



Okja (2017): Resisting Containment

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Abstract

Bong Joon-ho's *Okja* (2017) has attracted sustained interest across disciplines that seldom intersect. This article reviews that scholarship by asking: How was *Okja* (2017) examined and reclassified in academic discourse after its release? A systematized review identified and examined key texts. Across disciplines, scholars largely agree that *Okja* remains compelling precisely because it resists stable categorization. The film challenges genre conventions, blurs national and platform identities, and exposes how institutions classify living things to enable disposability. Instead of framing these interpretations as competing, the review traces the film's ongoing impact by examining the systems, institutions, and emotions that uphold categories - and the moments when *Okja* disrupts and unsettles them.

Keywords: *Okja* (2017), systematized review, transnational cinema, Netflix, genre hybridity, Anthropocene, critical animal and media studies, animal welfare, monstrosity, containment

1. Introduction

Bong Joon Ho's 2017 release of *Okja* marked a hog-wild milestone. The story follows a rural girl determined to save her beloved super-pig from a global corporation intent on turning *Okja* into meat. Premiering amid controversy, its French Riviera debut sparked debate over Netflix's unconventional release strategy, which bypasses conventional theatrical run ^[1-4]. This troubled institutional boundaries that guide audiences and gatekeepers in defining cinema. The initial unsettling only intensified once spectators met the film itself. Movie reviewers and critics ^[1, 5-7] responded in sharply mixed ways to its blend of family adventure, corporate satire, activist caper, and industrial horror. This review addresses four themes: boundary concerns in form and identity; institutions and infrastructures of containment; visibility, affect, and limits of reception; and global systems revealed through monstrosity.

2. Design, methodology, and procedures

2.1 Research question

Just as *Okja* (the super-pig) is prodded in the laboratory to evaluate the quality of her flesh, the film's release invited a parallel form of multidisciplinary scrutiny, with each field *testing* its significance through its own conceptual tools. In this sense, *Okja*'s afterlife is not only a matter of theme but

also of form: its genre shifts, tonal dissonances, and distribution context repeatedly unsettle the interpretive rules by which films are categorized and valued. This paper asks: How was *Okja* (2017) examined and reclassified in scholarly discourse following its release?

2.2 Data collection

This research followed a systematized review approach ^[8], which involves identifying relevant publications and conducting structured coding and thematic analysis. A comprehensive search across ProQuest, JSTOR, and ERIC Google Scholar yielded a final corpus of 17 post-2017 texts from various disciplines: 11 refereed journal articles, 2 books, 2 graduate theses, 1 conference proceedings paper, and 1 editorially reviewed article.

2.3 Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework guided the coding and analysis: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report ^[9]. Each text was coded under four categories: (1) discipline or venue, (2) main interpretive lens, (3) which boundary was at stake, and (4) how the text explains *Okja*'s resistance to closure or containment. The coded data were then consolidated into themes.

Table 1: Characteristics of included texts and analytic lenses used for coding.

Theme	Author	Year	Field/Discipline	Publication type	Primary lens	Secondary lens
Boundary trouble: form/identity	Uzuner, N.	2020	Film/Media; global studies	Jrnl media review	GEN	PE
	Lee, N.	2020	Film studies (auteur)	Book	PE	PLAT
	Ballard, G.	2023	Film studies; urban/culture	Book	NAT	
	Spaethen, L. M.	2020	Film/Media (MA thesis)	MA thesis	PLAT	NAT
Institutions/ infrastructures	Acquier, A., & Rehn, A.	2019	Org/management studies	Jrnl commentary	ORG	
	Nielsen, E. B., & Andersen, G.	2022	Pop culture; env. humanities	Jrnl article	ANTH	PE
	Miva, N. A.	2023	Literary/cultural studies	Jrnl article	WEL	
	Khan, C.	2021	Critical animal studies	Jrnl article (essay)	CAS	
	Gunawan, M.	2018	Law/socio-legal	Jrnl article	ORG	WEL
Visibility/affect/reception	Parkinson, C.	2018	Visual culture; animal studies	Jrnl essay	VIS	
	Steede <i>et al.</i>	2018	Comm; agri-food studies	Jrnl article	REC	
Global systems/ monstrosity	Jin, J. Y.	2019	Comp lit/cultural studies	Jrnl article	MON	PE
	Imanjaya, E., Amelia, A., & Meilani.	2021	Env. humanities; film	Conf proceedings	MON	ANTH
	Putri, K. K., & Harahap, R. H.	2025	Sociology; env. studies	Jrnl article	PE	ANTH
	Almiron, N., Cole, M., & Freeman, C. P.	2018	Comm/media	Jrnl article	VIS	CAS
	Zavitz, T., & Kielbiski, C.	2021	Media; animal studies (CAMS)	Jrnl article	VIS	CAS
	Koilybayeva, B.	2022	Animal studies; philosophy	MA thesis	SUBJ	VIS

Note. Interpretive lens tags: ANTH = Anthropocene/technofix and infrastructure; CAS = Critical Animal Studies/antispeciesism; GEN = Genre and tonal hybridity; MON = Monstrosity and globalization; NAT = National and transnational identity; ORG = Organization and technical systems; PLAT = Platform and distribution politics; PE = Political economy; SUBJ = Animal subjectivity and animal gaze; VIS = Visibility, witnessing and affect; REC = Reception and audience study; WEL = Animal welfare and applied ethics.

2.4 Limitation

As a systematized rather than fully systematic literature review, this study prioritizes interpretive depth over exhaustive coverage [8]. The corpus is deliberately limited in scope and cross-disciplinary in composition. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as a thematic mapping of major interpretive pathways rather than an exhaustive catalogue of all scholarship on *Okja*.

3. Discussion

3.1 Boundary trouble in form and identity

3.1.1 Disrupting conventions

Films operate within genre conventions that structure audience expectations, rendering viewing more legible and, often, more reassuring. *Okja* denies this reassurance, shifting from tenderness to urgency, from corporate satire to routine industrial slaughter. By doing so, *Okja* withholds the comfort usually offered by genre conventions. Uzuner states, “*Okja* is beyond any genre. It suggests that dichotomies can, in some ways, harmonize” [10 p.1]. The film is thus easy to describe yet hard to define. This elusiveness creates fertile ground for analysis.

3.1.2 A blurred multi-layered identity

A basic question can be complex: Is *Okja* a Korean film, a Hollywood film, or a transnational platform product? [2]. The answer matters because national labels shape ideas about authenticity, power, and ideology. Higson notes that national cinema is constructed not only through production and marketing, but also by the conditions under which people interpret and use films [11]. *Okja* both asserts and destabilizes Korean-ness by moving between “an idyllic countryside mountain in Korea” and the “forest of concrete buildings” in New York [2 p.61]. Ballard similarly contends that although promoted as a Korean story upon its release, the film resists a stable national identity. It creates cultural “transferability and interchangeability” because Korean specificity is diluted by a globalized story and a Seoul-New

York binary [12 p.170].

This instability extends beyond national framing. *Okja* crosses genres, cultures, and institutional boundaries. This openness helps clarify the film’s appeal across disciplines. Film studies, media industry studies, animal studies, environmental humanities, and political economy all provide access points, as *Okja* repeatedly emphasizes questions of classification central to each discipline. Spaethen, for example, regards *Okja*’s Netflix identity as critically important: Netflix’s global reach is essential to the film’s ecological-political message - that it should be “watched worldwide” [13 p.36].

3.2 Institutions and infrastructures of containment

3.2.1 Boundary object

Once genre and national labels fail to explain *Okja*, scholars turn to the institutions that make and enforce categories. One way to describe this resistance to classification is to see *Okja* as a boundary object. In management and organization studies, Acquier argues that *Okja* “cuts across categories and questions established boundaries” such as animals and humans, childhood and adulthood, public and private issues, fiction and reality, nature, culture, and artificial beings, individuals and organizations, and animals, pets, and foods [14 p.518]. She adds that the Cannes-Netflix dispute also shows *Okja* as “a case of institutional and technological disruption” [14 p.518]. Acquier’s Ellul-based analysis of *Okja* then frames Mirando Corporation’s super-pig program as an expression of what the French philosopher Jacques Ellul calls *Technique*: a self-extending technical system in which “technical rationality manages to take precedence over all other values and virtues” [14 p.523].

3.2.2 Anthropocene technofix and welfare frameworks

The Anthropocene denotes a proposed geological epoch in which the planet has entered a distinctly human-dominated phase, in which human activity operates as a planetary force shaping and regulating Earth-system functioning [15].

Nielsen and Andersen's analysis of *Okja* through an Anthropocene lens helps explain why the film's tonal and generic instability is not a shortcoming but a strategy. *Okja* can be read as a "lighthearted romp" even as it conveys the "cruel optimism of the technofix," presenting biotechnology as an Anthropocene remedy whose large-scale implementation produces new ethical issues and infrastructural harms [16 p.737]. For example, Lucy Miranda's *Environment and Life* launch functions as a parody of corporate greenwashing [16 p.737], attaching promises of being "eco-friendly" and "natural" [16 p.738] to a bioengineered organism.

As the story progresses, *Okja* (the super-pig) is reduced to data, images, and merchandise, yet the camera insists on her subjectivity by lingering in close-up shots of her to elicit audience identification [16]. This becomes brutally explicit in the final slaughterhouse sequence. Pens, fences, and mechanical restraint devices show that the technofix is inseparable from a purpose-built "sub-infrastructure" engineered to process living beings at top speed [16 p.740]. Accordingly, *Okja*'s cute surface and its industrial horror comprise two sides of the same Anthropocene fantasy [16]. Promising technological advances become cruel through the systems required to realize them.

Viewed through an applied animal-welfare lens, the film highlights how Anthropocene infrastructures affect bodies. In welfare theory, ethical assessment typically weighs outcomes by comparing the utility they generate [17]. Miva interprets Miranda Corporation's treatment of *Okja* (the super-pig) as a violation of the UK's Five Freedoms framework, particularly once *Okja* entered laboratory and slaughterhouse spaces. In the film, *Okja*'s confinement curtails her natural behavior, the stressful handling has produced fear and distress, and their industrial procedures exposed *Okja* to suffering and injury [18 p.74]. While Miva frames containment as an ethical breach in welfare terms, Nielsen and Andersen argue that such harms are structurally generated by the technofix itself. Once a "solution to a global environmental problem" is recast as a scalable industrial promise, containment and violence are no longer exceptions - they become necessary operating conditions of the system [16 p.738].

Khan's essay adds a productive complication to this Anthropocene-welfare pairing. Even as *Okja* criticizes the technofix, it still relies on Anthropocentric storytelling structures to make its critique emotionally legible to the audience. She notes that animal-centered cinema often ends with a happy ending. However, it is also worth asking for whom the happy ending is meant, as happy endings often cater to the human gaze more than they acknowledge the ongoing reality of animal suffering [19].

3.2.3 Foucauldian apparatuses and legal categorization

Expanding the issue of classification beyond genre and nation, Gunawan's Foucauldian reading reveals that categorization is also legal and institutional [20]. As the super-pig passes through different "apparatuses" - the home, the laboratory, the media spectacle, and the slaughterhouse - *Okja*'s status is repeatedly reclassified as companion, livestock, and corporate property. In doing so, the film challenges containment at the level of the category itself.

3.3 Visibility, affect, and reception limits

3.3.1 From shock to skepticism

How does *Okja* evoke embodied empathy, and how does such empathy resonate or fail to resonate among different interpretive communities? Parkinson defines embodied visuality as "the relationship between the viewer and the image of an animal" [21 p.53] and turns to Prof. Laura Marks to define haptic imagery as "those that do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image" (Marks, as cited in Parkinson) [21 p.55]. Parkinson tackles the question of empathy by arguing that *Okja* employs embodied visuality and haptic imagery to produce a visceral collapse of the socially constructed categories "pet" and "food" [21 p.51]. Steede and colleagues then provide an empirical counterpoint. In a study using focus groups, participants described the film as "overdramatized and misrepresented food production" [22 p.9]. Moreover, agriculture majors in particular note the use of a persuasive tactic by portraying *Okja* (the super-pig) as "puppy-like" [22 p.6].

Okja fosters identification through affective and sensorial cinematic techniques, but viewers may accept, resist, or reinterpret this identification in light of their prior knowledge and beliefs. Moreover, even when the film elicits strong emotional responses, Steede and peers found little evidence of shifts in purchasing behavior, indicating that *Okja* can generate intense experience without necessarily producing behavioral change [22].

3.4 Global systems made legible through monstrosity

3.4.1 Monster theory

A further approach reads *Okja* through the lens of monster theory. This theory treats monstrosity as something culturally produced through processes of crisis, categorization, fear, and possibility [23]. Monster theory also asks how the channels of affect and interpretation through which monster narratives operate stabilize or contest ideology [24]. Jin and Roe suggest that monster narratives function as a cultural technology for rendering diffuse global forces intelligible, particularly when "global forces such as neoliberalism and reactionary nationalism, technology, climate change, migration and displacement lead to accelerating instability and proliferating problems without local solutions, thus leading to growing fear and anger in search of targets" [24 p.2].

Jin frames *Okja* as a "global monster" by arguing that the monster makes globalization visible. Globalization often works through dispersed systems that are hard to perceive directly, so the monster's movement provides a way to trace them. In the film, this is staged through a contrast between the mountain home, which offers a fantasy of "stability, predictability, and containment," and the corporate networks that seize *Okja* (the super-pig) once she is removed from that pastoral space [25 p.5]. The Seoul Metro chase marks a major turning point, making *Okja*'s misfit status unmistakable within the system now hunting her. Jin likewise emphasizes *Okja*'s liminal identity of being "a super pig and a super pet at the same time" to illustrate how global capitalism classifies, brands, and circulates living beings [25 p.5]. Finally, she reads Mija's trajectory as a story

of constrained development, in which the apparent return to the pastoral does not resolve the conflict but rather signals ongoing containment within the structures the film critiques.

3.4.2 A pet monster

This global-monster mapping also resonates with ecological-film readings that classify *Okja* as a “pet monster made by GMOs” and marketed as an eco-friendly solution to hunger, even as the narrative exposes the cruelty and profit logic of the industrial meat system [26 p.3]. Imanjaya and colleagues note that Mirando Corporation’s project is marketed as “an eco-friendly cure for world hunger,” even as the narrative exposes the ethical and ecological contradictions that such promises conceal [26 p.3]. In this sense, the ecological monster refers to both *Okja*’s engineered body and the wider apparatus that normalizes technoscientific fixes while shifting their costs onto animal lives [26].

3.4.3 Greenwashing, conflict, and ecological vulnerability

Putri and Harahap’s study aligns with - and extends - these readings by translating *Okja*’s monster-ecology dynamic into the idioms of conflict theory and ecological sociology [27]. It foregrounds a structural antagonism between corporate power and profit-driven growth, on the one hand, and ecological welfare and the vulnerability of humans and nonhumans rendered expendable, on the other. They also explicitly frame Mirando’s sustainability messaging as “greenwashing,” arguing that environmental rhetoric serves to secure legitimacy and public consent for exploitative practices [27 p.364].

3.4.4 From naturalization to ethical seeing

If monster theory explains how global systems become perceptible, critical animal and media studies (CAMS) explain how those systems are naturalized or disrupted through regimes of visibility. CAMS examines how media normalize speciesism by framing animals as resources while obscuring the violence that enables their use [28]. It asks how representation reproduces human dominance and how film might disrupt that dominance by making exploitation visible [28].

From this perspective, Zavitz and Kielbinski argue that while mainstream media often naturalizes animal exploitation, cinema can also open an “ethical space” for a creaturely gaze that affirms cross-species communicability (Creed, as cited in Zavitz and Kielbinski) [29 p.96]. The film pulls viewers into ordinarily hidden sites of institutionalized exploitation, including slaughterhouses. In doing so, it aligns spectatorship with what Timothy Pachirat calls a “politics of sight” that “pierces zones of confinement in order to bring about social and political transformation” [29 p.99].

3.4.5 Making exploitation visible

Koilybayeva sharpens this account by asking whether *Okja* (the super-pig) is framed as a pet or a farmed animal, and how that label recalibrates her moral status and disposability. Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s emphasis on being “seen” by the animal, she argues that the film foregrounds the reciprocal gaze between Mija and *Okja* as

an engine of empathy. In Derrida’s terms, the animal’s look places the human within the animal’s field of vision, disrupting the assumed hierarchy between species [30].

Overall, CAMS clarifies why visibility and representation are politically consequential, while Derridean interpretation shows how *Okja*’s gaze-driven affect can unsettle the hierarchy between human and non-human, even as the conclusion risks neutralizing its challenge by returning to the familiar, optimistic pet-film closure [28-30].

4. Conclusion

To understand *Okja*’s enduring afterlife, it is useful to recognize how diverse interpretations converge on the problem of containment. The film refuses generic stability, sliding from pastoral bliss to corporate satire, activist spectacle, and industrial atrocity. On the cultural level, the film likewise defies fixity. As a Netflix-distributed film, *Okja* circulates globally while continuing to be interpreted - and contested - through national frameworks. *Okja*’s dual instability is not a shortcoming but a strategy that renders global systems more legible.

The literature surveyed in this paper shows that *Okja* invites multiple readings. It has been interpreted as an Anthropocene technofix parable, a study in organizational *Technique*, a CAMS account of witnessing and mediated compassion, a Foucauldian analysis of institutional apparatuses, and a monstrous mapping of variable development. These approaches do not negate one another. Rather, the film accommodates them simultaneously by remaining poised between categories: pet and livestock, nature and technology, Korean narrative and global commodity.

If the film offers any resolution, it is deliberately incomplete. Mija’s rescue of her pet is an exception negotiated within the very system the film condemns. The machinery remains intact. *Okja* remains analytically productive by withholding both generic and moral closure. It continues to resist containment by foregrounding the conditions of its own production. The film traces this process through the institutions that determine what counts as cinema, the infrastructures that confine and process bodies, and the narratives that recast violence as necessity, progress, or sustainability. *Okja*’s enduring contribution is an insistence that viewers confront unstable cages - and the worlds they are meant to protect.

5. Recommendations

Future research could compare *Okja* with other Netflix films to see how shared platform circulation shapes interpretation. It could also trace the film’s movement across scholarly, popular, and advocacy arenas to assess its influence on debates about animal ethics, industrial food systems, and corporate power.

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