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"CULTURAL SPECIFICITY IN THE AGE OF AI-DRIVEN CINEMA INDUSTRIES: A COMPARISON BETWEEN KOREAN AND FRENCH LANDSCAPES"

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the reception and integration of artificial intelligence (AI) within the South Korean and French film industries, highlighting how each national context shapes the trajectory of technological adoption. Employing a comparative methodology, the analysis draws on industry reports, trade publications, government policy documents, and festival materials to trace recent developments in both countries.

As this research argue, South Korean cinema is negotiating a particularly important shift for its economic and cultural situation with the help of AI, in a way that allows it to transcend a system that was once successful but has now run out of steam. On the contrary, French film industry sees the same situation as a further loss of authority for its already waning artistic hegemony.

By contrasting South Korea's proactive embrace of AI as a means to restore industrial profitability and cultural competitiveness with France's cautious approach rooted in artistic tradition and regulatory frameworks, the paper thus illuminates how divergent cinematic traditions and policy responses mediate the impact of AI, ultimately influencing the preservation – or transformation – of cultural specificity in a rapidly globalizing media ecosystem.

Keywords

Artificial Intelligence; Film Industry; Generated Film; France; South Korea; Film Festivals; Cultural Specificity; Genre Hybridity; Transnational Studies

Introduction

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into film industries worldwide is reshaping both creative and industrial processes (Vasilis and Kitsios 2025). This study adopts a comparative framework to analyze recent transformations in two very distinct models of film industry governance and cultural branding with regards to AI, South Korea and France. In recent years, each of them has developed notably different approaches, shaped by their distinct cultural, economic, and policy contexts. While the South Korean industry has embraced AI as a strategic tool to enhance competitiveness amid market challenges, the French industry has approached these technological advancements with more caution, prioritizing artistic tradition and regulatory concerns.

This research compares the development, acceptance, and perceived risks of AI implementation in both countries' film sectors: the former, which will be the focus of this article, is characterized as very *proactive* in transforming its industry, while the latter is, on the contrary, considered particularly *reactive* to AI promises. By highlighting these contrasts, the paper aims to illuminate how national context and cinematic tradition mediates the impact of technological innovation on cinema industries.

The primary sources include industry reports from institutions such as the Korean Film Council and the French National Center for Cinema, festival programs, trade publications, and relevant policy documents published between 2018 and 2025. The analysis is guided by the rationale that both countries represent distinctly influential film cultures navigating AI integration under different economic imperatives, and cultural traditions. These cases are selected for their exemplary divergence in national branding, industry structure, and response to digital disruption, allowing for a nuanced discussion of how cultural and political contexts shape the adoption of technological innovation in cinema.

Contemporary issues in the South Korean film industry

The so-called "AI-revolution" of cultural and media landscape is not taking place in a socio-economical vacuum. Rather, the emergence of AI in the South Korean film industry needs to be placed within a specific context, the late 2010s, that marked a turning point both in terms of general cultural trends and from an economic perspective.

As numerous scholars have already shown, the last decade marks the transition from the original *hallyu* to a second wave, or *hallyu 2.0*. This new step marks the renewing and the deepening of the previous wave that took form during the late 1990s and, at the time, surged mostly in Asia. This new wave, now perfectly globalized, draws its strength from content produced and discussed online by fan communities. The term thus hints at cultural forms that are no longer solely manufactured by the industry, as was the case before, but are profoundly renegotiated through consumer participation online (Choi 2015). In the same book, Dal Yong Jin highlights the role of new digital technologies for *Hallyu 2.0:*

> "the combination of social media, their techniques and practices, and the uses and affordances they provide, and this new stage has been made possible because Korea has advanced its digital technologies" (Jin 2015: 54)

As these two articles show, Hallyu 2.0 is based on cultural objects that are even more community-oriented than cinema: such as series, lifestyle, food, manhwa, etc. *Hallyu 2.0* represents a shift from a *cinema-centric* model (the period that has been labeled "New Korean Cinema") to one where cinema holds a secondary role, even in the audiovisual landscape.

This transition from cinema to digital content is one of the key factors of the contemporary phenomenon stated by Jin in a later article as the "convergence between AI and popular culture". This phenomenon is both the result and the cause of increasing "platformization" of the cultural practices, a term emphasizing the decisive role played by tech industry groups in the production and consumption of cultural goods for economic profit (Jin 2024). To fully understand the current prominence of AI in the South Korean film sector, it is important to contextualize contemporary issues within the shifting economic conditions that have defined the industry's recent history. The following analysis will therefore quantify these trends with up-to-date data on cinema attendance, revenues, and investment patterns, highlighting the critical juncture at which AI technologies have been introduced.

The second determining factor of this period, corollary to the context just described, is the decline in the profitability of South Korean cinema: the drastic slowdown in its growth, triggered by the pandemic, but much deeper than this epiphenomenon. This can clearly be seen first as the end of a period of very high and rapid growth in the number of cinema screens and cinema attendance in the country (Fig. 1, KOFIC) but also the collapse of revenues after the Covid-19 pandemic, that is not coming back to normal five years after (Fig. 2 shows that 2024 figures are only about 60% of the revenue in 2019). Even this brief overview of the economic situation of South Korean cinema allows us to make a few assumptions about the appeal of AI in industry, and why it is pushed so much, especially in this time of crisis for the cinema industry.

Under these conditions, the arrival of AI appears – for investors and especially the powerful conglomerates known in South Korean as *chaebols* – as a timely means of restoring industrial profitability by reducing costs. A recent note produced by the Korean Film Council (KOFIC) in August 2025 clearly shows that it is the primary economic challenge of AI: "The area where AI has the greatest impact is in familiar but low-value tasks. Prioritizing the automation of such tasks to enhance productivity is the most rational approach." (Lee 2025) And indeed, the first uses of AI in the industry were in special effects (such as Yeon Sang-ho's *Jung_E* in 2023) and remastering (the most cited example being the remastering of the 2011 animated film classic Oh Seong-yun's *Leafie, a Hen into the Wild*, which beneficiated enhanced colors and details, the correction of scratches on the analog footage, and a 4K upscaling).

But the same KOFIC note highlights above all the immense possibilities promised by generative AI: "Among AI-based film production technologies, the most anticipated area is video generation" (Lee 2025). This clearly shows that the South Korean industry intends to participate in the race for generated films, following the model of *Critterz*, an animated film produced by OpenAI that aims to be screened at the next Cannes Film Festival in 2026. The film is expected to cost $30 million – compared to $200 million for recent Pixar films (Toonkel 2025). For instance, the studio behind the success of *King of Kings* (Jang Seong-ho, 2025), Mofac Studios, is currently trying to reinvent film production with AI with help of venture capital. Other studios, such as Mediation with a Pencil or Galaxy Corp., signed important deals with AI companies to develop the future of AI-generated characters in films (Kim 2025).

But private actors are not the only ones after this "AI-revolution". For the first time in a political tradition very reluctant to direct funding of cultural industries (Parc and Messerlin 2021), this shift in the industry will be funded with direct financial help from the government. In a recent article, the *Korea Herald* reported that "the government will inject 70 billion won [50M$] into the Korea Creative Content Agency's film account to create a

140 billion [100M$] won investment fund, doubling last year's contribution. Technology initiatives include 2.2 billion [1.5 M$] won for AI-powered production and 16.4 billion won [11.8 M$] for a virtual production studio in Busan" (Moon).

It is in this context that we can understand the initiatives to host generated film festivals, which recall the extremely proactive role that the Busan Film Festival has played for the South Korean film industry since its creation in 1996 (Ahn 2012). Besides the Busan AI film festival, a lot of new initiatives developed, such as the AI-program of the Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival, with 11 films in competition, the K-AI FF, Korean AI Film Festival with an emphasis on the "New Opportunities Presented by AI" : "the festival aims to support the creation of video contents utilizing generative AI and explore the path of content creation and the possibility of win-win development in the AI era." (festival website), or the Jeju AI global film festival, created "to enhance global awareness of AI technology and establish Jeju as a hub for AI and cultural convergence, creating synergies between Jeju tourism and the cultural content industry." (festival website)

Indeed, there are already several South Korean-produced films, some of which have won international awards: Kwon Han-seul presented *One More Pumpkin* at the Dubai International AI Film Festival in 2025, winning both the Grand Prize and the Audience Award, while *M. Hotel* by Changik Jeong wins a prize at Busan International Artificial Intelligence Film Festival. This last film was produced by CJ Entertainment, one of the big *chaebols* operating in the cinema industry.

While economic imperatives and technological interventions have undoubtedly re-shaped industrial strategies, it is equally crucial to consider how these changes interact with deeper questions of identity and cultural legacy. Before delving into the specifics of AI-driven content production, the discussion will now turn to how notions of cultural specificity have been theorized and operationalized within South Korean cinema – laying the groundwork for a more robust comparison with the French context.

Cultural Specificity and Strategy: Hybridity as a Resource

This brief overview of the shifting landscape of the cinema industry raises the question of whether South Korea's strategy needs to be renewed to keep its significant role in the international competition, and what place cinema can occupy in this new strategy. Since 2000, numerous studies have already focused on South Korea's "national branding" and how it has developed since the beginning of *hallyu* with the help of cinema. In these in-depth analyses, authors argued that brand image was both its comparative advantage in the globalized film market and an important geopolitical vector of soft power. (Lee 2000; Shin and Stringer 2005; Paquet 2009; Kim 2013; Jin 2016)
But at first glance, AI poses a challenge to the appreciation of national specificity in an economic ecosystem where the most dominant companies have a stranglehold on training datasets and software. Indeed, the leading text-to-video models such as Veo 3, Runway, Sora or Kling AI are all proprietary models of US- (Google, Open AI, Runway) or China- (Kuaishou) based firms. It is now well-documented that AI-models, especially text-to-image ones, are perpetuating, if not increasing racial biases. They for instance tend to distort the morphology of non-Western people, their language or their culture (Noble 2018). Governments are also increasingly aware of copyright violation of artists' intellectual property by US companies. In October 2025, Japanese companies such as Nintendo, followed by the Japanese government, claimed that OpenAI is "devouring Japanese culture" (manga, videogames or movies) with their new generation of Sora. With Sora 2, users can reproduce anime characters that closely resemble Studio Ghibli's character and other works protected by copyright in Japan. However, the American company has never entered into any agreement with the Japanese rights holders and use this material without any compensation. As these examples suggest, the evolution of AI in the cultural domain, based on cultural expropriation, could cause an even greater problem of representation. Indeed, AI-generated films lose the specificity of the setting, actors and the mise-en-scène particularity of the country of origin, in favor of a globalized aesthetic, shaped to follow the dominant industrial model.

In this context, is it still possible to produce images full of "Korean-ness" that maintain the economic and soft-power advantage hard-won during the first Hallyu? Does AI pose a risk to South Korea's strategy of moving from an industry based on cultural specificity to an image whose form is globalized and completely devoid of local color?

I would argue that this is not the case, due to a tendency that was already well established during the previous period. As the important studies I mentioned before argued, South Korean cinema has based its appeal on a particular form, which involves a specific way of combining conventional (Hollywood-style) content with local characteristics that go beyond mere local color. The *Korean-ness* of South Korean cinema should therefore not be understood in terms of the model of "Italian-ness" discussed at length by Roland Barthes in his famous "Rhetoric of the Image", where he discusses the packaging of a pasta pack branded by Barilla as a "theater of signification" based on semantic characteristics (Barthes 1964: 49).

In the context of South Korean cinema, it is not just cultural traits, but a particular cultural sensibility to different cinematic influences, which critics have called *hybridity*, or sometimes *genre-bending*. As stated by Colette Balmain:

> "… hybridity has become perhaps the defining feature of contemporary South Korean Cinema, with films often starting off in one genre before suddenly shifting into another genre […] it is most difficult to categorize South Korean cinema using conventional definition of genre, even taking into consideration that the concept of genre is inherently problematic. Genre hybridity in South Korean Cinema is closely aligned to the troubled development of cinema in Korea, as genres, like cinema, were something which was imported rather than developing naturally out of existing cultural artifacts and ideas."
>
> "In these terms the way in which genres were imitated through variation and difference produced culturally specific genre through an imbrication of Korean sensibility with foreign narrative forms." (Balmain 2013: 8–10)

It is particularly interesting to note that hybridity is also one of the main characteristics of AI-generated content. Its aesthetic of recycling, mashups and appropriation resonates strongly with the main formulas used in the South Korean film industry.

Colette Balmain's concept of "genre hybridity" in Korean cinema is characterized by the dynamic blending and shifting of genres within films that reflect the complexity and fluidity of contemporary Korean society. Classic examples such as *Shiri* (Kang Je-gyu, 1999), *Joint Security Area* (Park Chan-wook, 2000), and *The Thieves* (Choi Dong-hoon, 2012) showcase this hybridity, combining Hollywood-style action and genre conventions with Korean melodramatic sensibilities and cultural themes. This blending produces a "third space" where global and local elements coexist, creating unique cinematic expressions that resonate both domestically and internationally. Balmain highlights that hybridity is not mere mixing, but the creation of a distinct cultural sphere that balances commercial success and national identity through innovative genre fusion.

In the context of AI-assisted production, this hybridity serves as a critical and industrial resource. The aesthetic of AI-generated content often embraces themes of recycling, mashups, and appropriation—traits that align with Korean cinema's genre-bending tendencies. This alignment allows the industry to harness AI not only as a technological innovation but as an extension of its already hybridized narrative and stylistic forms. In this way, hybridity fosters resilience by enabling adaptation to technological change, while also supporting creativity by expanding the possibilities for new cinematic expressions that maintain cultural specificity despite global pressures. Drawing on Balmain's influential work, hybridity emerges not only as a trademark of Korean genre cinema, but also as a critical strategy for negotiating the challenges of algorithmic production. This aligns with Appadurai's notion of global cultural flows, whereby South Korean cinema harnesses hybridity to reassert local agency within transnational markets. Thus, hybridity matters critically because it frames Korean cinema's negotiation of modernity and globalization as an active reworking of meaning and form, rather than passive assimilation. Industrially, it matters as a strategic tool that equips filmmakers and producers to innovate within the competitive global market without relinquishing their cultural distinctiveness.

It can therefore be argued that the South Korean industry is better prepared than others due to its long-standing tendency towards hybridization. As an example, *Brutal Seoul* (2025), a film entirely generated by a studio named Freewillusion under the supervision of Hansl von Kwon, is embracing the ability to generate references to cultural content at will, such as Godzilla or Mad Max. The film clearly plays within the US-genre system, merging references to post-apocalyptic western and zombie films, but also relocalize it within a Korean context thanks to AI generation. (with aggressive coding through flags, express way sign, or Korean historical context, Fig. 3–5).

I therefore suggest that South Korean industry is doing more than simply adapting proactively to inevitable constraints. It is seizing on the rapid transformation of the ecosystem to push its advantage and propose a reversal: in order to avoid the standardization of image that AI risks bringing about, South Korean industry is embracing AI aesthetics and culture so that it can denote a Korean specificity in the future.

For South Korea, there is no internal contradiction in accepting a technology seen as "exogenous", since cinema was already seen as an imported invention. On the contrary, it is more important to "Koreanise" globalized techniques and cultural products as quickly as possible in order to maintain and, if possible, accelerate the growth of its market share. As Jin stated:

> "For local cultural industries firms and digital platforms, it is essential to utilize new digital technologies, such as AI, big data, and algorithms, to develop cultural products that may appeal to new generations. Traditional media in Korea have to develop new approaches to reflect the shifting cultural consumption habits of contemporary consumers" (Jin 2024: 106)

For this cultural and economic reason, South Korea's industry already seems particularly well-structured to offer audiovisual products such as films, K-dramas or K-pop videoclips with the use of what one could call *K-AI*. Indeed, as early as 2024, Jin stated that there is a real effort on the part of the industry to get up to speed with AI. This solution contrasts sharply with other film industries that claim a form of "cultural exception" to globalized free trade and will suffer much more directly as a result.

This interplay of industrial change and cultural strategy sets the stage for a comparative perspective. Having explored the South Korean case in terms of both its economic realignment and hybridization of genre and technique, the analysis now turns to France. Here, a markedly different model emerges – one where regulatory vigilance and artistic sovereignty guide the film industry's cautious adaptation to AI, reflecting the broader values and policy imperatives that distinguish the French cinematic landscape from its Korean counterpart.

Counterexample: France and Cultural Protectionism

In France, the adoption of artificial intelligence within the film industry remains cautious and framed by rigorous ethical, social, and economic considerations. Since 2023, the National Center for Cinema (CNC), in partnership with Bearing Point, published annual reports mapping uses of AI in the industry according to audiovisual sectors, and a barometer of AI acceptability within the field.

Studies reveal that AI is primarily employed for administrative or support tasks such as translation, text rephrasing, and information structuring rather than for genuinely creative or documentary research activities. This pattern suggests an underutilization of AI's creative potential in French cinema, where the artisanal tradition and auteur-driven quality remain fundamental elements of professional identity. Additionally, issues such as copyright, labor rights, ecological footprint, cultural diversity, and algorithmic bias trigger intense social debates.

Furthermore, many professionals express fears about the financial pressures that could lead to AI replacing certain creative roles, notably in film music and special effects, though some emphasize that the role of the director remains secure (CNC 2025: 13). Others highlight "negative effects on employment quality in graphic design and animation" (14). These comments reflect real anxieties about job precarity and the erosion of craftsmanship. Moreover, there is a strong call for professional training to better adapt to new digital realities: "I believe we should all receive training on AI so that we can adapt to it as best we can" (15). As this quote suggests, the technical novelty of AI is viewed through the prism of *adaptation* – a technology seen as inevitable (a feeling carefully constructed by the major industries of the field) and putting at risk most professions well before its effective adoption. In this context, we can but notice how AI is already used as a menacing tool, threatening the revendication of the most precarious workers in the workplace. While creative and technical teams exhibit significant apprehension, large companies and financial sectors demonstrate greater confidence in AI integration, reflecting a fracture within the sector ("High level of concern among professionals, but less pronounced among producers", 17).

As we saw, French cinema stakeholders emphasize the urgent need to develop new competencies to master AI tools and avoid marginalization amid rapid technological shifts. While this adaptation is seen as essential, it also raises legitimate concerns about possible standardization of productions and potential loss of a cultural specificity rooted in France's artisanal filmmaking heritage. Notably, auteurs have voiced concern, highlighting anxieties around the dilution of cinematic identity and the persistence of artisanal traditions amid digital transformation.

It is noteworthy that the anxieties expressed by French auteurs resonate closely with concerns voiced by prominent South Korean filmmaker Park Chan-wook. For instance, Bertrand Bonello's reflections on maintaining cinematic identity and artisanal traditions amid digital transformation in *La Bête* (2023) (Maillé 2024) find a compelling parallel in Park's recent statements during the promotion of his film *No Other Choice* (2025): "The problem of AI is raised in the film's final act, and it reflects a fear we all share. Even if it has not yet transformed our industry, the pace of development is impossible to measure. Nobody knows what might happen soon" (Ramachandran 2025). Park, an auteur deeply influenced by French "auteur theory", advocates a vision of filmmaking centered on artistic singularity and human sensibility. He warns of the risks AI poses for diluting the emotional and creative core of cinema, echoing Bonello's apprehensions about the erosion of craftsmanship and the normative pressures of algorithmic image production.

This discourse converges with broader French political positions underscoring a commitment to cultural "exception," valuing artistic sovereignty and seeking to shield the sector from unregulated and hasty digital transformations. Thus, the French film industry adopts a strategic posture of vigilance and social control, attempting to harmonize respect for tradition with a measured openness to digital tools. This dual imperative explains why, unlike the South Korean dynamic, AI is often regarded in France as a challenge to be carefully managed to preserve both cultural identity and employment, while progressively preparing the profession to embrace innovations that will inevitably reshape the audiovisual landscape.

Conclusion

This comparative study illustrates how artificial intelligence is transforming film industries while amplifying national differences in strategy and identity. In this article, I have argued that the significant differences between the two countries' adaptation to AI are the result of diverging cinematic traditions. For both countries, maintaining cultural specificity (in terms of identity) also appears to be a comparative advantage (in economical terms), but their cinematic specificity places them on the opposite end of the spectrum of AI.

South Korea demonstrates a *proactive* engagement with AI, harnessing technological innovation to strengthen its competitiveness and cultural reach. Its strategy is therefore to accept – as quickly as possible – the technical innovations of AI and incorporate them into its national identity. This new K-AI is therefore pushed in order to preserve the international influence they have already established thanks to their influential technology sector (*chaebols* such as Samsung).

In France, on the other hand, cultural identity has long since ceased to be linked to technological progress (as it was the case in the 19th century, with the significant effort to make people believe that moving images were invented in France). Since at least the middle of the last century, its identity has become one of artisanal cinema, craftsmanship and auteurist expression – therefore, the need to master new tools is much less pressing. On the contrary, it would be a significant devaluation for the industry, which has everything to lose. This is why French industry greets these changes with a protective attachment to established artistic values, expressing caution towards rapid technological integration.

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