

A comparative Analysis of Documentary Films on the so-called “comfort women” of the Japanese Imperial Army

Topic and Research Question

The thesis aims to analyse and compare these six documentaries on former so-called “comfort women” and studies a range of issues related to the discourse:

1. “Senso Daughters” by Sekiguchi Yuka (1989)
2. The trilogy “The Murmuring” (1995), “Habitual Sadness” (1997) and “My own breathing”(1999) by Byun Young-joo
3. “Song of the Reed” by Wu Hsiu-ching (2014)
4. “The Apology” by Tiffany Hsiung (2016)

Research Questions:

- In which ways are documentary films able to influence the public discourse on “comfort women” in societies and can they even trigger political action?
- What patterns of hegemonic representations of former so-called “comfort women” can be observed in the documentaries? What images of former so-called “comfort women” are created within documentaries and the public discourse? In which ways might they be exploited and for whose and which agendas?
- What are the differences between the domestic and interstate discourse and what are the reasons for the differences?
- How do documentary films on so-called “comfort women” deal with issues of gender and power?
- In which ways is the “comfort women” discourse integrated in a broader feminist discourse on issues such as victim shaming, forced prostitution or sexual violence on women in armed conflicts?

State of the Art

Olivieri, Domitilla (2012) “Haunted by reality. Toward a feminist study of documentary film.”: Feminism is concerned with the politics of representation in literature and film, but has focused their attention mainly on mainstream fiction films, often ignoring documentaries. However, documentaries are important as they influence the way we learn about and look at other cultures, societies and historical events. In addition to the “male gaze” an “imperial gaze” exists, and the two concepts cannot be separated. In dominant discourses, the “Other” is gendered as well as ethnicised. When analysing documentaries about non-Western societies, one should be aware that the

relationship with cultures of former colonies is influenced by power imbalances at an economic, geopolitical and social level, and a at the level of cultural representation.

Nam, Soo-young (2001) “Recounting ‘History’: Documentary as Women’s Cinema.”: Nam explains how the notion that documentary images are more truthful than fictional films is problematic. Documentaries often employ the tool of voice-over, an authoritative voice that surpasses any other voice in the film and is usually the voice of a male narrator. This voice-over aims to give authority over the narrative of the documentary and should tell the audience the “official” truth.

Berry, Chris; Lu Xinyu; and Rofel, Lisa (ed.) (2010) “The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement.”: According to Berry, there is an “ethical dilemma” or “conflict of consciousness” when producing documentaries regarding the exploitation of the subjects. The relationship between filmmakers and subjects is never of equal power and documentary filming poses ethical questions on how to represent subjects with dignity and sensitivity. Documentary is considered to be a representation of reality, which is why discussions of ethics often proceed from the assumption that one key issue is to represent reality as accurately as possible and to minimize the impact of filming, not considering filming as part of reality, and that therefore filmmakers should be concerned that the filming process itself could be a social practice that benefits their subjects.

Hung, Su-Chen (2010) “Exploring the Recovery Process of Former Taiwanese Comfort Women through Drama Therapy.”: Hung conducted research on the psychotherapeutic aspects of the recovery process of former so-called “comfort women”. Her findings shine light on the positive effects that being filmed could have on the recovery process, for example were survivors enabled to see their own experiences in a historical context, and the historical perspective on issues of colonization and abuse by a colonial power relieved them of personal issues of blame and individual responsibility of having been deceived.

Methodology and Approach

This paper follows a comparative approach and tries to analyse and compare the six documentaries using the following analytical framework of criteria:

1. Gender norms and socioeconomic power imbalances
2. Stereotypical images, cultural inequalities and geopolitical power imbalances
3. Awareness of hegemonic discourses on “comfort women”
4. Inclusion and Exclusion
5. Global and historical implications of current political affairs
6. Can the documentary eventually trigger political change and justice for survivors?
7. Is the documentary a useful tool for the production of knowledge?
8. How does the documentary deal with the ethical dilemma of exploitation of its subjects?
9. Filming and narrative techniques: voice, voice-over, interviews, testimonies
10. Support of the survivors’ healing process
11. Connection to a broader feminist discourse on victim blaming and sexual violence

The conduction of expert interviews with directors of documentaries is another method to gain more insight and provide different perspectives on the “comfort women” discourse. I had the opportunity to meet and talk to director Wu in person, and to conduct interviews via E-mail with directors Byun and Sekiguchi.

Main Facts and Results

Between the release of the oldest documentary analysed and the most recent one, almost three decades had passed and this significant time gap is to be noted when comparing the documentaries, because research on and awareness of the injustice suffered by former so-called “comfort women” has expanded as well as institutional advocacy for the survivors. The earlier documentaries on the topic, had to raise awareness, while “Song of the Reed” and “The Apology” had to stress the urgency of the issue, as the now older survivors were gradually passing away. While “The Murmuring” and “The Apology” concentrate more on the activism for justice, “Habitual Sadness” and “Song of the Reed” put the emphasis on the personal healing process. In “Senso Daughters”, “The Murmuring”, “Song of the Reed” and “The Apology”, there is criticism of women’s exclusion from historical records, meaning that all of the four directors included this issue in their

work. In a similar manner, five of the six documentaries analysed have references to the history textbook issue and demand that so-called “comfort women” are included in Japanese history textbooks. In the context of sexual violence, the term “justice” can mean “retributive justice” (justice based on prosecution and punishment), or “restorative justice” (justice that emphasizes processes of healing). Generally, the documentaries focus more on elements of “restorative justice”: truth and reconciliation, compensation and reparation, healing and recovery. All of the documentaries are critical of patriarchal gender norms and that girls had little access to education, which was a relevant factor why they could be easily deceived. As sources of multiple detailed accounts of live witnesses, the documentaries are all useful tools for the production of knowledge on so-called “comfort women”. Although the documentaries originated in four different countries and were produced in three different decades and emphasize different aspects of the issue, all of them qualify as “feminist documentaries” according to the analytical framework applied. Without exception, all six documentaries can be integrated in a broader feminist discourse as they all connect the issue to other forms of conflict-related sexual violence. In all of the six documentaries, we can see multiple testimonies of how the survivors were shamed when telling their surroundings about the crimes they suffered.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at> .

About the Author

Katharina Fischer has received her bachelor’s degrees in Japanese and Korean studies at the University of Vienna. During her high school and university education, she has spent several months in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and China. In her free time she mostly enjoys to drink the precious teas she has acquired during her travels in East Asia.

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