

From Helpless Victims to Inhumane Criminals Visual Representation of Korean Women in Films about the Korean Conflict

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Abstract

Korea is known in the world as a country that is still divided. It is not currently unusual to hear about North Korean refugees from various social classes, all of whom have individual reasons for their plight, as a result of the current political atmosphere in Kim Jung-Un's North Korea. Until today the divided Korea is issued in the various parts of South Korea, especially in films from the beginning of the South Korean film history. Korean conflict films are defined as films about political issues regarding national breakdown and the relationship with North Korea as the key topic, and are of nationwide interest. This paper starts by asking how conflict films describe the division of Korea into north and south and how Koreans relate to this. I will analyze how the lives of Korean women from North and South Korea are visually represented by the different filmmakers in this special local film genre. The cinematic rewriting of past and present describes how the Korean War influenced the life of Korean women and asked why they should be depicted as "poor victims". Since the end of 2000 the topic of North Korean refugees has concerned both Koreas and solutions were demanded urgently to protect human rights in North Korea. This political topic is also represented in films, for example in films that describe genuine episodes of the lack of food in North Korea, which is explained by North Korean refugees. These films strongly criticize the violation of human rights, especially of women. They not only depict tragic family stories but look at them in close connection with the divided Korea. Several films will be organized by theme, for example women before and after the Korean War, to show the life situations of Korea's women in this film genre

Keywords: Korean conflict film, division of the Koreas, Korean War, visual representation of women's life, cinematic rewriting of past and present, women as victims. *Shiri, JSA, Welcome to Dongmakgol, Taegukgi, The Front Line, Ode to My father, Winter Butterfly, 48m, Yodok Stories*

1. At the Beginning: The Korean War and after then

The Korean War (1950-1953) broke out in 1950 without warning, five years after the independence of Korea from Japanese colonial rule, when Korea was still in chaos. After the war Korea was divided into two and this political situation remains unchanged. The keyword "division" is important to understand not only the political development, but also the other various elements of Korea, such as cultural and social fields. More than sixty years after the Korean War this historical event is written and rewritten constantly, in several parts of South Korean society: not only in literature, but also in the visual arts. They reflect the emergence of new evidence, as well as the evolution of political doctrines and knowledge (Bleiker, 2005, p. 113). How did Korean women live during the Korean War? What could they do in this national crisis situation? The Korean War, as in other wars, had just two results for individuals: die or survive.

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2. Women during the Korean War: *Taegukgi*, *The Front Line*, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* and *Ode to My father*

The war film *Taegukgi* (2004, R: Je-Kyu Kang) is one of the most important films in South Korean film history. It was introduced after a long stagnation in Korean War films, which are actually linked to true Korean history and the established f, which is still relevant in South Korea. *Taegukgi* depicts the tragedy of the Korean War very realistically, so that it imparts an anti-war message. As a result, this film had an enormous audience and is recorded as one of the most successful films in South Korea. In this film the female figure Young-Sin, and the mother of the both brothers, are shown in the traditional image of Korean women: they work around the clock for their family and during the absence of the men take over the role of family head and protect the rest of the family. The mother and Young-Sin are helpless in the war situation, however, the deaf mother can say nothing about the unwanted farewell, and must accept it as her destiny. The female figures at home are a strong motivation for male war veterans to return home alive, but their death show them to be the true victims of the war. In the fitful situation of the war in the hometown Young-Sin is killed in a moment. Young-Sin's role as a victim is emphasized, and the character of her friend Jin-Tae changed more violently during the war as a result. Her death is depicted in slow motion in a close-up: the more dramatically and tragically her death is depicted, the greater her sacrificial role.

In another war film *The Front Line* (2011, R: Hun Jang) a different female figure is to be seen, one who decided to fight against her enemy. The woman, as a mysterious sniper on the side of North Koreans, and nicknamed "Two Seconds" kills South Korean soldiers in just two seconds. She was the innocent girl in her family photo before the war, but during the war her family was killed and this turned her into a cold-blooded killer. She also did not survive. The film depicts her death as another meaningless victim of the war, just like the other thousands of deaths.

The film *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (2005, R: Kwang-Hyun Park) introduces the image of innocent women more concretely. The female figure Yeo-II is described with the name "Another", showing that she does not belong to the ideological position which is typical for conflict film. From a realistic viewpoint she is rather a mad girl. In some Korean texts she is considered a mythological figure. Her name has several symbolic meanings. Yeo-II means immutability, unity, and in other words is a symbol of an isolated world which belongs neither to the south nor north, but is a natural and free being, and as a result can consider the problem from a different perspective. In the widest sense she symbolizes the country's unity. Jeong-Ran Kim defines Yeo-II as a divine figure of the earth (Kim, 2007). The village elder woman is also described as the spiritual leader of her village. Kim compares her role in this film to that of Yeo-II, as the goddess of nature and origin of existence (Kim, 2007), who cares for the villagers as a symbolic figure. As a divine symbol she can connect the American, and South and North Korean soldiers who accidentally come into this village, and treats them as a guest regardless of their ideology. Like the other female characters, however, Yeo-II is killed, as an innocent victim. Through her death, the film asks why the women must die by violence. The rule that women are represented in men's history as victims is confirmed in this fairytale war movie.

Then, how did women who survived the war live? We meet another female figure, Young-Ja, in the film *Ode to My Father* (2014, R: Jae-Kyun Yoon), who, with her children, barely survived during the war. The film *Ode to My Father* tells the story of an ordinary family who lived through modern Korean history from the Korean War until to the present age. Young-Ja, the mother of the main character in this film, lost her husband and her daughter. After she arrived safely in Busan, South Korea, she had to find some way to earn money for her young children during the crisis of the time. Relying on her eldest son, she struggles with her life and her whole family. Although she did not see her husband once again, she fortunately found her youngest daughter thirty years later. The director tells a realistic life story, combining historical events and the various fictional experiences of the female character: She lived in continuous economical hardship; she convinced her eldest son to go to Germany as "a mine worker"; she missed her youngest daughter her whole life, and only met her again three years before her death. The well-known historical events in South Korea and the personal life story of the female character are depicted in this film in order to show the position not only of the father, but also the mother in modern Korean society. The meaning of the word "mother" reminds us how women, especially Young-Ja's generation, took "small steps" through their own efforts.

3. Women after the Korean War

Women under the ideology of the Cold War: Spies with double identities or helpless observers - *Shiri* and *JSA*

In this chapter the images of women after the Korean War will be analyzed through two conflict films, *Shiri* (1999, R: Je-Kyu Kang) and *JSA* (2000, R: Chan-Wook Park). Such images changed dramatically during the Cold War. Both films introduce new images of women that are very different from their classic roles as victim figures: North Korean female spies or neutral mediators. In both films the female figures approach the violence of male figures in traditional films, and seem to have escaped their traditional images: now they are in the midst of the violent situation as active fighters and participate actively and professionally in the violence. They also control the men, and are determined and powerful enough to reach their goals without any problems. This change is particularly seen in the two remarkable protagonists in the films *Shiri* and *JSA*. The Korean film critic Young-Sub Sim explains this cinematic change as being based on the new image of women and describes the main female characters in both films: they appear "as powerful women and try to prevail against the men, but in the course of the films they return to their traditional social position, as weak, helpless figures". (Sim, 2007) At first, Myoung-Hyeun's identity is vague and changeable compared to the male characters in this film; she is a highly educated North Korean spy who was used for the specific purpose of North Korea. She is the first female character to represent North Korea in a conflict film, and is presented as a cold-blooded and powerful weapon. Using two identities, she lives in South Korea, but fights for her country as a spy. Her impressive performances as a North Korean spy are diminished by her identity crisis in the course of the film, and finally she belongs nowhere.

The two different identities of this female character are represented by two different names; Bang-Hee is the North Korean spy searching for the South Korean national security agent Jung-Won, and Myoung-Hyeun is the ordinary South Korean citizen and fiancé of Jung-Won. The different faces of the female figure suggest her monstrous image as the "Hydra" from the history of the division of the state, and the film condenses the tragedy of the country's division into this figure. When looking for her own identity, however, this figure fails over and over again. The film shows her two identities in contrast, and the associated very different ways of life and values as two completely different personalities. In order to examine more closely how her two completely different identities are depicted (Back, 2002), two sequences can be compared, in which each particular identity emerges for the first time in the film.

Behind a bush a woman emerges with her comrades to kill the other people. She is wearing a soldier's uniform and a hat with a red cloth around her head, just like her male comrades. The camera follows this woman who kills people professionally, with perfect body control. This first sequence in *Shiri* only shows visually how the first North Korean woman becomes a professional killer through various battle situations. To be chosen as the best North Korean spy she has given up her private life. In the other example sequence this woman, under her other name, Myoung-Hyeun, has a fish shop and a friend named Jung-Won. Here she is a simple citizen who leads her everyday life and dreams of a happy future. A perfect transformation to a new identity creates a new contrasting picture of her. The film shows how this monstrous figure with a double identity fluctuates between her ideology and her personal emotions, and her inner turmoil is clear in several camera shots.

Finally, the secret of Myoung-Hyeun and Jung-Won is discovered, and her two opponents know her true identity. Now the agents who have both searched for her for years meet, and direct their guns at each other. A slow-motion effect depicts the confrontation between them, and Myoung-Hyeun's death in a close-up. The sequence in which Jung-Won and Myoung-Hyeun meet as opponents contains the main statement of the film. The pair sways between the official and private areas of life, they are forced by the two countries to decide on their official tasks and Myoung-Hyeun is killed by her boyfriend. Her death clearly shows that she plays the role of all victims in the confrontation of ideologies, and the role of women as victims is in fact barely changed in this film. Another female character, Sophie in the movie *JSA*, appears as a neutral mediator with the help of her origin. As the only female protagonist, she represents both South and North Korea and tries to find out what happened exactly between South and North Korea.

Her position as a mediator emphasizes her role as an important person: her appearance in the film makes it clear that she is the first woman to enter the JSA since the division of Korea. She breaks the taboo to enter the area of the men and can move boundlessly between both countries. She is also self-confident and competent in her job. Nevertheless, Sophie cannot solve the problem because of her personal family history, where her father was a North Korean soldier who decided to go to the third country and marry a Swedish woman. As a result Sophie lost her neutral position and has to resign from the scandal between the both countries. It is not possible for her to reach the man's world.

North Korean women in conflict films: *Winter Butterfly*, *48m* and *Yodok Stories*

The filmmaker of *Winter Butterfly* (2011, R: Kyu-Min Kim), who is a North Korean refugee who makes various films on the subject of North Korea, shows many different social groups in this film, mostly families in North Korea, so as to report the real situation in North Korea more clearly. The descriptions of families show the application of gender concepts especially clearly: fathers in families are completely absent or shown as destroyed by social problems. They are incompetent; finally they are completely alone at the tragic end. The film *Winter Butterfly* is based on the true story of a poor family with only two members, a boy named Jin-Ho and his sick mother. Jin-Ho's father and older brother, the active leader of his family, are absent and the role of the father was taken by the young boy. The whole family exists only in a family picture on the wall as the memory of past, not in reality. During the absence of his father, Jin-Ho and his mother live in their life problems as the victim. In other films with similar topic children play an important role as the main characters, and at the same time as the victims?

In the film *48m* (2012, R: Baek-Doo Min) there are more female figures who experience the death of their parents, children and siblings. The conflict between women and soldiers is depicted more directly than in *Winter Butterfly*. North Korean women who lost their family or property stand helpless against the brutal violence of the North Korean soldiers, the symbol of the state authority. The North Korean women suffer under the violence of the men and are bound by their households. Seok-Hyang Kim (2005) describes the worthless meaning of gender equality between a North Korean man and woman. There are however also active women, who try to leave North Korea, and with this goal they earn money to sell clothes, which they obtain illegally from China. They risk their lives to cross the river to China for this reason. Their simple hope, to live in safety, cannot be fulfilled and the film *48m* closes with their death on the frozen river.

The subject of the lack of food in North Korea is one of most well-known and important issues through which to understand the cinematic themes of conflict films. Since the late 1990s the North Korean people have been on an official long march that makes that of Mao look like a stroll. The period from the late 1980s through to the famine was described as an 'Arduous March'. As severe shortages continued into 1998 the slogan was adjusted to the 'Forced March to Final Victory'. Then, despite no let-up in the economic situation, the slogan was again reworked to the hopelessly optimistic 'March to Paradise'. At no time did the state admit to any ideological, economic or systemic problem as causes of the industrial decline or famine (French, 2007, p. 115-116).

The lack of food in North Korea, as "an odd, exasperating, anachronistic, and faintly poignant nation" (Cumings, 2003, p. 154), is shown in the middle of the film *Winter Butterfly*. The visual representation of the deficiency of food is very realistic and direct in this film, except for flash sequences in high-key: The empty kitchen, the frequent dialogs about foods between Jin-Ho and his mother, and all add to the tension of the situation. First of all, the repeating of flash sequences (high-key) in this context is important, in comparison with the main narrative. This film begins with an imaginative sequence, in which the main character Jin-Ho appears with musical accompaniment against a bright background. Jin-Ho stands out with his colorful, radiant appearance against the white background; he is neat as are the other children in South Korea. He talks with his mother about how to cook a chicken soup. Without his red scarf nobody notices that he is from North Korea. The use of the high-key style in this flash sequences refers a happy ending to the story, such as sensitivity, simplicity, cheerfulness, openness or triviality (Gans, 1999). Their reality is, of course, exactly the opposite.

After this first sequence the camera shows the boy and his mother in their dark and empty house, their real living space, finally notices that the first sequence contains an extreme contrast between picture and sound. The strong visual contrasts between the first sequence and the next sequence are emphasized still more tragically in the same conversation situation; in the connecting sequence Jin-Ho and his mother are wearing dark gray clothes and blankets on a dark background. This naturalistic space is dark, and even darker in comparison with the imaginative sequence.

The worsening of the food shortage is emphasized by Jin-Ho's mother. When she loses the last opportunity to gain food because Jin-Ho is wounded, her own food ration becomes still more strict: a close-up sequence shows how Jin-ho's mother soaks a towel with the water which lay in the food, and wrings out to the last drop, and it closes with the shot where she drinks the liquid from a big bowl. The close-up view of this figure and the changes caused by her need for food and her ill son show the real condition of North Korean society and the suffering of North Koreans. The tragic end of this little family is shown in the last short sequence: Jin-Ho and his mother, who finish cooking the chicken soup, are shown together in a happy family photo. This film shows the cynical propaganda and the untruthfulness of propaganda in North Korea, and lets the dream as just a dream remain. The reality doesn't permit North Korean dreams. This repeated flash sequence, the beginning sequence, dominates reality to the end of the film so strongly that Jin-Ho's mother leads to a tragic end; in this family tragedy, the relationship between mother and son is broken.

The tragic sequence in *Winter Butterfly* is depicted significantly differently in comparison to other cinematic presentations; the family history strongly reflects the problems in life, particularly the problems over food, in a quiet and everyday manner. The normal running sequence, which lets the audience hope for a happy ending right until the film ends, in spite of the family's misfortune, actually hides a great secret and reminds us that this film is based on a true story. In this end sequence the camera, which observes Jin-Ho's family passively, as eyes of the narrator, suddenly changes its character. To stage the hard truth, two methods of cinematic presentation are used very effectively: repetition and unreliable narrative. The camera suddenly turns the beginning of this sequence as the end, what it has already shown. In this time the camera depicts, or to be more exact it describes, what the camera concealed from the audience before.

Repetition is part of the memory, in the film mostly expressed through flashbacks, which visualize not only mental images of a movie character, but also compensate for a lack of information of the viewer. For the figures, the flashback has sometimes cathartic effect, such as when a process of knowledge or even self-knowledge is initiated. In rare cases such repeated repetition takes place after closing credits – also not because we experience especially affecting scenes in the repetition once again, but because the ambiguous play of the film we realize in retrospect (Gerdes, 2001).

In fact, the repeating sequence gives the audience visual information; there is no fortune, rather an unbelievable tragedy: it was not a dog, the mother has killed and cooked. The cannibalistic act is recognized in the repeating sequence which makes it clear that the mother has cooked her injured son. This episode is in the film *Yodok Stories* (2009/Norway, R: Andryej Fidyk) as attested in an interview by a North Korean refugee, who was for several years in the Yodok prison camp. In his opinion, it is not unusual to hear of such cannibalistic acts in North Korea. Films about North Korea and North Korean refugees in this era support the veracity of the reports of North Korean refugees. The following quotation is in general about the borders of the representation of hunger, food rituals, pleasure and loathing.

The aestheticisation of food can wake thus the need for annexation and will get to know accordingly as a state of an expected nearness. (...) The topos of food in this film therefore does not exhaust itself in a tasteful stylization of food, but also extends to the phenomenon of disgust and the representation of the adversaries. Because the disgust characteristically exceeds the "good taste", the question arises as to what extent it may occur as an object in the aesthetic field in appearance (Koch & Koch, 2009).

Before the shock can be processed, this film ends with a text explaining that the arrested mother apologized for having cooked the dog, which she wanted to give her son to eat. The moment of shock is still strongly felt. In an interview, the filmmaker Kim emphasized that what he wanted to bring forward with this film was that "you cannot protect even the great love in North Korea" (Kim, 2011). He explained further: "The mother's love is the most beautiful and greatest love of all. However, this can also crash depending on society. The mother and her son in this film try not to lose their joy and hope of life, in spite of the laborious life. The terrible living conditions in North Korea, nevertheless, it leads to a shocking end. That is the current reality in North Korea". (Kim, 2011) It is clarified that the term hunger is limited "not only on the annoyance of the growling stomach" Koebner (2009).

Thomas Koebner means that: "hunger is a metaphor to characterize even mental and spiritual deficiency that has to be to reduce by feeding experiences and feelings Koebner (2009). In fact, the mother in the film *Winter Butterfly* is completely confused, when she takes a cloud of earth instead of rice for herself in the transition period of her mental and moral lack from hunger. The final sequence contains not only a tragic family history, but also the idea of how strongly hunger can break relationships among people, and their morality.

4. Conclusion

This paper assembled various visual representations of Korean women in selected conflict films, asking how the films in this category depicted Korean women over the course of time. Korean history, from the Korean War and division of the country, influenced the life of all Korean citizens massively, not only through internal and external policy. In the epoch of confusion and chaos since the Korean War it was not easy, especially for Korean women, to avoid misfortunes, or life and death situations. They were either killed during the war or carried alone of the responsibility for their remaining family. The Korean women, who survived during the war and then took care of their family as the family leader, are represented by the figure Young-Ja in the film *Ode to My Father*. Women who survived had to give up their individual dreams, and were forced to sacrifice themselves. After the war, Korean women suffered due to the different ideological aspects. In films which depict the politically tense situation between South and North Korea during the Cold War they are represented by the North Korean spy in *Shiri* or as a passive observer with foreign citizenship and a family background affected by her father from North Korea in *JSA*. In the latest conflict film, the struggle for the survival of North Korean women is shown by the director as the struggle of North Korean refugees.

Korean Women are represented in extremely different depictions as active soldiers, helpless victims or devoted family leaders in relation to Korean history. They show the tragic struggle of Korean women to survive in their time and the critical view that Korean history has of them. To conclude, just one question remains: who is responsible for their life? The discourse about the Korean War and its traces is found in many parts of women's lives, not just in reality, but also in films, helping to build the collective memory of both Koreas. The next question might be this: what will the next cinematic rewriting of them be, in conflict film? As noted, the historical division of this country is still not over.

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