

A Reading of *The Host*
by Gord Sellar

*The following is a simplified version of a “reading” of *The Host* that I published in Arena Journal in 2011, titled “Politics & Ecology on the Korean Left: Anti-Americanism and Environmental Dystopia in *The Host*.” It’s missing a lot of detail, because I had to simplify my argument to fit into ~1250 words.*

Bong Joon-ho’s 2006 film *The Host* (괴물) is a fascinating piece of science fiction. While it at first seems to simply be another “giant monster movie” following the tradition of films like *King Kong* and *Godzilla*, the movie in fact has a hidden layer of commentary on modern South Korean history and politics.

In the opening of the film, we see an undertaker on an American military base having his assistants pour many bottles of formalin down the drain into the Han River. This is, of course, inspired by a real-life incident of inappropriate formalin disposal in the Han River that was widely protested by environmentalists.¹ This scene, in its use of a specific environmentalist complaint against US military bases, essentially suggests that the politics of the film are leftist, since anti-Americanism (and especially being anti-US military) and environmental concern were in 2006 both widely understood in South Korea as left-wing sentiments.

This introduces partisan politics into the monster film. Of course, it is possible for viewers to read the movie simply as entertainment, or as merely mass market blockbuster fun. However, having been alerted to the political leanings of the film, it is difficult not to notice a thread of similarly politically-charged choices made in the production of the film.

One powerful example is the Park family, whose child is abducted by the monster. They suffer from not just poverty but also failures of confidence—as in the sister, Nam-Joo’s faltering confidence as an archer. (It is worth remembering that not just in modern times, but throughout history, archery has been deeply associated with Korea and Korean identity.) While Korea has become rich in their lifetime, this family has remained poor and struggling. Indeed, the brother Nam-Il specifically is identified as left-wing: he is a former democracy movement protester who has spent his life paying the price for his sacrifices. (At one point in the movie, he uses the same kind of Molotov cocktail against the monster that, decades earlier, he threw as a protester.) Meanwhile Hie-Bong (the father character) is an emblem of the old Korea, prior to democratization, when rural poverty was far from unusual. He is from the generation that was so busy working that they had no choice but to neglect their children, and he speaks guiltily of how his son Gang-Doo’s mental handicap might be a result of starvation. (He even refers to how Gang-Doo had to resort to doing “seori” (a somewhat socially acceptable form of theft involving “borrowing” from a farmer’s field) in order to eat.

If *The Host* is indeed a political film, how do the politics affect how we should understand its story? For one thing, the movie explores from a left-wing perspective the terrain of power in

¹ Notably, the South Korean lumber industry contributes orders of magnitude more formalin to Korean waterways than any American military base, but were not protested in the same way. This suggests protesters were motivated more by objection to America’s military presence in Korea than out of an environmental concern, although both are traditionally “leftist” concerns in South Korean politics.

Example “Reading” of a Work of SF.
English Through Science Fiction (Midterm Example)

modern South Korea. This is most obvious when Gang-Doo’s family attempts to get help from the government to retrieve their missing daughter, Hyun-Seo. The government refuses to help, since, of course, it has lied about the monster stalking the Han River, claiming that instead a virus has broken out in Seoul. This is representative of how Korea’s dictatorships are known to have directly lied about events in South Korea to maintain control of the country.

The nature of “power” in South Korea is most explicitly revealed soon after Gang-Doo is taken away for “medical” treatment. He wakes up in a trailer surrounded by doctors how are about to perform a lobotomy on him. He realizes that his brain is about to be damaged and resists, fighting his way free only to emerge from the trailer to a very revealing scene: on the lawn outside the trailer, a strange collection of people are enjoying a barbecue. The individuals included in the scene are suggestive, too: there are doctors in white lab coats, Caucasians in military uniforms, and Korean men in business suits. This scene is of course carefully planned and choreographed as a revelation of the nature of power: the American military, the social elite (in the form of doctors), and politicians (the men in the suits) are bound together and enjoy the benefits of their collaboration, and meanwhile the poor and underprivileged, like Gang-Doo, are forced to suffer whatever is necessary in order for this unholy alliance to maintain power.

This “unholy alliance” isn’t only limited to the social elite, the government, and the American military, of course. In one important scene, the former protester Nam-Il contacts an old friend of his from his protesting years. He requests help from the friend, who is now a powerful businessman, but in the end he is betrayed when the “friend” reports his presence to the police. The corruption introduced into society is so profound that even a fellow protester for democracy can no longer be trusted to fight for the poor and suffering class, or even to help an old friend. In other words, the world of *The Host* is a true dystopia, *and* it is intended to reflect dystopian elements of real life under the dictatorship and post-dictatorship eras in South Korea.

How, then, are we to interpret the monster in the film? There are a few important details to remember, as we study this question. First, the monster is a giant form of an originally small creature, which has grown miraculously quickly due to toxic pollution introduced by Americans. Next, the monster literally consumes people. Third, the monster emerges from the Han River. Of course, just as a monster is often a symbol in movies, the Han River also has symbolic status in South Korea. Indeed, the speed of South Korea’s rapid economic modernization was for many years literally referred to as “The Miracle on the Han” (“한강의 기적”).

Within the political reference frame of the movie, one way to “read” the monster in *The Host* is to interpret it as a representation of the “dark” and “repressed” side of the Miracle on the Han. While South Korea has celebrated the benefits of economic development for those who have enjoyed its fruits, those benefits have not been enjoyed equally by all, and neither was the price that was paid to achieve it paid equally by all. Some people’s suffering was not rewarded, and many people were “devoured” by the system that made that economic change possible. Examples that come to mind are the protesters and demonstrators who disappeared in the night; the young men sent to fight and die in Vietnam to appease the demands of alliance with America; the countless workers who labored with relatively little protections of their human and labor rights only to end up elderly and impoverished, and, perhaps most

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English Through Science Fiction (Midterm Example)

relevant, the countless girls and women who ended up disappearing into the “underground” — most notably, into “camptowns” where they were forced to provide sexual services for American soldiers throughout the Park and Chun dictatorships.² While Hyun-Seo’s abduction is vague and not exactly a parallel to any of these fates, her fate makes one thing clear: while some people suffered from the Miracle on the Han, others were outright killed by it. The Miracle on the Han made rapid economic development possible, of course, but at the same time, it also devoured human beings in terrifying manner that most people refuse to see or acknowledge, just as the government refuses to acknowledge the very existence of the monster.

In the end, the monster in *The Host* suggests that the unevenness and speed of South Korea’s rapid modernization and economic development had a hidden dark side and a hidden human cost that continues to linger and to shape the lives of many South Koreans even today.

² For more on the history of camptowns and the ways in which many South Korean girls and women were kept in them against their will—and the role of, for example, police in keeping them there—see Katharine H.S. Moon’s *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations* (Columbia University Press, 1997).