Three “ecological monsters” in Bong Joon-Ho’s films

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Abstract. As Parasite wins four Oscar awards at 2019 Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director, more film scholars and critics pay more attention to the South Korean film industry, particularly to the film director, Bong Joon-Ho. Regarding biospheric harmony, the director depicts “ecological monsters” in his works, namely toxic chemical waste, Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and cruelty towards animals, and the frozen earth caused by global warming. By having a close reading and textual analysis on The Host (2006), Snowpiercer (2013), and Okja (2016), the research will focus on those films directed by Bong Joon-Ho, which represent the horrific environmental issues. Particularly, the authors will investigate how the three films depict the discourses of ecological problems. The results show how strong messages regarding ecological issues are represented in the three films, metaphorically and literally and become valuable lessons for environmentalists and film scholars/filmmakers. The Host depicts a monster made by “biological terror”, namely toxic waste, which is the real threat metaphor in real life and based on the actual ecological disaster. Okja reveals the horror side of the meat industry, particularly the ones with GMOs, and issues of vegetarianism and animal rights. Meanwhile, Snowpiercer is a story of survivors that portray the impact of global warming in the cold and frozen ear

Keywords: ecological monsters, Bong Joon-Ho, films

1. Introduction
South Korean film director Bong Joon-Ho with his recent film, Parasite, made history by winning 4 Oscar awards in 2019 Academy Awards. The film got the Best Picture, Best Directing, Best International Feature Film, and Best Writing (Original Screenplay). It made history by becoming the first non-English film that won the Best Picture award [1]. He was awarded Best Director and outdid big names such as Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino [2].

Globally, everybody involving in the film industry turned their attention to the South Korean film industry. More people searched other films of the country, studied them, and learned how they successfully developed their film industry.

The research will focus on Bong Joon-Ho’s films related to environmental issues. Particularly, the authors will investigate on how The Host (2006), Snowpiercer (2013), and Okja (2016) represent the discourses of ecological problems. The three films were chosen because, in many ways, we assume that they represent three ecological monsters, which we will elaborate.
2. Methodology
In this study, the researchers apply textual analysis. This approach considers movies as an audiovisual language. The researchers also read the aspects of specific movies by applying particular perspectives or approaches. In this study, we see the films as a criticism of environmental issues by analyzing the narrative and other cinematic languages dealing with the issues. A literature review will be applied to answer the research questions. First, it is how do Bong Joon-ho's films depict ecological issues in his films. The second question is to what extent we can consider humans' role in causing these issues and what lessons we should learn from the films.

Therefore, the authors collect many scholarly articles related to the topic and quote them to support our argument. While reading, the authors also seek the patterns, anomalies, and trends regarding ecological problems within the films.

3. The Host: A monster made by environmental crime
Beyond the monster film genre, The Host also represents criticism on epidemiological outbreak narratives, news reportage, melodrama, and slapstick comedy [3]. The story focuses on Gang-du family trying to save Hyun-Seo, the youngest member of the family, who gets kidnapped by a monster appearing suddenly at Han River. However, before they fight against the monster, they need to be quarantined by South Korean soldiers since they are exposed to the monster.

The monster in the movie is the impact of biological terror, which can be seen as a metaphor for the real threat in real life [3]. In fact, at the very beginning, the scene shows that the US military base throws a toxic chemical waste into the Han River, and in two years, the monster grows and terrorizes people. This scene is actually based on actual ecological misconduct run by Albert McFarland, an American mortician-USFK employee, who dumped 480 large bottles of past-its-prime formaldehyde down a sewage system that drains to the Han River, which is drinking water supply for over 10 million citizens [3]. Later, McFarland was given a two-year suspended sentence by Korean Law [4]. Moreover, McFarland was punished by a thirty-day suspension by the United States Forces Korea and $4,000 fine by South Korea’s Ministry of Justice. This issue triggered massive protests by Korean environmental activists [3]. However, Bong Jong-Ho directed the film with a satirical outbreak narrative by making a parody of biosecurity measures and represent the officials comically [3].

Some film critics raise questions regarding Health Safety Environment (HSE) regulation. For example, the questions are about responsibility and accountability, risk and values, regulation and management, social power, and [5].

From the analysis, we can conclude that the monster in the film is created accidentally by humans, who dump poisonous materials into the river.

4. Okja: A pet monster made by GMOs
In a way, Okja, the creature whose name becomes the title of the movie, is also a monster, but a cute, lovable, and harmless one. If The Host represents the monster as a superior horrific creature made by the accident of an irresponsible human, Okja is, on the contrary, is the object of human's greed. The film deals with animal rights, vegetarianism, and Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) [6].

The film focuses on Okja, a super pig made from GMOs, which is mainly used for research purposes only for the supply of the global food industry. Mirando Corporation, led by Lucy Mirando, announces the super pig project as an environmentally-friendly cure for world hunger [6]. Different global farmers with different cultures will take all 26 piglets. In ten years, they will participate in the Best Super Pig competition to start producing a whole new species of super pigs that will revolutionize the food industry. Later, as mentioned earlier, the audience knows that, instead of applying a proven eco-friendly procedure, the gigantic pigs are genetically engineered by GMOs methods, something that the customers are cautious about, to gain more profit for them [6].

Okja and its owner, a little girl named Mija, is stuck in that situation. Knowing that Okja is the most premium product and calming Mija down, Mirando picks Okja as her corporate mascot by saying, "she's young, she's pretty, she's eco-friendly, and she's global. She's a godsend!". Mija does not know that
Okja, her beloved pet instead of an animal farm, is sent back to the company to be sacrificed with other super pigs violently. This condition is complicated by the attempt of Animal Liberation Front (ALF), a radical animal rights group, to save Okja.

It is important to note that Mirando deceptively uses the terms eco-friendly and environmentally-friendly for her benefit. In fact, GMOs are not entirely proven as eco-friendly. GMOs have a few problematic issues, such as unpredictable evolution and human health [7].

Finally, the issues of vegetarianism and animal rights occur as the film depicts the horror side of the meat industry. Particularly, it is how the food industry treats animals cruelly to be slaughtered. Booker argues that the film is at the same spirit of 1898 science fiction novel The War of the Worlds, pointing out that the practice is really no more horrifying or barbaric than the human practice of eating the meat of defenseless animals, such as rabbit [6, 8].

Since Okja is created from a genetically engineered attempt, its safety for human consumption is still debatable. We can consider it as a threat. As GMOs are human intervention, we can also conclude that humans create this monster.

5. Snowpiercer: A train and a cold frozen world

Snowpiercer is a prediction of the near future if world leaders do not formulate and apply strategic plans accordingly to anticipate global warming. The film is a loose adaptation of Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette’s Le Transperceneige (1982). It depicts the make-believe world that is cold and frozen. The only surviving human beings are on board a train that must keep moving around the globe to survive the weather. The story focuses on the social class struggling between the tail section, a proletary repressed society, and the head section, the leader and the wealthy class.

The frozen situation is a failure of a technological effort to reverse global warming [9]. In 2014, an association of 79 countries tries to lower temperatures down to comfortable levels by putting a material called CW7 into the stratosphere. The attempt goes wrong, and by 2032, the temperatures drop drastically and kill most living creatures [10]. The story starts in 2013, telling stories about the survivors.

From the very beginning, the audience can see the setting or the result of an ecological disaster. The surviving human beings need to survive on the train, and it is believed that the train must keep moving [10]. Furthermore, sustainable issues occur. The situation has a domino effect on the economy, culture, and politics. People need to adapt (how to eat and live). Then, social, cultural, and economy sustainability is interplayed and interconnected with environmental sustainability [10], including the attempt to overcome ecological issues, such as air pollution [11].

This fictional film made scholars think about how climate change should be handled based on their film analysis. Air contamination, including carbon emission, and global warming are connected [11]. If the two problems are separated or viewed as disconnected, we can end up with a world in which there are fewer deaths from air pollution than heat stroke [11].

Moreover, Snowpiercer applies the Necrofuturism approach that the unhappy economic and ecological future will emerge out of current trends, but not in a register that suggests or nurtures alternatives. Necrofuturism resigns us to a coming disaster we can anticipate but not prevent [9].

Snowpiercer focuses more on sustainability issues. Analyzing the train as a metaphor, the authors underline the importance of maintaining both social and ecological order to ensure the train’s inhabitants [10]. We conclude that both orders should be maintained when the time comes and prevent it before it happens. It means that biospheric harmony is the critical key to avoid the catastrophe. In this film, the monster is extreme weather. Once again, it is the result of human failure.

6. Conclusion

All three films made by Bong Joon-Ho show three different ecological monsters. Each of them affects the environment in their ways. The director focuses on the narrative and other elements, such as mise-en-scene, which depict the horrific events caused by these three monsters.
First of all, in *The Host*, the monster is created from toxic chemical waste, which was dumped by an irresponsible US military official. We can conclude that the film also has strong criticism regarding HSE regulation, particularly biohazard, a danger to human health or the nature evolving from biological work. Visually, the audience can find a scary monster, as the metaphor of the danger of the poisonous garbage, threatening the society.

Okja, on the other hand, is an adorable monster or considered a pet by Mija and becomes the victim and object of abuse. It raises questions about animal rights and vegetarianism. Moreover, Okja is created by GMOs, that its effect on human health is still debatable until now. From the scenes in the film, the audience can watch how humans are manipulative and treat animals cruelly. To some extent, it can make them rethink animal rights.

Finally, *Snowpiercer* highlights frozen earth as a monster, which the only remaining humans depend on a train. In this film, the cold and snowy world is caused by the actions of humans. The cold snow, which can make arms frozen and fragile to break, forces the rest of humans to survive, manage, and reproduce the resources, causing conflicts among them.

That makes us answer the second research question. As elaborated, all three different ecological monsters are created by humans. Therefore, human beings can play important roles in both nurturing and destroying the environment. It is the job of humans to consider nature as a stakeholder and keep the world as biospheric harmony.

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