

UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN

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ABSTRACT

Until We Meet Again is a 40-minute documentary where I, as a South-Korean Canadian filmmaker, follow a group of North Korean university students' first journey to the outside world for their graduation trip. North Koreans are banned from leaving the country or interacting with foreigners. I was able to get a rare permission to document the journey as an official stills photographer. This film attempts to peek into the lives of North Korea's young students, and to document my personal interaction with them during the trip.

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INTRODUCTION

This film did not initially start from a place of intellectual curiosity. In the summer of 2014, I was given rare permission to visit a North Korean university and follow its convocation class' graduation trip to China. Initially I did not intend on making a film; I was purely excited by the sheer opportunity of meeting young North Koreans as this is virtually impossible for a South Korean.

The notion of separation and reunification is an abstract concept for many young South Koreans who have grown up without the direct experience of the Korean War (1950-1953). Many people are so far removed from the historical reality that North Korea has become an entity in a fairy tale, something that once existed in our collective memory but is now fading away in the minds of the younger generation.

I was simply handed this rare and unique opportunity by chance and in documenting the events unfolding in front of me, a personal story began to emerge and I decided to explore and peek into the humanity of *the other*, my North Korean brothers.

Scholars interested in viewing the film, and reviewing additional background research, can contact me, Eui Yong Zong, at zongfilm@gmail.com.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Since the Korean War ended in 1953, the two Koreas have remained separated for the last 64 years. North and South Koreans are forbidden to see each other except for rare high-level political talks. Korea(s) is the only country in the world where the tangible remnants of the Cold War still exist, between one people in two nations who share blood and a common history.

At the end of World War II, Korea was liberated from decades of Japanese colonization. However, the United States and the Soviet Union divided the Korean peninsula in two along the 38th parallel, with the Soviets controlling the North and the United States controlling the South. On June 25, 1950, a civil war broke out backed by the newly crowned super powers and by the end of the war in 1953, it claimed millions of lives. On July 27, 1953, an armistice was signed between the two countries, but no peace treaty has ever been signed, so the two Koreas have been technically at war and remained divided ever since.

SEPARATED FAMILIES

Since the end of the war, no contact or communication between the citizens of the two countries has been allowed. The border between North and South Korea is the most heavily militarized border in the world and it is virtually impossible to cross. Many people in both North and South Korea have lost contact with the rest of their families without knowing the fate of their loved ones, dead or alive. The first family reunions were only permitted 40 years after the armistice in 1985 and it took another 15 years until the second reunion was arranged between the two countries when the liberal government came into office in South Korea in 2000. Depending on the political climate, these formal reunions took place for 3-4 days in a highly controlled setting where the tragedies of these divided families become nationally televised. There have been 20 such reunions since 1985, and the people who were lucky enough to be picked from the millions of separated families are given a chance to meet in a highly monitored public space under the surveillance of officials from the two countries. Medical personnel are on standby as many participants have fainted at the sight of their mothers, fathers, siblings, sons and daughters, the tears of joy, the cries of anguish all in one. Even amidst these emotional meetings, it is not uncommon to see North Korean family members using the platform to praise the leaders and their generosity. The national narrative takes charge of their most personal and intimate moments; there is no space for individual suffering and mourning on this national stage.

MY PREVIOUS WORK

Prior to *Until We Meet Again*, I have made 6 short films. My films tend to deal with the issues of family and memories. When searching for stories and characters, my interest has always been, “Can the personal and quotidian also be represented as historical?” I strive to look for historical and political agencies from what is deemed to be the most mundane and personal. My purpose is to examine the specificities of real life, and where they are located in history.

In my first film *My Grandpa* (verite short doc), I confront my family about my grandfather who was a Korean War veteran whose death prompted no mourning in his children but served as an unlikely childhood inspiration to me. Though the war is not the central focus in the film at all, my emotional approach when conceptualizing this film was to understand the personal to examine the historical remnants that permeated my dysfunctional family dynamics.

With the docu-fiction *Leftover*, I had real-life North Korean migrants play themselves in the story based on their real life history and their own past experiences. In the film, 7-year-old Michael does not eat his lunch at school and brings home the leftovers. Michael’s father Chul who, for his family’s sake, managed to escape the famine and the regime, cannot accept this behavior as it provokes memories of the past that come back to haunt his life in the present. Not knowing Michael is being bullied for the smelly Korean food, Chul takes extreme measures to discipline his son. The family’s painful past is revealed and magnified through something as small as a lunchbox.

In *Until We Meet Again*, I avoided making grand or expositional statements about the political situation between the two countries, and instead focused solely on making a personal connection with the students with whom I share a common history. I tried to be careful not to ridicule the subjects as I have often seen this done in other North Korean-related publications and films; my intention was solely to peek into their humanity and my hope was that in forging that bond with the students there might be an opportunity to look at the broader context, the tragic political reality we live under.

INFLUENCES

Using personal footage of her travelogue, Yang Yong Hi's Yang's intimate and sensitive portrayal of her family in the two part series, *Dear Pyongyang* and *Goodbye Pyongyang* was the biggest stylistic inspiration for my thesis project. Yang's project was arguably one of the first films to show the authentic moments and interactions of ordinary North Koreans living inside the country.

During the Japanese colonization of Korea, many Koreans ended up settling down in Japan for a variety of reasons, often times for practical reasons beyond their desire and choice. After the Korean War divided the country into two, Koreans overseas in the diaspora faced a dilemma of choosing and claiming one Korea or the other as their fatherland. Yang's family was one of those who picked North Korea to be their homeland and they have remained faithful to the North Korean regime ever since. Yang's brothers left Japan for North Korea in the early 1970s under a repatriation campaign sponsored by ethnic activist organization Chongryon, when it seemed like North Korea was a blossoming utopia compared to South Korea as the nation was in turmoil both economically and politically. This was a traumatic experience for Yang who was only 7 years old at that time to be separated from her brothers and she was only allowed to go back and reunite with her siblings after 11 years. Yang was given permission to travel and visit her brother's family and she was able to capture their lives with utmost sensitivity and intimacy using a small handy cam in the span of a decade. She herself becomes a character in the film as she navigates between being an observer and a storyteller. Intercutting with family archives, Yang examines her North Korean upbringing and her complicated family history as she struggles to reconcile her beliefs with that of her family's. She is careful not to challenge

her family with tough questions; instead, she focuses on revealing the humanity of an ordinary family living in the most reclusive country in the world. Using slates and voiceover, Yang intervenes as a filmmaker detailing the contexts and how she felt about certain situations, but she avoids making an explicitly political statement or voicing a critique on her encounters. Though it becomes clear at the end where she stands politically, she is careful not to point the finger. The only things portrayed and expressed in the media about North Korea are the surface and the façade, devoid of any human connections. But through these genuine and intimate interactions in Yang's film, we begin to understand and relate to her North Korean family members and the complicated history of the diaspora Koreans on a human level. It is when the political intervenes and creeps through to the personal; that the weight of the tragedy is magnified and felt on a deeply personal level.

Under the Sun by Vitaly Mansky is another reference film that I watched while doing research for my thesis project. After negotiating with the North Korean government for two years, Mansky obtained permission to follow a 7 year old girl Jimin as she prepares to join the party's Communist Children's Union. Despite his attempts to have some control over the narrative, Mansky was only permitted to shoot a documentary-style propaganda piece that would show the everyday life of a little girl learning the ways of the Party. The narrative was strictly controlled and scripted by the government and Mansky's role was to capture the performance. However, he kept rolling between the takes when his collaborators and minders were getting ready to shoot, capturing 'genuine' moments from Jimin and other actors' reactions on set. As the fatigue of the shoot begins to take its toll on Jimin, the performance and the façade of the utopian country begin to crack in front of

the camera. Mansky's unprecedented access allowed him to examine the people who are being transformed within the grand political machinery.

STRUCTURE AND STYLE

Until We Meet Again is essentially a personal travelogue. It has a clear beginning and ending as the viewer follows the students' journey chronologically. Aesthetically in my previous films, I tried to follow an observational approach whereby my camera follows the actions unfold as a third person. However, because of my role as an official photographer of the very trip I was documenting, inevitably I became a character and some of the restrictions placed on me as a photographer became part of my documentary form, aesthetics, and narrative, in the case of my thesis film.

Bill Nichols presents different modalities in understanding the documentary practice: expository, observational, interactive, and poetic. I will use these terms so as to broadly define a conventional notion of narrative functionality in different documentary practice, but I would argue that these categorizations are often temporary and interchangeable depending on the practical reality of the filming and editing process. Expository documentaries are often associated with the Griersonian tradition where the filmmaker addresses the audience directly, and presents an argument in didactic terms.¹ Observational documentary follows a process where the emphasis is on the neutrality of the filmmaker with respect to the subject with minimum interference in the events that are unfolding. Interactive is a form where the filmmaker actively engages with the subject, therefore impacting the course of the narrative in the process. I believe there is no such thing as objective distance from the subject because the presence of the camera inevitably changes the nature of the interactions and the power dynamic. The subject' inevitably acquires a heightened awareness of his or her surroundings when a camera is present;

¹ Paul Ward. *Documentary: The Margins of Reality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p13.

negotiating that relationship of trust, distance, realism and objectivity is very tricky. In that sense, in Yang's *Dear Pyongyang*, the filmmaker engages in direct interference and participates in the process, because she is a family member, and there is a greater level of intimacy that is earned and revealed; therefore, the metric by which one measures the objective distance in relation to the observational and interactive cinema could be contingent upon the nature of the access. Lastly, poetic documentary focuses on building the associations of mood, tone, and texture.² As is the case with *Dear Pyongyang*, it is hard to categorize my film into just one type of modality of documentary practice outlined by Nichols, in fact, no films should be boxed into a type of categorization if the story calls for a certain narrative device.

In the case of *Until We Meet Again*, while I strive to pursue a more observational approach, as in my previous works, this film is different because of my role as a photographer participating in the action. That role was clearly defined in relation to the subjects, and therefore it was inevitable that I would take on a more participatory approach in the filming process. The role of the camera not only becomes that of the observer, but also it draws the subjects into the frame; the freeze frame effects become a medium through which my relationship with the characters is explored and built gradually during the course of the trip and the film. My role as official photographer gives me opportunities to interact and intervene, and this also opens up the opportunity for my own reflections on what is unfolding on screen, and in my own consciousness. The fourth wall is broken constantly; I am both an observer and a character that is actively engaging with and impacting the subjects' journey. The freeze frame effects were used to clearly emphasize my official role

² Paul Ward. *Documentary: The Margins of Reality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p14.

and the way it changed the nature of my relationship to the subjects, but the other reason for this is to suggest that the accumulation of images and shared memories, throughout the film, wind up taken away and denied us by the censorship board. Some viewers might find the freeze frames effects repetitive, but my intention was to make the impact of the final sequence that much more powerful, as a reminder that those moments were fleeting and could not be shared for reasons beyond our control.

Another technique that is used in the film is narration. Stella Bruzzi offers her opinions in her book titled 'New Documentary' on the use of narration in documentary films:

The primary features of narration-led documentaries are: that, by blending omniscience and intimacy, they address the spectator directly; they set out an argument (thus implying forethought knowledge, the ability to assimilate); they possess a dominant and constant perspective on the events they represent to which all elements within the film conform; they offer a solution thereby a closure to the stories they tell.”³

I originally wanted to follow a more observational approach, but my plans had to be adjusted to more of a participatory and expository approach because of my role as official photographer, and the inherent restrictions the shoot necessitated the need for my intervention. The travel sequences could only be stitched together to form a subjective perspective by allowing my voice to enter. However, while allowing the viewers into my personal thoughts, I tried to eschew from posing an argument or a moral judgment on the

³ Stella Bruzzi. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 49.

subjects, or giving a sense of closure to the stories and the events unfolding, the voiceover was used solely for the purpose of communicating contexts and delivering my inner thoughts. My intention for the use of voiceover was strictly within the confines of my own introspection.

EDITING PROCESS

There were two parts of the editing process: visual editing and writing. Because the backbone of the story was the trip itself, the chronology of sequences was laid out roughly according to what took place during the trip. There were 10 days of footage in total, from which I selected the scenes that I thought would work narratively and assembled the key moments each scene. I knew that the center of the storyline would revolve around Jae, so I went through every moment that I had with Jae and tried to build each moment into respective scene. One of the challenges was that I did not have a lot of moments with Jae to build any semblance of a story arc around our emerging friendship. I only had fragments. Jae emerged as a character a few days into the trip and alongside this; I had to build generic moments of the trip into the narrative. For instance, when I interviewed the two students, I initially planned of having Jae only, but because the contents of what he said lacked emotional weight, I chose to include the other student to give the scene a sense of closure and move onto the next chapter. Once the individual scenes were assembled, I put them in the order that made the most narrative sense in the emotional arc of the film. By and large, the structure followed the chronological order. The only exception was when Jae talks about his observation about the Chinese girls, which was a moment I captured on the last day, but have edited into the sequence earlier. I placed this candid moment in the midpoint of the film, as it did not work well emotionally being close to the end.

The second part of the editing process involved finding structure beyond just the travelogue and writing narration to insert my personal reflections onto the film to sustain an exploration of the reality of separation. After the first round of feedback sessions with my thesis supervisors, it was evident that the film needed a stronger personal perspective

to make sense of the generic moments of the graduation trip. Based on the visuals, I wrote down my feelings that I found it difficult to translate and reflected further on the footage. The challenge was to differentiate between informational texts and my own subjective thoughts and feelings without making the film purely expositional.

The film is loosely divided into three parts: intro, travelogue and epilogue. Sandwiched between the beginning and ending is a generic travelogue in which we experience the bond between Jae and I growing on a personal and a micro level. The intro and the epilogue offer the chance to communicate my point and to connect the overall theme of the separation on a macro level, from the personal to the historical.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

I began this journey by questioning whether or not I could reveal the humanity of the people who are portrayed to be devoid of the very notion of it; whether or not I could find a way to reveal that they are more than just ideological automatons, but the very assumption of such a thought can be problematic and orientalist. Due to the inherent restrictions of the access, media coverage of North Korea can only reach the surface, the façade; North Korea only exists in our imagination and political rhetoric. But perhaps this is the inevitable historical consequence and tragedy of separation between our two nations: without the direct contact with one another, without meeting with one another, one could only imagine, assume or question the humanity of the other. Hopefully, the brief encounter I had with the students offers a glimpse of a possibility for a friendship and reconciliation between North and South Koreans.

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