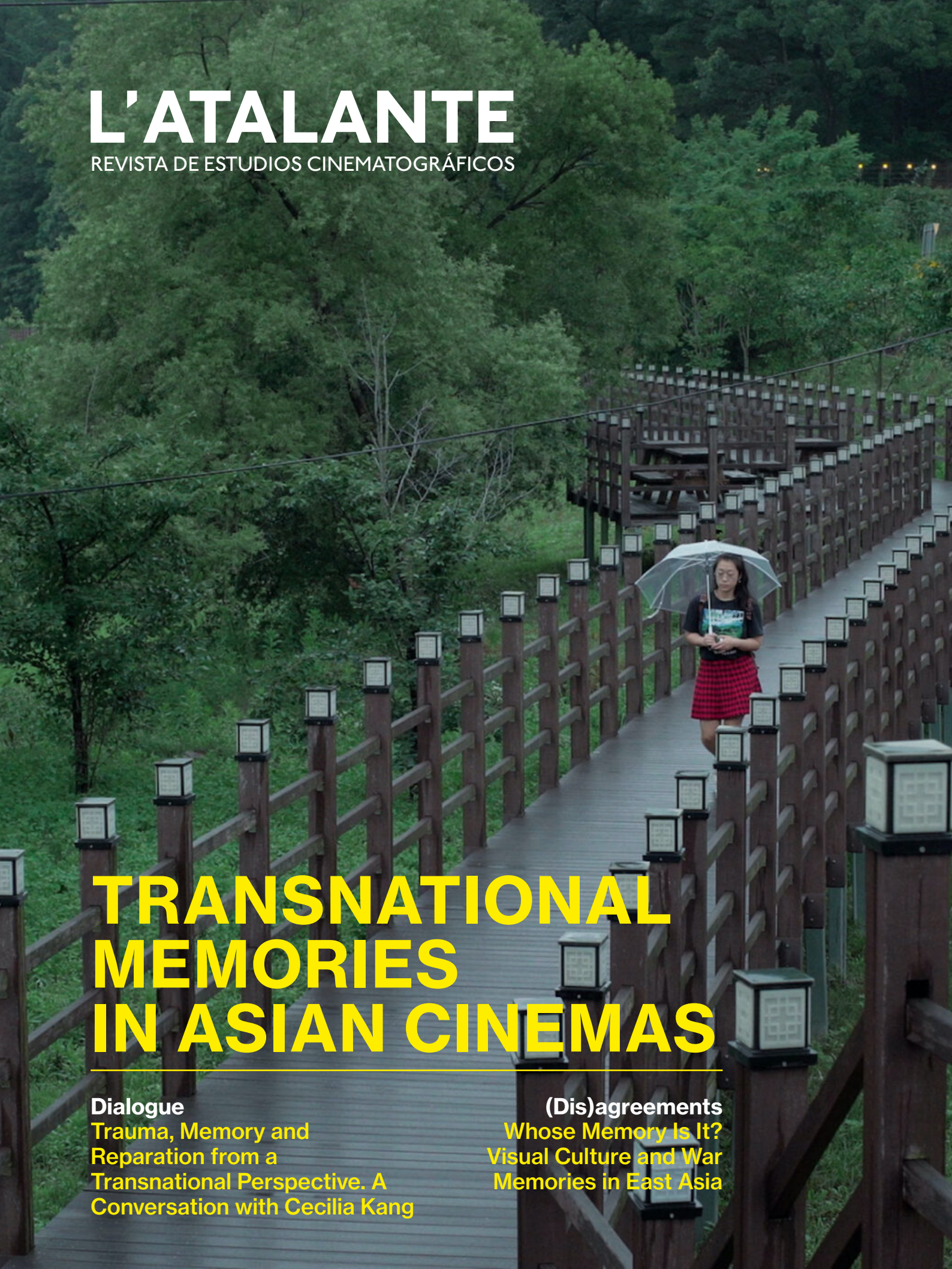
L'ATALANTE
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS CINEMATOGRÁFICOS



# TRANSNATIONAL MEMORIES IN ASIAN CINEMAS

**Dialogue**
Trauma, Memory and Reparation from a Transnational Perspective. A Conversation with Cecilia Kang

**(Dis)agreements**
Whose Memory Is It? Visual Culture and War Memories in East Asia

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**Authors (Autores):** Enric Burgos (Universidad de Valencia), Marcela Canizo (Universidad de Buenos Aires), Dody M.H. Chen (Wenzhou Business College), Cora Cuenca-Navarrete (Universidad Loyola Andalucía), Damián Esteban Bretones (Universidad de Córdoba), Pablo Ferrando García (Universitat Jaume I), Jihoon Kim (Chung-ang University), Edurne Larumbe (Universitat Pompeu Fabra), Hyunseon Lee (University of London), Xiaoning Lu (SOAS), Dongye Lyu (The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology), Lledó Morales Roig (Universitat Jaume I), Miguel Muñoz-Garnica (Universidad Loyola Andalucía), Sen Ni (Seoul National University), Jordi Revert (Universidad de Valencia), Lucía Rud (Universidad de Buenos Aires), Miriam Sánchez Manzano (Universitat Pompeu Fabra), Bingbing Shi (Oxford University), Adrián Tarín-Sanz (Universidad UTE), Edward Vickers (Kyushu University), Yuepeng Wei (Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona), Fang Xie (Jiangsu Ocean University), Tiantian Xu (Universidad de Jining) y Nekane Zubiaur Gorozika (Universidad del País Vasco-Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea).

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# WE WERE THE SCENERY: TRANSNATIONAL REMEMBRANCE IN AN AGE OF GLOBAL MEMORY[1]

AMANDA WEISS
MARCOS CENTENO-MARTÍN
ALBERTO PORTA-PÉREZ

## THE SCENERY OF MEMORY

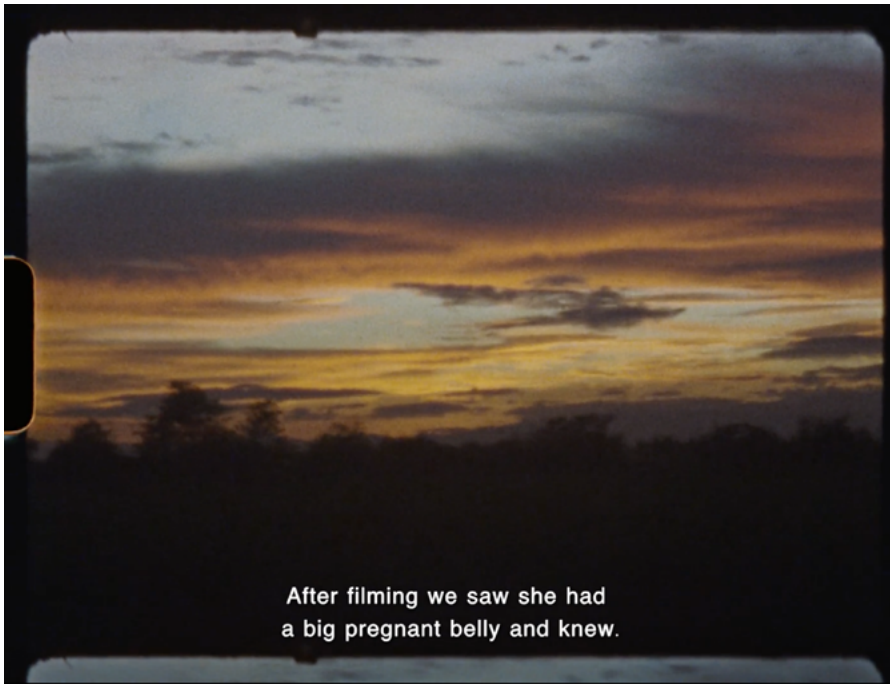
In the recent short documentary, *We Were the Scenery* (Christopher Radcliff, 2025), two elderly Vietnamese refugees recall their experiences during the Vietnam War from their living room in California. The survivors, Hoa Thi Le and Hue Nguyen Che, describe attacks coming from all sides: schools destroyed and village leaders abducted by the Viet Cong; civilians murdered indiscriminately by South Vietnamese soldiers; local communities terrorized by American troops. Though Le and Che eventually found refuge in a refugee camp in the Philippines, they found themselves unexpectedly recruited as extras in the infamous American war film *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). Once again, they were caught between competing national projects: this time over how the past should be remembered.

Rather than serving simply as an illustrative anecdote, this documentary offers an illustration of the themes that animate this special issue: the relationship between individual and national narratives, the transnational circulation of memory, the significance of film as a medium of remembrance, and the ongoing contest over how violence in the Pacific is remembered. When Le

and Che became "scenery" in a canonical American war film, their individual experiences were subsumed by a narrative focused on the American perspective, a perspective that later gained outsize influence due to the global impact of the film. *We Were the Scenery* intervenes in that established remembrance by having Le and Che reverse the gaze, shifting attention from the American protagonists to the Vietnamese extras who populated the film's background. As they watch clips together, Le and Che identify friends from the refugee camp, recalling where they lived, what roles they played, and what became of them after filming. "That's Dam," Che remarks matter-of-factly, recognizing a woman from the camp as she is gunned down by an American helicopter in the film. "She was pregnant, but her belly was still small." "She hadn't told anyone!" adds Le. "After filming we saw she had a big pregnant belly and we knew. She ended up moving to Georgia." "Atlanta," nods Che. (Images 1 and 2). The faceless woman now has a name, a family, and a history, pulling her narrative into the foreground and revealing how memories of war travel globally.

Above. Image 1. Le and Che recall the story of Dam
Below. Image 2. Le and Che recall the story of Dam




Le and Che likewise challenge the dynamics of the film by critiquing the film itself. Neither can make sense of the infamous surfing scene, which they bluntly describe as "weird" in the context of active war. Che further declares that their part of the film is the best because it is "action-packed," dismissing the rest as "average, just a bunch of talking." They even refer to director Coppola—venerated as a giant in American cinema—as "that guy," humorously recalling that they saw him carrying around mangos that he'd bite into without removing the skin. Such individual memories reverse the power relations established by the

original film as the people being looked at are now looking; the artificiality of filmic choices is rendered ridiculous by those with lived experience, and an acclaimed director becomes an unremarkable participant in their memories.

These reversals are possible precisely because *We Were the Scenery* is itself a transnational production. An American-Canadian documentary written by Le and Che's daughter, Cathy Linh Che, it was filmed in both Vietnam and the United States and focuses on members of the Vietnamese diaspora. Thus, the film functions simultaneously as a family history in the tradition of *postmemory* (Hirsch, 1997), a diasporic documentary, and a reflection on one of the most globally circulated films about the Vietnam War. In doing so, the film raises broader questions that resonate across the Pacific, where histories of colonialism, migration, and violence have produced memories that continually cross-national borders.

The essays collected in this issue ask similar questions in other historical and cultural contexts. Collectively, they show that memories of violence in the Pacific may not be contained within national frameworks, but can continually be produced through transnational encounters, migration, media circulation, and cultural exchange. Thus, the volume proposes a methodological framework that draws on recent developments in Memory Studies, a "transnational turn" that responds to the limitations of studying film practices within the confines of the nation-state. Scholars have demonstrated that memories travel across borders, are shaped by diasporic communities, and may circulate through global media networks. Like *We Were the Scenery*, the essays here demonstrate that media does not merely preserve memory but actively shapes, contests, and transforms it. The documentary foregrounds the three questions that animate the essays collected here: Who is remembered? Who gets to remember? And how are memories transformed as they circulate across national borders and media forms?

## A PRESSING MATTER: MEMORY BATTLES IN ASIA

Why do these questions matter urgently today? As the essays in this issue demonstrate, contemporary geopolitical tensions, renewed disputes over historical responsibility, the passing of the last generation of living witnesses, and rapidly evolving media environments have made the remembrance of violence in the Pacific a continually contested terrain. The urgency of these questions emerges from a broader transformation in contemporary memory culture. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall (Finney, 2017), scholars have noted the expansion of memory work marked by the growth of memorials, museums, documentaries, historical films, and public debates about the past. This "memory boom" has generated not only new forms of commemoration but also new scholarly attention to the politics of remembrance. Andreas Huyssen (2000) has argued that this contemporary "memory obsession" is driven by media saturation, globalization, and technological change, while François Hartog (2015) has described the current era as one of "presentism," in which uncertainty about the future produces intensified attention to heritage and the past. In this sense, contemporary societies appear caught in a self-reinforcing cycle of remembrance: the more the past is represented, the more new debates emerge over how that past should be understood.

This cycle is particularly visible in what Weiss (2023) terms memory loops: concentrated transnational discourses centered on particular historical events or conflicts in which each new representation returns to and responds to earlier acts of remembrance. Rather than existing as fixed narratives, memories circulate through repeated encounters among films, memoirs, museums, anniversaries, political debates, and digital platforms. In the example above, remembrance of the Vietnam War is continually reconstructed onscreen. Each new text enters into dialogue with

previous ones, producing an ongoing negotiation over what the conflict means, whose experiences should be foregrounded, and how do these stories become visible. The rise of digital media has accelerated these processes by fundamentally altering how memories circulate. Through the internet, formerly national memory narratives have transformed into globally accessible and contestable forms, with digitization, translation, streaming platforms, and social media streamlining the rapid dissemination of remembrance across borders. Historical debates now unfold not only through books, films, and museums, but also through TikToks, memes, and Reddit threads.

These transformations are particularly significant for the study of Asia and the Pacific. The region's histories of colonialism, war, forced migration, dictatorship, partition, nuclear catastrophe, and environmental disaster have produced memories that increasingly expand beyond their national borders and, as the ongoing "memory battles" in Asia reveal (Jager and Mitter, 2007; Saito, 2016), generate new "memory loops" and new cycles of conflict. Memories of violence are shaped through transnational movement, media circulation, migration, and intergenerational transmission; media have become not simply representations of memory but active participants in its production.

As Jeffrey Olick (2013) reminds us, memory work is always political work. Collective memory is an ongoing struggle over what events mean, whose experiences become visible, and whose stories remain marginalized. In an era of global media circulation, these struggles increasingly transcend the nation-state while remaining deeply shaped by national histories and institutions. The essays collected in this issue examine this tension through a range of Asian contexts and media forms. Together, they ask how memories travel across borders, how media transform historical experience into cultural memory, and how transnational circulation reshapes not only what we remember, but how we remember.

East Asia has become core of popular, cultural, political and scholarly debates on the way societies deal with their traumatic past in the present. The region is witnessing unseen memory struggles in recent decades, simultaneous to the proliferation of memorial sites, battles for promotion of their difficult past as world heritage, and increasing number of cultural products in which films, both fictional and documentaries, are playing a crucial role. The importance of these cultural memories is not only the result of the new global position of China, Japan and Korea in economic and cultural terms but also seem to be result of the current geopolitical scene (Vickers, Lee and Huang, 2022; Kirsch, 2015). This is giving shape violent-past-related tensions operating a several levels, from activism to cultural practices, which are conditioning even current diplomatic relations.

This is happening in a context of increasing competition among China, South Korea, and Japan as global economic and cultural powers (Guarné, 2020; Iwabuchi, 2007; Kim, 2013). As the readership of this volume will note, many of the memory loops that are being cinematically represented emerge from events perpetrated during the so-called "dark valley" (1931–1945), the last stage of the Japanese imperialist expansion. As contributors of this volume show, other episodes of mass violence related to the Korean postwar and the Vietnam War in the following decades also became memory loops on the big screen. All of these traumatic events represented on screen belong to international conflicts and as a result, the projected cultural memories are transnational per se. Asian cinemas have played a crucial role in socialising this difficult past, shaping ways historical atrocities are revisited. Fiction and nonfiction films have become key sites where the memory of wartime violence is appropriated, reimagined, and consumed. In this sense, visual culture does not simply reflect preexisting memory; it actively participates in the construction of postmemory communities, collectives comprised of genera-

tions that did not directly experience traumatic events but nevertheless are deeply marked by them. Film audiences in Asia mostly come from this postmemory environment, and thus, cinema has become a primary medium for transgenerational transmission and national identity building around affective and mnemonic communities.

This volume seeks to update current discussions about the memory of 20th-century violent events by decolonizing Memory Studies, which in this field entails moving away from Eurocentric frameworks centred on the Holocaust. Instead, the articles presented here propose shifting the focus to the Asian context, while paying special attention to voices that have historically been neglected in academic inquiry, such as women, children, ethnic minorities and sexual minorities. Asia-Pacific is not only a site of numerous unresolved historical traumas but also a region whose film cultures now exert global influence. China, Japan and South Korea have particularly become major cultural powers and their films, as well as the examples taken from Southeast Asia, are shaping global understandings of the Asian past violences. This cultural competition and global circulation have intensified memory struggles at multiple levels, from national institutions to film industries. Thus, cinema becomes entangled with national interests and diplomatic agendas while at the same time target transnational audiences. Therefore, the transnational approach to these traumatic memories through is essential not only for understanding current cinematic phenomena but also for grasping contemporary cultural, political and social dynamics.

At the same time, the temporal distance from the war and the generational shift toward postmemory complicate the study of remembrance. Since access to living testimonies is increasingly limited, and film representations often become objects to study memory manifestations. While memory is often conceptualised as a stable concept, it has also been noted that processes of remembrance are fluid and changing phenomena that constantly adopt new meaning in memorial sites (Rigney, 2008; Lee 2019) as well as films (Centeno-Martin, 2019, 2020; Sánchez-Biosca, 2024). To examine them, the volume proposes a methodological shift from focusing on fixed memorial narratives to analysing the dynamics of memory creation through films, i.e. assessing how moving images are produced, circulated and reinterpreted across time and space. In this sense, memory-related film cultures become a form of cultural heritage, whether used as political activism, artistic intervention or commercialized. It must be noted that in any of those cases, film productions result from contemporary events—new archival discoveries, filmmakers' engagement, political agendas, victims' initiatives or commercial interests. Consequently, cinema may be interpreted as a medium that materialises current concerns onto past events. Iconographies of the war in Asia are thus shaped by changing sensitivities and evolving imaginaries, which differ across national contexts and historical periods. Thus, films may act as both "channelling agents" of contemporary anxieties and as "transformative agents" that may reshape how the past is memorialized and challenging hegemonic discourses.

## FRAMES OF REPRESENTATION, FRAMES OF MEMORY IN THE TRANSNATIONAL ERA

The transformative aspect of memory-related films entails a political and ethical approach that materializes in different narrative and aesthetic strategies. In media studies, Butler (2016) asks how we might describe both the lived experience of violence and the representational frameworks through which that violence becomes intelligible. As Butler argues, "The frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality" (2016, xiii). Several essays in this issue examine precisely this



Image 3. Le and Che discuss their criticisms of the film

tension: the wound of a violent past and the ways in which media frames determine whose suffering becomes visible, whose experiences are marginalized, and whose memories enter collective remembrance.

Taken together, the essays in this issue demonstrate that collective memory, a term that goes back to Maurice Halbwachs (1992), is not simply a record of past violence, but an ongoing process shaped by visibility, movement, and mediation. They reveal how individuals and communities disappear and reappear within dominant narratives. Critical voices emerged from the 21st century like Neiger, Meyers and Zandberg (2011) point to the fact that scholars tended to view widely popular film and media representations of the past as almost straightforward manifestations of a collective attitude without critically engaging in memory conflicts within a community. As a consequence, the notion of collective memory has resulted in stabilising identities that have often been conceptualised within the context of the nation-state, neglecting transnational and global processes. Memorial cultures to date have often been understood in terms of these homogenous "container cultures" with clear-cut borders. To overcome the limitations and essentialisms in existing literature, some scholars have recommended to revisit previous approaches by adding 'transcultural' perspectives (Welsch, 1999), examining the complex creation of memorial cultures moulded by globalisation interdependence and blurring of cultural boundaries (Erll 2011). How memories travel across borders and disrupt fixed categories of belonging, and how media forms create new possibilities for remembering what has been suppressed or forgotten. In doing so, these essays move beyond the question of what societies remember to ask a more fundamental question: how do the conditions of remembering themselves change in an era of transnational media?

Film cultures in general and in East Asia ones in particular, are becoming the ground for dynamics that create memory beyond the national boundaries (sometimes in the form of cosmopolitan and global memories). The fields of Image, Film, Media and Screen Studies are increasingly interested in exploring these realities (Higson, 1989; Crofts, 1993, Centeno-Martin and Morita 2020a, 2020b) and understanding how they create transnational public spheres in which transcultural memories operate (Kirsch, 2015; Centeno-Martin, 2019, 2020). The international creation, circulation and reception of films on traumatic and violent past in Asia have an important impact for the socialisation of wartime memory. This is not necessarily new but requires an updated theoretical framework. To tackle this issue, Film and Memory Studies need to be reimagined in order to interrogate transnational dynamics that challenge the conceptual limits imposed by national boundaries. New approaches to these cultural flows need to go beyond narrow interpretations from national perspectives. As a consequence, this monograph proposes an original transnational approach that helps the reader examine production of war and conflict-related films, the appropriations of traumatic events, their cultural and social as well as aesthetic and narrative implications, their impact on the international arena, and their role in not only representing but also transforming memory of the traumatic past.

The image with which this introduction began —Le and Che recovering their memories from the background of *Apocalypse Now*— (Image 3) captures many of the questions explored throughout this issue. Le and Che are not merely witnesses to history but participants in two struggles: the first over territory, power, and survival; the second over representation and memory. Their story reminds us that memory is never simply inherited from the past. It is continually reconstructed through media, shaped by national and transnational frameworks, and renegotiated by those whose experiences have too often remained at the margins of official histories. The essays collected here similarly examine how films recover forgotten voices, challenge dominant narratives, and create new forms of remembrance that travel across generations and borders.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

Sexual violence occupies a particularly politicized position within memories of war because it becomes entangled with narratives of nationhood, masculinity, and collective identity. Wartime violence is rarely remembered only as an assault against individual bodies; it is frequently articulated through narratives of national humiliation, sovereignty, and power. McClintock (1995) famously argues that all nationalisms are gendered, with women—both real and imagined—frequently positioned as symbols of cultural continuity and national purity, while men are imagined as the agents of political action and historical agency. Similarly, Yuval-Davis (1997) explores how women are constructed as biological reproducers of nations and carriers of national culture. Within these frameworks, wartime rape is often represented as the rape of a nation itself, with the violation of women's bodies becoming a symbolic attack on national identity and the masculinity of the defeated nation.

In this volume, Xie, Lyu, and Chen examine gendered sexual violence and its remembrance in their article on the Chinese film *The Flowers of War* (Jin ling shi san chai, Yimou Zhang, 2011). Focusing on the cinematic apparatus and its techniques of visualization, they demonstrate how the female body becomes a site through which trauma is represented, negotiated, and contested within national memory. Their analysis draws attention not only to the violence represented on screen but also to the ways that women's bodies become objects of viewing. Sen Ni's article similarly examines the transnational dimensions of

wartime sexual violence through her analysis of Kim Dong-won's *63 Years On* (Ggeutnaji anhmeun jeon jaeng, 2008). Rather than treating comfort women discourse solely as a national memory conflict, Ni demonstrates how the film creates a cinematic space for sharing transnational experiences of gendered violence. Through its attention to survivors' shared experiences across national contexts, the film challenges the boundaries that often define whose suffering belongs within particular national histories.

As these authors demonstrate, sexual violence is among the most politically contested forms of wartime violence to remember. When such violence is committed, it is often encouraged or enabled by state power as a means of domination and humiliation. Yet memories of sexual violence are also frequently constrained after the fact: perpetrator nations may seek to minimize or erase responsibility, while victim nations may frame survivors through narratives of collective suffering and national victimhood. As scholars have noted (Soh, 2008; Weiss, 2016), these frameworks often reduce survivors to "perfect victims," limiting the complexity of their experiences and obscuring uncomfortable aspects of historical responsibility, including local forms of complicity. Like Le and Che's—*We Were the Scenery*'s protagonists— realization that they had been rendered little more than cinematic background within *Apocalypse Now*, these essays demonstrate how women affected by wartime sexual violence have often been transformed into symbolic figures within national narratives rather than remembered as historical subjects with complex lives, voices, and agency.

Revert-Gomis turns to another form of violence, genocide, similarly exploring how cinema might recover histories that have been deliberately suppressed. His article examines how the American filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary diptych *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014) attempt to access remembrance of the Indonesian mass killings of 1965–66 through performative documentary. His article foregrounds the cinematic techniques through which the films access suppressed remembrance: the first by using the performativity of the perpetrators to ironically comment on their crimes; the second by following the brother of a victim as he attempts to challenge the official narrative and structures of power by interviewing the perpetrators. In both cases, cinema becomes a means of accessing memories that have been denied or erased within dominant political narratives.

Yet visibility is never only a national question. As the "transnational turn" in memory studies has demonstrated, national memories are rarely isolated formations; they are continually shaped through dialogue with global and transnational frameworks. Anderson (1983) and Nora (1989) have demonstrated that nations are constructed through shared narratives and commemorative practices; later scholars have shown how these collective narratives are transformed through global circulation. The Holocaust became not only a European historical event but also a global symbol of trauma and genocide. Levy and Sznaider (2006) describe this process as the emergence of a form of global or cosmopolitan memory, while Rothberg (2009) develops the concept of multidirectional memory to describe how memories of violence can interact across contexts rather than simply compete with one another. Similarly, Erll (2011) proposes the concept of travelling memory to describe the ways memories move across geographic, cultural, and media boundaries.

Wei and Xu's piece on the *Tokyo Trial* (Dong Jing shen pan, Qunshu Gao, 2006) forcefully examines these tensions between the national and the transnational. They argue that the film, which focuses on Judge Mei Ru'ao's moral authority, attempts to surpass earlier Chinese narratives that focus on victimhood or spectacle by appealing to a transnational visibility. However, they also demonstrate that transnational visibility does not

necessarily produce more equitable memory. Because the film largely accepts the tribunal's official historiography, a historiography shaped by uneven global power relations, it reproduces some of the asymmetries embedded within the postwar international order. In seeking dialogue with Japanese and Western audiences, the film remains caught between what Rey Chow and the authors identify as tensions between "First World imperialism and Third World nationalism." The article thus highlights a central concern of this issue: crossing national borders may open new possibilities for remembrance, but can also reproduce existing structures of power.

The question of belonging becomes even more complicated for those whose lives exist between or outside national categories. If Le and Che found themselves literally relegated to the background of another nation's cinematic narrative, migrants, defectors, and returnees similarly occupy unstable positions within competing systems of memory and identity. Hyunseon Lee's article on gendered migration in Korean defector narratives examines these tensions through the experiences of North Korean defectors, whose lives challenge the idea that national cultures cannot be understood as homogeneous or territorially fixed in an age of globalisation, mobility, and cultural hybridization. The article demonstrates that defector narratives exist within competing representational frameworks: while memoirs often emphasize survival, displacement, and complex identities, South Korean television dramas frequently reproduce national anxieties and emphasize South Korean identity. Importantly, Lee also highlights the gendered dimensions of migration and survival. Female defectors experience additional forms of vulnerability, including sexual violence, forced labor, and heightened risks of exploitation and detention. This reveals how migration narratives are shaped not only by national borders but also by gendered structures of power.

Muñoz-Garnica, Cuenca-Navarrete and Tarín-Sanz's article on journey narratives similarly explores how movement itself can become a method of collective remembrance. Comparing *Children of the Beehive* (Hachi no su no kodomotachi, Hiroshi Shimizu, 1948) and *Voices in the Wind* (Kaze no denwa, Nobuhiro Suwa, 2020), they argue that journeys across devastated landscapes function as more than narrative devices. In both films, travel becomes a process through which displaced individuals gradually reconnect with communities, memories, and forms of belonging. The journey allows characters to encounter the traces of violence while negotiating relationships between individual trauma and collective history. Through movement, memory becomes not a fixed location but a process of reconstruction.

These questions of identity and belonging also shape Burgos' analysis of *Viet and Nam* (Trong lòng dat, Minh Quý Trương, 2024). Burgos argues that the film challenges dominant national narratives of the Vietnam War, which often monumentalize remembrance through heroism, sacrifice, and revolutionary struggle, by instead emphasizing unresolved grief, missing bodies, and continuing wounds. The film's focus on queer love further disrupts narratives of militarized masculinity and national sacrifice, offering alternative forms of attachment and remembrance. At the same time, the film positions itself within broader international conversations through its circulation at film festivals and its engagement with multidirectional memory.

Finally, we return to the question with which this introduction began: what can media itself do? There is a well-established body of scholarship examining the relationship between media and collective memory. Hirsch's (1997) work on photographs and familial remembrance of the Holocaust demonstrates how images can transmit traumatic histories across generations. Landsberg's (2004) concept of prosthetic memory examines how mass-mediated representations allow individuals

to develop relationships with histories beyond their own lived experiences, while Rosenstone (2023) explores how historical films produce particular forms of historical understanding. Building upon these foundational interventions, the essays in this volume examine how films and documentaries, particularly those that are transnational in their production, funding, distribution, or subject matter, function as strategies for accessing, reshaping, and contesting collective remembrance.

Several essays demonstrate how cinema can create alternative frameworks for transnational memory. Ni's article draws upon Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory to examine how cinematic representation allows memories of gendered violence to move across national boundaries. She argues that the transnational testimonies brought together by the film reveal resonances across different histories of recruitment, incarceration, stigma, and enforced silence. These shared patterns, while rooted in distinct national contexts, open the possibility of a trans-Asian ethics of memory that privileges historical justice over nationally bounded narratives of remembrance. In this way, cinema becomes not simply a representation of memory but a mechanism through which new collective articulations of remembrance can be rendered visible.

Burgos's analysis of *Viet and Nam* similarly demonstrates how cinematic form itself can create new possibilities for remembrance. Through its use of long takes, fragmented chronology, and dreamlike aesthetics, the film communicates the fractured nature of trauma and challenges the linear, heroic narratives that often structure official national histories. Rather than resolving historical violence into a coherent narrative of sacrifice or redemption, the film preserves uncertainty, absence, and unresolved grief. In doing so, it functions as a counter-memory (Foucault, 1977): a form of remembrance that challenges dominant narratives by attending to what remains unfinished, forgotten, or unrepresentable.

Jihoon Kim examines another dimension of transnational filmmaking through the concept of Hjort's (2009) affirmative transnationalism. Focusing on documentary works by Oh Minwook and Im Heung-soon, the article examines how filmmakers use cultural affinity and shared historical experiences to explore contested memories across East Asia. Rather than understanding transnational filmmaking simply as a product of global circulation or international collaboration, the article emphasizes its potential as a form of memory work: a way of recognizing historical parallels across borders while acknowledging the differences among particular experiences of trauma. These works demonstrate how media can create spaces for dialogue among memories that have often been separated by national frameworks.

Revert-Gomis's analysis of *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* further illustrates how cinematic form can provide access to suppressed histories. He examines how Oppenheimer uses performance and reenactment to confront perpetrators with their own narratives of violence. By asking former perpetrators to recreate their crimes through cinematic conventions drawn from Hollywood genres, the perpetrators are positioned simultaneously as actors, narrators, and subjects of critique. This approach recalls Diana Taylor's (2003) distinction between the archive and the repertoire. When official records disappear and when bodies, documents, and testimonies have been erased or suppressed, embodied performance becomes a crucial means through which memory can be accessed. In Oppenheimer's films, gestures, reenactments, and storytelling become forms of embodied remembrance that challenge official narratives and expose histories that have been denied.

Finally, Muñoz-Garnica, Cuenca-Navarrete and Tarín-Sanz's article demonstrates how cinema can facilitate the working-through of collective trauma not by reconstructing historical events directly, but by engaging with the material traces

they leave behind. They argue that the films produce a "hermeneutics of ruins," wherein scenes of travel through devastated landscapes transform ruins from evidence of destruction into spaces of memory, mourning, and ethical recovery. Although the films depict different catastrophes (the aftermath of the Asia-Pacific War and the 2011 Tōhoku disaster), they similarly share an interest in how encounters with damaged environments allow individuals and communities to interpret traumatic histories and imagine possibilities for reconnection. ■

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## NOTES

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## WE WERE THE SCENERY: TRANSNATIONAL REMEMBRANCE IN AN AGE OF GLOBAL MEMORY

**Abstract**

This article calls for decolonizing Memory Studies exploring the relationship between visual culture, memory, and transnationality in East Asia and the Pacific. Taking the documentary *We Were the Scenery* (Christopher Radcliff, 2025) as its point of departure, it reflects on who is remembered, who is granted visibility within historical narratives of war and its aftermath, and how audiovisual media participate in the construction, circulation, and contestation of collective memory. It argues that memories of violence cannot remain confined within national frameworks but are instead shaped through transnational processes of migration, media circulation, and cultural exchange. Resulting from the «memory battles» in the region, Asian Cinemas, shaped by histories of colonialism, war, and migration, have become central sites for negotiating traumatic pasts and forming postmemory communities. Ultimately, the article contends that films act as transformative agents that not only preserve the past but also actively contribute to the production of new forms of memory, challenging national narratives, and revealing how remembrance itself changes in an era of global media circulation.

**Key words**

Transnational Memory; Visual Culture; Collective Memory; East Asia; Memory Studies.

**Authors**

Amanda Weiss holds a PhD in Information Studies from the University of Tokyo. She is Associate Professor of Japanese at Georgia Institute of Technology, where she teaches courses in media studies and cultural studies. Her research centers on Chinese and Japanese contemporary media, and especially works that explore national identity and collective memory. Her book, *Han Heroes and Yamato Warriors: Competing Masculinities in Chinese and Japanese War Cinema* (Hong Kong University Press, 2023), examines contemporary East Asian remembrance of WWII. Contact: amanda.weiss@modlangs.gatech.edu.

## ÉRAMOS EL DECORADO: LA REMEMORACIÓN TRANSNACIONAL EN LA ERA DE LA MEMORIA GLOBAL

**Resumen**

Este artículo propone una descolonización de los estudios de la memoria mediante el análisis de las relaciones entre cultura visual, memoria y transnacionalidad en Asia Oriental y el Pacífico. Tomando como punto de partida el documental *We Were the Scenery* (Christopher Radcliff, 2025), reflexiona sobre quién es recordado, quién adquiere visibilidad dentro de los relatos históricos sobre la guerra y sus consecuencias y de qué modo los medios audiovisuales participan en la construcción, circulación y disputa de la memoria colectiva. Se sostiene que las memorias de la violencia no pueden permanecer confinadas dentro de marcos nacionales, sino que se configuran mediante procesos transnacionales de migración, circulación mediática e intercambio cultural. Como resultado de las «batallas por la memoria» en la región, los cines asiáticos, marcados por las historias de colonialismo, guerra y migración, se han convertido en espacios fundamentales para negociar pasados traumáticos y conformar comunidades de posmemoria. En última instancia, el artículo defiende que el cine actúa como un agente transformador que no solo preserva el pasado, sino que contribuye activamente a la producción de nuevas formas de memoria, cuestionando los relatos nacionales y mostrando cómo los propios procesos de rememoración se transforman en una era de circulación mediática global.

**Palabras clave**

Memoria transnacional; Cultura visual; Memoria colectiva; Asia Oriental; Estudios de la memoria.

**Autores**

Amanda Weiss es doctora en Estudios de la Información por la Universidad de Tokio. Actualmente, es profesora asociada de japonés en el Georgia Institute of Technology, donde imparte docencia en los ámbitos de los estudios de medios y los estudios culturales. Su investigación se centra en los medios contemporáneos chinos y japoneses, especialmente en aquellas obras que exploran la identidad nacional y la memoria colectiva. Es autora de *Han Heroes and Yamato Warriors: Competing Masculinities in Chinese and Japanese War Cinema* (Hong Kong University Press, 2023), un estudio sobre la rememoración contemporánea de la Segunda Guerra Mundial en Asia Oriental. Contacto: amanda.weiss@modlangs.gatech.edu.

Marcos Centeno-Martin is Associate Professor in at the University of Valencia where he teaches Film and Japanese Studies and serves as director for its Master in Japanese and Korean studies. Previously, he worked as Japanese Programme director at Birkbeck, University of London, and as lecturer at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), where he coordinated the MA Global Cinemas and the Transcultural. His research focuses on Japanese documentary cinema, transculturality, memory, and the visual representation of the Ainu people. Centeno has been PI of the research project "TRAMEVIC: Transnational Memories in East Asian Visual Culture" (CIGE/2023/066). Contact: marcos.centeno@uv.es.

Alberto Porta-Pérez holds a PhD in Communication Sciences and teaches Audiovisual Communication and Video Game Design and Development at Universitat Jaume I (Castellón, Spain). He was a visiting doctoral researcher at Ritsumeikan University (Kyoto, Japan). His research focuses on interactive narratives, ethics, and emotional experiences in video games, with particular attention to childhood, nostalgia, and slow gameplay in Japanese games. He is a member of the Spanish chapter of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA España) and an associate member of the Unitat d'Investigació Japó (UIJ) at the Universitat de València, where he teaches postgraduate courses on Japanese audiovisual culture. Contact: aporta@uji.es.

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Marcos Centeno-Martín es profesor titular de la Universitat de València, donde imparte docencia en Cine y Estudios Japoneses y dirige el Máster en Estudios de Asia Oriental. Anteriormente, fue director del programa de japonés en Birkbeck, University of London, y profesor en la SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), donde coordinó el máster Global Cinemas and the Transcultural. Su investigación se centra en el cine documental japonés, la transculturalidad, la memoria y la representación visual del pueblo ainu. Es investigador principal del proyecto «TRAMEVIC: Transnational Memories in East Asian Visual Culture» (CIGE/2023/066). Contacto: marcos.centeno@uv.es.

Alberto Porta-Pérez es doctor en Ciencias de la Comunicación y profesor de Comunicación Audiovisual y del Grado en Diseño y Desarrollo de Videojuegos en la Universitat Jaume I (Castellón, España). Realizó una estancia de investigación doctoral en la Ritsumeikan University (Kioto, Japón). Su investigación se centra en las narrativas interactivas, la ética y las experiencias emocionales en los videojuegos, con especial atención a la infancia, la nostalgia y las formas de juego pausadas en los videojuegos japoneses. Es miembro de Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA España) y miembro colaborador de la Unitat d'Investigació Japó (UIJ) de la Universitat de València, donde imparte docencia de posgrado sobre cultura audiovisual japonesa. Contacto: aporta@uji.es.

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NOTEBOOK

# TRANSNATIONAL MEMORIES IN ASIAN CINEMAS


**HERMENEUTICS OF RUINS: FROM TRACES TO THE HEALING OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMA IN *CHILDREN OF THE BEEHIVE* AND *VOICES IN THE WIND***
Miguel Muñoz-Garnica, Cora Cuenca-Navarrete, Adrián Tarín-Sanz

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***THE TOKYO TRIAL*: REFLECTIONS ON VISUALITY, TRANSNATIONAL DIALOGUE AND MONUMENTALITY**
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**BEYOND NATIONAL MEMORY: MULTILINGUAL WITNESSING AND TRANSNATIONAL COMFORT WOMEN SURVIVORSHIP IN *63 YEARS ON***
Sen Ni

**THE NORTH KOREAN DIASPORA AND KOREAN POPULAR CULTURE: GENDERED MIGRATION IN DEFECTOR MEMOIRS AND SCREEN MEDIA**
Hyunseon Lee

# HERMENEUTICS OF RUINS: FROM TRACES TO THE HEALING OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMA IN *CHILDREN OF THE BEEHIVE* AND *VOICES IN THE WIND*

MIGUEL MUÑOZ-GARNICA
CORA CUENCA-NAVARRETE
ADRIÁN TARÍN-SANZ

## INTRODUCTION

In 1948, Japanese director Hiroshi Shimizu released *Children of the Beehive* (Hachi no su no kodomotachi, Hiroshi Shimizu, 1948), his first film produced after the Second World War. A self-financed project, it contained no scripted dialogue, was shot entirely on location, and starred a group of non-professional child actors (McDonald, 2006: 185). It tells the story of a gang of war orphans who wander aimlessly surviving on petty theft until they encounter a repatriated soldier who leads them on a journey across Japan. The film presents a country devastated by military defeat, including a sequence showing Hiroshima still in ruins after the atomic bombing. But its realism extends beyond the setting, as the children in the cast were essentially playing themselves. They were real war orphans from a shelter funded by Shimizu himself in the aftermath of the war (Drew, 2004).

Until then, Shimizu had been one of the leading directors at Shochiku, a major Japanese film studio. For this project, however, he made the unusual decision to establish a small independent company and shoot the film with only three crew members: cinematographer Saburo Furuyama, assistant director Shinichi Sekizawa, and former director Tadamoto Ōkubo, who, having been left unemployed after the war, accepted the role of educator of the orphaned children. The remaining tasks were carried out by people with no professional experience in filmmaking, such as the two employees from the Atami train station outside Tokyo who were recruited to serve as assistant director and as the actor playing the repatriated soldier. The children themselves contributed to the production not only as performers but also by carrying equipment and holding reflectors. A single truck transported the entire crew and all the production materials between locations (Sato, 1997: 32).

While the production methods were unprecedented in Shimizu's directorial career, the sensibility that informed them was not. Since the 1930s, his films had been reflecting his commitment to social causes:

> His characters are almost always those who are alienated from the mainstream of society, whether by personal situation (poverty, family breakdown), profession (his men are often artists; his women, hostesses or prostitutes), or geography (most of his films are set in outlying areas of Japan, particularly the mountainous and inaccessible Izu Peninsula). Shimizu's sympathy for the outsider grants him the perspective from which to look sceptically at the society into which his characters fit only uneasily, if it all (Jacoby, 2004).

The "journey-event" also had precedents in Shimizu's work, both as a method of production and as a narrative framework. *Mr. Thank You* (Arigatō-san, Hiroshi Shimizu, 1936), one of his most celebrated films, had a narrative structured around a bus journey through the mountains of the Izu Peninsula. The story begins at the departure point of the bus's journey and ends at its destination, offering glimpses into the lives of its passengers along the way. The same structure is used in *Children of the Beehive*, which begins where the children first meet the repatriated soldier, stops wherever they stop, and concludes when they reach their destination, an orphanage known as the "Introspection Tower". This location also establishes a connection with another of Shimizu's films, *Introspection Tower* (Mikaeri no tō, Hiroshi Shimizu, 1941), which had previously reflected his concern for the education and care of underprivileged children. Like *Mr. Thank You*, *Children of the Beehive* presents a light-hearted narrative punctuated by a few more sentimental episodes, but all characterised by a structure akin to an adventure comedy and a mise-en-scène more attentive to the movement of its cast and their relationship with the setting than to the eruption of personal dramas.

However, *Children of the Beehive* differs significantly from Shimizu's earlier work, and not solely because of its unusually austere production methods. The historical event it deals with is of a far greater magnitude, as it constitutes 20th-century Japan's most profound national trauma: a years-long military conflict that resulted in millions of deaths, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the defeat and devastation of the country. In this context, Shimizu's film addresses two central concerns: the first is the need—more intuitive than explicit—to take the camera into the spaces of a shattered Japan and explore them as a way of confronting the wound head-on; the second is the need to start the healing, which explains the addition of a fictional layer in the form of a journey taken by two archetypes of alienation in post-war Japan: the orphan and the repatriated soldier.

Nearly 70 years later, Nobuhiro Suwa would make *Voices in the Wind* (Kaze no denwa, Nobuhiro Suwa, 2020), a film that deals with Japan's most significant collective disaster of the 21st century—the Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident—through a similar journey narrative, a filmmaking process markedly open to the real, and a confrontation with the ruins left in the disaster's wake. The film was inspired by an installation of the same name: an unconnected telephone booth that a resident of Ōtsuchi, Iwate Prefecture, installed in his garden to talk to his deceased cousin. After the Tōhoku disaster (in which more than a tenth of Ōtsuchi's population perished), its creator decided to make the booth open to the public so that other survivors could use it in the same way. According to reports in the Japanese media, the phone booth attracted thousands of visitors, prompting producer Eiji Izumi to commission Suwa to make a film about it. Out of this emerged the plot for *Voices in the Wind*: Haru, a teenage girl who lost her parents and younger brother in the tsunami, sets out on a journey from Hiroshima to Ōtsuchi, where her family home once stood.

But Haru's journey is not motivated by the existence of the phone booth. In fact, she only discovers the booth by chance, as Suwa believed it would be more effective for the journey to remain open-ended and only find its purpose at the very end (Daichi, 2019). Rather, what drives her is a gradually discovered desire to return home. It is also no accident that her journey begins in Hiroshima: Suwa was born there, and he had previously explored the tragic legacy of the atomic bombings in *H Story* (2001), which tells the fictional yet plausible story of a film crew led by Suwa himself that attempt to shoot a remake of *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959). The project is doomed to failure, allowing the filmmaker to reflect on the impossible nature of recreating the ruins of Hiroshima, and to explore a spectral space between memory and the marks of trauma (Muñoz-Garnica, 2018: 8).

Although Suwa did not experience the bombing himself, its imprint is evident throughout his filmography, including in *Voices in the Wind*, where it appears not only in the film's point of departure in Hiroshima, but also in the testimony of an elderly woman who tells Haru of her memories of the attack, which she experienced as a child—memories, incidentally, that are the genuine recollections of the actress who portrays her. In this way, Haru's journey establishes a relationship not only between the film's locations but also between the memories of the disasters of 1945 and 2011.

As in *Children of the Beehive*, Suwa's filmmaking methodology was grounded in an openness to the real that is clearly inspired by André Bazin, embracing a conception of cinema in which images preserve the imprint of the real—by virtue of their photographic basis and the inherent *objectivity* of the cinematic apparatus—and therefore aspire to respect "the ambiguity of the real" (Bazin, 2008: 136). The film's plot took shape progressively; the script functioned merely as a general guide and in most cases the actors improvised their lines. Haru's final monologue, for instance, was not prepared: Suwa decided that the actress would improvise it upon stepping inside the phone booth for the first time (Wakata, 2020). Although the film featured professional actors (including the rising star Serena Motola alongside veterans such as Hidetoshi Nishijima, Tomokazu Miura, and Toshiyuki Nishida), it also incorporated non-professionals who simply recounted their own personal stories.

In this way, the exploration of national trauma, the healing journey narrative and the methodology of improvisation and openness to the real establish a clear connection between *Children of the Beehive* and *Voices in the Wind*. Indeed, Suwa himself reinforces this connection: in an essay on Shimizu's film, he describes it not merely as a docufiction about war orphans but as a crystallization of the ideal of filming childhood. He goes on to ask: "Is it a coincidence that this crystallization, achieved in isolation by Hiroshi Shimizu, emerged simultaneously in Italy and later spread to France and Iran, resonating with the spirit of a new cinema that has endured to our day?" (Suwa, 2018: 73).

Suwa thus suggests that Shimizu in Japan—at the same time as Italian Neorealism yet with no intention of imitating it—planted the seed of cinematic modernity. He conceives of this modernity as a succession of interconnected movements—from the French Nouvelle Vague to the New Iranian Cinema—to which he himself belongs. *H Story*, for example, is conceived of as a dialogue with *Hiroshima mon amour*, just as *Un couple parfait* (2005) engages intertextually with one of the canonical works of cinematic modernity, Roberto Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* (1954) (Muñoz-Garnica, 2018). Viewed from this perspective, both *Children of the Beehive* and *Voices in the Wind* belong to a modern cinematic tradition that transcends national and historical boundaries. They even recreate what Serge Daney identified as the foundation of this type of cinema: the ruins of cities devastated by the Second World War, leaving a modernity

THE RUINS ARE REAL SPACES THAT FUNCTION SIMULTANEOUSLY AS DOCUMENTARY TESTIMONIES TO TRAUMA AND AS INSTRUMENTS OF HEALING

founded "the ruins of annihilated and disqualified cinema, on the fundamental refusal of the fake, of mise en scène, of the stage" (Daney, 1983: 172).

Another element that consolidates the dialogue between the two films is the development of a parent-child dynamic between victims of catastrophe: between the repatriated soldier and the war orphans, and again between Haru and Morio, a character who gradually becomes both her travelling companion and her protector, and who also lost his wife and daughter in the tsunami. But of greatest interest for this study is the way both films concentrate these concerns on the ruins: real spaces that function simultaneously as documentary testimonies to trauma, as places where that trauma can be confronted, and as instruments of healing. To this end, both films deploy a series of formal strategies that will be analysed below to explore the dialogue they establish. First, however, it is important to outline the conceptual framework that informs this study and to address a noteworthy phenomenon of modern Japanese history: the promotion by social and political forces in the country of a kind of collective amnesia in relation to the traumas of the past, which effectively makes these two films acts of resistance.

## TRAUMA, CINEMA AND THE CONCEALMENT OF PAIN

Out of all the possible human responses to the shock caused by a traumatic event, researcher Dominick LaCapra highlights two: "acting out" and "working through". In the first, we performatively re-enact or relive the past as if it was occurring in the present rather than merely represented in the memory; we are thus haunted by the return of that which we have repressed (Yoneyama, 1999: 31; LaCapra, 2001: 70). In the second, we attempt to take a critical distance from the problem and to distinguish between the past, the present and the future. Thes two categories are reminiscent of the types of memory distinguished by Tzvetan Todorov (1996) in his now classic work *Les abus de la mémoire*: on the one hand, "literal" memory, which renders the remembered event insurmountable, leading to a subjugation of the present to the past; and on the other, "exemplary" memory, which allows us to construct a principle of action for the present out of the recollection.

LaCapra's and Todorov's conceptualisations of "working through" and exemplary memory foster a collective understanding of trauma, whereby the specific behaviours and (dis)affections of the victims are articulated publicly and politically. In this way, trauma acts on the members of a community and "leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander, 2012: 6). This is why the power of mourning—a basic tool for managing trauma—lies in its shared nature, in the exposure of the pain to the world ("socialization or ritualization of the repetition compulsion") in order to seek solace and "resumption of social life [...] and renewal" (LaCapra, 2001: 66).

In this "resumption of social life", returning from the trauma to a restored life, the multidirectional conception of memory (Rothberg, 2009) can become a powerful ally. Thus, in contrast to a model of isolated or subordinate memories, they should be brought into conversation with each other, interweaving them so that they can influence one another and generate unexpected solidarities between the different communities that have suffered catastrophic events, even at different moments in time, like the traumatic events recounted in *Children of the Beehive* and *Voices in the*

*Wind*, which, as shown above, can still engage in dialogue with one another.[1]

If, as Caruth (1995) suggests, a traumatised person is "possessed" by an image or an event, it could be argued that Japan is a "possessed" nation that has constructed its narrative of resilience through the elevation of the nation-group, so that it can act as a reflective shield against any uncomfortable accusations that might be levelled against it. Stories of resilience and irrepressible progress, insofar as they reinforce the moral status of the community (Wohl and Branscombe, 2008; Shibata, 2021: 108), also encourage societies to look the other way, establishing what Reyes-Mate (2013) calls a "facticity" that discriminates, conceals and consigns to oblivion. This may explain why Volpato and Licata (2010: 7) argue that collective amnesia and forgetting are common phenomena in the processes of constructing national identities. In this way, "[m]aintaining silence may be more useful than redesigning the past when it comes to shaping the future" (Evans, 2003: 9).

Therefore, "reality is not facticity, what is there. Reality also encompasses what is not, what wanted to be but could not be, what was thwarted" (López, Seiz and Gurpegui, 2008: 103). Progress—or the appearance of progress—cannot be separated from that hidden part it contains within itself, and thus the construction of a facticity "entails waste materials or ruins that do not form part of the reality achieved" (Reyes-Mate, 2003: 27) but that are there nevertheless.

In response to these dynamics of pain concealment, however, memory can rebel and permeate cinematic practice, opening up different, non-institutionalised avenues of access to the past, because what was relegated to the margins of history is part of reality, even if it is not part of "facticity" (Reyes-Mate, 2013: 59).

*Children of the Beehive* and *Voices in the Wind* thus become the victims' partners in rebellion, albeit on two distinct yet deeply interconnected levels. On the first level, Hiroshi Shimizu and Nobuhiro Suwa refuse to portray a "facticity" that does not incorporate the collective suffering caused by the Second World War and the Tōhoku disaster. As part of the traumatised society themselves, they take a stand on the margins of the film industry (as noted above, Shimizu went so far as to give up his privileged position at Shochiku) to turn their gaze towards the ruins. Both seek healing through the protagonists' wanderlust, the impulse that leads the children to follow the soldier to the "Introspection Tower", and Haru towards the telephone in the wind. And while this first level is founded on the socio-political dimension of the filmmakers' stance and their desire for healing, the second addresses ethical and aesthetic questions: through their specific and deliberate use of cinematic resources, both films offer the spectator the possibility of engaging with a hermeneutics of the ruins to develop a complex understanding of the traumatised emotions of the victims shown on screen. Through the despair Haru expresses on her journey, her frustration that everyone else seems to carry on "as if nothing had happened", cinema acts as a mediator between the traumatic past and the wounded present, giving concrete form to these dynamics of resistance against collective forgetting and institutionalised silence.

## BETWEEN SELECTIVE MEMORY AND AMNESIA: RUINS AS A WITNESS

As a pathological phenomenon, trauma is defined not by the event that causes it but by how we process and convey it (Caruth, 1995). In this respect, this study is especially concerned with trauma's discursive nature, and specifically with the materialisation of that nature through the medium of film through a refusal to aestheticise its consequences and a profound respect for its victims.

*Children of the Beehive* was released in 1948, just three years after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when Japan was still under US occupation. That same year saw the conclu-

sion of the so-called Tokyo Trials, a series of legal proceedings against Japanese war criminals that were "seen as an atonement obligation imposed on a defeated Japan, and the faithful execution of that duty was seen as one of the few means for Japan to gain reacceptance by the international community" (Tomoki, 2020: 17). Major urban centres such as Tokyo, Osaka and Hiroshima had been reduced to rubble, and economic and political turmoil was mounting due to low production and rising inflation (Teranishi, 1994: 139).

Thus, after the war, Japanese society was dominated by a strong sense of injustice, combined with the certainty of having emerged from the conflict as victims (Kaoru, 2020: 8). As Sebastian Conrad points out, we cannot understand the articulation of postwar memory in Japan without considering the American presence in the country. Both what could be remembered and what had to be forgotten had been predetermined by the Allied power, which informed any possible interpretation of the past:

> The enunciative space for interpretations of the past was further delimited by the institution of censorship. In both countries, the central objects of national commemoration were subject to restrictive measures by the occupation authorities. In Japan, coverage of the atomic bomb explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was largely prohibited, and photographic documentary was banned. Only after the end of the occupation in 1952 were pictures of the catastrophic event published in major newspapers (Conrad, 2003: 88).

The postwar narrative constructed by the United States during the occupation endowed Japan with various roles: aggressor, as the perpetrator of the war; victim, as the casualty of the atomic bombing; and loser, following its capitulation (Kaoru, 2020). Of the three, the one strategically promoted by Washington—and, conveniently, accepted by Tokyo—was the second (McCormack, 2014): at a discursive level, the crimes committed by Japan during the war were neutralised through their juxtaposition with the brutal impact of the atomic bombing. With the international community having exonerated Japan, it was left to the United States to promote a heroic and "lesser-evilist" narrative that would justify the killing of hundreds of thousands of people.

There was thus a tendency to incorporate the injuries the country had suffered rather than the ones it had inflicted into the discursive construction of Japanese national "facticity." According to Dower (1999: 14), this preoccupation with their own misery, which led a large proportion of the Japanese population to ignore the suffering they had caused others, sheds light on how self-perception as a victim influences the identities that nations construct for themselves.

According to Evans (2003: 9), the Japanese showed the world that they had reconciled with their past by abandoning militarism and authoritarianism and embracing a "positive pacifism" (McCormack, 2014: 73) that coexisted with a "historical amnesia" regarding war crimes (Dower, 1999: 14).

However, it would not be fair to the films analysed here to treat the concept of historical amnesia in absolute terms as the epistemic foundation upon which this study is based. Both realities can coexist: on the one hand, the revision of national history in the decades after the war resulted in the downplaying or omission of atrocities committed by the "defeated" and the celebration and "memorialisation" of the lives lost (Inuzuka, 2013); on the other hand, as Orr maintains, the amnesia was never actually total, but rather intermittent and partial: "there have always been voices of conscience, just as there have always been incidences of inadvertent and willful neglect of Japan's aggressive past. Rather than dwell on this amnesia, one needs also to trace the selective and manipulated remembrance of those aggressions" (Orr, 2001: 173). It might therefore be more appropriate to refer to these social and institutional processes and patterns of remembering and forgetting as

the implementation of a selective memory—a facticity, after all—rather than a collective amnesia.

In any case, the deliberate forgetting of the crimes committed by Japan during the first half of the last century constitutes one more step on the path toward the main reasoning and basis of this analysis: after the Second World War, the process of memory construction was affected by a distortion that continues to permeate the discursive elaboration of catastrophic events in contemporary Japan. The distorted discourse is ambivalent and complex, because while it elevates the legitimacy of the victim, it tends to ignore the power of the ruins, despite the fact that these two elements are intrinsically connected. Ultimately, the ruins recall a responsibility that can fragment a victimising narrative.

The postwar period brought with it the silence imposed by the US military and the initiation of the "Japanese economic miracle" in the 1960s. In the case of the 2011 triple disaster, this distortion was expressed in the narratives of "resilient nationalism" and "Ganbarō Nippon!"[2] promoted by the administration of Prime Minister Shinzō Abe (Shani, 2016: 130).

> The trauma narratives created around 3/11 are socially and culturally constructed. This narrative of natural disaster tells a story of communal suffering on the national level and removes questions of blame from a very politically fraught context. This national narrative also avoids the difficulty of talking about or looking at the actual destruction itself. It moves away from the site of danger and distress to a distant, yet comfortable and familiar narrative of recovery (Dinitto, 2014: 344).

Aiko Kashimura goes further in this sense, suggesting that one of the reactions to the Tōhoku catastrophe was not distortion but rather the suspension of representation: "In Japan disasters are not well articulated and represented. Disasters are viewed as unrepresented things." (Kashimura, 2016: 203).

In light of this distorted (non-)representation, that selective memory or partial amnesia, this study analyses films made by filmmakers—"voices of conscience", as Orr describes them—who have chosen to revisit the catastrophe in all its complexity through protagonists who are traumatised individuals doing all they can to carry on. In a context where the ruins of Hiroshima constituted forbidden ground, Shimizu used them as a form of resistance and a symptom of an intellectual approach that refused to coexist with a conflict-ridden present that excluded the past. In Warburgian terms, the filmmaker acted as a seismograph to measure the sometimes violent movements between the tectonic plates of memory and of history. The director sought to integrate the destruction caused by the bombings into the collective psyche of the Japanese people, not through a one-dimensional notion of victimhood but through the way the children interact with each other and with the soldier, through a soundscape that colours the imagery with warm and gentle tones, and through the rejection of anything programmatic or that might impose a single doctrine or a singular memory.

On the other hand, *Voices in the Wind* constructs a discourse on collective trauma and the paths, both solitary and shared, toward healing. Like Shimizu, Suwa revisits the ruins through his young protagonist, Haru; as she embarks on her personal quest, she becomes a custodian of the testimonies of people affected by catastrophe: an elderly woman who witnessed the bombings of Hiroshima; Morio, a man who, like her, lost his family in the 2011 triple disaster; but also a Kurdish family that embodies the complex reality faced by migrants in contemporary Japan. As spectators, we understand that for Haru the institutionalised "Ganbarō Nippon!" narrative represents an unreasonable demand to give up her memories, guilt and grief and look towards the future. Confronted with this frustrating and empty narrative, she decides to undertake the reverse

journey: to return to the heart of the traumatic event, to the ruins that bear witness to her loss. It is there that her healing begins.

## THE RUINS: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The two films examined here respond to collective trauma through the logic of "working through" and what Todorov terms "exemplary memory", eschewing the direct representation—and consequent aestheticization—of the disasters and instead seeking a way of overcoming them grounded not in reliving the events themselves, but in revisiting their traces. One key feature of this approach is the temporal distance between the catastrophe and the story in each film: *Children of the Beehive* was shot and set three years after Japan's surrender, while *Voices in the Wind* takes place eight years after the Tōhoku disaster. Both films are thus sufficiently removed from the events to avoid sensationalist images of the catastrophes, yet close enough for their traces still to be visible.

### *Children of the Beehive*

The opening of *Children of the Beehive* firmly establishes the film's temporal coordinates. The setting of the Shimonoseki railway station immediately situates us in a postwar Japan whose wounds remain painfully exposed. The ragged orphans scour the area in search of opportunities to steal; travellers disembark from trains and wait beside their belongings (Shimizu includes some close-ups of both actors in the film and real passers-by); a man with a missing leg (possibly lost in the war) acts as leader of the gang of child thieves. These opening scenes thus reinforce Japan's self-image as a victimised nation.

A series of shots introduces the gang's hideout, nestled amidst large concrete pipes that Shimizu uses for his typical geometric compositions and framing-within-the-frame effects (Figure 1). Yet the visual prominence of these structures also creates the impression of a landscape under construction, which has not yet succeeded in erasing the remnants of earlier destruction. It is a precarious, transitional environment through which the orphaned children move naturally, establishing one of the film's central ideas: that looking only toward the future and the hope of reconstruction is simply impossible.

As noted above, the sequence that most clearly reveals the seismographic quality of *Children of the Beehive* is the one set in Hiroshima, one of the stops on the characters' journey. It opens with

Figure 1. The children's hideout in *Children of the Beehive*

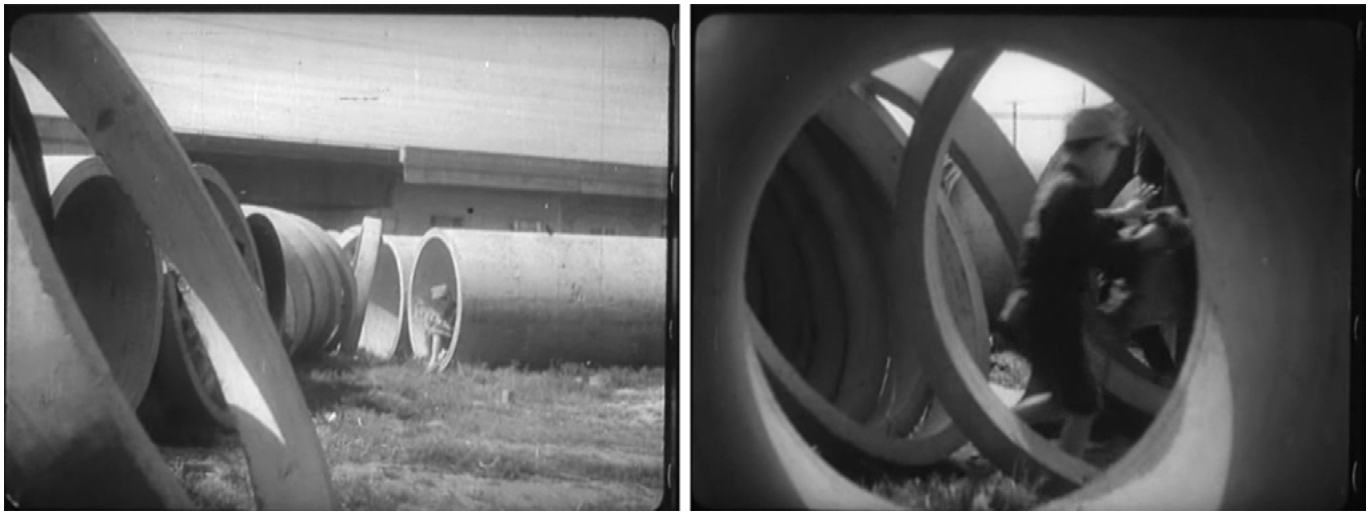




Figure 2. Shot/reverse-shot structure in the Hiroshima sequence of *Children of the Beehive*

a long pan over the city in an extreme long shot, moving from the less devastated end of the city to the other end, which the camera gradually reveals to be a wasteland of ruins. Here, Shimizu evokes a much more unequivocal opposition between destruction and reconstruction, reinforced by a subsequent shot/reverse-shot structure (Figure 2). In a medium long shot of the repatriated soldier and one of the children, we see the "living city" stretching out behind them, with new buildings and cars moving through its streets. The following long shot, filmed from behind them, places their figures amid the ruins of the "dead city", on a devastated hilltop that serves as the setting for the entire sequence. Shimizu is not particularly emphatic in his presentation of the rubble (although it clearly plays an important role in the compositions), which only makes their presence more striking: they appear both as a Dantean landscape of "twisted rock that looks extraterrestrial" (Cortés, 2020: 29), and as an everyday setting through which the characters move unperturbed.

Figure 3. The staircase and the hilltop in the Hiroshima sequence of *Children of the Beehive*





Figure 4. Playing with verticality in the Hiroshima sequence of *Children of the Beehive*

This lack of emphasis is also closely related to the historical context of the film's production. At a time when direct representations of the effects of the atomic bombings had been subject to restrictions during the US occupation (Conrad, 2003: 88), the integration of the ruins into the everyday texture of the scene functions as a way of inscribing back into the image that which had been partially excluded from public discourse.

If the mnemonic significance of the ruins appears to go unnoticed by the characters, it does not escape Shimizu. The filmmaker uses this setting to develop what is arguably the central—and perhaps even the only—dramatic focal point of the film: the story of Yoshibo, the only child whose past is known to us, whose mother died at sea. In Hiroshima, the protagonists meet up again with a repatriated woman who had first met them at Shimonoseki Station at the beginning of the film. Yoshibo, the first to notice her, runs up the steps and stands before her with his arms outstretched, as if claiming the woman's company for himself alone. Despite their apparent spontaneity, the staging of these two moments (Figure 3) establishes two significant visual patterns. The first involves playing with verticality by alternating high-angle and low-angle shots on the steps and through the frenetic movement of the children as they run up and down them. The second turns the hilltop into something resembling the heart of the ruins, a place where the return of the traumatic past collides with the present.

The scene makes clear that Yoshibo's attachment to the woman is rooted in his longing for his absent mother. The shot in which he shields her with his outstretched arms can thus be read as an expression of his fixation on the past. Yet what is ultimately negotiated on the hill is a new separation. With the soldier's assistance, the woman must persuade the boy that it is in his best interest to continue on his journey to the orphanage, where he will receive an education and the possibility of a future.

At this point, the visual motif of heights, ascents and descents comes dramatically into play (Figure 4). Yoshibo leaves the hill apparently convinced, but he turns back to look at the steps in a slightly angled shot taken from the hilltop. Then, a low-angle shot from the boy's point of view shows the woman looking down from the top of the hill. Her figure, small and only partly visible in the frame, seems almost to dissolve among the ruins.



Figure 5. Yoshibo and the woman hidden among the ruins of Hiroshima in *Children of the Beehive*

Driven by nostalgia, Yoshibo climbs back up the hill and searches desperately for the woman, unable to bear another separation. She hides among the rubble, and when he fails to find her, he bursts into tears. A long shot (Figure 5) captures this scene, holding its position as he exits the frame, after which the woman emerges from behind the rocks and watches him leave, her figure now even more concealed within the image.

Through this recurrent playing with verticality and the woman's repeated "disappearances", the hilltop comes to signify a space where past and present are negotiated. The ruins of Hiroshima, testifying directly to a national trauma, also bring Yoshibo's individual trauma to the surface, reviving the repressed memory of his separation from his mother. In obedience to the official "facticity", Shimizu avoids any explicit reference to the bombings or the war, yet the location alone is eloquent enough to evoke them. Narratively, the film simply stages its most significant personal drama against the backdrop of these ruins, the traces of the catastrophe. However, its hermeneutics of the ruins encourage us to read this story as a tiny part standing in for a much larger whole.

The Hiroshima sequence has its reflection in another one later in the film. Yoshibo falls gravely ill and asks one of his companions to help him get to the top of a nearby mountain, where he hopes to be able to see the sea so that he can remember his mother. When they finally reach the top, the boy carrying him discovers to his horror that Yoshibo has died on the way up. Yet this revelation serves merely as the abrupt conclusion to a sequence lasting several minutes showing the boy carrying Yoshibo up the mountainside. The sequence echoes the one on the hilltop in Hiroshima, with its heights and ascents. As Jesús Cortés observes, however, this mirror-sequence is completely devoid of pretext: "Neither allusions nor symbolism, neither destiny nor the future, neither war nor death. Only a child struggling up a mountain with another child, exhausted and motionless, on his back" (Cortés, 2020: 29).

Shimizu concludes both sequences with a dramatic punctuation (separation in one, death in the other), but he lingers on them long enough for the repetition to focus our attention on what has been gained along the way: not (just) compassion for

## IF TRAUMA IS COLLECTIVE, HEALING MUST BE COLLECTIVE AS WELL

Yoshibo, whose fixation on the past prevents him from completing the journey, but also hope for the companion who carries him on his back to the end, just as the children and the repatriated soldier carry one another through the final stages of their journey to the "Introspection Tower". If trauma is collective, healing must be collective as well.

### *Voices in the Wind*

As noted above, the odyssey taken in this film connects Hiroshima and Ōtsuchi, the beginning and end of Haru's journey and the sites of two national traumas. In consonance with this structure, Suwa adopts a circular pattern that repeatedly returns to the trope of the ruins. In both cities, scenes set amid devastated landscapes bring Haru face-to-face with the traces of her loss and lead her, like Yoshibo on the hilltop in Hiroshima, to break down in tears.

A comparison of these two scenes (Figure 6) suggests that this circularity is also constructed through formal repetition. The first scene, set in

Figure 6. Left: three frames from *Voices in the Wind* set among the ruins left by flooding in Hiroshima. Right: three frames depicting the ruins of Haru's former home in Ōtsuchi



Hiroshima, takes place after Haru's aunt has been taken to hospital in critical condition. Her illness reawakens Haru's memories of the death of her family, who perished in the Tōhoku disaster. Several neighbourhoods of Hiroshima have recently been affected by severe flooding that has done damage to streets and homes. Ignoring the barriers set up to restrict access to the area, Haru wanders through these new ruins and, standing amid the debris, delivers a monologue expressing the feelings of guilt she carries as the sole survivor of her family. Suwa seems to suggest that she is drawn to this particular devastated landscape by a kind of magnetic force. In one of the few houses left standing after the flood, she meets an elderly woman who recounts her memories of the atomic bombing in 1945, and it is in response to the old woman's testimony that Haru verbalises her own condition as a survivor of the tsunami for the first time. The ruins in this first sequence carry a personal and national mnemonic weight that transcends the flood, which serves primarily as a catalyst. Here, for the first time in the film, Suwa creates a dynamic of multidirectional memories. This is especially evident in Haru's interaction with the elderly woman: rather than a competition of memories of suffering across generations, what emerges is a dialogue that intertwines them and begins to construct a network of solidarities that Haru will encounter throughout her journey.

The frames selected here (Figure 6) reveal two formal devices that associate Haru with the ruins. The first is a rear shot, close to Haru's point of view, which places her in a painful confrontation with the devastated landscape; the second is an extreme long shot that renders her tiny. In this way, Suwa establishes much the same idea that Shimizu articulates in the opening sequence of *Children of the Beehive* at the train station: reconstruction is impossible because the ruins cannot be ignored.

A while later in Ōtsuchi, standing before what little remains of her former home, Haru is once again framed from behind as she faces the ruins (Figure 6). She then repeats an action we saw previously in the scene in Hiroshima, where she collapses in exhaustion among the debris and a man comes to her aid and helps her back to her feet. In the Ōtsuchi scene, she sinks to the ground once again upon the remains of her house and then Morio encourages her to rise. The actions are virtually identical; what differs is the scale of the shot, which is much closer the second time.

THE RUINS OF HIROSHIMA REOPEN THE WOUNDS OF A TRAUMATIC PAST, WHILE THE RUINS OF ŌTSUCHI TELL OF A PROCESS OF HEALING MADE POSSIBLE BY THE JOURNEY ITSELF.

Despite the formal differences between these two moments, their similarities are clear. Both men express a kind of empathetic solidarity with Haru. We learn that the first lost his sister and has not seen his children for years due to his divorce, while Morio lost both his wife and daughter in the tsunami and carries a burden of guilt as a former worker at the Fukushima nuclear power plant. Through this empathy, both characters suggest an unfulfilled fatherly instinct, and their efforts to help and protect Haru similarly hint at a recognition of a shared loss.

In this way, the ruins of Hiroshima reopen the wounds of a traumatic past—suffered individually by Haru and historically by Japan—while the ruins of Ōtsuchi tell of a process of healing made possible by the journey itself.

As is typical of Suwa's films, *Voices in the Wind* relies heavily on long takes. This final sequence among the ruins of Ōtsuchi consists of only two shots lasting a total of six minutes before Morio finally helps Haru to her feet. As a result, each cut highlights the expressive significance of this operation. This is how we should understand the third shot in the sequence, which marks a shift in



Figure 7. Frame from *Voices in the Wind* showing a ruined house in Ōtsuchi

the point of view while at the same time affirming the characters' growing recognition of the shared nature of their suffering. In LaCapra's terms, their pain becomes a means of seeking consolation and of re-entering and resuming their social life, to use LaCapra's expression (2001: 61). This third shot reframes Morio and Haru on a wider scale (Figure 7), showing the ruins of the house in their entirety, the row of neighbouring homes that testify to the continuity of life in the town, and the hills in the background. At the same time, the glare of sunlight "burns" the image and creates a dividing line in the shot, providing a shelter beneath which the two characters walk together as they leave the site of the trauma behind. The cut to this shut thus entails a new way of seeing not only for the spectator but also for the two characters, who have just taken a decisive step in their shared process of healing. As the change to the scene suggests, they are beginning to envision their future in a brighter light.

Of course, this step forward does not mean the end of the trauma, but it does mean its transformation into a shared experience. In this way, the film eschews a linear narrative about characters overcoming their pain to acknowledge a more prolonged process of mourning, closer to the "mourning work" described by Creighton (2014) than to the narratives of instant resilience promoted by institutional discourse. This mourning work might include the creation of spontaneous memorials, community storytelling or the recovery and restoration of photographs swept away by the tsunami, all of which are understood as ways of reinscribing lost relationships in the present.

## CONCLUSIONS

Like any other political community, Japan has articulated its relationship with collective traumas through institutional narratives that tend to organise, channel or even limit its memory. In

contrast to these frameworks—ranging from the restrictions imposed during the US occupation to contemporary rhetorics of resilience—the films made by Shimizu and Suwa propose ways of relating to the past that involve re-inscribing it into present experience rather than insisting on its closure. In this sense, the analysis of the two films sheds light on how certain methodological and formal resources—an openness to the real, the metaphor of the journey, a focus on ruins—serve as ways of intervening in the memory regimes of their respective historical contexts.

In *Children of the Beehive*, this intervention is articulated through a shift towards the intimate, which, far from representing a de-historicisation, functions as a strategy for the indirect inscription of trauma. In the absence of an explicit discourse on the war or the bombings (in a context of restrictions on the public representation of the recent past), the film depicts their effects on everyday life, on bodies and on the connections between people. Yoshibo's drama, read as a synecdoche, a "tiny part standing in for the whole", thus allows the image to sustain what could not be fully expressed, transforming the ruins into a space where history persists in seemingly minor yet densely significant forms.

*Voices in the Wind*, on the other hand, deploys a distinct yet complementary logic. In opposition to the institutionally promoted recovery and resilience narratives in the wake of the Tōhoku disaster, this film insists on a return to the devastated spaces and an openness to fragmentary narratives about the traumatic experience. This aligns the film with practices of "memory from below" whereby communities process their loss by re-inscribing it in the space and in their connections with each other. The ruins thus cease to be mere remnants of the past and become sites of encounters between memories, where mourning is not concluded but instead shared and transformed.

In this way, the dialogue between the two films also facilitates the articulation of a productive relationship between the theoretical frameworks discussed—trauma as a collective process (LaCapra), multidirectional memory (Rothberg) and the critique of "facticity" (Reyes Mate)—and their expression in specific cinematic forms. While such concepts help identify the tensions between memory and oblivion, between "working through" and closure, it is the images that demonstrate how these tensions are embodied in bodies, spaces and actions. Conversely, the textual analysis of the films sheds light on the material and affective dimensions of these concepts, preventing them from being reduced to mere abstractions.

Both *Children of the Beehive* and *Voices in the Wind* are thus inscribed in the cinematic tradition of modernity, which uses the ruins to question hegemonic narratives of progress and overcoming. Rather than opposing these narratives explicitly, these films displace them by exploring what they tend to exclude: the persistence of pain, the materiality of the ruins, and the need for ongoing mourning. In this sense, the films do not merely narrate trauma but aim to make it inhabitable, and to facilitate the "resumption of social life" for the victims through a perspective committed to examining the fractures of the past.

This resistance against the closure of the past can be viewed through a Benjaminian lens. In 1940, Walter Benjamin wrote a brief text regarding a painting by Paul Klee that obsessed him so much that he ultimately purchased it: *Angelus Novus*. In this text, the German thinker describes a cross-eyed angel whom he compares to "history" because his eyes look behind him at the relentless piling up of "rubble on top of rubble", while a storm—progress—has caught itself up in his wings and "drives him irresistibly into the future" (Benjamin, 2008: 310). From this perspective, *Children of the Beehive* and *Voices in the Wind* can act as the necessary anchors to prevent the storm from sweeping history away and erasing the traces of the past. This would be an exemplary practice of memory, facilitating the extraction from the traumatic experience of an

essence oriented towards the future of a repaired life that neither conceals nor exhibits its collective wounds, but merely renders them visible in order to learn how to live with them. ■

## NOTES

1 It is not the intention of this study to compare the scale or severity of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with that of the Tōhoku disaster. Rather, its aim is to bring the filmic and discursive articulations that have developed around these two events into a conversation with each other.

2 *Ganbarō Nippon!*, usually translated as "Let's do our best, Japan!" or "Stay strong, Japan!", was a slogan widely disseminated in the aftermath of the triple disaster. In this context, it came to acquire a particular meaning related to ideas of resilience, national unity and collective determination in the face of crisis. At the same time, however, this narrative of perseverance tended to obscure structural problems, including failures in crisis management and unresolved questions concerning responsibility and accountability.

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## HERMENEUTICS OF RUINS: FROM TRACES TO THE HEALING OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMA IN *CHILDREN OF THE BEEHIVE* AND *VOICES IN THE WIND*

**Abstract**

The article analyzes how *Children of the Beehive* (Hachi no su no kodomotachi, Hiroshi Shimizu, 1948) and *Voices in the Wind* (Kaze no denwa, Nobuhiro Suwa, 2020) use ruins as ethical-formal devices to address the major collective traumas experienced by Japan since World War II. In both films, the ruins not only serve as devastated settings caused by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the Tōhoku catastrophe but also act as traces of a pain that resists being addressed by official narratives. Through a cinematic methodology open to the real and the journey as a narrative motif, the directors propose an ethics of testimony that avoids the aestheticization of trauma, instead offering an "exemplary" and "multidirectional" memory that connects different generations of victims and survivors. In contrast to the institutionalization of forgetting promoted by the Japanese state in the name of modernization and stability, these works construct cinematic spaces of resistance, where the traumatic can be collectively processed, thus laying symbolic foundations for a grassroots healing process.

**Key words**

Collective trauma; Memory; Cinema; Japan; Ruins; Institutionalization of forgetting.

**Authors**

Miguel Muñoz-Garnica (Guadix, 1988) holds a PhD in Communication from the Universidad de Navarra, is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication and Education at the Universidad Loyola de Andalucía and a member of the research group "Audiovisual Narrative and Aesthetics (NEA)" at the Universidad de Navarra. His lines of research focus on film analysis, especially Japanese and Asian cinema. He is the author of several articles published in scientific journals, such as Fotocinema, Revista de comunicación and Quarterly Review of Film and Video. He has published the book *Hirokazu Koreeda* (*Cátedra*, 2022). Contact: miguelmunoz@uloyola.es

## HERMENÉUTICA DE LAS RUINAS. DE LAS HUELLAS A LA SANACIÓN DEL TRAUMA COLECTIVO EN *LOS NIÑOS DE LA COLMENA* Y *EL TELÉFONO DEL VIENTO*

**Resumen**

El artículo analiza cómo *Los niños de la colmena* (Hachi no su no kodomotachi, Hiroshi Shimizu, 1948) y *El teléfono del viento* (Kaze no denwa, Nobuhiro Suwa, 2020) utilizan las ruinas como dispositivos ético-formales para afrontar los principales traumas colectivos sufridos por Japón desde la Segunda Guerra Mundial. En ambas películas, las ruinas no solo funcionan como escenarios devastados por los bombardeos de Hiroshima y Nagasaki o por la catástrofe de Tōhoku, sino que actúan como huellas de un dolor que se resiste a ser abordado por las narrativas oficiales. A través de una metodología cinematográfica abierta a lo real y del viaje como motivo narrativo, los directores plantean una ética del testimonio que evita la estetización del trauma, proponiendo en su lugar una «memoria ejemplar» y «multidireccional» que conecta diferentes generaciones de víctimas y supervivientes. Frente a la institucionalización del olvido promovida por el Estado japonés en aras de la modernización y la estabilidad, estas obras construyen espacios fílmicos de resistencia, donde lo traumático puede ser elaborado colectivamente, sentando así las bases simbólicas para una sanación «desde abajo».

**Palabras clave**

Trauma colectivo; Memoria; Cine; Japón; Ruinas; Institucionalización del olvido.

**Autores**

Miguel Muñoz-Garnica (Guadix, 1988) es doctor en Comunicación por la Universidad de Navarra, profesor ayudante doctor en el departamento de Comunicación y Educación de la Universidad Loyola de Andalucía y miembro del grupo de investigación «Narrativa y Estética Audiovisual (NEA)» de la Universidad de Navarra. Sus líneas de investigación se centran en el análisis fílmico, en especial de cine japonés y asiático. Es autor de diversos artículos publicados en revistas científicas, como *Fotocinema*, *Revista de comunicación* y *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*. Ha publicado el libro *Hirokazu Koreeda* (Cátedra, 2022). Contacto: miguelmunoz@uloyola.es

Cora Cuenca Navarrete (Córdoba, 1996) holds a PhD in Communication from the Universidad de Sevilla. She is a lecturer in the Department of Communication and Education at Universidad Loyola de Andalucía, and a member of the research group "Memory and Communication: The Political Uses of the Past (MEYCOM)." Her research focuses on the ethical-aesthetic binomial in cinema about traumatic pasts, and the tensions between audiovisual narratives and the temporal and spatial contexts in which they are embedded. She is the author of several articles published in scientific journals such as *Fotocinema*, *Teknokultura*, and *Documentación de las Ciencias de la Información*. She has published the book *Violence, Memory, Cinema: The Audiovisual Construction of the Past* (Comunicación Social, 2024). Contact: ccuenca@uloyola.es

Adrián Tarín-Sanz (San Cristóbal de La Laguna, Spain, 1987) holds a PhD in Communication from the University of Seville. He is a Lecturer at UTE University and a member of the research group Memory and Communication: The Political Uses of the Past (MEYCOM). His research focuses on the relationship between ideology and the media. He is the author of numerous articles published in peer-reviewed journals, including *Problems of Post-Communism and Civil Wars*. He has also published the books *The Media System and Propaganda in Putin's Russia* (Comunicación Social, 2008) and *The Working Class: An Agent of Change in the Twenty-First Century?* (Siglo XXI, 2008). Contact: tarinadrian@gmail.com

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Cora Cuenca Navarrete (Córdoba, 1996) es doctora en Comunicación por la Universidad de Sevilla, profesora ayudante doctora en el departamento de Comunicación y Educación de la Universidad Loyola Andalucía y miembro del grupo de investigación «Memoria y Comunicación: Los usos políticos del pasado (MEYCOM)». Sus líneas de investigación se centran en el binomio ético-estético en el cine de pasados traumáticos, y las tensiones entre las narrativas audiovisuales y los contextos temporales y espaciales en los que se insertan. Es autora de diversos artículos publicados en revistas científicas como *Fotocinema*, *Teknokultura* o *Documentación de las Ciencias de la Información*. Ha publicado el libro *Violencias, memoria, cine. La construcción audiovisual del pasado* (Comunicación Social, 2024). Contacto: ccuenca@uloyola.es

Adrián Tarín-Sanz (San Cristóbal de La Laguna, 1987) es doctor en Comunicación por la Universidad de Sevilla, profesor ocasional en la Universidad UTE y miembro del grupo de investigación «Memoria y Comunicación: Los usos políticos del pasado (MEYCOM)». Sus líneas de investigación se centran en las relaciones entre la ideología y los medios de comunicación. Es autor de diversos artículos publicados en revistas científicas, como *Problems of Post-Communism y Civil Wars*. Ha publicado los libros *Sistema mediático y propaganda en la Rusia de Putin* (Comunicación Social, 2008) y *La clase trabajadora. ¿Sujeto de cambio en el siglo XXI?* (Siglo XXI, 2008). Contacto: tarinadrian@gmail.com

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# FROM TRAUMA TO MEMORY: THE VISUAL TRANSLATION OF FEMALE BODIES IN *THE FLOWERS OF WAR**

FANG XIE
DONGYE LYU
MENGHAN CHEN

## 1. INTRODUCTION: FROM WAR IMAGES TO THE RECONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL MEMORY

War is not just a military or political event; it is also a traumatic rupture that reorders social relations, gendered hierarchies and embodied life. Trauma often registers belatedly and resurfaces in mediated forms rather than being fully assimilated at the moment of violence (Caruth, 2016). At the same time, war is continuously narrativised and stabilised as shared remembrance. As a modern audiovisual medium, cinema participates in historical representation not simply by recounting events but by reorganising the past through form, style and sensory address (Rosenstone, 1995). In this context, cinema can produce "prosthetic memories" that provide non-witness audiences with a sensory and affective experience of historical traumas that "originate outside a person's lived experience and yet are taken on and worn by that person through mass cultural technologies of memory" (Landsberg, 2004: 19).

In China, the War of Resistance against Japan—particularly the Nanjing Massacre—constitutes one of the most profound national traumas of the twentieth century (Wang, 2017: 36). The Japanese capture of Nanjing in 1937 involved large-scale killing, rape, torture and looting, resulting in mass death, displacement and the collapse of everyday life throughout the city. The event has left a persistent wound whose public articulation has varied across historical periods, while also being transmitted through family memories and local narratives (Wang, 2017). Visual representations of the violence therefore do more than illustrate history: they intervene in ongoing struggles over cultural identity, moral positioning and the boundaries of national memory.

Recent scholarship on Chinese war films has examined how Nanjing narratives are shaped by representational politics, including debates over

victimhood, the visibility of sexual violence and the transnational circulation of national trauma. Comparative studies have discussed how films such as *The Flowers of War* (Jīnlíng Shísān Chāi, Zhang Yimou, 2011) and *City of Life and Death* (Nánjīng! Nánjīng!, Lu Chuan, 2009) negotiate historical suffering within a nation-centred moral discourse while also addressing international audiences and market logics (Zhu, 2013; Yang, 2014; Weiss, 2016; Lopes, 2022). Building on this line of research, this article focuses on a more specific problem: how the cinematic form organises bodily images to translate gendered suffering into a legible memory regime.

BY STAGING THE FEMALE BODY AS THE SURFACE ON WHICH HISTORICAL VIOLENCE IS INSCRIBED AND MORALLY REORGANISED, THE FILM FUSES INDIVIDUAL SUFFERING WITH A NATION-CENTRED ORDEAL. WITHIN THIS SYSTEM, WOMEN ARE DIVIDED INTO "STUDENTS" AND "PROSTITUTES" AND THEIR BODIES ARE EXPOSED TO VIEWING, INJURY, CONCEALMENT AND SACRIFICE WHILE BEING ENDOWED WITH MEANINGS THAT TRANSCEND THE INDIVIDUAL

*The Flowers of War* is set during the Japanese capture of Nanjing. A group of convent schoolgirls takes refuge in a Western-run church compound referred to in the film as Winchester Cathedral, where they are later joined by a group of women from a nearby brothel seeking protection. John Miller, an American mortician, becomes trapped inside the church compound as Japanese forces close in. The narrative escalates toward a climactic act of substitution in which the women from the brothel disguise themselves as schoolgirls and take their place at a Japanese military event. By staging the female body as the surface on which historical violence is inscribed and morally reorganised, the film fuses individual suffering with a nation-centred ordeal. Within this system, women are divided into "students" and "prostitutes" and their bodies are exposed to viewing, injury, concealment and sacrifice while being endowed with meanings that transcend the individual. Social representation assigns differentiated values to these bodies and, by inserting them into a broader symbolic order, helps define what counts as "human" and worthy of protection (Cubas, 2011; Xie et al., 2025). In this process, the body becomes an intersection of cultural consciousness and social power, with symbolic value emerging through repeated acts of deconstruction and reconstruction (Gao & Abas, 2024).

To avoid conceptual slippage, this article uses a minimal, consistent taxonomy of terms in relation to memory. "Cultural memory" is used as the primary umbrella term for mediated, symbolic and transgenerational remembrance (Assmann, 1995). Collective memory is referred to only in its foundational sense as the social framing of remembrance, following Halbwachs, while cultural memory remains the focus of the analysis because cinema operates with durable media forms and aesthetic conventions. The concept of prosthetic memory is used to specify how non-witness audiences come to "feel" and assimilate traumatic history in audiovisual form, and national memory denotes a politically framed articulation of cultural memory in a nation-centred discourse of morality and identity. In relation to prosthetic memory, mediated engagement with the past "is the foundation for more than individual subjectivity; it becomes the basis for mediated collective identification and the production of potentially counterhegemonic public spheres" (Landsberg, 2004: 21). Throughout this paper, "traumatic" is used as a descriptor of the past and of memory's affective charge, rather than as an independent category.

Existing research on war cinema and memory often either (a) discusses trauma and remembrance at the level of theme and ideology, or (b) offers close readings without a sufficiently explicit procedure for linking micro-level visual form to macro-level memory effects. This article proposes a concise, stepwise model of cinematic transduction that specifies how images of the body move from visualisation (making trauma perceivable) to symbolisation (stabilising meanings through recurring signs) and ethical communalisation (inviting shared moral positioning). This model is designed as a portable analytic tool for comparing how films translate gendered suffering into cultural and national memory. Methodologically, the model is operationalised through close analysis of framing, gaze alignment, concealment, costume coding and spatial pressure across key sequences, thereby linking the micro-level cinematic form to its memory-making effects (Cheng, 2012; Chen, 2025; Qin & Zhang, 2025).

Accordingly, taking *The Flowers of War* as a case study, this article aims to answer the following questions: How is historical trauma inscribed on female bodies in the filmic image? How do these bodies participate in the reproduction of national memory? And how do they contribute to the (re) configuration of identity under wartime conditions? Furthermore, by tracing how meaning is generated and translated through the film's visual narration of the female body, the article shows how cinematic techniques of visualisation and symbolisation turn women's bodies into affective conduits and cultural metaphors of historical memory, clarifying the internal connections between gender, memory and national narrative in war cinema.

## 2. VISUALISING TRAUMA: VIOLENT NARRATIVES OF THE FEMALE BODY

The term "trauma" refers to an overwhelming experience beyond immediate comprehension. Caruth (2016) highlights its belated structure: the event is often only acknowledged later through intrusive repetitions and disruptions. Audiovisual narratives are particularly suited to this logic because they can represent otherwise inexpressible pain through image, sound and recurrence. In war memory narratives, female bodies often become privileged sites through which collective vulnerability is rendered visible (Kaplan, 2005). Trauma is represented not only through scenes of suffering but also through formal disruption, where "the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection" (Whitehead, 2004: 3).

In *The Flowers of War*, the female body serves as this central visual medium, registering violence through wounds, restraint and mortal threat, while simultaneously externalising fear and shock. By repeatedly staging and framing these images of the body, the film converts individual pain into a shareable affective archive, translating private trauma into collective emotional memory.

### 2.1 External Violence Borne by the Female Body

War has often been narrated through a male-centred lens that sustains heroic masculinity and relegates women to the margins, securing male subjectivity while depicting female bodies as "the other" or as surfaces for projection (Weiss, 2016). *The Flowers of War* appears to depart from this convention by centring women's bodies as the principal site of visual narration, and thus their bodies become the main register of wartime trauma. The film establishes vulnerability through a recurring motif of bodily contraction and disappearance. In the opening scene showing the ruins of Nanjing, the camera follows schoolgirls running and hiding themselves in grass, pipes or collapsed structures. These movements of crouching, curling up and covering themselves are not incidental; they constitute a visual grammar of



Figure 1. Japanese soldiers assaulting female students in a church

fear. The body shrinks under external pressure, signalling entrapment in an environment saturated with violence.

As the narrative moves into the church, the film briefly frames the space as a sanctuary, only to depict its rapid violation. When Japanese soldiers enter, the girls are chased, their bodies pinned and forced against walls and into corners; close framings of limbs being grasped, clothing torn and postures constrained intensify the sense of proximity of the violence (Figure 1). The audiovisual design, through movement, impact and heightened sound, translates violence into an embodied experience for the viewer, marking the desecration of the refuge and the conversion of "safety" into a theatre of domination.

The violence is not presented as random destruction but as gendered power enacted on the female body. The soldiers' intrusion carries sexualised threats and coercion that strips the girls of agency and reasserts patriarchal control within the war zone (Brownmiller, 1993; Elshtain, 1995; Nath, 2022). In this sense, the violence of war and the intrusion of males converge: the church's protective symbolism disintegrates, while the female body becomes the central sign where military force and gender hierarchy intersect and are remembered.

To conceptualise this process, the film's presentation of female pain is understood here as an aestheticising of suffering, a representational regime that renders atrocity watchable through stylistic control and affective organisation (Sontag, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2006). In *The Flowers of War*, stylised lighting, tableau-like compositions and choreographies of vulnerability, with heads lowered and bodies huddled in confined spaces, depict trauma as an emotionally mobilising form that can be absorbed into national memorialisation. Comparative research on East Asian war cinema suggests that such codified female suffering can elicit compassion while silencing questions of structural responsibility (e.g., Coates, 2021).

Methodologically, visual power is classified here in two analytic categories. First, the male



Figure 2. Prostitutes in the basement

gaze refers to how camera alignment, shot duration and framing position women as objects of visual control (Mulvey, 1975; Doane, 2002), coded through POV structures, isolating close-ups, body fragmentation and asymmetries of looking. Second, occlusion refers to how sexual violence is managed through concealment, partial visibility and spatial blockage, making the threat legible while maintaining aesthetic control. Applied across key sequences, these categories connect the micro-level of the filmic form to the macro-level of memory effects, showing how the film crystallises wartime trauma in and through the female body as a privileged site of violence and remembrance.

### 2.2 Internal Fear and Psychic Oppression

Most of the film unfolds inside the church, where the external threat is translated into spatial organisation and controlled visibility. The church is not merely a refuge; it is a hierarchically structured enclosure divided into an attic and a basement. The priest hides the schoolgirls above and confines the prostitutes below, in a vertical segregation that reproduces moral hierarchy and unequal protection: the schoolgirls are treated as "innocent" bodies to be safeguarded, while the prostitutes are managed as socially tainted bodies to be contained (Liu & Xiang, 2020: 67).

Cinematically, this hierarchy materialises through the lighting and framing. The prostitutes are shown in the dim cellar, often only semi-visible, partially obscured and spatially compressed (Figure 2). Instead of offering an erotic display with glamorising close-ups typical of genre cinema (Doane, 2013), *The Flowers of War* withholds full visibility: bodies are fragmented by shadows, blocked by the architecture, and restricted to the margins of the frame. This is not a neutral aesthetic choice but a visual technology of power. By distributing visibility unevenly, the film implies a deprivation of social existence: power enacted through organisation of the space,

THIS PSYCHOLOGICAL PRESSURE SHAPES HOW THE PROSTITUTES NEGOTIATE THEIR SURVIVAL. THEIR FEAR IS PROVOKED NOT ONLY BY THE IMMINENT THREAT OF VIOLENCE BUT ALSO BY THEIR LONG-STANDING SHAME AND DISPOSABILITY WITHIN THE PATRIARCHAL ORDER: SAFETY IS IMAGINED AS NEGOTIABLE THROUGH SEXUAL AVAILABILITY, A STRATEGY THAT PRESERVES THEIR LIVES WHILE FURTHER ERODING THEIR AGENCY

regulation of movements and control over who is seen and how (Foucault, 2012). Over time, external restriction becomes internalised as self-discipline: the women learn to hide, to stay silent and to make themselves small, turning the basement into a site where oppression is both imposed and embodied (Bartky, 2015).

This psychological pressure shapes how the prostitutes negotiate their survival. Their fear is provoked not only by the imminent threat of violence but also by their long-standing shame and disposability within the patriarchal order: safety is imagined as negotiable through sexual availability, a strategy that preserves their lives while further eroding their agency. When the Japanese soldiers approach, the women keep quiet and stay hidden, performing vulnerability through enforced silence. As Butler argues, "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies," and "loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies" (2004: 20). But this vulnerability is not distributed equally. Some lives are protected and their loss is mourned; others are designated as expendable. The prostitutes' bodies embody the asymmetry: they are simultaneously victims of violence and instruments used to maintain a moral order.

At the same time, the film organises women's suffering through regulated visual grammar rather than chaotic documentation. Screams, blood and silent hiding are portrayed as repeatable semiotic codes that render pain legible and emotionally addressable, encouraging ethical resonance rather than mere recognition (Sontag, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2006). Yet this aestheticising of suffering is ambivalent: while it elicits sympathy, it can also domesticate violence within an acceptable visual order and undermine the interrogation of structural responsibility as trauma enters collective memory (Coates, 2021). In this sense, the prostitutes are caught in a double regime of gendered hierarchy and national narration, giving their bodies symbolic value while eliminating the possibility of stable self-representation. Trauma thus extends beyond physical injury to the psychological violence of silence and erasure as women are unable to speak from their own embodied position.

## 3. REPRODUCING MEMORY: THE REDEMPTIVE SIGNIFICATION OF THE FEMALE BODY

War inflicts not only physical injury but also enduring trauma that persists beyond the conflict and is continually reworked into social memory. As Halbwachs (1992) argues, memory is not a simple record of the past but a collective process in which experience is reorganised through shared narratives and representational forms. Cinema participates in this process by translating historical violence into audiovisual images that can be circulated, stabilised and re-remembered over time. In *The Flowers of War*, the female body becomes the privileged medium of this translation, bearing the marks of destruction while simultaneously being recoded as a sign of moral redemption for the community. In this way, it shifts from individual embodiment to a visual node where trauma, cultural meaning and historical memory converge.

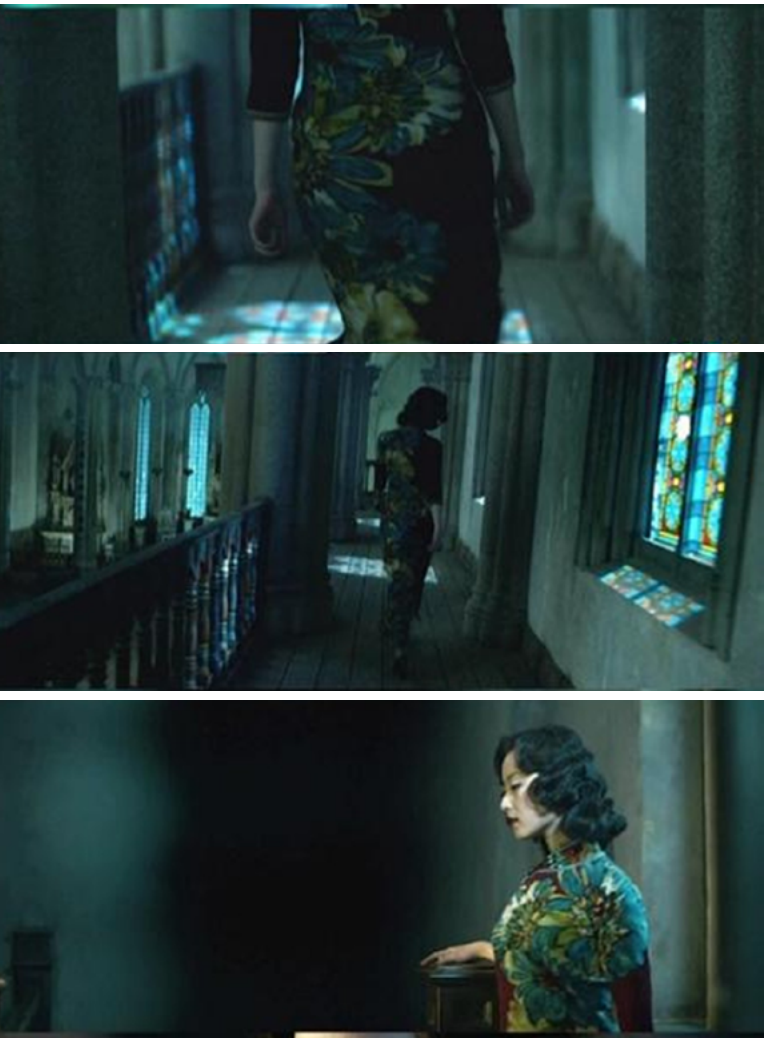


Figure 3. Yu Mo in the church corridor at night

### 3.1 Continuities of Memory: The Female Body as Witness to History

In mass culture, historical events are often re-encountered through mediated viewing, and repeated circulation can transform history into collectively shared memory (Burgoyne, 2003). Because "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories" and "recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (Halbwachs, 1992: 38), individual suffering becomes embedded in collective memory structures. Cinema translates a specific past into embodied, affective forms that audiences come to remember as their own.

IN THE FILM, THE DIM LIGHTING HAS AN AMBIVALENT EFFECT, CONCEALING AND PROTECTING YU MO'S BODY, BUT ALSO RESTRICTING WHEN AND HOW IT CAN BE SEEN. THROUGH THE FILM'S CONTROLLED USE OF LIGHT, SHADOW AND IMAGERY, YU MO'S BODY BECOMES BOTH A WITNESS TO VIOLENCE AND AN INDEX OF DESIRE, SURVIVAL AND VITALITY UNDER SIEGE

In *The Flowers of War*, female bodies serve as the primary medium of the translation. When the prostitutes enter the church, the film immediately organises their bodies within a moralised spatial hierarchy, as they are confined to the dark cellar while the schoolgirls occupy the upper level associated with faith and protection. This vertical segregation marks the prostitutes' marginal status and visualises their exclusion from dominant narratives of innocence and worth. Inside the cellar, the camera dwells on their cramped movement and micro-reactions, such as flinching, trembling and huddling together, so that the fear of each individual contributes to a shared bodily atmosphere. The resulting portrait is not of a single woman's trauma but of a communal experience that places individual pain in a collective affective register.

Against this background, the film gradually foregrounds the prostitute Yu Mo as a focal point for the intersection between trauma and the narration of the female experience. Her appearances in low lighting emphasise her *qipao* (or *cheongsam*) as a legible sign of gendered visibility and social coding, while close framing of her figure produces a tension between erotic readability and wartime vulnerability. Worn widely by women in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s, the *qipao* is



Figure 4. Female students on top of the church

a fitted dress with a stand-up collar, frog-button fastening and side slits. Its tailored silhouette accentuates the female form while constraining the body (Pan, 2020). In modern China, the *qipao* became an emblem of femininity, desire and urban modernity (Zhang, 2026: 113). In the film, the dim lighting has an ambivalent effect, concealing and protecting Yu Mo's body, but also restricting when and how it can be seen. Through the film's controlled use of light, shadow and imagery, Yu Mo's body becomes both a witness to violence and an index of desire, survival and vitality under siege (Figure 3).

*THE FLOWERS OF WAR* CONNECTS THE BODILY EXPERIENCE OF YU MO AND THE OTHER PROSTITUTES TO THE NANJING MASSACRE BY MAKING THE FEMALE BODY A CONCRETE VESSEL THROUGH WHICH HISTORICAL TRAUMA IS FELT, ORGANISED AND RE-REMEMBERED. BY DEPICTING FEAR, CONFINEMENT AND VISIBILITY AS SHARED CONDITIONS, THE FILM VISUALISES A SHIFT FROM INDIVIDUAL SUFFERING TO COLLECTIVE REMEMBRANCE, TURNING WOMEN'S BODIES INTO ENDURING BEARERS OF NATIONAL TRAUMA IN CINEMATIC FORM

Overall, *The Flowers of War* connects the bodily experience of Yu Mo and the other prostitutes to the Nanjing Massacre by making the female body a concrete vessel through which historical trauma is felt, organised and re-remembered. By depicting fear, confinement and visibility as shared conditions, the film visualises a shift from individual suffering to collective remembrance, turning women's bodies into enduring bearers of national trauma in cinematic form.

### 3.2 Remaking Meaning: The Female Body as Cultural Vehicle

Cinema operates as social memory: it does not merely refer to the past but reworks it for the present by shaping shared emotions and identities. In *The Flowers of War*, the depiction of female bodies allows subsequent generations who did not witness the Nanjing Massacre to inherit the trauma as an affective experience. As a technology of cultural memory, film images construct a shared sensory archive rather than merely recording history (Assmann, 2011). The female body becomes the privileged bearer of this archive, inviting audiences to re-encounter history through embodied perception. Throughout the film, women's bodies are assigned meanings that transcend the individual, shifting from physiological presence to cultural sign, which can be seen as a condensed "mode of signification" for the narration of national trauma and redemption (Barthes, 1999). In this register, the body serves as a bridge between personal suffering and state-centred memory, translating violence into legible moral meaning.

This logic crystallises in the church sequence later in the film, when Japanese troops plan to remove the schoolgirls under the pretext of a "celebration". Trapped within the church's closed architecture, the girls confront a dilemma between wartime violence and the moral demands of national discourse. Faced with abduction, they consider collective suicide by climbing to the highest point of the church, imagining death as the only way of preventing their violation (Figure 4).

This is not just an extreme assertion of bodily autonomy but also a culturally coded act. By choosing self-sacrifice, the girls seek to protect their "chastity" and "purity", values embedded in moral tradition, thereby fusing personal dignity with national dignity (Yu, 2023: 273). Through the willingness to cross the boundary of self-destruction, they reclaim agency: the body ceases to be merely an object of others' violence and becomes a sign of national integrity. In Douglas's terms, bodily boundaries become metaphors for the social order (Douglas, 2003). By defending those boundaries, the girls in the film enact a specifically gendered form of resistance in which bodily harm becomes a shared moral resource. In this sense, altering or sacrificing the body intensifies memory. The girls' readiness to injure themselves



Figure 5. Prostitutes in qipaos



Figure 6. Prostitutes in school uniforms

stages a passage from the personal to the national, from the physiological to the cultural. As a core medium of cultural memory, the body converts individual experience into a communal emotional resource (Assmann, 2011). Such a sacrifice not only re-enacts wartime trauma but recasts women as producers of cultural memory: through their bodies, national suffering is re-narrated as a circulating symbol that endures violence while signifying resilience and redemption.

Gendered bodily transformation is a technique of national memory. *The Flowers of War* stabilises traumatic history as national memory by reorganising women's bodies in a three-step sequence that converts social differences into moral value. First, *desexualisation* displaces prostitution as social memory: the *qipao*-coded body is progressively stripped of erotic-professional legibility through concealment, uniforming and spatial confinement, allowing the women to be recoded as subjects of collective mourning rather than inhabitants of the social periphery. Second, the film sustains a deferred *resexualisation*: overt display is reduced, yet the threat of sexual violence persists as an implicit horizon that structures fear and suspense, keeping the trauma visible without explicitly depicting it and extending vulnerability across female bodies. Third, *rematernalisation* culminates in substitution and sacrifice. Through bandaging, hair cutting and protective postures, the prostitutes' bodies are rewritten as maternal shields for "innocence", transforming individual suffering into a communally endorsed ethical act. Taken together, this sequence makes the female body the key medium through which gendered trauma is moralised and articulated as national memory.

GENDERED BODILY TRANSFORMATION IS A TECHNIQUE OF NATIONAL MEMORY. *THE FLOWERS OF WAR* STABILISES TRAUMATIC HISTORY AS NATIONAL MEMORY BY REORGANISING WOMEN'S BODIES IN A THREE-STEP SEQUENCE THAT CONVERTS SOCIAL DIFFERENCES INTO MORAL VALUE

## 4. FROM SEPARATION TO FUSION: TRAJECTORIES OF FEMALE IDENTITY

In war cinema, the body often serves as a nexus between personal experience and collective remembrance, becoming a symbolic site where his-

torical meaning is produced and contested (Nora, 1996). In *The Flowers of War*, female identity is continuously reconfigured through the circulation of bodies across spaces, costumes and gestures, so that the body becomes the medium for negotiating and redrawing social boundaries. As the narrative unfolds, the interaction between prostitutes and schoolgirls intensifies, and the spatial hierarchy begins to shift. When the prostitutes rush to the church's highest point to prevent the schoolgirls' collective suicide, they enter the attic previously coded as the space of "purity". Later, when the girls learn that the prostitutes plan to take their place at the Japanese "celebration", they descend into the cellar, a space associated with concealment and stigma. This exchange is not merely a change of setting; it signals a displacement of social identity and a redistribution of bodily value.

This reconfiguration is initially structured as a moral binary. Prostitutes are framed as bodies already marked by violation, while schoolgirls are framed as innocent bodies to be safeguarded. The film expresses this divide through clothing. The *qipao*, with its fitted cut and saturated palette (Figure 5), contrasts with the school uniform's loose silhouette and subdued tones, marking different social positions and moral expectations (Chen, 2012). Importantly, the *qipao* is not significant in isolation, but acquires meaning through a dichotomous visual connection with the school uniform that produces paired oppositions around which the film's gender politics are organised: the object of the gaze versus the object of protection, commodified femininity versus sanctified innocence, and social periphery versus moral centre. As the plot progresses, these oppositions are repeatedly disrupted through spatial exchange, concealment, uniforming and ultimately substitution, so that the clothed body becomes a site where power, morality, and memory are renegotiated rather than merely displayed (Shi, 2012). Crucially, the film gradually reframes these social roles as historically contingent and ethically chosen: what the women "are" is not ultimately determined by their background or prior social status, but by the decisions they make under wartime conditions.

IN THE FINAL SEQUENCE, THE PROSTITUTES, WHO ARE UNIFORMED, STYLED, AND VISUALLY HOMOGENISED AS SCHOOLGIRLS, WALK OUT OF THE CHURCH UNDER JAPANESE GUARD. THEIR INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES ARE ERASED, COMPLETING THE RECODING OF BODILY MEANING INTO A COLLECTIVE FIGURE. THEIR FATE IS NOT SHOWN BUT INSISTENTLY IMPLIED: THE LAST VISIBLE IMAGE IS OF THEM BOARDING THE TRUCKS. THIS OMISSION PRODUCES THE TRAUMATIC STRUCTURE CARUTH (2016) DESCRIBES AS AN "ABSENT PRESENCE", IN WHICH THE VIOLENCE OF THE EVENT IS FELT THROUGH ITS NARRATIVE AND VISUAL ELISION

To stand in for the schoolgirls, the prostitutes undertake a deliberate remaking of the body: cutting their hair, binding their breasts, and replacing their qipaos with school uniforms (Figure 6). This transformation does not confer "purity" in any essential sense; rather, it attempts to erase the social memory of prostitution and to enter a symbolic order in which "student" signifies innocence. In this way, the binary opposition between prostitute and schoolgirl becomes unstable. The prostitutes' bodies shift from stigmatised visibility to moral legibility, and their commitment to shielding the girls dissolves earlier conflicts of status and image. The body is no longer a fixed social sign but a contingent surface that can be reinscribed by changing contexts and wartime demands, an ethics of action that overrides any identity of origin. The film reinforces this instability through temporal layering. When the prostitutes, now dressed as

students, sing in the cellar, the schoolgirls recall their first encounter with them in their qipaos and heavy makeup. Cross-cutting between present and past mobilises bodily meaning: the prostitutes' former social readability overlaps with their present sacrifice, allowing the two groups' identities to become mutually permeable.

THE SUBSTITUTION OF THE PROSTITUTES FOR THE SCHOOLGIRLS FUNCTIONS AS BOTH A PLOT-LEVEL REDEMPTION AND A RECONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL MEMORY. BY OFFERING THEIR BODIES IN PLACE OF THE GIRLS', THE PROSTITUTES ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR PROTECTION AND, ON A SYMBOLIC LEVEL, TAKE ON A MATERNAL ROLE

In the final sequence, the prostitutes, who are uniformed, styled, and visually homogenised as schoolgirls, walk out of the church under Japanese guard. Their individual differences are erased, completing the recoding of bodily meaning into a collective figure. Their fate is not shown but insistently implied: the last visible image is of them boarding the trucks. This omission produces the traumatic structure Caruth (2016) describes as an "absent presence", in which the violence of the event is felt through its narrative and visual elision.

The substitution of the prostitutes for the schoolgirls functions as both a plot-level redemption and a reconstruction of cultural memory. By offering their bodies in place of the girls', the prostitutes assume responsibility for their protection and, on a symbolic level, take on a maternal role. This rematernalisation is reinforced by micro-level staging choices: protective gestures (shielding, guiding and encompassing the schoolgirls), spatial re-organisation that positions transformed bodies as buffers in thresholds, and repeated visual signs of care (touch, covering, calming). In the interests of methodological transparency, it is important to understand this rematernalisation as a symbolic inference from the film's visual rhetoric rather than a claim about the characters' intentions within the diegesis. The prostitutes become both courageous fighters and maternal figures in the national narrative. Their bodies are depicted as emblematic bearers of collective commitment and historical memory.

Yet the shelter offered by the church is temporary, and the film's ethical resolution remains ambivalent. The women's sacrifice completes an identity shift, from stigmatised bodies to redemptive figures, while also revealing how patriarchal war narratives often imagine female "liberation" only through self-destruction. In this sense, the fusion comes at a cost: bodies acquire national significance precisely because they are made available for sacrifice.

## 5. CONCLUSION: THE REGENERATION OF MEMORY THROUGH THE FEMALE BODY

Historical narrative provides the frame within which memory is organised; however, memory is not a simple reproduction of facts, but a mediated reconstruction of the past. As a site of memory production, cinema reshapes historical experience in audiovisual form and invites audiences to participate in a shared re-encounter with history. In this process, the body serves as a key medium for the inscription and circulation of affect, and it is therefore essential to making memory perceptible. By examining the representations of the female body in *The Flowers of War*, this article has shown how women's bodily trauma is translated from individual experience into national memory.

The analysis first examined how the violence of war is inscribed on women's bodies through both physical injury and psychological oppression, revealing the precarious position of female life in wartime. As the narrative progresses, the meaning of the body is continually reorganised, as it shifts from witnessing trauma to producing

memory. Through being looked at, threatened, wounded and ultimately sacrificed, women's bodies are recoded from sites of harm into bearers of national value, linking historical atrocities to a redemptive moral narrative. In this sense, the film constructs a feminised model of national memory that renders trauma legible through embodied suffering and ethical substitution, foregrounding the performance of political remembrance through gendered bodies.

At the same time, this centring of women does not fully escape patriarchal mediation. Redemption is achieved largely through acts involving suffering and self-sacrifice: the prostitutes' martyrdom is elevated to the level of a national allegory, yet it also serves to complete a broader heroic arc, and female pain risks being aestheticised into a watchable spectacle. The film thus renders the female body both meaningful and constrained, visible as a medium of memory yet shaped by regimes of the gaze and moral coding. Crucially, however, the film does not depict social roles as determined by background alone. Instead, it reframes identity as contingent on wartime choice: women's status and moral significance emerge through their decisions, actions and sacrifice, emphasising agency and moral responsibility in the context of a historical catastrophe. The "regeneration" of memory through the female body is therefore double-edged, simultaneously recovering silenced suffering and reinscribing it in a narrative form that expresses bodily discipline.

The significance of this dynamic extends beyond the film itself. In East Asia, wartime atrocities remain a key issue of public contention, and "memory battles" have intensified since the late 20th century, shaping cultural politics and regional diplomacy (Holcombe, 2017). Controversies such as the human experimentation conducted at Unit 731 entered broader public discussion only in the 1980s (Dickinson, 2007), while the international community only began giving sustained attention to the Nanjing Massacre and "comfort women" debates in the 1990s thanks to the circulation of documentation and testimonies (Fogel, 2007; Seo, 2008; Yoshida, 2009). In addressing these controversies, what Asian cinema offers is not a passive reflection of history but an active arena where atrocities are visualised, moralised and reinterpreted (Jager & Mitter, 2007; Schneider, 2008). It also contributes to "postmemory", shaping how non-witness generations inherit traumatic pasts through images (Hirsch, 2008). From this perspective, *The Flowers of War* functions as an agent of cultural memory, mobilising the female body as both a site and medium through which the past is remembered, contested, and reimagined. ■

## NOTES

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1. The Nanjing Massacre is a collective term for the atrocities committed by the invading Japanese army after occupying Nanjing, the capital of the Republic of China. These atrocities included massacre, rape, arson and looting, and mainly occurred over a period of six weeks from 13 December 1937 to January 1938.
2. *The Flowers of War* (Jīnlíng Shísān Chāi, 2011) is a historical war drama directed by Zhang Yimou and adapted from Geling Yan's novella *13 Flowers of Nanjing*.

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## FROM TRAUMA TO MEMORY: THE VISUAL TRANSLATION OF FEMALE BODIES IN *THE FLOWERS OF WAR*


### Abstract

Taking Zhang Yimou's *The Flowers of War* (2011) as a case study, this article examines how war films translate historical trauma into collective remembrance through the visual construction of the female body. Anchored in the theories of collective and cultural memory as articulated by Assmann (2011), alongside the concept of prosthetic memory established by Landsberg (2004), this analysis employs semiotics of the body and gender studies to conduct a close reading of two distinct positions of female subjects in the film: schoolgirls and prostitutes. The study identifies a three-step "cinematic transduction" of trauma: (1) visualisation, whereby exposure/occlusion, extreme close-ups and disjunctive editing present violence as embodied experience; (2) symbolisation, as female bodies shift from victimhood to an ethical-aesthetic "sublime body", bearing structures of sacrifice, mutual aid and communal mourning; and (3) ethical communalisation, whereby previously segmented social identities converge in the context of a civilian catastrophe, transforming the female body into a conduit between individual affect and national narrative. In this trajectory, the body serves not merely as a physical entity but as a cultural sign where power, gender and memory intersect. This article thus argues that gendered embodiment operates as a pivotal nexus in the production of national memory, as the film's visual grammar, especially the interplay of concealment and exposure, re-codes women's bodies as affective archives and cultural metaphors, enabling traumatic history to become sensorially shareable and narratively durable. The findings thus offer an operational framework for analysing the memory politics and bodily aesthetics of Chinese war films.



### Key words

Female body; Collective memory; Trauma narration; Cinematic transduction.



### Authors

Fang Xie holds a PhD in Journalism from Universidad Complutense de Madrid, and is an Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism, School of Literature and Law at Jiangsu Ocean University, China. Her research focuses mainly on film studies, semiotics and gender studies. In recent years, she has published a number of papers in academic journals, including *Historia y Comunicación Social*, *Street Art and Urban Creativity*, *Media and Intercultural Communication* and *Sport in Society*.


## DEL TRAUMA A LA MEMORIA: LA TRADUCCIÓN VISUAL DE LOS CUERPOS FEMENINOS EN *LAS FLORES DE LA GUERRA*


### Resumen

Tomando como caso de estudio la película *Las flores de la guerra* (Zhang Yimou, 2011), este artículo analiza cómo el cine bélico traduce el trauma histórico en memoria colectiva mediante la construcción visual del cuerpo femenino. A partir de las teorías de la memoria colectiva y cultural de Assmann (2011) y del concepto de memoria protésica de Landsberg (2004), se recurre a la semiótica corporal y a los estudios de género para realizar una lectura minuciosa de dos posiciones femeninas diferenciadas en el filme: colegialas y cortesanas. El análisis identifica una "transducción cinematográfica" del trauma en tres momentos: (1) la visualización, mediante la cual la mirada/oclusión, los primeros planos y el montaje disyuntivo convierten la violencia en experiencia corpórea; (2) la simbolización, en la que los cuerpos femeninos dejan de ocupar exclusivamente el lugar de víctimas para devenir un "cuerpo sublime" ético-estético atravesado por el sacrificio, la ayuda mutua y el duelo comunitario; y (3) la comunalización ética, donde identidades sociales previamente segmentadas convergen bajo la catástrofe cívica, transformando el cuerpo femenino en un conducto entre el afecto individual y la narrativa nacional. En este recorrido, el cuerpo no se presenta solo como entidad física, sino como signo cultural en el que se entrecruzan el poder, el género y la memoria. El artículo sostiene, en consecuencia, que la corporeización generizada funciona como un mecanismo clave en la producción de la memoria nacional: la gramática visual del film, en particular la tensión entre ocultamiento y exposición, recodifica los cuerpos femeninos como archivos afectivos y metáforas culturales, haciendo que la historia traumática se vuelva sensorialmente compartida y narrativamente perdurable. En conjunto, los hallazgos ofrecen un marco operativo para examinar las políticas de la memoria y la estética corporal en el cine de guerra chino.



### Palabras clave

Cuerpo femenino; memoria colectiva; narración del trauma; transducción cinematográfica; identidad nacional.



### Autores

Fang Xie es doctora en Periodismo por la Universidad Complutense de Madrid y profesora asociada del Departamento de Periodismo de la Facultad de Literatura y Derecho de la Jiangsu Ocean University (China). Sus principales líneas de investigación son los estudios cinematográficos, la semiótica y los estudios de género. En los últimos años ha publicado diversos trabajos en revistas académicas como *Historia y Comunicación Social*, *Street Art and Urban Creativity*, *Media and Intercultural Communication* y *Sport in Society*.

Dongye Lyu (corresponding author) holds a PhD in Audiovisual Communication, Advertising and Public Relations from Universidad Complutense de Madrid. He is a lecturer at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Guangzhou), and a researcher affiliated with Universidad Complutense de Madrid and Universidade de Aveiro. His research focuses on communication studies, sport and body culture, visual media and sociocultural analysis. His recent work explores the representation of gender, power, memory, nationalism and embodiment in media and sporting contexts through discourse analysis and interdisciplinary approaches. He has published in journals including *Sport in Society*, *Movimento*, *Index Comunicación*, *Vivat Academia* and the *International Journal of the History of Sport*. Email: dongyelyu@hkust-gz.edu.cn

Menghan Chen (Dody) holds a PhD in Video Game Localisation from University College London. She is a lecturer and the deputy director of the Department of International Journalism and Communication at Wenzhou Business College, China. Her main research interests are video game localisation, esports, game streaming and media communication. Her published research covers multiple game-related topics, including the Blizzard-NetEase incident and Chinese cyber nationalism, streamers' localisation in live game streaming, localisation of esports live streaming, fan translation of esports news, the online sharing practices of Chinese game localisers and the internationalisation of Chinese indie games.

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Dongye Lyu (autor para la correspondencia) es doctor en Comunicación Audiovisual, Publicidad y Relaciones Públicas por la Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Actualmente es profesor en la Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Guangzhou) e investigador afiliado a la Universidad Complutense de Madrid y a la Universidade de Aveiro. Sus líneas de investigación se centran en los estudios de comunicación, la cultura deportiva y corporal, los medios visuales y el análisis sociocultural. Sus trabajos recientes examinan las representaciones del género, el poder, la memoria, el nacionalismo y la corporalidad en contextos mediáticos y deportivos mediante el análisis del discurso y enfoques interdisciplinarios. Ha publicado en revistas científicas como *Sport in Society*, *Movimento*, *Index Comunicación*, *Vivat Academia* e *International Journal of the History of Sport*. Contacto: dongyelyu@hkust-gz.edu.cn.

Menghan Chen (Dody) es doctora en Localización de Videojuegos por University College London. Actualmente es profesora y subdirectora del Departamento de Periodismo y Comunicación Internacional de Wenzhou Business College (China). Sus principales intereses de investigación incluyen la localización de videojuegos, los deportes electrónicos (*esports*), las retransmisiones de videojuegos en directo (*game streaming*) y la comunicación mediática. Sus publicaciones abordan diversos temas relacionados con los videojuegos, entre ellos el conflicto entre Blizzard y NetEase y el cibernacionalismo chino, la localización de creadores de contenido en retransmisiones de videojuegos en directo, la localización de emisiones de esports, la traducción realizada por aficionados de noticias sobre deportes electrónicos, las prácticas de intercambio de conocimiento entre localizadores de videojuegos en China y los procesos de internacionalización de los videojuegos independientes chinos.

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

JIHOON KIM

## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## OH MINWOOK'S *LETTERS TO BURIRAM*

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

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

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



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



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

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

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




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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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




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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CONCLUSION

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

## NOTES

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

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

**Abstract**

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

**Key words**

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

**Author**

Jihoon Kim is professor and director of CAU Center for Cinema and Media Studies (cau-ccms.com) at Chung-ang University. He is the author of four books, including *Activism and Post-activism: Korean Documentary Cinema, 1981-2022* (Oxford University Press, 2024), the first English-language monograph on the evolution of South Korean non-fiction film and video in non-governmental and non-corporate sectors from their foundational period to the present. Contact: jihoonfelix@gmail.com

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

**Resumen**

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

**Palabras clave**

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

**Autor**

Jihoon Kim es profesor y director del CAU Center for Cinema and Media Studies de la Universidad Chung-Ang (cau-ccms.com). Es autor de cuatro libros, entre los que destaca *Activism and Post-activism: Korean Documentary Cinema, 1981-2022* (Oxford University Press, 2024), la primera monografía publicada en lengua inglesa dedicada a la evolución del cine y el vídeo documental surcoreanos producidos fuera de los ámbitos gubernamental y corporativo, desde sus orígenes hasta la actualidad. Contacto: jihoonfelix@gmail.com

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# DEATH ON SCREEN: SELF-REPRESENTATION AND PERFORMATIVITY IN *THE ACT OF KILLING* AND *THE LOOK OF SILENCE*[1]

JORDI REVERT-GOMIS

## INTRODUCTION: THE INDONESIAN CASE

In January 2023, the President of the Republic of Indonesia at the time, Joko Widodo (popularly known as Jokowi), issued a public apology for the country's bloody postcolonial past (Teresia and Widianto, 2023). His speech referred not only to the persecution and purging of communists and ethnic Chinese civilians in 1965 and 1966 but also to eleven other cases of human rights violations in the country's recent history. The blanket apology drew responses from various non-governmental organisations and survivor support groups, who demanded that criminal cases be opened against the perpetrators, who remain unpunished to date.

Widodo's apology marks the latest step in a series of efforts to recover the memory of one of the most horrific episodes of the 20th century. The systematic mass killings and torture that preceded the establishment of Suharto's pro-Western military dictatorship—the so-called "New Order"—remain in the collective memory, although for decades the Indonesian government denied these events and blocked any initiatives that contradicted the official discourse.[2] This, combined with the lack of documentary evidence, created a climate of silence and intimidation. Melvin (2017: 487) notes another difficulty: the classification of the 1965–1966 killings as genocide, accepted in academic circles since the 1980s, faced an obstacle in the categorisation proposed by the Genocide Convention approved by the UN General Assembly in 1948, which defines genocide victims as national, ethnic, racial or religious groups, while the Indonesian case involved political groups (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). In 2016, the International People's Tribunal in The Hague condemned the events of 1965 and 1966 as crimes against humanity and argued for their classification as genocide against a national group (International People's Tribunal on 1965 Crimes Against Humanity in Indonesia, 2017: 8). The lack of evidence made it

difficult to prove the violence was coordinated and systematic until 2010, when Melvin gained access to thousands of classified military documents in Aceh, northern Sumatra (Melvin, 2017: 488) containing evidence of the participation of the military apparatus in the exterminations, which thus came to be referred to as the Indonesian Genocide Files. Subsequent revelations of the complicity of the US, British and Australian governments during the genocide (Curby, 2016) intensified international pressure on Jakarta and ultimately led to Widodo's official apology.

## RETURN TO SUMATRA

The documentary diptych comprising *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn, and Anonymous, 2012) and *The Look of Silence* (Oppenheimer, 2014) was released in the period between the discovery of the Indonesian Genocide Files and the symbolic verdict of the International People's Tribunal. The culmination of years of work by its creators, the project marked a milestone in documentary cinema, received critical acclaim[3] and drew attention to the Indonesian genocide, especially after both films were nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. This duology is situated within the dynamics of the performative documentary, a term coined by Bill Nichols[4] to designate works that emphasise the subjective or expressive aspects of the filmmaker's engagement with the subject and the audience's receptivity to that engagement (Nichols, 2001: 34).[5] Oppenheimer's approach also supports Stella Bruzzi's idea that documentaries are themselves "performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable and informed by issues of performance and performativity" (Bruzzi, 2006: 11). This flexible nature, open to heterogeneous processes for shaping narratives that offer somewhat faint traces of concrete realities, translates here into two complementary instalments: the first gives almost exclusive attention to the perpetrators, while the second focuses on Adi Rukun, the brother of one of the genocide victims.[6] The two films adopt distinct strategies to examine their central characters; strategies that complement each other, speaking through the bodies and mirrors of their representation to enable a complex discourse on memory and trauma.

The objective of this study is to conduct a textual analysis of representative sequences from both works to identify these documentary strategies. This analysis explores how the narrative structure operates, from complementary perspectives, to recover the memory of the genocide from the standpoint of both perpetrators and victims. It also aims to contextualise the significance of the films within the series of events that has highlighted the urgent need for this recovery in recent years, as well as public reparations and the criminal prosecution of any perpetrators who are still alive today. The initial hypothesis is that the two films employ distinct strategies to represent the opposing parties in the genocide, and that the reinterpretation of the historical violence broadcast on the television screen provides a unifying theme for both sides: in one case, to align it with the performativity that shapes the hegemonic narrative (while using irony to become a commentary on that narrative); in the other, to expose it as the encapsulated image of a historiography that disregards and marginalises the victims. The origins of this research date back to 2016, when I first explored the figure of the perpetrator and the inscription of the memory of historical violence in body language through a comparative analysis of *The Act of Killing* and *S21: The Red Killing Machine* (S21, la machine de mort khmère rouge, Rithy Panh, 2003) (Revert Gomis, 2016). In this article, the focus is on the complementary nature of Oppenheimer's Indonesian diptych[7] and the dialectic it establishes between perpetrators and victims, with the aim of further exploring documentary strategies in order to delve more deeply into the nuances of the Indonesian case and the range of resources drawn on to examine it.

## NOTES FOR A DOCUMENTARY ON GENOCIDE

The origins of the techniques used in the duology can be traced back to the early collaboration between Christine Cynn and Joshua Oppenheimer, co-directors of *The Act of Killing*. Shortly after graduating from Harvard in 1997, this creative duo began "experimenting with the space between documentary and fiction," with a particular interest in "how fiction and fantasy makes up what appears to be our factual reality" (Oppenheimer, 2013). A little later, Cynn and Oppenheimer moved to London, where they continued working with performative methods. In 2001, a friend invited them to participate in a project with workers at a Belgian-owned palm oil plantation in Indonesia. The result was the collaborative film *The Globalization Tapes* (Various Artists, 2003), composed of segments that offer different creative perspectives on the harmful effects of globalized capitalism on local workers, such as wages too low to live on, a lack of labour protections, or early deaths due to chemical exposure. Although the experience of producing this film made the urgent need for a union clear, the workers themselves dismissed this idea for fear of a repeat of the reprisals of 1965 and 1966, when their grandparents, who were union members, had been accused of being communist sympathisers and were murdered. In 2003, Cynn and Oppenheimer returned to Indonesia to undertake another project, intending to interview survivors of the genocide. Members of the army, however, shut down the interviews, forcing them to abandon the initial plan. It was then that locals they had worked with on the first film suggested they speak to some of their neighbours whom they knew had participated in the purges and were responsible for disappearances. Oppenheimer later explained, in an interview, his initial bewilderment at the perpetrators' reaction:

> To our horror and astonishment, these men would, all of them, open up with these grotesque, boastful, shocking stories of mass killing, they would tell you, in front of their wives, their children, sometimes even their grandchildren. And suddenly there was this huge question of why are they boasting? For whom are they boasting? We weren't getting testimonial, sober efforts to remember. We were getting performance. And performance is somehow always oriented towards a spectator. And the question was, who is the spectator? And performance always is meant to somehow have real effects in the world. And what were the effects they were trying to achieve through these performances? (Oppenheimer, 2013).

These are, in fact, the issues that motivated the representational approach adopted in *The Act of Killing* and Oppenheimer's subsequent exploration of the relationship between performativity, violence and memory. In light of the initial impossibility of obtaining an account from the victims' perspective, the perpetrator's testimony becomes the focus of attention for what it reveals about the past through a memory suspended between reality and the fictionalised, violent fantasy of the subjugator. It is both a means of documentary exploration and a framework for self-representation, whose performative nature takes the same form adopted by the official discourse, like a reflection. One of the main pillars of this official discourse is the propaganda feature film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (Penumpasan Pengkhianatan G 30 S PKI, Arifin, C. Noer, 1984), a docudrama about the kidnapping, torture and murder of six Indonesian army generals in the early hours of 1 October 1965, in what has traditionally been described as a failed coup attempt by the 30 September Movement, a military faction aligned with the PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia, or Indonesian Communist Party).[8] Made during the Suharto dictatorship, the film was mandatory viewing until the dictator's resignation in 1998,[9] serving to assign blame to the communists for the coup attempt itself and, indirectly, for the subsequent violence that spread across the archipelago. To this end, it focuses on depicting the

events in exhaustive detail, with a graphic use of violence[10] that is particularly brutal in the torture scenes, where it flirts with the aesthetic conventions of the slasher and gore genres. At the same time, it adopts the tone of a political or espionage thriller, with a meticulous reconstruction of the conspiracy. This blend of genres, Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo note, serves the historiography of the New Order, clearly and explicitly portraying PKI members as sadists, while also depicting them as a spectral threat (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo, 2012: 289). And yet, such extreme violence is an inextricable fact of the massacres that the film attempts to justify without ever explicitly referring to them:

> the film is able to depict genocide without directly citing it, then, because the genocide is the violence that continues to constitute the film's iterative condition. Thus the film conjures a violence as *spectre*—the extermination of the entire PKI (a group itself rendered spectral)—by not mentioning it explicitly. It is in this way that *G30S* is a *performative* instrument of terror—it does violence (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo, 2012: 290).

In this sense, the authors add, it is "a history in the performative register: history as a histrionics of terror" (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo, 2012: 290). The logic of performative terror thus takes root in Indonesian society, which has experienced neither reparations nor catharsis, particularly in the narrative of perpetrators who know they are protected not only by an official narrative but also by a storytelling mode grounded in power and intimidation over those who fear reprisals.

THE LOGIC OF PERFORMATIVE TERROR THUS TAKES ROOT IN INDONESIAN SOCIETY, WHICH HAS EXPERIENCED NEITHER REPARATIONS NOR CATHARSIS.

## THE PERPETRATORS' PERSPECTIVE: *THE ACT OF KILLING*

*The Act of Killing* thus appropriates this performative dynamic that comes naturally to the perpetrators. It is in the context of this regime of impunity, and the narratives emerging from it, that Oppenheimer proposes an unusual starting point: they are invited to participate in the filming of a purported fiction film in which they are actors and stars. In this process, they are also encouraged to draw on their experience as torturers and murderers to achieve greater realism in their roles, which are reimagined using recognisable codes of various genres (war films, Westerns, horror films, gangster films and political thrillers). Previous research (Revert Gomis, 2016) already directly identified the ultimate aim of the performative device, which is to reverse the dehumanisation in the executioner's gaze and (re)activate empathy for the Other. This strategy is realised through an extension of this role-playing that results at a certain point in a reversal of identities, in which Anwar Congo or Herman Koto[11] embodies a victim and is subject to a simulation of violence and abuse (Image 1).

This is therefore not a typical reenactment in which the subject's memory is revealed through the repetition of past actions.[12] This incorporation of historical violence into present-day fiction entails not only the memory of gestures but also the perpetrators' self-perception, which is shaped by



Image 1. The role reversal allows Anwar Congo to experience a simulation of the torture suffered by his victims

the dominant narrative and by the way it unfolds to erase difference.

> This method of archaeological performance entails successively working with and through the gestures, routines and rituals that were the motor of the massacres, as well as the genres and grammars of its historical recount, typically moving from interview and reenactment with the historical actors, such as that of Amir and Inong on the Snake River, to increasingly elaborate restagings of the events related in the interviews. Between a buried historical event and its restaging with historical actors this method opens a process of simultaneous *historical excavation* (working down through strata), and *histrionic reconstruction* (adding layers of stylised performance and recounting) (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo, 2012: 304–305).

This method inevitably opens up a referential gap which, far from producing a distancing effect in the recounting of the events of 1965 and 1966 (which are never directly shown in any photographs or footage), recreates their essential violence so that what is left out of the frame is completed by the spectator through their own subjectivity and background.

> In other words, the absent documentary invoked by the ironic documentary enjoys a psychic reality that depends on what the spectator imagines or fantasizes it to be—a psychic reality partly based on previous experience and partly invoked by the specific strategies a given filmmaker utilizes. It is, in fact, not so much absent as missing: we hold out an expectation of the absent film's potential appearance, which is quite different from merely noting something that is not present (Nichols, 2013: 28).

This is what Oppenheimer himself has come to call *the documentary of the imagination*, a concept that resists traditional categorisations, in which individual subjectivity and its relationship with reality cannot be confined to a real/unreal binary. Rather, it is a matter of documenting "the ways we imagine ourselves, the ways we know ourselves" (Hill, 2021: 802). It is only from this hazy space that we can cross the threshold of astonishment and bewilderment induced by a first viewing of *The Act of Killing*—Why do these men boast of their crimes? What motivates them to celebrate their cruelty? Why have they gone unpunished?—and begin to understand that their actions stem from a self-representation rooted in: 1) the official discourse of the New Order, whereby the alleged cruelty and violence of the 30 September conspirators—illustrated in *Pengkhianatan G30S PKI*—demanded an even crueller and more violent response, leading to their complete (and justified) annihilation; 2) the elevation of the exterminators to the level of national heroes—as part of the celebrated *Angkatan 66*, or Generation of '66—confirmed in public ceremonies and institutional interactions; and 3) a new reframing, in the form of simulation, that confers upon them the status of movie stars in the classical sense of the Hollywood star system, leading them to identify themselves as performers and to adopt generic codes of hegemonic American cinema. Decisive to the construction of identity and morality resulting from the convergence of these three factors is the media component, whether articulated through the mouthpieces of power, public forums or the mass media, particularly film and television, which constitute the focus of this analysis.

Several scenes highlight the centrality of these media forms and their role in discourses of power.[13] In this regard, the figure of Anwar Congo establishes a direct connection between cinematic imagination and the violence of the genocide, as during the years of the massacre he worked at a cinema in the heart of the city of Medan. A few minutes into the film, he is interviewed inside the now-abandoned building, accompanied by an attentive Koto. Later, outside the cinema, he explains to the camera that at the height of their power the communists advocated for curtailing screenings of American films, a move that for gangsters like him would have meant reduced box office revenue, since Hollywood titles were the most popular. As the interview continues, Congo recounts

coming out of the cinema dancing with joy after watching Elvis Presley films. Together with Koto, he recreates the mood as they cross the street, remembering the elation he felt until they reach the paramilitary office where torture and killings took place. Upon reaching the door, a visibly cheerful Congo remarks, "I'd see the guy being interrogated. I'd give him a cigarette. I'd still be dancing, laughing. It was like we were killing… happily!" This is no mere trip down memory lane; on the contrary, the scene carries strong symbolic weight, illustrating how the imaginary constructed by Hollywood's modes of representation becomes inscribed in the individual, permeates him, and how this assimilation in turn is ultimately adapted to genocidal violence. In *The Act of Killing*, this hegemonic cinema—with its suppression of other cinematic forms, which itself establishes a power dynamic—shapes the perpetrator's fantasy when he tortures and kills, creating a single subjective space where the factual is merely one of the narrative layers that make up his identity.

The above is not the only reference made in the film to cinema. In various scenes, Congo enthusiastically expresses his love for films, such as when he names Al Pacino and John Wayne among his favourite actors, or when he recalls how as a young man he would watch and imitate Hollywood movies. In parallel with these recollections is a revealing evolution of his self-perception as a star: early on we see him watching his first screen tests on a television set and fiercely criticising his own performance. However, his acting in successive simulations eventually leads him to define himself as *an artist* and to deny that status for Koto. In another scene, he sits in front of the same TV set watching *Pengkhianatan G30S PKI*, a film from which he will later recreate scenes, playing the role of one of the victims. This operation clarifies the filmmakers' strategy: the gaze intrinsic to the performative violence that has forged the dominant narrative of the genocide is turned back onto the perpetrators themselves in simulated conditions, creating a grim game of mirrors.

The most significant scene, however, takes place later in a television studio. It is a talk show titled *Special Dialogue*, featuring Ibrahim Sinik, a newspaper editor who also participated in the massacres, the paramilitary leader Ali Usman, along with Congo and Koto. The audience consists exclusively of members of the Pancasila Youth, and a disturbing set design features a table draped in a red cloth positioned in front of the presenter, on which three sculptures of heads with expressionless faces are displayed as props. The host introduces her guests as "movie theatre gangsters who are making a film to commemorate the extermination of the communists." After interviewing Sinik, the host asks Congo who his favourite movie star is. He replies, "The one who looks most like me. There was a Black star named Sidney Poitier." After a round of applause, the interview continues, and Congo remarks that the meaning of the word for "gangster" in Indonesian is *free man*,[14] which is why they have included the song "Born Free" at both the beginning and the end of their film (Image 2).

Congo's appearance on the talk show and the host's description of him as *the star of the film* reinforce the media-driven nature of his persona and his enduring connection to the Hollywood imaginary—which, in the case of the Poitier reference, takes on a paradoxical meaning, as the African



Image 2. The song "Born Free", featuring Anwar Congo and Herman Koto

American actor generally played characters who stood out for their nobility and/or were subjected to racial discrimination. Usman's interview then brings the conversation back to the realm of historiography, as he stresses how important it is for young people to remember their history and that there can be no reconciliation because "the story had to go this way." The scene ends with the interviewer asking about the possibility of revenge by the victims' children, to which Congo replies: "It's not that they don't want to take revenge. They can't!" He has barely finished his answer when somebody off-screen shouts: "Because we'd exterminate them all!" The camera then reveals the speaker: the local paramilitary leader Safit Pardede, who is speaking into a handheld microphone while sitting in a jeep full of Pancasila soldiers that forms part of the studio set. His interjection triggers a new round of applause and concludes the talk show segment, having effectively documented the media's complicity in this performative terror that maintains order through intimidation in Indonesian society. As Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo point out: "Rather it is to recognise that these fatal acts reveal the threat of repetition as a constitutive element of the performance of terror: not merely, 'this is what is done', but 'this is what *will* be done'" (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo, 2012: 294).

In short, the perpetrator's gaze in *The Act of Killing* is articulated by the mediation of the film or television screen. These media forms serve as a framework that simultaneously enables fantasies and validates self-representations, a site of exchange that transforms experience into performance, in which the violence of the historical world leaves its imprint on the potential simulacra of fiction. The mise-en-scène that the documentary constructs around Anwar Congo thus seems to reaffirm him time and again, culminating in his supposed *moral awakening*, when the images of violence finally seem to make their mark on the perpetrator. This is a sequence discussed in previous research (Revert Gomis, 2016), where Congo watches himself playing a torture victim, when he finally seems to open up to empathy and guilt. In it, the shot-reverse-shot interplay between his face and the television allows for an exchange that frames the device as an everyday object in the room. However, after Congo's grandchildren join the viewing, at the precise moment that the transformation occurs, the reverse shot closes in on the images on the screen so that the frame of the TV set is no longer visible. The shift in "scalarity" achieved through the editing functions here as a suitable marker of the point of no return in the gaze of the perpetrator, who can no longer escape the weight of the violence conveyed by these images, which appeal to him directly.

THESE MEDIA FORMS SERVE AS A FRAMEWORK THAT SIMULTANEOUSLY ENABLES FANTASIES AND VALIDATES SELF-REPRESENTATIONS, A SITE OF EXCHANGE THAT TRANSFORMS EXPERIENCE INTO PERFORMANCE, IN WHICH THE VIOLENCE OF THE HISTORICAL WORLD LEAVES ITS IMPRINT ON THE POTENTIAL SIMULACRA OF FICTION

## THE VICTIMS' PERSPECTIVE: *THE LOOK OF SILENCE*

The images in *The Act of Killing* are charged with the absence of that other possible documentary, the one denied to us by the lack of archival material or evidence that could support a direct report on the facts. But they also carry the absence of the memory of the victims, who barely seem to exist outside the executioners' account. Their absence, explained by the fact that Oppenheimer's Indonesian project was originally inspired by the widespread fear among part of the civilian population to speak of what happened, finds its discursive an-



Image 3. Adi Rukun interviews one of the perpetrators



Image 4. Rukun watches footage of the perpetrators on TV impassively

swer in *The Look of Silence*. This second instalment focuses on Adi Rukun, an ophthalmologist whose brother was tortured and murdered in the purges of northern Sumatra. As with Congo in the previous film, there are various sequences showing the protagonist watching television intently (Image 3), which serve as a unifying motif throughout the film. In these scenes, he watches the culprits make statements acknowledging all kinds of atrocities without remorse, or even reenacting them.

On one occasion, however, the television footage includes a record previously absent from the duology: a 1967 NBC News story on the massacres in the archipelago, reported by a neutral, distant voiceover while the screen shows scenes of the army dispersing civilians: "Sixteen months ago, these beautiful and tranquil looking islands exploded with stunning violence. In many cases, entire families were liquidated, and the purge continues to this day." The narration is interrupted by a reporter who praises the beauty of Bali as he walks alongside a local, who casually remarks: "Now Bali become more beautiful without communists," and then explains that it was the communists themselves who, after realising the error of their ways, had asked to be killed. Another dimension of the official historiography thus unfolds to justify the genocidal violence, framed within an expository document that makes no attempt to question the facts, instead offering an external perspective more inclined toward complicity than critique. Whether the images were taken by NBC or by the perpetrators themselves, the fundamental difference in this film lies in the position of the victim, who watches as the spectator of a spectacle from which he is excluded. This changes the relationship of the gaze with the scopic regime, with which it can no longer be complicit. Far from the emotional involvement of Congo, Rukun observes the images impassively, without any apparent emotional response (Image 4).

This impassivity, however, contrasts with his determination to interview the perpetrators and to try to understand what happened. By presenting this dual aspect of his protagonist, Oppenheimer seems to suggest that the media apparatus—which was essential to the validation of the perpetrator's perspective—is ineffective at engaging with the victim's gaze. As Yago Paris points out, these conversations follow a structure through which the protagonist systematically challenges the perpetrator's narrative:

SEEMS TO SUGGEST THAT THE MEDIA APPARATUS—WHICH WAS ESSENTIAL TO THE VALIDATION OF THE PERPETRATOR'S PERSPECTIVE—IS INEFFECTIVE AT ENGAGING WITH THE VICTIM'S GAZE

> Throughout *The Look of Silence*, every time Adi tries to speak about the past with the different perpetrators he meets, a similar pattern takes place. In the beginning, the questions are not harsh or confrontational, and, as a result, the perpetrators feel comfortable explaining what they remember about the past. This changes when Adi brings up topics that connect to ideas of guilt or responsibility. In these cases, every interviewee reacts in a similar manner, by rejecting the version of the past that Adi offers. There is a fixed idea of the past, and any diversion is immediately canceled (Paris, 2021: 9).

In fact, in his article Paris identifies a series of defence mechanisms used by the perpetrators in an attempt to thwart the possibility of a different narrative that would be beyond their control. Rukun can therefore be seen as the bearer of the silenced perspective of the victims, reclaiming their space and, with it, the right to a different memory. The quest for redress is further symbolised by the optical device used on Inong, one of the leaders of the death squads, as its application to the murderer's own eyes visually expresses the possibility of correcting the gaze (Image 5).

By placing Adi Rukun at the centre of the narrative in *The Look of Silence*, Oppenheimer goes beyond simply giving a voice to one of the victims. From the outset, Rukun is portrayed as an active figure who seeks to counter the discourse of intimidation in various contexts: he explains to his son that what he is taught in school about the failed coup of the 30 September Movement is a lie; he tries to persuade a reluctant neighbour who lived in Aceh to recount what she witnessed; and he even speaks with the family of the late Amir Hasan, showing them a video in which Hasan openly admits his responsibility for 32 deaths, which he proudly recorded in his book, a copy of which Rukun presents to them. In this way, Rukun's efforts to engage in dialogue and present the facts are not directed solely at the perpetrators but involve various groups representative of Indonesian society, thereby revealing the need for a widespread re-education of the gaze. The fact that the final stop on his journey is Hasan's family carries significant dramatic weight, as it was Hasan's squad that tortured and murdered Rukun's brother Ramli. The exposure—both on video and in writing—of the atrocities committed by their now-deceased patriarch shocks his family, eliciting an apology from his wife, and provoking the ire of his sons, who accuse Rukun and Oppenheimer of *opening wounds*. In this sense, one of their reactions echoes the official narrative aimed at burying the past: "Enough! My mother is ill, and this will traumatise her. Forget the past. Let's all get along like the military dictatorship taught us." The meeting ends shortly thereafter with no reconciliation in sight.



Image 5. The symbolic correction of the perpetrator's gaze

## CONCLUSION: REIMAGINING THE GAZE

*The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* form a documentary diptych that explores the Indonesian genocide based on a two-phase strategy, with each film addressing a phase. While the first film astutely employs the performative mechanisms of New Order discourse to hold up a mirror to the perpetrators and attempt to reverse the empathy, the second shows how the victims' gaze cannot engage in dialogue within the same discursive framework, as it is founded on power, violence, and intimidation of the *Other*, who fears that history may be repeated. The convergence of these



**Image 6. Film genres as a source of imagination and performativity**

two gazes on television and cinema screens creates symbolic frames of reference: for the perpetrators, these serve as sources of imagery and performativity (Image 6), while at the same time reflecting back to validate their identity; for the victims, however, these images constitute an incomplete memory that excludes them and requires rectification.

Thus, under the theoretical umbrella of the "documentary of the imagination", the filmmaker has reflected on the use of fiction and autofiction as a means of inhabiting the elusive world of the senses, an idea that is theoretically incompatible with the orthodox notions of expository discourse or the constraints of observational cinema. It is not surprising that his latest venture, the post-apocalyptic feature film *The End* (2024), should abandon all referential reality to observe the human condition through the codes of the musical. What truly matters is not the genre label, but his radical and uninterrupted investigation into how narrative and representation are used to survive unbearable conditions.

From this perspective, the performative and fictional mechanisms studied in this article, particularly those used in *The Act of Killing*, serve as tools for lifting the veil over the perpetrators' gaze. The final stage, which could open up the possibility of a desirable social reimagining, nevertheless requires dialogue between the parties: a confrontation in a context where fear and the imbalance of power have been neutralised, or at least mitigated, as exemplified by the accidental, revealing encounter between the painter Vann Nath and his jailer, Hoi, in *S-21: The Red Killing Machine*. It is in this unmediated presence that the limits of humanity are tested and the baggage and contradictions of the human gaze can be assessed. This is what Oppenheimer—through Rukun—proposes at the end of his duology: public dialogue, without performativity or audiovisual mediation, remains the most plausible option for neutralising discourses of intimidation, healing wounds and rewriting a coexistence that rises above trauma without forgetting it. ■

## NOTES

1 This study has been conducted in the context of the research project Transnational War-time Memories in East Asian Visual Culture (TRAMEVIC), code CIGE/2023/066, under the direction of Marcos Pablo Centeno Martín (IP).

2 Jess Melvin documents Minister Luhut Pandjaitan's denial of the massacres in 2016, as well as the Jakarta police's cancellation of an academic debate on the subject, organised by Indonesia's Legal Aid Foundation (LBH), in 2017 (Melvin, 2017: 488).

3 Notable among these is an article by philosopher Slavoj Žižek, whose reading of the film focuses on the concept of the privatisation of public space and the ethical impasse of global capitalism (Žižek, 2013).

4 As is well known, Nichols later added the poetic and performative modes (2001) to the four documentary modes he originally proposed: expository, observational, interactive and reflective representation (Nichols, 1991).

5 Notable figures working in this mode include Michael Moore, Errol Morris, Werner Herzog and Morgan Spurlock, although it actually covers a broad and flexible range of documentary practices that allow for different degrees and forms of involvement and presence on the part of the filmmakers.

6 Rukun discovered how his brother Ramli was killed thanks to both the interview transcripts with the perpetrators and the book *Embun Berdarah* ("Dew of Blood"), published by Amir Hasan in 1994. In it, the author—the leader of the squad that tortured his brother to death—describes the crimes committed in 1965 as "heroic acts" (Marching 2017: 113). Hasan's case is explored extensively by Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo in their essay "Show of Force: A Cinema-Séance of Power and Violence in Sumatra's Plantation Belt" (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo, 2012).

7 *The Act of Killing* was co-directed with Christine Cynn and an anonymous director. *The Look of Silence*, on the other hand, was directed solely by Oppenheimer. For this reason, this article generally refers to Oppenheimer as the primary driving force behind the two-film project.

8 Scholars such as John Roosa have argued that the 30 September Movement was used as a pretext for the army to launch a long-anticipated attack against the PKI. He develops his thesis in the book *Pretext for Mass Murder: The 30 September Movement and Suharto's Coup d'Etat in Indonesia* (Roosa, 2006).

9 In addition to being broadcast on television, screenings were organised in cinemas for school groups. In a scene in *The Act of Killing*, Congo watches *Pengkhianatan G30S PKI* on television while explaining, from his experience as a worker at a cinema, how little children were seated in the front rows and how many of them were left traumatised by the screenings.

10 It should be noted that there are multiple edits of the film, with varying lengths and degrees of censorship, although the two versions generally accepted as canonical are the 271-minute version and the shortened 220-minute version. Both versions can be found on YouTube.

11 Unlike other protagonists in *The Act of Killing*, Koto is not a perpetrator, as he belongs to a younger generation that was unable to participate in the purges of 1965 and 1966. He appears in Oppenheimer's film as a gangster and paramilitary leader; in other words, as one of the heirs to the positions of power and intimidation embodied by figures such as Congo.

12 In *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, also analysed in the previous study, examples are provided of a more orthodox reenactment, in which perpetrators of the Khmer Rouge regime recreate their routines at the Cambodian prison S-21—where victims were imprisoned, tortured and executed—or the bureaucratic procedures associated with each prisoner.

13 The version of *The Act of Killing* referred to in this article is the 159-minute Director's Cut, whose longer runtime—compared to the 115 minutes of the more widely distributed version—allows for a deeper exploration of Oppenheimer and Cynn's performative and staging techniques, as well as the role of propaganda itself.

14 The etymology refers to the Indonesian word *preman*, which denotes a thug or gangster, and which derives from the Dutch term *vrijman*, meaning "free man".

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## DEATH ON SCREEN: SELF-REPRESENTATION AND PERFORMATIVITY IN *THE ACT OF KILLING* AND *THE LOOK OF SILENCE*


### Abstract

The documentary diptych comprising *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* constituted a turning point in the past decade in the recovery of the memory of the Indonesian genocide that took place in 1965 and 1966. At the same time, both films, directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, marked a watershed in the evolution of the performative documentary and the representation of violence in the discursive practices of non-fiction memory construction. This article explores the strategies these films employ to incorporate the testimonies of perpetrators and victims, with a particular focus on self-representation, performativity and the role that television and film play in the narrative of the genocide. To this end, it presents a textual analysis of key sequences grounded in visual semiotics, with the aim of determining the effects these strategies have on documentary discourse and assessing their significance in a context of growing pressure in Indonesia to recover its historical memory.



### Key words

*The Act of Killing*; *The Look of Silence*; Joshua Oppenheimer; Indonesian genocide; Self-representation; Performative documentary; Performativity; Representation of violence.



### Author

Jordi Revert Gomis is a professor of Audiovisual Communication at Universitat de València (UVEG), where he earned his PhD with a thesis on intermediality between comics and films in the digital age. He is the author of dozens of articles in academic journals and several chapters in edited volumes, as well as the sole author of the books *Paul Verhoeven* (Cátedra, 2016), *En busca de lo real: 50 documentales esenciales* (Editorial UOC, 2017), and *Cine y cómic* (Cátedra, 2023). He has completed research stays at Universidad Tres de Febrero in Buenos Aires and Universidad Pontificia de Medellín. His main lines of research focus on documentary film and intermediality between films and comics. Contact: jordi.revert@uv.es



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## LA MUERTE EN LA PANTALLA. AUTORREPRESENTACIÓN Y PERFORMATIVIDAD EN *THE ACT OF KILLING* Y *LA MIRADA DEL SILENCIO*


### Resumen

El díptico documental conformado por *The Act of Killing* y *La mirada del silencio* supuso, en la década pasada, un punto de inflexión en la recuperación de la memoria del genocidio indonesio acontecido entre 1965 y 1966. Al mismo tiempo, ambas películas, dirigidas por Joshua Oppenheimer, marcaron un antes y un después en la evolución del documental performativo y la representación de la violencia en los discursos memorísticos de la no ficción. En el presente artículo se exploran las estrategias desarrolladas por estos títulos en la incorporación de los testimonios de perpetradores y víctimas, poniendo especial atención a la autorrepresentación, la performatividad y el papel de la televisión y el cine en la narrativa del genocidio. Se aborda para ello un análisis textual de secuencias clave que parte de la semiótica visual, con el fin de determinar los efectos que dichas estrategias tienen en el discurso documental y ponderar la importancia de las obras en un contexto de creciente presión para la reparación de la memoria indonesia.



### Palabras clave

*The Act of Killing*; *La mirada del silencio*; Joshua Oppenheimer; genocidio indonesio; autorrepresentación; documental performativo; performatividad; representación de la violencia.



### Autor

Jordi Revert Gomis es profesor de Comunicación Audiovisual en la Universitat de València (UVEG), centro en el que se doctoró con una tesis sobre la intermedialidad entre cómic y cine en la era digital. Es autor de decenas de artículos en publicaciones científicas y de varios capítulos en libros colectivos, así como autor en solitario de los libros *Paul Verhoeven* (Cátedra, 2016), En busca de lo real: *50 documentales esenciales* (Editorial UOC, 2017) y *Cine y cómic* (Cátedra, 2023). Ha realizado estancias de investigación en la Universidad Tres de Febrero de Buenos Aires y la Universidad Pontificia de Medellín. Sus principales líneas de investigación se centran en el cine documental y la intermedialidad entre cine y cómic. Contacto: jordi.revert@uv.es.



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# FROM MEMORY TO POST-MEMORY: THE TRAUMA OF THE LEGACY OF WAR IN *VIET AND NAM*

ENRIC BURGOS

## MEMORIES OF THE WAR IN VIETNAMESE CINEMA: AN INTRODUCTION

The war between Vietnam and the United States has been portrayed in countless fiction films over the half-century since the conflict ended in 1975. Despite the diverse perspectives that filmmakers have offered us, the image that has prevailed globally has been the Hollywood version, which presents American soldiers as the victims of the trauma of the war, while generally characterising the Vietnamese as heartless fanatics who fought for a pernicious ideology and relegating them to a supporting role in an American tragedy (Westrup, 2006; Healy, 2010).

The subjectivity of the Vietnamese perspective on the war and the pain it caused the Vietnamese people has faced difficulties in gaining visibility even within the country's own film industry. In a society where art essentially serves as propaganda, the government has imposed a degree of control over creative output that was particularly strict in the years immediately following the conflict. As a result, the human dimension of the war and the depth of the trauma were censored, and films made in the late 1970s and early 1980s—such as *Season of the Whirlwind* (Mùa Gió Chướng, Hồng Sến, 1978) or *Motherland* (Đất Mẹ, Hải Ninh, 1980)—offered, as Healy (2010) points out, an idealised vision of the war as a symbol of patriotism, national unity, revolutionary fervour and the efficiency of the communist regime. The official narrative of the conflict conveyed by these feature films—which are riddled with war slogans that were recycled in peacetime (Nhàn, 2008)—was rarely heard outside the country's borders, and when it was, its international reach was often limited to the Soviet bloc. However, with the *Đổi Mới* reforms, approved at the 6th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1986, the country established a socialist-oriented market economy, opening up to foreign investment

and to regional and international integration. Although cautiously and under state supervision, these reforms introduced changes to the film industry that allowed for new topics and styles, as well as new audiences and distribution channels for Vietnamese cinema.[1]

During the reforms of the mid-1980s, Vietnamese filmmakers began moving away from narratives glorifying war and collective triumph to explore stories of personal tragedy, abandoning the socialist realism that had been dominant until then with films addressing intimate themes characterised by measured pacing, a contemplative tone, and the expressive power of silences and symbols. The new political climate allowed various films to go even further than the poetic, subjective approach taken by Đặng Nhật Minh prior to *Đổi Mới* with *When the Tenth Month Comes* (Bao Giờ Cho Đến Tháng Mười, Đặng Nhật Minh, 1984), a film that explores the complexity of the grief of a woman who has lost her husband at the front and hides it from her father-in-law. The same director would continue to explore women's experiences during and after the war (one of the recurring themes of Vietnamese cinema during the reform period) in films such as *The Girl on the River* (Cô Gái Trên Sông, Đặng Nhật Minh, 1987), which did not receive government approval, and *Nostalgia for the Countryside* (Thương nhớ đồng quê, Đặng Nhật Minh, 1995).

*When the Tenth Month Comes* also constitutes a seminal work for the films of the reform period that explore the thematic motif of the fallen soldier. Much like the deceased husbands in *Wharf of Widows* (Bến không chồng, Lưu Trọng Ninh, 2001), in Minh's film the husband who died in combat becomes a symbolic presence that shapes the lives of his loved ones, a kind of *con ma* or angry ghost associated in Vietnamese culture with those who died in tragic circumstances and did not receive a proper funeral (Kwon, 2008; Gustafsson, 2008). Far from being portrayed as a heroic martyr, the fallen soldier in these films becomes what Bradley (2001) describes as a spectre that subverts the construction of official memory by the State.

The trope of the war veteran was subjected to a similar subversion in *Đổi Mới* cinema, with the archetype of the victorious soldier giving way to the portrayal of ex-combatants as spectral figures who are unable to find their place in the post-war world. An example of this can be found in *Brothers and Relations* (Anh và Em, Trần Vũ & Nguyễn Hữu Luyện, 1986) and *The Retired General* (Tướng về hưu, Nguyễn Khắc Lợi, 1988), both of which depict divided families and highlight the difficulties veterans faced on returning home and their disillusionment with the communist system for which they had fought.

Around the turn of the 21st century, the Vietnamese economy underwent further substantial changes that affected the country's film industry. After being subjected to an embargo for almost twenty years, normal trade relations with the United States resumed in 1994, and in that same year the Vietnamese government approved a program to rebuild the film industry, aimed at counteracting the decline of the country's state-run studios. The sector was gradually privatised, foreign funding was secured, and local filmmakers began being permitted to explore aspects of the war that had until then been off-limits. Perhaps the clearest examples of this are *Living in Fear* (Sống trong sợ hãi, Bùi Thạc Chuyên, 2005) and *Don't Burn* (Đừng đốt, Đặng Nhật Minh, 2009). From the perspective of a former South Vietnam-

VIETNAMESE FILMMAKERS BEGAN MOVING AWAY FROM NARRATIVES GLORIFYING WAR AND COLLECTIVE TRIUMPH TO EXPLORE STORIES OF PERSONAL TRAGEDY, ABANDONING THE SOCIALIST REALISM THAT HAD BEEN DOMINANT UNTIL THEN WITH FILMS ADDRESSING INTIMATE THEMES

ese soldier, *Living in Fear* condemns the treatment meted out to those who fought on the losing side, highlights the difficulties associated with the country's reunification, and uses the problem of unexploded landmines as a symbol of the war's painful legacy. Taking a humanist approach rooted in the Vietnamese poetic tradition, the film offers an emotional expression of the trauma of war with minimal dialogue and dramatic action. On the other hand, *Don't Burn* tells the story of an American soldier who finds the diary of a woman who served as a medic for the Viet Cong. The diary, which recounts the horrors of the conflict, helps the soldier recognise the humanity of the enemy. With its introspective and elegiac tone, this film reconstructs the war as an experience of pain and humanity rather than victory.

The change of atmosphere in Vietnam at the turn of the century has had other significant consequences for the country's film industry. *Three Seasons* (Tony Bui, 1999) became the first American film to be shot in Vietnam since the end of the war. Directed by a Vietnamese immigrant who had arrived in the United States at the age of two, the acclaimed film deals mainly with the vicissitudes of the country's Westernisation, though it also includes the evocative story of an US army veteran who travels to Vietnam to search for his daughter and make peace with the country in which he fought. Another case worthy of note is *Green Dragon* (Timothy Linh Bui, 2001), an independent film also directed by a Vietnamese immigrant—in fact, the brother of the director of *Three Seasons*—which explores the plight of the Vietnamese refugees who left their homeland for the United States after the war. Although both films (especially the second) clearly flirt with the conventions of Hollywood cinema, it is interesting to observe how the cinema of the Vietnamese diaspora, until then known mainly for the success of the French-based director Trần Anh Hùng, openly examines the memory of the war and contributes to a transnational perspective on the conflict and its consequences.

In a similar vein, it is worth highlighting *Journey from the Fall* (Ham Tran, 2006) and its "bleak yet redemptive portrait of postwar Vietnam in the South" (Duong, 2020: 56). Banned in Vietnam, this film addresses two taboo subjects for the State: the re-education camps for South Vietnamese prisoners, and the tragedy of the *Thuyền nhân Việt Nam* (boat people), refugees whose flight from the country initiated a flood of migration that was particularly intense in the first twenty years after the war but has continued to this day. Conversely, a film that did get released in Vietnam was *The White Silk Dress* (Áo Lụa Hà Đông, Lưu Huỳnh, 2006), a historical melodrama written and directed by another Vietnamese immigrant who had arrived in the United States as a teenager. This film, which focuses on non-combatant victims and highlights the strength and spirit of Vietnamese women, was a huge box-office success in Vietnam and received significant national and international acclaim.

Filmmakers of the diaspora continued to seek creative ways to capture the complexity of wartime and post-war experiences, with notable titles such as *Mother Fish* (Khoa Do, 2009), an Australian feature film that draws on its director's experience as a refugee to delve into the hardships and dangers faced by those who set out to sea in small boats to flee their homeland. Meanwhile, domestic Vietnamese cinema took a different direction in the 2010s, with Hollywood blockbusters gaining a foothold in Vietnam and increasingly influencing the country's film production. The memory of the war is of little interest to Vietnamese youth, who view it as a matter of the past and who, moreover, have grown up with a different kind of cinema. The audience's thematic and aesthetic preferences are becoming Westernised, and the spirit of cinematic renewal that flourished in the 1980s and 1990s seems to have faded.

However, Vietnam's growing cinematic exchange with the outside world has given rise in recent years to a new generation of filmmakers

who, although trained and based in Vietnam, reflect the influence of international arthouse films in their work. Filmmakers such as Nguyễn Hoàng Điệp, Trương Minh Quý and Phạm Thiên Ân combine Vietnamese funding with international grants and are putting their country on the map of world auteur cinema. Without abandoning a local flavour, but with a clearly international outlook, their films cast a critical eye on the country's contemporary reality through intimate experience, poetry and symbolism.

VIETNAM'S GROWING CINEMATIC EXCHANGE WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD HAS GIVEN RISE IN RECENT YEARS TO A NEW GENERATION OF FILMMAKERS WHO, ALTHOUGH TRAINED AND BASED IN VIETNAM, REFLECT THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNATIONAL ARTHOUSE FILMS

Among the films by these young directors, *Viet and Nam* (Trương Minh Quý, 2024) is undoubtedly the one that most explicitly addresses the trauma of the war between Vietnam and the United States. Set in 2001 (references to the 9/11 attacks contributes significantly to its historical context), *Viet and Nam* tells the story of Nam, a man in his twenties who works in a mine alongside his partner, Viet. Nam plans to flee the country illegally by sea, but first decides to help his mother find the remains of his father, a Viet Cong fighter who went missing in the South during the conflict.

*Viet and Nam* follows in the tradition of the cinema of the *Đổi Mới* reform era, even venturing into territories still deemed problematic by the Vietnamese government, which only filmmakers in exile have been able to explore. Moreover, the film employs the interpretative lens of post-memory (Young, 2002; Hirsch, 2008), referring to the unique experience of generations who did not live through the tragic events in question but who are indirectly marked by the emotional legacy of the trauma they caused. Furthermore, the film connects with a transnational logic evident in its humanistic approach to trauma, its cinematic style, the director's career, its status as a co-production, and its international release. Indeed, while the film was banned in Vietnam, it has been nominated at numerous festivals around the world (Cannes, Chicago, Sydney, Tokyo, Reykjavik and Guanajuato, for example) and has won awards at festivals in Munich, Singapore, Bangkok and the QCinema International Film Festival in the Philippines.

The evocative qualities of *Viet and Nam* make it an interesting object of study for the purpose of exploring how it interweaves thematic and formal elements to offer an alternative perspective on the memory of the Vietnam War. Guided by the methodology of textual analysis, this study examines the expressive and narrative devices employed in various key scenes of the film in order to highlight how it draws on the films of both the *Đổi Mới* period and of the Vietnamese diaspora, while at the same time taking the discussion of the trauma caused by the war to a whole new level.

## NAM, VIET AND VIETNAM IN *VIET AND NAM*

*Viet and Nam* opens with a black screen spotted with small, gently falling white particles, which might be tiny snowflakes or floating dust. While we hear the sound of constantly dripping water, a human figure becomes discernible in the top right-hand corner of the frame. In the dim lighting, we can only just glimpse a naked man walking slowly, hunched over, while we begin to hear the movement of the water he stirs as he advances and his constant gasping, as if he were short of breath. The figure crosses the frame, and just before he leaves it we notice a hand clutching his leg. The last of the credits appear over the dark image, followed by the sound of a male voice-over describing the difficulties of being submerged in water inside a plastic bag that makes it almost im-

possible to breathe. Then a two-shot provides a frontal view of the young man speaking and the person listening to him. Both are seated with their backs against a dark wall. They are wearing the same uniform and their skin is stained with soot. The first man continues with his story, talking about the sunlight that seeps through the plastic bag, which contrasts with the gloom of their current setting. When the story is over, the two men stare at each other intently and caress one another's faces, while the constant dripping of water continues. One of the men sensually slips his thumb into the other's mouth (Image 1); then, a bell rings and the pair abruptly cease their affectionate behaviour. The shot, which has remained static for over two minutes, now shifts slightly as the young men put on their miners' helmets and stand up, while other miners pass in front of them like shadows.

The film's first two shots introduce us to Viet and Nam, a pair of miners forced to keep their love for one another a secret, far removed from the light of day. Neither in this scene nor at any point in the film, however, is it made clear which one is Viet is and which one is Nam.[2] This vagueness sets the tone for the ambiguous rhetoric that pervades the film, while at the same time drawing attention to what unites and (con)fuses the two protagonists throughout the film: the paternal absence that marks their past, the romantic relationship that binds them in the present, and the shared fate that the future holds for them. The characters' names—and the film's title—also suggest that the story of these two is being presented metonymically as the story of their nation.

Image 1



At the same time, we are given a first glimpse of the intertwining of several themes explored in the film, with the connection established between work in the mine and the enigmatically introduced theme of fleeing the country illegally by sea. Both experiences are marked by a suffocating atmosphere which, as will be discussed below, characterises the lives of various characters and is conveyed to the viewer by means of dark, claustrophobic settings, accentuated by the film's 4:3 aspect ratio. Similarly, the symbolic omnipresence of water in the film is already made clear in these opening scenes. While this scene shows the mine's groundwater and the water mentioned in the story, subsequent scenes will feature rain, a river, a pond, a flood or the sea for different expressive purposes. In any case, the constant appearance of this symbol invites us to contemplate the polysemous nature of the Vietnamese word *nước*, which can be translated as "water" but also as "homeland", "fatherland" or "nation"[3] (Nguyên, 2017), further encouraging a metonymic-metaphorical reading of *Viet and Nam*.

Another important element, which is introduced in a more veiled manner as the film unfolds, is the motif of the earth, the ground beneath which the two young men carry out their arduous work, which is used to allude to the hidden nature of their homosexual relationship, and will also be connected later in the film to the unexploded bombs, the remains of those who disappeared during the war, and ultimately, to everything buried beneath the government's version of the conflict. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the title planned for the film's failed premiere in Vietnam was *Trong lòng đất* [In the Heart of the Earth].

Finally, the brief sequence discussed above clearly exudes a contemplative aesthetic, constructed using long, static shots with no back-

ground music, reflecting a placid narrative, a slow pace and an intimate tone that invite the spectator to reflect on the sometimes cryptic and often critical perspective offered by the film. The opening scene thus gives a first glimpse of a cinematic work that blends a documentary approach with a lyrical or even dreamlike atmosphere to present us—through the careful parcelling out of information and the use of editing and ellipses—with a sort of jigsaw puzzle of interchangeable pieces that we must piece together to get a picture of the (post)memories of the war in contemporary Vietnam.

## SON, MOTHER… AND THE GHOST OF THE FATHER

Later in the film, various fragments delve into Nam's relationship with Hoa, his mother. In one of these, the two characters are shown panning for minerals in the river and in the humble, gloomy family business while an announcer on television lists the names of soldiers whose bodies have not yet been found. In another scene, while working by the river, Hoa says to her son: "He's back. This time he was standing about a hundred or two hundred metres away from me. It looked as though he was carrying a pistol behind his back. Then he disappeared. When I turned around, there was a very large tree. Then I woke up." The conversation that ensues makes it clear that Hoa is sharing with her son the latest dream in which her husband—the father whom the war never allowed Nam to meet—appeared to her.

The ghost of the fallen soldier haunts Hoa's dreams, keeping her in a state of perpetual mourning for the missing man. Nam is Hoa's only possible refuge, and the image of her absent husband merges with that of her son: "He was the spitting image of you. You look just like him," she tells Nam as they prepare the mosquito net for the bed where they will sleep after she sings her son a lullaby. The bond of mutual



Image 2

understanding between them has already been highlighted moments earlier, in a scene showing Nam carefully painting his mother's nails (Image 2) while she worries over her son's injuries and the risk of infection in the mine. Without words, Nam confesses his relationship with Viet to his mother, before announcing that he will soon be leaving them as he intends to move abroad. Hoa tries to convince him to stay and builds yet another bridge between her husband and her son, between past and present: "Your father… I should have told him not to go."

Nam's vicarious memory of his father—and, in part, his memory of the war—is filtered through his mother's perspective, through the memories she has of him. But his father does not appear to Nam in his dreams; instead, he appears at the moment of sexual climax with Viet. The father's ghost intrudes upon the lovers and Nam sees his father's face merge with Viet's, as he confesses to Viet in a later scene. The spectral presence of the absent father haunts Hoa and Nam's daily

THE SPECTRAL PRESENCE OF THE ABSENT FATHER HAUNTS HOA AND NAM'S DAILY LIVES MUCH LIKE THE MANY GHOSTS OF THE WAR WHO, AS WILL BE DISCUSSED BELOW, INVADE THE COUNTRY'S EVERYDAY EXISTENCE

lives much like the many ghosts of the war who, as will be discussed below, invade the country's everyday existence. In this way, as the film's director himself describes it: "*Viet and Nam* interweaves the image of the father with the history of the nation. The relationship young people have with this 'father' is a relationship with a national history full of crises which, in my view, have not been resolved or sufficiently discussed" (Quý, 2024).

## DIGGING INTO THE EARTH

Shortly before the film reaches its halfway point, following a fade to black, the title *Viet and Nam* appears on screen, establishing two more divisions to accompany the many reflected in the story. The first is the split contained in the title itself, which makes explicit the separation between the two parts of the country's name; the second is the split in the narrative introduced at this moment, dividing it into two parts. The action then shifts to southern Vietnam, and more specifically to the Ba Chúc Memorial, which pays tribute to the victims of the massacre committed there in 1978 by Pol Pot's troops. Around this location, Hoa and Nam search for the remains of Nam's father, who was a Viet Cong guerrilla. They are accompanied by Viet and Ba, a veteran who had befriended the missing man during the war. The four characters look around at the skulls and bones piled up at the memorial while an elderly woman lights incense sticks and places them on an altar. Ba confesses to Hoa that he finds it hard to breathe there, and they leave in the company of a visitor who tells them about a medium who specialises in locating the remains of the missing. Despite acknowledging the futility of her quest, Hoa is determined to find the tree she has seen in her dreams, aided by Ba, who constantly shares stories of the war with his travelling companions. These stories continue to feed Nam's memory of a father—and of a war—that he never knew first-hand.

After dodging various unexploded bombs still buried in the ground and taking a short rest by the river, the four continue their journey through the dark jungle until they reach a place where mannequins of soldiers depict scenes of the war. Nam approaches one of them and strokes him affectionately (Image 3) immediately after a chronologically decontextualised shot of a man crying on his knees in the rain amidst the mud and smoke. Both these shots are accompanied by a song performed a cappella by a female voice. Although the credits do not identify the composition, the repetitive structure of the vocal chant is reminiscent of *chầu văn*, a Vietnamese folk music genre used at spirit-conjuring rituals to induce a state of trance. The next shot reveals the diegetic source of the music, showing us the back of the woman singing (soon to be identified as the aforementioned medium), who is dressed in a traditional pink *áo dài*. As will be the case throughout the sequence, the editing here breaks the continuity to create a dialogue between different locations and, above all, different times, all equally marked by the horror of war.

When the song is over, the medium begins communicating with the spirit of a fallen soldier. Off-screen, one of the soldier's relatives is heard weeping, and the medium turns around. Her white-painted, tear-streaked face looks sinister, as does her inquisitorial expression when she accuses some of those present of not believing in her

Image 3



powers (Image 4). The camera shifts to show the relatives of the soldier whose spirit the medium has contacted, holding photos of the missing man, and finally, the medium approaching the four protagonists, who simply watch from a distance. A medium close-up then shows the woman in a trance with a look of horror on her face, her back to the audience watching her. In the next shot, she is shown lying on the ground, having taken on the form of the soldier who was shot in the war, who she claims was buried by his comrades at that very spot. Following the medium's instructions, a man starts digging there, and then the medium herself gets into the hole and begins burrowing with her hands. She takes a handful of mud and holds it up to one of the fallen soldier's relatives: "Here is the flesh of your father's head. The flesh has turned to black earth." Notwithstanding the grotesque nature of the medium's performance and the possibility of deception, the funeral rites carried out by the soldier's family in the following scene reflect their need to close an open wound that the discourse of victory has failed to heal.

Another scene, comprised of a single shot, returns our attention to the static (as static as the official memory) re-enactment of episodes from the war. A horizontal tracking shot moving from left to right captures the mannequin soldiers using picks to dig up explosives buried in a stretch of ground marked with red flags. In what sounds al-

Image 4



NOTWITHSTANDING THE GROTESQUE NATURE OF THE MEDIUM'S PERFORMANCE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF DECEPTION, THE FUNERAL RITES CARRIED OUT BY THE SOLDIER'S FAMILY IN THE FOLLOWING SCENE REFLECT THEIR NEED TO CLOSE AN OPEN WOUND THAT THE DISCOURSE OF VICTORY HAS FAILED TO HEAL

most like a documentary voice-over, Ba names the various devices shown there. The long descriptive shot ends by focusing on a visitor with only one leg, who observes the motionless display while leaning on a crutch. The sequence is intercut with a series of brief scenes that take us to different places and times, all of which are thematically connected as they revolve around Nam's imminent departure and the consequences this will have for his relationship with Viet, who compares his fate to that of the women who a quarter of a century earlier waited in vain for their husbands to come back from the war.

We then return to the jungle, where Hoa finds the tree they were looking for. The four characters dig at the spot with their picks, just as we saw Viet and Nam doing earlier in the mine, the man who helped the medium, and even the mannequins in the re-enactment. The sound of a sharp thud makes them all stop digging suddenly, and their silence and exchanges of glances maintain the suspense for a few seconds. As Ba warns them, what they have uncovered is not the remains of the missing man but an unexploded bomb. As in the film *Living in Fear* mentioned above, the undetonated explosive buried underground represents the suffering deeply embedded in a country barely capable of expressing it. In this case, the scene connects the unexploded mine to the ghost of the fallen soldier, and thus to the raw scars expressed in Ba's guilt, Hoa's unresolved grief and Nam's complex relationship with the figure of his father.

The sequence ends with a final scene that begins with a close-up of a frog in the rain emerging from a puddle that has formed where they were digging. The four travellers are sleeping by the tree. Nam wakes up, watches the frog and follows it through the trees until it disappears into a hole in the rocks. The rain has stopped and a wide shot shows a bare-chested Nam standing in the middle of the frame, staring at the hole. A reverberating internal voice-over give us access to the thoughts of the young man, who fantasises about his father's return home. The camera gradually zooms in, adding an emotional undertone to a scene with a distinctly dreamlike quality. A reverse shot shows the hole in the rocks, and the camera zooms in on it. We hear the sound of dripping water coming from its dark interior while we can just barely make out the rocks in an image that recalls the scenes in the mine where the lovers work. A shot taken from inside the hole shows Nam again as he finishes his imaginary dialogue: "Dad, I'm scared." Just then we hear the sound of a gunshot and Nam collapses to the ground (Image 5). The next shot shows him lying still, with no sign of a bullet wound. This time speaking aloud, the young man asks: "Is this what it's like to be dead?" This question, which ends the sequence, highlights Nam's inability to make peace either with the vicarious memory of his father or with the homeland he is about to leave, while at the same time opening the door to an ending in which the protagonists will try new ways of banishing their ghost(s).



Image 5

## A BETTER FUTURE?

Back home, various scenes return us to daily life in the mine. The editing suggestively connects the end of one sequence with the start of the next one. A wide shot shows Viet, Nam and other miners in a mine shaft lift as it begins to descend. The shot lingers for a few seconds after a large grate covers the shaft, and this image is juxtaposed with a shot of Nam in another confined space—in this case, inside a moving vehicle. The next shot shows the container in which Nam will leave the country. A young man dressed in a blazer, Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses is drinking Coca-Cola while giving instructions in the middle of the night to a group of people on how to open the containers. Just then, another van arrives on the scene with more people ready to make the illegal journey and, as we discover along with Nam, Viet is among them. The scene ends with a long tracking shot lasting over a minute, with no sound other than ambient noise, rolling past one container after another, bringing to mind not only those who fled Vietnam in the late 1970s, but also those who are still leaving the country today in search of a better life.

The action cuts directly to a scene in which Ba confesses to Hoa the secret he has kept since the war ended. Ba's confession begins with a static long shot lasting over three minutes, showing him with his face to the camera while Hoa goes about her work in the family business. Shortly before Ba's account reaches its climax, Hoa sits down. A few seconds later, we hear exactly the same words from Ba again, over a medium-close-up shot of Hoa in profile. It is then that the veteran finally reveals that he accidentally shot Hoa's husband in a moment of panic.

The disruptive rhythm of the editing in this scene allows us to focus first on the heart-wrenching testimony of the man who served in the war,

and then separately on the distraught reaction of the woman who lost her husband and the father of her child, thus drawing our attention to the different emotions associated with a multifaceted memory that is not—and cannot be—the same for everyone. After this scene, Hoa calls the medium on the phone and tells her everything she wants her to convey to her late husband, while a wide shot of a country road shows a Vietnamese flag fluttering in the centre of the frame, once again emphasising the collective nature of a trauma that affects the whole country in one way or another.

The film's final scene begins with a medium close-up of Viet and Nam that recalls the shot that first introduced the couple to us. Both men are bare-chested and covered in soot, leaning against a black wall. Viet kisses and caresses Nam, who says to him: "I've finally seen him. But he didn't say a word to me." Viet replies that it was a hallucination caused by a lack of oxygen. Nam looks into the camera and asks Viet if he can see anything. The camera pulls back gradually as they talk about the darkness of the place and the need to stay calm and not use up too much air. At certain moments, the couple seem to be floating against a starry night sky, but both their conversation and the image—which is now a long shot— reveal that they are actually inside a shipping container (Image 6). In the final shot, while we hear Nam talking about the story of exile and happy return told by the Vietnamese legend of *Mai An Tiêm*, the container drifts on the waves in the vastness of the blue sea.

THE DISRUPTIVE RHYTHM OF THE EDITING IN THIS SCENE ALLOWS US TO FOCUS FIRST ON THE HEART-WRENCHING TESTIMONY OF THE MAN WHO SERVED IN THE WAR, AND THEN SEPARATELY ON THE DISTRAUGHT REACTION OF THE WOMAN WHO LOST HER HUSBAND AND THE FATHER OF HER CHILD



Image 6

## CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of *Viet and Nam* has explored how the film orchestrates a pluralistic memory of the war, adopting a subjective and intergenerational perspective to challenge the static nature of the official narrative. The film eschews the traditional heroic model by focusing on the memory of Ba, a war veteran, while also conveying Hoa's fruitless efforts to find closure for her grief, as a woman who cannot break free from her past. But in addition to exposing the permanent scar of the trauma suffered by these two characters, *Viet and Nam* also ventures into the realm of post-memory with its examination of the legacy of grief inherited by Nam, its young protagonist. It thus explores the connection between a nation, its youth and its war-torn past through a narrative shaped by the queer experience, with an intimate story that functions as a counter-narrative to the patriarchal framework of the institutional rhetoric.

The film offers an *archaeology of trauma* (this expression seems particularly apt given the symbolic role it assigns to the earth) in which the ghost of the fallen soldier not only connects the aforementioned characters, but also serves (especially if we consider the function of water, another of the film's symbol, water) to characterise the spectral country that Quý shows us: a shattered Vietnam in which the wounds of the past mark everyday life in the present. The filmmaker's for-

mal choices prove crucial to these dimensions of his work. On the one hand, the use of sensory (and especially the dreamlike and the quasi-fantastical) elements more effectively exposes the contradictory persistence of national pain than mere mimesis could. On the other hand, the fragmentary and non-linear narrative, replete with silences, ellipses and the interweaving of different themes, settings and time-frames, helps place the film in opposition to the monolithic vision promoted by the official (and impossible) unified memory.

Thus, while telling a personal story, the film presents a portrait of contemporary Vietnam that at times even confronts with a tragedy that transcends not only geographical but also generational boundaries. With its emphasis on the human experience of trauma, the weight given in its story to exile, and the somewhat veiled references to Pol Pot's genocide or the 9/11 attacks, *Viet and Nam* opens the door to a transnational interpretation. This possibility is further reinforced by the film's international impact and the dialogue Quý establishes between the Vietnamese aesthetic tradition, slow cinema, and that global style of auteur filmmaking whose influence on the director has not gone unnoticed by critics, who have compared him, for example, to Bresson, Resnais and Tarkovsky (Fabre, 2024) or to more contemporary examples such as Alain Guiraudie and Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Henderson, 2024).

In short, this study shows that *Viet and Nam* expands and at the same time shifts the focus of the cinema of both the *Đưi Mưi* era and the Vietnamese diaspora. From the former, it takes its intimate approach and its subversion of the epic narrative, while from the latter it takes the exploration of memory from the perspective of an unsettling alienation and the drama of exile. However, the dismantling of the official narrative that the film seeks to achieve through its focus on grief is not merely the result of merging themes and styles from the cinematic trends discussed in the introduction. As a film about the echo at a point when there is almost no voice left, *Viet and Nam* can be understood as a convergence of domestic and diaspora memory, but also as an intersection of the war experienced and the trauma inherited, of history and rumour. Its focus on vicarious memory, its adoption of a non-heteronormative gaze, and its experimental formal approach point towards a kind of rupture that serves as an indicator of a generational shift. *Viet and Nam* demonstrates that trauma can be transmitted, reinterpreted and filmed without having been directly experienced, that national memory can be conceived of in a context of emotional intimacy, and that the queer experience not only inserts a dissident body into history but also offers an alternative way of telling it. It is at this meeting point—between post-memory, queer sensibility and a transnational aesthetic—that the film opens up a new direction in Vietnamese cinema for exploring the memory of the war. ■

## NOTES

1 For a detailed analysis of cinema during the *Đổi Mới* period, see Charlot, 1989.

2 Not even the end credits specify which character each actor plays. For the sake of greater clarity, and following the example set by the film's director in interviews, we shall henceforth refer to the protagonist as Nam.

3 The film *2030* (Nước, Nghiem-Minh Nguyen-Vo, 2014) addresses the polysemous nature of the Vietnamese word for water in a similar manner, connecting the floods caused by climate change to the loss of national territory.

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## FROM MEMORY TO POST-MEMORY: THE TRAUMA OF THE LEGACY OF WAR IN *VIET AND NAM*

**Abstract**

This article offers an analysis of *Viet and Nam* (Trương Minh Quý, 2024), examining the film's alternative approach to the memory of the war between Vietnam and the United States. It begins with a brief overview of the films that consolidated the official interpretation of the conflict promoted by the Vietnamese government, and then considers the transformations brought about by films of both the *Đổi mới* era and the Vietnamese diaspora, which introduced new ways of thinking about trauma. A textual analysis of *Viet and Nam* shows how the film engages with these movements while taking a significantly different approach to the memory of war, highlighting the importance the film gives to the experience of grief, the exploration of post-memory, and the inscription of a queer gaze that destabilises dominant frameworks. At the same time, the film's fragmentary sensory narrative is revealed to be a device for conveying the indirect experience of trauma, connecting the intimate with the historical and offering a reflection on memory from a generational and transnational perspective.

**Key words**

Vietnam War; Memory; Post-memory; Trauma; Queer; Exile; *Viet and Nam*; Film Analysis.

**Author**

Enric Burgos holds bachelor's degrees in Philosophy and in Audiovisual Communication from Universitat de València and a PhD in Communication Science from Universitat Jaume I. He is currently a lecturer at Universitat de València. His research interests include deviations from the hegemonic model in films and TV series, as well as the perspective of contemporary audiovisual production towards animalism. He has authored several articles in scholarly journals, including *Fotocinema*, *Communication & Society*, *Brumal* and *Cinema. Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image*.

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## DE LA MEMORIA A LA POSMEMORIA. EL TRAUMA DE LA HERENCIA BÉLICA EN *VIET AND NAM*

**Resumen**

El presente artículo toma *Viet and Nam* (Trương Minh Quý, 2024) como objeto de análisis con el fin de examinar cómo el film procura una aproximación alternativa a la memoria de la guerra entre Vietnam y Estados Unidos. En primer lugar, se revisan sucintamente las representaciones cinematográficas que consolidaron la lectura oficial del conflicto promovida por el gobierno de Vietnam para, posteriormente, atender a las transformaciones introducidas tanto por el cine del *Đổi mới* como por el cine de la diáspora vietnamita, ya que estas impulsaron nuevas vías para pensar el trauma. Seguidamente, el análisis textual de *Viet and Nam* muestra cómo la película dialoga con estas corrientes, a la vez que introduce desplazamientos significativos en su abordaje de la memoria bélica. Se destaca, así, el importante peso que el film otorga a la experiencia del duelo, a la exploración de la posmemoria y a la inscripción de una mirada *queer* que desestabiliza los marcos dominantes. Asimismo, se presenta la narrativa fragmentaria y sensorial del film como dispositivo que permite articular la transmisión del trauma más allá de la experiencia directa, vinculando lo íntimo con lo histórico y abriendo una reflexión sobre la memoria desde una perspectiva generacional y transnacional.

**Palabras clave**

Guerra de Vietnam; Memoria; Posmemoria; Trauma; *Queer*; Exilio; *Viet and Nam*; Análisis fílmico.

**Autor**

Enric Burgos (València, 1976) es licenciado en Filosofía y en Comunicación Audiovisual por la Universitat de València y doctor en Ciencias de la Comunicación por la Universitat Jaume I. Actualmente es profesor ayudante doctor en la Universitat de València. Sus intereses de investigación incluyen las desviaciones del modelo hegemónico en el cine y series de televisión, así como la mirada de la producción audiovisual contemporánea hacia el animalismo. Es autor de diversos artículos en revistas científicas, como *Fotocinema*, *Communication & Society*, *Brumal*, *Con A de Animación* o *Cinema. Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image*. Contacto: enric.burgos@uv.es

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# *THE TOKYO TRIAL*: REFLECTIONS ON VISUALITY, TRANSNATIONAL DIALOGUE AND MONUMENTALITY

YUEPENG WEI
TIANTIAN XU

*The Tokyo Trial* (Dōngjīng Shěnpàn, Gao Qunshu, 2006) is a Chinese film made in the context of the commemorations for the 60th anniversary of the victory in the Second Sino-Japanese War. Along with other archives and publications related to the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, this film has become what Pierre Nora (2008: 21) calls a *lieu de mémoire*. While on the one hand it conforms to and reinforces the official historiography of the Second World War, on the other it explores possible ways of transcending the national or ethnographic narrative frameworks of Chinese cinema.

The film's examination of the ambivalence between monumentality and dialogue offers a much-needed perspective for analysing Chinese films about the Second World War, with a view to better understanding the country's post-war memory and nation-building project. The aim of this article is to explore the dilemmas faced by post-colonial subjects caught between "'first world' imperialism and 'third world' nationalism"[1] (Chow, 1995: 23) in the narration of historical traumas, and to establish a dialogue and possible resonances between Rey Chow's notion of cinema as cultural translation (1995) and other theoretical frameworks in cultural, visual and memory studies.

## VISUALISED MODERNITY AND SPLIT SUBJECTIVITY

While a student in Japan in the early 20th century, the Chinese intellectual Lu Xun (1881-1936) attended the projection of propaganda slides taken by Japanese forces, including one showing the execution of a Chinese prisoner suspected of spying during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). The shocking nature of this image inspired Lu Xun to launch a project of national salvation through literature, while the event itself became part of China's national cultural memory[2] (Assmann, 1992:

5). Throughout the 20th century, its symbolic quality was reinforced through its repeated use in different cultural products, so that it acquired a kind of monumentality through its association with the awakening of the modern Chinese intellectual consciousness.

The relationship between visual violence and the production of a post-colonial subjectivity revealed by this event also caught the attention of Rey Chow. In her analysis of Lu Xun, Chow (1995: 6) argues that the moment when the young Chinese student in a Japanese classroom sees his compatriots observing an execution signifies the forcible exposure the post-colonial subject's nascent self-awareness to a violence that splits it between the "viewing subject" and the "object viewed". According to Chow (1995: 10), although they harboured doubts about the capacity of literature to operate as a self-sufficient system of meaning or to tackle the huge transformations being brought about by modernity, representative figures of modern Chinese literature such as Lu Xun turned to literary expression. It could even be argued that the decision to turn back to literature constituted a symbolic attempt to heal the split between the "viewing subject" and the "viewed object". Underlying this idea is the hypothesis that the visual violence caused by the division within the post-colonial subject is not limited to that particular moment but becomes an ongoing structural trauma. Depictions of the violence of war and colonialism, along with the construction of the memories and post-memories (Hirsch, 2012: 4) associated with them, often have to expose or transcend the structural trauma of a split subject.

The recurring evocation and artistic recreation of Lu Xun's experience by different groups reveals the importance of cultural memory associated with trauma for nation building in the Third World. The trauma and victory chosen for remembrance have taken on an important legitimising role in the construction of national identity (Wang, 2012: 21), to which audiovisual media have also made significant contributions. Indeed, images of war violence are particularly effective for reinforcing identities based on collective historical traumas. This means that filmmakers committed to exploring alternative narratives (although always contingent on the immediacy of the image) need to decide how they will expose or transcend the inherent violence, while reflecting on the possibility of disconnecting the trauma from nationalist narratives. In China specifically, the tension between personal memory and official memory is even more complex: researchers such as Kirk Denton argue that both tend to be totalised or co-opted in a nationalised framework, with the result that each individual's relationship with the past runs the risk of being repressed (Denton, 2014: 11). This makes negotiating with the dominant discourse and exploring different narrative strategies a very difficult task.

In this sense, *The Tokyo Trial* (2006) is a valuable object of study, as it offers a highly original exploration of the narration of historical traumas, although it also suffers from certain limitations. The film, directed by Gao Qunshu, recounts the experience of the judge Mei Ju-ao and the Chinese delegation to the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, while at the same time depicting the spiritual crisis afflicting post-war Japan, as witnessed by the Chinese judge. The director has chosen not to depict the atrocities directly, opting instead to show fragments of a fictional Japanese family's life in order to show the wounds left by the war—an approach that is quite novel for Chinese cinema. To some extent, Gao Qunshu makes an effort to establish new power dynamics in relation to the act of viewing, developing strategies that differentiate his film from most Chinese war narratives, which have generally adopted a national or ethnographic framework that positions the victims as spectacles.

The effort to reconstruct the power dynamics in relation to the gaze is expressed in at least two

significant ways: by avoiding direct depictions of the atrocities of the war; and by eschewing the use of autoethnographic strategies. In her description of the strategies commonly employed by China's Fifth Generation filmmakers (such as Zhang Yimou or Chen Kaige), Chow (1995: 38) uses the term autoethnography[3] to argue that their practice of exhibiting what is (constructed as) natural, primitive and third-world destabilises the distinction between "us" and "them". In this way, the visual power relation in an autoethnographic framework is defined as a situation where "'viewed object' is now looking at 'viewing subject' looking" (Chow, 1995: 180-181). The autoethnographic strategy would prove at once seductive and deceptive: although it has earned these filmmakers recognition at international festivals, there is no doubt that autoethnography runs the risk of portraying China's internal *Other* (i.e. women and children) as embodiments of the "primitive", as Chow points out (1995: 21). This means that such a strategy to a large extent involves a reproduction of existing power dynamics.

Gao Qunshu's rejection of autoethnography in *The Tokyo Trial* reflects both his refusal to represent the Chinese as primitive and an ambivalence towards the identification of China as a national entity in the position of victim. There are no stimulating visuals in the form of either direct depictions of atrocities or primitive folk culture symbols, and the narrative is located in the chambers of the Tribunal, presenting a civilising trial to judge war crimes. In other words, instead of depictions of the primitive, the filmmaker has consciously chosen to go in the opposite direction, to present the Chinese as emissaries of civilisation vested with judicial authority. In one significant scene, where a few members of the delegation are talking to the owner of a local tavern, a Japanese woman who speaks fluent Chinese, they mention China's military expansion during its pre-modern imperial period. Such a reference to China's imperial past is unusual in Chinese films, as it represents a kind of abandonment of the cinematic fascination with the myth of an authentic, primitive Chinese culture. Although this scene is not directly related to the trial, it offers an insight into the director's creative objective to maintain a sceptical attitude towards the fascination with nationalist glory.

The character of Mei is essential to the accomplishment of the director's creative intentions. Not only does he embody China's role as a national entity in the post-war international political order, but he also provides personal testimony related to post-war Japan. In light of Chow's analysis of Lu Xun, it is apparent that the split described by Chow between viewing subject and viewed object is fleetingly and symbolically resolved through Mei's perspective. The transformation of the violent gaze into a retrospective view charged with redemptive potential constitutes a paradigm shift that is both promising and necessary for post-colonial subjects. In this context, Mei's power to look and his ability to represent justice for the victims are briefly combined. The Chinese portrayed on screen are neither passive victims of imperialist violence nor apathetic spectators watching an execution; instead, they are witnesses casting a compassionate retrospective gaze over the ruins of war. This gives the character certain qualities typical of an external observer, whose view of the war's aftermath is similar to the kind of retrospective contemplation that contemporary spectators might have of the judicial proceedings and the historical period.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE VIOLENT GAZE INTO A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW CHARGED WITH REDEMPTIVE POTENTIAL CONSTITUTES A PARADIGM SHIFT THAT IS BOTH PROMISING AND NECESSARY FOR POST-COLONIAL SUBJECTS

Power dynamics in relation to the gaze are subverted in this film by merging the contemporary spectator's view with Mei's to establish a perspective that is both embodied and retrospective, an heir to the historical trauma but with moral authority. For Chinese viewers who possess this post-memory, the scenes establishing the beginning of the war, the criminal guilt of the defendants, etc., reveal how the official historiography was constructed. In addition to acting as a participant in an important historical event, Mei's character is also vested with *extrahistorical* and *metahistorical* attributes: what really matters is his compassionate retrospective view and his location at the crucial points of the historiography.

There is a clear effort to turn this historical event into a quintessential *lieu de mémoire* that the audience can return to; a space constructed by films, publications and commemorations that also contribute to revitalising the official historiography of the war. By transforming commemorative activities into everyday practices, national historical narratives have come to constitute an important element of transgenerational cultural memory. These everyday practices offer a micro-level view of the symbiosis between nation, memory and history described by Pierre Nora (2008: 23).

According to Nora (2008: 172), commemorations transpose violent memories into ink-written history, while proclaiming their future orientation and regulating the impact of traumatic memories of the past. In third-world nation-building, commemorations not only provide the community with a centripetal force, but also offer contingent and hybrid identities a temporary, symbolic stability. According to Li Xiaoping (2000: 201), nation-building in the Third World involves shifting from the conception of the nation as a temporally coherent entity towards a spatial understanding of the nation, i.e. as an entity adapted to a global time-space organised on the basis of the nation-state. The debates in the film about the seating arrangements in the tribunal clearly reflect this issue, while also revealing that China's national identity depends not only on shared traumatic memories and past glories, but also on its participation in the post-war international order as one of the powerful nations on the winning side. This achieves a momentary reconciliation between the past and the future, between the temporal and spatial conceptions of the nation, while establishing a coherence in modern Chinese historiography.

Li Xiaoping (2000: 194) argues that the paradox of Chinese nationalism lies in the fact that the quest for a coherent, autonomous and authentic nation is founded on incoherent, relational and hybrid articulations. In other words, both the split experienced by the post-colonial subject and that subject's ambivalence towards a historical awareness marked by discontinuity or a national identity based on hybrid and unstable elements, even within what at least appears to be a coherent narrative, can only be reconciled symbolically.

## A SYMBOLIC SUTURE AND NEW FRACTURES

When the split is symbolically sutured, two new fractures emerge: on the one hand, from the significant divergences between different Asian countries, and between these countries and the West, in the "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière, 2005: 15) in relation to the Second World War, posing serious obstacles to dialogue and cultural translation; and on the other, from the fact that by accepting the historiography established by the Tokyo Trial, the film simultaneously adopts the deficiencies inherent in the judicial process itself.

The historical event on which *The Tokyo Trial* is based, the Military Tribunal for the Far East (1946-1948), continued the paradigm established by the Nuremberg Trials of holding specific individuals accountable for the war crimes commit-

ted, while at the same time it made more obvious compromises based on post-war geopolitical considerations[4] and the marked divisions on the panel of judges itself. Critics who question the impartiality of the Nuremberg Trials argue that they were determined by the power of the victors over the vanquished, rather than on any inherent superiority of the Allies. Such criticisms have also been applied to the Tokyo Trial, heightened by the added consideration of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States (Ōnuma, 2009: 4). In this regard, the Japanese intellectual Takeuchi Yoshimi (1959) suggested that Japan should not be held accountable to the victorious Western powers, but instead should answer to the Asian countries that suffered from Japanese colonialism and its imperialist war, such as China. Ōnuma Yasuaki (2009: 21), a specialist in international law, categorically asserts that the Tokyo Trial effectively overlooked Asia and that the inclusion on the judicial panel of colonial powers such as Britain, France and the Netherlands, all of which had participated in colonial domination on the Asian continent, reflected a "civilising arrogance". According to Ōnuma (2009: 22), the court "selected the defendants in accordance with the historical perspective of the Pacific War," leading the United States to focus the charges almost exclusively on Tōjō's cabinet, in the context of the attack on Pearl Harbor, while allowing Kwantung Army officers such as Ishiwara Kanji to evade prosecution (Ōnuma, 2009: 26). China and the other Asian nations that had suffered the horrors of war and colonisation therefore had a legitimate basis for demanding justice, yet that legitimacy had been undermined by the fact that the proceedings were controlled by Western powers such as the United States.

In light of the above, the cinematic depiction of this trial requires a particularly cautious approach. China's legitimate right to hold the enemy accountable for the war may be unquestionable, but the same cannot be said of the West, and especially not of the United States. The shadow of the atomic bomb looms over the Western post-memory of the Second World War, an unmistakeable image evoking a potent symbolic violence. In fact, the humanitarian disaster resulting from that moment is to some extent overshadowed by the visual sign of the explosion itself. In general terms, it could be argued that the West has turned a hypervisible and highly symbolic mushroom cloud into a metaphor for apocalyptic horror, without necessarily grasping the unfathomable humanitarian disaster it represents. Meanwhile, the Chinese feel that their own suffering in the war has never been sufficiently acknowledged or reflected on. For example, victims of wartime sexual exploitation faced huge difficulties in their struggle to demand accountability and obtain reparations. Other Asian countries experienced the replacement of the former Western invaders with the new Japanese colonisers, yet this experience lacked the visibility that it warranted in narratives about the war, and the Military Tribunal's trials of Japanese atrocities committed in the Philippines has also received scant attention. As for Japan itself, although Ōnuma (2009: 4) recognises a similar delimitation of culpability for war crimes as the one established by Takeuchi, he points out that the Tokyo Trial has been consolidated as a cultural memory that functions both as a psychological altar at which all the blame was placed on villains such as Tōjō and as a reflection of the hypocrisy of the Allies. For this reason, there is necessarily a vast difference in the distribution of the sensible between Asian nations and the Western world, which to some extent also results in big differences between the two regions in terms of the mechanisms used to construct the post-memory of the Second World War in the media. Assuming that cultural translation needs to be geared towards mutual understanding and not merely towards reinforcing the idea of spectacle normally assigned to non-Western cultures, such differences in the distribution

of the sensible will obviously pose huge obstacles to the effectiveness of this translation process.

At the same time, the film fails to effectively express its questioning of this colonial notion of civilisation, and consequently it also fails to distinguish civilisation clearly from the power exercised by the victorious Western powers. Although it avoids the obsession with the primitive and the primal that characterises the autoethnographic paradigm, the film nevertheless exhibits a fascination with the *civilised*. Given that autoethnography reproduces existing power dynamics by depicting *internal Others* as more primitive, the acceptance of this historiography, including its "disregard for Asia" and its "selection of defendants according to the historical perspective of the Pacific War" (Ōnuma, 2009: 21, 22, 26), itself constitutes a reproduction of existing power dynamics to some extent. This acceptance of the colonialist notion of civilisation also seems to fall into the trap of universalism.

This clearly reflects the tension identified by Rey Chow between "'first world' imperialism and 'third world' nationalism" (1995: 23), as the narrative strategies required for a film to find success at home often differ from those necessary for a successful cultural translation within existing knowledge-power structures.[5] In addition to contributing to the construction of China's national memory of the Second World War, *The Tokyo Trial* attempts to engage in a cultural dialogue or translation that is almost inevitably fraught or incomplete. This dialogue clearly targets not only an imagined West, but also what Maruyama Masao referred to as the Japanese "community of repentance"[6] (1977).

Given that, as Chow argues (1995: 180), spectacle constitutes the main element in the intercultural representation of non-Western subjects, the split described above cannot be completely erased by the establishment of new power dynamics in relation to the gaze. Chow (1995: 37, 42) argues that primitive passions not only reflect a fascination with nature and primitivism, but also include myths about the future and progress, associated both with nostalgia and retrospection, and with the certainty of China's centrality and uniqueness. While this film cannot be said to convey a completely linear historical view of progress, its fascination with civilisation clearly explains what Chow (1995: 37) identifies as the other facet of primitive passions: the enchantment with the radically new. The film effectively affirms a new international order and a new way of conceptualising the nation, whereby history is artificially divided into old and new chapters. What Chow calls primitive passions can therefore also be interpreted as the ambivalence experienced by the post-colonial subject when faced with a visualised modernity. When the split subjectivity is symbolically sutured, new fractures emerge.

ALTHOUGH IT AVOIDS THE OBSESSION WITH THE PRIMITIVE AND THE PRIMAL THAT CHARACTERISES THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC PARADIGM, THE FILM NEVERTHELESS EXHIBITS A FASCINATION WITH THE *CIVILISED*

## EMOTIONAL COMMUNITY AND IMAGINED HOMOGENEITY

A significant strategy proposed in this film to overcome the huge difficulty of articulating a transnational dialogue is to posit the possibility of intersubjectivity on the basis of a morality intuited through a sense of emotional community and on the idea of universal affective reactions. Specifically, the film establishes this emotional community in a narrative that represents civilians in both China and Japan as victims of the violence of war. In this sense, compassion for the victims and outrage at the war crimes constitute the intuited morality and the emotional response

that the filmmaker aims to elicit. This emotional community is a kind of prerequisite for the circulation of symbols or memories across national boundaries.

Although the characters of the various members of the fictional Japanese family portrayed in the film are highly stereotypical and insufficiently developed, they convey each individual's spiritual dilemma and the difficulties associated with psychological reconstruction in the post-war period: the young man who fervently believed in extreme nationalism, whose inner world collapses with the Japanese defeat; the soldier returning from the Chinese front who is tormented by remorse and trauma over the atrocities he has witnessed; and the woman who was tricked by war propaganda into becoming a victim of sexual exploitation. By avoiding a homogeneous depiction of an entire community as criminals, as cogs in a deranged war machine, or as ludicrous villains in a heroic narrative, the film eschews the old narrative framework for films of this kind.

Most of the scenes depicting daily life after the war take place in indoor settings with warm lighting, creating a soft, nostalgic visual effect that contrasts with the tribunal scenes, which are dominated by a palette of cold grey tones, and with the traumatised and chaotic psychological worlds of the characters, marked by trauma and chaos.

While the film cannot be described as explicitly nostalgic, the approach taken seems to subtly evoke a longing for a lost world, for an idealised past: the harmonious life this family might have had in a time free of the material harm of war and the spiritual malaise of fascism. It could even be argued that although the film does not reflect an obsession with the myth of Chinese authenticity, it does seem to suggest a veiled kind of Japanese authenticity. As paradoxical as it may seem, this approach is reminiscent of the emphasis on everyday life that characterised Ozu Yasujirō's films after his return to Japan from the war against China.[7]

This *lost world of yesterday* is not exclusive to Japan but also belongs to other countries that suffered the horrors of war. This shared longing for the same idealised past may create an emotional community that transcends national identity, offering greater openness and fluidity, and thus encouraging a "reparative reading" (Sedgwick, 2002: 123).[8] However, it is important to acknowledge that this community is unstable (as a narrative potentially favourable to a "reparative reading" could still become bogged down in nationalist interpretative frameworks), and its foundation on the idea of universal affective responses also risks ignoring internal diversity, leading to an imagined homogeneity with the Other. This, in turn, could obscure the effectiveness of the dialogue.

This imagined homogeneity can be examined by means of an analysis of the singing scenes in the film. The Japanese film critic Inuhiko Yomota (2022) points out that Ōshima's films also contain

Image I. The scenes depicting post-war life are mostly interior shots with warm lighting





Image 2. Different colour schemes used for the scenes of the trial and of post-war life



Image 3. Different colour schemes used for the scenes of the trial and of post-war life

numerous singing scenes, and he classifies the singers into four categories: (1) those who join the choir in the midst of a crowd; (2) those who sing at a gathering; (3) those who sing to themselves; and (4) those who, for whatever reason, are unable to join the choir. Yomota believes that the act of singing—especially choral singing—may be used to convey a shared sense of nostalgia, an ideology or a community identity. Consequently, there are always people who are excluded from the shared experience or the community and cannot join the choir, in which case their inability to sing is expressed as a form of either voluntary or enforced silence.

In *The Tokyo Trial*, the singing scene occurs when the members of the Chinese delegation and diners at a tavern sing together. However, this moment of harmony is violently cut short when the owner of the tavern—the Japanese woman mentioned above who speaks Chinese fluently—is shot dead by an unidentified attacker. Although not made explicit, it is suggested that the killer is a radical Japanese nationalist, no doubt driven to frustration by his country's defeat. The metaphor is clear: China and Japan might have progressed together towards reconciliation and friendship, but fascism is the common enemy lurking in the shadows, intent on destroying any chance of such a future. It would be rash to claim that this perception is wrong, or that vigilance against a possible fascist resurgence is entirely unnecessary. However, the treatment of this scene seems to be founded once again on a vague, poorly defined notion of public sentiment, rather than an exploration of the internal mechanisms that make fascism appealing to some. In reality, the absence of more thoughtful discussion is not unique to this film. This absence has been pointed out by left-wing Japanese thinkers such as Takeuchi Yoshimi (1959) and Maruyama Masao (1977) in their reflections on pre-war Japan and the role of intellectuals; the culturalist approach of the American anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1946) also had a profound influence on this question, and the Dutch scholar Ian Buruma (1994) highlighted the incomplete nature of the post-war Japanese political transition. However, the whitewashing of Japan's war crimes has driven researchers such as Takahashi Tetsuya (1999) and Ōnuma Yasuaki (2009) to devote considerable attention to clarifying culpability for the acts committed during the war. Most debates about Japanese fascism have adopted the frameworks established by Takeuchi and Maruyama, resulting in a simplistic understanding of the roots of fascism and extreme nationalism that ignores the complexity of Japanese society. As Yomota notes in his analysis of Ōshima, it is important to rec-

ognise that Japan's post-war spiritual crisis was complex, marked by ruptures and gaps, and by intense confrontations between different ideologies, suggesting that the imagined homogeneity may simply never have existed.

The question of how to evaluate this historical event and its legacy is not easily answered. Many scholars studying the Tokyo Trial point out that the victorious Western powers' own war crimes led many in Japan to view the proceedings as a case of "the wolf reproaching the lion" (Ōnuma, 2009: 16), undermining serious reflection on the crimes Japan had committed in East and Southeast Asia. Buruma notes that in 1953 a petition "demanding the release of all Japanese war criminals", on the basis that the trial "had the character of revenge" on the part of the victors, received more than 15 million signatures (1994: 179). Recounting his meeting with the granddaughter of Doihara Kenji, the key conspirator in the Mukden incident and a "Class A" war criminal at the Tokyo Trial, Buruma comments that although she claimed not to be proud of her lineage, her son often mentioned with pride that he was Doihara's great-grandson.

As a result, in subsequent cultural products depicting the event, reconciling a recognition of the trial's inherent problems with a call for a clearer understanding of both the process and the culpability for war crimes is a long and arduous task. It is to be hoped that in time the events will be judged more fully and equitably, and that the truth will not be consigned to oblivion. From this perspective, the monumentality of the film can be considered a response to the memory crisis arising out of what Nora refers to as the "acceleration of history" (2008). While such a response is necessary, post-memory, as a process constantly under construction, should be conducive to a consideration of individuals and their real experiences in history, rather than to a continuous reinforcement of the existing hegemonic discourse.

## INTERTEXTUALITY WITH *JUDGMENT AT NUREMBURG* (STANLEY KRAMER, 1961) AND A REFLECTION ON CULPABILITY AND RESPONSE

As noted above, *The Tokyo Trial* reflects an aim to engage in a dialogue that also targets a potential imagined Western spectator familiar with the hegemonic narratives of the war. This section examines the nature of this dialogue and why it could be described as incomplete, representing a starting point rather than a destination.

The first question analysed in this respect is the intertextual relationship the film establishes with Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremburg* (1961), based on the Nuremberg Trials, in order to identify parallels between the historical events of the Tokyo and Nuremberg tribunals. The influence of classical Hollywood cinema on *The Tokyo Trial* is obvious, as both films begin with the judge-protagonist driving through the ruins of the city where the trial takes place (Nuremberg, Tokyo), expressing regret over the devastation he sees; then, in both cases, the judicial proceedings are juxtaposed with fragments of local life witnessed by the delegation.

Before conducting a comparative analysis of the two films, it is important to consider why the director of *The Tokyo Trial* tries to establish this parallel. Both this film and various publication projects[9] in China related to the Tokyo Trial have sought to establish a connection with the Nuremberg Trials. Ian Buruma's study offers a partial explanation for this tendency. It is a widespread view in both Japan and the West that Nazi Germany was a product of modernity, while atrocities such as the Nanjing massacre and others committed in the context of Japanese imperialist expansion were collateral consequences of military operations rather than systematic actions based on a modern bureaucracy and instrumental rationality, and therefore the two cases not comparable. While recognising the validity of Maruyama



Image 4. Comparison of the opening scenes of the two films, both showing the ruins of war from the perspective of the protagonists

Masao's theory of the "system of irresponsibility" (1963), Buruma argues that no clearly defined totalitarian regime existed in wartime Japan. In other words, there was no figure analogous to Hitler; most of the Japanese war criminals were "autocratic bureaucrats and conservative politicians", while the Emperor himself was exempted from prosecution. This, of course, raised huge obstacles to determinations of culpability. However, the theory of racial superiority prevalent in the dominant Asian nation, along with a cult of the Emperor that vested the imperialist project with the quality of a "holy war", provided the ideological basis for the Japanese war crimes across Asia (Buruma, 1994: 170, 63, 172, 173). The "system of irresponsibility" undoubtedly contributed to what Hannah Arendt (1963) describes as the banality of evil, but it also made it extremely difficult to identify and analyse that evil.

The parallel established in Gao Qunshu's film between the Tokyo and Nuremberg Trials constitutes an implicit refutation of the perspective described above. It is a strategy that enables a wider audience to view the war crimes committed by Japanese forces in a familiar context. In other words, it is necessary not only to translate memory written in blood into history written in ink, but also to transform that history into what would supposedly be a universally intelligible narrative.

The comparative analysis of the two films conducted for this study found that *Judgment at Nuremberg* addresses the issue of war crimes more clearly. It does not skirt around important legal issues, such as the fact that the defendants, from the perspective of the Nazi regime, were not only law-abiding citizens but also celebrated legal experts who never violated any of the laws of their country. Nor does it shy away from the potential ethical problem of who had the right to judge the war crimes committed by the countries that won the war. Moreover, the film reproduces the crucial moment at the Nuremberg Trials when film taken of the liberation of the concentration camps was screened as evidence, and even uses original archival footage of the event. The Nuremberg tribunal's original decision to show these images is undoubtedly a monumental event in visual history, and the direct use of the original footage in Kramer's film further confirms the power of visuality. While the film's treatment of its topic could be questioned on ethical grounds today, it may simply reflect a particular historical conception in 1961, at a time when the end of the war was much more recent, when the mass media was amplifying the power of visuality: the idea that images can anchor an unimaginable horror to a visual reality, as evidence of an irrefutable historical truth and not merely the story written by the victors. Consequently, there should also be justice within our view that can be pursued collectively. Paradoxically, although the combination of the mass media and the hegemony of visuality contains extreme symbolic violence, and the mechanisms of power determining the selection and circulation of images raise ethical dilemmas, the Nuremberg paradigm demonstrates that recorded visual reality



Image 5. Preparations for the screening of the evidence filmed during the liberation of the concentration camps

became the most direct medium for international reflection on atrocities, and for the quest for universal justice. This is perhaps the great paradox of visual history.

*The Tokyo Trial*, on the other hand, makes no direct use of images to depict the atrocities. Beyond the creative intentions discussed above, this choice should be understood as the result of a historical fact: the Tokyo Trial, in contrast to Nuremberg, depended more on witnesses and documentary evidence than on filmed evidence. However, this approach prevents the film from achieving the logical coherence that characterises *Judgment at Nuremberg*, which on the one hand uses the polyphony of debates to invite the spectator to consider the ethical deficiencies of the proceedings, and on the other hand uses the potency of visuality to transcend the notion of a mere power struggle between winners and losers, preventing the film's message from being reduced to the idea that *there is no truth, only interpretation*. Conversely, although by omitting explicit images of the atrocities *The Tokyo Trial* manages to avoid running the risk of an overly symbolic representation of a humanitarian catastrophe, the absence of a rigorous ethical and legal debate results in a monumentality that partly overshadows the film's effectiveness as a dialogue. While the assumption that culpability for the atrocities is self-evident may be interpreted as a deliberate choice that respects the inevitable emotional reaction in China, it seems important to point out, as Takeuchi (1959) and Ōnuma (2009) have done, that Japan needed be held accountable primarily to Asian nations, and not to the victorious Western powers, for its war crimes and colonialism. This would necessitate avoiding an excessively monumental representation of the trial, which is essential to explore potential spaces for dialogue. As Ōnuma (2009) has suggested, the context of the trial may need to be reassessed from a decidedly decolonised and Asian-centred perspective.

Describing cinema as cultural translation, Chow (1995: 182) points out that the word "translation" itself is etymologically linked to both "tradition" and "betrayal". What emerges out of

THE QUESTION OF HOW TO RESPOND TO THE INVISIBLE OTHERS, THE FORGOTTEN, THE ONES SCREENED OUT BY THE SELECTION MECHANISMS OF THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY, THOSE NOT CONSIDERED WORTHY OF BEING REMEMBERED, CONSTITUTES A RESPONSIBILITY THAT MUST BE TAKEN ON BY BOTH THE RECORDER AND THE VIEWER OF THE IMAGES

translation is therefore perhaps still difference, or in Chow's terms, an "ontological hierarchy of languages" (1995: 184). For *The Tokyo Trial*, the two poles that connect the word "translation" are dialogue and monumentality. Reconsidering the film from this perspective, what emerges from its incomplete dialogue is precisely the dilemma of the post-colonial subject and the difficulty of resisting the hegemony of universalism and national discourse. At the same time, the mechanism that distinguishes subjects according to whether or not they deserve to be mourned (Butler, 2006) becomes even more violent with the omnipresence of the mass media. This raises the question of the ethical perspective that should be adopted by filmmakers, as cultural translators, and spectators born in the post-war era.

In her theory of the civil contract of photography, Ariella Azoulay (2008) defines the responsibility of the viewer as a "response-ability". Indeed, this responsibility entails an ability to respond to the Other, which constitutes the starting point of the ethics explored by Derrida (2000) in his book *The Gift of Death*. However, Derrida points out that responding to one group of Others may often involve leaving another group in the shadows. The question of how to respond to the invisible Others, the forgotten, the ones screened out by the selection mechanisms of the collective memory, those not considered worthy of being remembered, constitutes a responsibility that must be taken on by both the recorder and the viewer of the images. When Takahashi Tetsuya discusses "post-war responsibility", he points precisely to this dimension: "As long as we forget our responsibility to the dead, no present-centred or future-oriented solution will suffice" (1999: 163). The post-war generation, which perhaps only possesses a mediated post-memory of the war, must not be limited to a passive acceptance of this post-memory: we can and must respond to the Other, to the dead, to the potential redeemer who was not given a presence in history.

A narrative about historical trauma should therefore not stop at merely establishing a dialogue, searching for an answer or erecting a monument. Rather, both creators and spectators need to recognise that a monument implies something completed, while our response to the Other should never have an endpoint. The construction of a multidirectional memory (Rothberg, 2009) of historical trauma should also have this ultimately ethical orientation. This is perhaps the most radical revelation and the most essential means of overcoming the structural trauma of a history in images.

## CONCLUSIONS

As this article has shown, *The Tokyo Trial* expresses the ambiguous artistic approach of its creators, which swings between dialogue and monumentality, and reflects the reality that an intuited morality based on emotional community cannot replace more rigorous and articulated debates. However, the conclusion offered here is an exhortation rather than a criticism. If a film, in its capacity as a form of cultural translation, as has been suggested here, can transcend the pigeonholing of the non-Western as a viewed object, if it can initiate a transnational dialogue and produce intersubjectivity, Chinese filmmakers should actively explore new narrative strategies and pro-

vide their own answers to these questions. For now, cultural translation continues to display limitations in its endeavour to ensure mutual understanding between subjects conditioned by different hegemonic discourses and situated in different cultures. However, taking the response to the Other as an ethical orientation, it may be possible to go further than mere mutual tolerance.

## NOTES

1 Although the categories of "first world" and "third world" may be excessively generic and outdated, as Aijaz Ahmad (1992) has pointed out, Rey Chow uses this binary opposition in her analysis of Chinese culture and cinema. For this study it has been decided that the use of "third world" to refer to non-Western countries subjected to imperialist wars and colonialism facilitates the subsequent development of this discussion. Therefore, in keeping with Chow's approach, these terms are employed here.

2 This article draws on three key concepts from memory studies: cultural memory (Assmann, 1992), referring to the collective memories established in a society through institutions and objects; post-memory (Hirsch, 2012), which describes the relationship of later generations to traumas inherited from their ancestors; and multidirectional memory (Rothberg, 2009), which proposes that collective memories interact and influence rather than compete with each other.

3 Chow (1995: 38) uses Mary Louise Pratt's term "autoethnography" (1992) to refer to how the colonised deliberately use the way the colonisers view them to represent themselves.

4 The most important of these was MacArthur's agreement to absolve Emperor Shōwa and the entire Japanese royal family of responsibility, limiting the blame to Tōjō Hideki's government.

5 Foucault first systematically defined the relationship between knowledge and power in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), arguing that knowledge cannot be discussed without reference to the subject who is immersed in networks of power.

6 Maruyama Masao (1977) reflects on the passivity of intellectuals in the pre-war period and discusses shared repentance within the intellectual community.

7 The relationship between Ozu's experience taking part in the war against China and his subsequent artistic career is explored by Yomota (2022) in his text on Ōshima Nagisa.

8 Reparative reading is a term coined by Eve Sedgwick (2003), who also uses the term "paranoid reading" to refer to the totalising tendency that subsumes phenomena in an oppressive metanarrative, which is dominant in critical theory. In contrast to this approach, Sedgwick proposes the possibility of a "reparative reading", a potentially more productive interpretation that focuses on assembling and repairing meanings based on fragments.

9 Shanghai Jiao Tong University organised a publishing project consisting of historical archives, testimonies by direct witnesses (including Mei Ju-ao and his descendants) and related research, in addition to establishing an online archive dedicated to the International Military Tribunal for the Far East: http://www.tokyotrial.cn

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## *THE TOKYO TRIAL*: REFLECTIONS ON VISUALITY, TRANSNATIONAL DIALOGUE AND MONUMENTALITY


### Abstract

Taking the film *The Tokyo Trial* (2006) as a case study, this article explores the dilemmas faced by post-colonial subjects in the narration of historical trauma, as well as their efforts to transcend the structural trauma of visual history and establish new power dynamics related to the gaze. Drawing on Rey Chow's theory of cinema as a discourse of cultural translation (1995), it discusses whether transnational dialogues initiated by non-Western cultures are ultimately confined to showcasing their "to-be-looked-at-ness". At the same time, using cultural representations based on historical events such as the Tokyo and Nuremberg Trials as examples, it examines the responsibility of the post-war generation as an audience.



### Key words

Autoethnography; Cultural Translation; Emotional Community; Post-war Responsibility; Monumentality.



### Authors

Yuepeng Wei is a doctoral candidate in Translation and Intercultural Studies at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Her research focuses on cultural studies and East-West comparative studies. Contact: weiyuepeng0516@gmail.com

Tiantian Xu holds a PhD in Translation and Intercultural Studies from Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. She is a senior lecturer with the Department of Literature and Communication at Jining University and a member of the university's literary theory research group. Her research focuses on semiotics and cultural studies. Contact: delia0316@126.com



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## *THE TOKYO TRIAL*: REFLEXIONES SOBRE LO VISUAL, EL DIÁLOGO TRANSNACIONAL Y LA MONUMENTALIDAD


### Resumen

Mediante un análisis de caso de la película *The Tokyo Trial* (2006), este artículo explora los dilemas a los que hacen frente los sujetos poscoloniales al narrar traumas históricos, así como los esfuerzos por trascender el trauma estructural de la historia visual y establecer nuevas relaciones de poder en torno a la mirada. Partiendo de la teoría de Rey Chow sobre el «cine como discurso de traducción cultural» (1995), se discute si los diálogos transnacionales impulsados por culturas no occidentales conducen inevitablemente a una intensificación de su posición espectacular. Asimismo, tomando como ejemplo las representaciones culturales basadas en eventos históricos como los juicios de Tokio y Nuremberg, se reflexiona sobre la responsabilidad de la generación de posguerra como audiencia.



### Palabras clave

Autoetnografía; traducción cultural; comunidad emocional; responsabilidad de la posguerra; monumentalidad.



### Autoras

Yuepeng Wei (China, 1991) es doctoranda en Traducción y Estudios Interculturales en la Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, sus líneas de investigación se centran en estudios culturales y estudios comparativos East-West. Contacto: weiyuepeng0516@gmail.com

Tiantian Xu (China, 1992) es doctora en Traducción y Estudios Interculturales por la Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, profesora titular en el Departamento de Literatura y Comunicación de la Universidad de Jining y miembro del grupo de investigación en teorías literarias. Sus líneas de investigación se centran en la semiótica y los estudios culturales. Contacto: delia0316@126.com



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# BEYOND NATIONAL MEMORY: MULTILINGUAL WITNESSING AND TRANSNATIONAL COMFORT WOMEN SURVIVORSHIP IN *63 YEARS ON*

SEN NI

## INTRODUCTION

"We were all sisters in our suffering at the same time." This reflection offered by Jan Ruff-O'Herne, a Dutch survivor raised in the colonial East Indies, in Kim Dong-won's "comfort women" documentary[1] *63 Years On* (Kkeunnaji aneun jeonjaeng, 2008), has often been cited for its emotional clarity. Yet its claim of shared suffering carries a resonance that transcends the moment of its utterance. A Dutch woman raised in the colonial East Indies makes a remark that immediately touches women in South Korea, China, the Philippines, and across Southeast Asia. Her words open a space where histories that rarely meet begin to intersect, a space where disparate events momentarily converge. It maps a topology of affect produced through a violence that crosses borders, battlefields, and a wide range of colonial spaces. Rather than a politics of identity, "sisterhood" actualises a structure through a shared experience of the same imperial power. It is this that provides the starting point for this analysis, which explores how *63 Years On* translates this structure of transnational resonance into cinematic form.

This documentary was made at a time when the issue of "comfort women" had already been consolidated as a focus of civil activism in South Korea. In fact, in the 1990s, an increasing number of protests, lawsuits and survivor-driven narratives began bringing this issue to public attention in South Korea, Taiwan, Japan and the Philippines (Ku, 2015). By the early 2000s, activists in this area were engaging in wider international networking, not only to raise public awareness about this issue but also to ensure its inclusion in discussions of wartime sexual violence worldwide. Among the actions taken, documentaries on "comfort women" function as an archive

that can fill the gaps left by official documentation (Kim, 2025). It was in this context that Kim Dong-won—known for decades for documenting human rights issues in his films[2]—made *63 Years On*, which brings together survivors from Korea, China, the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies, in the first meeting of its kind in history. The time of the documentary's release was a significant moment in the history of the "comfort women" movement, which by the end of the 2000s had developed into a transnational network supported by survivor testimony, NGO activity, and legal challenges in several jurisdictions, most notably the US House of Representatives Resolution 121 (2007). At the same time, memory studies was undergoing a transcultural turn, reflected in texts such as Erll and Nünning's *Cultural Memory Studies* and Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), which reimagined the collective memory as an activity that transcends national borders, media formats, and historical references (Erll and Nünning 2008; Erll 2011; Rothberg 2009). In this respect, *63 Years On* can be said to have anticipated developments in memory studies as a field, providing a cinematic foreshadowing of the concept of transcultural and multidirectional memory that would become prominent in academic circles only a few years later. The film premiered at the Jeonju International Film Festival in 2008, won the Asia Pacific Screen Award for Best Documentary, and was later used by NGOs as a tool for international education.

While the film's circulation was significant, the formal structure used to organise the testimonies it presents deserves equal attention. Most documentaries dealing with the "comfort women" issue have adopted a national focus: South Korean films about Korean survivors, Chinese films on Chinese survivors, or Filipino films featuring Filipino survivors.[3] These works offer a vital memory of the past, even as they index the administrative borders of the modern nation-state. Memory is nationally anchored; the survivor appears as a signifier of national suffering, and the analysis of the imperial structure that created the conditions for "comfort women" is frequently broken up into separate national contexts. Scholars have noted that transnational memory practices around "comfort women" often reproduce national agendas rather than dismantling them (Ahn, 2015, Herr, 2016, Nadesan & Kim, 2022). As Kim (2020) argues, the global proliferation of statues of "comfort women" tends to be animated less by cross-border ethics than by a nationalist imperative that travels across borders.

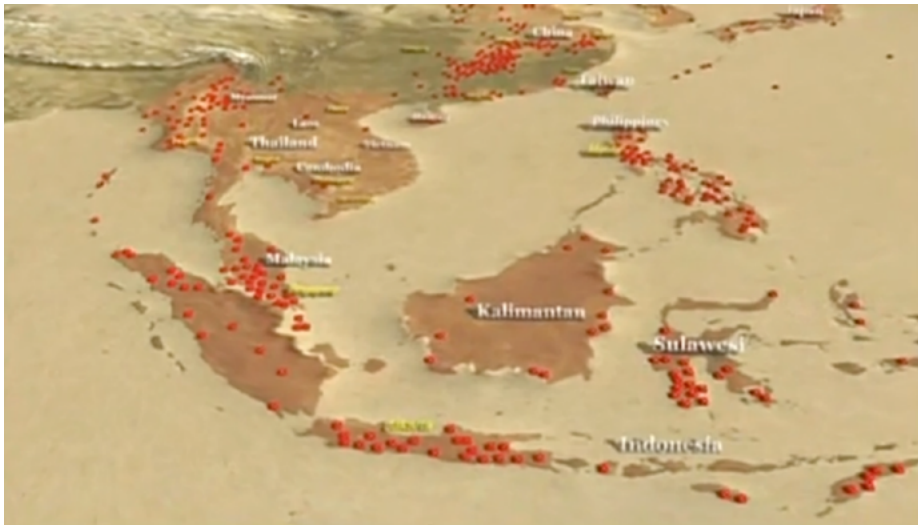
Yoneyama (2016) suggests that the "comfort women" issue cannot be understood through a strictly national frame: it emerged out of a *longue durée* of transpacific entanglements: Japanese colonial violence, the postwar US military presence in Asia, and the Cold War institutions that delayed efforts to address it. This helps clarify what the film makes newly visible: a regionally organised system of militarised sexual slavery. *63 Years On* offers a different kind of map. Instead of portraying each survivor's experience through a narrowly national lens, the film allows their stories to cross borders. It takes the viewer from Korea to China, from the Philippines to Australia, neither to emphasise cultural variations nor to elucidate a linear "before" and "after" of the war, but to expose the regional mechanisms of violence that have shaped their experiences. The stories are not presented as separate instances; each one resonates, intertwines and engages with the others. The editing places these stories side by side, creating a horizontal structure of memory. The regional scope also reorients the spatial imagination of the history of "comfort women". Documentary accounts have tended to anchor testimony to bounded sites of violence: individual "comfort stations" or specific villages where the women were captured. *63 Years On* instead lets its testimonies travel across Korea, northeast China, the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies in a single film (Figure

1). What emerges is not an administrative map of the system, but a lived geography produced when survivors' memories are placed alongside one another, cultivating a mode of listening that transcends borders and contributing to recent efforts to remap the wartime spatialities of the Asia-Pacific from the perspective of those who were moved—forcibly—through them.

Building on these critiques, this paper proposes what I call an "ethics of connection" as the analytical framework for reading *63 Years On*. Rather than identity or equivalence, the term "connection" here refers to adjacency, to the filmic organisation of testimonies next to one another in such a way that their uniqueness is respected and maintained even as they are heard in relation to each other. This theoretical paradigm integrates three concepts from feminist theory and memory studies. First, based on Chandra Mohanty's idea of a "global sisterhood" (2003: 110–112), it embraces the principle that women's solidarity must be based not on identity, but on an understanding of how power dynamics overlap, particularly the regional dynamic of Japanese military sexual slavery. Secondly, it engages with the notion of "speaking nearby" (Chen & Minh-ha, 2014: 433), a practice of documentary ethics that avoids speaking on behalf of or about its subjects, choosing instead to listen alongside them. And third, from Rothberg's account of multidirectional memory (2009) it takes the premise that traumatic histories gain rather than lose meaning when they are placed in dialogue across national and cultural lines. The ethics of connection thus names a cinematic practice in which sisterhood is reconfigured as a structural rather than an identitarian relationship, sustained by formal techniques that hold survivors together without dissolving their differences.

Methodologically, this paper identifies what is described here as an emotional syntax through which the film performs its ethics of connection. For this study, "emotional syntax" means the expressive elements in the context of traumatic memory: the tremor prior to uttering a word, the pause between phrases or the silence held in front of the camera. These are the ways that emotional syntax is performed, across linguistic, bodily and cinematic registers. In the multilingual dialogue of the film, these are affective markers common to Korean, Mandarin, English and Tagalog. On the bodies of the survivors, these are the shaking hands, the teardrop held in check and the scars that mark the skin regardless of culture. On the cinematographic level, these include the framing, editing and the use of distance.

Figure 1. Distribution of "comfort stations"




In this way, this study develops its argument over the course of the following sections, each one focused on a particular level where the film pursues its ethical objective. The first section analyses its translingual mode of testimony, showing how affective and bodily traces allow suffering to travel across linguistic borders. The next section deals with embodied witnessing, reading the ageing

body—its scars, gestures and silences—as an archive that goes beyond national framing. This is followed by an examination of the film's camera ethics, showing how staging, editing and measured distance create a horizontal field in which no survivor's testimony is privileged over another's. The conclusion then situates these formal practices within the broader transnational advocacy networks that *63 Years On* both documents and helps to sustain.

## TRANSLINGUAL TESTIMONY: HOW PAIN TRAVELS ACROSS LANGUAGES

As Thoma (2000) argues, testimony is never a self-contained personal narrative; rather, it is a relational practice shaped by the dialogic encounter between speaker and listener. In this context, it is evident that *63 Years On* creates a transnational community of testimony based on the notion of women who have never met speaking "toward each other" within a relational space made possible by editing and "translation". From the outset, one of the most salient effects of *63 Years On* is its pragmatic demonstration of a linguistically plural form of testimony. The film contains a range of languages that include Korean, Chinese, Filipino, English and occasionally Dutch. Each survivor speaks at her own pace, using vocabulary shaped by distinct colonial histories, yet these voices increasingly converge in shared registers of pitch, hesitation and emotion. *63 Years On* highlights the effort involved in speaking itself. Survivors are not hurried through their accounts; silences are kept rather than cut. What becomes audible across languages is an "emotional syntax"—the constriction of the throat, the tremor of an utterance, the failure of a word—through which the structure of violence registers before the content does.

The film's earliest demonstration of this translingual logic occurs in a sequence dealing with childhood. Jan Ruff-O'Herne, speaking in English, recalls her Dutch colonial childhood in Java: "We were a very musical family [...]. We loved dancing and lovely games as children in the garden and at birthday parties." With no intermediary verbal cue, the film cuts here to monochrome footage of Korean *haenyeo* divers underwater, and then we hear Lee Soo-san speaking in Korean, recalling the joy she experienced when she was sent out to gather abalone with her father. Two languages, two colonial spaces, and two testimonies of joy converge by proximity. Neither testimony clarifies the other.

There are more convergences when the women talk about the physical environment of violence that they experienced. Although the settings differ, the details match up. They speak of a wet mattress smell, the sound of boots on wooden floors and the absence of sunlight. They describe being led to beds with coarse sheets, lined up or made to wait in a series of small rooms until soldiers led them away. These minute details of violence differ verbally but share a similar structure. The imperial system of violence was at once systematic and systemic: it imposed a programmed logic of repetition on the bodies it controlled while embedding that logic into the everyday architecture of the comfort station. The comfort station's environment, although now long gone, still betrays the presence of this imperial system. Over visual shots of the rooms, the film's voice-over narration describes the comfort station as a "cramped space" in which the women "had to receive dozens of Japanese soldiers each day, from morning to night." The film's editing then renders this spatial logic legible by linking rooms

HUMILIATION IN ENGLISH, THE UNSPOKEN PAUSE IN KOREAN, THE LOWERED VOICE IN MANDARIN ALL BECOME RESONANCES RATHER THAN SYNONYMS, EACH LANGUAGE COMING TO A PLACE WHERE SPEECH FAILS

across testimonies. Jan Ruff-O'Herne, speaking in English, recalls the small window of her room, through which Japanese soldiers could look on as she was raped. In the absence of a verbal bridge, the film then shifts to the testimony of Lee Soo-san, who offers a first-person narrative in Korean about her detention inside a small room beside a Manchurian railway track, where she suffered physical violence when she tried to escape; later, Wei Shao Lan recounts her experience of being confined to a room resembling a bunker in Guangxi. The editing makes the space of captivity itself, rather than any single station, the unit of memory.

SISTERHOOD HERE IS NOT A HORIZON OF IDENTIFICATION BUT A RELATIONSHIP BORN OF STRUCTURAL PROXIMITY: WOMEN WHO NEVER MET ARE, THROUGH THE VERY MECHANISM OF THEIR OPPRESSION, LOCATED AT THE SAME POINT ON THE MAP OF EMPIRE

The same logic intensifies when Jan Ruff-O'Herne recounts a forced medical examination: the doctor "left the door wide open [...] he said to the Japanese, oh, you can all come and have a look while the girls were being examined. I mean, the humiliation, can you imagine the humiliation?" Her voice speeds up, then halts on the repeated word. The film does not translate this into another woman's testimony in the same scene; it does not need to. Humiliation in English, the unspoken pause in Korean, the lowered voice in Mandarin all become resonances rather than synonyms, each language coming to a place where speech fails. What the film thus makes audible is not individual psychology but a regional structure of affect: the imprint left by wartime forced sexual slavery, in nearly identical form, across every linguistic group it reached.

Lee Soo-san's testimony makes translingual dislocation itself a topic of discussion. Returning, on camera, to the Mudanjiang site where she was held for two years, she stands before what is now a factory and points to where there were once spiked walls installed to prevent escape. She speaks in Korean, but the place she returns to is now Chinese. After the war ended, return proved impossible—postwar stigma, broken family ties and closed borders in the context of the Cold War precluded the homecoming that had once been imaginable. She remained in China, married a Chinese man, and raised a Chinese son in a language not her own. Japanese imperial violence did not end in 1945; instead it became a permanent condition of linguistic and familial exile. The film registers this not by translating it away but by portraying her standing in the gap, the camera showing her at the threshold of a building she once could not leave.

Subtitling, however, creates a textual point of contact that makes patterns repeatable in different languages accessible for interpretation. While they cannot heal fractures of memory, subtitles allow them to be put into context. In this context, English becomes the language of the domain, as the film is narrated in English and the dialogue is translated into other languages. Here, the film engages in a discussion of what Mohanty refers to as the worldwide human rights debate, the linguistic requirements for which are well worth analysing. By saying that "the world might listen more to me" because she is a European speaking English, Jan Ruff-O'Herne draws attention to this hierarchy of visibility from within the film, showing how some voices speak out without translation while others can only be heard if there is someone to translate them. In other words, it is not accidental or neutral to choose English as the language of narration. While it opens up many possibilities, it reiterates the very structure of marginalisation that Mohanty (2003) criticises in her analysis of global sisterhood, the idea

that it is centred around a particular language, English. Although *63 Years On* does not resolve the issue, it dramatises it by using the devices of equal framing of the interviews and horizontal montage while preserving a linguistic hierarchy nonetheless.

Considering its asymmetry of address, it is worth asking what type of sisterhood is enacted in *63 Years On*. The women in the film do not share the same culture, language or nation, or even the same imperial connection to the Empire of Japan. What connects them is an architecture of violence, with localised modes of practice that follow one common logic: the same networks of recruitment, medical examination, physical containment and erasure. Sisterhood here is not a horizon of identification but a relationship born of structural proximity: women who never met are, through the very mechanism of their oppression, located at the same point on the map of empire. This definition of sisterhood is considered to be a historical fact that allows the establishment of an affective connection despite the presence of difference, a fact that is neither articulated nor emphasised in the film but expressed through translingual testimony, witnessed pain, and a horizontal composition.

## EMBODIED WITNESSING: HOW THE DOCUMENTARY MAKES VULNERABLE BODIES VISIBLE ACROSS BORDERS

In much of East Asian memory culture, the female body has been read as a site for projecting a national trauma (Cui, 2003). *63 Years On* shifts this register by treating the body as a transnational site of witnessing. The film foregrounds what the camera renders legible across linguistic and cultural differences: trembling hands, bent backs, scar tissue hardened by time. The women appear on screen many decades after the events they recount, and their bodies are presented before their voices are heard. Each survivor is introduced in an extended, uninterrupted take, long enough that small body gestures become legible: the faint tremor of Lee Soo-san's folded hands, the gradual shift of Wei Shao Lan's posture from upright to slouched as she speaks, the contained alertness of Jan Ruff-O'Herne's gaze. The extended length of these shots not only provides visibility to these moments but recontextualises the relationship of the body to the time within the frame. If the shot were shorter, then these micro-moments would be ignored; they are too slow and too subtle for a quick shot to pick them up. Instead of following this conventional logic of the documentary, where evidence of the testimony comes through the spoken word and the body merely serves as the visual complement, the film focuses on the temporal nature of the body—the slight tremble that occurs after a few seconds, the shift in posture while speaking—which becomes another form of testimony.

These corporealities are particularly important to the construction of a space of embodied witnessing. When language falls short in the narration of trauma, the body records something that words cannot fully express. Butler's theory of vulnerability is useful here, although it must be carefully considered in context. According to Butler, vulnerability is not something specific to any individual or to certain bodies; rather, it is something universal to embodied lives that can be recognised only when it is not equally shared (Butler, 2004). The objective then is not to elicit sympathy for vulnerable individuals but to ensure that their vulnerable bodies have been made grievable: their wounds matter. Instead of protectively withdrawing the body, *63 Years On* performs a kind of paradox of closeness and distancing in relation to bodily injuries. Pilar Frias removes her headscarf to show a wound burned into her scalp; Lee Soo-san holds up her hand to point to the mark on her chest where she was burned with a branding iron; Wei Shao Lan pulls down her clothes to show a scar on her thigh. Close-up shots capture

what each of the interviewees chooses to reveal and how. But after each such revelation, the focus of the shot moves back to their faces in mid-shot, thus rendering the body and the subject who speaks of trauma inseparable. As a result, what the camera achieves here is not merely to establish some general "respectful distance" from the bodies but to reconfigure the process of disclosure in a specific way: the close-ups on the body are determined by the survivors, not by the filmmaker. Vulnerability becomes grievable precisely because it is articulated on screen by the one who has suffered harm.

The film organises its most explicit confrontation with bodily memory into a tightly composed sequence on the survivors' present-day bodies. In one frame, Pilar Frias lifts her headscarf to expose a circular depression in her scalp: cigarette burns left by a Japanese soldier sixty years earlier. In another, Lee Soo-san describes, in Korean, the moment her chest "was so hot that it was hard to move [...]. I was hit by a steel wire," and the camera follows her hand as she points to the flesh beneath her clothing. The editing layers her description of being branded over images of other survivors' marked bodies. The body is not "shown" but offered as testimony in the position oral witness usually occupies (Figure 2).

The longitudinal presence of these injuries is even more enlightening. They occurred sixty years ago, yet they can be read today, defying the common belief that memory vanishes or is washed away by the passage of time. The body is now a long-term memory that bridges linguistic and national divides. What Saidiya Hartman, in a different historical register, calls the "afterlife of slavery" (2007: 6), the persistence of structural violence long after the institution that produced it has formally ended, offers a useful frame for reading these images. The injuries inscribed on the survivors' bodies similarly outlive the war, the soldiers and the empires that produced them. The system that branded these bodies has been dismantled in name, but its work continues to be borne, materially, by those it harmed. The body bears the political fact that historical reckoning has denied.

This is a quality of time that reveals itself through the scars, but also through the texture of ageing. Each woman's bearing, gaze and movement create a topography that is a product of time. The hardness in Jan Ruff-O'Herne's eyes contrasts with the hesitancy of her utterances;

Figure 2. Close-up shots of scars



THE SYSTEM THAT BRANDED THESE BODIES HAS BEEN DISMANTLED IN NAME, BUT ITS WORK CONTINUES TO BE BORNE, MATERIALLY, BY THOSE IT HARMED. THE BODY BEARS THE POLITICAL FACT THAT HISTORICAL RECKONING HAS DENIED

the enlightened gaze speaks of a memory that is sometimes corroborated by words that are stumbled over. It seems as if Wei Shao Lan's skin is inscribing the experience of decades of survival through its deeply embedded scars. Lee Soo-san's quiet weeping traces paths across the terrain of age, making her sorrow both fresh and familiar, a long-known phenomenon. But perhaps the most disquieting form this archive takes is musical. Felicidad de los Reyes, in one of the film's quieter moments, begins to hum a Japanese military song she was forced to memorise as a girl. She trembles; she falters; her memory of the melody, however, is intact. Decades after the violence ended, what her body has held most accurately is the sound the violence made her produce. The camera again maintains a measured distance, neither too reverent nor too cold. Here is where the embedding of violence in the body reveals its own truth. The song is embedded somewhere, in a lifetime of memory.

The body's archival function is not limited to scars. In a sustained mid-shot, Jan Ruff-O'Herne speaks of a fear that returns every evening: "Sometimes when it's getting dark at night and I draw the curtains and I see it's getting dark; I get that funny feeling coming over me again of total fear." The camera does not push in, but remains at her side as she finishes the sentence, and a sustained silence follows. If the burn scar shows the body as a record of something that happened, this shot shows the body as the place where it continues to happen—archival and ongoing at once.

The editing expands this bodily dialogue across borders. The bodies here appear not to erase each other in uniform similarity but to develop patterns of resonance: the rhythms of ageing bodies, the irregular patterns of bodily movement, the silence of a body prior to weeping. These images, moving from one survivor to another, constitute a dialogue among a group of bodies that never occupy the same space. They are coordinated into a shared template that is readable by the viewer, who identifies patterns in them that would never be spotted separately. Here, the body's vulnerability is a condition produced by, and indexed through, a regional body of violence, registered through the precise montage of bodies in the film.

## THE CAMERA AS A CROSS-BORDER ETHICAL APPARATUS: HOW THE DOCUMENTARY ORGANISES A TRANSNATIONAL ETHICS OF WITNESSING

The camera in *63 Years On* establishes a space for cross-witnessing that is neither competitive nor spectacular. The subjects come from different parts of the world and speak different languages, and their educational backgrounds, access to representation and experiences with justice are varied. Thus, rather than the plot, the challenge of the film lies in the ethics of how to create a common visual field out of a diversity of subjects, without privileging any one of them.

The framing of each witness is not positioned at eye level; instead, the camera is at a slight low-angle that does not make the witness appear grand or important but gives the body dignity in the wake of all the erasures suffered at the hands of the historical record. It is not the grand upward angle typical of political photographs, but it is enough to make the viewer sense the slight difference between looking from up close and looking up. This framing is an ethical choice related to what Chen and Minh-ha call "speaking nearby" (2014), an attempt to address the ques-

tion of how one person can be close to another and speak without claiming to fully understand them. This practice entails a rejection of two common stances in documentaries: speaking for (representation) and speaking about (anthropological mastery). Instead, it raises the question of what it might mean to speak alongside, to be nearby and not to claim authority on what is being said. *63 Years On* achieves this ethically complex practice through its form. The camera does not zoom in when the subject's emotions are rising, there is no voice-over commentary explaining the witnesses' stories and the differences between them are not reconciled to create one unified image. What the framing produces is the visual analogue of "speaking nearby": a position from which the viewer can listen without having already understood.

This horizontal position is also a way of avoiding differential intimacy. The fact that a South Korean filmmaker is documenting Korean, Chinese, Filipino and Dutch survivors could result in uneven access, whereby his compatriots are more closely framed, more frequently shown or more amply contextualized. *63 Years On* rejects this asymmetry. The film's lighting, colour tone and shot scale remain consistent across all four national registers, embedding each testimony in a cinematic field of equal weight.

What this consistency makes possible is something close to what Ariella Azoulay (2021) calls a *civil contract* in the visual sphere. For Azoulay, photography is not a one-way act of representation but a tripartite relationship between the photographer, the person photographed and the spectator, a relationship that compels the viewer to recognise the subject as a civil claimant whose claim exceeds the jurisdiction of any particular nation-state. This frame is unusually apt for *63 Years On*, as the survivors it documents have been failed by national frameworks: Lee Soo-san,




Figure 3. Camera positions of comfort women survivors

unable to return to Korea after the war, lived as a denizen in China, holding no full citizenship in either of the countries where the comfort women system had been imposed. The film does not "represent" her on behalf of any nation. By offering her testimony in the same cinematic terms as the testimonies of survivors from three other countries, it positions her—and each of the others—as a civilian interlocutor with a transnational audience brought together by the documentary itself. The viewer, in turn, is asked not to consume these images but to assume a responsibility for them: to acknowledge the close-up of a scar, the tremor of a hand, the song carried in a body, as claims addressed to a public of which the viewer is now a member (Figure 3).

While the framing organises equivalence within each shot, the editing organises equivalence across shots. The sequencing of the shots is what controls the way the stories are combined. Whereas most survivor stories would typically present a series of national chapters, from Korea to China to the Philippines, and finally the Dutch survivor, *63 Years On* varies this pattern by intertwining the stories. After one survivor recounts her memory of her first night in a "comfort station" and another tells of her experience of a "confinement room", a description of euphemisms for a "camp" is offered. It is up to the viewer to pick out common patterns.

When the sequence about Wei Shao Lan's capture in Guilin, where she was thrown into a river with her one-year-old daughter in her arms, is followed without commentary by Lee Soo-san's recollection of being lured onto a military train bound for China with the promise of factory wages, the editing does not subordinate one woman's account to the other. The Korean shoreline, the Guangxi village, the eastbound train, the Mudanjiang room: each one appears in the same shot scale, with comparable lighting. Different places, recognisable in their specificity, are made adjacent by the system that shaped them. This is a form of ethical juxtaposition, as the edit constructs a horizontal dialogue in which each testimony is positioned alongside the others without being subsumed by them. The comfort station, the rural Chinese outpost, the Philippine garrison and the Dutch East Indian camp become points on a regional grid rather than local anomalies, not because the film asserts their similarity but because the editing renders their structural co-location visible.

It is equally important that the camera functions as a silent witness. The camera's restraint becomes most articulate in Jan Ruff-O'Herne's longest testimony, describing the daily mechanics of the comfort station: the photographs of the women posted on the wall for soldiers to choose from, the disinfectants distributed for use before and after intercourse, the dozens of soldiers received "from morning to night." Throughout this account, the camera shows her in a frontal medium close-up and never moves. There are no inserts, no music, no cutaways. When her voice tightens, the camera does not zoom in. Stillness here is not neutrality, but a rejection of the television grammar in which intensified suffering is treated with intensified visual access; the pace of the testimony continues to be controlled by the witness.

Ultimately, *63 Years On* pursues a documentarian purpose that offers a template for recording testimonials of "comfort women" based on a discourse of transnationalism, rather than a testimony of one national experience over another.

## TESTIMONIAL ALLIANCES AND TRANS-ASIAN SURVIVORSHIP: TOWARD A TRANS-ASIAN ETHICS OF REMEMBERING

The film demonstrates that survivorship takes on a different shape when testimonies cross borders. The defining moment of this transition is when Jan Ruff-O'Herne mentions witnessing Kim Hak-sun and other Korean women share their

experiences on television. Their testimonies, she says, meant that "the time had come" for her to "back them up because the world might listen to a European woman." It is crucial to point out an important aspect of this situation: a woman who survived the atrocities in one region found the ability to express herself only after other women from another region were able to do so. It is interesting to note that, as indicated by Kim (2022), although many countries formally recognise human rights, they tend to regress in the face any accusations made by foreigners instead of their own nationals.

This alliance of "comfort women" has also developed as an activist group, which has always been dependent on an extremely dense network of international civil society organisations across at least eight different countries, who cooperate in Asia and beyond to obtain information and documents and engage in cross-border activism (Shin, 2021). This film was made with the aid of these networks. The testimony in it includes victims from South Korea, China, the Philippines and the former Dutch East Indies, while the end credits thank the advocacy groups, archives and researchers involved in the project. The documentary can thus be considered an exercise in activism itself.

It is possible to trace the lineage of this influence on the next generation of "comfort women" documentaries. Tiffany Hsiung's *Within Every Woman* (2012) and *The Apology* (2016) feature women from China, Korea and the Philippines, proposing a regional scope much like that of *63 Years On*, through multilingual storytelling that is structurally comparable to the earlier film's interview structure, and editing techniques that create a space for women to engage across different sites. These productions can be seen to continue the regional approach begun by Kim Dong-won's documentary, as they are the product of a regional focus for which *63 Years On* provided the model.

The film's most concentrated demonstration of the cross-border alliance can be found in a single sequence that begins with archival video footage of Kim Hak-sun's December 1991 press conference. We see her in close frontal framing as she explains: "I was forced to live in a Japanese camp. I want to make sure that I say it before I die." The image is grainy, marking it as a historical document. The film cuts, without a voice-over bridge, to Jan Ruff-O'Herne in the present-day colour of the documentary's interview footage: "And when I saw those women, I thought, now is the time to speak [...] because as a European voice, a European woman, it sounds terrible to say, but I thought the world might listen more to me." Three temporal layers are thus compressed into one sequence: the 1991 archival image of the Korean testimony, the act of viewing that image and the present-day testimony in which the act of having viewed it itself becomes articulable.

The subsequent sequence of shots constructs a short montage of images spanning many different geographical areas: Korean activists protesting in Seoul, rekindling the "comfort women" story in the press after half a century, protests by members of the diaspora and expressions of European solidarity. Jan Ruff-O'Herne's act of breaking the silence around the "comfort women" issue cannot be seen as an independent ethical action, but rather as one that forms part of a larger loop. While Mohanty argues that solidarity must be built on a shared analysis of structural conditions rather than presumed identity, *63 Years On* shows how that analysis can be performed cinematically, edited into being rather than asserted.

What sustains this network across borders is the film's combination of linguistic readability and bodily proof. Viewers may dispute a translation or contest the truth of a memory, but a trembling hand or a decades-old cigarette burn carries a weight much harder to deny. On this evidentiary foundation, the film builds something more ambitious than a corroborated record. While the

SURVIVORSHIP EMERGES AS THE WORK OF CONTINUING TO LIVE AFTERWARD, ACROSS THE BORDERS, LANGUAGES AND SILENCES IMPOSED BY THE IMPERIAL VIOLENCE

"comfort women" system is conventionally narrated through national framings (Korean trauma, Chinese trauma, Filipino trauma), *63 Years On* reframes it as a regional phenomenon of the wartime Asia-Pacific. Multisited testimony, multilingual subtitles and horizontal montage combine to construct what could be described as an infrastructure of shared memory, in which the system itself, rather than any single national wound, becomes the unit of historical recognition.

The epistemological implications of this are significant. The film offers a model of regional historiography that neither replaces national histories nor attempts to place them within a larger spatial or political dynamic, but that instead reveals the failure of memory cultures founded on a national paradigm, where memories often speak to each other across a divide or at cross-purposes. It establishes a space where experiences can occupy the same frame, offering a different way of finding one's place through a cross-Asian memory space.

From this perspective, the ethical horizon of the film lies not in emotional resonance alone but in the structural work of memory. What the preceding sections identified as a "sisterhood" is transformed, in the coda, into a political-historical relationship articulated through shared experiences of violence and a shared need for recognition. This sisterhood is articulated not through emotion or feeling but through resonance: the resonance of patterns of recruitment, of the similarity of prison spaces, of the experience of stigma, of shared experiences of being reduced to silence. The film indexes these resonances, even as their differences emerge. It also indexes a possible ethics of memory that is trans-Asian and less bound to the concerns of one nation's memory than to its own pursuit of a form of historical justice.

The film's closing register is not denunciation but restoration. Near the end, Lee Soo-san is reunited with her Chinese son, the child she raised in a language not her own, in a country to which she could not return as anything but a stranger. The reunion does not resolve the violence documented in the film; instead, it contextualises that violence in a life that goes on. Survivorship emerges as the work of continuing to live afterward, across the borders, languages and silences imposed by the imperial violence.

This ethic transcends the simple representational function of memory to embrace an ethical politics that looks toward a future where women's testimonies can maintain a kind of corroborative relationship with each other and challenge denialism by offering stronger evidence, while also generating a regional memory of the violence connected through cross-regional relations. The expected apology by the Japanese government in the film is thus considered essential not only for these women but also for peace between countries, including within Japan itself. In this sense, *63 Years On* serves not merely as an archival document but also as an apparatus for forming a transnational community of survivors and allies, as an archive of moving images circulating internationally, and as a methodology through which regional histories might be narrated. ■

## NOTES

1 The term "comfort women" is a euphemism used by the Japanese army during the war for women forced into a transnational system of military sexual slavery (Soh, 2008; Yoneyama, 2016). The term is placed in quotation marks throughout the article to mark its euphemistic nature while preserving its established usage in survivor-led and scholarly discourse. The

term "comfort women documentary" refers to films that foreground survivor testimony and function as a counter-archive to the silences of the official record (Kim, 2025).

2 Kim Dong-won is a leading figure among South Korean independent documentary makers. His major works include *Sanggye-dong Olympics* (1988), *Myungsung, Six Days of Record* (1997), and *Repatriation* (2004), which won the Sundance Freedom of Expression Award. He founded the collective Purun Video in 1991, and for years he has focused on urban dispossession and human rights issues.

3 In South Korea, Byun Young-joo's landmark trilogy comprised of the films *The Murmuring* (1995), *Habitual Sadness* (1997) and *My Own Breathing* (1999) focuses exclusively on South Korean survivors; in China, Guo Ke's *Thirty Two* (2012) and *Twenty Two* (2015) both deal solely with Chinese victims; and in the Philippines, films such as Björn Jensen's *Forgotten Sex Slaves: Comfort Women in the Philippines* (2015) present Filipino cases.

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## BEYOND NATIONAL MEMORY: MULTILINGUAL WITNESSING AND TRANSNATIONAL COMFORT WOMEN SURVIVORSHIP IN *63 YEARS ON*

**Abstract**

This paper examines how *63 Years On* (Kim Dong-won, 2008) reconfigures the history of the Japanese military "comfort women" system through a transnational mode of witnessing. Instead of organising testimonies within national boundaries, the film brings women from Korea, China, the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies into a shared cinematic space. Their memories—spoken in different languages yet shaped by similar ruptures of childhood, community and bodily integrity—form a network of resonance that reveals the regional structure of wartime violence. The film achieves this through a network of practices that include a translingual model of testimony, whereby suffering can be articulated across linguistic difference; a bodily semiotics of the women's facial expressions and gestures, of halting body movements and of restrained weeping that is readable across cultural difference; and finally, a mode of camera ethics that places each woman's testimony on an equal footing with the others that is maintained through careful staging, measured distancing and a horizontal montage. Each of these practices creates a space of cross-cultural dialogue that is unreadable through any of these methods independently. It is thus argued that *63 Years On* not only documents traumatic experiences but proposes a trans-Asian ethics of remembering, where survivorship emerges as a shared historical claim grounded in interconnected experiences of violence and the collective pursuit of justice.

**Key words**

*63 Years On*; Comfort women; Embodied memory; Documentary; Transnational witnessing.

**Author**

Sen Ni is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Korean Language and Literature at Seoul National University, expected to receive his Ph.D. in February 2027. His research interests include Korean cinema, film history and theatre history. His dissertation, *Negotiating Colour: A History of Natural-Colour Cinema in Korea (1948–1980)*, examines the technological, industrial and aesthetic formations of colour film in postwar South Korea. His research has been accepted for publication in 2026 in *Animals & Society* and *Women's Studies: An Inter-disciplinary Journal*. Contact: nissen1@snu.ac.kr.

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## MÁS ALLÁ DE LA MEMORIA NACIONAL: TESTIMONIOS MULTILINGÜES Y SUPERVIVENCIA TRANSNACIONAL EN *63 YEARS ON*

**Resumen**

Este artículo examina cómo *63 Years On* (2008) reconfigura la historia del sistema de «mujeres de consuelo» del ejército japonés mediante un modo transnacional de testificación. En lugar de organizar los testimonios dentro de límites nacionales, la película reúne a mujeres de Corea, China, Filipinas y las Indias Orientales Neerlandesas en un mismo campo cinematográfico. Sus memorias —expresadas en diferentes idiomas, pero marcadas por rupturas similares en la infancia, la vida comunitaria y la integridad corporal— forman una red de resonancias que revela la estructura regional de la violencia en tiempos de guerra. La película logra este efecto mediante un conjunto de prácticas que incluyen un modelo translingüístico de testimonio, a través del cual el sufrimiento puede articularse más allá de la diferencia lingüística; una semiótica corporal que se manifiesta en expresiones faciales, gestos, movimientos interrumpidos y lágrimas contenidas, legibles a través de distintas culturas; y, finalmente, una ética de la cámara que sitúa los testimonios en un plano de igualdad, mantenido mediante una puesta en escena cuidadosa, una distancia medida y un montaje horizontal. Cada una de estas prácticas crea un espacio de diálogo intercultural que no puede comprenderse plenamente a través de ninguno de estos elementos por separado. Sostengo que *63 Years On* no solo documenta experiencias traumáticas, sino que propone una ética transasiática de la memoria, en la que la condición de supervivencia se convierte en una reivindicación histórica compartida, arraigada en experiencias interconectadas de violencia y en la búsqueda colectiva de justicia.

**Palabras clave**

Mujeres de consuelo; cuerpo; *63 Years On*; transnacional.

**Autor**

Sen Ni es candidato doctoral en el Departamento de Lengua y Literatura Coreanas de la Universidad Nacional de Seúl, y prevé obtener su doctorado en agosto de 2026. Sus líneas de investigación abarcan el cine coreano, la historia del cine y la historia del teatro. Su tesis doctoral, *Negotiating Color: A History of Natural-Color Cinema in Korea (1948–1980)*, estudia las configuraciones tecnológicas, industriales y estéticas del cine en color en la Corea del Sur de la posguerra. Sus investigaciones serán publicadas en 2026 en *Animals & Society* y en *Women's Studies: An Inter-disciplinary Journal*. Contacto: nissen1@snu.ac.kr.

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# THE NORTH KOREAN DIASPORA AND KOREAN POPULAR CULTURE: GENDERED MIGRATION IN DEFECTOR MEMOIRS AND SCREEN MEDIA*

HYUNSEON LEE

## INTRODUCTION

Migration, and more specifically forced displacement, has become one of the defining structural conditions of the 21st century (Stankovic et al., 2021). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide reached approximately 120 million in 2024, reflecting intensifying geopolitical conflicts and the deepening entanglement of mobility, precarity and global inequality (UNHCR, 2024). Within this broader landscape, the North Korean diaspora occupies a distinctive analytical position shaped by Cold War division, post-socialist economic collapse, authoritarian governance and the global circulation of media images that continually reframe displacement as both a humanitarian crisis and a cultural narrative.

Since the 1994–1998 famine, women have been disproportionately represented among the waves of defection, accounting for approximately 72% of migrants to South Korea between 2004 and 2023 (Korean Ministry of Unification, 2023). More than merely a case of geographic relocation, this movement represents a diasporic formation structured through networks of adaptation, survival and resistance (Clifford, 1997). In this sense, the North Korean diaspora emerges not as a fixed identity but as a shifting relational field shaped by gendered precarity and transnational mobility.

The visibility of the North Korean defector has undergone a radical transformation in parallel with the global rise of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*). While early South Korean media framed North Korea on the basis of rigid ideological paradigms, the contemporary Hallyu era (post-2000s, and

particularly in the 2020s) has reconfigured the defector as a transnationally circulating media figure embedded in global platform economies. For the "*Jangmadang* Generation" (North Koreans born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s), South Korean media functioned historically as a catalyst for defection; today, the same media landscape constitutes the primary arena for the circulation, mediation and global consumption of survival narratives.

This study interrogates the cultural production of the North Korean diaspora by foregrounding the role of the contemporary Hallyu media economy, with particular attention to the ways that global streaming platforms such as Netflix shape the aesthetic and narrative circulation of defector stories. Although women represent the majority of North Korean defectors and play a central role in testimonial production, their experiences remain under-theorised in media and cultural studies. This article addresses this gap by focusing on gendered survival as an analytic category, while also combining South Korean primary sources and transnational media discourse in an effort to reduce the linguistic and archival asymmetries that structure international scholarship on North Korean migration and representation.

Drawing on defector life-writing, interviews conducted in the UK and screen media, the analysis is structured around what could be described as a "theoretical triangulation" of Guy Debord's (1967) concept of the spectacle, Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory of the gaze and Alison Landsberg's (2004) notion of prosthetic memory. These frameworks are employed to examine how narratives of survival are aesthetically organised for transnational circulation. The central questions guiding the study are how visual and narrative strategies of the Hallyu era shape global perceptions of North Korea and its defectors, and the extent to which this "spectacle of survival" both disrupts and reproduces configurations of victimhood, gender and national belonging.

## THE ARDUOUS MARCH AND THE FEMINISATION OF SURVIVAL: GENDERED POLITICAL ECONOMY AND PRECARIOUS LIFE

The Arduous March (1994–1998) constitutes both a humanitarian catastrophe and a structural rupture in the political economy of the North Korean state. While demographic estimates suggest between 600,000 and 1,000,000 deaths during this period (Haggard & Noland, 2007), its analytical significance lies less in the number of fatalities than in the reconfiguration of governance, distribution and everyday life that followed the collapse of the socialist provisioning system. This rupture was exacerbated by the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994 and the broader geopolitical transformation brought by the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Communist Bloc, which stripped the North Korean system of many of its external economic and ideological supports. The breakdown of the Public Distribution System (PDS) resulted in food scarcity and gave rise to a reorganisation of the way North Koreans subsisted, grounded in informal economies, illicit circulation, and gendered labour adaptation.

Since the Arduous March, North Korean migration has undergone a profound structural transformation. In addition to causing mass starvation,

SINCE THE ARDUOUS MARCH, NORTH KOREAN MIGRATION HAS UNDERGONE A PROFOUND STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION. IN ADDITION TO CAUSING MASS STARVATION, THE COLLAPSE OF THE PDS LED TO THE EMERGENCE OF INFORMAL SURVIVAL ECONOMIES (*JANGMADANG*), IN WHICH GENDER BECAME A DECISIVE FACTOR SHAPING MOBILITY, EMPLOYMENT AND RISK

the collapse of the PDS led to the emergence of informal survival economies (*Jangmadang*), in which gender became a decisive factor shaping mobility, employment and risk. As a result of this transformation, women became the main agents of survival. While men remained largely dependent on formal state institutions such as the military, factories and administrative systems, women were increasingly participating in cross-border trade, informal markets and clandestine migration networks. This asymmetry reflects what Saskia Sassen (2000) describes as the "feminisation of survival", whereby women disproportionately absorb the burdens imposed by economic restructuring and government withdrawal. In the North Korean case, however, feminisation is not only economic but also spatial and embodied, producing forms of mobility that are simultaneously adaptive and profoundly precarious.

## MIGRATION ACROSS THE NORTH KOREA–CHINA BORDER AND BEYOND IS THEREFORE NOT A LINEAR MOVEMENT FROM OPPRESSION TO FREEDOM BUT A FRAGMENTED AND MEDIATED PROCESS SHAPED BY BROKERS, INFORMAL ECONOMIES, RELIGIOUS INTERMEDIARIES AND DETENTION REGIMES

Migration across the North Korea–China border and beyond is therefore not a linear movement from oppression to freedom but a fragmented and mediated process shaped by brokers, informal economies, religious intermediaries and detention regimes. This condition can be theorised using Judith Butler's concept of "precarious life", (2004: 25) which emphasises that vulnerability is socially and politically produced and unevenly distributed. North Korean women experience a particularly intense form of precarity as their mobility is simultaneously enabled and constrained by transnational networks that expose them to trafficking, forced marriage, detention and systemic invisibility.

Migration also results in a transformation of subjectivity. As Iain Chambers argues, it constitutes a "journey of no return", continuously destabilising identity through displacement (1994: 5). For North Korean defectors, this trajectory unfolds across multiple thresholds—from internal displacement to clandestine movement through China and Southeast Asia, and finally to resettlement in South Korea or a third country. Each stage involves not only physical risk but also epistemological dislocation, which strips notions such as home, identity and belonging of their referential stability.

This destabilisation is intensified by what Vilém Flusser calls an "uncanny sensation" that makes the homeland seem simultaneously familiar and strange, present and absent (1995: 30). In the diasporic consciousness, North Korea is therefore not a stable empirical referent but a layered construct shaped by ideology, memory and mediated representation.

In this context, media plays a structurally central role. Alison Landsberg's (2004) concept of prosthetic memory provides a framework for understanding how mediated representations of migration circulate and are affectively internalised by global audiences. In the case of the North Korean diaspora, such narratives invite affective engagement with experiences of famine, escape and displacement. However, this process operates within what Guy Debord defines as the "society of the spectacle", in which lived experience is replaced by representation and social relations are increasingly mediated through images (1967: 12). The North Korean defector is thus transformed into a dual figure: both the subject of lived trauma and the object of global visual consumption.

The so-called "*Jangmadang* Generation" embodies this structural contradiction. Growing up in conditions of famine and state collapse while si-

multaneously being exposed to illicit South Korean media, including television dramas, films and popular music, this cohort occupies a structurally split cultural position. Exposure to these contradictory experiences generates a recursive cultural logic whereby South Korean media produces imaginaries of escape and modernity while defector narratives are later reabsorbed into the same media system as evidence of suffering, authenticity and survival. Within this loop, gender functions as a primary axis of visibility. Female defectors are disproportionately represented in both memoir and screen media, not only due to their demographic predominance in the real world but also because their narratives align with global narrative economies of vulnerability, endurance and redemption. Yet this visibility is structurally ambivalent, as it elicits recognition and empathy while simultaneously reinforcing hierarchies of suffering that position women as primary victims of trauma, while men are more readily associated with agency, reintegration and professional mobility.

## MEMOIR BOOM: PERFORMING THE SELF FOR THE GLOBAL GAZE

The proliferation of North Korean defector memoirs over the past two decades constitutes what may be analytically described as a "memoir boom". These life narratives transform experiences of displacement into globally circulating accounts of trauma, survival and moral legibility. Paradoxically, the increase in the number of published testimonies has coincided with a marked decline in actual defection rates since the early 2010s, suggesting a shift in North Korean migration from physical movement to representational production. The defector has thus become both a geopolitical subject and a media narrative figure whose presence has been intensified by textual, visual and digital circulation.

A foundational text in this representational field is Barbara Demick's *Nothing to Envy* (2009), which established a dominant interpretive framework for North Korean life-writing. While grounded in journalistic ethnography, Demick's text positions famine as the central narrative axis around which North Korean subjectivity is rendered intelligible to global readers. In so doing, it risks limiting North Korean life to a restricted repertoire of suffering, deprivation and moral endurance. Individual biographies are interpreted less as unique stories than as fragments illustrative of systemic collapse, resulting in what can be understood as narrative homogenisation. Subsequent memoirs authored by defectors both reproduce and complicate this representational logic. In Hyeonseo Lee's *The Girl with Seven Names* (2015), identity is constructed through fragmentation and multiplicity rather than linear selfhood. The repeated renaming of the subject functions not just as a biographical detail but also as an index of ontological instability, whereby the self is constantly reconstituted across shifting geopolitical and institutional contexts. Identity emerges here as a survival strategy rather than a stable essence, distributed across borders, documents and acts of concealment.

By contrast, Yeonmi Park's *In Order to Live* (2015) foregrounds corporeal vulnerability and embodied trauma as its dominant narrative mode. The memoir repeatedly focuses on scenes of hunger, trafficking and sexual violence, producing a narrative economy in which the body becomes the primary site of political inscription (Park & Vollers, 2015). Survival is rendered legible through bodily suffering, aligning the text with global humanitarian expectations of recognisability. Rather than calling into question the authenticity of the testimony, this highlights the conditions under which trauma becomes narratively and commercially intelligible in global publishing markets. These memoirs operate within what Laura Mulvey theorises as a broader regime of "to-be-looked-at-ness", which positions female bodies as sites of visual and affective consumption

THE MEMOIR BECOMES A FORM OF CULTURAL CAPITAL. TESTIMONY IS BOTH AN ACT OF REMEMBRANCE AND A MODE OF PROFESSIONALISED SELF-PRODUCTION THAT TRANSLATES SURVIVAL INTO GLOBALLY RECOGNISABLE NARRATIVE VALUE

(1975: 837). Although memoir is a textual form, its circulation is embedded in visual economies that include interviews, lectures, documentaries and digital platforms. The female defector is therefore not only read but also visually framed as an object of humanitarian empathy.

This dynamic is further intensified by translation practices, editorial mediation and publishing infrastructures, particularly in markets in the English-speaking world. Memoirs are not simply transmitted but actively restructured through an editorial selection and narrative framing process that privileges coherence, emotional accessibility and moral determination. A regime of narrative legibility is thus established, to which end trauma must be organised into linear and affectively intelligible sequences in order to circulate effectively within global media systems.

Within this regime, the memoir becomes a form of cultural capital. Testimony is both an act of remembrance and a mode of professionalised self-production that translates survival into globally recognisable narrative value. This gives rise to a structural tension between agency and mediation: while defectors assert narrative authority over their lived experiences, their voices are simultaneously shaped by the expectations of humanitarian discourse and global media platforms that reward particular configurations of suffering.

This condition can be further explained with reference to Alison Landsberg's concept of "prosthetic memory" (2004: 2), which describes how individuals acquire mediated memories of events they did not directly experience through cultural technologies such as film, television and memoir. In the case of North Korean defector narratives, prosthetic memory enables global audiences to inhabit famine, escape and displacement as affectively immediate experiences despite geographical and circumstantial distances. However, this mediated empathy is structurally embedded in what Guy Debord calls the "society of the spectacle" (1967: 12), in which social relations are increasingly mediated by images and representation substitutes lived experience. More than merely communicate trauma, defector memories circulate as spectacular objects that must remain legible, consumable and affectively productive in global attention economies.

The "*Jangmadang* Generation" embodies the historical contradiction underpinning this memoir boom. Their formative lives were shaped by the simultaneity of state collapse, famine and the clandestine circulation of South Korean media, including television dramas, films and popular music. In this recursive process of mediation, defector narratives are transformed from testimonies of individual experience into cultural sites where competing claims to authenticity, suffering and survival are asserted and negotiated.

## THE NORTH KOREAN DEFECTOR NARRATIVE AND THE HALLYU SPECTACLE

The representation of North Korean defectors in South Korean media has undergone a significant transformation in the Hallyu era, shifting from Cold War ideological caricatures to affectively charged, globally legible figures embedded in transnational media circulation. This transformation, however, does not constitute a rupture so much as a reconfiguration of earlier representational regimes. As Aram Kim (2022) argues, gendered patterns of migration and representation were already evident in the post-Korean War period. From the 1950s through to the 1980s, in Sou-

th Korean cinema—particularly in Korean War films, including depictions of female partisans—and on television, North Koreans were depicted in accordance with rigid ideological frameworks shaped by Cold War politics. In these works, cinematic space, framing and narrative positioning were governed by a binary moral logic that clearly distinguished enemy from ally. By the 1990s, however, the figure of the North Korean soldier underwent a notable transformation, becoming central to the emergence of the South Korean blockbuster and its reconfiguration of national division as spectacle (Lee, 2023). What distinguishes the contemporary period is therefore not the presence of North Korea in South Korean media but the formal reorganisation of its visibility through camera work, colour schemes, perspective and spatial design under the conditions of global streaming capitalism.

ACROSS BOTH LITERARY AND AUDIOVISUAL FORMS, DEFECTION IS CONSISTENTLY REFRAMED THROUGH A KINSHIP-BASED ECONOMY OF OBLIGATION IN WHICH SURVIVAL LABOUR IS CARRIED OUT PRIMARILY BY THE FEMALE SUBJECT. WHETHER IN MEMOIR OR IN GLOBAL STREAMING DRAMAS, NARRATIVE LEGIBILITY DEPENDS UPON THE TRANSFORMATION OF GEOPOLITICAL RUPTURE INTO EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGIBLE FAMILY STRUCTURES

Beyond their thematic concern with North Korean displacement, defector memoirs and their cinematic reconfigurations in Hallyu media share structural similarities in their narrative organisation of survival. Across both literary and audiovisual forms, defection is consistently reframed through a kinship-based economy of obligation in which survival labour is carried out primarily by the female subject. Whether in memoir or in global streaming dramas, narrative legibility depends upon the transformation of geopolitical rupture into emotionally intelligible family structures.

In this sense, the memoir boom analysed in the previous section and the Hallyu spectacle examined here operate in the same representational regime. Both require the translation of displacement into a morally readable configuration of suffering, endurance and family repair. The defector is not an autonomous political subject but a figure whose legitimacy is secured through kinship responsibility, most often articulated through mother-child or sibling bonds in conditions of extreme precarity. This shared narrative grammar becomes visible when comparing textual life-writing and audiovisual representation. In both domains, female figures such as Kang Saebyeok are not exceptional constructions but rather condensations of a previously established logic: survival as obligation, mobility as sacrifice and defection as the deferred work of family restoration.

Building on this narrative grammar of kinship-based survival, Hallyu media products have formalised defection as a visual regime in which spatial design, cinematography and affective coding render displacement globally comprehensible. In this context, platforms such as Netflix intensify this transformation by demanding narrative legibility across linguistic and cultural boundaries. As a result, complex histories of displacement are condensed into a limited set of recognisable figures: the victim, the survivor or the morally exceptional subject. Guy Debord's concept of the "society of the spectacle" (1967: 12) is central here, as lived experience is increasingly replaced by mediated representation.

This logic is most clearly visible in the series *Squid Game* (Ojingeo Geim, Hwang Dong-hyuk, Netflix: 2021-2025), where Kang Sae-byeok serves as a paradigmatic figure in the Hallyu-era defector imaginary. Her subjectivity is construct-

ed through restricted spatial access, as the camera consistently confines her within enclosed environments that limit orientation and reinforce the sense of structural precarity. Cinematic space is constructed in the series as an abstract competitive architecture rather than a socially grounded geography, eliminating any stable sense of belonging or territorial anchoring. At the level of camera work, Sae-byeok is frequently framed in tight close-ups and medium shots that limit our spatial awareness while intensifying emotional proximity. These shots isolate her face as the primary site of meaning production, reducing spatial depth and reinforcing the idea of psychological containment. The use of shallow depth of field further dissolves the background space, rendering the environment blurred and unreadable, which contributes to epistemic uncertainty. The series also relies heavily on desaturated colour palettes dominated by greys and cold blues, and muted lighting conditions that strip the environment of warmth and cultural specificity. This chromatic strategy constructs an affective atmosphere of exhaustion and survival, where colour itself becomes a marker of precarity.

Spatially, Sae-byeok's memory of North Korea is presented in fragmented form rather than as a coherent geography. In the episode "Gganbu" (#1x06: Kkanbu, Hwang Dong-hyuk, Netflix: 2021), this structure is condensed: Sae-byeok's recollection of returning to a devastated village does not unfold within a stable framework but emerges as isolated narrative fragments. The absence of establishing shots disrupts the spatial continuity, producing what can be understood as a *collapsed narrative space*, in which trauma displaces geography. This process aligns with Alison Landsberg's concept of "prosthetic memory" (2004: 2), where audiences adopt mediated experiences of trauma through cultural representation. In this context, however, prosthetic memory is structured through formal visual constraints—framing, colour grading and spatial restriction—that determine how trauma is made legible. The gendered dimension of this construction is crucial. Sae-byeok's body is not eroticised, but it is affectively contained through the use of close-up, which transforms vulnerability into consumable emotional intensity. Her eventual death completes this transformation, converting her from a narrative agent into a symbolic figure in the spectacle.

## GENDER ALSO STRUCTURES VISUAL REGIMES IN COMPETING SPATIAL FORMATIONS OF MIGRATION

A contrasting spatial logic appears in *Crash Landing on You* (Sarang-ŭi Pulsich'ak, Park Ji-eun, tvN: 2019), where North Korea is constructed through expansive rural landscapes, warm colour grading and symmetrical framing, producing an aestheticised rendering of geopolitical division. Cinematic space is thereby stabilised and softened, reducing political tension with pastoral familiarity. The use of warm tones and a balanced composition produces what can be described as a "soft spectacle" in which ideological difference is visually neutralised.

A gendered differentiation is also evident in the series, as the male protagonist Ri Jeong-hyeok is constructed as a figure of disciplined masculine power. His visual framing consistently emphasises composure, spatial control and protective sovereignty, positioning him as a stabilising presence within the narrative economy of division. In contrast to female characters, whose mobility is often articulated through vulnerability, emotional negotiation or romantic suspense, Ri's subjectivity is grounded in a contained authority that creates the impression of a character able to master rather than merely endure space. In this configuration, masculinity is aligned with spatial legibility and narrative agency, while femininity is more consistently coded through affective exposure and relational dependency.

Gender also structures visual regimes in competing spatial formations of migration. In *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (Isanghan Byeonhosa U Yŏng-ŭ, Moon Ji-won, ENA: 2022), female defector figures are consistently framed through static medium-close shots, shallow spatial depth and high-key lighting, which isolate them in emotional rather than social space. Their visibility is thus organised through an affective regime of proximity that restricts spatial extension, positioning femininity within enclosed circuits of recognition and emotional legibility. By contrast, *Doctor Stranger* (Dakteo Ibang-in, Park Jin-woo, Kim Joo, SBS: 2014) constructs male defector subjectivity through expanded spatial mobility, clinical environments and narrative-coded professional agency within transnational medical and political infrastructures. Dynamic camera movements and mobile tracking shots convey a sense of spatial permeability, suggesting that male characters have access to institutional networks and circulatory pathways that extend beyond their immediate environment. Mobility here is not merely physical but structurally embedded in regimes of access, expertise and institutional negotiation.

These formal differences suggest that gender in Hallyu media is encoded not only at the level of narrative but also through distinct spatial regimes of visibility. Camera movements, framing and depth of field all contribute to the distribution of mobility and constraints, producing a gendered hierarchy of spatial legibility that determines a body's degree of freedom or containment. Understood in relation to the broader Hallyu spectacle, these configurations do not eliminate ideology but reconfigure it through formal systems that determine how defection is made visible in the first place. Camera, colour and spatial composition operate as regulatory devices of perception, structuring the conditions under which North Korean defection is rendered emotionally intelligible, narratively functional and politically readable for global media audiences.

## SPATIAL REGIMES OF MIGRATION: CINEMATIC INTERVENTIONS AND THE LIMITS OF SPECTACLE

While mainstream K-dramas often operate within the logics of spectacle and global consumption, South Korean and transnational films offer alternative aesthetic strategies aimed at negotiating and at times resisting these dominant modes of representation. These cinematic interventions expose the limits of the Hallyu spectacle by foregrounding the material, spatial and affective dimensions of migration that are often flattened in mainstream narratives. A key strategy used in these films to differentiate them is their treatment of space as an active rather than neutral cinematic force. Unlike the compressed narrative spaces of television drama, where geography is subordinated to plot acceleration, these films construct space as fragmented, unstable and structurally meaningful. Migration is thus not simply movement across territory; rather, it is an experience of spatial discontinuity.

In *My Name Is Loh Kiwan* (Nae Ireumeun Loh Kiwan, Kim Hee-jin, Netflix: 2024), European space is constructed as bureaucratic and affectively cold, structured through institutional imagery rather than depictions of cultural belonging. The repeated use of shallow focus renders backgrounds blurred or inaccessible, keeping the spatial integration unstable. The space is never fully legible; it is mediated by paperwork, waiting rooms and fragmented encounters. The film's colour palette reinforces this sense of estrangement, relying on cold, desaturated blues and grey-green tones that suppress warmth and intensify emotional distance. Colour functions here not as an aesthetic surface but as a structural index of alienation, creating an environment that visually precludes any possibility of belonging. The camera movements intensify this condition, as handheld medium shots following the protagonist generate a paradox of mobility without orientation:

movement is tracked, but a stable sense of spatial control is withheld from both the character and the viewer. Corridors, narrow streets and institutional interiors dominate the frames, resulting in a spatial recursion where characters circulate in constrained rather than expansive settings. This spatial logic is also gendered. Male subjectivity is given limited navigational agency through the use of medium shots that permit partial mobility, whereas female characters are more frequently confined to tight close-ups that isolate them in an emotional rather than a geographic space. Bodily mobility is thus unevenly distributed between genders.

THIS INTERROGATION OF SPACE IS NOT LIMITED TO FICTION FILMS, BUT CAN ALSO BE FOUND IN DOCUMENTARY AND HYBRID FORMS

In the film *On the Way to South* (Nam-ŭro Kanŭn Kil, Kim Sang-rae, 2025), the spatial logic is based on an expansive environment instead of institutional fragmentation. The Mongolian desert becomes a space of exposure where the geography itself exerts pressure on the body. Extreme long shots render human figures tiny in vast horizontal landscapes, subordinating the body to its immense surroundings. This setting conveys a persistent sense of vulnerability: figures are repeatedly positioned at the edges or the bottom of the frame, surrounded by overwhelming expanses of sand and sky. This space here is elemental rather than institutional, defined by endurance rather than belonging. The film's colour design amplifies this condition through muted earth tones and high natural contrast, creating an environment defined by barrenness, heat and exhaustion. The colour is environmental rather than symbolic, embedding precarity in the material texture of landscape. The camera work is restrained, with static and slow-moving shots that depict the landscape far beyond human action. Movement becomes repetitive and exhausting, collapsing the protagonist's experience of space and time into a state of physical fatigue. There is no stable viewpoint; the camera remains grounded, aligning our perception with the limitations of the human bodies rather than with a visual mastery of the landscape.

This interrogation of space is not limited to fiction films, but can also be found in documentary and hybrid forms. In *Beyond Utopia* (Madeleine Gavin, 2023), migration is constructed with handheld cinematography, fragmented spatial continuity and night-vision colour grading, producing a visual field evocative of surveillance, in which space is partially visible but never fully accessible. Borders are inferred rather than shown, reinforcing the precarity of movement. The inclusion in Gavin's film of the North Korean defector Hyeonseo Lee, author of *The Girl With Seven Names* (2015), blurs the boundaries between testimony and mediation. Rather than focusing on humanitarian intermediaries, it turns to the defection process itself as a form of exposure. It follows a North Korean family along clandestine escape routes, rendering them visible primarily as figures of survival under constant surveillance.

An even more intense expression of this logic can be found in *Humint* (Ryoo Seung-wan, 2026), which focuses on defections across the Russia–North Korea border and foregrounds the intelligence infrastructures established to monitor human movement. In this film, migration is primarily framed not as a question of survival or humanitarian rescue but as an operative field of knowledge extraction. Bodies become sites for the production, circulation and monetisation of information in transnational security and trafficking networks. In this configuration, defection is structured according to a humint (human intelligence) logic in which human subjects function simulta-

neously as vulnerable bodies and informational assets. Gendered precarity is central to this system, as trafficking economies, coercion and family rescue imperatives have a disproportionate impact on female mobility. Visibility is not merely representational but also operational, embedded in regimes that convert lived experience into actionable intelligence. Positioned between observational documentary and slow cinema modes, *Humint* marks a transition from the visibility of escape to the operationalisation of human movement as intelligence related to border regimes.

In contrast, *Little Pyongyang* (Rittŭl P'yŏngyang, Roxy Rezvany, 2017) adopts a more observational spatial logic. Through static framing, symmetrical composition and subdued lighting, the film constructs a stable yet layered environment in which memory, everyday life and diasporic temporality all coexist. Rather than a rupture, migration is depicted as a continuity embedded in ordinary time. The camera holds instead of following, allowing subjects to inhabit the space without narrative acceleration. This results in a temporal density in which repetition, suspension and incompletion resist emotional compression. Ambiguity is preserved rather than resolved, rejecting full legibility as an aesthetic principle.

In all these works, what emerges is not a unified aesthetic but a differentiated field of spatial regimes: institutional fragmentation, exposure to the environment, the visibility of surveillance, intelligence extraction and observational duration. Despite their formal differences, these cinematic forms remain shaped by the broader conditions of global media circulation, where visibility is unevenly distributed and structurally mediated. The Hallyu spectacle, therefore, is not a single genre, functioning instead as a prevailing visual logic against which alternative spatialities are defined, negotiated or partially withheld.

## CONCLUSION: FROM HALLYU SPECTACLE TO DIGITAL AGENCY

The North Korean diaspora, emerging from the historical rupture of the "Arduous March", has evolved into a complex and globally mediated phenomenon shaped by the intersection of gender, migration and media circulation. In this article it has been argued that the figure of the North Korean defector must be understood not simply as a political subject or humanitarian category, but as a culturally produced and mediated figure whose visibility is structured by the logics of the Korean Wave and the broader global media economy. In memoirs, television dramas, films and documentaries, the defector's narrative has been transformed into what Guy Debord (1967) conceptualises as the "society of the spectacle," in which lived experience is reorganised into forms of representation designed for consumption. In this context, a "spectacle of survival" emerges as a central paradigm: trauma is narrated but also aestheticised through recognisable narrative arcs and visual conventions that render it intelligible to transnational audiences. While such representations facilitate global visibility of North Korean defectors, they also risk flattening the complexity of individual experience into emotionally legible tropes.

At the same time, this study has shown that the spectacle is not a monolithic structure. From the combined perspectives of Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze (1975) and Alison Landberg's concept of prosthetic memory (2004), representation can be understood as a site of tension between empathy and objectification, identification and distance, agency and mediation. Female defectors, in particular, occupy a paradoxical position: they are highly visible in global media systems, yet this visibility is frequently structured through gendered regimes of affect and containment in which the female body becomes a site of emotional legibility and narrative constraints.

The analysis of memoirs has demonstrated how defector narratives are shaped by both personal testimony and global publishing infrastructures, resulting in what may be described as performative authenticity. Although authors such as Hyeonseo Lee and Yeonmi Park exercise narrative agency, their accounts are also mediated through editorial and market logics that privilege certain configurations of suffering, resilience and redemption. In this sense, memoir becomes a site where lived experience is translated into globally readable narrative forms that both enable and delimit expression.

Similarly, the analysis of Hallyu screen media has shown how the defector is reconfigured as a transnational figure in platform-driven economies. In globally circulating series such as *Squid Game*, North Korean characters function as condensed figures of trauma and resilience, enabling forms of prosthetic memory while remaining shaped by the aesthetic demands of global streaming culture. As a result, defection becomes both visible and constrained within regimes that prioritise emotional clarity, narrative compression and visual immediacy.

The cinematic and documentary interventions discussed in this article offer important counterpoints to this dominant logic. Through alternative uses of space, temporality and visual form, films such as *My Name Is Loh Kiwan* and *On the Way to South* challenge the immediacy of spectacle by foregrounding fragmentation, endurance and exposure to the environment. Documentaries such as *Beyond Utopia* and *Little Pyongyang* further complicate this field by oscillating between a visibility of surveillance and observational restraint. Yet even these alternative forms are still entangled in global circuits of production, funding and distribution that structure what can be seen and how it can be seen. The transition to digital platforms marks a further transformation in this representational landscape. Social media environments such as YouTube and Instagram have allowed some defectors to become active producers of their own narratives, shifting from objects of representation to subjects of self-mediation. This introduces new forms of agency and immediacy in storytelling. However, as Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics suggests (2008), visibility itself is a regulated field of power. Algorithmic infrastructures prioritise emotionally engaging and visually consumable content, thereby reproducing many of the same logics of selection, exposure and commodification that structure the Hallyu spectacle.

This article has proposed that the representation of North Korean defectors can be understood through three overlapping regimes: the ideological cipher; the spectacular icon; and the digital subject. Rather than forming a linear progression, these regimes coexist in a layered representational field in which Cold War imaginaries, Hallyu-era spectacle, and platform-mediated self-representation intersect. In all three, gender remains a central structuring axis, shaping the distribution of visibility, agency and affect. While this study has primarily focused on cinematic and televisual forms of representation, the increasing role of digital and social media platforms in the creation of self-mediated defector narratives suggests a shift in the conditions of visibility beyond traditional Hallyu structures.

WHILE THE INCREASED VISIBILITY OF NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS IN GLOBAL MEDIA MARKS A SIGNIFICANT MOVE AWAY FROM THEIR HISTORICAL MARGINALISATION, THIS VISIBILITY MUST BE CRITICALLY INTERROGATED. VISIBILITY DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY TRANSLATE INTO EMPOWERMENT; IT CAN ALSO PRODUCE NEW FORMS OF COMMODIFICATION, EMOTIONAL SCRIPTING AND EPISTEMIC CONSTRAINTS

While the increased visibility of North Korean defectors in global media marks a significant move away from their historical marginalisation, this visibility must be critically interrogated. Visibility does not automatically translate into empowerment; it can also produce new forms of commodification, emotional scripting and epistemic constraints. Studies of North Korean defectors should therefore not be limited to examining their representation, but should also attend to the conditions in which that representation becomes possible and meaningful. Such an approach requires an ethical and analytical shift beyond the consumption of trauma toward a recognition of defectors as situated political and cultural agents who actively participate in shaping the narratives that make their lives intelligible. In this sense, the future of North Korean diaspora studies lies not only in analysing representation, but in rethinking the aesthetic, institutional and technological conditions that structure it. ■

## NOTES

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## THE NORTH KOREAN DIASPORA AND KOREAN POPULAR CULTURE: GENDERED MIGRATION IN DEFECTOR MEMOIRS AND SCREEN MEDIA

**Abstract**

This study examines the gendered dimensions of the North Korean diaspora as represented and circulated in Korean popular culture through defector memoirs, interviews, K-dramas, films and digital and social media, situating these narratives in the contexts of transnational memory, historical tensions and migration studies. A large wave of displacement following the "Arduous March" famine of the mid-1990s—during which hundreds of thousands died—is framed by the legacies of Japanese colonial rule, the unresolved Korean War and the peninsula's enduring Cold War-shaped division. Since the early 2000s, women have represented over 70 percent of defectors to South Korea, yet their experiences of sexual violence, human trafficking and forced marriage in China—where they are classified as illegal migrants rather than refugees—remain underexamined. This study analyses how female defectors construct survival narratives and negotiate visibility across transmedia platforms embedded in the Korean Wave. These narratives illuminate the intersections of personal displacement and East Asian geopolitics, while digital media amplify complex forms of witnessing for global audiences. Applying frameworks of trauma memory, witness narrative, and transnational media studies, the article demonstrates how women's migration stories in Korean popular culture challenge conventional notions of victimhood, heroism and national belonging.

**Key words**

North Korean diaspora; Gendered migration; Defector narratives; Collective memory; Transnational media; Korean popular culture; Defector memoirs; Screen media.

## LA DIÁSPORA NORCOREANA Y LA CULTURA POPULAR COREANA: LA MIGRACIÓN POR MOTIVOS DE GÉNERO EN LAS MEMORIAS DE LOS DESERTORES Y LOS MEDIOS AUDIOVISUALES

**Resumen**

Este estudio examina las dimensiones de género de la diáspora norcoreana tal y como se representa y difunde en la cultura popular coreana a través de memorias de desertores, entrevistas, dramas coreanos, películas y medios digitales y sociales, situando estas narrativas en el contexto de la memoria transnacional, las tensiones históricas y los estudios sobre migración. La gran ola de desplazamientos que siguió a la hambruna de mediados de la década de 1990, conocida como la «Marcha Ardua», durante la cual murieron cientos de miles de personas en medio del colapso económico y la muerte de Kim Il-sung, se enmarca en el legado del dominio colonial japonés, la Guerra de Corea sin resolver y la división de la península, moldeada por la Guerra Fría. Desde principios de la década de 2000, las mujeres representan más del 70 % de los desertores a Corea del Sur, pero sus experiencias de violencia sexual, trata de personas y matrimonios forzados en China —donde se las clasifica como migrantes ilegales en lugar de refugiadas— siguen sin ser suficientemente investigadas. Este estudio analiza cómo las mujeres desertoras construyen narrativas de supervivencia y negocian su visibilidad a través de plataformas transmedia integradas en la ola coreana. Estas narrativas iluminan las intersecciones entre el desplazamiento personal y la geopolítica de Asia Oriental, mientras que los medios digitales amplifican formas complejas de testimonio para el público global. Aplicando marcos conceptuales sobre la memoria traumática, la narrativa testimonial y los estudios transnacionales sobre los medios de comunicación, el artículo demuestra cómo las historias de migración de las mujeres en la cultura popular coreana desafían las nociones convencionales de victimismo, heroísmo y pertenencia nacional.

**Palabras clave**

Diáspora norcoreana; Migración por motivos de género; Relatos de desertores; Memoria colectiva; Medios de comunicación transnacionales; Cultura popular coreana; Memorias de desertores; Medios audiovisuales.

**Author**

Hyunseon Lee, *dr. habil.*, is Professorial Research Associate at the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics, SOAS, University of London, and *Privatdozentin* in German Studies at the University of Siegen. She specialises in film, media and literary studies, focusing on transcultural exchanges between Europe and East Asia. Her current research examines memory, war, operatic and shamanistic performance and gender in Korean cinema and Hallyu. She is the author of *Metamorphosen der Madame Butterfly. Interkulturelle Liebschaften zwischen Literatur, Oper und Film* (2020) and *Geständniszwang und „Wahrheit des Charakters" in der Literatur der DDR* (2000). She has also edited the collective works *Korean Film and History* (2023) and *Korean Film and Festivals* (2022), co-edited *Opera, Exoticism and Visual Culture* (2015), *Mörderinnen* (2013), and *Akira Kurosawa und seine Zeit* (2005) and published over sixty essays and articles. Contact: hyunseonlee@hotmail.com

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**Autora**

Hyunseon Lee, Dra. habil., es profesora investigadora asociada en la Facultad de Lenguas, Culturas y Lingüística de SOAS, Universidad de Londres, y profesora titular de Estudios Alemanes en la Universidad de Siegen. Está especializada en estudios cinematográficos, mediáticos y literarios, con especial atención a los intercambios transculturales entre Europa y Asia Oriental. Su investigación actual se centra en la memoria, la guerra, las representaciones operísticas y chamánicas, así como en las cuestiones de género en el cine coreano y el Hallyu. Es autora de *Metamorphosen der Madame Butterfly. Interkulturelle Liebschaften zwischen Literatur, Oper und Film* (2020) y *Geständniszwang und «Wahrheit des Charakters» in der Literatur der DDR* (2000). Ha editado *Korean Film and History* (2023) y *Korean Film and Festivals* (2022), y coeditado *Opera, Exoticism and Visual Culture* (2015), *Mörderinnen* (2013) y *Akira Kurosawa und seine Zeit* (2005). Ha publicado más de sesenta ensayos y artículos académicos. Contacto: hyunseonlee@hotmail.com

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DIALOGUE

# TRAUMA, MEMORY AND REPARATION FROM A TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Conversation with

**CECILIA KANG**

# INTRODUCTION

LUCÍA RUD

From 1931 until the end of the Second World War in 1945, the Imperial Japanese Army recruited women and girls from different countries into a system of military sexual slavery, referring to them by the euphemistic term "comfort women" (*wianbu* in Korean). This issue remained largely silenced in South Korea until the 1990s. From that point onwards, survivors' testimonies, historical research, and the work of human rights organisations began to reveal both the scale and the systematic nature of the system. It is estimated that, during the Japanese occupation, between 200,000 and 400,000 women, primarily from the Korean Peninsula, China, the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, and other parts of Asia, were subjected to forced recruitment, deceptive labour promises, abduction, or economic coercion that ultimately led to their sexual exploitation in so-called "comfort stations" for soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army. Many of these women died because of abuse, malnutrition, or while being transported to combat zones. After the war ended, the survivors remained silent for decades due to social stigma and the absence of institutional support.

In this context of mnemonic contestation, cinema has played a crucial role as a vehicle for testimony, the transmission of transgenerational memory, and symbolic reparation. Alongside Byun Young-joo's foundational documentary trilogy—*The Murmuring* (1995), *Habitual Sadness* (1997), and *My Own Breathing* (1999)—several fiction films have also addressed the issue, including *Spirits' Homecoming* (Cho Jung-rae, 2016) and *I Can Speak* (Kim Hyun-seok, 2017), among others.

However, this body of films has often been examined through the lens of Korean national cinema, limiting our understanding of how traumatic memory travels, is reconfigured, and becomes mobilised across borders, particularly given that the so-called "comfort women" were predominantly—but by no means exclusively—Korean.

Today, approximately seven million Koreans, including both migrants and their descendants, live outside the Korean Peninsula, dispersed across countries around the world. The largest communities are found in China, the United States, Japan, Canada, and the former Soviet republics. The traumas experienced by the Korean population during the twentieth century continue to resonate within these diasporic communities, where they have also inspired forms of remembrance and activism. Audiovisual works such as *The Voices of the Silenced* (Park Soo-nam and Park Maeui, 2024), which focuses on the *Zainichi* (ethnic Koreans in Japan), and the television series *Pachinko* (Soo Hugh, Apple TV+, 2022), adapted from the 2017 novel of the same name by Korean American author Min Jin Lee, recover the history of Koreans under Japanese imperialism and explore its enduring consequences.

Cecilia Kang (Buenos Aires, 1985) is an Argentine filmmaker of Korean descent. In Argentina, she studied film directing at the National School of Film Experimentation and Production (ENERC) and furthered her training at the Film Laboratory of Torcuato Di Tella University (UTDT). Her body of work includes several short films, among them *Videojuegos* (2014), *Que viva el agua* (2011), and *Bicicletas* (2018). Her debut feature, *My Last Failure* (2017), is a documentary that explores identity, displacement, and the experiences of women within the Korean community in Argentina. In 2025, she premiered her first fiction feature, *Firstborn Son*, a co-production between Argentina (Tarea Fina) and France (Invivo Films) that examines the Korean Argentine diasporic experience through the perspective of a young woman. For this film, Kang received the Best Emerging Director award in the Cineasti del Presente section at the Locarno International Film Festival in 2025.

*Partió de mí un barco llevándome* (Cecilia Kang, 2023) was produced with the support of Argentina's National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts (INCAA), in collaboration with Korean institutions such as the Seoul Film Commission, as well as private funding. The film stars Melanie Chong, an Argentine actress of Korean descent (born in Argentina to Korean parents). This geographical positioning offers a distinctive perspective on the issue of the "comfort women," challenging narratives that have been framed exclusively within national boundaries.

The film forms part of a broader series of initiatives on the issue of the "comfort women" in Argentina, demonstrating how movements for historical justice and memory can take root in geographically and culturally distant contexts through academic institutions, artistic practices, and human rights activism. In this regard, the work of the scholar María del Pilar Álvarez has been particularly significant. A leading figure in the dissemination and analysis of this issue in Argentina, she has published numerous articles in Spanish and, more recently, the book *Halmoni: The Revolution of the Korean Grandmothers* (2025).

The connection between the historical memories of Argentina and Korea also became explicit with the inauguration of the photographic exhibition *Comfort Women: Korean Women in the Diaspora* (2023), by Japanese photographer Yajima Tsukasa. Featuring portraits of the survivors in their everyday lives, the exhibition was held at the House of Identity within the Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos (former ESMA) as part of the Month of Women and Memory. It was organised by the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo and the Korean Association in Argentina, with María del Pilar Álvarez serving as curator. This collaboration between the Grandmothers' Association—an internationally recognised symbol of the struggle

for memory and identity—and the Korean diaspora reinforced the transnational understanding of the "comfort women" system as a systematic violation of the human rights of women from Korea, China, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Yajima's photographs, taken in 2004, played a crucial role in making the faces of these elderly survivors visible.

*Partió de mí un barco llevándome* explores the transmission of memory and identity when one lives between two countries. Seeking to connect the experiences of the "comfort women" with those of contemporary young women, Kang selected a testimony from Ustinia Dolgopol and Snehal Paranjape's research report *Comfort Women: An Unfinished Ordeal. Report of a Mission* (1994) and invited several young Argentine women of Korean descent to study and recite it.

The film opens by foregrounding the documentary's own process of construction. Kang interviews several young Korean Argentines, asking them about their life experiences, employment, and whether they are familiar with the history of the "comfort women." Among them, she chooses to work with actress Melanie Chong (Buenos Aires, 1993), whom she describes as "her mirror" because of their shared interest in the performing arts—an uncommon career path within the Korean Argentine community. Chong studied at the Metropolitan School of Dramatic Arts (EMAD, 2012–2015), where she trained with Julio Chávez and Lisandro Rodríguez. Throughout her career, she has appeared in television series such as *Sr. y Sra. Camas* (TV Pública Canal 7, 2011) and *Niní* (Telefé, 2009–2010), as well as in stage productions including *La persona que esperábamos viene a la cena* (presented at the First Urgent Theatre Festival, 2016) and *Estoy perdido* (staged as part of the *Politically Incorrect: Francophone Theatre in Residence* programme, directed by Agustín Toscano and Ezequiel Radusky, 2024) (Alternativa Teatral, n.d.).

Melanie memorises and rehearses the testimony of Hwang Geum-ju, a former "comfort woman." When she first encounters the text, however, the testimony does not recount the atrocities committed under Japanese imperialism. Instead, it focuses on the survivor's later relationship with her mother and with post-war Korean society. The audience hears excerpts from Melanie's rehearsals in different settings: before her mother, with her Argentine friend Mora, in front of a mirror, and with actor and acting coach Julio Chávez, each rehearsal seeking a different emotional response from its interlocutor. Yet the complete testimony, performed during an open-microphone event at *La Pulpería*, remains off-screen.

Throughout the film, Melanie undergoes a profound shift in her understanding of its pur-

Image 1






pose. After performing Hwang's testimony at *La Pulpería*, she expresses her reservations and confronts the director: "You think… what's the point of reopening another wound? Or the same wound, over and over again… like those women. Why keep talking? It's over, it's over. The past can't be changed, you know?"

In the film's second section, Melanie travels to Seoul. There, she encounters Hwang's face in archival documents and personal objects displayed at the War & Women's Human Rights Museum. She later visits the House of Sharing (*Nanum ŭi Chip*) together with photographer Yajima Tsukasa. Yajima tells her that Hwang had been an active and passionate participant in the campaigns demanding justice from the Japanese government. Finally, Melanie takes part in the 1,551st Wednesday Demonstration, the weekly protest held every Wednesday since 1992 in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, calling for justice and reparations. There, she delivers in English a speech on domestic violence that directly echoes the experiences of her own mother, Hae Kyung-jeon. Earlier in the film, her mother recounts a testimony that is, in many ways, analogous to Hwang's: she describes the physical abuse inflicted by her husband, the lack of protection from her own mother ("How could they not hit you with that awful temper of yours?"), the silence surrounding the abuse and the absence of any formal complaint, as well as her own inability at the time to recognise it as violence ("But I didn't know that any of that was violence. I thought it was normal.")

Melanie's participation in the Wednesday Demonstration in Seoul and her rehearsal of Hwang Geum-ju's testimony at *La Pulpería* in Argentina can be understood as rituals of cultural trauma repair. These performances are not intended merely to inform but to generate an emotional resonance that fosters the audience's identification with the victims' suffering. The film never shows Melanie's performance at *La Pulpería*, and Lee (2025) notes that she ultimately failed to deliver the testimony. By contrast, during the Wednesday Demonstration, Melanie not only succeeds in speaking publicly about the "comfort women"—and does so in English, a language that is not her own—but also reflects on her mother and on her own personal history.

Together with her Korean Argentine friend Eunice, her brother Álex, and her non-Korean Argentine friend Mora, Melanie reflects on the differences between Argentina and Korea: how people sit, whether they remove their shoes indoors, whether they use umbrellas, when they apply sunscreen, and their different relationships with the ground and the sky. These conversations seek to articulate cultural difference while revealing how Korean Argentines never fully belong to either place, experiencing shifting positions between "us" and "them." Language also becomes a site of negotiation. In Seoul, Melanie chooses to speak English as a mediating language because she feels that her Korean is not sufficiently fluent.

The relationship with men constitutes another recurring source of tension throughout the film. It is present both in Hwang's testimony, where she explains that she never married because of her aversion to men and to sex, and in Hae Kyung-jeon's account. On the one hand, Hae recalls the violence of her former partner; on the other, she advises Melanie that, in order to "save" them both—herself and her daughter—she should try to marry a Korean man ("a millionaire," she adds). From the perspective of these older women, there appears to be no complete escape from structures of oppression.

The film's title is drawn from a line in Alejandra Pizarnik's poem *To Explain with the Words of This World*, included in her collection *The Tree of Diana* (1962). In interviews, Kang has explained that this verse conveys the difficulty of expressing traumatic and ineffable experiences through language, an idea she sought to communicate through the protagonist's journey. Kang had previously engaged with Pizarnik's work in a poetry

workshop led by Andi Nachón, where participants reflected on the inadequacy of words to articulate pain and on the need to explore visual and sonic forms of expression. This reflection is materialised throughout the film in a series of visual motifs: the sculptures displayed in the museum, the paintings created by former "comfort women" as vehicles for transmitting memory, and the tattoo Melanie chooses to have—a little she-devil—which, as she explains in hesitant Korean, carries a meaning: "a bad girl, but a pretty one."

The documentary had its world premiere on 7 November 2023 in the International Competition of the Mar del Plata International Film Festival, where it received the Astor Piazzolla Special Jury Award and the Audience Award. It was first screened in Buenos Aires as part of the Argentine Women Directors programme, organised by Género DAC and GPS Audiovisual. The film later won the 2025 Sur Award for Best Documentary, presented by the Argentine Academy of Cinema. Despite these accolades, presidential spokesperson Manuel Adorni defended budget cuts to Argentina's National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts (INCAA) by arguing that it subsidised films with very low attendance, citing this documentary while providing inaccurate—and false—figures regarding its audience (Página/12, 2024).

Ninety-three years after the establishment of the first "comfort station" in Asia, very few former "comfort women" remain alive (Álvarez, 2025), making the transmission of their memories and the pursuit of at least symbolic forms of reparation an urgent task. Such remembrance should not be confined to a nationalist framework but should also acknowledge the ways in which sexual violence against women has recurred across different wartime contexts, from Bosnia to Rwanda. This broader perspective has increasingly been embraced by Korean institutions. The War & Women's Human Rights Museum in Seoul has dedicated a permanent gallery to violence against women worldwide; the Women at War Film Festival, inaugurated in Seoul in 2023, situates the issue within a transnational framework; and, in 2024, the Research Institute on Japanese Military Sexual Slavery (RIMSS) organised a symposium in Seoul in which Cecilia Kang participated.

With regard to the "comfort women," it is important to recall that, despite the broad historical consensus on the issue, the Japanese government has never issued an official apology acknowledging legal responsibility that has been ratified by its parliament. In 2015, under the administrations of Park Geun-hye and Shinzo Abe, South Korea and Japan reached an agreement establishing a compensation fund for some surviving victims. However, the agreement was never enacted into law, and many survivors and advocacy organisations criticised it as little more than humanitarian assistance rather than an act of state reparation accompanied by an acknowledgment of responsibility. The continued prominence of the issue in cinema reflects the fact that the wound remains open so long as Japan does not offer a formal, comprehensive, and legally recognised apology (Nam, 2022).

*Partió de mí un barco llevándome* stands out within this landscape because it reveals the continuity of violence against women beyond the specific historical episode of the "comfort women," while underscoring the importance of narration and testimony as pathways toward healing. Equally significant is its diasporic perspective, which is at once both insider and outsider, endowing the film with a distinctive critical vantage point. From this dual position, the narrative ceases to belong exclusively to the history of Korean—or even Asian—women and instead opens onto a broader understanding: this violence is not merely a national or regional trauma but part of a global pattern that has affected women across different geographical contexts and armed conflicts. ■

# INTERVIEW

MARCELA CANIZO

**Thank you very much for speaking with us, Cecilia. To begin, could you introduce yourself and tell us about your career as a filmmaker in Argentina, as well as your relationship with Korea and its history?**

Thank you very much for the invitation and for this conversation. I am a filmmaker, and I have directed two documentary features. The first is *My Last Failure*, and the second is *Partió de mí un barco llevándome*. Both explore the position of women within the Korean community in Argentina. In each case, I am essentially trying to answer the question of who I am, having been born in Buenos Aires in 1985 to Korean parents. I have always been interested in these issues—questions of identity formation and of how we construct our representation as women. More recently, I premiered my first fiction feature, which also incorporates documentary elements. In many ways, I would say it is the result of the exploration I have been undertaking in my previous films. This latest work follows the emotional journey of a man from South Korea who decides to travel to the southernmost part of the world. The film explores the consequences of making such a decision—of seeking a kind of freedom that is profoundly different from the one that has been given to you.

**As your body of work has evolved, your exploration of the representation of Asian diasporas in Buenos Aires has become increasingly nuanced and profound. Even in your early short films, such as *Videojuegos* (2014), Asian characters already occupy a central place. Before returning to your filmmaking, however, we would like to ask about your parents' migration and how the narratives surrounding war were transmitted within your family, shaping your own understanding of Korean history.**

It is an interesting question. I think my parents' story is, to a certain extent, a fairly typical one. They both came from humble working-class families, and neither had the opportunity to pursue education beyond secondary school. Although they both aspired to continue their studies, neither was able to fulfil that ambition. My father was the eldest son in his family and was expected to provide for everyone. His father would not allow him to continue his education because he needed to work the land alongside him. In a way, his act of rebellion was to leave for the big city. He came from a small coastal town in southern Korea called Taean. My mother's story was different. She was an exceptionally diligent and intelligent young woman, yet she too was denied access to higher education,

simply because she was a woman. Her family consisted of my grandmother and her seven children. My grandfather died when my mother was fourteen years old, and my grandmother had to prioritise the education of her sons in Seoul. It was a Korea devastated by war, marked by widespread poverty and military dictatorship.

**How did these stories reach you? How were they told within your family?**

My parents' view of that historical period—and of the political regimes that shaped it—is quite polarised. They experienced the war firsthand as children, so their political understanding is deeply rooted in lived experience rather than in historical analysis. My father, for example, lost a brother during the Vietnam War. At the same time, the main reason he ultimately left Korea was simply that there were no employment opportunities for someone of his age and ability to work. The poverty people experienced was a direct consequence of the harsh policies that were being implemented at the time. I will never forget one trip I made with my family to the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea. My father pointed towards the mountains on the northern side and said: "Those are red mountains. You can clearly see the lack of vegetation. That is the difference between the North and the South. They have no resources because they have exhausted them all. In South Korea, by contrast, people's sacrifices made it possible to rebuild society." It is a deeply complex and contradictory narrative, because my parents themselves were never really part of that story of economic progress. They were forced to leave the country.

In fact, that is precisely what my most recent film is about, as it is based on my own family's history. After settling in Argentina, my parents got married. My sister was born in 1976, and the following year my father found work at a gas extraction plant and moved to the Middle East. He was originally supposed to return after a year, but he did not come back until the 1980s.

**Thinking specifically about *Partió de mí un barco llevándome*, how did you first come across the history of the *wianbu*?**

Until 2014, I knew nothing about that chapter of history. I had never even heard the euphemism "comfort women." Realising how little I knew filled me with a sense of shame. That year, I travelled to Korea to film several scenes for my first documentary. I was accompanying one of the film's protagonists, Kim Ran, a Korean artist who had lived in Argentina for many years and was travelling to Korea to attend a women's conference. I wanted to document her experience there. It was at that conference that I first attended a talk on the subject. Kim Ran presented the testimony of a survivor named Kim Bok-dong, who could easily have been my grandmother. She looked like her—we shared the same facial features. She began by describing how she had been abducted at the age of fourteen, how she was raped by more than thirty soldiers a day, and how she witnessed other women dying beside her. She spoke of the guilt she carried for having survived while so many of her friends did not. She did not speak only about the atrocities she endured during the war, but also about the stigma she faced afterwards upon returning to Korea—having to live in silence, as though she were an outcast, a source of shame for her own nation. At the end of her testimony, she said: "All I want is for the Japanese government to acknowledge these crimes. I do not need financial compensation. What I want is for children to learn this history, so that it never happens again. I hope it will one day be included in school textbooks." That is how her talk concluded. It was profoundly moving and utterly unforgettable.

That experience truly shattered me. It affected me in an extraordinarily deep way. This was in 2014, more than ten years ago. I returned from that trip preoccupied with the idea that there was not even a widely used equivalent of the word feminism in Korean. I was trying to understand the position of women within that Asian context,

which, despite my heritage, also felt strangely unfamiliar to me. I remember coming back to Argentina and asking my mother, "Did you know about this?" She replied, "Of course. We all know." And I asked her, "Then why did you never tell me?" My parents belong to a generation for whom certain things simply were not discussed—you don't talk about that, you never mention the war. And I understand why. Speaking about it meant reliving the pain. At the same time, it was deeply rewarding when the film premiered and my mother attended the screening with her friends, seeing their own community represented on screen. For me, it was important to help people of her generation understand that these wounds needed to be spoken about, however painful that might be. Sharing the past is essential if we are to avoid repeating it.

**The way you work with testimonial speech in the film is particularly compelling. It is not only the protagonist who gives voice to the testimony; her body also becomes a medium through which testimony and memory are re-enacted and made present. How did you conceive the relationship between this testimonial text, the film itself, and Melanie's personal story?**

The central question was how to make a film about a subject like this. After attending that conference in 2014, I returned to Argentina and made my first documentary. Yet this story continued to haunt me. At the time, it felt impossible to approach—to make a film about something so vast, so overwhelming, and so horrific. Years passed, and... in truth, I do not think we choose our films. Films choose us. There comes a moment when you no longer have any other option—or at least that is how it happened for me. I then began working with Virginia Roffo, the film's screenwriter, and together we started thinking about how this story could be told. We read extensively, but we also felt it was essential to consult specialists. We contacted María del Pilar Álvarez,

Image 2





Image 3

an Argentine sociologist whose research on the "comfort women" has been fundamental, as well as Lucía Rud, who generously shared a great deal of material and guidance with us. We were fully aware that this was already a thoroughly documented historical subject, and yet, amid that immense body of scholarship, we still felt there was a need to make this film. At the same time, I am not a historian or a sociologist. I make films—that is what I do. We discussed this very openly with Melanie, the protagonist. I told her, "We have to tell this story through you."

That conflict became the film's primary driving force—the first clue as to how we might begin thinking about it. How could we tell the story of such immense pain, of such an unspeakable atrocity, from where we ourselves stood at that moment, on the other side of the world? Later, we came across a collection of first-person testimonies by surviving "comfort women," compiled by a group of Swiss jurists in The Hague. They were extraordinarily harrowing accounts. It was there that we found the testimony of Hwang Geum-ju, which ultimately became the text used in the film. Those authentic testimonies, together with our initial question, provided the foundation for the film's first possible structure. The question was essentially this: What would happen if young women from the Korean community—women like me—were confronted with these testimonies?

The film was originally conceived as an ensemble piece, much like the opening sequence that appears in the final cut. In fact, we held exactly that audition: it was a real casting call in which we invited young women from the Korean community to participate. We were looking for women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five who were interested in taking part in a documentary about this subject. From the outset, the idea was to create a space in which different conversations and reflections could emerge. As is often the case with documentary filmmaking,

the filming process inevitably rewrote the project. You begin with a series of hypotheses and ideas that seem convincing in your mind, but once they encounter reality, many of them no longer fit. I conducted a short interview with each participant to learn about her background, her family, and her relationships. I was particularly interested in how they navigated their dual cultural identity. What I was looking for was a response similar to the one I had experienced when I first listened to Kim Bok-dong's testimony: the sudden awareness of an invisible yet inescapable connection to Korea, despite living on the other side of the world. After each interview, I asked the participants to read aloud an excerpt from one of the survivors' testimonies. Once they had finished, I asked them how they felt and what they thought about what they had just read. Most of them had heard of the issue before, but only in very general terms. Those conversations helped me realise that what ultimately mattered was not only the historical past but the forms of violence that continue to exist in the present—violence that is often normalised or rendered invisible in everyday life. It is something that affects all women, in different ways and across different experiences. That initial casting process gradually transformed the structure of the film. It was also where I first met Melanie. She was the very first young woman I interviewed. Within the Korean community, very few people choose to pursue careers in the arts, so I was deeply moved to meet a young Korean Argentine woman who had decided to become an actress. That was our first point of connection. As our conversation unfolded, she revealed that she carried a very specific and deeply personal pain related to the domestic violence she had experienced. That became especially evident when she read the survivor's testimony for the first time. Her response to the text fundamentally reshaped the project. It allowed me to understand where the film needed to go and gave it the direction it had been searching for.

It is worth noting that the casting took place in December 2019, and just two months later the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. We were forced to put the entire project on hold for a full year. That pause ultimately became the moment when we had to make a crucial decision: should we continue with the idea of an ensemble film, or should we focus on a single protagonist? How could we delve much more deeply into the subject? At the beginning of the following year, my producer, Martín Rodríguez Redondo, suggested that we use that period of stillness to revisit the footage and decide who the film's central character should be. By then, I had already chosen Melanie. At the time, I probably could not even articulate why it had to be her, but there was an undeniable emotional connection. Throughout that year, we stayed in touch through phone calls and video chats. It became a year of getting to know one another, of building trust, and ultimately of becoming friends.

**And regarding Melanie's journey, was the trip to Korea—and in particular to the House of Sharing museum—part of the project from the very beginning?**

In an early version of the project proposal, which we submitted to the Argentine National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts (INCAA) for funding, the trip to Korea was already part of the plan. Virginia and I had discovered the existence of the House of Sharing, which functions both as a museum and as a residence for some of the surviving "comfort women"—there were four women living there at the time. From the very beginning, we were certain that we did not want the survivors themselves to appear in the film or to interview them, because we did not want to contribute to their revictimisation. As we continued rewriting the script, the idea of Melanie's reunion with her brother emerged. The pandemic also gave us the time to rethink the project and shift its focus toward Melanie and her everyday life with her family. Eventually, we received the grant—unfor-

tunately, that funding programme no longer exists—and were able to begin filming. However, the budget was not sufficient to cover a trip to Korea. We filmed for two weeks within the limits of the resources we had and rewrote the ending to exclude the journey altogether. We were also working against a deadline because I had to travel to Singapore for work. Unfortunately, rain forced us to cancel the final day of shooting, which had to be postponed until my return nearly six months later. At that point I was geographically very close to Korea, but without either the crew or the protagonist. In the end, we discovered an open funding call from the Korean Film Commission and decided to apply. We were awarded the grant, and the Korean community in Argentina also helped us raise additional support. Thanks to that combination of funding, we were finally able to organise the trip to Korea with Melanie, Martín—our producer—and Victoria Pereda, the film's cinematographer.

**And were those funds institutional grants, or did they come from private contributions?**

Yes. The Korean funding came from the Korean Film Commission, while the rest consisted of private contributions raised through the Korean Business Association in Argentina. I remain deeply grateful for the support we received—and, to be honest, I was also genuinely surprised by it. I was fully aware that we were dealing with a highly sensitive subject. What surprised me most was that we were able to secure that level of support, especially considering that we had not received any backing from the official Korean institutions operating in Argentina.

**To conclude, we would like to return to your approach to documentary filmmaking. In this film, you made the deliberate decision not to work directly with the testimonies of the survivors themselves, but instead to give voice to another woman who takes on that role and, in a sense, becomes their witness. Looking back now, with some distance from the project, how do you reflect on the experience of making *Partió de mí un barco llevándome*?**

I hope we can eventually move beyond the point where that distinction matters, because, in a way, everything is fiction. At the same time, documentary filmmaking offers extraordinary possibilities. For me, making documentaries is actually far more exciting than making fiction films. Fiction tends to be much more linear. There is usually a fixed script, with very little room for improvisation. Documentary, by contrast, opens up as many paths as there are possible worlds. That is what I find most extraordinary about it. It represents cinema at its fullest potential.

When you make films, you become obsessed with finding those moments of truth. I am not referring to objective truth or to documenting historical events in an objective way. Absolute objectivity does not exist in cinema, because there is always a point of view. There is always a camera framing one part of reality while leaving another outside the image. Yet there are certain combinations of images and sounds that reach such profound emotional depths that they feel like pure truth. That is what interests me most: working with the malleability of reality, with people inhabiting their own spaces and inviting you into them. That, for me, is where the true power of documentary cinema lies.

Documentary filmmaking also entails an enormous sense of responsibility. In fiction, the world is largely shaped in a single direction by the filmmaker. In documentary, however, you have to understand the responsibility that comes with engaging with—and interpreting—the realities of other people. For me, making documentaries has always been an exercise in humility and a process of learning. Every film teaches you something, but the experience of making this film in particular was such a profound and transformative learning process that I remain deeply grateful for it. I am certain that Melanie, Victoria, Martín, and

everyone involved in *Partió de mí un barco llevándome* would say the same. These are genuinely transformative experiences. There is nothing more beautiful than being able to live through and share something like that.

Making a film always changes you. To me, that is the true power of cinema, and of documentary in particular. The journey from what you write to what you eventually film—and then to what you edit—is one of constant reading, rereading, and rewriting, not only of the material itself but also of what you believed you had said or wanted to say. You keep listening to yourself anew. In the end, the process inevitably teaches you to broaden the way you see the world. To me, that is something truly wonderful. Beautiful. ■

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## TRAUMA, MEMORY AND REPARATION FROM A TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE. A CONVERSATION WITH CECILIA KANG

**Abstract**

This conversation with filmmaker Cecilia Kang explores the intersections of trauma, memory, and reparation through her documentary *Partió de mí un barco llevándome* (2023). The Argentine-Korean director focuses on the memory of the so-called "comfort women" of the Japanese Imperial Army from a transnational and diasporic perspective. The interview examines documentary strategies for representing the intergenerational transmission of trauma and considers the potential of documentary cinema as a form of symbolic reparation. Kang reflects on how her own personal experience informs both the creative process and the construction of the film through its protagonist, Melanie. *Partió de mí un barco llevándome* establishes connections between wartime sexual violence and the forms of gender-based violence that continue to affect women today. Through Kang's voice and documentary practice, the conversation offers a reflection on cinema as a space of mediation between past and present, capable of fostering processes of memory, recognition, and reparation that transcend national boundaries.

**Key words**

Transnational memory; comfort women; Cecilia Kang; documentary cinema; Korean cinema.

**Authors**

Marcela Canizo is a Director of Photography who graduated from the National School of Cinematography of Argentina. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Arts from the University of Buenos Aires and a Master's degree in Communication and Semiotics from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo. She is a member of the CEO (Center for Oriental Studies) at PUC-SP. She currently teaches in the Intercultural Education Program at the Nichia Gakuin Institute. Her research focuses on Orientalist visual culture in the West and on representations of Asian diasporas in contemporary transnational cinema. Contact:

Lucía Rud (Buenos Aires, 1984) is a film researcher from the University of Buenos Aires/National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET). She received her Ph.D. from the University of Buenos Aires and holds an M.A. in cultural diversity from Tres de Febrero University. During the past nine years, she has been researching the transnational cultural ties between Argentina and South Korea.

## TRAUMA, MEMORIA Y REPARACIÓN EN CLAVE TRANSNACIONAL. CONVERSACIÓN CON CECILIA KANG

**Resumen**

La conversación con la cineasta Cecilia Kang aborda los entretejidos entre trauma, memoria y reparación con el documental *Partió de mí un barco llevándome* (2023) como protagonista. La autora argentino-coreana pone el foco en la memoria de las denominadas «mujeres de confort» del Ejército Japonés y lo hace desde una perspectiva transnacional y diaspórica. La entrevista pone sobre la mesa procesos documentales para representar la transmisión intergeneracional sobre el trauma y las posibilidades del cine documental como forma de reparación simbólica. Cecilia Kang reflexiona sobre cómo su propia experiencia personal interviene en el proceso creativo y en la construcción de la pieza audiovisual a través de Melanie, la protagonista. *Partió de mí un barco llevándome* establece diálogos entre la violencia sexual ocurrida en la guerra y otras violencias que persisten contra las mujeres. La voz de Kang a través del documental propone una reflexión sobre el cine como espacio de mediación entre el pasado y el presente, capaz de activar procesos de memoria, reconocimiento y reparación más allá de los marcos nacionales.

**Palabras clave**

Memoria transnacional; mujeres del confort; Cecilia Kang; cine documental; cine coreano.

**Autoras**

Marcela Canizo es directora de fotografía egresada de la Escuela Nacional de Realización y Experimentación Cinematográfica (ENERC) de Argentina, licenciada en Artes por la Universidad de Buenos Aires y Magister en Comunicación y Semiótica por la Pontificia Universidad de São Paulo de Brasil. Actualmente, integra el Centro de Estudios Orientales (CEO) de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú y ejerce como docente en la Tecnicatura Superior en Cultura y Lengua Japonesa con orientación en Educación Intercultural del Instituto Nichia Gakuin de Buenos Aires. Su investigación aborda la cultura visual orientalista en Occidente y las representaciones de las diásporas asiáticas en el cine transnacional contemporáneo. Contacto:

Lucía Rud es doctora en Teoría e Historia de las Artes por la Universidad de Buenos Aires. Sus líneas de investigación se centran en las relaciones cinematográficas entre Corea del Sur y Argentina. Es autora de diversos artículos publicados en revistas científicas, como *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* e *Imagofagia*.

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(DIS)AGREEMENTS

# WHOSE MEMORY IS IT? VISUAL CULTURE AND WAR MEMORIES IN EAST ASIA

**introduction**
Marcos Centeno-Martín
Alberto Porta-Pérez

**discussion**
Edward Vickers
Bingbing Shi
Xiaoning Lu

**conclusions**
Marcos Centeno-Martín
Alberto Porta-Pérez

# introduction

MARCOS CENTENO-MARTÍN
ALBERTO PORTA-PÉREZ

While a global cultural obsession with remembrance and commemoration intensified after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, this phenomenon has resulted in intense "Memory Struggles" in East Asia about the mass violence suffered in the region in the 20th century. Simultaneously, new academic discussions have emerged on this traumatic past (Holcombe, 2017; Tanigaki Tonomura and Mitsui 2026), often focusing on the atrocities perpetrated under the Japanese empire during the so-called "dark valley" (1931–1945) - including the Nanjing Massacre (Fogel 2007; Yoshida 2009), Unit 731's crimes (Keiichi 2005; Dickinson 2007) and the exploitation of "comfort women" (Seo 2008; Yan 2026), followed by the Korean War (1950-53), remain unresolved and keep conditioning diplomatic relations and cultural politics in the region. This difficult past has prompted the proliferation of museums and revival of memorial practices across Japan, South Korea, and China (Frost, Schumacher and Vickers 2019). Alongside them, the circulation of wartime topics across film and non-fiction films have become central to the socialization of memory, particularly for generations with no direct experience of war. In this sense, cinema has become a key audiovisual medium for transgenerational transmission. Concepts such as "postmemory" (Hirsch, 2008) and "prosthetic memory" (Landsberg 2004) highlight how images mediate the transmission of trauma across time and space, enabling descendants and outsiders alike to experience past violence as if it were their own, reimagining them through film productions.

Related traumatic events have generated their own visual repertoires in cinema, which has become arena for representing, socialising and

calling into question long-standing categories of heroes, victims and perpetrators –proposed by Hashimoto (2015) in relation to Japanese cultural production—. These memory struggles are not confined to national borders but they unfold within global media flows, transnational productions, circuits of distribution and reception. This has also promoted new ways of looking at this violent past by focusing on historically neglected voices, such as women, diasporic communities and other marginalised groups of victims and survivors. Thus, traumatic memory in Asian films have evolved in distinctive ways that demand renew decolonised and transnational approaches.

The theoretical challenge, then, is to move beyond the notion of collective memory as a stable and nationally bounded construct. Thus, this special issue foregrounds transnational perspectives that move beyond the national, examining the complexity of memory-related films. The transnational is approached here as a methodological tool applicable from textual analysis –examining aesthetic and narrative influences— to production studies and to reception by critics and audiences. The goal is examining not only how films represent the past but also how they are negotiating identities, power relations, and international dynamics in the present. To that aim, we have conceived this (Dis)Agreements section as a forum for discussion with leading scholars in the fields of Asian Film and Memory Studies to share their perspectives: Edward Vickers, Professor of Comparative Education at Kyushu University and a specialist in memory and education in East Asia; Bingbing Shi, Departmental Lecturer in Modern Chinese Literature and Culture at the University of Oxford, whose research focuses on modern Chinese literature, literature-to-screen adaptation, and feminist writing; and Xiaoning Lu, Reader in Modern Chinese Culture and Language at SOAS University of London, specializing in modern Chinese cinema and visual culture.■

# discussion

**1. To what extent is contemporary visual culture generating new ways of representing and engaging in difficult pasts? How do visual artefacts related to memory influence the production of other cultural forms, foster the emergence of new voices, and contribute to the reinterpretation of past conflicts in the present?**

**Edward Vickers**

Regarding the reinterpretation of past conflicts, I am currently working on a book that examines the changing politics of public historical narratives concerning China's frontier regions: Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Recent developments reveal significant shifts in how conflicts associated with these territories and their populations are represented. In the Chinese context, these narratives are largely, though not exclusively, shaped by state-sanctioned interpretations.

One revealing example concerns Inner Mongolia and the representation of the Mongol Empire. During a research visit in 2019, I found that museums in the region devoted considerable space to the history of the Mongols, Chinggis Khan, and the Yuan dynasty. Yet only a few years later, the exhibition on the Mongol Empire had disappeared entirely from the Inner Mongolia Museum. Around the same time, a planned collaboration between the museum and a French institution collapsed after Chinese partners reportedly requested substantial revisions to references

to Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Empire. The exhibition was eventually revived in cooperation with a museum in Ulaanbaatar. For reasons that remain unclear, official narratives surrounding the Mongol Empire appear to have undergone a marked transformation around 2020.

A second example concerns Taiwan and the changing status of Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga), long celebrated in the People's Republic of China as a national hero who expelled the Dutch from Taiwan in 1662 and reclaimed the island for the Chinese nation. Despite his prominence in textbooks, commemorations of the 400th anniversary of his birth in 2024 received relatively limited national attention. By contrast, a recent blockbuster film, *The Battle of Penghu* (Penghu Hai Zhan, Soi Cheang, 2026), focuses on Shi Lang, the Qing admiral who conquered Taiwan on behalf of the Qing dynasty. In effect, Shi Lang appears to be displacing Zheng Chenggong as the preferred national hero in narratives concerning Taiwan.

This shift is politically revealing. Zheng Chenggong was a Ming loyalist who used Taiwan as a base of resistance against the newly established Qing regime. From one perspective, he can be seen as a figure associated with opposition to the central government. Shi Lang, by contrast, represents the commander sent by the state to bring Taiwan under imperial control. It is therefore not difficult to see why his story may resonate more strongly with the current leadership in Beijing. What is equally interesting, however, is the reaction among some Chinese nationalists. For these groups, Shi Lang's service to the Manchu-led Qing dynasty raises uncomfortable questions about political and ethnic loyalty. Some argue that the Ming loyalists in Taiwan were more authentically Chinese than a military leader who chose to serve what they regard as a foreign regime. This interpretation does not reflect the official narrative, but rather a form of popular resistance to it among online nationalist communities. So those are just a couple of illustrations of sort of shifts I think that have happened recently in China. But I'm sure that Bing Bing and Xiaing have plenty more examples of that sort of thing than I can think of.

**Bingbing Shi**

When I think about this topic, I immediately relate it to my PhD dissertation, which I am currently revising into a book. My research is about adaptation. One of the key aspects of adaptation is repetition: stories need to be repeated, but at the same time they must be renewed. In China, a very striking phenomenon in relation to war stories, war films, and television series is that many of these stories have been adapted repeatedly. Examples include *Railway Guerrilla* (Tie dao you ji dui, Ming Zhao, 1956) and *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy* (Xiao bing Zhang Ga, Wei Cui and Hongying Ouyang, 1963). These are stories that are very familiar to Chinese audiences and have been adapted many times. Railway Guerrilla, for example, was first produced in 1956 and, by 2021, had been adapted at least seven times into different films and television series. What interests me is that, through this repeated adaptation, the core narrative is continually reproduced, reinforcing mainstream and official interpretations of the war.

At the same time, developments in media and film technology require new elements to be introduced in order to attract younger generations. Sometimes, however, new media also creates possibilities for addressing the past in different ways. One example I analyse is the video game *Lurking on the Red Path* (Qianfu zhi chitu, 2013), which was developed during a period when video games —especially independent games— had not yet become a major focus of censorship in China. The game was designed by young creators, including doctoral students, and, because it is an interactive medium, it allows for multiple narrative endings. Although it is also a war story,

its different endings offer alternative perspectives that would have been difficult to imagine in traditional films or television. In one possible ending, the protagonist, who is Chinese, returns to Japan after the war and becomes a war hero there. Such a scenario would previously have been almost unthinkable in mainstream screen representations, where a Chinese protagonist aligning with Japan would have been seen as betraying the motherland.

This suggests that, at certain historical moments and through particular media forms, there may be opportunities to imagine the past differently. *Lurking on the Red Path* was created around 2013–2014, and that specific context allowed for a degree of experimentation that might not have been possible at another time. Nevertheless, I would argue that, in general, these stories continue to be repeated primarily in ways that reinforce mainstream memories and dominant ideologies.

**Xiaoning Lu**

It is very interesting to hear Edward talk about memories in the frontier regions because I am thinking more about national memories. In the past few years, two major wars have been repeatedly remembered and visually represented in China. One is, of course, the Second Sino-Japanese War, especially through representations of the Nanjing Massacre. The other is the Korean War, which has largely been forgotten elsewhere in the world but remains extremely important in the PRC, where it is often regarded as the founding war and a crucial event in the formation of the state's identity.

When thinking about these wars, we often frame them through the opposition between perpetrator and victim. This is particularly true of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Nanjing Massacre, which remain highly contentious subjects, not least because of ongoing debates over Japan's perceived failure to fully acknowledge or apologise for wartime atrocities.

If we look at recent cinematic representations of the Nanjing Massacre, two films are especially interesting. The first is *City of Life and Death* (Nanjing! Nanjing!, Lu Chuan, 2009). I sometimes feel that this film was released ahead of time. Visually, it is a remarkable black-and-white film, but it became highly controversial in China because it partially adopts the perspective of a Japanese soldier. Many viewers questioned why the director appeared to invite sympathy for Japanese soldiers when, in their view, Japan still owed China an apology. Yet I think the film is extremely powerful. I use it in my undergraduate course "History and Memory in East Asian Cultures", and many students find it difficult to watch. Its visual impact is deeply unsettling and traumatic. More importantly, it conveys the brutality of war and the ways in which war can erode our sense of humanity. For this reason, I think the film was not simply controversial; it was also ahead of its time. It appeared at a moment when many Chinese audiences were not yet ready to accept, or even engage with, that perspective.

The second film I would mention is *Dead to Rights* (Nanjing zhaoxiangguan, Ao Shen, 2025). Photographic evidence has long played a crucial role in efforts to establish historical justice and document Japanese atrocities during the war, and this film engages with that legacy in a compelling way. It was also received very positively by Chinese audiences. The story follows a group of civilians who take shelter in a photographic studio during the Nanjing Massacre. They are ordinary people—a postman, a photo studio owner, and others—yet they risk their lives to protect photographic images of Japanese atrocities. Through their relay-like efforts to preserve and pass on this visual evidence, these characters ultimately help produce crucial evidence for the trial of war criminals.

One aspect I find quite interesting is the representation of women. In many wartime narratives, female characters are often reduced to victims, symbols of national humiliation, or fetishised figures. In this film, however, the violence inflicted upon women is represented only indirectly. The audience never explicitly witnesses rape or sexual violence; instead, these experiences are suggested through subtle visual and narrative cues. Moreover, the film creates a memorable female character: an opera singer who is forced to perform for the Japanese army. In response to that invitation, she tells her lover that what she has been singing all her life are stories of heroic women generals from China's past. In other words, through these operas, she has developed a strong sense of justice and moral clarity.

The film's nuanced portrayal of ordinary civilians is, I think, one reason for its success. It fulfils a psychological need among many viewers by showing how powerless individuals can still find solidarity and sustain a quiet but enduring spirit of resistance. Another memorable moment comes when the Chinese postman says to the Japanese military photographer, who at first appears civil and even humane but later reveals himself to be no different from the other cold=blooded aggressors, "Tomodachi janai" or "We are not friends." The line resonated strongly with Chinese audiences because of its moral clarity. It refuses the illusion of friendship or reconciliation without accountability, and it points to the unresolved question of Japan's historical responsibility and the apology that many Chinese viewers still feel is owed.

What interests me about these two films is that, although both break away from earlier official narratives of the Sino-Japanese War, they generate very different kinds of affective power. *City of Life and Death* leaves the audience contemplating the multiple costs of war. It does not offer easy answers but instead leaves many moral and emotional questions open. *Dead to Rights*, by contrast, provides a form of closure to historical and psychological wounds. The film concludes with contemporary images of Nanjing as a city of peace and prosperity, implicitly revealing the aftermath of the war and suggesting that the city's present is built upon the sacrifices of previous generations. In this way, the film links the past to the present in a deeply moving way. Together, these examples remind us of the wide range of visual strategies through which Chinese cinema continues to engage with the memory of the Sino-Japanese War.

**2. In your view, has visual culture in recent decades mainly reproduced established categories and narratives, or has it contributed to the representation of new social and historical realities? More specifically, does it challenge the traditional victim–perpetrator dichotomy, or does it tend to reinforce it?**

**Edward Vickers**

To pick up on what Xiaoying and Bingbing were saying about portrayals of the Sino-Japanese War and perhaps the Korean War as well, although I am less familiar with representations of that conflict, I was involved more than ten years ago in a project examining East Asian images of Japan. One of the chapters in the resulting volume was written by the Hong Kong-based scholar Kinnia Yau and focused on the portrayal of "good Japanese" in Chinese war films.

One of the films she discussed was *City of Life and Death*, which I think is an excellent film. It occupies something of a grey zone in terms of its representation of the Japanese, since its central character is a Japanese soldier portrayed in a relatively sympathetic manner. By contrast, the film that Bingbing mentioned, *Dead to Rights*, and especially the line "tomodachi janai", seems to move away from that grey zone towards a much more black-and-white depiction of the war. In this framework, the Chinese clearly belong in the category of "pengyou" or friends while the Japanese most definitely do not belong in the category of "tomodachi".

To me, this reflects a broader loss of nuance in representations of conflict in contemporary China. Xi Jinping's China does not seem particularly interested in ambiguity when it comes to the portrayal of past conflicts. The distinction between friends and enemies is made very clear. Perhaps this sounds somewhat pretentious, but one is reminded of the influence of Carl Schmitt on certain Chinese public intellectuals. Schmitt's insistence on the centrality of the friend-enemy distinction resonates with a political culture that emphasises the need to identify external threats and rally behind a strong state capable of defeating them. In many ways, that seems to be the overarching message communicated by much contemporary visual culture dealing with memories of conflict.

This raises another question: to what extent are China and the Chinese portrayed as victims? In *City of Life and Death*, despite the more nuanced representation of some Japanese characters, the Chinese are still very clearly depicted as victims. Yet if one visits the Nanjing Massacre Memorial today, one encounters a different emphasis. The original memorial focused primarily on Japanese atrocities and Chinese suffering. However, the large exhibition space added in 2015 is devoted almost entirely to the theme of victory.

More broadly, while narratives of China's struggles against foreign aggressors remain a recurring theme, there has been a significant shift away from commemorating suffering and victimhood towards celebrating strength, resistance, and triumph. Rather than presenting the Chinese primarily as passive victims, contemporary representations increasingly portray them as determined victors who confront imperialist powers, defeat them, and restore national dignity. I think this shift is clearly visible in the evolution of the Nanjing Massacre Memorial itself, which has become an increasingly expansive space for narrating not only trauma, but also national victory.

**Bingbing Shi**

I completely agree. I do not have much to add, but Edward's comments on the ending of *Dead to Rights* made me think about a broader trend in contemporary Chinese war narratives. China is no longer portrayed simply as a victim; it is also presented as a victor. These films ultimately seek to generate a sense of national pride and cultural confidence. The message is that, although China

suffered greatly in the past, it overcame those hardships and emerged stronger. I would also add that audiences seem to embrace this kind of narrative enthusiastically. When I think about younger generations, including my own generation and those that came after it, we grew up during a period in which China became increasingly powerful and experienced remarkable economic development. As a result, I think many young people respond positively to narratives that emphasise confidence, resilience, and national strength. This may help explain why films of this kind have become so popular in China in recent years.

**Xiaoning Lu**

I would just add that William Callahan, a professor at LSE, discusses this dynamic in his book *China: The Pessoptimist Nation* (2008) His argument captures precisely this combination of victimhood and triumphalism: China suffered, but it also endured hardship and ultimately prevailed. In that sense, the discourse of national humiliation is not simply about remembering past suffering; it is also about affirming the need to stand up, overcome adversity, and become stronger.

**Edward Vickers**

I think you are right that this narrative has considerable popular appeal. In particular, the narrative of the Sino-Japanese War remains highly prominent. I am less certain about the Korean War, but the Sino-Japanese War is clearly the conflict to which the Party repeatedly returns. One reason it has retained such prominence in popular culture is that, when the authorities placed it at the centre of the Patriotic Education Campaign in the 1990s, they realised that it resonated strongly with many Chinese people. The campaign tapped into popular family memories that were still very much alive at that time.

The question, however, is whether this narrative resonates in the same way on China's periphery, which is the area I have been studying. I do not think it carries the same significance for Tibetans or Uyghurs, although it may have greater relevance for Mongols. Hong Kong provides a particularly interesting case because, until relatively recently, the war with Japan was not a major theme in the territory's public historical culture.

It appeared to some extent in cinema, and films featuring Japanese villains were certainly not uncommon. However, Hong Kong's popular culture has historically been more varied and nuanced in its treatment of conflict, memory, and the distinction between heroes and villains. Since the protests of 2019 and the introduction of the National Security Law in 2020, however, there has been a much more concerted effort to extend the mainland's Patriotic Education Campaign to Hong Kong in a relatively direct form. One manifestation of this has been the increased prominence given to the war against Japan.

For example, what was formerly known as the Museum of Coastal Defence was renamed the Hong Kong Museum of the War of Resistance and Coastal Defence. Likewise, the commemoration of Nanjing Massacre Memorial Day, which became an important event in mainland China after its official establishment in 2014, was not previously a significant feature of public life in Hong Kong. Since 2021, however, it has become much more visible. The Education Bureau has distributed teaching materials, including short documentary films intended for use in schools. In some cases, teachers—under considerable pressure to demonstrate compliance with official expectations—have shown graphic images of wartime atrocities, including scenes of beheadings and bayonet attacks, even to primary-school pupils.

There has therefore been a significant shift in the place occupied by the Sino-Japanese War within officially promoted narratives of the national past, including visual narratives. At the same time, I am not convinced that these narratives resonate with Hong Kong audiences in quite the same way that they do with audiences on the mainland.

**3. Based on the visual culture and films you have been discussing, do you think these representations primarily reinforce existing international tensions and historical antagonisms, or do they also create space for reconciliation and new forms of dialogue? To what extent do these emerging narratives challenge entrenched memories of conflict?**

**Bingbing Shi**

I can think of one example. I recently read reports about the film *731* (Zhao Linshan, 2025), which deals with Japan's use of biological warfare in China during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Although I have not seen the film myself, I understand that it portrays these events in a particularly graphic and disturbing way. What I found interesting is that there were reports suggesting that the authorities delayed or limited the film's release because of concerns that it might intensify tensions between China and Japan. If those reports are accurate, it would suggest an awareness on the part of the government that certain representations of wartime atrocities can have a direct impact on contemporary international relations.

Since I have not watched the film, I cannot comment on its specific content, but given its subject matter, I can imagine that it is a very brutal portrayal of the war. In this case, at least, there appears to have been some concern that visual representations of historical violence might generate excessive tension between the two countries.

**Edward Vickers**

Very briefly, I am afraid that, in East Asia at least, I do not see visual culture playing a particularly significant role in promoting reconciliation. This is not only true in the case of China but also in Japan, where censorship and political pressure directed at those seeking to portray conflict in more nuanced ways can be considerable. Of course, everyone is aware of the extent of censorship in China, and the situation has become markedly more restrictive since *City of Life and Death*was released. There are several examples of interesting Chinese films about the Sino-Japanese War that would simply not be made today. My favourite is *Devils on the Doorstep* (Guizi lai le, Jiang Wen, 2000). It is a fascinating dark, often humorous, and deeply unsettling film. Films of that kind, which humanise their protagonists and avoid overly simplistic moral binaries, potentially have a cross-border appeal. Precisely because they do not take themselves too seriously, they create space for more complex engagements with the past.

Yet similar pressures exist in Japan. There is considerable pressure surrounding public history and cinematic representations of contentious historical issues. One example is *Shusenjo: The Main Battleground of the Comfort Women Issue* (Shusenjō, Miki Dezaki, 2018), a documentary by the Japanese American filmmaker. Following its release, Dezaki was sued by several right-wing nationalists. Although he ultimately won the case, the legal proceedings significantly restricted the film's circulation in Japan for several years. In effect, this amounted to a form of censorship. More generally, when controversial films are screened at festivals in Japan, cinemas can become targets of intimidation. Demonstrations are sometimes organised outside venues, and pressure groups associated with the nationalist right may attempt to disrupt screenings. Thus, while Japan is formally committed to the rule of law, civil liberties, and freedom of expression, there remain strong social and political pressures to suppress representations of past conflicts that challenge or offend nationalist sensibilities.

**Bingbing Shi**
I also think education plays an important role here. From conversations with some of my Japanese colleagues, I have the impression that they learned relatively little about the Second World War in school. If that is the case, it may help explain some of the sensitivities surrounding these issues, including the pressures and forms of censorship that Edward has just described.

**Edward Vickers**
This is not a new observation, but I think a large part of the problem relates to the question of how perpetrators and victims are represented. Across East Asia, there is a strong tendency for different societies to insist on their own victimhood. In China, for example, there is often an emphasis on the uniqueness of Chinese suffering during wartime: the implicit message is that no one has suffered as much as China, and therefore other experiences of suffering, such as the atomic bombings of Japan can appear secondary or less deserving of attention. Yet similar dynamics can be found elsewhere. In Japan, some argue that the country's experience as the only nation to have suffered atomic bombings gives it a unique understanding of the horrors of war. In Korea, memories of invasion, colonisation, and the devastation of the Korean War can likewise foster a strong sense of historical victimhood, whether in relation to China, Japan, or the United States.

My point is not that these experiences are comparable in any simple way, but rather that an intense focus on one's own national suffering can make people less receptive to the suffering of others. When public culture and commemorative practices are organised primarily around narratives of national victimhood, they can encourage competition rather than empathy. In many cases, the broader apparatus of public memory, education, and cultural production is geared towards sustaining that focus on national suffering rather than fostering a more shared understanding of the past.

**Xiaoning Lu**
Edward, why do you think these narratives are never enough? Despite the large number of films that continue to be produced, societies seem to return repeatedly to the same stories of suffering and victimhood. Why is there a persistent need for new films about events such as the Nanjing Massacre? Why do these narratives require constant repetition, whether in China or, in different ways, in Japan?

**Edward Vickers**
In the case of China, if we look at the last century alone, there is potentially a wide range of conflicts and traumas that could become subjects of public memory and cinematic representation: the Great Leap Forward and the ensuing famine, the Chinese Civil War, or the Cultural Revolution, among others. *In the Heat of the Sun* (Yangguang canlan de rizi, Jiang Wen, 1994) is a very interesting example of a film that engages with the Cultural Revolution. It is also the kind of film that, in my view, could not be made in China today. One reason films about the Nanjing Massacre continue to be produced is that this remains one of the few major historical traumas that can be discussed relatively openly. Many of the other conflicts and upheavals that still fall within living memory are far more politically sensitive because they involve episodes in which the Communist Party itself played a central role. As a result, they are much more difficult to address through mainstream cultural production.

In that sense, the repeated return to the Nanjing Massacre is not simply a reflection of public interest in that event; it is also related to the limited range of historical traumas that can be publicly represented and debated.

**4. Several of the points you have raised have already touched upon the next issue we wanted to discuss, namely the transnational dimension of memory. What role do transnational perspectives play in the construction and circulation of memory? Do national frameworks still dominate the way historical conflicts are remembered and represented, or is there increasing room for more transnational approaches to memory? More broadly, do you think a transnational perspective is meaningful or productive when examining these visual narratives of the past?**

**Xiaoning Lu**

The memory of the Korean War is undoubtedly transnational, and this makes it an interesting case. Although China participated in the conflict by sending the People's Volunteer Army to the Korean Peninsula, the war was not fought on Chinese territory, unlike the Sino-Japanese War. As a result, most Chinese citizens did not directly experience it. This raises an important question from the perspective of memory studies. We often think of postmemory as something transmitted between generations, but in the case of the Korean War, how is the experience of war transmitted to a population that largely has no direct personal connection to it?

For a long time, memory of the Korean War in China was largely preserved by relatively specialised groups, including historians, former military officiers, and veterans. Much of the early memory work took the form of memoirs, oral histories, and military accounts. Visual representations were also important, but initially they were not primarily cinematic. During the war itself, propaganda posters played a central role. Produced between 1950 and 1953, they were designed to mobilise support for the war effort by encouraging economic production and public contributions to the supply of troops on the Korean front Cinema also played a role. Several well-known films about the war were produced in the 1950s and 1960s, including *Battle on Shangganling Mountain* (Shangganling, Sha Meng and Lin Shan, 1956). However, cinematic engagement with the Korean War largely disappeared during the 1990s before experiencing a revival after the 2010s.

The Korean War is inherently transnational because it involved not only China and Korea but also the United States and the wider United Nations coalition. Yet in Chinese cinema, this transnational complexity is often reframed through a nationalist lens. The dominant narrative emphasises resistance to American imperialism, primarily through the heroic battles of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army against UN troops led by the United States. Relatively little attention is paid to China's coordination with the Korean People's Army or to its engagement with the wider socialist camp.

This contrasts with many South Korean representations of the war. Films such as *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War* (Taegukgi Hwinalrimyeo, Kang Je-gyu, 2004) and *The Front Line* (Gojijeon, Jang Hun, 2011) tend to place greater emphasis on the human cost of the conflict. Themes such as family separation, brotherhood, and the tragedy of civil war are central to these narratives. American films, meanwhile, have often approached the Korean War from different angles, sometimes using it as a backdrop for broader anxieties about ideology, psychology, or Cold War politics, as in *The Manchurian Candidate* (John Frankenheimer, 1962).

In China, however, the memory of the Korean War has become increasingly significant in recent years, especially since the deterioration of Sino-American relations and the onset of the trade war with the United States. The conflict is now often invoked as a historical example of China's ability to confront a more powerful adversary and demonstrate its national strength. What is particularly interesting is that this memory now

circulates through a wide range of cultural forms. For example, during the Sino-American trade war, an enamel mug was sold on Chinese e-commerce platforms as a "commemorative cup for participation in the China-US trade war". The object was clearly modelled on the "Resist America, Aid Korea" commemorative enamel cups, which were tokens of appreciation given to participants in the Korean War. In other words, the mug playfully borrowed the material form, visual language, and commemorative rhetoric of Korean War memory, but redirected them toward a contemporary economic conflict.

It is clear that different countries engage with conflict through their own political concerns, cultural forms and memory practices. The Chinese case also reminds us that the present often shapes how the past is remembered. The circumstances in which we remember a conflict may ultimately matter as much as the conflict itself.

**5. One of the questions underlying this discussion is whether memory can still be understood primarily within national frameworks. To what extent do transnational actors, diasporic communities, and cross-border circulations of images and narratives reshape collective memory today? Are we witnessing the emergence of genuinely transnational memory cultures, or does the nation-state remain the dominant framework through which historical conflicts are remembered and represented?**

**Bingbing Shi**

When I think about the transnational dimension of memory, one example that comes to mind is *The Message* (Feng sheng, Chen Kuo-fu and Gao Qunshu, 2009). It is a commercial war film that was originally based on a novel and later adapted into a highly successful film. What I find particularly interesting is that it was subsequently remade in South Korea. However, in the Korean adaptation, most of the specific historical elements were either removed or made much more ambiguous. The focus shifted away from the historical context and towards genre conventions, particularly suspense and espionage. In other words, the adaptation became much more about genre than about history.

This suggests that when Chinese war films, or the memories associated with them, travel across national borders, commercial considerations may become especially important. In this case, Korean film producers clearly recognised the box-office success of the original film in China and sought to adapt the story for a Korean audience. As a result, what circulated transnationally was not necessarily the historical memory itself, but rather a commercially successful narrative framework.

**Edward Vickers**

Very briefly, on the question of transnational memory, I would point to the issue of the comfort women, a topic on which I conducted some research several years ago. The exploitation and trafficking of women in wartime is, in many respects, a transnational issue. The specific case of the comfort women system was also inherently transnational, involving multiple countries and populations across East Asia. For that reason, it presents a clear opportunity for developing forms of remembrance that transcend national boundaries. At a fundamental level, the issue relates to broader attitudes towards women and gender relations in East Asian societies during the early and mid-twentieth century, attitudes that were by no means unique to any single country. It also connects to wider questions of exploitation and trafficking that persisted long after the end of the

Second World War and, in some respects, continue into the present.

Some activists involved in movements for commemoration and reparations have sought to frame the comfort women issue as a transnational feminist cause. However, those efforts have had only limited success. Time and again, the issue has been drawn back into national frameworks, whether by Korean, Chinese, or Japanese actors, and mobilised in support of national narratives and historical grievances. As an issue of gender, women's history, and women's experiences of war, the comfort women system has the potential to move beyond nationalist patterns of memory. Yet, in practice, that potential has rarely been fully realised.

**6. Our final topic concerns the intersection of gender and memory. How do contemporary films, visual media, and other cultural forms engage with women's experiences of war, violence, and historical trauma? Have gender perspectives opened up new ways of remembering the past, or do national and official narratives continue to shape the representation of these experiences?**

**Bingbing Shi**

One question that interests me is why war films so often rely on the figure of the female spy. She is typically portrayed as a *femme fatale*: attractive yet dangerous, highly capable yet ultimately defined by her romantic relationships. From a critical perspective, I would argue that this recurring trope reveals the extent to which female characters continue to be objectified within wartime visual culture. Such figures are often used to make war narratives more appealing and commercially successful, rather than to explore women's experiences.

More broadly, in representations of war and national trauma, women frequently function as symbolic embodiments of national suffering. Their bodies and experiences are used to signify the nation's victimhood and its historical wounds. Yet women's agencies, subjectivity, and lived experiences are often only partially represented. As a result, women become vehicles through which national trauma is narrated, rather than fully developed historical actors.

**Edward Vickers**

When you talk about portrayals of female spies, are you thinking of films such as *Lust, Caution* (*Sè, Jiè*, Ang Lee, 2007)?

**Bingbing Shi**

Yes, and *The Message*. More generally, female spies appear very frequently in Chinese war films and television dramas. In fact, they have become a recurring character type across the genre.

**Xiaoning Lu**

I would add that this trope is especially common in narratives about the Chinese Civil War and the conflict between the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In films about the Sino-Japanese War, by contrast, the more interesting recurring figure is often the male collaborator or traitor rather than the female spy.

**7. That is interesting because it also suggests the issue of the comfort women. Discussions of this subject usually focus on the women who were recruited from Japan's colonies and occupied territories, but the experiences of Japanese comfort women themselves often remain outside the conversation. In a way, this also raises questions about visibility, representation, and the selective nature of memory.**

**Edward Vickers**
There were, of course, Japanese comfort women as well, but they are rarely discussed. Or at least they are rarely discussed as victims. The common assumption is often that Japanese comfort women were simply prostitutes and therefore somehow less deserving of sympathy or recognition.

**Xiaoning Lu**
The discussion of comfort women also reminds me of the transnational dimension of memory. We have Korean films dealing with the comfort women issue, as well as several Chinese-language documentaries about Chinese comfort women. In Taiwan, for example, there is *Song of the Reeds* (Lúwěi zhī Gē, Wu Hsiu-ching, 2015), which focuses on the experiences of Taiwanese comfort women. In that sense, this is a genuinely transnational memory issue. I believe there are also films from Malaysia and other parts of Southeast Asia that address similar experiences.

Returning to the earlier question about the complexity of representation, I think there are examples of more nuanced portrayals of women. One can be found in *City of Life and Death*. The film includes a prostitute who initially appears as an outsider among the other women. Even while taking shelter, she continues to apply wear makeup and is presented as somewhat out of place, especially in contrast to the terrified and the more conventionally respectable female characters around her. Yet she is ultimately the one who volunteers to accompany the Japanese soldiers.

**Edward Vickers**
In order to prevent them from taking the younger girls.

**Xiaoning Lu**
Exactly. That creates a very interesting reversal. The film complicates the conventional opposition between innocent women and sexualised women. Characters who might initially appear marginal or morally suspect are shown to possess agency and moral courage. In that sense, I do think there are examples of more subtle and complex representations of women.

**Edward Vickers**
That's true. But then we return to the fact that *City of Life and Death* were heavily criticised almost as soon as it was released.

**Xiaoning Lu**
In that respect, I think *City of Life and Death* offers a much more interesting representation of women than *The Flowers of War*. In *The Flowers of War*, the narrative still relies on a conventional opposition between innocent schoolgirls and courtesans. At the end of the film, the courtesans dress as schoolgirls and go in their place to the party arranged by the Japanese soldiers, so it is through their sacrifice that the actual schoolgirls' innocence is preserved. In that sense, the film reinforces a familiar gendered logic: some women are seen as pure and worth protecting, while others are sexualised and made available for sacrifice. Their bodies become the means through which the nation is symbolically saved.

**Edward Vickers**
When it comes to the comfort women issue, one example of a relatively nuanced approach, and one that, to some extent, recognised the transnational nature of victimhood, comes to mind. In Tokyo,

there is the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace, which does very interesting work, although it faces considerable difficulties and its exhibitions can hardly be described as part of mainstream public culture. There was also a museum in Taipei, the Ama Museum, dedicated to the memory of comfort women. What I found interesting about its approach was that, partly because of Taiwan's relatively pro-Japanese climate in recent years, it did not frame the issue in strongly anti-Japanese terms. This was no doubt related to the broader political context, but I think it also reflected the outlook of many of the activists involved, who tended to view the issue primarily as a feminist concern rather than a nationalist one.

Unfortunately, the museum ceased operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. What is interesting, however, is that the issue also became the subject of political contestation in Taiwan. At one point, the Kuomintang attempted to promote a much more nationalist interpretation of the comfort women issue, using it as a way of criticising the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) for being insufficiently willing to defend Taiwan's interests in relation to Japan. That effort had very limited political impact, but it nevertheless illustrates how the issue could be mobilised for nationalist purposes. In the end, the attempt largely fell flat, which highlights an important contrast between Taiwan and places such as South Korea or mainland China, where the politicisation of the comfort women issue has generally been much more pronounced.

**8. One issue that interests us is the extent to which memory is negotiated through genres that are not conventionally associated with historical trauma or war. We often think of memory in relation to war films, historical dramas, or documentaries, yet memories of conflict can also emerge in more unexpected forms, such as musicals, romances, family dramas, comedies, or even erotic cinema. In your respective fields, have you observed similar tendencies? Are there examples in which questions of memory, trauma, or historical violence are being explored through genres that might not ordinarily be associated with these themes?**

**Bingbing Shi**
I would also mention online fiction. There is a hugely popular genre of web novels devoted to war and military themes, many of which attract very large readerships. These are often long-form narratives published online.

**Xiaoning Lu**
Are these stories set against historical backgrounds, or are they completely fictionalised versions of war?

**Bingbing Shi**
In many cases, they are set within real historical contexts, but they are also highly imaginative. For example, one novel I read involves a protagonist who travels back in time to the period of the Second Sino-Japanese War. He finds himself inhabiting the body of the son-in-law of a powerful Japanese military officer. Equipped with modern knowledge and sensibilities, he navigates wartime society while secretly working as a spy for the CCP, gathering intelligence from within the family. Stories like this are highly imaginative, but they are still anchored in the historical setting of the Second Sino-Japanese War. What is interesting is the way they combine multiple genres, including time travel, romance, family drama, espionage, and war. ■

# conclusions

MARCOS CENTENO-MARTÍN
ALBERTO PORTA-PÉREZ

This dialogue suggests that memory is never stable and that, more specifically, memories in East Asia remain deeply contested and unresolved. As our discussion has shown, narratives surrounding conflicts such as the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Korean War are continually reconfigured in response to present-day political concerns. These narratives also contribute to shaping interpretations of the past and of national identity, while remaining subject to contestation, reinterpretation, and resignification.

Rather than providing definitive answers, this dialogue raises new questions about the potential and the limitations of transnational approaches in the face of the enduring influence of national narratives. The conversation also highlights that visual culture does not merely reflect memory but actively constructs it. The examples discussed demonstrate that this process extends well beyond cinema to include photography, video games, museums, and museum exhibitions. Each of these media contributes to the construction and interpretation of memories of the past. ■

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## WHOSE MEMORY IS IT? VISUAL CULTURE AND WAR MEMORIES IN EAST ASIA


### Abstract

This interview brings together three leading scholars whose research focuses on transnational memory from different disciplinary perspectives. Edward Vickers, Bingbing Shi, and Xiaoning Lu reflect on the relationship between memory and historical conflict in East Asia, using visual culture as the central axis of the discussion. Through the analysis of film and other forms of representation, they examine how visual culture both reinforces and challenges national narratives of war. The conversation also addresses specific historical events, including the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Korean War, the Nanjing Massacre, and the unresolved legacy of the comfort women system. Furthermore, it interrogates the categories of victim and perpetrator, as well as the tensions between national and transnational memory. Taken together, the interview highlights how visual culture constitutes a privileged site for negotiating memories of the past and for understanding the contemporary challenges of memory in East Asia.



### Key words

Visual Culture; Transnational Memory; East Asian Cinema; Historical Memory; War Memory; Comfort Women.



### Authors

Marcos Centeno-Martin is Associate Professor at the University of Valencia (UV) where he teaches Film and Japanese Studies and serves as director for its Master in Japanese and Korean studies. Previously, Centeno worked as the Japanese Programme director at Birkbeck, University of London, and as lecturer for the Department of Japan and Korea at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), where he coordinated the MA Global Cinemas and the Transcultural. He also was grant holder at Yale University (2022/23), research associate at Oxford University (2024) and served as a guest lecturer at Nanzan University. He carried out undergraduate and postgraduate studies at Waseda University, Tokyo. His main research interests revolve around documentary film, wartime memory in East Asia and transculturality. About these themes he has coordinated funded projects, most recently he has been PI for TRAMEVIC (Transnational Memories in East Asian Visual Culture), CIGE/2023/066. Contact: marcos.centeno@uv.es

Alberto Porta-Pérez holds a PhD in Communication Sciences and teaches Audiovisual Communication and Video Game Design and Development at Universitat Jaume I (Castellón, Spain). He was a visiting doctoral researcher at Ritsumeikan University (Kyoto, Japan). His research focuses on interactive narratives, ethics, and emotional experiences in video games, with particular attention to childhood, nostalgia, and slow gameplay in Japanese games. He is a member of the Spanish chapter of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA España) and an associate member of the Unitat d'Investigació Japó (UIJ) at the Universitat de València, where he teaches postgraduate courses on Japanese audiovisual culture. Contact: aporta@uji.es.


## ¿DE QUIÉN ES LA MEMORIA? CULTURA VISUAL Y MEMORIAS DE GUERRA EN ASIA ORIENTAL


### Resumen

Esta entrevista reúne a tres destacados especialistas cuyas investigaciones abordan la memoria transnacional desde diferentes perspectivas disciplinares. Edward Vickers, Bingbing Shi y Xiaoning Lu reflexionan sobre la relación entre la memoria y los conflictos históricos en Asia Oriental, tomando la cultura visual como eje central de la discusión. A través del análisis del cine y de otras formas de representación, examinan cómo la cultura visual contribuye tanto a reforzar como a cuestionar las narrativas nacionales sobre la guerra. La conversación aborda, asimismo, acontecimientos históricos concretos, entre ellos la segunda guerra sino-japonesa, la guerra de Corea, la masacre de Nankín y el legado aún no resuelto del sistema de las «mujeres del consuelo». Asimismo, analiza críticamente las categorías de víctima y perpetrador, así como las tensiones entre la memoria nacional y la memoria transnacional. En conjunto, la entrevista pone de relieve que la cultura visual constituye un espacio privilegiado para la negociación de las memorias del pasado y para comprender los desafíos contemporáneos de la memoria en Asia Oriental.



### Palabras clave

Cultura visual; Memoria transnacional; Cine de Asia Oriental; Memoria histórica; memoria de guerra; «Mujeres del consuelo».



### Autores

Marcos Centeno-Martín es profesor titular de la Universitat de València (UV), donde imparte docencia en Cine y Estudios Japoneses y dirige el Máster en Estudios Japoneses y Coreanos. Anteriormente fue director del Programa de Japonés en Birkbeck, University of London, y profesor en el Departamento de Japón y Corea de SOAS University of London, donde coordinó el máster Global Cinemas and the Transcultural. También fue investigador visitante en la Universidad de Yale (2022–2023), investigador asociado en la Universidad de Oxford (2024) y profesor invitado en la Universidad de Nanzan. Realizó estudios de grado y posgrado en la Universidad de Waseda (Tokio). Su investigación se centra en el cine documental, la memoria de guerra en Asia Oriental y la transculturalidad. Ha dirigido diversos proyectos de investigación financiados, entre ellos TRAMEVIC (Transnational Memories in East Asian Visual Culture, CIGE/2023/066). Contacto: marcos.centeno@uv.es.

Alberto Porta-Pérez es doctor en Ciencias de la Comunicación y profesor de Comunicación Audiovisual y del Grado en Diseño y Desarrollo de Videojuegos en la Universitat Jaume I (Castellón, España). Realizó una estancia de investigación doctoral en la Ritsumeikan University (Kioto, Japón). Su investigación se centra en las narrativas interactivas, la ética y las experiencias emocionales en los videojuegos, con especial atención a la infancia, la nostalgia y las formas de juego pausadas en los videojuegos japoneses. Es miembro de Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA España) y miembro colaborador de la Unitat d'Investigació Japó (UIJ) de la Universitat de València, donde imparte docencia de posgrado sobre cultura audiovisual japonesa. Contacto: aporta@uji.es.

Edward Vickers is Professor of Comparative Education at Kyushu University (Japan), where he holds the UNESCO Chair on Education for Peace, Social Justice and Global Citizenship. His research focuses on the history and politics of education in contemporary Asia, with particular attention to historical memory, identity, museums and heritage in Chinese societies and East Asia. He is the co-author, with Zeng Xiaodong, of *Education and Society in Post-Mao China* (2017) and co-editor of *Remembering Asia's World War Two* (2019). Vickers also directs Kyushu University's Taiwan Studies Programme and has contributed to several UNESCO initiatives on education, peace, sustainable development and global citizenship. Contact: edvickers08@gmail.com.

Xiaoning Lu is a scholar of modern Chinese cinema and culture whose research focuses on the relationship between cultural production and state governance. She teaches at SOAS University of London, having previously held positions at Stony Brook University and Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich. Her work examines Chinese socialist cinema, visual culture, and transnational film practices. She is the author of *Moulding the Socialist Subject: Cinema and Chinese Modernity, 1949–1966* (Brill, 2020) and co-editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Communist Visual Cultures* (Oxford University Press, 2020). She was a Leverhulme Research Fellow (2018–2020) and has published widely on Chinese cinema and visual culture. She has also contributed expert commentary on Chinese society and culture to major international media outlets. Contact: xl1@soas.ac.uk.

Bingbing Shi is Departmental Lecturer in Modern Chinese Literature and Culture at the University of Oxford. Her research focuses on modern and contemporary Chinese literature, literature-to-screen adaptation, feminist writing, and cultural memory. She completed her PhD at the University of Cambridge in 2024 with a dissertation on literature-to-screen adaptations and China's cultural memory of the Second World War. She is also a postdoctoral researcher affiliated with the Institute of Chinese Studies at the University of Freiburg, where she is developing a project on digital technology and feminist writing in contemporary China. Her research examines the intersections of literature, visual media, memory, and digital culture. Contact: information@chinese.ox.ac.uk.

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Edward Vickers es profesor de Educación Comparada en la Universidad de Kyushu (Japón), donde ocupa la Cátedra UNESCO de Educación para la Paz, la Justicia Social y la Ciudadanía Global. Su investigación se centra en la historia y la política de la educación en Asia contemporánea, con especial atención a la memoria histórica, la identidad, los museos y el patrimonio en las sociedades chinas y Asia Oriental. Es coautor, junto con Zeng Xiaodong, de *Education and Society in Post-Mao China* (2017) y coeditor de *Remembering Asia's World War Two* (2019). Asimismo, dirige el Programa de Estudios Taiwaneses de la Universidad de Kyushu y ha participado en diversas iniciativas de la UNESCO sobre educación, paz, desarrollo sostenible y ciudadanía global. Contacto: edvickers08@gmail.com.

Xiaoning Lu es profesora en SOAS University of London. Su investigación se centra en el cine y la cultura de la China moderna, con especial atención a las relaciones entre la producción cultural y la gobernanza estatal, el cine socialista chino, la cultura visual y las prácticas cinematográficas transnacionales. Es autora de *Moulding the Socialist Subject: Cinema and Chinese Modernity, 1949–1966* (2020) y coeditora de *The Oxford Handbook of Communist Visual Cultures* (2020). Fue investigadora Leverhulme entre 2018 y 2020 y ha publicado ampliamente sobre cine y cultura visual chinos. Asimismo, ha colaborado como experta en diversos medios internacionales, analizando cuestiones relacionadas con la sociedad y la cultura chinas. Contacto: xl1@soas.ac.uk.

Bingbing Shi es profesora de Literatura y Cultura China Moderna en la Universidad de Oxford. Su investigación se centra en la literatura china moderna y contemporánea, las adaptaciones de la literatura a la pantalla, la escritura feminista y la memoria cultural. Obtuvo el doctorado en la Universidad de Cambridge en 2024 con una tesis sobre las adaptaciones audiovisuales de obras literarias y la memoria cultural china de la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Asimismo, es investigadora posdoctoral asociada al Instituto de Estudios Chinos de la Universidad de Friburgo, donde desarrolla un proyecto sobre tecnología digital y escritura feminista en la China contemporánea. Su trabajo explora las intersecciones entre literatura, medios visuales, memoria y cultura digital. Contacto: information@chinese.ox.ac.uk.

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# VANISHING POINTS

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# BODIES OF WATER: READINGS OF FLOODING AND OVERFLOWING IN *THE WATER* AND *CREATURA*

MIRIAM SÁNCHEZ-MANZANO
EDURNE LARUMBE VILLARREAL

## INTRODUCTION

In both *The Water* (El Agua, Elena López Riera, 2022) and *Creatura* (Elena Martín Gimeno, 2023), aquatic environments are depicted as intimately connected to the bodies of the films' protagonists. *The Water* is the first film by its director, who has described it as "a naturalistic representation of the mystical" (López Riera, quoted in Losilla, 2023: 114). It follows the inner journey of Ana (Luna Pàmies), a teenage girl who over the course of the film must learn to accept the water inside her. The story is based on a local legend in Orihuela (the director's place of birth and the setting for the film), a region prone to flooding due to its geographical location south of Valencia. According to the legend, every time the river spills over its banks it is because it has fallen in love with a woman and is rising up to seek her out. The woman, sensing that she *has the water inside her*, feels drawn to the river, to which she must give herself to avert the natural disaster. This legend is the film's main theme, reinforced by documentary footage featuring different women from Orihuela recounting the legend.[1] Water thus serves to intertwine the documentary part of the film with its fictional narrative. In *Creatura*, which is also its filmmaker's directorial debut, water similarly plays a central role. This film tells the story of Mila (played by Elena Martín herself), a young woman of around thirty who moves with her boyfriend to her grandmother's old house on the Catalan coastal region of Costa Brava. Like López Riera's film, *Creatura* also explores its protagonist's inner journey, although in this case it is a journey into her memories of her childhood and adolescence, which are marked by repressed sexual experiences that affect her in the present. As we switch back and forth between Mila's life today and her recollections of the past, these memories connect the film's different narrative timelines. Water acts as a unifying element, as the various flashbacks are bookmarked by scenes of

her immersed in the sea as a child, a teenager and an adult. In addition to using water to weave together their different narratives, both films associate the bodies of their protagonists with aquatic environments. In *The Water*, Ana's body is linked to the local legend when she begins to feel that she *has the water inside her*, just as other women of the village have felt in the past. In *Creatura*, Mila's body establishes a similar intimate connection to the sea, which is depicted as a liminal space that allows her to travel between her past and present.

Both these films constitute clear examples of a trend in Spanish cinema that Shaila García-Catalán, Aarón Rodríguez-Serrano and Marta Martín-Núñez (2022) have described as "An Other New Spanish Cinema Made by Women".[2] This trend, characterised by intimate stories told from the subjective perspective of a female protagonist, is described as "Other" because it constitutes a kind of auteur filmmaking that challenges the narrative hegemony of Spanish commercial cinema, and as "New" because, although it draws on a broader genealogy dating back to the work of pioneers such as Cecilia Bartolomé, Josefina Molina and Pilar Miró, it explores new ways of constructing the contemporary identity and subjectivity of women on screen. Films such as *Summer 1993* (Estiu 1993, Carla Simón, 2017), *Watermelon Juice* (Suc de Síndria, Irene Moray, 2019), *Libertad* (Clara Roquet, 2021), *20,000 Species of Bees* (20000 especies de abejas, Estíbaliz Urresola Solaguren, 2023), *The Rye Horn* (O corno, Jaione Camborda, 2023), *The Girls Are Alright* (Las chicas están bien, Itsaso Arana, 2023), *The Enchanted* (Els encantats, Elena Trapé, 2023) and *Salve María* (Mar Coll, 2024) all belong to this movement. For various researchers of contemporary Spanish cinema, such as García-Catalán, Rodríguez-Serrano and Martín-Núñez (2022), Anna Vilaró (2021), Carlos Losilla (2023) and Raquel Fernández-Asenjo (2024), these films are also representative of another visual and narrative theme explored by this new wave of women filmmakers: the return to the countryside, reflected in the female protagonist's direct contact with elements of nature such as forests, fields, rivers, lakes or seas. In the particular cases of *The Water* and *Creatura*, it is aquatic environments that the protagonists connect with. As Belén Cornejo-Daza and Olga Fenoll-Martínez (2024) have previously explored in their analysis of *The Water*, the relationship between Ana's body and the river opens her up to new *more-than-human* ways of being as the film progresses, while Fernando Sánchez-López (2025) suggests that the connection between Mila's body and the sea in *Creatura* effectively resignifies the monstrous-feminine in fluid terms.

Focusing on this relationship between body and water, this article offers a comparative, narrative and visual analysis of *The Water* and *Creatura* with the aim of determining how each film portrays water as a liminal space in which the body of its protagonist can be transformed. Although this analysis, like the study of *The Water* by Cornejo-Daza and Fenoll-Martínez (2024), draws on the theories of the feminist new materialisms spearheaded by authors such as Donna Haraway (1991), Rosi Braidotti (1994) and Karen Barad (2007), the specific aim here is to reflect on the notion of the boundaries of the body and the transgression of those boundaries when they come into contact with water. For this reason, the theoretical framework for the analysis of the images in these films is founded on Elizabeth Grosz's notion of the volatility of the body (1994) and Astrida Neimanis's concept of bodies of water (2012; 2013; 2017). These authors, who also situate their work in the context of the feminist new materialisms, reinterpret Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection (1982) and Luce Irigaray's ontology of fluids ([1977] 2009) to propose that women's bodies extend through and beyond their material limits, articulating an interconnectivity with fluidity. All these authors thus identify water as a way of transgressing the notions of a contained, solid female body (traditionally understood as delimited, stable and separate

from its surroundings) to think of it instead as an open, volatile, fluid body with its own capacity to pick apart the monolithic conceptions of gender and sexuality.

## CONTAINMENT AND BOUNDARIES OF THE BODY: WATER AS A LIMINAL SPACE

The liminal space represented by water for Ana's and Mila's bodies in these films recalls Kristeva's concept of abjection (1982), which describes the fracture that occurs between the inside and the outside of the body when something is expelled from it. According to Kristeva, the substances that come out of our bodies challenge our perception of bodily unity. She thus defines abjection as a breakdown in the meaning of the body, a phenomenon that "disturbs identity, system, order", that "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, 1982: 4). Abjection is therefore manifested in the body's orifices, dissolving the border between inside and outside by positioning itself precisely in the "in-between", the boundary of the corporeal. Throughout *The Water* and *Creatura*, although bodily fluids are never explicitly shown, water acts as a liminal space that challenges the perception of bodily unity for the protagonists.

This connection even appears in the promotional posters for both films. The two posters for *The Water* featuring Ana explicitly identify her with the aquatic environment.[3] The poster used to promote the film in Spain (Image 1) shows her face as she looks intently at the viewer (a gaze that will take on great importance at the end of the film) while the rest of her body is bathed in a blue colour suggestive of water. On the other hand, the poster for the French market (Image 2) shows Ana with her eyes closed and her body immersed in water, with only her face above the surface. It is an image that alludes to the iconography of Ophelia, the archetypal woman who gives herself to the water.[4] A similar composition is used in one of the two promotional posters for *Creatura* (Image 3), which shows Mila resting her head on a rock as seawater flows around her naked torso. The other promotional poster for the film (Image 4) also evokes the aquatic theme, as it shows Mila in the three different stages of her life—as a child, as a teenager and as an adult—all looking down at the camera, which seems to be underwater. The watery, liquid texture of the image distorts their faces, underscoring their aquatic connection.

These representations contrast with the opening sequences of both films, where the protago-













Images 1, 2, 3 and 4. Water is associated with the bodies of the female protagonists in the posters for *The Water* (*El Agua*, Elena López Riera, 2021) and Creatura (Elena Martín Gimeno, 2022)

nists' bodies are portrayed as restrained and tense. In *The Water*, Ana repeatedly expresses her desire to leave Orihuela, as she feels trapped in a town that spurns her all-woman family, a place that she believes offers no hope for the future. In *Creatura*, Mila feels confined inside her own body as she struggles with her repressed sexual desires. Kristeva's theory of abjection draws on the anthropological studies of Mary Douglas ([1966] 1991), who understood the body's limits as forces that are not just material but also constructed by the social reality. In other words, the boundaries of the body constitute what Judith Butler ([1990] 2018) calls "the limits of the socially hegemonic" (Butler, 2018: 258). This is why Kristeva identifies the corpse as the site where these limits break down. As a decomposing, lifeless body reduced to refuse, the corpse is the ultimate representation of the abject, symbolising a threat to all living bodies because that which once had life has now been stripped of it. As Kristeva explains: "My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I may live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver" (Kristeva, 1982: 3).

In line with this idea, one of the first scenes in *The Water* shows Ana and her friends watching a dead goat floating downstream in the river while they discuss their desire to escape the village (Images 5 and 6). Seeing the goat, one of them remarks: "That's why the river smells of death." Another responds: "Because of the goat." A third adds: "This river is cursed; that's why it's full of shit." At this moment, one of Ana's friends recalls the legend of the woman who *had the water inside her*. This is how the legend that underpins the whole film is first introduced. It is a legend that evokes a truth buried deep in Ana's psyche: like the goat and all of the women drawn into the river, she is fated to die in that town, with no hope of escape. At the same time, the sight of this corpse floating in the river reveals to Ana the breakdown of the body's limits: both her own and those of the





**Images 5 and 6. A dead goat floats downstream while Ana and her friends talk about the legend of the women taken by the river because they have water inside them in *The Water***

women who, like the goat, dissolved when they gave themselves up to the river. In this way, while the dead goat is understood by Ana as something that contaminates the water, its association with the lineage of women who have been taken every time the river floods also turns it into a symbol of the repression and confinement of her body within the town's limits. As Lidia Mateo-Leivas (2024) points out, thanks to this initial scene

> we already know that the protagonist of *The Water* is going to be taken by the river, a river that smells of death, that is putrid [...]. And it doesn't matter whether the liquid flows along the riverbed or through her veins. What runs through [the women called by the river], what shapes them in their fluids, whether putrid water or bad blood, is what dooms them. (Mateo-Leivas, 2024: 58)

In *Creatura*, the protagonist's confinement is also expressed in Kristeva's concept of the cadaver: a decomposing, diseased and contagious

body. This idea is represented in Mila's own body through the hives that begin at her vulva and spread all over her body (Images 7 and 8). In the film's first scene Mila and her boyfriend, Marcel, are trying to have sex when she begins to feel discomfort. She starts screaming, crying and scratching her vulva compulsively. On the inner journey she takes through her memories, we discover that her hives are a physical reaction to a traumatic encounter she had with her father as a child. In one of the film's many flashbacks, a six-year-old Mila is playing on top of her father, who is lying





**Images 7 and 8. Mila's hives break out again on her body when she tries to engage in sexual relations with her boyfriend, Marcel, in the opening sequence of *Creatura***

in bed next to her mother. The little girl begins to rub her body over her father's belly and crotch. In response, after warning her several times to stop, he yanks her forcefully off the bed and begins to shout at her that what she was doing is wrong. Little Mila then begins to cry inconsolably, unable to understand what she did that was so terrible. After this experience, the little girl suffers her first bout of hives on her vulva, in a visual echo of the opening scene depicting her frustrated sexual encounter with Marcel.[5] In this sense, as Anna Casas-Aguilar (2024) points out, Mila's hives become an aspect of her body that connects the film's three different timelines, just as water does. The message that her father conveyed to her when she was a child leads her to experience her body and sexuality in a way suggested by the film's title: as a *creature* whose drives and desires are socially codified as abject, and which must therefore be restrained. This question is precisely what leads Sánchez-López (2025) to identify a connection between Mila's hives and the concepts of body horror and female monstrosity.

Both Ana and Mila thus experience their own bodies as a problem for them, as excessive corporealities that must be restrained. Throughout each film, each woman's body poses a constant threat: of flooding in Ana's case, and of overflowing in Mila's. For Grosz (1994), by returning to the fluidity of the body (that is, to contact with its inherent watery materiality), it is possible to dissolve the boundaries of the body and transgress its relationship with its surroundings. Thus, in opposition to a Cartesian understanding of the body that conceives of it merely as a vessel of the mind, Grosz proposes fluidity as a way of reclaiming agency over our bodily materiality. Irigaray (2009) argues that sexual difference has been constructed on the basis of an ontological hierarchy of solids over liquids. Solid bodies—which for Irigaray represent male logic—prioritise restraint and stability, while liquid bodies—which are associated with the female—are characterised by a lack of control, flooding and overflowing, as they are constantly affected by phenomena such as menstruation, childbirth and lactation. In her ma-

BOTH ANA AND MILA EXPERIENCE THEIR OWN BODIES AS A PROBLEM FOR THEM, AS EXCESSIVE CORPOREALITIES THAT MUST BE RESTRAINED

terialist reinterpretation, Grosz (1994) questions this binary logic by exploring the potential of the fluid body. Because it is experienced as an intense, viscous, leaking amorphous mass, the fluid body stands in total opposition to the rational, stable model of the solid body. With this in mind, Grosz raises the question:

> Can it be that in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow, as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much the phallus but self-containment; not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order? I am not suggesting that this is how women are, that this is their ontological status. Instead, my hypothesis is that women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage (Grosz, 1994: 203).

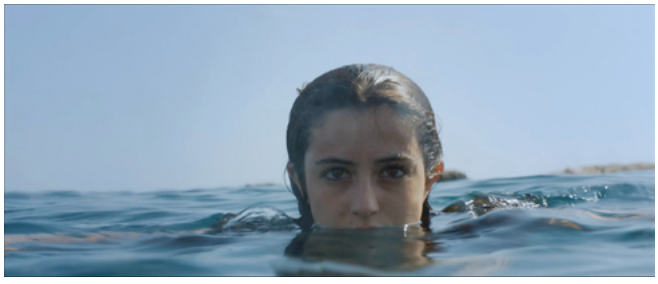
As the narrative progresses in *The Water*, Ana's body gradually begins to surrender to its own fluidity. One of the first signs of this is the beginning of her relationship with José, which for her represents a possible way of escaping the village. José appears to be the only young man in Orihuela who has ever left the town and lived outside Spain, although this is later revealed to be untrue. It is significant that their first encounters take place on the banks of the river, in scenes that show them either immersed in the water or lying down beside it. In this way, Ana stops thinking of the river as a threat and begins gradually to understand it as an increasingly attractive object of desire. "Grandma, is it true what they say about having water inside you?" Anna asks her grandmother. The old woman strokes her face and replies: "Everything is going to turn out fine." Ana's transformation culminates with her giving herself to the river for the first time. In this scene, she visits the village church with José. Once inside, she takes him to look at a statue of Saint Rita. Ana studies the details of the saint's body: her crown of thorns, the blood running down her face, the contours of her skin. A moment later, Ana's expression changes completely when she makes a decisive move away from José when attempts to kiss her. Surprised, he tries to put his arms around her, but she pulls out of his embrace. Annoyed, José storms out of the church, leaving Ana behind, still gazing quietly at the saint. Then, when she kneels in a pew to pray, we see other women around the church—the same women who take part in the documentary part of the film. This is the first time that the two diegetic worlds appear together in the same place. Ana then notices a woman looking at her from a distance. Without a word, the woman walks out of the church, and Ana follows her to the banks of the river. There, the stranger tells Ana that she knows "everything". This is when Ana begins to accept her aqueous condition and gives herself for the first time to the river. "Here you've got me!" she calls out to the water as she steps into the shallows (Image 9). But her offer appears not to work, as the town ends up being struck by another flood.



**Image 9. Ana gives herself to the river for the first time in *The Water***

In *Creatura*, on the other hand, from the outset Mila's body experiences water as a means of expressing her sexual desire freely. A paradigmatic example of this is a scene showing the teenage Mila, her eyes peeking above the surface of the water, watching a group of teenagers from the village as they fool around half-naked on a pon-

toon platform floating in the sea, trying to keep themselves from falling into the water (Images 10 and 11). This image subtly marks the moment in the film of Mila's sexual awakening, constructed through a conscious gaze that situates her desire in her active observation of the boys' wet torsos while she hides in the water, like a mermaid stalking her prey. Unlike Ana, Mila is not afraid of the water, as it is depicted as the only place where she can experience a certain agency over her body and her sexuality. This image of Mila as a teenager connects directly to the last scene of Mila as a child, when the water of the sea is first presented as a source of healing for her. After the first time that hives break out on her vulva, following the fight with her father, her mother pours seawater on the rash and explains that it has great healing power (Image 12). Moreover, this scene resonates with one in *The Water* of Ana bathing her grandmother, while the old woman tells her of the violence she suffered over the years at the hands of her late husband, Ana's grandfather (Image 13). Both these images convey an intimate relationship with water in the protagonists' past and present experiences of their bodies.





**Images 10 and 11. The teenage Mila exhibits agency over her own desire in the water of the sea in *Creatura***





**Images 12 and 13. Personal care related to water. Mila's mother teaches her about the power the sea has to heal her hives in *Creatura*, while Ana washes her grandmother in *The Water***

## FLOODING AND OVERFLOWING: WATER AS TRANS-CORPOREALITY

In the final scenes of *The Water* (Images 14 and 15) and *Creatura* (Images 16 and 17), Ana and Mila both experience a unification with water that ultimately frees their bodies from their constraints. At the end of each film, we see the protagonist immerse herself in the aquatic environment that has been present throughout the story (the river in Ana's case and the sea in Mila's) for a final catharsis that allows her body to embrace a fluid corporeality that transforms it into a body of water. As Neimanis points out, "we should recall that water is not only fluid; it works according to a logic of differentiation. There is no such thing as water in the abstract; all water is embodied" (2013: 35). Thinking of ourselves as aqueous enables us to "open to alterity—to other bodies, other ways of being and acting in the world—in the simultaneous recognition that this alterity also flows through us" (Neimanis, 2012: 96). Although Kris-





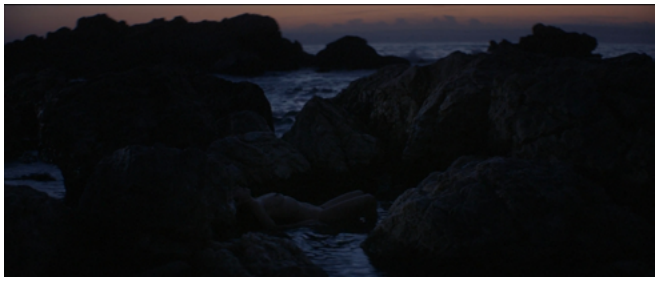
Images 14 and 15. Ana's body is flooded by the river, becoming a body of water in the final scene of *The Water*

teva (1982) defines catharsis as part of a process of bodily purification and cleansing based on the expulsion of the abject, water in these final scenes becomes the element that facilitates the protagonists' acceptance of their abjection. In other words, it is identified as the medium that triggers their agency and the liberation of their fluid bodies. These cathartic experiences operate in these scenes in two apparently opposed yet complementary ways: through flooding in Ana's case, when she gives herself to the river, and through overflowing in Mila's, when she enters the sea.

At the end of *The Water*, Ana is afraid to give herself to the river completely and disappear as the legend requires, as did so many other women of the village in previous floods. However, she gradually comes to recognise a possibility of liberation in this act of surrender. When the village is hit by another torrential downpour, the young villagers go out drinking and Ana seizes the opportunity to give herself to the water. She says goodbye to her

IN THE FINAL SCENES OF *THE WATER* AND *CREATURA*, ANA AND MILA BOTH EXPERIENCE A UNIFICATION WITH WATER THAT ULTIMATELY FREES THEIR BODIES FROM THEIR CONSTRAINTS

mother and grandmother with a conspiratorial look and goes off to her last party before surrendering to her fate. It is here that it becomes clear that Ana is as drawn to the river as it is to her, because when she leaves the party without saying a word, she takes one last look back at José and her friends, impervious to the rain that is drenching her body. The two bodies—Ana's and the body of water—are seeking each other out. After some real documentary footage showing the devastation caused by the flash floods of 2019 in Orihuela and its surrounding area (a weather event that occurred while the film was being made, resulting in another moment when reality and fiction come together in the story), Ana is shown submerged in the river in an overhead shot (Image 14). At last,





Images 16 and 17. Mila's body overflows in the water of the sea, becoming a body of water in the final scene of *Creatura*

she has allowed herself to be flooded by the water. She then steps out of the river looking directly at the camera (Image 15) while we hear her speaking in a voice-over:

> I am my mother. I am my grandmother. I am that woman from 1670. From 1850. From 1987. I also have water inside, although now I only see water outside. All full of water. All full of shit. The water full of shit. I am my mother. I am my grandmother. I am that woman. She is always the same woman who returns. I am that woman, but there was no need to count on me to have a fear, because now I am the one who is going to tell my story.

With these words and that final gaze into the camera, Ana claims her place as a member of that lineage of women who, like her, *have the water inside them*. The culmination of the legend represents her acceptance of her corporeal excesses; the flooding of a body in which the only thing separating the water outside and the water inside is her own skin. In this sense, both her words and the fact that she rises out of the water and looks at the camera suggest a relationship between equals: a flood between two bodies that become one. This moment of mutual flooding is for Ana a cathartic experience of *trans-corporeality* when she accepts her fluid nature. Stacy Alaimo (2010) describes trans-corporeality as an interconnection of the human with the more-than-human. According to Astrida Neimainis, who draws on Alaimo's theoretical framework, "[t]his does not mean the self disappears, but rather that she is dispersed through waterways of mutual imbrications" (2013: 35).

In the case of *Creatura*, the catharsis operates through the overflowing of Mila's body in relation to her hives. Throughout the film, Mila's hives represent her repressed sexual desires, giving rise to the somatisation of what she needs to let go of but is unable to. This situation represents an "abjection of self", a demonstration that "all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (Kristeva, 1982: 5). This need to free herself from the limits of her own body is met in the film's final scene, when the action of giving herself to the seawater is for her a catharsis that brings an end to her trauma. The scene begins in her bed, a place that throughout the film has served to represent her sexually blocked condition. Unable to stop scratching the itch caused by her hives, she leaves the house and heads for the beach. When she reaches the shore, she strips naked and stretches out beside the rocks (Image 16). Lying in the shallows, she begins pouring seawater over the hives with one hand while caressing her belly, thighs and vulva (Image 17). This action, which she repeats several times, allows her to achieve a state of bodily pleasure that finally results in an orgasm. This final scene depicting her body overflowing also represents a cathartic moment of *trans-corporeality* for Mila as she accepts her fluid condition. In these images we also see her free herself in the water, dissolving the boundaries of her body so that the two elements—her body and the water—become one.

At the same time, Mila's bodily overflow suggests a return to the womb and the amniotic fluid, representing a reconnection with her body and with female sexuality. For Irigaray (2009), amniotic fluid leaves a mark on the bodies of mother and child. This is an idea that is also present to some extent in the scene of Ana's flooding experience in the river, as she connects with her mother and grandmother, and with all the other women of her village, while in the final scene to *Creatura* it is expressed in Mila's sense of touch. As Irigaray explains, this scene evokes the intrauterine experience of the infant, "[e]specially without memory of that first event where he is enveloped-touched by a tangible invisible out of which even his eyes are formed but which he will never see: without seeing, neither visible nor visibility in this place" (Irigaray, quoted in Grosz, 1994: 104). When Mila strokes her vulva while pouring seawater over herself, this fluid tactility is expressed in the

scene's dim lighting, which establishes a visual atmosphere of dark tones that allude to the moment described by Irigaray, a moment when we see nothing but feel ourselves submerged in and touched by water. For Neimanis (2017), immersing ourselves in water dissolves the boundaries of our bodies, as these are integrated into a watery nature that dilutes the skin. In this regard, in her materialist reinterpretation of Irigaray's (2009) description of the amniotic fluid, she argues that "this gestationality need not take the form of a reprosexual human womb [...], [since] [w]e learn gestationality from water; we repeat its potential *in* and *as* watery bodies" (Neimanis, 2017: 69). *Creatura* culminates with all three versions of Mila—the child and teenager of the past and the adult in the present—swimming in the sea, filmed from such an extreme proximity to their skin that it is impossible to distinguish clearly where their bodies end and the water begins.

## CONCLUSIONS

For Sara Ahmed, although the skin

> appears to be the matter which separates the body, it rather allows us to think of how the materialisation of bodies involves, not containment, but an affective opening out of bodies to other bodies, in the sense that the skin registers how bodies are touched by others. (Ahmed, 2000: 45)

In *The Water* and *Creatura*, aquatic environments are revealed to be bodies that *touch* and transform the films' protagonists by triggering their desire and flooding and overflowing what had until then been contained. At the same time, the watery materiality that constitutes Ana's and Mila's bodies establishes a *hydrological* corporeality that transcends the individual qualities of these two films and connects them to each other. As Neimanis explains, water "does not ask us to confirm *either* the irreducibility of alterity *or* material connection" but instead "flows between, as both" (2012: 90). By flowing through their bodies, water is embodied in them, both materially and metaphorically, inscribing them into the natural environment that surrounds them, and into other ways of understanding the female corporeality inherited from previous generations. In the women in the documentary part of *The Water*, in the ones who gave themselves to the river before Ana, and in the evocation of a sexuality unleashed when Mila's mother teaches her how to calm her hives with seawater, these films transgress the notions of a delimited, confined, solid female body and conceive of it instead as a body of water, open and fluid. In this way, through their tactile connection to water, Ana and Mila interconnect *trans-corporeally* with other watery bodies, transcending their own identity, gender and sexuality.

THE WATERY MATERIALITY THAT CONSTITUTES ANA'S AND MILA'S BODIES ESTABLISHES A *HYDROLOGICAL* CORPOREALITY THAT TRANSCENDS THE INDIVIDUAL QUALITIES OF THESE TWO FILMS AND CONNECTS THEM TO EACH OTHER

For García-Catalán, Rodríguez-Serrano and Martín-Nuñez, the films made by the recent wave of Spanish women filmmakers have introduced new "filmic forms related to the body" (2022: 9). In this sense, *The Water* and *Creatura* invite us to think about the body beyond its material boundaries, understanding aquatic environments as sites of subjectivity and embodied resistance where these new corporeal forms emerge in contemporary Spanish cinema. However, it is worth highlighting that these two films in particular can be included in a broader movement of films, including a number of recent titles of the "Other New Spanish Cinema Made by Women". These include the aforementioned films *Summer 1993* (Estiu 1993, Carla Simón, 2017), *Watermelon Juice* (Suc de

sìndria, Irene Moray, 2019), *Libertad* (Clara Roquet, 2021), *20,000 Species of Bees* (20.000 especies de abejas, Estíbaliz Urresola Solaguren, 2023), *The Rye Horn* (O corno, Jaione Camborda, 2023), *The Girls Are Alright* (Las chicas están bien, Itsaso Arana, 2023), *The Enchanted* (Els encantats, Elena Trapé, 2023) and *Salve María* (Mar Coll, 2024). It is a genealogy that can be traced back to much earlier Spanish films such as *Let's Go, Barbara* (Vámonos, Bárbara, Cecilia Bartolomé, 1978) and *Costa Brava* (Marta Balletbò Coll, 1995). All these works participate in what Neimanis (2017) calls a *hydrocommons*: a material and symbolic space where water can become a site for connection and bodily transformation. In these films, water passes through each of the protagonists' bodies in various ways (either as an active element that comes into direct contact with their bodies, or as part of the *mise-en-scène*), creating similar aquatic experiences that extend beyond each individual film.[6] In this ocean of films, *The Water* and *Creatura* are two paradigmatic examples that serve as a foundation to begin exploring the narrative, aesthetic and political potential of bodies of water in contemporary Spanish cinema. ■

## NOTES

1 This legend is told gradually over the course of the film in scenes showing different women from the village looking directly at the camera as they recount it. In this way, the filmmaker constructs a documentary component that unfolds in parallel with the fictional narrative. These women include the director's own mother, as well as some of her neighbours (López-Riera, 2022).

2 It should be noted that Barbara Zecchi (2014a; 2014b) previously pointed out Spanish women filmmakers who preceded this current wave, who were especially popular in the 1990s and emerged as creators of a new cinematic language in Spain. For Zecchi, this language was characterised by a tactile understanding of the bodies of the films' female protagonists. This question has also been explored by Silvia Guillamón-Carrasco (2020) and Nuria Cancela & Miriam Sánchez-Manzano (2020) in relation to this new wave of women filmmakers emerging in the first decades of the 21st century.

3 In addition to these two, there was a third poster released in Spain showing the façade of a house and the fields that surround it all flooded with water.

4 The film's relationship with the iconography of Ophelia is explored in greater depth in Larumbe-Villarreal (2023; 2026 [forthcoming]).

5 It is worth highlighting that Elena Martín blurs the depictions of these two male characters in various scenes in the film, intensifying the ambiguity with certain shots that confuse her father's body with Marcel's. Especially noteworthy in this respect is a scene showing Mila lying in bed, when a man wearing a jersey that we have previously seen her father wearing reaches his arm out to her suddenly and holds her down forcefully. As we are not shown his face, we are initially led to believe it is her father, but a few seconds later we find out that it is actually Marcel. This ambiguity clearly evokes the Oedipus complex, a condition that the director herself identified as a theme of the film in an interview with Mireia Trías and Gonzalo de Lucas (2025).

6 This idea of the *hydrocommons* in contemporary Spanish women's cinema is explored in a book chapter titled "Bodily Materialities of Water in Contemporary Spanish Women's Cinema", included in the forthcoming collective publication *Amphibious Screens: Film and TV Between Land and Sea* (2027), edited by Joanne Garde-Hansen, Linda Kopitz and Carolyn Birdsall.

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## BODIES OF WATER: READINGS OF FLOODING AND OVERFLOWING IN *THE WATER* AND *CREATURA*

**Abstract**
This article examines how aquatic environments are configured as spaces of bodily agency and transformation for the protagonists of *The Water* (*El Agua*, Elena López Riera, 2021) and *Creatura* (Elena Martín Gimeno, 2022). Based on a comparative analysis of both films and drawing on the theories of various feminist new materialist scholars on the potentialities of aqueous and fluid bodies, it explores how Ana and Mila—the protagonists of these films—conceive of water as a space where they can transcend their bodily limits. In this process, their experience with water gives rise to a transformation that floods and overflows the body, articulating new forms of fluid corporeality.

**Key words**
Body; Water; Fluid; Materiality; *The Water*, *Creatura*; Spanish cinema; Spanish women directors.

**Authors**
Miriam Sánchez Manzano is a pre-doctoral fellow with the Department of Communication at Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF). She holds a degree in Audiovisual Communication from Universitat Rovira i Virgili and a master's degree in Contemporary Film and Audiovisual Studies from UPF. She has taught classes on film and audiovisual history at both universities. Her research focuses on the intersections between bodily materiality, feminisms and experimental cinema, as reflected in her doctoral thesis funded by the Generalitat de Catalunya (FI SDUR-2022-00178), which explores menstruation and sexual fluids in the early films of the experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer. Contact: miriam.sanchez@upf.edu

Edurne Larumbe Villarreal is a pre-doctoral fellow with the Department of Communication at Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF). She holds a degree in Bilingual Audiovisual Communication from Universidad de Navarra and a master's degree in Contemporary Film and Audiovisual Studies from UPF, where she has taught classes in film theory and film culture. Her research focuses on visual motifs in cinema, bodily abjection and contemporary cinema made by women, as reflected in her doctoral thesis, which analyses visual motifs of the abject female body in contemporary cinema. Her doctoral thesis is funded by MICU through an FPU grant (FPU21/02229). Contact edurne.larumbe@upf.edu

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## CUERPOS DE AGUA: LECTURAS DE LA INUNDACIÓN Y EL DESBORDAMIENTO EN *EL AGUA* Y *CREATURA*

**Resumen**
Este artículo se propone analizar cómo el medio acuático se configura como un espacio de agenciamiento y transformación corporal para las protagonistas de *El Agua* (Elena López Riera, 2021) y *Creatura* (Elena Martín Gimeno, 2022). A partir de un análisis comparativo de ambas películas, y con el apoyo de diversas pensadoras que desde los nuevos materialismos feministas han teorizado sobre la potencialidad de un cuerpo acuoso y fluido, este texto examina cómo Ana y Mila —las protagonistas de estos films— conciben el agua como un espacio desde el que trascender sus propios límites corporales. En este proceso, la experiencia acuática da lugar a una transformación que las inunda y desborda, articulando nuevas formas de corporalidad fluida.

**Palabras clave**
Cuerpo; Agua; Fluido; Materialidad; *El Agua*, *Creatura*; Cine español; Mujeres directoras españolas.

**Autoras**
Miriam Sánchez Manzano (Barcelona, 1996) es investigadora predoctoral en formación en el Departamento de Comunicación de la Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Graduada en Comunicación Audiovisual por la Universitat Rovira i Virgili y en el máster en Estudios de Cine y Audiovisual Contemporáneos por la Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Ha impartido clases de historia del cine y audiovisual en ambas universidades. Sus líneas de investigación se centran en las intersecciones entre materialidad corporal, feminismos y cine experimental, como así se refleja en su tesis doctoral, financiada por la Generalitat de Catalunya (FI SDUR-2022-00178), centrada en el estudio de la menstruación y los fluidos sexuales en las primeras películas de la cineasta experimental Barbara Hammer. Contacto: miriam.sanchez@upf.edu

Edurne Larumbe Villarreal (Pamplona, 1996) es investigadora predoctoral en formación en el Departamento de Comunicación de la Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Graduada en Comunicación Audiovisual Bilingüe por la Universidad de Navarra y en el máster en Estudios de Cine y Audiovisual Contemporáneos por la Universitat Pompeu Fabra. En esta universidad ha impartido clases de teoría del cine y cultura cinematográfica. Sus líneas de investigación se focalizan en los motivos visuales del cine, la abyección corporal y el cine contemporáneo hecho por mujeres, tal y como refleja su tesis doctoral centrada en el análisis de los motivos visuales del cuerpo abyecto femenino en el cine contemporáneo, financiada por MICU a través de una ayuda FPU (FPU21/02229). Contacto edurne.larumbe@upf.edu

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# MONSTROUS LESBIANS: CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION IN THE CONTEMPORARY HORROR FILM[1]

LLEDÓ MORALES ROIG

## 1. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MONSTROUS LESBIAN THROUGH ITS CLASSICAL HERITAGE

Horror cinema provides the opportunity to depict the monstrous threat posed by lesbian desire using its stylistic devices that characterise the genre. The monster functions as the formal vessel (Navarro, 2022) of the enigma and foregrounds the difference between the human (male) —mankind— and the *Other*. Looking at a woman is a punishment for the hero (Pedraza, 1991); she is positioned as an obstacle and a boundary, as the *Other* in relation to his heroic male position. Female desire is defined in theoretical discourse as an enigma and an uncontrollable excess: "this multiplicity and plurality of female pleasure cannot be understood within a logic that is male" (Cardenal, 2012: 359). Its diversity makes it impossible to articulate a representative discourse around it (Lacan, 1990), and it is precisely the enigma of a jouissance that becomes monstrous in the construction of these characters. Creed (1993) argues that the monstrous in cinema emerges from that which threatens the patriarchal symbolic order, and that the female body is constructed as radical otherness in opposition to the male subject. The enigma of the female has been rendered monstrous under the canonical male gaze, but how does this enigma operate in the lesbian world? The horror genre offers an approach that explores this enigma through the mise-en-scène, the narrative and the use of the fantastic, presenting the lesbianism of its protagonists as a form of femininity that has no need of men and thus constitutes a monstrous threat to the androcentrism of the diegetic world.

These characters are constructed through abjection (Kristeva, 1982), whose main feature is its ambiguity: they are at once attractive and repulsive, constantly challenging social norms and the unstable boundary between good and evil, the acceptable and the unacceptable. The bodies of

THE ENIGMA OF THE FEMALE HAS BEEN RENDERED MONSTROUS UNDER THE CANONICAL MALE GAZE, BUT HOW DOES THIS ENIGMA OPERATE IN THE LESBIAN WORLD?

these characters are interpreted (by other characters and by the audience) as marginalised, viewed as both pleasing and menacing. Lesbian desire in cinema has been expressed as abject from the perspective of the male gaze (Mulvey, 2013), as it threatens the heteropatriarchal status quo while at the same time serving as fantasy material for the pornographic and objectifying fetishisation of actresses (Dworkin, 1981). For Kristeva, in its liminal state between life and death the monster's cadaverous body constitutes the perfect representation of abjection. The monstrous-feminine in the horror genre is an image that encapsulates male anxieties and desires in relation to women, their submission or their power (Creed, 1993: 7). Through the disruption provoked by the abject, cinema constructs its sapphic[2] (lesbian and/or bisexual) characters in terms of a difference that is either monstrously physical or menacingly psychological. This aspect of character construction is directly related to the cinematic subgenre. Based on a search of open databases and applying my own classification system for films with explicitly sapphic protagonists released in the West since the 2000s, I have identified 39 films belonging to the horror macro-genre, 27 of which are classified as supernatural horror films, while the other 12 are psychological thrillers.[3]

### 1.1. The Vampiress: The Primordial Archetype

The vampiress is one of the most frequently depicted and explored representations of the killer lesbian, as an expression of the monstrous lesbian archetype. As Ribes Pericàs observes, "the perception of lesbianism as something unnatural and perverse [...] has been associated in popular films with monstrosity and fantasy" (2022: 276). The lesbian vampiress is a threat to society because she represents attraction and pleasure between women (Creed, 1993: 61). The very first two films to portray the lesbian as a monster depict her as a vampiress: *Vampyr* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1932) and *Dracula's Daughter* (Lambert Hillyer, 1936), both of which are based on J. S. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), whose narrative structure would become a model for 1970s vampire films. Le Fanu's novella establishes a model for this study with its representation of the monstrous lesbian archetype: beautiful, seductive, and murderous, a femme fatale who aligns herself with *other* women and against men. In line with previous research, "it is important to identify the early 19th century as the period of the genesis of lesbian vampirism in both literature and art [...], which was placed at the service of male voyeurism" (Morales Roig, García-Catalán, Izquierdo Castillo, 2023: 802), and which would provide the basis for the construction of the archetype in cinema. These *monstrous lesbians* are constructed to contribute to the satisfaction of male fetishistic fantasies. Seduction between women stimulates male desire without posing a threat to the phallic masculinity of the canonical male audience, as men are depicted as heroes while penetration continues to be symbolically present in the stabbing death of the monster. This trope reinforces the dystopian threat of a society dominated by the female, which, in the story, will ultimately be defeated by the hero. González Requena (2006) interprets the return of figures associated with the maternal or the Goddess as a symptom of a crisis in the symbolic *Law of the Father* and the consequent disintegration of the social order, where these narratives are understood from an opposing perspective as narratives of decadence that can only be counteracted through the restoration of a masculine heroic principle that reimposes law and meaning.

Sapphic women serve as symbols of peril: the unnatural (Signorotti, 1996) and the perverse (De Lauretis, 1994). Their explicit presence on screen became prominent in popular horror films in the 1970s, where they appear as seductive killer vampiresses (Clover, 1992). Throughout the 20th century, 47 films featuring vampiresses as protagonists were released in the West; another 24 released since the 2000s make for a total of 71 films that recount variations on the story of *Carmilla*. Seven European films made in the 1960s explore the theme of the sapphic vampiress, but its peak came in the 1970s, when 26 titles were released, including *The Vampire Lovers* (Roy Ward Baker, 1970), *Daughters of Darkness* (Les lèvres rouges, Harry Kümel, 1971), and *Vampyres* (José Ramón Larraz, 1974). A notable 1980s production is *The Hunger* (Tony Scott, 1983), which takes a more modernist and less myth-bound approach to the vampiric tradition of the 1970s. In all these films, one of the female protagonists acts as a mentor who turns the other into a vampiress, as a metaphor for lesbianism. In none of them does the lesbian mentor escape death at the hands of the hero, who ultimately rescues the other woman, as she still maintains a connection to the world of men. The story thus adheres to the punitive moralising principle of early lesbian films that portray the consequences of acting on a desire defined as *other* and therefore monstrous and unacceptable, inheriting elements from both melodrama (Roig, 2025) and the "dead lesbian syndrome" (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2017).

From the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, the killer vampiress theme that had previously dominated mainstream horror became more typical of independent cinema. Although early vampiress films took a restrained approach in order to avoid being censored, these independent productions included a number of films that were sexually explicit and even pornographic, following the sexploitation film trend that emerged in the wake of the sexual liberation movement. As a result, supernatural horror lost its gravity and force as it shifted in the late 1990s towards sexual comedy, as exemplified by the *Caress of the Vampire* saga (Frank Terranova, 1996–1999). In the 2000s, a camp aesthetic—characterised by a love of the unnatural, artifice and exaggeration (Sontag, 1984)—is evident in films such as *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* (Lee Demarbre, 2001) and *Lesbian Vampire Killers* (Phil Claydon, 2009), in which lesbian characters serve merely as narrative accessories and objects of attraction for male heroes. This classical archetype of the lesbian vampiress is still used in contemporary horror to construct the *monstrous lesbian*, whose narrative tropes continue to be both reinforced and subverted.

### 1.2. The Killer Lesbian in the Psychological Thriller

The disruption of the supernatural horror genre resulting from its hybridisation with comedy opened up an opportunity in the 1990s for the reinvention of the killer lesbian in the psychological thriller. The trope thus continued to be used, although the construction of killer lesbian characters in these films generally eschewed vampiric depictions. Instead, they are extremely attractive women who continue to occupy a femme fatale role, seducing and killing the male heroes together with their sapphic partners. They thus recycle the old tale of revenge through the seduction of the male hero while eliminating the paranormal premise in favour of more realistic stories that explain the character's abjection and perversion as

THIS CLASSICAL ARCHETYPE OF THE LESBIAN VAMPIRESS IS STILL USED IN CONTEMPORARY HORROR TO CONSTRUCT THE MONSTROUS LESBIAN, WHOSE NARRATIVE TROPES CONTINUE TO BE BOTH REINFORCED AND SUBVERTED

a psychological disorder. In this way, their monstrous quality is constructed through a prism that does not involve a bodily transformation but still entails violence. The protagonists of these films are unstable individuals or criminals with backstories more typical of the drama genre. These characters are explored by Ribes-Pericàs (2022) and Smelik (2004), who analyse the importance of the archetype in films of the 1990s. Some of these films are based on real events or news stories, which are incorporated into the aesthetic and narrative frameworks of the psychological thriller: in *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994), Juliet (Kate Winslet) and Pauline (Melanie Lynskey) murder Pauline's mother, the only obstacle to their obsessive relationship; in *Sister My Sister* (Nancy Meckler, 1994), two sisters develop an obsessive lesbian relationship that culminates in the brutal murder of their employer, a storyline echoed in *La cérémonie* (Claude Chabrol, 1995) and more recently in the contemporary films *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2004), *The Handmaiden* (Park Chan-wook, 2016), and *Lizzie* (Bryce Kass, 2018). The trope of the pair of sapphic murderers also appears in *Butterfly Kiss* (Michael Winterbottom, 1995) and *Bound* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1996).

The sapphic killer archetype has become a recurring feature of the psychological horror subgenre throughout the 21st century, although in some cases, instead of killing others, these characters end up committing suicide or harming themselves in fits of delirium or psychotic episodes. Examples of this can be found in *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001), *Chloe* (Atom Egoyan, 2010), *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010), and *Thelma* (Joachim Trier, 2017). Although these films all belong to the horror macro-genre, the terrifying nature of their protagonists is depicted not in the bodily abjection of their sexual difference[4] but in their psychological instability, constructed through the story around the female as a mystery to be solved.

## 2. THE APPROPRIATION AND SUBVERSION OF THE ARCHETYPE

The monstrous lesbian archetype has functioned as a meaningful site for exploring the complexities of female desire, and queer creators have appropriated monstrosity as a form of vindication. Not only have these characters served as representations of terror and seduction, but they have also facilitated the articulation of the sapphic experience in a medium and a historical period largely dominated by heteronormative narratives. Their implications and connotations have evolved thanks to feminist perspectives, lesbian film theory, and the legacy of the new queer cinema (NQC) movement that first emerged in the 1990s. NQC marked a break with the identity-based paradigm of the gay and lesbian films of previous decades. In addition to its alternative storylines, it proposed a provocative formal exploration dominated by hybridity and pastiche (Rich, 1992), characterised by the reappropriation of sexualised and homophobic stereotypes from 1970s cinema, as well as by their inversion as a radical response to the depiction of normative sexuality in mainstream films. However, it also posed a challenge for lesbian filmmakers, as "most of the products identified as 'new' and 'queer' were [...] overwhelmingly male" (Pick, 2004: 105). With the arrival of the new millennium, more queer women had the opportunity to write, direct and produce films, building on a long-standing tradition established by mavericks such as Dorothy Arzner, Barbara Hammer and Su Friedrich. This led to a reconstruction of the archetype that explored the (re-)appropriation of the female on a symbolically powerful level in conflict with lesbian desire itself. The character arc of these femmes fatales shifts towards climactic endings that do not involve punishment or death, and although the politics of desire remains central to the story, it is articulated not through a normative romanticism but through a disruptive, transgressive, and often violent force.

Supernatural horror, which dominated the genre in its early years, appears in hybrid form in contemporary cinema, combined with comedy, as in *Jennifer's Body* (Karyn Kusama, 2009), *The Carmilla Movie* (Spencer Maybee, 2017) and *Bit* (Brad Michael Elmore, 2019). Since 2018, the killer lesbian character has been further hybridised with body horror, psychological horror and the supernatural, adopting a perspective that hearkens back to dramatic horror and contains elements of the slasher. These films depict killer lesbians with none of the vampiric constructions or the sexualisation of their bodies for voyeuristic pleasure. They are anti-heroines with complex psychologies who make questionable decisions, but who do not end up facing the expected punitive fate. Examples include *Knife + Heart* (Yann Gonzalez, 2018), *The Perfection* (Richard Shepard, 2018), *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (Halina Reijn, 2022) and *Love Lies Bleeding* (Rose Glass, 2024).

## 3. ANALYSIS OF AN EVOLVING ARCHETYPE

Textual analysis with a semiotic-discursive and psychoanalytic approach (Metz, 1974; Font, 2002; Casetti, 1991), combined with insights from feminist and queer theory, can reveal how audiovisual language positions these characters in a recognisable location for the spectator through specific modes of representation: the construction of the gaze, the positioning of the camera and the development of characters and archetypes. Serge Daney suggests that "the body is at the service of the story and appears in film as a vampiric entity" (quoted in Font, 2002: 127), because to achieve the visceral effects demanded of the image in postmodern cinema it is the actress who must feed on the character to become an agent of historical mutations, finding the character's gestures, gazes and desires. There is something intrinsically monstrous in character construction, as it cannot be understood without identifying with the performer who gives the character her body, voice and gestures. This construction necessarily involves the processes of casting and direction, through which layers of meaning are inscribed onto the body by the screenplay and the subjectivity of the performer as an active agent. Through an analysis of the text and the construction of the characters in three paradigmatic films from each decade of the twenty-first century, this study explores how lesbian protagonists in contemporary horror cinema reinforce and subvert the traditional archetype: Jennifer in *Jennifer's Body*; Thelma in *Thelma*; and Jackie in *Love Lies Bleeding*.

### 3.1. Comic Subversion of the Classical Vampiress

The protagonist in *Jennifer's Body* is a teenage girl who is transformed into a succubus (a variation on the vampiress archetype) as a result of a bungled demonic sacrifice. From a heteronormative perspective, the film does not conform to the conventions of scopophilic cinema, as it does not satisfy the desire to turn the woman into an object of the male gaze. Despite being played by Megan Fox, Jennifer is not portrayed for fetishistic enjoyment. Lesbian cinema engages with a visual legacy in which the female body has historically been constructed as an object for scopophilic consumption; however, the quality of *"to-be-looked-at-ness"* (Mulvey, 1975) operates ironically in the construction of Jennifer's character, shifting and problematising this logic from a queer perspective. The casting of the monster—in this case, a character whose body and name gives the film its title—is by no means insignificant. Megan Fox starred in the first instalment of the *Transformers* franchise (2007) as Mikaela Banes, and subsequently topped the list of the Top 100 Sexiest Women published in 2008 by *FHM*.[5] With this objectified status, Fox's body is displayed in the film as inaccessible to the men in the story—all of whom she seduces solely in order to devour them—as her desire is directed towards Needy Le-

snicki (Amanda Seyfried). The film evokes abjection through its combination of fetishism with the repulsion provoked by the character's behaviour towards men. Although realistic performances in postmodern cinema function as a device for diminishing the presence of the actress, in the construction of mainstream archetypes the signifier cannot be separated from the body. Fox acts as the iconic modern femme fatale and as an object of the audience's desire marked by a diabolical, vampiric status, with the aim of both satiating and contradicting the spectator's pleasure.

The film begins with Needy's crazed face looking directly at the camera, revealing on the level of the enunciation what we will later understand to be a confirmation of the transfer of the monstrously female aspect of lesbian desire from one protagonist to the other. Needy, who is the narrator, introduces us through a flashback to Jennifer and their shared story of terror and transformation. At the film's climactic moment, Jennifer, like her vampiress precursors, does not escape death, but her murderer's justification for killing her constitutes a significant paradigm shift. Needy tries to restrain Jennifer's monstrous desire, but it proves uncontrollable. The two women confront each other in hand-to-hand combat. In the struggle, Needy straddles Jennifer and slashes her body with a knife, but Jennifer regenerates. The wound—a symbol of the cavity, of *lack* in its psychoanalytic sense—serves as a reaffirmation of phallic desire. Jennifer takes pleasure in the penetration and bites Needy's neck, evoking the vampiric legacy of conversion and the transfer of powers (Figure 1). The monster's death comes only once Needy rips off the heart-shaped pendant she wears, symbolising their love for one another: "BFF" (best friends forever). Jennifer's power is weakened when the pact of love that binds them is broken. Needy plunges the knife into Jennifer's heart. Now that their love is dead, the knife wound is fatal and the monster dies along with the woman. Yet her monstrous legacy lives on in Needy, as suggested by the movement of their bodies in the shot, reflecting the transfer of powers. Needy thus serves both as the monster's lover and as the final heroine.



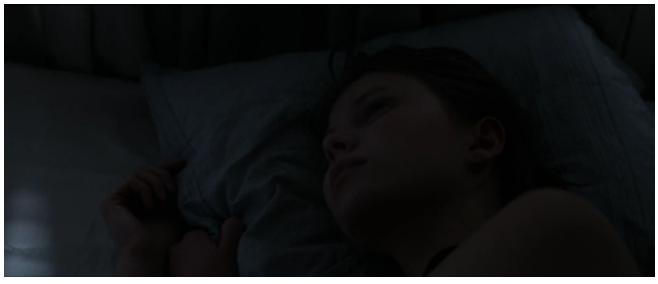
Image 1. The transfer of powers through the bite

### 3.2. The monster from a psychological perspective

The protagonist in *Thelma* (Eili Harboe) is unaware of her own monstrous nature, representative of her lesbian desire. She possesses supernatural powers that her parents fear and seek to control, as hinted at in the film's pre-credit sequence. In this scene, she is shown as a child lost in a forest, threatened by her father with his hunter's shotgun. The nature of her desire constitutes an intolerable threat. The film's next scene begins with a wide aerial shot, like the view of a crow stalking its prey, which slowly zooms in on Thelma in the middle of a university campus. She is now a young woman and is entering a new, uncontrolled environment, leaving behind the home where her mother kept the monster contained. Horror films about monstrous teenage girls often portray the process of sexual maturation as painful and perilous (Renner, 2016). It is a process closely associated with self-actualisation and acceptance, and with the destruction of the female body resulting from the awareness of desire (Wittig, 1977). This abject deconstruction of the body is absolutely necessary to articulate the new lesbian body-subject. Thelma's acknowledgement of her desire unleashes her uncontrollable superhuman powers,

which haunt her throughout the film's second act. Her body becomes deformed in the absence of maternal protection. Gestures convey pain and dissatisfaction, life and death, strength and weakness (Guzmán, 2018). The monster manifests itself through epileptic psychotic seizures in which her body shakes, turns rigid and loses control—symptoms triggered whenever Anja (Kaya Wilkins) is near her, exposing her desire for the *Other*. For her Catholic mother, the anxiety caused by the uncontrollable nature of desire necessitates the monster's captivity, but when Thelma leaves the house, her body reacts, unleashing her desire and exposing her condition: whatever Thelma desires deep down becomes a reality. Alcohol, drugs and pleasure join Thelma's and Anja's together in the shot. The choreographed movement, the continuity of the camera and the editing present them as though they were a single body divided in space and time, until Thelma's desire becomes so powerful that it draws Anja towards her (Image 2 -3).





Images 2-3. The attraction of bodies in the editing

Thelma's sexual desire is expressed in the contortion of her body, but it is only when she finally manages to control it that her powers manifest themselves. Gestures intervene in the image and portray the interactions between the two characters, imbuing the narrative arrangement of the action with intention while leveraging the camera's violent, stifling position in extreme close-ups that confront the body with its alterity. The mise-en-scène and the framing reduce the body to an abject, compressed and constrained space set apart in a wide shot filled with menacing lines in the composition and a dark, vast depth of field that diminishes its presence in the shot. Thelma's contact with Anja is captured in extreme close-ups that are not constrictive, with staring eyes, half-open mouths, detail shots and hands delicately sliding over the body, followed by blurred pans inscribed with desire, shaking and clouded shots, evoking the trend of haptic lesbian cinema (Marks, 1998). When Anja touches her, Thelma tries to control her spasms, which cause movements and noises that are almost orgasmic, but when Anja kisses her, she runs home to take refuge under the shelter of religion. Her desire is so repressed that her supernatural powers make Anja disappear in her attempt to suppress her pleasure. With the confession of her otherness, she regains her position and spatial presence in the frame, the camera now following the movement of her body rather than the other way round. Inscribed in her glances and gestures is the power of a sexuality overflowing with *desires*, which attempts to express her trauma and drive symptomatically through a form of jouissance that is intrinsically sensory.

### 3.3. Excessive Monstrous Body

*Love Lies Bleeding* begins with an aerial tracking shot over a rugged cliff. The camera movement, the music and the red light flooding the lens plunge us into an abyss. Through a dissolve, at the bottom of the cliff —a dumping ground for corpses— what awaits the camera is not death but a worm's eye view of a starry night sky, which serves as the backdrop to the opening credits. The camera then tilts downward to reveal the hometown of the film's protagonists, stretched out under a clear night sky that foreshadows the hopeful

ending in which love sets the monster free. From the first scene in the gym, this film plays with the codes of the body horror subgenre, showing bodies straining, sweating and stretching, while at the same time it transgresses those codes through a mise-en-scène that prioritises the haptic pleasure elicited by the image and a perspective grounded in body worship, excess and overstimulation.

The monstrous lesbian has traditionally been constructed based on a canonically sexualised, attractive archetype, characterised by highly feminised qualities that are socially accepted as desirable. In *Love Lies Bleeding*, the construction of both protagonists breaks with the convention of displaying the female body, instead revealing two women who push at the boundaries of heterosexual norms. Lou (Kristen Stewart) is first shown from behind, following the opening credits, as a figure set in contrast to her diegetic world, a world from which she is alienated but to which the other protagonist clearly belongs. She is crouched over a toilet bowl, reaching into it in an effort to unclog the drain, thus plunging her hand into a hole whose symbolic value signals her status while also foreshadowing a subsequent scene in which she penetrates Jackie (Katy M. O'Brian) with her fingers, producing a jouissance that unleashes her monstrous nature. Her androgynous appearance, constructed through the presentation of her body, clothing and movements, situates her in a phallic role understood as a symbolic function rather than an identification with masculinity. Throughout the film, the representation of this role discourages any essentialist reading: in contrast to the gym setting, Lou does not embody domination or aggression; instead, she appears vulnerable and pensive in response to her father's violence, revealing that this phallic role is defined in relational terms rather than in terms of identity. The editing brings the future lovers together in a form of bodily symmetry in a sequence where Lou masturbates face down on a sofa, which cuts to Jackie completing a transactional sexual encounter in a car with JJ (Dave Franco), in the hope that he will give her a job (later, in her monstrous form, she will kill JJ as punishment for abusing his wife).

Jackie's movements, clothing and behaviour are all explicitly feminine, but her bodybuilder's physique goes beyond heteronormative boundaries. She confesses that she wants her body to be even more excessive, and Lou assists her with her goal by administering a dose of steroids, thereby inscribing Jackie's body in a logic of chemical-political prosthesis characteristic of a pharmaco-pornographic era in which desire and identity are produced and regulated using biochemical technologies (Preciado, 2008). The penetration of the needle is followed by a kiss initiated by Jackie and a sex scene that awakens her mutating monstrous muscles (Images 4, 5).





**Images 4–5. The needle and sex as triggers for the monster**

Jackie trains, copulates, bites, kills, licks and vomits with a savage intensity. She drinks a dense, reddish protein mixture that resembles blood. Her monstrous body is not vampiric, demonic or bewitched, but what is monstrous about it is the strength of her muscles, which are antithetical to the feminine stereotype. A *mise-en-abyme* positions her as gigantic while her muscles continue

to grow, and the *mise-en-scène* depicts her as increasingly monstrous. Her body challenges gender norms and frames her as a threatening figure capable of extreme violence.

By the end of the film, both women have been labelled as "monstrous" by their families: Jackie by her mother and Lou by her sister. Lou rescues Jackie from her father's attempt to kidnap her, but he then tortures Lou, which triggers the mutation of Jackie's body into its final form (Image 6). Love provokes the ultimate transformation of her abject, gigantic, monstrous body, a mutation sparked by excess, forged out of repressed rage and rendered beautiful beneath the same stars shown in the opening credits. Her body has become irrepressible and she is possessed by a primordial force that places her on the boundary between the human and the indomitable, the supernatural and unbridled desire. Yet the visuals present this excess as beautiful, and the monster is revealed to be simply a female body at the limits of the normative, surrounded by the beauty of the cosmos, inscribed into a shot-reverse-shot from Lou's point of view.



Image 6. The body transforming

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Horror films about sapphic women can be classified into two subgenres, both of which are directly related to the construction of their characters: the psychological thriller and supernatural horror. The corpus analysed here reveals how these films redefine the political realism of desire proposed by new queer cinema through body horror and an aesthetic of excess, while embracing the fantastical elements of their classical heritage in order to reinterpret filmic spaces of symbolic and sensory creativity. In keeping with Judith Butler's call to "conceptualize the body in the field of politics" (2011: 385), the lesbian body of the contemporary monster is constructed as a political territory through the affirmation of the subject in her position of alterity and through the excess of desire. These films reinvent the horror genre at the narrative level, where the source of the terror is no longer the *Other* but the internal fracture of the self and the consequences of confronting it. Their protagonists are queer women who are not trying to love according to the conventional model; instead, they are consumed and exalted by a desire that overflows. The body becomes a surface for the inscription of desire, but also trauma, jouissance and the collapse of identity. The lesbian perspective interrogates the female character as a territory of autonomous desire rather than reducing her to an object of the male gaze or a mere fetish, and thus the use of the monstrous body explicitly involves both the camera and the narrative, not to victimise or demonise it, but to celebrate its contradictions and to hold it accountable for them.

The three paradigmatic films analysed here present the monstrous lesbian liberated from remorse or coercive correction. Rather than being subjugated to the moral position established by hetero-masculine power, the monster accepts the *otherness* of its unbridled sexuality in order to inhabit its own narrative. Instead of deliberately attempting to normalise the protagonists' homosexuality, these films integrate this aspect of the character in a transversal and organic way. The queer female body is thus not just a site of political struggle but also an opportunity to embrace the monstrous, the magical and the sublime through a vulnerable psychological alienation that collapses under the weight of desire and accepts it without regret. This collapse suspends the normative

THESE FILMS REINVENT THE HORROR GENRE AT THE NARRATIVE LEVEL, WHERE THE SOURCE OF THE TERROR IS NO LONGER THE OTHER BUT THE INTERNAL FRACTURE OF THE SELF AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF CONFRONTING IT

frameworks that organise subjectivity and the body, allowing excess to be inscribed as a form of agency rather than as a moral failing (Leo Bersani, 1995; Lee Edelman, 2014). In this way, the monster is neither corrected nor punished; instead, it inhabits an experience of jouissance that breaks down the disciplinary logic of the narrative and enables a queer conception of the body as a site of transformation, risk and affirmation of the *Other* (Barbara Creed, 1993; Julia Kristeva, 1982). Through horror, lesbian stories are told not merely through confession or discovery, but through eruption and the catharsis of excess, through an uncontrollable, magical desire.

The lost vulnerability of the lesbian bodies consumed and murdered in 1970s horror cinema is translated in contemporary films into the experience of victims of the system, who are resignified through monstrosity to avenge the violence inflicted by men and by society upon women, to protect themselves and to create a space for pleasure. In this sense, jouissance not only exceeds the normative economy of enjoyment but also activates a potentially queer dimension in its ego-dissolving nature, entailing a suspension of the integrity of the self (Bersani, 1995) by associating queer negativity with the death drive and resistance against reproductive regimes of meaning (Edelman, 2014 [2004]). While desire suggests a logic of lack and displacement, jouissance, in its Lacanian sense, points beyond the pleasure principle to an experience of excess that destabilises the subject. Queer bodies are simultaneously victims and weapons, objects of control and subjects of transformative violence. For Carol J. Clover, "the archetypal female monster is embodied in the figure of the rape-avenger. This character appears as the protagonist of the rape-revenge narrative structure, which usually depicts the transformation of a normal and defenceless woman into a ruthless murderer" (1992: 95). Since the vast majority of avenging female monsters are constructed from the perspective of the male gaze, Clover argues, they continue to perpetuate standards of sexualisation and spectacularisation of the female body through the representation of fetishised characters, as their discursive construction is based on the depiction of the fetishised actress's individuality (Holmes, 2005: 10). As Domènec Font suggests, "one of the most excruciating exercises in personality torture offered by cinema in recent decades is [...] the condition of the automaton as a frequently invoked trope in modern cinema, straddling the line between the pure state of the actor's body and the impossible anatomy of the character" (2002: 148). This is why the abject body of the monster in *Jennifer's Body*, *Thelma* and *Love Lies Bleeding* is constructed with an awareness of the star system and supported by the queer bodies of cast members such as Kristen Stewart and Megan Fox. The visible personal narratives of the actresses' sexuality outside the films become inscribed within them, acquiring symbolic value both for the characters and for the storylines. The body serves as a medium between the visible and the invisible, the rational and the uncontrollable.

The storyline constructs the body from the perspective of a female gaze that appeals to an awareness of and pride in abjection as a vessel of pleasure. The jouissance of the haptic is a particular feature of lesbian cinema, expressed in bodily contortions and skin textures, in the montages, dissolves and blurred images that characterise feminist art more broadly, but that acquire a particular resonance in lesbian art, articulated through metaphors for the body taken to the extreme, such as

demonic possession, supernatural repression and religious ecstasy. Bodies twist, vomit or levitate, swelling with a jouissance written as contrary to the hegemonic norm; rather than being displayed for voyeuristic desire, they are constructed haptically with detail shots showing them dismembered and stitched together, but never objectified. With these strategies, filmmaking becomes a tool of resistance, memory and the (re)imagining of the queer experience from the perspective of the abject and the monstrous. These films transform the archetype and challenge previous cinematic traditions that either rendered lesbians invisible or hypersexualised them as *Other* to turn them into fodder for fantasy. They acknowledge their cinematic heritage but do not require the explicit articulation of social conflict in order to construct their narratives, shifting it instead into a symbolic perceptual register of the image, articulated using formal and narrative techniques that operate on the body. The queer female body is thus constructed as political while at the same time challenging and breaking the normative boundaries of fantasy that attempt to contain it. ■

## NOTES

1 Funding: "Las creadoras en el audiovisual y sus redes. Un estudio de los vínculos como elemento de transformación y consolidación en la industria" [Women Audiovisual Creators and Their Networks: A Study of Bonds as an Element of Transformation and Consolidation in the Industry], Valencian government grant, PI: Jessica Izquierdo-Castillo, Code: 25I449.01/1.

2 An umbrella term derived from Sappho of Lesbos, covering the sexualities of cis and trans women who are attracted to other women: lesbian, bisexual and non-binary.

3 The information used to categorise the films has been taken from open databases [*IMDB*, *Filmaffinity* and *Letterboxd*]. Despite the theoretical disparities in relation to subgenres, it was decided to use the categorisations of these databases as a homogeneous source. For the classification, thematic lists have been used with labels such as LGTBIQ+ films featuring Sapphic women (lesbians and/or bisexual women), which have been verified with viewings, and from which the following data was extracted: year of release, genre, direction, production, earnings and nationality. The database compiled contains feature films released in the West (North America and Europe) in the years from 2000 to 2025. The three paradigmatic films chosen for the analysis were selected because they are more mainstream/accessible in terms of production, earnings and audience data taken from these databases and because each one was made in a different decade out of the three decades covered by the corpus.

4 "Sexual difference" is understood here to encompass non-male otherness and alienation due to homosexuality.

5 A magazine targeting a male readership that published an annual list of "The Sexiest Women in the World" based on subscriber surveys.

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## MONSTROUS LESBIANS: CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION IN THE CONTEMPORARY HORROR FILM


### Abstract

The *monstrous lesbian* archetype has evolved over course of the history of the horror film genre. Contemporary lesbian filmmakers engage with this heritage at a certain distance. The approach to this archetype depends on the subgenre: in supernatural horror it appears as a monstrous villain in the tradition of the vampiress of 1970s cinema, while in psychological thrillers it is depicted as a murderous femme fatale. In horror films, the construction of sapphic protagonists reflects an evolution of the archetype based on creative self-awareness and influences from cultural studies. Through the textual analysis of three paradigmatic films—*Jennifer's Body* (2009), *Thelma* (2017) and *Love, Lies, Bleeding* (2024)—with an interdisciplinary perspective combining lesbian film theory, aspects of queer film theory, psychoanalysis and film theory, this article examines the dynamics of narrative and character construction that establish the female body of the monster as a site of transgression, abjection and power. The construction of the monstrous is posited as a reflection of an internal break with the feminine, where the abject nature of the body involves the rejection of desire, with protagonists who subvert the traditional narrative and redefine the limits of their agency.



### Key words

Lesbian archetype; Film analysis; Character construction; Monstrous lesbian; Queer Cinema.



### Author

Lledó Morales Roig is a PhD student in Communication Sciences at Universitat Jaume I, a faculty member in the Audiovisual Communication degree program and a member of the OBCOP (Observatorio de Contenidos y Plataformas Mediáticas) and IRMA VEP (Investigación de los Recursos en los Medios Audiovisuales: Voces, Escrituras y Psicoanálisis) research groups. Her lines of research focus on the analysis of the construction of lesbian characters in contemporary film and television fiction narratives. She has also authored articles published in scholarly journals such as *Fotocinema* and *Asparkía*.



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## LESBIANAS MONSTRUOSAS: LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL PERSONAJE EN EL CINE DE TERROR CONTEMPORÁNEO


### Resumen

El arquetipo de la *lesbiana monstruosa* se ha construido a lo largo del cine de terror. El cine lésbico contemporáneo lo hereda desde cierta distancia. Se encuentra, dependiendo del subgénero del film, en el terror sobrenatural como una villana monstruosa, heredera de la vampira de los años 70 o en el thriller psicológico como una *femme fatale* asesina. En el cine de terror, las protagonistas sáficas se construyen evolucionando el arquetipo desde autoconsciencia creativa e influencias de los estudios culturales. A través del análisis textual de tres películas paradigmáticas: *El cuerpo de Jennifer* (2009), *Thelma* (2017) y *Sangre en los labios* (2024), con una perspectiva interdisciplinaria desde la teoría fílmica lésbica, que combina aspectos de la teoría fílmica *queer*, el psicoanálisis y la teoría fílmica, se examinan las dinámicas narrativas y de construcción de personajes que configuran el cuerpo femenino del monstruo como un espacio de transgresión, abyección y poder. Proponemos la construcción de lo monstruoso como reflejo de una escisión interna con lo femenino, donde lo abyecto del cuerpo pasa por el rechazo al deseo, con figuras protagonistas que subvierten la narrativa tradicional y redefinen los límites de su agencia.



### Palabras clave

Arquetipo lésbico; Análisis fílmico; Construcción de personaje; Lesbiana monstruosa; Cine Queer.



### Autor/a

Lledó Morales Roig (Almenara, 1999) es doctoranda en Ciencias de la Comunicación por la Universitat Jaume I, PDI en el grado de Comunicación Audiovisual y miembro de los grupos de investigación OBCOP [Observatorio de Contenidos y Plataformas Mediáticas] e IRMA VEP [Investigación de los Recursos en los Medios Audiovisuales: Voces, Escrituras y Psicoanálisis]. Sus líneas de investigación se centran en el análisis de la construcción de personajes lésbicos en narrativas contemporáneas de ficción cinematográfica y televisiva. Es autora de artículos publicados en revistas científicas como *Fotocinema* o *Asparkía*.



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# GLORY IN DEFEAT AND RECONCILIATION: THE CONFEDERACY IN THE FILMS OF JOHN FORD

NEKANE E. ZUBIAUR GOROZIKA

## 1. THE TRACES OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR IN THE FILMOGRAPHY OF JOHN FORD

At the beginning of *The Prisoner of Shark Island* (John Ford, 1936), Abraham Lincoln (Frank McGlynn Sr.) steps out wearily onto the balcony of the White House to greet a cheering crowd celebrating the end of the Civil War. Instead of delivering a speech he has not had time to prepare, he asks the band there to play "Dixie". In this way, "Lincoln instinctually attempts to rechannel the duty with which the war was fought into a policy of reconciliation", effectively claiming the unofficial Confederate anthem[1] "for *all* Americans. But other factions instinctually feel that duty demands revenge: Lincoln is assassinated" (Gallagher, 1986: 132). Ford portrays the assassination, carried out by the Southern sympathiser John Wilkes Booth, in the very next sequence. "He was assassinated, but the Union is not assassinated [...]. Death does its work, obliterates a hundred, a thousand—President, general, captain, private—but the nation is immortal," wrote Walt Whitman in "Death of President Lincoln" (1887: 107). Preserving the national unity was Lincoln's chief obsession during the fratricidal conflict that tore the United States in two from 1861 to 1865. The consequences of that obsession were his own assassination and the deaths of 620,000 soldiers on both sides, as well as the emancipation of four million enslaved Black people and the amendment of the Constitution in an effort to consolidate the principles of equality and freedom.

Abraham Lincoln is a recurring figure in John Ford's filmography[2], an oeuvre that takes US history as one of its central concerns. According to Santos Zunzunegui, Ford engages in a "mythic transubstantiation" of his country's history through the exploration of two themes:

> On the one hand, the Westward journey, a primordial odyssey that condenses the whole adventure of a colonisation whose dark underbelly is the elimination of the *Other* who inhabited those lands

> [...]. On the other, the drama of the fracture caused by a civil war of unprecedented violence that pitted a North attuned to democratic values and marked by an economically advanced capitalism against a South struggling to survive by upholding obsolete aristocratic principles through the exploitation of a people (the Black population) who have been relegated to animal status" (2021: 136-137).

Despite their shared origins, language and constitution, profound differences existed between these two regions. "Mid-century Southerners proclaimed themselves to be a superior breed to Northerners, preserving the agrarian way of life on which the republic had been founded at the Revolution and led by a breed of cultivated gentlemen who better resembled the Founding Fathers than the money-grubbing capitalists who dominated public life in the North. The South's poorer classes, too, sons of the soil and outdoorsmen, were held to be superior to their equivalents in the North, whose lives were confined by factory walls and who were often not native-born but immigrants, sometimes not English-speaking, and Catholic rather than Protestant" (Keegan, 2010: 28). Confederate President Jefferson Davis declared that the reason for secession was to defend and protect the rights bequeathed to them by their forebears: the right to own slaves (which after all was not prohibited by law), the freedom to carry their *property* into other territories, and the sovereignty of the states to form a Southern nation. The North, meanwhile, fought for the Union, for democracy and, ultimately, for the emancipation of the slaves (McPherson, 1988).

Historical records speak in equal measure of expressions of goodwill and animosity between Johnny Reb and Billy Yank[3]. "Americans remained American. Accent apart [...], the soldiers of the two sides resembled each other much more than they differed" (Keegan, 2010: 8). Yet it is striking, for example, to note the absence of Confederate graves in the Gettysburg Cemetery, given that the Federal government often dug mass graves to bury rebels who had died on Northern territory (Keegan, 2010: 81). In the South, Andersonville Prison effectively became an extermination centre for Yankee prisoners of war, who died in their thousands from disease or starvation. After the end of the war and Lincoln's assassination, Northerners became seized by suspicion of their Southern neighbours: "the whole of the reconstruction era was clouded by the feeling that these Southerners just were not to be trusted. They were men to be feared, men to be watched, men to be controlled by force, and a bitterness and estrangement flared up that took generations to die down" (Catton, 1986: 102).

Ford was an avid reader of books on the Civil War and possessed a thorough knowledge of its history. However, he directed only two films set explicitly in the period: *The Horse Soldiers* (1959) and the chapter titled "The Civil War" in the anthology film *How the West Was Won* (John Ford, Henry Hathaway and George Marshall, 1962). *The Horse Soldiers* explores the second theme identified by Zunzunegui. Based on the novel by Harold Sinclair, it recounts the raid of Southern territory carried out by three Union cavalry regiments under the command of Colonel Benjamin H. Grierson: who travelled approximately five hundred miles over sixteen days, from La Grange in Tennessee to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, destroying all the railroads, telegraph wires and Confederate supplies they came upon along the way in support of the decisive siege of Vicksburg led by General Ulysses S. Grant in 1863.

The film includes two epic sequences that glorify the spirit of resistance of Southerners. The first of these depicts a death-defying attack launched by a small group of rebels against Colonel Marlowe (John Wayne)—Grierson's alter ego in the film—and his men after they capture the Newton station, the primary objective of the mission. The surprise offensive is orchestrated by Colonel Jonathan Miles (Carleton Young), whose face, shown

ALTHOUGH IT ADOPTS THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE UNION SIDE, *THE HORSE SOLDIERS* INCLUDES TWO EPIC SEQUENCES THAT GLORIFY THE SPIRIT OF RESISTANCE OF SOUTHERNERS

through a windowpane, fuses with the reflection of a train loaded with Confederate soldiers ready to attack Marlowe's regiment (Image 1). The shot composition here is reminiscent of the famous shot in the final sequence of *Fort Apache* (1948) showing the ghostly reflection of the cavalry soldiers cut down by Cochise superimposed over the image of Captain York (John Wayne), who resolves not to reveal Lieutenant Colonel Thursday's (Henry Fonda) culpability for the massacre to the press and shares only the glorious legend of those men who put duty and loyalty to the army above their own lives (Image 2).

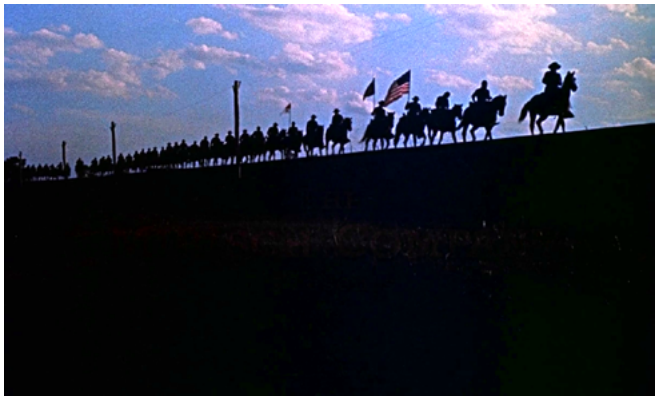
Images 1 and 2





The second sequence—one of the true highlights of the film—shows a corps of underage cadets from the Jefferson Military Academy marching with assurance in perfect formation to confront Marlowe's troops. The low camera angle, enhancing the image of their small figures silhouetted against the sky, recalls the image of the Northern soldiers at the beginning of the film (Images 3 and 4)[4].





Images 3 and 4

Although the film is relatively faithful to historical events, both the sequences described above depict fictitious events; the second sequence does not even appear in John Lee Mahin and Martin Rackin's screenplay, suggesting it was entirely John Ford's creation (York, 2001: 94)[5]. Overall, the film focuses on the dedication and sacrifice of Union soldiers, so these two sequences introduce an apparent contradiction—one that, moreover, runs throughout Ford's oeuvre.

*The Horse Soldiers* and "The Civil War" chapter in *How the West Was Won* are Ford's only two films that focus directly on the war[6]. Both are aligned with the cause of the North, and in both "the filmmaker's position is critical of the destruction and cruelty that war entails", although "he considers it an indispensable sacrifice to keep the nation united" (Zubiaur, 2026: 269). Yet referencesto the conflict can be found in much of his filmography, which is filled with memorable Confederate characters. This article traces the presence of the American Civil War in Ford's films other than the two aforementioned titles, analysing the portrait this Maine-born filmmaker offers of the opposing side: the defeated Confederates. The working hypothesis is that Ford glorifies certain features of the Southern temperament in order to reinforce the ideas of national unity and reconciliation championed by Abraham Lincoln during his brief yet decisive presidency.

## 2. THE CONFEDERACY IN FORD'S FILMS

Ford's Confederate characters can be organised into three categories based on their personal traits and situations: redeemed outcasts; Kentucky judges; and Confederates in his Cavalry Trilogy.

### 2.1. Redeemed outcasts

The protagonist of *The Prisoner of Shark Island*, Samuel Alexander Mudd (Warner Baxter), is the doctor who treated John Wilkes Booth's injured leg when he was on the run after assassinating Lincoln. A victim of the irrational climate of hatred and vengeance that spread across the country in the wake of the president's death, Mudd is sentenced to life imprisonment as an accomplice to murder by a hastily arranged court martial in which even the most basic due process was disregarded. Despite being tortured by his jailers on the Dry Tortugas islands, he ends up saving their lives during an outbreak of yellow fever when he steps in for the prison doctor after his death.

FORD'S CONFEDERATE CHARACTERS CAN BE ORGANISED INTO THREE CATEGORIES: REDEEMED OUTCASTS; KENTUCKY JUDGES; AND CONFEDERATES IN HIS CAVALRY TRILOGY

Mudd's behaviour reflects his status as an honourable Southern man. He assists Booth (Francis McDonald) without knowing his identity and combats an epidemic that is killing his enemies without any promise of reward, guided solely by a sense of duty. He shows concern for the welfare of his slaves, and unlike the Yankees, he knows how to convince some Black soldiers who have mutinied in the fort to return to their posts. In the end, he leads an artillery attack against a government vessel in order to force it to unload the provisions and medicines they so urgently need. His redemption arrives in the form of a presidential pardon.

Historical research has found evidence that the real Samuel Mudd was in fact a member of a clandestine network of Confederate sympathisers through which he met Booth; however, the extent of his involvement in the assassination remains unclear. Thus, *"The Prisoner of Shark Island* perhaps should be approached more for its mythic qualities than for its claims of historical accuracy [...] as an allegory about the need to 'bind up the nation's wounds'" (McBride, 2003: 256).

Other redeemed outcasts appear in two of John Ford's most acclaimed Westerns. The first is without doubt the most memorable of Ford's characters of this kind: the tormented Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in *The Searchers*, whose background as a Confederate soldier is crucial to understanding his dark and complex personality. Ford is "the filmmaker of what is left unsaid, of what can be seen but cannot be explained" (Viota, 2019: 209), and also of what can be heard. Kathryn Kalinak points out that the choice of musical

ETHAN EDWARDS'S BACKGROUND AS A CONFEDERATE SOLDIER IS CRUCIAL TO UNDERSTANDING HIS DARK AND COMPLEX PERSONALITY

accompaniment for the scene of Ethan's arrival at his brother's ranch at the beginning of the film establishes the character's defeated condition from the outset (2007: 167). His sister-in-law Martha (Dorothy Jordan) opens the door as if anticipating his return, while we hear the strains of J. P. Webster's "Lorena", whose lyrics tell the story of a love affair thwarted by a prohibition. Martha gazes into the distance and glimpses Ethan approaching on horseback, while the tune to "Lorena" gives way to the melody of the Confederate anthem "The Bonnie Blue Flag". As Ethan dismounts and greets his brother, we hear once again the tune to the film's theme song (composed by Stan Jones), which we heard moments earlier over the opening credits with its lyrics asking: "What makes a man to wander? What makes a man to roam?".

The opening caption inserted by Ford, which was not included in Frank S. Nugent's original script, indicates the setting as "Texas, 1868". Texas is a former Confederate state now rocked by a battle for territory between settlers and Native Americans. The South lost the American Civil War three years earlier, yet Ethan still wears his Confederate sabre and greatcoat because he says he doesn't believe in surrendering. He also fought for Emperor Maximilian in Mexico (another lost cause), and now he has returned to a home that is not his own after years of running away from his longing for Martha. "Lorena", a song that was especially popular in the South, alludes to this unconsummated yet requited love, as revealed by the way Martha caresses Ethan's Confederate coat before they part for the last time. It is the same coat that will later serve as a shroud for her daughter Lucy (Pippa Scott).

This emotional wound is "what shapes his character and establishes the analogy that runs throughout the story: while Scar—the Native American chief who rapes, mutilates and murders Martha and her family and takes [his niece] Debbie as his own—derives his name from the scar across his face, Ethan carries an internal scar of his own inside him, as the alter ego of the 'redskin' he pursues relentlessly for nearly seven years" (Zunzunegui, 2016: 43). Ethan does not get the chance to kill Scar himself, but he does scalp his corpse, just as Scar did to Martha. Zunzunegui observes that Ford repeatedly conceals the eyes of the protagonist, a man blinded by hatred and vengeance. When he finally finds Debbie (Natalie Wood), the object of his obsessive search, he lifts her into his arms with the intention of killing her. In this way, he repeats an act we see at the beginning of the film, when he mistakes Debbie for her elder sister, Lucy; now, the tune to "Lorena" accompanies the moment he recognises her as Martha's daughter (2016: 26).

"Ethan's physical search is only a search for himself, to come to terms with his own solitude. And the search will resolve not with the death of Scar [...], but with a transmutation of Ethan's violence, solitude and racism into love, community and (the antonym of racism?) fraternity" (Gallagher, 1986: 408). Ethan takes Debbie back to the Jorgensen ranch, yet he remains outside. His redemption cannot be complete. The actions of this brutal and violent man secure the future of the settlers in Texas through his nephew Martin (Jeffrey Hunter)—who is one-eighth Cherokee—and his niece Debbie, who was raised by the Comanche. But his scars are too deep and his sins too grave for him to enter that civilised world. He must continue to "search his heart and soul".

Hatfield (John Carradine), the gambler in *Stagecoach*, is Ford's other former Confederate soldier who finds redemption—in this case, on a journey through Monument Valley. Spurned by all the respectable establishments and hinted to

have shot a man in the back, he occupies the same social space as other marginalised characters, such as the outlaw Ringo (John Wayne), the prostitute Dallas (Claire Trevor) and the alcoholic doctor Josiah Boone (Thomas Mitchell), who are in fact the most morally upright characters in the film. Yet he is as disdainful and prejudiced towards them as the Virginia belle Lucy Mallory (Louise Platt), under whose father he served in the war and whom he offers to protect on the journey.

At the end of the film, we discover that he is actually the son of an eminent judge named Ringfield, and it may be surmised that as a Southern gentleman, he changed his surname upon becoming a gambler so as not to dishonour his family name. Hatfield fights bravely alongside the other passengers during the Apache attack on the stagecoach, thereby recovering the dignity of his past, but he dies at the very moment he intends to use his last bullet to spare Lucy Mallory the torture—and implied dishonour—of being captured by the Native Americans[7].

Like the protagonist in "The Civil War", Lucy enacts the two movements described by Zunzunegui (North-South and East-West): she marries a Union captain despite her Southern lineage, and she travels out west to join him. She thus embodies the symbolic healing of the wound that has torn the country apart, a wound represented throughout the film by the mutual hostility between the Confederate Hatfield and the Unionist Doc Boone. The nation cannot be rebuilt upon the ideological foundations of the South, and so Hatfield must die while Lucy must survive. She is rescued at the very last moment by the cavalry—a detail that is far from insignificant, as will be discussed below.

### 2.2. Kentucky judges

Kentucky, the birthplace of both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis and a border state between the North and the South, was a slave state in 1861. Although its governor declared neutrality in the war, both sides regarded it as part of their respective territories, and Kentuckians enlisted as volunteers in both armies.

John Ford set two films in this contested territory featuring the judge Billy Priest, a character created by Irvin S. Cobb. Both stories, suffused with lyricism and humour, take place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Fairfield, a placid, old-fashioned town whose black and white communities coexist in harmony—though not in equality—and where the achievements of the Confederacy are still commemorated.

In *Judge Priest* (1934), Will Rogers portrays a plain-spoken, ironic and astute judge who is more concerned with goodness and justice than with the letter of the law or social conventions, a philosopher of life who challenges class divisions and the intolerance of the community. When the blacksmith Robert Gillis (David Landau), an outsider with a mysterious past, is wrongfully accused of assaulting the town barber, Priest ensures his acquittal with the testimony of Reverend Brand (Henry B. Walthall)[8]. During the trial, the reverend explains that Gillis had been recruited from the prison where he was serving a life sentence to fight in the war, but that he had demonstrated great heroism, rescuing an enemy soldier and even fighting Union artillery single-handedly. The strains of "Dixie", performed by an African American band orchestrated by Priest, accompany the conclusion of his testimony, which culminates in riotous cheers all round and brings the proceedings to an end: no further evidence of Gillis's innocence is required. "Combining a celebration of brotherhood under fire with a shameless manipulation of the jury's Confederate sympathies is the judge's way of

PRIEST A PLAIN-SPOKEN, IRONIC AND ASTUTE JUDGE WHO IS MORE CONCERNED WITH GOODNESS AND JUSTICE THAN WITH THE LETTER OF THE LAW OR SOCIAL CONVENTIONS

bringing the community together while acknowledging and subtly mocking the enduring strength of their prejudices" (McBride, 2003: 211).

During this testimony, flashbacks to the events of the war are superimposed over the image of the reverend, who is positioned in the bottom left corner of the screen. Ford sometimes maintains this off-centre composition even when there are no flashbacks; the empty space is then filled by a portrait hanging on the wall behind him of Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, so nicknamed because his troops held back Union forces like a "stone wall" at the First Battle of Bull Run (1861). Endowed with an aura of invincibility after defeating a numerically superior army in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley (1862) (McPherson, 1988: 460), Jackson became the embodiment of the kind of respect that Priest recognised and sought to command.



Image 5

The picture of "Stonewall" also presides over the Fairfield county courthouse in *The Sun Shines Bright*, Ford's 1953 update to *Judge Priest*. The Billy Priest portrayed by Charles Winninger displays the same humanist attitude as his predecessor, though he is older, more cynical, and more overtly concerned with politics. He is running for re-election against Maydew (Milburn Stone), an arrogant Yankee who wants to do away with the old Southern values—"the doddering relics of a lost cause"—that characterise Priest's approach as a judge. Priest senses the threat posed by the progress advocated by his opponent, yet he cannot help but challenge the intolerance and hypocrisy of his fellow citizens with actions that jeopardise his re-election, such as stopping a mob from lynching a young Black man and leading the procession at the funeral for a prostitute, which he himself officiates.

This funeral constitutes one of the most moving instances of community reconciliation in Ford's filmography. Priest walks alone behind the coffin, accompanied only by the women from the brothel; however, after overcoming their initial astonishment, the town's respectable citizens begin to join him. It is significant that the first to support the judge's defiant gesture is Joe Habersham (Henry O'Neill), the head of the local chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic, the Union veterans' association. In an earlier sequence, the Confederate veterans led by Priest open their meeting by saluting both the Union and Confederate flags. Habersham interrupts the meeting to politely request the return of the flag stolen from his association. Priest solemnly carries the flag to the Grand Army of the Republic headquarters, where Habersham alludes to some tattered Confederate flags that Ford respectfully leaves outside the frame. The whole episode is a stratagem devised by the astute Priest in an attempt to secure votes in otherwise inaccessible quarters, but his message, applauded by the old Yankees, is unequivocally conciliatory: "Those Confederate flags and *our* national standard are what has made this Union great." Priest leaves the place on his own, shrouded in shadow. He pauses beside some old disused cannons and offers an ironic salute to a campaign poster for Maydew. A choir is heard singing the Union song "Tenting on the Old Camp Ground": "Many are the hearts that are weary tonight, wishing for the war to cease. Many are the hearts that are looking for the right to see the dawn of peace."

The community ultimately acknowledges Priest's good judgement by re-electing him, but after the parade held in his honour he disappears into the darkness of his house as if he were walking into the sunset. Priest belongs to a world that is now obsolete.

### 2.3. Confederates in the Cavalry Trilogy

The films *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) and *Rio Grande* (1950) are referred to as the "Cavalry Trilogy", although they were not originally conceived of as such. All three films are based on stories published in *The Saturday Evening Post* by James Warner Bellah, whom McBride describes as "an unreconstructed Southern white supremacist" (2003: 449). Set after the American Civil War during the period of westward expansion, they recount the vicissitudes of cavalry regiments stationed on the frontier.

"Ford's view of the cavalry is not ethnocentric, however, but an acknowledgement of American cultural diversity" (McBride, 2003: 454). That diversity included Confederates. In *Fort Apache*, the Mexican actor Pedro Armendáriz plays a former Confederate soldier, Sergeant Beaufort, who is entrusted with such essential duties as training new recruits and serving as an interpreter for the Native Americans. However, perhaps the most compelling Southern character in the trilogy is Sergeant Tyree (Ben Johnson) in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. The film's protagonist, Captain Nathan Brittles (John Wayne), is an accomplished Union army veteran on the verge of retirement. Abby Allshard (Mildred Natwick), the wife of his superior, nicknames him "Marching Through Georgia", after a song commemorating General William T. Sherman's March to the Sea (1863-1864), a military campaign in which Brittles may have taken part, which devastated Southern states such as Georgia and the Carolinas. Despite this background, the veteran Yankee captain places his trust in the former Confederate soldier Tyree. A swift and skilled horseman, Tyree rides ahead of the column to scout the territory; he sees everything before Brittles does and he is the only subordinate whose opinion the captain seeks, even though Tyree is reluctant to offer it because, he says, his mother "didn't raise any sons to be making guesses before a captain". He is also the only one to accompany Brittles on his final mission—significantly, a peace mission—in which the captain must negotiate with the old Native American chief Pony-That-Walks (Chief John Big Tree) to avert a war desired only by the younger generations. "Tyree is the perfect solitary figure, silhouetted on horseback against the impressionistic skies of *She Wore*.... He is a man who has no need of others, who excludes himself; in this sense, he resembles Ethan. Yet others do need both men. Ford's astuteness lies in embodying such a character in a professional soldier, contrary to the cliché of the army as a space of subjugation. Tyree serves as evidence that a man can be free in any situation" (Viota, 2022: 245-246).

Brittles and Tyree share one of the film's most moving moments in a burial scene, a ritual often featured in Ford's films, which, like all the ceremonies he portrays, serves to reinforce the bonds that unite the community. The stagecoach post at Sudrow's Wells has been torched by Cheyenne warriors, who killed the couple who ran it and mortally wounded a trooper named John Smith (Rudy Bowman), a man too old for such a low rank. As Brittles and Tyree attend him in his final moments, the tune to "Dixie" begins to play, as softly as a lullaby. In his dying breaths, the old soldier addresses Tyree as "captain". The scene that follows clarifies what Ford has already subtly hinted to those attentive enough to have noticed. The regiment gathers at dusk around the coffin of their fallen comrade, shown in a high-angle long shot that has something of a painterly quality (Image 6). Ford then cuts to a medium shot centred on Brittles as he commends to God the soul of Rome Clay, a brigadier general in the Confederate army (Image 7). He then grants Tyree permission







Images 6, 7 and 8

to place upon the coffin a makeshift Confederate flag sewn by the wife of the Union commander Allshard—who says she is "proud to do it"—out of her red petticoats (Image 8). Through a simple yet revealing change of shot, Ford foregrounds the honourable gesture of the Union captain who restores to his former enemy not only his identity ("John Smith" is of course a pseudonym) but also the dignity of his rank.

In *Rio Grande*, Ben Johnson would also play the role of a cavalryman named Tyree, who in this case is a noble young Texan arrested for killing a Yankee soldier who insulted his sister—once again invoking the Southern code of honour. Although he manages to escape, he decides to return to the company to help them rescue children abducted by Apache warriors. The true protagonists of the film, however, are Lieutenant Colonel Kirby Yorke (John Wayne) and his wife Kathleen (Maureen O'Hara), who separated fifteen years earlier after set fire to her family's plantation in the Shenandoah Valley during the American Civil War, on orders from the Union general Philip H. Sheridan[9]. Their son, Jeff (Claude Jarman Jr.), whom Kirby barely knows, has enlisted in the army and has been assigned to his father's regiment. Kathleen arrives at the fort determined to remove her son from a military institution that has already taken her husband from her, but the embers of an enduring love and the strength of familial bonds—between the Yorkes, but also between the members of the cavalry—ultimately lead her to accept defeat. The couple's reconciliation is expressed in a symbolic exchange of objects related to their old hostilities: Kathleen has ironed Kirby's uniform, and he pays her for it with ten Confederate dollars, whose only value lies in the fact that he has preserved them. She, in turn, gives him his change in Union coins—the very coins she had intended to use to pay for Jeff's release from the army—thereby returning their son to Kirby and reuniting the family.

The most significant peace-making gesture, however, occurs between Kathleen and General Philip H. Sheridan (J. Carroll Naish), a Union hero whose victory in the Battle of Cedar Creek constituted "the most notable example of personal bat-

tlefield leadership in the war" (McPherson, 1988: 779): Sheridan rode his horse Rienzi for fifteen miles to rally his troops and counterattack, completely routing Jubal Early's rebel forces. Along with Sherman, he was also among the Union generals most reviled by the Confederates for implementing a brutal scorched-earth policy in the Shenandoah Valley in 1864. In one of his conversations with Kirby, who is still under his command, the general ponders with regret how history will judge his actions in Shenandoah. However, at the end of the film he assuages his doubts and finds redemption through two conciliatory acts: first, he



Image 9

allows the brave Southern soldier Tyree to escape from the sheriff on his swift horse; and second, he orders the band to play "Dixie" during the parade to honour the soldiers who have rescued the kidnapped children. Kirby, long divided between two incompatible allegiances—the Union army and his Confederate wife—now stands between them as a kind of bridge or conduit (Image 9).

Sheridan and Kathleen share an Irish background, and Paulino Viota has suggested that the idea of "Dixie" may have occurred to the general during a serenade performed for him earlier in the film, when the regiment band plays "By the Glenside", a song celebrating the Irish Fenian independence movement. The song was actually composed in 1916, many years after the period depicted in the film. This anachronism, almost certainly deliberate on the part of a filmmaker as knowledgeable about popular music as Ford was, *must* carry a deeper meaning: Sheridan, "moved by the Irish separatists who were so dear to him, may perhaps have come to understand the American separatists he had so despised" (2019: 305).

## 3. CONCLUSIONS

Sheridan's gesture in *Rio Grande* mirrors Lincoln's in *The Prisoner of Shark Island*, mentioned at the beginning of this article. For Ford, Abraham Lincoln is "the archetypal figure of justice, a man who dispenses legal wisdom with a priestlike humor, charity and tolerance. He is the forefather of the Fordian lineage of folksy, humane judges and politicians that also includes Judge Priest and Mayor Skeffington" (McBride, 2003: 302).

The foundation of the American nation is one of the central themes of Ford's filmography. The two movements identified by Zunzunegui—from East to West and from the North against the South—trace a kind of cross over the American landscape, marking "the ossuary upon which the national project grew, which had its true crucible in those first movements" (2021: 137). Ford had already placed President Lincoln at the centre of this cross in one of his first major films, *The Iron Horse* (1924). The film's final sequence depicts the moment when the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads were connected at Promontory Point, Utah, on 10 May 1869, linking the east and west coasts for the first time. This was a project promoted by Lincoln during the war, reflecting his intention to build a shared future for the whole country in an effort to heal the scars left by the war. Lincoln consistently proclaimed that this national project was a "house" that could not stand while it was divided against itself[10], and that a sense of brotherhood and unity among Americans was essential to the nation's progress.

The admiring and redemptive portrayal of Confederate characters in Ford's films is in line with this philosophy of reconciliation. Ford praises Southern soldiers and adherents to the Confederate cause for their loyalty, sense of duty, spirit of freedom and perseverance. Although geography allowed them to pursue a purely defensive strategy, the Southerners "really did believe in their ability to defeat superior numbers of Yankees. [...] Southerners wanted to invade the unseceding states and win victories on their soil, not just oppose Northern advances into the Confederacy" (Keegan, 2010: 83). "It seems probable [...] that, had food been available and if numbers had sufficed, [Confederate General Lee] might well have gone on resisting, as would many of his men" (Keegan, 2010: 347).

That resistance was associated with the feelings that McPherson (1997) suggests compensated for the fear, fatigue and homesickness that affected soldiers on both sides right from the beginning of the war: camaraderie and group cohesion, but above all duty, honour and love for their homeland. These are qualities that Ford assigns particular value; it is no coincidence that the Fordian hero, characterised by his rectitude and sense of justice, feels a duty to support his community and even sacrifice himself for it on a pilgrimage towards redemption (Gallagher, 1986: 496). Moreover, Confederate characters represent another recurring motif in Ford's work: "defeat, failure: the tragedy of it, but also the peculiar glory inherent in it" (Bogdanovich, 1978: 23).

After the war, it was necessary to ease the hostilities between brothers and rebuild the country. In this sense, Ford's work depicts the colonisation of the West "as a space for national expansion and construction", while the vertical axis of the cross described by Zunzunegui is understood as "a scar that at a given moment ran through the social body". The traces of this scar, which mark several of Ford's Southern characters, "must be erased through the reabsorption of one community (in this case, the former Confederate states) into another that was more open and inclusive" (2021: 137). This reabsorption was achieved precisely in the context of the westward expansion that sparked new brutal confrontations, this time with the Native Americans. The spirit of familial community that Ford attributes to the army, and more specifically to the cavalry, provides the ideal context for Yankee and Confederate soldiers to forget their differences, share a sense of loyalty and camaraderie, and fight side by side for a new shared goal.

THE SPIRIT OF FAMILIAL COMMUNITY THAT FORD ATTRIBUTES TO THE CAVALRY PROVIDES THE IDEAL CONTEXT FOR YANKEE AND CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS TO FORGET THEIR DIFFERENCES

At the end of *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, when Tyree comes to Brittles—who believes he is already retired—with the notice of his new appointment, Brittles looks at the notice and sees the signatures of the generals who won the war: Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, and Philip H. Sheridan.[11] "There's three aces for you, boy!" he exclaims. Tyree replies that he kind of wished it had been a full hand, with a fourth ace: Robert E. Lee's signature. Brittles smiles and replies: "Wouldn't have been bad." The two men then ride back to the fort, two indistinguishable silhouettes against the twilight: just two riders crossing the plains of Monument Valley together. ■

## NOTES

1 This was despite the fact it had been composed by a Northerner, Daniel Decatur Emmett, a detail that was very much in keeping with Lincoln's unifying ambitions.

2 There are eight Ford films in which the president either physically appears or is referred to: *The Iron Horse* (1924), *Mother Machree* (1927), *Young Mr. Lin-*

*coln* (1939), *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960), the "The Civil War" chapter in *How the West Was Won* (1962), *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964).

3 Generic appellations used to designate Confederate rebels and Yankee Unionists, respectively.

4 Both examples reflect Ford's habitual practice, characteristic of poetic language, of establishing symmetries and correspondences between situations, gestures or compositions within a single film or across multiple films, contributing to the overall construction of the productions and enriching his filmography as a whole (Viota, 2022).

5 This sequence was inspired by a real event: the participation of the cadets from the Virginia Military Institute in the Battle of New Market in May 1864, following Grierson's Raid.

6 The limited nature of this material may explain why the subject of the American Civil War has not aroused much interest among Ford scholars.

7 A few moments earlier, Hatfield drapes his cloak over the body of a young white woman assaulted by the Native Americans, just as Ethan will do when he finds his niece.

8 Walthall was the actor who played the "Little Colonel" in *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915).

9 In *The Horse Soldiers*, the Union cavalryman Colonel Marlowe also falls in love with a Southern lady, Hannah Hunter, although the film never clarifies the fate of this romance, whose musical accompaniment is, inevitably, "Lorena". The vicissitudes of the Yorkes' marriage also evoke elements of Ford's own marriage to Mary Smith, whose family's plantation in South Carolina was burnt down by General Sherman's troops.

10 From a speech delivered in 1858 at the Illinois Republican Party Convention.

11 Grant and Sherman appear in *The Horse Soldiers* and "The Civil War", so all three generals mentioned here have a physical presence in Ford's filmography.

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## GLORY IN DEFEAT AND RECONCILIATION: THE CONFEDERACY IN THE FILMS OF JOHN FORD

**Abstract**

John Ford only directed two films set during the American Civil War, and although it was a subject of particular interest to him, the impact of this historical event on his work has received very little scholarly attention. This article traces the presence of the American Civil War in Ford's filmography and, more specifically, analyses the portrayal of Confederate characters, whose ideological perspectives diametrically oppose his own. These characters fall into three categories: redeemed outcasts, Kentucky judges, and Confederates in his Cavalry Trilogy. These characters exhibit a number of the traits that the American filmmaker particularly valued, such as a sense of duty, resilience and honour in defeat. Their relationships with characters who had fought on the Union side, especially in the cavalry films, reveal Ford's affinity with the philosophy of fraternity and reconciliation promulgated by Lincoln during his brief term of office and suggest that the army is an ideal context for implementing it.

**Key words**

John Ford; American Civil War; Confederacy; Historical Film; Cavalry Trilogy.

**Author**

Nekane E. Zubiaur Gorozika holds a PhD in Audiovisual Communication from Universidad del País Vasco / Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea (EHU), where she lectures in the Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising. Her lines of research focus on Spanish film history and film analysis. She is the author of various articles published in scholarly journals, including *Signa*, *Fotocinema* and *Arte, individuo y sociedad*. She has also published the books *Anatomía de un cineasta pasional. El cine de Manuel Mur Oti* (Shangrila, 2013), *Peter Weir* (Cátedra, 2013) and *Cortometrajes de Kimuak. Semillas del cine vasco* (Comunicación Social, 2014, co-authored with Ainhoa Fernández de Arroyabe and Iñaki Lazkano). Contact: nekaneerritte.zubiaur@ehu.eus

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## GLORIA EN LA DERROTA Y RECONCILIACIÓN. LA CONFEDERACIÓN EN EL CINE DE JOHN FORD

**Resumen**

John Ford solo dirigió dos películas ambientadas en la Guerra de Secesión y, aunque es un tema que a él le interesaba particularmente, la impronta de dicho acontecimiento histórico en su obra apenas ha sido estudiada. Este artículo rastrea las huellas de la Guerra Civil en su filmografía y analiza más concretamente el retrato que Ford esbozó de los personajes confederados, contrarios a sus propios postulados ideológicos. Dichos personajes se dividen en tres categorías: los marginados redimidos, los jueces de Kentucky y los confederados de la trilogía de la caballería. Los perfiles de estos personajes muestran algunos de los rasgos que el cineasta norteamericano estimaba especialmente, como el sentido del deber, la resistencia y el honor en la derrota. Las relaciones que mantienen con los personajes del bando de la Unión, especialmente en las películas de la caballería, revelan la afinidad de Ford con la filosofía de fraternidad y reconciliación que Lincoln promulgó durante su breve mandato y señalan al ejército como marco idóneo para desarrollarla.

**Palabras clave**

John Ford; Guerra de Secesión; Confederación; Cine de historia; Trilogía de la caballería.

**Autora**

Nekane E. Zubiaur Gorozika (Bilbao, 1979) es doctora en Comunicación Audiovisual por la Universidad del País Vasco / Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea (EHU), y profesora agregada en el departamento de Comunicación Audiovisual y Publicidad de la misma universidad. Sus líneas de investigación se centran en la historia del cine español y el análisis fílmico. Es autora de diversos artículos publicados en revistas científicas como *Signa*, *Fotocinema* o *Arte, individuo y sociedad*. Ha publicado los libros *Anatomía de un cineasta pasional. El cine de Manuel Mur Oti* (Shangrila, 2013), *Peter Weir* (Cátedra, 2013) o *Cortometrajes de Kimuak. Semillas del cine vasco* (Comunicación Social, 2014, junto a Ainhoa Fernández de Arroyabe e Iñaki Lazkano). Contacto: nekaneerritte.zubiaur@ehu.eus

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# BEYOND REPRESENTATION: CINEMATIC INTERTEXTUALITY AS AN AESTHETIC POLITICS OF RESISTANCE IN THE FILMS OF JORDAN PEELE

DAMIAN ESTEBAN BRETONES

## INTRODUCTION

The opening credits to Jordan Peele's *Nope* (2022) conclude with a direct allusion to *The Horse in Motion* (Eadweard Muybridge, 1878), widely regarded as a landmark work for the development of filmmaking. This foundational reference—examined in detail later in this article—introduces a central theme of the film: the figure of the Black jockey, rendered invisible in film history, and his descendants. In this way, Peele questions the very logic of the cinematic archive: which images are canonised, which are rendered invisible, and how formal strategies may critically intervene in film history. Of central importance in this context is intertextuality, understood both from the dialogic and implicit perspective articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), later developed by Julia Kristeva (2024), and through Gérard Genette's systematic and narratological concept of transtextuality, defined as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (Genette, 1997: 1).

Beyond these theoretical formulations, intertextuality also operates as a procedure that raises questions about the transmission of images, the distribution of cultural value, and the relationship between visual memory and racial hierarchies. These are operations that Jean-Luc Godard undertook in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1989–1999) by editing together fragments from different films and playing with their visual texture and sound. The quotations, references and connections to other works thus operate as more than historical allusions, functioning as well as sites of intertextual negotiation. As Robert Stam suggests, films are produced within a "dense informational network", which includes other films, literary texts, genres, styles and discourses that the new film "can take up, amplify, ignore, subvert, or transform" (Stam, 2000: 68), reaccentuating earlier materials in new historical and ideological contexts. This network

is shaped by the historical moment in which the new film is made, by the intentions of its creators, and by the dynamics of audiovisual production and consumption. Intertextuality is not a neutral space but rather a battlefield where meanings are won and lost, and where ideological values are confronted and challenged:

> Cultural studies view texts similarly, as the site of a series of struggles for meaning. The dominant ideology, working through the form of the text, can be resisted, evaded, or negotiated with, in varying degrees by differently socially situated readers (Fiske, 1987: 41).

These considerations raise the question of whether cinematic intertextual analysis can serve as a bridge between formal analysis and cultural critique, whether it can shift the debate beyond the politics of representation towards a deeper interrogation of the racialised logics inscribed in film history. Along these lines, Racquel Gates (2017) argues for a return to the formal and aesthetic dimensions of African American cinema—an area often eclipsed by debates about representation—and demonstrates how attention to these can shed light on the ideologies of race, class, and gender that structure these images. Gates suggests that this endeavour should not be dismissed, but rather that it should be pursued as "a study of black images that was never 'there' in the first place" (Gates, 2017: 44).

Although representation has been a central concern in film studies—from André Bazin's ontology of realism (2004) to Siegfried Kracauer's social theory of cinema (1960)—and particularly in analyses of African American cinema (hooks, 1992), its limitations are obvious: essentialism, reductionism and an inability to fully engage with form, affect, filmic materiality or historical complexity. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994) argue, an approach focused exclusively on representation risks reducing film studies to a moralising framework, neglecting questions of form, the archive, and aesthetic genealogy. From a different perspective, Laura Marks (2000) demonstrates that images embody sensory and intercultural memories that exceed the mimetic paradigm, inviting an understanding of visual experience beyond representational transparency. These limitations point to the need for an analytical framework attentive not only to what images show, but to how they produce desire, vulnerability and memory: an approach especially pertinent to contemporary African American cinema, and particularly to the reconfigurations of racial horror in Jordan Peele's work.

With the above in mind, this article explores whether cinematic intertextuality, with its reinscription of images in new formal contexts, may constitute an aesthetic politics of symbolic resistance through its processes of identifying and resignifying other films. As a point of departure for this discussion, a selection of audiovisual allusions in Jordan Peele's films—*Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019) and *Nope*—are examined to offer what is not merely as an introduction to his filmography, but as a kaleidoscopic view of intertextuality as a critical tool.[1] This approach seeks to move beyond the politics of representation by exposing the racialised aesthetic logics that continue to shape US cinema through an analysis of Peele's oeuvre.

The references selected for analysis cover narrative, staging, thematic and visual registers: the masked ritual sequence in *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999); the family visit by the interracial couple in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967); the subterranean world of human-

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oids in *C.H.U.D.* (Douglas Cheek, 1984); the television broadcast of the Hands Across America fundraising initiative (1986); and the aforementioned pioneering photographic sequence, *The Horse in Motion*. The aim of this study is to analyse their resignification in Peele's films, their combinations and the aesthetic and political effects produced by their recontextualization.

## NESTED ALLUSIONS: CEREMONIAL-RITUAL CONSUMPTION OF BODIES FROM *EYES WIDE SHUT* TO *GET OUT*

Nested intertextual allusions can be understood as references that contain layers of embedded quotations, each marked by its own formal, contextual or political inflection, producing a textual stratification akin to the effect of matryoshka dolls. As Julia Kristeva suggests, "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (2024: 64). Intertextuality, therefore, is not merely the presence of one text within another, but the staging of a complex network of relations, often hierarchical or interconnected in nature. This stratification is evident in the ceremonial-ritual consumption of bodies in *Get Out*, where the sadistic figure of the libertine is nested through the aesthetic variations introduced by the allusion to *Eyes Wide Shut*. What are these variations? What remains? What disappears? What is resignified? And how do these shifts affect the film's social and political critique?

*Eyes Wide Shut* is the only film explicitly named in *Get Out*. The quotation occurs in a phone conversation between Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) and his friend Rod (Lil Rel Howery), who warns him: "You in some *Eyes Wide Shut* situation"[2] (1:05:20–1:05:25). This warning comes in response to the unsettling reappearance of a long-lost acquaintance, Andre Logan King (Lakeith Stanfield) at the garden party organised by the white family of Chris's girlfriend, Rose Armitage (Allison Williams). This direct reference functions as a colloquial shortcut that condenses what *Eyes Wide Shut* represents: a film about secret societies and a couple's breakdown, which Rod reinterprets as a story of sexual enslavement of the Black male body in the context of a ritualised orgy. This presents an anomaly that Mikhail Iampolski describes as a moment that forces the spectator to search for the meaning elsewhere, "to seek its motivation in some other logic or explanatory cause outside the text. The search is then conducted in the realm of intertextuality" (Iampolski, 1998: 30).

On this point, it is crucial to note how the dimension of lust and sadism organises the symbolic core that connects *Eyes Wide Shut* to *Get Out*. In Kubrick's film, this regime of desire recalls the aristocratic vampirism of Hammer Films' *Dracula* series,[3] characterised by an aesthetic of saturated reds, with a particular emphasis on deep reds that functions not merely as decoration but as a means of turning the violence and the body into a visual "spectacle", intensifying its erotic dimension (Hutchings, 2021: 34). This ritualised theatricality is controlled by elites who suck the vitality out of subservient bodies, as many Hammer horror films stage violence as ceremony, using a theatrical *mise-en-scène*, exaggerated gestures and repetitive ritual actions that transform individual acts into symbolic performances (Hutchings, 2021: 47). This logic also connects to the exploration of erotic power as domination in *The Night Porter* (Il portiere di notte, Liliana Cavani, 1974), and with the dynamics of masks, subtle coercions and bourgeois tensions developed by Arthur Schnitzler in his novella *Traumnovelle* (1925), which provides the literary foundation for Kubrick's film (Boa, 1987: 45).

In Peele's work, sadism is not constructed in opposition to the family but embedded in the inner workings of the household itself: Rose derives pleasure from capturing her Black partner-victims; her brother perpetrates physical violence upon them as a form of subjugation; their mother

controls them by means of hypnosis; and their father commodifies their bodies in surgical operations. In both films, the libidinal and the sadistic constitute more than a domain of sexual desire; they function as the dispositif that structures the circulation of power, the gaze, and the cinematic form, determining how bodies—seduced, exposed, or violated—are organised and interpreted in the story.

Kubrick's film also operates as a formal model for the auction scene in *Get Out*: Black bodies are not merely observed but commodified through a ritualised white bourgeois performance. As Chris walks through the garden with his girlfriend, the white guests bid on his body using gestures and numbered cards. The auctioned body is mediated by a framed photograph of Chris in a medium shot, holding his camera—the symbol of his profession—which becomes an object of desire for the blind art dealer who longs to possess his gaze. This racialised desire, which bell hooks describes as "eating the Other" (hooks, 1992: 21), forms the core of the cultural consumption of Blackness, operating as a form of political lust that converts the vitality of the Black body into biological capital (Waldby and Mitchell, 2006). As John Pultz observes, "photographic albums in particular were used by nineteenth-century Europeans for the fetishistic collecting, controlling, and defining of the bodies of native inhabitants of newly colonized lands" (Pultz, 1995: 21).

The photographic image of Chris functions as a fetishised icon, sold at an auction whose intertextual resonances are both historical (slave auctions) and cinematic (the masked ritual in *Eyes Wide Shut*). In Kubrick's film, the sexually consumed bodies are placed at the centre of a circle in a room, where a master of ceremonies marks participation in the orgy by striking a staff, accompanied by diegetic organ music (Image 1). In *Get Out*, the composition is square-shaped rather than circular, but equally central: the framed photograph is inside the square formed by the garden pergola's columns that surround the auction's master of ceremonies, Mr. Armitage, whose gestures acknowledging the bids are underscored by non-diegetic organ music (Image 2). In Kubrick's film, the elite absorbs and neutralises the libidinal agency of those who enter its orbit, transforming the protagonist—Dr. William Harford (Tom Cruise)—into an exposed body which, once discovered, also occupies the centre of a circle as a vulnerable intruder at the orgy (Image 3). This



Figure 1. Stillframe from the sexual ritual sequence in *Eyes Wide Shut*



Figure 2. Stillframe from the auction sequence in *Get Out*



Figure 3. Stillframe of the intruder within the circle in *Eyes Wide Shut*

condition finds its analogue in *Get Out* in Chris's fragility in the face of the power structures that operate as invisible yet omnipotent presences in these body markets—whether spaces of sexual exchange or contemporary slave auctions—in the two films.

Hollywood films addressing slavery in the United States or the transatlantic slave trade, such as *Mandingo* (Richard Fleischer, 1975), *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012) and *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013), often depict slave auctions with explicit brutality. Such overexposure of suffering runs the risk reproducing the very domination they are intended to condemn, as Saidiya V. Hartman warns when she asks: "How does one revisit the slave scenes without replicating the grammar of violence?" (Hartman, 2008: 4). In contrast, US independent films such as *Sankofa* (Haile Gerima, 1993), or Afro-Caribbean films such as *Nèg Maron* (Jean-Claude Flamand-Barny, 2005), proposes alternative aesthetic and narrative strategies by shifting the violence into more introspective codes, where memory, spirituality and cultural resistance become central (Woolford, 1994). Films such as *Get Out* and *Eyes Wide Shut*, however, depict the processes of choosing and purchasing bodies as ritualised scenes of power: silent theatres of control, coded and choreographed, where violence operates symbolically and psychologically rather than overtly—at least at first.

These closed worlds unsettle the spectator, as the camera movements, music and choreography all suggest institutional oppression—whether racial or sexual-economic, disguised as bourgeois civility in one case and elitist festivity in the other. The camera movements and focal techniques further accentuate the contrast between the two secret societies: the fluid movements of the camera in the masked orgy are contained in an enclosed space in *Eyes Wide Shut*, while zooming and static framing compress the open garden setting of the auction scene in *Get Out*. The colour choices ultimately define both environments: the intense baroque reds expose the bodies in the first film, while a desaturated, naturalistic palette of browns, whites and blacks foreground an ostensibly ordinary setting centred on skin colour.

The updating of the intertextual reference, and its formal variation, shifts the critique towards racism not only through the content but also through an aesthetic that destabilises essentialist narratives of Blackness by unsettling the spectator's cultural and affective codes. Intertextuality here not only articulates thematic resonances, but also defines formal modulations of desire and violence that connect the two films. In *Get Out*, the auction visually echoes Kubrick's ritual, but here it is racialised—not so much by quantifying the Black presence on screen as by employing an aesthetic strategy that defines African American cinema, which Michael Boyce Gillespie describes as "a highly variable and unfinalizable braiding of art, culture, and history" (Boyce Gillespie, 2016: 6).

## INTERRACIAL TEMPORAL PALIMPSEST: FROM *GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER* TO *GET OUT*

*Get Out* establishes an intertextual dialogue with *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, an emblematic work of liberal American cinema on interracial relationships, which Jordan Peele has acknowledged as one of his main inspirations: "[if you] take the race out of it, everybody can relate to the fear of meeting your potential in-laws for the first time. So, at some point I had a revelation that that was also the way to get into this film [*Get Out*]" (Goldsmith, 2017). In the final moments of the film's opening credits, Rose arrives at her boyfriend Chris's apartment. As they get ready to go visit her wealthy white family, Chris expresses his worries, but Rose reassures him by telling him that her parents "are not racist. I would have told you. I wouldn't be bringing you home to them" (08:20–08:38). The plotline introduced here di-

rectly recalls *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, in which Joey Drayton (Katharine Houghton), the daughter of a progressive white couple (played by Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn), introduces her parents to her fiancé, John Prentice, a Black doctor portrayed by Sidney Poitier. Before their arrival, Joey reassures him that her parents are open-minded.

At first glance, this may appear to be a simple narrative recycling, with the family visit as the catalyst for the drama. However, a closer comparison—particularly of the dinner-table scenes—reveals substantial differences in the representation of racism. The scene where Chris meets Rose's parents in *Get Out*, clearly modelled on its counterpart in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, is charged with veiled racial tensions: allusions to Obama, to the supposed physical superiority of Black bodies and to the figure of the benevolent white liberal. In Kramer's film, the parents' shock upon learning of their daughter's interracial relationship shakes their convictions but ends in reconciliation. At the same time, their Black housekeeper voices doubts about the relationship, introducing an intra-racial perspective absent from the white liberal worldview that structures the main narrative. In *Get Out*, her counterpart appears equally servile and compliant, until it is revealed that her behaviour is the product of a system of control: the servants are, in fact, victims of hypnosis. Shots of Chris are juxtaposed with those of the parents—a psychologist and a neurosurgeon—during a barely disguised interrogation. Their questions about his family and habits create a visual unease in a domestic environment that initially appears familiar and safe but soon becomes clearly disturbing.

Whereas Kramer's *mise-en-scène* places the interracial couple in tension with the older generation, culminating in a verbal confrontation between father and daughter, the figure of the Black doctor is ultimately accepted as an exceptional, morally and professionally exemplary individual. His presence is tolerated on the basis of what bell hooks calls "conditional acceptance", whereby white progressives admit the Black subject "without divesting of white supremacist thinking about Blackness" (hooks, 1992: 10). This dynamic resonates with Frantz Fanon's notion of "wearing the white mask", a metaphor for alienation and self-discipline, referring to the obligation imposed on Black individuals in white-dominated spaces to excel and assimilate in order to be accepted: "It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend. It is that other being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed" (Fanon, 2008: 180).

Chris, however, does not seek approval; he has been chosen without his knowledge. The white family that claims to admire Black bodies has selected him to be a host for another consciousness. This perverse operation reveals that the admiration is merely a mask for violent appropriation: the Black body is being used as a vessel for white longevity. The dinner scenes—hopeful in one film, charged with latent menace in the other—dramatise what Toni Morrison identified as the utility of the Black subject in the white imaginary, acceptable only insofar as it is functional or exceptional (Morrison, 1994). The Black doctor and the Black photographer embody this logic of utility, albeit in inverse terms. In the 1967 film, initial resistance gives way to moral enlightenment. In *Get Out*, superficial cordiality conceals a brutal and premeditated violence.

When the intertextual reference explicitly addresses race, it creates a palimpsest: a layered inscription that links past and present. As Laura Mulvey argues, "the concept of the palimpsest has special relevance, evoking the way that quotation and reference create layers of time, bringing something from the past into the present, which then inscribes the present onto the past" (Mulvey, 2014: 29). This stratified reading is not nostalgic but diagnostic, as it exposes contemporary forms of racism. At the same time, it projects the present back onto the past, producing an unsettling iro-

ny: the bodies of the Black servants remain under white control, albeit through more subtle and insidious mechanisms. The juxtaposition of these two time-frames ultimately unmasks the social masquerade. The young Black man visiting the white family does so not in pursuit of mutual understanding but in a struggle for survival.

## CROSS-REFERENCES: *C.H.U.D.* AND HANDS ACROSS AMERICA IN *US*

From its very first scene, *Us* (2019) establishes intertextuality not as a mere decorative gesture but as a structural principle of its storytelling. The film constructs a complex network of quotations and cultural references that shape a formally sophisticated and explicitly political universe. At its centre, the Wilsons are an African American family who confront their exact doubles (the "Tethered"), inhabitants of a parallel underground world of doppelgangers of the entire US population, created by the government and condemned to mechanically and grotesquely mimic the behaviour of those living on the surface.

The film opens with titles on a black screen: "There are thousands of miles of tunnels beneath the continental United States… Abandoned subway systems, unused service routes, and deserted mine shafts… Many have no known purpose at all"[4] (00:52–01:20). The final sentence lingers a moment, functioning as a warning both visually and conceptually (Image 4). The next shot shows an old television set surrounded by VHS cassette cases: *C.H.U.D.* (1984), *The Goonies* (Richard Donner, 1985), *The Man with Two Brains* (Carl Reiner, 1983) and *The Right Stuff* (Philip Kaufman, 1983). Playing on the screen is a television commercial for the charity campaign Hands Across America—a real-life initiative to create a human chain across the United States to raise awareness about poverty (Image 5). This reference serves not as a nostalgic backdrop, as it does in *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), but rather as a critical

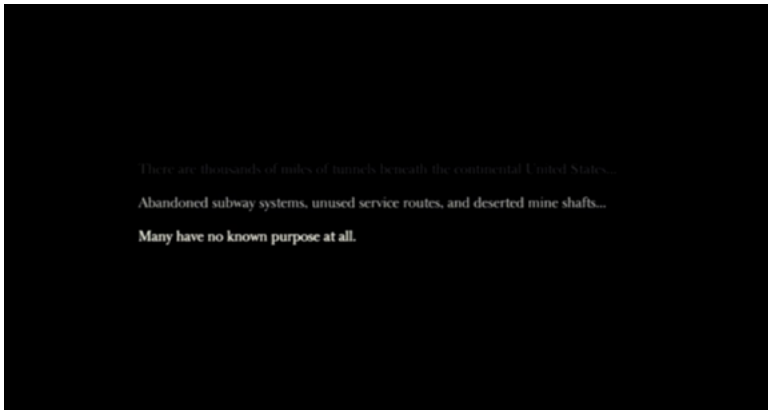



Figure 4. Introductory title in *Us*




Figure 5. References to *C.H.U.D.* and Hands Across America in *Us*

residue: the campaign becomes a symbol of the nation's failure to achieve solidarity, a catastrophe that exposes the myth of the American Dream.

Each VHS cassette case visible in the shot reinforces a central theme of the film:

— *The Man with Two Brains* introduces the idea of duality and identity theft.
— *The Goonies*, a film about children exploring subterranean tunnels, evokes the world inhabited by the Tethered.
— *The Right Stuff* evokes the patriotic idealism of the Reagan era, which constitutes the film's ideological backdrop.
— *C.H.U.D.*, the most significant reference due to its critical charge, articulates an intertextual operation in opposition to Hands Across America: a B-horror film that functions "as a cultural remnant of low prestige, whose residue shifts meaning from the margins, desta-

bilising and questioning established symbolic hierarchies" (Richard, 1998: 15).

In *C.H.U.D.*, the city literally buries its marginalised population: homeless people who are exposed to toxic waste by the government itself, and are thus transformed into monstrous beings. This story dramatises what David Halperin, drawing on Foucault, describes as a strategy of exclusion that confines bodies deemed deviant from the norm to both physical and symbolic marginalisation (Halperin, 1995: 17). Monstrosity here is not innate but institutionally imposed through systemic neglect and repression. *Us* reinterprets this logic: externally, the Tethered are not monsters but reflections of normative US society—shadows of the dominant subject, created for control and later abandoned to a mechanical, voiceless existence. The film's title itself invites a double reading: *Us*, the first person plural, but also the acronym used for the United States. Marginalisation is not peripheral to the system but constitutive of it. The oppressed are simultaneously the shadow and the excess of the oppressor. As Frantz Fanon wrote, "the oppressed will always believe the worst about themselves" (2005: 30), suggesting that the dominated come to define themselves in relation to the dominator, and that their very identity emerges as a direct consequence of domination.

In this context, *Us* stages a confrontation not only between individuals but between specular subjectivities: between surface and subsoil, consciousness and repression. The encounter between Adelaide and her doppelganger Red—both portrayed by Lupita Nyong'o—functions not merely as a narrative device but as an allegorical structure that exposes the fragility of identity and the violence necessary to sustain its coherence. The film offers no closure; in the end, the boundary between victim and perpetrator, original and copy, self and other remains destabilised, underscoring the inescapability of historical trauma and its reappearance through the very bodies it attempted to erase. This duality is further reinforced by the juxtaposition of Hands Across America as the socially sanctioned image and *C.H.U.D.* as the abject image, creating a dialectic between the visible and the repressed in the national imaginary. *Us* thus invokes Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject: that which is expelled by the social and symbolic order but inevitably returns to threaten it from within (Kristeva, 1982: 4–5). This aesthetic and ethical ambiguity resists moral clarity offers no consolatory resolution.

From this perspective, the reference to *C.H.U.D.* is not merely thematic, as it also signals a racial politics in the aesthetic. The trajectory of *C.H.U.D.*, a low-budget film with limited cultural capital, reappearing in *Us*, a high-profile production with broad critical recognition, illustrates what Hito Steyerl (2009) describes as "the displacement of the poor image." Although *C.H.U.D.* was produced in the context of the capitalist film industry and received a commercial theatrical release,[5] its status in the landscape of 1980s B-horror films facilitated its circulation in the form of degraded video copies (Benson-Allott, 2013) whose material instability functions both as an index of marginalisation and as a potential act of cultural resistance (Steyerl, 2009). When such degraded images are reappropriated and resignified, they acquire a new symbolic value, in a process that constitutes a critical rewriting of genre conventions and an aesthetic mode of resistance that exposes the historical erasure of marginalised lives concealed behind the liberal spectacle of progress.

## REVEALING INTERTEXTUALITY AS AN AESTHETIC POLITICS OF RESISTANCE: *THE HORSE IN MOTION* IN *NOPE*

The opening credits of *Nope* conclude with a reference to Eadweard Muybridge's *The Horse in Motion*. The galloping horse appears in an almost planar composition that emphasises the image's lateral movement. Peele, however, shifts the viewer's attention from the horse and to the Afri-

can American rider—an anonymous figure whose name has been erased from history. The moving image is framed by what we later come to understand to be the mouth-screen of an extraterrestrial entity that absorbs and devours everything in its path. The rider gradually emerges from a fade to black, becoming clearer and larger through a shift in camera focus, until the image is centred on the rider—specifically, on the colour of his skin—for two reasons: first, the horse is repeatedly blocked from view by the opening credits superimposed over it; and second, the definition of the image itself is quite sharp (Image 6). The editing and cinematographic strategies employed in a dimly lit setting—the lighting, framing and composition—by editor Nicholas Monsour and cinematographer Hoyte van Hoytema,[6] in collaboration with Peele, create a complex sequence of overlapping frames that reveal the image of the forgotten rider in all its depth.




**Figure 6 – The opening credits block out the horse in *The Horse in Motion* in *Nope***

From this perspective, the analysis of how intertextual quotations are presented reveals the racial politics embedded in aesthetic practices. In this case, Peele not only invokes *The Horse in Motion* but also reformulates its formal qualities in a way that actively counteracts the rider's historical invisibility. The filmmaker proposes an alternative film history told from the margins through intertextual reference. The film's protagonist, OJ Haywood (Daniel Kaluuya), is introduced as a direct descendant of the anonymous rider, thereby linking the visual exploitation of the Black body to the cinematic apparatus itself. From the very beginning of *Nope*, the origins of cinema are redefined not only as a technological achievement but also as an act of racial erasure and distortion—an idea developed extensively by bell hooks (1992)—that involves both an absence and a form of symbolic violence with real consequences for Black identity, recognition and autonomy.

Filmmakers, as readers of the works they incorporate into their own films, possess the ability to reinterpret them, vesting them with new meanings by relating them to other texts. A text does not have a single meaning; rather, its meaning changes according to the cultural position of the reader, the social conditions of the reading and the historical moment in which that reading takes place: "Such a meaning is, of course, not fixed in a universal, empirical 'reality,' but in the social situation of the viewer. Different readings may stabilize texts differently and momentarily, but they do achieve moments of stability, moments of meaning" (Fiske, 1987: 117). From this perspective, the scene quoting *The Horse in Motion* is a critical revelation of the Black figure erased from the history of the moving picture. It underscores the violent relationship between race, spectacle and technological progress. This is particularly significant given the omission of the rider in other media products that reference Muybridge's work, such as Mark Neale's music video for U2's "Lemon" (1993) or the animated short *Muybridge's Strings* (Koji Yamamura, 2011), where the rider appears only fleetingly before vanishing to give way to a narrative centred on Muybridge and his riderless horse. As Jacques Derrida argued, the archive is founded on violence, on exclusion (1995: 11). Cinematic intertextuality, therefore, engages not only with the past but also with its exclusions, and examining how those exclusions are reframed in a

new work can offer a deeper understanding of cinema's shifting relationship to the politics of racialised aesthetics.

In *Nope*, this historical omission is actively counteracted through the fictional Haywood family, who claim descent from the anonymous rider and position themselves simultaneously as heirs to—and challengers of—a tradition of Black invisibility in Hollywood's visual regime, as they continue to work with horses in the worlds of cinema and advertising. These forms of violence persist within the extractive and spectacular logic of the entertainment industry, symbolised in the film by the extraterrestrial mouth-screen that devours and silences everything in its path. *Nope* situates the camera as an instrument of both violence and resistance, particularly emphasising the need for Black narratives to reimagine the archive. In this sense, the film combines archive and imagination to reconstruct erased Black lives as a form of resistance against the enduring forms of violence of slavery, persisting even after its abolition. As Saidiya Hartman suggests, this constitutes a form of "critical fabulation" about the afterlife of slavery, an attempt "both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling" by combining historical and archival research with critical theory and fictional narrative (Hartman, 2008: 11).

## BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: BEYOND REPRESENTATION

Jordan Peele develops an intertextual poetics that is not limited to an aesthetic strategy of cultural recognition or to a playful exercise in quotation. On the contrary, his cinema turns intertextuality into a means of destabilising the cultural hierarchies and genre conventions that have historically invisibilised, trivialised or aestheticised Blackness on screen. By borrowing images and narrative structures from different texts, ranging from the liberal prestige of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* to the marginal exploitation cinema of *C.H.U.D.*, Peele activates a stratified reading that exposes the structural racism embedded in the American cultural imaginary.

These formal and narrative operations go beyond a politics of representation centred solely on Black visibility, working instead in multiple directions at once. First, Peele reinscribes on the present what Laura Mulvey (2014: 29) has described as the "intertextual palimpsest": overlapping temporal layers in which the past returns under new conditions of legibility. Thus, *Get Out* reinterprets *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* from the perspective of a present in which liberal cordiality masks racial violence. Second, the filmmaker subverts the cultural status of the texts he references, placing canonical films such as *Eyes Wide Shut* on the same level as marginal cultural objects such as *C.H.U.D.* Third, he transforms the function of the reference itself: instead of evoking nostalgia, it operates as a revelation, exposing the structural violence that the original texts tend to veil. In this way, the accepted Black doctor in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is contrasted with the Black photographer in *Get Out*, whose supposed integration conceals a project of bodily and symbolic exploitation. The Hands Across America campaign is invoked not as a symbol of solidarity but as an emblem of the nation's failure to realise its own ideals of equality. And the underground monster in *C.H.U.D.* serves as an allegory for a system that produces exclusion as a condition for it to function.

Intertextuality is thus a critical procedure. Mikhail Bakhtin describes these different social voices (which he calls "'languages' of heter-

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oglossia") as "specific points of view on the world", which "may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically" (Bakhtin, 1981: 291–292). These voices are not neutral; they are capable of harming one another. They constitute acts of resistance, intervention and reconfiguration, which refuse to allow history to be forgotten or fully absorbed by systems of power, operating through a fractured temporality that denies closure. Rather than offering definitive answers, Peele's films engage in an exercise of storytelling described by Hartman as "listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives" (Hartman, 2008: 12). Intertextuality thus functions as a revelation of that which is repressed in the cultural archive: the racial violence that undergirds both the liberal promise and the national myth. In this sense, it is an aesthetic politics of resistance, destabilising the symbolic order by demonstrating that what is repressed never disappears but returns in spectral and distorted forms.

Ultimately, the intertextual references in Jordan Peele's work do not close the narrative with the satisfaction of recognition; instead, they establish a sense of unease. They reveal that what seems familiar—the dinner table, the home, the media spectacle, the American landscape—is always inhabited by the strange. This estrangement is not incidental; it compels us to see how the dominant culture is constituted through exclusion, appropriation and the repression of racial difference. Peele's aesthetic politics thus involves more than merely representing Black bodies on screen, constituting a restructuring of the very act of seeing. His use of intertextuality reveals that although mainstream American culture has attempted to control or suppress certain narratives, the racial history of the United States cannot be relegated to a forgotten past, as it constitutes the very material of its present. ■

## NOTES

1. This practice of recycling films of the past can be found in Peele's early television work with Keegan-Michael Key in the sketch series *Key & Peele* (2012–2015), which can be read as a laboratory of cinematic intertexts. This series laid the conceptual groundwork for his feature films with its parodic sketches charged with political critique. Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, *Key & Peele*, Season 5, Episode ("Hoodie: Hoodie Ho?!"), 2015, YouTube video, 5:12, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztRSm_SJP58
2. *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017). Streaming platform copy, Netflix, https://www.netflix.com/es/title/80149258
3. Hammer Film Productions was a British film studio that played a crucial role in the reconfiguration of horror cinema beginning in the late 1950s, particularly through its use of colour, the eroticisation of the body and the reformulation of classical myths. In the case of vampirism, it produced a series of nine feature films about Dracula from 1958 to 1974, beginning with *Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958). See Peter Hutchings (2003, 2021).
4. *Us* (Jordan Peele, 2019). Streaming platform copy, Prime Video, https://www.primevideo.com/-/es/detail/Nosotros/0RE22OX69O5EH00UUQOYDMB4DA
5. *C.H.U.D.* grossed a total of US$4,654,423 at the box office (https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0087015/), a respectable figure given its modest production budget of approximately US$3 million. However, its cultural significance was largely consolidated through its subsequent distribution on VHS, the success of which led to a sequel, *C.H.U.D. II: Bud the Chud* (David Irving, 1989), released directly to video.

6. James Whitaker interviews *Nope* cinematographer Hoyte van Hoytema about his approach to the film's visual aesthetics. Van Hoytema implemented a pioneering technical solution for the film's night scenes, pairing an IMAX camera with a Panavision 65mm camera modified for infrared photography, recording the same scene simultaneously on both devices in order to enable selective compositing in postproduction. See James Whitaker (2022).

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## BEYOND REPRESENTATION: CINEMATIC INTERTEXTUALITY AS AN AESTHETIC POLITICS OF RESISTANCE IN THE FILMS OF JORDAN PEELE


### Abstract

This article examines the work of Jordan Peele—*Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019), and *Nope* (2022)—through the lens of intertextuality as an aesthetic politics of resistance, deployed as a critical strategy to expose the racial violence inscribed on film history and the American cultural imaginary. Through references to films such as *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967) and *C.H.U.D.* (Douglas Cheek, 1984), the Hands Across America media campaign (1986) and Muybridge's photographic series *The Horse in Motion* (1878), Peele destabilises symbolic hierarchies and reinscribes the memory of historically erased Black bodies and subjectivities by means of temporal and formal shifts that transcend his own filmography. In this way, he seeks to move beyond the politics of representation by exposing the racialised aesthetic logics that continue to shape US cinema.



### Key words

Jordan Peele; Intertextuality; Cultural studies; Aesthetic politics of resistance; Racism



### Author

Damian Esteban Bretones is a researcher and PhD candidate in Film Studies at Universidad de Córdoba (UCO). He holds an MFA in Screenwriting & Directing from Columbia University, New York. His research focuses on the analysis of audiovisual media, including films and television series, from an intertextual perspective, combining cultural and aesthetic approaches. He has authored several articles on audiovisual media and has published in scholarly journals such as *Fotocinema* and *Seriarte*. Contact: bretonesdamian@gmail.com



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## MÁS ALLÁ DE LA REPRESENTACIÓN: INTERTEXTUALIDAD CINEMATOGRÁFICA COMO POLÍTICA ESTÉTICA DE RESISTENCIA EN LA OBRA CINEMATOGRÁFICA DE JORDAN PEELE


### Resumen

Este artículo analiza la obra de Jordan Peele —*Déjame salir* (2017), *Nosotros* (2019) y *Nop* (2022)— desde la intertextualidad entendida como política estética de resistencia, que se despliega como estrategia crítica que revela la violencia racial inscrita en la historia del cine y en el imaginario cultural estadounidense. A través de referencias a films como *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), *Adivina quién viene esta noche* (1967) o *C.H.U.D.* (1984), y de la campaña mediática *Manos a través de América* (1986) o la serie fotográfica *El caballo en movimiento* de Muybridge (1878), Peele desestabiliza jerarquías simbólicas y reinscribe la memoria de cuerpos y subjetividades negras históricamente borradas, a través de juegos temporales y formales, que trascienden su propia obra. Este enfoque pretende trascender la política de la representación al exponer las lógicas estéticas raciales que continúan modelando el cine estadounidense.



### Palabras clave

Jordan Peele; Intertextualidad; Estudios culturales; Política estética de resistencia; Racismo.



### Autor/a

Damian Esteban Bretones (Granada, 1987) es investigador y doctorando en cinematografía por la UCO. MFA en Guion y Dirección Cinematográfica (Universidad de Columbia, Nueva York). Sus líneas de investigación se centran en el análisis de medios audiovisuales, cine y series, desde la intertextualidad, combinando los estudios culturales y estéticos. Es autor de diversos artículos sobre medios audiovisuales y ha publicado en revistas científicas como *Fotocinema* y *Seriarte*. Contacto: bretonesdamian@gmail.com



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# THE PLEASURE OF PAIN IN *THE PIANO TEACHER*. TRAJECTORY OF A SADEAN PERSPECTIVE: VIOLENCE, PERVERSION AND SELF-DESTRUCTION*

PABLO FERRANDO GARCÍA

"Crime, when examined closely, is nothing more than the energy of the passions carried to the extreme."
(Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*)

"Man's desire is the desire of the Other."
(Jacques Lacan, Seminar XI: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*)

## BETWEEN DEBORD AND SADE, NARRATION AND SUBJECTIVITY IN *THE PIANO TEACHER*

This article presents a textual analysis of *The Piano Teacher* (La Pianiste, Michael Haneke, 2001) from a narratological perspective, an approach that facilitates the identification of the dramatic strategies that contribute to the construction of the film's discourse. The analysis focuses particularly on the articulation of the narrative across the temporal arc of four of the eight nights that structure the film. Due to the limited scope of this study, only the first, third, fourth and fifth nights are analysed. The first night establishes the context of the story, lays the film's aesthetic foundations, introduces the main characters and creates a stifling, repressive atmosphere. The third night is also a key sequence for the way it distances the spectator from the protagonist's perverse gaze on pornographic videos, while playing with perspectives in a manner that suggests our active participation in the viewing experience. For the fourth and fifth nights, the implied narrator depicts Erika's drive to find pleasure in pain with a cold, bleak tone completely alien to the conventions of mainstream cinema. These four nights are all key to appreciating how the story is constructed in a metacinematic operation that appeals to the spectator through the perverse voyeurism foreshadowed on the third night.

The main objective of this study is to chart the trajectory of Erika's inner world from the perspective of the Sadean universe. The notions of desire, power and the transgression of bourgeois con-

ventions as Haneke interprets them are explored here in dialogue with the universe of Elfriede Jelinek, the author of the novel of the same name on which the film is based. The exploration is informed by Lacanian psychoanalysis, which can be drawn on to explain the political and sexual violence endemic to the contemporary world, as well as the relationship between violence and desire.

Based on the above considerations, this analysis will reflect on "freedom and its limits" and "the close relationship between freedom and evil" (Carrera, 2023: 7). Moreover, the importance of Franz Schubert's music in the film will also be discussed, with the aim of unravelling the layers of psychological and sexual violence present in the relationship between the protagonists.

In short, this analysis reveals how the film exposes the signs of decadence in an image-consuming society, a critique that bears commonalities with Guy Debord's notions related to the society of the spectacle. Both Debord and Haneke understand that this society is articulated "around a set of symbols and representations established as a model for living where the spectacle has turned into a nightmare" (Ferrando, 2013: 110). Critics such as Grundmann (2010) argue that Haneke uses the camera to subvert the spectator's voyeurism: what Erika's self-destruction seeks is not compassion but confrontation. On the other hand, López Agulló (2014) stresses that violence in contemporary cinema is a symptom of the loss of real points of reference. In Haneke's film, Schubert's music serves not to enhance the emotion but to underscore the dissonance between the piano teacher's perfect technique and the fragmented nature of her psyche. Her final self-destruction is presented as the only way out for a character who has been unable to find a place in the symbolic order beyond the mark on her own skin, reflecting the close relationship between freedom and evil in the work of the Austrian filmmaker.

## A FEW THEORETICAL POINTS

Film text analysis is an approach that interrogates the very materiality of the film. Its origins can be traced back to the notion of displacement proposed by Roland Barthes, who differentiates the *work* (the physical, closed object) from the *text* (a methodological field for the production of meaning). For Barthes, the text is "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, bend and clash" (1977: 146). This means that the analyst has to "dissect" the text in order to observe how the codes are interwoven to generate a plurality of meanings.

In the foundational period of film semiotics, Christian Metz (2002) tried to apply the categories of structural linguistics to film. Metz postulated that cinema lacks a language in the Saussurian sense, but possesses a "grand syntagma" that organises the units of sound and image. However, contemporary textual analysis focuses more on markers of enunciation. As Jesús González Requena suggests, textual analysis involves a "reading to the letter" (2006:14), an effort to take a position at the origins of meaning, where the text ceases to be a mere vehicle of information and becomes instead an aesthetic object that confronts us with our own desire and lack.

Edward Branigan revolutionised this field by connecting the structure of the narrative to the spectator's mental processes. Branigan introduced the notion that storytelling is a process of world-building where concepts such as *focalisation* (who sees or who knows) and *ocularisation* (the relationship between the camera and the character's point of view) determine the aesthetic experience. According to Branigan (1992: 112), focalisation is not merely a question of camera angle, but of a level of subjectivity that filters the diegetic reality. This is crucial in *The Piano Teacher*, where the external focalisation distances us from Erika's tragic pathos.

Francisco Javier Gómez Tarín underscores the importance of the subject of the enunciation or the *meganarrator*, arguing that the film narrative is the product of a discursive intent that organises sensory material to guide the spectator's gaze (2011: 45). Gaudreault and Jost (2004) also contribute concepts of importance to this study, such as the notion of the delegated narrator and the distinction between the time of the narration and the time of story, which explains the segmentation of the film into eight nights as a strategy to track the pace of the character's decline.

To understand the architecture of pain in *The Piano Teacher*, it is imperative to consider the distinction Jacques Lacan makes between pleasure and *jouissance* (ecstasy or rapture). While the pleasure principle seeks balance, *jouissance* is located in a realm where the drive is satisfied through transgression and suffering. Lacan connects Kant's position to Sade's, suggesting that Kant's moral law and Sade's will-to-*jouissance* are two sides of the same coin. As López Agulló points out, "perversion is not a mere deviation, but a structure whereby the subject becomes the instrument of the Other's *jouissance*" (2014: 56). In the Sadean universe, crime is the energy of the passions taken to the extreme, a premise that Haneke conveys in the suffocating relationship between Erika Kohut and her mother.

The Lacanian concept of *jouissance* is expressed in Erika as an inability to achieve symbolic mediation. For authors such as Žižek (2012), the contemporary subject is trapped in an imperative of *jouissance* that ultimately nullifies desire. In Erika's case, desire has been petrified in a ritual of pain. By establishing a sadomasochistic contract with Walter, she attempts to regulate her *jouissance*, transforming the chaos of the drive into a structured script of humiliation.

The textual analysis presented here aims to show the film's use of a narratological device that nullifies the spectator's gratification to expose the impossible nature of a shared eroticism in an image-consuming society where *jouissance* is geared towards self-destruction. The working hypothesis is that Erika's downfall lies in her attempt to regulate her *jouissance* through a Sadean contract that the Other (Walter) cannot fulfil, demonstrating that desire has been replaced with a simulacrum of violence that can only find truth in self-harm. The explanation for this approach is articulated in the film's eight-night structure, where the narratological theories of Branigan and Gómez Tarín help expose the workings of the visual trap, and Lacanian psychoanalysis explains Erika's existential emptiness.

## THE EIGHT NIGHTS OF *THE PIANO TEACHER*: NARRATION, DESIRE AND CONFINEMENT

The film is set in contemporary Vienna. Erika Kohut (Isabelle Huppert), a prestigious piano teacher, lives trapped between two oppressive worlds: the home she shares with a possessive, domineering mother (Annie Girardot), and the conservatory where she asserts strict control over her students. Behind this façade of discipline, she lives a secret life of voyeurism and sadomasochistic practices.

The arrival of Walter Klemmer (Benoît Magimel), a talented and seductive young pianist, awakens a contradictory desire in Erika: she is attracted to him, but afraid to give herself to him. Their attempts to interact lead to a perverse game of power, humiliation and violence, in which Erika projects her deepest and darkest impulses. Rejected by Walter when she shares her fantasies with him, and consumed by her jealousy of Anna, her brightest student, Erika is set firmly on a path towards self-destruction.

The music of Schubert, which is repeated constantly throughout the story like a tragic echo, serves as musical accompaniment to the private breakdown of a woman unable to reconcile her desire with the rigid structure of her life, until at last her repressed passion turns into an open wound.

In general terms, the film can be described as having an eight-night structure. However, it is important to note that this time-frame is not obviously apparent in a first viewing, as there are no explicit markers of the passage of time. Each night is in turn linked to Erika's daytime life. With no clear temporal delimitations, the days and nights flow together and even blur into each other, as many scenes are filmed indoors in dark, windowless settings. As a result, the spaces have both a nocturnal atmosphere—the film's final sequence also takes place at night—and a claustrophobic feeling suggestive of confinement and repression. Moreover, the film's sequences are long, as the diegetic time of each one is similar to the actual viewing time. This technique strengthens the dramatic intensity and enhances the reality effect. The *meganarrator* accompanies the characters constantly, observing their gestures and actions, without mediating or intervening in the events, in an effort to act as impartial voice.

It is reasonable to argue that the most significant sequences are the ones that take place at night, as it is in these that the relationship triangle of Erika, her mother and Walter is established. Conversely, the daytime sequences in the conservatory depict the events in her classes and her professional routines, such as her rehearsals with her colleagues. In these scenes, we see her other side, characterised by an emasculating attitude towards her students that reflects the repressive influence of her mother. Both the lessons and the rehearsals contribute to the construction of Erika's psychological duality. The remarks she makes to her students about the music of Schubert, Bach or Beethoven ultimately reveal her own inner crisis.

However, this duality is diluted—or rather, contradicted—every time Walter Klemmer enters the scene. His appearance provokes a psychological conflict that reaches a climax in the final part of the film: Erika gives into her feelings for the young student, but her perverse side clashes head-on with the rigid self-censorship imposed by her mother.

In general terms, the film's eight-night structure can be broken down as follows:

| Night | Description of the narrative action |
|---|---|
| 1. | Setting the story–context: first domestic fight between Erika and her mother |
| 2. | Erika meets Walter: private recital at the Blonskijs' House (11:20) |
| 3. | Erika visits an adult video shop (23:38) |
| 4. | Erika is at home with her mother; cuts her genitals with a blade (33:53) |
| 5. | Visit to the drive-in: another perverse voyeuristic experience (46:05) |
| 6. | Walter invades the family home and discovers Erika's sadomasochistic tendencies (1:20:33) |
| 7. | Walter rapes Erika in the family home (1:46:32) |
| 8. | Moments prior to the jubilee concert; Erika substitutes for Anna. She stabs herself in the chest and leaves the conservatory (2:01:24) |

Erika's solitary wanderings at night reveal the trajectory of her perverse sexual practices. On all these outings, she wears her characteristic beige trenchcoat and brown gloves; in addition, in certain key scenes she also wears a headscarf with pictures of keys on it. This choice of attire evokes the conventional image of the *voyeur* or the flasher. Only towards the end of the film is there a significant change to her outfit: on the sixth night, after returning home, she appears wearing a red hat, a dark brown coat and an orange blouse. The contrast with the dull colours she wears in the first hour of the film (black, grey, brown) suggests an external expression of her emotions associated with falling in love, beginning in the conservatory bathroom scene when she has her first sexual encounter with Walter.

Later, Walter's rejection of Erika after she gives him the letter—an anachronistic act of communication—drives her to retreat into herself: she starts wearing her trenchcoat again, like a protective shield over her inner world, "dominated by the desire to be subjugated, humiliated and abused, in accordance with the standard definition of the sadomasochist." As their relationship develops, the gaping chasm between Erika's and Walter's ideas of romantic love is revealed, explicitly exposing her deviations from "normal affective expression" (Von Sacher-Masoch/Sampedro, 2000: 9; 21).

The first hour of the film thus constructs a recognisable image of the visual prototype of a sexual exhibitionist, highlighting the trouble Erika has interacting with the Other's body without projecting her own erotic ghosts onto it.

## FAMILY, POWER AND REPRESSION: THE FIRST NIGHT IN *THE PIANO TEACHER*

The film's opening sequence constitutes a veritable statement of intent in both formal and discursive terms. At the very beginning, Haneke foreshadows the key narrative theme of the mother-daughter relationship and introduces us to the Hanekian universe, characterised by its reconstruction of the extreme abnormalities of the bourgeois family.

In the first scene, the camera is positioned in the semi-darkness of the entrance hall: Erika enters wearing her trenchcoat and brown gloves, shown in a medium shot. Haneke places mother and daughter in the same visual frame, thereby underscoring the symmetrical and oppressive tension of their relationship. Erika's action of closing and locking the front door hints at her confinement in a claustrophobic space with no real possibility of escape.

Their struggle over the bag and the brown dress accentuates the conflict between the two women. The clinking sound of the keys in Erika's gloved hand, which she then throws onto the chest in the hall, symbolises her submission to her mother's power. The fight reaches its climax when it turns physical, as Erika pulls her mother's hair in a close-up that places the violence right in front of us. Haneke inserts an action match-cut here that takes us suddenly from the clash between mother and daughter to a scene from a German TV hospital drama. This abrupt cut creates a disturbing contrast: physical violence in the family gives way to another kind of violence, now verbal, in a television drama showing a nurse severely rebuking a sexist patient.



Image 1

Haneke thus articulates a sequence that presents us first with the television program footage and then shows Erika's mother watching it. The sudden replacement of a real conflict with a fictional one tells us something of Mrs. Kohut's daily life, which is limited to watching Erika's musical performances and spending long hours in front of the TV. The cut also serves as a dramatic ellipsis that resets the emotional climate between mother and daughter: the violence is over and a truce has been called. The two women make up to one another in tears: Erika behaves like a repentant child, while her mother resorts to emotional blackmail, portraying herself as the victim of a temperamental heritage.

This game of dominance and submission between mother and daughter recalls what Bataille



Image 2

refers to as "intimacy in the extreme" (1988: 63), where the affective bond is inseparably mixed with cruelty. At the same time, the claustrophobia of the scene evokes Haneke's description of the bourgeois family as a "sounding board for repressed violence" (2012: 45). It is relevant to note that Sade himself suggested that "power is exerted more strongly in domestic spaces, where the victim has no escape" (1990: 212). This idea is central to Erika's confinement in her family home.

## BODIES, GAZES AND SCREENS: FROM EROTICISM TO OBSCENITY ON THE THIRD NIGHT

On the third and fifth nights (23:08), what has been concealed up to now is revealed. From the first sequence, when the camera enters the family home, it offers us a privileged view of Erika's vicissitudes. However, we gradually discover the other side of her life: what happens behind closed doors, after classes and rehearsals. In this context, the sequence articulates an *external ocularisation* (Gaudreault & Jost, 2004: 72), following Erika from the outside in order to portray her inner turmoil without ever penetrating into her thoughts or feelings.

The knowledge we gain about the protagonist is thus limited by *external focalisation* (Gaudreault & Jost, 2004: 75). The implied narrator adopts a distanced perspective, observing the gestures, movements and actions of Erika's body without intervening in them or offering us direct access to her mind. This type of focalisation has a critical distancing effect whereby the spectator bears witness to the protagonist's inner tension through her actions and her interaction with the space rather than through a direct subjective narrative. The combination of an external ocularisation with a distanced implied narrator creates a dual dynamic, bringing us closer to Erika in the sense that it enables us to observe her gestures and behaviour in detail, but maintaining a cognitive distance from her inner world, reinforcing the tension and the mystery that surrounds her private life.

On this day, Erika goes first to the house of some friends to rehearse. As soon as she enters their apartment, her friend reminds her to phone her mother, hinting at the extreme level of parental surveillance she must endure. Erika makes the call from the bedroom of her friend's young daughter. She explains that she will need at least three hours for the rehearsal, in a conversation that makes it clear why she was seeking time to get away on the first night. The phone call reinforces the oppressive atmosphere: Erika's mother insists that she take a taxi home. This dialogue conveys the constant infantilisation to which her mother subjects her.

After the call, the musicians rehearse Schubert's famous piece *Piano Trio No. 2, Opus 100*. However, the direct visual cut that follows—showing Erika walking through a shopping centre while the music continues—establishes a decisive expressive contrast: the *diegetic* music becomes *extra-diegetic*, accompanying the protagonist as she walks. A lateral tracking shot follows her as she walks on, lost in thought, dressed in her beige trench coat and brown gloves. When a passer-by accidentally bumps into her she reacts with disgust, rubbing her shoulder twice, as if trying to wipe off the stain the contact has left on her body. Haneke thus indicates the imbalance between Erika's body and the world around her: she is in a daze, engrossed in the Schubert melody that fills her mind.



Image 3

Her self-absorption ends abruptly when she enters a video shop. The camera keeps its distance: the *implied narrator* observes without intervening. The *extradiegetic* music continues, drowning out the ambient noise and becoming a *marker of enunciation* that distances us from what we see. Schubert's music is still playing when footage from four different porn videos appear on a multiscreen. The spectator shares Erika's experience, hearing Schubert's music while seeing the obscene images, creating a radical contrast between high culture and consumer culture. This technique recalls Guy Debord's description of the *society of the spectacle*, in which "every social connection is transformed into a relationship mediated by images" (Debord, 2002: 45). Haneke turns the spectator into an accomplice in this indiscriminate consumption of images. Schubert's music functions as a distancing device in the Brechtian sense, but also as a critical question posed by the *meganarrator*: how do we react to this bombardment of images?

When the music stops, Erika continues to watch the video with calm indifference. First we see the split screen, then her inexpressive face. The match cut between the two maintains continuity but also highlights the emotional fracture: Erika is unmoved. The repeated overhead shots—a woman performing fellatio filmed from above, showing the man's point of view—echoes other overhead shots in the film, particularly those that show hands on the keys of a piano.[1] In this way, Haneke constructs a visual connection between mechanical eroticism and piano technique. As Bataille points out, "transgression always links eroticism and death through the gaze" (1988: 117). Sade reminds us that "true sensuality demands the humiliation of the object" (1990: 212), and in this scene the pornographic device deploys this logic of domination. But Haneke does more than merely reproduce it: he films it from a distance that exposes the mechanical, almost banal nature of obscenity. As the filmmaker himself explains: "I show violence not to excite, but to make the viewer think about the gaze that consumes violence" (2012: 62).

On this third night, romantic music, pornographic banality and critical distance all converge on a space that exposes the tension between desire and spectacle. Erika thus becomes the epicentre of a dialectic that swings between intimate voyeurism and a direct appeal to the spectator.

## BETWEEN MASOCHISM AND VOYEURISM: THE MANAGEMENT OF PLEASURE AND THE GAZE IN *THE PIANO TEACHER* ON THE FOURTH AND FIFTH NIGHTS

While on the fourth night we witness self-mutilation when Erika cuts her own genitals with a blade (an action that her mother confuses with menstruation), on the fifth night we are shown another abnormal form of sexual behaviour. In this case, Erika adopts a passive role, becoming a *voyeur* as she spies on a couple copulating inside a car. She witnesses the sexual act indiscreetly—as we do, as the spectators who share her point of view—but she also becomes aroused by it and masturbates shortly before the young man (played by the well-known Austrian actor George Friedrich) becomes aware of her indiscretion. Thus, in this new sequence we are left with no doubt that "Erika's attitude towards her body is negative, clearly masochistic, and completely impulsive, which she inscribes on her own flesh in the form of self-mu-

tilation: a wounded body that abuses itself, a body that denies itself pleasure but does not renounce it, that can only watch it but not experience it or let others experience it" (Imbert, 2010: 133).

With a bleak mood obviously influenced by the murky atmosphere created by Jelinek in the novel on which the film is based, Haneke introduces us to a woman who simultaneously plays the role of victim (of her mother) and executioner (of her young lover) in a perverse balancing act. It is precisely her refusal to accept her own body as a vehicle for satisfying her carnal desires that leads her to take refuge in her sordid fantasies and to experience pleasure through the *jouissance* of others, as is made clear in the sequence at the drive-in. In this way, the body is constructed in accordance with "the staging that Sade used for his own philosophical ideas", as it opens "the door to radically new ways of dismantling social and sexual norms, gender hierarchies and the independence between freedom and evil... and without seeking forgiveness for it" (Mahon, 2023: 17).

After the encounter with her pupil, Erika shuts herself in the bathroom to cut her genitalia with a razor blade, shown in a wide shot. This scene lasts for three minutes, during which Haneke devotes much more time to all the ablutions she carries out before and after her self-mutilation than to the act itself. Erika cuts her genitals with the aid of a small mirror; only she can see the wound inflicted on her body clearly. We only see it from afar. The camera maintains a discreet distance so as not to turn the image into an obscene display similar to the inserts that are so common in pornographic productions. Erika does not experience any sexual pleasure or satisfaction from the self-harm she inflicts. She experiences the *jouissance* of the masochist. As Gérard Imbert astutely points out, Haneke exposes "a ceremony of pain [...], an act of absolute denial of pleasure, a way of cutting it off, of preventing it from becoming a reality" (2010: 133). This type of punishment of her own body manifests itself as a symptom of a malaise of the subject, a denial of life itself, but above all a rejection of sexuality, constituting a personality disorder.

The scene at the drive-in similarly points to this denial of pleasure while at the same time revealing Erika's *scopic drive*, which replaces what



Image 4

she might experience and feel with the *Other*, separating her from her relationship with the *real*. It is important to note here that Haneke does not adapt the original scene from Jelinek's novel, which takes place on the Prater in Vienna. Instead, he relocates the scene at a drive-in cinema, thereby creating a projection that transcends the framework of the story. He is thus able to create a "shifting of frames of reference" as Oliver C. Speck (2010: 1-3) points out, with the purpose of vesting the succession of images with new meaning.

On the one hand, we are the sole witnesses to Erika's sexual acts and desires. On the other, with the help of the editing, we are also invited to participate in the *jouissance* of the scopic drive by looking at the couple making love inside a car, while always being aware that throughout the scene a film for commercial consumption is being projected in the *diegetic* space. Throughout this narrative sequence, Haneke alternates the shots of Erika at the drive-in with images of her mother watching television at home. The voyeurism of spectators at the cinema has always had a forbid-

den quality. In the context of the excitement of big cities, where audiences gather in the darkness of the theatre, it also constitutes a transgressive act. The *mise en abyme* created by the filmmaker throughout the drive-in sequence hints at "the cinemagoers' furtive desire for a kind of vicarious phallic *jouissance* [...]. Erika is here identified with the motif of the key and the keyhole. As she leaves the snack bar to wander around, the medium close-up of her head, juxtaposed against numerous screens behind her, makes the pictured keys on her headscarf distinguishable" (Naquvi, Koné, 2010: 132).

Afterwards, the *meganarrator* returns to take us back to the Kohuts' house. This change of setting interrupting Erika's actions is introduced to suspend the piano teacher's story for a moment in order to build the suspense for the spectator. Its inclusion may also be intended to show how boring life is for her mother, whose only domestic activities consist of drinking a few glasses of white wine and watching TV, when she is not monitoring her daughter's comings and goings. In addition, it enables the spectator to retroactively fill in the protagonist's backstory: at this point, we begin to understand that what Erika is looking for on her nighttime outings is liberation.

After the brief scene of Erika's mother watching television, we return once again to the drive-in. The camera trucks left in a medium POV shot as Erika weaves through the cars. For a few moments, we are struck by the silence of her surroundings; all we can hear in the foreground are her footsteps. In this way, we see what Erika sees as she walks across the car park. Haneke aligns our point of view with Erika's, allowing us to imagine that we are as indiscreet as she is. Then we cut to a medium shot of Erika herself, wearing the scarf with the pictures of keys wrapped around her head. After approaching the car, she watches the couple having sex inside in a hypnotic state and becomes aroused as the couple's moans of pleasure grow more intense. She squats down while she watches them, and at the same time begins to urinate. She closes her eyes and appears to become excited. Her face shows all the signs of an orgasm, as if she were ejaculating. Her lips part, and for a moment it seems as if the sound of the woman's panting is emanating from Erika's mouth. Tears run down her face. Her expression at this moment is significant because until now she has not revealed any kind of any kind of emotion, except when she picks up a used paper towel in the booth at the adult video shop to smell the semen on it. She identifies with the sexual object of the same gender during the act of penetration; that is, with the anonymous young woman copulating in the vehicle, who moans with pleasure, oblivious all the while to the presence of the piano teacher. Of relevance to this point, Fatima Naqvi and Koné Christophe cite an insight offered by the psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel on the role of identification in the process of the gaze: "Anyone who desires to witness the sexual activities of a man and woman really always desires to share their experience by a process of empathy, generally in a homosexual sense" (2010: 68).

While in Jelinek's novel this identification is embodied in the figure of the Other through the character of a Turkish man having sex at the Prater amusement park, in the film adaptation it is represented by a well-known star of Austrian

Image 5







Image 6 and 7

cinema, George Friedrich, who often plays lower-class, proletarian characters.

This whole narrative sequence serves to maintain the linear progression of the story, although the order of narrative causality is disrupted here as the effect is placed before the cause. Erika arrives home late because of her sordid wanderings, and when she does we witness her mother's fury. We then bear witness to the daily love-hate ritual between mother and daughter that we already had the opportunity to see in the first sequence of the film. When Erika comes home, we recognise the same framing and similar lighting (the dark entrance hall). The scene ends abruptly right after her mother suddenly announces that Erika's father has died. It is an announcement that catches us by surprise because at the private recital Erika has mentioned her father's death. This confession leads her to ruminate on the decline and death of musicians, but she also projects her family experience onto Adorno's reflections on Schumann's *Fantasie in C Major*. These comments are contributions inserted by Haneke that are not included in Jelinek's novel. They stand in contrast to her mother's deranged and paralysing attitude, since the erudite words spoken by Erika to Walter convey a great emotional intensity and, in turn, offer a glimpse of the *meganarrator*'s voice.

Despite her emotional imperviousness, Erika is able to convey intimate thoughts through classical music. Only in this way can we appreciate her emotional dimension. She projects her feelings about her late father onto her artistic heritage through her identification with musicians whose death she experiences on the same emotional level. It is the only way she has of freeing herself from her repression. Music helps her to exert control over the Other, to exploit her privileged position of power. However, when she has to express herself with her body, music nullifies her authority. She is unable to control and subdue her own gaze, as becomes absolutely clear whenever Walter appears. The final part of the film expands on this idea.

Unlike the servile Turkish man in Jelinek's novel, who quickly falls silent again and gives up his futile search for the stalker, the boyfriend at the drive-in cinema explodes with anger and furiously pursues Erika. We thus bear witness to the moment when the piano teacher's and the young man's gazes meet at close range. His anger has been triggered by her observation of him, usurping, according to the narrator, the natural role of the male spectator. This space becomes the site of Erika's perverse voyeurism, as beneath her designer trenchcoat lies a desire to control the male gaze and make it public "by displaying herself as keyhole" (Naquvi & Koné, 2010: 133).

Erika's voyeurism links the scenes at the drive-in and at the adult video shop through a sensory shift from sight to touch and smell. In both cases,

the *jouissance* of pain and sensory stimulation are synaesthetic experiences exclusive to Erika. The spectator, on the other hand, is excluded from this pleasure due to the presence of an implied narrator that imposes a distancing effect using the camera and the editing. This detachment is evident in Erika's sexual encounter with Walter at the conservatory. After he closes the door and puts on the "locked" sign, the camera denies us a view of what is going on inside. In the act, Erika demands that Walter look only at her, while the mise-en-scène, based on medium shots and the contrast between Walter's dark clothing and the blinding whiteness of the bathroom, undermines the scene's visibility. This visual and spatial coldness foreshadows Erika's loneliness at the skating rink after her failed romantic encounter.



Image 8

Erika possesses the ability to master and challenge the gaze, while the implied narrator denies us access to the depiction of desire. This break with the syntax of classical cinema prevents us from being able to identify with the camera, undermining our expectations and turning us into excluded witnesses. Through this dynamic, the film "thematizes the process whereby the spectators are shut out from the image. They are often aligned with Erika [...] and her desire to control the view as well as her inability to do so is abundantly obvious. The melodramatic tragedy of this woman is that she wants to be the subject and the object of the gaze at the same time [...]; she wants to see without being seen [...]; she wants to be seen while directing and controlling Walter's (and our) gaze. In this, she is very much like the director himself" (Naquvi & Koné, 2010: 137).

## CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of The Piano Teacher confirms that Michael Haneke constructs a narrative device aimed not at satisfying the spectator's scopic drive, but at interrogating it. Over the course of the eight nights that form the basic structure of the film, Erika Kohut embodies the tension between desire, power and repression, in a context dominated by observation, violence and the impossibility of reconciling pleasure with everyday life. In this sense, the film engages directly with the Sadean tradition. Sade argued that "crime, when looked at closely, is nothing but the energy of passions carried to the extreme" (1990: 212). Erika represents precisely this unbridled energy which, unable to find normative channels of satisfaction, leads to self-destruction. It is not pleasure that Erika enjoys but its denial: self-mutilation, clandestine voyeurism, humiliation as the full extent of desire. Haneke updates Sade's legacy for contemporary times, revealing how freedom can be distorted into something evil, how desire can be transformed into a machinery of suffering, and how intimacy can turn into a battleground.

From a Lacanian perspective, the relationship between Erika and Walter illustrates the dead end that desire leads to when it is articulated in sadomasochistic terms. Lacan points out that "man's desire is the desire of the *Other*" (1991: 235), and in *The Piano Teacher* that *Other* becomes an agent of domination or submission, but never a romantic partner. Erika's masochism expresses an attempt to become the object of the Other's *jouissance*, erasing her own subjectivity to find recognition in humiliation. However, where love—un-

derstood by Lacan (2011) as "giving what one does not have to someone who does not exist"—might have arisen, violence emerges instead, because the sadomasochistic dialectic impedes reciprocity. Love assumes an acceptance of lack and an openness to otherness; conversely, the connection between Erika and Walter reveals the impossibility of such an experience, as they become trapped in an economy of power and pain that precludes any genuine encounter with the Other.

It might therefore be argued that Haneke contrasts sharply with Antonioni's aesthetics when it comes to exploring the relationship between sex and the world today. In his analysis of certain behaviours in Antonioni's filmography, Deleuze wrote that "we are sick from Eros because Eros himself is objectively sick: "what has become of love if a man or a woman must end up so defenceless, withered and grieving, and act so badly at the beginning and the end in a corrupted society?" (Hernández Les, 2009:127).

Georges Bataille helps explain this liminal dimension of erotic experience, suggesting that "eroticism is assenting to life even in death" (1988: 63). Indeed, for Erika, sexuality is confused with pain and self-destruction. The scene with the blade on the fourth night, the scene of her humiliation in front of Walter, and even the film's final scene where she stabs herself in the chest express a central paradox: the body is not a site of pleasure, but a territory of atonement. What Erika seeks is not a shared eroticism, but a *jouissance* that can only be consummated in suffering, in the closing up of her own body. The "ceremony of pain" (Imbert, 2010: 133) replaces the act of love, confirming that in Haneke's work eroticism is shaped by the death drive.

At the same time, Guy Debord offers a theoretical framework that is essential for contextualising the implicit social criticism in Haneke's film. In The Society of the Spectacle, Debord argues that "[e]verything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (2014: 2). The scene in the video shop on the third night is a perfect illustration of this diagnosis: the contrast between Schubert's music and the banality of the pornographic images exposes how spectacle has colonised intimacy and turned desire into a commodity. Erika consumes obscene images with the same indifference with which her mother consumes television; both are trapped in a regime of representation that nullifies the authentic experience of the body and of human connection.

Haneke thus articulates a filmmaking approach that calls into question the role of the spectator. As the filmmaker himself explains: "I show violence not to excite people, but to make them think about the gaze that consumes violence" (Haneke, 2012: 62). In The Piano Teacher, this approach translates into a constant frustration of our expectations: sexual acts are shown from a distance, climaxes are replaced with uncomfortable silences, and the narration eschews any explanatory psychology. What we are offered by watching the film is not a catharsis, but an appeal that forces us to reflect on our own desire to look.

In short, The Piano Teacher can be read as a point of convergence of the concepts of Sade, Bataille and Debord, filtered by Haneke's aesthetic and ethical sensibility. Sade contributes the idea of a desire that can only be realised in transgression, while Bataille offers the conception of eroticism as an extreme experience, and Debord denounces the spectacularisation of the body and of intimacy. Haneke weaves these conceptual threads together and transforms them into a cinematic discourse that questions both contemporary society and the position of the spectator. His filmography thus serves as an uncomfortable mirror where desire is shown to be inseparable from violence and where the gaze is never innocent. ■

## NOTES

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1 It is important to note that the film, like Jelinek's novel, includes constant, explicit allusions to hand mutilation. At the beginning of the film, for example, Erika's mother is watching a hospital drama on television, while sitting on a sofa crying and rebuking Erika: "*You should cut your hands! Hitting your own mother!*" Later, Erika cuts her own genitals with a blade, then cuts her student Ana's hands with broken glass, and finally stabs herself in the right side of the chest.

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## THE PLEASURE OF PAIN IN *THE PIANO TEACHER*. TRAJECTORY OF A SADEAN PERSPECTIVE: VIOLENCE, PERVERSION AND SELF-DESTRUCTION


### Abstract

This article presents an analysis of *The Piano Teacher* (Michael Haneke, 2001) from a narratological perspective, focusing on the eight-night structure that articulates the film and the representation of the desire of its protagonist, Erika Kohut. The methodology adopted combines textual analysis with concepts drawn from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, as well as the works of the Marquis de Sade, Georges Bataille and Guy Debord, while also establishing a dialogue with Elfriede Jelinek's novel of the same name. The findings shed light on Haneke's construction of a narrative mechanism in which the protagonist, trapped between maternal control and institutional rigidity, engages in sadomasochistic and voyeuristic practices that reflect the impossible nature of shared eroticism. Far from expressing love, her relationship with Walter Klemmer constitutes a game of power and humiliation that culminates in self-destruction, echoed gloomily by the music of Schubert that accompanies it. Key sequences reveal that the film eschews erotic spectacle in favour of an interrogation of both desire and the spectator's gaze. In short, *The Piano Teacher* combines cinematic storytelling, social critique and philosophical reflection, while situating intimacy on the boundary between pleasure and pain, and demonstrating that in Haneke's oeuvre, the gaze is never innocent.



### Key words

Marquis de Sade; Society of the Spectacle; Sadomasochism; Desire and Pain; Voyeur; Scopic Drive; *Jouissance* of the Other.



### Author

Pablo Ferrando García holds a PhD in Audiovisual Communication from Universitat de València. He is a lecturer in the Department of Audiovisual Communication at Universitat Jaume I and a member of the ITACA research group. His lines of research include the work of director Michael Haneke, modern cinema and Spanish cinema. He is the author of several articles published in scholarly journals such as *L'Atalante*, *Trípodos*, *Ámbitos*, *Archivos de la Filmoteca*, *El Profesional de la Información (EPI)* and *Fotocinema*. He is the author of the book *Roma, ciudad abierta* (Nau Llibres-Octaedro, 2006) and co-author, with Javier Moral, of *Antes y después de Auschwitz* (Shangrila, 2016). Contact: pferrand@uji.es



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## EL GOCE DEL DOLOR EN *LA PIANISTA*. ITINERARIO DE UNA MIRADA SADIANA: VIOLENCIA, PERVERSIÓN Y AUTODESTRUCCIÓN


### Resumen

El trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar *La pianista* (*La pianiste*, Michael Haneke, 2001) desde la narratología, atendiendo a la estructura de las ocho noches que la vertebran y a la representación del deseo de su protagonista, Erika Kohut. La metodología del artículo combina el análisis textual con algunos conceptos del psicoanálisis lacaniano, así como las aportaciones de Sade, Bataille y Debord, construyendo un diálogo con la novela homónima de Elfriede Jelinek. Los resultados permiten ilustrar cómo Haneke articula un mecanismo narrativo donde la protagonista, atrapada entre el control materno y la rigidez institucional, desarrolla prácticas sadomasoquistas y vouyeristas que expresan la imposibilidad de un erotismo compartido. La relación con Walter Klemmer, lejos de materializar el amor, se traduce en un juego de poder y humillación que culmina en la autodestrucción, acompañada por la música de Schubert como resonancia melancólica. Las secuencias clave revelan que el film rehúye el espectáculo erótico para interrogar tanto el deseo como la mirada del espectador. En conclusión, *La pianista* se erige en un punto de encuentro entre narración fílmica, crítica social y reflexión filosófica, situando la intimidad en el límite entre placer y dolor, y evidenciando que en la obra de Haneke la mirada nunca es inocente.



### Palabras clave

Sade; Sociedad del espectáculo; Sadomasoquismo; Deseo y dolor; *Voyeur*; Pulsión escópica; Goce del *Otro*.



### Autor/a

Pablo Ferrando García (Valencia, 1965) es doctor en Comunicación Audiovisual por la Universidad de Valencia, profesor permanente laboral en el departamento de Comunicación Audiovisual y miembro del grupo de investigación ITACA. Sus líneas de investigación se centran en la obra del director Michael Haneke, el cine moderno y el cine español. Es autor de diversos artículos publicados en revistas científicas como *L'Atalante*, *Trípodos*, *Ámbitos, Archivos de la Filmoteca, El Profesional de la Información* (EPI), y *Fotocinema*. Ha publicado el libro *Roma, ciudad abierta* (Nau Llibres-Octaedro, 2006) y es coautor, junto con el profesor Javier Moral, de *Antes y después de Auschwitz* (Shangrila, 2016). Contacto: pferrand@uji.es



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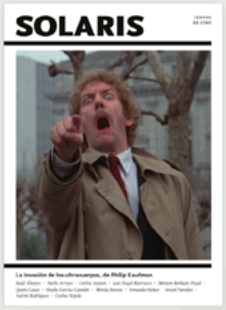

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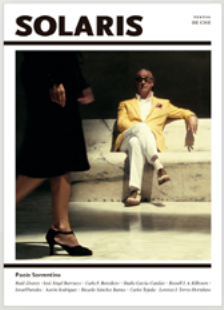

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