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There Is A Frozen Land

by Zeeone Kang

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA Imaging Arts/Computer Animation

SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION

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Abstract

This film is a poetic documentary about the sad relationship between North and South Korea. One day, a South Korean filmmaker encounters North Korean defectors and starts to think about what North Korea means to her. North Korea is the closest country to South Korea in terms of distance, but it is often the farthest thing from the minds of South Koreans. This film takes a journey through the minds of South Koreans and asks what they think and feel about North Korea with the hope to raise awareness of the land to the north before the distance in their minds becomes too great.

Thinking about North Korea as a South Korean

I sit at the Spin Café in downtown Rochester, New York. This is one of my favorite places in the world. It is the place where I first thought about my thesis film subject. At that time, I sat there and had a coffee and a giant piece of cheesecake. There was a newspaper someone left. I don't remember what it was about, but it showed a world map and I automatically found Korea, my country. Then I saw the line. I realized that I am from only half of Korea. Suddenly, I imagine North Koreans in North Korea now. They live totally different lives from mine, and I did not know what to think about North Korea.

Have I ever thought about North Korea? No, why should I think of it? Because it is Korea and I think we are the same country. I started to ask myself many questions, but I barely answered my questions. I did not know much about North Korea.

The simple fact that I was not concerned about North Korea or Korean unification before that day at the Spin Café gave me enough reasons to make a documentary about it now, for this would mean thinking about the subject all the time. It was the first time I cared about North Korea in my life. I thought it is better late than never.

Some History

When I decided to make a documentary about North and South Korea, I wanted to start with a Korean traditional fairy tale ‘*Oh-Jak-Gyo*’.

It is a love story about two lovers who can meet only once a year. They meet on a bridge named “Oh-Jak-Gyo” that is made by crows in the sky. It is a naïve folk tale. Now, I admit that I too was naïve to understand the two Koreas’ peculiar relationship. This folk tale would not be the right story to present the relationship between North and South Korea. There are a lot of complicated facts and history between the two Koreas. I thought I might want to make a documentary with a happy ending, but it was hard to even start thinking about it because there is no warm and lovely energy between North and South Korea.

Meeting North Korean Settlers

I have a friend who studied about North Korea at Ewha Womans University in Seoul, Korea. She helped me to meet some North Korean defectors, warning me that it would be better not to expect much from them. I could not understand at first what she was trying to say to me. I met several North Korean defectors, and had phone conversations with them: then I vaguely understood what she meant. I confess that meeting North Korean defectors was not a delightful experience for me. I couldn’t

imagine how hard it was for them on their journey to South Korea.

They would have been killed if the escape was not successful. Their journey must have been tougher than anything I could have imagined, and maybe that is why their personalities seem to me more aggressive. I could understand that. However, when I had to face their toughness, I regretted my decision to make this film. There were many uncomfortable moments, a few of which I wish to share with you.

I met a North Korean pianist whose father had had a high position in the Communist party in North Korea. He lived an exceptional lavish life in North Korea, unlike other North Koreans, so he did not want to be treated like other North Korean defectors. I was disappointed that he still had such a strong sense of class distinction, even though he lives in South Korea. Honestly, it was the moment that I became afraid of unification. I wondered what North and South Korea mean to him. In the conversation, he seemed not to care about other North Koreans who lived under severe conditions. I asked myself if I was ready for unification. Am I ready to embrace selfish North Koreans who do not want to think all people have the same rights to live happily? I was desperate because I was talking with someone whom I thought of as coming from the same country, but who did not even understand what communism and real capitalism are. Then, I realized North and South Korea need somehow to get to know each other before it is too late. I asked for a short interview

on video with him. He refused because he was not the main character of my film. He said that he did not want to sacrifice his identity.

I had a chance to film an English camp for North Korean defectors where I was able to meet many young North Korean defectors. It was nice, but again, they were defensive about meeting others. Nobody wanted to tell their real names. Some of them were friends, but they did not use their real names during the camp. I learned a new Korean word, “Sae-Tu-Min”, which means North Korean settlers. This word sounds more friendly to South Koreans than North Korean defector which is “Tal-Buk-Ja”. The camp was small and friendly, but I felt it was for the South Koreans who organized the camp, not for the North Korean Settlers who try hard to live in Seoul.

After I left the camp, I contacted one of the North Koreans, and he helped me to interview young North Korean settlers in Seoul. It was nice meeting them, but when I tried to meet them again, nobody called me back. I emailed, and called, but no one responded to me. I kind of understood their anxiety, but I was sad because I think it might be impossible for them to be really free unless North and South Korea are unified. They were paranoid about talking to me, and refuse to be interviewed again. In casual conversations, they kept saying that the North Korean Communist party might know what they were doing in South Korea. It might be true, but it might be not.

Unexpected Actions of North Korea

(a) Action 1

When I wrote my thesis proposal, the relationship between North and South Korea was not bad, it could be described as being static. In July of 2008, a mother in her late fifties was shot by a North Korean soldier during her Mount Geumgan trip. The Mt. Geumgang trip was the only place in North Korea that South Koreans can visit. The shooting motivated South Korean to rethink how they felt about North Korea. The North Korean government did not apologize for the shooting, and the Mt. Geumgang trip has been shut down since then.

(b) Action 2

April 4th, 2009, was an ordinary Saturday. I was watching TV after having a typical Saturday brunch at home. A breaking news story came on in the middle of the TV show I was watching. It said that North Korea had launched a missile without any warning. I was stunned, and did not know what to say about it. It was the first time that North Korea became a possible enemy in my mind. I wondered what kind of missile they sent and why and what for? I realized that North Korea could threaten us badly. It was the first moment that I really thought about North Korea in a negative way.

Less than an hour later, the South Korean Military announced that it was a rocket not a missile. Then soon after, a Pyongyang Broadcast announced it was a “communications satellite.” I was relieved with the news that it was a satellite, not a missile even though I felt that it possibly would not be a problem anyway. Before the North Korean rocket action, South Koreans seemed to have forgotten about North Korea in our lives, but this threatening rocket action made some South Korean nervous. I expected to make a peaceful and warm documentary about the Korean unification, but this sudden satellite trial turned the red alarm lights on for South Koreans.

My Regret

I confess that I was not completely happy with my idea of making a documentary about North Korea. There are various reasons for my regret.

Firstly, it was hard to get reliable information about North Korea as a South Korean. After the Korean War, there was a long term Cold War between the North and South. At that time, it was prohibited for South Koreans to study North Korea. That memory still stands out in the memory of the majority of South Koreans now. When I told my family or friends that I wanted to make a documentary about North and South Korea, most of their reactions were negative. They asked me what made

me start thinking about North Korea. Their question connoted multiple and negative meanings. I asked myself, "Was I wrong? Could it be wrong to be curious about North Korea? Most people were not comfortable with North Korea as a subject, but how about me? Was I truly okay with the North Korean issue?" I thought of North Korea as a part of my country, but in truth, there is no place for North Korea in the minds of South Koreans. When I came up with this subject, I vaguely dreamed about peaceful unification in the future. However, the reality I found in South Korea is that there are two Koreas that have become so distant from each other that they no longer desired unification.

Encounter with North Korean Defectors

I had been spending hopeless days in Seoul. The weather was too hot to film, and whatever I tried film something, such as having interviews with South Koreans, North Koreans or even my dad, I was unsuccessful. My camera person and I planed to go on the Mt. Geumgang Trip to North Korea, but due to the accident (A South Korean woman got a shot by North Korean Soldiers in July, 2008), we couldn't. I felt all doors were shut on me and my film. I was desperate to find a way to make the film until early one morning in the summer when my mother woke me up. She said that I had to see something. She had found a rope made of shoestrings leading from the fifth floor of a neighboring building.

At the end of the shoestring, a bottle tied with a note which said that we are from North Korea and the NIS (National Intelligence Service) was investigating them, but they really wanted a cigarette. In the note, they asked if we could give them some cigarettes. I gave cigarettes to them and filmed the event. Why did I think that North Korea was far away from my daily life? In terms of distance, I was not close to North Korea, but I found the reason why I had to make the film on that day. South Koreans tend to consider 'North Korea' or 'unification' as something far away from our peaceful South Korean reality. We hypnotize ourselves that way because if we thought about North Korea and unification, it would be too troubling and make us uncomfortable. There is no correct answer for this odd relationship. I felt I found the entrance to a maze and felt if I navigated it successfully, I could learn something valuable.

The Process of Editing

I used up 48 tapes of film, which is a lot for a 25minute film. I had a really hard time editing the film. It was difficult to watch all the footage I filmed. Moreover, I had to watch myself in the film, which was a huge torture for me. It took almost a month to get used to it. However, that was not the end. I had other critical moments while I was editing.

Finding a Structure and Direction

The first crisis was in the beginning. The footage I had was too diverse to fit into a 25 minute long documentary film. I did not know how I could possibly make it one piece of work. While I was watching all the footage I had, I worried how I could connect each sequence. I had footage of interviews with North Korean settlers, my trip to the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone), my time in the English Camp, and more. I kept making a typical unattractive informational type of old fashioned TV documentary. I was desperate because I thought I might need to go back to Korea to film again, but I did not know what I could film. Fortunately, my problem was solved before I went back to Korea. I had been translating the questions and answers in the kids' interview, and while I was watching these interviews, I found their thoughts and emotions about North Korea were honest. I decided that kids would make good bridges in my film. Their interviews became a very important part of the film, guiding the direction of the film, and giving it structure. The children's responses were typical of how confused and ambivalent most South Koreans are towards North Korea.

Dealing with Translation and Voice Narration

Another crisis was from something I anticipated in pre-production. First, it was about translation. I knew that the translation would be one of the hardest parts I had to deal with because Korean is very different from English. It was not only 'a word to word' problem, but also that some idioms or expressions carry specific nuances that are hard to translate. The kids' interviews were easy to translate because they were simple and direct. Also, the audience can see their facial expressions and that helps to express delicate nuances in an interesting way. However, translating the interviews with my father and mother were difficult. My father tended to repeat answers, each time slightly differently. I chose to not translate all the things he said. I had to edit some of them and there were two reasons for this. Firstly, I wanted to make the subtitles visually interesting in my film. I did not want to use a general type of subtitle that one generally finds in all foreign films. I wanted to show subtitles like a speech bubble, but not in a funny way. I tried to make it like one was reading someone's idea or mind. That's why I put my subtitles near the character's head or heart. Secondly, the frame has a limited area for putting subtitles. I had to translate efficiently, so I shortened some of the long or repeated answers.

The Use of Voice Narration and Music

From the beginning, I planned for my film to be accessible to a non-Korean audience so I knew that I needed a lot of translation and English narration. Initially, I did not want to use my voice for the narration.

However, I tried it because I could not find anyone with the voice I wanted and thought that since I appear in the film it would be better to let the audience listen to my voice instead that of a professional voice actor. It seemed like it might be more honest and closer to the audience.

Unfortunately, after I used my voice, I hated it. It came out was much worse than I expected because I could not concentrate on my lines. I had no idea I was such a terrible reader. Recording my voice at a decent mixing studio in Seoul, I could not stand listening to myself stumble over the lines.

I tried to ask a couple of Koreans who speak English fluently, but I wasn't pleased with the results because even though they were better readers than me, their voices did not match the image I wanted to portray. It was like putting some odd music in the film. It was a miracle that I met my friend, Ji-Hye Yi, who did the voice narration for the film. She is my old friend from high school and is pursuing acting right now, her passion. Her voice tone matches very well with the images. Moreover, I could direct her reading and also she understood what I wanted.

Recording went very smoothly. Her monotonous narration conveyed the mood of the film that I was looking for - distant and calm.

An interesting thing is that many people believe I did the narration in the film. Cat Ashworth who is my thesis advisor professor, said it could be because Ji-Hye said, “ I am Zeeone and I am Korean” when my face appeared on the screen.

Choosing Music

I had three well-made pieces of music for the film before I started editing. Hae-Kwang Chun is the composer who wrote the music. All three tracks were amazing, but I did not use any of them. Because of the jumpy and rough editing style that the film has, one single song could not follow the images. The three tracks were beautiful pieces, but not suitable for the film.

After editing, I wanted the music to serve as vehicle to reveal my emotions. To accomplish this, Hae-Kwang and I met while I was still editing and we discussed how the music might be able to better accompany the images and emphasize the feelings of the narrator. I showed him the parts to which I wanted to add music and told him that I wanted something clean and simple. About a week later, he came up to the mixing studio with an acoustic guitar. He composed a lyrical melody, which was not over-powering. I was satisfied with it. Originally, I had

planned to include a lot more music than I now have, but as soon as I heard his music, I eliminated some parts because his music accomplished what I wanted in a shorter time span.

Conclusion

It was a long journey for me to complete this short documentary film. Even though I started with plans, I continually encountered something that I did not expect. In the end, those unexpected difficulties helped to make the film better and thus I can see the value in them.

The planning I did for this project was the same as I do when I go on a trip. I was excited and this carried over into my pre-production. Unfortunately, my excitement did not last long. My excitement started to wane in the beginning of production because of all the unexpected events. Nonetheless, the real hard part was my own doing and not from anything else.

My biggest challenge was dealing with my emotions related to the unpredictable events that transpired. This project was my first documentary experience. In the beginning, I thought a documentary production would be easier than a fiction film production. I thought that because I wouldn't need to prepare intensive art directions, find staff and a crew, have auditions for actors and find locations for shoots, all things

that require a lot of work. The idea of making a documentary felt like a piece of cake. Now, I know, I was so wrong. I now know how difficult it is to put myself in the documentary set as a director who does not have charge of the set. I needed to change my idea of the director on the set. I now believe that flexibility and the ability to think on one's feet are the essential ingredients for being a good documentary film director on the set. For example, time management is very important in the fiction film set. I go to the set with a shot list and try to get all the shots on the list as possible as I can. On the contrary, having a shot list was not meaningful in the documentary set. Nevertheless, I always prepared a shot list for this project but it was for B rolls. All the people in this film, they spoke and behaved in ways that I could not have imagined. For example, when I prepared for the interviews with kids, I thought that some of them might prepare for it, but the kids acted completely different from what I had imagined. They didn't seem like the same kids I used to know. After interviewing a couple of them, I changed my questions and also changed the way I asked my questions. I was really stressed out because I thought I lacked the ability to make the film and I did not know what the appropriate actions of a director should be. However, I think about it differently now. I do not think I did something wrong or insincere. As a documentary filmmaker, a different attitude is needed for the shoot – flexibility and the ability to think on one's feet are the most important aspects of it. I tried my best to relax on the set. In other

words, I tried to embrace all the unforeseen happenings and events rather than try to rigidly stick to the ideas I had made before the shoot.

In doing this, I came to see that I could better focus on filming and be more intimate with the people or situation I was involved in. Things did not change in terms of being unpredictable or trying during my filming, but the way I looked at all of it changed. I learned to enjoy the moments.

It was great breakthrough in my filmmaking experience.

Post-production was another great experience for me. If I said the production could have been initially described by word “difficult,” then post-production could have been initially described as “painful.” Unlike fiction film editing, when I started editing this documentary, I did not know what the final cut would be. While every moment seemed precious to me, I had to eliminate so much and make it a firm story. Also, watching myself in the frame were the most painful moments in the whole production. After I got used to seeing a huge amount of footage, including the footage of myself, I came to realize a few things. While I was watching all the footage, I kept thinking about how I could make it as meaningful as I wanted. My final cut was not from my first idea, but it defines my journey and can now be called the film, *There Is A Frozen*

Land.

The journey that this short documentary film took me on seemed like one that would have no end. Now, I look back on what I had to do for this project, and am thankful for this film. Although sometimes it was so

hard that I wanted to give up, it gave me a chance to enjoy filmmaking at its most difficult. Whereas I once might have said I wasn't the type to make documentaries, if I have the chance to make one and go on the journey again, I will gladly do it. For now, I can only smile with excited anticipation.

I have submitted my film to a number of film festivals around the world. Recently, I was notified by the Bridge-Fest International Film Festival that my film has been chosen to be included in the official selection category for their festival this year in Sarajevo. I do not know much about this festival and have yet to win anything. However, I think it could be a good chance to say thank some people who helped me and supported in making the film. There is little doubt that I could have finished my Masters of Fine Arts thesis project without their help. Among those that helped, I wanted to give special thanks to my thesis committee: Cat Ashworth, Malcolm Spaul, and Nancy Ghertner. They were always patient with me and encouraged me instead of pushing me whenever I was stuck. I cannot thank them enough.

