

Activism and Post-Activism: Korean Documentary Cinema, 1981–2022 by Jihoon Kim. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 316 pp.

In this timely published monograph, Kim Jihoon (Kim Jihun) focuses on the politics and aesthetics of activist filmmaking, offering a compelling historical survey and theoretical realignment of Korean documentary cinema spanning from 1981 to 2022. With its interdisciplinary framing and expansive scope, Kim's project has foregrounded the activist and post-activist "tendencies" of Korean documentary cinema. The book is structured into two major parts: part I (three chapters) concerns "activism" and part II (four chapters) "post-activism," with each organized chronologically.

With this ambitious project, Kim Jihoon highlights how, since the early 1980s, nonfiction filmmaking and video practices in the independent and non-corporate spheres in South Korea have mediated, taken part in, and intervened in the discourses and practices of activism in South Korea and beyond. Realigning the tides and waves of historical social movements and protests, along with newly emerging dynamics of civil disobedience and diversified public mobilization, democratic participation, and acts driven by social awareness, Kim carefully examines documentary cinema's engagement with the traumatic history of the Korean Peninsula, particularly South Korea's fraught transformation from military dictatorship to a globalizing society.

Kim details the activist documentary tradition by highlighting its origins in the socially engaged film movement, rooted in cine-clubs and film collectives inspired by the era-defining 1980 Gwangju Democratic Uprising. However, the prefix "post" in "post-activism" is not employed to create a simplistic historiography of Korean documentary cinema, nor to suggest a dichotomous model. Acknowledging that "post-activist" works did not emerge or become prominent until the early twenty-first century, the term post-activism nonetheless serves as a critical framework for Kim, underscoring how individual filmmakers, collectives, and institutions have sought to overcome and renew the Korean activist tradition amid shifting political landscapes, evolving social movements, and changing modes of participation. He emphasizes the "coevolution" of both strands in the twenty-first century, noting that some directors and veterans of the activist mode might have begun to engage in post-activist experiments within a highly porous ecosystem of production, circulation, and exhibition.

Proffering accounts of both tendencies of documentary cinema—its epistemologies, styles, discourses, and practices—Kim skillfully interweaves textual analysis with a rich survey of the broader sociopolitical landscape and

media ecosystems, encompassing technological and infrastructural networks of production, circulation, distribution, and exhibition. Traversing crucial anglophone scholarship on society and culture, he has also attended to the intellectual debates concerning history and memory, as well as the critical issues of gender, sexuality, and the environment within South Korean society. In doing so, he facilitates dynamic conversations between the North American-European scholarly sphere—often regarded as the epistemic “center” for documentary studies—and the vernacular theories and discourses on documentary cinema from a non-Western society. Meanwhile, a transnational comparative perspective, drawing on inter-Asian documentary connections (such as those fostered by the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in Japan or realized through Zainichi Korean filmmaker Yang Yong-hi [Yang Yeonghui]), serves as an invaluable theoretical contribution to rethinking activist documentary cinema in other parts of East Asia, including the People’s Republic of China and Japan—two regions with which I am more familiar.

Part I, “Activism,” consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 usefully outlines activist documentary cinema’s historical connections with the burgeoning film movement (*yeonghwa undong*) in the early 1980s and its transition to becoming “independent documentary” (*dongnip dakyumenteor*i) in the 1990s. Kim foregrounds *hyeonjang* (on-the-scene) aesthetics and interviews as the dominant representational strategies of the activist mode, while also mapping out activist documentary’s evolving institutional and infrastructural spheres of criticism, production, distribution, and exhibition (e.g., film festivals) into the twenty-first century. Centered on solid case studies of specific documentary works, chapter 2 takes a closer look at what Kim identifies as the “three traditional issues” characterizing the activist mode of the 1980s and 1990s: “state and ideological violence, labor issues, and disenfranchised subjects” (10). Unpacking how the “collective subjects” of the twenty-first century have been redefined from *minjung* (“common people”) to “multitude” (*dajung*), chapter 3 explores how documentary auteurs actively engage with feminist and LGBTQ movements and environmental activism to facilitate social change. Additionally, “alternative strategies” of documentary production, such as “migratory-grassroots media activism” and omnibus documentary filmmaking, extend the potential for engaging the multitude.

Part II of the book consists of four illuminating chapters that explore the post-activist “turns” of the twenty-first century: the “personal turn” (chapter 4), “audiovisual turn” (chapter 5), “archival turn” (chapter 6), and “digital turn” (chapter 7). Aesthetically and formally, these distinct post-activist “turns” diverge from, and even challenge, *hyeonjang* realism. Kim scrutinizes these shifts

by examining the influence of globally connected networks of film festivals and related platforms and institutions. He also underscores the reconceptualization of the practitioner's identity, shifting from activist to director, framed within a discourse of the personal/private (*sajeok*) and the individual (*gaein*). I find this aspect of post-activism particularly inspiring, as it prompts me to consider whether similar "post" tendencies and aesthetic innovations might be observed in contemporary Chinese or Japanese documentary cinema today.

As with any comprehensive research project, Kim Jihoon's book, while illuminating, also leaves room for further questions and critical reflection. My first inquiry concerns the author's preference for the term "documentary cinema" rather than "documentary media." Given that many of the works discussed are produced for and distributed on television, presented as installations at galleries and contemporary art exhibitions, and streamed on the internet, I wonder whether the multifaceted "turns" explored in the book also intertwine with the ecology of "post-cinema" and even "post-cinematic" ontology. Additionally, as a cinephile living outside of South Korea, I question the accessibility of the documentary titles examined in the book, particularly for a global readership. Could special curations and retrospectives be organized to facilitate the circulation of these compelling works beyond South Korea? Despite this minor concern, I believe Kim's book should be read by scholars and researchers in cinema and media studies, as well as Asian Studies. It could also serve as an inviting textbook for university courses in documentary studies and Korean Studies.

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