

WOMEN'S HISTORY TRILOGY (KIM SOYOUNG, 2000-2004)

By Serena Formica

Women's History Trilogy, directed by the South Korean filmmaker Kim Soyoung, is a trilogy of documentaries (*Koryu: Southern Women South Korea*, *I'll Be Seeing Her*, and *New Women: Her First Song*) realised between 2000 and 2004. In order to contextualise the documentaries' review, I will provide a brief introduction regarding the work of Kim Soyoung as documentarist and her involvement in the Women Filmmakers' Collective 'Parituh.' The latter will be briefly examined in the context of Korea's feminist film movement(s). Finally, considering the screening of many of her works in international and local film festivals, I will spend a few words on the importance and significance of film festivals in Korea.

Introduction

The South Korean director Kim Soyoung has been an active filmmaker since 1984, when she directed the *Little Time-Maker*, her graduation short film for the Korean Film Academy of Arts, where she was among the first graduates. In 1986 Soyoung directed the short film (12 minutes) *Little Blue Requiem*, which was shown at the Asian American International Film Festival in New York. At the end of the 1980s (the years of the *renaissance* of the Korean cinema after a period of political and economical recession¹) and precisely in 1988, Kim Soyoung became one of the founding members of Women Filmmakers' Collective 'Parituh.'

Parituh is a social movement composed of only women, including both filmmakers and academics, who intended to use filmmaking - documentaries in particular - as a medium of opposition to the climate of political and social oppression that characterised South Korea at that time.

The term "parituh" is formed by the Korean word "pari," which was the ancient name of princesses, and "tuh," which means "place." The first work realised by Parituh is the short fiction film (running 38 minutes) *Even a Little Grass has its Name* (1989), which concerned the issue of women's role in the formation of labor unions. Parituh then produced the short documentary *Our Children* as a result of research conducted on the issue of day care centers.

Members of the movement include Pyon Yongjoo (filmmaker of the *Comfort Women Trilogy*), Kim Yong (producer of the 2003 horror film *A Tale of Two Sisters*), Kim Haewon (producer of *Addiction*, *Chongdok*), the feminist critic Kwon Eunson, the programmer of Pusan Film Festival, Hong Hyosook, and Mun Haejoo, a film distributor.

Eventually, Parituh joined the "documentary coalition group," which in turn, was involved with the people's movement. The Parituh can thus be inscribed in the wider tradition of feminist filmmaking in South Korea. Kim Soyoung explains that:

[T]he new field of interest in both the representation and spectatorship of women after the [Second World] war ... anticipated the emergence of Korea's first woman filmmaker, Pak Nam-ok, [whose] *The Widow*, (*Mimangin*, 1955) was shown at the opening night of the First Women's Film Festival held in Seoul in 1997 (Kim, *Questions*).

The Widow was Pak Nam-ok's only film, since, as Joo Jin-sook has said, "surviving as a woman director in Korea was exceedingly [difficult]." This was due to the general condition in which women were living "until recently," for they were not allowed to "be first passenger in a taxi... nor were they allowed to touch a camera." (Joo 10) Thus it is not surprising that in the next two decades after Pak Nam-ok there were only one or two women directors.

In 1989 Kim Soyoungh directed the short film *Invisible Colours*, which was shown at the Vancouver Film Festival and in 1997, *Sky Blue Hometown*, a documentary about Korean-Uzbekistani painter Nikolai Sergevich, on the background of the extremely difficult conditions of Koreans in the former Soviet Union. The documentary shows how deep are Kim's interest and empathy towards the life and the pain suffered by her people abroad. She once said about *Sky Blue Hometown*: "Through my own historical film a devastating part of Korean history can hopefully be introduced to the world."² Kim Soyoungh is also founding director of the Seoul Women's Film Festival and the Jeonju International Film Festival.

The "recent proliferation of all kinds of film festivals in South Korea" (Kim 2005, 79) is connected with the rise of East Asian cinema new waves (Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, China and Taiwan) since the 1980s. In South Korea, Film Festivals have assumed a particular significance in shaping national identity and in providing "a discursive space where the relevant issues can emerge and take shape." According to Kim Soyoungh, the main factors are:

[F]irst the 'cine-mania', the Korean version of 'cinephilia.' Second the "enactment of a local self-government system. Third, there has been a shift in the site of Korean activism from the politico-economic to the cultural sphere. And last, there is the ambitious project of *Saegaehwa*, the Korean official version of globalization. (Kim 2005, 79)

As mentioned, Kim Soyoungh has always been involved at both ends of Korean Film Festivals, as promoter and organiser on one hand and as participant on the other. Indeed, Kim's desire for spreading worldwide her cinematic representation of Koreans' lives is reflected in the screening of her movies in several international festivals in the US, Japan, China and Italy.

Besides her activity as filmmaker, Kim has also pursued a career as an academic. She is currently Professor in the Cinema Studies Department of the Korean National University of the Arts in Seoul, where she teaches transnational cinema and cinema theories, keeping separate her academic role as professor from her work as director.

Women's History Trilogy: Review

Koryu: Southern Women/South Korea is the first documentary of Kim Soyoungh's *Women's History Trilogy*. *Koryu*, realised in 2000, can be divided into two main parts. In the first part, which is partially autobiographical, a narrator, who can be considered the director's *alter ego*, tells us the story of her grandmother's life. In the second part, Kim Soyoungh presents the lives of very different women that have in common the experience of a life in a foreign territory.

Kim Soyoungh has said that in the documentary, the term *Koryu* has four different meanings and is derived from the word *Koryu-min*, which refers to Japanese-Koreans in Japan. The second meaning is more general: "women's mode of existence, minor modes of existence."

The third meaning is “life and death” in a Buddhist context. There is also a fourth, meaning “enlightening,” which according to the director refers to a village called Koryu that Kim discovered by chance close to her grandmother’s own home.

Koryu opens with an image that resembles a wondering face, and seems to invite us to wonder about the stories that the spectator is invited to see, or as it were, to witness. We will learn later that the image is nothing but a reflection in a well, in the home village of the narrator’s grandmother, which is the real protagonist of the first half of the movie. The narrator’s voice-over tells us her story, and the camera, with a long opening travelling shot sequence that gives a sense of anticipation, leads us into the grandmother’s hometown of Ko-sung.

The story unfolds through slow takes that assume the form of still pictures, as the camera lingers on rooms, landscapes and paintings. At times, the foggy atmosphere and the stillness of the image make it difficult to distinguish between paintings and reality, while the narrator’s voice blends everything in a poetic form. One particular painting shows a network of streets, and a street signal on the way to Ko-sung indicates different directions. However, for the grandmother it was possible to take only one of them: the way towards matrimony that took her away from her birth family. During the time of her grandmother’s youth, women were allowed to go back to their original families in the occasion of the parents’ death. At the funeral, they would read eulogies to celebrate their lives, in one of the rare opportunities given to women to contribute to the literary tradition during Confucian times.

Through the words of the narrator, we find out that her grandmother was a writer. One of the inhabitants of Ko-sung that the camera introduces to us is an energetic ninety year-old woman who used to write eulogies. Her serene face in the viewer’s imagination becomes the face of the director’s grandmother, and it does not really matter if it is not the same person. What is important is to listen to her voice that reads the eulogies, a voice that, for the initial absence of subtitles, sounds to a western viewer as a tune, a melody that accompanies us in the journey away from Ko-sung, while the camera retraces the same route that led us to the town, but this time backwards.

Travelling shots are a constant in *Koryu*: in the second part different routes takes us to hear the stories of different women. The director opens a window into the lives of these women, and they tell us their stories in brief interviews. The camera from time to time moves away from them, to linger on rooms that appear to be empty, but on a second look reveals the objects of a lifetime.

These women have in common a diasporic existence, which in some cases challenge their own identities and in other cases help to discover them. One of the women interviewed tells us that she first had the awareness of herself as Korean when, after marrying a British man, she could not call her parents-in-law by their names. Thus, we discover that being far away from one’s homeland can reinforce one’s identity. Kim Soyoung said that *Koryu* “is not a general history of Korea, but is a particular history of Korea, and provide[s] the points where the general history is left out.”

The opening shots of *I’ll Be Seeing Her*, the third film in the trilogy, contains a quick juxtaposition of faces of women against a colourful, fast-changing background that recalls video clips from the 1970s. With this beginning, the documentary introduces itself as a kaleidoscope of images that retraces the representation of women in South Korean cinema

from the mid-50s to today. In the documentary, Kim Soyoung uses different styles, from footage of important Korean directors like Kim Kiyong, Shin Sangok, and Lee Manhee, to interviews with woman moviegoers and woman filmmakers.

With *I'll Be Seeing Her*, Kim shifts from print film criticism to screen criticism, without renouncing completely the use of the written word. Commenting on *Going Home*, a 1967 film, the director calls the protagonist a "modern woman." Later, in introducing *Madame Freedom*, a 1956 feature, the director mentions how elements of western culture like dancing, tight dresses and public kissing have astonished the Korean society. Already from this initial part of the documentary, we have a characterisation of women, revealing the changing of an era; "modern" and "freedom" are two connotations that can be read as opposite of something; "modern" as the opposite of "antique," and "freedom" as the opposite of "constraint."

More than any of her previous documentaries, *I'll Be Seeing Her* reveals Kim Soyoung as a feminist critic. Whereas *Koryu* tells us stories of women without commenting on them, thus leaving reflection entirely to the spectator, here the director comments directly on the condition of women. In the short captions at the beginning of each section, the highlighted character is introduced with an adjective. We have the "runaway" wife, the "marginal" teenager, the "lone" and "vulnerable" woman; these adjectives all reveal a condition, which is never plain and never happy. However, as Korean history unfolds through the documentary footage, we begin to see the signs of an improving condition. With Kim Kiyong's *The Housemaid* in 1960, we learn that "the upward mobility of a housemaid threatens the middle class family," and in a later film, a group of women will unite to help one of them who was beaten by her husband.

I'll Be Seeing Her is a documentary that not only shows what is beyond the screen but also what is before it, dwelling upon women's reactions to their first experiences as moviegoers. After the Korean War, women began to go to the cinema. As Kim Soyoung tells us, "Going to the movies was thrilling, and women shared laughs, tears and they comfort each other." One woman recalls how she was so impressed by *Bitter, but Once Again* (*Miwodo Dasihanbon*, Chong So-yong, 1968) that she went to see it three times, the first time in a multiplex and then in second and third-run theatres. In the process, we discover with the director aspects of movie theatres in Korean cinema history.

The original title of the documentary, *Hwangholkyong*, evokes states of ecstasy, fantasy and phantasmagoria, states that can all be found in the footage of the presented movies. Kim Soyoung shows us images of different genres, from horror to melodrama, from blockbuster to classics, all characterised by the presence of women: rebellious women, romantic women, even ghost women who demand, even after their death, a place in society.

In one of the featured films there is this revealing dialogue: "Granny, why do you want us to film you carrying pumpkins?" "Because we are harvesting what we planted." "How do you want to appear in the film?" "As a woman who works like a cow." This dialogue from *Habitual Sadness* tells us about the hard situation of some women in Korea, and it is revealing that it is referring to 1997, a relatively recent time. With her comment, "the comfort woman, breaking the silence, makes a film," the director points out the willingness of the Korean women to speak out. Similarly, two young filmmakers interviewed about *Food, Flower and Scapegoat*, from 2001, want to denounce the difficult conditions of canteen workers. With their film, two women give voice to other women, unsung heroes of a changing society.

Kim Soyoung blends the elements of her documentary in an unconventional way, alternating interview and film footage, written words and moving images. In one of the interviews of the documentary, the artist Yoon Sunman says movies give us what we do not have in reality. *I'll Be Seeing Her* gives us an insight into Korean cinema, and leaves in us the desire of seeing some of the movies that were presented in the past.

New Woman: Her First Song is the second documentary of the trilogy. The title refers to a feminist movement born in England in the late nineteenth century. The expression “new woman” indicates a woman unconstrained by Victorian norms and a woman who challenges conventional gender roles. We will learn from the documentary that the connotations of the British “new woman” were slightly different from the connotations of the new woman of eastern countries of the world. The Korean new woman was seen as opposite of the old woman, thus with different hairstyles and different dresses.

The documentary opens with a series of fast-paced images, juxtapositions, music, and an interaction between animation and live action footage. Kim Soyoung then presents to us a gallery of images of people who were first in a particular field: the first woman aviator, the first writer, the first man to publish a magazine entirely dedicated to woman and the first woman to paint a western subject. The attention of the director will then focus in particular on the latter, the painter and writer Na Haesuk, born toward the end of nineteenth century, who was “the first female painter to emerge in the Chosun [Korea] era and created shock waves because of her quest for free love and her determination to get a divorce.” (*New Women* synopsis) Kim Soyoung presents the life of the painter in an unconventional way, alternating film footage and interviews. The interviewees are people with a vast range of study interests, from anthropology to sociology, and of professions, all providing insights into Na Haesuk’s art and life from different perspectives. What emerges is the portrait of a versatile woman that lived an extreme life, a woman who was dismissed by the critics as a sell out to the west.

New Women, presenting film footage from the twenties and the thirties, fills a gap that was left by *I'll Be Seeing Her*, which was limited to feature film footage from the mid fifties to today. Thanks to this footage and to other materials such as cartoons, we learn how Korean new women used to dress, and in which ways they were perceived by both men and other women, to whom they represented a scandal.

In respect to the other two documentaries of the trilogy, *New Women* is not limited to what was happening in Korea, but establishes a dialogue amongst other East Asian countries like China and Japan, thus giving to the subject a broader dimension. Whereas a partiality towards feminism is fully revealed in *I'll Be Seeing Her*, in *New Women* emerges the pride of being a woman. Many of Kim Soyoung’s interviewees talk about their desire for fulfilment through their lives as activists or through their feminist art. The documentary has the merit to show that feminism is not a phenomenon of the past, but that is alive and active.

But there is more than that. Young people interviewed are more inclined to reveal themselves as feminists, to declare their feelings and passions, whereas the middle-aged interviewees are more detached in their judgements. If the documentary has a limit, it is that it does not fully investigate men’s opinions toward feminism, with the exception of the interview with Earl Jackson Jr., Professor at UC Santa Cruz concerning strategies of deviance, and with Kim

Taesin, Buddhist Monk and painter, who was interviewed for his early acquaintance with Na Haesuk.

One of the interviewees, the sociologist Kim Sujin, reveals yet another aspect of Na Haesuk's life, telling us that she was a representative of the confessional literary genre. The confessional genre was originally a male genre, but was then modified by the women who employed it in the colonial period. Whereas for men it was a kind of voyeurism, with women it became a sad, elegiac, and real narrative. As Kim Sujin says, women "should confess and reveal their pain to be acknowledged and recognized." The confession was a forced step for Na Haesuk, who was asked to confess her divorce. Due to Na Haesuk's extreme life, later generations of feminists began to think that if they wanted to be radical, they would have had a tragic destiny. With time, however, feminism began to change, passing from forms of radicalism to interest in social welfare and even taking patriotic directions.

In *New Women*, Kim Soyoung shows us the various fields in which feminism represents itself, from cinema to art, passing via literature to arrive at new forms, such as webzines. This aspect of the documentary gives a sense of the complexity of Korean feminism and at the same time illustrates to what extent it has changed. Today's feminism can assume the form of a documentary with films like *New Women*, in which the director Kim Soyoung declares, "I wanted to make a film that not only evokes a life of a new woman but a kind of afterlife and affect that her thunderstorm sort of life has left to the contemporary women."

Women's History Trilogy was screened within the East Asian Film Festival held at Lake Side Art Centre, in Nottingham (UK) from 15th to 23rd of October 2005. The program of the Festival featured the screening of contemporary fiction films, short movies and documentaries of the Korean, Chinese and Japanese cinema including *Take Care of My Cat* (South Korea, 2001), *Suzhou River* (China, 1999), and the extra screening of the 1965 Chinese drama *Two Stage Sisters*. The screenings were free and open to the public, thus the Festival had a pretty heterogeneous audience of academics, students, and the general public. Though a larger number attended the fiction films, Kim Soyoung's documentary *Women's History Trilogy* was received with vivid interest and curiosity.

Women's History Trilogy was supported by Korean Film Commission Film Promotion Fund. *Koryu, I'll Be Seeing Her* and *New Women* together provide an insightful image of Eastern Asian and Korean women in particular as analysed through the delicate eye of Kim Soyoung.³

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¹ For a concise history of Korean cinema see (in Italian language) Gianluca Gibilaro, *Breve Storia del Cinema Coreano (Brief History of Korean Cinema)*, in <http://www.cinematicoreano.it/saggi/storia.htm>.

² See «Korea Now», bi-weekly magazine, http://kn.koreaherald.co.kr/SITE/data/html_dir/2000/11/18/200011180029.asp (accessed 25th October 2005)

³ The documentary is available on a two-disc set DVD released by the Korean Foundation. (*Women's History Trilogy*, 2005 by Kim Soyoung, region code: 3, running time: 193 minutes. Special features: interview in English with the director; includes a booklet with brief introduction and synopsis of the three documentaries).

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