

# *Visual Design in Korean Disaster Films: A Case Study of The Flu and Train to Busan*

Kejie Huang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Animation and Digital Arts, Communication University of China, Beijing, China*  
*a. afeliciano79253@student.napavalley.edu*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Disaster films, a captivating genre within the ever-evolving world of cinema, wield a global impact through their unique narratives and emotional resonance. Korean disaster cinema has garnered special attention for its distinctive visual aesthetics and emotional depth, earning acclaim both domestically and on the international stage. Hollywood boasts a rich tradition of disaster films, marked by advanced technology and a mature production system, attracting a vast global audience. In an era of economic globalization, disaster films hold substantial market potential. Two controversial but widely praised Korean disaster films, *Train to Busan* and *The Flu*, have left an indelible mark worldwide. Through their taut narratives and stunning visuals, these films immerse viewers in worlds of chaos and crisis. This paper delves into these films, analyzing their visual storytelling techniques, thematic exploration of disasters, and engagement with societal issues. By scrutinizing elements such as imagery, color palettes, camera angles, and special effects, we uncover how these films engross audiences in tension-laden narratives, prompting profound contemplation of human nature and societal complexities.

**Keywords:** disaster film, *Train to Busan*, *The Flu*, Korean film

## 1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving realm of film art, a diverse array of genres has emerged, leaving a profound global impact on audiences. Among these genres, disaster films have garnered special attention for their unique storytelling and emotional resonance. Korean disaster films, in particular, have achieved notable success, distinguished by their distinct visual aesthetics and emotional expression. These films have not only garnered recognition in domestic markets but have also made a significant mark on the international stage.

As a major category within Hollywood's extensive film catalog, disaster films have amassed a high market value and a vast audience thanks to advanced technology and a mature production system. In today's era of global economic integration, disaster films hold tremendous market appeal [1]. Consequently, Korean cinema has exhibited a noticeable trend of 'imitating Hollywood,' which has garnered criticism from some quarters. However, beneath this surface emulation, Korean films have been able to carve out a unique 'localization' characteristic, distinct from Hollywood, by assimilating successful elements from Hollywood films. This distinct approach has played a pivotal role in the rapid development of Korean disaster movies.

Two equally controversial disaster films, *Train to Busan* and *The Flu*, have garnered enthusiastic responses and unanimous praise from audiences worldwide. With their tight, gripping plots and stunning visuals, these films transport viewers into a world filled with panic and turmoil.

This paper aims to delve deep into these two representative works, *The Flu* and *Train to Busan*, and explore their visual design in emotional expression, their treatment of disaster themes, and their engagement with social issues. By analyzing the visual elements, including imagery, color schemes, camera angles, and special effects, we will uncover how these films immerse the audience into a world brimming with tension and emotions, ultimately provoking profound contemplation on human nature and societal contradictions.

## 2. Overview of Korean Disaster Movies

Disaster Movies, as a sub-genre of film, initially evolved from the realm of science fiction movies—often featuring one or several ingenious scientists as protagonists [2]. Today, these films have developed their own set of formulas, focusing on human struggles in extreme situations and examining issues related to human nature, morality, and society. This type of film has a unique advantage in terms of plot tension, emotional resonance and social concern, which has aroused wide attention in the international film circle.

In recent times, established narrative have gradually taken shape, with the primary aim of delving into human nature, morality, social issues, and other profound themes through the portrayal of human struggles for survival in extreme circumstances. Disaster film of Korea, as a particular genre which captures people's reaction to the unexpected circumstances, always has strong societal relevance, garnering widespread attention within the international film community.

Korean disaster films stand out due to their distinctive national and regional character, in contrast to mere emulation of Hollywood-style disaster movies. South Korean disaster cinema frequently incorporates elements of parody, hero worship, an intricate exploration of human nature, and critique and satire of the state. When it comes to “zombie” films, many immediately think of “Resident Evil,” where Milla Jovovich plays the role of a hero battling hordes of zombies. In contrast, the Korean film *Train to Busan* centers around everyday individuals: a father, a husband, a pregnant woman, a family, children, and students. Even the most unassuming characters exude a heroic aura. Consequently, as audiences watch the film, they can vicariously experience the transformation of these characters within the narrative [3].

South Korean disaster films manage to retain elements of the Hollywood disaster film archetype of heroism while uniquely attributing heroism to ordinary roles. This distinct approach is deeply rooted in Korea's historical, cultural, and societal context. Korea holds Confucianism in high regard, with various Confucian customs and etiquette persisting to this day. Korean society places a strong emphasis on family morality, with the honor of mothers and the filial piety of fathers being enduring themes, and children receiving unwavering care. Consequently, Korean films frequently feature characters centered around father-daughter relationships, as exemplified in *Train to Busan*. Additionally, *The Flu* explores the choices made by a trio of mother-daughter pairs from the perspective of underdogs in the face of disaster.

Korean disaster movies boast a diverse array of characters, and when disaster strikes, their primary concern is how to protect their loved ones. In *Train to Busan*, the character played by Gong Yoo portrays a father who may not be considered exemplary due to his work commitments, leading to limited time with his son and a sense of indifference. The son yearns for affection from his father, who, in turn, is often occupied with his responsibilities and rarely communicates with his child. The husband portrayed by Ma Dong-seok and the pregnant mother played by Jung Yu-mi form an ordinary couple deeply in love. One is willing to sacrifice his life for his wife, while the other is determined to

survive for their children. This highlights how Korean disaster films predominantly reflect the nuances of local culture.

South Korean disaster films, with their distinctive thematic choices and emotional depth, have captured the attention of global audiences. Unlike the traditional Hollywood style, these films place greater emphasis on the emotional depth and resonance of their characters, allowing viewers to immerse themselves more fully in the crisis environment depicted on screen. Moreover, when addressing social issues, these films often employ nuanced observation and presentation, prompting thoughtful reflection from the audience. Their high production quality and emotionally resonant storytelling have led to critical acclaim in international film reviews. Furthermore, South Korean disaster films have achieved significant box office success, consistently transcending geographical boundaries and expanding their influence. Notably, the impact of South Korean disaster films is increasingly strengthening in Asia, making them a crucial part of the Asian film market.

The distinct status of South Korean disaster films within the global film industry is notably manifested through their unique aesthetic styles and visual designs. These films frequently employ color, composition, and special effects to craft a powerful visual impact on the audience, immersing them in the movie's environment. This fusion of emotional expression and exploration of social issues imbues these films with depth and cultural significance.

South Korean disaster movies have garnered international attention due to their distinctive subject matter and emotional approach. Diverging from traditional Hollywood conventions, Korean disaster films prioritize the emotional depth and resonance of their characters, allowing viewers to deeply connect with the crisis depicted on screen [4]. Furthermore, when these films delve into social issues, they often employ subtle observation and presentation techniques to provoke profound contemplation among the audience. Their high production quality and precise emotional storytelling have earned them critical acclaim on a global scale.

Additionally, South Korean disaster films have achieved remarkable success at the box office, consistently transcending regional boundaries and expanding their influence. Notably, their impact in Asia has been steadily growing, making them a significant component of the Asian film market. When it comes to Korean cinema, it's not just about disaster movies; many of them pose fundamental questions and reflections on human nature and how it manifests in different circumstances [5]. In these disaster films, individual interests often overshadow collective interests in the face of survival crises, and the societal framework struggles to protect and constrain people, leading to diverse human responses.

The unique standing of Korean disaster films in the international film arena is further underscored by their distinct aesthetic style and visual design. These movies regularly employ techniques such as color schemes, lens composition, and special effects to create a visceral visual experience for the audience, immersing them in the film's world.

However, in comparison to Hollywood disaster films, Korean counterparts sometimes rely more on imitation methods, which can lead to certain technical shortcomings. Nonetheless, their notable strength lies in their ability to convey the essence of the characters in disaster scenarios using straightforward shots and brisk editing. While there is room for improvement in their technical execution, South Korean disaster films continue to captivate audiences worldwide with their unique storytelling and emotional depth.

### **3. A Comparative Analysis of Visual Design in *The Flu* and *Train to Busan***

#### **3.1. Main Plot Introduction**

*The Flu* and *Train to Busan* belong to the Korean disaster film genre but present different types of disasters and emotional experiences. The movie *The Flu* was released in 2013. It depicts a scenario

where a deadly flu virus, brought by illegal immigrants, rapidly spreads within the city of Bundang in South Korea, causing massive panic and disaster. Those trapped in the city struggle for survival as the infected die within 36 hours. The movie is set in a fictional town near Seoul and narrates the catastrophe triggered by the arrival of illegal immigrants from Southeast Asia who with the deadly swine flu virus [1]. Firefighter Kang Ji-gu and Dr. Kim In-hae are embroiled in this crisis, struggling to find a way to curb the epidemic while protecting their families and others.

However, the movie *Train To Busan* was released in 2016. It primarily focuses on the passengers of a train heading to Busan and narrates the story of survivors fighting for their lives in confined train compartments after a zombie virus outbreak. In the film, the moment the train starts moving, an infected individual rushes into a compartment. She quickly turns into a zombie and launches a bloody assault on the healthy individuals. Soon after, the number of zombies grows exponentially. Protagonist Shi Yu and his daughter Xiu An on this train, they and other passengers together face the threat of zombies, but also show the good and evil of human nature, mutual assistance and conflict. Through the tense scenes during the train journey, the film takes the audience into a disaster world full of fear and challenges.

## 3.2. Elements and Modes of Visual Expression

### 3.2.1. Color Correction

Color correction is a method overcomes the monotony and limitations of original scenes which directly recorded by the cameras, enriching a director's expressiveness and tension; it is a fundamental element for directors to set the mood and convey ideas [2]. The film *The Flu* employs cool tones, such as blues and grays, to emphasize tension and a sense of crisis. Particularly in scenes of viral outbreak, the blue lighting and dim environment create an atmosphere of tension. *Train to Busan* is a visual feast, seamlessly connecting with crisp shots and clever camera movements. From a physics standpoint, it utilizes confined settings, making elements like luggage racks unusable. The cinematography strikes a good balance between horror and humor in its overall tone [3].

### 3.2.2. Camera Angles and Movements

The film *The Flu* is directed by Kim Sung-su, a powerful South Korean director and renowned cinematographer, who has previously worked on the cinematography for films like "Memories of Murder" and "The Host." In *The Flu*, Kim Sung-su fully leverages his skills as a cinematographer. Several wide shots perfectly capture the decay of a large city ravaged by the virus. The film uses quick cuts and moving camera shots to heighten the sense of urgency and tension. In scenes depicting the outbreak of infection and efforts to control the epidemic, handheld camera work and rapid camera movements immerse the audience in the chaos and crisis. In *Train to Busan*, the confined space of the train serves as an ideal backdrop for the film's tense atmosphere. The angles and camera movements make the audience feel the claustrophobic environment; shots from narrow perspectives capture the passengers' reactions, increasing both the tension and the audience's sense of immersion.

### 3.2.3. Special Effects

*The Flu* utilizes special effects to illustrate the spread of the virus within the human body. Through realistic visual presentation, the audience can see how the virus rapidly spreads between cells, emphasizing the severity of the epidemic. The zombie special effects in *Train to Busan* highlight the threat of virus transmission through unforgettable visual effects. The zombies' movements and changing appearances are presented through special effects, increasing the audience's sense of tension and deepening the horrifying atmosphere of the zombie theme.

### 3.2.4. Design of Reality

In *The Flu*, the realistic settings of the urban environment and inside the hospital enhance the audience's sense of immersion. The scenes depicting the city under quarantine vividly portray people's fear, crowding, and helplessness through detailed settings. *Train to Busan* provides a unique space for emotional expression through the confined train compartments. In this closed space, the audience can clearly feel the survivors' fear, tension, and helplessness. Furthermore, the detailed design within the train compartments, such as seats covered with photographs, enhances the expression of the characters' emotions.

### 3.2.5. Sound and Visual Coordination

Sound effects play a crucial role in creating a tense atmosphere and emotional expression. In scenes of epidemic outbreaks, zombie attacks, and emergency rescues, the cacophony of human voices and the sounds of medical equipment closely intertwine with visual elements, intensifying the audience's sense of immersion.

## 3.3. Disaster Themes and Emotional Expression

The characters in *Train to Busan* are father and daughter, couples, classmates, girlfriends, etc., and the feelings and contradictions between various relationships are also the most common love and conflict in our daily life. Therefore, the audience will have a strong resonance and reflection on this family-style character relationship when watching. Almost without exception, South Korean disaster movies criticize and satirize the government. When the people need help, the government's hesitation and inaction and the consideration of the so-called overall interests deepen the harm to the suffering families in the film. In fact, the soul of Korean disaster movies is to return to family and society and to tell the disaster with the most primitive and local narrative techniques [6].

In the film *The Flu*, the utilization of binary opposition serves to not only depict the contrast between people and disasters but also to establish opposition and contradiction between the disaster-stricken individuals and the governing authorities, all within the context of societal culture [7]. Through the emotional journey of the protagonists, the film effectively intertwines personal emotions with the broader disaster theme, reflecting the state of society.

The central characters, Kang Ji-koo and Kim In-hae, symbolize individuals from diverse professional backgrounds, and their emotional experiences and decisions shed light on broader social issues like government responses and moral dilemmas during crises. By illustrating the profound impact of public health emergencies on society and the challenges humanity faces, the film serves as a warning to prioritize public health safety, acknowledge the intricacies and diversities of human behavior, and emphasize the significance of teamwork [8]. This message remains relevant today, making the film highly valuable.

Throughout the film, many characters are driven by selfishness, fear, and self-interest, leading them to prioritize their own survival at any cost. This includes hoarding essential supplies from supermarkets and fleeing the city, actions that clearly reveal their self-centeredness without considering the needs and interests of others. Such behavior exposes the most despicable and egoistic aspects of human nature [9].

The movie *Train to Busan* effectively showcases the diversity of human responses in the face of disaster through the emotional expressions of its main characters and other passengers. In moments of life and death, passengers exhibit a range of emotions, including selfishness, bravery, mutual assistance, and conflict, reflecting the moral and social contradictions that exist within society [10]. The film achieves this by employing limited viewing angles, rapid editing, and dynamic camera movements, fully immersing the viewer in the tense train environment. As the camera angles shift



and the editing pace intensifies, the audience feels the mounting emergency situation and experiences the urgency of life and death alongside the protagonists.

Life is inherently unpredictable, and individuals are not entirely bound by fate. However, people's selfish tendencies can sometimes lead to irrational behavior. A rational selfish person prioritizes their self-interest without harming others. In *Train to Busan*, the character played by Gong Yoo initially exhibits selfishness by attempting to shut out a couple in order to protect the safety of his mother and son. However, as the story unfolds and he endures numerous trials, he ultimately chooses to give up his selfishness and decides to protect not only his family but also those who have survived.

Furthermore, Korean films often depict sharp contrasts in human nature, showcasing both loyal love and lofty ideals alongside individuals who fear death and prioritize self-preservation. In *Train to Busan*, Ma Dong-seok portrays a character who uses his physical strength to shield his family, while Gong Yoo's character, after becoming infected, fears he might inadvertently harm his child and opts for self-sacrifice without his child's knowledge. Jin Changlin's character takes calculated risks. Moreover, the film highlights the contrast between childlike innocence and the stark realities of adulthood, reflecting the stark juxtaposition of light and darkness in humanity when facing trials.

#### 4. International Impact and Insights from Korean Disaster Films

Korean disaster films have attracted international attention with their unique visual design and emotional expression, having a profound impact globally. This impact stems not only from their high production quality but also from their deep thematic explorations and emotional resonance. Korean disaster films provide many valuable insights for disaster film-making in other countries.

Disaster has been the central focus of this genre from its inception, but over time, disaster films have evolved into a distinct genre with a history spanning more than a century. Currently, the development of disaster films in South Korea, while not perfect, is showing an upward trajectory. It can be argued that Korean directors have successfully "localized" the formula for disaster films, which is a key factor contributing to the significant success of Korean disaster films. Drawing from their unique cultural and societal context, South Korean filmmakers have made notable contributions to the disaster film genre.

Given this background, it's valuable to explore the accomplishments of Korean cinema in the realm of disaster themes, as it can provide insights and a potential blueprint for the development of similar themes in the context of Chinese filmmaking [11]. By analyzing the strategies and approaches taken by Korean directors, Chinese filmmakers can find inspiration for creating impactful disaster films that resonate with audiences both at home and abroad.

Korean disaster films have made a significant impact by actively pursuing immersion in their visual design and emotional expression. Take, for example, *Train to Busan*, which skillfully conveys the desperation and determination of survivors facing a zombie virus through intense and tightly choreographed scenes within the train. This carefully crafted visual design, combined with the in-depth emotional portrayals of the characters, effectively elicits empathy from the audience. This approach serves as a valuable lesson for filmmakers from other countries, offering a creative means to deepen the audience's comprehension and emotional engagement with the gravity of disaster scenarios.

Secondly, by integrating social issues in the narrative, Korean disaster films present an evident social critique by portraying the response of people in different classes. This means they strive to reflect real life and societal problems in the films. For example, audiences can see the responses from the government, medical systems, and ordinary people in scenarios of epidemic outbreaks, which reflect real societal issues and challenges. This comprehensive storytelling not only makes the film more entertaining but also educates the audience, prompting deeper thinking. Other countries'

disaster films can incorporate more content about human nature and social ethics to provoke more profound reflections from the audience.

Thirdly, Korean disaster films focus on details when presenting disaster scenes. The confined space inside the train and the special effects used to depict zombies in *Train to Busan* create a genuinely tense atmosphere. Other countries' disaster films can strive for higher realism in scene and special effects design to immerse the audience better and enhance emotional experience [12].

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has conducted a comprehensive analysis of the visual design in two representative Korean disaster films, *The Flu* and *Train to Busan*, shedding light on the distinctive value of this film genre in emotional expression and exploration of social issues. Korean disaster films have left a profound impact on the global film landscape, owing to their high production quality and emotional resonance.

In *The Flu*, the film adeptly merges its unique aesthetic style and emotionally resonant expression with themes such as viral outbreaks, governmental responses, and individual choices. It invites audiences to reflect deeply on matters of survival, ethics, and human nature. Through the utilization of color schemes, camera angles, and special effects, the film immerses viewers in a tense disaster environment, heightening their emotional involvement.

*Train to Busan*, on the other hand, crafts a world of disaster fraught with fear and emotion, primarily through the intense scenes within the train and the realistic depiction of zombies. The visual design effectively conveys a sense of urgency and tension. By delving into character emotions, the film unveils the diversity of human nature and the societal contradictions that arise in the face of disaster, prompting viewers to contemplate pertinent social issues.

Both films not only engage the audience at an emotional level but also stimulate profound contemplation through their exploration of societal dilemmas. Korean disaster films, with their unique creative approaches and substantial themes, offer invaluable lessons for the development of international disaster films. They underscore that visual design is not merely an aesthetic endeavor but a potent tool for conveying emotions and delving into social concerns. By deeply exploring character emotions and ethical quandaries, disaster films can entertain while also provoking profound reflection among their audience, thus enhancing their overall value.

In summary, Korean disaster films captivate audiences through their distinctive visual design, offering a powerful viewing experience. Simultaneously, they incite contemplation on subjects like survival, human nature, and societal issues. This impact extends not only within the international film arena but also provides valuable creative inspiration for disaster films produced in other countries. By embracing the visual design and emotional expression techniques pioneered by Korean disaster films, filmmakers from around the world can craft more engaging and thought-provoking works within the disaster genre.

## References

- [1] Li, C. (2022). "Seeing" and "Being Seen" in East Asian Disaster Movies [Doctoral Dissertation, Southwest University].
- [2] Xu, E. (2008). *The Ideographic Function and Artistic Characteristics of Film Color Language* [Doctoral Dissertation, Central China Normal University].
- [3] Permission. *Research on Contemporary Korean Disaster Film Art [D]*. Yunnan Normal University, 2019.
- [4] Xu, W., Wang, T., Zhang, Y. (2021). From "Fantasy World" to Human Disaster in Film Art: A Case Study of South Korea's Disastrous Film "The Flu". *News Research Guide*, 12(03), 151-152.
- [5] Li, J. (2017). Disaster with the Ugly and Beauty of Human Nature -- A Review of the Korean Movie "The Train to Busan". *The World of Chinese Opera in the New Century*, 1(6), 59-64.
- [6] Zhang, Y., Chen, L. (2019). Genre Narrative and Reality Observation of Korean Disaster Films. *Contemporary Film*, 11, 5, 72-75.

- [7] Xi, P. (2021). *Research on the Construction of Crisis Fields in Korean Plague Disaster Films* [Doctoral Dissertation, Sichuan University].
- [8] Zhang, L. *Analysis on the Model of South Korean Disaster Movies*. *Drama House*, 11, 127-128.
- [9] Wan, B. (2018). *The Inheritance and Innovation of Disaster Film Shooting: The Beginning of Dean Devlin's Film Road*. *Movie Review*, 2(3), 55-57.
- [10] Yang, Y. *Interpreting the "Hate Culture" of Korean Disaster Films from the Perspective of Children*. *Drama House*, 29, 132-133.
- [11] Xiong, X. (2016). *Research on Genre and Localization of Korean Disaster Films*. *Grain in Ear: The Second Half of the Month*, 2, 107-109.
- [12] Wang, S. (2019). *Analysis on the Unique Ending Settings of Korean Disaster Films*. *Modern and Ancient Legends: Cultural Review*, 2, 2.