

**AUTOFICTIONAL DOCUMENTARY, SITUATED
KNOWLEDGES, AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY**

ON DEAR CHAEMIN (2020)

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected communities already marginalized in pre-coronavirus societies, aggravated by socio-political technologies of racialization, sexism, homo- and transphobia. *Dear Chaemin* (directed by Bae, 2020) is an autofictional documentary series of three video letters sent from The Hague to the director's sister in Seoul amid isolation. The film juxtaposes the Korean and Dutch contexts of state surveillance, entangled with the b/ordering technologies against queer communities in Seoul and Asian communities in Europe. This paper explores autofictional documentary as an audiovisual method to engage with contemporary dynamics of international politics. First, I summarize the arguments made in the three chapters of the film *Dear Chaemin*. Second, I propose autofictional documentary as an effective cinematic mode that accounts for situated knowledges and critiques collective memories. Finally, I explore how the autofictional mode is further contextualized through the use of unconventional, non-lens-based audiovisual material.

1 INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected communities that were already marginalized in pre-coronavirus societies, aggravated by socio-political technologies of racialization, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Philip di Salvo (2021) provides an overarching account of how the pandemic recodified the everyday politics in the “datafied pandemic.” The chapter demonstrates how solutionism (i.e., the idea that technology can solve all social and political problems) and surveillance became ever more intertwined with the political efforts to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus worldwide. With the technologized interventions, preexisting forms of oppression and violence intensified as these measures brought about uneven consequences. These issues urgently call for critical readings of the worldwide crisis. Such tasks should depart from the quantification and datafication of the harm that took place.

Dear Chaemin (directed by Bae, 2020) is an autofictional documentary series of three video letters sent from The Hague to the director’s sister in Seoul amid isolation. The film juxtaposes the Korean and Dutch contexts of state surveillance, entangled with the b/ordering technologies against queer communities in Seoul and Asian communities in Europe. This project questions the normativity embedded in the (techno-)optimistic outlook toward the post-Corona futures.

This paper explores autofictional documentary as an audio-visual method to engage with contemporary dynamics of international politics. First, I reiterate the arguments made in the three chapters of the film *Dear Chaemin*. Second, I propose autofictional documentary as an effective cinematic mode that accounts for situated knowledges and critiques collective memories. Finally, I explore how the autofictional mode is further contextualized through the use of unconventional, non-lens-based audio-visual material.

2 FOR “BEARING THE WORSENING”: *DEAR CHAEMIN*

The first letter serves an introductory role in the series. It traces the internationally praised South Korean measures to contain the coronavirus back to the history of the Resident Registration Numbering (RRN) system. South Korea’s technology-intensive efforts foregrounded fine-grained locational data and social network analysis to track and target individuals for containment and treatment (Ramraj, 2021; French and Monahan, 2020). While deemed exceptional and temporary, the aggressive measures were only made possible through the infrastructural RRN system and its inherently gendered governance of citizenship. South Korea’s RRN system assigns a 13-digit number to all residents in the country to manage and control the population. Established during the Park Chung-hee dictatorship in 1968, RRN constituted the institutional foundation for state security from

the threat of North Korea (Hong, 2007, p. 324). The seventh digit, which follows the first six digits signifying the birthdate of the holder, indicates the individual's binary gender assigned at birth. As the numbering system is implemented in every aspect of living in South Korea—education, banking, employment, law enforcement, and healthcare—the institutionalized body is continually subject to the cisnormative order. The coronavirus measures and policies, ironically yet unsurprisingly, jeopardize queer, trans, and gender non-conforming people's health through the infrastructural technology of the RRN system (Lee et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021).

The second letter investigates the racialized “lateral surveillance” (Andrejevic, 2004) in the Dutch context. Lateral surveillance, or peer-to-peer monitoring that happens among individuals rather than surveillance by institutions, is known to target the racialized other disproportionately. The events following the outbreak of the COVID-19 in Wuhan, China, again exemplified how the racialized other is perceived as destabilizing and threatening to the white body politic (French and Monahan, 2020, p. 5). This chapter represents an autoethnographic account of the racialized experience in Europe amid lockdowns. Sinophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic not only operated according to citizenship but also extended to the East Asian-looking population. Furthering the arguments made in the first letter, this chapter also discusses how the racialized migrant experience is complicated by queerness. The Western homonationalist agenda extends its reach to non-Western queer beings. Homonationalism, or the co-optation of queer identity claims by nationalist discourses, regulates sexual-racial populations in terms of national identity (Puar, 2007). Promoting queer rights in European states, including marriage equality, registered partnership, and gender affirmation, does not only contribute to the branding of national homosexuality within borders but also generates a yearning for departure for non-European queers. When migration seemingly enables the queer migrant to achieve this desire, they face continued exclusion as they are denied the (white) queer citizenship by racializing logic.

The third and last letter examines the techno-solutionist outlook towards the post-COVID era through the figuration of the immune citizen. While earlier chapters present archival footage to evidence the proposition that state and interpersonal surveillance was not newly adopted for the public health emergency but was just the latest iteration, this chapter draws on archival footage to discuss the idealization of the safe, immune, and unthreatening body with reference to the exclusion of the contagious other. The collective imagination—which was strongest during the first year of the outbreak—and the anticipation of clear-cut emancipation from the disease, is critically assessed. Finally, this chapter draws on trans activist-scholar Ruin's (2019) work to question the temporal imagination of linear advancement. In her essay “Deo Naeun Miraeraneun Chakgak [The Illusion of a Better Future],” Ruin writes that “regardless of the hopes and aspirations for a linear improvement,

life and movements flow,” as she examines archival material about South Korean queer history. The subtitle of the essay section, “Bearing the Worsening,” encapsulates one of the most powerful lessons for trying times from the tradition of feminist and queer thinkers. The collective imagination of the post-COVID era must reject the romanticization of the pre-COVID era and instead embrace “a politics of epistemological humility” (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz, 2005). This premise honors the very fact that we are entering into an unknown time and space entangled with and embracing the uneven distribution of impossibilities, instabilities, and insecurities (Jun, 2021). A collective imagination of such politics foregrounding the queer epistemology will strive for a world-building for the otherwise that addresses these challenges while “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016).

3 “THERE WERE NO LIES”: AUTOFICTIONAL DOCUMENTARY AND COLLECTIVELY SITUATED KNOWLEDGES

“I know this letter will live short, and that these words will fade. Still, I wrote for memory. Half of this was a confession, and the other half a novel. There were no lies.” (*Dear Chaemin*, 2020)

Autofictional approaches in documentary filmmaking have been identified as a sub-genre of documentary that emerged from the postmodern perspective with the demise of the “metanarrative” or “grand narrative” (Lyotard 1984). In autofictional documentaries, filmmakers “felt free to not only put themselves in their films, but to employ a wide range of stylistic approaches in telling their stories, and to maybe even lie a little” (Corbett, 2016, p. 52). Following the tradition of autofiction as a literary genre, autofictional filmmaking is understood as “a contemporary cinematic mode that challenges, and at times subverts, the generic limits of documentary and fiction film from a self-reflexive position” (Forné and López-Gay, 2022, p. 228).

I propose that autofictional documentary is an effective cinematic mode that accounts for situated knowledges and critiques collective memories. For *Dear Chaemin*, the autofictional mode was a strategic decision to re-stage the rapidly unfolding events of intertwined racism and queerphobia that followed the intensifying pandemic on a global scale. The challenges of its research and production lay, on one hand, in the racialization of the coronavirus targeted at Asian diasporas across countries and continents, while I was confined to the regional quarantine at the time of production. On the other hand, the tasks of this film included representing the experiences of queer and trans communities of color without reducing them to testimonial appropriations. Autofictional filmmaking, characterized by the aesthetics of ambiguity, allows a translation that “can seize on the same facts and events, but assembles them in a radically altered presentation, disorderly or in an order, which deconstructs and reconstructs the narrative according to its own logic with a novelistic design of its own” (Doubrovsky, 2013).

Autofictional documentary is particularly useful for narrativizing situated knowledge from a located position while speaking nearby different positionalities. Donna Haraway's (1988) theory on situated knowledges based on the embodied nature of all vision cannot be ignored when considering documentary filmmaking as a mode of knowledge production. While vision is taken as a metaphor to discuss scientific objectivity Haraway's the seminal work, filmmaking as a visualizing technology evidences that every perspective is partial and contextualized by its embodied standpoint. Through the characterized presence of the filmmaker, autofictional documentary enables a storytelling of "the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (Haraway, 1988). For Haraway, a mere partiality does not suffice. It is "the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position" (Haraway, 1988) that allows translations and solidarities. While Haraway emphasizes conversations between partial perspectives, however, the question of *how* these connections could be accessed is less explored (Jeong, 2013).

When it comes to filmmaking, the question of how to mobilize multiple partialities may align with Trinh T. Minh-ha's approach of "speaking nearby" instead of "speaking about." To speak nearby is:

to acknowledge the possible gap between you and those who populate your film: in other words, to leave the space of representation open so that, although you're very close to your subject, you're also committed to not speaking on their behalf, in their place or on top of them. You can only speak nearby, in proximity (whether the other is physically present or absent), which requires that you deliberately suspend meaning, preventing it from merely closing and hence leaving a gap in the formation process. (Balsom, 2018)

For Trinh, it is an "attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world," rather than a technique or a statement that is materialized in all aspects of the film with a challenge to approach truth indirectly (Chen, 1992, p. 87). Filmmaker An van Dienderen (2017) interprets the approach of speaking nearby as ambiguity and hybridity aimed through fictional and archival filmic strategies. Embracing that documentary is a "flow between fact and fiction" (Trinh, 1990), Trinh's practice of speaking nearby entails a critique of objectivity that destabilizes power relations in knowledge production, namely the hierarchy between the filmmaker and the subject.

The autofictional extends the provocation—or the play between fact and fiction—to encompass a further malleability. For *Dear Chaemin*, this malleability in rearranging the reality is what enabled staging and performing dialogues between my situated knowledge and other positionalities without a goal for universal or journalistic objectivity. I do not wish to disclose what was fact or what was fiction in this film—not in this paper nor elsewhere. It is precisely through the

ambiguity of the autofictional that I could map the socio-political entanglements in proximity. In this project, I deploy citational narrativizing as the primary strategy that weaved a web of relations to speak nearby. I mobilize dispersed lived experiences based on news articles, testimonials, blog posts, and literary works into a community of lovers, friends, and families. Through scriptwriting in-between fact and fiction, news and novels, or documentary and narrative, I sought to collectivize partial and localized experiences to be contextualized in a form that promotes intimacy.

Two years after its production, my reflections on *Dear Chaemin* are also a recognition of it as an attempt to archive the early stage of the pandemic from a queer-feminist perspective. Forné and López-Gay (2022) conceptualize the autofictional as an archival practice of memorialization through a self-reflexive process. The ambiguity established between the filmmaker and audience also “suffuses the poetics of memory that [the autofictional films] deploy” (Forné and López-Gay, 2022, p. 229) and invites the viewer to actively interpret and participate in the process of memory construction. For *Dear Chaemin*, the collective memory it constructs primarily interrogates the normative conception of the pandemic in its earlier stage as a universal public health emergency. Further, this project leads to a questioning of the romanticization of the “old normal” as it rearranges historical traces.

In this vein, the autofictional mode can be further contextualized through the use of unconventional, non-lens-based audio-visual material. The research and development of *Dear Chaemin* in its pre-production were populated by news coverage and archival material, most of which were accessed online. Employing desktop recordings and 3D mapping, the film not only adheres to the project of documenting but also interrogates digital representations of marginalized experiences depicted online and in the mass media. It historicizes the securitization of the pandemic mediated by socio-technical assemblages of governance. As a result, *Dear Chaemin* becomes an archive that creates and examines both digital and analogue forms of individual and collective memories, which together shape contemporary memorialization processes.

4 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have discussed how autofictional documentary as a sub-genre of documentary enables narrativizing that collectivizes differently located situated knowledges. I locate the malleability of the autofictional in reassembling realities as a cinematic strategy for speaking nearby other positionalities while embracing and advocating for the partiality of vision. Further, autofictional filmmaking—with the viewer—participates in the process of memory construction. Accompanied by non-lens-based material, the autofictional mode can engage with the socio-technical process of memorialization.

Through this paper and the film *Dear Chaemin*, I propose that autofictional documentary is a cinematic mode of research of studying contemporary dynamics of international politics that refuses to engage in all-knowing claims. It enables the filmmaker/researcher to present an embodied process of research with a “symmetrical embrace of (fluid and constantly shifting) alphabetical and material-aesthetic forms” (Austin and Leander, 2021, p. 92).

Collective memory shapes cultural identity, global politics, and an attitude in life towards temporal and spatial multiplicities. Memorializing differently situated positionalities draws on a community of divergent angles of vision. The autofictional, contrary to its common association with the narcissistic, offers the potential of the flow between fact and fiction to remember and imagine social and political solidarities that bears the worsening.

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