KOREAN POPULAR FILM IN OUR AGE: AUTEUR CRITICISM ON THE DETECTIVE, MIXED GENRE, AND THE MOTIF

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Abstract - By analyzing a number of the Korean popular films, this paper examines one of the popular film genres, a detective genre, which has been continuously developed in the last two decades. From The Memories of Murder (2003) to the action, Veteran (2015), a thriller, Wailing (2016), and the recently commercially succeeded comedy, Extreme Job (2018), this paper explores those of the mixed genre, which are based on the detective format. This paper provides the significant values of the auteur criticism (author theory) through a various aspect of the genre film, the motif, and the format made by film directors. Not only this paper adds a positive perspective to the debate on the commercial auteur criticism, but also defines the Korean film as the creative genre film, based on the various motifs.

Keywords - Auteur Criticism, Detective Genre, Extreme Job, Korean Genre Film.

I. INTRODUCTION

Recently, Extreme Job (2018) had greatly succeeded in the Korean film market. This film broke the highest record; over 16 million filmgoers watched this film in 2018 and in 2019. Synopsis is simply a comedy action detective film full of fun elements; detectives opens and run a fried chicken shop to catch the criminals. Hollywood also keeps on eye on this remarkable film; it is decided to remake the film in Hollywood with the same format. Likewise, the major characteristics of the Korean film culture is: what kind of film this year will break the record of the 10 million of audiences of the previous years. However, audiences changes, and not every time, the same style of film is popular. The time period of the release is also important factor to gather a large group of audiences, therefore, it is hard to predict what kind of film will break the 10 million-audience record. However, genre terms seem best immediately employed in the analysis of the relation between groups of films, the cultures in which they are made, and the cultures in which they are exhibited. That is because the genre films have attracted to tens of millions of audiences who can expect from the genre. The question about genre film may start with the thought about what kind of genre, and why it is still powerful and ongoing in Korean film. As I hope to show, first, I need to provide the current popular genres (e.g. detective, historical fiction, etc.), by analyzing hundreds of the Korean films released in the last 20 years and examine how the genre categorized and developed from the mixed genre with the various motif. Genre film represents the time period of that society and is considered the target audiences' taste. Some Korean directors have satisfied with over 10 million of filmgoers for each film, taking the format of the genre film. Thus, the current Korean auteur (author) criticism is on the same page with the popular genre films as well as the unique perspectives of directors. This may be the key factor in developing genre films in the Korean film industry. I assume the auteur criticism refers to the point of view which emphasizes the importance of the genre in our age. Taking auteur criticism, this paper explores how the trend of filmmaking flows and changes to another popular genre in terms of the motif through the particular format by different film directors.

II. THE KOREAN POPULAR GENRE

A. The Analysis of the Korean Film in 2000s and 2010s

Contemporary Korean film has been enjoying widespread popularity with its audience, reaching the highest world record of domestic market share since 2000, and over tens of millions of viewers in the 2010s watched various genre of films. From 2012 to 2019, Korean film is more closely intertwined than ever before. The film industry earned over tens of billion dollars in one country for the following commercial films, including Masquerade (historical fiction, 2012) by Chu Chang-min, The Thieves (criminal action, 2012) by Choi Dong-hun, Miracle in Cell No.7 (comedy, 2013) by Lee Hwan-kyung, Roaring Currents (action drama, 2014) by Kim Han-min, Veteran (action drama, 2015) by Ryu Seung-wan, Assassination (action drama, 2015) by Choi Dong-hun, Train to Busan (action thriller, 2016) by Yeon Sang-ho, and Extreme Job (comedy detective, 2018) by Lee Byung-hun. The various genres of films have had immense appeal for analysis of visual culture in recent decades (see Table I). Among 23 10 million-viewers record films, Korean films were 18, and the other 5 films were Hollywood film, including Avatar (2009), Avengers: Infinity War (2018), Interstellar (2014), Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015), and Frozen (2013). Most genre critics argue that film within a genre will share recurrent situations and consistent narrative patterns (Maltby 120). Genre film usually identifies up to eight genres, in Hollywood

feature film production, for example, the Western, the comedy, the musical, and the war film are for uncontested categories. However, some critics argue that the relative independent merit of genre is that it produces at least one of the thriller, either one or two additional genres (Maltby 116).

Contemporary Korean film synthesizes the forces that have, each at one time or another, seemed to dominate the cinematic formula. As shown in Table II, one of the noticeable feature is that genres varied, and they are mixed. Among 18 Korean films, crime, detective genre has been popular the most, including some of mixed genre based on the detective format (see Table II). Korean film has been dominated by crime, thriller, detective and action genres.

Table I. Korean Films Ranking #1-23, having over 10 million-viewers record (referenced by Korean Film Council.)

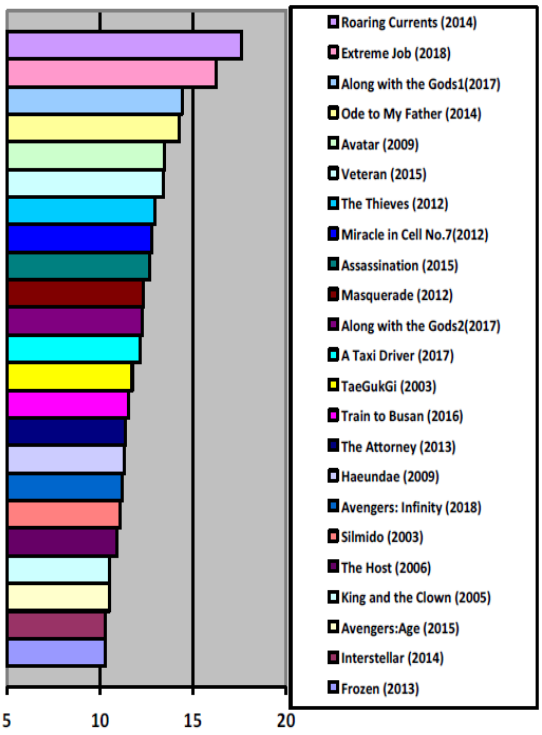


Table II. Korean Popular Film Genre

Genre	The Number of Tally marks
Crime, Detective	/////
Drama	/////
Action	////
Historical Fiction	///
Comedy	//
Adventure	//
War	//
Fantasy	//

B. The Crime, Thriller, Detective Genre, Starting from Memories of Murder (2003)

Bong Joon-ho created Memories of Murder (2003), adopting genre films. The format was sensational. Memories of Murder is a fact-based film, and became one of the successful genres. This is a crime, thriller film that has been conceived from the original play of the literary motifs (see Fig I). After this film, many fact-based films were made, and certain genre films, such as criminal, action, and noir, have occurred in the contemporary Korean film. For example, this crime genre has produced another tendency to the production of the commercial genre, which is a gangster, action genre, such as The Chaser (2008) by Na Hong-jin, New World (2013) by Park Hoon-hung, and Inside Men (2015) by Lee Byung-hun.

Generally, the gangster, thriller genre is said to have certain crucial established conventions—revenge themes, certain patterns of black images, good or bad distinctions, and sometimes ritualistic gunfights (Grant 18). This is the appealing contemporary genre with the culture and draws strength from the contrast. This genre is concerned with the anxieties of contemporary life; between the rise and fall of genres and the social realities, the anxieties reflect (Mast 355).

Social historians raise a question about why the public likes and dislikes a film, and how the film appeals to the unconscious fear and aspiration of the public. The answer is because we have seen other films that strongly resemble the particular film at hand that we can say, “Yes, this is a crime or thriller film.” Also, film genres, or genre terms are categorized according to their attributes and standards and, generally, are maintained as a promise of customary interaction between the film and the audience. Both the genre filmmaker and the genre audience are aware of the prior films and the way in which each of these concrete samples is an attempt to embody once again the essence of a well-known story (Grant 40).

The conventions of films can be described as consistent patterns employed by filmmakers to communicate meaning to an audience (Sari 110). This film converts the images to its own conventional language. Even though Memories of Murder shows a neat plot, Bong Joon-ho lost the persistence of criminal behavior and criminals that followed them. The focus on murderers is concealed, the murder case turns into a mystery, and the story is devoid of any moral message. The emphasis on irritability and excitement is not emphasized on the seriousness of the murder or the consciousness of the problem.



Fig I. Memories of Murder copyright © https://movie.naver.com

C.Mixed Genre in Veteran (2015)

Genre films have been easy to imitate and have been degraded by the formula of mechanical repetition, which is the genre film's biggest drawback. The sensational plot now becomes cliché. The audiences ' needs also unpredictable. Indeed, it was required a new perspective beyond the genre. For the last two decades, this genre has expanded by another genre and commercially succeeded. According to a film critic, Robert Warshow, the power of gangster film derives from its concern with the problem of violence. In addition, a crime and a gangster genre view humans as instinctive, impulsive beings. In the meantime, scholars examine the layer of implicit meaning that reflects any cultural assumptions that the filmmakers and audience might take for granted. The ending was enough to satisfied with the anticipation of the audiences. And the problems posed by the contradictions are solved simply. This film resolves the contradictory feelings of fear and desire which are aroused by attempts to achieve financial and social success, as the gangster film wants to show the fearful results of attempting to rise within a hierarchical society and thus defend class lines (Grant 55). Some social historians emphasize that film is a kind of collective experience and reflects the popular sentiment of the time. Like in Veteran, sometimes gangster, detective film shows it mercilessly and provides audiences a delightful action.



Fig II. Veterancopyright © https://movie.naver.com

Veteran did a biggest hit the record due to the mixed format, the successful point was the action, with the resembled format of the past years. This trend on the crime, detective genre shows that how a popular genre film has a cycle and even branches during the last decade. Veteran takes place in a social structure so separate from the contemporary structure in which it appears to be taking place that its actual time and place become irrelevant.

D.The Motif of The Wailing (2016)

If the genre's convention does not make meaningful innovations in style or subject matter, they are nothing but clichés. Nevertheless, the reason that filmmakers are attracted to genre films is because genre films automatically synthesize vast amounts of cultural information and enable them to freely explore more personal interests (Gianetti 359).

Na Hong-jin became one of the remarkable directors who particularly focus on one genre. His first film, The Chaser (2008) accomplished huge success. Since then, he tends to focus on the crime genre, including The Yellow Sea (2010), and his upcoming film. One of his recent film, The Wailing (2016) is remarkable in terms of the motif and it was a new trial in the Korean film history. The Wailing has been acclaimed by critics and awarded at Hong Kong film festival. This film is a thriller which deals with an angel versus an evil, that is it can be also interpreted by the religious meaning in terms of the motif (see Fig. III).

A British critic, Lawrence Alloway, argued for a radically different approach to film criticism. In his catalog for a screening of popular crime films, he wrote: “In terms of continuing themes and motifs, the obsolescence of single films is compensated for by the prolongation of ideas in film after film (Miller 26).” First, one interesting point is that Alloway’s approach is based on the “recurring” themes and motifs of popular films in terms of the film history. Alloway’s approach is that it requires a critical approach in terms of “motifs”, which are added by adaptations or directors toward a new genre. The premise for the term motif on the genre film is based on the relationship with the possibility of improvement of a film as a new genre. Psychologically also, it was believed that art reflects the potential structure and satisfies the specific needs that are latent in both the art and the audience.

The difference from other previous thriller films was that The Wailing improved the level of the audience with the hidden meaning of the film theme. Many of the prototypes embody basic concepts of art and society. For example, there are concepts such as God and the devil, active and passive, male and female. The director, Na Hong-jin, actually is known as a Christian. His thought and knowledge made his film unique, which has never been seen in the Korean film history. The artists should draw unprocessed prototypes, consciously or unconsciously, to become the common forms preferred by a given culture, as Carl Jung said (Gianetti 366).



Fig III. Wailingcopyright © https://movie.naver.com

E.The Climax of the Genre Film, Extreme Job (2018)

What is true of the crime genre is also true of the

action, gangster film, thriller film, or any fictional genre one can identify? The commercial film genre has maintained a consistency of basic content; the motifs, plots, settings, and characters remain the same. Any particular popular film of any definable group is only recognizable as part of that group if it is an imitation of that which came before. Andrew Sarris used the term "genre film" to describe works without distinction, although he occasionally described genre films as having unexpected deposits of feeling (Miller 26).The recent film, Extreme Job (2018) tried to a comedy genre based on the detective characters. The film commercially succeeded and became one of the films which gathered the most filmgoers in the Korean film. The format of the detectives was still powerful to allowed audience to have tension and it was appropriate to give some fun elements for the comedy genre. Based on the detective's characteristics, consequently, it achieved the highest record in the first quarter of the year 2019 (see Fig IV).

A popular genre is clearly the root of most uses of the genre. It is this usage that leads to the notion of conventions in a genre. A crime, gangster film has been a highly conventional film genre as opposed to the creative film where convention becomes subordinate to inventive themes. A cycle of a genre is obviously a part of the film history. We are caught in a circle which first requires that the films are to lean on a common cultural consensus as to what constitutes a 'popular genre,' and then go on to analyze it in detail going on and on.

However, since the beginning of the Korean commercial film era, people have paid much attention to success, not the critical points of view of the genre film as a whole film history. In addition, the viewers may be blind to the implied messages that help make the film so appealing because so much of this response occurs on an unconscious, emotional level in the commercial films.



Fig IV. Extreme Job copyright © https://movie.naver.com

III. COMMERCIAL AUTEUR (AUTHOR) CRITICISM IN THE KOREAN FILM

A. Auteur Criticism in the Korean Film History

How does the relevance of auteur criticism in film studies not come only from the actual conditions that surround film practice in recent years? Korean film can be defined as "film by a director." The first step out of this shall carefully construct representable directors' group has come only in the last two decades with a leader of Korean auteur criticism (author theory) demonstrating the intensity of the current films in the film history. Korean film has received awards at major international film festivals. Worldwide interest in art film from Korea has centered on a small group of directors such as Lee Chang-dong, Park Chan-wook, and Hong Sang-soo, but none have matched the phenomenal success of Park Chan-wook, after Joint Security Area (2000). He won the Best Jury Prize for Oldboy (2003) at Cannes in 2003, the Jury Prize for Thirst (2009) in 2009 and many others. Park Chan-wook became one of the representatives of Korean film.

The auteur theory or auteur criticism has long constituted an important domain of research in film history. The idea of the auteur (author)'s presence in a cinematic work has been long debated. Some critics argue that a work's coherence depends on the vision and decision of a single person, as an author. Critics of the auteur criticism have argued that creating a good film is not the theme itself, but the style of expression in the film. If the director is a visionary, the one person who makes a film what it is, then cinematic style is the DNA by which that "author" can be identified (Gocsik 93).

For example, Park Chan-wook made a series of revenge, Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance (2002), Oldboy, and Thirst (2009). He used to produce action, thriller genre films like Quentin Tarantino style, for instance, Oldboy (2003). Also, Hong Sang-soo, who is a Korean screenwriter and director, usually deals with a romance, drama genre film such as On the Beach at Night Alone (2016), reflecting on his real experiences or situations. However, Lee Chang-dong's first film, Green Fish (1997) escaped from the genre film and created Oasis (2002), and Secret Sunshine (2007). His social criticism departs from attitudes of the 1980s' Korean directors who relied on melodramatic conventions and clichéd relationships (Ciecko 191). Na Hong-jin usually deals with crime, thriller themes of the Korean society, such as The Chaser (2008) and The Yellow Sea (2010). At the same time, it is necessary psychologically to see a film as the work of a single creator in terms of genre history in the way of changing (Boyum 4).

B. Genre and Film Directors

On the other hand, some critics believe that it is the structure of a work—and not the personality that create it. In examining the film history, Chamberlin takes up a conception that a film history should be a history of films, not a history or a directory of filmmakers (Chamberlin 271). Chamberlin's remark challenges an entire set of postulates implicit in contemporary auteur criticism in film criticism. The characteristic of recent Korean film is that it has been

altering the industry system to the form of genre films, which can be named commercial auteur criticism as a whole. Korean film can become called some trends of directors, that is the contemporary Korean film is a period of commercial auteur criticism. The recognition of the importance of auteur criticism in the Korean film is a relatively recent development, although chronologically it narrowly predates the early work of auteur criticism.

For the first time, in the late 20th and the early 21st Korean film, the major directors had failed their commercial success. For example, Park Chan-wook's first film, The Moon is What the Sun Dreams of (1992), also was not commercially successful. Bong Joon-ho's first film was also low ranked. The answer to succeed was to turn to the genre film. In 2000s, as major directors have tried diverse genres, they have contributed to the diversity of Korean films by changing genres. Most directors have started to adopt the genre film, and they started to create more popular films. They sometimes used well-known events or hybrid genres to satisfy the majority of audiences. Some of genre division mixed genre tall marks all applied in the each category.

A genre explorer, Kim Ji-woon has created various genre films, including The Foul King (Comedy Drama 2000), A Tale of Two Sisters (Thriller, 2003), A Bittersweet Life (Noir, 2005), The Good, The Bad, The Weird (Western, 2008) and The Age of Shadows (Action, 2016). Bong Joon-ho also pursuits the diversity of genre films in his film career. He created various genre films such as crime, thriller, and action genre, including Memory of Murder (2003), The Host (2006) and Mother (2009). Bong Joon-ho also has tried world-wide scale films, including Snowpiercer (2013) and the Netflix original, Okja (2016). New directors are also trying many genres, ranging from action, melodrama, horror, thriller, noir, and classical genres. Significantly, as with the successful commercial films, awarded films show a wide spectrum of genres, themes, and film style.

Commercially, many directors are creating various films through the support of the film industry, the policies, and the development of the digital medium. This positive energy of genre film produces dynamic changes and expands the diversity of genres in the Korean film history. The popular genre of film produces another similar genre with its repetition. A cultural history of the film develops neither through the direct appreciation of films nor through the direct amassing of relevant facts associated with the films (Hill 184). The constant challenge of the new generation of filmmakers contributed to raising the diversity of Korean national cinema. Only the directors' vision can discover its possibilities, and the discovery of a motif is the discovery of a new genre. The artistic pursuit of the unique national cinematic form produces the strength of national cinema. At the end of this assessment, it only remains for me to express such a hope. I hope that there will be the evolving Korean auteur criticism which should become a unique Korean cinema by visons of the directors.

CONCLUSION

Towards to the 2020s, this paper examines popular genre films in the Korean film history in the 2000s and the 2010s. This paper chose one of the popular film genres, that is a crime, thriller, detective genre by a number of the popular films in the last two decades in the Korean film history. This paper proved that this genre started to be popular by a film, The Memories of Murder (2003), which motif based on the unsolved real crime in the past, and examines the development of this genre. The next step toward popular genre particularly requires our attention to turn to the film's motif and the narrative. This paper also shows the significant values of the auteur criticism (author theory), that are those on the inspection of contemporary popular genres in the course of the popularity of the film audiences. This paper also emphasized the ways in which motif, as a mode of a genre film, remains inscribed in the very dynamics in Korean film culture of our time. The auteur criticism on film and filmmakers offers the audience a critical eye not only in many of our visual culture but in Korean film history as well. Korean audiences have some considerable consensus on what constitutes the characteristic language of a genre film. Film is a popular cultural medium, which broadly affects the current flow of the film culture as well as the director's vision. This paper particularly dealt with one genre of detective thriller; however, I hope scholars and filmmakers, as well as the audience, have critical eyes through the different popular genre (e.g. historical fiction genre) in contemporary Korean film.

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