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Lisa - Marie Spaethen

*Chapman University*, [spaethen@chapman.edu](mailto:spaethen@chapman.edu)

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Bong Joon-Ho's Transnational Challenge To Eurocentrism

A Thesis by

Lisa – Marie Spaethen

Chapman University

Orange, CA

Dodge College of Film and Media Arts

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Film Studies

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Committee in charge

Chair: Dr. Kelli Fuery

Dr. Nam Lee

Dr. Erica Agüero

The thesis of Lisa – Marie Spaethen is approved.



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Chair: Dr. Kelli Fuery



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Dr. Nam Lee



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Dr. Erica Agüero

April 2020

Bong Joon-Ho's Transnational Challenge To Eurocentrism

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ABSTRACT  
Bong Joon-Ho's Transnational Challenge To Eurocentrism

by Lisa – Marie Spaethen

Through a narrative analysis of three of Bong Joon-ho's films: *The Host* (2006), *Snowpiercer* (2013), and *Okja* (2017), this thesis explores the impact of global media flow of transnational cinema, foregrounding its potential to convey broader (but more effective) social and ecological political messages through its wider reach to audiences. Each film selected highlights a specific aspect of transnational cinema – postcolonial transnationalism (Shohat and Stam, 1994), transnational odor (Koichi Iwabuchi, 2002), and ecocinema transnationalism (Kääpä Pietari, 2013) - illustrating the fluidity of cinema in the 21st century and further, the unique position Netflix holds in our contemporary mediascape as a global producer and distributor. Netflix is disrupting the traditional cinema system, offering its users worldwide the possibility to watch films and series on demand from home.

Using Homi. L. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's theories this thesis will show how Bong Joon-ho's films destabilize the Eurocentric perspective of traditional cinema. Moreover, it will become clear how the transnational character of Bong Joon-ho's films and their form of distribution have the potential to engender deconstructive viewing positions, and by doing so, challenge Eurocentric perspectives.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Understanding Transnational Cinema Possibilities in Post Cinema and Postcolonial Era.....	8
<i>The Host</i> (2006) - Of Foreign Influences and Finding a National Identity.....	14
<i>Snowpiercer</i> (2013) - A Blockbuster That Does Not Smell Like Hollywood.....	20
<i>Okja</i> (2017) - A Netflix Original in Global Context.....	29
Conclusion.....	35
Bibliography.....	37

## **Bong Joon-Ho's Transnational Challenge To Eurocentrism**

*Sometimes it is not really an issue of just theme, it's also an issue of when a movie comes out and what it has to say, and I think there is no better time than now for something like [Okja]... the platform of a film, how far [a film] can reach, and to how many people it can get to communicate a message is extraordinarily important.*  
(Jake Gyllenhaal, Festival de Cannes 2017)

During a press conference in Cannes 2017 for the transnational Netflix Original film *Okja* (Bong Joon-ho, 2017) directed by the South Korean director Bong Joon-ho, Jake Gyllenhaal highlighted the film's contemporary value and importance of global distribution made possible by Netflix's digital platform. More than ever, streaming distribution platforms allow films to transcend geographic borders and reach global audiences. If we understand cinema and television as forms of cultural expression, we can see how streaming platforms enable different national perspectives and ideas to circulate. It is arguable that this circulation of different cultural products creates a transnational flow as it enables audiences to engage with ideas and perspectives outside of their usual meaning systems.

In a critical roundtable hosted by Austin Fischer and Robert Smith, held through the Society for Cinema and Media Studies in 2016, a group of renown film and media scholars debated the question "What is your definition of 'transnational cinema'?" hoping to address the diversity that exists within the scholarship. Elizabeth Ezra responded that "the concept of transnationalism enables us to better understand the changing ways in which the contemporary world is being imagined by an increasing number of filmmakers across genres as a global system rather than as a collection of more or less autonomous nations" (Fischer and Austin 7). Ezra notes transnational cinema identifies a global system and flow and through this builds a connection between countries. Andrew Higson noted "the term [transnational] can signify the ways in which

audiences in different national contexts engage with and make sense of the films they watch” (Fischer and Smith 14). Both comments show how the concept of transnationalism builds an understanding of media flow in the 21st century and its consequences for a global audience. In *Transnational Cinema: An Introduction*, Steven Rawle (2018) argues transnational cinema is difficult to define due to the many different perspectives of production, distribution, exhibition, and narrative, that construct diverse cinematic language with respect to transnationality (Rawle, 2018).

Through a narrative analysis of three of Bong Joon-ho’s films: *The Host* (Bong Joon-ho, 2006), *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-ho, 2013), and *Okja*, this thesis explores the impact of global media flow of transnational cinema, foregrounding its potential to convey broader (but more effective) social and ecological political messages through its wider reach to audiences. Each film selected highlights a specific aspect of transnational cinema – postcolonial transnationalism, transnational odor, and ecocinema transnationalism - illustrating the fluidity of cinema in the 21st century and further, the unique position Netflix holds in our contemporary mediascape as a global producer and distributor. Netflix is disrupting the traditional cinema system, offering its users worldwide the possibility to watch films and series on demand from home. Furthermore, Netflix users have access to a wide variety of international content, the combination of which has not been previously available in a single channel via cable television networks. Amanda Lotz explains how online streaming portals, such as Netflix deconstruct borders. “The international reach of several portals further destabilizes nation and geographic proximity that were reasonably assumed of the cultural role of previous television distribution technologies” (Lotz, 2017, p.58). As we can see here, Netflix can be understood as a platform that brings together multiple perspectives from all over the world. This enables audiences to broaden their perspectives outside their national borders and gives directors the chance to present their work on a global level.



Bong Joon-ho, a South Korean director who emerged in the late 1990s, holds a special perspective that is influenced by South Korea's history. After over a century of cultural oppression via different occupation phases, a division between Korea's communist North and capitalist South, and following a military dictatorship South Korea, the social and political climate started to calm down with the election of Roh Tae-woo in 1988. This also affected the Renaissance of South Korean cinema in the late 1990s. Filmmakers finally were able to make films without political censorship (Kim, 2006). In response to this relaxing of cinematic censorship, a group of young filmmakers emerged, most of whom who would grow to become very influential and globally well-known: Park Chan-wook, Kim Jee-woon, and Bong Joon-ho. These young filmmakers came in contact with a wide variety of Hollywood genre films through US military television channels. As Christina Klein explains, Bong's "transaction with Hollywood consisted of assembling the 'Lego pieces' of the crime film and the monster movie in new ways that both signify his films' kinship with an established body of Hollywood films and accommodate the specific Korean realities (...). He uses global Hollywood's language of genre to tell uniquely Korean stories." (Christina Klein, 2008, p. 874). The genre hybridity of Bong's films enables them to challenge the Eurocentric perspective by putting narrative structures into a new perspective as well as gives them the ability to cross borders as the narrative structures of Hollywood genre films are understandable for a wide variety of different audiences.

Higson identifies Hollywood as an international role model for filmmaking, claiming that even though its perspective is a Eurocentric one, Hollywood's global influence on filmmakers with respect to narrative structure, style, ideology, and genre is undeniable (Higson, 1989). Todd Berliner states that "mass audiences tend to enjoy especially uniform and unified artworks that are easily understood" (Berliner, 2017, p. 16). Hollywood's aim in creating films is to offer its audiences a complete and coherent film experience. The storytelling devices make it easy to

follow causal connections and are supported by stylistic devices that establish a fluent motion between time and space. Berliner (2017) argues that Hollywood films offer a simple worldview which facilitates easy interpretation for audiences and guides their feelings and this supports the genre system's promise to audiences - a certain narrative structure can be relied upon to meet expectations of familiar characters, settings, and scenarios.

Bong Joon-ho's films are not simply universal products, but multivocal stories that illustrate a complex global flow of ideas, messages, production, and distribution practices. While other South Korean filmmakers can be listed who emerged from the same background as Bong, Bong's cinematic work stands out due to his international success and the commercial character of his films which makes them attractive to a broad audience. The main contention of this thesis is how the transnational approaches in Bong Joon-ho's filmmaking and distribution have engendered deconstructive viewing positions, and by doing so, have challenged Eurocentric perspectives. Looking at Bong's films, this thesis argues transnationality itself is reflective of an always changing and developing nature which adapts to its time, while always working towards a creation of flow of different cinema cultures.

The thesis begins by building a strong theoretical foundation that illustrates the still existing problems of a Eurocentric perspective in filmmaking and distribution, as well as the possible solutions that transnational approaches to filmmaking offer. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam stress the importance of changing the Eurocentric perspectives in films for our contemporary mass media. Shohat and Stam explain "if the culture of empire authorized the pleasure of seizing ephemeral glimpses of its "margins" through travel and tourism, the nineteenth-century invention of the photographic and later the cinematographic camera made it possible to record such glimpses" (Shohat and Stam, 1994, p. 104). The camera set out to document foreign countries and brought the captured pictures back home to the West. There the pictures of foreign countries,

cultures, and people pleased the voyeurism of the Western audience towards the exotic ‘Other’ and helped to build a shared feeling of community from a Western perspective. Those elements which separate the Western audience from an exotic ‘Other’ are still found in today’s Hollywood cinema. Stuart Hall’s (1997) analysis on the representation of the ‘Other’ identifies where the problematic of those existing colonial perspectives and their influence lies. Film can have a huge impact on how we see and position ourselves and others in our society. “Representation is a complex business and, especially when dealing with ‘difference’, it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer.” (Hall, 1997, p.226).

Colonial perspectives uphold negative ideas of racial and cultural differences and through this support an unfair power relationship. Combining those theoretical concepts, I discuss how transnational cinema and its shifting relationship between national and global film culture offers possibilities for a positive change for still existing colonial perspectives in our post-cinema era.

The three key transnational approaches to illustrate this include, 1) the postcolonial cinema, 2) transnational “odor”, and 3) the notion of an ‘ecocinema’. Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim outline the cultural formations and representations within films that were produced in a diasporic and/or postcolonial context, thematizing how foreign cultures have to deal with new cultural surroundings and being in the middle of a merging process (Higbee and Lim, 2010). Such films must focus on the representation of the different cultures within the film’s diegesis in order to be able to show how transnationality (through the combination and merging of national cinematics) occurs. The people and culture of Korea experienced during the time of the Japanese colonialism and following US-American occupation damage and trauma. Higbee and Lim’s theory of transnational film of postcolonial countries is, therefore, applicable here. Through close narrative analysis of *The Host*, I illustrate how Bong Joon-ho’s national origins as a filmmaker have influenced his style, developing a genre-bending aesthetic. This case study will situate South

Korea's film history and further position Bong as a filmmaker who was emerged in a time in which South Korean filmmakers were able to make films without censorship and governmental regulation for the first time. Drawing on the respective works of Christina Klein (2008) and Chung Hye Seung (2015), I argue how *The Host* is a mixture of Korean national identity and foreign cinematic influences of Japan and the United States. I examine how the film represents the relationship between the South Korean 'us' and the global American 'other' as a David vs. Goliath fight on a socio-political level (Chung 2015). At the same time, *The Host's* national specific themes will lead into a discussion through which the developing and fluid relationship between transnational and national becomes apparent.

The concept of cultural odor was first introduced by Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) in the context of the expansion of Japanese products onto the global market. The term odor usually refers to an unpleasant smell and can implicate a distinction between oneself and the Other. Smells that are pleasant or not noticeable are accepted by us, while odors are referred to as something that is not welcomed. Iwabuchi explains that his term of the "cultural odor" refers to the characteristics of products that give us a hint to their cultural heritage (Iwabuchi, 2002). The "cultural odor" would turn into a fragrance from a Eurocentric perspective. I will develop this concept further. I will show how the odorlessness of Bong's films do not erase a national heritage or perspective in his films. Much more, it will become clear how the concept of the cultural odor can help transnational films to travel and interesting for a global audience to watch, while at the same time integrates new perspectives into the audiences meaning systems. As Rawle states "the transnational has been conceived as a concept that destabilizes former binaries and the neat borders between nations and identities that Eurocentrism constructed so problematically" (Rawle, 2018, p. 12). Rawle's view of transnational functionality helps to link Iwabuchi's and Hall's theories, particularly in term of how hybridity is the key of transnational cinema that enables it to

cross borders (2018). I discuss this hybridization of Korean and Hollywood convention further through an analysis of *Snowpiercer*. As Ye Dam Yi states “while the production and distribution model easily make it a blockbuster movie, it is difficult to position *Snowpiercer* in the heritage of Korean blockbuster, and, needless to say, in that of Hollywood blockbusters” (Yi, 2014, p. 20). To further explore *Snowpiercer*’s missing cultural heritage I will connect previously explored transnational characteristics of Bong’s cinematic language, a hybridization of Hollywood genre conventions and South Korean specific themes, with the content and production of *Snowpiercer*. Through this, I will show how the film fits into Iwabuchi’s term of ‘odorless’ transnationalism.

Developing Iwabuchi’s conception of ‘cultural odor’ further, I analyze Bong’s films within the wider context of ecocinema. As Kiu Wai Chu (2016) explains ecocinema studies cover “environmental ethics and aesthetics; environmental justice studies; animal studies; pollution and toxic discourses; health, food and sustainability; posthumanism” (Kiu, 2016, p. 2). While ecocinema does not address one specific country, it does address the need for cinema to be seen in a wider context of global issues and problems that are shared worldwide. Based on these two key theoretical concepts, this thesis examines how such films, like Bong Joon-ho’s, gain traits to travel globally and why these films require global platforms. In conclusion, I argue how this provides a critical challenge to cinema’s predominant Eurocentric perspective. Song Hwee Lim explains that *Okja*’s contemporary importance as a transnational ecocinema film lays in presenting the “relationships between humans and nature, critical animal studies, environmental injustice towards ethnic minorities and nonhuman subjects, environmental problems, and ecological disasters” (Song, 2019, p. 6). These themes that they share are contemporary issues that often have a global impact. Furthermore, Song states that transnationality works in ecocinema as a useful synergy, providing ‘openness to diversity and difference’ and maintains “awareness if the contradictory and multidirectional forms of the rhetoric of which contemporary

film culture consists” (2019, p. 6). The final case study of *Okja* returns to Gyllenhaal’s statement, highlighting the significance of media platforms that have a global reach for transnational films. Though Netflix and other online streaming providers have disrupted cinema and television as we used to know it, they also enable possible of growth of the medium by adapting to a world in which we all are affected by globalization.

### **Understanding Transnational Cinema Possibilities in Post Cinema and Postcolonial Era**

Stuart Hall (1997) explains how stereotypes and biases in our modern mass media trace back to times of colonial expansion of Western countries. Those stereotypes and biases are a dominant method of communicating colonialist imperatives, that is the glory and justification of expansion and the oppression of native peoples and their culture. As Hall explains, we can communicate with each other because we broadly share the same concepts through which we make sense of the world around us and give things meaning (1997). He writes as “we interpret the world in roughly similar ways, we are able to build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together.” (1997, p. 4). By assigning such concepts to forms of representation that we can share (for example via words or images), we create symbolic systems of meaning within our culture that establish and sustain communication exchange. For Hall, culture depends on giving things meaning by assigning them to different positions within a classification system. Difference is fundamental to build a cultural meaning and identity (Hall 1997). The problem lies not in the difference itself but in naturalizing differences by referring culture to nature and making it something that signifies race. If the difference is defined by culture, then it is open for modification and change; if it is ‘natural,’ they are born with it and one species wins over the other (1997).

Homi K. Bhabha argues “postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 171). He demands a change of this perspective, explaining the postcolonial perspective forces us to acknowledge how cultural and political identities are constructed through a process of alterity (1994). The postcolonial perspective is rooted in historical events in which Third World countries and minorities were occupied by a Western ‘White Power’. Western contemporary cinema cultures developed from an occupying perspective, and still contain images and representations from these film periods because they have been deeply established into entertainment media culture.

Shohat and Stam discuss how cinema became a tool to tell stories of success concerning the imperialism of Third World countries and through this strengthened a conception of European and Neo-European countries to share common origins, locations, and aspirations (Shohat & Stam, 1994). They explain that the leading countries of film-production during the silent period (Britain, France, the US, and Germany) also were the leading imperialist countries with a clear interest to promote their colonial expansion (1994). Cinema in the 20th century developed at a moment in history when there was a desire to spread enthusiasm for the imperial project “beyond the elites into the popular strata, partly thanks to popular fictions and exhibitions” (1994, p. 100). As such, cinema helped to strengthen an identification of what it means to be West and created a shared perspective of the ‘Other’ which would justify unfair power relationships and conquering. This start of early film production set the tone for the future where racial and bias representations became established in Western film culture. While contemporary Western cinema may not consciously promote a gap between colonizing West and the colonized ‘Other’, a Eurocentric perspective remains its toxic legacy.

Shohat and Stam's solution is to engender a shift from eurocentrism to polycentric multiculturalism. Stating that the world has many dynamic cultural locations, they call for multiple, pluralist, and hybrid perspectives of seeing the world (Shohat & Stam, 1994). Transnational approaches to film production and distribution might be the key to the change required for the deconstruction of the Eurocentric perspective. In defining transnational cinema, Hjort states "what is needed, in my view, is not some stipulative definition that strictly rules out certain possible meanings of the term 'transnational', but a detailed typology that links the concept of transnational to different models of cinematic production, each motivated by specific concerns and designed to achieve particular effects" (Hjort 15). In Hjort's view, there must be many different types of cinematic transnationalism which are hybrids based on distinct national elements such as norms like solidarity, friendship, innovation, or social and political progress (Hjort 15). If we accept that transnational film, at its core, allows a cultural flow and fusion of different cinema cultures while staying flexible in its form, we can see that transnational film provides room for diversity and difference and challenges fixed stereotypes and biases. By creating a dynamic and multicultural perspective of the world transnational film offers the possibility to challenge the existing Eurocentric view.

In the thesis epigraph, Gyllenhaal highlights the important link between distribution and *Okja's* theme that is not solely meant for a festival audience, rather it is meant to be seen by a global audience. Without an audience, films lack impact. While festivals are significant platforms that generate awareness and visibility, helping many international filmmakers gain international and national recognition, their films are often fairly unknown to a wider audience. The accessibility of transnational films is therefore vital for their ability to deconstruct a Eurocentric perspective. Netflix, as an online streaming platform, provides its global audience a huge variety of different content from all over the world. Though we do have to keep in mind that Netflix uses algorithms



to profile its users and through this limits the variety and diversity of content advertised to them, Netflix still collects all those different contents on one platform and makes it possible for its users to access it on demand.

Netflix challenges conventional cinema as an institution but also, from a post-television perspective, it combines and challenges both medium's interests. In this context, Netflix can be understood as a transnational producer and distributor as it brings together a huge diversity of voices through different entertainment formats and contents on one spot easily accessible for its users worldwide. Like Gray and Lotz (2011), Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch explain that television should be understood as an ongoing cultural process. They argue:

A cultural basis for the analysis and criticism of television is, for us, the bridge between a concern for television as communications medium, central to contemporary society, and television as aesthetic object, the expressive medium that, through its storytelling functions, unites and examines a culture.

(Newcomb and Hirsch 2011, p. 561).

Their position echoes Hall's emphasis on the interrelationship of representation, power, and identity and illustrates how the normative identity of television as a medium of only popular culture has been able to be disrupted. Television in the 21st century facilitates awareness of the global multiplicity of voices. As Hall explains, culture is not able to be fixed into one definition or concept. Culture constantly evolves and adapts to new influences as it responds to political, social, and economic trends that do not stand constant (Hall, 1997). Television, as a medium, is a part of culture while at the same is creating culture.

Jeremy Butler states that television is a polysemic medium, containing multiple meanings and voices (Butler 2007). He explains that television needs to be understood as a text which is able to contain multiple meanings. As he explains, the power of polysemy lies in its ability to present

“conflicting meanings reside within the same program and facilitate the viewing pleasure of a broad range of individuals. With so many different meanings being signified, we are bound to find some that agree with our world view “(Butler, 2007, p. 10). As television is primarily episodic, structured in blocks (with each block being able to be another genre and type of program), these blocks are combined creating the language television makers use to communicate with their audience. Depending on the chosen cinematic and narrative style, not all those blocks contain the same meaning and are of different strength, which enables television to represent different voices. In addition to this, the audience's background shapes his or her understanding of what they see on screen and what they choose to watch in the first place (Butler 2007). Butler’s discussion of television’s polysemy addresses network area television as well as Netflix’s own polysemic character. With respect to Netflix, the concept of polysemy extends far beyond a national broadcast content, as Netflix offers and produces content all over the world. Through television’s polysemic character we can understand that Netflix functions as a cultural platform that has the ability to create a flow of different voices that offer a wide spectrum of audiences the possibility to identify with the happenings on screen.

We need to understand Netflix not only from a perspective that challenges conventional cinema as an institution but also from a post television perspective as it combines and challenges both medium’s interests. In this context, Netflix can be understood as a transnational producer and distributor as it brings together a diversity of voices through varying entertainment formats and contents via a single vector easily accessible for its users worldwide. A Eurocentric perspective in film and television is upheld through an imbalanced relationship between the represented voices and perspectives in film and television. To challenge this, new and diverse voices need to become integrated into the available content.

As Bhabha states “postcolonial critical discourses require forms of dialectical thinking that do not disavow or sublimate the otherness (alterity) that constitutes the symbolic domain of psychic and social identification” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 173). The transnational flow of diverse cultures, ideas, and meanings have the potential to deconstruct eurocentrism. Netflix polysemy includes cultural products from all over the world. It makes it possible for directors to present their work and perspectives towards a world audience. We will see how films like those of Bong Joon-ho, which discuss socio-political issues in the context of globalization, profit from this distribution model while at the same time challenge eurocentrism.

The next part of this thesis examines three aspects of transnationalism in order to illustrate how Eurocentric perspectives are deconstructed through Bong Joon-ho’s films and the specific streaming platform of Netflix. Via three case studies, *The Host*, *Snowpiercer*, and *Okja*, this thesis will show how the transnational character of Bong’s films challenges the Eurocentric perspective. In *The Host* we will first discuss how postcolonial transnationalism breaks with Eurocentrism by taking the invaders’ cinematic influence and using it for their own purposes in order to develop national forms of cinematic expression. The case study on *Snowpiercer* will focus on the film’s transnational ‘odor’ which enables the film to travel across its national borders by combining national specific traits with the production style and narrative structure of Hollywood blockbuster films. Finally, *Okja* addresses the relevance of ecocinema, which deviates from national specifics and thematizes the effects of globalization as a global interest. We will see how Netflix, as a product of globalization, creates a cultural platform that represents diverse perspectives and challenges the Eurocentric perspective.

## ***The Host* (2006) - Of Foreign Influences and Finding a National Identity**

*The Host* tells the story of Gang-du who tries to save his daughter Hyun-seo who gets kidnapped by a giant mutated creature. The monster emerges from the Han River is the outcome of the negligence of the American military. Throughout the film, Gang-du keeps getting into trouble with US military officials and which ultimately prevents him from saving his daughter. As a result, Hyun-seo is killed by the monster. Higbee and Lim explain, that the protagonist of postcolonial cinema often inhabits “the relationship between the host and the home cultures” and the question “fixed ideas of a national film culture being transformed by the presence of protagonists (...) who have a presence within the nations, even if they exist on its margins, but find their origins quite clearly beyond it” (Higbee and Lim, 2010, p. 11).

In 2010 Higbee and Lim offer three main approaches for defining transnational cinema. First, how is transnationality defined through the movement of film production, distribution, and exhibition? Second, how is transnationality defined through exploring regional cinema of neighboring countries which share a cultural heritage (e.g. Nordic cinema)? The third approach considers cultural formations and representations which were produced in a diasporic or postcolonial context. Such films narrativize how foreign cultures have to deal with new cultural surroundings and being in the middle of a merging process (Higbee and Lim, 2010). Bhabha explains that culture under the experience of social marginality becomes a strategy of survival which gives us a feeling of ‘selfhood’. He further explains that culture as a strategy of survival is transnational “because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement.” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 172). It, therefore, is crucial to

distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experience (...) and the social specificity of each of these productions of meaning as they circulate as signs within specific of each of these productions of meanings as they

circulate as signs within specific contextual locations and social systems of value (1994, p. 172).

Postcolonial cinema expresses the host and the invader at the same time as the invader becomes a part of the host's own everyday life. Culture at this moment becomes a way to survive under new and harsh social conditions. Higbee and Lim, therefore, require "a critical understanding of political imbalances as well as the unstable and shifting identifications between host/home, individual/community, global/local and, indeed, national/transnational" (Higbee and Lim, 2010, p. 12.) *The Host* is used here to focus on the third approach as a synecdoche of contemporary South Korean cinema and Bong's cinematic character, illustrating how it has developed out of a colonial state mentality.

Looking at South Korean film history over the last hundred years we can see that South Korean filmmakers contributed to creating a shared feeling of national identity expressed via cinema as a reaction to foreign cinematic influences. Even though South Korea has never been a colony under Western European rule Korea is a postcolonial country as it had been around thirty-five years colonized by Japan. When Japan lost in WWII the colonial oppression ended and was followed by an US-American occupation. The Korean people suffered during this time from immense cultural damage. Higbee and Lim's theory of transnational film of postcolonial countries is, therefore, applicable to South Korea. Cinema and photography were initially introduced to South Korea in the late 1890s, being established in Korea during the Japanese occupation starting with the Eulsa Treaty through which Korea lost any diplomatic power to Japan in 1905 and was later fully annexed by Japan in 1910 (Shin and Yecies, 2011). With the takeover of power by Japan, a forceful oppression of culture and the degrading of Koreans as "colonial subjects and second-class citizens" (2011, p.42) followed. Though Filmmakers were

supported by the government financially and technically they had to face harsh censorship which effected their creative freedom and political expression (2011).

Christina Klein describes the climax scene of *The Host* as “a perfect mix of global and local, of Hollywood conventions and Korean realities” (Klein, 2008, p. 887). Bong’s film *The Host* expresses very well the fusion between Hollywood genre conventions and specifically South Korean realities through the chosen thematic, genre tropes, and underlying socio-political discussion. *The Host* demonstrates a transnational perspective that exemplifies South Korean cinema as a product of hybrid influences that can be found in postcolonial cinema.

*The Host* is a genre hybrid of the monster, horror, and comedy genres and creates a film in which the director uses the mutated monster as an entry into a wider discussion that critically reflects on the relationship between South Korea, Japan, and the United States. Chung Hye-seung states:

with its dialogic ability to denote parasitic feeding while connoting a country or area that provides services for a competition or event (as Seoul did in 1988, the year South Korea hosted the Summer Olympics), the term “host” is thus doubly evocative, a fitting indexical referent that brings additional socio-political relevance to the film’s “David-vs.-Goliath” scenario (Chung, 2015, p. 149).

Chung argues Bong’s use of genre is necessary to express the complicated relationship between America and South Korea. Bong breaks conventional Hollywood genres, bending them together, and in doing so applies a Korean perspective to the story. Through this Bong deviates from the well-oiled Hollywood genre formats which inhabit stereotypical representations and conceptual meanings, the result of which is a challenge to Eurocentric perspectives. As a filmmaker, he emerged from a time of oppression, where filmmakers were finally able to freely express themselves after nearly a century of occupation and military dictatorship. Bong, as a part of the

South Korean Cinema Renaissance, is, therefore, taking part in the creation of a shared national feeling through cinema after it has developed from a colonial like state. This becomes even more evident in *The Host* as it does not only stand in context with the South Korean US- American relationship but through the combined use of the monster film genre and the Japanese Gojira, it pluralizes possible interpretations thereby engendering cinematic transnationality.

As Chung explains, the Japanese monster genre can be understood as a typical anti-American film (Chung, 2015). After the 1945 Hiroshima attack, Gojira became a role model for the kaiju eiga genre and expressed a widespread paranoia related to future atomic attacks. Chon Noriega gives a detailed psychoanalysis of *Gojira* film series which illustrates the complex relationship between Japan and the United States alluded to in the film. He states that Gojira provides “an opportunity to challenge our constructions of the self and the Other” (Noriega, 1987, p 64). The monster Gojira represents the United States as the ‘Other’, but while the ‘Other’ from a Eurocentric position is mainly represented in harmful ways - clearly dividing between an ‘us’ and ‘them’ - Noriega’s analysis regarding the Japanese representation of the ‘Other’ has “a strong tendency to overcome this distinction by having the self-immersed itself in the other” (1987, p. 68). Therefore, Gojira symbolizes the ‘Other’ as the United States and Japan at the same time.

We can see that the monster subgenre is having its origin in Japanese and American popular culture. Korea was colonized by Japan and after liberation in 1945, South Korea was occupied by the United States while North Korea was occupied by U.S.S.R which eventually led to the national division between communist North and capitalist South. After the occupation period, South Korea’s relationship with the U.S. took a form of neo-colonialism. Although the film adopts a completely different narrative structure, just by using a similar monster as Gojira, Bong creates an underlying relationship triangle between the United States, Japan, and Korea. Bong’s monster stands in a context in which it represents the United States and Japan alike as the

monster subgenre to which it belongs emerged out of both national cinema cultures. The monster's origin, similar to Gojira's, is caused by an incident in which, through a foreign influence and demonstration of power, water gets polluted out of which the monster emerges. The monsters attack mainly hits civilians of the middle and lower class while the own government seems to be useless. Through this, it is arguable that *The Host* can be read as a representation of the power relationship between the Korean people and its foreign invaders.

Therefore, through *The Host*, Bong uses the Japanese monster genre and its underlying cultural meaning to tell a story from a Korean perspective. Through this fusion of Japanese and American cinematic characteristics and reflection of the Korean trauma through occupation, *The Host* becomes a transnational film that represents a cultural identity and challenges foreign norms. As Higbee and Lim state, transnational postcolonial cinemas aim to “challenge the western (neocolonial) construct of nation and national culture and, by extension, national cinema as stable and Eurocentric in its ideological norms as well as its narrative and aesthetic formations” (Higbee and Lim, 2010, p. 9). Lucia Nagib argues that we should not differentiate between what is Hollywood cinema and what is “alternative” or “different” cinema when it comes to films produced outside of the Hollywood system (Nagib, 2006). Nagib views world cinema as the cinema of the world in which “Hollywood and the West would cease to be the center of film history” and where “the idea of a single center is eliminated, nothings needs to be excluded from the world cinema map, not even Hollywood” (2006, p. 34). Such a perspective challenges us to see all cinema cultures as equally represented. As Rawle explains, Nagib's approach works toward a polycentric and pluralistic perspective on and in film (Rawle 2018). Moreover, it positions Hollywood within this framework, albeit not in its usual centrist position. To deconstruct Eurocentrism does not mean to exclude Hollywood and Western cinema, but to work towards a film language and culture which allows diversity and aims towards a multiplicity of



voices while at the same time is appealing towards a wide audience. The transnational character of *The Host* can be understood as post-colonial as it challenges the Eurocentric perspective by bending multiple Hollywood genres and Japanese popular film culture together and applying a narrative which message is mainly directed towards a South Korean specific audience. Through this Bong used a cinematic language derivative of a Hollywood aesthetic which often represents a Eurocentric viewing position and applied to it a South Korean perspective. *The Host* shows, therefore, that cinema as an expression and representation of culture is changeable and fluid.

*The Host* can be seen as a transnational product through the merge of foreign influences with national perspectives, exemplifying Higbee and Lim's perspective of a postcolonial cinema that challenges Eurocentrism. But even though *The Host* was a record-breaker that surpassed the Korean box office of Hollywood films by far on the domestic market, Kim Ki-Duk, (a 2006 favorite filmmaker on European festivals) stated *The Host* only reached popularity because of its patriotism, nationalism and audience 'questionable' taste. This criticism and the following backdrop on the oligopolistic structure of the South Korean film market led to a call for diversity in the future of contemporary Korean cinema (Howard 2008).

Chung offers another reason why South Korean cinema had become more diverse. She states that until 2010, images of foreigners in South Korean cinema were mostly limited to Japanese and Americans due to the Japanese and American occupation. Those figures often appeared in South Korean films in the context of a nationalist narrative. Like *The Host* those films portrayed the power relationship between South Korea and its invaders. The inclusion of other ethnicities and cultures in film was now necessary due to the rise in immigration from other Asian countries to South Korea, supported by the South Korean government (Chung, 2015). Using film non-Korean residents should get included in the South Korean society and an image of a new multicultural and global South Korea should get pushed (2015). South Korean films and

television shows gained not only popular on the home market but much more also on the across the South Korean border.

Howard concludes his article with the thought that “Given that ‘content’ needs distribution, it will be interesting to see how exactly the creative industries, celebration of content production functions in relation to domestic, regional and global distribution channels” (Howard, 2008, p. 100-101). *The Host* can be considered an example of a Korean national specific film born from transnational influences through American and Japan. The film also indicates a central point of change in which the need for more multiculturalism and inclusion of other cultures and ethnicities became relevant. While *The Host* is a transnational film, its ability to successfully travel outside of South Korea is questionable.

### ***Snowpiercer* (2013) - A Blockbuster That Does Not Smell Like Hollywood**

Bhabha explains that to deconstruct a colonial perspective an attempt must be made to “construct a theory of the social imaginary that require no subject expressing originary anguish (West), no singular self-image (Gates), no necessary of eternal belongingness (Bhabha, 1994, p. 179). From this, we can argue that a film which works towards a deconstruction of the Eurocentric and colonial perspective inhabits a certain form of ambiguity which expresses alterity and a multiple of perspectives. *Snowpiercer* is a film which evades specific national categorization. The problem of assigning *Snowpiercer* to one specific national background lies in the film’s transnationality, which is based on its thematic, cinematic structure, and production style. As discussed, transnationality is a fluid term that can define many different aspects of cinema and while transnationality was discussed with respect to *The Host* from a postcolonial perspective, I argue here that a transnational flow also can accrue due to a film’s themes, production, and distribution style. Through fusing together themes, production, and distribution

style of both, Hollywood and South Korean blockbuster, *Snowpiercer* can travel beyond its national borders and becomes more attractive towards a global audience while at the same time still contains national specific traits.

Yi explains in her article, Korean blockbusters are defined with the help of three main characteristics that distinguish them from Hollywood blockbusters - relatively smaller production costs, distribution limited to the home market, and a nationalist theme (Yi, 2014). Later characteristics are especially defined by thematizing the Korean history and staying true to those historical elements. If we compare *The Host* with *Snowpiercer* we can see here a clear difference. *The Host* fits into those characteristics as it was distributed in the South Korean home market, inhabiting clear nationalistic themes addressed towards a South Korean audience. Compared to *Snowpiercer*, *The Host* had a relatively small budget and therefore, *Snowpiercer* does not fit this mold perfectly.

Like *The Host*, *Snowpiercer* reflects upon imbalanced power relationships within a social-political structure. Set in a dystopian future, the world as we know it does not exist anymore. Due to global warming, the surface of the earth has completely frozen and become uninhabitable. The last survivors of humanity live in a giant, unstoppable train under a harsh caste system. The passengers of the train who purchased a train ticket live in luxury in the front section of the train, while those passengers who boarded the train without an expensive ticket are deemed to live in inhumane circumstances in the tail section under a harsh dictatorship from the people in the front. *Snowpiercer* is an adaptation of the French comic book *Le Transperceneige* (2014, Jacques Lob). For his vision, Bong received a budget of roughly \$39, 200, 000 (the most expensive South Korean film of its time) with intentional transnational distribution (167 countries in total) (Yi, 2014). The majority of the film was shot in English with a cast of Hollywood stars, (Chris Evans, John Hurt, Tilda Swinton, and Ed Harris) and the Korean actors Song Kang-ho

(plays Namgoong) and Ko Ah-seong (plays Yona). We can see here that the casting of *Snowpiercer* breaks away from the South Korean blockbuster mold in similar respect to the disruption seen in its production, distribution, and narrative structure.

As Hall describes, different social systems have different meaning systems, where meaning, language, and representation are inherently connected to our culture. “The meaning is constructed by the system of representation. (...) One way of thinking about ‘culture’, then, is in terms of these shared conceptual maps, shared language systems and the codes which governs the relationships of translation between them” (Hall, 1997, p. 7). Cinematic language is part of our national meaning systems as it uses and shapes forms of representations that are within the cultural understanding of the world around us.

Bhaskar Sarkar uses *Rush Hour* (Brett Ratner, 1998) as an example to describe that audiences from different countries have different viewing habits. Those are based on their social cultural background and the film content which they usually watch. As for *Rush Hour* he explains that, even though the film is very popular and funny for a Western audience due to the represented stereotypes between an Asian and Black character, it was not able to gain the same success in China as the stereotypes used for comedic effect are not common to a Chinese audience, and are therefore ineffective (Sarkar, 2009). Here Iwabuchi’s concept of the cultural odor becomes relevant as it gives us an understanding of how foreign cultural products can circulate and hybridize into other meaning systems. Using the example of the Sony Walk Iwabuchi explains that his term of the “cultural odor” refers to the characteristics of products that give us a hint to their cultural heritage. The Sony Walkman was a Japanese cultural product that had a significant impact on the Western consumer’s everyday life. It changed the consumer’s behavior of creating a personal space of consuming media within a public space. At the same time, such cultural impact was not specifically linked to a Japanese national heritage. Any consumer of the Sony

Walkman was able to enjoy the product without thinking about Japanese culture (Iwabuchi, 2002). Every product has a cultural imprint of the producing country, even if it is not recognizable by the consumer - the product is “culturally odorless”.

In consideration of Higson’s theories of national cinema, it is arguable that Hollywood cinema is universal. Pointing out Hollywood’s influence on other cinema cultures, Higson states “cinema develops in an economy characterized by the international ownership and circulation of images” (Higson, 1989, p. 38). Therefore, it becomes increasingly difficult to differ “between a variety of apparently nationally constituted modes of cinematic practice and filmically produced sign and meanings” (1989, p. 38). Higson understands Hollywood as a main role model for a standardization of cinema which provokes “audience expectations, professional ideologies, and practices and the establishment of infrastructure of production, distribution, exhibition, and marketing, to accommodate, regulate and reproduce these standards and values” (1989, p. 38). Especially in the European West Hollywood’s standardized cinematic language and way of production have established themselves and shaped the audience expectations and cinematic meaning system (1989). What we need to keep in mind here, is that Hollywood’s representation forms are mainly shaped by a Eurocentric perspective. To deconstruct this perspective, it is necessary to appeal the Western audience by working within its used cinematic meaning system, while at the same time breaking out of those Eurocentric ways of presentation. Iwabuchi applies his theories of the cultural odor and odorlessness to explain the global success of Japanese animation. He argues that animes were able to travel beyond their national borders because Japanese animators created stories and characters which would not imply any characteristic which would give a hint of their national origin (Iwabuchi, 2002). While Iwabuchi’s argumentation implies that the cultural origin needs to get fully Westernized in order to achieve an acceptance of a Western audience I want to argue that cultural odorlessness can work as a

Trojan Horse. While at the surface the film might appear to be a Western product and is therefore approachable to a wider audience its inside contains perspectives and themes which challenge the Eurocentric perspective and meaning system. As Higson explains Hollywood's cinematic language can be understood as a globally standardized practice for filmmaking due to Hollywood's influence on other national cultures. Therefore, different national audiences can understand films which are following this cinematic language pattern. By integrating new perspectives and meaning systems in such films there is a chance that the audience is able to integrate those new perspectives within their own meaning system.

*Snowpiercer* feels like a Hollywood blockbuster through its predominant US-American cast, use of English language, and expensive special effects made possible due to a high budget, but it does not 'smell' like one. This is shown through the protagonist Curtis played by Chris Evans. Evans is most recognized for his role as Steven Rogers aka Captain America of the Marvel franchise film series. Here he does not only appear in the *Captain America* and *Avengers* film series but occasionally appears in film series of the other Avengers heroes as well. It is, therefore, arguable that Chris Evans is connected to his role as and globally recognized by the audience as Captain America. Vanessa Del Prete Mainer argues that the character of Captain America is a modern adaptation of the Greek hero which strongly influenced later European narrative structures and through this reached the United States. Like no other superhero, Captain America embodies US American ideology and symbolism (Mainer, 2019). Captain America's backstory tells the story of a young man who comes from a poor family and who was orphaned early in his life. Nevertheless, he develops a strong sense of justice, duty, and willingness to serve his country. He desperately tries to enter the US military to fight in the Second World War but repeatedly gets turned down due to his poor physique. Through his strong will to serve his country he becomes accepted into a scientific experiment which turns him into a super soldier.

The story of Captain America is, therefore, firstly, the story of the American Dream in which through hard work and a strong will everyone can reach their goals in this land full of opportunities. Mainer further argues that Captain America is especially accessible to the American audience because of his willfulness to serve the US military and represent American ideals and justice (Mainer, 2019). Through Captain America's special connection to his national origin, he also represents a geopolitical position. Jason Dittmer explains Captain America's geopolitical position:

Generally speaking, the geopolitical order expressed in *Captain America* is one in which the United States enacts a liberal internationalist hegemony. The world is envisioned as a realist one of sovereign and equal states, but the United States has a special role to play, purportedly as a result of its morality, objectivity, and power. (Dittmer, 2013, p. 133)

Chris Evans is connected through his role as Captain America to an American patriotic image. He represents the American Dream, he is hard working, he is impossibly perfect, he is always successful, and he is always in the right. Though *Snowpiercer* does not directly link the character of Curtis to the character of Captain America and are part of two completely different cultural products through the casting of Chris Evans the two characters are connected. This connection does not lay on the surface of the film, but underlays in the audience's knowledge and recognition of Chris Evans. Roland Barthes states that every work once was a text and every work contributes into its consumers text. How an audience understands the work it consumes is inherently connected to their own individual background, which is influenced by their national identity, religion, culture, ethnicity, and personal experiences (Barthes, 1986). When we are consuming a work, for example watching a film, our meaning system makes sense out of what we are seeing by applying our text on to it and giving it our own interpretation and broaden our text. As Chris Evans is strongly connected to his prior role of Captain America this text would

flow into the character of Curtis as work and create a new text. Through this, the image of the American hero is deconstructed, evident in the way in which Curtis's character enacts Bong's trademark slapstick comedy. As Yi explains, Curtis slips, falls, and accidentally hurts himself, even in important fight and action scenes (Yi, 2017). Bong's hero, though a fighter, can be weak and full of mistakes and make the audience laugh, even in very serious moments. One example is when Curtis slips on a fish during a brutal battle. While both characters Curtis and Captain are leaders and figure people are looking up to, Curtis remains within the human realm. He is not a superhero. His strength is mostly based on the people who follow him and who sacrifice their lives for him so he can reach the front section. The pressure of his friend's trusts and believe in him, his guilt and trauma over his past self, and the uncertainty that he will find in the front section pushes Curtis is constantly at his breaking point. At the end of the film, Curtis dies and the success of his fight and protest is uncertain. As the character of Curtis differs so strongly from Captain America but is performed by the same actor, Bong breaks with the expectations of an audience which is familiar with Chris Evans as Captain and patriotic and the American values he previously embodied.

*Snowpiercer* does not only deconstruct US American values and perspectives through its protagonist but furthermore inhabits hints of South Korean nationality. Understanding those hints, in the context of the film's narrative, thematic, production, and distribution we will understand how to define *Snowpiercer's* transnationality and also how this transnationality distinguishes from *The Host's*. Yi's main argument is that the two South Korean characters Namgoong Minsoo and Yona represent what is Korean. Namgoong and his struggles relate to the unsolved relationship between Korea and Japan. He stands in a rebel and police relationship with the Japanese character Fuyu. Though both characters do not interact directly with each other their actions have consequences on each other lives. During the Japanese occupation, there was a



phase from 1910-1919 (called Military Police Reign Era) in which the police under Japanese control had the right to carry out the executive, legal, and legislative functions of the Korean government (Yi, 2017). Furthermore, Namgoong also represents an American Korean relationship. The train was built by an American conglomerate. Though it was Namgoong whose plans and knowledge were used to build the train he is not allowed to live with the company's owners in the front section of the train. Namgoong is an engineer who helped to build the train he knows. After the Korean War, South Korea followed the Japanese example and focused its economic power on the development of new technologies. The fast growth of the South Korean technological industry attracted the United States and Europe and South Korean companies in those sectors would be able to get jobs from the West (2017). But as production costs in South Korea were rising Western companies relocated their business interest to China (Yi 2017). Namgoong therefore also represents South Korea's economic development in relation to the Western / American market.

Through the character of Yona, *Snowpiercer* identifies what Korean identity means. She explains that Yona is a non-traditional character for a South Korean film, representing the outcome of a mixed-race family. Yona is the child of Namgoong who is Korean and an Inuit woman. Yi interprets this non-traditional representation of Korean identity as a metaphor of the representation of "Korean history with displaced dynamics between characters in the movie" (2017, p.24). At the time of *Snowpiercer*'s production, the Korean government was being asked to support multiculturalism and spread public awareness of non-Koreans living in South Korea (Howard, 2011).

We can, therefore, argue *Snowpiercer* even though it appears on the surface like a Hollywood blockbuster contains a deeper context that breaks representation forms and brings in perspectives of which are based on Bong's national background. As Rawle explains, regarding Iwabuchi's

theories of the cultural odor, films with culturally odorless qualities are “more likely to be subsumed by a process of localization. Hence, they become integrated into a local frame of reference, even though they are transnational products or even products seen as representing a strong sense of national specificity” (Rawle, 2018, p. 4). *Snowpiercer*'s transnationality and ability to travel across the South Korean national border lays in its odorless character.

*Snowpiercer* also shows us that transnationality is not detached from a national origin, even though it might not be visible or in the foreground. It shows that transnationality, in fact, is depended on the roots of nationality. *Snowpiercer* could not be a transnational film if it would not inhibit uniquely South Korean traits. Iwabuchi's theories show how “global cultural flows have decentered the power structure and vitalized local practices of appropriation and consumption of foreign cultural products and meanings” (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 35)” Instead of pointing to the national differences of culture, history, and perspective, Iwabuchi's theory of the cultural odor allows us to understand transnational cinema in a process of transcultural integration. Different national audiences can understand and engage with what they are seeing on screen and through the odorless character of those films they are able to integrate new perspectives into their own cultural meaning system.

Bong's use of Hollywood blockbuster style of production and the hybridization of genre does not reinforce a Eurocentric perspective but makes the *Snowpiercer*'s odorlessness possible as many audiences are familiar with this cinematic language. By implying his own perspective and national background to *Snowpiercer* Bong is then enforcing the odorless character and deconstructs the Eurocentric perspective. Through the hybridity of genre tropes, *Snowpiercer* mixes local and foreign perspectives and cinema languages

The possibility of representing multiple perspectives while at the same time offering the audience a way of integrating those perspectives within their own meaning system (Hall, 1997)

fits into Bhabha's demand for alterity and "no necessary of eternal belongingness" at the same time (Bhabha, 1994, p. 179). This furthermore offers a deconstruction of the Eurocentric perspective through working towards a polycentric multiculturalism (Shohat and Stam, 1994).

### ***Okja* (2017) - A Netflix Original in Global Context**

*Okja* tells the story of a young Korean girl, Mija, and her best friend - a giant mutated pig - Okja. Okja is the property of the corrupt US based company Mirando who chooses Okja to be the winner of a super pig competition which is supposed to boost the market for the company. Mija and her best friend get separated and the young girl tries everything to save Okja. To do so Mija runs away from home, unintentionally joins a radical animal liberation group, gets forced to be the new face of the Mirando company, and finally exposes said company to be cruel animal abusers. Though Mija and Okja reunite at the end and are able to return to their mountain idyll in South Korea, this happy ending comes with a bitter taste. Throughout the film, the audience is constantly exposed to the animal cruelty that Okja (as a product of a mass meat production) has to endure. The audience witnesses the violence Okja endures and learns of Mirando's slaughterhouse and farm. Scenes show the workings of the slaughterhouse of the company, where thousands of pigs just like Okja, are kept in horrible conditions waiting for their certain death. Mija only can save Okja by playing the game of the company and buying her free with a golden pig figure, a traditional Korean object as a dowry that her grandfather gave to her when Okja was first taken.

*Okja* is a bilingual film in a 50/50 ratio between Korean and English. The film was shot in nearly equal parts in South Korea and the United States and the cast is a mixture of Korean and American actors featuring Tilda Swinton (also cast in *Snowpiercer*), Jake Gyllenhaal, Steven Yeun, and Choi Woo-shik. Like *Snowpiercer*, *Okja* combines different genres and characteristics

of both Hollywood and Korean cinema culture. The difference here lies in the theme of the film and its form of distribution. *Okja* is a film that stands in the middle of a complexity of power relationships and the change of cinema as an institution and ideologies of globalization. As a Netflix production, *Okja* stands out through its form of distribution in a global context and addresses a worldwide audience.

Pietari Kääpä raises the question “Why should we only consider Western audience perspectives?” (Kääpä, 2013, p. 38). Kääpä is one of the leading theorists regarding ecocinema, arguing for a stronger recognition of its influence on Hollywood. He argues that blockbusters can be considered as ecocinema as they offer a wide range of audiences the experience of living “through the ecocatastrophe in as entertaining and easily digestible ways as possible” (Kääpä, 2013, 23). However, he warns they should not be the sole center of interest when it comes to transnational ecocinema as the Hollywood system maintains a cultural-industrial hegemony in which they present themselves as the global standard for representing global “within clearly constructed environmentally aware parameters” (Kääpä, 2013, p. 24). He sees it more important to explore ways in which an ecocritical awareness is equally represented on a global level (2013).

Through being the creation of a South Korean director and a production of Netflix, *Okja* fits into Kääpä’s request for ecocinema films outside of the Hollywood production and distribution system. *Okja* does not only address a Western audience but does contain characteristics of Hollywood blockbusters and genre conventions. Due to this *Okja* can offer a global audience entertainment and harsh facts in an approachable way.

Kääpä states that within our capitalist system nature became a property through which the ecosystem got disrupted through human interference motivated by capitalist agencies (Kääpä, 2013). *Okja* as an artificially created animal is at the same time representing nature as she is an indicator for human disruption of nature out of capitalistic interests. *Okja* is the happiest when

she can roam freely in the idyllic mountains in South Korea far away from any bigger city. The Mirando company represents American capitalism which becomes clear through the many discussions of different business strategies throughout the film and finally through Mija having to buy back her friend. Okja-as-nature is the property of the capitalist company, turned into a consumable product, and must get traded to obtain her freedom again. Nature here has no agency; it is the humans who decide from which perspective they want to understand her.

Again, Bong puts his protagonists in the context of an unfair power relationship. Mija, a child who grew up in a remote area, far away from the city, suddenly has to fight against an international capitalist company. Her small world gets disrupted and suddenly she is standing in the middle of globalization. Nearly a decade after ‘Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies’ Lim revisits some of its theories and questions, exploring a new trend within the scholarship of transnationality in film. Lim argues transnationality further developed and became more complex throughout the decade, while still being an expression of dynamic power relationships. The goal of his later article is, therefore, “to theorize transnational cinema as a conceptual framework that can be both inescapably national and inadvertently nation-less. Likewise, cinema and film have changed between the time of *The Host* and *Okja*. As Yi puts it “transnationality arises of the ideology of globalization while at the same time stays connected to its cultural heritage” (Ye, 2017).

The main enemy of Mija, and of the audience, becomes the Mirando company. By making Mirando the enemy, *Okja* opens up topics such as climate change, world hunger, and the effects of globalization. Those topics cannot get assigned specifically to one country but are a worldwide concern. Therefore, *Okja*’s transnationality can be understood under the newly raised term of ecocinema. *Okja* is not intended to address one specific nation, rather it is attractive to a wide variety of different national audiences, and as such addresses contemporary issues and concerns

which have a global impact. Furthermore, Song states that transnationality works in ecocinema as a useful synergy as it provides ‘openness to diversity and difference’ and maintains ‘awareness of the contradictory and multidirectional forms of the rhetoric of which contemporary film culture consists’ (Song 2019). Song further states the emerging genre of ecocinema brings a new ethos in transnational cinema that interacts with the ethics of our all day living under globalization and neoliberal capitalism. This ability of ecocinema - to encourage a multidirectional rhetoric in film via shared topics, concerns, and interests on a global level - allows us to locate ourselves not only within a national but much more within in a global context. This highlights transnational cinema’s deconstructionist potential and challenge towards the Eurocentric perspective as we see the world from a shared perspective which gives room to discuss the concerns and feelings of the individual.

*Okja* opens with a scene in which the owner of the Mirando company promises that she holds the key to solve world hunger, but the solution to this problem will not become the main issue of the narrative. Instead, the narrative focuses on Mija’s perspective. Mija represents a child of our contemporary time who suffers under the effects of globalization and capitalism. This becomes especially clear through the harsh contrast between the world Mija wants to live in (an idyllic mountain cabin detached from civilization) and a world run by consume, money, and companies. Looking at recent political activities which are fighting against climate change we can see that its current main activist is a teenage girl called Greta Thunberg. Greta states in her speeches that as a child she had no influence in the choices that were made that lead to the drastic climate change. Addressing the leaders of the world’s most influential countries she states in a speech 2019 UN climate action summit in New York:

“How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words.

(...) Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are at the beginning of mass extinction. And all

you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. (...) The eyes of all future generations are upon you.” (Greta Thunberg, UN Climate action summit 2012)

The effects of climate change would not only endanger her future but the future of all children around the world. Though Mija clearly is of Korean heritage, her overall story is the one of a child who must live under the effects of globalization. This story is a global one.

Furthermore, Mija’s Korean heritage and perspective of a child helps to deconstruct the Eurocentric perspective. As Kääpä explains Hollywood blockbusters, even those considered ‘greenbusters’ “provide occasional and highly stereotypical glimpses of life beyond the Western hemisphere—rarely do we see anything beyond the marketable exoticism of non-Western cultures” (Kääpä, p. 25). Mija opposes the capitalism of the West but ultimately is forced to participate in it to make her voice heard. The trade for Okja is a critical point of the film which shows that Mija only gains power and attention from the American company the moment she is speaking its language. It brings us back to the question of how can we deconstruct the Eurocentric perspective of cinema which is so linked in the Western meaning system? The answer appears to be found in benefitting from Hollywood’s globally accepted cinematic language, in hybridizing it, to bring in new perspectives and forms of representation, and to discuss topics of global importance. It is then up to new forms of distribution that those films like *Okja* are accessible to a global audience.

While film festivals have served for a long time as a way for directors and different voices outside of the Western circuit to be seen and heard it is doubtful if they were able to reach an actual audience outside of the festival and outside of the national border. While *Snowpiercer* was able to travel beyond its national borders due to the Hollywood characteristic that it inhabits, *Snowpiercer* was not aired in commercial cinema, instead, it was considered as an arthouse Sci-Fi Film. *Okja*, as a Netflix production, was able to travel across the world on a platform easily

accessible for its users. Netflix as a producer for a global audience granted Bong Joon-Ho as a director free hand on this project. Something special, as Bong mentioned in an interview with *Variety* “Netflix guaranteed my complete freedom in terms of putting together my team and the final cut privilege, which only godlike filmmakers such as Spielberg get” (Kil, 2017).

Netflix as a global producer and distributor holds a unique position within our contemporary media world. While it is disrupting our traditional forms of cinema and television and needs to get positioned within the post-cinema and post-network era, it simultaneously is a reaction to globalization and deconstructs national borders. Films and television series are now able to nearly travel freely across the globe as Netflix serving its users in over 200 countries. Those films and series are either national productions which were included in Netflix’s programming or as a Netflix original production. Returning to the polysemic characters of television, Butler raises the question of how meaning even is constructed if a main characteristic of television is polysemy? (Butler, 2007). Transferring this question onto Netflix we can find the answer in the audience. Netflix survives due to its global audience and international content variety. Through its high diversity of content, Netflix can be understood as a cultural platform on which its audiences are able to come in contact with multiple different cultural narratives, and therefore perspectives. While Netflix is not able to let us physically travel into other spaces it brings the cultural products of foreign countries into our living room and even smart devices. We can understand this possibility of the audience to engage with other meaning systems and in a wider sense to engage with meanings systems outside of the Eurocentric perspective as a crucial step to unthink and deconstruct Eurocentrism.



## **Conclusion:**

As Bhabha states the postcolonial perspective “forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive ‘liberal’ sense of cultural community. It insists that cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 175). Regarding Hall’s theories on language and representation, Bhabha argues that the metaphor of language raises “the question of cultural difference and incommensurability, not the consensual, ethnocentric notion of the pluralistic existence of cultural diversity” (1994, p. 177). While this is a fair point, we can see through the case studies of Bong Joon-ho’s films that transnationalism offers a bridge between different cinematic languages and cultural meaning systems which always works towards a deconstruction of Eurocentrism. Rawle explains that in its core transnationalism is about the “flows of people and objects across borders, between and above nations” (2018, xii).

*The Host* represents the ability of transnationalism to break Eurocentrism by bending a cinematic language which usually is part of an uphold of Eurocentrism to express another’s countries national specific perspective. As culture can function as a strategy of survival as Bhabha explains, such hybridity and transnationalism can be found within postcolonial cinema as an expression socio political power relationship.

While *The Host* is still concerned with finding a national identity in cinema, *Snowpiercer* appears to be more ‘neutral’ and fits into Iwabuchi’s theory of odorless cinema. It is arguable that *Snowpiercer*’s odorless character, through Bong’s use of Hollywood blockbuster style of production, cast, and genre bending with an integration of national specific thematic, enables the film to travel beyond its national borders. Bong through this created a transnational film which represents multiple perspectives while at the same time offers the audience those a way of integrating those perspectives within their own meanings system.

*Okja*, as a film which can be defined as transnational ecocinema, does not only express a flow of culture but more effectively addresses global issues which have no national specific traits. By being a product of the collaboration between Netflix and Bong Joon-ho, *Okja* follows Kääpä's request for decentering ecocinema films outside of Hollywood while still being approachable for a wide range of audiences. *Okja*'s place of distribution is of importance as its thematic is not intended to address one specific audience but should be watched worldwide. Netflix as a global producer and distributor holds a special place here as its global range enabled *Okja* to reach its global audience.

This thesis showed through three case studies of Bong Joon-ho's films argued transnational cinema needs to be understood as inherently linked to the development of cinema under the influence of globalization. Transnational is an occurrence of flow and change, and at the same time links local and global concerns with one another. Whether transnationalism is a challenge to the Eurocentric perspective or expressive of polysemic perspectives, as a modality of cinema it is constantly challenges the Eurocentric perspective. The reach and form of distribution of such films is therefore important. In combination with platforms like Netflix who give their audience the ability to engage with cultural products possible there is a chance to deconstruct the Eurocentric perspective.

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