



Korean Critical Realist Cinema and the Construction of a Simulacral Order in a Fragmented Society

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Abstract. This article delves into how Korean critical realist films achieve cultural and social effects of "the more critical, the more cohesive" by constructing a "simulated order" in the context of a highly fragmented society. The research reveals that Korean critical realist films, through highly artistic reconstruction of reality, establish a hyper-real narrative system with psychological comfort functions, transforming sharp social criticism into social consensus and emotional resonance. Korean domestic films emphasize immediate response and emotional compensation to local real-world issues, forming a unique "reality-simulation-reality" interactive model. The government, through institutional transformation and branding strategies, integrates critical films into the social governance and cultural export system, achieving the dual goals of domestic emotional relief and international image building. This article, through an in-depth analysis of representative films such as *Parasite*, *Silenced*, and *The Defender*, systematically explains how Korean films achieve real-world response and social cohesion through a simulated order, providing a new theoretical perspective for understanding the function of critical art in a fragmented society.

Keywords: South Korean film, simulation order, ideological state apparatus

1 Introduction

In global film studies, the interaction between literature and social ideologies remains a central theme. As a quintessential example of East Asian modernization, South Korea's democratization process and chaebol economy have exacerbated structural fractures including intergenerational conflicts, regional imbalances, and class solidification. Within this deeply fractured society shaped by class antagonism, ideological clashes, and historical trauma, critical realist films like *Parasite*, *The Defense*, and *Silenced* – which sharply critique social issues – have defied expectations by not intensifying social tensions. Instead, they demonstrate a unique "the more they criticize, the more they unite" phenomenon, functioning as implicit "adhesives" that maintain social stability. This phenomenon contradicts the conventional belief that critical artistic expression tends to exacerbate social divisions. This study investigates this paradox, focusing on how South Korean critical realist films effectively transform their sharp social critiques into forces that promote social cohesion rather than division within a

highly fractured social context. The core research question explores the underlying cultural-social mechanisms at play.

2 Theoretical Basis and Scope of Research

2.1 Definition of Research Scope

Critical realism is a literary movement that employs realist techniques to expose and critique the inhuman realities of capitalist society, originating in 19th-century Europe. Deeply influenced by Renaissance and Enlightenment ideals, European writers sought to reform societal ills. The writer of critical realism takes the humanism represented by human nature as the ideological weapon, reveals the social life conditions of all aspects of the specific period to the readers, and criticizes the darkness of the society and the evil of the reality.[1]While the conceptual analysis of critical realism primarily focuses on literature, it remains applicable to film analysis and application.

Korean critical realism cinema constitutes a relatively expansive genre, unlike genre films with clearly defined boundaries, as it synthesizes diverse themes including crime, romance, gangster narratives, suspense, and disaster. In light of the aforementioned discussion, this study defines Korean critical realism[2]cinema as films that, through varied content, forms, themes, and styles, demonstrate a profound concern for reality and historical development, along with a sense of responsibility. These works attribute individual tragedies to systemic corruption or historical trauma, depict class-rigidified bloody allegories, and integrate local social contexts to reveal social issues, contradictions, and injustices.

2.2 Theoretical Overview

Stuart Hall posits that cultural information must be encoded through specific linguistic means and social institutional relations to generate meaning or effect. However, for such information to produce "meaning" or "effect," "it must first be understood as meaningful discourse and decoded in a meaningful manner. In other words, at a particular normative moment, social and production organizational structures generate information through symbolic codes[3]; at another normative moment, this information enters specific social and organizational structures through decoding, transforming into particular behaviors and consciousness." The effects of cultural information do not simply transmit linearly from sender to receiver, but rather emerge as cultural practices where subjects interpret meanings derived from decoding within complex semantic structures and contexts. Korean critical realism films achieve audiovisual encoding precisely by sharing experiences of structural oppression. This resonance based on collective trauma transforms critical cinema into a conduit for social emotions, providing emotional bonds for divided groups.

Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum theory deconstructs cinema's compensatory function from a postmodern perspective. He further proposed the concepts of simulacrum and hyperreality, arguing that, The "real" produced by the simulation mode is not the original sense of natural reality, but the simulation of reality in a kind of symbolic fantasy,

which calls "hyperreality". The biggest characteristic of this hyperreality is that "the contradiction between reality and imagination disappears here"[4], and media-created "pseudo-environments" supersede objective reality, forming a hyperreality that surpasses the real[5]. Baudrillard divided the development of simulacra into three stages: imitation, production, and hyperreality, corresponding to different social formations. Baudrillard argues that simulacrum is disconnected from any reality; it is no longer an imitation of objective things that serve as originals" but instead produces self-replication and self-generation solely for the simulacrum itself. In this way, the simulacrum goes beyond merely reproducing existing realities in the objective world—it can create images and representations that do not exist but appear strikingly real according to its own "simulation" logic. [6]. Baudrillard pointed out that television media presents not objective reality but a "hyperreality" processed through media, leading audiences to equate this "pseudo-environment" with objective reality and consequently lose their sense of self-subjectivity. Korean critical realist films, by shaping themselves into Baudrillard's "simulacra," serve a role in spiritual stabilization while deconstructing reality.

3 Encoding and Decoding: Critical Content's Textual Turn to Social Consensus

In the dissemination chain of South Korean realist critical cinema, directors—forming the core group of cultural elites—play a pivotal role in "encoding." They skillfully weave profound social critique and specific ideological appeals into film narratives. Meanwhile, audiences are not passive recipients; their "decoding" process determines whether these critical messages can be transformed into broad social consensus, ultimately serving as a "bonding agent" to unite society.

Korean directors like Bong Joon-ho and Lee Chang-dong combine the social acumen of cultural elites with exceptional artistic mastery. This unique position enables them to keenly perceive social injustices, power distortions, and individual spiritual struggles, transforming these observations into sharp critical awareness that drives their films to dissect society. In *Parasite*, Bong Joon-ho directly addresses the wealth gap, while Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* profoundly portrays the existential void of youth, exposing the loss of values amidst social upheavals.

In terms of narrative strategies, the director demonstrates exceptional craftsmanship. Firstly, audiovisual symbols are imbued with profound ideological significance. Take *Parasite*, as an example: the stark contrast between the cramped, dimly lit basement and the spacious, bright mansion creates a shocking class disparity; the "basement odor" becomes an invisible barrier between social strata; lighting design also participates in storytelling, silently amplifying status gaps. Secondly, the narrative structure often centers on individuals resisting powerful corrupt systems. In *A Taxi Driver*, lawyer Song Woo-suk's transformation from profit-seeking to human rights advocacy directly targets judicial corruption; in *Silenced*, teacher Kang In-ho's struggle against the dark web woven by schools, judiciary, and power structures pushes the tension between individual and systemic evil to extremes, while also encoding a call for resistance. Thirdly,

character development serves critical stances. The films meticulously depict the opposition between grassroots justice fighters (like awakened Song Woo-suk) and the symbolizing tycoons and bureaucrats representing greed and abuse of power, guiding audience emotions toward criticism through stark moral contrasts. These strategies collectively convey a clear ideological message: denouncing social injustice, affirming the dignity and resistance of the underclass, and upholding the belief in justice.

Through "dominant decoding," audiences absorb and internalize encoded messages, which then crystallize into social consensus. This process operates through multiple pathways: Emotional resonance serves as the primary catalyst—*Sugwon's* nuanced portrayal of victimized families evokes both sympathy and indignation. Moral narratives establish the foundation for identification, as the rebels' motivations and methods align with universal principles like justice and conscience, making it easier for viewers to embrace critical perspectives. The realistic approach ensures credibility—*The Chaser's* authentic depiction of criminal ecosystems and police failures allows audiences to feel the visceral pain of these issues and the urgency for change.

For the underprivileged and those who have suffered injustice, such films serve as vital outlets for emotional release and a source of identity. When audiences witness their struggles starkly portrayed and criticized in *Parasite*, the pent-up frustration finds catharsis. The film's affirmation of resistance and its symbolic significance also provides spiritual solace to viewers facing similar challenges, making them feel seen and valued.

After watching films, audiences tend to form a brief consensus on the severity of social issues and the necessity of resistance. This consensus integrates individuals' fragmented perceptions and vague dissatisfaction into a relatively unified social critical stance. Similar to how Hong Kong gangster films unite specific communities through "gangster ethics," Korean critical cinema focuses on localized core issues such as class, justice, and power. With its strong real-world concerns, it successfully achieves effective ideological transmission and the construction of social consensus. From the director's critical encoding to the audience-led decoding and the interactive closed loop of social consensus formation, this constitutes the core mechanism of Korean realistic films in driving social reflection, consolidating critical forces, and promoting social cohesion.

4 The Order of Simulacra: The Collective Emotional Guidance and Psychological Comfort Provided by Film Texts to the Audience

In the creation and dissemination of critical realism cinema in South Korea, films not only reflect reality but also construct a unique "simulacrum order." Drawing on Baudrillard's theories of simulacra and simulacrum order, this chapter explores how Korean cinema creates "hyperreality" to construct virtual justice, and analyzes the psychological comfort function of this simulacrum order for audiences, while examining its role in social cohesion mechanisms.

The Collective Emotional Guidance of Film Text to the Audience-The "Ultra-Real" Justice Picture

Baudrillard's theory posits that media-generated "reality" may supersede actual reality. As a potent medium, South Korean critical realism cinema constructs an emotionally charged "hyper-real" virtual justice framework through audiovisual storytelling, artistically reconstructing social conflicts to immerse audiences. This constitutes the core mechanism of its "simulacrum consolation," primarily achieved through two narrative strategies.

4.1 The Logic of Punishment of "Justice Must Prevail"

This narrative approach establishes a moral order of "retribution for evil" in the visual realm, fulfilling audiences' expectations for rectifying social injustices. For instance, *Veteran* delivers immediate emotional catharsis through its direct and traditional theatrical approach, ultimately bringing the arrogant chaebol to justice. More profoundly, *Silenced* creates a paradigm of virtual-reality interaction: its scathing critique of sexual assault crimes and systemic cover-ups sparked massive social repercussions, directly driving the enactment of South Korea's Partial Amendment to the Special Act on Punishment of Sexual Violence Crimes. This not only substantively responds to the film's virtual justice appeal but also powerfully validates and reinforces the credibility of this quasi-real order of "retribution for evil," extending hyper-reality into social reality and significantly strengthening audiences' belief in virtual justice.

4.2 Spiritual Redemption of the Underclass Rebel and the Inevitability of the Narrative of Rebellion

Through its narrative structure and thematic expression, this film portrays "standing up to resist" as the sole and correct path to address injustice and break through structural oppression. It focuses on depicting the spiritual growth and moral elevation of individuals from the lower strata during their struggle against injustice, endowing their resistance with intrinsic value that transcends real-world hardships.

In *The Defender*, lawyer Song Yousuk undergoes a profound metamorphosis—from profit-driven scheming to relentless advocacy for human rights. This transformation embodies spiritual purification and redemption, with his noble character and moral triumph creating a powerful ethical resonance that allows audiences to perceive the inherent dignity of resisting corrupt systems. *The Gift from Room 7* presents a more tender narrative, revealing a sanctuary of redemption through the poignant father-daughter bond and humanity's radiant light within prison walls. This storytelling grants the underprivileged a profound sense of moral triumph, conveying the conviction that "justice will ultimately favor the good."

By centering the narrative on resistance and celebrating its courage and perseverance, the film consistently conveys a core message: when confronting systemic corruption and power abuse, only courageous defiance can break the cycle of injustice. This emphasis on the inevitability and legitimacy of resistance, coupled with its dramatic portrayal, creates a powerful moral imperative and call to action in the audience's mind.

It sanctifies the act of resistance itself, making it an indispensable pillar in the vision of virtual justice.

4.3 Psychological Comfort Provided by Film Text to the Audience-The Mechanism of the Function of "Simulacrum Comfort"

Amid deep-rooted social issues like rigid class divisions and systemic judicial injustices in South Korea, audiences often feel powerless or even despairing when confronting the immense resistance to real-world change. Against this backdrop, critical realist films play a pivotal role by offering viewers a psychological escape through meticulously crafted narratives, sustaining hope for social reform amidst harsh realities. A prime example is the film *Silenced*: it not only exposes the sexual violence at Gwangju School for the Deaf but also analyzes the systemic cover-up network formed by local elites, educational institutions, and the judicial system. The film's social impact ultimately led to the enactment of South Korea's Partial Amendment to the Special Act on Punishment of Sexual Violence Crimes. This case of "film influencing real legislation" has planted a strong belief in the audience—that change is possible through exposure and resistance.

When audiences witness the arrogant chaebol in *Veteran* ultimately facing justice, or the intellectually disabled father and daughter in *The Gift of Room 7* finding redemption and warmth in despair, their profound yearning for social justice finds substitute fulfillment within the film's hyper-realistic constructs. The frustration, anger, and powerlessness accumulated from real-world injustices find safe outlets in this hyper-realistic visual space. By identifying with these fictional just outcomes, viewers experience a psychological placebo effect—emotional compensation for real-world deficiencies, effectively channeling collective pent-up emotions.

Notably, the intensity of psychological comfort shows a significant positive correlation with the depth of film criticism. The more thoroughly films expose social injustices and analyze systemic darkness, the more pronounced the contrast becomes between their constructed virtual justice and harsh reality. This disparity allows audiences to experience profound sense of order, comfort, and psychological fulfillment when witnessing the realization of virtual justice. Sharp social criticism and the resulting psychological comfort do not cancel each other out but instead form a unique symbiotic relationship. This relationship not only fails to weaken audiences' pursuit of social justice but rather reinforces their fundamental belief in fairness and hope for social existence at a deeper level. The deeper the criticism, the stronger the call for justice, and the greater the power of comfort.

4.4 The Dual Echo of Reality and Virtuality

The compelling narrative of virtual justice in Korean critical realism cinema, which effectively serves as psychological solace, derives from its deep-rooted connection to reality rather than being purely fictional. This intrinsic link between the real and the imaginary creates a powerful dual resonance, enabling audiences to develop profound identification and value resonance.

On one hand, the creators' real-world roots lend their characters and resistance narratives profound authenticity. Critical realist directors like Bong Joon-ho and Lee Chang-dong derive their artistic vision from personal backgrounds and unique perspectives. Coming from humble beginnings, they observe society through the lens of the underclass, drawing on decades of firsthand experience with South Korea's social fabric. Their sustained focus on structural issues—from class divisions to wealth disparities—infuses their films with raw authenticity. This lived experience is vividly portrayed in characters like Kim Ki-taek's struggling family in *Parasite* and the disillusioned youth Jong-su in *Burning*, whose struggles and motivations are rooted in the very fabric of Korean society. Viewers can clearly perceive how these characters' dilemmas, motivations, and resistance actions are born from the nation's real-world realities.

On the other hand, the film's central conflicts and social issues closely mirror South Korea's pressing realities, creating a precise mirror image. This stark portrayal of societal contradictions resonates deeply with Korean audiences, as these are the very social realities they experience in their daily lives. When the film constructs a "hyper-real" justice system based on exposing harsh realities, viewers naturally perceive it as a rational extension of emotional appeals rooted in real-world dilemmas—a dramatic expression that "originates from reality yet transcends it," rather than an "airborne castle" detached from social context. This profound alignment with reality serves as the most powerful "anchor point" for the virtual order.

The precise alignment between the creator's realistic perspective and the film's social issues significantly enhances the audience's acceptance of the constructed pseudo-reality order. Viewers are not only moved by the narrative but also come to believe that the critical and hopeful elements embedded in this order reflect the collective unconscious demands of society, thereby endowing the virtual comfort with genuine emotional power.

In conclusion, South Korean critical realism cinema, as creators of "hyper-reality," constructs a pseudo-realist order through the "inevitable triumph of justice" imagery, spiritual redemption narratives, and the logic of resistance inevitability. This order is characterized by idealized, dramatized sketches of justice. It exerts a "placebo" effect, providing audiences with emotional catharsis while sustaining hope for society and preventing utter despair. The director's identity and the film's social issues resonate with reality, forming the key foundation for reinforcing the order's persuasiveness. This simulacrum order, where critique and solace coexist, becomes a core component of social cohesion mechanisms through the interaction of virtual and real—both alleviating collective anxiety and consolidating value consensus, ultimately shaping audiences' cognitive frameworks and emotional structures toward society.

5 Ideological State Machine: The Transformation of Critical Film Texts into Tools for Social Governance and Cultural Export

The flourishing of critical cinema in South Korea is closely related to the government's cultural governance strategies. Based on Althusser's theory of the ideological state apparatus, this paper analyzes how the South Korean government incorporates critical cinema into its ideological governance system through tacit approval, guidance, and branding operations, achieving the dual objectives of social cohesion and cultural export.

The institutional foundation of this governance model stems from the transformation of censorship systems: the strict control during the military regime was abolished in the late 1990s, replaced by a hierarchical system. This shift signifies a transition in governmental cultural governance from rigid control to flexible guidance, aligning with the democratization process while also providing institutional space for critical film production.

The government's tolerance strategy is rooted in the design of its "safety valve" mechanism. Confronting structural contradictions like class rigidity and chaebol monopolies, critical cinema serves as a channel to channel public discontent. Take *Parasite* as an example: its exposure of wealth disparity sparked widespread debate, allowing social emotions to be released within the cultural sphere. The rating system provides a controlled environment for such content, permitting films to reflect reality while confining critical discourse to predefined boundaries, thereby demonstrating the ideological state apparatus's guidance over social discourse.

In terms of proactive guidance, the government employs a dual strategy: First, the "Going Global" initiative supports films in international festivals like Cannes and the Oscars, transforming domestic criticism into "Korean stories" that enhance the nation's cultural soft power. Second, through domestic award systems such as the Grand Bell Awards and the Blue Dragon Awards, films like "The Defense" and "The Crucible" gain official recognition, drawing public attention to the social issues they expose and reinforcing the social role of cinema.

The Korea Film Industry Corporation (KOFIC) provides indirect support for critical cinema through funding and professional training. This support must be understood within the context of chaebol competition: chaebols are both targets of criticism and major investors in the film industry. By facilitating censorship and distribution, the government not only amplifies the film's influence through capital but also channels public discontent toward chaebols through content, thereby maintaining a dynamic balance in the power structure.

The government's branding strategy has generated remarkable synergistic effects. International recognition feeds back into domestic contexts, strengthening public identification and social engagement, thereby transforming critical cinema from a niche product into a societal focus. Through these mechanisms, the government has successfully "called upon" and "incorporated" the inherent social critique inherent in films as a governance tool—both channeling social sentiments and shaping the national image,

thus fulfilling the cohesive function of the ideological state apparatus as articulated by Althusser.

6 Summary

This paper, based on the social reality of South Korea, explores the phenomenon of "the more critical, the more cohesive" in critical realism films and its three-dimensional interactive mechanism. The study finds that this transformation depends on the dynamic three-dimensional interactive mechanism composed of director/text, audience/society, and state/institution, forming a sophisticated cultural-social operational logic.

The "critique → coalescence" transformation in South Korean critical realism cinema emerges from three interwoven dimensions: the resonant interaction between directors' critical encoding and audiences' dominant decoding, the filmic simulacrum order's role in channeling collective emotions, and the state ideology apparatus' strategic assimilation of critical forces. This complex mechanism not only reveals the unique stabilizing function of critical art in social fragmentation, but also provides a profound paradigm for understanding the flexible strategies of cultural governance and the dynamic ideological competition between state and society.

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