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Mobile Phone Cinema in South Korea: A Case Study of Two Film Festivals

My intention in presenting this paper is to shine an illuminating light onto certain aspects of an emerging media phenomenon to be found at film festivals in South Korea. It is my contention that what follows has a particular relevance and contribution to make to the study of how contemporary moving image media contributes to South Korean society within which it is currently situated.

Filmmaking using non-professional cameras, such as mobile phones and digital SLR cameras, urges curious filmmakers and those with limited financial means to explore new ways of making moving images. This creates alternative means of film distribution, and begins to describe new modes of cinematic discourse. Though this constitutes a trans-national and, I would argue, a trans-cultural phenomenon, I have found it has a particularly vigorous profile at film festivals in South Korea. Increasingly, film festivals have capitalisedon certain characteristics of this so-called *mobile filmmaking*, utilising factors such as the ease of digital distribution of digital moving imagesover the Internet and via increasingly ubiquitous smartphones. This has resulted in a fluidity and democratisation of the dissemination of cinematic expression, increasing in its pace and reach.

Such new ways of exhibiting cinematic stories,originating from and about contemporary South Korean society and culture, tell us much about its current character and health. They help us develop a possible taxonomy of their international, trans-national and trans-cultural influence: They are trans-national in that many films, such as*Shell*(Wong Fu Productions, 2011) thematically sit astride a non-specific national aesthetic. The only obvious cue to this particular film's country of origination is the language used for the characters' spoken dialogue. Similarly trans-national is a film like *Money Bag (*Sun ung Kim, 2011), which was filmed entirely on a mobile phone and described on YouTube as a *Thriller/Black Comedy*. It uses night-time Seoul as a main location, an absence of complicating dialogue and a jokey Italian pop song in its soundtrack, and a clear reference to the Hollywood *chase film* in its narrative construction. Most telling, I feel, is the use of the English words 'Money Bag' written on the eponymous bag in the final image. The film clearly reaches out to a global audience, familiar with its narrative and cinematic concerns, and does so whilst retaining a sense of *Korean-ness*or of a national identity which is in some way, on close analysis identifiably Korean. Following its success in competition at SESIFF, *Money Bag* went on to also win the first prize at the Hong Kong Mobile Film Awards earlier this year.

Such filmsspeak of South Korea's position at the vanguard of recent developments in digital media and film festival engagement. This is a feature that is, of course, not reserved for what might be regarded as 'minority interest' film festival events: Witness Busan International Film Festival, begun in 1996 and, when applying a number of financial criteria at least, is widely recognised as the largest film festival in Asia.

I begin, therefore, from the position of asking a reasonably simple question: What does the contemporary film festival in South Korea tell us about how innovative moving image making has become an intrinsic feature within the historical progression of South Korean national identity?

I will answer this by looking at two different film festivals in South Korea occurring during 2011:Jeonju International Film Festival (JIFF), and Seoul international Extreme-Short Image & Film Festival (SESIFF).It is not my intention to compare these two film festivals occurring within the same country and contrast them in some binary, oppositional way. Instead, I hope to reveal a sense of how they each, separately but nonetheless similarly, promote and express new ways of engaging with mobile cinema and digital moving images that are currently popular within South Korea.

Factors contributing to ways in whichfilm festivals catering for filmmaking using non-professional cameras has developed are, of course, several. I will avoid delivering a lengthy history lesson on these, but some of the following are particularly salient:

The first significant factor concerns the perceived low number of showing days for films in the late 1980s and the South Korean government-sanctioned increases following the establishment of the Screen Quota Civil Society in 1985. Remarking in 2006 on the drop in the domestic market share of Korean films between 1984 and 1993, which was perceived at governmental level at the time as a crisis of national identity, Hangjin Lee has written that 'the thriving film culture in contemporary Korea is due to a cultural resistance to the power of Western-led globalization' (Lee, 2006, p. 182). Darcy Paquet regards 1992 as a significant year in the history of the Korean film industry, when the domestic box office success *Marriage Story* was 25% financed by Samsung Corporation(Paquet, 2005, p.36). This made Samsung the first *chaebol* (the commonly-used word used for a small group of leading companies of national and strategic importance) to get into financing film production, soon to be followed by Daewoo and LG.

Also around this time, a new breed of entrepreneurial film producer began to attract co-production agreements following international festival successes by directors such as Im Kwon-taek and Park Chan-wook. In can be persuasively argued that this has led to a successful internationalization of South Korean cinema or, at the very least, a reaching out to the world through the moving image.

Thus, positive changes in the commercial fortune of South Korean cinema on the international festival stage have contributed to a base level of popular credibility. As one of its corollaries, this has influenced the commercial and cultural nature in which film festivals have developed in South Korea.

Additionally, movements in other areas of popular culture have had a marked effect on the South Korean mass media landscape. Consider the phenomenon of 'K-Pop' (South Korean pop music), which is not purely Western in its aesthetic, but draws on contemporary Asian popular cultural idioms of bright-eyed youthful exuberance and transient consumerism.

Add to this the growing confidence in the possibilities opened up by an emerging global digital culture often mediated through the handset and screen of the mobile phone. A recent article for TechinAsia (Martin, 2011) reports that South Korea's local telecoms companies have reached a total of 29.97 million smartphone subscribers, and is about to pass the 30 million mark.In South Korea particularly, the normalising of portable internet access tomoving image production and consumption has ushered inwith it the challenging of old ways, of established cultural and societal norms. This presents South Korean culture as poised to establish a leading role within a globally-connected media landscape; not following anymore, not similar-to but self-evidently its own thing, presented to the world in large part through moving images.

A picture then emerges of several points of stress bearing influence in a compound fashion on popular and, by extension, national culture within urbanised, metropolitan South Korea. We often hear rhetorical pronouncements from politicians and those with business interests, including film festival promoters, hoping to overstate their power to shape the trans-national media landscape. Yet in recent years South Korean media not merely followed innovations in global media, but has strategically planned development, politically, industrially and socially as part of a national project, to take a leading role in developing and capitalising on this potentially society-changing media revolution.

I characterise this as a 'national project' because it has been just that: The government of Kim Young-sam from 1993 to 1998 started to pursue a policy of internationalisation and globalisation known as *segyehwa*, (a shorthand phrase I usually accept as translating into*segye* meaning 'world' and *hwa* meaning 'becoming' or 'turning into'). This process was continued and refined by the following government of Kim Daejung between 1998 and 2003, evidently to even greater effect.

Jeeyoung Shin partly attributes the enthusiastic promotion of the cultural industries under Kim Dae Jung's presidency with the establishment of the Basic Cultural Industry Promotion Law in 1999 and the setting up of the Korea Culture and Contents Agency. She writes,

'Kim's government promoted particularly high-value-added culture industries such as film, animation and multi-media' (Shin, 2005, p. 55). Thus, we begin to see a shift in stress from a sense of the moving image as a component of commercial film production, to that of a medium for the delivery of national cultural expression. As Shin goes on to say, 'The governmental push to globalise Korea's cultural industries was intended not only to improve the competitiveness of the national economy, but also to promote cultural autonomy and integrity' (Shin, 2005, p. 55 - 56). My argument is that innovation in the area of film festivals, of what they are designed to do and can potentially do, has become intrinsic to the South Korean concept and policy of segyehwa.

Jeonju International Film Festival ran from 28 April to 6 May last year, and is now preparing for its 13th edition in 2012. Jeonju is located roughly in the centre of South Korea, half-way between Seoul and Busan – in what JIFF describes in the first line of the 'Overview' section of their website as 'a traditional and beautiful city of Korea'. The film festival, therefore, partly connects to notions of South Korean traditional culture, and as part of a more general tourism offer within Korea.

The JIFF website also announces the festival's intention to focus on 'unique voices of independent films from all over the world' and to introduce 'new films by world famous master filmmakers and a wide range of programmes each year'. So, we might conclude, there are no real surprises in this so far. Where JIFF's USP starts to emerge is in stating that 'JIFF is always trying to get with the flow and changes in the film industry' by producing two categories called 'Jeonju Digital Project' and 'Short! Short! Short!' These they describe, only partly correctly in my view, as 'the two main projects of JIFF'.

My experience of JIFF last year bears out much of the promise contained in the pre-publicity. Whole areas of the centre of Jeonju were taken over by the film festival. Apart from the screenings of the opening and closing films and ceremonies, screenings were mostly held within a small area of central Jeonju, referred to universally as 'Cinema Town'. Interior and exterior spaces were linked physically and psychologically as Cinemas, and a street re-named each year for the festival as 'Cinema Street' linked other venues for festival-associated events. Some of the 313-strong band of student festival volunteers guided traffic away from the blocked-off areas and helped visitors with directions, or just added to the smiling, youthful 'buzz' of the festival atmosphere. For the duration of the festival, the centre of Jeonju enthusiastically gave itself over to a particular kind of festival cinephilia, which it manifestly attempted to infect local inhabitants and visitors from outside the city with, as a kind of pleasantly benign malady.

Figures from JIFF's festival evaluation report, produced immediately following the festival's end, indicate that JIFF could be regarded as a medium to large film festival when compared internationally.

Jeonju International Film Festival:

Budget: 3,200,000,000 KRW (182,023,000 GBP)
Number of Screens: 14
Number of Films Screened: 190 from 38 countries
Average seat occupancy: 86%
Number of paid cinema seats: 77,590 (67,095 sold)
Press Attending (Foreign Press):   820 (111)
Number of guests (domestic/international): 1,892 (1,758/134)

(Source: JIFF's evaluation report published following the 2011 festival)

Additionally, the festival report estimates the audience for outdoor events, exhibitions and programmes of talks for visitors to Cinema Street to have been 3.8 million people during the festival period.

Disregarding for a moment the bare statistics contained in these figures, this tells us something important about the kind of information that JIFF wants to communicate to the

world, what it wants to say about the festival: Notably, the compilers of the report felt the need to highlight that approximately 7% of the total festival 'guests' (V.I.P.s etc.) were visitors from outside South Korea.

In practice, JIFF plainly provides a growing platform for independent feature filmmaking, for shorts production and exploring the possibilities of mobile phone filmmaking for emerging filmmakers. JIFF puts a stress on proclaiming its 'strengthening appeal' to a varied audience. As a participant observer at the 12th edition of the festival last year, I experienced JIFF establish its credentials as 'a productive and sustainable film festival', whilst introducing filmmaking using mobile phones to new audiences.

SESIFF 2011 ran from 29 September to 4 October of last year, its 3rd year in existence. An obvious clue being in the festival's name, Seoul International Extreme-Short Image & Film Festival is very much targeted at low (or no) budget filmmakers, artists and independent moving image-makers. The festival encourages its audience, filmmakers and would-be filmmakers to rally to the festival motto of 'Anyone can make and enjoy films, anytime, anywhere'.

Located in two main screening venues in Seoul, SESIFF was a more compact, intimate and *experimental* film festival than JIFF earlier in the same year. It drew on innovative and creative work from a larger constituency than JIFF and, with a much smaller budget, incorporated films and moving imagery that would not normally be found in other more *mainstream* film festivals across the world.

Seoul International Extreme Short-Image & Film Festival:

SESIFF International Competition = 104 films
DSLR International Competition = 30 films
Mobile International Competition = 17 films
Forest Films Domestic Competition = 15 films
International 3D Film Competition = 27 films
Going Underground Competition = 26 films
Kids Extreme Shorts = 9 films
Love Extreme Shorts = 10 films
Giggle Giggle Shorts = 11 films
Bloody Night = 10 films
Wang Fu Style = 10 films
Korean Vloger Collection = 10 film
Clermont-Ferand Lobo = 12 films
U.F.O. Undiscovered Film of Youth = 14 films
Total = 305 films

(Source: SESIFF website <http://www.sesiff.org/project/en_main.asp>)

SESIFF's categories are relatively numerous but with a small number of films screened in each. As a festival it feeds on and promotes experiments with new technologies such as the mobile phone and Digital SLR camera, spreading an inclusive net over new modes of making moving images, new filmmakers and new audiences.

The Wong Fu Productions' film, *Shell* was screened at both (JIFF) and (SESIFF) festivals. A section from it formed part of JIFF's festival 'ident' sequence together with sponsors' logos etc., and as the official trailer for SESIFF 2011. Wong Fu Productions, who made the film, is a California-based production company led by three American filmmakers of Korean descent. Much of their work is distributed through a YouTube channel on the Internet, and represents in a dramatic, or sometimes relaxed and light-hearted way, some of the day-to-day concerns of young Korean-Americans. I draw attention to it not in an attempt to illustrate a typicality of aesthetic employed by the films shown at JIFF and SESIFF, but to indicate how both festivals of 2011 employed a kind of globally-acceptable cinematic quality to visually cue the

sense of trans-nationality and trans-culturality they present to a visiting international audience.

Whilst both festivals discussed here include 'international' in their titles, they differ significantly in terms of size, number of visitors and films, the profile of filmmakers and types of films they attract. Each incorporate innovation in filmmaking in different ways: JIFF in independently produced, narrative-driven filmmaking and providing opportunities for new filmmakers to reach an audience, SESIFF in a more overt encouragement of new uses of small formats and new technologies, and in exploring experimental narrative forms. Soyoung Kim remarks that, 'Desire for cinema and desire for globalisation, often encapsulated in the official discourse of *saegaehwa*, converge in international film festivals' (Kim, 2005, p. 57, emphasis in original). Both JIFF and SESIFF take pride in expressing a unifying passion for innovative cinema. As Kim perceptively points out, 'the proliferation of theme-based film festivals and the emergence of identity groups in 1990s Korea may be articulated with one another. There is something in cinephilic culture that can facilitate the process of identity and subject formation and festival politics' (Kim, 2005, p. 89). Identities formed between film festival participants are the subject of affiliations with like-minded others, enthusiasts and fellow competitors in themed festival categories that draw people together to experience and share moving images.

Writing in 2005, Soyoung Kim noted that 'The growth of cinephilia in Korea is linked to the growth of film culture through the proliferation of film festivals, art-house cinema theatres, cinemateques, videoteques, film magazines, journals and cinema groups housed in cybespace and in real space' (Kim, 2005, p. 82). However, it's crucially important to highlight the shift in the nature of the South Korean love of the moving image, from cinema as part of a national story of growing cinephilia, to one of a comfortable familiarity with moving image in a post-digital world. My own observations of JIFF and SESIFF bear out recent historical and cultural scholarship that points to a progressive movement taking in developments in film culture within South Korea, changing notions of national identity and South Korea's global digital presence.

In harnessing the liberating potential of hand-held screens, both festivals seek to balance a seemingly conflictual dynamic of being simultaneously populist and representative of innovative modes of moving image production. As Nicholas Rombes puts it:'The mobility of the screen erodes the boundary between the place of dreams and everyday life' (Rombes, 2009, p.65).What we are left with is a debunking the comforting ideology of the dream palaces of cinema theatres from an earlier time, to affirm a more contemporarily-relevant politics of filmmaker and audience interaction.

We might ask why South Korean society is currently taking new forms of moving image making so seriously, exploring innovation in cinematic forms, and choosing film festivals as a means by which it presents itself to the world? My answer would be that this follows a logical progression in the development of South Korea's sense of its national identity, its global digital presence; in short, a mature recognition of what the film festival can contribute to how the world sees South Korea through its moving image culture.

As I have indicated, several scholars such as Hyangjin Lee and Jeeyoung Shin comment on what has influenced recent commercial cinema and the moving image in South Korean. Repeatedly, a kind of mantra is spoken of 'creating the future while reflecting on the nation's past' (Lee, 2006, p. 192).

A new sense of South Korean national identity, post the digital turn, is being contested and formed. Hyangjin Lee talks of how a 'hybridism of commercialism and artistic experimentalism' contributes to a new identity politics in Asia. The notion and practice of Segyehwa, as Hyun Ok Park describes it, 'represents is a de-territorialized national community among Koreans […] particularly in the ways that new technologies of communication and frequent travelling between home and diverse sub-communities may engender a border- transcending sense of belonging' (Park, 1996). The two film festivals I have been discussing exemplify this, as they challenge their audiences to engage with contemporary moving image making in unashamedly novel and innovative ways.

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