



# The Cinematheque Vision in Videotheque Practices: *Public Film Culture in 1990s South Korea*

Chonghwa CHUNG

## Abstract

*This study historicizes Korean film culture in the 1990s through the framework of two theques—the cinematheque as an idealized vision of a film archive modeled after the West and the videotheque as its practical counterpart. The driving force behind the transformation of Korean film culture during this period was the emergence of a new generation of young cinephiles who, armed with video media, developed curatorial practices. As no proper public cinematheque had been established, private cinematheques emerged to fill the void. These institutions effectively assumed the role of a national film archive, but functionally operated in the form of videotheques. In response to this evolving cultural landscape, the Korean Film Archive began expanding its role as a public cinematheque. Throughout the 1990s, amidst dynamic shifts between aspirations and realities, the two theques did not exist as separate domains, nor did videotheques simply transition into cinematheques. Rather, they functioned in a complementary manner, fulfilling different yet interconnected roles. This study highlights the advantages of this coexistence—namely, the flexible synergy between the two forms and the dynamism driven by young cinephiles. In doing so, it also offers insights into how the Korean Film Archive can engage new generations in the rediscovery of Korean classic cinema.*

**Keywords:** cinematheque, videotheque, cinematic youth (young cinephiles), practicing curation, Korean Film Archive

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Chonghwa CHUNG is Head of Research & Curation, senior researcher at the Korean Film Archive, and adjunct professor at Chung-Ang University in South Korea. E-mail: flicks74@gmail.com.

## Introduction

*“The cultural figure of the ‘literary youth’ may be gradually giving way to that of the ‘cinematic youth.’ While the previous generation formed ‘book clubs’ to engage with literature in their formative years, today’s young people are increasingly organizing ‘film circles,’ creating spaces for collective viewing and critical discourse on cinema.”<sup>1</sup>*

It would not be an exaggeration to say that cinema occupied a central position in South Korea’s cultural transformation during the 1990s. This decade saw the rise of a new generation of “cinematic youth” (*yeonghwa cheongnyeon*), or young cinephiles, who approached film with unprecedented intellectual rigor.<sup>2</sup> Their passionate engagement fueled the growth of film schools, the proliferation of weekly film periodicals, and the launch of international film festivals—developments that gained significant momentum following the centennial celebration of cinema in 1995.

To critically examine this transformation, it is essential to clarify the conceptual and institutional terms that underpin the analytical framework of this study—namely, cinematheque, videotheque, the role of the Korean Film Archive (hereafter KOFA), and the notion of cinematic youth. This study adopts the term cinematheque to refer to an institutional model of a film archive, modeled after Western prototypes, dedicated to celluloid film preservation, scholarly curation, and public exhibition. Videotheque describes grassroots video exhibition spaces centered around VHS media and home video technologies that enabled access to films outside

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1. “Yesulhon saechulgu ‘yeonghwa moim’ geupjeung” (Rise of ‘Film Clubs’ as New Outlets for Artistic Spirit), *Chosun Ilbo*, October 15, 1991.

2. The term *cinephile* derives from the French word for film enthusiast. During the 1990s in South Korea, media predominantly employed terms such as “movie mania” and its Korean equivalent, *yeonghwagwang* (영화광), to describe young individuals passionately engaged with cinema. In this study, *cinephile* is not used to denote the post-2000s cultural group in South Korea that distinguished itself from general film audiences as a form of cultural identification. Rather, the term is utilized in its broader, fundamental sense to refer to those with a profound appreciation for cinema.

commercial circulation. KOFA, a public institution established in 1974 with a primary focus on Korean feature films, plays a central institutional role in this analysis. Finally, the term cinematic youth refers to a generation of passionate cinephiles in their twenties and early thirties—many of whom were college students or university-educated, predominantly middle-class, and shaped by both liberalized cultural access and emerging global film discourse in the 1990s. This cohort organized film circles, programmed informal screenings, and developed curatorial practices that distinguished them from previous generations of cinephiles, who were often grounded in literary or politically activist frameworks. Whether as aspiring filmmakers, critics, or cultural organizers, these young cinephiles played a transformative role in reimagining Korean film culture during the 1990s.

This study explores the evolving landscape of South Korean film culture in the 1990s through two distinct yet interconnected perspectives. The first explores how young cinephiles utilized VHS tapes and videocassette recorders (VCRs) to develop their collection and curation practices. The second analyzes the expanding role of KOFA in the public sphere, particularly from 1990 onwards, as discussions surrounding the establishment and function of a national cinematheque began to solidify. Two key terms encapsulate the defining conditions of this period: videotheque and cinematheque. In the absence of a state-sanctioned cinematheque, independent cinematheques emerged to serve as film archives. Though functioning as *de facto* cinematheques, these spaces operated as videotheques in practice. The transformation of South Korean film culture during this era was driven by an emergent generation of cinephiles who, empowered by home video technology, developed sophisticated curatorial practices.

In response to these developments, KOFA began to actively expand its role as a public cinematheque. Despite operating under resource constraints and programming limitations, the institution maintained two dedicated film projection facilities while simultaneously expanding its videotheque services through its audiovisual library—a pragmatic approach given the material realities of the time. Though still in its nascent stages, this space became a formative site for aspiring cinephiles to study and engage with film.

The 1990s marked a period of dynamic transformation, in which the vision of a cinemathèque and the practices of a vidéothèque coexisted in productive tension, each continuously informing and reshaping the other. Rather than existing as separate domains, these two *theques* operated in a mutually reinforcing manner in both the private and public spheres.

In this sense, this study historicizes South Korean film culture of the 1990s through the dual lens of the cinemathèque, conceived as an idealized model of a film archive inspired by Western institutions, and the vidéothèque, realized as its pragmatic counterpart shaped by local constraints. By examining the interplay between the two *theques*, the study highlights how the coexistence of these two systems fostered a flexible complementarity and a user-driven dynamism that not only defined the film culture of the period but also holds valuable methodological insights for contemporary archival practices. I argue that these historical dynamics continue to inform KOFA's ongoing efforts to connect classic Korean cinema with new generations of viewers. The ways in which the cinemathèque and vidéothèque coexisted in the 1990s—linking institutional aspirations with grassroots initiatives—offer key lessons for rethinking how archival institutions today can engage with evolving audience practices.

### **Framing Two *Theques*: History and Scholarship**

Let us first consider the fundamental meanings embedded in the terms vidéothèque and cinemathèque. The French suffix *-thèque* designates spaces that mediate access to various forms of media, with the prefix specifying the primary mode of exhibition. A vidéothèque serves as a space for the storage, circulation, and viewing of video-based media—encompassing formats from VHS tapes to DVDs, Blu-ray discs, and contemporary digital platforms such as VOD services. Vidéothèques operate outside the realm of traditional theatrical projection.

The cinemathèque, conversely, is an institution dedicated to the exhibition of films that typically elude commercial theatrical distribution, including classic films, art-house cinema, and experimental works. Its

defining characteristic, however, extends beyond mere exhibition: the cinematheque has historically been closely associated with film archival functions, including the collection, preservation, and restoration of film prints.

While the distinction between these institutions might superficially appear to rest on their respective media formats, a more nuanced understanding reveals that they are fundamentally shaped by different screening contexts.

The videotheque, functioning as a specialized library for film research and viewing, ensures public accessibility through its non-theatrical flexibility, particularly in navigating copyright restrictions. The cinematheque, by contrast, distinguishes itself as a dedicated and continuous site of film exhibition.

In her analysis of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London's spatial identity, Lucy Bayley (2017, 156–157) highlights the growing importance of “an oscillation between preservation and dissemination,” a dynamic that has become increasingly pronounced in the digital age. She posits that the videotheque, in its library-like function, holds distinct value as a specialized resource. This perspective closely aligns with the conditions of 1990s South Korea, where the cinematheque existed primarily as an aspirational model while practical constraints necessitated the emergence of videotheques, often in conjunction with independent film clubs. These videotheques evolved into alternative cultural spaces, continuously refining methodologies to navigate their material limitations.

The conceptual significance of distinguishing the two *theques* is not confined to the early 1990s, when video media reached its peak utilization. Indeed, it continues to offer critical insights for ongoing debates on how KOFA engages with classic Korean cinema, particularly in developing new strategies for both preservation and public access.

Recent studies on 1990s South Korean cinephilia, particularly those by Andrew David Jackson (2023) and Lee Sun-joo (2024), have also examined the role of the videotheque. Jackson (2023, 81–82) identifies cultural centers, university film clubs, and videotheques as key nodes of non-theatrical film exhibition, arguing that these venues emerged as a grassroots response to

the state's failure to support the circulation of non-commercial foreign films in Korea. He further contends that these three modes of non-cinema exhibition reflected a growing public demand for films excluded from officially sanctioned channels—whether state-regulated distribution systems, network television, or mainstream commercial cinemas. His analysis highlights the videotheque's essential role as an alternative screening space, granting access to films beyond the reach of state-controlled infrastructures. Notably, Jackson observes, "These three non-theatrical exhibition spaces did not disappear with the emergence of art houses but co-existed simultaneously" (Jackson 2023, 81), a claim that aligns closely with one of this study's central premises: that rather than existing in opposition, these diverse screening spaces constituted a mutually supportive ecosystem. Within this framework, 1990s cinephilic audiences actively navigated between various venues depending on film availability, exercising curatorial agency within a fragmented exhibition landscape. While Jackson's analysis effectively situates videotheques within grassroots, oppositional network of non-theatrical exhibition, this study shifts the focus toward their latent archival dimensions and their evolving relationships with public institutions such as KOFA.

Taken together, Jackson's research and this study offer complementary analytical frameworks for understanding 1990s South Korean cinephilia: whereas Jackson emphasizes the circulation of non-commercial films through alternative channels, this study foregrounds how those same venues also functioned as informal archives, raising awareness of the need for institutional frameworks for long-term preservation and access. Collectively, these perspectives broaden the conceptual and material topography of South Korean film history by linking exhibition and distribution practices to evolving archival imaginaries.

Expanding upon this discourse, Lee Sun-joo (2024, 31) conceptualizes video not merely as a reproductive medium within videotheques, but as "a crucial medium and infrastructure that enabled the compressed cinephilia of the late 1980s and 1990s." She argues that "Video viewing, both in its private and clandestine modes and within the communal setting of alternative videotheques, constituted the vital heart of Korean cinephilic

culture” (Lee 2024, 50). While Lee’s emphasis on the technological underpinnings of the videotheque is well-founded, her characterization of the 1990s as a transitional phase superseding the videotheque in favor of the cinematheque merits closer examination. Rather than treating the videotheque as an outdated mode of film access, this study approaches it through the lens of complementarity, emphasizing its ongoing relevance in shaping contemporary South Korean film culture. This perspective reframes videotheques not as transitional remnants of a pre-cinematheque era, but as crucial agents that shaped the institutional conditions under which public film culture and national archives developed in tandem.

This study is structured into three interconnected sections. The first section examines key aspects from the 1980s that laid the groundwork for the transformation of South Korean film culture in the following decade. It pays particular attention to the collection and curation practices of young cinephiles during the 1990s, analyzing their broader social implications.

The second section examines the evolution of film library discourse in South Korea, from its emergence in the 1960s to the parallel efforts of private and public sectors to establish a cinematheque in the 1990s. Through this historical framework, the study conceptualizes the cinematheque and videotheque as complementary constructs—the former as a visionary ideal, the latter as its pragmatic realization—while emphasizing their continued relevance today.

The concluding section presents a case study of KOFA and its role in shaping a public cinematheque throughout the 1990s. Despite its limited resources, KOFA effectively fulfilled its essential role by adopting a distinctive model of cultural governance. This model was sustained by the active engagement of an emerging generation of cinema professionals and cinephiles who played dual roles as organizers and participants.

## The Landscape of 1990s South Korean Film Culture

### *The 1980s: Foundation of Change*

The 1990s marked an unprecedented period of cultural upheaval in South Korea, characterized by a profound transformation of the country's popular culture landscape. Situated at the juncture between the peak of analog media and the emergence of digital technology, this decade saw diverse subcultures across film, television, and popular music either ascend to mainstream prominence or cultivate distinctive cultural enclaves. Scholars have identified the 1988 Seoul Olympics as a pivotal moment that marked South Korea's transition into an era of intensified visual media consumption. The economic boom preceding the 1997 IMF crisis, along with the rise of a consumer public with newfound cultural agency, fundamentally reshaped the sensibilities of the era. Cinema was at the forefront of this transformation, playing a central role in shaping South Korea's evolving cultural landscape.

While cinema had long been central to mass entertainment, in the 1980s it also became a vehicle for political activism—particularly within university-led social movements. However, the 1990s marked an unprecedented expansion of film culture, characterized by increasingly sophisticated modes of audience engagement. The post-1987 liberalization of the Korean film market, though initially challenging for the domestic industry, paradoxically ushered in an era of unparalleled access to global cinema. Rapid expansion of the market facilitated the importation of films from a wide spectrum of global sources, including Third World art cinema. This transformation significantly altered audience behavior: moving beyond mere consumption of commercial films in mainstream theaters, cinephiles and enthusiasts actively sought out auteur-driven works, cult classics, and alternative cinematic experiences. Newly redefined terms such as “*yeonghwagwang*” (movie buff) and “cinematheque,” which had previously been unfamiliar, began appearing frequently in media discourse. Such linguistic markers signified both the expansion of cinematic discourse and the broadening horizons of South Korean film culture.

To fully grasp the cultural transformation of the 1990s, it is essential to acknowledge its roots in the 1980s. One of the defining moments that sparked young Korean cinephiles' growing interest in domestic cinema was the release of *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* (*Dalma-ga dongjok-euro gan kkadalgeun?*; dir. Bae Yong-kyoon, 1989). Produced over a four-year period by an art professor working entirely outside the mainstream Chungmuro film industry, this work achieved unprecedented recognition as the first Korean film to win the Grand Prix at the 42nd Locarno International Film Festival. Despite being a previously unknown art film, it garnered remarkable commercial success in Korea, drawing over 140,000 viewers and ranking sixth at the domestic box office.

The film's production was made possible by the 1985 revision of the Fifth Film Law, which liberalized film production and allowed non-industry creators to establish their own production companies.<sup>3</sup> The film epitomized the concept of *independent film* in its purest form—its director single-handedly oversaw all aspects of production, from screenplay and direction to cinematography, art direction, and editing, all without financial backing from major studios. The success of *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* marked Korean cinema's first serious recognition on the international stage and also ushered in a new phase of Korean film culture, one that would evolve in unprecedented ways throughout the 1990s.

The 1980s also saw concerted efforts by Korean filmmakers to gain international recognition through active participation in the global film festival circuit. While accolades at major festivals initially remained elusive, Korean films began to receive increasing attention within prestigious venues. The Berlin International Film Festival, for instance, featured Korean films in its competition section across several editions: *Mandala* (*Mandara*; dir. Im Kwon-taek, 1981) at the 32nd iteration in 1982, *Blazing Sun* (*Ttaeng byeol*; dir. Hah Myung-joong, 1984) at the 35th in 1985, and *Gilsotteum* (dir. Im

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3. "Gyosu-deuri yeonghwa gamdok matneunda" (Professors Take on Film Directing), *Kyung-hyang Shinmun*, April 16, 1986. This article highlighted the impact of film production liberalization, noting how Hyosung Women's University art professor Bae Yong-kyoon established Bae Yong-kyoon Productions to develop his screenplay *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?*

Kwon-taek, 1985) at the 36th in 1986.

At Cannes, *Spinning the Tales of Cruelty Towards Women* (*Yeoin janhoksa mulleya mulleya*; dir. Lee Doo-yong, 1983) and *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* were selected for the Un Certain Regard section in 1984 and 1989 respectively. The latter film achieved unprecedented international acclaim at the 42nd Locarno International Film Festival in 1989, securing not only the coveted Golden Leopard but also the FIPRESCI Prize and two further special distinctions. This landmark achievement—the first instance of a Korean film receiving the highest honor at a major Western film festival—paralleled another significant milestone: Kang Soo-yeon's Best Actress award at the 44th Venice International Film Festival in 1987 for her performance in *The Surrogate Woman* (*Ssibaji*; dir. Im Kwon-taek, 1986). *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* proved particularly transformative in challenging young cinephiles—already immersed in European art films—to reconceptualize Korean cinema beyond mainstream Chungmuro productions. It furnished a framework for interpreting Korean directors through the auteur theory paradigm, catalyzing a broader re-evaluation of domestic cinematic traditions.

While Korean cinema's definitive breakthrough at the Big Three festivals—Cannes, Berlin, and Venice—would not fully materialize until the early 2000s, the groundwork established in the 1980s proved indispensable. Although Korean films submitted to international festivals during this period were often criticized as *festival films* tailored to meet governmental expectations for global recognition, their sustained presence on the international stage carried significant weight. Throughout the 1980s, Korean films navigated governmental filters to reach prestigious competitions, culminating in Kang Soo-yeon's historic Best Actress win in 1987 and Bae Yong-kyoon's Grand Prix in 1989. These milestones were not just celebrated globally, they also resonated deeply within South Korea, challenging domestic perceptions of Korean cinema's cultural value. Significantly, these achievements catalyzed a crucial shift for young cinephiles, prompting them to move beyond their initial fascination with European art cinema. They began to actively engage with the aesthetic possibilities of domestic films, envisioning for Korea a prominent place within the broader landscape of global cinema.

### *Cinematic Youth: Practicing Collection and Curation*

The paradigmatic shift in South Korean film culture during the 1990s was fundamentally driven by the spread of film collection and curation, which, for the first time, became widely practiced at the individual level. This transformation was deeply intertwined with the rapid expansion of home video media in Korea from the mid-1980s.<sup>4</sup> While the expanding home video market laid the groundwork for a new era in the Korean film industry, it also raised concerns about the circulation of unauthorized and adult content. However, the *cinematic youth*, or young cinephiles, of the 1990s actively adopted and expanded on existing models, particularly those established by Télé(vision)-thèque, the videotheque at the Institut français in Seoul, and the video library at Sogang University's Communication Center (*Screen* 1984, 110–115).

Prior to the 1990s, film enthusiasts faced severely limited viewing options beyond theatrical releases and television broadcasts, with programs like *Weekend Cinema Classics* serving as their primary window into cinema.<sup>5</sup> Even those seeking deeper engagement with film found their resources largely confined to books and printed materials. The 1990s, however, ushered in an era of unprecedented accessibility, as an extensive range of films—from canonical classics to contemporary art-house works—became widely available through video technology. Video rental establishments not only enabled audiences to borrow films, they also facilitated the creation of personal collections through duplication.

Specialty vendors such as Cinetown (Yeonghwa maeul) and Yvideoshop (Eutteum-gwa beogeum) embraced the emerging cinephilic culture, even to

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4. “1-cheon-eok sijang, geu hyeonhwang-gwa yeokgineung” (One Trillion Won Video Market: Current Status and Side Effects), *Chosun Ilbo*, November 1, 1989. This article reported that in 1989, the video market surpassed 1 trillion won for the first time, outpacing the domestic film market, which remained in the 900 billion won range.

5. *Weekend Cinema Classics* (*Jumal-ui myeonghwa*) was a popular film program airing on MBC TV every Saturday night from August 1969 to October 2010, attracting a wide audience, including young cinephiles. Alongside KBS's *Saturday Movie Classics* (*Toyo myeonghwa*), it became a cornerstone of weekend television entertainment in South Korea.

the extent of setting up dedicated display sections exclusively for collector's editions. This transformation enabled enthusiasts to build tangible film archives and to develop sophisticated systems of categorization, establish aesthetic and historical connections, and curate personalized viewing experiences. Crucially, these curatorial practices transcended private collections, intersecting with programming decisions at videotheques and art-house venues to generate dynamic cultural exchanges. Through this process, individual curatorial practices evolved into collective cultural engagement, fundamentally expanding the parameters of South Korea's cinematic landscape.

While video rental stores provided cinephiles with primary access to films, an even broader range of titles—particularly those lacking official releases—circulated through alternative venues: videotheques. These informal archives grew out of the self-directed film study initiatives of young 1980s cinephiles. Enthusiasts who had cultivated their cinematic literacy through unofficial channels built extensive collections by acquiring foreign tapes and duplicating LaserDisc (LD) content, which they shared within their communities. Through thematically curated screenings, they fostered dynamic exchanges with other equally passionate cinephiles.

The organizers of these independent cinematheques played a pivotal role in democratizing access to global cinema, notably through their meticulous efforts to create and embed Korean subtitles. Though these analog copies—often the result of multiple duplications—suffered from degraded image quality, they offered an unprecedented breadth of programming. From canonical masterpieces to contemporary auteur works, from sophisticated genre films to cult B-movies, these informal screening spaces exposed cinephiles to an entirely new cinematic spectrum. Crucially, these venues did not merely serve as spaces for entertainment or niche knowledge accumulation; they also functioned as laboratories for deeper intellectual engagement with cinema's fundamental nature. The impact of these cinephile-led cinematheques extended well beyond screenings. Informal seminars evolved into structured educational programs that attracted college students seeking systematic film study. These initiatives expanded beyond theoretical discourse to include practical workshops on

small-gauge filmmaking, fostering both critical appreciation and creative production.

The 1990s witnessed the first systematic attempts by young cinephiles to conceptualize and implement the cinematheque as a specialized space for film appreciation. The videotheque Film Space 1895 (1989–July 1992) pioneered this movement, followed by SA/sé (August 1992–1995), while Cultural School Seoul (May 1991–July 2003) maintained a consistent presence throughout the decade. These institutions proved crucial in preventing South Korean film culture from succumbing entirely to commercial imperatives, instead nurturing a critical cinephilic culture that continuously interrogated cinema's role and meaning. By the mid-1990s, this ecosystem of independent cinematheques—operating within legal gray zones—laid the foundation for dedicated art-house venues, most notably Dongsoong Cinematheque. This cultural infrastructure ultimately culminated in the establishment in May 2002 of Seoul Art Cinema, an independent non-profit cinematheque managed by the Korean Association of Cinematheques, providing a dedicated space for cinematic art.

The 1990s granted young cinephiles unprecedented access to cinema through video rental stores and film periodicals. These enthusiasts navigated between informal videotheques and independent art-house venues, making these transitional, pre-millennial private cinematheques their primary cultural spaces. Their voracious appetite for contemporary cinema was most evident in their engagement with newly established international film festivals—beginning with the inaugural edition of the Busan International Film Festival in 1996—where they devotedly consumed multiple films per day. Equally transformative were the era's computerized bulletin board systems (BBS), particularly Cinema Paradise on Hitel and Go Screen on Chollian. These platforms became virtual agoras where film communities shared cult cinema and exchanged cinematic knowledge in dynamic, communal spaces. Central to these young cinephiles' development—whether as casual enthusiasts or committed cinephiles—was their methodical approach to film collection and their highly individualized curatorial sensibilities.

The cinematheque culture of the 1990s, both in programming and

participation, was fundamentally youth-driven. If their predecessors, who first pioneered systematic approaches to film study, can be termed the “Generation of Cultural Institutes,” then the cinematic youth of the 1990s, who engaged with cinema through video media, can be characterized as the “Generation (in Pursuit) of Cinematheques”—a cohort defined by their yearning for authentic cinematheque experiences.

### **Videtheque and Cinematheque: The Two *Theques***

#### *The Historical Reception of the Term “Cinematheque” in South Korea*

The emergence of the term cinematheque in South Korean cultural and artistic discourse, along with subsequent debates about the cinematheque’s function, can be traced to specific historical moments. While discussions of film libraries appeared in colonial-era media, substantive discourse gained momentum following the April 19 Revolution of 1960, as South Korean society began exploring new cultural paradigms. A notable newspaper article from this period, “Proposal for Film Library Establishment to Preserve Historical Film Materials,”<sup>6</sup> surveyed international film libraries and advocated for the establishment of a similar institution in the Korean film industry. That same year, in a published roundtable discussion, film director Yu Hyun-mok proposed that the government redirect revenues from foreign film imports toward the establishment of a film library and film museum.<sup>7</sup> Though the term cinematheque had not yet entered common usage, these early discussions demonstrated a growing recognition of the public function of film archiving institutions, encompassing both cinematheques and broader film archives.

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6. “Yeonghwasaja-jeok jaryo bojon wihae yeonghwa doseogwan seolchiron daedu” (Proposal for Film Library Establishment to Preserve Historical Film Materials), *Dong-A Ilbo*, June 8, 1960.

7. “Jisang jwadamhoe: Minjok yesul-ro kiweo nagaja/guksan yeonghwa-ui yukseong-eul wihayeo” (Round Table Discussion: Nurturing as National Art – For the Development of Korean Cinema), *Dong-A Ilbo*, September 2, 1960.

The 1960s conflation of cinematheques with film libraries in South Korea can be contextualized through Henri Langlois' own terminological choices. Langlois (1947), founder of the Cinémathèque Française, consistently referred to his institution in English as "The French Film Library." In a seminal article published in the January 1947 issue of *Hollywood Quarterly*, Langlois outlined the mission and aspirations of the Cinémathèque Française. He characterized the institution—established in 1936—as the French Film Library, emphasizing its dual role as both a museum and an archive that would serve artistic and historical functions (Langlois 1947, 207–209). This vision was realized more fully in 1948, when the Cinémathèque Française expanded into new Parisian premises, inaugurating a dedicated screening space and France's first film museum.

It is crucial to understand that in the postwar era, Henri Langlois conceptualized the cinémathèque as more than a mere repository of film materials; he envisioned it as an active institution that balanced preservation with utilization. He articulated this expansive vision as follows:

As a museum, it assumes responsibility for exhibiting film documents and for exhibiting and distributing films which have artistic or pedagogic value. As a research center, the Cinémathèque undertakes historical research programs and provides for the publication of the results. (Langlois 1947, 207)

Langlois distinctively approached preservation through exhibition itself, guided by his conviction that "archivists should be impassioned curators, not just dispassionate administrators" (Dupin 2012, 65). His philosophy emphasized active utilization, asserting that a film's intrinsic value emerges through its exhibition—a principle that fundamentally shaped his preservation methodology. This conception of archiving for accessibility would later resonate with the early development of KOFA, as it began exploring more active engagement with its collections in the 1990s. As discussed above, the videotheque model prioritizes accessibility and public engagement. Similarly, early discussions of film libraries in Korea reflected a growing recognition of the public function and operational flexibility of

archives—principles that would later inform KOFA’s evolution from a passive repository into an active cultural institution.

The term “cinémathèque” first entered South Korean cinephilic discourse through the Institut français in the 1970s. Established in September 1968, the institute’s annual program of approximately 100 French films played a pivotal role in cultivating local appreciation for art cinema. It further cemented its position as a cultural catalyst by launching a film club for college students named “Cinémathèque” in 1972, followed by a public “Ciné Club” in 1975, thus functioning as a key site for film education and engagement.<sup>8</sup> During this formative period, emerging cinephiles appear to have conceptualized the cinémathèque as a space anchored by curated film collections, where art films were exhibited and enthusiasts convened for critical discourse.

Drawing parallels with the bibliothèque (library)—which preserves and provides public access to literary works—the cinémathèque serves as a repository for films (celluloid prints) and related materials, actively engaging with these collections through screenings, exhibitions, and archival access within contemporary frameworks. While the cinémathèque broadly aligns with the film archive in its mission to preserve and activate cinema’s material and cultural heritage, it distinctly operates as an art-house venue—a space dedicated not merely to exhibiting classic and art films, but to cultivating a broader film culture, serving as an intellectual nexus for both cinephiles and scholars.

Around 1990, independent cinémathèques first put these ideas into practice, driven by the passionate efforts of young cinephiles such as the late Lee Eon-gyeong. This movement began with Film Space 1895 (Yeonghwa gonggan 1895), followed by SA/sé (Ssiang ssie), which carried on its legacy, and Cultural School Seoul (Munhwa hakgyo Seoul), which persevered throughout the 1990s and ultimately paved the way for Seoul Art Cinema. Similar initiatives emerged beyond the capital, including Film Workshop

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8. “Yeonghwagye-e juhan munhwawon sedae/oehwa gamsang yeongu, gamgak gibeop baewo gak bunya jinchul” (Cultural Center Generation in the Film Industry: Learning Foreign Film Appreciation and Techniques), *Chosun Ilbo*, March 17, 1984.

(Yeonghwa gongbang) in Cheonan and 1/24 in Busan, among other regional cinematheques. As Lee Ha-young recounted in his oral testimony, after co-founding Film Space 1895 with Lee Eon-gyeong in 1989, their guiding principle was simple: “Let’s collect all the videotapes we can find” (Lee and Kong 2023, 165). These early cinematheques, strictly speaking, operated as videotheques, as their screenings relied primarily on copied videotapes. However, this limitation was far from a weakness. Rather, it reflected a clear and deliberate commitment among young cinephiles to engage with film through both theoretical study and practical experimentation, fostering a space for rigorous cinematic inquiry.

Film Space 1895 formally inaugurated its operations in October 1990, establishing itself as South Korea’s pioneering independent cinematheque through its initial membership drive. Contemporaneously, *Hankyoreh* reported on the initiative, increasing calls for the creation of national-level cinematheques and audiovisual archives within university film departments.<sup>9</sup> The newspaper’s characterization of Film Space 1895 as a “private audiovisual archive”<sup>10</sup> acknowledged its role in filling a critical institutional void. Lee Eon-gyeong noted that the Korean Film Depository—Hanguk pilleum bogwanso, the institution’s official Korean name at the time, although its English name remained the Korean Film Archive—relocated to the Seoul Arts Center, yet inquiries regarding archival materials were still being directed to Film Space 1895, a small, privately-run venue. She relayed criticisms that, “As a state-operated institution, the Korean Film Depository should have established a dedicated and proactive system for archival collection.”<sup>11</sup>

Expanding beyond screenings and scholarly lectures, Film Space 1895

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9. “Gungnae sogae andoen joeun yeonghwa gadeuk/yeonghwa gongan 1895” (Film Space 1895: Abundant with Excellent Films Not Yet Introduced in Korea), *Hankyoreh*, February 3, 1991.
  10. “Yeonghwa gongan 1895, ‘24-sigan yeonghwa hakgyo’ gaeseol” (Film Space 1895 Launches ‘24-Hour Film School’), *Hankyoreh*, December 8, 1991.
  11. “Gungnae sogae andoen joeun yeonghwa gadeuk/yeonghwa gongan 1895” (Film Space 1895: Abundant with Excellent Films Not Yet Introduced in Korea), *Hankyoreh*, February 3, 1991.

launched “The Man with a Camera” in March 1991, a 16mm filmmaking workshop designed for college students and adults interested in film production. The initiative garnered significant enthusiasm, providing participants with practical experience in 16mm filmmaking. The organization further enhanced its theoretical programming through collaboration with the film quarterly *Film Language* (*Yeonghwa eoneo*) to establish the “Film School.”<sup>12</sup> As South Korea’s first private cinematheque, Film Space 1895 evolved into a crucial hub for students pursuing serious film studies, transcending traditional academic boundaries.

In the public domain, foreign cultural institutions—notably the French and German cultural centers—continued their film programming initiatives from the 1970s. The Sogang University Communication Center, established in 1981, further solidified its role as an audiovisual library by inaugurating an audiovisual resource room in March 1992, open to both students and the general public. Against this backdrop of expanding audiovisual access in the public domain, the role of KOFA began to shift in meaningful ways.

The Korean Film Archive, originally established in 1974 as the Korean Film Depository (*Hanguk pilleum bogwanso*), was initially focused on the institution-led preservation of Korean feature films and related materials such as posters and still photographs. As its original name suggests, the Korean Film Depository primarily functioned as a storage institution, without yet embracing exhibition, programming, or public accessibility—the fundamental attributes of a true cinematheque. At the time, domestic awareness of the cinémathèque model remained limited, though contemporary media drew attention to comparable international trends, noting that institutions such as the cinémathèque and discothèque had developed earlier abroad, much like the bibliothèque (library) in the context of literature.<sup>13</sup> Following its relocation to the Seoul Arts Center in 1990, the institution was officially rebranded in 1991 as the *Hanguk yeongsang jaryowon*—the new Korean name for the Korean Film Archive—signaling a shift toward its

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12. “Yeonghwa gongan 1895, ‘24-sigan yeonghwa hakgyo’ gaeseol” (Film Space 1895 Launches ‘24-Hour Film School’), *Hankyoreh*, December 8, 1991.

13. “Manmulsang” (Miscellany), *Chosun Ilbo*, April 12, 1974.

emerging role as a public cinematheque. It gradually expanded its public functions, operating in tandem two modest screening rooms and an audiovisual library containing over 2,500 VHS titles—both domestic and international. This public videotheque quickly became a vital space for aspiring film students, regularly drawing around 30 visitors a day.<sup>14</sup> While KOFA continued to face infrastructural and budgetary constraints, the complementary development of its screening and archival access functions laid the foundation for its eventual evolution into a fully established public cinematheque. These developments are examined further in subsequent sections.

*Navigating the Two Theques: Cinephilic Agency and Practice in 1990s South Korea*

In examining the two *theques*—the videotheque and the cinematheque—a compelling paradox emerges. While the independent cinematheques established by young cinephiles in the 1990s were, in terms of technological infrastructure, fundamentally videotheques, they functioned ideologically as cinematheques, filling a critical void in public film culture infrastructure. In the absence of state-sponsored cinematheques, these cinephiles took it upon themselves to create spaces for film appreciation, operating at a grassroots level.

Equipped with VCRs, they curated and expanded their video collections, organizing screenings in both communal cine-club spaces and private viewing environments. While gaining direct access to films—rather than encountering them solely through written discourse—was a transformative development, cinephiles increasingly longed for authentic cinematic presentation—presentation that would preserve original aspect ratios and provide accurate subtitle translations. Ultimately, they aspired to realize the cinematheque ideal: a space where classic and art-house films could be

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14. “Sinemateke tambang: Dangsini-i gunggeumhae haneun hanguk yeongsang jaryowon-ui modeun geot” (Cinematheque Spotlight: Everything You Want to Know About the Korean Film Archive), *Roadshow*, No. 91 (October 1995), 218.

projected in their original format and experienced collectively. This vision found its first manifestation in the private sector with the establishment in November 1995 of Dongsoong Cinematheque, South Korea's first dedicated art-house theater. Though initially modest in scope, its emergence marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of South Korea's cinematheque movement, setting the stage for further developments.

I wish to underscore the transformative agency of young cinephiles, who navigated both videotheques and cinematheques with unprecedented dedication. The 1990s generation of cinephiles distinguished itself through an unparalleled level of engagement, made possible by video technology's democratization of curatorial practice. In an oral history interview with KOFA, film critic Chung Sung-ill reflected on this paradigm shift:

The advent of video transcended textual engagement—we could finally experience films directly. Each of us established a personal cinematheque at home and began curating our own screenings.

Chung further emphasized that video technology had transformed everyone into potential programmers, radically reshaping cinephilic culture beyond initial expectation (Chung and Han 2023, 78). Meticulously curated video collections—primarily comprising duplicated VHS tapes—existed both within private cinematheques and personal spaces. Operating individually and collectively, cinephiles actively engaged in film collection and programming, fundamentally reimagining South Korean film culture and propelling it toward new horizons.

While South Korean society had long idealized Western models of film libraries and cinematheques, it was young cinephiles—empowered by the democratic potential of video—who established and expanded videotheques, laying the cultural foundation for the emergence of art-house cinemas and international film festivals in the mid-1990s. This cultural transformation also explains why KOFA, despite its operational constraints, found itself compelled to respond to the evolving landscape of film culture shaped by these emergent cinephiles.

## KOFA's Pursuit of a Public Cinematheque Identity

KOFA's development as a cinematheque can be periodized into two distinct phases: a *experimental phase* preceding 1991 and an *early cinematheque operation phase*, from 1991 to 2003. During these periods, KOFA explored and gradually established its role as a cinematheque. From 2004 to 2006, KOFA entered a transitional phase, during which it refined its programming and infrastructure in anticipation of becoming a fully realized cinematheque. Prior to establishing dedicated facilities in Seoul's Sangam-dong in 2007, KOFA operated two modest screening venues under the designation "KOFA Cinema," focusing on retrospectives of classic Korean films while formalizing its operational protocols.

Understanding KOFA's institutional evolution requires an examination of its historical origins. The organization emerged from the Korean Film Depository, established in 1974 under the Korea Motion Picture Promotion Corporation (KMPPC), a subsidiary of the Ministry of Culture and Public Information. The founding of the Korean Film Depository was directly catalyzed by the recognition of North Korea and its National Film Archive as a full member of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) that same year; this prompted South Korea to develop its own national film preservation institution.

The formal institutionalization of Korean film preservation materialized in 1980 through the government's "Film Initiative," which mandated that all designated "outstanding films" have a 35mm print permanently deposited at the Korean Film Depository. However, the institution's transition from a passive storage facility into a functional film library and international exchange center only began in 1985, as it prepared for full FIAF membership at the 41st FIAF Congress in April.

During the 1980s, the Korean Film Depository began making tentative efforts to activate its archival holdings through screenings and exhibitions at the KMPPC screening room. Though modest in scale, with only one to three events held annually, these initiatives represented the institution's earliest steps toward public engagement. The first such program was held in 1982 with a retrospective film week commemorating the 20th anniversary

of the Daejong Film Awards, a state-sponsored film festival. Hosted at the KMPPC screening room, the event featured six award-winning films, complemented by an exhibition of archival photographs.

Subsequent programming included a 1950s–1960s Korean cinema retrospective (1983), a Lee Man-hee directorial tribute (1984), a showcase of international festival prize-winners (1985), and a 1910s French silent cinema retrospective (1986). A significant milestone occurred in 1989, when the Korean Film Depository marked the 70th anniversary of Korean cinema with a film retrospective and a five-city touring program.<sup>15</sup> These screenings were frequently accompanied by exhibitions, held either in the KMPPC lobby or at a public venue such as Seoul's Chungmuro subway station.

The formal institutionalization of KOFA's cinematheque function commenced in September 1990 with the Korean Film Depository's relocation to the Arts Archive building at the Seoul Arts Center in Seocho-dong. This transition facilitated the establishment of dedicated screening facilities, including a 110-seat theater for 35mm projection and a 70-seat venue designated for 16mm and video presentations. Simultaneously, KOFA's audiovisual library, first introduced in 1990, expanded rapidly to meet increasing public demand. Undergoing major expansions in 1992 and 1998, it developed into a key videotheque, serving aspiring film studies graduate students in particular.

In May 1990, newly appointed KOFA chairperson Ho Hyun-chan articulated a pivotal institutional shift: "It is an embarrassing reality that foreign cultural centers have been fulfilling Korea's cinematheque function.

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15. "Hanguk yeonghwa 70-dol ginyeom gamsanghoe/yeongjingong-seo gunghnaeoe geoljak 22-pyeon sogae" (KMPPC to Present 22 Korean and Foreign Masterpieces for 70th Anniversary of Korean Cinema), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, October 24, 1989. Eight films recognized as classics of Korean cinema were screened during this period: *Hurrah! For Freedom* (1946), *Piagol* (dir. Lee Kang-cheon, 1955), *The Aimless Bullet* (*Obaltan*; dir. Yu Hyun-mok, 1961), *The Coachman* (*Mabu*; dir. Kang Dae-jin, 1961), *The March of Fools* (*Babodeul-ui haengjin*; dir. Ha Gil-jong, 1974), and *The Last Witness* (*Choehuui jeungin*; dir. Lee Doo-yong, 1979). Additionally, two award-winning films from international film festivals in the 1980s—*The Surrogate Woman* (1986) and *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* (1989)—were also featured.

It is now our responsibility to assume that role.”<sup>16</sup> This declaration signaled KOFA’s transformation from a passive repository into an active cinematheque. On October 30, 1990, KOFA inaugurated its new headquarters with a dedication ceremony, screening *Hurrah! For Freedom* (*Jayu manse*; dir. Choi In-gyu, 1946), the earliest surviving Korean feature in its collection, and *Gyeongseong* (dir. Shimizu Hiroshi, 1940), a colonial-era documentary. The absence of pre-1945 Korean feature films in KOFA’s holdings underscored critical gaps in the nation’s film preservation efforts.

In May 1991, KOFA further reinforced its commitment to public engagement, unveiling its first comprehensive annual programming schedule and pledging to transcend its former role as a mere repository.<sup>17</sup> This institutional metamorphosis culminated in the official rebranding of Hanguk pilleum bogwanso (Korean Film Depository) as Hanguk yeongsang jaryowon (Korean Film Archive) in September 1991. This renaming embodied its expanded mission: to not only preserve Korea’s audiovisual heritage but also to actively foster film education, scholarship, and public accessibility.<sup>18</sup>

KOFA initiated its cinematheque programming in 1991 with a retrospective honoring Na Un-gyu, a pivotal figure in Korean film history. This program, held as part of the “Year of Theater and Film,” was accompanied by an archival photography exhibition. Within its resource constraints, KOFA subsequently launched three key programming strands: the “Watching Good Films” program (1992–1997), the “Retrospective of Renowned Actors and Directors of Korean Cinema” series (1998–2003), and the screening of international art-house films in collaboration with foreign embassies and cultural centers.

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16. “Changgo gusil talpi yeonghwa baljeon didimdol-ro” (Breaking Away from Storage Function to Become a Stepping Stone for the Development of Film Culture), *Hankyoreh*, May 27, 1990.

17. “Pilleum changgo imiji beotgetda/pilleum bogwanso dayangan yeonghwa sangyeonggyehoek maryeon” (Shedding Film Storage Image: Film Depository Prepares Diverse Screening Plans), *Hankyoreh*, April 28, 1991.

18. “Hanguk pilleum bogwanso gaemyeong, hanguk yeongsang jaryowon-euro” (Korean Film Depository Renamed as Korean Film Archive), *Dong-A Ilbo*, September 20, 1991.

The “Watching Good Films” initiative expanded in 1992–1993 to include “Korean Films for Youth,” offering curated screenings tailored for younger audiences. In 1994, KOFA introduced an ambitious year-long “Director’s Week” series, systematically mapping the evolution of Korean cinema through retrospectives of 17 directors. The selection ranged from pioneers of the 1950s and 1960s—including Shin Sang-ok, Yu Hyun-mok, Kim Soo-yong, Lee Man-hee, and Im Kwon-taek—to contemporaries of the 1990s, such as Jang Sun-woo, Park Kwang-su, Lee Myung-se, and Kang Woo-suk. This was the first comprehensive institutional effort to historicize Korean auteurs across generations.

KOFA’s “Retrospective of Renowned Actors and Directors of Korean Cinema” series initially focused exclusively on the actors component, beginning with a Kim Seung-ho retrospective in 1998. In 2000, the program was expanded to encompass both actors and directors, with “Retrospective of Renowned Actors” and “Director’s Week” as distinct but parallel initiatives. These complementary programs were established as regular monthly fixtures; running consistently from March through December each year, they effectively functioned as permanent programming streams. The “Director’s Week” series, which featured filmmakers such as Shim Wu-seob, Lee Hyung-pyo, Kang Dae-jin, and Lee Bong-rae, enabled KOFA to pursue a twofold mission: establishing a canonical framework for classic Korean directors while simultaneously rehabilitating previously overlooked genre filmmakers (KOFA 2014, 268–271).

The historical significance of these initiatives was profound; while KOFA’s role in facilitating public film access may seem self-evident today, opening its preserved holdings for public screenings was a groundbreaking shift at the time. Despite its resource limitations, this period marked KOFA’s first systematic effort to provide archival access for research. Cultural studies scholar Lee Young-mee, in her oral history, identifies 1991 as the watershed year when scholars first gained access to KOFA’s film prints for academic research. She recounts how she and a group of young academics were able to screen 30 major films from the 1960s and earlier, beginning with *Hurrah! For Freedom* (Lee and Kong 2023, 71–73). This shift marked a crucial turning point: for the first time, classic Korean films became accessible to both

general audiences and scholars in their original projection format, rather than through secondary media.

A defining strength of KOFA was its third programming strand: the ability to showcase international art-house cinema in its original film format. KOFA's first initiative in foreign film exhibition took place in 1986, with a Franco-Korean diplomatic centennial screening series; this laid the groundwork for expanded international collaborations throughout the 1990s. In 1991–1992, KOFA had established core partnerships with the Institut français, the Goethe-Institut, and the Istituto Italiano di Cultura, enabling it to present art films previously exhibited in France, Germany, and Italy. Over time, this network broadened to include the embassies of Mexico, Portugal, the United Kingdom, Israel, and Canada, significantly enriching KOFA's international programming. KOFA's foreign retrospective series was officially launched in May 1991 with a Fritz Lang retrospective, accompanied by a photographic exhibition of his works. Later that year, KOFA curated a Carl Mayer retrospective, screening twelve silent films associated with the influential screenwriter.<sup>19</sup> These programs marked a turning point in South Korea's cinematic landscape, as they represented the first systematic presentation of professionally subtitled foreign films—a significant step toward global film heritage.

The 1990s saw an unprecedented wave of college students from diverse disciplines seeking film education, despite a lack of social infrastructure for watching and studying films. In response, independent videotheques sprang up—not merely as screening venues, but as educational hubs where students engaged in structured discourse and coursework with established scholars. This pedagogical model originated with Film Space 1895, which partnered with the film quarterly *Film Language* to launch the “24-Hour Film School.” The program brought together a cohort of emerging film critics and theorists—including Lee Gwang-mo, Jeon Yang-jun, Kim Ji-seok, Yi Hyo-in, Lee Yong-gwan, and Chung Sung-ill, all of whom had developed strong

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19. “Kal maieo museong yeonghwa dasi bonda” (Revisiting Carl Mayer’s Silent Films), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, December 7, 1991.

foundations in film criticism and theory.<sup>20</sup>

As Son Ju-yeon, who established SA/sé as the successor to Film Space 1895 by acquiring its assets, recounted, SA/sé maintained its predecessor's emphasis on educational programming. In doing so, it not only reinforced the place of film education as central to its mission, it also secured essential operational funding (Son and Kong 2023, 246). At the same time, the Sogang University Communication Center launched its "Summer Film School" in July 1991, featuring Kang Han-sup on film theory and Hyeon Dae-won on film production workshops. While this month-long program was relatively expensive—the tuition fee was 200,000 won—participants received exclusive access to the center's extensive collection of over 600 films, making it a highly sought-after opportunity.<sup>21</sup>

KOFA progressively integrated educational components into its screening programs, engaging directly with the film education ecosystem that was emerging from independent initiatives. In 1993, KOFA launched its own "Summer Film School," which quickly gained recognition among "cinematic youth." In 1996 the "Film Screenings with Discussions" series was added, establishing a structured forum where students, scholars, critics, and filmmakers engaged in in-depth discourse. Although the Summer Film School did not operate annually, it remained one of KOFA's most in-demand programs, with applications regularly exceeding available spots. The 1999 edition exemplified its caliber, featuring a distinguished faculty that included critics Chung Sung-ill and Kim Jung-ryong alongside directors Lee Myung-se, Park Chul-soo, and Byun Young-joo.

Meanwhile, the Film Screenings with Discussions program moved beyond conventional exhibition formats to include substantive post-screening dialogues between audiences and renowned scholars such as Lee Yong-gwan and Yu Gina. Participants in these educational initiatives—whether as students or instructors—not only played a pivotal role in shaping

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20. "Yeonghwa gongan 1895, '24-sigan yeonghwa hakgyo' gaeseol" (Film Space 1895 Launches '24-Hour Film School'), *Hankyoreh*, December 8, 1991.

21. "8-31-il 'Yeoreum yeongsang hakgyo'" ('Summer Film School,' August 8-31), *Hankyoreh*, June 30, 1991.

the evolving film culture of the 1990s, they also went on to become key figures driving the South Korean film industry into the 2000s and beyond. Many of them became leading filmmakers, critics, and scholars, contributing to the growth and international recognition of Korean cinema. Through these collaborative efforts, KOFA and the emerging film community collectively cultivated a public space for cinematheque culture.

KOFA's transformation into a fully-fledged cinematheque was only realized with its 2007 relocation to a new headquarters in Sangam-dong. The successive launches of its film reference library in June 2007, followed by Cinematheque KOFA and the Korean Film Museum in May 2008, finally established a comprehensive institutional framework where young cinephiles could engage with both Korean and international classic and art cinema.

### **Public Film Initiative: A Collective Effort of Cinema Professionals and Cinephiles**

Throughout the 1990s, KOFA operated under remarkable constraints, with a single curator overseeing all screening programs, exhibitions, and educational initiatives.<sup>22</sup> Despite its limited resources, the institution proved instrumental in shaping South Korea's cinematheque movement. During this period, KOFA refined the canonical framework of Korean film history while introducing audiences to European cinema—particularly German, French, and Italian works—through 35mm film presentations.

KOFA transcended mere exhibition practices by actively nurturing film education through initiatives such as the Film Screenings with Discussions series and the Summer Film School, transforming screenings into spaces of critical engagement rather than passive viewership. This pedagogical mission extended to its videotheque, which emerged as a vital incubator for

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22. "Dandon 200-won-e 'sinemacheonguk'/Hanguk yeongsang jaryowon yeonghwabaksa Bak Nomin-ssi" (Cinema Paradise for Just 200 Won: Park No-min, KOFA's Film Expert), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, March 27, 1998.

young cinephiles and aspiring filmmakers. By providing access to otherwise unavailable foreign films, KOFA's audiovisual library became an essential resource for both scholarly investigation and creative exploration.

KOFA's cinemathèque operations—encompassing screenings, educational programs, and archival activities—were more than its single curator could manage alone, so they were carried out in collaboration with scholars, critics, filmmakers, cinephiles, and film students, many of whom formed sustained relationships through the institution's educational initiatives. While KOFA's distinctive appeal lay partly in its rare capacity to present films in original 35mm format—a significant advantage over independent videotheques—it lacked the dynamism of privately operated venues. However, its unique position as an official, non-commercial public institution created an unprecedented forum for cinematic engagement.

This period coincided with an emerging scholarly and critical reappraisal of classic Korean cinema within academic and journalistic spheres. Despite operational constraints, KOFA developed modest yet vital programming that balanced scholarly demands, general audience interests, and archival limitations. The institution fostered a collaborative model wherein guest lecturers and audiences actively shaped both programmatic content and structure. This participatory framework extended beyond individual events, generating sustained discourse that informed future curatorial decisions. KOFA formalized these collaborative efforts through advisory committees drawn from academic and industry circles, while systematically gathering audience feedback through surveys, thus ensuring that its programming remained responsive to the film community's evolving needs.

It is useful to analyze KOFA's role in shaping 1990s South Korean film culture through the theoretical framework of cultural governance. Governance, in this context, denotes emergent approaches to public administration that developed alongside broader bureaucratic transformations. This model transcends traditional top-down, state-driven approaches, emphasizing instead collaborative problem-solving processes that actively incorporate private-sector participation in addressing public concerns (Oh 2006, 47–51). By the 1990s, the governance concept had evolved to encom-

pass procedural rationality, prioritizing participatory decision-making and consensus-building in response to civil society's expansion (Oh 2006, 55). This framework provides a vital analytical lens for understanding KOFA's unique position as a hybrid institution where state initiatives converged with independent cinephilic and scholarly engagement, facilitating a dynamic intersection between public policy and grassroots film culture.

KOFA's predecessor, the Korean Film Depository, functioned primarily as a subsidiary of KMPPC. Despite achieving full FIAF membership in 1985 and appointing an independent director in 1987, the institution remained spatially and financially dependent on KMPPC. A decisive shift occurred in August 1990 when Minister of Culture Lee O-young ordered the depository's relocation to the Seoul Arts Center. The following year, after discussions between Minister Lee and newly appointed chairperson Ho Hyun-chan, the institution was formally reconstituted as the Korean Film Archive—marking its *de facto* separation from KMPPC. This transformation—from a state-controlled subsidiary to an autonomous national archive—significantly expanded KOFA's capacity to collaborate with independent expert networks. It also reflected broader shifts toward more open and participatory models of cultural governance, embedding KOFA within an evolving framework that emphasized institutional adaptability and stakeholder engagement.

Despite enduring operational constraints, KOFA established vital avenues for engagement with independent cinephilic networks from 1991 onward. The transformation of South Korean film culture in the 1990s was driven by two key forces: the passion of young cinephiles—who actively embraced curatorial and collection practices to expand their cinematic horizons—and the guidance of an earlier generation, who collaborated with them in shaping and sustaining the cinematheque movement. KOFA played a pivotal mediating role in this evolution, serving as an accessible public institution that cinephiles could actively utilize, effectively bridging independent initiatives with institutional infrastructure.

Channeling the passion and aspirations of 1990s cinephiles, KOFA evolved into a fully realized public cinematheque by the late 2000s. Today, the institution continues to democratize access to Korean classic cinema through multiple platforms—including KMDb VOD, its YouTube channel,

and physical media formats such as DVD and Blu-ray—ensuring broad accessibility within South Korea and internationally. Contemporary cinephilia, rather than being shaped by the sweeping movements of the 1990s, now reflects a convergence of more specialized and diverse interests. Meanwhile, KOFA maintains its cultural vitality. A new generation of viewers in their 20s and 30s actively engages with both the cinematheque and the audiovisual library, sustaining the institution's role as an essential hub for film appreciation and scholarship.

## Conclusion

Returning to the dual framework of videotheque and cinematheque, the 1990s presented a distinctive paradox: while cinephiles aspired to the cinematheque ideal, they were constrained by the practical realities of the videotheque. Both programmers and participants engaged in curatorial practices within their material limitations, using video technology as an interim tool for film study and appreciation. Independent videotheques, exemplified by Cultural School Seoul, epitomized this model. These spaces required sustainable funding, yet securing formal screening rights remained an insurmountable challenge. To navigate copyright restrictions, they adopted membership-based systems—a strategic workaround that enabled their continued operation. Today, KOFA faces similar copyright complexities. These challenges are not new, but they have become more pronounced in an era of heightened legal scrutiny. As a public institution, KOFA is responsible for securing rights to post-1963 Korean classic films for cinematheque screenings, digital distribution, and physical media releases.<sup>23</sup> Yet a fundamental question remains: How can broader access to films and archival materials be facilitated for research and creative purposes?

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23. The Copyright Act of Korea was revised on June 30, 2011, extending the protection period to 70 years after the author's death in accordance with the Korea-EU Free Trade Agreement. This amendment took effect on July 1, 2013. Consequently, the previous 50-year posthumous protection period remained applicable until June 30, 2013, meaning that only Korean films produced up to 1962 have entered the public domain.

Analyzing the role of 1990s videotheques alongside KOFA's film reference library reveals pathways for expanding KOFA's public mission. Through strategic negotiations with rights holders and broader societal dialogue, KOFA could establish an institutional framework that grants researchers, critics, filmmakers, and other engaged users controlled on-site access to digitized versions of Korean classic films—many of which survive only in deteriorating analog formats such as VHS tapes or film prints. Henri Langlois' foundational vision offers a key insight: digitization is not merely a tool for accessibility but a fundamental strategy for preservation.

Over the past three decades, KOFA has absorbed and built upon the passion and expertise of the young cinephiles who shaped South Korea's videotheque culture in the 1990s. As the institution evolves to meet the needs of a new generation, it must reconsider the complementary potential of the *two theques* and develop a more integrated strategy that balances both cinematheque and videotheque functions. The cinematheque should remain a space for shared cinematic experiences—a venue for curated film events that foster communal engagement. At the same time, the videotheque must be reimagined as a hybrid offline-platform model, providing access to physical media as well as server-based digital archives for research and critical inquiry. The cultural dynamism and adaptability that defined the transitional videotheque era of the 1990s offer valuable insights for the future of archival accessibility. As KOFA continues to refine its preservation and utilization policies, these foundational principles can serve as a guiding framework, ensuring that the archive remains both historically rooted and responsive to contemporary cultural needs.

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