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To love or to eat the super-pig: Bong Joon-Ho's *Okja* (2017)—an ecocritical and transnational perspective

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This article analyses Bong Joon-ho's *Okja*, a co-production between South Korea and the United States, from the perspective of ecocriticism and its transnational nature within the context of film studies and animal ethics. Bong uses a compelling narrative about the relationship between a rural teenage girl, Mija, and her porcine companion, the genetically modified (GM) super-pig, *Okja*, to prompt a critical reflection on the ethical implications of meat consumption and capitalism. It sparks the dilemma of whether to eat or love the creature. The significance of Bong's *Okja* in the discourse surrounding human-animal relationships stems from a dialectical perspective—it simultaneously critiques human exceptionalism within a capitalist framework whilst also embracing the technological depiction of livestock and the advantage of global distribution facilitated by the giant streaming platform, Netflix. This article does not advocate an absolute resolution to human-animal reconciliation; rather, it offers an ecocriticism and perspective on film culture in relation to animal ethics. It explores the film from a seemingly biophilic and de-centring anthropocentric point of view. The question of animals transcends geographical and cultural boundaries.

KEYWORDS

transnationalism, ecocriticism, ecocinema, film studies, animal ethics

Introduction

Bong Joon-ho's *Okja* romanticises interspecies relationships, as exemplified by the bond between a South Korean girl, Mija (Ahn Seo-hyun), and the titular super-pig, a humongous fictional creature—a mutant pig that resembles a hybrid of a hippopotamus and a manatee. The two confront *Okja*'s producer, the two-faced Mirando Corporation, an exploitative company disguised as an environmentally friendly corporation dedicated to resolving global hunger. The film opens with Lucy Mirando (Tilda Swinton) introducing the discovery of the super-pigs, with 26 prototypes, including *Okja*, being sent to various locations around the world and raised by local farmers. A decade later, *Okja* is crowned the best super-pig at a fiesta to entice the public to indulge in super-pig sausages. The super-pigs are commodified. They are a symbol of revolutionary food production. The film reveals in the slaughterhouse scene the ferocity of the industrial-scale breeding and slaughtering of the super-pigs. It exposes the savage teeth of consumerism behind the friendly smile of corporate capitalism (Kermode, 2017). It draws our attention to the realities of industrial farming and how animals are treated as property to meet an end—to be consumed and maximise profits—rather than as sentient beings. At its core, the film focuses on Mija's quest to free *Okja* from the hands of capitalism, highlighting the dual roles of animals, which seem to coexist as both pet-like family members and sources of food.

Okja, a joint production between South Korea and the United States' streaming platform, Netflix, is an important example of coproduction and the role of media platforms as new financial sources. Netflix invested \$50 million in *Okja* as part of its expansion strategy in Asia (Jin, 2020). Whilst the influence of Netflix is significant, this article focuses on the film's subtle challenge to human dominance over animals within the context of transnationalism, which delivers an ethical response to transpacific capitalism. Bong's films are capable of providing a cultural forum for addressing pressing social issues that audiences can mobilise and discuss (Lee, 2020). For instance, the transnational production *Snowpiercer* (2013) explores global politics, class conflicts, and polarisation, whilst *The Host* (2006) highlights humanity's irresponsibility to nature by dumping formaldehyde into Seoul's Han River, creating a mutated monster. *Okja* sparked discussion about the modern meat industry. The film piques audiences' interest in vegetarianism and veganism, prompting us to reconsider our meat consumption (Kohn, 2017; Niazi, 2017; Barber, 2017). In stark contrast to the monster in *The Host*, who possesses an insatiable hunger for human prey, the super-pigs fall prey to humans' gluttonous appetite for meat.

This article explores two key aspects: first, it discusses how animals—specifically super-pigs—are integrated into the fabric of capitalism, reflecting on this issue through an ecocritical lens and considering transnational modes of production and distribution. Secondly, it invites readers to contemplate the dilemma of consuming super-pigs from a biophilic perspective, with the aim of mitigating anthropocentrism and highlighting that the question of animals transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. This article does not impose an absolute resolution to human-animal reconciliation; instead, it offers an ecocritical analysis and viewpoint on cinema culture about animals. The significance of Bong's *Okja* in the discourse of human-animal relationships is that it catalyses a dialectical perspective—it is both a critique of human exceptionalism in a capitalistic framework and an embrace of the technological rendering of livestock and the advantage of global distribution via the giant streaming platform of Netflix. This duality invites us to reflect on our own complicity in the systems of exploitation and consumption of non-human lives in an increasingly interconnected world.

Okja: eco- and transnational cinema

The super-pig project brings to mind Noske's (1997) concept of the animal-industrial complex (AIC)—a systematic exploitation of nonhuman animals on an industrial scale, highlighting the interrelationships amongst various industries in their production and distribution processes, thereby forming a 'complex.' The answer to why humans exploit so many animals is found in the way in which animal industries are embedded in a capitalistic fabric (Noske, 1997). Noske explains that this human-animal relationship entangles a web of exploitative practises in which one type of exploitation is carried over to another level; dominance relations also exist between various human groups. Noske's AIC emphasises intersectionality. It not only refers to factory farming in and of itself but also to the various legal, economic, technological, and even cultural apparatuses that intersect to produce farmed animals under capitalism. Twine (2012) broadens the discussion surrounding the AIC by incorporating the entertainment-industrial complex into these intersections.

He characterises the entertainment-industrial complex as a film industry and zoos that exploit animals for profitable entertainment.

The Mirando Corporation's operation is an apt illustration of the animal-industrial complex, and the film itself is an example of the animal-entertainment-industrial complex. The super-pig project is based not only on human needs but also on the principles of greed and profit. It involves dominance relations between various human groups, such as the Mirando Corporation and the local farmer, represented by Mija's grandfather. The corporation uses Mija's grandfather to align with its strategy for executing the super-pig project, portraying Mija and her grandfather as farmers who prioritise traditional practises in raising *Okja* in the rural mountains, as opposed to industrial-scale breeding and slaughtering. Lucy Mirando uses an eco-friendly strategy to mask the truth about the producing and mass slaughtering of GM super-pigs. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes increasingly evident that the choices made by Mija are not so much about economics as they are deeply ethical. Mija is determined to rescue *Okja* from slaughter and becomes involved with the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) in their plan to reveal the truth behind the creation of the super-pigs. These choices show her fighting against the dominant paradigm of Western capitalism. This ethical dimension challenges the prevailing capitalist mindset, which focuses on ends rather than means, and underpins the part that meat production and consumption play.

According to Ingram (2013), an "eco-film" is defined as a film that has conceptual content that more or less explicitly promotes ecological ideas or, more generally, an ecological sensibility. This conceptual content is usually understood to heighten viewers' awareness of concepts such as ecocentrism and ecological interconnectedness (Ingram, 2013). *Okja* addresses underlying questions related to an ecological understanding of industrial farming and the excessive human consumption of livestock. It forces us to confront the often-overlooked realities of consumption. Bong's cinematic sociology in *Okja* indicts a global phenomenon of neoliberal capitalism that allows corporate greed to gloss over serious issues of environmental crises and animal cruelty (Lee, 2020). In navigating the animal-industrial complex, Mija embodies the conciliation struggle to bridge the ontological differences between humans and animals who are fated to be slaughtered under the pressures of the industrialised world.

Okja employs the friendly-looking super-pigs and Mija's special affinity with *Okja* to critique the AIC, whilst simultaneously serving as a profitable form of entertainment within the mainstream film industry. The film weaves together technology—employing cutting-edge digital effects to create the computer-generated (CG) super-pig, alongside bioengineering technology within its narrative—and cultural apparatuses, such as transnational film production and the cultural diversity between the United States and South Korea, to expose the cruel exploitation of farmed animals under capitalism. *Okja* presents itself as a spectacle, drawing attention and offering entertainment value. Whilst mainstream cinema is often derided for perpetuating consumerist ideologies and disparaged for not having an actual ecological or environmental contribution (Kääpä and Gustafsson, 2013), this article positions *Okja* as an eco-film—a significant part of ecocinema. The film represents both a hindrance and a connection to the reconciliation between humans and animals. The film constructs *Okja* as both a sylvan soulmate and a profit source (Gorbman, 2018). The portrayal of *Okja* as the quintessence of nature—ironically, given that *Okja* is entirely a digital

creation—highlights the creature's ingenuousness and nature's untamed beauty. This, in turn, serves to amplify the evils of capitalism, which is also ironic considering that Bong's film is financed by global capitalism (Gorbman, 2018). The film's capitalistic nature risks exploitation, like a barricade that separates humanity from nature, but the film also serves as a critique of AIC, which connects humans to animals.

The super-pig project involves crossing nationals' boundaries, implicating a transnational concern, or rather, evoking a universal ecocritical awareness around the globe. As the term "transnational" suggests crossings of borders on multiple levels, it is essential to examine its applicability within ecocinema studies (Kääpä and Gustafsson, 2013). The film's streaming distribution enables spectators to engage with the diegetic world and its connection to our everyday food consumption in the easiest way possible. *Okja* does not only address a Western audience but does contain characteristics of Hollywood blockbusters and genre conventions that can offer a global audience entertainment and harsh facts in an approachable way (Spaethen, 2020). For example, Mija, ALF activists, and Mirando's henchmen engage in a riotously entertaining chase to rescue *Okja* in an underground shopping mall that can be both hilarious and poignant. The film explores ethical issues related to animal welfare and corporate greed, blending spectacle, compassion, and critique whilst maintaining the thrilling elements of mainstream cinema. It offers both an entertaining narrative and a powerful commentary on the relationship between humanity, capitalism, and nature.

Transnational modes of film production and distribution can effectively address ecological tensions, fostering a more inclusive understanding of environmental ethics (Brereton, 2016). Rather than perceiving transnationalism as merely a simplistic notion of niche cinema or cross-border film production, Kääpä and Gustafsson (2013) suggest the value of viewing transnationalism as a framework for comprehending how all ecocritical discussions are intertwined with culture, whilst also transcending these limiting notions. They contend that transnational ecocinema enables us to understand how films link ecological issues to cultural contexts whilst also striving to detach them from these contexts to provide a broader perspective on the ecosystem (Kääpä and Gustafsson, 2013). The influence of globalised streaming services, therefore, entails a crucial obligation to engage with ethical responsibilities on a global scale. In this context, *Okja* challenges the centrality of nations in ecological thinking whilst also acknowledging that nations persist not only in ecopolitics but also in ecocinema, which leads to a reframing of transnationalism.

To love or to eat the super-pig

The transnationalism of the film extends to post-production, where it is a collaboration between the US-based visual effects (VFX) company Method Studios and the Korean VFX studio 4th Creative Party. Method Studios took the helm for most of the VFX and animation for the film. The shy titular creature is intended to be a source of affection, inviting touching and cuddling whilst maintaining a massive heft that would appeal to the greedy food industry (Tsui, 2022). Despite *Okja* being an imaginary creature, her design, skin texture, locomotion, and gait are based on real animals, such as the hippopotamus, elephant, and manatee, and aspects of canine behaviour are also included (Failes, 2017; Buder, 2017; O'Falt, 2018).

According to Erik de Boer, the VFX supervisor for the film, the character studies possess the appropriate musculature and skin definition (cited in Buder, 2017). The volumetric weight and momentum and the overall Newtonian simulation render the CG super-pig to appear healthy, as though one could harvest a lot of pork from her mass (de Boer, cited in Buder, 2017). These tactics contribute to creating a digital creature that is imaginatively equivalent to a real flesh-and-blood material being. The healthy-looking super-pigs may whet one's appetite, but their benign presence mobilises an empathetic connection at the same time.

For the slaughterhouse scene, the production designer, Kevin Thompson, explains, "No real meat could be put on the set for sanitary reasons, so all the meat was manufactured using silicone forms and hand-painted, such as the super-pig-sized livers moving on the conveyor belts" (Thompson, cited in Ward, 2018). The headless super-pig carcasses hanging in the background of the abattoir, including the one being sawn in half in front of Mija, are artificial creations from the Korean VFX studio 4th Creative Party (de Boer, cited in Ward, 2018). The success of the VFX studios in generating realistic 3D renderings of *Okja* and the other super-pigs in the film evokes not only a tactile desire to touch them but also a desire to eat (or not to eat) them. It is as though one were touching a film with one's eyes, creating a synaesthetic experience of haptic visuality (Marks, 2000). In this context, the haptic visuality of the CG super-pig encourages a bodily relationship between the spectator and the image. This complex emotional response compels spectators to confront their ethical considerations regarding the treatment of sentient beings as objects—or, more appropriately, as subjects worthy of love or food. Such a dilemma alludes to the 'meat paradox' (Niemyjska et al., 2018), where individuals have to reconcile the pleasure of eating meat with the distressing recognition of the animal suffering involved in meat production.

Eating, too, is a tactile and physical experience. *Okja*'s physicality and behaviours are ostensibly cute and pet-like, akin to a dog, but she also has the characteristics of a pig, as per the title of her 'species'—'super-pig.' Unlike pigs, who are rarely pets, or dogs, who are rarely eaten, *Okja* conflates pets and food from the start. This conveys the tension between how the super-pig can be highly palatable and the resistance to eating it. The super-pigs bring to mind the question 'to love or to eat?' in the first chapter of Melanie Joy's *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows* (Joy, 2010). Joy compares a dog and a pig for food and interrogates why certain foods are considered palatable, whilst others become virtually inedible. Joy (2010) describes, 'The stew's main ingredient—meat—did not really change at all; it was animal flesh to begin with, and it remained that way.' Joy proposes that humans react differently to different types of meat not because of physical differences but because our perception of them is different. People tend to consider dogs as "lovable," "friendly," and "protective," whilst pigs are "dirty," "stupid," and "lazy." Joy argues that it is absurd that we eat pigs and love dogs and do not even know why; most people do not consider the species of animals we eat, leading to an industry that kills ten billion animals annually.

Bong insists that *Okja* has to look kind, introverted, and sad (cited in Jung, 2017). Aesthetically, cute relies on big eyes, round heads, and fat bellies; it tumbles, toddles, waddles, rolls, and tricks itself into kindness (Richard, 2022). *Okja* waddles and rolls as she roams in the forest. Her tender gaze, round head and body, and fat belly convey cuteness. 'Cuteness' refers to the 'look' of objects (or subjects) that

appear to be appealingly powerless—soft and malleable (Ngai, 2022). *Okja*'s cuteness conveys an impression of her vulnerability, adorableness, amiability, and ingenuousness. The creature's cuteness creates an ethical dilemma: eating the super-pig may cause the same moral discomfort as if one were to eat one's own pet dog. From a different perspective, the super-pig was bred to be eaten. The super-pig's enormous body mass, which adds to its cuteness, could potentially stimulate one's appetite. Joy (2010) explains that what is most striking about our selection of edible and inedible animals is not the presence of disgust but the absence of it. The super-pig's cuteness nullifies disgust. Thus, the tactile aspect of super-pigs is tied into the question of whether to love them or eat them.

The Mirando Corporation, advocating for the production of bioengineered, genetically modified super-pigs, posits that the reproducibility of animal life is solely determined by its ability to satisfy human appetite. The factory-farming capitalists and their operations suggest that industrialised countries consume the animals they can reproduce most efficiently and cheaply. Animals are quantified to curb global hunger concerning the human population from the vantage point of their reproducibility. 82% of starving children live in countries where food is fed to animals in livestock systems, which are eaten by more well-off individuals in developed countries, such as the US, UK, and Europe (Blunden, 2021). We could feed every human being an adequate diet if we turned animal feed into food for humans. Therefore, defending GMOs is like giving a drink of water to a drowning man. Transnational capitalism drives the mass production of livestock animals. The super-pigs are fatally vulnerable to bio-capitalist exploitation. The film enframes them as mere stock from an economic perspective. *Okja*'s survival is, ironically, an exchange based on the value of a tiny gold pig.

Okja encapsulates collective desires to look and eat in the Anthropocene epoch. Eating inevitably consumes and destroys the object; "to look but not eat is to accept the existence of things beyond our own satiation" (Pick, 2018). The super-pig oscillates between the extremes of looking and eating. It prompts us to consider the "non-devouring gaze" (Pick, 2018)—to experience pleasure in looking without the compulsion to consume, acquire, or destroy. This perspective encourages a more compassionate engagement with nonhuman animals. By embracing this non-devouring gaze, we can cultivate a profound appreciation for the beauty and complexity of life. It may seem impossible to completely escape the violence against animals that permeates and sustains daily life. Nonetheless, the film's narrative signifies a symbolic refusal to engage in animal cruelty. Ultimately, the dilemma of whether to love or eat the super-pigs does not seek definitive solutions; instead, it should remain an enduring conundrum in terms of consumption, both visual and gastronomic. *Okja* underscores the role of digital technologies as significant instruments for grappling with this dilemma whilst also fostering a dialogue regarding human exceptionalism within the context of transnational capitalism. The film exemplifies the convergence and reciprocal influence of eco-cinema and transnational cinema studies. It marks an essential intervention in the prevailing culture of animal consumption and heralds a future for posthumanist cinema.

Conclusion

Okja has the potential to radically transform us and instil a moral obligation to care for other living beings. Bong's aesthetic choice to make the harsh realities of industrial livestock farming visible and

accessible, along with the method of film distribution, calls attention to the relationship between transnationalism and ecocinema. The nuance of film production and distribution, which crosses national boundaries, urges the need to reevaluate both the interconnectedness of human cultures and all beings. The film transforms the reality that livestock experience into a cultural product of the film industry, which is then distributed and consumed; this visual consumption impacts our society in the material world. It is a critique of the animal-entertainment-industrial complex and yet an embrace of benevolent human-animal relationships. The film's transnationalism effectively targets the inherent anthropocentrism in human interactions with animals. *Okja* transcends not only geographical and cultural borders but also the human-animal divide by posing a fundamental question: should we love or eat the animal?

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