

## The Sublime and the Cute in Bong Joon Ho's Ecocinema

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From the television series *Planet Earth* to documentary jeremiads like *An Inconvenient Truth*, viewers are inundated with sublime images of nature that overwhelm them with feelings of awe. Images of cuddly, cute animals, on the other hand, populate newsfeeds but play only a minor role in the visual rhetoric of environmental activism. This article analyzes two films from Korean filmmaker Bong Joon Ho, *Snowpiercer* and *Okja*, to trace the implications of these two views of nature and argue that invoking the sublime seamlessly functions with colonialist notions of a universal global environmentalism. The minor pleasures of cuteness, by contrast, open spaces for localized resistance to the harm of environmental colonialism.

*Keywords: ecocinema, cute, sublime, Snowpiercer, Okja, Bong Joon Ho, globalization*

It seems to be axiomatic that environmental concerns are global concerns. The meltdown of a nuclear reactor in Japan poisons the fish off the Washington coast. The water bottle someone throws in the trash in Paris ends up in the Pacific garbage patch. Nature itself is understood to be universal, to have an autonomous existence outside of the human. However, scholars writing on distributed agency and the materiality of the more than human argue that nature does not stand outside or apart from the human (Alaimo, 2010; Chen, 2012; Haraway, 2013). To decolonize ecocinema, then, viewers must heed scholarship that demonstrates how the effect of environmental degradation is uneven and, moreover, is experienced differently across nations and cultures due to human-centered hierarchies and unequal power relations (De Onis, 2021; Kimmerer, 2013; Nixon, 2011; Saranillio, 2018). This understanding of multiple natures instead of a singular nature has far-reaching implications for what counts as an environmental concern, as well as how to respond to the global environmental crisis under the continuing conditions of capitalism and colonialism.

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To understand the divergences of these ways of imagining our positionality in nature, I look to two films from the oeuvre of transnational filmmaker Bong Joon Ho. Both *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) and *Okja* (Bong, 2017), like much of Bong Joon Ho's work, incorporate visions of a dystopic, environmentally compromised future, but the production, narrative, and aesthetics of the two films provide dichotomous ways of conceptualizing and, by extension, addressing environmental harm. I argue that invoking the sublime seamlessly functions with colonialist notions of universal global environmentalism, while the minor pleasures of cuteness open spaces for localized resistances to the harms of environmental colonialism.

*Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) is a big-budget, bombastic action film about the dangers of climate change and human arrogance in our response to it. Using shock and awe, it provides an apocalyptic view of the future. *Okja* (Bong, 2017), a film marketed as a children's story, starring a young Korean girl and her large, porcine pet seems an abrupt reversal of *Snowpiercer's* depiction of an ultraviolent struggle against dominant capitalist forces. However, *Okja* also details the environmental harms of contemporary capitalism, and both films, as Jeon (2024) argues, mark a turn toward the global and the transnational in Bong Joon Ho's filmography. The all-encompassing, global environmental collapse of *Snowpiercer* follows the logic of global capitalism. The film itself was a product of multinational investment and was meant to garner a global audience. It pointedly envisions a restricted and highly stratified society that encloses all humanity within one sociopolitical system with no hope of escape. The ambitions of *Okja* seem smaller in comparison. Although funded by a multinational streaming powerhouse, the film was one of the first specifically made for Netflix distribution while the rules for this kind of film production were still being written. The narrowcasting that characterizes the Netflix approach to imagining its audience suggests the possibilities for anticolonial responses to environmental harm. Although *Okja*, like *Snowpiercer*, takes place across a global stage as the action moves from South Korea (hereafter Korea) to the East Coast of the United States, it thematizes rather than erases the disjunction between colonizing and colonized nations and amplifies the frictions that arise between distinct worldviews.

The public has known for decades that the world is headed toward environmental collapse, yet as environmental communication scholars argue, the scale of the climate crisis appears to inspire despair and paralyzing anxiety instead of action. It is crucial, then, to understand the affective dimensions of climate narratives. These two films not only allow us to think through the relationship between production and cultural expression but also to trace their links to two primary and competing aesthetics of environmental activism: the sublime and the cute. These aesthetic distinctions are, ultimately, also affective ones. The grand emotions of the sublime match the immense scale of climate change, but the feminized and racialized associations of the cute pull us toward the minor emotions of the everyday. Although the environmental crisis has the potential to inspire a coordinated global response, it also falls prey to familiar colonial responses that subsume all stories into a single, powerful master narrative. The cute narrative of *Okja* (Bong, 2017), by contrast, appears as one story among many. In its minor, partial, and cute approach, it tells an environmental story that favors the local and the limited. Instead of the despair of a fear-based call to action, the cute favors connection to local places and spaces to enable feelings of care and attachment to motivate a more activist orientation. It is environmentalism without guarantees, but one that better suits this present moment.

### The Sublime and the Cute in Ecocinema

Nature and its visual representation have long been associated with the sublime, the most elevated and intensely studied of aesthetic responses. Closely related to the beautiful, the sublime overcomes us, stirring ineffable emotions beyond our conscious control. Natural landscapes were the examples *par excellence* of the terrifying and transformative power of European and American responses to the visual. Today, images of nature that veer toward the cute—cuddly pandas or sloths eating their leaves in slow motion—flood our newsfeeds (Lobato & Meese, 2014), evoking what seems to be an opposite response: the long, drawn-out *awwww* of cuteness rather than the sublime *awe* of nature in all its immensity. Scholars and environmental activists have critiqued these images for overemphasizing charismatic megafauna over less photogenic animals like snails or snakes (Milton, 2016). Even more damning, these images of cute nature commercialize, trivialize, and anthropomorphize nature, according to critics. It achieves the short-term goal of eliciting clicks and even donations, but it also turns nature into an easily consumed commodity.

Our current view of nature as a source of the sublime is deeply indebted to 18th- and 19th-century European Romantic poets and critics who argued that wild nature could inspire feelings of awe and exultation to repair the corruptions of urban living and bring us closer to God (Ivakhiv, 2013; Squire, 1988). Their views were articulated by Burke, who argued that the overwhelming scale of natural vistas creates a heightened state of both terror and delight. These scenes provoke an experience of the sublime, thereby forcing us to abandon rational thought (Burke, 1844). While at odds with Burke's (1844) notion that the sublime cannot be captured or represented, DeLuca and Demo (2001) read Carleton Watkins's Yosemite landscape photography as an important contributor to our current view of nature and the sublime. In particular, the dwarfing or elimination of human figures from landscape painting and photography heightened the sense of the sublime and shaped national U.S. policy. Their analysis, however, warns about the use of these visual rhetorical arguments to justify the removal of the Ahwahneechee people in the creation of the National Park System. DeLuca and Demo's (2001) analysis demonstrates the ease with which environmental rhetoric can be co-opted to justify colonial rule.

While *Snowpiercer's* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) depictions of unending, fiercely beautiful, abandoned snowscapes reach for the sublime, *Okja* (Bong, 2017) dwells in the world of the delightfully pastoral cute. Cuteness forms a distorted mirror of the sublime. Where the sublime is vast, unmanageable, and overpowering, the cute is usually small, inviting, and helpless.<sup>2</sup> The distinct affective responses to the sublime and the cute have been taken up by scholars wrestling with the connection between art and commerce, aesthetics and capitalism. Most famously, Ngai (2012) has argued for the importance of minor aesthetics, including cuteness, as opposed to the primary focus on the major categories of beauty and the sublime. She writes that while people usually imagine the cute object as weak and vulnerable, it also exerts its control over us by appearing to compel our response of affection or sympathy. Unlike the sublime, however, those overwhelming feelings of pity inspire both care and

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars attempting to study its effects define cuteness through a series of physical attributes like large eyes, a small mouth, and the short limbs characteristic of young animals (Aragón, Clark, Dyer, & Bargh, 2015; Nittono, Fukushima, Yano, & Moriya, 2012; Sanefuji, Ohgami, & Hashiya, 2007).

aggression (Aragón et al., 2015). Further, the cute object appears to invite consumption, as in the phrase “You’re so cute, I could eat you up.” The saying articulates the feelings of both desire and destruction through consumption.

The easy fit of cuteness with consumerism, along with the violence embedded in our response to the cute object’s vulnerability, would seem to nullify any possibility of agency or resistance in our response to cuteness. The rise of *kawaii* culture (often translated as “cute” culture), in particular, invokes a close association of cuteness with frivolity, childishness, hyperfemininity, and East Asian culture. However, rather than a retreat from politics, popular culture scholars note the Japanese government’s deliberate exporting of *kawaii* culture as an exertion of soft power (Allison, 2006; Tran, 2018; Yano, 2013). Even more provocatively, Ngai (2012) argues that by relinquishing power, cuteness paradoxically exercises its own form of politics. Ivy (2010) extends Ngai’s (2012) comparison of the cute to the avant-garde to position cuteness as a form of “resistant ineffectuality” that remains intentionally outside of legible political forms. Both inside and outside of politics, both overpowering and powerless, cuteness enables considerations of a politics that defies the binary absolutes of resistance and accommodation.

This article responds to Rust, Monani, and Cubitt’s (2023) call to build on foundational work to create a theoretical and aesthetic vocabulary of ecocinema and to examine films with an overt ecological message. This article’s critique of earlier analyses of the natural sublime and the introduction of cuteness studies to frame ecocinema are in step with the movement of the field toward greater context. Current ecocinema studies “invoke where films come from and where they are going” and, thus, take up “cultural, economic, and ecological consideration of how they travel through time and space to reach us” (Rust et al., 2023, p. 6). In his study of ecocinema, Ivakhiv (2013) argues there are at least “three sets of ecologies—the material, the social, and the perceptual” to consider (p. 6). Thus, in the analysis that follows, I reconsider the binary of the sublime and the cute in representations of the climate crisis through each of these three lenses to understand how meaning is made through an ecology of forces and relations. I recount the *material* basis of the production of each film and how its funding and distribution give us a blueprint for viewing the ideological investments of the film narratives and how the films build particular worlds as givens. I set the diegetic world of film in dialectical relation to the larger *social* landscape of climate anxiety, colonialism, and consumerism, focusing on the semiautonomous role of human (or humanlike) figures and the special relationship between the young girl and her piglike companion in *Okja* (Bong, 2017). Finally, the analysis also considers the visuals, sound, and generic conventions of the films to trace the connections between film aesthetics and audience affect, what Ivakhiv (2013) terms the *perceptual* realm. It is here that critics can begin to grasp what the film does instead of simply what it represents. These multiple approaches allow us a fuller understanding of how *Snowpiercer*’s (Bong & Masterson, 2013) representation of the natural sublime can undermine our sense of agency in confronting the devastation of global warming, while the cuteness of *Okja* creates the possibility of alternative ways to connect to and care for the natural world.

### ***Snowpiercer* as Universal Global Culture**

*Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) delivers its warning about climate change devastation through sensory overload. The action-movie pacing, explicit violence, and spectacular scenes of

environmental devastation create an overwhelming cinematic experience. The film, a critical success, overtly addressed environmental issues, targeting the role of unbridled global capitalism in causing and perpetuating climate change and its unequal effects. The film takes place after a failed attempt at a technological fix for climate change, and the planet is now a frozen wasteland. The only survivors live on a train endlessly circling the globe. As multiple scholars have argued, the film literalizes class stratification with the luxurious front of the train contrasted with the tail end of the train packed with half-starved passengers (Canavan, 2014; Kara, 2016; Lee & Manicasteri, 2018). Although the film differentiates between the economic classes on the train, all other differences are subsumed by those divisions. There remains only one world, now reduced to a few survivors living on the train, with one social and economic structure. The film ultimately argues that all problems must be solved at the planetary level, requiring a complete revolution and a new start.

The global environmental narrative of the film echoes the film's production, which marked Bong Joon Ho's entrance into multinational filmmaking. Although Bong was globally recognized as a filmmaker and hugely popular in Korea, *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) was the first of his films to be widely distributed and, significantly, recorded predominantly in English. The movie, based on a French graphic novel, was acquired and developed by the Korean Moho Films, filmed in the Czech Republic, and distributed by the U.S.-based Weinstein Company. At the time, it was estimated to be the most expensive Korean movie ever made ("*Snowpiercer*," 2012). Although the film's large budget might seem at odds with its pointed critique of capitalism, it does align with Bong Joon Ho's global vision of capitalism's inescapability. His widely memed quote sums up this view: "We all live in the same country, it's called capitalism" (Hagen, 2019, para. 6). The train in *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) may traverse the globe, but it remains within the single country of capitalism. While many of Bong Joon Ho's films firmly situate their themes in a specific place, the train society in *Snowpiercer* is an exception in its disregard of national boundaries, but its global reach does not break down barriers. Instead, it organizes the entire planet into one unequal system. Similarly, the movie's narrative sounds the alarm about the global and transnational reach of climate change, and its production history provides a lesson in multinational capitalization.

At the same time, the film demonstrates the default Western whiteness of narratives of globalization, which maintain hierarchies of personhood even as they weaken national boundaries. As Wynter (2003) has famously argued, the equation of man and humanity, where man is understood to be enlightened, rational, and European, emerged during the age of European colonialism and served to center their worldviews as universal. *Snowpiercer's* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) supposedly global storyline is told in English, and the film's heroic protagonist, Curtis, is played by Chris Evans, who is best known for his role as Captain America in the Marvel movies. Even as he ultimately fails to save the train and its inhabitants, the movie positions his story and perspective as the point of audience suture to its emotional world. The contradiction echoes much of our current conversations around climate change. From popular films and documentaries to the Paris Climate Accord, politicians as well as activists frame climate disasters as global events that require global solutions, yet they continually center the voices and needs of the United States and then construe them as universal.

### Ruin Porn and the Sublime

The large scale of the film's plot and its ambitions for a global audience set the stage for its activation of the sublime and the spectacular in its portrayal of the dystopic future of climate change. Each time the audience sees the world outside the train, Bong Joon Ho provides an opportunity to experience the natural sublime. Besides a few brief dark glimpses of frozen cars during the credits, the audience has its first view of the outside world through the eyes of the residents of the last car, who have not seen a window in 17 years. As the train exits a tunnel, the camera turns to view the outside world as the music swells, and the motion slows so the camera can more fully take in the frozen cities and mountains. The scene outside stuns the revolutionaries, who stop their fight to stare. Wilson (2019) notes, "Bong's manic-depressive train ride through a snow-white arctic limbo . . . seems oddly aesthetic," but I would argue that the aesthetic of the world outside the train is fundamental to the film rather than an odd quirk of the filmmaker (p. 203). This first scene of the outside world functions pedagogically, teaching audiences to view the spaces outside the train with a combination of awe and despair. The contrast between the cramped, darkened space of the train and the vastness of the world outside posits the immeasurable power of nature in contrast to the closed world of capitalism.

The film rapidly intersperses the vastness of the natural landscape with repeated shots of frozen and abandoned cityscapes, and the viscerally thrilling combination brings together the natural sublime and ruin porn. Lyons (2018) writes, "Modern ruins arouse both despair and fascination . . . They remind us, in a very sublime way, of the inevitability of human extinction" (p. 1). In the end, "ruin porn is the new sublime" (Lyons, 2018, pp. 1–2). Day (2021) accuses the genre of political quietism in her analysis of photographic ruin porn because it narrows our vision to apocalyptic collapse rather than turning to current solutions like fighting the fossil fuel industry (p. 128).

The film's narrative progressively shuts off any alternatives to the complete annihilation of the train, which is the only existing human social structure on earth. As the rebels enter the final engine cabin at the front of the train, the audience learns that the rebellion has been orchestrated from the beginning to find a replacement for the current conductor. The audience realizes the impossibility of change; the new conductor can only repeat the actions of the last conductor to keep the train running.

While the film does lodge a powerful critique of capitalism as the engine that fuels climate change, it also overwhelms the viewer with its sublimely apocalyptic vision of nature's inevitable revenge on the human race. Canavan (2014) terms the film's apocalyptic ending "necrofuturism," which he defines as "the endlessly rehearsed landscape of death and disaster that dominate contemporary visions of the coming decades" (p. 3). While Canavan (2014) and Lee and Manicasteri (2018) argue that the dark dystopia of *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) functions as a wake-up call and an invitation to think outside of capitalist logics, I argue that the film disallows any space outside of those logics.

Bong Joon Ho gives us a small crack in its bleak totality in the characters of Namgoong Minsoo (Song Kang-ho) and his daughter Yona (Ko Asung). They fit with neither the tail-car revolutionaries nor the clueless elite, and they have no common cause with the soldiers and officials who dole out punishment to the workers. While audiences might view their recalcitrant attitudes and behaviors as narcissistic or ignorant

of the true nature of the problem, they also belie the illusion that everyone on the train is caught in the same systems and ideologies. They disrupt the narrative of universality, and Bong Joon Ho emphasizes their outsider status by having Namgoong be the only person in the movie who does not speak English. In interviews, the director also claims to have chosen Namgoong's name to challenge his audiences because it is difficult for non-Korean speakers to pronounce. He inserts several jokes about the name in the film, including an untranslated scolding that Namgoong gives to Curtis for not understanding his name. These mark the few moments when audiences might recognize that a full identification with the White male hero of the movie leaves us ignorant of other perspectives and worlds.

In the search for a cinematic language that can adequately convey the scale of the coming climate disaster, *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) turns to the sublime to overwhelm us with both the thrill and the despair of a natural apocalypse. Nixon (2019) writes, "Some latent telos of modernity's death drive resides at the core of Bong Joon Ho's Korean-global film, enacting a vision all but shorn of place, shorn of situation, shorn of any capable politics or resources of hope" (pp. 211–212). However, the last scenes of the movie portray Yona and a young Black boy as the only survivors of the crash, who head off into the snowscape and an uncertain future. In his next film, *Okja* (Bong & Masterson, 2013), Bong Joon Ho takes this minor woman-of-color role and sets it at the center of the story. Instead of the universalizing noplacement of the ever-moving train, the movie shifts to the local and the specific. In the process, Bong Joon Ho reimagines not only a narrative of environmental harm but also its genre, its aesthetics, and the audience's affective response to that harm.

### ***Okja* as Global Narrowcasting**

Bong Joon Ho followed *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) with *Okja* (Bong, 2017), a film he cowrote and directed for the multinational streaming giant Netflix. As one of the first films financed by Netflix, *Okja* is not exactly an escape from capitalism, and for that very reason, it can be a useful point of comparison. *Snowpiercer's* sublime view of existing capitalist systems as all-encompassing ignores the unevenness of both the spread and impact of those systems and denies the possibilities of lines of flight that might emerge from a system under pressure. *Okja*, by contrast, dwells on the cute, the minor, and the local as responses to environmental crisis. Although both were made under the same system of global capitalism, the resulting films diverge in their aesthetics and representations of environmental catastrophe. Instead of *Snowpiercer's* absolutes that create a forced choice between a fascist capitalist system and the complete destruction of all current systems and nearly all people, *Okja* serves up a compromised fantasy of escape.

The nihilism of *Snowpiercer's* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) closed system elevates a single comprehensive narrative of environmental apocalypse. *Okja* (Bong, 2017), by contrast, localizes its story, opening up spaces for multiple possible futures. *Snowpiercer* internationalized its narrative by pulling together a multinational group led by a White male American, played by an actor extratextually coded as heroic. *Okja's* story depicts the global by juxtaposing the distinct spaces through which a super pig, named *Okja*, passes. It centers on a young Korean girl, with the White actors all playing supporting roles. The everyplace and noplacement of the speeding train are replaced by the specific and distinctly different environments of Seoul, New York, and New Jersey. The language differences solved by sci-fi technology in

*Snowpiercer* are sources of comedy and concern in *Okja*, with the asymmetric status of languages recognized and built into the film's storyline. In *Okja*, heterogeneity, rather than being a concern resolved through sci-fi fantasies of a single world order, functions as a speed bump and a source of friction slowing down globalization.

The film, a fablelike story of a genetically engineered cross between a pig and a hippo, garnered most of its press from its production rather than its message. Netflix used the movie as a test case to try out a new means of distributing film and targeting multiple audiences (Tiffany, 2017). Although Netflix's distribution across nations is uneven and subject to the specific limitations imposed by national regulatory systems (Lobato, 2019), it, nevertheless, operates in ways that are more transnational and even cosmopolitan than other large streaming companies like HBO. Netflix's move into local markets includes programming in multiple languages, streaming content created outside North America, and subtitling much of its original content. Currently, more than half of its subscribers are outside of the United States. In imagining its audience, then, Netflix targets multiple niche and national audiences. In contrast to *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013), which attempted to bring non-U.S. audiences into a supposedly neutral cultural space, Netflix looks to create content that might divergently appeal to distinct markets.

The plot of *Okja* (Bong, 2017) echoes this alternate view of market globalization. The narrative is driven by a contest created by the Mirando Corporation (a not very subtle reference to Monsanto). The corporation genetically engineers a super pig, which they publicize as a cure for food shortages worldwide, but it also puts them in a position to control global food production and colonize local markets with centrally produced and controlled livestock. To demonstrate how easily the super pig could thrive across different geographies, they sent 26 engineered super pigs across the world. The film begins by turning a cynical eye toward claims of the local or of traditional cultures since they seem to be merely corporate catchphrases, but as the film unfolds, the local refuses to be subsumed into the dominant Mirando press story.

The film materially enacts a similar move. Although Netflix is surely motivated by corporate profits and a will to dominate the global media market, it is also pushed to encounter differences. Lee (2019) argues that *Okja's* production "reflects changes in the media ecology. The controversies created by the advent of *Okja* include concerns about clashes between old and new media, their competition of industrial hegemony, and the altered relationship between the global and the local" (p. 156). Netflix's gestures toward multiplicity are ultimately in the service of media consolidation, but I want to take a moment to read this particular film as a break or detour along the path toward a multinational cinematic hegemony. Gray (1995), in his study of Black television in the early days of cable, argues that the introduction of a new media technology can be an important space for those who are frequently shut out of mainstream media. As upstart technologies like cable or streaming media search for new viewers, they often look to neglected demographic groups to cultivate as audiences. Lotz (2022) and Han (2023) extend this argument to current Netflix productions as it attempts to distinguish itself in the marketplace. As a piece of media located at a turning point in distribution networks and audience reach, *Okja* can engage and critique the kind of cinematic globalization represented by *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013), which seeks to create universal narratives. Instead, *Okja's* aesthetic unfurls in ways that might not be available in more established production models.

### ***Okja's* Antiglobalization Narrative**

The critical acclaim that followed the political allegory and generic disruptions of *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) is largely missing for *Okja* (Bong, 2017). Instead of the male-centered, dystopic, violent sci-fi of *Snowpiercer* and its overwhelming feelings of the natural sublime, Bong Joon Ho gives us a powerful, but cute and petlike, creature and the appealingly small-featured face of its young companion to invoke feelings of attachment and *kawaii*. *Okja* targets the totalizing narratives of globalization as an object of critique, yet many critics ignore that element of the film to focus on its moralizing around food production, which they judge as overdrawn and cartoonish. As Wise (2019) writes in his review, "As an anti-meat industry polemic, the film consistently glosses over any moral ambiguity that might legitimately complicate its core message" (p. 291). However, by widening the film's critique, viewers can understand its target beyond factory farming. The film concerns itself with the way factory farming imposes a single homogenous approach to food shortages, one that prioritizes the desires of wealthy Westerners and organizes a neocolonial relationship with those they purport to help.

Certainly, there are villains in the movie, most of whom are working for the multinational Mirando Corporation, and factory farming is depicted as a nightmarish, violent, and depraved practice. However, it is the scale of the farming and the attendant objectification of the animals that reveal the dark underside of the Mirando Corporation, not its creation of genetically modified animals. Instead of a critique that more narrowly centers on the meat industry, *Okja* (Bong, 2017) fictionalizes the extraction of what Vora (2015) terms "vital energy" from colonized spaces for use in the imperium. The global/local contrast set up by the film is not only evident in the face-off between Mija and the Mirando Corporation but also in the gaps between Mija's goals and the help offered by the "good guys" of the Animal Liberation Front (ALF). The U.S.-based group goes to Korea on a mission to kidnap *Okja* and expose the Mirando Corporation with little regard to the danger this poses to *Okja* herself. Although the movie depicts the group as sincere and committed, it also spoofs environmental movements in both their extremism and their efforts to impose what they believe to be universal truths.

The language politics of the movie, like that of *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013), make visible the colonialist echoes in ALF's methods. In his study of these two films, Jeon (2024) argues that language translation foregrounds the potential for conflict and chaos in transnational circuits of both media and culture. Played for comic relief, ALF is an American organization, and K (a role written for Korean American Steven Yuen) is the only member of the group who can communicate in Korean, but the audience soon learns that K has only rudimentary language skills and frequently mistranslates or only pretends to understand Korean. In *Snowpiercer*, the problems of translation are magically solved by new translation software, but in *Okja* (Bong, 2017), ALF's failure to learn Korean even as the organization intervenes in the lives of Mija and *Okja* creates lasting problems. The film deprives the audience of the luxury of pretending cultural differences do not exist and a single language, presumably English, can speak for everyone. K's final words to Mija are subtitled "Try learning English. It will open up new doors," but what he actually says in Korean is "My name is Gu Soon-bom" (Bong, 2017, 00:58:22) These diametrically opposed meanings would be lost on the non-Korean-speaking viewers, emphasizing the gaps in understanding and knowledge between Korean and non-Korean audiences for the movie. By telling Mija his name, K violates his group's anonymity to forge a closer connection to Mija through a shared language. The false translation suggests

the centrality of English for Mija's future advantage, but the actual meaning ties K to a specific Korean diasporic identity, an identity that ties together the two characters. Rather than advocating for the supposed opportunities offered by English, a language spread and maintained through colonialism and multinational capitalism, K's use of Korean enables a moment of attachment to Mija and a break from the exploitative use of her story by the ALF group.

### **Cuteness, Childhood, and Care**

If *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) persuades us to view climate change as a global crisis through awe, *Okja* (Bong, 2017) asks us to turn toward the natural world through the cuteness of its human and animal stars and their deep and familial connection. Instead of the homogenizing imperialist view out the windows of the speeding train, the viewer is confined to a specific locale only accessible by foot. After the film's opening sequence, the movie immediately moves to an isolated mountaintop in Korea, where Okja is cared for by a young Korean girl, Mija, and her grandfather. Outside of the mountaintop, the world crowds in bright and loud, the pace frenetic, but these early scenes with Mija and Okja are idyllic and slow-paced. There is almost no dialogue, but the sounds of nature are amplified and create a rich aural landscape. Here they mainly eat food grown or caught with Okja's help. In the opening sequences, Mija gathers persimmons that Okja knocks from the trees and picks up fish splashed up by Okja's dive into a waterfall-fed pool. They seem to exist on the margins of capitalism, with little contact with markets or money.

Through Okja and Mija's cuteness, the film depicts the natural world in a way that domesticates and feminizes it, but it also challenges the easy slippage between cuteness and commodification in its idealized depictions of nature. This resistance to the marketplace in the film works in contradistinction to the dominant mode of cuteness, which collaborates with capitalism by commodifying the cute object and inspiring a desire to possess and consume it. Merish (1996) charts the rise of cuteness in popular culture as part of growing feminine spectatorship and consumer culture of the 19th century. The globalization of Japanese *kawaii* culture in the late 20th century has similarly been critiqued for its commodification of hyperfemininity in pursuit of new markets, yet amid these consistent concerns about commodification, the cute object also creates possibilities for alternative kinds of attachments. Cuteness can unite fan communities, for instance, to include neglected populations in political campaigns (Yang, 2023). Additionally, Kanosaka (2022) writes, "However, if the ambivalence of cuteness has the negative effect of enabling domination to appear harmless, it also carries the potential for expressing genuine tenderness and care" (para. 6). In this article, I extend this argument to consider the mobilization of cuteness to create family bonds beyond the human and how these attachments help us envision spaces outside of capitalism. However, like Merish, I also understand cuteness as a phenomenon operating within power differences and hierarchies that contain and revalue the racialized and gendered other.

In envisioning these spaces outside the metropole and the colonial centers of power, *Okja* (Bong, 2017) imagines a space where Mija and Okja cement their relation to each other through their ties to the ecology that surrounds them. Their daily time spent looking for food and enjoying nature reinforces their interdependence. This embodied and everyday entanglement forms what Alaimo (2010) calls "trans-

corporeality" to name how "the human is always intermeshed with the more than human world (and), underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the environment" (p. 2). Instead of the distance from nature necessitated by the grim, frozen, postapocalyptic landscape of *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013), *Okja* invites us into an idealized landscape. It replaces awe with sentimentality and the sublime with the cute, but rather than cheapening nature, these sequences amplify the audience's emotional attachment to Okja, Mija, and their environment as well as solidify their attachment to each other. The cute images of the pig and little girl adventuring in a benign and abundant environment activate feelings of desire in viewers and encourage them to become attuned to their transcorporeality.

By reading *Okja* (Bong, 2017) against *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013), viewers can read the distance and isolation of Mija and Okja's home as an alternative response to Bong Joon Ho's single global culture of capitalism. Only by escaping the cosmopolitan centers to the outskirts of empire can Mija carve out a space not wholly consumed by capitalism. While never completely free of capitalism (after all, the Mirando Corporation stole Okja from her isolated home), Mija's home spaces enable greater freedoms and alternative ways to socially organize. When the representatives from Mirando first arrive to check on Okja, the film ridicules their exhaustion and struggles to hike up to Mija's home, emphasizing the weakness of their reach.

Instead of the consumer-driven identities and relationalities of owner and livestock that dominate the urban centers of the film, Mija and Okja develop a different kind of bond. Their relationship within the eccentric space of their rural home deviates from their expected positions of either farmer and livestock or owner and pet. Instead, as Haraway (2003) writes in her discussion of human/dog relations, they are "co-constitutive relationships in which none of the partners pre-exist the relating" (p. 12). Noting the proliferation of cute animal memes, Dale, Goggin, Leyda, McIntyre, and Negra (2016) argue that cuteness plays a key role in understanding contemporary human-animal subjectivities. For Mija and Okja, cuteness invites protection and care and destabilizes the relation between the human and the more-than-human world, undermining familiar gender and familial structures that subtend those relationships. Okja both feeds and protects Mija in the forest during the first half of the film, and Mija does the same for Okja in the film's second half. While Mija is more socially empowered as Okja's ostensible owner, Okja is physically stronger, bigger, and, at the end of the film, more maternal. Throughout the film, it can be difficult to know who is caring for whom. At other times, they are coconspirators seeming to speak a language only they can understand. Given the central role of language in the film, the short moments when Mija whispers into Okja's ear signify a fundamental tie between the two. They share a language and, by extension, a social bond that cannot be defined by only human terms.

Mija's emotional attachment to Okja transforms her route through the world and gives her the chance to step out of her expected gender role and her obligations as a citizen-consumer. In theories of child development, cute objects like plush toys are termed "transitional objects." For a child to properly mature and develop, the transitional object "must be overcome, discarded, expelled from the household and from the physical attachment and love of the child" (Ivy, 2010, p. 19). Mija's grandfather attempts to discipline her into transitioning away from her attachment to Okja toward a mature heterosexual future. When he is unable to buy Okja from the Mirando Corporation, he instead uses the money to buy a gold pig

and gives it to Mija, saying, "In the old days the elders would give a gold pig to their daughters as a wedding gift" (Bong, 2017, 00:27:06). He then tells Mija that he does not like her spending all her time with a pig and she should spend time with a boy instead. In response, Mija throws the gold pig to the ground and cuts off her grandfather before he can finish expressing his wish for her to meet a boy in town. She maintains her attachment to her transitional object for the rest of the film, delaying both her sexual development and her entry into capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

### Cuteness and Containment

While the cuteness that animates *Okja* (Bong, 2017) gives us a space to reimagine our relation to the more than human, it also sets hard limits to Mija and Okja's autonomy. Although Mija remains cute throughout the movie, the uncomfortable racialization of cuteness as Asian and the violent responses to moments when Okja transgresses boundaries open up the film to a xenophobic reading of global movement and migration. As Bow (2021) has argued, the racialization of cuteness betrays an anti-Asian bias and anxiously defuses fears of Asia economic competition. The alternative relationalities imagined through Mija and Okja confine them to their rural, digitally disconnected, apolitical world. The pastoral spaces of Mija and Okja's isolated mountain home bookend the movie, and it is in these spaces that Okja's cuteness becomes legible. As noted earlier, the compulsion to care for the cute object closely aligns with feelings of aggression. Those aggressive impulses are given free rein if the cute object slides into monstrosity (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2007; Caudwell, 2014). That potential slippage from cute to monstrous always threatens the status of the cute.

In the mountains, foraging for food with Mija, Okja gleefully and awkwardly gallops through the trees and splashes in the waterfalls and ponds. Here she is, all cute floppy ears and happy waggles. Later in the movie, when she attempts to escape capture by careening through a packed mall, she destroys property, terrifying the other shoppers. Her transformation is complete when, in the most horrifying sequence in the movie, Mirando's animal specialist tortures Okja in a concrete pen, rendering her abject and pathetic in a way that does not transform into cuteness. In that world, Mija must conform to the hierarchies of capitalism and ultimately use the gold pig to buy back Okja from the Mirando Corporation. These transformations demonstrate how cuteness resides in the interaction between the object and the audience, and that reaction depends on context. A study by anthropologist Milton (2016) compares Australian and New Zealander responses to possums. In Australia, they view possums as cute creatures, but New Zealanders view possums as unwelcome pests, which "overrides any cuteness appeal they might have by casting them in two negatively valued roles: as disease carriers and as undesirable aliens" (Milton, 2016, p. 74). Cuteness out of place, then, can shift our response from care and sympathy to aggressive hostility, delimiting the boundaries within which the cute object can circulate.

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<sup>3</sup> *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952), that other famous story about a girl and her pig, sharply contrasts with *Okja*. Fern, Mija's counterpart in the book, ultimately abandons the barnyard community. Toward the end of the book, she leaves Wilbur, the pig, vulnerable to being sold and eaten as she turns her time and attention toward a local boy.

Ultimately, the film returns us to its original bounded cute utopia. Mija rescues Okja and another baby super pig and returns to her mountaintop home with them. They leave behind a massive stockyard filled with other super pigs living in squalid conditions, waiting for slaughter. As they escape, the film pulls back for a wide shot that reinforces the horror of the industrial scale of the feedlot and dwarfs their tiny figures. The next scene returns to the mountains of Korea and the small family unit of Mija, her grandfather, Okja, and the small adopted pig. The alternative to the industrial slaughterhouse and this grim view of life under the capitalocene is an idealized fantasy space removed from the rest of society and distanced from the suffering of others.

Like the matching of a universal global audience imagined by *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) and its multinational funders, *Okja's* (Bong, 2017) individualized rural utopia echoes the global, but fragmented, audiences targeted by Netflix. While audiences are dominated by consolidated centers of power, our affective responses to cuteness remind us that context and location continue to matter. While these alternative spaces are limited, it is important to recognize how they, nevertheless, produce new visions of possible worlds. The movie provides us with a fantasy of life outside the standardized time of capitalism. There are no time clocks in their world and no uniform systems of exchange. They gather or grow their food, never accumulating capital and rarely interacting with the marketplace.<sup>4</sup> In this childlike space, there is no labor alienation, no creation of commodities, no exchange of goods or services. If, in *Snowpiercer*, everyone lives in the same country of capitalism, the final family in *Okja* only exists at its margins and borderlands, giving us a glimpse into other worlds and other ways of being.

### Engaging Disengagement

Should audiences read this final vision as mere fantasy, or as an invitation to imagine other relationalities? As Nixon (2011) shows us in *Slow Violence*, the impact of environmental harm is disproportionately felt by colonized or postcolonial nations. They do not have a protected space apart from larger global systems. However, when denouncing this exploitative and deadly reality, scholars and activists should remember how marginalized and colonized people continue to generate alternative spaces. From the Freedom Freedom movement in Detroit to the expanding food sovereignty movement in Hawai'i, communities are cultivating a new relationship with the land. Taking over the "wastelands" of Detroit's defunded and abandoned vacant lots, Freedom Freedom supports food gardens to feed those living in urban food deserts (Quizar, 2018). Kanaka Maoli food sovereignty activists in Hawai'i resist the commodification and division of the land as well as the rhetoric of scarcity. Fujikane (2021) writes, "Abundant-mindedness is a radical refusal of capitalist economies. 'Abundance' is a word grown out of Kanaka Maoli restoration projects, as practitioners assert their capacity to determine their own decolonial futures" (p. 6). The small scale of these political projects may seem inconsequential to global capitalism, but they enable us to imagine an alternative relationship to nature, one that is not foreclosed by the logic of capitalism.

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<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of the film, Mija and her grandfather talk about wanting to buy a new television, and audiences see a few bottles of alcohol, but they appear distant from any regular connection with the marketplace.

The animal-human family imagined in *Okja* (Bong, 2017) may turn away from the larger world and its politics, but even within its limits, they enact a form of resistance to a totalizing and petrifying narrative of the coming environmental apocalypse—petrifying not only because of the fear it inspires but because it also terrorizes us into inaction, freezing us in space. As Ivy (2010) and Ngai (2012) convincingly argue, cuteness fails as a liberation theology, but it, nevertheless, enacts a form of resistance through extreme powerlessness. For both the avant-garde and the cute, their powerlessness also gives them a space to view and meditate on the nature of power. *Okja's* depiction of cuteness that generates a fantasy space outside of the (meat) marketplace similarly gives us the space to reflect on our relationship to animals as both food and companions. It encourages a relationality that cannot simply be subsumed under “the country of capitalism” (Hagen, 2019, para. 6).

We have overvalued awe and the sublime to both appreciate nature and inspire a response to global environmental collapse, and we have undervalued the lesser emotions inspired by cute nature, usually embodied by furry, often endangered, animals. When read against each other, *Snowpiercer* (Bong & Masterson, 2013) and *Okja* (Bong, 2017) demonstrate the limitations of large-scale critiques of global capitalism. The all-encompassing nature of global capitalist critique finds its fullest expression in works like *Snowpiercer* that invoke the sublime, yet the more compromised aesthetic of cuteness domesticates and localizes nature to draw out the possibilities of affective ties to the more than human and the kinds of imaginative possibilities those ties could entail.

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