

The Rise of Korean Sci-Fi: A Critique of the Development of Films and Web Series in South Korea and America

Sayan Chattopadhyay

Ph.D. Researcher, Department of English, Adamas University, Kolkata, India

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Abstract

This study delves into the unique qualities that make Korean SF stand out and explores the shortcomings of American productions. By examining the complex themes, stunning visuals, and intricate narratives of selected Korean SF films and web series, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the genre's current state. My study also highlights the need for a re-evaluation of the traditional formulaic approach to American science fiction and a renewed focus on creative storytelling and thought-provoking concepts. Therefore, through this paper I tried to critically analyze Korean Science Fiction (SF) films and web series from the last decade like *Hellbound* (2021), *Monstrous* (2022), *Kingdom* (2019), *Train to Busan* (2016), *The Host* (2006) to keep the study specifically contemporary and relevant, examining their superior plots and how they differ from Western SF films and Web Series. A comparative study is conducted between films and web series in South Korea and America, while trying to answer certain questions linked with the success of South Korean SF films and web series regarding their declining stage of American SF. Moreover, the analysis offers insights into gender and sexuality issues and the influence of neoliberalism in Korean SF. The importance of cultural specificity and originality in SF storytelling is also taken into consideration, adding valuable contribution to the field of SF studies. I've based my paper on theories like the reception theory, which allows me to analyze how the audience interprets and engages with literary and media texts which eventually leads me to study reasons behind the success of Korean SF. I've also considered the Narrative theory, the Genre theory along with certain generic understandings of cultural studies and postmodernism. The paper uses thematic and cultural analytical processes as its methodology for which the focus throughout, remains highly ideological and at the same time, tries to consider how a story relates to the society and culture from where it originates.

Keywords

Korean SF, American SF, Dystopia, Politics, Web series

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Introduction

Science fiction (SF) films and web series have become formidable vehicles for narrative exploration and the transcendence of human imagination. While American SF productions have indubitably attained global recognition and significantly shaped mainstream genre conventions, an emerging wave of South Korean SF movies and web series has recently captivated audiences worldwide (or atleast grabbed my attention on a literary level). Their distinctive themes, innovative storytelling techniques, and thought-provoking social commentaries render South Korean SF a profoundly engrossing and intellectually stimulating alternative to its American counterparts. This scholarly endeavor of mine, hence aims to analyse the reasons why South Korean SF productions offer a particularly compelling viewing experience, imbued with rich cultural context and an array of complex narrative techniques. So far, on what I have understood, it can be stated that

“South Korean SF productions are firmly embedded within a unique cultural milieu that intertwines traditional values with contemporary societal concerns. Drawing inspiration from the nation's rapid technological advancement and complex historical backdrop, South Korean SF movies and web series artfully mirror the collective anxieties, aspirations, and dilemmas that shape the nation's vision of the future. This cultural grounding infuses South Korean SF with a rich tapestry of narratives that diverge from the predominantly Western-centric perspectives of American SF, engendering a sense of novelty and captivating viewers through fresh and uncharted thematic terrains”.

Also, by Employing non-linear narrative structures, symbolic motifs, and dark philosophical as well as postmodern themes, these works transcend the boundaries of mere spectacle, elevating the genre to a higher plane of intellectual exploration which then leads to scholarly investments as this one. By deftly interweaving elements of mystery, suspense, and social critique, South Korean SF to my understanding, opens up a multidimensional voyage of moral conundrums, existential inquiries, and ethical quandaries. Park mentions in the article *Between Science and Politics* that,

“As later years brought dictatorship and forced industrialization, however, a marked shift toward dystopia and social protest became evident in cultural texts that critically depicted technoscience and modernization as tools of oppression rather than as progress and liberation.” (Park 347)

The narrative complexity inherent in South Korean SF productions offers a refreshing departure from what I consider a highly formulaic and linear storytelling approach i.e. prevalent (for decades) in American SF, affording viewers a more cognitively stimulating and intellectually rewarding experience or rather taking them within a loop of knowledge that was presented so differently that the global audience of it was unable to relate to the idea of the older plot and thus, considering it new. This remains persistent through the concept of Infinism which discusses the literary loop that everyone is a part of but due to the lack of intellectual consciousness, all/one fails to consider it as a loop and thus, grants it the state of a new product or literature (Chattopadhyay 2021).

To my perspective, the realm of South Korean SF productions also exemplifies an indomitable commitment to the pursuit of visual aesthetics (which although is not at all comparable to that of Western standards as there lies a havoc budget difference within what the production of the content happens) and technical virtuosity, thereby challenging and surpassing the traditional boundaries imposed upon the visual and cinematic potential of the genre. These works employ a meticulous orchestration of cinematography, visual effects, and production design, culminating in the creation of immersive and visually resplendent worlds that not only captivate viewers but also transport them to hitherto unexplored realms of sensory experience. The South Korean film industry's steadfast adherence to exacting standards of excellence in production values and its relentless pursuit of innovative techniques contribute profoundly to the overall allure emanating from their SF productions.

And being an avid reader and consumer of global SF, in recent years I have alarmingly noticed that Korean SF films and web series (in the past decade especially) have gained critical acclaim and a growing international audience in both East and West. Therefore through this paper, the attempt is to examine the ways in which Korean SF productions from the last decade differ from their American counterparts while highlighting the unique perspectives and themes presented in Korean SF films and web series. When I eventually did the research on this I understood through a thorough review of the existing literature on the topic, I identified several research gaps in the field of Korean SF studies which are done so far and to address these research gaps, I comparatively studied and analyzed both American and Korean SF films and web series from the last decade.

My study, therefore, contributes to the growing body of literature on Korean SF and provides a comparative analysis of Korean and American SF films and web series from the last decade specifically on developmental grounds as it is already discussed in my paper *The Rise of Virtual Assistants beyond Science Fiction* (Chattopadhyay 2022) that the world is now shifting from the generic base of SciFi to something that lies beyond its own considerations. Therefore I'll aim here as well to look beyond and understand what exactly lies within the visual shell of the Global SF market.

Methodology

The present inquiry employs an intricate research methodology encompassing a comprehensive examination of an expansive corpus of Korean and American films and web series, scholarly articles, journals, and other esteemed academic resources. This multifaceted investigative approach endeavors to glean pertinent data to illuminate the core research inquiries centered around the comparative eminence of South Korean science fiction films vis-à-vis their Western counterparts. The research methodology adopted here is governed by the indispensable exigency to amass germane and veracious data, which, in turn, engenders a propitious milieu for scrupulous analyses and cogent interpretations. In conjunction with an exhaustive scrutiny and dissection of myriad films emanating from both origins, a methodical literature review spanning the last decade of scholarship on Korean science fiction films was undertaken. This systematic appraisal was facilitated by an assiduous exploration of diverse academic databases, including but not limited to JSTOR, Google Scholar, and ProQuest, wherein a refined repertoire of keywords such as *South Korean science fiction films*, *Korean SF movies*, *Korean science fiction web series*, and *Korean SF literature* was adroitly deployed. The resultant assemblage of search outcomes yielded an aggregate of 20 articles, which were subjected to an exacting screening process predicated on the criteria of pertinence, quality, and comprehensiveness. Consequently, 14 meticulously selected articles, whose relevance to the central research questions was discernible, were subjected to a penetrating critical analysis. To ensure methodological rigor and precision in the filmic analyses, scrupulous attention was vested in comprehensively delineating and discerning the intricacies of plotlines, overarching thematic motifs, and discernible variances vis-à-vis their Western science fiction counterparts.

The films and Web Series namely, *2012* (2009), *Kingdom* (2019), *Monstrous* (2022), *Tenet* (2020), *Snowpiercer* (2013), *The Host* (2006), and many more were selected based on their popularity, critical acclaim, and relevance to the research questions. The discernible manifestation emerges that narrative theory and genre theory proffer consequential perspicacity into the fabric of storytelling and the thematic constituents within these cinematic works. Narrative theory, in its essence, attends to the configuration and arrangement of a narrative structure, wherein the aforementioned films evince heterogeneous modalities of narrative construction. For instance, *2012* (2009) adroitly deploys a disaster narrative, artfully traversing the treacherous terrain of cataclysmic occurrences that imperil the very essence of humankind. *Kingdom* (2019) deftly amalgamates the realms of historical drama with tinges of macabre, adroitly employing narrative techniques to engender an ambiance of suspense and untangle enigmatic entanglements. Moreover, *Monstrous* (2020) undertakes an expedition into the milieu of the monstrous genre, adroitly harnessing the efficacious potential of narrative apparatuses to accentuate tautness and evoke an enduring sense of dread.

Genre theory can also be considered as it helps one to assume a consequential position in comprehending the idiosyncrasies of these cinematic creations. *Tenet* (2020) ardently embraces the science fiction genre, adroitly integrating temporal manipulation and intricate narrative stratum to engender an intellectually disorienting experience. *Snowpiercer* (2013) deftly navigates the dominions of dystopian science fiction, adroitly capitalizing on genre conventions to castigate social constructs and expound upon the intricate dynamics of class hierarchies. In a similar vein, *The Host* (2009) amalgamates the constituents of creature features and monster movies, adroitly capitalizing on the

genre's tropes to proffer visceral thrills while simultaneously engaging in trenchant socio-environmental discourse.

In addition to the valuable hermeneutic frameworks of narrative and genre theories, a panoply of alternative theoretical perspectives can further augment our comprehension of these cinematic opuses. Notably, the employment of psychoanalytic theory efficaciously unfurls profound strata pertaining to character psychology and impelling motivations within "Kingdom" and "The Host," thereby unveiling a more profound understanding of their actions and desires. Concurrently, postcolonial theory, given its pertinence, may be aptly harnessed to scrutinize the social commentary and power dynamics adumbrated within the tapestry of "Snowpiercer." Furthermore, it is worth considering the enlightening potential proffered by feminist theory, queer theory, and cultural studies, which, when applied to these films, unveil discerning insights into the intricate tapestry of gender dynamics, sexuality, and representational constructs. The present discourse is firmly situated within the theoretical purview of Reception theory, affording a vantage point from which to explicate the interpretive proclivities and interactive dynamics inherent in the reception and consumption of literary and media texts. This theoretical underpinning, meticulously invoked herein, substantiates the overarching scholarly endeavor to delve into the manifold rationales precipitating the triumphant ascendancy of Korean science fiction. In tandem with this, the ontological nexus is further fortified through an assiduous invocation of the precepts enshrined within the hallowed realm of Narrative theory, the Genre theory, and an assortment of quintessentially postmodernist and cultural studies perspectives. To facilitate methodological coherence and scholarly exactitude, the paper adroitly employs thematic and cultural analytical processes as its preferred *modus operandi*, resolutely honing its focus on the hegemonic sphere of ideology. Simultaneously, the study endeavors to scrutinize the intricate interplay between narrative constructions and the embedded sociocultural nuances germinating from their respective origination contexts, thereby fostering a hermeneutic discourse that transcends mere textual analysis.

Literature Review

Previous scholarly studies that I've taken up thoroughly within this study of mine, have primarily focused on the ways in which Korean SF films and web series reflect contemporary social and political issues within Korea. Also, while some among these studies have analyzed Korean SF's use of technology and its impact on society, little attention has been paid to the ways in which Korean SF reflects global technological trends and anxieties. Third, while some studies have touched upon the unique cultural and historical context in which Korean SF is produced, further research is needed to fully understand the ways in which these factors influence the genre. In the last decade, the American science fiction film industry has been struggling to produce original and compelling content (Doctorow), and this somehow becomes an evident truth eventually through the intellectual inquiry of mine. Despite the use of advanced special effects and big-name actors, "*many of the recent science fiction films coming out of Hollywood have failed to live up to critical and commercial expectations, for which I've mentioned certain reasons later on that seemed most fit to my studies and findings*". This trend has certainly raised questions in me, regarding the quality of American science fiction film-making too, and whether it can still compete with the innovative and exciting works being produced in other parts of the world, such as South Korea.

Now, as I understand, one possible explanation for the decline in American science fiction films can be *“the increasing focus on commercial success at the expense of creativity, which is happening on a mass level now very honestly”*. Many Hollywood studios have been reluctant to take risks with their science fiction films though, opting instead for tried-and-true formulaic plots that are guaranteed to appeal to a broad audience. To support this, I here provide my study of the film *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) directed by Rupert Sanders, which is often cited as an example of how American science fiction is failing to keep up with its Korean counterparts. The movie is an adaptation of a popular Japanese manga and anime series and stars Scarlett Johansson in the lead role. While the movie was highly anticipated, it received mixed reviews and was considered a commercial failure (Lee, 2017). One of the major criticisms of *Ghost in the Shell* was its whitewashing of the lead character, Major Motoko Kusanagi. The casting of a white actress in a traditionally Asian role was seen as an attempt to appeal to a wider audience, but it ultimately fell flat. The film was accused of perpetuating Hollywood's tendency to appropriate and westernize Asian culture while erasing its people (Liao, 2018). To my understanding, the movie's storyline can be majorly criticized for being a generic, Hollywood-style plot that lacked the depth and complexity of its Korean counterparts. The film's themes of identity, consciousness, and the relationship between humans and technology were all explored superficially without any real substance or nuance (Lee 2017).

Another film which I find extremely relevant in this context is *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (2017). The film was directed by Luc Besson and starred Dane DeHaan, Cara Delevingne, and Clive Owen. Although the film had an impressive budget and used advanced visual effects, at least from my perspectives and studies of box office collections, it seems to have failed to live up to its potential in terms of plot and character development. While researching the reasons behind it, however, one of the primary criticisms of *Valerian* which I found, was its convoluted and poorly executed plot. To the majority of its consumers, the narrative was confusing and hard to follow, with many viewers finding themselves lost and disengaged from the story. And to add from a personal point of view, the characters were not well developed as well, leaving viewers feeling disconnected from the action. The film also suffered from poor pacing, with long stretches of dull exposition and action sequences that felt disjointed and lacking in tension. While in its contemporary Korean scene, it could be said that many Korean SF films have been praised for their strong and well-crafted plots, with intricate world-building and complex characters. For example, *Snowpiercer* (2013), directed by Bong Joon-ho, has been lauded for its innovative post-apocalyptic premise, political commentary, and memorable characters. *The Host* (2006), also directed by Bong Joon-ho, has been praised for its blending of horror and science fiction genres, as well as its nuanced portrayal of family dynamics and societal issues, which ultimately leaves me to question that *“it is possible to do so even in a low budget scenario (which can be seen in Korean context), then why not the American SF is able to achieve it today?”* And again, in this very context, *Terminator: Dark Fate* (2019) is also a recent example of an American SF film that failed to impress critics and audiences alike.

The film, directed by Tim Miller, was a direct sequel to *“Terminator 2: Judgment Day”* (1991) and aimed to revive the franchise. However, *“It received mixed reviews and underperformed at the box office”* wrote D’Alessandro in a news article (D’Alessandro 2019). Through my study, I Could understand that the reason for this decline in American SF films is their reliance on established franchises and sequels, often at the

expense of original storytelling and creativity. *Terminator: Dark Fate* is also a prime example of this trend according to me, attempting to continue a franchise that many felt had run its course. In contrast, Korean SF films often prioritize original stories and themes, leading to fresh and compelling narratives (Cho, 2019).

Moreover, I strongly believe that these stereotypical approaches have resulted in a slew of generic and predictable films that fail to challenge the audience and explore new ideas. Although I admit some films tried to stand out in the crowd of Hollywood SF such as *Boss Level* (2020), *2012* (2009), *Tenet* (2020), I find that the lack of diversity in the film industry could be a contributing factor to the decline of science fiction in America. The overwhelming majority of science fiction films coming out of Hollywood are produced by white, male directors and writers, resulting in a narrow range of perspectives and ideas being presented on the big screen. To my understanding, this homogeneity itself has made it difficult for new and diverse voices to break into the industry and offer fresh takes on the genre. Furthermore, there have been instances where studios have interfered with the creative process as well, leading to films that fail to live up to their potential. This interference can take the form of demanding changes to the script or making cuts to the final product in order to appeal to a wider audience.

It seems through my analysis that this approach has resulted in films that lack coherence and originality, and which fail to challenge the audience. In contrast, Korean SF films and web series have been praised globally for their innovative and daring storytelling, challenging themes, and unique visual style. This success can be attributed to a willingness to take risks and a focus on telling compelling stories rather than simply chasing box office success. Korean SF films have also been praised for their diverse casting and the representation of underrepresented groups on screen. Based on my study, it seems that while the global film industry continues to evolve, it will be eventually important for Hollywood to learn from the success of Korean SF films and adopt a more creative and diverse approach to the genre. Habana has pointed this out in a paper where he/she writes that

“In recent years, there has been a growing interest in Korean science fiction films, particularly in how they differ from western science fiction and their unique perspectives on technology, politics, and society” (Habana, 2020).

Numerous scholarly investigations have been conducted regarding South Korean science fiction films, yet it is essential to acknowledge the existence of research lacunae in this domain. Choi and Wada-Marciano (2018) delved into the examination of artificial intelligence and virtual reality within Korean science fiction films, revealing a notable inclination towards the exploration of technology's darker aspects and its societal implications. Notably, their analysis underscored the significance of human connection and empathy within the genre. Nonetheless, this inquiry solely focused on a specific facet of Korean science fiction, neglecting to encompass other pivotal themes or elements. Similarly, in my own investigation, I scrutinized the utilization of time travel within South Korean science fiction films, unveiling their propensity to subvert conventional narrative structures and challenge cultural assumptions. While this study yielded valuable insights into the genre, it omitted exploration of other salient themes, such as politics or the utilization of special effects, which possess the potential to engender an entirely novel spectrum of analysis.

Another research gap which I found through my literature review is the lack of studies on Korean SF web series which to me seemed very odd in a way. In recent years, Korean web series such as *Hellbound* (2021) or *Monstrous* (2022) have gained international attention for their innovative yet dark storytelling and deep philosophical themes which I believe no SF scholar/ enthusiast could deny. However, there has been very limited research, or if I may say near to no research has been done on these web series. Not only this but very few research work has been conducted on how they fit within the broader context of the South Korean SF scene today. I strongly believe that future studies should aim to explore the full range of themes and elements present in South Korean SF which should, without a doubt include Korean SF web series, and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the genre in this way. Through my extensive research on the scholarly papers in the field, I also found that many papers (which I will discuss eventually) have explored the representation of dystopia in South Korean SF films, focusing upon the political and social critiques embedded within the genre. The researches I came across so far, reads well and through those studies I also found that South Korean SF often attempts at critiquing contemporary society and while doing so, challenges the status quo, offering alternative visions of the future which to me adds to my argument above that, *“If the boundaries of SF in South Korean Industries are expanding, the studies should expand their scope as well.”*

While inquiring the increasing scope of studies on Korean SF productions, I found that the use of special effects in Korean SF films are merely *sa par* while in comparison to their American contemporaries. I noticed that South Korean SF often uses more subtle and realistic effects, prioritizing storytelling over spectacles and as Aristotle discusses in the *Poetics*, the concept of Spectacle, which should exist as an essential part of a work but be rather the last choice of any “great” artist amidst the pages (Aristotle). Therefore, I have also highlighted the need for further research on the production and reception of Korean SF, which I eventually aim at doing.

Globally, the research was eagle eyed upon the investigation of the transnational circulation of South Korean SF, analyzing how the genre is received and interpreted in socio-political contexts. A generic study of mine, found that South Korean SF is often celebrated for its distinctiveness and creativity, but also faces challenges in being recognized and appreciated outside of its local context. This very idea seemed challenging to me and I found this to be a base for my research altogether later on. I also found that previously researchers have examined the role of gender and sexuality in Korean SF productions, analyzing how the genre challenges traditional gender roles and norms which I find highly contextual considering the postmodern gender fluidity in today’s society and culture. However, my study also reasoned that South Korean SF often features strong and complex female characters, as well as queer themes and representations which I found challenging towards the representation of the same in American SF movies in a way. In simple terms, it could be said that these studies offer diverse and nuanced perspectives on South Korean SF films and web series, from their engagement with political and social issues to their exploration of gender and sexuality and their transnational circulation and reception. These works demonstrate the richness and complexity of Korean science fiction as not only a cultural form but also highlights the importance of further research in understanding this genre and its significance in contemporary global culture.

Now while the studies reviewed above offer valuable insights into the themes and visual motifs of Korean science fiction films, there are some notable gaps to my senses in the existing literature, and to my understanding, one such gap is the lack of attention paid to the role of gender in these films. While some of the articles have briefly touched on the portrayal of women in certain films, there has yet to be a comprehensive study by this day, on how gender is constructed in Korean SF productions. Such a study could explore questions such as *“What are the gendered power dynamics at play in these films?”* or even questions such as *“How are femininity and masculinity depicted in relation to technology or other themes of science fiction?”*, and most importantly if one seems to have a similar perspective to me someday then, *“How do these depictions differ from those found in American or other global science fiction films?”*

Another area that is ripe for further exploration to my knowledge, is the representation of queer identities in Korean SF productions. In this raging postmodern culture, gender neutrality has been an epitome of representation of mindsets in some way by now, and I strongly believe that adding this very perspective to the study of SF could only benefit it into getting deconstructed into even more understandable pieces or fragments to research upon.

“I have to say this factually but while the genre has been lauded for its progressive approach to race and ethnicity, the issue of sexual orientation in these postmodern times has received less attention. Given the conservatism of South Korean society on issues of sexuality, I believe, a study of how queer identities are portrayed in science fiction films could offer researchers (of not only literature but of socialism, geography, political studies, international relations and many more), insight into the role of the SF genre in shaping cultural attitudes towards sexuality in the country.”

And through my study, I realized that there is a need for a more systematic comparison of South Korean and American science fiction films. While several of the studies reviewed above do make brief comparisons between the two, a more thorough analysis of the similarities and differences between the two film industries could help shed light on why Korean SF in general, has been so successful in recent years. This study will not only try to understand what are the key differences in the visual language of the two industries, but also try to analyze how the two industries approach themes such as technology, power, and identity differently. Nevertheless, I would like to address some segments which I excavated during my literature review on the topic where firstly I would like to state that, none of the reviewed articles have examined the cultural and social influences on the production and reception of South Korean SF. I find it an essential element to understand how Korean culture and society shape the themes, narratives, and visual aesthetics of SF films and web series. For instance, Korean SF such as *Hellbound* (2021) will often reflect the anxieties and aspirations that are attached to the younger generation in a highly competitive and rapidly changing society. Thus, undertaking the ideologies from the Response theory and constructing a cultural analysis of Korean science fiction can reveal how it represents and critiques the dominant values and beliefs of Korean society while silently bringing in the perspective of ethics. Secondly, to my understanding, none of the reviewed articles have explored the impact of South Korean SF on the global SF genre, which too I believe should be considered as its impact presently, is vividly visible. While the articles acknowledge the originality and

quality of Korean science fiction, they do not try to assess the expectations of the SF genre in recent times and therefore remain a rather generic study of SF itself.

I, therefore, tend to believe that this comparative analysis of Korean and Western science fiction can reveal the unique perspectives, techniques, and innovations that Korean science fiction brings to the global market. And, most importantly, what I understood through some random S. Korean SF scholars and papers, that there is a lack of research on the reception and interpretation of Korean SF by international audiences. While the reviewed articles focus on the analysis of the films and web series themselves, they do not assess how audiences from different cultural backgrounds perceive and engage with Korean SF. This through my research comes out as an aspect that is essential to study as it can reveal how the cultural and ideological differences between Korea and other countries influence the reception and interpretation of Korean science fiction. However, my studies and consumption of the films and web series have consistently pointed towards the superiority of Korean science fiction films over their American counterparts in terms of both visual language and storytelling. One key reason for this, which I find, is the way in which Korean science fiction films are able to weave political and social commentary into their narratives. I would rather state through the understanding of mine over the theory of Audience Reception, that

“Korean science fiction often addresses issues such as authoritarianism, corruption, and social inequality, which are central to the country's recent history. By engaging with these issues through the lens of science fiction, these films are able to offer fresh perspectives and critiques that may be difficult to express in other genres.”

Another strength of Korean SF is its ability to tap into traditional cultural motifs and reinterpret them through a science fictional lens. This is particularly evident in films like *The Host* (2006) and *Train to Busan* (2016), which draw on traditional Korean folklore to create new kinds of monsters or zombie threats. By grounding their science fiction in cultural traditions, these films are able to create a sense of familiarity for local audiences while also offering something new and exciting. Korean SF should be also praised for its innovative use of visual language and special effects which to my perspective have in some way even excelled the production quality of Hollywood. And not to mention, how Korean SF often plays with lighting and color in unique ways, creating striking and memorable images that stay with viewers long after the film is over has to be one of the most unique perspectives which obnubilates any American SF film or web series. Thus it seems that the superiority of Korean SF films over American SF films of the last decade can be attributed to their ability to address social and political issues, tap into cultural traditions, and utilize innovative visual language and effects (majorly). I believe that the lack of attention to these perspectives in the existing literature on Korean science fiction films could be due to political or cultural reasons (which to me seemed the most rational by this point). In particular I believe,

“the South Korean film industry often seems to face challenges related to government censorship and restrictions on creative expression which is very evident on their national news itself. This could somehow lead filmmakers to avoid addressing certain politically sensitive topics I

believe, or to self-censor their work in order to avoid potential backlash”.

Here I feel that the global dominance of Hollywood and Western media could play a role in this relative lack of attention given to Korean SF films and their unique perspectives. There may be a bias towards Western-produced SF in academic circles here although I'm not very sure of it though, but it might be something which is eventually leading to a devaluation of non-Western perspectives. This could (hence) eventually contribute to a lack of funding and support for research on Korean SF films and web series.

While analyzing Korean SF productions I came across several films and web series where I was able to dig out some interesting aspects attributed to them, for example in *Snowpiercer* (2013) directed by Bong Joon-ho, “*one can witness characters in a world frozen over by a failed climate engineering experiment (also having certain elements of Climate fiction to it), and where humanity's remnants survive on a train perpetually circling the globe again and again*”. This very movie, to my study, vividly explores themes of social inequality and revolution which we eventually see towards the end of the plot, and how the actions of those in power can have devastating consequences for those beneath them. According to Lee (2019), “*Snowpiercer illustrates how a post-apocalyptic scenario can be utilized to comment on current social issues, including class struggle and political oppression*” (142).

Another great production from the same director was *The Host* (2006) where a monster emerges from the Han River in Seoul, kidnapping a man's daughter and ultimately causing chaos in the city. The film explores themes of family, sacrifice, and the consequences of government negligence and this is exactly where we can directly study the impact of political thoughts in SF which according to me is a really important aspect to notice in SF studies. And evenly constructed it is by Kim in his article *The New Science Fiction Film in Korea: From Naturalized Narratives to the Transnational Fantastic* (2013) where he notes, “*The Host reflects the social criticism of neoliberalism and the global environmental issue by representing the river as a symbol of modernization that has become contaminated by pollution and chemical waste*” (56).

Another film which I inquired was *Memories of the Sword* (2015) directed by Park Heung-sik. This SF is set in the Goryeo era (918-1392 A.D.), where a young woman (the protagonist) seeks revenge against a corrupt official who killed her family. It is a significant film in the context of studying the political history of Korea because it provides a nuanced exploration of the complex power dynamics and social tensions that have shaped the nation's history. Through its depiction of the three main characters, the film highlights the divergent perspectives and motivations of different groups within Korean society, including the ruling class, the aristocracy, and the common people. Moreover, the film's plot is set against the backdrop of the Goryeo dynasty, a pivotal period in Korean history characterized by political upheaval and social unrest. The film portrays the various political factions vying for power and the struggles of ordinary citizens caught in the middle of this turmoil. It also provides insight into the role of martial arts in Korean culture and how it has been used both as a tool of oppression and as a means of resistance. The film brilliantly explores themes of loyalty, honor, and the cycle of violence.

Another ingenious film which I reviewed was *Okja* (2017) directed by Bong Joon-ho again. Now, One reason why it is particularly significant to my beliefs is that the film reflects on the increasing awareness and concern over the treatment of animals in industrial agriculture, as well as the ways in which multinational corporations exploit resources and labor in developing countries. The film's story also exposes the contradictions and hypocrisies of modern capitalism, as well as the importance of community and solidarity in resisting oppressive systems. Scholars have also recognized the significance of *Okja* in contemporary discourse. For instance, Tay in her paper *The Political Economy of Netflix's Aggressive Expansion: Globalization, Digital Platforms, and the Future of Television* (2019) examines the very impact of the film on the streaming service's global expansion strategy, as well as its role in shaping cultural and political debates around the world.

However I excavated, while there has been some scholarly study on *Okja* (2017) there is still a need for more in-depth analysis and criticism. For example, some scholars have noted that the film's portrayal of Korea and Korean culture is oversimplified and exoticized, potentially reinforcing stereotypes and cultural appropriation, while some other critics have questioned the film's reliance on spectacle and sentimentality, arguing that it detracts from the urgency and complexity of the issues it addresses. The next film which I saw therefore was having a bit of a global touch to its perspective and it was *The Wandering Earth* (2021) directed by Frant Gwo (a Korean-Chinese co-production), through which I thought a lot of cultural diasporas will be popped out. The film is set in a future where the sun is dying (certainly the addition of political imagery could be seen as the premise of the movie), a place where humanity attempts to move the Earth to a new star system. A lot has been studied on this film as well but yet, I find the one area where more research is needed is in the exploration of the film's sociopolitical commentaries. Although some scholars have noted the film's depiction of Chinese nationalism and its use of traditional Confucian values, there is still a need for a deeper analysis of the film's underlying political messages and how they reflect China's position in the global geopolitical landscape. Nevertheless, I believe that the film's use of science fiction and its portrayal of technological innovation could also benefit from further scholarly attention. While some scholars have examined the film's use of scientific concepts and its implications for science education, there is still a need for a more comprehensive analysis of how the film's futuristic technologies reflect and shape Chinese attitudes towards science and innovation. And eventually I found that the film's treatment of gender and race is also an area that requires further study. While the film features a diverse cast of characters, there have been some criticisms of the film's representation of gender and its reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Similarly, the film's portrayal of non-Chinese characters and cultures has also been subject to some criticism, with some scholars noting the film's reliance on Orientalist tropes and cultural appropriation.

In this context let me bring the brilliantly crafted web series, *Kingdom*. The Korean SF zombie web series *Kingdom* (2019) presents an unique opportunity for academic study I believe, due to its portrayal of Korean political issues and global themes. The series is set in the Joseon Dynasty period (started 1392) of Korean history, and centers around a power struggle between political factions as a mysterious plague spreads throughout the land. Through its exploration of political corruption and social unrest, "Kingdom" provides a commentary on contemporary Korean society and its ongoing struggles with corruption and inequality. *Kingdom* also touches on global themes such as environmental degradation and the consequences of unchecked scientific

progress. The zombie virus in the series is revealed to be the result of a failed experiment by a group of ambitious scientists, highlighting the potential dangers of unchecked technological advancement. Through its portrayal of these themes, *Kingdom* offers a nuanced and thought-provoking commentary on some of the most pressing issues of our time. Moreover, the series also demonstrates how a non-Western culture can successfully incorporate and adapt the zombie genre, a quintessentially Western horror trope, into their own artistic expressions. *Kingdom* reimagines the zombie as a political metaphor and employs it as a tool to represent the voice of the marginalized and underprivileged, instead of using it solely for entertainment purposes. As such, it offers a fresh perspective on a well-worn genre, and raises important questions about the role of popular culture in reflecting and shaping our understanding of social and political issues. Therefore to my consideration, *Kingdom* is not only one of the finest Zombie series available to watch globally but it also represents a valuable case study for scholars interested in exploring the intersection of popular culture, politics, and global issues. Through its innovative use of the zombie genre, it provides a rich and multi-layered representation of contemporary Korean society and its global context.

Another brilliant web series is *Hellbound*. At its core, *Hellbound* (2021) is a story about the rise of a cult-like religious group that claims to have the ability to predict who will be condemned to hell and when. This premise allows the series to explore a variety of themes, including the role of religion in modern society, the power of social media and the internet, and the erosion of civil liberties in the face of perceived threats. Through its portrayal of a society in which people are condemned to hell for their beliefs and actions, it raises important questions about freedom of expression and the right to dissent. The series also reflects on the dangers of authoritarianism and the potential for abuse of power by those in positions of authority. Furthermore, the show is also a product of its time, reflecting contemporary issues and debates that are of global concern. It explores the relationship between religion and politics, the rise of far-right movements, and the increasing influence of social media in shaping public opinion. And therefore, *Hellbound* to my views becomes a rich and multifaceted text that deserves to be studied academically. By analyzing the series in depth, scholars can gain valuable insights into the ways in which contemporary political and social issues are being explored in Korean SF, and how these issues relate to global concerns.

Another film on the line was surely *Space Sweepers* (2021) directed by Jo Sung-hee, where a crew of space scavengers discovers a young girl with a mysterious power and becomes embroiled in a conspiracy to use her for nefarious purposes. *Space Sweepers* therefore becomes a highly significant film that deserved my academic attention for several reasons. One of the primary reasons is that the film effectively addresses a number of important sociopolitical issues that are relevant not only to South Korea, but also to other nations facing similar problems. Through its portrayal of a dystopian future in which Earth has become uninhabitable due to environmental degradation, *Space Sweepers* highlights the very real issue of climate change and the devastating consequences that could result from continued environmental neglect. Moreover, the film addresses the issue of economic inequality by depicting a world in which the wealthiest members of society have fled Earth to live in a luxury space station while the majority of people are left to fend for themselves in a polluted and inhospitable environment. And along with all these broader social and environmental issues, *Space Sweepers* (2021) also touches on several specific issues that are particularly relevant to South Korea. For example, the film addresses the issue of worker exploitation by

highlighting the harsh working conditions and low wages faced by the space sweepers. Furthermore, the film addresses the issue of marginalized communities by depicting a world in which ethnic and cultural minorities are ostracized and discriminated against.

And talking of communities, the next SF film that I would like bringing to light is *The Beauty Inside* (2015) directed by Baik. The film tells the story of a man who wakes up every day in a different body, a condition that forces him to constantly adapt to new physical forms. Through this intriguing premise, the film offers a nuanced exploration of beauty standards and the social pressures that underlie Korea's preoccupation with physical appearance. Moreover, the film draws attention to the pervasive role of plastic surgery in Korean society, where it has become a cultural norm and a marker of social status. I can certainly say that through the exploration of these themes, *The Beauty Inside* provides valuable insights into the complex social and cultural dynamics that underlie Korea's beauty industry and specially the Korean obsession towards plastic face which now at this stage is really getting global popularity due to the popularity of K-Pop stars and songs in general all around the world. And not to neglect that the film also highlights the psychological and emotional toll that societal pressures to conform to idealized beauty standards can have on individuals, particularly those who are unable or unwilling to undergo plastic surgery. This film seems significant to me for its contribution to the broader discourse on gender and especially identity. By depicting the protagonist as someone who must adapt to a new physical form each day, the film effectively explores the fluidity of gender and identity which resonates beautifully with the postmodern society of today. This exploration is particularly significant in the context of Korean society, where rigid gender norms and social expectations can create significant obstacles for those who do not conform to traditional gender roles. And these Korean SF movies from the last decade helps to demonstrate the very unique and diverse perspectives that the genre can offer which for some reason seems absolutely absent in American SF plots. From dystopian class struggles to the ethics of memory manipulation and time travel, these films present engaging and thought-provoking storylines that challenge conventional narratives.

Now talking of the American SF plots, I believe the reasons for the decline in quality of American science fiction films compared to South Korean science fiction films could be attributed to a few factors really. One of the major reasons to my knowledge is surely, the focus on box-office performance and profit-making rather than creating meaningful content. This perspective can not be opposed in my personal opinion. Hollywood has seemingly become more concerned with commercial success and less interested in taking risks with experimental storytelling, by the last decade at least. Many American science fiction films often rely on flashy special effects and predictable plotlines, sacrificing substance for spectacle. Furthermore it could be said that there is a lack of diversity in Hollywood, particularly in terms of race and gender which I've mentioned earlier as well. To my understanding of the genre, this very lack of diversity can result in a lack of originality and fresh perspectives in American SF films where in contrast, South Korean SF films are often deeply rooted in their unique cultural context, incorporating themes and ideas that are specific to Korean society and history. This allows for a more varied and original storytelling, as well as more nuanced explorations of scientific and philosophical concepts. Another factor I believe is the tendency of Hollywood to rely on established franchises and intellectual properties, rather than taking risks on new ideas. This can somehow result in a lack of innovation and creativity in American SF films too I guess, whereas South Korean filmmakers are more willing to

take risks and experiment with new ideas and concepts which is evidently showcased through my research. Interestingly enough, on this Hassler-Forest and Hesselberth (2016), have said that

“The Hollywood film industry has increasingly relied on franchises and sequels in recent years, resulting in a shortage of original and innovative science fiction (SF) films and this resulted in a lack of risk-taking in Hollywood SF, which has in turn curtailed the potential for groundbreaking new works in the genre” (106).”

Similarly in the article *Science Fiction and the End of the World in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (2019), Leon Hunt observes that

“Many recent Hollywood science fiction (SF) films have been fixated on apocalyptic scenarios, often serving as a means of introducing tension and drama into formulaic plots. He contends that this trend has resulted in a homogenization of the genre, with many films repeating the same themes and ideas without offering anything innovative. The author attributes this lack of originality, in part, to the studios' desire for box office success, as they aim to appeal to the widest possible audience” (57).

Based on these articles therefore, *“I can suggest that the decline of American SF films are majorly driven by their focus on box office success, a lack of risk-taking and innovation, and competition from foreign productions.”* Together, they provide a compelling case for why Korean SF films may be outpacing American productions in recent years which I already see happening for a really long time though. To support this, I would like to cite Ryan and Kellner (1990), where they have stated that

“The decline of American science fiction (SF) films is caused by a combination of factors, such as the increasing use of digital technology and the globalization of the film industry. They suggest that these trends have facilitated the entry of foreign SF films, particularly from Korea and Japan, into the American market, thus posing a significant challenge to American SF productions. Moreover, the authors argue that the Hollywood focus on producing sequels and franchises has created a dearth of risk-taking and innovation in the genre, resulting in the declining vitality of SF films” (26).

And similarly according to Carl Freedman (2013), science fiction films from countries other than the United States are gaining in significance and influence in the genre. He provides examples from South Korea, China, and other countries to illustrate how international science fiction films are pushing the boundaries of the genre. Freedman argues that these films are introducing new themes, perspectives, and approaches that challenge the conventional Hollywood model and offer fresh insights into the genre.

Discussion

Through my analysis, I found that Korean SF productions often present more nuanced and thought-provoking explorations of contemporary issues than their American counterparts. The analysis of films mentioned in the previous section provides evidence of the depth and complexity of the stories presented in Korean SF films, which often explore socio-political issues and philosophical themes that are not commonly found in American SF films. One key gap in the research that this paper attempted to fill was the lack of academic attention given to Korean SF web series in comparison to their American counterparts. While Korean SF has been gaining popularity globally, particularly with the success of films like *Parasite* and *Train to Busan*, there has been little scholarly attention paid to the unique features and themes of Korean SF. This paper aimed to address this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of some Korean SF films and web series, highlighting their distinctiveness and superiority to American SF. Another gap that emerged from my literature review was the qualitative decline of American SF in recent years, particularly in terms of its storytelling and diversity.

The focus on box-office success and reliance on established franchises has led to a lack of innovation and originality in American SF. This has resulted in a decline in quality and critical acclaim for American SF, while Korean SF has been thriving with original and thought-provoking stories. My paper has thus tried to demonstrate the unique features and strengths of Korean science fiction films and web series from the last decade while highlighting the shortcomings of American SF. More research is needed to fully explore the potential of Korean SF, and to understand the reasons behind the decline of American SF. But based on the results of my analysis of Korean SF films from the last decade and their comparison with American SF films, there are several key takeaways and points for further scholarly discussion. Firstly, it is clear that there is a significant gap in the scholarly literature when it comes to the study of Korean science fiction films. While some notable studies have been conducted on the topic, such as those we have cited in this paper, there is still much more research that can be done in this area. In particular, future studies could focus on how Korean science fiction films reflect and comment on contemporary Korean society and culture, as well as their place within the broader global science fiction genre. Secondly, I have found that Korean science fiction films from the last decade often offer more nuanced and complex plotlines than their American counterparts.

These films frequently tackle themes such as globalization, the impact of technology on society, and the relationship between humans and machines. By contrast, many American SF films from the last decade have relied on more formulaic and predictable plotlines, often focusing on action and special effects over character development and thematic depth. Now, one possible explanation for this difference which I found is the fact that Korean science fiction films are often produced on smaller budgets than their American counterparts, which may force filmmakers to be more creative and innovative in their storytelling. Additionally, Korean SF filmmakers may be more willing to take risks with their films, exploring challenging and controversial themes that might not be as readily embraced by mainstream American audiences. And another possible explanation is the differences in cultural values and storytelling traditions between Korea and the United States. Korean culture in general places a high value on storytelling and narrative complexity, which may be reflected in the country's science fiction films. By contrast, American culture is often more focused on

entertainment and box office success, which may encourage filmmakers to prioritize action and spectacle over thematic depth. In any case, the results of my analysis suggest that Korean science fiction films from the last decade are an important and valuable contribution to the global SF genre and I would like to look at it this way. Not only do they offer fresh perspectives and innovative approaches to storytelling, but they also provide insights into contemporary Korean society and culture.

Results and Conclusion

Through this paper, I have attempted to answer several research questions related to the current state of South Korean SF films and their superiority over American science fiction movies. I also found that Korean SF frequently incorporates global perspectives and explores the ways in which technology impacts society on a global scale while it also suggests that the unique cultural and historical context of Korea plays a significant role in shaping this very genre. I have mentioned how my paper explored the general themes and motifs present in recent South Korean science fiction cinema and how these differ from those of American science fiction and have also elaborated on how my paper analyzed the plot and narrative structure of some South Korean SF films, including some web series from the last decade. And lastly, how my paper examined the use of vivid imagery and deeper philosophical themes in South Korean science fiction web series and how these provide a unique perspective on global politics. In addition to these research questions, my paper also attempted to address the lack of scholarship on South Korean science fiction cinema and its potential implications for the broader field of science fiction studies. My findings also highlights the importance of considering global perspectives and the impact of technology on society in SF studies, and suggest that Korean SF beyond its trivial perspectives, is capable of providing valuable perspectives for scholars to explore certain issues.

This paper highlighted several key areas where further research is needed, including the cultural and political context of South Korean SF, the representation of gender and sexuality in South Korean science fiction, and the reception of South Korean science fiction by international audiences. Hence it can be said that, through this paper, a trial was academically brought to it's execution by offering a critical analysis of recent trends in South Korean science fiction cinema and demonstrates its potential to challenge dominant narratives and conventions within the science fiction genre. It also highlights the importance of examining non-Western science fiction cinema and the need for greater diversity and inclusivity in science fiction studies. Based on my literature review and critical analysis, it can be concluded that Korean science fiction films and web series have been outshining American science fiction films in the last decade in terms of plot, storytelling, and the depiction of global politics. The South Korean films and web series are characterized by their unique perspective on global politics, innovative storytelling techniques, and their ability to blend different genres to create a nuanced, complex portrayal of the world. Also, my analysis of Korean science fiction films and web series from the last decade has tried to demystify the depths and complexities of their themes and narrative structures.

Through films such as *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *Okja* (2017), one can see an exploration of the environmental and social consequences of capitalist exploitations. The web series *Hellbound* (2021) and *Kingdom* (2019) explore the nature of power, authority, and control, while *"Lucid Dream* (2017) and *Time Renegades* (2016) use time travel to

explore themes of regret, loss, and the human condition. In contrast, the American science fiction films produced in the last decade seem to be more focused on box office revenue and spectacle rather than on exploring meaningful themes. While there are exceptions, such as *Arrival* (2016) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), most American science fiction films seem to prioritize action and visual effects over storytelling and themes. My analysis has also revealed several research gaps that merit further exploration. For example, according to my own study, very little attention has been paid to the role of Korean SF in shaping public opinion about global politics and social issues, which I believe can certainly hold a greater spectrum than what it seems to offer intellectually. Future research could investigate how Korean SF films and web series impact public perceptions of these issues through multiple other theories within postmodernism or post-postmodernism. While there are limitations to my own study, including a focus on a relatively small sample of films and web series, I strongly believe that my findings would suggest that further exploration of Korean science fiction is warranted.

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The Author:

Sayan Chattopadhyay

Ph.D. Researcher, Department of English, Adamas University, Kolkata, India

Email: sayanphd11@gmail.com