AN ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND FILM STYLE OF SOUTH KOREAN CULT FILMS[*]

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Abstract

This study focuses on how narrative structure and film style contribute to the cult status of contemporary South Korean cinema. Four films—Oldboy (2003), Memories of Murder (2003), Lady Vengeance (2005), and Mother (2009)— are analyzed through qualitative textual analysis grounded in narrative theory and film stylistics. The analysis covers both narrative elements (plot, character, viewpoint, theme) and stylistic features (mise-en-scène, camerawork, lighting, sound, editing, color).

Findings show frequent use of non-linear plotting, unreliable or imited narration, and ethically uncertain endings. These narrative strategies converge with symbolic imagery and emotionally intense performances to stage trauma, revenge, guilt, and identity crisis. Stylistically, spatial constriction, controlled camera movement, low-key lighting, minimal sound design, and an alternation between long takes and sharp montage intensify emotional realism and moral uncertainty. Color functions as a visual signal of meaning —muted palettes punctuated by saturated highlights—embedding meaning within the visual field. Taken together, these features constitute a hybrid cinematic language that

marries global genre conventions with South Korean cultural themes such as haan and social critique.

The study identifiesa recurrent arc (setup–incitement–escalation–confrontation–open resolution) while showing how deviations from classical continuity foster cult appeal. It argues that South Korean cult films serve as vehicles of cultural memory and public sentiment rather than mere shock aesthetics, expanding prevailing accounts of cult cinema beyond camp or excess. The conclusions inform pedagogy, criticism, and comparative work on Asian and global cult cinemas.

Keywords: South Korean cult Films, Narrative structure, Film style, Emotional resonance.

Introduction

The concept of cult cinema has long fascinated scholars and cinephiles alike for its defiance of mainstream conventions and its passionate fan base. Cult films are often recognized for their unconventional narratives, subversive aesthetics, and the cultural phenomena they create. These films tend to emerge outside dominant cinematic institutions and are characterized by their distinctive visual styles, provocative themes, and loyal followings. As Boerner (2017) notes, cult films often feature exaggerated characters, garish set designs, and stories that deviate from traditional storytelling, a characterization largely associated with Western cult traditions. Rather than a settled category, "cult" remains a contested designation shaped by tensions among textual transgression, audience reception, and circulation; this article focuses on how narrative structure and film style generate cult appeal in the South Korean context.

Throughout the 20th century, the definition and scope of cult cinema evolved significantly. As scholars observe, cult films often reflect "the most

obscure, perverse, controversial, and bizarre films ever made," offering a space for cultural resistance and artistic rebellion.

In the context of Asian cinema, South Korea has emerged as a powerful force in the global film industry, particularly since the 1990s. The democratization of South Korea, combined with rapid economic modernization and technological advancement, fostered an environment conducive to artistic experimentation. This period gave rise to the Korean New Wave, led by directors such as Park Chan-wook and Bong Joon-ho, who gained international recognition for their genre-bending narratives and striking visual styles (Park, 2002; Jang & Paik, 2012). These filmmakers not only transformed the aesthetic language of South Korean cinema but also challenged societal taboos through emotionally charged and politically resonant stories.

Both Park Chan-wook and Bong Joon-ho are central figures in the global recognition of South Korean cult cinema. Park's Oldboy (2003) and Lady Vengeance (2004) are known for their stylized violence, moral ambiguity, and psychological intensity. Bong's Memories of Murder (2003) and Mother (2009), meanwhile, offer deeply introspective meditations on justice, memory, and maternal sacrifice. While much scholarship addresses industrial diplomacy and globalization (e.g., Jang & Paik, 2012; Lee, 2022), fewer studies integrate narrative structure with film style to explain cult appeal; this article addresses that gap.

The narrative and stylistic qualities of South Korean cult films are essential to understanding their cultural and artistic impact. Their use of non-linear storytelling, unreliable narration, and symbolic mise-en-scène reflects broader themes of national identity, social alienation, and unresolved historical trauma. For example, beyond our selected corpus, The Host has been interpreted as an allegory of South Korea's post-war anxieties and collective memory (Lukasiak, 2013).

The study of South Korean cult films is not only relevant to film scholars but also for cultural theorists and sociologists. By analyzing their narrative

strategies and aesthetic decisions, scholars can better understand how cultural products shape and reflect collective values, fears, and aspirations. Moreover, the cult status of these films illustrates how marginalized or controversial works can influence mainstream discourse over time.

South Korean cult cinema cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader socio-political and economic transformations of the country. From the trauma of Japanese colonization and the Korean War to the rise of neoliberalism and digital globalization, each historical phase has imprinted itself on the nation's cultural imagination.

Objectives

1. Analyze the Narrative Structure as a driver of cult appeal and cultural memory.

2. Analyze the Style of South Korean Cult Films in relation to moral ambiguity, trauma, and social critique.

Literature Review

South Korean cult films occupy a distinct position in global cinema, characterized by their engagement with cultural identity, narrative complexity, and stylistic innovation. Defined as cinematic "orphans" later embraced by niche audiences (Bentley-Baker, 2010), these films emerged in alignment with key historical shifts, including democratization, censorship reform in the 1990s, and the rise of Hallyu (Lee, 2022), positioning them as both national expressions and global cultural exports. Cult films such as Oldboy and Mother exemplify a cinema of hybridity, fusing melodrama, horror, and socio-political critique (Jin, 2016). In contrast to many Western cult traditions centered on camp and excess, South Korean cases tend to foreground psychological realism, moral ambiguity, and the culturally specific register of *haan*, reframing cult appeal beyond spectacle.

Narrative theory provides a vital framework for analyzing these works. From classical models like Aristotle's Poetics and Freytag's Pyramid to contemporary expansions such as Cutting's five-part structure (Cutting, 2016), these films reveal a preference for morally ambiguous, psychologically charged story arcs. Unlike traditional Western three-act narratives, South Korean cult films frequently adopt non-linear, fragmented structures that reflect existential and social crises.

Stylistically, South Korean cult cinema relies heavily on mise-en-scène, lighting, sound, editing, and color to articulate psychological states and socio-political critique. Scenario design often mirrors characters' inner turmoil, while camera work and lighting enhance emotional realism and suspense (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2008). Color functions as both an aesthetic and a narrativedevice, used strategically to signal mood, identity, and thematic shifts (Yao et al., 2022).

The symbolic density of these films deepens their cultural resonance. Recurring motifs—such as the piggy bank in Squid Game or ghostly figures in horror narratives—function as vehicles for critiquing social inequality, historical trauma, and psychological repression (Gardener, 2020).

Scholarship on South Korean cult films increasingly highlights their negotiation of postcolonial identity, neoliberal critique, and globalization (Wagner, 2016). Taken together, (Wagner, 2016) and (Lee ,2022) help explain how circulation pathways and market positioning enable South Korean texts to acquire cult status.Their appeal lies not only in stylistic distinctiveness but also in their thematic richness and moral ambiguity.

Methodology

1. Qualitative Research: This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the narrative structures and film styles of selected South Korean cult films. Qualitative research is a method that emphasizes in-depth interpretation,

contextual understanding, and the analysis of meaning within cultural texts. In this study, textual analysis is employed to thoroughly investigate how cinematic form—both narrative and stylistic—constructs the cult status of four South Korean films. Structural analysis of Oldboy (2003), Lady Vengeance (2005), Memories of Murder (2003), and Mother (2009) aims to uncover the aesthetic and thematic elements that define South Korean cult films between 2003 and 2009. This study is limited to textual analysis of four films; audience reception and industrial context are not empirically examined and are noted for future research.

2. Literature Review: The literature review method systematically examines existing academic work related to cult films, narrative theory, and Korean cinema. This method helps contextualize the selected films within broader scholarly debates and theoretical frameworks. In this research, the literature review informs both the narrative and stylistic dimensions of analysis. These reviews establish a critical foundation for the dual focus of the study: how narrative techniques and filmic style reflect socio-cultural trauma, psychological depth, and alternative storytelling within South Korean cult films.

3. Conceptual Framework

As Figure 1.
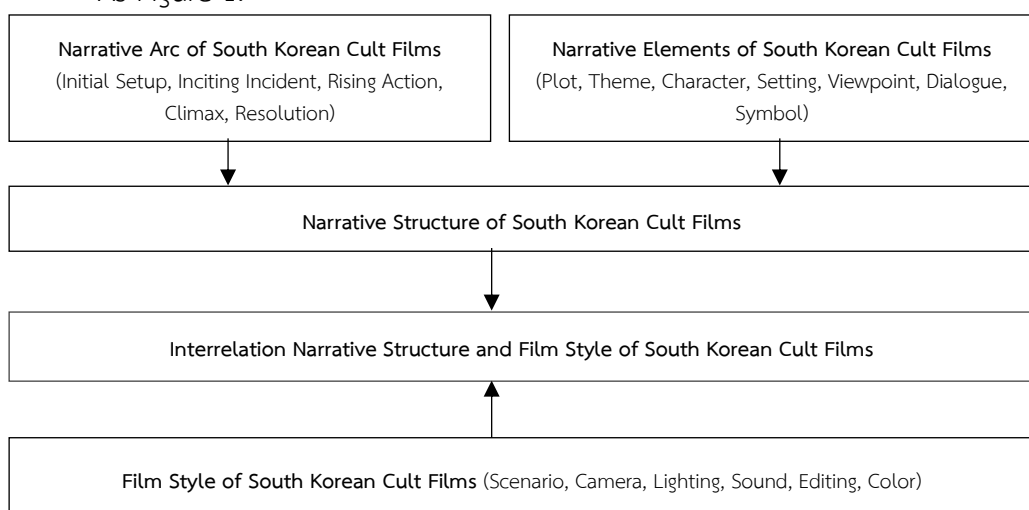
Figure 1 Conceptual Framework (Source: Constructed by the researcher)

4. Research Scope

This paper focused on the practical application of narrative and stylistic analysis, selecting four South Korean cult films from Park Chan-wook or Bong Joon-ho—Oldboy (2003), Memories of Murder (2003), Lady Vengeance (2004), and Mother (2009)—from the period of 2003 to 2009. These works, widely recognized for their unconventional storytelling, visual extremity, and subversive themes, exemplified the hallmarks of cult cinema in a South Korean context. The study investigated how these films reflected national trauma, identity struggles, and cultural resistance through subtle narrative cues and emotionally charged aesthetics. The films are as follows as Table 1.

Table 1 List of Selected South Korean Cult Films (2003-2009).

Film Name	Release Year	Director	Film Poster
Old boy	2003	Park Chan-wook	
Memories of Murder	2003	Bong Joon ho	
Lady Vengeance	2005	Park Chan-wook	
Mother	2009	Bong Joon ho	

Results

1. Narrative Structure of South Korean Cult Films

South Korean cult films are defined by narrative structures that are deliberately complex, emotionally intense, and thematically layered. The selected films—Oldboy, Memories of Murder, Lady Vengeance, and Mother—demonstrated a consistent pattern of constructing narratives that deviate from classical linear progression. Instead, these films embraced fragmentation, moral ambiguity, and psychological depth. The plots evolved through escalating crises that reflected personal traumas and societal dysfunctions, culminating in ambiguous resolutions that defied conventional closure. The films portrayed protagonists with conflicted moral identities, whose internal struggles echoed broader social tensions such as justice, guilt, retribution, and memory. By employing shifting viewpoints, symbolic elements, and psychologically driven character development, these narratives created a multi-dimensional storytelling environment. This approach positioned South Korean cult films as a cinematic form that not only entertains but also critiques and reflects on the complexities of human existence. To minimize plot summary, the analysis evaluated narrative and stylistic choices in terms of their functions and implications rather than recounting events.

1.1 Narrative Arc

The narrative arc in these films followed an extended version of Freytag's Pyramid, incorporating Initial Setup, Inciting Incident, Rising Action, Climax, and Resolution. These stages served not only as structural milestones but also as devices to provoke ethical inquiry and emotional resonance.

1.1.1 The Initial Setting-Up

Each film established a deceptive normalcy that was quickly unsettled by disorienting or violent events. Oldboy began with a mundane arrest before shifting into confinement and vengeance, a transition that reoriented audience

alignment and framed revenge as an ethical paradox; Memories of Murder introduced an almost routine investigation in a rural setting, which unraveled into chaos, foregrounding institutional impotence. These opening sequences introduced the audience to both the external world and the inner psychological frameworks of the characters. The initial setups grounded the films in reality while hinting at the emotional volatility to come. Through mise-en-scène, subdued color tones, and understated performances, the directors foreshadowed the moral complexity that would later unfold.

1.1.2 Inciting Incident

Inciting incidents functioned as narrative catalysts, forcing the protagonists to confront moral dilemmas or existential crises. In Oldboy, Dae-su's unexpected release and the mysterious phone call prompted his descent into vengeance, sustaining restricted narration and moral uncertainty. In Mother, the wrongful accusation of her son propelled the protagonist into a desperate quest for truth, complicating audience judgment. These moments disrupted the protagonists' routines and aligned the viewers' emotional perspective with their trauma and confusion. Each incident was carefully embedded to introduce a psychological rupture that carried through the film.

1.1.3 Rising Action

The rising action intensified emotional tension and ethical complexity. Characters pursued justice or revenge, often crossing moral boundaries in the process. In Lady Vengeance, Geum-ja's preparation for retribution was interwoven with flashbacks of imprisonment and regret. In Memories of Murder, investigative failures and police brutality compounded the tension. These sequences utilized non-linear storytelling, dual timelines, and escalating interpersonal conflict to enhance the sense of inevitability and emotional breakdown.

1.1.4 Climax

Climaxes in these films were emotionally charged confrontations that blurred the line between justice and vengeance. In Oldboy, the revelation of

Dae-su's manipulated incest created a deeply unsettling moral paradox. In Lady Vengeance, the communal execution of the child killer posed ethical questions about revenge. These climactic moments were staged with heightened audiovisual techniques—such as intense close-ups, dissonant sound, and chiaroscuro lighting—to maximize emotional and philosophical impact.

1.1.5 Resolution

The resolutions often withheld narrative closure, favoring emotional ambiguity and moral unease. Mother's ending, with the protagonist dancing alone on a bus after committing murder, offered no comfort. Oldboy's hypnosis scene raised questions about memory and denial rather than redemption. These endings underscored the enduring effects of trauma and the impossibility of moral absolutes, reinforcing the films' cult status through their resistance to conventional resolution. Comparatively, Oldboy and Lady Vengeance mobilized revenge arcs to stage ethical paradox and communal judgment, whereas Memories of Murder and Mother juxtaposed institutional impotence with maternal agency, producing distinct forms of open-ended resolution.

1.2 Narrative Elements

South Korean cult films integrate intricate narrative elements to explore the multifaceted nature of justice, guilt, and identity. Character development is driven by moral dilemmas, while settings reflect internal and societal tensions. Symbolism, strategic dialogue, and layered perspectives are used to enrich the narrative and provoke introspection.

1.2.1 Plot

The plots in South Korean cult films revolved around emotionally charged personal journeys entangled with societal failures. Characters were driven by quests for truth, justice, or vengeance, and their paths were filled with psychological obstacles. Each plot emphasized nonlinear progression, internal conflict, and social critique, establishing narrative complexity and viewer

immersion. The intricate narrative structures challenged the audience to interpret causality and meaning beyond the superficial sequence of events.

1.2.2 Theme

Dominant themes included vengeance, guilt, trauma, moral ambiguity, and justice. These themes were not abstract but closely tied to South Korea's sociopolitical context—post-dictatorship trauma, modernization, and generational disconnection. Films like Memories of Murder reflected on institutional impotence, while Lady Vengeance explored motherhood and ethical retribution. These thematic undercurrents positioned the films as not only psychological thrillers but also cultural texts that interrogate national identity and social memory.

1.2.3 Character

Characters were constructed with moral complexity and psychological depth. Protagonists were often anti-heroes: a wronged father, a vengeful mother, an obsessive detective. Their motivations were driven by trauma, love, guilt, or obsession. Their transformations revealed the corrupting nature of revenge and the fragility of justice. Even minor characters served symbolic roles, representing institutions, social norms, or suppressed desires.

1.2.4 Setting

Settings functioned as extensions of psychological states and thematic concerns. Urban claustrophobia, rural decay, and sterile institutional spaces were common. In Oldboy, the prison room and urban landscape reflected confinement and alienation. In Mother, the small town accentuated the protagonist's isolation. These settings provided a visual metaphor for emotional states and reinforced the moral atmosphere of each film.

1.2.5 Viewpoint

Viewpoint manipulation allowed for emotional immersion and narrative misdirection. Directors employed restricted knowledge, unreliable narration, and shifting perspectives to destabilize the viewer's moral compass. For example, the

audience's alignment with Geum-ja's revenge in Lady Vengeance was complicated by flashbacks and conflicting moral testimonies. This fluidity of viewpoint created a dynamic interpretive space.

1.2.6 Dialogue

Dialogue in these films was sparse but loaded with implication. Exchanges were often understated, creating tension through silence or subtext. When characters did speak, their words revealed psychological fractures or moral doubt. The juxtaposition of minimalism and emotional intensity heightened the dramatic weight of pivotal scenes.

1.2.7 Symbol

Symbolism played a vital role in these films. Items such as the hammer in Oldboy, the red eye shadow in Lady Vengeance, and acupuncture needles in Mother were not mere props but visual extensions of trauma and control. These objects acquired meaning through repetition, context, and narrative significance, inviting allegorical interpretation and enhancing the cult value of the films.

2. Film Style of South Korean Cult Films

The stylistic composition of South Korean cult films enhances their emotional and thematic resonance. Scenario design, camera work, lighting, sound, editing, and color function cohesively to express character psychology, narrative tension, and sociopolitical commentary. Each stylistic element supports the films' overall tone and philosophical depth.

2.1 Scenario

Scenario design grounded the films in physical and emotional reality. Spatial choices—narrow corridors, confined rooms, desolate towns—visually articulated themes of entrapment, guilt, and repression. In Oldboy, the private prison and rooftop sequences marked thresholds between psychological states. In Mother, the town's oppressive intimacy mirrored the protagonist's internal turmoil. Scenario design thus served as both environment and narrative symbol.

2.2 Camera

Camera work emphasized emotional and psychological perspective. Tracking shots, handheld motion, and asymmetric framing were employed to produce disorientation or intimacy. In Oldboy, the hallway fight scene used a lateral tracking shot to symbolize relentless struggle. In Memories of Murder, wide-angle shots emphasized the characters' helplessness within a vast, indifferent world. Camera choices reinforced mood, theme, and character psychology.

2.3 Lighting

Lighting in these films conveyed emotional tone and symbolic contrast. Low-key lighting, harsh shadows, and limited natural light intensified themes of secrecy, duality, and moral ambiguity. The chiaroscuro effects in Lady Vengeance mirrored the duality of forgiveness and vengeance. In Mother, shifting light suggested emotional exposure and concealment. Lighting thus played a critical role in visual storytelling.

2.4 Sound

Sound design favored restraint and contrast. Silence was often more powerful than noise, used to highlight isolation or psychological breakdown. Music, when used, was emotionally evocative—melancholic piano, dissonant strings, or ambient drones. The juxtaposition of everyday sounds with surreal atmospheres deepened tension. Sound was used narratively, not decoratively, supporting character development and emotional pacing.

2.5 Editing

Editing style reflected internal chaos or narrative fragmentation. Non-linear cuts, abrupt transitions, and interwoven timelines disrupted traditional continuity. In Lady Vengeance, editing alternated between confession, revenge planning, and flashbacks, creating an experiential timeline. Pacing varied strategically, using long takes for tension and rapid montage for psychological disruption. Editing shaped viewer perception and emotional intensity.

2.6 Color

Color palettes reinforced symbolic meaning. Muted tones dominated, occasionally punctuated by saturated reds or blues to signal emotional or thematic peaks. In Oldboy, the dominant red symbolized passion and rage. In Lady Vengeance, white signified purity corrupted.

Together, these narrative and stylistic features revealed the distinctive grammar of South Korean cult films: emotionally resonant, morally complex, and formally innovative. Through structural ambiguity, symbolic density, and aesthetic control, these films redefined what cult cinema could represent in a globalized cultural landscape.

Color was integral to mise-en-scène, functioning both atmospherically and metaphorically. Across cases, color operated differently—Oldboy's saturated reds signaled exposure and rage; Lady Vengeance's black/white palette coded atonement and guilt; and the desaturated rural tones in Memories of Murder and Mother underscored futility and isolation.

Discussion

South Korean cult cinema has gained broad recognition in the field due to its distinctive approach and profound thematic resonance. Its influence was not only evident in global cinephile communities but also contributed significantly to scholarly discourses on trauma, identity, and visual ethics. This study reaffirmed the unique place of South Korean cult films in the broader cult film canon. showing how narrative structure and film style jointly generate cult appeal. Scholars such as Boerner (2017) have discussed Western cult traditions, while Park (2002) and Lukasiak (2013) emphasized the inseparability of South Korean cinema from its socio-political context.

In contrast to Western cult traditions that foreground camp and excess, South Korean cases centered psychological realism and moral ambiguity, shifting cult appeal from spectacle to ethical inquiry.

From a reception perspective, interpretive openness and symbolic density encouraged participatory decoding and long-tail fandom; under globalization, industry reconfiguration and nation-branding/cultural diplomacy enabled festival, boutique, and streaming circulation, facilitating the accrual of cult status (Wagner, 2016; Lee, 2022).

The distinguishing features of South Korean cult films could be observed in both their narrative complexity and stylistic restraint. By rejecting linear storytelling and embracing moral ambiguity, films like Memories of Murder and Mother offered a psychological depth rarely found in Western cult films, challenging Schneider's (2010) emphasis on grotesquery and obscurity. Through detailed narrative analysis, this study found that female-centered revenge narratives (Lady Vengeance) and trauma-infused procedural dramas (Memories of Murder) engaged with gender, justice, and historical silence. Moreover, the emotional core of these films emerged through ethically conflicted protagonists and fragmented timelines. Visually, directors employed chiaroscuro lighting, spatial constriction, and dissonant soundscapes to reinforce psychological states and thematic undercurrents, thereby linking style to ethical engagement rather than spectacle.

Rather than restating plot-level details, we synthesize two implications:

1. Narrative techniques within South Korean cult films departed from linear plot development and instead adopted emotionally saturated, ethically ambiguous structures that reflected collective trauma and socio-political disillusionment. These approaches expanded conventional understandings of cult storytelling.

2. Stylistically, the selected films employed restrained yet symbolically charged visual languages—including confined spaces, muted palettes, and

disorienting editing—to express psychological entrapment and cultural "haan." These choices marked a significant divergence from the camp or irony typical of Western cult aesthetics.

In sum, South Korean cult films between 2003 and 2009 synthesized narrative innovation with stylistic restraint to reflect national trauma, moral complexity, and cultural identity. Rather than relying on shock or irony, these films redefined cult aesthetics through emotionally saturated storytelling, ethically ambiguous characters, and symbolic visual language—positioning them as both culturally situated and globally resonant cinematic works.

Consequently, in the South Korean context, "cult" is best understood as a mode of ethical engagement rather than a subcultural taste alone, which clarifies both the films' distinctiveness and their transnational traction.

Recommendations

1. Educational and Practical Applications

Curriculum integration. Incorporate Oldboy, Lady Vengeance, Memories of Murder, and Mother into film and cultural studies curricula. Pair close scene analysis with discussions of narrative structure (setup, inciting incident, rising action, climax, resolution) and stylistic choices (mise-en-scène, lighting, sound, editing, color) to show how form produces meaning.

Assessment design: Use shot-by-shot breakdowns, storyboard reconstructions, and short analytical memos to connect non-linear storytelling and unreliable narration with ethical ambiguity and psychological depth.

Professional and critical practice: Curators, programmers, and critics can employ these films as case studies for rethinking genre boundaries and audience expectations, emphasizing spatial constriction, muted palettes, and restrained soundscapes as strategies for conveying trauma and moral conflict.

2. Directions for Future Research

Broader and comparative corpora: Extend the dataset beyond 2003–2009 to include additional decades, directors, and sub-genres (e.g., horror, melodrama, independent cinema), and conduct cross-regional comparisons to clarify distinctive narrative and stylistic conventions, including a Western comparison set (≈8 films, 2000–2010) and a larger South Korean sample (≈12–16 films) to test generalizability.

Contextual depth: Situate textual analysis within socio-political histories (e.g., democratization and economic change) to trace how cultural memory shapes narrative ambiguity and visual restraint, triangulating with archival policy documents and news timelines coded at the film-year level.

Audience and reception: Combine close reading with surveys or interviews to examine how domestic and international audiences interpret moral ambiguity, trauma, and "haan," and how such readings contribute to cult status; design an online bilingual survey (KR/EN) with a target n ≈ 300 per country using 5-point Likert items for moral ambiguity, psychological realism, and ethical engagement, followed by 3–5 focus groups (6–8 participants each) to probe interpretive strategies.

Methodological diversification: Pair qualitative interpretation with formal/technical measures (e.g., shot length distributions, sound–silence ratios, palette profiling) to test links between style, emotion, and narrative effect ; build a codebook for non-linearity, restricted narration, open endings, spatial constriction, color saturation/monochrome, and sound restraint; double-code with two coders and report Krippendorff's $\alpha \geq .80$; compute average shot length, cut rate, color histograms/luminance dispersion, and audio RMS using open-source tools.

Industrial pathways: Investigate production, distribution, and festival/streaming circulation to understand how industrial conditions foster the emergence and endurance of cult reception; capture variables such as festival selections/awards, release windows, box-office tiers, and streaming availability by

region, and analyze diffusion with simple time-to-availability curves and correlations with reception metrics (ratings, review volume).

Ethics and transparency: Obtain ethics approval, pre-register hypotheses and analysis plans, and anonymize responses to enhance transparency and reproducibility.

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