On Netflix and next projects, a night in genre-king Bong Joon-Ho’s lecture hall

Enlarge / Seated in the simulcast overflow room for Bong Joon-Ho (center). Evidently the first ~350 person lecture hall filled up an hour and a half early. There were definitely people sitting on the floor in the second.
Nathan Mattise

reader comments

7 with 7 posters participating, including story author

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AUSTIN, Texas—Usually when people line up for two hours or more in Austin, Texas, barbecue awaits at the other end. But the Fleming Lecture Hall at the University of Texas didn’t suddenly start producing world-class brisket last Wednesday. Instead, in what may be a first, roughly 700 people lined up and then descended upon the humble classroom for *a lecture* at 5pm on a weeknight.

Technically, it was a guest lecture. And in fairness, it’s not every Wednesday that South Korean genre film legend Bong Joon-Ho *(Snowpiercer, Okja*) is both in Austin *and* available to sit for student questions.

But the best genre-film festival in the US (Fantastic Fest) was taking place a few miles south of UT’s campus throughout last week, and Bong’s latest work, *Parasite,* screened among the closing films. The filmmaker’s PR rep also happens to be a UT alum, and so a special campus viewing took place earlier in

the week ahead of this—the one time no one seemed willing to skip an evening lecture.

- Earlier this week, Director Bong Joon-Ho in front of what was then known as the Alamo Drafthouse South Lamar (aka the location of Fantastic Fest).
  Jack Plunkett / Fantastic Fest
- L to R: Actor Choi Woo-shik, Actor Song Kang-Ho, and Bong Joon-ho of *Parasite* at the Toronto International Film Festival.
  Vivien Killilea/Getty Images for NEON
- A still from *Parasite* showing the family at the film's center.
  Neon / Fantastic Fest
- Always check your local alt-weekly's event listings, all.
  Austin Chronicle
- Bong clearly has a sense of humor and is game for a lot (including speaking to undergrads and having an entire screening audience dress like his film's poster).
- Hmmm… Bong Joon-ho is leading a toast after *Parasite* finally screened at Fantastic Fest on Thursday evening.
- …because Alamo Drafthouse founder and NEON productions co-founder Tim League (L) renamed the freakin' entire theater in Bong's honor after the director brought *Parasite* to Texas this week.
- The inscription: "In modern classics like Memories of Murder, Mother, and Parasite, director Bong Joon Ho inspires and challenges us with a pitch-perfect blend of humanity, suspense, humor, and craft. His work reminds us why we love cinema…"

Not film school, but films then

school

Bong started by quickly admitting to not being the ideal role model for any future film students in attendance. He studied sociology back in his university days in the 1980s, but really he spent more time in a nearby theater than any classroom. “When I first went to college, I thought, ‘I’ll major in anything and join a film club,'” Bong said. (The filmmaker took questions in English but largely responded for the audience via a translator.) “So I did and rarely went to class.”

But South Korea at that time was itself an education—the country was essentially transitioning out from underneath a military regime, so Bong supplemented his sociology studies simply by keeping his head up. “Society was very dynamic with students still protesting,” he said. “Observing the students around me was my education rather than just textbooks.”

For fans of Bong’s work, that dynamic between those in control and those subjected to it likely sounds familiar. In the sci-fi/action mash-up *Snowpiercer,* survivors of some climate change counteractions gone wrong live on a train arranged by societal standing. In the horror thriller *Mother,* a small village treats a boy with intellectual disabilities poorly to their detriment. Near-future *Okja* has corporations versus animal activists; *Parasite* is 99% versus the 1%. Often this dynamic gets dressed up in multiple genres, but the central idea is very based in reality.

“With *Parasite*, in the US and Europe, they comment on how the film mixes genres,” Bong said when asked about how his films get received differently across the globe. “But Korean audiences see it as close to reality. A lot of people mention how their lives are; some smelled themselves after leaving the theater.”

While the writer/director’s cultural nuance came on campus,

Bong's affinity for genre started long before that. He recalls studying some Asian filmmakers closely at university (like Hou Hsiao-hsien), but "the films that have permeated my body and stay in my bloodstream are the genre films from the US I watched when I was little."

As a kid, Bong recalls staying up late at night until his family fell asleep in order to watch AFKN, a network broadcasting American productions for servicemen stationed in Korea at the time. He loved the thrillers of John Schlesinger (*Midnight Cowboy*), for instance, and obviously these influences became ingrained only to later resurface in things like *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite.*

"They played a lot of midnight films with quite a lot of sex and violence, films you couldn't see on Korean channels at the time," he said. "And because I didn't know English, I'd construct the narrative on my own. I only realized later these are famous films, stuff from John Carpenter and Brian De Palma."

[embedded content]
The trailer for *Parasite.*

Netflix and what's next

Bong didn't want to spoil much about *Parasite* for anyone who hadn't yet seen it—after all, the film will have its US theatrical release beginning October 11. So he kept his comments on the film general, discussing its inspirations (he thought of three central characters: a father, a son, and a maid, and toyed with it as a stage play) and praising the actors (especially longtime collaborator Song Kang-ho). "I wrote the script with him in mind, and a couple of scenes are only possible with him," Bong said. "He's basically an amplifier—regardless of what emotions I want to portray through his character, he delivers ten-fold, a hundred-fold."

Instead, the night's film discussions turned toward Bong's other projects. For instance, Bong's last film to compete at Cannes (*Okja*) eventually landed at Netflix; why not do the same with *Parasite*?

"From the beginning [at Netflix], I was guaranteed the Director's Cut in the contract and had R-rating approval," Bong said, expressing admiration for how much control the streaming giant gives creators. "They said, 'It's OK if they roll around in blood at the slaughterhouse.' So whether in the US or Korea, as long as I'm guaranteed control, I'd work anywhere."

Beyond being the reason audiences are unlikely to see Bong do a Marvel movie any time soon, that control is a big motivator for Bong to continually push for theatrical releases of his films. He sees great benefits in streaming services—more people enjoy films, it encourages archival preservation—but no viewing experience preserves a director's vision quite like the theater.

"It's not that the screen is big or you're watching with others, but it's the only place you can't press pause," Bong said. "Whether it's Netflix, DVDs, Blu-ray, you can pause to go to the bathroom or because someone is calling. But as a filmmaker, I believe a film is one unit from beginning to end—there's a pace and rhythm. Just like a conductor or composer, I want that singular unit, and the theater is the only place that preserves that."

Even though he didn't want to discuss *Parasite* in-depth, that didn't stop Bong from teasing his *next* project—something he's already thinking about and working toward. UT Radio, Television, and Film Department Chair Noah Isenberg moderated the discussion and had read in Korean media that Bong was working on something centered around a disaster in Seoul, so he ended by asking for any information the director would offer up. *What can you tell us?*

“Well, it’s a secret,” Bong began, allowing a moment or two for silence before finally indulging everyone. “I don’t know if you can call it horror, because in all my films the genre is ambiguous. But if you have to describe it, it’s ‘horror-action’ and a disaster that happens in Seoul. I’ve had this idea since 2001, so I’ve been developing it for 18 years, and now I have an obsession. I really do have to shoot this movie.

“To give you one hint, it’s not a film you can shoot in NYC or Chicago: it only works if all the pedestrians on the street have the same skin tone.”

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