

The Debates around Realism in the Korean Cinema

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The Colonial Period: The Dialectic of Proletarianism and Realism

Whether addressing overall history or individual films, realism characterizes Korean film historiography. The critics first introduced realism during the colonial period. Terms such as “proletarian realism,” “materialist dialectical creation,” and “socialist realism” were all current then, and they were intended to advance the proletarian cause under the slogan of Bolshevism, as well as enlighten and mobilize the general public. Therefore, the critics pointed out anti-proletarian ideas and the lack of socialist ideology in the films of colonized Korea. Realism was absolutely necessary to understand reality. But that did not mean portraying reality as it appeared was sufficient. Rather, the key to proletarian realism was both the vision of a socialist future and an educational effect. As film professionals used the concept of realism to mean the representation of “reality,” realism was of course only defined in terms of themes. This kind of realism that centered on the representation of “social reality” had a broad effect on Korean cinema.



Open City (Roberto Rossellini, 1946)



The Bicycle Thief (Vittorio De Sica, 1948)



An Aimless Bullet (Yu Hyun-mok, 1961)

The 1950s: New Korean Realism and Humanism

In the 1950s' cinematic discourse, the realism based on representation that dominated the colonial and post-liberation eras continued. But, at the same time, the earlier proletarian realism was deployed more selectively. The "new" realist discourse emerged to provide a new ideology in the mid and late 1950s after the peninsula was divided and the Korean film community was rebuilt. The *Youngbwa Segye* magazine ran a feature story titled "A Comparison of Korean and Italian Realism" in its February 1957 issue, stimulating debate about "Korean realism." The authors wrote that an excess of period films and melodramas constituted a crisis in Korean cinema. Huh Baek-nyun argued for "neo-realism" and Yu Du-yeon argued that "Korean realism" should replace naturalistic realism. In particular, Yu said "The essence of realism should capture the 'truth' of Koreans, who had to have a 'resistance' mindset during the colonial period," and also that, "local style needs to be combined with the 'resistance' mindset to represent the 'Korean reality'." In the realist discourse of the 1950s, resistance and struggle were directed at the "tragic modern era" that might explode because of one hydrogen bomb. This existential insecurity was close to idealism. This mentality was probably because of our war experiences and because western realist discourse was introduced to Korea via Japan.

At the same time, Italian neo-realism was suggested as a standard for a new Korean realism, particularly following the success of *Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1946) and *The Bicycle Thief* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948). This favorable assessment of neo-realism's potential was based on shared post-war poverty; a high evaluation of the aesthetic elements of "realism" that were believed to have legitimacy and universality; and a desire to develop the Korean film industry rapidly, just as Italy had done with its limited resources.

The realism discourse of the 1950s, even though depoliticized, somehow played the role of a progressive discourse at a time when left-wing creativity was blocked. First of all, realism could be considered



Oh, Dream Nation (Jangsangotmae, 1988)



Chil-su and Man-su (Park Kwang-su, 1988)



The Marriage Story (Kim Eui-suk, 1992)

as serious high art and not just a way of escaping reality or a mere entertainment. Furthermore, realism could be used as an alibi for maintaining democratic participation by directly dealing with social issues amidst strict censorship. Advocating Korean realism also worked as a strategy to ensure the continued legitimacy of national realism, which had started with Na Woon-kyu's *Arirang* (1926). This realism that was formed at the end of the 1950s dominated Korean cinema discourse until left-wing creativity began to revive in the 1980s.

From the 1960s to the 1970s: Extending to Aesthetic Realism

The post-war era tended to emphasize “humanistic” themes over technology and film language. However, soon enough, neo-realist aesthetics began to emerge as an alternative to Soviet montage as well as the sophisticated technology of American movies that critics of the time considered popular and entertaining. Afterwards, “Korean realist aesthetics” developed rapidly, influenced by the surrealist concept of “photogénie” that had been revived in the 1950s as part of the *Nouvelle Vague*, the New American Cinema, and British documentary. Significantly, new trends in world cinema were broadly viewed in relation to the concepts of “realism”, “reality,” or even “humanism.” Unlike the opposite concept of montage, photogénie was treated as a concept emphasizing the expressive power of the image itself, because critics understood photogénie as connected to the “accountability” or “documentary characteristics” of neo-realist aesthetics. As a result, Korean cinema criticism was dominated by a simple logic where cinematic art was guaranteed by realism and the aesthetic identity of realist cinema was guaranteed by the use of the long shot and long-take combination.

The 1980s to the mid 1990s: The Switch to Social Realism

During the democracy movement sparked by the Gwangju Uprising in 1980, college film groups began to consider cinema as a cultural

movement. Film had to become a “cinema movement” devoted to the task of transforming Korean society. Progressive filmmakers began to think about what the “new Korean cinema” should be, and decided on a social realism. This would be a “cinema that speaks openly and from a progressive point of view about the hardships of history, sufferings as a result of colonization, oppressed people, false consciousness resulting from undemocratic and inhumane power, and the exploitation of labor and sex” (Lee Jung-ha, 1988, p. 119). This kind of new Korean cinema, dubbed “national cinema,” expressed strong disapproval of Hollywood movies and mainstream movies under the slogans of anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism. “Realism” was called upon once again as the direction of this new cinema. The objective of this new realism was to make people observe reality and structural contradiction and think about directions for change while they watched movies. Lukacian realism, the style of non-Hollywood art films, and the third world cinema movement were cited as possible exemplars.

Realism formed through the underground cinema movement created two possible models for realist cinemas of the time. Both independent films totally separated from Hollywood cinema practice and Chungmu-ro’s capital as well as auteurist films born after the dark decade of the 1970s were justified as realist cinema. Whatever direction they took, ultimately they arrived at social realism.

The mid 1990s to the present

The success of *Marriage Story* (Kim Eui-suk) in 1992 changed the landscape of Korean cinema. With large conglomerates investing in the film industry and postmodernism expanding its influence, Korean cinema faced a proliferation of genres and genre filmmaking, as a result of which realist aesthetics fell by the wayside. There are no longer critics who openly call for realism. However, many critics still expect Korean cinema to deal with the reality of Korean society. In this regard, we can assume that dependence on realism still persists, albeit passively.