



SYNOPTIQUE

## DMZ International Documentary Film Festival: Film, Peace, and the Cold War industry

A Festival Report  
by Catherine Russell



Between North and South Korea lies a four kilometer-wide strip of land known as the DMZ or “Demilitarized Zone” running 250 kilometers across the peninsula. Contrary to its name, the DMZ is one of the most heavily militarized borders in the world. Rare species of wildlife survive in this swath of wilderness, one of the most “undeveloped” areas in East Asia, but even the animals are prey to the random detonations of landmines in the night. What better place for a film festival? In fact the DMZ Documentary Festival is located in Paju City, a suburb of Seoul, about 20 km from the southern border of the DMZ. Inaugurated in 2008, the festival is committed to ideals of peace, “co-existence,” and communication, as well as the promotion of Asian documentaries.

I was invited by the festival for the 2014 edition to give a paper on found footage filmmaking, as this was to be one of the festival themes. In order to make this long-distance voyage all worthwhile, I agreed to serve on the jury for the International Competition and to give another lecture at Chung-an University in Seoul. In the end, the “found footage” theme was somewhat downplayed in the festival programming, and given my jury and lecture obligations, I could not attend all the screenings I would have like to, but that tends to be the case for film festivals in my experience. The best films are those that got away. Nevertheless, I am pleased to report that the DMZ Festival features some excellent programming and facilities, and I can highly recommend it as a unique cultural and festival experience. It also features a Project Market through which the festival funds documentaries pitched by filmmakers from all over the world.

The program in 2014 was impressive in its span, including approximately 112 films. Besides the International Competition, there was a Korean Competition and a Youth Competition. Dozens more films were included in sections called “Global Vision,” “Asian Perspective,” “Korean Docs Showcase,” and “All about Docs.” The latter appeared to be aimed at the general public, and included such fare as *Cathedrals of Culture*, the Wenders et al. 3D co-production about monumental new architecture. A “Hot Docs Strand” featured six selections from the Toronto festival, most of them recent, but it also included *Harlan County U.S.A.*, Barbara Kopple’s seminal documentary from 1976. On top of all this was an homage to the British director Mark Corwin, who made a series of radical documentaries in the 1970s; an homage to Alberto Griffi, director of the 1975 video *Anna*; and a selection of found footage films from the U.S., Europe, and Asia. And to top it all off, there was an “Italian Documentary Special” featuring seven works from the 1950s and 60s, including two Pasolini titles, as well as two more recent films.

Unfortunately, this jam-packed program attracted a limited audience. More than an hour by subway from downtown Seoul, with no universities or other cultural centres within miles, it was quite a trek for local audiences. I was told that the Korean programs were slightly better attended than the international screenings, even though all the theatres featured English and Korean subtitle projections. The festival is hosted in a “Megaplex”

Cinema next door to a luxury department store, with condo developments to the east and farmer's fields to the west (Image 1). All the international guests were housed in a luxury high-rise hotel in the middle of a field, and apparently that was the only accommodation in the area. It was indeed an unusual place for a festival (and an even more unusual place to find a Walter Benjamin café) (Image 2).



Image 1



Image 2

The year before, I was told, the opening ceremony was held in an abandoned American army bunker inside the DMZ but the logistics of transport and security screening were too challenging to repeat the experiment.

Like many international film festivals, the DMZ Documentary festival is sponsored by municipal, provincial and national levels of government, and to some extent the support is linked to the tourist attraction of the DMZ. However, I was curious about the connections between documentary film specifically and Korean geopolitics. The Opening Ceremony, emceed by two local film stars, provided some insight as it featured a musician playing a nostalgic ballad for the motherland of North Korea.

The DMZ for many Koreans is a symbol of a “reunification” of the nation, and indeed, nationalism is alive and well in the peninsula, cohabiting with the Cold War culture that the DMZ also represents. The opening film of the festival, *Crying Boxers* was about high-school boys of Korean ancestry living in Japan and their school’s successful record

in national boxing competitions. Despite the fact that the kids are three generations Japanese, their attachments to Korea and their identity as “Zainichi” remains strong, even when that attachment is to North Korea, from where their families were displaced during the Korean war—or even earlier, during the Japanese Occupation. Indeed, many South Koreans have relatives in North Korea, with whom they long to reunite.

The full complexity of Korean politics still eludes me, but I was struck by the overall lack of critique, or dialogue about North Korea and the actual challenges of reunification. *Crying Boxers* was one of the first films to be produced by the DMZ project market and may be indicative of the direction of the festival in the future. The overall umbrella theme of the festival is most definitely one of peace and co-operation, but human rights is not part of the dialogue. The festival director is a well-known TV and movie star, Cho Jae-hyun (who stars in several films by Kim Ki-duk, among other roles), and lends the festival a tone of glamour and celebrity (Image 3).



Image 3

The Opening Ceremony also featured two young actors, “ambassadors” to the festival, who seemed uncertain about what a documentary film might be, except that it is “important.” The reception following the opening ceremony was, surprisingly, sponsored by the Canadian Ambassador to Korea, who explained the Canadian role as a shared interest in world peace and stability, an imminent Canadian-Korean trade deal, and the longstanding documentary achievements of Canada, by which he was probably referring to the legacy of the NFB, although it was not exactly named.

Despite this inauspicious beginning, the festival programming was, as far as I could tell, fairly experimental. Chief programmer Jeon Song-kwon has a strong arts orientation,

and the films in the International Competition were all well made, unconventional, treatments of a wide range of subjects. The term “poetic documentary” is probably a better fit, in my critical view, than experimental, for these films. As with the general discourse of reunification, peace, and harmony, none of the films that I saw exercised any real level of political critique. It was interesting to see how many city-based films were in this competition, ranging from Ramallah, to Beirut, Marseille, Mexico City, a small Austrian town called Ebensee, and Wuhan in China. Independent filmmakers are evidently drawn to these sites where ethnography, historical memory, and contemporary social issues are expressed within distinctive built environments. We gave the prize to *Birds of September* by Lebanese director Sarah Francis, a unique portrait of Beirut that captures the language and rhythms of the city.

It is possible that the more critical, activist style of international documentaries were included within the “Global Visions” section (based on program descriptions and the filmmakers I met). Given the legacy of political documentaries featured in the side bar events, especially the rarely screened work of Mark Corwin, it is evident that the programmers did not shy away from “political” material all together. Indeed the festival offers a unique venue for Korean audiences to view key works in documentary film history.

Although I did not have the opportunity to see any of the Korean or “Asian Perspective” components of the program, the mission of the Festival is clearly aimed at the promotion and support of local and regional filmmaking, and the development of a discourse around documentary filmmaking in general. The academic, scholarly, and international components of the program may have appeared to be a kind of parallel side-show, and yet I think the festival has created an ideal platform for the development of a more engaged film practice. The presence of so many figures from the industry alongside Cho Jae-Hyun—who seems to have a genuine commitment to independent film, if not political activism—speaks to a recognition of the value of documentary as a mode of independent filmmaking outside the sphere of commercial cinema. One can

only hope that the audience deficit does not kill the potential of this most unusual festival.

Being the poor festival-goer that I am, I did choose to spend a day on a tour of the DMZ itself—although I have to acknowledge the assistance of the festival staff in arranging this tour for myself and several other international guests, so we did not feel like we were playing hooky in any way, but somehow still participating in the festival. The “Real DMZ” is an annual art project consisting of a series of site-specific works along the boundary of the DMZ.

Curated by a local gallery, it includes an international spectrum of artists whose works address critical issues of borders, war trauma, Cold War culture, and the goals of peaceful reconciliation. The artworks are set in abandoned bunkers and evacuation chambers, a desolate “Peace Plaza” and one of the many Observation Centres that are dotted along the border outfitted with binoculars to peer into the empty landscape of North Korea (Image 4). Several video works were included, one of them screened in a village barn, although the strongest works were sound pieces in my opinion.

The “Real DMZ” was in many ways designed to address the contradictions and traumas of the perpetuation of Cold War culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even here, the rhetoric of peace is dominant and only one piece by a German artist, in a text that is read on the tour bus, addressed the real challenges facing reunification. Nevertheless, the exhibition provides a valuable space for dialogue and creative thinking and research. The DMZ is also a key site for war memories as it was at the scene of many battles in the Korean War, and the art tour offers visitors the opportunity to revisit those traumas of national culture, through the intervention of research-based arts. The particular conjunction of Cold War ideology and nostalgia that dominates Korean nationalism has become something of a tourist industry, and a documentary film festival may in fact be the best way to really engage with this history by experimenting with representation, truth, and the media.



Image 4

DMZ Docs Website: [www.dmzdocs.com/eng/about/dmzdocs.asp](http://www.dmzdocs.com/eng/about/dmzdocs.asp)