
Evolving Aesthetics in Korean Cinema: From “Literary” to “Art” Films

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Korean cinema has undergone a major transformation since the late 1980s. Its subjects and styles have become diversified and refined. The emergence of the new, vital film culture accounts for the unprecedented commercial success of Kang Chegyu's Korean blockbuster *Shiri* with both domestic and international audiences. The recognition of Im Kwŏntaek's artistic achievements in *Ch'unhyang* and *Ch'ihwasŏn* at the Cannes Film Festival is yet another indication of the remarkable feat of the New Korean Cinema in the recent years.

It is out of this transitional cultural milieu that the concept of art cinema has arisen in Korea as a pressing issue for audiences, critics and the industry alike. The box-office record set by *Shiri*, which was surpassed a year later by the popularity of another suspense thriller, *Joint Security Area* by Pak Ch'anuk, gave rise to the new trend of big-budget films for mass consumption. Along with this development, concerns have been raised about the financing and exhibiting of low-budget, independent works. This phenomenon can surely be read as a sign of the maturity of Korean cinema. Given the dynamic changes in today's Korean film – in subject, style and spectatorship – this paper investigates from a historical perspective the evolving notion of art cinema in the Korean context.

Art cinema generally refers to a film with intellectual content and aesthetic merit. Ideologically, it is allied with counter, underground, independent, experimental or avant-garde cinema in opposition to popular, escapist, commercial, mass-entertainment, or propaganda movies.¹ Within film studies there is a tendency to approach art cinema in terms

of genre. According to Andrew Tudor: “over a period of time, and in a complicated way, certain conventions become established as to what can be expected from an ‘art-movie’ as compared to some other category” (1974, 145-46). In a similar manner, David Bordwell also states: “we can usefully consider the ‘art cinema’ as a distinct mode of film practice, possessing a definite historical existence, a set of formal conventions, and implicit viewing procedures” (1999, 716).

For its defining ethos, art cinema is often linked to the modernist movement in the early twentieth century. Film historians have especially noted the influence of literary modernism on art cinema in its rejection of plot-driven, illusionistic realism and Renaissance perspectivism. Modernism challenges a nineteenth-century view of the world as a coherent, meaningful whole subverting its dominant social norms, moral values and aesthetic conventions. Specifically, art cinema is identified in terms of its deviation from the conventions of classical narrative film, which strives for verisimilitude by relying on a chain of causation as its organizing principle. Art film's “broken teleology,” as Bordwell puts it, is believed to truthfully mirror the constant presence of contingency in the way our lives shape themselves (1999, 718). Violating the rules of the well-made movie, art cinema is marked by subjective, psychological reality, lack of causal, temporal and spatial linkages, open-ended narrative and the filmmaker's thematic and stylistic signature as author.

In accordance with the above conceptual guidelines, a discussion of Korean art films can proceed

by establishing their historical existence and formal properties.² When did art cinema begin to form a discernible category in Korean film history? In view of the internal and external conditions of the local film community, the end of the 1980s can be considered the dawn of Korean art cinema. This is when the nation had its first democratic presidential election after decades of military dictatorship. Among the films put out during this critical transition, Bae Yongkyun's *Why Has Bodhi Dharma Left for the East?* has perhaps provided a most decisive catalyst for the advent of art cinema in terms of its drastic departure from mainstream cinema in style, sensibility and production process, and of its impact on subsequent Korean film culture in general.

To understand the significance of Bae's work in the evolving Korean art cinema, it must be contextualized in national film history which offers two important reference points: the 1960s "literary films" and the 1980s "New Korean Cinema." If the former can be viewed as the precursors of Korean art cinema, the latter can be described as its groundwork. Starting from the late 1950s throughout the mid-1960s, the mainstream industry produced a host of black-and-white films that were predominantly literary adaptations. Thus called "literary films," these works achieved a considerable level of artistic elegance amid the post-war rubble. Indeed, the cinematic upheaval these films triggered has led the early 1960s to be labeled the Golden Age of Korean cinema. The cinematic renderings of short stories, novels, and drama during these years reflect the general paucity of screenplays and screenwriters. However, the popularity of adaptation was mostly ascribed to the government policy of invigorating the domestic film industry by giving the producers of "quality films" tax exemptions as well as importation rights for foreign films, which were more profitable. In spite of these less-than-noble incentives behind their vogue, the literary films made enormous contributions to changing the pub-

lic perception of the cinema as a medium of art, not merely as entertainment or as a propaganda tool.

The literary films prefigure the contemporary art cinema in several respects. Above all, their origin in *belle lettres* promises a certain degree of thematic depth and stylistic sophistication. This is best demonstrated by the masterpieces of this genre: Yu Hyŏnmok's *A Stray Bullet*, Kang Taejin's *Horseman*, Shin Sangok's *Mama and the Border* and Kim Kiyŏng's *The Housemaid*. *A Stray Bullet* and *Horseman* treat topical issues of the post-war years by vividly depicting the urban poor in their struggle to retain their humanity in the face of the nefarious socio-economic conditions. *Mama and the Border* captures the subtle romantic feelings which develop between a young widow and her border. Reminiscent of a simple yet evocative ink painting, Shin's exquisite visual language is faithful to the low-keyed lyrical ambience of Chu Yosŏp's short story of the same title. *The Housemaid* tackles the timeless subject of humanity's diabolic, instinctual side through the lascivious and manipulative working-class heroine who seduces a happily married music teacher and destroys his family.

Among the number of directors actively engaged in the literary film genre, Yu's accomplishments deserve special attention from the vantage point of today's art cinema. Yu made several narrative films besides *A Stray Bullet*, preserving in most cases their original novelistic titles.³ Critics frequently characterize Yu's oeuvre as the epitome of social realism in Korean cinema. It is true that his films persistently probe the confusion and agony of innocent individuals who are caught up in the conflicting demands of moral integrity and social survival. This obsessive motif is vividly cinematized in *A Stray Bullet*, in which the honest, hard-working protagonist Ch'ŏlho is torn apart in a vortex of poverty, insanity, helplessness and anger that afflicts every member of his family. Ch'ŏlho's doomed sense of entrapment in such a hellish life is compellingly

communicated through the closing sequence of the film. This famous ending shows him totally lost and gone astray; he circles back and forth in a taxi between the police station where his brother is being arraigned for a bank robbery, the maternity hospital where his wife and newborn baby have just died, and his home in the shanty-town where his bedridden and demented mother convulsively screams, "Let's get out!" Yu's scathing comments on the destitution and desperation of ordinary people are very much in the vein of Italian Neorealism. The absence of a final resolution in the narrative and the unsettling effect it generates – what Peter Wollen sums up as "unpleasure" of counter cinema – undoubtedly have a modernist resonance (1999, 499).

While Yu's position as a revered master of the realist tradition in Korean cinema is validly grounded, such an encomium appears more often than not to function as a protean reductionism of his brilliantly rich style. In *A Stray Bullet*, for example, Yu interlaces the realist textual fabric with a strand of Expressionism by means of starkly contrastive lighting, skewed camera angles and positions, claustrophobically composed frames and a strategic use of montage and deep focus, all of which are conducive to tension and imbalance. In relation to this, it is noteworthy that Yu and his contemporaries were extensively exposed to European avant-garde cinema. Coincidentally, the above-mentioned representative literary films by Yu, Kang, Shin and Kim were all released between 1960 and 1961, only a couple of years after Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, Michaelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* and Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* were introduced to American audiences, fostering an art movie boom.

Although the literary film genre assured the possibility of art film in Korea, setting its ideological orientation toward social problem cinema, the following decades saw a rapid decline in the overall quality of Korean cinema under the government's severe control of the industry. Sentimental and

pornographic melodrama – the ultimate escapist fantasy – became rampant along with anti-communist movies and shoddy martial arts films. From a historical point of view, the appearance of art films in Korea can be seen as a reaction to these shallow entertainment pieces churned out by Ch'ungmuro in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ This production system and its output were perceived as embodying the ills of the oppressive military regimes. Therefore, they became *the* heinous "norm" to dismantle for the angry young filmmakers who came to "stir Seoul" in the 1980s (Rayns 1994).

A "discovery" of Korean cinema in the international arena began with this young generation of directors who were deeply discontented with the existing film culture and so attempted to reform it. The result is what Western commentators now call the "New Korean Cinema" or "Korean New Wave."⁵ Problematic as they are, these appellations serve as convenient ways of referring to the films made in the late 1980s and early 1990s by Pak Kwangsu, Chang Sönu, Yi Myöngse and Pak Chongwöŋ, among others. The ideological driving force behind this diverse and loosely linked group is youthful angst for a reportage or protest cinema. With their dedication to the function of the camera as a transparent window on the world of the socially marginalized and also as a recorder of lived history, the New Wave directors paved the road to contemporary art films.

However, the works of the above directors cannot be classified as art films per se because they are not sufficiently distanced from the traditional forms and genres. Their emphasis on the cinema's sociological role and their occasional experiments with a quasi-documentary style are germane to the spirit of the art film. Yet, despite their resistance to the dominant forms of mainstream cinema, their film narratives still operate largely in a conventional framework, especially that of the melodrama genre. This point is well evinced by Pak Kwangsu's *Ch'ilsu and Mansu*, *Black Republic* and *To the Starry Island*. Pak, the

leading figure of the Korean New Wave, acknowledges melodrama as a cherished and indispensable vehicle for conveying his populist vision of cinematic art (Lee 2000, 176-77; Rayns 1994, 13).

What qualities, then, distinguish *Why Has Bodhi Dharma Left for the East?* as a landmark in the emergent Korean art cinema? In what ways does it champion the new mode of film practice? Chronologically, this film nearly coincides with the onset of the New Wave. It is, however, significantly different from the latter on numerous points. First of all, Bae's Buddhist film examines humanity's pursuit of spiritual enlightenment, one of the perennial preoccupations of art. While the New Wave concentrates on immediate social realities, Bae addresses man's profoundly "real" inner yearnings.⁶

Secondly, no Korean film is as much dependent on the author as originator and organizer as *Why Has Bodhi Dharma Left for the East?*. It is an independent film par excellence; Bae scripted, shot and edited it. He even financed it. Consequently, the author's control permeates all aspects of the product as well as the production process.

In terms of narrative mode, the film contains minimal action. Instead of cause and effect, it highlights the characters' inner states. In addition, Bae's extraordinary use of animals in the plot development raises a fundamental question about the traditional concept of character. Bae's narrative is full of gaps and allegorical tropes and its ending is widely open. For the ordinary audience not well versed in Korean Sŏn Buddhism, all these unfamiliar elements are likely to create a Brechtian alienation effect.

Bae's film minimizes the role of dialogue in the cinematic text. Indeed, dialogue is not interjected in the film until about fifteen minutes into the narrative. Bae's "optocentrism" is masterfully signaled through a self-referential line at the end of the opening credits (Graham 1997, 38): "To the disciple who asked about the Truth, without a word he showed a

lotus flower." Alluding to the celebrated story about the Buddha and his foremost disciple Mahakashyapa, this passage prefigures Bae's cinematic mode, which centers on exquisite images subtly contextualized in nuanced silence or the sounds of nature. The passage thus sets up the film's dominant tone (equanimity), theme (emptiness) and style (evocation) in harmonious coordination.

As for Bae's camera work, it frequently violates the familiar grammar of a narrative film. The camera, for instance, tends to avoid the characters' faces as identity markers. Instead, it focuses on their hands, feet and backs. Furthermore, the director regularly makes a striking juxtaposition between long and extreme long shots, and close-ups and extreme close-ups. Examples abound, including the sequence in which the little monk Haejin, shocked by the maggots devouring the dead bird, falls into a pool from a tall rock. This elliptical sequence also epitomizes Bae's editing style, which thwarts the expectations of the spectator accustomed to the flow of classical narrative film. For possible explanatory principles of Bae's unusual camera movement, we are urged to look into Buddhist art and Sŏn poetics. These unconventional, modernist authorial traits fully satisfy the criteria of art cinema as articulated by film scholars.

Why Has Bodhi Dharma Left for the East? adumbrated a new pattern of aestheticism in Korean cinema. It challenged superficial Hollywood-derivative films by presenting native material which was in tune with the spectators' sensibilities; it thus freshened their interest in the legacies of a traditional spirituality long displaced by modern consumer culture. His iconoclastic filmmaking process was in and of itself a sincere protest against the film Establishment. Moreover, his quest for aesthetic perfection was an act of courage when radical populist sentiments could easily occlude the idea of artistic freedom. In parallel with the constructive tension between the "pure" and "engagement" camps

within Korean literary circles, Bae's film brought a balance to the film community by initiating a fresh current whose central concern was to fulfill the artist's personal vision. This refreshingly innovative attempt complemented the endeavors of the progressive filmmakers whose devotion to politically conscious films had succored the soul of Korean cinema during its darkest days.

The 1990s Korean cinema witnessed a flood of young talent who have enhanced the national film language at an unforeseen pace. Among them, Hong Sangsu and Yi Kwangmo are decidedly on the path to the art film circuit, insisting on their own signatory motifs and styles. Hong's trilogy – *The Day A Pig Fell into the Well*, *The Power of Kangwŏn Province* and *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* – exploits the modernist notion of fragmented narrative as a reflection of the pervading sense of alienation. As a critique of social mores, it poignantly deconstructs the image of the young male intellectual as a Korean cultural hero. Through a juxtaposition of multiple viewpoints on the same events, Hong's films uncover the hypocrisy and violence hidden beneath the smooth, impersonal façade of the day-to-day lives of urban Koreans. Hong's film world can be provocative and even disturbing to a passive spectator due to its seamy contents and non-linear, repetitive and elliptical construction.

Compared with Hong's methods of ironic distancing, Yi's *Spring in My Hometown* is unfurled in a conventional fashion. What is foregrounded instead is the beauty of his meticulously constructed visual images. Following the Bazinian realist tradition, Yi's measured use of long shots and long takes nostalgically unravels the bittersweet memories of a wartime childhood.

What should be noted about Korean cinema in transition is that its old masters, such as Im Kwŏntaek, Pak Ch'ŏlsu and Bae Ch'angho, have also been quite responsive to the spirit of art film. Im's hybridization of the Korean musical genre *p'ansori*

and the Western cinematic art in *Ch'unhyang* and his incorporation of the techniques of the traditional Korean painting into his visual language in *Ch'ihwasŏn* have elicited considerable critical applause. While his creative inspiration springs mainly from earthly folk arts, his work of late has achieved a superb level of stylistic finesse and intellectual substance. Equally surprising is the reflexive narrative form Pak has explored with escalating intensity throughout *301/302*, *Farewell My Darling* and *Kazoku Cinema*. Bae, meanwhile, has turned his painterly eye to the mythopoetic world of Korean women's collective memory in *My Heart*. The changes occurring in these seasoned directors are somewhat ironic in that they have long represented the commercial film sector. Their shifts, however, validate Bordwell's observation that art cinema stimulates other film genres and that they ultimately cross-fertilize one another by borrowing each others' motifs and techniques.

From a broad perspective, the complex cultural climate of contemporary Korean society has played a pivotal role in developing particular patterns of art film. The Western conception of art cinema is heavily indebted to modernism. In Korea, however, art cinema has evolved in the wake of democratization, postmodernism and globalization. In scholarly essays on recent Korean cinema, two factors often crop up as being responsible for its revitalization: the political liberalization and the opening of its domestic market to foreign films. What is overlooked in this diagnosis is the impact of the "postmodern controversy" that stormed through the Korean intellectual and artistic communities in the 1980s. Postmodernism's dual relation to modernism – continuation and discontinuation – sheds an insightful light on the coexistence of colorfully varied elements in contemporary Korean cinema. A good example is Chang Sŏnu's "unexpected" or "unpredictable" transition from *The Road to the Horse Track* and *Passage to Buddha* to *Lies* and *Timeless*

Bottomless Bad Movie, and then to *Resurrection of the Little Match Girl*. The larger cultural forces that encourage Chang's multiple and on-going metamorphoses can also explain the proliferation of playful genre-bending and genre-mixing in the current film scene. This postmodern sensibility is what Yi Myŏngse taps into with pastiche and simulacra in *Nowhere to Hide*. Perhaps the notion of compressed modernization can be appropriated as a way of tracing Korean cinema's rapid aesthetic maturation for the last two decades.

What characterizes Korean art cinema today is the immense potential shown by a wide spectrum of stylists, which ranges from Yi Ch'angdong's sober realism to Kim Kidŏk's bizarre experimentalism. The search for alternative films has been intensified by the digital generation of filmmakers which include a growing number of women directors. Among them, Song Ilgon, Yi Chŏnghyang and Im Sunrye invite careful observation. While these and other gifted newcomers promise a bright future for Korean art cinema, it remains to be seen who will ultimately emerge as auteurs who, with their profound visions of art and humanity, will enlighten not only local but also global audiences. In the meantime, a rather urgent task facing the Korean art film community at large seems to lie in elucidating the definition and function of art cinema which, while based on the native cultural logic, can ultimately enrich transnational film aesthetics.

NOTES

- 1 According to Murray Smith (1998), national culture and the taste for high arts constitute two chief characteristics of art cinema. The former, in particular, is accountable for the widespread view of art cinema as "exotic or sophisticated" in the American film market (p. 402). For differences between art cinema and avant-garde cinema, see Smith, pp. 399-412.

- 2 Strictly speaking, any attempts to define a genre, including art cinema, are bound to confront a logical quandary. Gunther Muller poses this problem in relation to literary classification: "How can I define tragedy (or any other genre) before I know on which works to base the definition, yet how can I know on which works to base the definition before I have defined tragedy?" (in Hernadi 1972, 2). This conundrum should be kept in mind when we define Korean art cinema, especially because the concept of the art film has been theorized mostly in the context of Western cinema.
- 3 Yu's film is based on Yi Pŏmsŏn's novel entitled *A Stray Bullet*. Yu's other well-known adaptations include: *The Daughters of the Pharmacist Kim* (Pak Kyŏngni, 1963); *Martyrs* (Kim ūn'guk, 1965); *The Descendants of Cain* (Hwang Sunwŏn, 1968); *Sparks of Life* (Sŏnu Hŭi, 1975); *Rainy Days* (Yun Hŭnggil, 1979); and *Son of Man* (Yi Munyŏl, 1980).
- 4 Ch'ungmuro refers to the street in downtown Seoul where many production companies are located.
- 5 These two terms are used more or less interchangeably in the literature on Korean cinema. However, the "New Wave" appears to focus specifically on the late 1980s and early 1990s whereas the "New Korean Cinema" covers more broadly the years since the late 1980s.
- 6 Here the expression "real" is used in the way Bordwell defines "realism" as a characteristic of art cinema. He maintains that art cinema portrays things as they "really" are by delving into serious sociological and psychological issues and by adopting a narrative mode devoid of the structural principles of classical narrative film.

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