Cinema in Your Hand, Cinema on the Street: The Aesthetics of Korean Cinema

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In November 20, 2002, a short, two-minute digital video with the funky name of *Loafer and Egg* (Lee Hee-Cheul) was introduced to the Korean audience—not on the familiar screen of the movie theatre, but on the small screen of a mobile phone. Paired with two other videos exclusively created for the mobile phone screen, *Project X* (Han Sang-Hee) and *My Good Partner* (Lee Sang-Ui), it marked the beginning of what became known later as "mobile cinema" in Korea. It was also one of the earliest examples of moving images created and serviced specifically for the mobile phone. Commissioned by SK telecom, the largest mobile service provider in Korea, whose 3G mobile multimedia content service (called June) was launched earlier in 2002, this first generation of original mobile video content successfully drew public attention to the newly invented mobile screen. More importantly, as the industry-leading prototype that originated from the local context, whose highly advanced information technologies and innovative forms of new media services were well known in the global digital media scene, this Korean mobile cinema represented the discursive and industrial practices behind the transformation of cinema into "digitized content" in the convergent media environment.

Mobile cinema is born out of a shift or transition of our media environment and the paradigm of techno-culture on a global scale heading in a direction toward "personal screen culture" and "media convergence." With a disparate pace and configurations in diverse local contexts, this continual, yet accelerated media transition, has reformulated the boundaries of traditional media forms and institutions, whether in cinema, television, or print journalism. Within this paradigm, digital technology functions as a transformative mechanism, which renders and delivers cinematic and televisual images as "digitized content" to diverse "display channels": that is, multiplied and multifunctional screens. In particular, mobile technology plays a key role in diversifying display channels and cultivating convergent media culture. Not only did the creation of mobile technology expand the horizon of personal communication, but it also introduced a new type of mobile screen experience based on its changed status as the "mutable mobile,"[1] a new portal where information technologies converge and create new display formats for multimedia contents. Various portable devices and wireless services, such as the mobile phone, PDA (Personal Digital Assistant), PSP (Play Station Portable), PMP (Portable Media Player), and Mobile TV, employ "mobility" as the predominant mode of media experience emerged as convergent media platforms that represent rapidly expanding personal screen culture.

After the successful experiments with the first generation of mobile cinema, SK Telecom moved forward with a larger scale mobile content project *Yigong: Twenty Identities* (2002) and the mobile drama *Five Stars* (2004). This original mobile content explored mobile screen-specific aesthetic forms, and, thus, represented the concrete

aesthetic and cultural imagination of ideal moving images for the mobile screen. By the time *Five Stars* was produced, the industrial practice of producing, marketing, and consuming original mobile content established a set pattern, and the aesthetic characteristics of original mobile content become conventionalized. Furthermore, key aesthetic features, in terms of narrative structure and *mise-en-scene*, and diverse experiments with mobile screen-specific forms, introduced a new visual language on which subsequent mobile video content continue to rely.

This article's analysis of the formal characteristics of early examples of original mobile video content focuses on the *Yigong* series, which has influenced ongoing aesthetic experiments of digital moving-image content. A detailed textual analysis of the *Yigong* series will illuminate the way in which the particular cultural context of Korea shaped the formulation of convergent aesthetics of mobile video content. I argue that this new convergent aesthetics is created by the practice of re-appropriating existing media conventions and transforming them into new narrative structures, visual style, modes of address, and interactive protocols. Upon consideration of the broader context of changes of media environment, this new aesthetics of the *Yigong* series, and of mobile cinema in general, also reflects a new participatory digital culture of young people that centres on Internet and mobile media.

Defining Mobile Cinema: *Yigong (Twenty Identities)* series

Figure.1 Shots from twenty movies in *Yigong* series. *Yigong* DVD, 2004.

Technologically, original mobile video content is a trope of digital video, digitally generated images similar to online streaming multimedia such as YouTube videos, web cinema, "little movies," and QuickTime movies that appeared in the 1990s. The technical constraints of the mobile screen pre-condition the forms of original mobile content at the preproduction, delivery, and display stage. Taking digital technology as its ontological precondition, mobile cinema succeeds in what early experiments of web cinema explored.[2] First, in the case of content for mobile phone, generally, the content is shot in digital video or re-edited into a series of short episodes that run between approximately 1 to 10 minutes (up to 30 minutes for mobile TV content), and are then transferred to MPEG 4 file format for wireless transmission for which movie frames are readjusted down

to 12 to 20 frames per second, as opposed to the standard 24 frames per second of a conventional film. It is then screened on an LCD screen, which is the smallest screen among currently available screen formats, varying from 2 x 4cm to 4 x 7cm depending on the mobile devices. Aesthetically, they are what Holly Willis defines as a "new form of digital media art situated at the intersection of formerly separate realms of filmmaking, music video, animation, print design, live club events, and video art"[3] in the post-medium condition, which is metaphorically eulogized with the "end of cinema"[4] thesis or "death of video art."[5] Coming at the ends of every medium—in the modernist sense—original mobile video content enjoys the liberty of "reworking the roles of images"[6] or "remediating"[7] the old and familiar media forms and our relations to them into new hybrid ones.

Yigong: Twenty Identities is the first mobile cinema series in which the Korean film industry was actively involved from the conceptual stage in envisioning the potential of the mobile phone as a new and alternative venue for movie display. The genesis of *Yigong,* according to the story behind its production, is somewhat accidental; although it was anticipated, it was not pre-determined. According to SK Telecom, the Korean Film Academy (KFA), one of the prestigious professional film academies and a cradle for numerous important filmmakers in Korea, proposed that SK Telecom produce a special omnibus movie series, which was to be a part of a celebration of the 20th anniversary of the KFA. Participating as a co-producer for this project, SK Telecom funded the entire project, allotting $20,000 for each movie on the condition each were premiered solely on the display channel June beginning December 8, 2003. In commemoration of its twenty years of history, twenty KFA alumni, including such rising and established popular filmmakers responsible for the recent renaissance of Korean cinema as Huh Jin-Ho, Bong Jun-Ho, and Min, Gyu-Dong, made twenty digital shorts with the shared theme of "twenty." Following this thread, twenty movies, each approximately five to fifteen minutes in length, were shot, using HD cameras, in two weeks and then edited in two weeks. After the first run on June, they were released on DVD.[8] The project name, *Yigong,* succinctly represents the multilayered meaning of this unique project, as the Korean word *Yigong* is a homonym that could simultaneously signify the "number twenty" (read phonemically), "alone but together" and "a different space" (written in different Chinese characters semantically). Considering this genesis, *Yigong* is an outcome of the cooperation between the movie industry and the mobile industry in keeping pace with the changing media environment.

Without June as a preconceived display channel, *Yigong* would not be much different from any common digital movie series, as it was officially designed as *Digital Shorts Omnibus Project: Twenty Identities.* However, initially introduced as mobile cinema, it inevitably suggests a particular model of "micro cinema" born and situated in the intersection where conventional discourse of cinema and discourse of new technology—digital and mobile—conjoined. In other words, it expands the dimension of each within a more radically changed media environment, where the boundaries that once demarcated media experience between on-line and off-line, analogue and digital, static and mobile, commercial and art, and public and private have become more flexible and mutable. However, it is the legacy of cinema—its discourses and conventions—that not only circumscribes the mode of production and consumption of these movies, but also "re-mediates" the creation of formal characteristics of moving images for the mobile screen. In general, Korean mobile cinema presents five outstanding tendencies of "imaging" cinema for the mobile screen: most notably, tension between narrative integration and exhibitionist aesthetics, serial narrative structure, interactive form, intermedial/convergent genres, and a re-appropriation of familiar content. Movies of *Yigong* series develop variations of these formal tendencies in respective ways.

Mobile Cinema of Attraction: Cinematic Register

Most of *Yigong* movies integrate this consideration of medium-specific and technical conditions of the mobile screen into disparate formal aesthetics. In general, the *Yigong* series tends to strategically mobilize visual spectacle as the mode of address over the conventional narrative. Some rely on proven cinematic tactics to appropriate genres, such as action. Jung Hyun-Seong, an art director in *The Twenty's Law,* explicitly advocates this strategy, asking, "[m]elodrama in 5 min[sic]? It should be an action movie in order to grasp the viewer's attention."[9] However, *The Twenty's Law* is one of few *Yigong* movies produced with immediate consideration of specific generic conventions, and most of *Yigong* movies remain ambiguous in terms of genre, while attempting to tackle given obstacles through diverse experiments of cinematic and non-cinematic languages.

Given that the length of the story is technically limited to no longer than 10 minutes, narratives tend to be episodic or situational. Spatial backgrounds are mostly indoors, whether it is a convenience store or a nondescript, closed room (*Alone Together, Sutda, At 2.0 AM Convenience Store,* and *Fucked Up Shoes!*), while a few of movies found a way to bring the out-of-doors into the small screen (*Runner's High, It's Different on Mobile Queen, The Twenty's Law,* and *Sink & Rise*). This spatio-temporally condensed and compressed narrative, the "sense of fragmented moment," is partly attributed to the technical conditions of the digital video camera, which enables filmmakers swift, handy and easy mobility. Intended to be digital short videos on the small screen, movies of *Yigong*, with small stories in a real world, embody the cinematic narrative in documentary style and thus generate the increased sense of "intimacy" for the viewer, pertinent to the personal and private nature of the mobile screen. Interestingly, however, rather than delivering the naturalistic representation of fleeting moment, each employs various convergent formal strategies, which highlight visual display, tendencies of mobile spectacle introduced by the first generation of mobile cinema, and, thus, produce what I call *mobile cinema of attraction.*[10]

The Twenty's Law (Cho Min-Ho), *It's Different on Mobile Queen* (Lee Young-Jae), and *At 2.0 AM Convenience Store* (Kim Tae-Gyun), prominently demonstrate formal traits of *mobile cinema of attraction*, particular strategies of incorporating exhibitionist aesthetics, in respective ways. *At 2.0 AM Convenience Store* presents an archetypical example of experimenting with image-centered narrative construction in consideration of the technical conditions of the mobile screen. At first glance, *At 2.0 AM Convenience Store,* a short story about a boy and a girl's nonchalant encounter at a convenience store and their emotional exchange, looks like a stylish music video due to its heavy use of background music, appealing images enhanced by a soft-focus filter and high-key lighting, minimal dialogue, and foregrounded mood over action. Shot in an actual location of a convenience store, *At 2.0 AM Convenience Store* attempts to overcome the physical limitations of the location with various camera angles—tilted, high and low—and montages of full-shot and multiple close-up shots (Fig. 2-9), whose alteration creates a rhythm, breaking an otherwise monotonous and stationary *mise-en-scene,* in a confined space and frame. At the climatic moment, the movie utilizes still-cuts of two main protagonists' faces for dramatic effect. As seen in Figure 7 and Figure 8, two close-up shots seen from characters' points-of-view suddenly turn from color to monochrome, with a zoom-out effect, where the characters fixate their gaze on each other, focusing the viewer's attention on a rare, revealing moment of the characters' psychology. Eventually, the visual closure of the narrative suggests their possible romantic connection by converging two split screens with images of their faces into one wiping shot (Fig. 9).

Figure 2-3 Titled overhead angle shots (left & centre), Figure 4 Surveillance camera shot (right)

Figure 5 Establishment and full shots

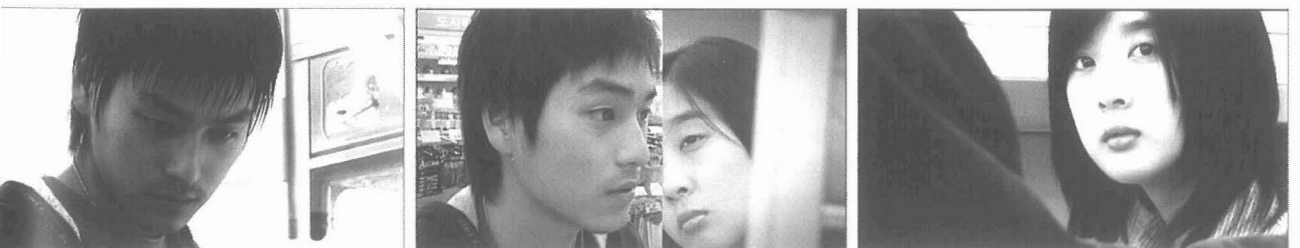
Figure 6 Close-up shots of objects

Figure 7-8 Inserted stills cuts (left & right)
Figure 9 Wiping with split screens (centre), all in *At 2.0 AM Convenience Store*, *Yigong* DVD, 2004

Figure 10-25 Compilation of close-up shots from *Yigong* movies

In fact, the salient use of (extreme) close-up shots in tight angles is one of the most predominant formal traits of *Yigong* movies and literally the most popular cinematic register mobilized in mobile cinema in general (Fig. 10-25). As in *At 2.0 AM Convenience Store,* close-up shots serve not only to fix the viewer's (and the character's) gaze on the character and significant objects for smooth, narrative progression within the limited space of the small screen,[11] but also deliver the emotional states of the characters to the viewer, which is a difficult effect to achieve within the limited spatio-temporal frames of mobile cinema (*To the 21st* [Fig.10], *Runner's High* [Fig.12], *Neighbors* [Fig.20]). At the same time, however, along with this more conventional use of a close-up shot in the service of providing a narrative clue or the object of emotional identification, a close-up shot also functions to render images into (often, inanimate) objects of spectacle on its own (*At 2.0 AM Convenience Store* [Fig. 6]), generating a "tableau effect" that is also produced with the insertion of still-cuts and stationary, fixed camera shots.

In her discussion of the Quick Time Movie, Vivian Sobchack argues that the "tableau effect" is an ontological characteristic of the "little movie," as its "miniature size" inevitably affects our sense of space and time.[12] While, in general, this phenomenological understanding of the miniature-as-tableau is relevant to understanding the material presence of the mobile screen as a "miniature screen," I also would like to point out that examples of mobile cinemas—miniature (miniature images) on top of another miniature (miniature screen)—reveal a tension between the desire to achieve narrative with expository closure, and resorting to cinematic techniques that self-reflexively appropriate the "tableau effect." Although fragmented and situational, most of mobile cinema attempts to construct a narrative within condensed and compressed space, with the support of various cinematic techniques.

This "tableau effect" is enhanced by the prevalent employment of the stationary camera, shot with a single, vantage-point fixed camera, which foreground the theatrical display. A trope of mobile cinema, notably, *Sutda, Fucked Up Shoes,* and *Neighborhood,* foreground this "tableau effect" as their central structure. *Fucked Up Shoes* explicitly employs this effect as a central formal strategy, as *Fucked Up Shoes* constructs its entire narrative with a succession of events captured in three fixed and confrontational camera positions (Fig. 26). The camera

Figure 26 Tableau shots from three camera positions, *Fucked Up Shoes*

does not move, but displays theatrical skits happening around mixed-up shoes at the threshold of a restaurant from stationary and observational positions, while alternating between fast and slow motion, and thus adding a visual rhythm to the motionless shots. Through these spatially fixed, yet temporally variable tableau shots, *Fucked Up Shoes* records people's behaviors, gestures of taking off shoes, and the arrangement of colorful shoes in front of a doormat/shoe shelf, and thereafter presents characters' bodily movements and the shoe arrangements as its main subject. *Fucked Up Shoes*' strategy of relying on the theatrical mode of presentational display, without elaborate cinematic manipulations, is one example of tackling the technical specificity of the mobile screen, where its small screen size hinders the immersive experience.

Most of all, this centrality of (stationary) images in constructing narratives is intensified by the empowered presence of background music or sound effects over the dialogue. On the one hand, heavy presence of the music in the foreground, rather than in the background—whether it functions as the defining feature (e.g., the director claimed *Neighborhood* was a "video dance") or as a tool to create mood (*At 2.0 AM Convenience Store*)—illuminates the *intermedial* aspect of these movies situated at the intersection of conventional cinema and music video. In most *Yigong* movies, on the other hand, dialogue exists at a minimal level (*At 2.0 AM Convenience Store, Pass Me, and Twenty Questions*), or not at all (*Twenty, Alone Together, Neighborhood,* and *Looking for Sex*), providing room for voice-over narration (*Sutda, Runner's High and My Baby*). As dialogue does not perform its usual function as a central drive of narrative progression, more attention is drawn to the montage of the visual images, whose effects of exhibitionist display are intentionally coordinated.

The Legacy of Cinema

In sum, the ranges of stylistic and thematic strategies that *Yigong* movies employ to tackle the mobile screen are diverse and sometimes contradictory in their effects. Specifically, it is notable that the search for the ideal aesthetics within the *Yigong* movies reaches out to diverse visual media for inspirations, while sustaining an association with the traditional cinema. The predominant tendency of exploring presentational formal strategies examined in *Yigong*, in particular, reinstates the legacy of a cinema of attraction in contemporary media content in the nuanced way. Whether the effect of this presentational cinematic aesthetics is to serve realistic, yet fragmented narratives or to intensify the "tableau effect," these aesthetics are the main operating principle to make mobile cinemas *spectacular* visual objects. In the end, moving images within the small frame

of the mobile phone form part of the spectacle, the condition of contemporary life that the mobile viewer encounters and in which he or she navigates on a daily basis. Constantly moving and watching, the female *flânerie* in *Pass Me,* emblematically incarnates the *idea* of mobile cinema based on the epiphany of mobility—mobile spectacle, mobile viewer, and the mobile screen—in different spaces that *Yigong* dreamed.

Cinema, in this sense, is not dead (although its celluloid origin may have become a memory), but is rejuvenated more than ever, persistently operating as a cultural interface *par excellence* of original images that mediate and educate the cultural experience of any new forms of moving images. What cinema might have lost is its institutional power as a public technology; that is, the decline of cinema as public space. The media transition accompanying digital technology, latent since the early days of media history throughout the development of television, and convergent industrial practices that head toward the "one-source-multi-use" paradigm, disperse the location of the cinematic experience into diverse venues outside of the ritualized social space of theatre, and thus "privatizing" theatre for the "de-centralized user/spectator." However, with the mobile screen this decentralized user is *spatialized* and *materialized*, as opposed to what early digital theories predicted about immaterialized subjectivity in virtual space. The mobile screen keeps the controlling subject, who can immediately control the screen and whose subjectivity is always particularly spatialized (in diverse viewing locations across private and public space) and materialized, deeply situated within his or her distracting environment. This alludes to what early cinema has dreamt as its future, a mobile cinema dependent on what Lauren Rabinovitz calls "*the reflexivity of embodied spectatorship*"[13] (my emphasis). The true meaning of individual mobile cinema and screen media itself depends on the *situation-specific,* personal viewing experience in a particular networked place, through interdependent technologies, and across social arrangements. Mobile cinema, therefore, embodies the advent of personal screen media through its nomadic display of cinematic imaginary, the aesthetic possibility (intersected) in the context of network, and the interactive relationship with users within ubiquitous digital screen culture.

ENDNOTES

1 Geoff Cooper, "The Mutable Mobile: Social Theory in the Wireless World," *Wireless World: Social and Interactional Aspects of the Mobile Age,* eds. B. Brown, N. Green, R. Harper (London: Springer, 2002), 19-31

2 Early web cinema experiments in both commercial and artistic sectors advocated the potential of freer artistic expressions and more direct communications with audiences on the computer screen, although they were short-lived after the so-called "dot-com crash." See, Holly Willis, *New Digital Cinema: Reinventing the Moving Image* (London: Willflower Press, 2005) for further analysis.

3 Holly Willis, *New Digital Cinema: Reinventing the Moving Image* (London: Willflower Press, 2005), 3

4 Anne Friedberg, "The End of Cinema: Multimedia and Technological Change," *Film Theory and Criticism* (Sixth Edition), Leo Baudry and Marshall Cohen, eds. (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

5 Michael Rash, "Visions after Television: Technocultural Convergence, Hypermedia, and New Media Arts Field," *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices,* Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

6 Holly Willis, 3.

7 John David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999)

8 *Yigong* series include: *Under a Big Tree* (Park Kyoung-Hee), *Sutda* (Kim Eui-Seok), *A Runner's High* (Kim So-Young), *Innocence* (Oh Byoung-Chul), *Fucked up Shoes!* (Yoo Young-Sik), *Twenty Millimeter Thick* (Lee Hyun-Seong), *The Twenty's Law* (Cho Min-Ho), *Pass me* (Kim Tae-Yong), *It's different on Mobile Queen* (Lee Young-Jae), *Alone Together* (Huh Jin-Ho), *Twenty* (Park Ki-Yong), *Secrets and Lies* (Min Kyu-Dong), *Looking for Sex* (Lee Yong-Bae), *Race* (Kwon Chil-In), *Oh, My Baby* (Jung Byung-Gak), *Twenty Questions* (Lee Soo-Yeon), *To the 21st* (Jang Hyun-Soo), *Neighborhood* (Hwang Qu-Dok), *At 2.0 AM Convenience Store* (Kim Tae-Kyun), *Sink & Rise* (Bong Joon-Ho).

9 Jeong Hye-Seong, "20: Yigong Series the 2nd," *Cinebus* 169 (25 November 2003): 40

10 I use this term inspired by Tom Gunning's nominal discussion of the "cinema of attraction," which reinterprets the significance of spectacle in the history of cinema; Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," *Film and Theory: An Anthology,* Robert Stam and Toby Miller, eds., (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 229-235; "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," *Film Theory and Criticism,* Leo Baudry and Marshall Cohen, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 818-832.

11 Other examples include, *To the 21st* (Fig. 16), *Alone Together* (Fig. 11), *Sutda* (Fig. 23; 25), and *It's different on Mobile Queen* (Fig.14; 22).

12 Vivian Sobchack, "Nostalgia for a Digital Object: Regrets on the Quickening of QuickTime," *Millennium Film Journal* 34 (Fall 1999); available online: http://www.mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ34/VivianSobchack.html

13 Lauren Rabinovitz, "More than Movies: A History of Somatic Visual Culture through Hales' Tours, IMAX and Motion Simulation Rides," *Memory Bites: History, Technology, and Digital Culture,* Lauren Rabinovitz and Abraham Gail, eds. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 100