AFFIRMATIVE TRANSNATIONALISM IN RECENT KOREAN DOCUMENTARY CINEMA: THE WORKS OF OH MINWOOK AND IM HEUNG-SOON

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INTRODUCTION

South Korean documentaries in the 21st century have actively engaged in what historian Lim Jie-hyun has called a "memory war" (*kiŏk chŏnjaeng*), referring not only to the ongoing battle over the past between victims and perpetrators—as evidenced by the continued fight for recognition by the former comfort women (*wianbu*) who experienced humiliation and exploitation at the hands of the Japanese military—but also to the fact that "people's critical attitude toward the erasure and distortion of the past has become more sensitive than ever" (2019: 295). The battles in this memory war have also been fought by ideological victims of the Korean War, sex workers in Korea's US military camptowns (*kijich'on*) and the bereaved families of those who died fighting for democratisation during the military dictatorship, to name just a few. In addition to articulating the discourses of truth and reconciliation, legal evidentiality, human rights, victimhood (*hisaengjasŏng*), empowerment or solidarity, all of which have been demanded by a diverse array of memory activists, a number of documentarians have explored the trauma and suffering of the individuals subjected to state and ideological violence, or those around them who have been haunted by their untold memories. To this end, these filmmakers have experimented with variants of personal documentary, reenactment and aesthetic and technical procedures for amplifying the visual and auditory qualities of the image portraying a place or landscape. As I have noted in *Activism and Post-activism* (Kim, 2024), my monograph on the history and evolution of South Korean documentaries since the 1980s, such documentarians' films and videos have attested to a "post-activism" that signifies both "the formal, aesthetic, epistemological and discursive breaks from the activist tradition and its renewals" (2024: 17). Addressing the memory wars that have been raging in 21st-century South

Korean society, these filmmakers have established the individual and the place as two thematic foundations for their post-activist endeavours: rather than representing traumatised victims either as collective subjects for social change or as objects of enlightenment, these documentarians have focused on individuals and their microhistories, presenting their memories as testimony excluded from or supplemental to the official history of the victims of state and ideological violence; and their emphasis on the visible and sonic qualities of footage with expressive camerawork and editing instead of didactic voice-over narration or cause-and-effect narratives has framed the places and landscapes of the present, including ruins, monuments and natural environments, as "memoryscape, in which remainders of *past events*, if seemingly invisible, are viewed as cohabiting with *the present*" (Kim, 2024: 169, emphasis in original).

Notably, post-activist investigations into Korean bodies and sites have problematised the country's imagined community premised on the idea of a shared identity and sense of belonging while also cultivating a transnational perspective on the memories of national atrocities. Documentaries by border-crossing diasporic filmmakers, such as Zainichi (Japanese-Korean) director Yang Yonghi, reflect this latter aspect. *Soup and Ideology* (Sup'ŭwa ideollogi, 2021) expands her first-person documentary filmmaking about her transborder family narrative, intertwined with Cold War history beyond the scope of the Zainichi's liminal identity drifting between Japan and North Korea, to explore the still-controversial South Korean geopolitical and ideological tragedy of the Jeju April Third Incident (*Sasam sagŏn*). Investigating the traumatic memory that her late mother refused to share with her, she revisits key sites of the political event on Jeju Island that began with an attack by a few hundred communist guerrillas on the local police in 1948. The Incident eventually led to counterinsurgency operations by the police and the US Army, who were responsible for a bloody massacre of 80,000 civilians (nearly one third of the island's entire population), including many who were falsely accused of being communists or rioters.[1] Yang is not the only Korean documentary filmmaker to construct a transnational perspective on the places and subjects that embody turbulent memories and haunting traumas: this century, a group of domestic (that is, non-diasporic) filmmakers have been travelling to other countries in Asia to reconfigure the memories of national atrocities, moving beyond the reassertion of what is specific to Korean history and identity. Lee Kil-bora's *Untold* (Kiŏgŭi chŏnjaeng, 2018) explores the massacres of Vietnamese civilians by South Korean troops during the Vietnam War, presenting survivors' testimonies and their legal struggle against the Korean government to challenge the nationalist depiction of South Korea as a victim of Cold War violence. *East Asia Anti-Japan Armed Front* (Tongashia panilmujangjŏnsŏn, 2020), directed by Kim Mi-rye, whose work focuses on investigating labour issues in the early 21st century, examines the radical Japanese leftist group responsible for anti-imperialist bombings in the 1970s, with a rich tapestry of historical documents and interviews that challenge conventional views on violence, imperialism and terrorism.

This paper focuses on this transnationalist tendency in 21st century post-activist Korean non-fiction film and video production with an analysis of the work of two artist-filmmakers: Oh Minwook and Im Heung-soon. Expanding on an idea outlined in the epilogue of *Activism and Post-activism*, I characterise their documentary films and installations as driven by what Mette Hjort (2009) has called "affirmative transnationalism", a mode of transnational filmmaking that involves cross-border collaboration inspired by the concept of cultural affinity or similarity. As Hjort explains, affirmative transnationalism does not necessarily have to be premised upon a shared ethnicity, language or culture between multiple nations, as it "can also arise in connection with shared problems or commitments in a punctual now, or with the discov-

ery of features of other national contexts that are deemed to be relevant to key problems experienced within a home context" (2009: 17). A key implication of this concept is its usefulness for identifying strategies of documentary production that involve the perspectives, histories and cultural conditions of multiple countries, and for highlighting unconventional or alternative modes of non-fiction filmmaking that set in motion a transnational view of their parallel histories or realities.

It is not only for their exploration of memories and traumas but also for their formal and aesthetic experimentation that Oh's and Im's films are considered illustrative of the affirmative transnationalism of recent South Korean documentary cinema. Oh, who has delved into the untold memories and spectral vestiges of postcolonial modernity underlying the cityscape of Busan with his experimental documentary approach, expands the scope of his work to examine the transnational impacts of Cold War violence on different places in East Asia—Busan, Taiwan, and Japan—in *Letters to Buriram* (Haehyŏp, 2019). This film combines a poetic travelogue style reminiscent of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1982) with an epistolary mode of narration enacted by a Taiwanese woman artist. Im, on the other hand, uses an experimental non-fiction filmmaking style that orchestrates testimonies, landscape imagery and reenactments, to develop a parallel storytelling approach that connects multiple subjects who have survived the political and cultural atrocities of the modern age in Korea and elsewhere. His films *Reincarnation* (Hwansaeng, 2015) and *The Waves* (P'ado, 2022) attest to the capacity his multiscreen video installations have to express an affirmative transnationalism that constructs a rich set of parallels between different vestiges of violence in Asia, and between the subjects who endeavour to question that violence and reclaim their contested memory of it.

This paper also suggests that the affirmative transnationalism expressed by these two filmmakers in their experimental documentaries may constitute an audiovisual equivalent of the "transcultural memory" that is proposed "with a view to both the synchronic circulation of representations—e.g. of 'traumatic pasts'—as well as to the diachronic dimension of memory ('afterlives')" (Erll, 2011), or of what Michael Rothberg might call a "multidirectional memory" based on the "intercultural" interaction of "different historical memories" (2009: 3). While both notions encourage us to abandon memory studies' methodological nationalism and instead pay attention to forms of traumas and the memory of them across different nations, cultures and periods, a new approach to the traumatised individuals and memoryscapes in recent Korean documentary films may be able to dismantle or transcend national boundaries in order to reconstruct the contested history and reality of Korea in relation to its internal and external Others.

OH MINWOOK'S *LETTERS TO BURIRAM*

Traversing Taiwan, Japan and South Korea and revisiting cities and towns haunted by traumas of violence and disaster during and after the Cold War, *Letters to Buriram* offers a transnational perspective that goes beyond the usual national paradigm of documentaries dealing with the memory of war. The places explored in the film include Kinmen, a group of islands governed by Taiwan, the cities of Kyoto and Tokyo in Japan, and Busan in South Korea. The film reflects Oh's mode of transnational coproduction that always involved journeys like these. Oh met a Taiwanese artist named Hsiao Kaitzu at a film festival in Tainan; she would later co-produce and narrate this film connecting Taiwan, China, Korea and Japan through their shared experience of wars waged in East Asia's tumultuous geopolitical conditions. The encounter between Oh and Hsiao led to the poetic landscape images and the ethnographic records of ceremonies and rituals that he filmed

on either side of two straits (the Taiwan Strait between Taiwan and China, and the Korea Strait separating Korea from Japan), including footage of Kinmen (to which Oh and Hsiao travelled together), and a series of personal letters that Hsiao sent to her mother in Buriram, Thailand. As a result, the film offers a transnational tapestry that weaves together different yet interrelated spectral vestiges of Cold War violence. What is integral to this film is its particular mode of documentary filmmaking: an essayistic approach marked by the material heterogeneity and polyvocality of epistolary narration, evocative sound effects and poetic landscape imagery. Oh's deliberate blending of all these components offers a new perspective on the commonalities between memories of trauma afflicting different regions of East Asia.

The affirmative transnationalism that informed the production of *Letters to Buriram* is reflected in its interplay of sound and vision. Offering her personal reflections and vicariously expressing Oh's shifting consciousness, Hsiao's letters, which she reads in a voice-over, serve as the discursive anchor that brings together stories of the traumas and ghosts of different historical experiences of wars and disasters. In the first letter, Hsiao begins by recounting a nightmare she had, caused by an earthquake that struck Hualien in February 2018, which reminded her of her experience of the Tainan earthquake exactly two years earlier. Hsiao's expression of her longing for her mother in Buriram, which motivates her to write the letter, gradually transitions into what she witnessed and researched with Oh on their visit to Kinmen. A key story related to this region involves Choi Byung-woo, a Korean newspaper journalist who died at sea while covering the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis (STSC) in 1958. The voice-over that summons up the victims of war and natural disasters, including the Chinese tourists who were buried under the rubble of collapsed buildings in the Tainan earthquake, speaks over a series of images related to the Hungry Ghost Festival, a traditional Buddhist-Taoist festival in Chinese culture celebrated in the seventh month of the lunar year, when spirits and ghosts rise out from underground (Figure 1). The footage presented in the film's opening sequence focuses on both the rituals for paying homage to deceased ancestors and the lyrical images of everyday life, the landscapes of Kinmen and preparations for the festival. The juxtaposition of this footage



Figure 1. Ancestral rite for the Hungry Ghost Festival in Kinmen, Taiwan, stillframe from *Letters to Buriram* (Oh Minwook, 2019), courtesy of the artist



Figure 2. Monks' ceremony for the Buddhist All Soul's Day in Busan, South Korea, stillframe from *Letter to Buriram*, courtesy of the artist

with Hsiao's voiceover contributes to the film's transnational perspective on the historical traumas in different parts of East Asia, as the images of ancestral rites and fire ceremonies go beyond ethnographic portrayals of Taiwan's traditional culture. This becomes evident in the film's middle sequences, which present footage of two festivals that normally take place in the seventh month of the lunar calendar: Gion Matsuri in Kyoto, when people pray to God for the eradication of infectious diseases; and Buddhist All Souls' Day in Busan, when people pray for the dead and the sea overflows onto the land because the moon as at its closest point to the Earth (Figure 2).

With his forays into experimental documentary in the feature-length films *Ash: Re* (Chae, 2013) and *A Roar of the Prairie* (Pŏmjŏn, 2015), Oh explores the layers of time found in the places and landscapes of Busan. As Lucas Hilderbrand argues, experimental documentary makers rely on "visuality (cinematography that does not strive toward commercial production values, layered images, non-plot driven digital effects) and temporality (fragmented narrative structures, contrapuntal sounds, pensive silences)" (2009: 5-6) in order to combine their interest in documentary form with their commitment to the realities of history, politics and culture. Oh's experimentation with the visuality and temporality of the places and landscapes where the memories of Busan's modernisation are buried is incorporated into *Letters to Buriram* with a transnational-transhistorical perspective. His static camera captures a series of natural objects and monumental vestiges in a summer in Kinmen, such as trees and grasses swaying in the wind, a group of Buddha statues, the now-empty memorial building commemorating the Taiwanese soldiers who died during the STSC and their cemetery (Figure 3). The camera's careful attention to details, including the backs and faces of the statues and the photos of the dead soldiers inside the building, taken from various angles and positions, establishes Kinmen as an aesthetic object in which both the geopolitical tensions between China and Taiwan and the haunted memories of their victims are implicated. Oh's transnational-transhistorical perspective on these traumatic memories becomes all the more apparent in the second sequence showing natural objects and artificial remnants in Kinmen, this time on a rainy day. In contrast to the first Kinmen sequence, marked by her reflection on the



Figure 3. Cemetery of the dead soldiers of the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in Kinmen, stillframe from *Letters to Buriram*, courtesy of the artist



Figure 4. Portrait of a dead soldier on the altar in a memorial building of the cemetery, stillframe from *Letters to Buriram*, courtesy of the artist

Hungry Ghost Festival and the 1958 battle in the Taiwan Strait, in this sequence Hsiao's voiceover, reading out another letter to her mother, narrates two stories that Oh told her: the first is about Igidae (the name of a seaside cliff in Busan), where two *gisaeng* (low-born women trained to entertain the upper classes) sacrificed themselves during the Japanese invasion of Korea (1592-1598), embracing a drunken Japanese commander and jumping into the sea with him; and the second is about a small Japanese island whose woods echo with the cries of dead children after soldiers killed its inhabitants due to a plague. Afterwards, Hsiao's voiceover recounts another story that she feels "has a lot in common" with the two stories Oh shared with her: a story "about the days when cannonball rained down" on Kinmen, synchronised with a shot that frames a portrait of a dead

soldier on the altar in a memorial building (Figure 4). In this way, Oh's idiosyncratic disjunction of sound and vision does more than guide viewers toward historical layers of Kinmen's past that are invisible yet still sensed in the present. The mismatch between Hsiao's epistolary narration and the images that accompany it draws viewers' attention to the memoryscape of Kinmen, enabling us to look beyond Taiwan's national borders and imagine other memories of wars and other rituals for appeasing the gods and commemorating the dead on both sides of the two straits in East Asia. The images of the sea in these two straits, then, serve as a metaphor for where such memories sink or sometimes rise, of Oh's itinerant filmmaking practice to seek out their commonalities, and of his wandering consciousness.

Another significant achievement of *Letters to Buriram* lies in Oh's effort to extend his mode of experimental documentary filmmaking into a cross-cultural, cross-border ethnographic approach that informs viewers of both commonalities and differences between Taiwan, China, Korea and Japan. The connections between the Hungry Ghost Festival, Gion Matsuri and Buddhist All Souls' Day are suggested and repeated through the interplay of Hsiao's contemplative narration conveying the streams of consciousness of both narrator and filmmaker, and through Oh's handheld camerawork capturing the dynamic details of each ritual. The sequences showing two official commemorative ceremonies in Kinmen and Busan (the latter being for the victims of the Korean War) are presented in a way that informs the viewer of the anti-communist ideology promoted in both places. Commonalities like this one are juxtaposed with a series of geopolitical and ideological differences between the countries on either side of each strait: on the one hand, the extended sequences of the haunted monuments and landscapes in Kinmen are contrasted with the vignettes of the ferry to Xiamen, the mainland city nearest to Taiwan that has become emblematic of China's rapid economic modernisation; and on the other hand, images of the Busan Port at night viewed from a ferry travelling to Shimonoseki in Japan, coupled with Korean survivors' testimonies about Japanese soldiers' actions during the Japanese Occupation, overlap with the penultimate sequence in Tokyo, where far-right groups are participating in a demonstration, chanting slogans in support of the Japanese Emperor and attacking "communists from China and Korea". Again, Hsiao's voice-over not only underlines these geopolitical and ideological differences but also allows viewers to consider the asymmetrical aftereffects that the common experiences of wars and conflicts in the region have left on each country. Through their combination with the ethnographic images of spiritual or ceremonial activities in the three countries, the haunting images of their historical sites and the memories of recent regional or transregional crises, Hsiao's letters turn *Letters to Buriram* into an epistolary essay film that "radically mixes and merges private notations and commentary on public matters, [and] the record of both everyday life and momentous events" (Rascaroli, 2018: 146). This mixture of the personal and the public, and of the visual and the auditory, ultimately makes a case of affirmative transnationalism that reflects the common significance of traumatic memories and their political-cultural underpinnings in East Asia.

IM HEUNG-SOON'S *REINCARNATION* AND *THE WAVES*

By carefully orchestrating testimonies, landscape imagery and reenactments, Im's films and installations turn stories of individual suffering and loss into a transnational and transhistorical narrative of violence. Im is not content to present the trauma of victims or survivors as something unknowable and inexpressible; rather, his work shows how different types of violence, including colonial suppression, war, ideological power and post-

colonial economic exploitation, affect individuals and communities in different regions and with different histories, while also "affirming a sense of belonging, kinship, and mutual trust" (Visser, 2015: 258). In his feature-length documentary *Factory Complex* (2015), for instance, Im respects the singularity of each testimony bearing witness to the pain and loss caused by the rapid industrial modernisation of the South Korean economic system. At the same time, he makes a leap from the historical trauma of South Korean working-class women in the 1970s and 1980s to the Canadia Industrial Park in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where a South Korean trading company is exploiting working-class women in the Cambodian textile industry with its low-wage policy. By juxtaposing the experiences and memories of women workers in South Korea and Cambodia, *Factory Complex* makes a case for affective transnationalism as a poignant strategy to reveal common issues of violence, exploitation and suffering, thereby conveying the collective aspirations of an ethical community of minorities, disenfranchised people and victims whose voices have been excluded from the official discourse of both contemporary reality and history.

Im has also effectively extended his affirmative transnationalism into his use of the multiscreen interface for his installations, as this device structures a rich intersection of landscape imagery, reenactments and oral testimonies. The multiscreen interface has been adapted to a vast array of moving image installations based on the appropriation and transformation of film footage, montages and narratives since the 1990s, contributing to the relocation of the forms and subject matter of documentary cinema within gallery walls. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the multiscreen interface in such contexts has been used to "activate a range of strategies for presenting the times of images in ways unavailable with the standardized cinematic apparatus, including multiplication, fragmentation, parallelism, looping, etc." (2018: 256). In her discussion of the documentary installation by Omer Fast and Kutluğ Ataman, who have opted for video art production to renew their non-fiction filmmaking practice, Erika Balsom sees the effect of the multiscreen-based narrative as the creation of "hybrid formations of documentary and fiction", while also characterising their underlying motivation as "[exploring] the multiplicity of relations that mediate between the real and the image" (2013: 154). Recognising this effect of the multiscreen interface, Im, whose work is emblematic of the crossover of documentary filmmaking and moving image art in 21st-century South Korea, has leveraged its capacity for multiplication, parallelism and exchange to recover traumatic memories of violence across different regions and historical periods and encourage viewers' empathic and contemplative engagement with subjects who are haunted by or obsessed with such memories.

Reincarnation (Figure 5) is a two-channel video installation that uses two screens facing each other in opposite directions. While the left screen presents the story of a mother who lost her son in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), the right documents an old woman who survived an attack by South Korean soldiers in a Vietnamese village during the Vietnam War. The work starts with images of two different seashores projected on the two screens. Despite differences in location and date (the left screen shows an image of a seashore at dusk, while the right presents a blue sky and ocean in daylight), the commonalities between the two screens, such as the horizon and the tide washing over each of the two sand beaches, suggest a range of symbolic motifs that will be developed in relation to the victims of each war and their previously untold traumas. From these common denominators, the two screens present their own set of images portraying the artificial and natural landscapes of each village: the left screen provides long shots of a mountain village in Iran covered with fog early in the morning, while the



Figure 5. Im Heung-soon, *Reincarnation* (2015), two-channel video installation, installation view, courtesy of the artist

right screen is filled with images taken inside a dimly lit house, in which a couple of dogs stand in a space framed by a ray of sunshine shining through the open door. These two screens coalesce on a pair of objects that share the same type of atmosphere: a tree with fallen leaves on the left screen and white shirts hanging from a tree thick with leaves on the right screen. The juxtaposition of these two images evokes an atmosphere of absence, loss and the lingering presence of ghosts.

As the work progresses, the seemingly peaceful images of the two villages and their natural surroundings come to be viewed as ruins representing the traumatic losses and spectral presence of the victims of the two wars. This is particularly evident in the Vietnam segment, which asks viewers to contemplate the unspoken or inaudible pain and grief of the victim. Viewers initially see an old Vietnamese woman sitting in the shadow that covers her house. This semi-darkness, which renders her face unidentifiable, is set against a background of bright tropical foliage framed in a barred window behind her. In this contrast between darkness and light, and between the visibility of the natural setting and the near invisibility of her face, a South Korean interviewer tells the woman that many people died in the village where she lived during the Vietnam War, as well as in neighbouring areas. She goes on to inform the old woman that sometimes ghosts appear in those villages, and she asks: "Have you ever seen ghosts or heard from anyone around here who saw ghosts?" The woman does not answer the question, but the silence that follows and her indistinguishable face effectively affirm the impossibility of representing the ghosts or of telling her

story about them. This unfinished interview is complemented by a shot of a dense jungle from the point of view of an unidentified subject. This viewpoint could be attributed to Im, given the shot was taken with a shaky handheld camera, but as it is juxtaposed with the interviewer's question and the old woman's silence, it might also be that of the old woman or of the ghost of the dead she may have seen. Here, it becomes clear that both the jungle and her empty house are being framed as the ruins where her still unspeakable pain and the spectral presence of the dead linger. This sequence is followed by a scene showing an old diorama in the memorial hall of the Vietnamese village recreating the South Korean army's attack, with sound effects of gunshots and flashing light. These artificial effects suggest the idea of the woman as a kind of living dead, a ghostly figure hovering between her present world and her painful past. In this sense, the combination of the diorama and the sound effects functions as a vicarious device of reenactment, a phantasmatic form that Im has frequently employed in varied ways in his documentaries, in close dialogue with his poetic portrayal of landscapes.

The trauma of the loss of a son in the Iran episode on the left screen is expressed in the form of a theatrical play about a mother and aunt waiting for news of Mostafa, who ultimately hear of his death on a phone call from their neighbour. The two protagonists' melodramatic performance of this past event culminates in the play's climax, when the mother repeats that she is waiting for her son, possessed with the hallucination that he is coming home. With a passionate gesture she screams: "I prepared for his wedding myself! He brought his bride to our house." Im's camera remains static throughout the shots that frame the play, positioning the viewer as an imaginary spectator who might be watching the play in the theatre. This framing acknowledges the gap between the past of the traumatic loss and the present, while also indicating the reenactment's phantasmatic quality as a bridge. The reenactment's transformation of the trauma of a loss suffered in the past into performative staging of the ghost in the present reflects the oscillation between continuity and rupture that Marianne Hirsch (2012) identifies as a feature of "postmemory". Indeed, Im incorporates the characteristics of postmemory, such as temporal delay, imaginative recreation and transmission into this reenactment by asking the actual mother's daughters to play the scenes based on her testimony:

> What I wanted to hear were the emotions that they felt, as mothers, women, and human beings, but that wasn't easy. So, I thought that it would be more meaningful to have a younger generation of Iranian women narrate their untold stories [...]. It was important for me to convey the feelings of the next generation (quoted in Kim, 2018: 346–347).

Emotions of loss and longing are intertwined with a poetic series of static images showing photos of the dead son and his bedroom. By intersecting the two episodes of Vietnam and Iran and highlighting the commonalities and differences of their formal components, the two-screen interface of *Reincarnation* demonstrates how evocative poetically framed landscapes and reenactments can be for portraying memories of violence and its victims, despite the sheer absence of oral testimonies, disrupting the chronological ordering of past and present.

Im's *The Waves* (Figure 6) interweaves three traumatic events caused by the oppression or incompetence of the South Korean government. The first is the Yeosun Uprising in 1948, an incident where the soldiers of the 14th Army Regiment in Yeosu and Suncheon (referred to collectively as Yeosun) revolted against the order by President Rhee Syngman's government to kill the protestors on Jeju Island during the April Third Incident; the second, returning to one of the themes of *Reincarnation*, is the massacre of Vietnamese civilians by South Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War; and the third is the Sewol Ferry Disaster on 16



Figure 6. Im Heung-soon, *Waves* (2022), three-channel video installation, installation view, courtesy of the artist

April 2014, which claimed 304 lives due to the failure of President Park Geun-hye's government to rescue the sinking ferry and its passengers in time. Im's orchestration of the three traumatic events in the form of a three-channel video installation translates his transnational-transhistorical perspective on their commonalities into visual and discursive resonances of different testimonies and landscapes. Based on this endeavour, *The Waves* juxtaposes the stories of three protagonists who revisit the historical trauma or address its lingering aftereffects: a Vietnamese interpreter named Sinae (Nguyễn Ngọc Tuyển), who translated the words of a survivor of the 1968 massacre (Nguyễn Thị Thanh) for her court case against the South Korean government demanding compensation for damages that included the loss of her relatives; a male historian named Joo Chul-hee, who has been studying the Yeosun Uprising for many years; and a former art teacher named Kim Jung-hee, who became a shaman (*mudang*) to soothe and mourn those who drowned in the Sewol Ferry Disaster.

The effectiveness of the multiscreen interface to convey Im's affirmative transnationalism is reflected from the outset in the work's opening sequence, where Joo explains that what triggered the Yeosun Uprising is that the military refused to suppress the civilian protesters against the Jeju April Third Incident. Following this, the middle screen shows a photo of the 14th Army Regiment, while in a voice-over Sinae recalls stories of South Korean soldiers who would terrify her mother "to her bones". This recollection of the fear caused by the massacres and rapes committed by the South Korean army committed in Vietnam is then combined with photos of the army's departure ceremony and a series of documents related to the victims whom Sinae met and helped. Subsequently, Sinae's testimony overlaps with images of Kim preparing for a *gut*, a shaman ritual for the diseased. Kim's account of how she turned from art teacher to shaman is then followed by another interview with Joo, who reconstructs the beginnings of the Uprising, along with newsreel

footage of the incident (on the left screen) and images of Yeosun in the present, where traces of the event remain invisible (on the right). With the gradual transitions from one series of audiovisual images to another, punctuated by intermittent black screens, these rhythmic opening sequences articulate South Korea's complicated position as both a victim of a colonial and postcolonial military dictatorship and as a perpetrator of violence on civilians both within the country (the April Third Incident and Sewol Ferry Disaster) and abroad (the Vietnam War). The three-screen interface here establishes South Korean soldiers both as heroes rebelling against the government's unjust order and as culprits responsible for the massacre in Vietnam, thereby framing the paradoxical repetition of state and ideological violence from a transnational and transhistorical perspective. This perspective is further reinforced later in the testimony of Nguyễn Thị Thanh, who tells of how her mother, aunt and younger sister were killed. Her testimony is augmented by the interplay of images of her tranquil hometown, mannequins of the South Korean soldiers who committed the massacre, and documentation on its victims. Again, the three-screen interface juxtaposes these images related to the Vietnam War with others of the Yeosun Uprising and the Sewol Ferry Disaster to underscore the circular repetition of violence. The result is a symbolic montage that constructs the commonalities of the traumas caused by violence, evidenced by the similarities between the photos of the victims of the massacre and the pictures of those who lost their lives on the sinking ferry.

As in his other films and installations, the images of landscapes and natural objects in *The Waves* serve as a symbolic visual motif that highlights Im's transhistorical-transnational perspective on violence and its memoryscape. Ocean waves and insects are the most salient images appearing throughout the work, occupying its three screens in different rhythms and topologies. Acknowledging his inspiration from Virginia Woolf's modernist novel *The Waves* (1931), Im also remarked that its title inspired him to think about how the three incidents were connected to one another in his mind:

> Although [they] involved different kinds of state violence, I felt they were linked together by the sea. Obviously, this applies to Sewol Ferry disaster, but the Yeosun Uprising occurred when soldiers refused to kill their fellow citizens across the sea, and the troops heading to Vietnam departed from Busan Port (quoted in Lee, 2025: 392).

As a result, the images of waves in this three-screen installation evoke multiple connotations related to how memories of state violence become opaque and yet are nonetheless recovered. While Joo explains the history of mass burial at sea off the Korean southern coast during the Yeosun Uprising and the Korean War as an example of its deep-seated anti-communist violence, the next sequence presents the traditional *cheondo* ritual that Kim performs to send the wandering souls of the victims of the Sewol Ferry Disaster to heaven, coupled with her narration of a story about a family whose father was drowned during South Korea's military dictatorship. Eventually, the three screens simultaneously present different oceanic images, reinforcing the idea of waves as the unifying theme of the transnational and transhistorical perspective, and identifying the sea as a site of state violence, of the lingering trauma it causes, and of the task of mourning.

Like the waves, images of insects also evoke multiple affective registers, serving to underscore the filmmaker's affirmative transnationalism. These images first accompany Sinae's brief question: "An insect?" They bounce across all three screens while she continues: "Yes, indeed. Treated like insects. It was because the Korean army treated us, the people here, like insects, just like insects, and slaughtered them." This affective association of human with non-human life to evoke the commonalities of trauma and pain in the different

historical incidents is later repeated in different ways. For instance, Im inserts an image of a mantis between headshots of Kim and Sinae talking to articulate a literal parallel between the Vietnam massacre and the Sewol Ferry Disaster. The symbolic power of non-human entities for connecting the different traumatic incidents is also expressed in the images of clams on a seashore, which accompany Sinae's account of a Vietnamese woman who was killed on the ferry. Consequently, the three-screen interface that Im employs for *The Waves* effectively translates his poetic and contemplative treatment of political violence and its contested memories into multiple connections between testimonies, documents and non-human entities, and by extension, between different historical incidents that have nonetheless caused similar traumas across Korea and Vietnam, and across Korea's modern and contemporary periods.

CONCLUSION

The works of Oh Minwook and Im Heung-soon discussed in this article are emblematic of the significance of affirmative transnationalism in these documentary makers' formal and aesthetic endeavours to find new ways of engaging with memory and history. Their unconventional, experimental approaches to documentary filmmaking through the essayistic mode and the multiscreen interface evoke an affirmative transnationalism that achieves a reconciliation between the particular (exploring different national traumas and sufferings) and the universal (identifying their commonalities), between microhistories and larger historical narratives. With their formal and aesthetic experiments, both filmmakers successfully weave the traumatic, spectral vestiges of violence that haunt different people and places across nations and eras. Both Oh's essayistic mode and Im's parallelism create multilayered audiovisual discourses and experiences, thereby establishing a translocal or inter-Asian connection between the wars and other violent incidents seemingly unrelated in terms of their location and political context. In this way, the two artist-filmmakers aspire to establish spectral memories of violent times as a common denominator between different countries in Asia, as Im himself suggests when discussing *Reincarnation*: "I didn't see much difference between the struggles of Asian countries experiencing Western imperialist rule, so I wondered if there might be a connection between myself as a spectator and a Korean and these two seemingly unrelated wars" (2015: para. 1). Their affective transnationalism ultimately reveals how the creative multiplication of documentary images and discourses and their thought-provoking juxtaposition can result in the productive multidimensional and transcultural reconstruction of traumatic and contested memories across the national borders of different Asian countries. ■

NOTES

1 The Incident has been one of South Korea's historic events that the military dictatorship's monolithic, ideologically codified narrative long described as a communist riot or invasion. In the 21st century, there have been a series of notable South Korean documentaries that revisit the case, including Im Heung-soon's *Jeju Prayer* (Pinyŏm, 2012).

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AFFIRMATIVE TRANSNATIONALISM IN RECENT KOREAN DOCUMENTARY CINEMA: THE WORKS OF OH MINWOOK AND IM HEUNG-SOON

Abstract

This paper examines the documentary works of two South Korean artist-filmmakers—Oh Minwook and Im Heung-soon—through the prism of what Mette Hjort (2009) has called "affirmative transnationalism", a mode of transnational filmmaking that involves cross-border collaboration inspired by the concept of cultural affinity or similarity. In *Letters to Buriram* (Haehyŏp, 2019), Oh combines a poetic travelogue style reminiscent of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1982) with the epistolary mode of narration enacted by Taiwanese woman artist, to offer an experimental reflection on the transnational traumatic impacts of Cold War violence on the landscape of South Korea, Taiwan and Japan. Im's affective transnationalism is made visible in multiscreen documentary installations such as *Reincarnation* (Hwansaeng, 2015) and *The Waves* (P'ado, 2022), both of which interweave a rich set of parallels between subjects in different parts of Asia (South Korea, Vietnam, Iran) who endeavour to question the violence they suffered and reclaim their contested memory of it. All these cases demonstrate that the post-activist documentary in the 21st-century South Korea offers new, transnational and multidimensional perspectives on memories of regional violence by expanding its national and aesthetic boundaries.

Key words

Korean documentary cinema; Oh Minwook; Im Heung-soon; Affirmative transnationalism; Experimental documentary; Essay film; Multiscreen installation.

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TRANSNACIONALISMO AFIRMATIVO EN EL DOCUMENTAL COREANO RECIENTE: LAS OBRAS DE OH MINWOOK E IM HEUNG-SOON

Resumen

Este artículo examina la obra documental de dos cineastas-artistas surcoreanos, Oh Minwook e Im Heung-soon, a través del prisma de lo que Mette Hjort (2009) denomina «transnacionalismo afirmativo», una modalidad de producción cinematográfica transnacional basada en la colaboración entre contextos nacionales distintos a partir de afinidades culturales, históricas o experienciales compartidas. En *Letters to Buriram* (Haehyŏp, Oh Minwook, 2019), Oh combina una estética de cuaderno de viaje próxima a *Sans Soleil* (Chris Marker, 1982) con una estructura epistolar articulada por la voz de una artista taiwanesa, configurando una reflexión experimental sobre las huellas transnacionales de la violencia de la Guerra Fría en Corea del Sur, Taiwán y Japón. Por su parte, el transnacionalismo afectivo desarrollado por Im Heung-soon se manifiesta en instalaciones documentales multipantalla como *Reincarnation* (Hwansaeng, 2015) y *The Waves* (P'ado, 2022), obras que establecen complejas correspondencias entre sujetos procedentes de distintos lugares de Asia, Corea del Sur, Vietnam e Irán, que buscan interrogar las violencias sufridas y recuperar memorias históricas disputadas. En conjunto, estos casos muestran cómo el documental posactivista surcoreano del siglo XXI amplía sus límites nacionales y estéticos para proponer perspectivas transnacionales y multidimensionales sobre las memorias de la violencia regional.

Palabras clave

Cine documental coreano; Oh Minwook; Im Heung-soon; transnacionalismo afirmativo; documental experimental; cine ensayo; instalación multipantalla.

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