PARIS TO PYONGYANG

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ABSTRACT

Paris to Pyongyang is a 32-minute essay film about post-Korean War era recollections presented through dual narratives: a contingent of French artists and intellectuals visiting North Korea in 1958 who wrote about or made artistic and literary works about this cross-cultural encounter, and a Korean War family separation story presented from the perspective of the filmmaker's mother. Through archival and material processes of loss, recovery, and re-creation, the film reframes these events through a contemporary, inquiring lens. The film proposes how contingencies of language, translation and cultural power affect our knowledge and understanding of socio-political histories and personal and familial memory, as reconstructions and material processes. Paris to Pyongyang foregrounds artistic creation and access to the means of representation in its retelling and restoration of narratives of immigration and wartime trauma, in pursuit of new pathways for diasporic aesthetic expressions.

Scholars, researchers and fellow filmmakers who wish to view this thesis film, contact: gradfilm@yorku.ca. Please explain your interest and confirm that it is for personal/private research purposes only, and that you will respect copyright and not screen the film publicly in any manner.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The proverbial "It takes a village" is true in my case. Countless people supported my creative endeavours during MFA studies at York University. Many appear in the film credits. Among them is supervisor Brenda Longfellow; my sincere gratitude for her guidance through several radically different iterations of the thesis film project, notably an intervention that pushed me further as a filmmaker. To reader Ali Kazimi, for his steadfast and collegial support during this project and throughout the years. Both Ali and Brenda warmly shared their knowledge and feedback with generosity and patience.

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Special thanks to John Greyson, a decades-long mentor who rebooted this leap into academia redux. Like Richard Fung, who has been my strongest influence, John has long been a model for socially engaged filmmaking for me and many others; both have been among my strongest supporters, and I cherish their friendship and wisdom in film and life.

My dearest thanks to two confidantes who bookended the film's conception and its completion, and were instrumental throughout its making: Mike Hoolboom, who first planted the seed for the film; and Chris Chong Chan Fui, who re-energized me and pushed me to the finish line (where Mike was again waiting to help sow the harvest with the sharpest of scythes). Both are stellar filmmakers who kept the faith; they inspire me with their professionalism, boundless enthusiasm and marvelous work ethic.

I benefited from numerous creative collaborations, starting with daughter Taein Park, who has worked as a professional actress the past two years in Seoul with Shinsegae/New World Theatre Company (https://www.instagram.com/newworld_s/). As a fledgling first year acting student in university, Taein was game enough to play in the sandbox with her mother, an MFA student herself; I am mama-proud of her artistic development and our collaboration. Huge props to two DPs in two countries and two languages, Lim Kyung Lock and Xavier Faltot, who eagerly went with the flow with their nimble cinematography when we had neither much time nor money (not to mention, no script); each is an artist at heart with a curious spirit and special eye. Other partners in crime, invaluable in post-production and great moral support in equal measure: editor Jharol Mendoza; music/sound wiz Bill Hermans, and DaVinci experimentalist and gyopo comrade-in-arms Samuel Kiehoon Lee; I am indebted to this trio for their creative camaraderie and steadfast loyalty to the project.

Heartfelt thanks to my mother, Jung-Sook Lee, for opening her own heart and trusting me; we came to understand each other more through the making of this film. The film is dedicated to mom and her eldest sister, my late aunt In-Sook Kim, a writer who wrote her own Korean language memoir, *Take Me Back to the Motherland* (어머니의 강산으로 날 보내주오) and longed for Korea's reunification more than anyone I know.

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INTRODUCTION

"Our life is nothing but movement."

Michel de Montaigne Of Experience

Paris to Pyongyang is an essay film that signals our arrivals and departures as opportunities for reflection and also as markers of transitions— in life, modes of thinking, historical change. The film invites us into a kind of immigrant tale, but one as circuitous as most of these journeys are—and, here, circuitously rendered. The losses depicted in the film—of family, country, memory, self—are not dealt with as "traumatic" experiences per se, but as buried histories that emerge from conditions of pre- and post-War Korea. The film is a kind of excavation and meditation of these experiences—interpellated by sometimes abstracted, sometimes referential imagery—often mediated by the filmmaker¹ herself and her speculations and questions, rather than yielding definitive answers.

The film takes a prismatic and multivalent approach to its material and attempts to incorporate various "storylines" into cohesive narrative form, abetted by the narration (spoken by the filmmaker). Three primary narrative strands from the original 1958 trip emerge: the making of the film *Moranbong* (Jean-Claude Bonnardot, 1960), the photographs and text that Chris Marker created for his book, *Coréennes* (1959), and the encounter with a North Korean nurse that Claude Lanzmann describes in detail in his memoir, *Le Lièvre de Patagonie* (2009).² Parallel to

¹ In this paper, I sometimes refer to myself as "filmmaker" to distinguish between my objectified role in the film (at times in the "role" of daughter, others as filmmaker; the emphasis varies) and the intentionalities that I discuss in detail here in the paper, as creator of the film, where I use the pronominal shifter "I". See Allen S. Weiss, *Perverse Desire and the Ambiguous Icon* (in the chapter "Formations of Subjectivity," p. 82-83) where he discusses this, citing linguist Emile Benveniste and use of the pronominal shifter as a marker of subjectivity in speech. Here, the "I" is reserved for when discussing particularities of the film and filmmaking vs. "filmmaker" when describing myself as a "character" in the film.

² Published two years later in English as *The Patagonian Hare: A Memoir* (2011).

this is the story provided by Jung-Sook Lee, the filmmaker's mother, who recounts her upbringing before and after the Korean War, taking us through her mother's clandestine association with the communist Workers' Party of South Korea (남로당 or Namro-dang) in Seoul, to her own desolation, post-Korean War, after her mother and three siblings went to North Korea, and to her immigration to Canada with her new family. Jung-Sook's voiceover is also presented as a deliberate construction, reciting lines from prepared text but also — at a key moment — breaking form and speaking extemporaneously. As the film progresses, this counterpointing narrative starts to provide the main narrative thrust of the film, as the relationship between these intertwining, apparently unrelated strands is revealed.

The filmmaker's voiceover acts as a guide and/or interpreter of the visual content, which is connotative at most and uninflected at least. In the narration, she sets up a conceptual frame for some of the sequences, providing exposition when required or asking rhetorical questions or added speculations, from which the viewers can derive their own. The filmmaker also takes the "role" of the protagonist's daughter, questioning her mother or prompting her voiceover sequences. The filmmaker also interpellates the material presented, as these submerged narratives strands emerge and become interwoven. The voices of "Chris Marker" and "Claude Lanzmann" are also presented as a flux between characterizing these historical figures and providing meta-commentary in the film.

Paris to Pyongyang (PTP) is a personal essay film that presents a series of "losses": of *Moranbong*, the French-North Korean film; the mother of the filmmaker's mother, who left for North Korea along with several offspring (a mother lost; and a family, separated, that grew up without knowing each other); and North Korea itself, a nation that is rendered unknowable and

effectively Othered.³ In a non-fiction film that incorporates both real-life persons and imaginative recounting (through memory or speculation or fictionalized sequences), what kind of film form can effectively account for these life experiences, on film? Can acts of representation and recovery, such as image retrieval or resurrecting archival material, help us understand and restore these experiences through new forms of representation (even when that material is lacking or missing, and must be conjured or made up)? And when these experiences are narrativized and translated onscreen, often funneled through story tropes, can the language of loss be adequately expressed through this cinema language? The thesis film and this paper explore these questions, through the dynamics of discursive, expository and fictional modes of cinema expression, in search of new aesthetic models for diasporic filmmaking.

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³ This othering effect takes place not only in English language Western media but is also widely apparent in Korean language media in South Korea. South Koreans generally view North Koreans as brethren "from another country." However, progressive media outlets like *Hankyoreh* report inter-Korean relations from the perspective of a divided state with a preponderance of articles on reunification efforts (relative to conservative media such as *Chosun Ilbo* and *Joongang Ilbo*, with their pro-American views that are largely anti-engagement).

ORIGINS

Korea was the starting point, or rather the *idea* of Korea. Although I was born there, I immigrated to Canada when I was four years old with my two-year-old sister Sally (my parents had immigrated one year prior), so it is a place that loomed larger in my imagination than in my actual lived reality⁴-- a familiar situation for many immigrants. Ever since I started making films in Canada in the early 1990s, I had wanted to make a film that engaged with these diasporic conceptions of Korea.⁵ At that time, the first cohort of Asian and Korean diasporic filmmakers was mainly concerned with immigration narratives and stories that slanted towards assimilation into mainstream society. In my view, these works tended to centre whiteness and were pitched towards an audience unfamiliar with "being Korean outside of Korea." As a filmmaker, I wanted to focus on "gyopo"-ness and the condition of being a diasporic Korean without the white precondition. Also, as both a creator and viewer, I was more attracted to the gaps and fissures in our narratives, the elisions and interruptions. So, it was inevitable that one day I would turn to my mother's story about her experience of separating from her family during the Korean War. There was much to explore because I knew little about it; the topic was like a black hole in my upbringing. I had heard that my maternal grandfather had died shortly after the Korean War. My mother and her older sister were the only remaining members of their family; nothing was spoken about my grandmother except in hushed references to bbal-gaengi/빨갱이

⁴ Until I moved back to Korea as an adult in my late 30s; essentially, a "reverse immigration."

⁵ I started researching and shooting a film called *You Taste Korean* and later abandoned it.

⁶ This tendency would culminate in Lee Isaac Chung's *Minari* (2020), a well-made, classically-told immigrant narrative within mainstream sensibilities. While not referring explicitly to Chung's film, Cathy Park Hong in her landmark book, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, cautions against the power of the "single story," when only the immigrant narratives palatable to white audiences are told and retold.

 $^{^{7}}$ Gyopo (\square 王) is the term for "overseas Korean," or someone of Korean descent who lives outside of Korea.

(literally, "Red" or Commies). As a child, I assumed these "discontinuities" were attributed to our family's immigration to Canada, and these facts and people belonged to a remote past. Only when I was older did I realize that this was odd or out of the ordinary, that I had never met or known anything about my grandmother. There are not that many people who voluntarily defect to a Communist country, like she did, and in this case, a nation like North Korea whose borders are effectively sealed from the outside world (adding to its geopolitical mystique), making my grandmother a spectre in our lives, not a real person.

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^{*} Since my mother was born into a colonized Korea, there was much tumult and uprooting even before the Korean War: her parents moved to Japan, where she was born, then returned to Korea after Japan's defeat and Korea's liberation at the end of WWII in 1945, when she was 7 years old. Also during this time, her eldest sister In-sook (who appears in photographs at the beginning and end of the thesis film), moved to Manchuria with her husband and first child for economic opportunities. For that generation of my mother and aunt, Japanese was their first language; the Korean language, Hangul (한글; called Chosun-gul (조선글) in North Korea), was forbidden and only Japanese was spoken, even in the home. My mother first learned her mother tongue in primary school in Seoul, where she was told her Korean name was Kim Jung-Sook (김정숙). She changed her surname when applying to immigrate to Canada (my father's name is Myoung-goo Lee (이명구), which is how she became Jung-Sook Lee. In Korea, women do not change their surname upon marriage to their husband's but keep their original (father's) surname.



Image 1: Family photo of filmmaker's maternal grandparents and relatives in mid-1930s Japan (prior to mother Jung-Sook's birth). Jung-Sook's eldest sibling, In-Sook Kim, is pictured top left. Eldest brother Minsook is bottom right. (Sisters who went to North Korea are at front, middle.)

The other origin of the thesis film involves French filmmaker Chris Marker, a legendary figure known as a chief progenitor of the modern essay film, renowned for such works as *La Jetée* (1962) and *Sans Soleil* (1983). "Helen, did you know that Chris Marker visited North Korea in the late 1950s and published a book of photographs about it?" asked my filmmaker friend Mike Hoolboom. This was almost a decade ago. My first question was: did he make a book but not a

⁹ When I located information about the book, entitled *Coréennes* (*The Koreans*), I was both fascinated and perplexed (much of the text is metaphorical and aphoristic; the photographs are exceedingly rare as a foreigner's view of Koreans at that time). Published in 1959, the year after his visit to the newly established Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the original French book is now a collector's item (interviewee Jean-Michel Frodon recalled it being in his parents' home when he was a boy). The English translation of the text was available online on the website chrismarker.org and later I found the

film? As I searched for more information about the book – long out of print – I discovered that Chris Marker's trip to North Korea was larger in scope: he was part of a contingent of 10 men from Paris who also traveled to Beijing at the invitation of Chairman Mao. All male, they were writers and artists of the French intellectual Left, many of whom would go on to exceptional careers. The second question was: what compelled them to make such a journey? One of them, Claude Lanzmann, devoted a full chapter of his memoir, *Le Lièvre de Patagonie (The Patagonian Hare)*, to his experience of the trip, most notably his romantic/pseudo-sexual encounter with a North Korean nurse. A fine starting point as any.

There is another prelude to this project. I had proposed *Paris to Pyongyang* as a feature-length documentary to the National Film Board, Ontario Studio. Prior to this, I had started to work with producer Anita Lee on another documentary project called *The Divine Everyday*, about activist nuns and shamans in South Korea. After I completed the formal "initiate" phase, we had agreed not to further develop that project for lack of a compelling protagonist and clear storyline. After that project fizzled and I lost interest in pursuing it independently, I became intrigued by the story of Chris Marker and Claude Lanzmann visiting North Korea after the Korean War. I worked on a lengthy proposal for a hybrid documentary that combined experimental and essayistic modalities but it was rejected by NFB brass in Montreal as "esoteric" and "niche," overly academic for a general audience. Agreed: perhaps *PTP* was not a theatrical documentary that could support a million-dollar budget with commensurate popular viewership. I couldn't

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Korean version, which featured all the photographs and visuals with the translated Korean text but missing was the Afterword, written in 1997 (which was more explicitly political and critical of the DPRK and Kim regime/dynasty).

¹⁰ Foremost are Chris Marker and also Claude Lanzmann, who would become internationally famous as the creator of the 9-hour Holocaust documentary, *Shoah* (1985), a genre-defining, galvanizing work with lasting social impact. Armand Gatti became a celebrated figure in French theatre circles; Francis Lemarque went on to become the music composer of Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967) and frequent musical collaborator of renowned French composer Michel Legrand.

argue for its mainstream appeal but the story itself took hold in me. And it is worth saying that the final form of this thesis film – a half-hour essay film – represents the original kernel and intent of this idea, in all its digressive storytelling.

I entered the York MFA program in 2018 with the enthusiastic support of John Greyson, a faculty member and long-time mentor-colleague who I had first met in the mid-1980s when I was working at the non-theatrical distributor of social/political documentaries, DEC Films (first as a summer intern, then as a full-time collective member). I worked on the release campaign for his first feature, *Urinal*, and it was my first engagement with a progressive political community. Much later, at a casual dinner at the home of Richard Fung, I told them about my failed NFB project, *Paris to Pyongyang*, and John responded that this would make a perfect thesis film. After years of adjunct teaching at Yonsei University and Korea National University of Arts in Seoul, where I taught film aesthetics and directing to MFA students, I returned to school and became an MFA student myself.

¹¹ Other DEC Films collective members included Richad Fung, Ferne Cristall, and the late Peter Steven. I consider them my first and lifelong mentors, and working at DEC profoundly influenced me; it was where much of my politics were formed. (Other interns at the time were Cameron Bailey, Elle Flanders and Ian Iqbal Rashid, and we all remain in touch.) After my DEC Films internship, I was hired full-time and worked there for two years before moving to New York in 1989 for MA studies at NYU's Cinema Studies program.

CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

Prior to starting the York program, some of the preliminary research I conducted provided some direction to the approach I would take with the project. I interviewed Antoine Coppola, Seoul-based Sungkyungkwan University film professor and author of the monograph, "Ciné-Voyage en Corée du Nord: L'Expérience du Film Moranbong" (2012) in 2015. Antoine and another Seoul-based film professional, Jérémy Segay (Office Director of UniFrance in Asia), were both well-acquainted with the 1958 expedition. When I was living in Seoul, Antoine was my initial point of contact, and his monograph provided a brief overview of the voyage and the making of *Moranbong*. Segay had attended the revival screening of *Moranbong* at the 2010 Pyongyang International Film Festival, and tangentially appears in the footage that was later provided to me by Jean-Jacques Hocquard (the officially invited representative of the film), when I met Jean-Jacques in Paris, summer of 2019. Afterwards, when I embarked on expanding the scope of the film, I realized that the French men's voyage was not really the story I wanted to tell. If I were to center their narratives in my film, this would amount to reinscribing the power dynamics that I had intended to critique. Perspectives from players such as Antoine and other French experts, while valuable, would not be the focus of my film.

Starting at York, I thought of ways to scale my initial feature idea – which had involved fictional elements and a sci-fi theme in an episodic structure – into a cogent short film. As a working filmmaker in the 1990s and early 2000s, I was accustomed to preparing and developing potential film projects for grant applications, funding agencies, and other adjudication venues. But the previous dozen years or so before I entered the York program, I had not been especially active as a filmmaker, spending my time adjunct teaching rather than making films (immersed in family

life in Seoul, raising two young children as I entered my 40s, became my priority). In undertaking this thesis film project within the parameters of an academic program, what was unusual for me was exposing fragmentary, undigested ideas about a film at such a germinal stage, when things were most uncertainly *not* developed. Moreover, I was sharing this with fellow classmates who were virtual strangers, not the usual trusted confidantes and filmmaker friends. I recall feeling vulnerable during John Greyson's Production class, when we were asked to, not just talk about our thesis projects, but *sing* about them. But it was a fun assignment. ¹² The karaoke format took the heat off producing something too serious or staid, and we could play; it was a sly and strategic assignment– kudos to John. The main comment I remember from that session was about tone – because my presentation took a wry, tongue-in-cheek approach – and I was surprised that its satirical intent was missed. Yes, one could say that the film would not be a comedy.

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Paris to Pyongyang Pitch Proposal (the Karaoke Version*):

¹² It was also, incidentally, the first time I ever made a PowerPoint-style presentation (using Google Slides), so this is how far away I was from pitching-style communication.

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1AbEAeNuzyam1kVUDID2RSItA3010MXnk4AVD-rhP9ZA/edit?usp=sharing

^{*}Set to the tune of Françoise Hardy's "Tous les garçons et les filles": https://youtu.be/Ju_5La_0n7M?si=bFgvaT5B7x5yfTWM



Her needle to his butt, that fated day. Her napalm scars and NK letters scorched his soul.

Image 2: Slide from class presentation of *Paris to Pyongyang*, the karaoke version (October 2018), best sung to "Tous les garçons et les filles" by Françoise Hardy.

During our next outing at the Grad Symposium Presentation, I recall one of my peers, Anthony Moss from the Cinema Studies strand of our cohort, asking about the balance of expository vs. discursive content—an excellent question. From the start, there would always be an issue of how much background and explanation was needed in what was appearing to be already a multi-stranded story, never mind the historical and political backdrop. My métier is not documentary, yet this was very much fact-based and not fiction; these were real people who lived out these events. My mother's story had not yet been formally adopted into the thesis plan, but the symposium presentation also brought out this salient aspect: what were my (personal) stakes in this material? Why did this topic engross me so? It became inevitable that, somehow, my own relationship to North Korea, through our family separation story, would become part of the film.

Another critical question that emerged from the symposium was the matter of copyright. It was a very pertinent concern since the project deals with both real people (now deceased¹³) and existing works of art and literature (films and books) that would customarily require clearance for distribution. Chris Marker's photographic work is still handled through a commercial art dealer, Peter Blum Gallery, in New York, and his films are managed through an estate. However, as a student making a student film without a proper budget, I knew the project would be stymied by limitations of what could or could not be licensed under contract. Unlike a film that was intended for broadcast or active non-theatrical distribution, PTP was intended as an artistic project, foremost, and not foreseeably a profitable one. Realistically, the film will play some festivals and perhaps some one-off screenings in the coming years, at best. Ultimately, the film's use of copyrighted works would likely fall under the fair dealing laws (similar to "fair use" in the United States), as it is a work created in the realm of criticism, research and scholarship. Another provision added to the Canadian Copyright Act is a "mash-up" exception that allows creators to use copyrighted material to create a new work and post them on sharing sites such as YouTube.¹⁴ However, this issue of "transformativeness" is contentious and, ironically, has historically disadvantaged marginalized authors such as independent filmmakers and avant-garde artists in the US context.¹⁵ Regardless, I believe both the fair dealing provision and mash-up exception would accommodate a film such as *Paris to Pyongyang*.

Finally, to conclude this Concept Development section, I would mention that between the initiation of this film at York and now, I was engaged in an adjunct teaching position at Queen's University over five semesters (2 to 3 courses per semester) that took up the better part of the

¹³ Key participants included: Chris Marker (1921-2012), Claude Lanzmann (1925-2018), Armand Gatti (1924-2017), Jean-Claude Bonnardot (1923-1981), Francis Lemarque (1917-2002).

¹⁴ Refer to: https://www.copyrightlaws.com/8-facts-about-canadian-copyright-law/

¹⁵ As opposed to "blue chip" artists such as Richard Prince and Jeff Koons. See Brian Frye's article "Copyright in a Nutshell for Found Footage Filmmakers," p 41.

past two and half years. While the reasons for my work on the thesis film being extended were due to teaching, Covid restrictions, and creative roadblocks in equal measure, the irony is not lost on me that I was hired to teach a course named Concept Development during this time. Truth is, it was a struggle to develop the core concept of *PTP*. I was still trying to find the right balance between the "Paris" part and its "Pyongyang" correlative: how could the film bridge the imaginative gap between these two worlds and build the spatial and conceptual parameters of a narrative that was complex and multi-stranded. Moreover, how could I keep that complexity intact yet maintain a coherent story to be conveyed to the viewer? Keeping all the balls in the air felt like a juggling act I hadn't yet mastered. Telling one story alone was difficult enough, but interweaving several together at once? And toward what end(ing)? Besides the content of the film, what of its form? What shape and rhythm would it take? As the project underwent this phase of concept development, these were persistent questions.

THE ESSAY FILM

Paris to Pyongyang is a long-gestating project which incorporates some footage that was originally shot more than 25 years ago for a previous project entitled You Taste Korean. These works, different from my narrative film practice, are hybrid in form and nature, and experimental in approach; like my first film, Sally's Beauty Spot, they are essay films. The discursive character of this form of filmmaking facilitated a blending of concept development and production phases that intermingled throughout the making of the film from start to finish, like a constant overlapping process (more of which will be elaborated later). Likewise, in its combination of non-fiction and semi-fictional elements, the film demonstrates such "boundary crossings," across genres that signify the hallmarks of a typical essay film. As described by Timothy Corrigan, one of the pre-eminent theorists of the essay film, there is a "defining overlapping" that is intrinsic to essayistic forms of filmmaking. It is, foremost, a "genre of experience," he states. Corrigan turns to Réda Bensmaïa, a cinema and comparative literature Francophone scholar publishing in both languages, who wrote that the essay film is "fundamentally antigeneric, undoing its own drive towards categorization." As such, it is interesting to note that in very few film festival application forms is there a checkbox for "essay film," despite the increasing ubiquity of the form. While the essay film and essayistic expressions aspire to go beyond categories of genre or style, never has the essay form so proliferated as now, in venues as wide-ranging as the museum and gallery, to the internet on social media, podcasts, and streaming sites. 17

¹⁶ Corrigan 8.

¹⁷ Whether this is due to individualistic and "experience-centric" paradigms of contemporary life; or attributed to the increased discursivity and intertexualities of public discourse, whether in the form of an increased libertarianism or a kind of nihilism, one can only speculate.

In his book, The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker, Corrigan historicizes the development of the essay film through such early practitioners and theorists as Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and Hans Richter; and later, by writers such as Alexandre Astruc and André Bazin. The works of French Wave Left Bank filmmakers Alain Resnais, Agnes Varda and, of course, the eponymous Chris Marker, also figure prominently in his discussion. Corrigan examines the historical emergence of the essay film from documentary traditions and avant-garde film practices, alongside its French literary heritage in cinema. This Gallic tradition of the essay film cannot be overlooked, alongside its alignment with auteurist modes of filmmaking (as first famously defined by Astruc as "caméra-stylo" or "camera pen," with filmmaker as author), not to mention its avant-garde origins. 18 The key literary antecedent that Corrigan cites in all his numerous writings on the essay film is philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), a prominent figure of the French Renaissance. Montaigne's sole work, a massive volume entitled Essais, is literally translated as "Attempts." Montaigne's writings are eclectic, merging intellectual speculation with light anecdotes and autobiographical detail, both poetic and prosaic, in turn—a Proust in essay form. The title itself, Corrigan points out, emphasizes the essay form itself as "provisional and explorative nature as 'attempts,' 'tries' or 'tests.'" Apropos, during the making of the thesis film, I also underwent these oscillations, numerous tries and attempts, as the ideas were forming, and stories sketched out.

¹⁸ See Alexandre Astruc's essay, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo."

¹⁹ Corrigan 13.

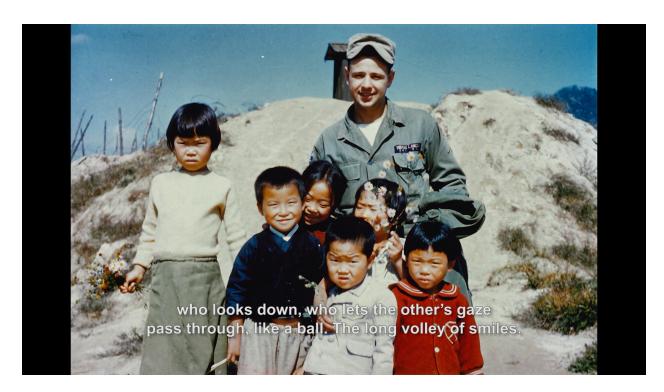


Image 3: Still from second version of thesis film (32:45), by first editor Alena Korleva, completed November 2020.²⁰ Pictured is Thomas Nuzzo, whose colour photographs shot during the Korean War appear in the final version of the thesis film (8:15).²¹ This image itself does not appear in the final thesis film.

Officially, I worked with three different editors over the course of three years, through at least four vastly different cuts of the film.²² It is useful to think of – provisionally, as a method of working – the film essay form and essayistic expression as "that materialized place for a provisional self and its thoughts, free of method and authority" (Corrigan 17). Almost literalizing this formulation, we underwent a process of shooting, editing, another shoot, another edit, digging through personal archives, rescanning old film footage, etc. etc. Every successive cut felt

²⁰ This was an hour-long version (60:42). Alena's first version was a half-hour version (31:58) completed July 12, 2020.

²¹ This particular photo does not appear in *PTP*. His photographs were taken in 1953 during the last year of the Korean War when he was stationed in Chuncheon, approximately 50 km from what is now the border or Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). In the early 90s, I met Thomas in a Korean language class in NYC, where he gave me his original colour slides because he knew I wanted to make a film about Korea and he wished for his photographs to be seen. More on Thomas: https://koreanwarlegacv.org/interviews/thomas-nuzzo/

²² And this is not even getting into the micro or syntagmatic level of working within the cut, from the shot to scene to sequence.

like a rematerialization of the ideas and images at that particular point in time. While they all had the same DNA, the next version seemed to be its own recombinant organism with a new cellular structure— each time a different body but from within the same family. I wish the working methods felt as "free of method and authority," but the content vs. form dyad was always a conundrum, to find both the right ideas/stories and its conceptual frame amidst a shape-shifting process and narrative structure. Up until we locked picture in December 2023,²³ it was like trying to put together a puzzle with scattered or missing pieces, and then the puzzle itself being upended or broken apart again.²⁴

It is worth noting that Montaigne describes the essay form as one that is "not corrupted by art or theorizing" (826), a proscription to which Alexandre Astruc may have ascribed but certainly not someone like Roland Barthes, for whom the essay form was the apotheosis of both art and theory. Corrigan tempers any attempt to describe the essay film as freewheeling by posing a critical paradigm proposed by writer Aldous Huxley (whose essays were published in the 1920s, preceding both Astruc and Barthes). Huxley writes:

The essay is a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything... Essays belong to a literary species whose *extreme variability* can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference. There is the pole of the *personal and the autobiographical*; there is the pole of the *objective, the factual, the concrete particular*; and there is the pole of the *abstract-universal*. Most essayists are at home and at their

²³ Although the third editor Jharol Mendoza and I formally locked picture on November 28 and I moved onto sound work with Bill Hermans, more picture changes (replacing shots, reversing order, etc.) and rewriting of voiceover (thus, more voiceover re-recording) took place as late as December 23 during the second pass of the online edit with Sam Lee. A critical last minute change was to add upfront the photograph of my aunt In-sook Kim on the bicycle, so as to introduce her as the sole sibling of my mother's to stay South, whereby the ending, when In-sook's trip to North Korea is presented, makes more sense and has with greater impact. My aunt was also a key figure in the backstory to my interest in North Korea: her Korean language memoir, 어머니의 강산으로 날 보내주오 (*Take Me Back to the Motherland*), recounts her upbringing in Japan (where, as mentioned, my mother was also born in 1938), and tells the separation story of their family from her own personal diasporic perspective. The literal translation of the book's title is: *Send Me To My Mother's Mountains and Rivers*.

²⁴ In all likelihood, we will still be fiddling with the picture and sound mix into the early months of 2024. The version presented for my thesis defence is the penultimate one, the next to final version.

best in the neighbourhood of only one of the essay's three poles, or at the most only in the neighbourhood of two of them. There are the predominantly personal essayists, who write fragments of reflective autobiography and who look at the world through the keyhole of anecdote and description. There are the predominantly objective essayists who do not speak directly of themselves, but turn their attention outward to some literary or scientific or political theme... The most richly satisfying essays are those which make the best not of one, not of two, but of all the three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist. (330) (italics mine)

The "poles" that Huxley defines was a starting point for Corrigan to devise his own categories for the essay film, which he further articulates into the following: portrait essays that describe representations of the self and self-expression; travel essays that map encounters with different spatial geographies; diary essays depicting different temporalities and velocities of modern life; editorial essays that reshape the news of world events; refractive essay films that critically engage art objects, films, and other aesthetic experiences. Among these categories, *PTP* dips and bobs among several of these categories but finally lands on the last one: it is a refractive essay film that seeks a critical engagement with said "art objects," as well as attempting to provide a *critical* experience for the viewer.

THE ESSAY FILM AND CHRIS MARKER

"I keep asking: How do people manage to live in such a world? And that's where my mania comes from, to see 'how things are going' in this place or that."

- Chris Marker 25

One of guiding lights of this mode of "refractive" filmmaking is Chris Marker, who is often regarded as its ultimate practitioner. Corrigan writes, "If Marker's Sunless (1982) represents one of the widely acknowledged triumphs of the practice, it represents the triumph of an amalgamation and orchestration of modular layers, as a travelogue, a diary, a news report, and a critical evaluation of film representation."²⁶ In Marker's usual peripatetic style, the film encompasses overlapping discursivities across a large geographical swath: from the epistolary opening of Iceland to Barthesian flâneur-like Japan to the brutal colonial history of Guinea-Bissau. The film's catholic, collage-like approach also detours to Paris and San Francisco, with cinematic references ranging from Tarkovsky's *Stalker* to the Hitchcock classic Vertigo to Marker's own equally classic La Jetée. Some of the film's narration consists of letters from a fictional filmmaker named Sandor Krasna, these missives forming a loose – very loose – backbone for the film's structure. The film does, indeed, take a page from the Montaignesque page book, drifting from casual observations and anecdotal asides to philosophical musings and semi-autobiographical notes. But the narrator is neither centered, a priori, as in the conventional "voice of God" documentary, nor does it centre a main protagonist as the chief organizing

²⁵ From a rare interview with Annick Rivoire and Samuel Douhaire published in *Libération*, March 5, 2003.: http://documentaryisneverneutral.com/words/markerinterview.html. Throughout his (long and productive) life, Marker almost never gave interviews, preferring that his work speak for itself.

²⁶ From Corrigan's Introduction, p. 8.

intelligence of the film's narration. Rather, in its refractive approach, there is a "dispersal of subjectivity" that uses the cinematic form to interrogate itself – or other aesthetic forms – in a way that, as Rick Warner points out in his review of Corrigan's book, "amounts to criticism proper and not mere commentary."²⁷ This approach, for the form itself to have meaning, was something I was interested in from the beginning for the thesis film.

In this kind of "refractive" approach, *PTP* is not *about* Chris Marker, per se, or even about his films and filmmaking. He is presented in the film as a figure who has been "constructed" in our discourses (about filmmaking and the French cultural Left), in this narrative take and perspective about that historical moment. As voiced by an actor, "Chris Marker" (also presented in quotation marks in the film), is disembodied and presented in a semi-fictional, even spectral form. His work itself is not particularly centered or given prominence, as may be expected. These elisions themselves, I hoped, would speak to the fragmentary and speculative nature of the cinematic enquiry of the film. This was the larger goal of making *PTP*, that it would not be simply representing something but also function as a kind of interrogation or meditation about how the subject is approached, its framing and context. This was the ambition of *PTP*, to mount a critique of what we are watching, simultaneous to its presentation of the material.

One tendency of the modern documentary form or semi-fictional filmmaking is the trope of self-reflexivity." I had first encountered this approach to documentary material through my study of ethnographic films with Faye Ginsburg at New York University's anthropology department. This methodology and cinematic techniques that overtly referred to or underlined the mechanics of representation were intended to provide a "frame" for anthropological discoveries or the filmmaker/anthropologist's research. There was intended to be a knowingness between the

²⁷ In *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 53, no. 3, p. 92.

subjects and the filmmaker, an acknowledgement that they were being filmed; and that that awareness would act as a buffer about the hard power dynamics that were at play. The argument was that self-referentiality would somehow exonerate the filmmaker ("See, we all know what we are doing, and we are all in agreement; we are all in this together."). I saw that this form of self-referentiality could also reinscribe the power inequities involved, and while I wanted there to be a similar kind of self-awareness to the thesis film, it should not be a false or superficial one. And that any kind of critique on my part would not be this, either; neither reflexive nor making easy revisionist assumptions about the material or the players.



Image 4: Still from *The Koumiko Mystery* (1965). The shot starts with a close-up of the unframed b&w photo in the middle, a photo still from *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961)²⁸, before zooming to this full frame (29:56).

²⁸ The second feature film of Alain Resnais, Marker's close colleague and once-collaborator. (Notably, Resnais' debut feature, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), also featured a Japanese main character as the male lead.) Marker collaborated with Resnais on his second film, *Statues Always Die* (*Les Statues Meurent Aussi*) (1953); cinematographer Ghislain Cloquet also received co-director credit on the short film.

While the outstanding reputation of Chris Marker has made him a redoubtable figure in the history of cinema – a legend beyond criticism, in a sense – I wanted to take his words and images not only at face value, ²⁹ but to try to contextualize them; and to not only critique them but also "import" them into my own narrative as an act of reclamation. Some of Chris Marker's work, such as *The Koumiko Mystery* (1965) and his book of photographs, *Passengers* (2011) are more than dubious from a contemporary feminist perspective. A film where Chris Marker follows a beautiful young Japanese woman who speaks French with Marker (as an unseen narrator), answering his questions as they traverse Tokyo during and after the 1964 Olympic Games; she is clearly objectified in the frame and narration (despite her own "talking back"). A book that features everyday women on the Paris subway, photographed unawares and without permission through Chris Marker's "spy" camera installed on his eyeglasses; they look off-frame or at him (the camera) or are caught sometimes sleeping. Likewise, while his book *Coréennes* is a fascinating, in-depth book of photos and text that is sui generis (and without its existence we would certainly be deprived), anyone who views the book could not deny that it is a document from a particular time and place, from a particular person with a special eye for beauty, 30 in a position of privilege. But one can also sense acknowledgement of Marker's own subjectivity, and his desire for not only the Other but for the dialogic. His enquiring and digressive approach in constructing his storytelling – presented neither as seamless nor linear – clues us into his "bricoleur" aesthetic.

What is the idea of "face value" except a "timelessness" that is afforded to only the privileged few.
 Nobody but nobody criticizes Chris Marker, the essay filmmaker nonpareil, but we can critique him.
 In this case, beauty is not just a euphemism for women, but also a beautiful moment depicting a child or animal, a particular object or landscape view.

As a "bricoleur" or someone who collects and works with pre-existing material, ³¹ Marker plays with form to construct films and books with intentional "gaps" of meaning. One result is that our subjectivities – and those of the film's protagonists or narrators – are suspended or seen as provisional; there is no single all-knowing figure. Subjectivity itself is provisional or contextual, at best. Likewise, this was a tricky balancing act in my film, where "Chris Marker" is presented as a historical figure, using his words, voiced by an actor, thereby assigning him and his story a particular place in the thesis film narrative, while at the same time critiquing his statements about the "Asiatic" (and its alignment with cats) or his artistic focus on women. These gaps or fissures of meaning are meant to be "productive" for the viewer, generative of new meaning or a revisionist reading from our vantage point. We are meant to engage with and reply to the dialogic address of Marker's camera. Similarly, *PTP* attempts to reap and sow from existing discourses – of the French cultural Left, Korean War legacies, tropes of immigration, the border, diaspora – with the intention of not just bearing fruit but to plant more seeds and make us dig even deeper.

³¹ It is worth noting that almost without exception, almost the entirety of Chris Marker's oeuvre was shot non-sync or MOS. He has described himself as the ultimate no-budget/low-budget filmmaker who shoots without sound and makes films on the most limited means; without a crew or production sound person.

ARCHIVE AS BRICOLAGE

"Film acts out an interaction with a world, which thus becomes a mirror for us to recognize our interaction with our world."

Daniel FramptonFilmosophy

At this juncture, I will discuss the various sources and source material for the thesis film, and how the different pieces ultimately came together during a rather convoluted work process. Rather than recount how the footage came into existence chronologically, I account for them in the order that they emerged and were incorporated during the filmmaking process. The reason is that not only are there older archival materials from public archives dating from 50 to 100 years ago, but there is original footage that I shot several decades earlier that was used in the thesis film, as well.

The first scenes shot for the film were the sequences in Paris with my then-20-year-old daughter, Taein Park, in June 2019. From the start, my idea was to situate a metaphorical figure "haunting" iconic Paris sites such as the Louvre and Eiffel Tower; we staged short vignettes and shot them MOS. When I arrived in the city, I scouted for other possible locations and discovered such places as a Medieval-era alleyway near the Marais, one of the famous Passages but an "abandoned" one, and other well-known locations such as the Montparnasse Cemetery (which didn't make it into the final cut) and Pont Notre-Dame (which did). At that time, the film was just forming in my head, still at the conceptual stage. What we did in Paris – the cinematographer Xavier Faltot (a collaborator recommended by my Paris-based friend, video artist Shu Lea Cheang) and my daughter Taein Park, was very free-form and experimental.

Accordingly, Xavier used a 4K Sony camera that shot high-resolution images which were easily croppable later, and also a beautifully portable DJI Osmo Pocket camera for our on-the-run, off-the-cuff shoots on Paris city streets. I had asked my daughter to bring from Korea: a trench coat with matching beige high-heel shoes, a clear plastic umbrella, boxing gloves and headgear, a hanbok (traditional Korean dress), and black leotard leggings with a black top.



Image 5: Production still of cinematographer Xavier Faltot and actress Taein Park at the Louvre (June 24, 2019).



Image 6 (L): Production still of actress Taein Park with director Helen Lee at Rue du Prévôt in Le Marais (June 25, 2019). Image 7 (R:) Production still of Taein Park with Sony camera at Passage Verdeau, Conduisant Aux Grands Boulevards (June 24, 2019).

Also in Paris, I filmed numerous interviews with scholars, curators, critics, and filmmakers in Paris who were acquainted with or knowledgeable about the work of Chris Marker, Claude Lanzmann, and also Armand Gatti and Jean-Claude Bonnardot (the writer and director, respectively, of *Moranbong*) or about the French cultural elite of that time. These interviewees included: Annick Rivoire (curator and collaborator of Chris Marker); Jean-Michel Frodon (former editor-in-chief of *Cahiers du Cinema*, personally well-acquainted with both Chris Marker and Claude Lanzmann, as well as extremely knowledgeable about their films and that cultural milieu); film producer François Margolin (producer of Lanzmann's penultimate film, *Napalm*, who traveled to North Korea with him for that shoot, among several trips there); and Mary Stephen (Chinese Canadian film editor and filmmaker, a longtime resident of Paris who

worked as Eric Rohmer's film editor, one of the only Asian women in the French film industry at the time). Most importantly, I met and twice interviewed Jean-Jacques Hocquard (with his wife Joelle, acting as translator), who was the producer of the late Armand Gatti (*Moranbong* screenwriter) and rights holder of the film. Jean-Jacques welcomed me into his home and shared much (print and video) documentation of the initial 1958 Pyongyang trip as well as his own trip to the Pyongyang International Film Festival in 2010, when *Moranbong* was invited to screen there for the first time to a North Korean audience. Footage from these interviews were in the initial two cuts of the film that were edited by Alena Korleva.

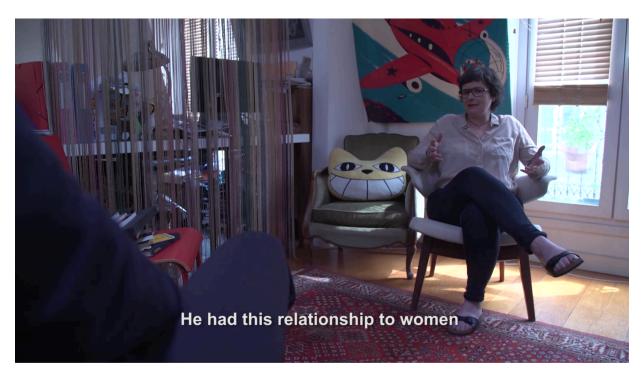


Image 8: Still from first editor Alena Korleva's second cut (Nov 28, 2020), where Annick Rivoire, curator of Chris Marker's work and a former artistic collaborator,³² is interviewed in her apartment beside a plushie of Marker's cat mascot, Guillaume-en-Égypte.³³ Neither this shot (25:42) nor the interview appears in the final film.³⁴

³² Rivoire is founder of "hacktivist" media collective Poptronics and co-curated "Planète Marker," a retrospective of Marker's digital media work held at Centre Pompidou (Nov/Dec 2013) the year following his death on July 29, 2012.

³³ Named after his own beloved cat. Marker had a famous love of animals, especially cats.

³⁴ None of the interviews shot in Paris and Seoul (as "talking head" interviews) were used in the finished work, for reasons explained at the end of this section.

I suspended work on the film when I returned to York that fall and became a tutorial assistant for the Screenwriting course taught to 2nd year students. The film continued to gestate in my mind when Mike Hoolboom suggested Alena Korleva as a possible editor for the film.³⁵ I wrote a script from which she worked remotely; we were never once in a room together working on or discussing the edit, which was difficult.³⁶ At this point, I introduced other footage (that I had shot decades before for another, never made film) about Korea that we had shot in Toronto. These are the underwater sequences, the US soldier/girl with chocolate scene, and the same actress, M.J. Kang, being dressed in a wedding hanbok. The footage was 16mm and Alena shot it off a wall, in order to slug in scenes that we may use. (Later, I found it necessary to have this footage professionally transferred at high quality.) Both cuts that Alena finished in July and November 2020 incorporated footage from North Korean documentaries found online or on Vimeo or YouTube. There were also slugs for family photos—many slugs. It became clear that I needed to incorporate more original footage into the film.

Moreover, I needed more voices. In addition to the visuals, I realized this was becoming a very layered film, and that more voices were required to help animate and enrich the story, further enhancing the film's polyvocality. Also, the inevitability that my mother's story would provide a counterpoint to the French men's narrative began to emerge; it became clear that my mother's story would need to be incorporated into the film somehow. These were where my stakes lay in

³⁵ Mike is a long-time creative confidante, especially regarding this film. He and Alena were newly married, and although she had not worked professionally as a film editor before, she was well-experienced with editing her own works and also making trailers for film festivals in Russia. Her work on the film commenced with the onset of the Covid pandemic and what she was able to accomplish working in a solitary fashion was heroic.

³⁶ I found this situation trying and unproductive because I couldn't collaborate with Alena in the way that I usually do with an editor – sitting side-by-side in front of the screen as the edit progresses – so it did not produce the usual fruits of creative collaboration. The process was not dialogic but rather went from my script to Alena's interpellation through the footage, without much back and forth.

the film, that this was the root of why I was interested in North Korea in the first place; I was interested in my own family's particular place within the wider cultural geopolitics of the situation, not the French men's journey in and of itself. I reached back into audio recordings of conversations I had with my mother in 2016 when she was translating for me her younger brother Min-woo's letters from North Korea to her older sister In-Sook, who was now deceased.³⁷ At the same time, I was interviewing her about the content of the letters in the context of our own family history. Then, specifics emerged about my mother's personal desolation at her abandonment and a suicide attempt as a university student (which she had never before disclosed to anyone), around the same time as when the French men's voyage took place: 1958. This became the connection between the two stories, a speculative relationship between my mother's story and theirs. While we were recording my mother's voiceover, I took out my iPhone camera and shot the session, thank God; or rather, thank John Greyson.³⁸

In addition to recording my mother with a newly written voiceover, other voices were needed to represent Claude Lanzmann and Chris Marker. I was introduced to two native French speakers, Bruno Moynié and Cédrick Daubenton (through my filmmaker/activist friend Kathy Wazana, who lives a Francophone life in Toronto), both with acting experience who could voice these characters, and I hired them for the recordings. Using selected text from their writings for their voiceover, we also recorded them in Toronto during the fall of 2020. The substance of their voiceovers would provide some of the necessary exposition. The actors both spoke Parisian French, which would be truthful to the linguistic/cultural differences (and gaps) that the film

³⁷ In addition to my mother, I'm also thankful to my cousin's daughter, Heidi Kim, for translating the memoir by my aunt In-Sook (her grandmother), *Take Me Back to the Motherland* (어머니의 강산으로 날 보내주오), for me. The book tells the family story vividly, including sections more dramatic than I was able to tell in the thesis film.

³⁸ Quite presciently, John Greyson strongly urged me to video my mother as she performed the recording. I had no intention to conduct a "talking head" interview with her or even shoot an interview, but if it weren't for this advice, there would be no sync scenes in the film.

would be presenting. Not being fluent in French myself,³⁹ this was one challenging aspect of the film, negotiating the languages themselves while trying to convey the fissures and dislocations of all these intercultural, interlingual exchanges. Much of the audio material and voiceovers (including my own) were recorded at this time, but as I was gathering the pieces, it wasn't yet clear how they'd all fit together.

In January 2021, I started a teaching contract at Queen's University. Little work got done on the thesis film during the five semesters that I taught there. But I was in Korea teaching remotely for a length of time during the pandemic and during that summer off, I planned for shoots in Seoul and Songdo (the suburb in Incheon where I live, approximately one hour from the capital). For those scenes, I worked with a skeleton crew who I had first met during the production of a previous dramatic short in 2008. Again, my daughter Taein would appear in some scenes; two actors were also hired to play Claude Lanzmann and Nurse Kim. We used footage from every location we shot in (the plaza where Lanzmann and the North Korean nurse meet and later dance together, scenes of them dating, and later intimate scenes shot in my apartment; Taein wandering in a black hanbok (typically worn by mourners during a funeral), climbing up rocks, and lying down in the field (drone shot), and also Seoul Station; and "modern-day" sequences of her standing in front of LED pixel light boards. These scenes would be related to or infer a relationship to the scenes of Taein we shot in Paris, so I was mindful that these scenes may be interwoven in some way. But in what specific way, I was yet unsure. Like in Paris, we worked in an intuitive, improvisatory fashion, although from a shot list. Location, actors, camera and (small but efficient) crew functioned in a multivalent way with everyone providing input along the way.

³⁹ My Korean is also only semi-fluent; enough for basic and even lengthy conversation, but not at a level suitable for intellectual discourse or discussing abstract concepts. (Most of my professional work in Korea, including film teaching, is mainly in English.)

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Image 9 (Top): Call Sheet/Shot List (June 24, 2021). Image 10 (Middle L): Production still from Korea shoot in Songdo, Incheon (June 26, 2021) with actors Sira Chae (Nurse Kim) and Daniel

C. Kennedy (Claude Lanzmann) and crew members DP Lim Kyung Lock and assistant director Byun Sung Jun with director Helen Lee. Image 11 (Middle R): Director Lee spots DP Lim walking backwards to shoot actor Taein Park. Image 12 (Bottom): Cast and crew, including production assistant Park Taesung. Stills by production manager Lee Hyunju.

Also, in Korea during this time, we filmed two more interviews with "experts": the well-known artist/videomaker Park Chan-Kyong and film scholar Cho Myung-Jin. Park was the curator of MediaCity Seoul Art Biennale in 2014, where *Moranbong* was screened for a South Korean audience. Cho is a Korean film curator and former Paris resident who completed her PhD in France on the topic of the relationship between Korean and French cinemas. Even as I conducted these interviews, I knew that the interview footage itself would not be included in the film and this marked the conclusion of my original research via interviews. The form that my film would take, as an essay film, could not accommodate these talking head interviews in the conventional manner. Rather, what ends up in the film (a couple sentences spoken by Jean-Michel Frodon and Mary Stephen in voiceover, as they flip through the *Coréennes* book; neither face appears, and their voices are identified by titles) was the most that could be included. This had something to do with the "transparency" of such interviews, or the implicit "truth" that interviewees present, whether as opinion or fact. Foregrounding the context in which such things are presented would be as crucial to PTP as the substance itself. Conceptual framing that underscores the context of what we are seeing was always a core concern of the film.

ARCHIVE AS "POOR IMAGE"

"It is impossible to question a given reality without questioning the particular genre you select or inherit to depict that reality."

Julio García Espinosa"For an Imperfect Cinema"

When I returned to Toronto in fall 2021, I shelved the film for another year. This was not intentional but, again, I was consumed by my teaching duties and other personal obligations. Also, I could not face what I felt was a monumental task of pulling together the different elements of the film into a cohesive whole; I wasn't yet ready to tackle this. Also, I was aware that the archival elements of the project needed attending to, technically, and I arranged for digital transfers (from film or video) to improve the image quality. Even when Alena was working with the footage, she was frustrated by the low-grade images; we were still working with slug images from sources shot off the wall or downloaded from the Internet.

Several sets of archival imagery that I had collected needed varying degrees of attention. These included: 1. archival footage from the 1930s that I sourced from the Library and Archives

Canada (then called the National Archives of Canada) when I was conducting research in Ottawa decades ago, on how foreigners represented Korea and Asia in their own travelogues (these scenes appear immediately after the underwater opening sequence); 2. 16mm prints of scenes we shot around the mid-1990s for another film, mostly starring actress M.J. Kang; 3. 35mm colour slide photography shot in 1953 by Thomas Nuzzo, a Korean War veteran (the actor playing the US soldier wears Thomas' uniform, which he had loaned to me for the shoot); 4. decades-old family photographs in old photo albums, ranging from 1930s Japan to 1950-60s South Korea to 1970s Toronto to 1989 North Korea to contemporary 2006-2022 Seoul/Toronto shots; 5.

camcorder footage shot by Jean-Jacques Hocquard on his trip to Pyongyang in 2010; 6. digital file reproductions of 1958 tourist photos shot by the French men during their trip; 7. reproductions of photos published in Chris Marker's book, *Coréennes*; 8. video transfer of the film *Moranbong*, given to me by rights holder Jean-Jacques Hocquard on a digital file (which was of similar low image/sound quality as the one that could be found on YouTube)⁴⁰; 9. interstitial images and video clips found on the Internet (including clips of Marker's work, photos of Marker and Lanzmann from the 1950s, historical and contemporary footage of North Korea, its leaders, etc.), of varying image quality; 10. super 8 footage that I shot in California in my early 20s before I ever made a film. I knew that with so many visual registers and drawing from so many sources – in addition to our original footage shot in Paris and Seoul/Songdo – would add to the "fragmented" quality of the film. But this seems an inevitability, that its collage or bricoleur aesthetic is baked into the concept of the film.⁴¹

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⁴⁰ As mentioned in the thesis film, *Moranbong* was "lost in the archives," meaning that although a 35mm print of the film existed, it needed professional restoration after decades of storage. The story of the film's discovery is a tale unto itself: curators of a theatre festival in Bobigny, France, were preparing a 2007 retrospective of Armand Gatti – who had since become a significant theatre artist in France – and found a screenplay to *Moranbong*, which led to a search for the film itself. Gatti, who had himself forgotten about the film, and descendants of director Jean-Claude Bonnardot, the film's legal owners of the film, were unaware of the film's existence. Gatti's producer, Jean-Jacques Hocquard, purchased the film rights from Bonnardot's sons. All of this coincided with Minister of Culture Jack Lang's active support in restoring the film, in line with President Nicolas Sarkozy's rapprochement with North Korea and attempts to normalize diplomatic relations.

⁴¹ Apart from the narration, the sound design and music by Bill Hermans would play a key role in bringing the various visual elements together.

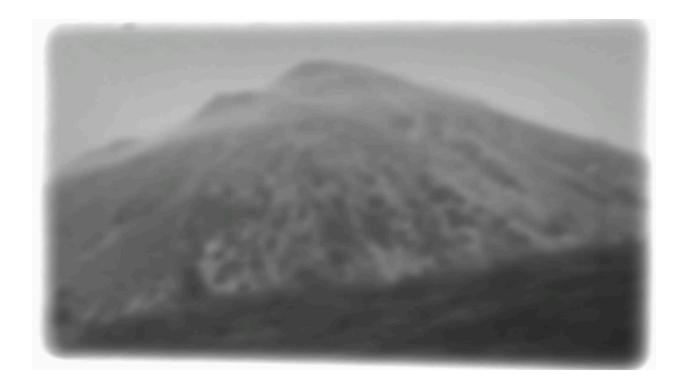


Image 13: Archival footage of ancient mountains of Korea? No, super 8 footage shot by the filmmaker in the late 80s in California. Film still from "poor image" interstitial scene before Seoul Station sequence in thesis film (15:14).

In her essay, "In Defense of the Poor Image," Hito Steyerl speaks about the contemporary hierarchy of images, a pecking order that prizes a "pristine visuality" that is based on sharpness and resolution of the image. ⁴² Steyerl defines the status of the "poor image" in a visual culture hyper-attuned to perfect, high-resolution imagery. ⁴³ Aligned with the "imperfect cinema" of Juan Garcia Espinosa's manifesto for Third Cinema (circa late 60s Cuba), she opines that the poor image is "revolutionary" in this context, ⁴⁴ as it defies capitalist consumption paradigms by "blurring the distinction between consumer and producer, audience and author." I also felt

⁴² Published in *e-flux Journal*, Issue #10, November 2009.

⁴³ In Steyerl's critique, the perfection of the image is implicitly related to the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism and the seamlessness of the "perfect" product masking class relations.

⁴⁴ Garcia Espinosa's critique that "perfect cinema—technically and artistically masterful—is almost always reactionary cinema" undoubtedly echoes – and follows on the heels of– a similar critique of "quality" that French New Wave critics and filmmakers such as André Bazin and François Truffaut lodged at directors they considered mere "metteur en scène" in Truffaut's A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" (1954), 15 years prior. Although Garcia Espinosa may balk at this comparison.

aligned with this philosophy, and it helped to explain why I was attracted to these "degraded" images. In fact, the second cut of the film, executed with fellow filmmaker Chris Chong as editor, opened with an extended sequence of shaky, blurry camcorder footage (documentation from the screening of *Moranbong* at the 2010 Pyongyang International Film Festival). It was out of focus with muffled, indecipherable dialogue in North Korean dialect that was left intentionally unsubtitled; it was presented deliberately without context, as a disorienting blur that was intended to entice the viewer into asking, "What is this? What's going on?" and mirror the dislocation of a Frenchman (or any Westerner) in North Korea. It was intended to present an illegibility that mirrored the "illegitimate" and shadowy status of that film, its historically submerged status as a "lost film" -- that all these elements in the film were, in a sense, forgotten narratives. But these shots were deemed too weak and erratic. I still love them and bemoan their absence. We kept many sections from that cut almost intact, 45 and I think preserved some of the abstractions and obliqueness that I find entrancing and provocative, and underscore the fact that some things remain unknowable.

This was an enduring issue during the thesis film's making, about not only the legibility of certain archival material but also its image quality. There was the inevitable concern about the image, namely, the images being of "poor" quality. But as we continued to work, not only was I not as fussy or demanding as others (such as the first editor, Alena, who, not surprisingly, asked for better quality reproductions of the original photos from the 1958 French men's trip⁴⁶; Chris

⁴⁵ Significant sections of the film were largely unchanged from the cut with Chris from summer 2023, including: b&w montage of Frenchmen in Pyongyang circa 1958; lovers meeting in plaza and their dating and sex scenes; *Moranbong* triptych, b&w sequence with US soldier and chocolate; Seoul Station; Le Marais alleyway and Passages scenes; and wandering through fields. Many of the underwater sequences and North Korean footage were selects from Alena's cuts. All the family photographs and interstitial shots/scenes were introduced during the edit with Jharol, in a new structure incorporating my voiceover.
⁴⁶ In this sequence, the fact is that most of these photographs could not stand up to full-screen size so my strategy was to devise a montage that would replicate photo booth strip-like layouts; it also seemed to harmonize with the perfunctory nature of the trip, as one that was both touristic and expansive. We could cover more ground that way, too.

was also concerned about this), but I preferred the original image (or copy of the image), no matter if rich or poor. To me, it felt that what we got, however poor the quality, was reflective of the production conditions— a student film-size budget of limited means. And that this was part of the process of recovery— an imperfect process. For cinephile eyes, this kind of imagery is hardly a novelty or even a compromise. As Steyerl continues in her "Poor Image" article, "Many works of avant-garde, essayistic, and non-commercial cinema have been resurrected as poor images. Whether they like it or not." Not completely coincidentally, the example par excellence is the work of Chris Marker, as she remarks, "At present, there are at least twenty torrents of Chris Marker's film essays available online. If you want a retrospective, you can have it." Steyerl points out that for many of us, who search out underground or marginal or difficult-to-see work, we may finally locate those copies as "poor image" copies. On the poor image in the process of the image in the process of the p

What qualifies a "poor image" to be "poor" in the first place? "Poor images are poor," Steyerl surmises, "because they are not assigned any value within the class society of images—their status as illicit or degraded grants them exemption from its criteria. Their lack of resolution attests to their appropriation and displacement." One might say that *PTP* consists solely of such

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⁴⁷ In this category also belongs the iPhone footage of documenting my mother recording her voiceover in a home studio: the amateur "sloppiness" of my camerawork, the "grain" or not perfectly lit look– it feels authentic and real.

⁴⁸ If *PTP* was budgeted at the scale of an NFB film or other properly funded project, we would have staff who would employ visual effects, animation, etc. to produce this kind of "polished" product.

⁴⁹ Steyerl continues: "But the economy of poor images is about more than just downloads: you can keep the files, watch them again, even re-edit or improve them if you think it necessary. And the results circulate. Blurred AVI files of half-forgotten masterpieces are exchanged on semi-secret P2P platforms. Clandestine cell-phone videos smuggled out of museums are broadcast on YouTube. DVDs of artists' viewing copies are bartered." See "In Defense of the Poor Image."

⁵⁰ Notably, the website Chrismarker.org, which was long a valuable resource for Chris Marker scholars and enthusiasts and specialists, is now offline (the website is marked "parked" by the web server, GoDaddy).

⁵¹ Further to this, Steyerl adds: "Obviously, this condition is not only connected to the neoliberal restructuring of media production and digital technology; it also has to do with the post-socialist and postcolonial restructuring of nation states, their cultures, and their archives. While some nation states are dismantled or fall apart, new cultures and traditions are invented and new histories created. This obviously also affects film archives—in many cases, a whole heritage of film prints is left without its supporting framework of national culture." Likewise, a film such as *Moranbong* falls out of political favour

"poor images." And in the era of file-sharing, one may believe our tolerance for the diminished image quality has risen, while the "aura" of the original (à la Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction") has fallen. But Steverl argues the opposite: rather, "the power of the new archives consists in twisting and modifying the film according to different interests, and in producing derivative versions for specific markets, thus formatting its audience and reinforcing or even creating different constituencies." As such, it creates its own circuit, thereby fulfilling the original mandate of essayistic and experimental cinema to "create an alternative economy of images, an imperfect cinema existing inside as well as beyond and under commercial media streams." In a somewhat utopic conclusion, Steyerl states that this new circuit "creates a shared history. It builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates. By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it." PTP is very much aligned with this formulation, whereby the aura is displaced from the "original" to a more diffused yet concentrated readings by audiences receptive to this "poverty," and with a hunger for such images.52

and is "lost," but its recovery and resurrection – and restoration of its value – also depended on changed political winds; in 2010, France's national film culture "needed" *Moranbong* to support its aims in re-engaging with North Korea and gaining influence on the Korean peninsula, the Asia-Pacific, and ultimately aligning with American geopolitical interests.

⁵² Steyerl concludes: "The circulation of poor images thus creates "visual bonds," as Dziga Vertov once called them." This conclusion is "Adamic," Stereyl admits, although Vertov's wish has come true, not only in "informing or entertaining viewers but also organizing its viewers," albeit under the rule of global information capitalism. In my mind, this echoes the formation of the citizen in Althusserian ISA (ideological state apparatus) and, by extension, the creation of a "model viewer" automated towards being desirous of Hollywood films and not Chris Marker essay films.

HIERARCHY OF VOICE AND CHARACTER

Diaspora:

from the Greek dia-, apart or through, + speirein, to scatter

Much of this project has been a kind of archeological project, one of excavating and mining or extracting buried stories. I knew it would be like this from the beginning and described it to others this way from the start. But I am not an archeologist. Or documentarian. I am most comfortable with working in fiction, extrapolating from the world and then using my imagination to write scripts from which to make a film. My work as a filmmaker feels more like the tasks of an architect, in terms of world-building and place-making for character creation, designing and executing a vision that started on paper. Moreover, I had known that the content or "information" required for the film would preside at different levels, some being hidden or unexposed or forgotten, or never enquired about— and trying to resituate that lost perspective somehow. So, one of the biggest challenges of the project was trying to figure out how to present this filmically—how to "figure" these voices; and, how to order them. The final piece of this voice-making came together in trying to locate a female narrator to perform the voice of the North Korean nurse who Claude Lanzmann met in Pyongyang. 53 How fitting it is that I found this person, Kim Na Lee, through my mother.

⁵³ This "character" of Kim Keum-shim, while a real person, is very much like a fictionalized creature wrought in the imagination of Claude Lanzmann, as a fantasy of his time in Pyongyang, an interlude among other love affairs and sexual conquests. In fact, she is misnamed in his memoir. While in his memoir, *The Patagonian Hare*, she is named "Kim Kum-sun," the name spelled in *Hangul* (the Korean alphabet) in the letter written in her hand is actually Kim Keum-shim (김금심). I have amended this, and as she reads her own letter, she speaks her correct name in voiceover in the thesis film; her real name is restored.



Image 14: Film still of Jung-Sook Lee narrating her memory of searching for her family at Busan refugee camps during the Korean War (18:04).

My mother's own reluctance to share this story was not only political (being ashamed of her family's Communist background) and personal (not telling anybody of her attempted suicide attempt) but also maternal. Most mothers, and especially Korean ones, do not put themselves in a vulnerable position— which is what telling your daughter about these critical facts of harrowing or difficult events in her past would be. Stoicism is a virtue, and getting past things was a means of survival. The way my mother was "voiced" in the film would never be as transparent as me simply interviewing her in front of a camera. Also, I felt this was not truthful. The process should be as fraught as our reckoning with the content itself. It went like this, sporadically over a multi-year timeline: a weeklong discussion of her younger brother Min-woo's letters from North Korea, as she translated the letters for me and I would ask her questions (these comprise our first "interviews," which were audio recorded). It was the first time she opened up to me about her

family's past, these letters providing both buffer and conduit. Several years later when I began this film, I wrote a voiceover for her based on my understanding of what happened. The voiceover was written in English; she translated them to Korean beforehand and made changes on the spot. Some of these scenes and exchanges – and negotiations – are included in the film.⁵⁴ There was never a simple situation of "giving voice" but perhaps "making space" is a better paradigm; and this was akin to that "space." These were her experiences, paraphrased by her filmmaker daughter in a form that was narratively composed and cinema-friendly. Her "ownership" of these words came with her translation. ⁵⁵ I found later, when I was in the edit, various places where she had made changes in the voiceover. Most of them were minor, but with varying expressions or intonations. Where she had faltered ("Ah, this is the complicated page.") – or questioned things ("So I have to do sentence-by-sentence?") – was when she described when/how she had last seen her family and was physically separated from them, under the pretense of being sent south to Busan for schooling ⁵⁶ – recalling the most emotionally fraught moments of her life.

My own voiceover came into being quite late in the project, just this past October, when it was decided that the version that Chris and I cut in the summer together lacked basic contextual information to understand the images and sequences.⁵⁷ An entirely new script was needed (and

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⁵⁴ Similar to the interviewing process and presentation used to great effect and acclaim in Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012). I was invited to a fine cut screening by producer Anita Lee and appreciated how adept Mike Munn's editing was in abetting the self-reflexive strategies of the film.

⁵⁵ There are moments in the film where my mother seems to "repossess" the lines in the voiceover and make them hers, just as there are lines when she seems to be merely reciting them. Repetition or repeated takes made her more at ease, and also more comfortable to change or amend words or expressions.

⁵⁶ While this was true (my mother's trip south was engineered by her mother, who had planned to evacuate to the North for ideological reasons), it is doubtful that the separation was expected to be permanent. Sending my mother south for safety, ironically, ensured her freedom (and enabled her eventual immigration to Canada).

⁵⁷ I think this occurred for two reasons: Because I had done the cuts with Alena that were more expository and descriptive, I had "absorbed" that content and then set out to make a film for myself, in a way, not

new structure), with narration that would help us put all the pieces together. I had avoided this all along so as not to impose a "master narrative" that was false or totalizing and masking the inherent fractiousness of the material. But without it, even the most experimental and abstractly inclined (like my filmmaker friend Mike Hoolboom), couldn't digest the film or its meaning. My supervisor Brenda Longfellow insisted that I take another stab, and I agreed. The pieces were not coalescing enough to resonate on their own. My reader Ali Kazimi⁵⁸ also insisted on identifying the "hinge" between the two main narrative storylines and clarifying their connection—why do these Frenchmen and my mother appear in the same film? I wrote a new script and commenced work with Jharol Mendoza. 59 the film's third and final editor, in mid-October 2023. As we worked together, I was constantly tweaking and rewriting (and re-recording) the narration.⁶⁰ Because the images shot for the film were not overtly denotative or descriptive, in and of themselves (I aimed for a dialogic relationship between image and sound/voice, a formally rigorous style favoured by filmmakers I admire such as Harun Farocki or Alexander Kluge⁶¹), the narration proved to be particularly critical. But I was always wary of striking that balance between exposition (which the narration provided) and the discursive spirit at the heart of the project. Also, juggling this narration with the other voices in the film, chiefly my mother's and

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realizing that the film was not communicating the most basic information. Also, I wanted to dive into abstraction or something more visually-driven and conceptually based, not a presentation of facts.

Sa Ali also insisted that it be clarified why *Moranbong* was banned, so my narration became more exacting:

³⁸ Ali also insisted that it be clarified why *Moranbong* was banned, so my narration became more exacting that the film contravened the Geneva Conventions. I am grateful for Ali's important note.

⁵⁹ Frankly, I was distraught at the thought of recutting the film yet another time. When I told Chris about an impending recut, he recommended Jharol Mendoza, who was part of his York cohort and had become a close friend of his. Besides Jharol's affable manner and instinctual editing chops, another plus was his relative unfamiliarity with Korean history, North Korea and the Korean War. While he is a cinephile, his lack of knowledge of Korea-related topics helped me pitch the film towards this demographic, in terms of what was being communicated content-wise while aiming for adventurous style.

⁶⁰ All told, there were at least six sessions with sound recordist Bill Herman where we re-recorded parts of my voiceover as it was rewritten, or sometimes for expression. The most patient sound person ever. ⁶¹ David Mamet also writes of using the "uninflected image" as one of the most powerful mechanisms of narrative, where the juxtaposition of two uninflected images provokes the viewer to generate meaning. While I subscribe to this in principle and as an ideal, I haven't been able to achieve this quite yet in my own filmmaking.

the Lanzmann and Marker texts that are voiced, was the trick. This layering or "hierarchy" of voices was paramount.

What was equally important was what was *not* said. I had been encouraged by Brenda to make a more explicit critique of the French men's Orientalism but felt that was too easy a target and flattened the complexities of those intercultural encounters. 62 And while it would have been one strategy to try to "empower" those erased and left voiceless by history (with no material remnants or creative products like those produced by the French men), it would have been false to do so. 63 Lanzmann's North Korean nurse remains mute because she was a fictional construct in Lanzmann's mind in the first place. We are not meant to "know" her. Her status and role in the narrative is conjured as someone who slipped between the cracks of history, whose objectification (as figured in the film) comes from the specific perspective of a Frenchman's mind, not a universal one. In my role as interlocutor of the material presented here, there would be no speculations on my part about what she might have said or what she might have been thinking. It is the job of the film to just place her and her knowability as a loss and, given the context of that relationship and her status as a fantasy object, an irrecuperable one. Nurse Kim would not be "given voice" or granted dialogue by me, after the fact; again, that would be too easy and, moreover, implausible. Her very voicelessness is the point. It is for the viewer to reflect upon the scenario, and perhaps think: what a loss for us. And leave that "space of

⁶² This is not even something that I did in 1990, when I made my first film, *Sally's Beauty Spot*, which also sought to complexify racialized desire.

⁶³ This follows on the heels of Trinh T. Minh-ha's famous formulation of not "speaking about" but "speaking nearby," (spoken in the narration of her film, *Reassemblage* (1982)), to avoid giving false voice or the appearance of empowerment in a way that masks structural inequities.

representation" open,⁶⁴ as a question for us to mull and query why that is, and how it can be rectified.

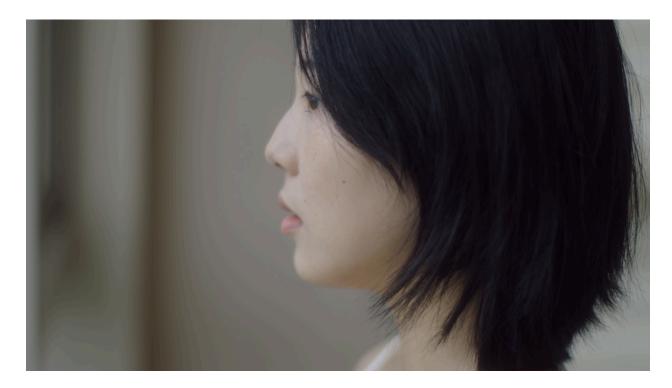


Image 15: Film still of Nurse Kim (Sira Chae) contemplating her fate after the sexual encounter with Claude Lanzmann (26:13).

The restoration of Nurse Kim came, for me, in finding the appropriate North Korean woman to voice her character. North Koreans outside of North Korea are not normally included in the demographic of diasporic Koreans because of their relative seclusion and desire to keep a low profile.⁶⁵ Kim Na Lee is a North Korean refugee who my mother was friends with at her church;

⁶⁴ Trinh writes, "By not trying to assume a position of authority in relation to the other, you are actually freeing yourself from the endless criteria generated with such an all-knowing claim and its hierarchies in knowledge." (From an interview with Erika Balsom, *Frieze*.) A widely respected filmmaker and scholar, Trinh's own essay films are exemplary. Although *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), a study of subjectivity and alterity very much filtered through her own theoretical paradigm, also demonstrates the challenges and limits of this practice.

⁶⁵ It is known that there are North Korean spies and informants among Korean immigrant communities in all sizable cities with Korean immigrant populations. Even with permanent resident or citizenship status, nobody feels fully safe, Ms. Na told me.

they both sing in the church choir. 66 Her life story, of which I know only a fragment, is worthy of a film itself.⁶⁷ Ms. Kim worked as a professional singer in North Korea and lived in a performing artist compound since she was 20 years old; she came to Canada as a refugee around a dozen years ago (she is now in her late 60s). There are several things that are significant in casting her: foremost, that even though only a Korean-speaking viewer would recognize her voice as being a North Korean person (because of their distinct accent and intonation), this was non-negotiable; Nurse Kim had to be voiced by a North Korean. Secondly, any North Korean (in Canada or the Western world) would be a refugee and would have fled from the country's regime, making it deeply ironic, considering the kind of loyal comrade that Nurse Kim is presumed to be. Lastly, Ms. Kim's voice sounds noticeably older than the woman who appears on the screen. ⁶⁸ To my mother's ears, or anyone who knows Korean, the voice reads as someone who is speaking from the future as an older woman. Upon hindsight of what history has wrought, the sentiments expressed in the letter sound even more idealistic and tragic, almost bathetic, considering all that has transpired with North Korea becoming a pariah state to the Western world. Recording Ms. Kim as Nurse Kim felt like finding the final piece of the puzzle. Again, it was just a matter of how the pieces would fit.

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⁶⁶ Kim Na Lee singing is heard three times in the film: during the b&w montage sequence depicting the French men's activities when arriving in Pyongyang, the final underwater scene, and the closing duet at the end credits, when she and my mother sing together, harmonizing.

⁶⁷ Ms. Kim disclosed to my mother that she'd remained single all her life and never married in North Korea because she spent decades living in a compound for performing artists (singers, musicians, dancers) of the state, where marriage was strictly forbidden among residents. On the compound was an "execution room" where residents who were deemed dissident or disloyal would be taken and killed for undermining the state.

⁶⁸ Sira Chae, who plays Nurse Kim onscreen, is in her mid-20s, was the approximate age of Nurse Kim at that time of her encounter with Lanzmann in 1958.

MEANING AND STRUCTURE: BEYOND STORY

"The audience comes last. I'm not making it for them, I'm making it for me."

- Rick Rubin

In describing the thesis film to others, I had resorted to just laying out and describing the various elements or storylines as "chapters"-- I still do: PTP is about the story of French male cultural elites who come to Pyongyang, end up making *Moranbong*, publishing *Coréennes* and *The* Patagonian Hare; and the parallel narrative about my mother's family separation story... each felt like a mini story unto itself. Likewise, in the early days of thesis preparation, Brenda had also recommended using chapters as a structuring device. The chapters could be conceived as "mini-films," as each chapter echoes with others with deliberate sequencing and thoughtful transitions within its overall structure. I knew this was possible and perhaps could even lend a cool Cubist quality, a conceptual puzzle to unravel, section to section, with each part meant to resonate in conceptual fashion. But I also wanted to take up the challenge of an interweaving structure, where the viewer also had to weave and bob, and work a little. It felt truer to the spirit of the film to lay out a kind of "structure-less" structure that decentralized chronology. The looping time structures, where the storytelling wasn't linear, felt truer to the diasporic aesthetics inherent to the project. The stories had been "scattered," or dispersed through geography and intergenerationally, and through time. The form itself had to reflect that.

This brings us to the predominance of "story" in cinematic storytelling, a trope that has also overtaken documentary filmmaking. In "Beyond Story: an Online, Community-Based

Manifesto,"69 authors Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow launch a polemic that challenges story as the prevailing mode of expression for even non-fiction film (as "today's ubiquitous mantra, structure, telos, and mind-set"). They write: "Not everything should be molded into a story." 70 One of the other consummate film essayists of our time, the German filmmaker Harun Farocki, also posed this question to himself when he asked, "How can I make a film structure which is not governed by a narrative?"⁷¹ If Farocki, whose career was in German television in the 1970s and 80s before moving into avant-garde filmmaking and art cinema, himself, faced this conundrum, and it was challenging for someone with a film practice known and celebrated as deeply counter-cultural and subversive, dialogic and non-linear, how would it be for anyone else? Even (and perhaps especially) for a practitioner of "resistant or non-conformist visual matter" (Steyerl), the question of form comes to the fore. Obviously Farocki has been met with a brick wall over this issue, of how to make his content more palatable through conventional cinematic form, like story. Even an essay film falls prey to these expectations, where cinematic forms have become more character-driven with conventional cause-and-effect dramatic structures of beginning-middle-end. But not everything can fit into that box. One could argue that as the media landscape becomes transformed in a creative flourishing through greater diversities and new technologies, there has been a concomitant shrinking on the industry side, by funders, commissioning editors and broadcasters/streamers that only admit certain modes of storytelling (driven by "story") that, ultimately, uphold dominant cultural and ideological conventions.

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⁶⁹ Refer to: "Beyond Story: an Online, Community-Based Manifesto" https://worldrecordsjournal.org/beyond-story-an-online-community-based-manifesto/

⁷⁰ By which they mean: "1) a small number of recognizable characters around whom feelings are generated, primarily by way of identification and cathexis, humanism and empathy, and; 2) said characters' actions being arranged through a set of recognizable spatial/temporal templates that cohere only nominally to lived reality given that they are arranged through a cause-effect logic that does not remotely resemble reality as it is experienced." See note 51 above.

⁷¹ From "The ABCs of The Film Essay" (2015), co-authored with Christa Blümlinger. Published in *Essays on the Essay Film*, Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan, eds. p. 299.



Image 16: Film still of metaphorical Armistice/stand-off between US soldier (Jay Oelbaum) and Jung-Sook as girl (M.J. Kang), film sprockets and all (25:41).

Instead of presenting the episodes as "mini stories" complete and compact unto themselves, *PTP* attempts a different kind of layering, one that is truer to its thematics of time, memory and understanding history as a retrieval and revisionist process. The film is non-linear in structure, moving back and forth in time, but not as avant-gardist "convention," either, to wear on its sleeve. Topics such as immigration and translation that the film is deeply embedded in, are not given typical treatment of "topics," as such. While I could not avoid some didacticism in speaking about the issue of representation – on picture-taking and privilege – and just laying it on straight, 72 most of the passages are meant to evoke and connote, not deliberately depict. We are meant to question the means of representation, to look at the frames and interrogate not just what we are seeing but how it is being presented. So no, there would not be a neat chapter about

⁷² When I asked: "and if they had their own cameras and pens." That is the extent to which I can say this, a "What if" question that is both rhetorical and suggestive. Any clearer than this, it would feel like I may be directing the viewer what to think.

Communism and the French Left; nor one about Communism and Korean nationalism, never mind explanations of what *Juche* is and how it defines North Korean society. History lessons were not the film's objective. The Korean War would not be rendered through archival footage or dramatic re-enactments, per se, but as mediated conceptual thought pieces. The histories and personages that had disappeared or been left behind were the film's goals, with an agenda for reconstruction, revival, re-imagination. Because the film is intended to possess this kind of criticality, the sequences have a "frame" or metaphorical quotations around them (and sometimes literal frames and framings exposing sprockets or light flares and uneven edges). Even in the "escapist" romance scenes with Claude Lanzmann and the North Korean, it is made clear that the events are shot through his imagination, not mere re-enactments— the actors are *actors*. Even if, at the same time, we are meant to be momentarily entranced in his romantic fantasy,⁷³ there are some referentiality markers⁷⁴ that function as clues for the viewer that the scenes presented here will require some critical reading, that they are not transparently presented as truth or fact for easy consumption.

This strategy of "storytelling" as a subjectively rendered, critical process with discursive aims could be encapsulated by how *PTP* presents the intertwining love stories: my mother with my father, Claude Lanzmann with the nurse, and the story of the lovers in *Moranbong*. Rather than presented at face value, each is framed *as* a story—in oblique, digressive fashion. There are enough simple details to go on and infer the rest. None are presented in linear or chronological

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⁷³ From our footage, another entire film could be made that looks like a *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1958), which was contemporaneous to those events depicted. Those sequences are meant to resonate with that French New Wave film, which is both gendered and Gallic in inspiration and execution. The idea was to make us compare and reflect on these cinematic antecedents and the visual treatments and narrative perspectives they presented.

These include: super close-ups that are at an angle a bit off for them to be his POV (they are ours); my voiceover that intrudes as exposition/commentary on the bed set-up; and, almost off the top, the "outtakes" scene that comes immediately after their first meet-up in plaza.

fashion: my parents immigrate before they, towards the latter part of the film, meet and get married; after the lovers "meet again" in a dance rendered as fantasy, we see the nurse staring out the window (in "real" colour); the lovers from *Moranbong* are resurrected 50 years later at the Pyongyang International Film Festival to meet their brethren of the future in an inhospitable audience (who view them as "dinosaurs"). Each instance of the story signals a progression, but not in a conventional dramatic structure trying to promote identificatory processes of empathy or purgation of emotions according to Aristotelian principles. Like most stories, none of them are conclusive: although my mother's marriage is a happy one, there always remains the spectre of her separation from her first nuclear family, a perennial loss; both Lanzmann's Orientalist fantasy and Nurse Kim's idealism are, in hindsight through our revisionist eyes, lovely failures; the protagonists of *Moranbong*, a fiction from the imaginations of two Frenchmen, are not embraced or understood by countrymen of either nation. 75 These love stories, as *stories*, are presented as contingent and contextual, arising from a specific historicization of their "recapture" and re-presentation in this film. While the stories may seem to signify as "stereotypical" love stories (conjugal; interracial; metaphorical), they are unlike typical lore or fairy tales that are passed down through tradition, or like Hollywood films with their generic story patterns and conclusive happy endings. The context is not an emotional one where the story's value hinges on conceptions of romantic love – as story – but each is, sui generis, belonging uniquely to its historical context and its positionality in the film's narrative.

If love itself cannot recoup these losses, how could possibly love stories? Rather than Story, that acts as a palliative, true restoration takes place on another register that incorporates a criticality

⁷⁵ Apart from its disastrous fate after its Cannes premiere, *Moranbong* was seen as not propagandistic enough by North Korean brass, neither when it was being made nor at its revival screening, due to its lack of veneration of Kim Il Sung. The same is true of Chris Marker's book, which was not embraced for its catholicism and not a single mention of "The Great Leader." (From oral interview with Antoine Coppola. See also Chris Marker's Afterword in *Coréennes*.)

and invites reflection. At most, we can pick up the pieces of our fragmented narratives to construct new ways of seeing and being: to honour the wounds and scars of experiences such as my mother's apparent abandonment and displacements of culture and language; to reverse the mis-interpellations of someone like Nurse Kim or the unaccounted-for-ness of, for instance, my relatives in North Korea (who disappeared into the proverbial "black hole" cited by Chris Marker in his Afterword in *Coréennes*). And perhaps we should leave the seams of storytelling undone, exposed for others to uncover more.



Image 17: Film still of the borderless underwater (with M.J. Kang) at end of thesis film (30:08).

RELATED WORKS

Among my previous works, PTP is most related to the short essayistic works I have made, starting with Sally's Beauty Spot (1990), my first film. That film also takes a discursive approach to its topic of racialized desire and Asian feminist self-representation. Scenes of my sister Sally are staged in a kind of intertextual "conversation" with short clips from the Hollywood melodrama, The World of Suzie Wong (1960), and quotes ranging from feminist theorist Tania Modleski, postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha, and philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, in voiceover. Additional voiceovers of scripted dialogue (between Sally and a lover; her therapist; and with friends) are also interspersed to comprise a narrative that evokes concepts of Blackness, beauty ideals, and Asian identity. Similarly, in PTP, various visual, polyphonic and conceptual registers are employed with the purpose of creating a filmic discourse. Where PTP goes further and beyond its archival origins is by engaging my mother's account and interrogating the compromised status of storytelling – even hers – as narratives we devise and fictions that we tell ourselves in order to keep living. The film underlines that her recounting is, foremost, a representation, while also trying to convey the emotional toll and import of her story, as one she survived.

Other short films and micro-shorts that I've made employing similar discursive strategies that are explicitly experimental in form and approach include: *What We Carry* (2023, co-directed with Dev Ramsawakh), *Into Such Assembly* (2019), based on the poem by Myung Mi Kim, ⁷⁶ *North By*

⁷⁶ Working with poet Myung Mi Kim, who wrote the poem "Into Such Assembly," and her avant-garde aesthetics, was influential to my artistic practice. I first met Myung Mi in 1995 at a conference of Korean American academics and artists organized by Elaine Kim at UC-Berkeley; the poem was first published in 1991 in her first book of collected poems, *Under Flag* (and has enjoyed two subsequent reprints). "Into Such Assembly" is her most "accessible" poem. Her other works contain a conceptual density that verges on opacity—how can you go out there without losing the audience/reader? Notably, Cathy Park Hong

Northeast (2019), Star (2001), and a profile of Afro-Caribbean Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip, commissioned for the Toronto Arts Award (1996).⁷⁷ In conception and spirit, these works are somewhat related to *PTP*, but the thesis film is far more ambitious and wide-ranging in subject and scope. It is also worth mentioning that the dominant form of my film practice is dramatic film and seems unrelated to *PTP* and its essayistic form. But the goal of a dialogic relationship between film and viewer remains the same; within my narrative projects is an experimental heart that strives for formal innovation. While an essayistic form does not automatically make a film innovative or guarantee genuine discursivity, my intention for *PTP* is both.

Works by other filmmakers that have inspired *PTP*, apart from the obvious (such as the Chris Marker opus, *Sans Soleil* (1983), and Harun Farocki's essential *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1989)), are key works by Canadian filmmakers such as Richard Fung and Brett Story. Fung's *Sea in the Blood* (2000) combines an introspective memoirist approach with a pointillist penchant for detail vs. abstraction, oscillating between clear-headed insights and family photographs, to more impressionistic imagery that gives us room to sink in and contemplate. Even though *PTP* is relatively fast-paced, those moments are crucial for viewers to come to their own conclusions and feel their own feelings. Likewise, in Story's film, *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* (2016), wide open spaces – not just literal but also conceptual – provide room for contemplation. Literally, not just the wide shots but even in intimate moments and close-ups, we can almost smell the air or feel the room. Story's film conveys both a sense of foreboding but also foregrounds the racist legacy of incarceration, as scars in the landscape and

cites Myung Mi, her former professor, as a major influence in her landmark book, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*.

⁷⁷ The latter two were, incidentally, shot by my reader, Ali Kazimi, who I also had the pleasure to work with on my second short film (and first drama), *My Niagara* (1992), when he worked as director of photography.

the way people are forced to move through (American) life and deal. Conceptually, the film is daring for this atmospheric, almost abstract approach; Story is a cultural geographer with a cinematic mind. She, more than almost any other filmmaker working at that level, makes great use of the uninflected image; we have room to make our own meaning because the film does not *tell* you what's going on or what to think. Hers is a more immersive, ultimately democratic approach. "To be invited to enter and to question is my favorite way of experiencing a film," Story recently told me. ⁷⁸ I hope for the same with *PTP*. Interestingly, when Mike Hoolboom saw a recent cut, he described the sequences as "rooms," and some of the transitions as "doors" to those rooms. ⁷⁹ While the house is still tightly constructed, my hope is that there is enough room between the seams of story, a place to pause at the door's threshold.



Images 18 (L): Poster of Soon-Mi Yoo's *Songs From the North* (2014); Image 19 (R): Promotional still from Nguyen Trinh Thi's *Letters from Panduranga* (2015).

⁷⁸ Via personal correspondence (text message), December 23, 2023.

⁷⁹ To clarify: some of those doors felt like waiting rooms, Mike said, and the transitions were a tad long or unnecessary, such as a second of black screen or an unnecessary fade out. To paraphrase: "we just want into the room and not to wait."

Finally, the two works most directly related to PTP that made the strongest impression on me while conceiving the thesis film were Soon-Mi Yoo's Songs from the North (2014) and Nguyen Trinh Thi's Letters from Panduranga (2015), set in North Korea and Vietnam, respectively. Both films are much more avant-garde and formally bold than PTP (which, by virtue of my narration, makes it far less experimental and more expository; my voiceover guides the viewer quite strongly), because much is left unexplained. In ethos, structure and approach, they are more "works of art" because they are not concerned about immediate legibility, not afraid to leave the viewer hanging- again, there is space for rumination.80 Yoo's film is an observational and meditative travelogue, shot during several trips to North Korea. She trusts the viewer to stay on during numerous long wordless episodes, where we do not know what we are seeing or why, exactly. Devoid of exposition, the film is daring in this regard. Popular North Korean movies, patriotic anthems and propagandistic songs are used to infuse otherwise neutral or flat (non-denotative) imagery with meaning; song lyrics or swelling melodies help induce feeling—or not. In PTP, there is a similar juxtaposition/disjunction between the contemporary North Korean archival footage that was used, overlaid with a 1970s South Korean pop song (that would have never organically played in a setting like North Korea; this kind of pairing would not really exist except in a film like mine or Yoo's). Nguyen's work is more formalist in style, incorporating a video aesthetic (using digital visual effects), formal repetitions and rhymings, and is not narratively driven. Using Marker's epistolary trick, two voices (female and male) read from their letters, exchanging observations that critique and counterpoint the documentary-like imagery that has been given experimental treatment in the editing room. Nguyen's film juxtaposes archaic vs. modern in a subversive, ingenious way that forces a prismatic reading of the "recolonization" of the Cham people, an Indigenous Hindu ethnic minority, at the hands of the state. Some of the

⁸⁰ Both films would play equally well in a movie theatre (for art cinema) or in a gallery or museum.

images literally become prismatic and we are forced to contend with multiple viewing perspectives that make us look closer and question modes of visuality. Likewise, with *PTP*, I strived for a similar multi-faceted approach towards its complex, enmeshed storylines, varied imagery, and the personal/historical legacies still under contention.

CONCLUSION

Paris to Pyongyang is a non-fiction film that embraces an essayistic approach rather than conventional documentary form. At the same time, the film has a strong narrative disposition, provided not only by the filmmaker's narration but a visual methodology that interweaves the archival with original, fictionalized imagery. By both excavating the archive and adopting multiple narrative perspectives that oscillate between reality and imagination, the film exemplifies the kind of "defining overlapping" inherent to essayistic film form. The essay film form, as a "genre of experience" accommodates different critical life experiences that the thesis film aims to convey. But its essayistic form, unlike a conventional documentary or realist dramatic film, does not tie it to only what happened, but can also what could have happened, whether as passing speculation or living actively in the imagination. The creative leaps enabled by and within the essay film form afford the filmmaker boundless freedom to explore diasporic legacies without limit, and perhaps for the viewer also.

PTP gathers disparate, dispersed visual and conceptual elements to carve out its own niche of cinematic space and time, one not ruled by specific edicts of story, chronological time or cause-and-effect structures. While there are structuring elements in the thesis film, such as the underwater sequences that mark the film's beginning, middle and end, and definable "characters" and even a lead protagonist, there are otherwise no other characteristics that typify a narratively based film structure. The stories presented, and "story," in and of itself, are presented as contingent or hard-won and arduously told. This archive – recovered visual and narrative fragments, or imagery and music such the family photos or cartoon clip or native songs – survives as memory lives on. When these representations are reactivated and refigured, and

provided with a new context, it can function as a restoration and even restitution. No, not all is lost.



Image 20: Film still of Taein Park looking out to the future (28:36).

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