

“What Does Art Have to Do with a Guy Eating a Live Octopus?": The Transpacific Reception of *Oldboy* as an Art/Non-Art Film

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IN “THE VIOLENCE (AND THE SEAFOOD) IS MORE THAN RAW,” FILM critic Manohla Dargis begins her *New York Times* review of the Korean film *Oldboy* with a provocative question: “What does art have to do with a guy eating a live octopus, and then hammering a couple of (human) heads?” Dargis describes *Oldboy* as the epitome of “a modern plague that threatens to bury us in shiny, meaningless movies” and “pop nihilism and dedication to the plasticity of the medium,” with which “there is not much to think about . . . outside of the choreographed mayhem.” In this “B movie tricked out as an A movie,” which is “staying within the prison house of genre rather than transcending it,” she finds “a bankrupt, reductive postmodernism . . . promot[ing] a spurious aesthetic relativism” and a world in which “aesthetic and moral judgments—much less philosophical and political inquiries—are rejected in favor of a vague taxonomy of cool.” Dargis asserts that this film’s fans “may be those cult-film aficionados for whom distinctions between high art and low are unknown, unrecognized and certainly unwelcome” and that Park Chan-wook, director of *Oldboy*, seems to “know the adolescent mindset of his target audience.”¹ She concludes the review with her nostalgia for the old auteurs of violence and extremity, writing “we are a long way from Pasolini and Peckinpah.” Dargis criticizes not only the excess of style and lack of meaning in *Oldboy* but also the cultural crisis it epitomizes, that is, the blurring

boundary between high art and low trash. Reception of *Oldboy*, however, shows that the cultural hierarchy is not stable and depends upon cultural context. Comparing *Oldboy*'s Korean and American receptions against each culture in terms of the definition of art film reveals the problem of categorization at the heart of Dargis's argument.

In his chapter "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," David Bordwell considers the art film as "a distinct mode of film practice" (*Poetics* 151), which shares a certain tendency "against the classical narrative mode" (152). One of the main art filmic factors, for Bordwell, is "authorial expressivity" (153), which allows the director as an author to come to exist as "a formal component, the overriding intelligence organizing the film for our comprehension" (154), making his signature through "recurrent violations of the classical norm" (155). It is tempting to locate Bordwell's definition of the art film in the tradition of modernistic aesthetics that explicitly resist the process of mass production and celebrate the film as the creation of an artist rather than as the product of collaboration. Even though Bordwell focuses more on the formalistic theorization of the art film than its contextualization, his formulation of the art film hints at another layer embedded in the process of making and consuming the art film. Explaining the formation of the classical narrative mode, Bordwell suggests the importance of the spectator's role, indicating, "the viewer makes sense of the classical film through criteria of verisimilitude, of generic appropriateness, and of compositional unity" (152). To recognize a film as an art film, one must have pre-existing knowledge about rules in the classical mode and the eye to catch the subversion or negotiation in comparison with the mainstream mode. What happens if spectators do not share a consensus on the characteristics of the classical narrative mode? Or, what if there are no homogenous sets of rules to regulate the classical mode? Sometimes, there is a discrepancy between the director's consciousness of and the spectators' perception of "generic appropriateness," and as a result, there is a gap between the mode of production and the consumption of a film. The Korean context of *Oldboy*'s production and reception exemplifies a trajectory that defines the significance of a film text in the net of its cultural discourse.

The Korean Reception of *Oldboy*: Produced as a Mainstream Film and Consumed as an Art Film

Park's fifth feature film, *Oldboy*, is a double-layered revenge story, which is a loose adaptation of a Japanese manga with the same title. Oh Dae-su (Choi Min-sik), the protagonist of the film, was confined in a private prison for fifteen years without knowing the reason. When Dae-su is released, Lee Woo-jin (You Ji-tae) proposes to kill himself if Dae-su discovers the reason for his imprisonment within five days. The dénouement reveals that Woo-jin's sister killed herself because of their rumored incest, which originated from Dae-su during their high school days. In the end, Woo-jin's real vengeance is not the fifteen-year imprisonment but coercing Dae-su into committing incest with his own daughter, Mi-do (Kang Hye-jung). The ending sequence shows Dae-su attempting to erase his memory through hypnosis. Because of its "too dark and uncomfortable content" (Lee, "In One Week"), a pessimistic box office prediction was prevalent in the film industry before the film's release. However, there was not much dispute surrounding the incest and excessive violence, and it turned out to be one of the most successful films in 2003, with over one million viewers in its first week.

The context of Korean contemporary culture and the film industry shaped the production and consumption of *Oldboy*, and that context is evident in the domestic reception of the film. The production of *Oldboy* cost around \$3.3 million, which was almost the average budget in 2003 for Korean film production, and the film earned nearly \$15 million worldwide.² With 3.1 million admissions to 45 screens, *Oldboy* ranked sixth in Korean box office records in 2003 while *Memories of Murder*, a Korean thriller, ranked first with 5.2 million admissions to 54 screens. *The Matrix Reloaded* was third (the first among the foreign films) with nearly 5 million admissions to 102 screens ("2003"). The promotion of *Oldboy* utilized the popularity of Choi Min-sik, the star of the Korean blockbuster *Swiri* (1998) and *Chihwaseon: Painted Fire* (2002), an art film directed by Im Kwon-taek. Before the release of the film, critics and would-be viewers focused on Choi's performance style and devotion to the role, including his twenty-pound weight loss.

Considering its production scale and distribution method, star marketing strategy, and popular appeal reflected in box office records,

it is obvious that *Oldboy* was produced and consumed as a mainstream film in Korea. However, Korean journalists and critics overtly used strategies for reading art film when approaching *Oldboy* upon its release. Michael Budd explores this matter of art filmic authorship in terms of its relationship with the consumption context. In a case study of *Dr. Caligari*, whose “novelty is inadequately consumable” (17), Budd explains that “cultural patronage, “‘enlightened’ producers or state subsidies for production, festivals and prizes, art theatres, publicity” (13) constitute “a set of institutions” that provide a differentiated mode of reception and consumption for the art film. As the concept of authorial voice in film production is commodified in general, the individual director is also consumed and circulated as a brand. However, the exchange value of the director/brand is generated from an already-established film market circumstance that affects the level of negotiation and resistance of an individual film and the spectators’ cultural capital, which determines their anticipation of the film as well as their understanding of it.

Korean journalism’s coverage of *Oldboy* adopts this auteuristic reading style on the grounds of the already-established status of Park, and almost all of the critics attempted to find Park’s signature and message in *Oldboy*. One of the obvious reasons for such auteuristic readings was the brand value of Park as a star director with artistic vision. *JSA: Joint Security Area* (2000), his third film, grossed over 2.5 million admissions (Seoul only), which was the highest box office record in Korean film history up until then, and it received almost unanimously favorable notices. In addition to this enthusiastic domestic reception, the fact that *JSA* was exported to Japan for an unprecedented price (\$2 million) and invited to the Berlin Film Festival was used to exemplify the potential marketability of the art film (Nam). Park’s next film, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), was a box office disaster, but it invited one of the hottest debates among critics and the audience. With those two films, Park was identified and marketed as one of a few directors who could combine artistic vision with commercial genre rules.

In addition to the success of *JSA* and the spectacular failure of *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, the discourse of cultural generations also aided in Park’s identification as an auteur director. His widely known past career as a film critic, his scriptwriting for other films as well as his own, and his philosophy background were frequently cited in

order to foreground his stylistic and thematic differences from an older generation. In addition, he was regarded as a member of “the first generation of film mania directors in Chugmooro (Korean Hollywood)” (Joo 82), contrary to previous directors who were trained in the strict and traditional apprenticeship system. Park was viewed as a representative of contemporary cinephiles who were actively engaged in film viewing through college level courses and movie clubs on campus and who had many opportunities to watch foreign films, including the art film canon, on campus and in theaters.

In addition to his artistic consciousness, presumably informed by his education, career, and generation, daily newspapers paid attention to Park’s social and political consciousness. Many interviewers mentioned that one of Park’s aborted projects after *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* was a film on the Inhyukdang case, a buried Korean history intertwined with conflicting ideology (Park, “Park”). Even more poignantly, Park directed an advertisement for the Democratic Labor Party, which, at the time, was newly formed and attempting to represent the interests of the working class for the 2002 presidential election. Immediately following the success of *Oldboy* and *Memories of Murder*, the Democratic Labor Party made a statement reminding the public that the respective directors, Park and Bong Joon-ho, were their members (Ahn), and both Park and Bong explicitly articulated their political positions through interviews with newspapers (Hwang, “We Are”). Despite the Korean film industry’s tendency to avoid overt announcements of one’s political position, Park facilitated the general impression that he is a politically conscious director.

In this vein, Park’s works were regularly read against the contemporary political and social context: *JSA* was evaluated as a work that “deals with the separation of Koreans beyond coldwar ideology” (Ahn), and *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* was widely reviewed as a critique of capitalism. Influenced by previous works, some critics even read social engagement and political reflection in *Oldboy*. One of the most frequently mentioned moments in *Oldboy* involves Dae-su’s journal keeping in the private prison, which allows him to detail what and to whom he did wrong to search for the reason for his imprisonment and the identity of his enemy. As Park has mentioned, Dae-su’s “review of [his] whole life” was one of the most important original additions to his adaptation (Jung, “Attractively”). While most American critics did not emphasize or even mention the significance of

Dae-su's journal of wrongdoing, Korean critics seemed fascinated with the theme of recording and reflecting on the past through pain. Along with other films, such as *Memories of Murder* or *A Good Lawyer's Wife*, which explore the past and its residue in the present, *Oldboy* is read as a response to concealed Korean history or the trauma of the past (Kim, "Your Dream"). Alternatively, in "You! Write Your Journal of Wrongdoing," a review that invited spectators' more active engagement with the film's moral as the title indicates, this scene was read as a challenge to spectators, urging them to be aware of "the possibility of wrongdoing without knowing," of unwittingly being an accomplice to political injustice in Korean society (Jang). Even though different critics found different morals and themes in the journal keeping, they did not fail to notice that some historical trauma hovered over the protagonist's fate.

While most Korean critics briefly mentioned *Oldboy*'s reflection on contemporary society in a neutral way, two reviewers criticized *Oldboy*'s complicity with contemporary ideologies. Hwang Jinmi argues that both Woo-jin's judgment and Dae-su's response to Woo-jin's action follow the trajectory of fascism. Hwang identifies Woo-jin as a "hegemonic ruler" who exerts a sort of governmental control over Dae-su's life and emulates the procedure of the court to punish Dae-su, and she defines Dae-su's attempt to erase memory as submission to Woo-jin's fascism with his "abandonment of reason, indoctrination of Woo-jin's way" and the "invitation of his daughter to repeat incestuous crime" (Hwang, "Surrender"). While Hwang's argument, on the surface, sounds like a typical Oedipal analysis, especially in the comparison of *Oldboy* with *Oedipus Rex*, her repeated use of "fascism" suggests that her psychological reading is more concerned about the power relationship between characters. At the same time, Hwang invokes this film's more direct correlation with its social context when she labels Woo-jin as the "body" of the system and Dae-su as a "feather," metaphors which have been commonly used in Korean journalism to signify hidden political power. In a similar way, Kim Soyoung defines Dae-su's final action as "repetition and duplication of Woo-jin's incest," arguing that *Oldboy* shows us "the oppressed dream as the replica of the oppressor's fantasy" ("Your Dream"). In addition to a political reading, Dae-su's path is read as the male identity search in Korean patriarchal society. As an "extreme extension of male fantasy," Dae-su is viewed as "a father killer" who wants to

occupy a “safe position” in society but ultimately succumbs to “the cruel order of Woo-jin” (Choi).

With the exception of the few reviews that emphasize the importance of social context in reading *Oldboy*, however, most reviews more or less suggest that the world of *Oldboy* is isolated from contemporary society. One of the recurrent attacks against Park is that his works lack a sense of reality, in general, and that the revenge and incest in *Oldboy*, in particular, is considered to be “archetypical” (Choi) rather than realistic. In an interview, when a reporter remarks that Park’s films reveal “a departure from nostalgia” and dwell upon “ambiguous time” unlike other contemporary films, Park admits that *Oldboy* can be seen as a film that “lacks the sense of ‘here and now’” and jokingly remarks that he also wants to make “a Korean film” (Joo). Park’s reputation as a socially conscious director, which heightens people’s expectations of political engagement through his films, may invite this criticism. However, Lee Seung-jae’s definition of *Oldboy* as “fantasy film in the disguise of realism” (“Oldboy”) invites other possible ways of reading the criticism of Park’s “a-nationality film” (Joo): the main concern of the critic is not the content of Park’s films but the style—more precisely, the discrepancy between content and form. As Park admits, his films seem to “be located outside of Korean film history and, as a consequence, look strange under Korean film tradition” (Joo). Considering a kind of decorum in the correspondence between form and content in Korean films—for example, the realistic presentation of a social issue, such as in *Memories of Murder*—the hybridity of this film resists being read as a commentary on society and politics and, at the same time, attracts critics to read its indifference to reality and then focus upon its genre consciousness per se.

“My Bloodtype is AB”: Generic Convention and Hierarchy

Why did Korean journalism privilege Park’s genre consciousness over his political consciousness in finding his authorial voice? Or why did the fusion of genres in *Oldboy* draw attention and even reduce other possible readings? Or, more simply, what was the significance of genre in 2003 Korean film culture? “Well-made,” the cliché used in describing the “genre identity” (Joo) of *Oldboy*, leads to one possible answer to these questions. In the Korean context, the adjective

“well-made” almost always accompanies the generic designation as shown in a “well-made commercial film” (Park, “*Oldboy*”) or a “well-made mystery thriller” (Byun). Kim So-hee sums up so-called the “well-made” phenomenon in contemporary Korean film industry as follows:

One of the most important key terms in recent Korean film culture is well-made Retrospectively, Park Chan-wook has been redefined as a director who opened the era of well-made Korean film with *JSA* Well-made film can be roughly defined as a commercial film that utilizes genre convention and the star system but, at the same time, is well equipped with the director's style and consciousness, attracting favorable spectator approval Traditionally, this term is used to signify a work lacking a certain auteuristic quality Yet, the usage of this term has evolved. Well-made film possesses the possibility of mild negotiation in terms of aesthetics and theme when it seeks public and open communication. (“Well-made”)

On the one hand, the “well-made” label is used to “substitute the problematized term, blockbuster” as an attempt to erase the impression of film as the product of the film industry (“Well-made”). On the other hand, “well-made-ness” suggests a mastery and acceptance of genre conventions that satisfy the expectations of spectators. This emphasis on well-made film hints at the Korean film industry's aspiration to be the Asian Hollywood through familiarity and comfort with genre, but at the same time, it reveals its desire to differentiate itself from mainstream Hollywood and explore a niche market.

The oxymoron that the mastery of “genre convention” approximates the auteuristic signature—for example, as shown in the statement, “Park reveals the absurdity of life and the violence of reality like Godard with the refinement of genre convention” (Lee, “*Oldboy*”)—was justified by a transitional moment in Korean film. After the unprecedented success of Korean films in the domestic market beginning in 2003, journalists attempted to formulate some similarities among these hits and concluded that well-made-ness was the secret of their success. Until 2003, the Korean film industry mainly exploited the comedy genre, especially gangster comedies and romantic comedies. The year that *Oldboy* was produced coincided with the introduction of several genres that were previously ignored, such as

horror and sci-fi, to satisfy the audience's desire for variety. It also marked the establishment of genre conventions as well as the shift into genre diversity and experimentation.

This attention to genre conventions in the film industry as well as journalism provides an interpretation of the genre consciousness in *Oldboy*. In spite of its extremity in theme and excess of visual presentation, *Oldboy* is praised for its well-organized narrative, and Park's mastery of storytelling is confirmed even in negative criticism. Lee Dong-jin, for example, insists, "even though this film's plot is not that simply summarized, you will never feel any discrepancies in narrative" ("Revenge"), and Nam Dong-chul indicates that this film follows the trajectory of a thriller faithfully with "harmony of the hidden and the revealed" ("2003"). In response to an interviewer's assertion that *Oldboy* is defined as the hard-boiled genre, Park openly admits his fascination with genre convention and *Oldboy*'s generic formulation, saying, "because I watched tons of genre film, the rule of genre, in some sense, is internalized and sometimes revealed in my film Anyway, *Oldboy* seems to be one of the most typical genre films among my films up until now" (Joo). However, at the same time, Park expresses his embarrassment at being defined as a genre master when he teasingly asks, "why did you never ask director Ryu, a fist fighter, or director Kang, a gunman, questions on their generic identity?" (Jung, "Attractively").

As the Korean film industry transitioned toward well-made, auteur film, Park's status was ambiguous, as the director of both the well-made genre film *JSA* and the rule breaker *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. When critics watched *Oldboy*, the first question they asked is, "Is this like *JSA* or *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*?" and they seemed to locate the answer in the AB blood type scene in *Oldboy*—the scene in which Dae-su asks if there is anyone with type AB blood, suggesting that his opponent will be beaten seriously and need a blood donation. One of the consensuses among critics is that this question is a sort of in-joke on this film's status, triggered by the previous criticism of *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. Critics suggest that this short line refers to the film's fusion of the so-called "A way," that is, conformity to the genre convention, and the "B way," that is, resistance to the mainstream (Byun). Shim Young-sup, for instance, asserts that *Oldboy* is "an AB film like the blood type of that gangster" ("Christian"), and

Byun suggests that this question about AB blood type reveals “the director’s consciousness of its filmic identity” (“Refined”).

Park repeatedly argues that the film is the product of collaboration and not the creation of an auteur, and he wants to be “a director who exists only in the final credits” (Jung, “Attractively”); more specifically, he claims that he never intended that kind of genre consciousness through the AB blood type line. However, Park’s authorial voice is coined beyond his film texts or his private positions, and speculation on Park’s self-consciousness or the self-reflexivity of film production or genre condition is created by the discourses surrounding the contemporary film industry as well as Park’s already-established reputation. In addition to the AB blood type line, the motives of desire, memory, and forgetting are reviewed as part of the film’s self-reflexive exploration of the very nature of film. Byun concluded that Park wants to “speak on the world through his film but [also] on the film itself,” and *Oldboy* raises the fundamental question of the “im/possibility of dealing with truth and desire without the mediation of the screen” in contemporary Korean society (“Refined”). Shim’s criticism of *Oldboy* also depends on the fact that this film is “obsessed with the meta-gaze, that is, a gaze over gaze” and, moreover, all of Park’s works are full of “indicators of fantasy that confirm the un-reality of the real” (“Christian”). Kim So-young analyzes “the filmic strategy” which ridicules or challenges “the authority of representation” and specifically indicates a connection between Woo-jin’s remarks on Dae-su’s actions as “not interesting” and film critics’ judgments of film (“Your Dream”).

As a result of this speculation on genre identity and auteuristic marketing strategy, *Oldboy* is characterized as an intellectual film. Sometimes, this braininess is indicated as Park’s weakest point. Shim concludes her review of Park’s film with the words, “with no heart and too much brain,” comparing Park’s work to an essay about the Sistine Chapel written by “a boy who has never visited Cappella Sistina but knows everything about it through reading” (“Christian”). To Shim, Park’s ability to weave the story seamlessly in the genre convention is a symptom of narcissistic self-consciousness. However, other critics attempt to locate Park’s work in the context of the introduction of well-made works and highly value the differentiation from previous film trends that exploited sensation and sentimentalism. In this vein, they invite spectators to find “the path that should be followed by your intelligence” (Jung, “Park Chan-wook’s”), even though

the emotional impact and the performance of the actors are “hot and passionate” (Lee, “In One Week”).

American Reception of *Oldboy*: Korean New Wave and Arthouse Film from Without

While the Korean reception of *Oldboy* operates on the basis of genre discourse and Park's merchandized auteurism, the American context for its reception was totally different in terms of genre anticipation and definition. The major conditions that influence how American critics define *Oldboy*'s characteristics are its status as a Cannes winner, its similarity in style to Quentin Tarantino films, and its association with Asian Extreme. Their preference for those key terms over the categories of Korean film can be explained through the scarcity of Korean film releases in the United States. The delayed release of *Oldboy* can be read as evidence of the lack of general interest in Korean film at that moment; *Oldboy*, which was released in November 2003 in Korea, was not released in the United States until April 2005 after it took the Grand Prix du Jury (the second prize) at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival and Universal Pictures purchased the right to remake it in 2004. The release of Korean films in the United States has been limited in amount and selection; several films were released under the Asian horror category, and some film festival winners, such as Im Kwon-taek's *Chihwaseon: Painted Fire*, have been distributed as art-house films. As retrospectively analyzed, *Oldboy* “helped push Korean film into the consciousness of Americans” as an example of “a new wave in Korean filmmaking” (Frater 11) and the first Korean “genre piece that stands a better chance of gaining access to the mainstream moviegoer” (Leong). Contrary to the Korean context in which the discourses of Park and the filmic context flourished, both Korean film and Park's work had not yet been clearly defined and categorized by US spectators or critics, and as a result, *Oldboy* was introduced as an exotic and recent addition to the catalogue of foreign film.

It is obvious that this limited accessibility of Korean films has generated a certain level of overgeneralization regarding Korean film as a whole. On the one hand, the so-called Korean “new wave,” which Park exemplifies for American critics, is at best an imitation of “J-horror” (Parks) or is characterized through “narratives driven by

unbound emotionalism, and often driven like kamikaze stock cars” (Atkinson). On the other hand, the Korean film industry is imagined as a totally independent production system that “can flourish without the Studio influence and control we see in Hollywood” (Brunton). It is not surprising that Western reviewers read it from a totally different (sometimes misguided) angle from Korean viewers; “western critics read *Oldboy* and *Lady Vengeance* as a metaphor for the divided Koreas. That’s fundamentally different from how they’re perceived in Korea, where no one sees that in those films” (Cashill 58). When no other aspect of Korean society than its status as a separated nation is known, it may be tempting to read the political message in that way. When these simplified versions of Korean society as a divided nation, Korean films as the copy of Japanese culture, or Korea’s undeveloped industrial circumstances come to function as the sole and dominant key terms for interpreting the difference and message of *Oldboy* as a Korean film, the film is regarded as isolated from the mainstream film industry and culture.

Without previous discourses in terms of the production context and filmic tradition, *Oldboy* is roughly located as one of the alternatives to Hollywood mainstream films or American popular culture. Comparing the lack of cultural diversity in America to a vitamin C deficiency, Stephanie Zacharek suggests that films like *Oldboy* may provide other ways “of interpreting the polychromatic strata of human emotion than [what] ‘American Idol’ and ‘America’s Next Top Model’ can give” (“Thunder”). Likewise, Roger Ebert reflects American’s idealized anticipation of foreign film:

In [*Oldboy*’s] sexuality and violence, this is the kind of movie that can no longer easily be made in the United States; the standards of a puritanical minority, imposed on broadcasting and threatened even for cable, make studios unwilling to produce films that might face certain distribution *Oldboy* is a powerful film not because of what it depicts, but because of the depths of the human heart which it strips bare.

Even though Ebert wants to emphasize the morality and emotion that *Oldboy* inspires and attempts to advocate the extremity “not without reason,” at the same time, he reveals that some of the significance of foreign films can be found in their liberal choice of theme and a sort

of “shock value” that the American entertainment industry cannot attempt with self-regulation based upon economical reason.

Critics seem to turn to the classical notion suggested by Bordwell to determine whether *Oldboy* is a mainstream film when they emphasize “story causality and motivation” (Bordwell et al. 12–24) as the criteria. When Glenn Kenny, reviewing for *Premiere*, praises *Oldboy* for presenting a “juicy motive” for its character’s revenge, contrary to “the motive-free thriller-horror movie” in which characters are “more at home expending their energies on ways to kill people than on reasons for doing so,” he is responding to other reviews that criticize its lack of motivation, locating *Oldboy* among mainstream films in a positive way.

Narrative causality is more frequently used to examine the validity and marketability of this film than its motivation. Negative criticism of *Oldboy* affirms that this film fails to achieve narrative coherence, and therefore, cannot be a mainstream film. Avril Carruthers, reviewing for *Movie Vault*, advises Park to devote more time to “some judicious editing,” which will help him avoid “some meanderings of the script” because spectators “are [as] unsure of what is really happening” as Dae-su is, and “the movie runs out of steam and falters around looking for direction” in some scenes. Likewise, Ty Burr, reviewing for *The Boston Globe*, puts the blame on the “director’s taste for surgical shock,” which “outstrips his interest in narrative logic.” While Carruthers and Burr treat the incoherence in the narrative as a sort of failure, Anthony Lane, reviewing for *The New Yorker*, attributes the narrative failure to “the fatal air of wanting so desperately to be a cult movie,” that is, an attempt to be differentiated. In this vein, James Mudge, reviewing for *Beyond Hollywood*, presents another perspective on this narrative incoherence when he argues that this film “leav[es] gaps that force the audience to think for themselves” and presents a “refreshing change from the often patronizing simplicity of Hollywood.” Here, Mudge tries to save this film from being labeled as a mere action thriller, advocating its differentiation in narrative style from mainstream film as its virtue.

When *Oldboy* is located as a non-Hollywood film, its appeal is naturally defined as targeting a limited group of coteries. One of the most obvious factors for reviewers is that this film is not for everyone because of its visual presentation of extreme violence. *Village Voice* reviewer Michael Atkinson is not alone when he warns, “the warfare

waged on teeth and tongue will separate the pulp geeks from the average filmgoers.” On the other hand, critics do not doubt its status as a “work of art” (Savlov), especially with its win at Cannes. As a mixture of visual violence and artistic vision, *Oldboy* is regarded as occupying both ends of the filmic hierarchy—the art film as a Cannes winner and the lowbrow horror genre—while being excluded from the category of mainstream film in the middle of the strata. However, as the concept of “Hollywood film” cannot be easily and clearly pinned down, the alternative to mainstream film also is hard to formulate with neatly divided categorization.

What kind of art film is *Oldboy* to an American audience? Even critics who define it as an art film have a hard time clarifying its connection with established modes of art film, especially the Asian art film. *Oldboy* is surely neither a “genteel arthouse tone poem,” (Tanzer) nor one of “the latest, made-for-export costume epics” (Kehr 22), nor “a slow moving art house piece” (Mudge). At the same time, it is “an importable cinema that is neither homogeneous nor benumbed by desolate art-film torpor” (Atkinson). Furthermore, even when this film is aligned with previous art films, it is doubly doubted with the suspicion of the legitimacy of the art film tradition; Lane satirically indicates that Park is “under the impression that if [spectators] stitch together enough gestures, either coolly subdued or egregiously violent, [they] will wind up with a rounded character,” which “makes him a decadent descendant of the French New Wave.” It is ironic that *Oldboy*, which is trapped in the transition to genre formation in its Korean context is again located in-between in the shift of the Asian art film in its American context.

“A Lavish Birthday Cake with a Nail Bomb”: Body Genre and Trash Film

The discomfort caused by the identification of *Oldboy* as an art film comes partly from its Cannes win, which guarantees the status of an art film in other cases. When this film is compared to *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which won first prize at the 2004 Cannes Festival, its “artistry” (Antosca) is asserted against Michael Moore’s conspicuous political consciousness. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that *Oldboy* was “reportedly added late to the festival lineup in an effort to appease both

[chair Tarantino's] taste for end-of-its-tether cinema and the festival's wish to season its diet of stately auteur movies with a dollop of gritty genre fare" (Foundas). As a result, Park is easily fit into the category of "the next Quentin Tarantino/Robert Rodriguez/Takashi Miike/in-insert your favorite bad-boy director here" (Burr) in the American context, and the discourse surrounding Tarantino as a problematized auteur places a shadow upon Park's American reception.

In addition to the Tarantino connection, the other category—Asian Extreme—qualifies the reception of *Oldboy* as an art film. This film was distributed by Tartan, "a cutting edge entertainment company" (Carter). Tartan's US division "features an eclectic and controversial slate of films from around the world," and its "Asia Extreme label" is known to "highlight the most daring and cutting-edge horror, thriller and action films" (Carter). Even though American reluctantly accepted the fact that they "happen to be living at a time when all things Asian and extreme ... are enjoying a halcyon moment" (Foundas), they seem to be offended by the "grueling, intense, cruel—the very definition of extreme cinema" (Addiego) and by *Oldboy* as a specimen of "the upstart genre of Korean shock cinema" (Villarreal). In this vein, the visualization of violence and other excess in *Oldboy* is understood to be served "without any higher purpose," and therefore, "the titillation of incest is just as banal in an Asian context and any attempts at deeper meaning fall flat" (Parks).

The fact that almost all reviews including positive ones mention the octopus scene as the litmus of bad taste suggests that *Oldboy* as a non-Hollywood film approximates the "body genre" that presents "a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm" (Williams 729); it invites the spectator's "bodily response" (730) and is considered to be the lowest genre of all. Reviewer depictions of the octopus scene clearly aim at foregrounding their bodily experiences because *Oldboy*'s "assault is as much on the audience as the screen characters" (Axmaker). When this film, "trailing clouds of octopus," presents the tragedy of "mobile meal" (Lane), reviewers do not fail to sympathize with the poor "wriggling octopus" (Thompson, "Oldboy's"). The expressions of eating, digesting, and disgust reveal the kind of response this film invokes. Marc Savlov compares this film with "a lavish birthday cake with a nail bomb hidden inside that you can't stop devouring"; Vince D'Amato warns that this is not for an audience with "an unbearably weak stomach"; and Dennis Schwartz

argues that Park has “an acquired taste like one’s appetite for sushi and violence without a purpose.”

Considering its attention to extremity, it is not surprising that *Oldboy* is as often consumed as a specimen of low culture as it is constructed as high art. The website *Movies for Guys* expresses its satisfaction with the “gross” (Williams 728) pleasure that this film provides when it refers to the sex scene in *Oldboy* as “one of the most stimulating sex scenes that I’ve seen in a movie in recent years (outside of my porn collection)” (Alex). However, when this website celebrates *Oldboy*’s success as a piece of high culture, this suggests that there is no strict line between high art and low culture; it declares, “we here at *Movies for Guys* don’t normally agree with or give a damn about what the rest of the world says about a movie, but in this case it’s worth pointing out that the widespread acclaim being thrown down from the ivory towers of the movie critique elite is, amazingly enough, well deserved” (Alex). The reviewer’s pride in his differentiated taste and indifference to mainstream discourse reveals the distance between “the ivory towers” and the world of these tough guys, but at the same time, *Oldboy*’s reception oddly provides a bridge between those two seemingly incompatible worlds.

Contrary to the Korean reading of *Oldboy* that develops a self-conscious break from the discourse surrounding genre and cultural construction, the American context, in which Park does not have the status of auteur but rather a lack of contextual knowledge of other sets of genre discourse, prevails; this context does not allow us to read self-reflexivity as the indicator of an art film. For example, manga, one of the stylistic factors that determines self-consciousness in the Korean context, is reduced to “the material’s pulpy chop-socky origins” (Gilchrist) or only “pop excitement” (Addiego), which reflects manga’s status in the American context. When the American audience finds that this film “never lurches into the obvious self-indulgence that plagues modern cinema” (Mudge), this film, which is considered to be too brainy in the Korean context, is viewed as “an often excruciating journey with an arsenal of emotions” and a work that leaves the audience “shocked, shaken and surprisingly moved” (Thompson, “Boy”).

For Dargis, the answer to the question, “what does art have to do with a guy eating a live octopus?” is absolutely nothing. However, the answer from a Korean reviewer within the Korean cultural

context may be something else altogether. While the domestic reception of *Oldboy* shows that a film produced as a commercial film can be consumed as an art film, its American reading captures the moment of osmosis between high art and low trash as the alternatives to Hollywood. In the end, even though the art film is obviously “a distinct mode of film practice” that offers differentiated sets of filmic experience, the chemistry between spectator, culture, film industry, and the film is the real agent to determine the significance of a text.

Notes

1. This article writes Korean names in the Korean way in which the family name is before the given name. Park Chan-wook's name has been romanized in various ways: Chan-wook Park, Chanwook Park, Chanuk or Chan Wook Park. This article will use “Park Chan-wook” with the exception of direct quotations.
2. Even though the exact production cost was not publicized, some previews mentioned that the estimated cost was \$3.3 million. The worldwide earning information comes from *IMDB.com* (“Oldeuboi”).

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