

Empathy for the "other" in the films of Yim Soon-rye from the perspective of auteur theory

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Abstract: Yim Soon-rye is a director with a distinct thematic awareness and vivid visual expression, often hailed as the most representative female director in South Korea. Her control over visual treatment and narrative, along with the era-specific and realistic significance displayed in her works, led the "Korean Film Calendar" to note that her "film world is not confined to the term 'female'". Throughout Yim Soon-rye's films, there is a profound empathy for the "other" in society and a hopeful anticipation for the "other's" aspirations, radiating the brilliance of warm realism. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the outstanding South Korean female director Yim Soon-rye from the perspective of auteur theory. It examines three aspects: the gaze on the "other" from her life experiences, the portrayal of the "other" in her visual works, and the care for the "other" in her creative style.

Key words: Yim Soon-rye; auteur theory; focus on the "other"; empathy for the "other"

1 Introduction

The "other" typically refers to an individual or group of individuals that are different from the self, external to the self, or heterogeneous compared to the self. In Western philosophy, this concept was initially introduced by French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, where the "other" (Autrui) refers to other people who exist independently of the self. In cultural and social theory, the "other" usually denotes groups that, in some way, differ from or are heterogeneous to the dominant subject, such as those of different races, cultures, religions, genders, or social statuses [1].

In this paper, the term "other" refers to individuals or groups labeled as failures, the humiliated, marginalized, or non-mainstream--those differentiated from or abandoned by mainstream society. This encompasses people of various ages, genders, residences, occupations, and personalities. In Yim Soon-rye's cinematic world, these individuals emit a faint light. They lack a voice, social status, and often go unnoticed. However, they harbor a persistent hope. Though they exist on the periphery of mainstream society, they embrace each other and move forward through difficulties, radiating the honor of the "other" [2].

2 The gaze of the "other": "I" and "other" in the author's life experience

Yim Soon-rye once expressed her film philosophy, saying, "What touches me the most are those who are enduring and abandoned by society, in other words, the 'failures' in society. Their situations of exclusion and neglect aroused my sympathy and interest." This reflects a director's keen sensitivity to social issues and a profound love for all aspects of life. This sense of "warm realism" permeates much of her work and is deeply rooted in her own experiences and background. Thus, the failures, the marginalized, and the neglected in real life have become prototypes in Yim Soon-rye's films [3].

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Yim Soon-rye's films and her life experiences are closely intertwined. Her growth, education, and living environment have all contributed to her exposure and understanding of "other" groups. She has developed a deep empathy for their lives and circumstances.

In the 1960s, South Korea experienced 18 years of military rule. This period saw rapid economic development and social transformation but was also marked by severe social inequality, harsh working conditions, and political repression. Despite the economic growth, ordinary people's living standards and survival conditions faced numerous challenges. Yim Soon-rye was born in 1961 in Incheon, experiencing this era firsthand. Her childhood was marked by poverty, an experience that profoundly influenced her focus on and sympathy for the underprivileged in her films. During middle school, she developed a love for reading. However, after entering Incheon High School, she dropped out, citing "the school's physical humiliation of students with poor grades" as the reason. This personal experience of exclusion and marginalization further shaped her sensitivity to the struggles of the marginalized. This dropout experience is reflected in her later films. She later took the regular entrance exam and entered Hanyang University. "At this time, Yim Soon-rye's dream was not to become a film director, and her taste in films was nothing special [4]."

In 1984, with the adjustment of the strategic relationship between South Korea and the United States, the film and television market was opened. With favorable film policies, South Korea introduced a large number of films from various countries. When Yim Soon-rye was a junior in college, she often visited the French Cultural Institute to watch about 200 art films. Yim Soon-rye recalled, "From that time on, after watching films depicting subtle daily life, I was greatly 'culturally shocked' and began to want to tell my own story through film." Consequently, she entered the graduate school of the Department of Drama and Film at Hanyang University, and out of a desire to read film theory works, she went to study at Paris VIII University in France. However, she was dissatisfied with her graduate courses. "Her thesis failed to pass three times for unacceptable reasons, and she tore up the thesis in front of her supervisor." This is the true academic journey of director Yim Soon-rye, which is also the source of her later film and television creations and an indispensable part of her directorial style formation.

Upon returning to South Korea, Yim Soon-rye immediately participated in directing "Sado City" directed by Yeon Kyun-dong, which received critical acclaim and experiences. Additionally, she won the inaugural Seoul Short Film Festival Award and the Young Critics Award with *A Sad, Sad Story*, attracting attention and making a notable debut in the film industry. *The Film Promotion Act* introduced by South Korea in 1995 launched a series of favorable policies to promote the development of the film industry, enhance international film exchange, advocate for the establishment of film development funds, and support the development of the film industry. Yim Soon-rye was a beneficiary and promoter of this wave of filmmaking. Her debut feature film *Three Friends* in 1996 and *Waikiki Brothers* in 2001 received support and attention from the film industry and critics.

From 2003 onwards, Yim Soon-rye has successively served as a full-time lecturer in the Film and Media Studies Department at Longshan University, a handball ambassador, a representative of the animal protection NGO KARA, the chairman of the Incheon Film Commission, and the co-chairman of the Korean Film Gender Equality Center. Different experiences have led Yim Soon-rye's film narratives during this period to be closely tied to real life. For example, *Forever the Moment* reflects the sport of handball, *Sorry, Thank You* portrays the emotional bond between dogs and humans and advocates for animal welfare, while *Fly, Penguin* depicts the current living conditions of people. Yim Soon-rye's works mostly focus on ordinary people, marginalized individuals, failures, and those underestimated by society. These people are not only those around her in real life but also reflections of her past self. Therefore, when Yim Soon-rye intricately and

vividly portrays these "others" in her films, she often does so with their gaze and empathy, releasing a ray of hope in their bleak lives. This embodies the warm and compassionate style of Yim Soon-rye's filmmaking.

3 Empathy for the "other": depiction of the "other" in the director's films

Yim Soon-rye translates her sympathy for the marginalized in reality into empathy with the characters portrayed in her films, thus enabling the audience to empathize with the "other" characters in her films. This emotional transfer makes the characters in the film more vivid and lifelike, while also rendering the "other" characters more realistic.

3.1 Waikiki Brothers: pursuit of dreams by marginalized characters

"It's a story of characters continuously experiencing downfall yet still exploring possibilities." The film depicts a once-popular band now facing dissolution due to various real-life issues. Each band member carries the burdens of life, struggling to survive in different cities and situations, attempting to find the motivation to move forward.

Cheng-woo, the lead vocalist and guitarist, is the soul of the band but is deeply entangled in economic difficulties and family pressures. His marriage is crumbling, and his career is in decline, as he struggles between chasing dreams and the pressures of real life. Kang Jee-bin, the band's keyboardist, was once a promising musician but has fallen into playing in bars due to personal reasons. He is a typical marginalized individual, talented yet unable to find his place and belonging. His life is filled with uncertainty and confusion. Dae-chung, the band's drummer, has the most dismal life situation. His wife and child have left him, and he can only struggle to survive between performances and temporary jobs. His story portrays the loneliness and helplessness of an individual facing immense life pressures. Their lives are full of uncertainty and perplexity, representing a group of people struggling to survive at the bottom of society.

Waikiki Brothers features slow and steady yet bright and hazy cinematography, expressing an objective record of the plight and struggles of marginalized characters through a simple narrative style. The film can be seen as revolving around the backward, failed, and marginalized lives with a compassionate gaze, embodying the director Yim Soon-rye's theme of "empathy for the other".

3.2 Forever the Moment: struggles of non-mainstream characters

The film is based on true events and depicts the journey of the South Korean women's handball team at the 2004 Athens Olympics. Comprising retired veterans and young rookies, the team members each face different challenges and hardships in their lives. However, they come together once again for a common goal, striving to achieve victory at the Olympics, showcasing the challenges and perseverance experienced by these non-mainstream characters in pursuit of their dreams.

Han Mi-sook, once a star player on the handball team, retired years ago due to marriage and childbirth. She now works as a saleswoman in a large supermarket, burdened with her husband's debts. Faced with family pressure and societal expectations, she chooses to return to the court to rediscover her dreams. Her story reflects the balancing act and struggles of a woman between family and career. Choi Chun-joo is a young rookie full of passion and dreams but lacks experience. On the court, she must confront the doubts of the veterans and her own lack of confidence. Through continuous effort and learning, she eventually earns everyone's recognition. Hwang Kyung-ran is a former handball star who was forced to leave the sport due to personal reasons. Upon returning to the team, she faces challenges in physical fitness and form but, with her strong willpower and love for handball, ultimately stands back on the court.

Forever the Moment vividly portrays the struggles of non-mainstream characters in pursuit of their dreams through the journey of the South Korean women's handball team. The film showcases the transformation of these retired players as they return to the sport, presenting authentic character depictions filled with the director's hope for non-mainstream individuals to overcome obstacles and succeed against all odds.

3.3 *Fly, Penguin*: portrayal of the "little people" in modern Korean society

The film delves into the traits of the "little people" in modern Korean society, weaving multiple narrative threads to showcase the struggles and survival states of people from different backgrounds and classes under societal pressures. Through this film, director Yim Soon-rye once again demonstrates her profound insight into societal realities and her deep concern for ordinary people.

In a tender manner, the director reveals the helplessness and resistance of the "little people" when facing societal norms and pressures. The "others" in the film include several categories of characters, each representing different marginalized groups in Korean society: 1. Middle-aged men under workplace pressure: The middle-aged office workers in the film represent the struggles of the ordinary working class between workplace competition and family responsibilities. They often face high-pressure work environments and unreasonable demands from their companies, leading lives filled with helplessness and repression. The film portrays the dilemmas and psychological pressures faced by this middle-aged demographic through their daily lives. 2. Women conflicted between work and family: The professional female characters in the film showcase the dual pressures faced by modern women in balancing career and family. They not only strive in the workplace but also shoulder family responsibilities, often finding themselves in dilemmas. 3. Teenagers facing academic pressure: The teenage characters reflect the intense competition within the Korean education system and the burden placed on students by coping with entrance exams and parental expectations. The film depicts their anxiety and confusion under academic pressure, reflecting the high importance placed on education in Korean society and its associated problems. 4. Individuals from the lower strata of society: Some characters in the film, such as taxi drivers and convenience store workers, represent the laborers at the bottom of society. Despite their harsh living conditions and challenging work environments, they continue to strive for survival and search for hope in life. Through these characters, the film portrays the hardships and resilience of the lower strata of society.

Fly, Penguin depicts various portraits of "others" in modern Korean society, revealing how ordinary people face and struggle against the challenges of life under societal pressures. The film directly addresses current social issues in South Korea, such as private tutoring education, workplace organizational culture and discrimination, early study abroad, and late-life divorces, conveying the director's compassionate concern and sharp expression of the "other's gaze" towards reality.

3.4 Care for the "other": "hope" in the author's creative style

Yim Soon-rye's films reflect a societal concern and humanistic care for the "other" population. She focuses on individuals labeled as failures, marginalized, or non-mainstream, regardless of age, gender, residence, occupation, or personality. They are young people struggling to adapt in society, individuals who have not completed high school or attended college, 30-somethings unable to find employment or love, the uncelebrated "aunties" of the unpopular women's handball national team, and unsuccessful female college graduates, demonstrating profound humanistic care. Yim Soon-rye's films often explore cultural, historical, and social issues, prompting audiences to deeply contemplate life, human nature, and society. Although her film themes often involve social issues and personal dilemmas, the element of "hope" imbued within them makes her works particularly moving.

Yim Soon-rye's films are known for their realism, focusing on ordinary people in real-life situations and vividly portraying their everyday struggles. However, she not only exposes societal problems but also conveys positive energy and hope through the resilience and struggles of her characters. In *Forever the Moment*, Yim Soon-rye tells the story of a group of retired South Korean female handball players striving to return to the court. Despite facing age, physical, and family

pressures, they never give up their pursuit of victory and their dreams. Through the struggles of these women, the film conveys a spirit of resilience and hope for the future.

When depicting characters, Yim Soon-rye always captures the warmth and kindness deep within them. Her film characters often exhibit qualities of mutual support and love amidst adversity, portraying the splendor of humanity and filling her works with warmth and hope. In *Little Forest*, through multiple storylines, Yim Soon-rye showcases the lives of various ordinary people in modern Korean society. Although these characters live on the fringes of society, their warmth, mutual support, and optimistic attitudes towards life highlight the kindness and hope within human nature. Even in difficult environments, people can still find warmth, strength, and hope for the future.

4 Conclusion

While Yim Soon-rye's films address real-world issues, their cinematic narratives are not sharp or harsh. In the warm realism of her storytelling, she often brings light and hope to "other" groups such as failures, marginalized individuals, and those who have suffered humiliation. This is because her films are filled with love and compassion for the "other", evoking empathy for everyday strugglers. Through her films, Yim Soon-rye consoles and heals the souls of the wounded, showcasing her "other empathy" which is often reflected in most of her film creations, defining her authorial style with a touch of sharpness yet retaining warmth. Although the expression of Yim Soon-rye's "warm realism" in films may not always appeal to the masses, she consistently adheres to empathy for the "other", making her films stand out as unique and precious in the Korean film industry.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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