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Nagehan Uzuner  
*Istanbul Bilgi University*

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## Markets, Globalization & Development Review



## ***Film Review***

# **Bong Joon Ho, *Okja* (2017): Wounding the Feelings**

*Okja* by Bong Joon Ho is an action, adventure, drama and science-fiction movie that was financed and produced by Netflix in 2017, and it is about the meat industry. Unlike most films, *Okja* is beyond any genre. It predicates that dichotomies can, in some ways, be in a certain harmony together. Despite all the evilness of power, Bong Joon Ho creates a story about power. By using both Korean and English languages in the movie, the story draws attention to the relationship between the East and the West, and the movie takes place in both Korea and the United States of America. *Okja* was premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2017, and it was broadcasted on a digital platform, Netflix. Since it criticizes capitalism and challenges power issues, *Okja* gave rise to many controversies.

## **Infelicity**

In *Okja*, we watch the adventures of Mija, a young girl who is against the Mirando Company. Lucy, starred by Tilda Swinton, is the owner of the Mirando Corporations and acts as the villain. An opening scene welcomes the audience, showing a gaudy press launch held by Lucy who promotes innovative works and eco-friendly transformation of the company. Meat is described as the most important need for the world's emerging population, in the foreseeable future, due to scarcity of food. In contrast to all the ecological awareness, Lucy is presented in an excessively elaborated costume and make-up at the beginning of the movie. Her mouth is full of braces, and her gestures and facial expressions are exaggerated.

Lucy claims that the world needs a miracle to solve the struggle for hunger. Right after her claim, a beautiful pig-like, special little female creature is stunningly discovered on a Chilean farm. This little creature is taken to Mirando Ranch in Arizona. Mirando states that their scientists will take care of this little pig-like animal and create twenty-six poultry of these in a completely natural environment despite being produced in the laboratories of their own company. The company sends those pig-like animals – created for the film as computer generated images (cgi) – to the best farmers all around the world to find out the most ideal natural habitat for them. Further Lucy adds that a competition will be held in New York in ten years to declare the most efficient and nutritious one to the public via live broadcasting.

Mija and her grandfather are farmers and they foster one of those pig-like animals. Mija is starred by a Korean actress An Seo Hyun and she lives with her grandfather and their cuddly pig-like animal Okja. The poultry is on a mountainside in a beautiful natural setting in Korea. Mija and Okja's harmony with nature in their daily lives is remarkable. Mija likes to eat fish and chicken, but when she goes hunting with Okja, she sets free the fish back to the creek to respect the generous Mother Nature and its eco system.

After 10 years, the adventure begins when Mirando sends some officials to Korea to find out the most efficient and nutritious pig-like animal for the New York Pig-like Contest. When the officials from Mirando arrive at Mija's house, they use a MacBook computer to copy Okja's digital data to the system. Although Mija has lived her entire life far away from technology, in harmony with nature, her admiration for that computer with retina display highlights the effects of globalism. Even though she has seen those computers in the previous controls of their farm, the latest technology excites Mija.

## **Swashbuckling**

Growing up without her parents, Mija realizes her own grandfather has tricked her. Her grandfather accepts to give her a dowry and assurance for her future to look at this pig-like creature for money. We witness the disagreement and rejection between Mija and her grandfather when Mija breaks the piggy bank and rebels against her grandfather. Her reactions are also for fierce independence, rebelling against capitalism and all the patterns that society attaches to women. As Beauvoir (1993) describes it, the sole desire of Mija's grandfather is to raise her and see her get married to an adequate husband because he only sees her as "the second sex", the subservient gender. His beliefs in, and his expectations underscore, the female identity perceived in society. The golden pig is given to Mija to guarantee her future, to realize and to sustain the marriage she needs by default. Mija's rebellious behaviors also symbolize nontraditional roles of women in society and may be interpreted as an indicator of feminism.

Hereafter Okja is taken from Mija by officials of Mirando, the audience travels to Seoul and then to New York and they are drawn from one emotion to another. In the action scenes, we chase our ears with the rhapsodically Balkan melodies which bring excitement and hope of immigrant communities. As Çerezcioğlu (2010) explains, music, which is a cultural and differentiating symbolic practice, is an indicator of identity and difference for the expression of immigrant communities and migration movement. With this vigorous music, the audience is dragged into Mija's

migration from the countryside to the city and eventually her struggles. The movie, which begins as a comedy and visual feast, slowly turns into a drama and kind of an action-adventure.

Even if the aim is not to horrify the audience, when we see all those action scenes, we are surprised and even shudder. As we watch Mija's struggle to take back Okja in anxiety and fear, we witness the sharp distinction between good and evil. In the beginning of the movie, the relationship and the harmony of the friendship between Okja and Mija soften our hearts and promise great hope that Okja and Mija will meet again. The scene in which the director Bong Joon Ho moves us from life in nature to modern life ruled by capitalism begins by referring to Charlie Chaplin. It resembles the scene of people leaving the metro like a flock of sheep in Chaplin's 1936 movie called 'Modern Times'. In that scene where capitalism is symbolized by people walking at the exit of the metro station, Mija is portrayed as a character who rebels against the capitalist system with her red colored tracksuit top, turning in the opposite direction from the one that everyone is going to.

## **Disputes**

Animal Liberation Front (ALF) helps Mija and Okja get together and rescue Okja from Mirando. This civic organization is completely opposed to violence and the capitalist system. From time to time, disagreements arise among the characters of the film, even though they are on the same side. Mija's interpreter lies in order to achieve his goals on the initiative to rescue Okja and this is not tolerated by the ALF. At the end, the liar member is expelled from the commitment and trust systems. One paradoxical observation in the film is that despite the ALF being against violence, they use violence when removing the liar member. These attitudes are totally contradictory to their own context. In spite of the beliefs of nonviolence espoused by ALF, what triggers this behavior attests to the inevitability of anger and the fact that every individual holds views and intents that are both good and evil. The violent punishment scene aims and underlines to reinforce the viewer's belief in the good and the goodness over misconduct. Since the ALF does not use real weapons, they show resistance to violence and the capitalist system with marbles, toy guns and gushes, which can be interpreted as the most innocent sides of the dichotomy of good and evil. The production of mutant animal in the laboratory of Lucy and her desire for the pig-likes to get accepted all around the world can be considered as the representation of evil. Moreover, the ALF exaggerates goodness by using rose leaves, caring about safety, not using real weapons, and no-defense strategy.

When Lucy's plans do not go as she devised, she wants to use eco-friendly young girl (Mija) for her company's interests. While inviting Mija to the stage already prepared for the competition in New York, Lucy describes Mija as a global, young, natural farmer. In this context, Lucy artificially fills these concepts. In another scene, the truck driver of Mirando, who is in charge of Okja's transport, is uninsured, and he does not show loyalty to his company. This creates another justified reason to hate Mirando and dislike the corruptive side of capitalism.

We also see some disagreements between Lucy and her sister Nancy. At the beginning of the film, we do not see the former manager of the Mirando Company and we do not know much about her. We see, however, that Lucy – who acts as a fragile and naïve character – becomes as cruel as her twin sister in the subsequent scenes. Lucy is represented as a composite character embracing good and bad features, and she is portrayed as more sympathetic and eco-friendlier when compared to Nancy. Their disagreements are about power and money. The fight for the throne in the company management is the source of conflict among the sisters who, in essence, share the same cruel wishes and desires. As we keep watching the disagreements of these twin sisters, we are indecisive as to which sister is worse. Lucy's sister Nancy ridicules consumers' needs by undermining consumer value. Nancy believes that if products such as the sausages they produce are cheap enough, people will eventually eat them. We even come across the lines making the audience very uncomfortable with Nancy's embodiment of the capitalist system through selling dead animals. This attitude and the answer are the biggest acrimonious symbols representing the fierce capitalism in the movie. In contrast, Nancy sells Okja alive in exchange of a golden pig and she even bites to verify if the gold is real or not. After checking that it is real, Mija and Okja meet again happily in the end. Their convergence and coming together, however, does not change or transform the capitalist system. Therefore, we follow a story of success and happiness on a micro scale, bereft of the possibility of creating a just and happy overall system.

### **More Hypocrisy**

Throughout the movie, there are events and sections that mediate the characters and the concepts they represent. Mediatization is defined as “the process of social change in which the media play a key role” (Schulz 2004: 88). A microphone and a speaker to reach Mija and Okja are used to extend frames of the process of communication. The video camera placed in Okja's ear and the chip placed inside Okja's body monitor her physical condition during particular periods of time. The picture of pig-likes

by Mirando is eco-friendly and natural – meant for the sight of consumers. In fact, the reality is different. The pig-like animals are created in the basement laboratory of a dirty dungeon. The hidden camera in pig-like's ear confirm the reality.

Mundo – who works for Mirando – has an outward image of a friendly animal lover, and a popular veterinarian, but in reality Mundo is a drunken jealous man. After feeling deeply offended by Lucy, Mundo is unable to control his anger and jealousy as he is less popular when compared to Mija, Okja and Lucy. These scenes show humiliation by his own ego. Besides, it is clear that Mundo has important issues on gender roles in society because he is a man who is offended in front of his colleagues by a female manager. Apart from Mundo, there is another important male character called Frank Dawson, starred by Giancarlo Esposito, as he is the one behind all of the campaign ideas. Frank also emphasizes capitalistic values as he, lacking values of his own, is always following the winning party.

## **In Conclusion**

People have traveled from one place to another, especially from Europe to other parts of the world to find different foods and different kinds of nutrients throughout history. In this regard, The Silk Road was reshaped around the early 15th and 16th centuries to supply and transport several spices like saffron and black pepper. Bringing food from ground to table requires establishing many relationships and networks. The food industry deserves serious consideration. Over the years, access to food has been achieved through exchanges or government regulations (Grundig 2019a). Food comes to our table by making an average journey of one thousand kilometers (Grundig 2019b). Thus, *Okja's* adventure should be evaluated in the light of this supply-chain backdrop. *Okja* is an opportunity to reconsider people who have sought access to food and products from different geographies throughout history. *Okja* is a terrific movie that illustrates interdependence, compatibility and conflict – and prepares a great base to study the relationship between East and West. It is all about the causes and consequences of the dichotomy of the meat industry and globalization. The relationship between orientalism and globalization is emphasized from the perspective of the East-West distinction. In the movie, the sanctioning powers of Westerners on non-Westerners are shown as power symbols against the marginalized ones, and orientalism is used as the means to legitimize imperialism in a globalizing world (Said 1979).

As for the globalization of food industry, Okja is grown in the East and sent from Korea to the United States of America for commercial purposes. This, in a way, implies and foreshadows the global trade routes. Cultivating this pig-like animal by Mirando Company has a similar journey.

Besides, living in nature, fishing, harvesting, using analogue communication technologies as television, speaker and a microphone, using refrigerator as a shoe closet – these acts of simple living make us think that Mija and her grandfather do not need to save food for the next day. Thus, it reminds us of the importance of supplying food from nature and consuming fresh and healthy food.

The focal point of the movie is to demonstrate provocatively how the meat industry serves capitalistic aim and nourishes consumer culture. In this context, the content of the film is quite intense. I argue that the film encourages the audience to think about power balances, ethics and morals. As McLuhan and Powers suggested (1992), in modern lives in the global village, especially as a result of communication technologies, it is possible to find solutions to the needs of population density in any geography of the world by using another geography's workforce and resources. The problems in the movie are highly interesting as they are real, and the story is blended with a fictitious character. The events themselves mirror the problems and relationships that we face directly in our daily lives.

The shooting of the chaotic scene in an underground shopping center is challenging, and the chosen music for this scene is remarkable. Besides, Tilda portrays the twins leading an international company to explain both sides of capitalism. Twins presents the pessimistic sides of capitalism. It is a great choice for Nancy and Lucy to play a role in one body, so we can see that no one side is better than the other. The director of the movie, Bong Joon Ho, manifests that he is not a member of an organization that advocates any animal rights (TIFF Originals 2017). Moreover, in many scenes, we see that chicken and fish are eaten. I assume from those scenes that the main criticism of the movie is not against meat consumption and the aim does not seem to be to promote vegetarianism. The main issue the director wants to convey is that the meat industry functions as the battery of a system balancing mass production and consumption. Although we have been eating meat for thousands of years, the situation and stage that the industry has come to is thought provoking (TIFF Originals 2017).

The use of excellent music, bizarre characters, costumes, action scenes, and the scenario are the strengths of the production. Okja has a clear script. Besides, non-verbal parts of the movie speak by themselves.



The messages are clear. “Mija! Try learning English. It opens the doors!” (1:03:02); the Korean translator’s line above is the greatest example of globalization that unifies Eastern and Western culture. In terms of a weakness, the movie suggests that we may have only a micro effect on this meat industry. Although the movie reflects the AFL as an activist organization, Okja is the one that survives in the end. Therefore, there remain open many avenues to reflect on the representation of consumer activism and non-governmental organizations.

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