

Disaster Narratives in the South Korean Cultural Imaginary*

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Abstract

The modern South Korean cultural imaginary has been marked by a curious lack of large-scale, naturally occurring, apocalyptic disaster narratives. This absence becomes significant when mapped against narratives of manmade disasters that are typically juxtaposed with depictions of solid and unchanging physical land, within which the hyangto (home soil) frequently emerges as a comforting signifier for the cultural continuity of the Korean nation in the face of social and political disasters. This article will discuss the significance of this representational insistence of safe land, and why the physical soil of the Korean peninsula itself takes such a central stage in narratives of national (but very rarely natural) disasters. To foreground a reading of the only Korean natural disaster blockbuster film to date, Haeundae (Tidal Wave, 2009), as an example of how disaster narratives have been integrated into wider political discourses of communal or even national identity, this article will highlight a clear resistance to the mere possibility of nature turning on human beings in the modern Korean cinematic imaginary. This approach, in turn, reveals a strong symbolic link between the grand narrative of the Korean people and culture as being inextricably entwined with the unchanging nature of the physical soil itself.

Keywords: South Korean cinema, natural disasters, national identity discourses, authentic Koreanness, *hyangto* (home soil), disaster movies

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Introduction

Drawing on our fundamental anxieties about being unable to control the world around us, natural disasters and doomsday scenarios have long been a source of inspiration to the disaster movie genre in Hollywood. Yet the idea of a natural disaster without a human (or extraterrestrial) agent behind it has never taken a central stage in South Korean (hereafter “Korean”) cinematic representations. Such a tendency by no means suggests that cultural representations of disasters do not exist at all in Korea, but that rather than being naturally occurring ones, Korean cultural representations of disasters have almost invariably been referenced to manmade *national* disasters and often represented through the lives of individual characters. Disasters are also typically referenced to actual historical events, such as the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) or the Korean War (1950-1953), and often contain a significant degree of realism even if they are highly improbable: fights against viruses that are imported by accident from other countries (such as in the recent disaster movie *Gamgi* [The Flu], 2013), created by unscrupulous pharmaceutical companies that put profit before human life (*Yeongasi* [Deranged], 2012), or manmade, outlandish monsters in films such as *Goemul* (The Host, 2006) and *Chilgwanggu* (Sector 7, 2011).¹ Other than such manmade or supernatural disaster movies, the modern South Korean cultural imaginary has nevertheless been marked by a curious absence of such large-scale, naturally occurring apocalyptic narratives.

This lack stands in stark contrast to the cinematic imagination of disasters by Hollywood and Japan. In the Hollywood natural disaster movies such as *Twister* (1996), *Volcano* (1997), *2012* (2009), and *The Day After*

1. These examples do not include the horror genre, which typically focuses on narratives that describe how otherworldly spirits or events affect the actions and emotions of key protagonists in these narratives. This said, even the horror genre in South Korea often draws on traditional East Asian ghost narratives. In some the effect is achieved through the perceived potential link that events *could* take place in real life since some of the audience may hold on to a lingering belief in the afterlife and the notion that malicious spirits and ghosts of the vengeful dead could potentially return to haunt the living with real consequences. For a nuanced reading of two representative films of the Korean horror genre, see Kim (2007, 106-116).

Tomorrow (2004), humans are shown attempting to overcome insurmountable odds against the visual spectacle of an unfolding catastrophe of epic scope (Keane 2012). Postwar Japanese cinema has also frequently included apocalyptic visions of natural disasters that depict large-scale destruction of the Japanese archipelago (Napier 1993).² One might of course speculate that such prevalence is due to nothing more than the precarious location of Japan and parts of the U.S. in an intersection of shifting tectonic plates, yet the almost complete absence of natural disaster narratives in Korean popular cinema merits a closer look. In this article, I will discuss the significance of this representational insistence of a *safe* land, and why the physical soil of the Korean peninsula itself takes such a central stage in narratives of national (but not necessarily natural) disasters. I will also argue that depictions of constant and unchanging physical soil emerge as a key trope to signify cultural continuity in Korean postwar cinema. Moreover, to foreground my reading of the only Korean natural disaster blockbuster film to date (*Haeundae*) in the second part of this article, I will discuss the thematic use of disasters in modern South Korean cinema, and how the imagination of disasters has been integrated into wider political discourses of national identity that tend to envision disasters in the frame of social or political disintegration and collapse. This connection is noteworthy because it serves to highlight a clear resistance within the Korean cultural imaginary to contemplating even the very possibility of nature turning on human beings. Such resistance, in turn, reveals a significant symbolic link between the grand narrative of the Korean nation and its culture as being inextricably entwined with the perceived equilibrium of the physical soil (*hyangto*). Within this context, I argue that the non-aestheticization of natural disasters thus works toward easing lingering ontological anxieties about the grand narrative of the Korean nation through insisting on the validity of shared cultural values and practices, symbolically secured in the unchanging nature of the physical soil itself. Moreover, through analysing

2. Examples of such films include: *Nosutoradamusu No Daiyogen* (Prophecies of Nostradamus, 1979); *Sayonara Jiuipitā* (Bye-bye Jupiter, 1984); *Doragon Heddo* (Dragon Head, 2003); and *Nihon Chinbotsu* (The Sinking of Japan, 2006).

what kinds of ideological subtexts inform existing imaginaries of disasters, and through juxtaposing cinematic narratives of humanmade disasters with those of natural disasters, I will suggest why large scale apocalyptic natural disaster scenarios sit uneasily within the existing cultural grand narrative of the Korean nation, and why there appears to exist a phenomenon akin to a cultural amnesia and even active politics of cultural forgetting about real-life historical natural disasters (Kaplan 2005, 74), even when they (and floods in particular) have taken place throughout human history on the Korean peninsula.

Constructing Disasters: Imagining Disasters in Korean Cinema

Even if anxiety about the end times exists in Korean apocalyptic religious narratives in particular, such as in the Jeungsangyo apocalypse narratives,³ the emblematic narrative and representational silence about natural disasters that have not been caused by human or other sentient external agents⁴ become significant because they elevate the physical soil—or what Theodore Hughes refers to as “home soil” or *hyangto* (Hughes 2012, 5)—to a central symbolic importance in maintaining trust in shared cultural continuity in the face of political or social national disasters. In fact, an overview of films depicting non-naturally occurring disasters in postwar Korea reveals that only the very notion of immutable land (*hyangto*) as “the locus of inevitable return” allows for any cinematic representation of disasters at all (Hughes 2012, 49).

In the context of discussing the imagination of disasters, it might perhaps be useful to note that the very threat implicit for humankind in natural disaster narratives draws from the anxiety of not being able to prevent, contain or even survive a disaster because of the sheer enormity of the

3. I am grateful to Dr. Carl Young for this insight.

4. For example, human-caused environmental disasters, viral outbreaks, extraterrestrial threats, civil war, colonialism or other such humanmade events that spiral out of control and develop into full blown disasters.

event. Mark Anderson observes that natural disasters become disasters only when the elements “appear to rise up against human civilization, rendering violently ideology, institutions, and identity” (Anderson 2011, 1). Both in Hollywood and Korea, the imagination of natural disasters almost invariably functions as a narrative vehicle to renegotiate existing power relationships and a compelling background against which main characters are forced to reassess their lives and values since a catastrophe crystallizes the mind on what truly matters in the end, such as family, community, and shared humanity. However, while Hollywood movies tend to increasingly characterise the natural disaster as a monster unleashed that wreaks havoc on a global scale (Keane 2012, 101), in Korean disaster narratives, the survival of the nation state and its people are inextricably linked to the idea of secure, immovable and almost maternal land. For example, in disaster narratives that focus on describing the destructive nature of wars, such as the Korean War, the land emerges as comforting sign that remains constant in the background while wars rage on. Moreover, in narratives that deal with actual natural disasters, such as floods or storms, disasters tend to function as a thematic backdrop to political and social upheavals that are represented as true disasters and more threatening to individuals and communities than naturally occurring ones that serve only to heighten extant human misery. In this sense, and as I will show in the next part of this article, natural disasters are always ultimately rendered as safe because they function as a force for common good through compelling individuals and communities to work together for shared benefit, if not survival. The thematics of safe or secure nature represents an interesting twist in the Korean politics of aesthetics that appear quite specific to Korea’s modern historical and cultural conjunctures, where disasters emerge as an artistic regime for relating to past and present challenges and often retain echoes from Korea’s colonial imaginary, in which rural hometowns were similarly constructed as reassuring and consistent points of origin in the narratives of urban intellectuals who struggled to cope with colonial realities (Hughes 2012). The juxtaposing of disaster and *hyangto* therefore functions as a representational regime that is inherently political in nature, because it serves to highlight the symbolic centrality of the physical soil, the land itself, as a precondition

for creating meaningful political and social subjectivities in a changing and unpredictable world.

Safe Disasters and the Land in Postwar Disaster Narratives

Andrew Tudor's concepts of "secure horror" and "paranoid horror" are illuminating in this context to explain how disasters in the Korean cultural imaginary have been aestheticized as ultimately safe. In Tudor's parlance, "paranoid horror" refers to a threat "from within"—to one that cannot be seen or detected because it is rendered invisible by its very familiarity to those around it. In filmic narratives, such threats can be the enemy within, such as a spy who looks like us but turns on those around them unexpectedly and who remains undetected until it is too late.⁵ For this reason, "paranoid horror" in narratives "presupposes a thoroughly unreliable world," where no one and nothing can ultimately be trusted (Tudor 1997, 459). In contrast, "secure horror" is caused by a source that is apparent and external to the subject, and therefore, in due course, able to be defeated and therefore safe. Accordingly, when these ideas of "secure" and "paranoid" horror are plotted against the modern Korean cinematic imagination of disaster, it becomes evident that disasters are ultimately constructed as safe because the source of the threat can almost invariably be identified, meaning capable of defeat.

In addition, following national division in 1953, postwar (South) Korean cinema was not only reflecting on the aftermath and destruction of the war but also connected to anxieties caused by social, economic, and political insecurities and upheavals that followed. In fact, the Korean War (1950-1953) has largely defined the very notion of disaster so that the loss of life and livelihoods and the continuing division of the peninsula are perhaps the most significant themes of contemporary postwar Korean cultur-

5. An example of such an *enemy within* narrative can be found in the popular 1999 blockbuster film, *Shiri* (Swiri), in which highly trained North Korean spies infiltrate South Korean security forces with destructive consequences.

al production. In part, the absence of disaster films that depict large-scale destruction, as opposed to individual suffering, is symptomatic of the postwar politics of taste that governed what could and what could not be shown. Disaster films in the immediate postwar period were reduced to the level of individual struggle but referenced to real and traumatic events during and after the war, so that the audiences could relate to them but without the need to depict scenes of heroic battle and large-scale destruction. Perhaps for this reason, the cinema of the 1950s often focused on describing the realities of the present day and the introspective musings of the main protagonists as they struggled to find reasons to go on living amidst all the despair and devastation.⁶ These narratives referenced to the disaster that was the Korean War are, as Bordoloi asserts, “potent instruments not only for the circulation of popular culture but also for reflecting the contemporary socio-cultural scenario” (Bordoloi 2012, 89). The origins of this national disaster are shown to lie with the North, as in the 1955 anti-communist film *Piagol* about the final battles of the remaining murderous communist guerrilla fighters left on the Jirisan mountain in the South.

Nature, on the other hand, is shown to play the role of a silent observer of human misery, as well as a stage on which human disasters of epic scale are played out. In another Korean War disaster film referenced to a national disaster of epic proportions but played out between two families in a traditional Korean village, *Jangma* (Rainy Season, 1979), natural phenomena, rather than being a direct cause, serve to exacerbate a humanmade misery that is essentially already established. Natural weather phenomena, such as the constant rain that accompanies the most dramatic moments of the narrative,⁷ and features of the land—rivers, mountains, and bamboo groves—are used as symbolic signifiers that seek to reinforce the stability and immutability of the physical soil, which in turn is taken to represent the

6. Examples of cinematic narratives that address the anxieties of postwar Korea in films include: *Obaltan* (Aimless Bullet, 1961) and *Jiokhwa* (The Flower in Hell, 1958).

7. The only exception to the constant rain is the final scene where the two families are reconciled through a shamanistic exorcism rite, in which the clear weather is used to emphasize the cathartic nature of the film's narrative resolution.

essentially solid and unshakable historical and cultural origins of the Korean nation. Nature in these narratives thus not only forms a *mise-en-scène* or a silent observer and backdrop to human struggle but also allows for depictions of disasters in the first place. Whilst immutable, the land is also shown as having been sullied and scarred by humanmade disasters and the Korean War in particular. In more recent films, the Korean War has become a frequent theme in large-scale blockbuster films, and in films such as *Taebaek-sanmaek* (The Taebaek Mountains, 1994), *Taegeukgi Hwinallimyeo* (Taegukgi, 2004), *Gojijeon* (The Front Line, 2011), and *Areumdaun Sijeol* (Spring in My Hometown, 1998), the physical land may yet again be pounded and scarred by bombs and explosions whilst providing a comforting thematic background to attempts to overcome external or manmade threats.

Furthermore, the following rapid yet traumatic period of modernization and development shows this continuing representation of disasters but of individual kinds that are referenced to a new and often-nightmarish and bleak modernity. They chart the destruction of what directors saw as a traditional way of life and thus are inclined to dwell on the anxieties of an individual in a rapidly modernising society and on criticising social realities created by rapid industrialisation, dystopic modernity, political repression, economic exploitation, and the tragedy of national division. Essentially, postwar Korean cinema focused more on issues perceived as real and imminent and less on attempting to imagine new and unexpected forms for potential new disasters, perhaps since recent history and the present day contain enough real disasters already. However, that nature in these narratives again follows from the thematic of *hyangto* and takes the role of a passive observer is telling. In cinematic narratives of the 1960s and 1970s, films like *Gaenmaeul* (The Seashore Village, 1967, based on Oh Yeongsu's novel of the same title), *Angae* (Mist, 1967, based on Kim Seungok's *Trip to Mujin*), *Sampoganeun Gil* (The Road to Sampo, 1975, based on Hwang Sok-yong's short story with the same title), and *Mandara* (Mandala, 1981, based on a 1978 novel by Kim Seong-Dong with the same title), also capture scenes where fragile human beings are projected against great unmovable natural phenomena, such as mountains, rivers, and seas, that calmly look on as human beings struggle against humanmade disaster.

This symbolic framework of immutability is therefore significant and centrally important in that through juxtaposing the futile and ultimately meaningless struggles of men with the calmness of the land, it reveals a national aesthetics effectively grounded in faith in the physical land, which never turns on the people to whom it legitimately belongs—the Korean people. This imagination of disasters thus functions according to what Frank Furedi refers to as a “cultural script” that governs a society’s responses to fear and threats. Furedi maintains that this cultural script is a socially constructed phenomenon that “transmits rules about feelings and also ideas about what those feelings mean” (Furedi 2007, 237). Within this context, “individuals interpret and internalise these rules according to their circumstances and temperament, but express through culturally sanctioned idioms” (Furedi 2007, 237). Similarly, the cultural script that informs the Korean cultural imaginary of disaster links to historical realities, practical issues such as censorship (Paquet 2007, 34-36), and, as I suggest here, to a discursive construction of national identity that is symbolically interlinked with the idea of a *safe* and firm land, thereby foreclosing the very potential of a sudden and violent all-consuming natural disaster and thus rendering natural disasters as ultimately *safe* within this imaginary.

The Political Aesthetics of Disasters

The development of the aesthetic-ideological notion of *safe* natural disasters is further enforced through practical considerations that relate to limitations placed on individual filmmakers by an oppressive military dictatorship in Korea during the 1960s-1980s. This period was marked by strict anti-communist censorship laws that required film as well as literary narratives to fit within strictly defined parameters of subject topics in addition to the requirement to display a certain level of moral, ethical and social responsibility (Lim 2006; Elfving-Hwang 2011). Consequently, in the post Korean War period in particular, representing real disasters on screen has also been somewhat problematic because typically much of the dramatic tension in natural disaster films is created by portraying inadequate state-

led responses to the disaster and its effects or the inability of those in power to respond quickly enough to reduce at least some of the devastating effects of an impending natural doomsday scenario (Kakoudaki 2002, 122). In this sense, natural disaster films are often highly political because they can be easily referenced to current or recent political failures. Since open criticism of the government can still be construed as unconstitutional under the National Security Law in South Korea (Lim 2006, 82), the ways in which disasters function within the simulacrum of the plot must always be carefully grafted so as not to offend the authorities within the specific socio-historical context of their production. In fact, the growing number of large-scale disaster films in Korea is arguably not only an indication of growing production budgets but also of a greater degree of freedom to criticize and occasionally even parody the state's responses to disasters.

An early example of such politicization of disaster for light entertainment can be seen in the 1967 monster film entitled *Daegoesu Yonggari* (The Great Monster Yonggari, hereafter “*Yonggari*”), which was the first disaster film of its kind produced in Korea. In *Yonggari*, audiences are offered a vision of Korea as a developed nation since “the future perfect of development” is shown on screen (Hughes 2012, 162). While the basic plot takes its cue from Japanese *Godzilla* films and depicts a prehistoric monster awakened by an earthquake, the film's narrative logic focuses first and foremost on highlighting the necessity to protect the state and on an individual's perceived duties to the nation state. The disaster is caused by an external nonhuman threat, but even so—and as Hughes notes—*Yonggari* “follows statist anti-communism in its portrayal of the monster as something more than degraded other” (Hughes 2012, 162). What is significant to note, however, is that even if *Yonggari* symbolically stands for the North Korean state and the threat it poses, as a disaster narrative *Yonggari* can be coded as *safe* because it represents an identifiable external threat that can eventually be defeated. As the monster heads toward Seoul to consume the country's oil reserves, its fiendish attempt is stopped in the nick of time, owing to the bravery and the sheer scientific ingenuity of the government's leading scientists. While the anxieties caused by the looming oil crisis in the Middle East provide the context for the narrative, the cause of the

unfolding disaster, the monster is therefore never a real threat. Not only does the impending disaster that threatens to destroy Seoul function to highlight the citizens' responsibility to protect the nation's finite fuel reserves required for economic development, the narrative also simultaneously promotes the audience's unwavering faith in Korean scientists' ability to defeat any unbeatable, external threat, including that posed by North Korea. While the monster film—subgenre of the disaster film—never took off in Korea until very recently,⁸ *Yonggari* is worth noting here because it describes the narrative logic that has continued to inform other kinds of Korean disaster narratives thereafter and specifically their tendency to gesture toward issues of wider social importance specific to an acceptable national story (Jin 2006, 18; Shin 2007, 76).⁹ Within this context, disaster narratives emerge in the words of Jacques Rancière as “forms of knowledge [that] construct ‘fictions’ [about the nation]; that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done” (Rancière 2004, 39). These fictions work toward defining what kinds of events can or cannot be understood and represented as disasters within a given socio-historical and political context. In this juncture, it is revealing that despite this tension between modernity, progress, and perceived traditional values, the trust in Korean scientists to be able to manage and control science was rarely questioned in these early cinematic representations, such as *Yonggari*.¹⁰

Perhaps reflecting the process of democratization, recent South Kore-

8. Incidentally one of the first films in this genre was a remake of the 1967 *Yonggari* film released in 1999 under the title of *Yonggary* (also released under the title *Reptilian*). While production costs undoubtedly have had a constraining effect in whether or not to produce disaster films, one could speculate that the central concept of monster movies was not convincing enough so as to lead audiences toward a suspension of disbelief.

9. These national stories and grand narratives of the nation draw on ideologies, such as anti-communism, and the perceived need to protect or redefine what are considered as traditional Korean values.

10. It is interesting that this attitude was also largely reflected in public attitudes toward nuclear power, which enjoyed quite remarkable popular support and trust since the 1960s (Hong 2011, 409), until leaked documents about fake safety certificates for reactor supplies were made public in 2012.

an blockbuster disaster films are increasingly critiquing corporate greed or lack of political will to stand up against foreign powers in the face of humanmade disasters while highlighting faith in the perceived innate moral fibre of the common Korean citizen. Whilst science or human negligence is often shown as the cause for large-scale disasters, the events are typically used to emphasise the dialectics between what science in the *right* hands, that is, in *our* hands, can achieve as an enabling force since it can be controlled absolutely, and how science in the *wrong* hands, that is, the outsiders, whether North Koreans, the U.S. military or unscrupulous corporate forces whose motivations are shown to be driven not by common good but by neo-liberal multinational economic forces, can create a problem that is nearly impossible to contain. *Goemul*, for example, draws on generic conventions of a monster movie and points to a biochemical leak from a U.S. military base as the origin of a mutated amphibious monster that evolves to stalk unsuspecting victims, including the main protagonist's daughter, by the Hangang river. As the authorities seem disinterested in rescuing the child despite evidence that she is still alive somewhere in the sewers of the city, the family is left to rescue the girl. The setting of the film with the Hangang river constantly looming in the background is significant because although the monster dwells in the river, nature is never to blame for the disaster that has befallen the family at the centre of the narrative. While the river provides a location for the monster to feed on the bodies of blue-collar workers committing suicide by jumping into the river, the narrative also affords the monster some moments of empathy. The monster, living in a river that is usually a place of carefree recreation for both the denizens of Seoul and foreign visitors alike, not to mention the source of the capital's potable water, is revealed in the course of the film as less of a threat to the wellbeing of the family than the authorities, who seem less interested in catching the monster than they are in disseminating news about a nonexistent virus that the monster supposedly carries. The real threat thus comes from the authorities, both domestic and international, and a public health discourse that in fact only allows individual misery to go unaddressed and unnoticed. The discourse on *health* is further parodied towards the end of the film as the authorities release an

experimental biocide, Agent Yellow, in order to protect the people of Seoul, and yet they release the biocide on demonstrating crowds below who attempt in vain to form a human shield to stop the release of the chemical agent. The authorities' willingness to defile and destroy the environment gestured toward the way in which environmental issues, especially industrial pollution, have often been employed in modern Korean literary narratives in particular as an additional signifier for an often-nightmarish and bleak modernity (Kwon 2003, 474-477). Similarly, in *Goemul* the Hangang river and the monster are both victims of human disregard, whilst reminding the main characters of values that truly matter, that is, loyalty to one's family, when human social structures can no longer be trusted.

Other examples of the emerging convention of human-agent-caused disaster films in Korea include recent disaster films, such as *Illyu Myeol-mang Bogoseo* (Doomsday Book, 2012), a compilation of three shorter films, one of which involves the population turning into flesh-eating zombies as a result of having come into contact with a toxic substance that produces a viral bacterial infection, *Yeongasi*, which presents a similar narrative where virus-infected mutant parasites created by an unscrupulous pharmaceutical company are vanquished by the main characters whose motivation is to save their family, and *Gamgi*, where a plaguelike flu is spread by illegal immigrants, provoking a violent government intervention and the involvement of U.S. military command in South Korea against the will of the President. The way the cause of these disasters is presented as stemming from an external source allows the actual disaster to be framed positively in these narratives because the very externality gives the disaster a unifying and nationalist narrative function within the plot by showing how adversity elicits the best out of "good people" (Furedi 2007, 238), whilst providing a social and political critique of neo-liberal market forces that allow for these essentially human-originated disasters to evolve. As such, and as Mark Anderson notes in the context of a discussion of disaster narratives in the Latin American literary imagination of the 20th century, "the rhetoric of disaster and crisis [becomes] particularly effective in promoting ideological points of view, particularly given the atmosphere of irrefutability that disaster narratives generate" (Anderson 2011, 18).

Notably, however, disasters have been, until the recent film *Haeundae*, invariably linked to a human agent as having caused the disaster in the first place. Unlike in Hollywood, where, in order to inform the plot, representations of mega earthquakes and tsunamis that engulf whole countries are made more effective through weaving a semi-scientific discourse of catastrophe in which the land turns on its inhabitants,¹¹ such potential for spontaneous, nonhuman originated destruction is almost completely absent in the Korean cultural imagination of natural disaster. I argue that this symbolic imaginary of the destruction of mountains and rivers is potentially threatening to the very sign that is taken to constitute the immovable core of *Koreanness*, symbolised through the representation of mountains, rivers, and the sea. Within this context, even the thought of visually representing an actual disappearance of the physical soil, such as in *Nihon Chinbotsu* (Japan Sinks), a 1973 Japanese film where the whole island sinks into the sea after a mega earthquake and tsunami, is simply unimaginable. In the Korean cultural imaginary, the insistence on the immovable, solid land is so consistent that it borders on the religious, and therefore, for audiences, the spectacle of sinking the peninsula might appear as nothing short of profane. Nature can thus bear witness or be attacked by humans, as in *Goemul* discussed previously, but it remains faithful and does not turn on its people even if it might turn on the outside forces seen to threaten the cosmic balance between nature and its inhabitants, as one can see in a recent magical realist war film *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (2005).

Constructive Disasters

As opposed to humanmade disasters, films about natural disasters are somewhat different because they do not require a human agent in order to take place. In the words of Anderson, “Disaster by definition is conceived of as a rupture or inversion of the normal order of things; natural disaster

11. Such disasters are typically shown to occur through sudden mega earthquakes or eruptions of super volcanos.

denotes that moment of disjuncture when nature topples what we see as the natural order of human dominance” (Anderson 2011, 1). As large-scale natural disasters cannot often be completely prevented or contained, they are never safe by their very definition. Yet, in the Korean cultural imaginary, nature has been coded as synonymous with cultural continuity, which insists on the notion of secure land. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the first natural disaster film ever to be filmed in Korea, *Haerundae*, was a long time in the making.¹² The film’s main characters include a volcanic scientist, through whom the audience gains insight into the science behind the inevitable spectacle of the tidal wave that will eventually come, as well as a group of commonfolk and jovial fishermen who make a modest living selling fish in the local seafood restaurants by the beaches of Busan. The villain comes in the form of a rich profit-seeking developer who wants to buy the land from the fishermen, threatening to destroy their tightly-knit community and way of life by buying them off and then bulldozing their shops in order to build a foreign investor-backed seaside leisure complex. Although the narrative is temporally consistent in that the events take place in chronological order and work toward a deadline scenario when a huge mega tsunami is set to wipe out the seaside city of Busan on the southeast coast of Korea, the actual disaster and its aftermath take a peculiarly small role in the film itself. Instead, most of the film is spent describing the highly predictable and formulaic relationships between the characters and how they come to realize the importance of tradition, love and family in the face of destruction. Even the eventual horror of rising waters and almost certain death is played down through the focus on how the realization of impending death affects romantic relationships between the main characters. As the narrative uses the tsunami to create near-miss scenarios where families are reunited through daring rescue operations only to be separated again, the focus remains on the moral message embedded in the characters’ realization that in the face of destruction what really matters is the survival of traditional communities. The catastrophic events that unfold simply func-

12. It should be noted that the higher than average production costs also undoubtedly played their part in the slow production of the film.

tion as a *mise-en-scène* for character development, and the events remain strangely detached from the central narrative throughout the film. In this respect, *Haeundae* stands apart from the formulaic Hollywood genre of natural disasters where character development often succumbs to the “mind-numbing spectacle” of an unfolding disaster (Keane 2012, 97). The film may borrow the grammar of Hollywood spectacle, yet the unstoppable rising waters provide a framework for the moral centre of the story, which emphasises the absolute trust in the moral fibre of *authentic* Korean characters and distrust of the wealthy who are shown to be in cahoots with greedy investors at the expense of the livelihoods of the common folk.

As the narrative proceeds to where a huge tidal wave hits the city of Busan, the disaster itself is not in any way terrifying, primarily because its outcome in the narrative remains utterly predictable. The main organizing theme in *Haeundae* focuses therefore not on impeding destruction but on nostalgia for a lost community and disdain for neo-liberal corporate capitalism that is shown to threaten indigenous Korean values signified by traditional seaside fishing communities. As such, the narrative unfolds as an elegy to an imagined *authentic Koreanness* rather than an example warning of the futility and unpredictability of the natural world. Moreover, the narrative further works to ease anxiety about potential real disasters through constructing an external source of blame for the lethally late evacuation of the denizens of Busan when the tidal wave eventually strikes. Through reiterating a number of times that scientists in Japan cannot be trusted to tell the truth and warn its neighbouring countries in time about earthquakes and other potentially threatening natural events taking place on the country’s shoreline, it is left to the insufficiently equipped Korean scientists to patrol the sea border in order to discover the truth about the impending disaster. As such, the narrative contains a very familiar ideological subtext that constructs a few chosen Korean scientists as self-sacrificing heroes in contrast to foreign scientists who are shown as only loyal to their own government’s agenda. In that sense, *Haeundae* emerges as a politically and ideologically charged cultural construction that contains echoes of post-colonial distrust and retains anxieties about the need to rely on one’s own resources to protect one’s people.

Accordingly, in *Haeundae* the disaster emerges not only as a destructive force but a reorganizing and constructive one: as the tidal wave is shown to rip through the city centre of Busan, turning it into a mass of water and floating debris, the focus of the narrative never shifts from the organising principle that aims to rebalance the relationships between the main characters, where greed, money and wealth have been shown to destroy the important elements of life. Nature is therefore shown to restore order where people are unable to do so, and as such the narrative gestures toward an unwavering faith in the reliability of *hyangto*. Anchored in the symbolism of constructive rather than monstrous nature, *Haeundae* evokes a sense of nostalgia for a fragmented and lost community, gesturing toward the perceived *uniqueness* of traditional Korean communities by positing *jeong* (human kindness) and *ingane daehan yeui* (consideration for others) against neo-liberal and multinational greed. The melodramatic turn where various characters make sacrifices to save their loved ones enables, in the words of Despina Kakoudaki, “the creation of view now lacking” and reaffirms the validity of the traditional way of life (Kakoudaki 2002, 17). The tidal wave becomes an agent of positive change along the lines of what Susanna Hoffman refers to as *creative destruction* (Hoffman 2002, cited in Anderson 2011, 12), and it can be read as a sign to renew and repent from moral decadence and destruction, a loss of community spirit as well as a loss of the *traditional* values of community spirit, including egalitarianism, and concern for others, rather than individual gain.¹³ In *Haeundae*, disaster is thus ultimately more about a symbolic return to the point of origin than it is about the end of civilization as we know it.

13. Similar discourse was played out in the public discourses that followed the Great Kantō Earthquake, where the ensuing destruction and death was taken by some (particularly right-wing) thinkers to function as a reminder that Japan had somehow lost its way and now stood at the crossroads of either destruction or greatness. This public discourse was effectively used to create a sense of social responsibility for the good of the nation (Schencking 2008).

Concluding Thoughts

Disasters in the Korean cultural imaginary have been largely humanmade and therefore preventable: if natural disasters occur they typically have external, human origins—viruses, toxic leaks that get out of control, wars, acts of terror—and these disasters are highly politicized. Conversely, these same cultural representations are infused with nostalgia for lost communities, even if the question of whether such communities had ever existed is an entirely different issue, and the (illusionary) promise that nature itself will restore social and perhaps even political balance where human beings are unable to do so. Ultimately, then, all of these disaster narratives work toward easing lingering ontological anxieties about the grand narrative of the Korean nation through insisting on the validity of shared cultural values and practices. They work through imagining and representing comforting signs of authentic Korean values, encoded as unwavering faith in family and true friendship, and which are simply made visible, rather than threatened, under duress. This process of *making visible* necessitates, however, maintaining the symbolic representation of *hyangto* as a trope for cultural continuity, immune to external and political threats. This logic simultaneously insists, however, that such disaster narratives work toward both justifying historical distrust of other nations or faceless authorities and foreclosing the potential of Tudor’s “paranoid horror” or threat from within, which in turn justifies insistence on absolute trust in those *within (our people)*.

This trust perhaps gestures to something quite fundamental about how disasters are imagined and understood in the Korean cinematic and more broadly, cultural imagination.¹⁴ Whilst expressing an ultimate belief

14. However, recent literary fiction shows indications of moving away from emphasising signs of ontological security to suggesting that life is ultimately never *safe*. Literary narratives that describe large-scale disasters, such as the Indian Ocean tsunami in Kim In-Sook’s *Michil Su Itgenni* (Can You Go Mad, 2011), man-eating zombies in Yun I-Hyeong’s *Keun Neukdae Parang* (The Big Blue Wolf, 2011) and pandemic flu in Pyun Hye-young’s *Jaewa Ppalgang* (The Ashes and Red, 2010), function both as catalysts that bring to the surface already existing internal disasters that the characters have suffered, such as the disintegration of relationships and shared values, ontological doubt, loss of humanity, and existential angst, but offer little consolation as to how to avert disaster or avoid succumbing to it.

that life is never *safe*, the fundamental reliability of the Korean soil is never brought into doubt. In contrast, in contemporary cinematic narratives the disintegration of imagined signs of cultural authenticity (as embodied in traditional family values) in the lives of individual protagonists are presented as disaster narratives of an equal or greater significance to any large-scale natural disaster. In this sense, the scarcity of cultural representations of natural disasters in the Korean cultural imaginary does not therefore necessarily evidence denial of the potential of nature turning on humankind in real life. What it does highlight, however, is the very centrality of stable land as a central symbolic trope for the continuity of the authentic Korean national body.

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