Independent Filmmaking across Borders in Contemporary Asia

Ma, Ran

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Ma, Ran.
Independent Filmmaking across Borders in Contemporary Asia.
Amsterdam University Press, 2019.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/71339.
Postscript

The Promise of Subversive Art

Abstract
In this concluding section, I summarize what I have examined in the preceding chapters to foreground the significance of this study. More importantly, I highlight some of the research concerns that could be explored further in the future. In proposing potential 'ways of seeing', I briefly look at how we can grasp border-crossing filmmaking in relation to current developments in visual technologies, especially apropos the ubiquitous use of drones, as instantiated in Ai Weiwei’s documentary project *Human Flow* (2017). Secondly, I suggest that in extending the questions of gender and sexuality, it would be useful for a future project to realign and re-examine the border-crossing auteurs and their films, both within and beyond the inter-Asia context.

Keywords: drone, gender, sexuality, pornography, minor objects

In the end, in thinking about the Asia question, we are not led to being absorbed in the question ‘What is Asia?’, but rather to reflect on ‘What sort of issues in fact are set forth in discussions with regard to Asia?’ In other words, Asia is merely a medium, through which we are effectively led to our history, and it is precisely because of this historical significance that it is important we keep asking ‘How does Asia mean?’

Sun Ge, 2000

For me, the fundamental question is to explore the possibility of maintaining spaces of play. To discover how to produce forms for the presentation of objects, forms for the organization of spaces, that thwart expectations. The main enemy of artistic creativity as well as of political creativity is consensus – that is, inscription within given roles, possibilities, and competences.

Jacques Rancière, 2007

Ma, Ran, *Independent Filmmaking across Borders in Contemporary Asia*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2020

DOI: 10.5117/9789462986640_POST
Independent Filmmaking across Borders in Contemporary Asia has been structured as a series of journeys initiated by the film auteurs and their protagonists, each of which departs from and/or traverses across specific Asian locales, while the translocal and transnational interrelations between these places and localities have also been foregrounded and examined. I hope that in this book I have illustrated how the analytic heuristic of ‘border-crossing cinema’ can help us to better interrogate cinematic transnationalism in the contemporary setting from within the socio-political and cultural spaces across Southeast Asia and East Asia. I have also illustrated how this study, in turning to the auteur-centred independent filmmaking within/from Asia, contributes to re-envisioning a cinema that ‘crosses lines, zigzags, derails, rerails, reroutes, jumps from one continent to another, [and] relies on artifice to create its imaginary spaces’ (quoted in Hunt & Leung, 2008: 3) so that we can re-examine the politics and aesthetics of contemporary cinema and global image cultures as a whole and reconsider how they ‘engage with the realities of globalization’ (Hinderliter et al. 2009: 2). If we return to Jacques Rancière, whose quote opens not only this chapter but also Chapter One, I suggest that this project has revolved around and reflected upon the promise of subversive art, in particularly pinpointing the dissensual potentialities of film and other moving image works. Nevertheless, my case studies have not aimed to provide an easy checklist to determine whether a film title or artwork is ‘qualified’ to be considered the art of the dissensual. As Rancière believes, “The work of dissensus is to always reexamine the boundaries between what is supposed to be normal and what is supposed to be subversive, between what is supposed to be active, and therefore political, and what is supposed to be passive or distant, and therefore apolitical’ (Rancière et al. 2007: 264). Arguably, the subversive art under examination is not enframed by sets of existing criteria or standards but is underpinned by the very dynamics of an unsettled ‘permanent guerrilla war’ regarding how the mode of appearance may be constantly re/configured (ibid.: 266).

Departing from the framing of translocalism, this book has foregrounded an assemblage of various aesthetic practices that have disrupted the consensual understandings of mobilities and identities. On the one hand, along with the meandering cinematic journeys throughout the whole book, I have located the politics of border-crossing cinema by turning to the diverse strands of practices and discourses of location shooting. While it is true that each filmmaker or film collective analysed here has theorized and worked differently with the location and cinematic spatiality, they have similarly leveraged the ‘place-based imagination’ while attending to a politics of place (see Dirlik 1999; Zhang 2010) in modifying how we might perceive and
envisage transborder subjects’ intricate engagement with the local-national-global spatial configurations. I have, for instance, demonstrated how the Japanese independent film collective Kuzoku approaches the landscape or ふけい within contemporary Japanese society and across Southeast Asian metropolises and border towns (Chapter Three). It would nevertheless be intriguing to see how Kuzoku’s transborder movement is also reminiscent of its ‘predecessor’, the Nihon Documentarist Union/NDU (Chapter One), an independent documentary collective most active in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is significant that despite the disparate socio-historical environments they have respectively engaged with, NDU and Kuzoku arguably share the provocative vision that critique of Japanese imperialism and the legacies of colonialism cannot be dissociated from a rethinking of Japan’s positioning within Asia, both then (e.g. in the high season of students protests and social movements) and now (in post-3.11 Japan). I contend that, not unlike other translocal practices explored in this book, NDU and Kuzoku’s border-crossing filmmaking has exemplified how the crucial question of ‘How does Asia mean?’, raised by Chinese intellectual Sun Ge in her attempt to reconceptualize ‘the question of Asia’, can be addressed cinematically. As Sun notes, ‘the question of Asia must not merely be pursued within the framework defined by the dichotomy of East versus West, but also should be considered as dealing with internal problems in the Asian region’ (Sun 2000: 14). Therefore, I do believe the specific strand of inter-Asia independent transnational filmmaking examined here has proffered creative praxis and refreshing perspectives for us to approach and further interrogate the meaning-production of ‘Asia’, Asian regionalism and cultural collaborations, and Asia’s interconnections with globalization. In elucidating dynamics and complicacies as such, this project has also sought to illustrate how the ‘Other’ cultures and ‘Other’ cinemas can talk back to the Eurocentric underpinnings of the Ranciérian survey of dissensual politics and aesthetics.

At the same time, in emphasizing the auteurs’ (as well as the artists’) positionality of being ‘minor transnational’, which interconnects with their multi-layered identities of being ethnic, diasporic, and/or postcolonial, I have looked at how the image-makers have leveraged their contingent positionings as a transformative edge to redistribute what is visible, audible, and speakable about Asian places and translocal subjects. My project has specifically turned to the multiple, complicated ways in which the minor transnational subjects, while remaining ‘invested in their respective geopolitical spaces’ (Lionnet & Shih 2005: 8), potentially traverse the ‘national, local, or global spaces across different and multiple spatialities and temporalities’ (ibid.: 6). Accordingly, I have highlighted, as examples, Korean-Chinese filmmaker
Zhang Lu (Chapter Two), becoming ‘Chinese-in-Japan’ cinema with Li Ying’s early documentaries (Chapter Four), the moving image works by Okinawan filmmaker Takamine Gō and Naha-based visual artist Yamashiro Chikako (Chapter Five), and the ‘homecoming’ films by Taipei-based, Myanmar-born filmmaker Midi Z (Chapter Six).

It is nonetheless necessary to point out that, so far, as Independent Filmmaking across Borders in Contemporary Asia has foregrounded minority, diasporic, and postcolonial subjectivities and identities by reconceptualizing the ‘minor’ with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri, my research has aimed to rethink the critical paradigms in transnational cinema studies, such as Hamid Naficy’s ‘accented cinema’ (2001) and Laura Marks’ ‘intercultural cinema’ (2000). I have attempted to illustrate that the ‘minor’ authorship under examination has registered a politics of identity not formulated upon the norms and standards that ‘police cultural expressions and practices’ (Lionnet & Shih 2005: 10); rather, it concerns how the identity is always ‘in the process of creation’, in its becoming (Colebrook 2001: 118). It is not upon the politics of recognition or the parameters of authenticity that a minor filmmaker envisions and expresses a community of hers/his. With Rancière, I shall propose that what the minor filmmakers and artists have ultimately aspired to create is a ‘community of sense’, and a community as such only becomes possible via ‘a frame of visibility and intelligibility that puts things or practices together under the same meaning’ (Rancière 2009: 31). Paradoxically, it is a community that ‘works toward being-together only through a consistent dismantling of any idealized common ground, form, or figure’ (Hinderlitter et al. 2009: 2). Whereas ‘the same meaning’ referred to by Rancière does not merely register the commonly shared feeling that gives shape to and unite a collective, I believe the meaning-production necessarily engages the ‘new taxonomies, paradigms, and palettes of sensibilities’ generated through the dynamics of dissensus (Tolia-Kelly 2019: 124). Therefore, in this project, I have specifically turned to affect and foregrounded an affective critique in situating my survey of the cinematic texts within the specific socio-historical contexts of film production, circulation, and exhibition. On the one hand, this study has explored how the articulation of identities as well as the manifestation of bodily, emotional, and affective states are contingent upon various modes of mobilities and translocal dynamics. On the other hand, I have zoomed in on the question of spectatorship. Instead of considering spectators to be those who occupy rather passive and pre-scripted positions waiting to be enlightened, I have illustrated how the viewers are encouraged to formulate indeterminate and therefore more provocative and productive relations with the independent image works.
To conclude, I want to highlight some of the research concerns that could be explored further in the future. In proposing potential ‘ways of seeing’, I briefly look at how we can grasp border-crossing filmmaking in relation to current developments in visual technologies, especially apropos the ubiquitous use of drones, as instantiated in Ai Weiwei’s documentary project *Human Flow* (2017). Secondly, I suggest that in extending the questions on gender and sexuality, it would be useful for a future project to realign and re-examine border-crossing auteurs and their films, both within and beyond the inter-Asia context.

‘From a High Vantage Point’

Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei’s English-language documentary *Human Flow* (2017), co-produced by several international film and media companies, is an epic travelogue film that records and reflects upon the problems encountered by refugees and migrants worldwide. The production crew had over 200 professional members, including 12 credited cameramen – some of whom are themselves veteran cinematographers (such as Christopher Doyle) or documentary filmmakers (e.g. Chinese filmmaker Zhang Zanbo, Huang Wenhai) as well as ‘a half dozen drone operators’ (see Dargis 2017). Also, importantly, the crews (some of whom the filmmaker himself never met) admirably travelled for the film through 40 refugee camps in 23 countries around the world. *Human Flow* turns its cameras to the displaced persons who are either stopped, entrapped, or already on their way to unknown destinations/destinies. Along these extraordinary global journeys, although he did not have a plan to include himself and the crew in the film in the first place, Ai plays the role of a motivated, sympathetic interviewer/observer (see Buder 2017). For instance, the work interweaves Ai’s meetings with world leaders, politicians, and spokespersons from international non-governmental organizations, including their commentary on some of the burning issues underlying this crisis.

While being interviewed for a written article, Ai Weiwei confessed that ‘I was a refugee for most of my lifetime’ (ibid.), closer to a condition of ‘being displaced without changing physical location’ (Dirlik 1999: 169). Nevertheless, *Human Flow* hardly concerns Ai’s personal ‘exilic’ trajectory.

---

1 Ai Weiwei reminisces, for instance, on the inhumane treatment that his father (one of PRC’s renowned modern poets, Ai Qing) suffered during China’s political turbulence in the 1950s, and his own traumatic experiences of incarceration by the Chinese government in 2011 because of his provocative activist activities leveraging art and documentary-making (see Buder 2017; Ai 2018).
as such (he based himself in Berlin after he was permitted to go abroad by the Chinese government in 2015); rather, his work aspires to provide its spectators ‘a better understanding of the refugee crisis in global conditions, with context’ (Buder 2017). This documentary extends the geopolitical scale and cinematic imaginary of the inter-Asia transborder projects examined in the previous chapters; that is, it engages the "global."

Intriguingly, art historian Georges Didi-Huberman found Ai’s documentary work most problematic with its ‘point of view’ (2018), that is, the fact that ‘high vantage points’ made possible by drones are dominating the work. Performing a meticulous analysis of the opening sequence of Human Flow, Didi-Huberman contends that ‘a film – particularly a film that creates images to “look at the plight of refugees” – ought, therefore, to be understood as an image gesture, one which reveals, to a certain degree, the nature of its own honesty or justice: a gesture that is therefore both ethical and aesthetic’. Hence, he questions the very act of 'looking down from airborne devices', in viewing the ‘anonymous moving masses’, namely the refugees, at a height, from a distance, and in their abstract form, which for Didi-Huberman ends up ‘producing visual clichés – as opposed to truthful images – of our world'. Meanwhile, the critic also problematizes Ai’s ‘own involvement in the story’, wherein Ai’s ‘greatness’ as an ‘activist artist’ on screen has been staged and magnified with carefully chosen angles and editing work (Didi-Huberman 2018), a point that is closely connected to what I have previously explored regarding the ‘flamboyant risk taking’ in documentary filmmaking.

Ultimately, the French art historian wonders ‘what happens at a human level' with Human Flow if the work itself has decorated its humanist discourse with 'dehumanizing' (emphasis in original), objectifying images, and if those who are speaking and who can be heard most throughout the film are not the refugees themselves but rather the authorities and spokespersons that Ai interviews. The analytical typology proposed by Didi-Huberman then suggests a documentary tackling such a topic should encompass a critical eye (on the part of the filmmakers) and critical form (that is, without necessarily resorting to the high vantage point).

I have organized the discussions in preceding chapters around the framing of the dissensus, thereby mapping out and exploring a specific strand of independent transnational filmmaking across various places in contemporary Southeast Asia and East Asia. Didi-Huberman’s uncompromising stance also sheds light on how the politics of such a strand of border-crossing cinema essentially concerns a politics of place. It is worth turning to Lisa Rofel who has proffered insights into the dialectics between the 'local' and the 'global', wherein she illumines:
The local and the global are both acts of positioning, perspectives rather than merely locales, used as signifiers of difference [...] The local, rather than a synonym for particularity, is a spatial category given meaning through specific signifying practices. Similarly, the global does not exist above and beyond the cultural processes of attaching meaning to places (2007: 93).

Arguably, the *critical* form stressed by Didi-Huberman entails a *critical* authorial positioning, and thus it demands a *critical eye* that goes lower and deeper, to hover at the street level and to reach the height of humans, in resisting the allure of seeing from the ‘high vantage points’, which aspires to grasp the transborder flows on their global dimensionality and construct certain cartographic and systematic knowledge about the world. Interestingly, if not self-conflicting in explaining how Ai Weiwei has ‘repurposed’ the drone in *Human Flow*, for instance, Rohan Crickmar actually analyzes one sequence where the drone camera is brought ‘down from above’ and is ‘pulled down to earth’, getting closer to the displaced children in a camp ‘so that the mass becomes recognisable, familiar, relatable, and all too human’ (Crickmar 2018). Here I cannot help but think of the miners featured in the documentaries by Midi Z or Lee Yong-chao (see Chapter Six), or the mud men and women who slide into the cave and tunnel in Yamashiro Chikako’s video work (see Chapter Five).

Despite Didi-Huberman’s sharp criticism, I do not think it is the drone technology and drone footage that he is ultimately critical of. In his discussions on ‘drone age cinema’, Steen Ledet Christiansen argues that ‘The drone relation thus entangles power, agency and dominance with fear, trauma and terror’ (Christiansen 2016: 19) to illustrate what he refers to as Harun Farocki’s ‘operative images’, which are images that do not ‘inform or entertain (though they may do either)’ but aim to ‘perform an action, i.e. to do something’ (ibid.). What is at stake in our interrogation of the ‘high vantage point’, then, concerns how the drones – or other technologies of visuality that are integral to our present-day socio-political conditions – are repurposed to (re)distribute the sensible in relation to agency and power.

Along the lines of the Rancièrean debates, with *Human Flow*, we can emphasize how there is nothing ‘naturally political’ with regard to independent filmmaking as a ‘way of doing and making’. And as Rancière attests, ‘there is a whole school of so-called critical thought and art that, despite its oppositional rhetoric, is entirely integrated within the space of consensus’ (Rancière et al. 2007: 266). In some cases, independent film practices could claim their activist, anti-establishment stances without ever disrupting
‘conventional forms of looking, of hearing, of perceiving’, that is, without necessarily enacting the dissensual (Panagia 2014: 103). Furthermore, as I have demonstrated earlier in the book, the rhizomatic networking in producing, circulating, and exhibiting independent films intersects them with the mainstream – and sometimes official mainstream – socio-cultural and economic infrastructures, institutions, and their corresponding ideo-economic apparatus. Such networking, together with the variously scaled media ecology that independent filmmaking is embedded within, has further complicated how it can be examined as an aesthetic practice, which I believe could be pursued in future studies.

Gendering Border-Crossing Cinema

As my writing progresses, it has become increasingly clear that the intersection between ‘gender and other axes of difference’ is critical for the study of border-crossing cinema, even though this book has not foregrounded feminism as its primary framework (Silvey 2004: 490). Throughout this book I have shown in films and artist videos how females, as minor transnational subjects, are given the stage to emerge – they are the North Korean defector, the mail-order bride, the sex worker, the human trafficker (and those who have been exploited are also girls) and the smuggler, the migrant labourer, the displaced artist, the overseas student, the returnee chef, and so on and so forth. Although I do not deploy any reflectionist reading to approach these image works wherein women are featured, some of them have intricately related to and proffered insights into the actual conditions of the translocal and transborder movement and migration of women in East and Southeast Asia into the new millennium.²

Rachel Silvey has outlined four strands of theoretical themes that she believes feminist theories have productively interwoven with geography and migration studies – namely ‘the politics of scale, mobility as a political process, place and space, and subjectivity/identity’ (Silvey 2004: 491). Her quadripartite framework has illustrated how the gendered perspective and feminist approach can contribute to retooling translocalism. Particularly, just as translocalism reconceptualizes scale, mobility, and place in terms

² According to Yamanaka and Piper, ‘By the dawn of the millennium, it was estimated that more than two million Asian women were working abroad in the region, making up a third of the estimated six million migrant workers there’. Both scholars suggest that East and Southeast Asia is increasingly witnessing ‘feminized and gendered migration’ (Yamanaka & Piper 2005: 2, 4).
of contingent social construction and the processes as such, feminism and gender studies ask useful questions regarding ‘how relations of gender and difference are constructed, maintained, and reworked through spatial mobility’ (Silvey 2004: 499). As suggested, for instance, feminism has elucidated the epistemological masculinist framing of borders and boundaries. Accordingly, feminist scholarship in intersecting gender with other forms of identity explores how the translocal self has been spatially positioned ‘as central to, associated with, or at the margins of political machinations and power relations’ (Fluri 2015: 237).

Throughout this book, I have presented several border-crossing filmmakers to engage ‘the perspectives and experiences of the marginalised and disenfranchised’ (ibid.: 238). I believe this current project could have been more comprehensive if I had asked more constructive questions regarding, for example, how gender might reframe how we approach borders and boundaries at the levels of both discourse and practice, if it is true that ‘movement never occurs through neutral physical space’ and ‘it involves gendered bodies through gendered space’ (Lee 2017: 85). As translocalism is opened up to intersectionality analysis to highlight the politics of gender and difference, it is necessary to underscore a gendered perspective to rethink how inter-Asia border-crossing cinema engages the experiences of journeying and displacement in relation to questions of subjectivity and identity as well as body and affectivity. It also helps to reframe translocal auteurship, which interlinks with my previous discussions of location shooting and place-based imagination. At the same time, it is crucial to highlight that my analysis also interrelates with the issues of sex, sexuality, and queer theory – this reinforces a rethinking of ‘the centrality of heteronormativity to the relationships between migration, the operation of power, and the construction of social order’ (Silvey 2004: 500).

Identity: A Document of Minor Objects

In *Identity* (2004; also known as ‘Seki★Rara’), a documentary-cum-pornographic video by Matsue Tetsuaki (b. 1977), the filmmaker recorded how he travelled to several Japanese cities with a small crew to meet his cast and shoot hardcore adult videos. A third-generation *zainichi* himself, Matsue was naturalized and obtained Japanese nationality when he was

3 A different version of *Identity* was also released by the Adult Video media products brand HMJM under the title of *Identity: A Document of South and North Koreans and Chinese in Japan* (*Aidentiti: Kan-Chō-Chū zainichi dokyumento)*.
5 years old. Writing on Matsue’s engagement with the pornography genre, Jasper Sharp has pointed out that some of his works produced in the Japanese adult video (AV) industry ‘present a fascinating conjunction between sex, politics, and representation’ (Sharp 2008: 314). In his debut documentary Annyong Kimchi (2000), a film considered an ‘intimate ethnography’ by Oliver Dew, Matsue ‘explores his grandfather (who was born Yū Chonsik) Matsue Yūkichi’s utter disavowal of his Koreanness’ (Dew 2016: 90-91). In the short shooting postscript for Identity, Matsue nevertheless states:

Years ago, I said that ‘I shall no longer do anything related to the zainichi material’. I didn’t think to question the history of the past would suit me and simply to listen to ‘the sad past’ could be exhausting. (In the latter scenario) I can relate to the mood when you (as a listener) have to respond with just ‘oh […] is that so?’ However, when I was told by someone that ‘several decades later there would be no zainichi Koreans’, I remember for a moment I indeed felt repulsed by such an idea. Therefore, ever since then, I was thinking, ‘if so I must make films on such topics’. And if I shall ever make such a film, I would try best to look at my own generation (dōsedai). Not the grandpas and grandmas of the Issei (the first generation), but the younger generations such as the third and the fourth generation (Aidentiti: Kan-Chō-Chū zainichi dokyumento [Identity: A Document of South and North Koreans and Chinese in Japan]).

Identity indeed did turn the camera towards Matsue’s peers – the second and third-generation zainichi subjects. The first part of the documentary mainly followed first-time AV actress (who are also labelled shirōto in Japanese) Aikawa Hiromi (born in 1983; nationality is South Korean) to several places to trace her nothing-out-of-the-ordinary life trajectories since childhood. During their road trip to Okayama, Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, and Onomichi of Hiroshima, however, Matsue encouraged Aikawa to share her location-specific memories and experiences as she grew up as a third-generation zainichi Korean. In their dialogues, which mostly take place in moving vehicles, during their city walks, or in hotel rooms, Aikawa shared with Matsue her personal accounts that shed light on how her zainichi identity was closely interlaced with the seemingly abstract ideas of ethnicity, nation(ality), family, and finally, sex(uality) in everyday life. Also, Matsue periodically inserted short intertitles to comment on and respond to Aikawa’s opinions and remembrance, including several brief explanations on the history of the zainichi and commonly-shared conditions of zainichi Koreans (e.g. the issue of naturalization; the Korean ritual known as ‘Jesa’ performed in memory
of one’s ancestors). Such stylistic form continued into the second part, wherein the audiences see Matsue, after bidding farewell to Aikawa, meeting up with an overseas Chinese student named Anna (Zhang Xinjia, born in 1979) – who was excited about her AV debut, and Anna’s on-screen partner, the handsome and muscular AV actor Hanaoka Jitta, a second-generation zainichi whose estranged father is from North Korea.

In the first part, three sequences of hardcore sex are interwoven between the interviews with Aikawa (and also her Japanese AV partner) and segments of the actress strolling in the cities she once lived. A similar structure can be observed in the second part where Matsue has alternated Anna and Hanaoka’s ecstatic performance on screen with sequences wherein the crew was seen doing their location shooting in Yokohama’s Chinatown (the largest in Japan) – like ordinary tourists, they are busy trying Chinese food and helping Anna purchase a ‘China Dress’ (qipao, the traditional one-piece dress).

Jasper Sharp reminds us how Matsue knowingly played with the generic conventions of both documentary and hardcore (heterosexual) pornography in his AV work but only ended up with more interesting results produced ‘in theory’ than ‘in practice’ (Sharp 2008: 314). Sharp suggests that Matsue only offered ‘a conception of documentary as merely a record of events, or of footage of people talking or revealing themselves directly to the camera’ (ibid.). However, I cannot totally agree with Sharp that the potential political charge of Identity, which for the critic interconnects with the zainichi subjects’ life stories throughout the documentary, has been compromised if not cancelled out by the filmmaker’s emphasis on ‘a series of explicit hardcore sequences’ they perform (ibid.).

To grasp Matsue’s intervention into both genres of documentary and pornography, it is necessary to see that it is the very filmmaking mechanisms of both genres that Matsue has sought to expose and make visible. For instance, Identity can be regarded as a ‘document’ (as its subtitle suggests) demonstrating ‘the making-of’ of adult videos, wherein the filmmaker is often heard (rather than seen) interacting with his cast through a handheld cam-recorder at an intimate distance. We can argue that Matsue mobilizes the techniques of self-referentiality and self-reflexivity to disturb the given conventions and therefore to comment not only on the generic cycles of repetitions and differences but also on his own authorial position within the so-called ‘nonfiction’ work (e.g. intertitles explaining how he directs the cast).

I somehow understand why Sharp feels disappointed by the incongruency between Matsue’s interrogation of identity and his handling of the sex scenes. For Sharp, while the former is resolutely political, the latter is less
certain. Nevertheless, I propose that the incongruency or gap should be grasped in terms of a dynamic process that re-distributes the sensible and the affect, during which any given division between the political and the pornographic becomes muddy – even though I do share Sharp’s concern over the problematic gender politics with the pornography genre and specifically within Japan’s AV industry. Instead of proposing cliched themes that sex/sexuality can transcend cultural differences and national borders, I contend that *Identity* leverages the love-making bodies and the ecstatic moans, namely the ‘visible’ and the ‘audible’ distinguishing the genre, to interrelate with what is less visible, audible, and speakable about body, sexuality, and, more importantly, the uneasy questions about identity and sense of belonging.

Meanwhile, with the differentiation between the interiority/exteriority collapsed by the self-reflexive ‘making-of’ sequences, as a travel film of sorts, *Identity* has created a contingent ‘community of sense’ wherein feelings and emotions are generated and circulated so that the audience is also invited to engage with Anna’s euphoric feeling of liberation in ‘being herself’ in Japan, Hanaoka’s anger and frustration over his family’s *zainichi* legacy (specifically apropos North Korea) and the dysfunctional father-son relationship, and Aikawa’s sentimental identification with Matsue as her ‘family member’. Therefore, *Identity* can be understood as a text, if not an archive, consisting of ‘minor objects’ that can be grasped as ‘those marginal forms, persons, and worlds that are mobilized in narrative (including archival) constructions to designate moments of crisis’ (Nguyen 2015: 12). As indicated by Mimi Thi Nguyen, ‘By way of a minor object, exclusion and normativity might be laid bare (though perhaps in no straightforward manner), and the contingent quality of knowledge or other claims fold under scrutiny’ (ibid.).

While a thorough discussion about Matsue’s work from the feminist perspective and affectivity, in tandem with a socio-historical survey of pornography in Japan, is beyond the scope of this work, I argue that future studies can look at *Identity* from several interrelated aspects that extend the survey of ‘minor objects’. First, there is Matsue’s positioning as an independent auteur of *zainichi* background who traverses in and out of the AV industry (now he mostly works in television). Second, a topic that needs to be further explored is *zainichi* subjects’ on-screen presence/performance in the non-mainstream industry/genre of pornography in relation to their socio-historical circumstances and cultural representation within Japanese society. And finally, it would be worth examining the role of females in heterosexual pornography across the spheres of filmmaking (performance and production), circulation, exhibition, and spectatorship.
ARAGANE: Wo/Men at Work

In the future, more attention can be given to women as well as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer) auteurs and visual artists to grasp their travelling and migratory trajectory at the intersection of gender, national/ethnic identity, and citizenship. Instances of new-millennium female border-crossing auteurs include Chinese-Malaysian filmmaker Tan Chuimui, *zainichi* Korean director Yang Yong-hi, and South Korean filmmaker Kim So-young (a.k.a. Jeong Kim), whose oeuvre has been mentioned at different lengths in preceding chapters. Here I want to briefly turn to the 1987-born Japanese filmmaker Oda Kaori, who has so far accomplished several short films and two features – documentary debut *ARAGANE* (2015) and an essay film, *Toward a Common Tenderness* (*Ano yasashi-sa e*, 2017). Born in Osaka, Japan, Oda possesses quite a cosmopolitan background as a translocal filmmaker. After she finished her undergraduate study in the US, Oda made a semi self-documentary short entitled *Thus the Noise Speaks* (*Noizu ga iu niwa*, 2010), through which she came out as a lesbian, or to be more exact, as someone whose gender identity remains undefined, as the ‘X-gender’ (personal interview with Oda). With *Thus the Noise Speaks*, Oda applied for the *Film Factory Project* (2013-2017) – a Sarajevo-based PhD level programme in filmmaking that had Hungarian maestro Béla Tarr as its head mentor, and was accepted. Shot at a Bosnian coal mine, *ARAGANE* is an observational work in which Oda carried her Canon 5D 300 metres underground with the male coal miners to single-handedly record how they worked in an alien, dark, and noisy space that deeply fascinated Oda in the first place (neoneoweb). For Jonathan Rosenbaum, Oda has demonstrated with *ARAGANE* ‘what cinema is and can be’ with a work of ‘exquisite formal and even abstract beauty’ (2018).

It is not Oda’s displaced identity that *ARAGANE* foregrounds, although the trailer accompanying the film’s nationwide theatrical release in Japan highlights the filmmaker’s authorial positioning as a ‘Nihonjin/Japanese’ (in Bosnia-Herzegovina). Neither does the documentary underscore the precarious conditions of the coal miners and labourers as we might expect from the works by Midi Z, Lee Yong-chao, or even in some documentaries by

---

4 Yang is most acclaimed for her ‘Pyongyang Trilogy’ consisting of *Dear Pyongyang* (2005), *Sona, the Other Myself* (2009), and *Our Homeland* (2012), the last of which is a fictional feature that was entered for the 85th Academy Awards in 2013 as Japan’s nominee for Best Foreign Film.

5 The pedagogical system of *film.factory* is currently merged into the curriculum of the Sarajevo Film Academy (see ‘FILM FACTORY’, n.d.)
Chinese documentarist Wang Bing. As Oda pointed out, ‘I didn’t approach the subject from the angle of the hard conditions of miners, unfairness, and danger of their works (even though it is there in the film because it was just there)’. She explains that ‘focusing on a social issue can be something good for miners, to say what is the problem and how ignorant we are about the issue, but I think the best I can do with my filmmaking is to try to be with the subject (space/people/time) and make them seen by being with them’ (quoted in Matteo 2016).

As Oda has reminded us, ARAGANE and all of her other films shot in Bosnia-Herzegovina feature an all-male cast. She confesses that, although it was not her conscious choice to privilege ‘the men’s world’ on screen, what might have attracted her most on location was the beauty of ‘manual labour’ (nikutai rōdō) and the miners’ ‘muscle movement’ (kinniku no ugoki) (quoted in Kobayashi).6 One may argue that the filmmaker’s camera has somehow empowered her, so she found it no longer intimidating to spend 4-hour sessions underground to shoot in the claustrophobic space of the coal mine, as one of the few women, if not the only one, down there. However, even though knowledge about the filmmaker’s gender/sexual identity might reshape the spectatorial perception regarding the tension between Oda

6 In our email interview, Oda shared with me that the male miners recognized her as ‘a filmmaker’ instead of a ‘female filmmaker’. Also, the filmmaker confessed to me that ‘being X gender’ may be related to her fascination with the miners’ bodies. Actually, there were also three women miners working in the pit (personal interview with Oda).
and her filming subjects at both the textual and extra-textual levels, what Oda’s ‘authorial-affective-risk-taking’ (a term from Trice, see Chapter Six) has disrupted is exactly the power grid structured upon the dichotomies of female/male, to-be-looked-at-ness/look-at-ness, and submission/domination. I would argue that her camera gaze is not meant to resist, overwrite, or claim control over the male gaze per se but functions in one way or another to shed light on the miners – making visible their risk-taking bodies and the underground coal mine mise-en-scène regardless of – or to be more accurate, in spite of – their gender differences. I suggest that it is also in disrupting the given ‘roles, possibilities, and competences’ assigned to a ‘woman filmmaker’ like herself (Rancière et al. 2007: 263) that Oda has carved out her ‘space of play’ in experimenting with dissensual art.

In an essay explicating her ‘Exile Trilogy’ – three documentaries (Heart of Snow, Heart of Blood, 2014; Sound of Nomad: Koryo Arirang, 2016; Goodbye My Love, North Korea, 2017) on the Koryo people, the ethnic Koreans in Central Asia and Russia – Korean film scholar and filmmaker Kim So-young posits that ‘The documentary practice can be an endeavour to bring back the dead, to illuminate the present of the past, to place the dead in a critical constellation’ (Kim 2016; also see Chapter Two). She used the last instalment of the trilogy, Goodbye My Love, North Korea, to illustrate the ‘technology of the dead’. It is a documentary about ten North Korean students who, during their studies at the Moscow Film School in the 1950s, decided to seek political asylum in the former Soviet Union in a gesture to condemn Kim Il-sung. By the time Kim So-young’s documentary project was wrapping up, nine of the ten subjects/interviewees had already passed away. Nevertheless, in the finished work, with the aid of archival material, interview footage, and ‘imaginative techniques’, Kim suggests that the dead return to ‘tell tales of history that tore their lives apart’. As claimed by Kim, ‘To bring them back is particularly significant for a contemporary Korean peninsula haunted by the last sediments of the Cold War’, given how the technology of the dead ‘can illuminate a history shadowed by persisting cold war, against a neoliberal bio-politics which perceives history as dead’ (ibid.). Inspired by Kim’s articulation of the ‘technology of the dead’, I suggest that Oda Kaori’s ARAGANE might have embodied a ‘technology of the living’ not simply in foregrounding the observational aesthetics that captures the ‘present’ on location but also through specific practices of ‘authorial-affective-risk-taking’. Oda has achieved her risk-taking not in an activist manner, nor is it the ‘charitable form’ adopted by Ai Weiwei, but rather by ‘being with them’, namely with the miners, in hiding behind the camera: she looks at them at the human height in ‘a gesture of giving
7.2 Following the miners to the underground world in *ARAGANE*

7.3 Observing the dark universe in *ARAGANE*

*back to the other person* – the person whose image is being shaped – their imperilled dignity’ (Didi-Huberman 2018; emphasis in original). Both the technology of the dead and that of the living, I shall contend, potentially constitute a poetics/politics intersecting with the ‘partition of the sensible’, which works through the ‘very organization of communicable form’ (Demos 2013: 92) in embracing the promise of subversive art.
Works Cited


