THE PORTRAYAL OF MIGRANTS IN SOUTH KOREAN CINEMA: INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGING REPRESENTATIONS

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Abstract - This study analyses how images of migrants have been created within and through the recent South Korean film industry. Within the local film industry and culture, the paper focuses on the visual devices of framing, spatial organization and silence that construct the figure of the migrant beyond the scope of their utterance. Analyzes of qualitative data from Bandhobi (2009) and Punch (2011) suggest that more relational, human-centered representations of migration gradually emerged in contrast to marginal and peripheral ones. It argues that spatial-temporal transformations in industrial restructuring and global circulation have played a role in changing representations of migration in South Korean cinema and re-negotiating national identity.

Keywords - Korean Cinema, Silence, Migration, Contemporary Cinema, Representation, Formalist Analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

South Korean film has historically had a global impact, and is an important part of film culture today. Its global reception has increased in recent decades due to industrial and technological developments, as well as developments in themes and representation. In the context of globalization and multiculturalism, migration and foreign residents increasingly feature in South Korean culture and public discourse.

Despite the increasing presence of migrant workers and migrants in South Korea, the film industry in South Korea rarely depicts the experience of the migrant workers in any substantial way, often relegating them to a foreign or fringe presence in the country. Recent films suggest that the industrial process of film production, through international markets and audience expectations, is beginning to shift towards a portrayal of realistic migrant experiences. Cinema is a medium in which social visibility and exclusion are articulated and produced. Learning how cinema's form constitutes social visibility in narrative and images is important. Elements like framing, spatial organization, performance and silence impact how the characters are situated within the filmic and social hierarchy.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology of the study is a qualitative film analysis that draws on existing research in film studies and cultural studies to undertake close readings of select South Korean films that foreground migrant characters within the context of South Korean film history and the film industry. Selected for their engagement with the migrant experience and importance within contemporary South Korean cinema, the four case studies are examined using the visual strategies of framing, spatial relations, performance and silence to explore how the migrant subject is constructed within the filmic narrative without engaging in dialogue or literary exposition.

III. INDUSTRIAL CONTEXT AND MIGRATION IN SOUTH KOREA

The increased prominence of migration narratives in South Korean cinema has been linked to a variety of industrial and socio-political developments in South Korea post-late 1990s, including globalization, a new acceptance of foreign labor within the country, and growing awareness of South Korea's own multiculturalism. The domestic film industry entered a new stage with new funding models, technological changes, and improved international distribution through film festivals and global distribution systems.

As foreign markets have become more available to South Korean films, the industry has been more inclined to look at social issues such as migration, identity, and exclusion within the limits of the screen. Migration, a historically minor and symbolic subject, gradually became a social reality and is now a topic directly linked with the industrial and representational transformation of contemporary South Korean cinema.

IV. CASE STUDY: REPRESENTATIONS OF MIGRANTS IN SOUTH KOREAN FILMS

A. Everyday Marginalization and Visibility in Bandhobi (2009)

Shin Dong-il's Bandhobi (2009) gives a more intimate understanding of migrant life in South Korea than is common in normal migrant worker drama: ordinary daily life is the focus as a Bangladeshi migrant worker and an isolated young Korean woman in a factory, on the street and in a tiny apartment, navigate the social distance between them.

The film's sparse dialogue and the fragmented, slash-like speech patterns of its characters, which reflect the disparity of power and language barriers between them, are also complemented by the photographic treatment of its migrant characters, often isolated by being placed on the edges of the frame or by walls, bars, or other physical barriers separating them from other characters.

Bandhobi contrasts with other 'migrant' films as it depicts the invisibility of domestic workers not through their words, but through silent depictions of their routine labor, vulnerability and emotional restraint, allowing for exclusion to be experienced, not solely articulated.

B. Hybrid Identity and Migrant Motherhood in Punch (2011)

Another example is Punch (2011) directed by Lee Han, which addresses the issue of hybrid identity and the family's role in migration: it is about a Korean teen who has a Filipino migrant mother, and it involves domestic issues and schooling in relation to migration.

Yet unlike the earlier focus on the migrant as worker, Punch itself is concerned with the migrant identity, and while taking account of language and cultural difference, it does so in a restrained manner. Silence and understated performances play an important role in conveying the unconfessed emotions and conflicts between the characters.

Visually, however, the film presents migrants within urban, domestic spaces in which they belong, creating less spatial alienation and perhaps allowing for greater viewer sympathy, as migrant lives become the quotidian social reality of South Korean cinemas, rather than simply a foreign, distant phenomenon.

V. DISCUSION

Through a comparison between Bandhobi and Punch, I examine how representations of migrants in South Korean cinema have progressively shifted from spatial and communicative exclusion to representational availability, particularly in the domains of relational and domestic space in family and household labor. This represents a shift from exclusion to conditional inclusion shaped by social change and the development of industry.

The industrial conditions and global distribution allowed filmmakers to consider migration as a socially constructed phenomenon, while South Korean films gained increasing presence in international markets allowing the exploration of transnationality and multiculturalism. Silence and visual storytelling, as key cinematographic devices, take on a new role while becoming important tools to evoke empathy and emotional proximity to South Korean migrants.

From this it follows that the depiction of migrants in film is inextricably linked to the way national identity and globalization issues are framed and reframed. In this sense, migration assumes a central role, both as a subject and as an object representation.

VI. CONCLUSION

Referring to case study and the film industry context, this paper has shown how the development of the South Korean film industry has informed the construction of migrants in contemporary South Korean cinema and how such representational change has been closely interrelated with structural change in the film industry and social change.

The investigation into these developments contributes to understanding how migrant subjectivity is produced through visual narratives and silence in contemporary South Korean Cinema, beyond the stereotypes and marginalization usually associated with them. It also opens discussions on the topics of migration, representation, and the functions of national cinema in a globalized world.

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