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Sheltering from Streaming Clouds: Nostalgia, Authenticity, and Drive-in Cinema in Korea

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Abstract

The multiplex — or a movie theater complex with multiple screens within a single venue — dominates South Korea's cinema landscape. Boosted by the long work hours of the average office worker, traffic congestion, and the pervasiveness of newly constructed shopping malls, the ubiquitous format allows people to easily meet up and catch a movie, browse boutiques, and have a meal together. As the diversity and scale of multiplexes increase, so does the struggle to survive for the few remaining independent cinemas. Among them are approximately two dozen drive-in cinemas. Scattered around the country, audiences come here to watch movies through the oft-tinted windscreens of their own car where they are responsible for their own air conditioning and sound quality. Seeing as the format entails considerable compromises in audio-visual quality, it would seem as though the current pandemic can offer the format no more than a temporary respite from its inevitable demise. But the drive-ins do not only promise protection from contagion; among other things they cater to a growing interest in alternative viewing experiences, one aspect of which is the ability to summon what Alison Landsberg calls "prosthetic memories" — nostalgia for experiences never had. In this article, I identify the compound set of factors that have fostered South Korea's drive-in cinema culture since its beginnings in the mid-1990s. I argue that despite challenges to its operations, the outdoor format of projecting a film to audiences seated in an automobile offers unique phenomenological features, which along with the summoning of nostalgia, promise the format's survival well beyond the pandemic.[1]

멀티플렉스, 즉 다수의 상영관이 한 건물에 몰려있는 형태의 복합 영화관이 한국의 영화 산업을 지배하고 있다. 장시간 근무와 교통 혼잡, 만연하는 쇼핑몰의 건설 등에 힘입어 이러한 형식의 유비쿼터스 공간은 현대인들에게 보다 쉽게 사람을 만나 영화를 보고 상점을 둘러보며 식사를 할 수 있게 한다. 멀티플렉스 영화관이 점차 다양해지고 규모가 커짐에 따라 몇 안 되는 독립 영화관들의 살아남기 위해 몸부림 치고 있다. 그들 중에는 약 24개의 자동차 영화관이 있다. 전국의 관객들은 에어컨과 음질 조절이 가능한 자동차 안에서 전면유리를 통해 영화를 관람하기 위해 이곳에 모인다. 자동차 극장은 뛰어난 품질의 시청각 경험을 제공하지 못하기에 피할 수 없는 멸종 상태에 이르렀지만, 최근의 코로나 상황을 계기로 일시적으로나마 부진을 면하고 있다. 자동차 극장은 코로나 감염으로부터 자유롭다는 측면뿐 아니라 대안적인 관람 경험 또한 제공한다. 그 중 하나는 앨리슨 랜즈버그가 "보철 기억(prosthetic memories)"이라고 부르는 것, 즉 직접 경험하지 않은 기

억에 대한 향수이다. 본 논문은 1990년대 중반부터 한국의 자동차 극장 문화를 견인해 온 복합적인 요소들을 파악하고자 한다. 근래의 자동차 극장 운영의 위기에도 불구하고 자동차에 앉아있는 관객들에게 야외에서 영화를 상영해주는 이러한 관람 형식이 향수를 불러 일으키는 독특한 현상학적 특징을 지니고 있기 때문에, 저자는 자동차 극장이 코로나 상황을 넘어서 지속적으로 그 운영이 유지되어야 한다고 주장한다.

Key words

drive-in cinema, the multiplex, nostalgia, retro, authenticity, experience, South Korea, IMF, pandemic.

Introduction

It appears that there is growing nostalgia in Korea over the experience of entertainment in the past. The pursuit of nostalgia is born out of a desire to reconnect with experiences considered more authentic, presumably because they were less polished and required more investment in time and effort on the part of the audience. That they were tied to life-changing events may also play an important role. Studies of individual recollections of past cinema experiences in the West highlight, for example, that the social aspect of going to the cinema was greater than the impact of particular movies, and not because of a lack of choice (Kuhn 1999, 535; see also Bowles 2009, 86; Aveyard 2011, 295). The mechanization of today's lifestyles means that entertainment is available at the push of a button. They are part of a "snack culture", a term Dal Yong Jin points out was coined by *Wired* in 2007 but applies well to South Korea (Jin 2019, 2094–2095). Indeed, on the metro system in Seoul you can often find yourself surrounded by people immersed on their smartphones with a webtoon, concert, or TV drama for the duration of just a few stops. Many people consume entertainment on the go, in bite-size pieces, inconsequentially: it requires no planning, no commitment, and little investment. Tied to this is the consumption of streamed home entertainment through platform providers like Netflix, which is said to have increased by more than 21 percent since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 (Sin 2021). The outcome of this is that the experience of consumption itself has become disposable and part of "on-demand culture" (Tryon 2013) which is often fleeting and not indelibly linked to people's lives. And yet especially when leisure time is limited, it is more important to spend it doing something memorable.

Possibly put off by the inconsequential, forgettable way in which today's entertainment is consumed, and driven by a longing for the unrestricted social engagement enjoyed prior to the pandemic, a growing number of audiences in Korea enjoy non-digital, live performances of both traditional and popular music (Lim 2020; Arts Council Korea

2021, 8). Nostalgia and an increase in time and money spent on hobbies on account of the pandemic are underpinning a market for retro products that includes analog media players, as well as fashion, snacks, and games (Lim 2020; Park 2020). The increased interest in live entertainment may also drive or be driven by the popularity of reality talent shows on television. Shows like these are geared towards the revelation of hidden natural talents, presumably to counterbalance that which appears to be factory-produced. They are a throw-back to the "music appreciation halls (eumak gamsangsil)" of the late 1950s and 1960s, which catered to urban youth and provided a stage for aspiring talents to make a name for themselves by winning over the audience. There were no sound effects, light shows, or background dancers; the music was central, its performance authentic. Feeding today's nostalgia are also the memories of solo singer-songwriters like Kim Min-gi and Kim Gwangseok, who were active in the 1970s and 1980s, and in the early 1990s, respectively, singing acoustically about individual struggles, pacifism, and the oppression of dissonant voices. Due, in part, to the personal thoughts they shared with their audiences in between songs, their low-key performances felt genuine and unvarnished.

The multiplex — or a movie theater complex with multiple screens within a single venue — was a new movie experience invented in the United States. Often located on the same real estate as shopping malls, the opening in 1982 of the 14-screen Cineplex in the Beverly Center Mall in West Hollywood, California, became the country's largest example of arena-like choice in moviegoing. These warehouse-like venues for cinemagoing have complemented the rise of blockbuster filmmaking and the implementation of neoliberal capitalism in the 1980s (Kapur and Wagner 2011). Belatedly becoming a trend in South Korea, since the 1990s multiplexes have come to dominate in the country's cinema landscape. Recent figures show that the three main multiplex chains — Megabox, CJ CGV, and Lotte Cinema — together took almost 97 percent of domestic ticket sales in 2018 (Yi 2019). Rather than because of any combination of factors, many Koreans "choose to" watch a movie at a multiplex because they have few if any alternatives. It is this desire for more audience-focused, unique experiences that in recent years multiplexes have sought to cater to by way of divergent ranges of venues and special events, including sing-along screenings of the 2018 hit musical *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Jin 2017; Kang 2018; Park H. 2019) and 4-D cinema experiences that cater to tactile experiences of the body. An alternative type of venue, not properly covered in Korean film studies, is the drive-in movie experience, combining an outdoor unenclosed screen and the use of an automobile with oft-tinted windshield as a second interface to the projected audio-visual image. While several factors have driven the proliferation of the drive-in cinema format in Korea since the mid-1990s, nostalgia and a desire for more authentic experiences have been key among them.

As Kate Bowles points out, studying the experience of cinemagoers is not an easy task. Apart from the relative infrequency of people's cinema attendance, defining and understanding it as either a cultural or social experience, or both, presents a significant methodological challenge. Indeed, film studies have long assumed that the average spectator arrives at a theatre "with the minimum of pre-planning and spends the duration of the film intent on the action on the screen" (Bowles 2009, 83－84). To make matters worse, those visiting a drive-in cinema have often been consigned to one of two categories — families with young children or couples interested in making out — neither of which was believed to come to watch a movie in earnest (Cohen 1994, 470－471). The discipline's frequent dismissal of non-diegetic criteria for ticket sales obfuscates both the social and practical aspects of cinema patronage, which ought not to be separated from, but considered alongside the importance of any cultural text projected. After all, audiences rarely end up at a particular cinema because of a movie alone. The personal experience and cultural capital that marketing and film reviews respectively promise may be the primary incentives, but location, facilities, and fellow audience members will equally underpin cinema patronage. In addition to meeting practical needs, a cinema may be tied to a community or social class that audience members seek to affiliate with. Even though that association could imply a limited selection and range of features, experiencing a movie in the company of a preferred kind of audience is a considerable lure (Evans 2011). In the case of shopping malls and multiplexes, the common multitude of socio-cultural symbols and the limited degree of social interaction required mitigate associations with an undesirable social group or class (see Hubbard 2003, 262). The dominant format has come to affect cinematic experiences around the world, including South Korea (hereafter: Korea). Multiplexes frequently offer a large selection of movies, as well as nearby dining and shopping options to suit a wide range of customers, and in Korea their pervasiveness and increasing variety have seen competition from alternative formats dwindle.

In this study I deliberate the features that have driven drive-in patronage in Korea and promise to sustain it well beyond the pandemic. Although I made several visits to drive-ins in and around Seoul in 2018 and 2019, to witness their operation and speak to employees, the pandemic prevented me from conducting further interviews with operators and customers. Ongoing engagement may have yielded alternative insights into the factors I deliberate below. After all, drive-ins have always appealed to those looking for something unique and therefore personal. In the US, where the format was invented, as well as in Australia, drive-in cinemas developed into an important part of mainstream cinema culture in the 1950s. In their heydays they introduced many ancillary attractions, such as restaurants, playgrounds, desk chairs for visitors without cars, and in some cases even a small petting zoo and an indoor theatre for days of bad weather (Fox 2015, 44).[2] In Korea, however, drive-ins have not offered facilities other than bathrooms and a kiosk, relying primarily on the unique outdoor viewing experience instead. Like their foreign predecessors, they project movies onto a large canvas to an audience watching from the comfort of their own car, parked in neatly arranged rows. Upon entering the outdoor premises, employees will help guide customers towards empty spots that leave a distance between cars of between two to five meters vertically, and approximately one meter horizontally. Passenger cars will go in front, and, because of their height, minibuses and vans must go in the back, to not obstruct views, while large buses and trucks are not permitted to enter (see No 1999, 216–217). Following a government regulation issued in 2004 aimed at reducing emissions, five minutes is the maximum amount of time engines are allowed to run in stationary when arriving or restarting to charge the battery.[3] Car lights, on the other hand, must be switched off immediately, and cannot be turned on again until the very end of the movie. Once the car has been parked and the audio set, customers can recline their seats and watch the movie from the comfort of their own cabin (Yi 2002). Indeed, at first glance the format appears to offer little practical appeal. Wherein lies its attraction?

Cultural Forces Driving the Drive-in

Korea's history of drive-in cinemas appears to have begun some twenty-seven years ago, on April 23, 1994, with the opening of a drive-in at Pocheon base town in Gyeonggi province. The movie screened at the time was Benny Chan's *A Moment of Romance 2* (1993), a romantic action flick that premiered in Korea three months earlier (see Anon. 1994). Since Hong Kong cinema was very popular in Korea at the time, the movie would have guaranteed attraction. The size of the screen was modest at first, measuring only 60m^2 (12 x 5m), but as the format, locally referred to as "car cinema" (jadongcha geukjang), began to proliferate, it would steadily increase. A screen arranged for a drive-in movie festival in Seoul's Jamsil district in 1996 measured almost double the size and was increased again in the ensuing year, to 27.3 x 12.1m (see Anon. 1996; Bae 1997b). In 1995, Bomun Cinema in Gyeongju opened with a screen width of approximately 25 x 20m, Asia's largest at the time. By early June 1998, five more had opened: Apple Star in front of Yongin's Korean Folk Village, Star Track at the Hwarang Amusement Park in Ansan, Movie Love (Yeonghwa Sarang) at the Jangheung Amusement Park, one inside Gwangju Family Land, and the Yangpyeong Drive-in Theater in the eastern part of Gyeonggi province, which has space for as many as five hundred cars (Kim

1998). The popularity of the format continued to grow with several more opening in 1999, including the Megabox chain's own EOE4 on the eastern slope of Namsan mountain just south of Seoul's primary CBD (Anon. 1999a). They were joined in 2000 by the Jayuro (Freedom Road) Drive-in Cinema northwest of Seoul,[4] and Cheonggye Movie Land (Mubi Raendeu) in Uiwang city south of Seoul, which prior to its closure around 2010 boasted of having Korea's largest screen, measuring 450m^2 (30 x 15m) (Han Jaehyeon 2001). In 2007, a total of sixty venues were in operation around the country (Kim Hyeonu 2017).

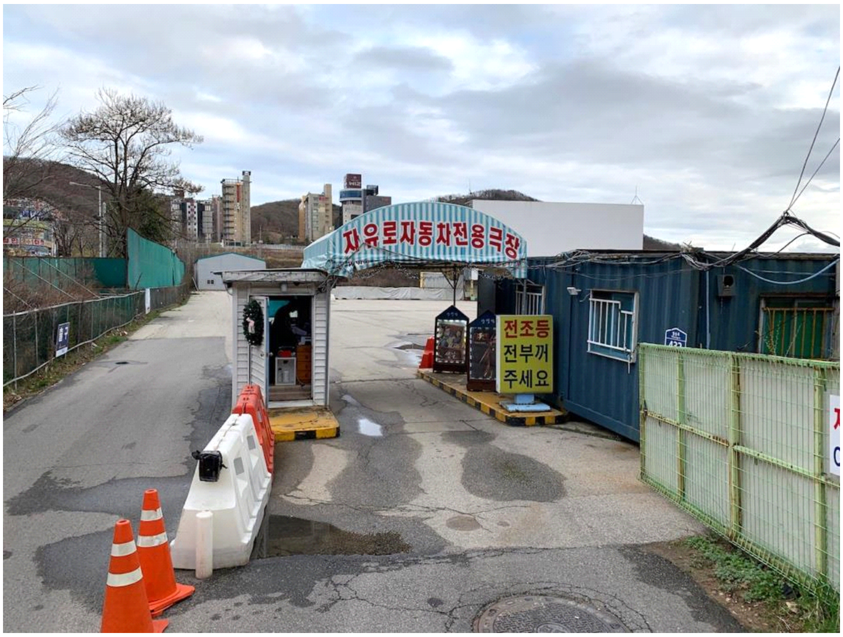

Figure 1. Entrance to the Jayuro Drive-in Cinema, on April 10, 2019. Photo by author.

One major factor behind the rapid increase in the number of drive-ins was the uncertainty facing the Korean economy. Especially in the years shortly after the economic crisis that hit Korea in late 1997 and became locally known as the IMF crisis, financial hardship appealed to customers looking to reduce the cost of their cinema outing (Anon. 1999b). Even though prices slowly rose, from approximately 12,000 won in 1997, to 15,000 won on weekdays and 20,000 won on weekends in 2002, to no more than 20,000 won (approx. 17 US dollar) today (Kim 1997; Yi Gihong 1998; Kim 1998; Yi 2002), they have always been charged per car, regardless of the number of passengers. In 1998, Mr Gwak won-gyu, then in charge of the drive-in cinema promotion company Turbo Star, said the IMF crisis led to many families turning up in vans (Kim 1998). Indeed, in the subsequent year, an employee of Megabox EOE4 was reported as having seen a van arrive with as many as twelve people inside (Anon. 1999b). Drive-ins began to adopt cost savings as a standard promotion ploy, often running special promotions with discounts of up to 50 percent, especially on weekdays, with some even allowing visitors to watch three movies for the price of one ticket (see No 1999, 216–217; Kim 2000). Prior to the pandemic small groups of people continued to show up, but not frequently; and I never saw one on any of my visits in 2018 and 2019. When I visited Megabox EOE4 in 2018, employee Mr O Myeong-geun told me that although cars with as many as four people inside did occasionally turn up, those seated in the back would not be able to watch a movie comfortably (O Myeong-geun, interview, Megabox EOE4, Seoul, November 24, 2018).[5] Since tickets for children, teenagers, and adults at regular cinemas downtown currently cost, respectively, 6,000, 9,000, and 12,000 won on average, drive-ins may not seem like a cost-saving alternative, even if they reduce the need for parking. But not having to worry about parking or paying separately for it can still boost the format's appeal. In early 2020, parking for three hours cost 18,000 won (approx. 15 US dollars) at both Lotte Department Store in Seoul's central Sogong-dong and the IFC Mall in Yeouido-dong, 7,000 won at the Star City Mall in Seoul's Jayang-dong, and 12,800 won at the Starfield COEX Mall. Even though it may be reduced or waived by way of receipts of purchases made at the respective department store or mall, the exorbitant cost of inner-city parking may still exceed that of a cinema ticket, while on busy nights customers will have to wait in line.

The attraction of the format has also lain in the unique experiences it entails. The aspects of adventure, romance, and privacy, for example, have long proven to be major selling points, and they continue to be used in advertising. An employee with Movie Love is reported as saying that one of the cinema's selling points was the large number of cultural facilities in the vicinity (No 1999, 216–217). Many other drive-ins are equally located just outside busy city centers near other entertainment venues, which allows visitors to drive to a bar, cultural venue, or scenic spot immediately after the movie. Indeed, according to one op-ed piece, "a drive-in cinema date starts when the movie stops" (jadongcha geukjang deiteu-neun yeonghwa-ga kkeunnan hu-buteo sijakdoenda) (Yi 2018).

Romance is a key factor. In the early 2000s, following enormous popularity for over a decade, private video and DVD viewing rooms began to lose their attraction in Korea (Baek 2010; Yeoseong gajokbu 2020, 51). Presumably because the venues lost their novelty and could not shake their somewhat seedy reputation, young couples began to look for alternatives. Since few of them owned a car or were able to borrow one, in March 2017 rental car company Carssum (Kasseom) posted several ads on its website and social media to entice young couples to try a drive-in. One of them showed a young man and woman sitting on the roof of a car oddly parked away from the screen watching a movie at sunset, with the caption across reading, “It’s warm; wanna go see a movie?” (Ttatteuthada, yeonghwa boreogallae?). Another showed only the legs of a couple leaned against a sports car supposedly kissing with a caption below that read, “Drive-ins where *sseom* (taken from the English word “something”) become a couple” (Sseom-i keopeur-i doeneun jadongcha geukjang). In 2002, one drive-in attendant noted that in their search for privacy, some couples sought to park on the fringes or in the parking areas designated for employees (French 2002). But at Megabox EOE4 in 2018, Mr O assured me with a grin that customers no longer engage in naughty behavior like some had done in the past (O Myeong-geun, interview, Megabox EOE4, Seoul, November 24, 2018). Even so, the conduct of customers, even when salacious, is not monitored during screenings and would often be obscured by tinted car windows.

Before the pandemic significantly diversified the audience, young couples accounted for most ticket sales. Like *Donga Ilbo* reporter Yi Gihong, who visited Apple Star in winter 1998 (see Yi Gihong 1998), on my visits more recently, I saw mostly couples in their twenties and early thirties. And although the manager of Megabox EOE4 commented back in 2002 that families accounted for sixty percent of ticket sales (Choe 2002), Mr O told me in 2018 that most of their customers were indeed in their twenties and thirties, with couples making up seventy percent of clientele (O Myeong-geun, interview, Megabox EOE4, Seoul, November 24, 2018). On December 7, 2014, a notice appeared on Jayuro Drive-in Cinema’s “Questions and Answers” (Mutgo-daphagi) online message board (via www.carmovie.co.kr) that on-screen proposals could be arranged. One such proposal shown to me by manager James (Yuyeong) Jin on April 10, 2019, began as follows:

> [0:00-0:24] a shot in soft focus shows only the hands of a young man at a café typing away on his laptop while a romantic piano tune plays non-diegetically.
> [0:25-0:37] while a deeply romantic ballad vocalized by a male singer starts playing non-diegetically, white text appears across a dark background seemingly as though it is typed in real time:
> “나의 소중한” (my precious) | “나의 소중한” [backspace deletes text to start anew]
> “안녕” (hi) “안녕” [deletes text to start anew]
> “안녕… 보람아 깜짝 놀랐지?” (hi… Boram, this must catch you by surprise, right?)
> “우리의 추억이 담긴 영상편지를 준비해봤어…” (I have prepared a video letter with our memories…)
> [0:40-0:52] while the ballad continues, a shot in soft focus shows the back of a young man walking in the direction of sunlight.

> [0:53-0:58] moving down from an overhead shot in soft focus, the camera shows a clothesline with photos hanging between trees.
> [0:59-⋯] a close-up of one of the photos reveals it is a snapshot of the couple that would now be watching this from inside a car presumably parked right in front of the screen. In the bottom left corner below the photo, the following text slowly appears: "마음 속 깊은 곳 나의 상자에 묻어두고 살았습니다." (I have been living with something buried deep in my heart)

The association of drive-ins with romance is often used in Korean movies and TV dramas. Unlike the Japanese *Be with You* (*Ima, Ai ni Yukimasu*, 2004; Dir. Doi Nobuhiro), on which it is based, the movie *Be with You* (*Jigeum Mannareo Gamnida,* 2018; Dir. Lee Jang-hoon) includes a scene in which the two protagonists sit on a hill overlooking a drive-in and playfully flirt with each other while trying to watch a movie with a single pair of binoculars. The scene ends with the couple kissing while CGI is used to make a close-up of a scene with cherry blossoms that supposedly plays on the screen down below cover the entire background. In the tenth episode of Season 10 of MBC TV's *Over the Rainbow* (*Obeo deo Reinbou*, 2006), a young man is shown driving onto the premises of a deserted drive-in at night and parking in front of the screen. Seated next to a young woman who he hopes will give him a second chance, he makes a brief phone call that prompts a video compilation like the one transcribed above to start playing, bringing tears to her eyes. Other romantic drive-in scenes can be found in episode 76 of MBC TV's *Princess Aurora* (*Orora Gongju*, 2013) and episode 12 of KBS's *Unkind Ladies* (*Chakhaji Anheun Yeojadeul*, 2015).

Apart from the obvious lure to lovers or the more promiscuous looking to score on a date, the format's privacy can be attractive to celebrities and, possibly at the other end of the social spectrum, those of the lower classes (Kim 2018; Cohen 1994, 479; French 2002). Young parents, meanwhile, do not have to worry about their baby or child asking for attention, disturbing other members in a quiet theater (O Myeong-geun, interview, Megabox EOE4, Seoul, November 24, 2018), nor do pet owners with barking dogs worry they are being a nuisance (French 2002). In addition, age restrictions do not appear to be enforced: in 1998, a newspaper reported on a couple watching *Alien Resurrection* with a five-year-old on the woman's lap (Yi Gihong 1998). Smoking is allowed, and since any food can be brought in and consumed inside one's car, both kids and adults often enjoy hot snacks during the movie (Anon. 2012), with fried chicken being a common favorite. And because there is no need to get out of the car at the venue, a fair number of disabled people are said to be among the venues' patrons (James Jin, interview, Jayuro Drive-in Cinema, Gyeonggi province, April 10, 2019). One reporter noted that the format has been attractive to those suffering from claustrophobia as well (Han Yunchang

2018), but one would think that cars may be a trigger rather than a remedy for the condition. The need to use one's personal car audio systems may also boost the format's appeal. Whereas speaker poles provided corded individual speakers in the past, these days drivers are provided a specific FM radio frequency upon entrance. This allows customers to adjust the sound quality and volume to match their personal preference (No 1999, 216－217).

These obvious aspects of adventure, romance, and convenience aside, what equally sets the drive-in apart from other formats is the viewing experience itself. The experience of a movie is commonly understood as deriving mostly from what is transmitted by the projector and, on a meta-semiotic level, the speakers (see Gorbman 1980). Indeed, according to Steven Shaviro, cinema constitutes a unidirectional experience:

> The experience of watching a film remains stubbornly concrete, immanent, and prereflective: it is devoid of depth and inferiority. Sitting in the dark, watching the play of images across a screen, any detachment from "raw phenomena," from the immediacy of sensation or from the speeds and delays of temporal duration, is radically impossible. I am confronted and assaulted by a flux of sensations that I can neither attach to physical presences nor translate into systematized abstractions. I am violently, viscerally affected by *this* image and *this* sound, without being able to have recourse to any frame of reference, any form of transcendental reflection, or any Symbolic order (Shaviro 1993, 31).

As the existence of drive-ins and the increasing diversification of multiplexes demonstrate, however, the audience's physical whereabouts are part of the attraction. Julian Hanich breaks down cinematic experience into three levels: the individual's experience of the movie on screen, the physical and spatial experience of the cinema, and the "social spectatorial experience of the 'collective' subject" (Hanich 2012, 584; see also Sobchak 1992, 287－289; Cohen 1994, 475). He notes that the degree of attention demanded by these three levels will vary throughout a movie, and indeed, one would think particularly so for couples on a date at a drive-in. Whereas in the past sound would come from a speaker hanging from a cable through a car window, these days the use of radio frequencies allows for the windows to be fully shut. Seeing as most cars in Korea have tinted windows, this lets customers keen on privacy shield themselves and others from being heard or seen. Seeing as the facilities do not invite customers to wander outside their car more than necessary, this does somewhat obfuscate both the outdoor experience and the notion of collectiveness. While the degree of sharing that takes place with other audience members may therefore be negligible, the privacy of cars heightens the intensity of individual customers' experience, something that pertains not only to watching a movie, but also to the interior surroundings: it is not the living room as private space but the car interior as semi-private space. The “collective recognition of accord” (Hanich 2012, 584; 597−599), the joy audience members derive from sharing responses to particular scenes or sequences with the group, may, then, be replaced with the sharing of responses with passengers (Cohen 1994, 473), though the experience may be more predictable and less authentic.

Synchronously engaging with a live or prospective audience of followers through social media will add a fourth level of experience. Indeed, on my visits to drive-in cinemas in Korea, I frequently noticed people using their smartphones, something regular cinemas do not allow. Likely on account of a degree of addiction to social media, many customers want to check for messages and responses to earlier engagements or invite new ones based on their current one. The act of imagining followers reacting to one’s drive-in adventure may aggregate the three levels while adding one that can be more performative or planned than emotional or spontaneous since it might be premised on the viewer’s performance of taste (in movies, venues, or choice of company). That is not to say that the other levels of experience are irrational, but they rely more on one’s own emotional reaction to a majority response and less toward soliciting positive confirmations from others.

The uniqueness of the outdoor format and its romanticism may be augmented by a sense of nostalgia drawn from popular portrayals of drive-in experiences. Hollywood productions that feature drive-in cinema scenes, such as *Grease* (1978), *Back to the Future III* (1990), and *Twister* (1996), did well in Korea and will have underpinned the format’s appeal with local audiences. Romantic scenes and the frequent inclusion of a kiss led to the venues becoming associated with a small measure of positive nonconformity (see also Cohen 1994, 471) even in Korea, where public displays of affection had long been taboo. It is possible that they also provided inspiration to the authors of the Korean TV dramas in which they featured roughly two decades later. Sarah Stubbings shows that because of its important role in identity formation, rather than the memory of a particular movie, the activity of cinema-going itself has been an important driver of memories, particularly among young adults on a date. Both Stubbings and Alison Landsberg note the importance of that nostalgia being one over a shared past: “there is an infusion of historical nostalgia in the recall of community life; memories of a shared leisure practice are often contrasted implicitly or explicitly with the individualistic tendencies of contemporary culture” (Stubbings 2003, 70; see also Landsberg 2003, 151). Few Koreans would have experienced a drive-in before the format was introduced in the mid-1990s, let alone as a group. But these portrayals may have kindled nostalgia over a more liberated, seemingly simpler past they never experienced in their formative years. Indeed, a report in *The Korea Times* from 2001 argued that the scene in the movie

Cinema Paradiso where an audience seeks shelter from the rain during the screening of a movie on a wall outside "may bring back fuzzy memories and a sense of nostalgia" among Korean audiences for their experiences of outdoor spectator experiences tied to the drive-in (Kim 2001). And in 2020, reporter Song Jung-a wrote that the resurgence of drive-ins in Korea might be related to "feelings of nostalgia and romance among audiences" (Song 2020). Unauthentic memories can be born out of empathy with the real or imagined experience of a community (see Holak and Havlena 1992; Baker and Kennedy 1994, 171). To describe such instances, Alison Landsberg has coined the term "prosthetic memory":

> It has become possible to have an intimate relationship to memories of events through which one did not live: these are the memories I call prosthetic. 'Prosthetic memories' are indeed 'personal' memories, as they derive from engaged and experientially-oriented encounters with the mass media's various technologies of memory. (Landsberg 2003, 148－149)

It is irrelevant that the events that Koreans "remember" in this case constitute fictional depictions featuring US citizens. Although the vast majority of Korean drive-in cinemagoers will watch a movie from inside their mobile entertainment venue — the car viewing pod and windshield as second interface — where they generally follow Korean norms of behavior, the format may still summon nostalgia over a lived or imagined past when they arrived in the hope of sharing their first kiss or quietly holding hands with someone (rather than clutch and then scroll through a smartphone).

Most independent cinemas select movies that correspond to the various tastes of their target audiences, who are likely to live in the area. Having worked as the General Manager of Seoul's popular Danseongsa cinema from 1966 to 1987, for example, Yi Yonghui surmised that both the prevalence of organized crime and prostitution in the back alleys, and the many schools in the area would have been responsible for the frequency of action movies featuring there (Min 2011, 21). Drive-ins, however, are often located away from residential areas where they seek to attract customers from around the city, so their offer must meet a broader range of expectations. Blockbusters remain their bread and butter; although they featured no new releases in the first few years of operations, they have included them in their selection at least since 1998 (Yi Dongjin 1998; Anon. 1999a). Even so, just like weather conditions (Yi 2018) and movies that feature romantic drive-in scenes, the physical and spatial setting of a particular drive-in can augment the appeal of a particular movie genre.

Operational Challenges

Despite the unique experiences and practical benefits drive-ins offer, the format's future in Korea has not looked bright. While drive-ins have now been around for more than twenty-seven years and are experiencing a major boost in popularity on account of the pandemic (Yi 2020), most Koreans have yet to experience them, which may be why for many years related newspaper reports tended to open with an explanation of their attraction. Groupism has not yet led to a rush to experience this semi-private moviegoing experience. There are nevertheless good reasons why customers would stay away.

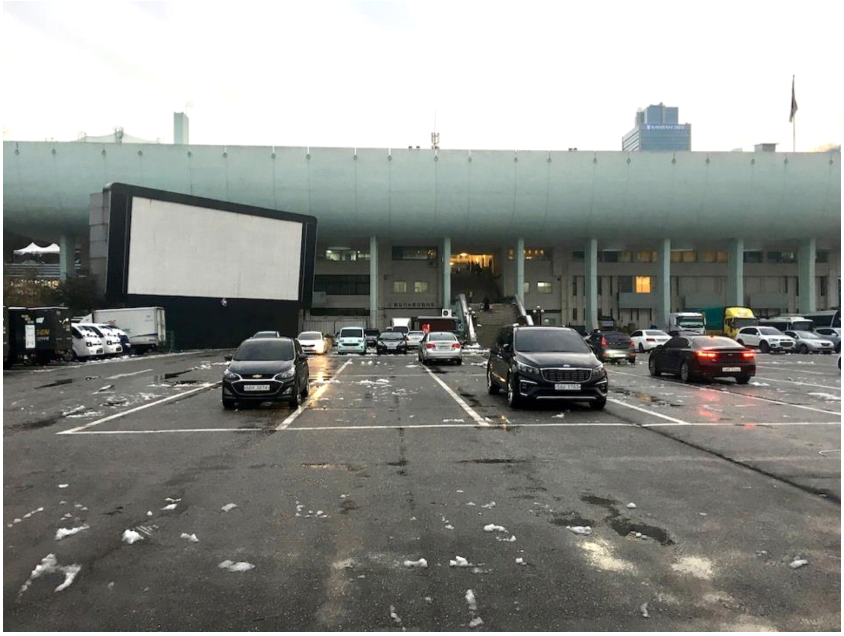

Figure 2. Entrance to Megabox EOE4, on November 24, 2018. Photo by author.

Aside from the relatively poor hygiene and scruffy infrastructure of the facilities[6], and the need for a car, for example, there is the considerably poorer overall video quality. Commerce and convenience have a way of lowering technology standards, the actual, "naked" quality of a technological medium, but the high technological standard of the sound and image of today's Hollywood blockbusters may nevertheless have a curbing effect on drive-in cinema patronage. The continued success of the format, Mr Jin concurred, "is dependent on technology, particularly the quality of image, sound, and other services" (James Jin, interview, Jayuro Drive-in Cinema, Gyeonggi province, April 10, 2019).[7] He argued that the technological standard of the projectors required to show Western movies is below that used for domestic ones and that movies that lack good contrast ratios, which includes many belonging to the horror or fantasy genres, produce a far darker image than desired.[8] He demonstrated this using a copy of *Hellboy* (2019), which indeed includes a number of scenes that due to their dimness and nocturnal darkness of the mise-en-scene were fairly hard to follow. The projection quality will undoubtedly improve over time, but the higher-quality rendition and absence of subtitles may be why at least at Megabox EOE4, Korean movies tended to be more popular than foreign ones (O Myeong-geun, interview, Megabox EOE4, Seoul, November 24, 2018).

Good projection will not, however, solve all viewing issues. If the car is parked relatively far away from the screen, it may require significant effort to immerse oneself in a movie. At Megabox EOE4, for example, all cars are lined up somewhat obliquely away from the screen, even those parked right in front (Yi Gihong 1998), which will cause the car's front pillar to obstruct the view. And although there may be many customers who prefer a cool summer breeze to an air-conditioned cabin (Kim 1998; Yi 2003), noise, extreme temperatures, and sun glare can still ruin the experience (Yi 2018). While the first screening usually takes place around 7 or 7:30 PM, with one or two additional screenings following later (Nam 1999; Anon. 1999b), in late June, when the days are the longest, twilight sets in from 8 PM, so the sky will not be completely dark throughout the first thirty minutes of the movie.[9] The difficulty of immersion may be exacerbated by tinted windows, a front-facing dash cam, or the headlights of cars driving past. Because foreign movies require subtitles, customers would not want to be parked too far away (Anon. 1999b), and if they fail to get into a movie altogether, driving out early is not an easy option. Meanwhile, the government requirement to kill the engine after five minutes means it can still get uncomfortable inside at times of extreme weather (Yi Gihong 1998). An additional complication is that many of today's cars with keyless start/stop buttons offer no obvious access to the ACC setting and switching the engine on or off inevitably results in briefly killing the radio and flashing the headlights.

A woman in her mid- to late forties (who asked not to be identified) who visited Megabox EOE4 in 2013 told me she was unable to run the radio without the headlights turned on, so the attendant helped her dim the lights with a blanket she happened to bring along in the back of her car. Although a solution was quickly found, it was a stressful experience (personal communication, Indiana University, September 17, 2018). Today, most drive-in cinemas offer separate black plastic headlight covers at a cost of a little over a dollar (1,000 won), which Mr Jin told me could easily be reused but frequently end up falling onto the premises' tarmac when customers drive out (James Jin, interview, Jayuro Drive-in Cinema, Gyeonggi province, April 10, 2019).

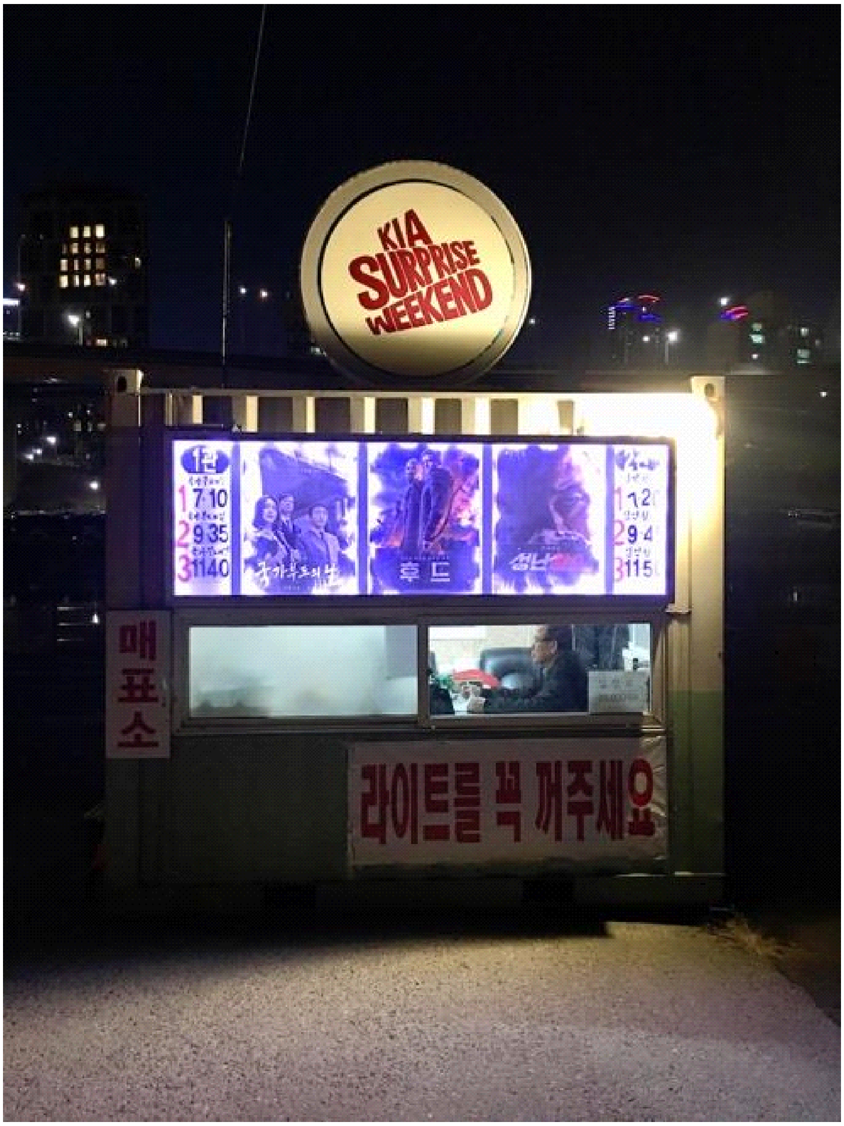

Figure 3. Entrance to the Jamsil Drive-in Cinema in the southeast of Seoul, on December 1, 2018. The banner below the window reads, “Please ensure you switch off your lights.” Photo by author.

Another car-related hurdle to the development of Korea’s drive-in cinema culture is the long absence of a culture of car enthusiasts. Drive-in cinemas abroad have often relied partly on car hobbyists flaunting their possession as a symbol of both financial and cultural capital, as well as on the image of them doing so.[10] But few Koreans share the passion for cars one finds in Japan, the United States, and Australia (Goldsmith 1999, 155) and plain black, white, or metallic grey sedan models dominate the conservative car landscape. Imported luxury automobiles remain commodities and expensive toys for Korea's growing 'neoliberal royalty' (Wagner 2016). Rather than treating them as a collectable or escape from the mundanity of everyday life, Koreans tend to buy a car that matches their profession (Nelson 2012, 99–100). Domestic car sharing and manufacturing companies make occasional use of the drive-in format to promote the diversity of their products (see, for example, Kim 1994; Bae 1997a; Anon. 2002), but a potential gathering of car aficionados keen on being seen (Cohen 1994, 479) is not currently a major factor driving ticket sales.

Conclusion

Over the past few decades, the greatest challenge drive-ins have faced is the rise of multiplexes, which began in 1998 with the opening of CGV Gangbyeon, Korea's first colossus of multiscreen entertainment. By the end of 2018, approximately 80 percent (384) of the total of 483 theatres nationwide were of this format (Yeonghwa jinheung wiwonhoe 2019, 74). With their common offer of parking facilities and nearby shopping and dining outlets, multiplexes have become the standard. It briefly appeared as though on-demand entertainment would throw drive-ins a lifeline when, in 2016 and 2017, respectively, Korean multiplexes decided not to screen Yuen Woo-ping's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Sword of Destiny* and Bong Joon-ho's *Okja*, on the grounds of them being Netflix productions, despite the latter receiving many favorable reviews at the 70th Cannes film festival that year. This allowed independent and drive-in cinemas to make much profit from their screening (Yi and Jang 2017; Sim 2017; Kim Junyeop 2017). But multiplexes have adapted and are now also starting to feature productions by on-demand entertainment companies, which in Korea include Netflix, Wavve, and Disney Plus (Kim 2021), further denying drive-ins that advantage.

When the pandemic hobbled Korea, it quickly and significantly boosted drive-in cinema ticket sales. The virus may thus have saved a few businesses, as many struggled despite investing in facilities.[11] In April 2020, a spokesperson for the Jayuro Drive-in Cinema, which was not planning any major improvements to its facilities at the time of my visit a year earlier, said sales had doubled since the pandemic (Song 2020). Seeing as it offers reasonable protection from contagion, it is no surprise that viewing times are often selling out. But the format's attraction lies also in the other aspects that have driven patronage over the years. Romance, uniqueness, the ability to use a smartphone, and prosthetic memories will continue to add to the format's appeal, which may be further boosted by Korea's burgeoning vintage, tuned or sports car aficionado culture. Having been considered unpatriotic for decades, sales of imported foreign passenger cars, including tuned high-performance cars, are increasing fast and have continued throughout 2020 (Lee 2011, 895–896; Yim and Chyung 2018; Park, Jeongmin 2019; Seo 2020). Like drive-in cinema, the cars may summon prosthetic memories over a time imagined, when Korean youth gathered at a drive-in in convertibles.

Ironically, successful vaccination could cause a range of online group experiences to become the object of nostalgia in the future. Until that time, the various attractions that drive-ins offer should extend the format's popularity, though they may not be able to lure large numbers of people away from the relative comfort of the inner city and a small if steady stream of customers will not cover the growing cost of operations. It is possible that future recollections of parking lot adventures that arose out of the IMF crisis or the current pandemic will yield more cultural capital or rite of passage-like symbolic capital than multiplexes, but hopefully mere memories ― whether real or prosthetic ― will not come to replace what for decades has represented a unique aspect of Korean cinema.

Notes

1. I am very grateful to Prof. Olga Fedorenko and three anonymous reviewers for their insightful and very helpful comments on this article.

2. See also http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/51938/comments. The Sundown Drive-in in the Australian Capital Territory's district of Symonston had a small play area for children in the center of the parking space. See http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/46600.

3. According to a 1998 report, allowing the car to run stationary for up to two hours would amount to three liters of wasted petrol and more than five grammes of pollutants (see Park 1998; Gwak 2007).

4. Mr Jin remembered *JSA* (which came out in September 2000) being the first movie shown. In 2010, he took ownership of the venue when the initial contractor failed to return his loan (James Jin, interview, Jayuro Drive-in Cinema, Gyeonggi province, April 10, 2019).

5. On January 24, when Korea moved to level 2.5 restrictions in an attempt to curb the growing number of infections, Pocheon Herb Island Drive-in Cinema announced on its website (http://drivethrumovie.co.kr) that cars were no longer allowed to have more than four people inside.

6. According to a Google review of Megabox EOE4 by jsigow, who in 2018 gave the venue 3 out of 5 stars, "Its accessibility in Seoul is good; less is that the toilets are dirty and the kiosks small." See https://kr.asiafirms.com/seoul/movie-theater/4.

7. Mr Jin said he was concerned about the ever-increasing cost of operations, which included the maintenance of technical equipment worth up to 100 million won (nearly 90,000 US dollars) (James Jin, interview, Jayuro Drive-in Cinema, Gyeonggi province, April 10, 2019). Another drive-in operator noted that because the projector light has a life span of 600 hours, it usually needs to be changed every four to five months at a substantial cost (Yi 2016). Land leases can compound the cost of operations. While in the past, some local governments supported drive-in businesses for the purpose of generating council revenue, giving permission to individual contractors to operate the venues at night (Anon. 1999a), as land prices continued to soar, profit became less an incentive for their involvement (Yi 2016). The increase in land prices also led to the closure of downtown Seoul's iconic independent cinema Danseongsa (Kim Hyeonu 2017).

8. At the Jayu Road Drive-in, Jin uses a Christie CP2000-SB for foreign productions and a Panasonic PT-EX16K with 16,000 ANSI lumen for domestic ones.

9. An interactive graph showing Seoul's annual daylight can be found here: https://www.timeanddate.com/sun/south-korea/seoul.

10. Indeed, in No Dong-seok's 2004 movie *Mai Jeneoreisyeon* (*My Generation*), the drive-in cinema is shown to remain a privilege exclusive to those who can afford both a car and a ticket (Yi Yeongju 2008).

11. One of the drawbacks of Korea's first drive-ins had been that they showed only movies that had come out at least a month prior.

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