

Korean Studies Internet Discussion List

KOREAN STUDIES REVIEW

Solrun Hoaas, *Rushing to Sunshine (Seoul Diaries)*, 2001. Distributed by Ronun Films (Australia and New Zealand). Goshu Films Pty. Ltd., P.O. Box 324 Albert park, VIC 3206, Australia. 1/2" Video, Color. 73 min.

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Solrun Hoaas follows her successful film, *Pyongyang Diaries*, with a new diary-style documentary, *Rushing to Sunshine (Seoul Diaries)*. Describing her visits to South Korea during a period of two years from March 1998 to March 2000, Hoaas engages critically the South Korean attempts at rapprochement with North Korea envisioned by Kim Dae Jung's "Sunshine Policy." Following the personal stories of several main characters as they attempt to develop a more constructive view of the north, Hoaas identifies some of the main problems with and paradoxes inherent in the process of opening up to the North. Perhaps the most notorious "character" in the documentary is the National Security Law, with its harsh proscriptions against praise of or contact with the North. Hoaas interrogates Kim Dae Jung's policies throughout the documentary, particularly his vow to emend or repeal the law as part of his election campaign, a vow that has yet to be enacted.

The documentary opens with Hoaas's voice-over explaining the burgeoning changes in the South Korean government's policies toward the North and the seeming willingness of the North to engage with the South. The voice-over has the potential to be mesmerizing, with its languid flow. However, it can also come across as crushingly monotonous and unnecessarily slow.

During the first eighteen minutes of the documentary, Hoaas uses an unusual split screen technique. Images of South Korea and, in particular, a demonstration by the outlawed National Student Congress at Myongdong Cathedral in spring of 1998, dominate the right hand side of the screen. On the smaller, left hand screen, changing images of first South Korea and later North Korea (images borrowed from *Pyongyang Diaries*), provide a running antipode to the main visual story on the right hand screen. The technique is an intriguing attempt to at once bridge the divide between North and South, an attempt made all the more vivid by the central role of bridge imagery in the left screen, while simultaneously erecting a visual representation of the division of the North and South. Although the idea is sound, the initial viewing experience is jarring and disjointed, detracting significantly from one's ability to comprehend the important background information provided in the voice-overs and the right screen action. The left hand screen in this context acts as a distraction without achieving the laudable metaphoric intent of the filmmaker. A montage using this technique may have been more appropriate as a bridging element in the middle portion of the film.

The voice-over of the documentary attempts to reinstall the self-reflexive ethnographic

approach that Hoas used to great effect in *Pyongyang Diaries*. In that film, the perplexed, probing voice of Hoas acts as a helpful guide in understanding the overwhelming and at times troubling imagery that she captured of the North. While in *Pyongyang Diaries* Hoas includes images of the standard tours provided to all visitors to the North, she also captured moments in time-isolates-that step out of the otherwise well-scripted presentation of the North to outsiders. This technique is less successful in *Seoul Diaries*, perhaps because the images are less jarring, perhaps because people in the South are generally more willing to express themselves to an outsider. This freedom of expression, however, clearly has its limits, as Hoas so expertly points out. It is this paradox-a new democracy with alleged freedom of expression coupled to the rabid enforcement of a legal relic, the National Security Law-that constitutes the most interesting aspect of Hoas's documentary. In one intriguing sequence, Hoas captures a group of young sailors responding with highly scripted soundbites for the television cameras in response to queries about their role in the sinking of a North Korean fishing vessel, an event known as the "West Sea Incident" in 1999. Short segments like this coupled to stories such as the on-going case against an author of a children's book that "praises and encourages" the North, highlight the limits of freedom of expression in the south.

In addition to Hoas's "video diary" of her experiences in South Korea, she relates the stories of several characters, although none of them become the main focus of the documentary. Indeed it is hard to single out one character as the focus of the documentary even though the term "diary" in the subtitle suggests that Hoas herself is the main character. Her voice, despite its persistence, never takes center stage. Instead, she shares that stage with a wide range of other characters. One of the more fascinating characters is Mr. Hong, an elderly man who works for reunification through an NGO he has established, and who also visits North Korea on the first Kumkangsan tour. His story is woven throughout the documentary, and almost acts as an anchor in the sea of stories in which Hoas submerges us.

A bit more time is dedicated to the slightly less compelling story of Professor Lee Jiang Hee. Lee's children's book on North Korea led to his prosecution for violating the National Security Law. Hoas weaves interviews with Lee together with interviews of the conservative journalist who hounded Lee, and Lee's young publisher, who was also indicted.

At the end of the documentary, Hoas visits with the well-known artist Shin Hak-Chul at his studio, where he displays and discusses his art. Shin is an articulate and compelling character and his discussion of one particular canvass-a depiction of rice transplanting-that had drawn the ire of conservative anti-communist crusaders, and had ultimately been banned by the government as "pro North," is among the more successful depictions of the absurd subjectivity that animates the enforcement of the National Security Law.

Other people who play minor roles are Hoas's interpreters, Cho Eung-Ju and Ha Myung-Mi, and Im Su-Kyong. Perhaps more tantalizing are the interviews Hoas has with several North Korean prisoners who had just been released after decades of imprisonment by the South. The potential weight of these interviews is diminished in part because Hoas does not spend substantial time with the ex-prisoners (indeed, they could be the focus of a documentary by themselves) and in part by the reluctance of the men to speak about their experiences as prisoners of the South Korean state (a reluctance attributable to their expressed fear of the government reaction to any public statements).

Hoas intersperses most of her main stories with short "man on the street" type interviews and visits to various sites of interest-a reunification festival, the DMZ, the port of Incheon. While few of these shorter interviews are compelling by themselves, the overall effect is one revealing the wide range of views that South Koreans hold on North Korea. With the summit meeting of June 2000, South Koreans appear to be more willing to speak openly about North Korea-a stark contrast to the interviews that Hoas captured in her earlier *Pyongyang Diaries*. One of the more amusing segments-albeit an uncritical segment-focuses on several young middle school students who made an animated short about the summit meeting.

Rushing to Sunshine would have benefited from a slightly more selective focus on one or two main characters. While polyvocality characterizes the South Korean political and intellectual landscape now-a welcome respite from the bifurcated arena that characterized much of the last three or four decades-the focus of the documentary suffers under the weight of too many stories. While *Pyongyang Diaries* was a personal account of travels in the North, making Hoas the main character, *Rushing to Sunshine* is only part video diary. Seen in conjunction with *Pyongyang Diaries*, *Rushing to Sunshine* does help provide a view of the complexities of the political and cultural situation on the peninsula. However, unlike the former film, *Rushing to Sunshine* lacks a clear focus and, given its slow pacing and large number of sub-stories, requires all of the viewer's patience and attention. The length itself is a significant problem for classroom use-while one might want to show both of these films in the classroom, only *Pyongyang Diaries* at 52 minutes will fit within the time constraints of most classes. Even a longish ninety minute seminar would need to stretch to accommodate the 73 minutes of *Rushing to Sunshine*. Nevertheless, *Rushing to Sunshine* is a welcome addition to the growing body of documentary films that consider aspects of contemporary Korea. Hoas should be commended for attempting to address the exceedingly complex issues surrounding South Korea's relationship with North Korea.

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