The Unending Korean War in Film: From The Bridges at Toko-Ri to Welcome to Dongmakgol

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Korean War films from the US and South Korea provide one cultural site through which scholar–teachers working in American studies, and the humanities in general, can intervene in the unending Korean War. An emergent peace movement has organized around term unending Korean War in order to educate the public both about the history of the three-year period of active combat, and about the repercussions of the fact that the Armistice Agreement, signed on 27 July 1953, stopped the shooting but did not end the war. In the US context, the Korean War is described as a forgotten war. When the war is remembered, it has often been interpreted as a limited, defensive, or static war—a war fought in the trenches—a perspective that tends to occlude the air war. Through a comparative study of the Hollywood film The Bridges at Toko-Ri (Mark Robson, 1954) and the South Korean film Welcome to Dongmakgol (Park Kwang-hyun, 2005), I explore conflicting ways of representing and remembering the air war: as limited to an interdiction campaign in the former, as the cause of civilian casualties in the latter. The friction that results from viewing Welcome to Dongmakgol against the grain of The Bridges at Toko-Ri provides one starting point for a discussion of the unending Korean War, a discussion which has yet to appear in the field of transnational American studies. My hope is that greater understanding of the devastating air war can contribute to the struggle for peace on the Korean peninsula.

During the three-year air war over North Korea, the US Air Force sowed the wind, and Koreans reaped the whirlwind. But few Americans know anything about this apocalypse, and even fewer care. Absence, forgetting, amnesia—and for the few who know, a willed unconcern (even laughter, so many Americans find it hard to take North Korea seriously, as anything more than a communist opera bouffe). Yet we Americans continue to reap the whirlwind even today because this war turned the DPRK in an eternal sworn enemy, and now, one with nuclear weapons.

Bruce Cumings, “Violet Ashes”

Here is a challenge to face or, for those who disagree, to dispute: either cosmopolitanism detaches Americans from their nation and does so in a time of war, when the price of such detachment rises precipitously, or it is not worth getting very excited about.

Bruce Robbins, Perpetual War

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In 2005, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Korea (TRCK) began to investigate human rights abuses and the massacre of civilians from the Japanese colonial period (1905–45), through the immediate postcolonial years (1945–50) and the Korean War (1950–53), to the era of military dictatorship (1961–87). The TRCK was the culmination of sixty years of grassroots struggles for justice that began immediately after liberation from Japan in 1945. As Jae-Jung Suh writes, “The victims, their families, and their sympathizers took the initiative to tell their stories, demand justice, conduct memorial services, and reinstate the honor of the victims. The state only followed, and it did so only after its democratization.”¹

The embattled work of the TRCK, which ended in 2010 after the election of conservative president Lee Myung-bak two years earlier, provides one institutional site from which to apprehend the repercussions of the unending Korean War, a defamiliarizing periodization that highlights the fact that the Armistice Agreement, signed on 27 July 1953, stopped the shooting but did not end the war. The present progressive tense of unending war draws explicit attention to the fact, too easily forgotten in the US, that the three-year period of active combat has not been followed by peacetime in Korea. Kim Dong-choon, a professor of sociology and the former standing commissioner of the TRCK, points out, “From a military perspective, the regime that signed the truce was never followed by a peacetime regime, and the war continues on the Korean Peninsula to this day.”² Two of the most overwhelming features of perpetual war on the peninsula, territorial division and military escalation, have activated peace movements in the US, South Korea, and other parts of the world that are composed of organizations and individuals – academic, human rights, community, veterans’, faith-based – working to move the US toward engagement with North Korea in order to formally end the war with a peace agreement. Three organizations in particular, the Alliance of Scholars Concerned about Korea (ASCK), the National Campaign to End the Korean War (NCEKW), and Women Cross DMZ (WCDMZ), are constellated around the project of disseminating information about the unending Korean War on university campuses, in the media, and to the general public through the organization of teach-ins, conferences, lectures, lectures, lectures.

² Dong-Choon Kim, The Unending Korean War: A Social History, trans. Kim Sung-ok (Buena Vista: Larkspur, 2000), x. In 2011, a conference was held at New York University entitled The (Unending) Korean War, which included lectures, film screenings, and art installations. See also Henry Em and Christine Hong, eds., The Unending Korean War, a special issue of positions: asia critique, 23, 4 (Nov. 2015).
peace tours, Korean Peace Days, exhibitions, and film screenings. These actions are having an impact at the level of the state. On 17 July 2015, National Korean War Veterans Armistice Day, the three remaining Korean War veterans in Congress, Charles B. Rangel (D-NY), John Conyers Jr. (D-MI), and Sam Johnson (R-TX), introduced House Resolution 384 “calling for a formal end to the Korean War.”

Korean War films from the US and South Korea, understood within the context of the TRCK and the pedagogical aspirations guiding this emergent peace movement, provide one position from which to begin a historically and politically engaged discussion of the unending Korean War, a discussion that has yet to appear in the field of transnational American studies. Transnational framing of Korean War films provides a historical corrective to cinematic representations of the war within national cinema. After UN Security Council Resolution 83 was passed on 27 June 1950, requiring UN member states to consider sending assistance, a total of twenty-two nations, and one non-UN member, provided combat support on the side of South Korea. The overall coalition included a total of fifty-eight nations. Sheila Miyoshi Jager emphasizes, “Never before in modern history had so many nations committed themselves to a common political and military endeavor as they did during the Korean War.”

Korean War films from the US and South Korea, like the war film in general, tend to be devoted to nationally homogeneous military units through which the genre functions as a critical reflection on a national history, identity, and purpose. Yet given the fact that ground combat in South Korea was not divided into discrete national units, but was made up of integrated coalition forces led by the United States under the United Nations Command (UNC), cinematic imaginaries that envision the war as fought between discrete nations are misleading.


5 Sheila Miyoshi Jager, Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 98.
From the point of view of the UNC in Korea, national cinema and the nationalism-war film genre have at times been obstacles to historically accurate portrayals of the Korean War.

Yet a contemporary comparative framing of Korean War films is to a large extent impossible because after the release of *M*A*S*H* (Robert Altman, 1970) there are no memorable Hollywood productions of the Korean War, whereas the genre exploded in South Korea after the democracy movement put an end to military dictatorship in 1987. The heavy presence of Korean War films in contemporary South Korean cinema, and near total absence from Hollywood, are the symptom of an unending war that is actively remembered in one context and forgotten in the other. Several generations of students of American studies have been introduced to the Vietnam War through a combination of film analysis and politically engaged cultural criticism, and this is a critical moment in which the US and North Korea teeter on the edge of a return to all-out war. Given the absence of contemporary Korean War films in the US, South Korean cinema can help fill the gap at the scale of the classroom as students of American studies need to hear and respond to the stories that this cinema has to tell, especially those stories that parallel the revelations of the TRCK. South Korean war films can help instigate a cosmopolitan pedagogy that, as Bruce Robbins argues, “detaches Americans from their nation and does so in a time of war.”

American studies classrooms are critical spaces where teachers and students might explore dimensions of the unending Korean War that are as urgent and contentious today as during the three-year phase of active combat: militarism and military technology, gender and camptown prostitution, race and orientalism, imperialism and US foreign policy, dislocation and diaspora, division and reunification. Here I touch on a number of these issues, but concentrate on one site of conflict that has received fluctuating and contested public attention in South Korea, and virtually no public attention in the US: the mass killing of civilians that resulted from the air war over Korea. I look first at Hollywood representations of US air power, with emphasis on *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* (Mark Robson, 1954), and then turn to the representation of air war in South Korean cinema, with emphasis on *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (Park Kwang-hyun, 2005). In the final section of the paper I explore what is at

6 The television series *M*A*S*H* (Larry Gelbart, 1972–83) shaped many American viewers’ understanding of the Korean War. Scholars tend to assume that the series, like the film, was more about Vietnam than Korea. David Scott Diffrient critiques this assumption in *M*A*S*H*: TV Milestones (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008). Diffrient argues that the show “did more to inscribe the idea of ‘Korea’ in America’s collective unconscious than any other cultural production of the twentieth century.” Ibid., 104.

stake in establishing a nonsynchronous or transtemporal comparative framework for two films separated by fifty long, bitter years of unending war.

**THE BRIDGES AT TOKO-RI AND LIMITED AIR WAR**

Given the paranoid climate of HUAC investigations, blacklists, and red scares, combined with the fact that World War II films were the leading genre at the box office in 1950, the Korean War should have given Hollywood ample opportunity to cash in on its commitment to anticommunism. When the movie industry came together as a whole under the Council of Motion Picture Organizations in 1951, the council informed Washington that it was “prepared to handle any job given by the government.” The onslaught of Korean War films never arrived, in part because, after China entered the war in November 1950, the prospect of total victory disappeared. When the front line stabilized a year later, the Korean War transformed into demoralizing World War I-style trench warfare, an “endless static war,” a war that was “small and mean and cold,” as James Brady describes it in his grim memoir. Waging limited war in Korea aimed to avoid direct confrontation with the Soviet Union by fighting to preserve the status quo that was in place before the invasion by the North on 25 June 1950. This war aim was not very inspiring and there was no hope for an obvious victory, so the studios decided that lighter genres such as westerns and science fiction would be a better sell.

Many Americans have not known what to do with the Korean War, either as it was happening or at the level of cultural memory, and neither has Hollywood. Between 1940 and 1945, five hundred films were made about World War II, whereas a total of only ninety-one films have been made about the Korean War. Of the films that did appear, a significant number dramatized the spectacle of air war, which was thought to be more exciting and inspiring than the “small and mean and cold” view from the trenches. In 1951, James Michener was a news correspondent aboard the USS Essex and USS Valley Forge, where he observed missions flown against railroad bridges

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9 Ibid., 220.  
at Majon-ri and Samdong-ri in North Korea. Michener translated these experiences into a best-selling novella, *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* (1953), which was such a hit with the navy that when filming began, Chief Naval Officer (CNO) Arleigh Burke “agreed to lend planes and pilots (not to mention nineteen ships) at no charge to Paramount.”

Lieutenant Harry Brubaker (William Holden), a lawyer from Denver, wanders around the aircraft carrier USS *Savo Island* wondering what he is doing in the Korean War and resentful of the fact that people back home do not care what soldiers like him are going through. At the start of the film, a fuel leak forces Brubaker to ditch at sea, where he is rescued by helicopter pilot Mike Forney (Mickey Rooney) and Nestor Gamidge (Earl Holliman). The crash traumatizes Brubaker and shakes his confidence in himself and in the war. The only answer Brubaker receives to the question “Why Korea?” is given by Rear Admiral Tarrant (Fredric March), who admits to Brubaker that, “Militarily, this war is a tragedy.” He then adds, “All through history men have had to fight the wrong war in the wrong place, but that’s the one they’re stuck with.” While the mission to bomb the eponymous bridges is a success, Brubaker is forced to crash-land in enemy territory, where he dies a pitiful death along with Forney and Gamidge, who tried to rescue him. The film does not conclude with a euphoric sense of victory or mission accomplished, but with images of death and sacrifice that are not redeemed by Cold War Manichean eschatology. Brubaker’s heroism is distinctly not romanticized; he died for a cause he never really believed in, leaving his wife and two children without a husband or father. When William Holden was signed on to play the role of Brubaker, his one condition was that Michener’s ending not be changed. The producers agreed to this condition and the “un-Hollywoodish” ending translated into positive reviews by critics. As evidenced by the $4,300,000 the film earned at the box office, it was also a hit with audiences, making *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* the first Korean War blockbuster.

The film opens with a bird’s-eye view of the East Sea, the frame filled with ten vessels recognizable only by their wake. This perspective dissolves into a long shot of an aircraft carrier approached slowly from the side, the flight deck filled with jets and propeller planes, giving the viewer plenty of time to take in this awesome vision of US air and sea power. As the camera pans to the bridge, the studio soundtrack gives way to the terse voice of the air boss

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13 David Sears, *Such Men as These: The Story of the Navy Pilots Who Flew the Deadly Skies over Korea* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2010), 323.

updating the crew, “Jet launch has been canceled,” while an alarm begins to sound. The next sequence of shots cuts between documentary footage filmed aboard real aircraft carriers during the war and the fictional drama. Nearly one-third of The Bridges at Toko-Ri is composed of documentary footage, or what was known as “actuality film,” showing jets taking off from and landing on a severely pitching flight deck, the roar of engine noise and strong winds providing the accompanying soundtrack.

The opening montage, and the film as a whole, establish continuity between documentary or actuality film and the feature film. James Chapman notes that actuality films served two main purposes:

The first was for intelligence and training: film assisted in such matters as gauging the accuracy and effectiveness of aerial bombing and the development of new weapons technologies … The second, and most visible, role for actuality film was in the production of special combat documentaries released after the event with the aim of informing the public about the war …

The insertion of actuality film in The Bridges of Toko-Ri retains these two functions yet adds another dimension. At the film’s premier in Washington, CNO Burke praised the film as a “meticulously accurate depiction of the naval air war in Korea and the best Navy war film ever.” Robson’s film appeared in 1954, when “[e]ach military branch was spending aggressively. For its part, the Navy was using the new flood of dollars to reactivate fleet carriers, aircraft (mainly Corsairs), and reserve squadrons.” The techno-euphoric representation of military technology in The Bridges at Toko-Ri projects a sense of awe for US air and sea power, functioning as both a product of and an advertisement for the large increase in defense spending called for by National Security Council Report 68 (NSC-68), the fifty-eight-page secret policy paper, delivered to President Truman two months before the outbreak of war on the Korean peninsula, that argued for the militarized containment of the Soviet Union. The film does not confidently endorse the war, but it does sell militarism. Propeller planes were still in use during the war, yet Robson’s film, like other depictions of the air war such as Sabre Jet (Louis King, 1953), features jets, which were a new technology. While the Korean War “gave the military the chance to test jets and learn jet tactics,” The Bridges at Toko-Ri gave viewers the opportunity to see this new military technology, and their hard-earned tax dollars, in action.

16 Sears, 323.
17 Ibid., 144.
19 Edwards, 32.
Other Korean War films such as The Steel Helmet (Samuel Fuller, 1951), Retreat, Hell! (Joseph H. Lewis, 1952), and Pork Chop Hill (Lewis Milestone, 1959) are filmed in black and white and depict ground combat as hellish. Slow, tense, casualty-heavy movement through a forest or a city or across a mountain range contrasts with the striking color photography of The Bridges at Toko-Ri, which visualizes air war as precise, fast, and modern – the technical aerial drama moving in contradiction to the moody human drama – which earned the film an award for special effects at the Academy Awards. As in the depiction of the South Korean Air Force in the South Korean film Red Muffler (Shin Sang-ok, 1964), also based on real missions, Brubaker’s objective is to fly in low and destroy tactically important bridges in North Korea. In the recon and attack scenes, filmed at the Chocolate Mountain Gunnery Range in California, deep royal blue Panther jets race over a dull, bare landscape devoid of human life: there are no cities, towns, or villages, only industrial structures, railroad cars, and anti-aircraft shells. The Bridges at Toko-Ri draws attention to US air power and in the process consolidates a memory of the war in which bombs were not directed at civilian populations but were restricted to military targets. In order to win consent to the bombing war, the Pentagon “recommended that the U.S. forces in Korea stop documenting the bombing of villages and begin calling them ‘military targets’ in order to avoid negative press.” As Conway-Lanz points out, the meaning of military targets was elastic and expanded over the course of the war to include “virtually every human-made structure in enemy-occupied territory.”

In a history unknown to the American public, after China entered the war, MacArthur “ordered that a wasteland be created between the war front and the Yalu River border, destroying from air every ‘installation, factory, city, and village’ over thousands of square miles of North Korean territory.” While US political leaders, military commanders, and the mainstream press insisted that every precaution was being taken to prevent the killing of civilians, the US Air Force dropped bombs and napalm on North Korean cities, towns, and villages for three years with “no concern for civilian

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21 Grace M. Cho, Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy and the Forgotten War (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 69–70.
casualties." Considering North Korea had significantly more populous urban areas than the South, the expansion of the concept of a military target to include cities, towns, and villages resulted in vast numbers of civilian casualties. In 1955, Air Force General Curtis LeMay, head of the Strategic Air Command during the Korean War, casually informed the Office of Air Force History, “Over a period of three years or so, we killed off – what – 20 percent of the population.” When aircraft ran out of urban targets, hydroelectric and irrigation dams were destroyed, which resulted in the flooding of farmland and destruction of crops. During World War II, similar acts by the Nazis in the Netherlands were judged to be a war crime at Nuremberg.

Following a meticulous study of USAF documents and North Korean investigation reports, Taewoo Kim forcefully concludes that “unrestricted attacks on cities and villages of North Korea put the term ‘limited war’ to shame.”

The air war over North Korea was not restricted to an interdiction program that only targeted transportation, communication, and supply lines. The air war was offensive and unlimited in its destruction. It was apocalyptic.

In Precarious Life, a study of the geopolitics of mourning, Judith Butler asks, “What makes for a grievable life?” Early in the war, there was a brief period in which the American press did grieve for ordinary civilians killed by American bombs. Surveying the destruction for the New York Times, George Barrett found “a macabre tribute to the totality of modern war”:

The inhabitants throughout the village and in the fields were caught and killed and kept the exact postures they held when the napalm struck – a man about to get on his bicycle, fifty boys and girls playing in an orphanage, a housewife strangely unmarked, holds in her hand a page torn from a Sears-Roebuck catalogue crayoned at Mail Order No. 3,811,294 for a $2.98 “betwitching bed jacket – coral.”

In response to the grotesque obituaries that were appearing in the press, Secretary of State Dean Acheson wanted censorship authorities notified about this kind of “sensationalized reporting” so it could be stopped. A kind of grieving for Korean civilian casualties, both North and South, did not occur in the press.

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24 Ibid., 150.
26 Jon Halliday and Bruce Cumings, Korea: The Unknown War (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 195.
27 Kim, 469.
29 Quoted in Cumings, 30.
30 Ibid.
resurface in US popular culture between 1972 and 1983, as this theme was central to the television series M*A*S*H. Captain B. J. Hunnicutt (Mike Farrell) sardonically encapsulated this theme on the final episode, “This is not a good place to have a career as an innocent bystander.”

Two Hollywood depictions of the air war in Korea do raise the issue of civilian casualties, One Minute to Zero (Tay Garnett, 1952) and Battle Hymn (Douglas Sirk, 1957). Battle Hymn is based on the true story of Air Force Colonel Dean Hess, played by Rock Hudson. In the film, Hess is a former World War II Air Force pilot who accidentally dropped a bomb on a German church and orphanage, killing thirty-seven children. Racked with guilt and feeling lost, Hess reenlists in the Korean War to help train South Korean pilots, but while in Korea he becomes obsessed with the many orphans running around the camp. The film amplifies tension between Hess the fighter pilot and Hess the humanitarian, memorializing the latter at the expense of the former. In the film, Hess spends most of his time with the orphans, who were cast from the Orphan’s Home of Korea on Jeju Island that he established. In reality, Hess spent most of his time at work and visited the children whenever he could. Battle Hymn does include exciting air battle sequences, but concludes from the point of view of hundreds of orphaned children as they are fleeing south. In the film, Hess accompanies the children as they are picked up by transport planes on a dusty runway and taken to safety on Jeju Island. But in reality, Hess went on another mission after the children were secure. Hess flew over 250 missions over a two-year period, a fact omitted from the film, which means there is a good chance that he was creating orphans with one hand and saving them with the other.

During a training exercise that turns into a live mission to destroy a North Korean convoy, Maples (James Edwards), an African American pilot, strafes a truck carrying civilian refugees. Maples is distraught, as he did not know there were refugees in the truck, and works through his guilt by helping take care of the children. A minor theme in Battle Hymn, the image of human shields is central to the plot of One Minute to Zero, an anguished depiction of US soldiers confronted with an enemy that hides in columns of refugees. US Army Colonel Steve Janowski (Robert Mitchum) is forced to order an attack on refugees in order to kill disguised North Korean soldiers and thus save American lives. The inclusion of this scene led the Department of Defense to withdraw support for the film. One Minute to Zero ends on an upbeat note, as Colonel Janowski gets the girl (Ann Blyth), and the US successfully lands at Incheon. Whereas hope for victory is absent from The Steel Helmet

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32 Lentz, Korean War Filmography, 46, 51.  
33 Ibid., 46.  
34 Ibid., 11.
and *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*, and scaled down to the Marine motto “no man left behind” in *Retreat, Hell!, One Minute to Zero* freezes the war at the Incheon Landing, before fighting stabilized around the 38th parallel, thus creating the appearance of victory. Later films such as *Pork Chop Hill* and *Battle Hymn*, which appeared as the conflict in Vietnam was heating up, engage in a revisionist effort to see the war as a victory, from saving the free world to saving the children, an assessment that becomes easier to make the farther one moves in time and space from the war. While *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* contributes to a war over memory in which the bombing and strafing of civilian populations are erased and only “military targets” are recorded and memorialized, *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, like *A Little Pond* (Lee Saang-woo, 2009), a historical reenactment of the No Gun Ri massacre in which hundreds of villagers were killed by the US military, opens with a prologue that explicitly contextualizes the film in terms of the impact of the air war on civilian populations.

**WELCOME TO DONGMAKGOL AND UNLIMITED AIR WAR**

While 1950s Hollywood debated, questioned, and doubted the Korean War, South Korean war films from the same period faced intense censorship from the authoritarian government of Syngman Rhee. Films made in the immediate postwar period, known as South Korean cinema’s Golden Age, were subject to strict laws in terms of how they represented the origins, conduct, and lessons of the war. In an overview of the period, Daniel Martin highlights the fact that Golden Age war films “are typically ideologically unambiguous and present a passionate indictment of the Communist regime of North Korea.”

Through the Motion Picture Act of 1962, “which imposed even greater restrictions on films than a decade earlier,” filmmaking came under the direct control of the military government of Park Chung-hee. This does not necessarily mean that Golden Age films are flatly jingoistic, devoid of semiotic complexity or ideological nuance. For example, two important films from this era, *The Hand of Destiny* (Han Hyung-mo, 1954) and *Piagol* (Lee Kang-cheon, 1955), demonize North Korean communists yet offer sympathetic representations of individual North Korean characters. Through a study of *Red Muffler*, David Scott Diffrient finds that, “[g]iven its ideological complexities, the war film genre – so often disparaged as a throwback to a politically repressive era – should not be dismissed as mere propaganda. Rather, these films

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56 Ibid., 100.

57 The Korean Film Archive has made a number of Golden Age Korean War films available with English subtitles on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/user/KoreanFilm](https://www.youtube.com/user/KoreanFilm).
constitute a mode of imperfect assimilation that can be interpreted as a form of cultural resistance.”

Discrete moments of resistance in Golden Age films complicated the smooth transmission of anticommunism and containment ideology instituted by the US through economic and military support for the governments of Syngman Rhee and Park Chung-hee. South Korean cinema, materially supported with film equipment donated by the US, was nevertheless a relatively stable ideological and institutional front during this early phase of the Cold War. With political liberalization in South Korea in the 1990s, the result of large-scale pro-democracy movements of the late 1970s and 1980s that ended three decades of US-backed military dictatorship, the Korean War became the “most important historical event on screen.”

Over the past twenty-five years, South Korean cinema has generated compelling counter-memories of the Korean War for which there are no Hollywood counterparts, thus making historically synchronous comparative analysis impossible. Korean New Wave cinema emerged in the context of the democracy movement and political liberalization, which is reflected in war films such as Nambugun (Chung Ji-young, 1990), Silver Stallion (Chang Kil-su, 1991), To the Starry Island (Park Kwang-su, 1994), and The Taebaek Mountains (Im Kwon-taek, 1994), which depart from official, state-instituted narratives of the Korean War that begin with a single, unquestioned, and unquestionable cause of the war: North Korea’s invasion of South Korea on 25 June 1950. This fundamentalist etiology is deconstructed in New Wave films that locate the partial origins of the war in civil conflicts, such as those between landlords and farmers, after liberation from Japan. Isolde Standish argues that New Wave films “work to mitigate entrenched fears of North Korea as a threat through images of the Korean people as a whole—both North and South—as victims of foreign imperialistic policies and their own governments.”

Welcome to Dongmakgol can be understood as an extension of these early New Wave films, yet the film is much more radical in its imagining of an anti-imperialist insurgency, a “North–South Joint Force.” As in Joint Security Area (Park Chan-wook, 2000) and The Front Line (Jang Hoon, 2011), Welcome to Dongmakgol valorizes an antiwar theme that would never appear in a Hollywood Korean War film—the enemy as comrade—not to

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mention desertion and fragging. The recoding of North Korean soldiers from enemies to friends and brothers works to overcome what Paik Nak-chung terms the “division mentality” that is both a product of and a support for the unending Korean War and division of the peninsula.

War films reflect the time in which they were made, and *Welcome to Dongmakgol* is clearly presentist in its representation of the Korean War, set as much during the hopeful period of the Sunshine Policy (1998–2007), which promoted engagement with North Korea as symbolized by the 2000 Inter-Korean Summit meetings between South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and the North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, as in 1950, shortly after the Incheon Landing. While the temporal setting is exact, the spatial setting is abstract, as this magical mountain village could be located anywhere on the peninsula, which is to say it is no-place, a utopia. When a motley crew of soldiers from North and South Korea get separated from their platoons, guidance and protection offered by the mountain spirit Yeo-il (Kang Hye-jung) brings them to the village. As lantern statues glow through the trees surrounding the village, bearing as much of a resemblance to the forest spirits in *Princess Mononoke* (Hayao Miyazake, 1997) or to Halloween pumpkins as to any Korean folk artifact, Dongmakgol appears strange and otherworldly.

Civil war erupts in the center of the village and the soldiers spend the night pointing their weapons at each other with the villagers caught in the middle, an allusion to the scene in *Nambugun* in which a boy and his dog wander into the middle of a field, caught between communist partisans on one side and the South Korean Army on the other. The standoff continues to the absurd point where soldiers start to nod off while the villagers get bored and begin to go about their daily routines, a fitting allegory of Inter-Korean relations in the present. Yeo-il pulls the pin on the grenade held by the North Korean soldier Taek-gi (Ryu Deok-hwan), thinking it is a ring. Taek-gi holds the pin-less grenade, but when he begins to doze off, he drops it. A South Korean soldier, Pyo (Shin Ha-kyun), jumps on it, ostensibly to protect the villagers, but in reality he is a deserter who wants to commit suicide because earlier in the war he was ordered to blow up a bridge full of

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41 In the final episode of *M*A*S*H*, “Goodbye, Farewell and Amen,” Emerson Winchester (David Ogden Stiers) forms a bond with a group of Chinese musicians who surrender shortly before the ceasefire, an ideologically safe form of fraternization.


43 At the 2005 Korean Film Awards, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* won Best Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Music, and Best New Director. While enormously popular when it was released in South Korea, there is no in-depth anglophone scholarship on this film.

44 There is a real village named Dongmakgol in the central part of South Korea, and Dongmakgol valley is located near Suraksan, north of Seoul.
refugees, an allusion to the bombing of the Hangang Bridge by South Korean forces as they were retreating south on 28 June 1950.

When the grenade appears to be a dud, Pyo tosses it into a food storage shed, where it detonates, and the raw corn stored inside cooks and explodes into a strange shower of popcorn that floats gently down over the villagers and soldiers as they look around in wonder. After this startling, discontinuous outburst of magic realism in the narrative, soldiers from opposing sides of the 38th parallel begin the process of being absorbed into the mountain community through their labor, as they intend to restore the agricultural surplus they destroyed. This process of absorption involves transformation at the level of work, as guns are replaced with agricultural tools; at the level of emotion, as anger and violence dissolve into laughter and intimacy; and at the sartorial level, as their national uniforms are replaced by farmer’s clothing. The film also undergoes a transformation, from tense civil war drama to pastoral comedy/male-bonding melodrama. This mixing of genres looks back to Golden Age war films that, as Diffrient argues, “treat the subject of the Korean War with sensitivity to the kind of genre-mixing, textual interplay, and self-reflexivity rarely witnessed in Hollywood war films.”

Genre-mixing in Welcome to Dongmakgol is facilitated by the visually arresting use of computer-generated graphics (CGI). Whereas the use of CGI in films like Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War (Kang Je-gyu, 2004) and The Front Line intensifies the battlefield realism so that, as Mark Morris puts it, the “spectacle of war is delivered with a visceral impact,” a normative expectation of the war film genre, Welcome to Dongmakgol deploys CGI to generate the unexpected, as with the popcorn or the capture of a wild boar, scenes which precipitate a sense of collectivity amongst enemy combatants.

Through their pilgrimage to Dongmakgol, soldiers from North and South Korea, along with the downed US Navy pilot Smith (Steve Taschler), are demobilized and demasculinized as soldiers and rehumanized through expressions of compassion and cooperation. They become different subjects on the mountain, where divisions between North and South, communist and capitalist, friend and enemy, dissolve into moments of working, playing, eating, drinking, and defecating with each other. This idealized representation of the mountain as a space of resistance and reconciliation appeared at the high point of the Sunshine Policy. Yet Welcome to Dongmakgol does not simply reproduce the liberal tenets of the Sunshine Policy, which projected

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45 Diffrient, “Han’guk Heroism,” 152.
North Korea as an Other that needed to be reformed by the “beauty of market reform and globalization,” an asymmetry also projected by the “Statue of Brothers” at the entrance to the War Memorial of Korea in Seoul, where an older and much taller South Korean officer embraces his younger brother, a North Korean soldier. Familiar border-crossing filmic tropes are here reversed as the South Korean Sang Sang (Seo Jae-kyung) refers to the North Korean Young-hee (Im Ha-ryung) as hyung or older brother, and both Commander Rhee (Jung Jae-yung) and Taek-gi appear to be in the process of finding romance south of the 38th parallel. From Piagol to Shiri (Kang Je-gyu, 1999), cross-border romance in South Korean cinema typically features a gendered geopolitical power relation that matches a South Korean man with a North Korean woman.

Welcome to Dongmakgol concludes as the soldiers-turned-peasants remobilize, a repetition with a difference when they form an anti-imperialist insurgency, a North–South Joint Force, in order to protect Dongmakgol from a UNC bombing mission that has defined the village as a military target. Following Theodore Hughes’s study of Taegukgi, Welcome to Dongmakgol can be seen to emerge out of a democracy movement that was critical of the governments of both South Korea and the US. Hughes further argues that Taegukgi distances itself from the political affiliations of the democracy movement, from “any imagining of alternatives associated with the left or North Korea.” This statement needs to be qualified in relation to Welcome to Dongmakgol, which clearly does not look to North Korea as a model of liberation, yet in the imagining of a peasant insurgency, the film does gesture toward a left genre that should be added to the vertiginous mix of genres already in play: Third Cinema or the cinema of decolonization. Given the fact that Third Cinema was founded in militant opposition to Hollywood and the commodification of film as entertainment, and that Welcome to Dongmakgol is the product of what Hughes terms “Planet Hallyuwood,” this would appear to be an impossible combination. Given the fact that South Korea is both a capitalist powerhouse and regional hegemon, and yet

49 The Korean word hallyu, or “Korean wave,” refers to the global popularity of South Korean films, television dramas, and pop music that began in the 1990s. Hughes argues, “The notion of a Planet Hallyuwood as a fusing of Hallyu and Hollywood allows us to look at the ways in which the South Korean film industry is linked to global markets and transnational spectators, as well as to the cross-cultural circulation of images, genres, and narrative techniques. At the same time, the term Hallyuwood enables a consideration of the relations between South Korean and U.S. cultural production.” Hughes, 197.
exists in neocolonial subordination to the United States, which remains in operational control of the South Korean military and while possessing eighty-three military bases on the peninsula, this contradictory articulation makes sense. The politics of this fiercely melodramatic, anti-imperialist blockbuster can be discerned in part by the fact that the film offers a Manichean understanding of the Korean War in which the UNC, and not North Korea or China, is portrayed as evil, most viscerally when a UNC soldier savagely slams the gentle, white-haired village elder’s head into a rock. For Kuan-Hsing Chen, cultural decolonization works to “deconstruct, decenter, and disarticulate the colonial cultural imaginary, and to reconstruct and rearticulate new imaginations and discover a more democratic future direction.” Welcome to Dongmakgol deconstructs Cold War binaries while at the same time working to imagine a new historical agent, a North–South Joint Force.

Within this hyper-mixing of genres, the film includes a dialogical situation that points both to the past and to the period in which the film was released. In the film, UNC commanders believe there is an anti-aircraft base in the area where Dongmakgol is located. Bombing the area is therefore viewed as a military necessity; Dongmakgol is a military target, not a village. As the mission is being planned, a Korean American official protests that the presence of an enemy base is not a fact but an assumption and they should investigate further because of the possibility of civilian casualties. Welcome to Dongmakgol introduced the issue of civilian casualties to South Korean audiences in the same year that the TRCK began its investigations. Because the TRCK was a product of compromise between conservatives and progressives, it had no legal authority when requesting documents from state institutions such as the Korean Central Intelligence Association (KCIA), the Bureau of Police, or the Ministry of Defense. “Only the political will of the president and the strong support of civil society,” Kim Dong-choon reports, “could force cooperation from these oppressive institutions.” Welcome to Dongmakgol made this melodramatic pedagogical intervention in civil society just as the TRCK was struggling to gain national popular support for its mandate.

Military dictatorship in South Korea used the National Security Law (NSL) and KCIA to suppress truths and silence dissent in the postwar period, thus preventing scholars from investigating and circulating interpretations of the Korean War that went against a dominant national narrative that viewed

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51 Kuan-Hsing Chen, Asia as Method (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 112.
53 Ibid., 35.
North Korea as the evil aggressor, South Korea as the victim, and the US the heroic savior. Research that drew attention to the extremely high civilian casualty rate, that explored the origins of the war in civil conflicts and border skirmishes between 1945 and 1950, or that was critical of US military presence on the peninsula, was criminalized. Scholars and ordinary civilians alike were thus prevented from asking a fundamental question: what happened during the war? In the 1990s, some uncomfortable answers to that question began to surface. While the mass killing of North Korean civilians could be relatively easily explained away and forgotten as collateral damage, politicians and military commanders in the US and South Korea had a harder time explaining the mass killing by the US military of South Korean civilians, the people they were supposed to be saving. No one in power wanted to hear stories about the fact that “throughout the Korean War far more people took refuge from U.S. bombing than from the KPA troops streaming south. Indiscriminate bombing by the U.S. Air Force was one of the things that terrified South Koreans the most after war broke out.”

On 30 September 1999, the Associated Press (AP) published a long report on a massacre at No Gun Ri, which they referred to as “Korea’s My Lai,” a “temporally out-of-joint reference that pointed to Nogun-ri’s belated visibility,” as Christine Hong put it. The AP report included interviews with a dozen former army soldiers who corroborated the testimony of the survivors. The report led to an official investigation by the US Defense Department, which in 2001 concluded that killings did occur, but were a “tragedy inherent to war.” President Bill Clinton expressed regret over the killings, but did not offer an apology to the victim’s families or survivors. Due to conflicts between survivors’ testimony and the official US report, the TRCK interviewed surviving witnesses and put together this narrative of events:

On July 25th, 1950, Korean villagers were forced by U.S. soldiers to evacuate their homes and move south. The next day, July 26, the villagers continued south along the road. When the villagers reached the vicinity of No Gun Ri, the soldiers stopped them at a roadblock and ordered the group onto the railroad tracks, where the soldiers searched them and their personal belongings. Although the soldiers found no prohibited items (such as weapons or other military contraband), the soldiers ordered an air attack upon the villagers via radio communications with U.S. aircraft. Shortly afterwards, planes flew over and dropped bombs and fired machine guns, killing approximately one hundred villagers on the railroad tracks. Those villagers

54 Kim, *The Unending Korean War*, 73.
who survived sought protection in a small culvert underneath the railroad tracks. The U.S. soldiers drove the villagers out of the culvert and into double tunnels nearby. The U.S. soldiers then fired into both ends of the tunnels over a period of four days (July 26–29, 1950), resulting in approximately 300 additional deaths.\(^{57}\)

Inspired by the AP investigation, *A Little Pond* director Lee Saang-woo and producer Lee Woo-jung also spent four years interviewing the survivors of No Gun Ri. Because of its controversial subject matter, *A Little Pond* was considered “unsellable,” and thus had difficulty attracting investment. In order for the film to be produced, many of the cast and crew donated their services and brought along family members to serve as extras, creating a collective sensibility that is reflected in the film.\(^{58}\)

The fictional farmers and their families go about their daily lives: playing, fighting, gossiping, eating, and drinking. They are often filmed from a stationary position across a middle distance, from above or from behind. The static camera and abundance of mid-shots, which typically connote a sense of objectivity, create the impression that the villagers are being looked at, that the viewer is a partial outsider to the action, thus limiting the possibility for identification. This limit is further emphasized by the fact that the villagers are not individualized, but are resolutely presented as a collective. Famous actors Moon Seung-keun, Moon So-ri, Kang Shin-il, Kim Roe-ha, Song Kang-ho, and Yu Hae-jin are not isolated, their stories and perspectives are not focalized, and we are given almost no background information on individual characters. There are no close-ups of individual characters, rather they are always framed within a social group: children playing, men drinking, families arguing, villagers debating. The bombing and strafing sequences capture the terror and chaos, the death and destruction, that the villagers experienced over those four days, but do not have the high production value or hyper-realism that audiences conditioned by war films like *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) have come to expect.\(^{59}\) Slightly shaky handheld camera shooting creates the impression that the viewer is observing the destruction from the perspective of an embedded war reporter. The shot remains fixed on the

\(^{57}\) Quoted in ibid., 68. Hanley, one of the original AP reporters, reveals that after the release of the official 2001 report, “it has emerged that the U.S. Army investigators withheld from the Korean counterparts and excluded from their own report critically important archival documents, including a U.S. ambassadorial communication reporting that the Army, before the No Gun Ri killings, had adopted a policy of firing on approaching refugees; many more unit-level documents ordering the shooting of refugees; and U.S. Air Force pilots’ reports in 1950 saying they were ordered to strafe ‘people in white,’ Korean civilians.” Ibid., 70–71.


\(^{59}\) On hyperrealism in war cinema see Chapman, *War and Film*, 17–34.
scene of destruction as the survivors run away from the camera. The restricted budget obviously played a role in what kind of shots could be filmed.

*A Little Pond* works to give voices to those whose stories have been actively silenced by the South Korean government, and ignored in the United States. Like *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, *A Little Pond* is a history of the present, of the impact of unending war on contemporary South Korean society. In the postwar period, the victim-survivors of massacres who spoke out against the government were discriminated against: their property was confiscated, educational and job opportunities were closed, and they were labeled “commies” in order prevent others from speaking out:

The stigmatization of the family members as “second-class citizens” or “untouchables” became a cautionary tale for others, warning them of the consequences of acting against the government. This situation reveals the underlying brutality of Korean society under the US military-backed dictatorship.\(^6\)

When the TRCK was formed in 2005 to investigate civilian massacres, the major newspapers in South Korea—*Chosun Ilbo*, *Donga Ilbo*, and *Jungang Ilbo*—“were uniformly hostile and provided little coverage except to point out Commission errors.”\(^6\) Television stations such as KBS and MBC, on the other hand, were favorable to the commission during the Roh Moo-hyun presidency (2003–8). Yet with the election of Lee Myung-bak in 2008, television stations stopped covering the work of the commission. Only the progressive newspapers *Hankyoreh* and *Kyunghyang Daily* continued to support the commission’s work. By 2010, investigations were concluded despite the fact that many cases “involving US bombing of civilians and other atrocities remain to be investigated and resolved.”\(^6\)

The work of the TRCK may have stopped, but it does not have to end. Considering the study and critique of civilian massacres have played a constitutive role in the evolution of American studies from the 1960s to the present, there are intellectual and activist traditions in the US within which the circulation of this work can and should be expanded. Richard Drinnon’s *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Empire-Building and Indian-Hating* (1980) examines continuities between the massacre of Native Americans at Wounded Knee, Filipinos at Balangiga, and Vietnamese at My Lai, yet omits any discussion of atrocities committed during the Korean War. This omission makes sense given the fact the AP story on the No Gun Ri massacre appeared nineteen years after the publication of Drinnon’s book, and four years after the publication of *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. US-backed military

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\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Ibid.
dictatorship in South Korea has had a direct impact on the field of American studies, from the revisionist work of the 1960s through the New Americanists of the 1980s, by making oppositional narratives and countermemories of the Korean War unavailable to scholars engaged in critiques of US colonialism and imperialism in Asia and the Pacific. Korea and the Korean War have been left out of recent anthologies of transnational and postcolonial American studies, which means that these fields continue to be complicit in the forgetting of the unending Korean War.

ON THE TEMPORALITY OF UNENDING WAR

In this paper, I have worked to foster tension between films from different moments in the unending Korean War. The Bridges at Toko-Ri, which appeared immediately after the ceasefire, represents the Korean War as a limited war, which has been the dominant understanding of the war in the US context for the past sixty-five years. The film attaches the desultory mood fostered by limited war to a triumphant display of US air power, which is also represented as limited, as a precise air interdiction campaign restricted to transportation, communication, and supply lines, which has been the dominant understanding of the air war in the US context for the past sixty-five years – if it is acknowledged at all.\(^{63}\) Conway-Lanz concludes, “This picture of a discriminate use of air power in Korea has survived in many historical treatments of the war including the official Air Force history and a number of popular military histories and cursory scholarly accounts of the air war in Korea.”\(^{64}\)

Welcome to Dongmakgol appeared fifty years after The Bridges at Toko-Ri, during the hopeful period of the Sunshine Policy in which some progress toward reconciliation between the Koreas was made. The transtemporal turn in this paper is necessitated by the fact that there are no significant contemporary Korean War films in the US and by the fact that a film like Welcome to Dongmakgol could not have been made before the South Korean democracy movement put an end to military dictatorship, creating the terrain on which critical cultural analyses of the Korean War could be conducted. Welcome to Dongmakgol, like A Little Pond, is deliberate in its effort to educate audiences about the killing of noncombatants by the United States as a

\(^{63}\) Journalist David Halberstam’s bestselling history of the Korean War, The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War (New York: Hyperion, 2007), includes only passing reference to the air war and two brief references to napalm. Over the course of seven hundred engaging and carefully researched pages, Halberstam includes no information about any of the following subjects: civilian casualties, indiscriminate bombing, No Gun Ri, or scorched-earth policy.

\(^{64}\) Conway-Lanz, “The Ethics of Bombing Civilians,” 11.
result of the air war. The friction that results from viewing *Welcome to Dongmakgol* against the grain of *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* provides one starting point, one potential site of cosmopolitan detachment, from which students and scholars working in American studies can begin to critically apprehend the meaning or meanings of the unending Korean War. A contrapuntal relationship structures the cinematic imaginaries of *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* and *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, as the latter’s depiction of unlimited air war provides a counterpoint to the former’s depiction of limited air war. From the perspective of ordinary Korean civilians on the ground, the air war cannot be represented or remembered as limited; it was total.

A nonsynchronous comparative framing of films that are thematically connected by the air war encourages viewers to rethink the temporal demarcations through which war is conventionally narrated. At the level of common sense, the time of war is typically understood in terms of clearly marked units: before, during, after. Yet in historical scholarship on war, these distinctions are often subject to scrutiny, debate, and revision, which means they are discursive—ideological distinctions, not objective categories. Historians are not the only ones who question the temporal markers through which war is interpreted and narrated. Cultural texts, such as literature and film, also offer conflicting ways of seeing and thinking about the duration of war. By foregrounding the civilian casualties that resulted from the air war, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* and *A Little Pond* commemorate and comment on the violent erasure of these casualties from public memory in South Korea in the decades after the ceasefire, violence which was justified by a Cold War structure in which any critique of South Korean or US conduct during the war was branded communist and therefore smothered. By linking past and present violence, these films create opportunities for critical detachment from a hegemonic historical narrative in which the Korean War is thought to have only endured for a relatively brief three-year period.

In *War-Time*, Mary L. Dudziak observes that “a set of ideas about time are embedded in the way we think about war. In particular, we tend to assume that wartime is always followed by peacetime, and therefore that an essential aspect of wartime is that it is temporary.” The present progressive tense of unending war draws explicit attention to the fact, too easily forgotten, that there has been no *after*, no peacetime in Korea. While a linear sense of progressive time captures the dramatic changes in terms of politics and economy in South Korea, a recursive sense of perpetual wartime confronts the repetitive Cold War animosities that emerge from the fact that Korea remains divided

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along the most heavily militarized border in the world. The trauma of territorial division is a major index of unending war and a dominant theme in South Korean war films from the 1950s to the present. From The Hand of Destiny to the blockbuster Shiri, and up to the recent blockbuster Ode to My Father (Yoon Je-kyun, 2014), the militarized division of the Korean peninsula has been repeatedly mourned and deepened, critiqued and solidified, transgressed and stabilized. In Welcome to Dongmakgol, the overcoming of division is both joyously hoped for and tragically shut down. From 1950 onwards, South Korean cinema has been a cinema of wartime, a cinema of unending war.

The absence of contemporary Korean War films in the US has created a void that is currently being filled with revisionist fantasies of victory. In a speech at the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the ceasefire, former President Barack Obama asserted that US troops and their allies won the war:

But here, today, we can say with confidence that war was no tie. Korea was a victory. When 50 million South Koreans live in freedom – a vibrant democracy, one of the world’s most dynamic economies, in stark contrast to the repression and poverty of the North – that’s a victory; that’s your legacy.66

One of the most troubling aspects of this triumphalist narrative is that it views the militarized division of the Korean peninsula as a victory. In declaring victory before the signing of a peace agreement that would officially end the Korean War and prepare the ground for reconciliation between the Koreas, President Obama ratified a state of perpetual, unending war in which the question of peacetime in Northeast Asia was rendered unthinkable. Every year, several hundred elderly South Koreans are allowed to cross into North Korea for excruciatingly brief, tear-drenched family reunions. One wonders if the former President could look these long-suffering grandmothers and grandfathers in the eye and tell them that the Korean War, that the militarized division of the peninsula, was a victory.

Another major index of unending war is the deepening militarization of both North and South Korea. In the summer of 2016, the Pentagon agreed to equip South Korea with the controversial Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system, a decision that immediately provoked a strong backlash by China, apocalyptic warnings from North Korea, a letter of opposition written in blood by Kim Hang-kon, the county governor of Seongju where the system was to be deployed, and large anti-THAAD demonstrations on the streets of Seoul. Also in the summer of 2016, North

Korea conducted more nuclear tests and test launches of the Musudan intermediate-range missile, which elicited the usual calls in the US for tougher sanctions and threats of preemptive strikes. And yet, in addition to the predictable responses to North Korean “provocations,” an increasing number of editorials have begun to express frustration with the policy of “strategic patience,” of waiting for North Korea to denuclearize before establishing diplomatic relations, and that something new needs to be tried.67

“Part of what we do as intellectuals is not only to define the situation,” Edward Said maintains, “but also to discern the possibilities for active intervention.”68 This is a moment of intense danger, made all the more dangerous by the recent US presidential election, in which the cycle of North Korean nuclear tests, US threats of preemptive strikes, and North Korean threats of retaliatory strikes against Seoul, will turn into all-out war. An emergent peace movement has been working to break this cycle by educating the American public about the repercussions of the fact that the Korean War is not over, and that a peace agreement, while obviously not a magic bullet, would be a step in the right direction. The comparative framing of Korean War films from the two national cinemas, and from different periods, opens a space of pedagogical intervention, of cosmopolitan detachment in a time of war, which can foster greater interest in, and possibilities for, diplomacy, reconciliation, and a demilitarized peace in which unending war has become a thing of the past.

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