



The Host (Gwoemul, South Korea 2006)

The South Korean director Bong Joon-ho became very well known in the West when his 2019 film *Parasite* won three Oscars at the 2020 Academy Awards. But before that his films failed to make the same impact in Europe and North America that they had achieved at home. *The Host* in 2006 had a limited release in the UK and struggled to find an audience but in South Korea it was a huge blockbuster, breaking records. Why the change of fortune, we might ask? It's taken us a long time to really appreciate the story-telling skills and technical proficiency of South Korean cinema, but directors like Bong have also learned to move away from stories rooted so firmly in Korean history, politics and social issues.

At first sight, *The Host* is simply a fantastic 'monster movie' with an unusual hero. Gang-du is played by South Korea's leading star actor Song Kang-ho, a seemingly slow-witted man who fights the monster to save his young daughter with the aid of his brother, sister and father. But Bong, and indeed South Korean cinema in general, are known for taking very innovative approaches to genre films without losing any of their entertainment elements. This means *The Host* combines the monster movie with the family comedy/melodrama and in the process presents a political critique of South Korea's alliance with the US and utilises the history of the previous twenty years to provide the unique talents and weaknesses of each family member.

So, without spoiling the action narrative, we can note several points about the characters and the events and how they carry specific meanings. For instance, Gang-du's sister is an archer representing the country in international competition but she struggles to maintain her confidence. Archery is a major sport in South Korea and the country's hosting of both a Summer and a Winter Olympics (1988 and 2018 respectively) were important events confirming South Korea's emergence as a modern advanced economy. Gang-du's brother was a student back in the politically turbulent 1980s and has since struggled to keep a job. But his student activism has made him efficient at evading the authorities while protesting violently. Gang-du himself has suffered some kind of mental illness which may well have been the result of poor nutrition when he was a small child in the 1960s before the advent of South Korea's economic miracle.

South Korea has a history of repression so the emergence of a monster in the Han River running through Seoul is met by a government trying to close down the riverside and using the media to divert attention to a possible outbreak of a new virus associated with the monster (the SARS outbreak in Southern China in 2002 created concern throughout East Asia). In this context we can all cheer for Chang-du and his family taking the initiative to find and protect their youngest member. Bong's previous film had been the equally impressive *Memories of Murder* (2003), a police procedural about a famous unsolved crime from 1986 that implicated police incompetence during the turbulent politics of the period.

The Host is an exhilarating thrill ride that is distinctively Korean but also demonstrates Bong's understanding of international cinema. Its nearest equivalent is perhaps the original *Godzilla* (*Gojira*, Japan 1954), but its monster is in itself an international product involving South Korean design ideas realised by a combination of Weta Workshop from New Zealand and *The Orphanage* from California. The monster is an impressive creation, visible throughout much of the film unlike those films that save the full reveal until the climax of the narrative. Like all the great genre films, *The Host* provides entertainment but also raises questions about individuals, families, politics and society's problems. Much like Bong's later film *Parasite* in fact.

Roy Stafford 10/11/22

IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

SCREEN
ARGYLL

BFI
FAN
BY FILM AUDIENCE NETWORK

THE NATIONAL
LOTTERY