

정치적 전위 예술로서 ‘뉴스릴’ 연구 분석 Research on ‘Newsreel’ as a Political Avant-garde

김재홍
서원대학교 공연영상학과

Jae-Hong Kim(gratitude@dreamwiz.com)

요약

1967년 뉴스릴의 탄생은 영화사에서 작은 혁명이었다. 뉴욕 뉴스릴은 1972년도에 제 3세계 뉴스릴이 되었다. 제 3세계 뉴스릴은 탄생의 목적을 ‘텔레비전 뉴스에 대한 대안의 제공’이라고 분명하게 명시하면서 제작시스템과 배급시스템의 변혁을 예고하였다. 제 3세계 뉴스릴에서 활동하던 크리스틴 최는 이후 그녀의 작품들을 통해 뉴스릴에서 제시하였던 정신을 계승하였다.

본 논문은 제 3세계 뉴스릴과 뉴스릴을 대표하는 크리스틴 최를 통해 뉴스릴집단의 생산양식과 스타일/미학을 이야기하고자 한다. 그들의 활동은 출발부터 정치적이었으며 논란을 일으켰다. 그들은 제작주체가 누구여야 하는지, 배급시스템이 어떠한지 고민했으며 치열한 논쟁을 통해 협업생산, 집단정체성 등을 획득하였고 그것이 그들 작업의 토대가 되었다. 크리스틴 최는 제 3세계 뉴스릴의 중심인물로서 그녀의 작품은 인종문제와 젠더문제에 집중하고 있다. 그녀의 작품은 언제나 정치적이고 동시에 역사적이다.

■ 중심어 : | 대안영화 | 정치적 전위예술 | 뉴스릴 | 크리스틴 최 |

Abstract

When newsreel was organized in 1967, it was a small but strong revolution. New York newsreel became the third world newsreel in 1972. The third world newsreel clearly stated that the purpose of the organization should be the alternative provision of the Television news. They also notified the revolution of the production system and the distribution system.

Christine Choy who actively worked at the Third world newsreel succeeded the spirit of the organization through her works. Through the third world newsreel and Christine Choy who was the representative of the organization, this article is dealing with the mode of production and the style and the aesthetics of the Newsreel. Their activities were originally political and always controversial. They agonized who should be the film maker, how should be the distribution system. Through the strong arguments, the group had acquired not only collective identity but also collective production. Those collaborations had become the foundation of their works. Christine Choy has been a key figure of the Third world newsreel and her films has focused on the racial problem and gender problem. Her works have always been political and historical.

■ keyword : | Alternative Cinema | Political Avant-garde | Newsreel | Christine Choy |

I. Introduction

In *Movie Journal* of January 25th in 1968, Jonas Mekas said, "December 22 (in 1967) will go into the history books of cinema[1]." According to him, on that day, some thirty filmmakers gathered at the Film-Makers' Cinematheque and created a radical film newsreel service called New York Newsreel. New York Newsreel was swiftly redirected to represent international communities of color and was renamed Third World Newsreel. Later, it gave rise to the developments of various newsreel branches throughout the country. By the official announcement of New York Newsreel, the purpose of it was to provide an alternative to the limited and biased coverage of television news. Thus they organized the alternative production and distribution system in order to use the films as a tool to empower Third World people and the working class.

Twenty-six years later, *Sa-I-Gu, From Korean Women's Perspectives*(Dae sil Kim, 1993), which literally means April twenty-ninth in Korean, was made by three Korean American women. At the introduction of film, they say, "We decided to make this documentary to give voice to the voiceless victims, i.e. Korean American shopkeepers and shop owners who lost everything during the Los Angeles upheaval." Besides, it is worth noting that one of the film makers is Christine Choy, who had been the representative of Third World Newsreel from 1974 to 1986. Therefore, along with the historical research of the newsreel, in particular, the transition from New York Newsreel to Third World Newsreel, reading *Sa-I-Gu* as a contemporary successor of the newsreel or as a political film will be a central argument in this project.

Alternative cinema usually means an alternative to commercial media or to conventional topics and

forms. As David James notices, the alternative cinema should be defined in terms of the mode of production as well as the style and esthetics. He argues that "the mode of production mediates between cultural superstructure and economic base, between art and politics[2]." On the other hand, Peter Bürger says, "The avant-garde not only negates the category of individual production but also that of individual reception[3]," and furthermore, "such production is not to be understood as artistic production, but as part of a liberating life praxis[3]." That is to say, the avant-garde can not be divorced from the dynamics between the production and reception, between the art and life. Hence, the avant-garde cinema is determined by the different politics of production, distribution, and exhibition in comparison with that of dominant cinema. As Theodor Adorno argues, "avant-gardiste art is a radical protest that rejects all false reconciliation with what exists and thus the only art form that has historical legitimacy[3]."

Thus, I assume that the newsreel can be regarded as one of the most important political avant-garde in that the radical production and distribution of it challenged and challenges the dominant media, that is, the ideological apparatus of capitalistic or imperialistic society.

II. Historical Survey of 'Newsreel'

The transition from New York Newsreel to Third World Newsreel is in some ways symptomatic of the contradiction of political film making by the people who know the social, economic, and political problem of the minority but never experience the material situation. Initially, New York Newsreel presumed their primary audience as follows: "all people working for change, students, organizations in ghettos and

other depressed areas and anyone who is not and can not be satisfied by the news film available through establishment channels[1].” Thus, their film mostly was supposed to project the social, political issue facing the working class and Third World people.

Yet, the earliest newsreel failed to create the films that could provide the audience, that is, the oppressed minority with a political praxis in everyday life. For the newsreel whose members were mainly white, male, and middle-class emphasized the multi-national revolution and working class solidarity divorced from everyday life. On the contrary, Third World people realized that “their fight should start within the everyday, in the fight for housing, day care, food, day-to-day survival[4].” Therefore, there were radically different attitudes toward film making and the means of production between Third World people with little technical training and whites with skills. This tension originated from the initial organization of newsreel in which several members had previously identified with experimental film making where there was little political consciousness. In other words, many of the people who played an early role in Newsreel came from very different backgrounds in terms of gender, race, class, and educational level causing the internal struggle between them. After all it was and is a question of who should make the political film for the working class and Third World people.

Regarding this question, Christine Choy says, “It’s not people who have a vocation to make film. Technique for us is secondary. The people themselves have a rich experience, a knowledge of history and their culture and community organization[4].”

The crisis of New York Newsreel began with doing a film about prisoners at Attica in 1971. Since most prisoners were Third World people, the crew consisted of three white members and three Third

World members. However, during its production, most of them except two members left out the team due to the frustration and conflict between the members. The remaining members were all women from Third World, who had no film making skill at all. One of them was Christine Choy, who completed the film, *Teach Our Children*, and acquired the essential film making skill. In the meantime, the white members decided to disband, and then New York Newsreel became Third World Newsreel in April 1972. Besides, leaving out the newsreel, they took all the film making equipment so that the group almost could not survive.

Yet, since she took over the representative of Third World Newsreel, Christine Choy had financially stabilized the organization of newsreel through the rebuilt distribution system. Moreover, Third World Newsreel cinematically succeeded in promoting the militant agitation film to the persuasive political film. Given the transformation of organization, Third World Newsreel radically reshaped the nature and purpose of the newsreel. Based on the collective identity, the newsreel began seeking the way in which minority people could raise the political consciousness oppressed by the dominant ideology and media.

In this respect, Third World Newsreel can be redefined as a minor film that has many characteristics in common with the minor literature that Deleuze and Guattari suggest. They argue that “A minor literature does not come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language[5].” Third World Newsreel is not unlike the minor literature in that it had sought to obtain the political identity within the established power structure of major society rather than the isolated national identity. Besides, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, in the minor film everything is inherently political in that day-to-day struggle such

as housing, working, food, and civil rights is a take-off for film making.

On the other hand, in the minor film everything takes on a collective value. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "Because talent is not abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation[5]." Instead, "Literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and ever revolutionary, enunciation. It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism[5]." Similarly, since the members of Third World Newsreel almost lacked the technical skills, they could not but cooperate in film making. Accordingly, they attempted to construct their collective identity by which they produce an active solidarity of community as well as of themselves. According to Christine Choy, the organization of Third World Newsreel has been based on the commune where everyone such as director, editor, cinematographer, and technician equally participates in film making and likewise each of them is equally rewarded[6]. There is no form of decision from the top down. Instead, there is again collective identity and democratic collaboration, which make it possible for them to create the alternative cinema.

III. Content Analysis of Christine Choy's documentaries

Christine Choy might be positioned as a central figure in redefining newsreel movement in terms of the political minor film. From *Teach our children to Sa-I-Gu*, her coherent purpose of film making is to problematize the social, political issue of race and gender. For her, giving the voice to the voiceless people provides otherwise unattainable means by which she as well as the voiceless can find out her

own identity as a minority woman. That is to say, the individual life or individual problem of her is immediately connected to the politics of film making. Consequently, she might be able to solve the inherent contradiction of New York Newsreel for she can easily identify herself more with the problem itself than with the solver or observer of it.

Christine Choy, a half Chinese and half Korean woman, was born and raised in China, educated in Korea, and finally matured in the United States. Hence, it is no accident that camera has been a weapon for her to protest against the racism, sexism, and imperialism. She says, "I began making a film in order to subvert the distorted, weird, and obedient image of Oriental that Hollywood has continuously created in their major films[6]."

Historically, the subject of her works has been changed from African American through Chinese American to Korean American women though there is no clear distinction. The more she approaches to her identity, the more her works come to focus on the minority among the minority. Referring to the characteristics of Choy's works, Sook-Ryul Rue notices that her films are first of all political in that they deal with the conflicts between different communities so as to raise the political consciousness[6]. Secondly, her films represent the historicity that each event is placed upon the dynamics of past and present. Thus each event is never isolated from the process of history. Finally, they are based on the individual reality of everyday life. For her life is directly interwoven with the social or political issue whereby the reality is embedded in her films[6]. In other words, the reality is not a fact but a power of the minority by which the problem of minority is politically, historically redefine in the larger scope.

On the other hand, what differentiates her works

from the conventional documentary is a form of addressing. She does not employ an omnipotent narrator; instead she provides the characters with a place to speak for themselves without interference. In this sense, the most remarkable film is *Who killed Vincent Chin*, which deals a murder case of Chinese worker killed by two white men working at the automobile factory. Because they thought Chin was Japanese who was responsible for the lay-off of auto-industry, they had a violent argument with him and later murdered him. According to Christine Choy, she designed this film to look like a relay broadcast of the trial. Although she has her own perspective, she does not insist her thoughts to the audience; rather she equally distributes the time to the defendants as well as the accusers. Whenever the same story is over and over repeated from the different point of view, the narrative gradually reveals the whole truth. Yet, the final conclusion is reserved for the viewer. Nonetheless, this film succeeds to disclose the accumulated discrimination or conflict between different races. In this sense, *Who Killed Vincent Chin* is likely to open new possibility of political film on the new level distinguished from the agitation or propaganda that Peter Wollen points out[4]. Although the film never asserts the political propaganda, nonetheless it is much more political than any other militant newsreel films.

Meanwhile, *Sa-I-Gu* returns to the persuasive propaganda film in that it directly articulates a political issue without hesitation or ambivalence. *Sa-I-Gu, From Korean Women's Perspectives* is a movie for the Korean women and by the Korean women. This film is written, directed, produced, and photographed by three Korean women including Christine Choy. The purpose of this film is to represent the different voices and images of Korean American distorted by the dominant mass media. In

the introduction, they argue that the most popular images of Korean American on the commercial network television during Los Angeles crisis are mainly three typical ones.

First, along with the famous Rodney King videotape, Korean American man shooting the African American teenager who would attempt to steal something in the shop. Secondly, crying female shopkeepers who are begging African American or Hispanic not to loot their stores. Finally, the male Korean American people holding the guns with their hands, who are apparently ready to shoot anyone only so as to protect their property. Accordingly, *Sa-I-Gu* allows Korean American, in particular, Korean American women, to speak for themselves. In this sense, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, “what she – that is, the Korean woman – says or does is necessarily political, even if others are not in agreement[5].”

As James suggests, there might be three categories of political film in terms of the production mode, that is to say, who makes the film: the film made by the intellectual or professional who intends to educate or sometimes control the people, the film by the intellectual who allows the people to speak themselves, and finally the film by the people themselves. While most agitation or propaganda films are subsumed within the first category, the amateur films or proletarian films are classified into the third category. In the respect of political consciousness, the third films are most powerful in that film making is immediately connected to the politics of everyday life and thus it empowers the people.

Meanwhile, *Sa-I-Gu* might be placed on the transition from the agitation to the proletarian film. Although Christine Choy produced and photographed this film, the others were not enough skillful to make the film. Besides, they had no enough money for film

making as well. Thus they borrowed the video camera and auxiliary equipment and completed this film. In this sense, the production mode of *Sa-I-Gu* is similar to that of minority film or amateur film. On the other hand, all of them are intellectuals who can not be ordinary people in any case. Although they do not apparently insist their notion or speak their thoughts, it is evident that they might control the whole narrative of the film through the editing and framework of it. Yet, *Sa-I-Gu* is less concerned with educating the ordinary people with the intellectual snobbism than with drawing the potential political consciousness of ordinary women into the public debate site where they are empowered.

Accordingly, the power of *Sa-I-Gu* as a political film is attributed to showing the gradual progress of political consciousness among the Korean American women. In the beginning of the film, they mostly blame the uprising on the individual African American people or the looters who took everything from them. Yet, they begin to realize that it is not an individual thing, it is not an individual man who killed her son; rather there is something. They likewise realize that it is media, it is the police, and it is the government that distorted the nature of crisis and then propelled the conflict of African American and Korean. At last they protest against the politics of America, which made them to be a scapegoat so as to hide the accumulated conflicts between the rich and the poor, the majority and the minority, and the white and the black. Therefore, except little inevitable narration, most parts of this film consist of direct speaking of Korean American women who were the shopkeepers and lost their property due to the crisis. Among them, the most remarkable story is about the death of Korean American teenager. Edward Jaesung Kim, who just would be nineteen years old at that time, was the only Korean American who died during

the uprising. His mother not only speaks her sorrow and resents, but also directly attempts to analyze the complicate factors that drove his son to the death. She says that it is not an individual man but something complicate to kill her son.

As such, it is the minority people not others or omnipotent voices that speak for themselves. The story does not necessarily depend on the role of master narrator any more. Consequently this participatory and persuasive framework of *Sa-I-Gu* serves to overcome the limitations of early newsreel. Meanwhile, regarding the language, it is worth noting that most women except one speak in Korean, that is a language cut off from the masses, or different from the major language. By the argument of Deleuze and Guattari, the minor language is a "deterritorialized language, appropriate for strange and minor uses[5]." When the women's remarks often include a few English words such as American dream, hope, the police, and government, the strange intermixed language with Korean and English deterritorializes their native language. Yet, their language does not look like "a paper language or an artificial language[5]" that Deleuze and Guattari suggest, but instead looks like an active language or live language. For the language used in the film is not a written language but a spoken language. For their spoken language is temporarily incorporated into the everyday life and spatially into the confined geography called Korea Town. Thus their language is reterritorialized by the specific tempo-spatial dynamics constructing the collective national identity within the major society.

While *Sa-I-Gu* succeeds in drawing and raising the political consciousness of Korean American women, it gives rise to the other controversial issue of counter-racism. In a sense, *Sa-I-Gu* seems to fail to persuade the other minority, in other words, African

American. Although there is certainly no intention to analyze and diagnose the Los Angeles crisis objectively, nonetheless, in some way, *Sa-I-Gu* reveals another problem of political film making, the subjectivity. As Peter Wollen notices, “the problem of political film is often posed in terms of one as against the other[4].” Yet, if political film treads a middle ground on the pretext of objectivity, it is likely to lose its politics. In other words, political film necessarily assumes the offensive for strategic purpose. It is no more a problem of who should make a film, but of how should make a film.

IV. Conclusion

When a movie was invented, there was no bright future in it. However the movie has acquired the status of the art and became the specialist area. Afterward, there have been diverse media and channels of the images and they have become the ‘window’ through which we can see the world.

Before the Digital era has come, there have been many attempts that ordinary people have challenged the movie making. Especially those attempts have been made when the new technology has emerged. They have tried to record and whistle-blow the contradictions in this world. Likewise, the newsreel works have been not the works of the professionals, but the ones of the amateurs. The newsreel makers held the camera for the voiceless in the society. Especially, the key-figure, Christine Choy held the camera for the discriminated minorities and women. She said, “It’s painful to look at the reality. But it’s better to hold the camera and go outside than to sit down in agony. Camera is still a weapon to record the truth![6]”

In this article, I have researched the newsreel

works in 1960’s before the TV documentary has become generalized. Also, I have examined the conditions and the limits that could make the newsreel works possible. In conclusion, I suggest that newsreel works could play great roles as political avant-garde because the spirit of them was based on the collective identity and democratic collaboration.

Lately, media technology has become totally digitalized and old technologies have been forgotten. One person media managed by multi channel networks has become general trend. One person media means creators who broadcast themselves on video streaming websites. Any news occurring all over the world can be easily produced and distributed by one person media. Moreover, it is much faster and fresher than that of old media. One person media is similar to newsreel in that it is basically an alternative to the existing media environment. However, in terms of journalism, one person media has many problems and limits in spite of its possibilities. As Kovach and Rosenstiel argue, “Technology is shaping a economic organization of information companies, which is subsuming journalism inside it. The threat is no longer simply from government censorship. The new danger is that independent journalism may be dissolved in the solvent of commercial communication and synergistic self-promotion[7].”

I wish this contemplation could be the guideline to film makers in digital era or the film makers who want to make an alternative cinema.

참고 문헌

- [1] J. Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971*, New York: Collier, 1972.

- [2] D. James, *Allegories of Cinema*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- [3] P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984.
- [4] B. Nichols, *Newsreel: Documentary Film making on the American Left*, New York: Arno Press, 1980.
- [5] G. Deleuze and G. Félix, "Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature," *Theory and History of Literature*, Vol.30, pp.16-17, 1983.
- [6] C. Choy, *The Truth of My Films, The Freedom of My Love*, Seoul: Myung-Jin Publishing Co., 1996.
- [7] B. Kovach and T. Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should expect*, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2001.

저 자 소 개

김 재 홍(Jae-Hong Kim)

정회원



- 1990년 2월 : 서울대학교 국어국문학과(문학사)
- 2001년 6월 : California Institute of the Arts(Master of Fine Arts)
- 2008년 3월 ~ 현재 : 서원대학교

공연영상학과 교수

<관심분야> : 영화제작, 영화서비스, 방송, 영상제작