

# Korean Division Films

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Contributor: Eunjin Choi

As one half of what is currently the only divided country in the world, the phenomenon of the so-called “division film” in South Korea has developed as a reflection of the social changes associated with its divided national background. The divided Korean Peninsula, the cause of military confrontation between the two Koreas, the Korean War, and espionage activities, is the background for Korean division films. As a result, the divided state serves as a narrative element and can be explored as a theme. Since the release of the first division films in 1949, a year after the Korean Peninsula was split into two countries, division films have been produced constantly. This entry analyzes major political changes, focusing on the regime changes represented in division films and, based on this approach, explores the cinematic illustrations of modern Korean history in three distinct periods. In a bid to reflect the characteristics of the times, division films portray historical elements while acting successfully as an advanced form of art. Herein, I will examine the definition and the range of these division films. This entry thus aims to discuss, in depth, the origin and history of Korea’s division films.

Keywords: film genre ; Korean division film ; division of Korea ; Korean film history ; modern Korean politics ; modern Korean history

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Korea’s unique divided national state is a constant source of inspiration for cinema. It has consequently contributed to the development of a film genre that is specific to Korea. Historically, some film genres have their roots in specific regions or sociopolitical contexts. Westerns, in reference to the specific geographical region in America, and also of a specific era, explain a crucial moment in history that defines the nation’s identity <sup>[1]</sup>. While the Korean Peninsula remains divided, this changing social landscape over time has been incorporated into film. The early versions of division films acted as propaganda, and captured anti-communist zeal. Over time, they have evolved into blockbusters.

As a nation state, Korea has a history of being divided into several small states within its own borders, but not by any external force. In contrast, the current division of Korea has resulted from the military intervention of other countries; therefore, the Korean people, longing for unification, have experienced feelings of national grief. Indeed, the division has had persistent and far-reaching effects on the lives of Koreans, impacting politics, the economy, and culture. Meanwhile, the inter-Korean confrontation, which was initiated by the U.S.–Soviet Joint Commission after liberation, and reaffirmed through the Korean War Armistice Agreement, posed a threat to global peace. In other words, the division is an inextricable characteristic of Korea’s national identity, eventually leading to the birth of “division films” in the local film industry.

In the early days, division films were produced under conditions set by the government, before evolving into a specific genre <sup>[2]</sup>. This unique background largely enabled division films to become a commercially viable genre and to be successful at the box office, since the government promoted them and encouraged citizens to see them. Division films were, therefore, born out of Korea’s divided, turbulent political trajectory and were produced regularly for nearly seven decades. They grew in popularity as cultural content, portraying the identities manifested during different periods of Korea’s modern history. Given this background, the investigation into division films allows for the segmentation of Korean history, and reveals the social significance of each time period. Moreover, the analysis of these films’ images and associated genre characteristics reveals how society is reflected in film.

This entry focuses on the historical aspects of the genre formation of division films since their establishment in the complex context of modern Korean history. Ever since Korea’s division in 1945, filmmakers have produced division films. Up until now, Korea has faced turbulence due to political as well as diplomatic shifts; thus, division films have been influenced by social change. This entry analyzes major political changes, focusing on the regime changes represented in division films and, based on this approach, explores the cinematic illustrations of modern Korean history in three distinct periods. Herein, I will examine the definition and range of these division films. This entry will expand the discourse related to division films from the perspective of Korean history, politics, and their representations in media.

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