat (2007) 'Conceptualizing an East Asian Popular Culture' in Chen, Kuan-Hsing and Chua, Beng Huat (eds.) *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, p. 120

<sup>21</sup> Chen, Kuan-Hsing and Chua, Beng Huat (2007) *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, p. 1

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