

Panel 2: Cross-Media Dialogue in Neoliberal Korea

Haerin Shin
Assistant Professor of English
Vanderbilt University

The Optics of Mutant Vectors: Run-away Neoliberalism in *Train to Busan*

Exploring South Korean cinema in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, Joseph Jeon observes the use of “second-order representations” (PAGE) – the fantastic and/or technologically mediated means of instantiation – as a way of diagnosing the problematics of economic institutions in his upcoming book *Vicious Circuits: Post-IMF Cinema and the End of the American Century* (2019). Indeed, many films from the early 2000s exhibit a growing awareness of their place in the global cinemascape, enlisting but also bending Hollywood conventions to feel out the socio-economic ruptures that troubled the triumphant narrative of post-IMF restitution. Building on Jeon’s analysis to identify a new breed of affective politics that emerged in South Korean cinema in the 2010s, this essay examines *Train to Busan* (2016) to illuminate what I call the mutant vectors of run-away neoliberalism in post-IMF cinema, whereby the operational logic of reclaimed prosperity portends catastrophe rather than sustainability. Arriving nearly two decades after the nation’s near-brush with ruin, the film’s optics recalibrates the focus of apocalyptic imaginary in the Korean context from the specters of institutionalized malfeasance to the rhetoric of individual agency and its discontent as the driving force behind not only economic resurgence but also the country’s newly acquired status as a global trend setter. The sheer scale and speed of the adversity in *Train to Busan* rely on mediatory technicity to highlight the value of individual responsibility and sacrifice, while the zombie trope’s ability to disintegrate the boundary between victim and victimizer calls attention to a growing sense of anxiety about implication and complicity – one that bypasses conscious intent or even control, belying fear of the other within rather than an exogenous alterity without.