

FICTIONS OF AN IDENTITY

Female figures and drifts in the New Korean Cinema

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〈Abstract〉

Fictions constitute narratives that represent an exercise of identity construction, which leads us to the fact of understanding identity as a constant construction in discourse. In this sense, we understand that the experiences of 'Korean women' have changed as a product of modernization regarding the senses and meanings that are articulated in filmic fiction territories. With this in mind, first we develop a brief review that defines the imaginary cinematographic of the *New Korean Cinema*. Then, we display a thematic and

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analytical lecture of the selected films attending the narrative interests and ways of representing regarding the experiences of women, which are part of a complex social process that tends to pluralism and cultural diversity. We reflect upon 'women of fiction' – from a discursive and symbolic conception of the subjects – leading us to the 'historical woman', and inviting us to (re)think the constitution of female identity in Korea from the particularity that it assumes in the field of the cinematographic representation.

Key words : Korea, women, cinema

1. Introduction

The objective of this article is to analyze and interpret the female figures and drifts regarding film fiction as a way of understanding certain aspects of the Korean society and culture, in the context of adaptation to modernity where interaction with cultural traditions has been (and remains) a constant. Specifically, we analyze representations of the female subject in the *New Korean Cinema* (NKC) to describe the contemporary female identity in relation to family and other social worlds. In this regard, it seeks to research the experiences of women as a contribution to the study of female identity in Korea immersed in the field of cinematographic representation.

We live in a time where women in the Korean society are achieving different positions and changing their roles and functions as a result of the modernization process, which involves a set of economic, political and cultural transformations that have had a great impact in lifestyle and in social and gender relations. By modernization we mean a process that is, at the same time, a social and an ideological one characterized by an emphasis on the experiences of industrialization, urbanization, secularization, bureaucratization,

the construction of citizenship and, above all, the individualization of the subject (Ortiz, 2000). In this sense, modernity is the emergence of a particular kind of identity and subjectivity. Thus, the concern for the search and manifestation of differentiated personal identities is exacerbated, being a symptomatic sign of modernity the proliferation of distinctive lifestyles (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1993).¹⁾ This generates several effects regarding the experiences of 'Korean women' in both public (participation in education, in the labor market and in the world of politics and citizen insertion) and in the private sphere (family, parentage relationships, marriage, motherhood, divorce, etc.). Due to these profound and accelerated socio-cultural changes several 'new' questions about identities have emerged.

Films are a representation of the social world and its historical mutations. They use a specific language and a logic of their own and, by doing so, they provide struggling communities of meaning, either from a hegemonic or counter-hegemonic worldview (Iadevito y Zambrini, 2008). Therefore, to analyze the experiences of the 'Korean women' we selected the following films of NKC: *A Good Lawyer's Wife*, by Im Sang-soo (2003); *My Mother, The Mermaid*, by Park Heung-Sik (2004) and *Family Ties*, by Kim Tae-young (2006).

We establish the NKC as the universe of our sources of analysis (films) for the following reasons: a) these types of films have emerged as a strong artistic and cultural expression of the process of adaptation towards South Korean modernity (Cueto, 2004); b) due to the sustained presence and increased circulation of Korean cinema worldwide (and in the City of Buenos Aires)

1) We will not go into the specific debate about modernity in Asia because this would force us to usher in a historical discussion that goes far beyond the scope of this article, however it is important to note that objections should be raised when the western conception of modernity is used acritically for the Korean case.

during the last decade (Bavoleo e Iadevito, 2010); c) because we seek to create a dialogue between recent film representations, social imaginary and gender identities (Iadevito, 2011).

The films were selected for the following reasons: a) they offer the possibility of an hermeneutic that takes into account the assumptions of cultural and ideological Korean current social context; b) they allow an approach to family and social worlds that have been established as part of the modernization, and the 'new family models' for the stories that tell ; c) they have great presence and prominence of female characters, and in this we read a trace of the NKC directors; d) the directors share certain generational, political and esthetical assumptions, such as the belonging to the generation of the nineties, the direction of more than one commercial film, the development of auteur content that claims an artistic profile, the reivindication of social and cultural rights, but also film making as an industry of entertainment alternative to *avant garde* productions, seen as elitist.

Moreover, the methodological decision to inquire into the modes of representation of women from male hegemonic cultural vision led us to choose men directors of the NKC that belong to the urban middle class of South Korean society. This is not a minor aspect, because these directors represent certain experiences of women who belong to a different social class of their own. Without considering gender or class relationships as a determinant aspect of how alterity is represented, we consider relevant the idea of Pierre Bourdieu (2000) about the 'double distance' which is built on the relationships between classes and genders. The directors not only narrate another gender, but also another class (or even another social world like peasantry). These 'filters' partially produce the approach and the process of interpretation: characters and narratives are constructed from their preconceptions and their cosmology.

The assumptions that functioned as guides of these ideas are: a) that cinema

sets up a space of signification and opens ideological dimensions from where it is possible to observe the ways in which the identity and gender marks establish the cultural network of a society; b) roles and functions of the 'Korean women' have been altered due to a context of social change, setting up a different type of female identity according to the values of modernity; c) actuality is not only formed by what is contemporary, but also by the continuities and effects of a cultural heritage.

We formulated some questions about the issue we analyze up to here: how are the experiences of women represented in films?, Do films reinforce or refute traditional gender and identity stereotypes?. Does the film fiction continue showing women strictly bonded to a sensitive, private and intimate world or, by the contrary, does it collaborate with the construction and projection of changes in the different scenarios and roles that women occupy in current Korean society?.

We analyze the experiences of 'women'²⁾ in fiction films based on the recognition of the fluid relationship between cinema and society, expressed in different ways and during historical changes (Sorlín, 1995). The film does not replace reality but represents and constructs it. From this approach the cinematic discourse is recognized as the bearer of a culture that is projected through codes and signifying practices playing and organizing a system of values. In this transaction, the cinema is invariably an ideological device (De Lauretis, 2001; Hall, 2000; Torres, 2006). In that sense, in this paper we will study the connection between certain terms such as *(filmic) representation*, *gender* and *(female) identity* trying to examine what role words and images play in the social and subjective construction in relation to the female subject and its universe of meaning (Bourdieu, 1987; Colaizzi, 2006).

2) We consider that the category 'woman' is crossed by historical relations of power and, in consequence, its configurations are provisional, open and contingent

In this framework certain theoretical concepts from the field of Cultural Theory and gender studies became relevant being the sociological perspective responsible for articulating them.³⁾ The notion of film representation that we refer to, is understood here under the theoretical assumptions defined by post-structuralism, in its significant dimension (Austin, 1990 [1962]; Barthes, 1987). From this point of view, the representation of the events is only possible once it is symbolized (White, 1992), and the identity is seen as inseparable from the narration – necessarily fictional – of the subject and their experiences (Ricoeur, 1991). The concept of *identity* is defined as a discursive formation that creates subject positions using certain rules and ways of enunciation, that express positions determined by history and tradition as well as constant (re)configurations (Arfuch, 2002; Hall, 1996). We incorporate the concept *gender* since it enables a perspective of an analysis where ‘the feminine’ and the ‘masculine’ are defined as a mutual, historical and cultural relationship crossed by power. The gender relations are also articulated with other social relations such as class, ethnicity, age, sexual preference and religion from which the identity of the subject is formed (Scott, 1990; Lamas, 1995; De Lauretis, 1992; 2000).

The treatment of the filmic *corpus* is based on a narrative methodological strategy⁴⁾ that allows us to analyze our object of study (*the filmic representations of the experiences of Korean women*) seen as an *other* because of the different

3) In the Argentine academic field it is common the use of epistemological and theoretical eurocentric frameworks that, many times, are inaccurate, incomplete or obsolete to understand the Asian world. However, these patterns of thought are legitimate because they have institutional support. The scientific community chooses them to develop research. This is why they are a social, cultural and symbolic capital (also academic) which is used to systematize and analyze both primary and secondary sources (Bourdieu, 2003). We intend to demonstrate the importance of developing a theoretical, reflexive and critical view of Asia from the Latin American thought and experience to incorporate the theories and hermeneutics from which these societies and others decipher and interpret the world (Iadevito, 2006).

4) We have neglected the structural and technical analysis, and the semiotics of the moving images since they involve working with other epistemologies and methods.

positions of enunciation and not so much due to the geographical and cultural distance. This means, that this type of analysis points out the inflections present in the way characters, actions and events are told and created. The films are analyzed based on certain dimensions that shape female identity: i) changes in family and gender roles; ii) female attitudes to marriage; iii) motherhood; iv) female participation in the public sphere; among other.

Before beginning this journey it is necessary to repair on the following points, which in some way, defines the possibilities and limits of this work paper.

First of all, it's sociological analysis focused on the ideological level through the narrative approach of the representations of women experiences in films, excluding other possible approximations based on formal and/or content readings. Second, certain dimensions of representations and narrations of women experiences are analyzed, which excludes other important issues present in the selected fictions. Third, we focused on certain scenes and segments considering them significant for a characterization of 'women of fiction' leaving aside other aspects that could also result substantial in analytical terms. Fourth, the selected materials are specific products inside an enormous variety of film productions, which prevents proposing general conclusions. Fifth and final point, the theoretical categories of *representation*, *gender* and *identity* are a set of analytical tools, among others, for the treatment of filmic fiction.

2. A 'new' cinematographic imaginary

In terms of themes and genres the *New Korean Cinema* delivers a broad and diverse cinematography, and within these filmic expression lays a multiplicity of creators with common and opposite interests.

Film critics agree that the rising of Korean cinema is due to the combination and mixture of genres, never seen in other films in the world. This clearly exposes what Bajtín (2005 [1988]) understands by discursive genres: a set of principles relatively stable that share certain characteristics, but also are constitutively hybrid, heterogeneous.

For example, within the category 'film author' we can mention directors such as Kim Ki-duk and Hong Sang-soo, with an original style based on an essentialist point of view of the world; the realist Lee Chang-dong, who expresses humanism and social protest in a series of sophisticated films; the filmmaker and sociologist Im Sang-soo, with his memorable productions that offer a personal interpretation of modern Korean society. However, there are also new films that provide the stepping stone to the so-called *third option*, where different films that converge belong to young directors that question classic genres and commercial films with a blunt, transgressor and personal imprint speech. Some important directors that stand out in this aspect are Park Chan-wook, Bong Joon-ho, Jang Jun-hwan, Kim Ji-un, Kim Jee-won, Lee Myung-se Yu Seung-wan, among others.⁵⁾

A Good Lawyer's Wife (2003), *My Mother*, *The Mermaid* (2004) and *Family Ties* (2006) fall into this new cinematic expression, and their directors are filmmakers who are part of the 'film author' category with productions that have a commercial circulation and massive reach. In addition, these creators

5) These are some of the authors about Korean film history that have been consulted: Cueto, 2004; Doherty (1984); Elena (2004); Lee (2000).

share the condition of being witnesses of the changes that the South Korean society has been experimenting since the second half of the XX century, which makes them have the same worldview. Their life experiences are reflected directly in their cinematographic productions, which are part of a context of changes in national cinema related with institutional aspects (appearance of school films and a new way of production), formal aspects (technical progress, a more elaborated use of sound, imperfections as a resource, casting systems, among others) and, mainly, thematics closely linked to emergent social scenarios and situations in the context of western modernization (Chi y Stringer, 2005).

In this renewed cinematographic context, women representation suffered a significant transformation. Films start showing/creating a critic view of the traditional female stereotype that alluded women to be dependent and submissive and, instead, tend to represent women in more active and decision making roles. This means, while in classic filmic productions, representations and narratives would show what being a woman meant according to the traditional and Confucian precepts of Korean society,⁶⁾ in recent filmic productions, more specifically in those of the NKC, the ways of representing and narrating relationships, question the essence of what is 'feminine' and what is 'masculine'. Gradually they begin trespassing the limit of what has not been named, put into a topic or visualized, emphasizing visions that replenishes the *female subject* as part of a complex web of inter-subjective relations (Lee Hyae-kyoung, 2001).

As sustained by Moon Jae-cheol (2006) contemporary Korean cinema

6) We refer to the films during the 1945-1970 period where women responded to categories such as 'virtuous women' (mother, daughter, wife, widow), 'bad women' (those that enjoy the pleasures of life, also denominated *femme fatale*) and 'prostitute-women' (victim of destiny and prisoners of their own misery). In modern cinema the female and gender stereotypes have stayed within these standards.

overcame the radical innovation that meant the *New Wave* in the 80's. The NKC has been able to adapt to the needs and taste of the international public by combining the artistic style with what is popular, and elements from the local and global scenery (Elena, 2004). Directors of these types of films have been admitted in the commercial circuit, not just because of an economic interest. Also none of the filmmakers have made artistic films in a traditional author cinema sense. Therefore, it is said that the work of the new generation of filmmakers dissolve the limits between commercial cinema and author film, and outlines, in this way, a trend within the South Korean cinematographic field that provides an original and critical view which is not related with dismantling hegemonic cinema ingrained in political conventions of the time.

3. Reading the New Korean Cinema: interests and ways of representation in film narratives

The analysis of cinema proposed by Im Sang-soo, Park Heung-sik and Kim Tae-young conceive, as a starting point, that the narrative interests of these directors are drifts of the social-cultural and filmic context that are marked in their productions.⁷⁾ NKC's current films reveal their concern upon certain themes and problems: traditional Korean family's breakdown, the emergence of new family models (modern nuclear family/assembled families), the changes in the everyday life as well as their lifestyle, and personal and existential crisis of contemporary life marked by consumption and cultural diversity; meaning, the interest is put on the experiences of the modern subject.

A Good Lawyer's Wife (2003), shows the history of a nuclear middle class

7) This analysis of the experiences of women in the fiction films selected does not aim to be exhaustive. What we propose is a theoretical and critical reflection about certain aspects of the configuration of female identity in the contemporary Korean society.

family in crisis and decomposition as an attempt to reflect the new Korean lifestyle. *My Mother, The Mermaid* (2004), is a clear example of how a married couple belonging to an agricultural origin and a daughter socialized in accordance with the traditional Confucian values inculcated by her parents have to adapt to the demands of modern, industrial and urban life. On the other hand, *Family ties* (2006), is a film that expresses changes in the everyday scenarios portraying assembled and dysfunctional families, that is to say, it illustrates the democratization of forms and social relationships, and the trend towards personal autonomy.

In regard to women that are part of the new social scenarios of the South Korean modernity, our directors analyze them as part of a cultural and gender model different from the traditional society. In the next paragraph we will begin describing analytically this statement through the revision of the selected films.

Women, families, gender roles

The family model began to change with the establishment of the Republic of Korea and invigorated since the seventies with incentive policies of modernization, which modified the forms and functions of primary social nucleus (Mera, 2007).⁸⁾

8) Primary social nucleus refers to the institution of the family. In traditional society the hegemonic model of *extended family* was characterized by the coexistence of three or even four generations under one roof [The fundamental principles of the Confucian family model: the *patriarchal*, the *patrilocal* and the *patriarchal lined* can be consulted in Doménech del Río, 2006.]. With modernization the *extended family* vanish into the *nuclear family*. *This type of family* is organized based on a marriage of free choice and a more horizontal exchange among members of the group. However, the *nuclearization did* not install the idea of a family completely independent, and detached from the Confucian cultural values such as collectivism, solidarity, harmony and duty in relation to others (Iadevito, 2011).

A Good Lawyer's Wife (2003) presents a modern nuclear family consisting of a couple and their adopted son, living a lifestyle similar to Western society. However, in terms of domestic roles and functions, *Hojung's* character matches – in several aspects – with the figure of a ‘virtuous woman’ that purifies and harmonizes the family environment through her actions. In other words, *Hojung* responds to the model of a traditional woman that fulfills all social expectations: she is responsible for the upbringing of her child, organizes and administrates her house, assumes the responsibilities regarding her husband and political family, just as established in the Confucian and patriarchal ideology of the past. The central masculine figure of the film responds to the virile archetype (Moreno Sarda, 1986). *Youngiak* developed his profession, his work and social life outside marriage, family and home environment. We find that the sexual division of work, that outlines obligations and duties different for women and men, is fully staged in *A Good Lawyer's Wife*. The traditional roles of gender, that prioritizes the individual perfection for the collective good, and subsume personal achievement for the well-being of the group,⁹⁾ is still something very common in actual Korean families.

Two traumatic events trigger the end of the family project: the death of her son and the sickness of *Hojung's* father-in-law, who she takes care of him during his disease.¹⁰⁾ From here on, *Hojung's* life has a new direction and sense. From the traditional position and role of a woman that is a wife and mother, a new woman emerges as she is represented as a divorced and single mother due to a romance with a young teenager. The new experiences of *Hojung's* life is part of the tendency for individualization that the subject experiments

9) Within the traditional Confucian family model, the existence of a marked differentiation of gender roles had the purpose of contributing to harmony and the well-being of the group (Park Boo-jin, 2001).

10) Let's recall that within the traditional Confucian family model women have to attend their father-in-law first in case both parents are sick. (Kim Eun-shil, 1997).

with modernity.¹¹⁾ This identity displacement is also observed in the character of *Youngiak's* mother that, just before becoming a widow, lets her son know that she is seeing another man with whom she thinks in marrying. The film image shows the typical picture of the traditional Korean family – resting on mattresses which lay on the floor (a Korean habit) – when the voice of *Youngiak's* mother bursts out announcing their engagement in a transgressor and revolutionary way for her generation and gender condition. Perplexity takes over the face of *Youngiak* listening to her mother's words. *Hojung's* reaction is very different, who shows herself much more tolerant and compressive with her mother-in-law. In this analysis it is important to remark that within the traditional Confucian model widow women must keep chastity beyond their husband's death.¹²⁾

In *My Mother, The Mermaid* (2004) the filmmaker also presents a nuclear family model, which consists of a marriage and a daughter. The traditional gender stereotype is currently shown in both female characters: *Yeon-sun* and *Na-yeong* (mother and daughter respectively). They respond to this traditional gender since this is what they have learned and internalized in early socialization. *Yeon-sun* plays an adult woman socialized according to traditional values, that was born and lived her childhood, adolescence and part of her youth in an island village, receiving no formal education and working as a fisher. Having to migrate to the city, implied a profound change in *Yeon-sun's* lifestyle, as she had to adapt to the modern social-cultural context, and at the same time her husband suffered an economic collapse, which placed her in the head of the family role and as a fighter regarding the need of

11) Even though individuals of modernity are constantly seeking for their own personal achievement, Korea continues understanding family as a fundamental value, and the family project is considered priority for Korea women (Doménech del Río, 2006).

12) In traditional Korea, widowhood is one of the most important symbols in the practice of the Confucian ideology and the principles of the patriarchy (García Daris, 2006).

overcoming with her husband his depression and ensuring the welfare of her daughter and herself. *Na-yeong* also notices the decline of her father and assumes the role of supporting her mother to save the family.¹³⁾

The father-chief family figure that is seen as a provider with determination and power, continues operating in the imaginary of both women, even though in their lives they are the ones that fulfill all these functions. The incorporation of modern changes makes mother and daughter become strong, brave, and determined women who explore the world, however, a conflict is perceived regarding functions and gender roles and the expectations that respond to the traditional internalized model. An example of recovering the traditional 'virtuous woman' model, according to the Confucian ideology that establishes as pillars femininity, purity, good presence and model correction, can be visualized in *Na-yeong* character who questions her mother's behavior who – because of her social background and life conditions – conducts in an inadequate and ordinary way (she spits, yells and confronts other people constantly). In a scene from the film, *Yeon-sun* is in a public bathroom where she works and spits on the floor while she counts her profit. *Na-yeong* is there, and angrily asks her to stop it. Similar scenes are repeated in other segments of the film.

Family Ties (2006) shows complex family scenarios and the multiplicity of traditional and modern feminine roles in public and private worlds, and the presence of nuances between each other. The film's first story puts on scene an assembled family where there's a woman that follows the traditional model since she responds to the female ritual's at her house and stands up for her brother. We are referring to *Mi-ra*, *Hyung-chul's* sister. However, she is

13) Despite the changes that occur in connection with modernization, the firstborn child and second sons and daughters are expected to provide economic and emotional support for their parents (Moon Okpyo, 2007).

part of the modern model since she works and is economically independent. She hasn't re-married either, having past the average age for women to get married.¹⁴⁾ The other female character in this story is *Mu-shin*, who breaks the model of the traditional woman due to her elections and lifestyle: she is separated and is dating *Hyung-chul*, a younger man, in a context that separated women, with new couples and with younger man are not well seen. *Mu-shin* also transgresses traditional rules with some of her uninhibited behaviors: she smokes, drinks, and jokes in public, among others, as we can see in a scene where she meets for dinner with *Hyung-chul*, *Mi-ra* and her *fiancé*.

Regarding *Hyung-chul*, his character refers to a man whose role as the family chief and provider has suffered weakness and has been absolutely discredited due to his imprudence, committed crimes, and for not having a liable attitude and speech. Several sequences of the film show him as a man with a childish and playful conduct, even in tense contexts that don't imply such behavior. Even though in modern times the patriarch power has suffered weakness, and with this so has the rigid and hierarchical social structure that positioned women in an 'inferior' place, we can state that it's still *Hyung-chul* who sets up the families group lifestyle and dominates in a symbolic level. *Mi-ra* and *Mu-shin* accept his decisions for example, when he insists that *Chae-hyan*¹⁵⁾ should stay and live with them. Both women justify his behavior and they take care of him. This is due to the space of superiority that men have traditionally occupied in the hierarchical scale regarding women and the rest

14) Korea is one of the countries with the lowest index of single population; the numbers round 0.3% for women and 0.4% for men in 1995 (United Nation data). The statistics of the National Statistical Office point out the growth of average age for marriage in women: 21 years in 1960; 24 in 1985 and 26 in 2001. Source: Hahm In-hee (2003)

15) This character is a little five year old girl, daughter of the ex-wife of the ex-husband of *Mu-shin* (another reference to the complexity of family ties assumed in current Korean society).

of the members of the group, being the patriarchal the person in charge of children and the well-being of the family. But, beyond this common point, we can say that while *Mi-ra*, expresses the traditional woman model, *Mu-shin* expresses the contrary, the modern woman model.

The second story of the film puts a dysfunctional family on scene showing the life of two women (mother and daughter). *Sun-kyung's* mother maintains an intimate relationship with a married man, the father of her younger son, which she lives with. She accepts being the second woman of her couple, who lives with her official wife and her two sons sharing the everyday life and assuming the role of husband, father and economic support. In this aspect, the fact that a man can have more than one stable sentimental relationship and more than one family is naturalized; and is seen as a frequent and accepted situation within the traditional society model. *Sun-kyung* is young, single, works and lives alone; just as the case of *Mi-ra*, who is also close to being thirty years old. The young women find inadmissible that her mother doesn't adequate to the first and only virtuous wife role, being this the principle motive of discord and distance between them. On the other hand, recriminations and mistreatment of *Sun-kyung* towards her ex couple expresses her resentment towards men. This reaction finds an explanation, probably, in the Confucian ideal of marriage and family that she couldn't see achieved in her mother.

The third story that the film narrates, that paradoxically is the one that opens and recovers the rest, is centered in the love relationship between youngsters: *Chae-byun*, the girl of the first story, and *Sun-kyung's* younger brother, from the second story. The love bonding that unites them is based on equality, free election, something that has become 'common currency' in the set-up of actual society. The narrative recovers a relatively recent past that confronts us with the dynamics of a modernization process that still advances and keeps growing. Majority of urban scenarios in which the characters enter

in action agree with the construction of a love that – despite bonding with others and losing others, and their respective motivations – offers a modern vision of feelings and affectivity.

Female attitudes towards marriage

The institution of marriage has suffered changes in the context of modernization, regarding attitudes and decisions related to the fact of getting married, as well as the ritualities and practices associated with the union between people and families. But even though ideological diversity and heterogeneity have changed marriage patterns, what is more currently registered is the increase of divorces and singlehood.¹⁶⁾

A Good Lawyer's Wife stages a typical middle-class marriage with a western lifestyle in which the union of a couple is based on the free choice of the adults, this means it is not performed by taxation or any requirement of parents and/ or family like it used to happen in the context of arranged marriages of traditional society (Kendall, 1996). Meanwhile, soon after becoming a widow the mother of the lawyer expects to marry a younger man. *Family Ties* shows a similar situation between a divorced woman (*Mu-shin*) that is married to a younger man (*Hyung-chul*). It also shows the relationship that *Sun-kyung's* mother has with a married man. Young women have changed their attitude towards marriage. This fact is reflected in *Mi-ra* and *Sun-kyun*, since they are old enough to get married but they prefer being single.¹⁷⁾

16) However, the image of the 'separated', 'divorce', 'remains' a stigma for women. On the other hand, men can 'come and go' between these different civil stages several times throughout life. As for widowhood, the number remains higher in women than men, since women traditionally did not get marry again and remained in their caste (Hahm, 2003; Scott y Keates, 2004).

17) One of the crucial social pressures in Korea is the fact of getting married. Men and

Chae-hyun and *Kyung-suk* are a couple that corresponds to a Western-style culture and they would likely assume the free form of modern marriage. However, *Kyung-suk* seeks to impose a different life style to his couple responding to Confucian values in which women should maintain an attitude of submission in the relationship. In *My Mother, The Mermaid* the marriage of *Na-yeongs* parents respects the tradition of being a couple with the same social background, even though they have different economic, educational and cultural status. However, the daughter has profound doubts concerning marriage, and it is possible that this is due to the bad experience of their parents and how she suffered because of her family life.

Dilemmas about motherhood

While motherhood is a universal phenomenon, it assumes different forms according to the culture the subject belong to and the sociocultural position that is held by women-mothers. The dilemmas and tensions around motherhood are represented in films by mother figures linked to the traditional model, and modern values.

A Good Lawyer's Wife represents a motherhood that is far from being characterized as the 'natural' standard: the couple's son is adopted. In several scenes in which *Hojung* dialogues with the child, we can observe the concern and torment that he feels because he is adopted – a practice recently incorporated by the South Korean society – due to the prejudiced and discriminatory environment. Modernity introduced substantial changes in

women are expected to marry in *Honki*, which means the age that determines that the person is old enough to be married. At *honki* women directly and indirectly are under pressure and stress level, but after *honki*, if they are not married they start having serious problems of sociability (Lee Sung-yong, 1996).

family law, such as including adoption as a legal act (Young, 2010). However, this change has not yet been fully assimilated in a society that still recognizes Confucianism as an ideological and social force (Mera, 2007; Okpyo Moon, 2007). Furthermore, the film expresses the idea of motherhood as a regenerative act. Facing all types of adversities (a husband who is unfaithful, cheats and leaves her, and the irremediable pain over the death of her son), *Hojung* becomes pregnant with her lover, and following this pregnancy a 'new' life becomes possible. Her decision is linked to certain aspects regarding cultural change, but she still maintains traditional values, according to which motherhood was the only way that gave women the opportunity to (re)position themselves within their home, improving their status and being valued by the patriarch and his family. Currently, the idea of women fulfilling themselves throughout procreation and the preference for sons persists, but in a more nuanced way (Doménech del Río, 2004).

In My Mother, The Mermaid and Family Ties we find dissimilar models of what is considered a mother: imperfect mothers, absent mothers, substitute mothers. This concept of motherhood seen in the films is a way of showing the complex scenario of current maternity. However, beyond this diversity of models of mothers linked to the multiplication of scenarios and family and affective ties, we also identified that traditional model of the responsible, struggled, sacrificed, 'Korean mother' that with tenacity and courage faces the vicissitudes of everyday life, prioritizing always the welfare and future of their children.

The mother stereotypes represented and narrated by the fictional film directors refer to a variety of maternal figures, which allows us to build an image of the woman-mother more 'humanized', with errors and ambiguities, contradictions and imperfections, contrary to the traditional Korean figure of a mother self-sacrificing and faultless. Appearing on stage a variety of maternal

figures and maternal ways of love, that differ from 'natural' and socially legitimized behavior, it shows figures with the supposed 'homogeneity' regarding the concept of motherhood, understood from a traditional view of the female role. However, motherhood continues to be fictionalized as an area regarding ethics, world view and basic primary intersubjectivities.

Female participation in the labor sphere

In modern Korean society the female universe ceased to be exclusively associated with the private and domestic world. However, the change in employment and economic participation of women did not imply a profound modification in their homes and domestic life styles. The 'Korean women' that work, just as in the West, are overloaded with responsibilities, and therefore they look for support and collaboration from women that belong to their family group. Our films show working women, and this presence is linked not only to the social segment represented (that differs according to the generation and social class), but also to the view of the directors that seek to replace the female voice, which is gaining spaces in different areas of modernity.

In *My Mother*, *The Mermaid* and *Family Ties*, the families that are represented belong to lower middle class families, coming from popular sectors and therefore most of the female figures appear in workplaces and/or developing paid off activities. In the first film mentioned, *Yeon-sun* – a farm women with no education, who lives in the city and has to adapt herself to the modern world – works as a manager of a public bathroom. *Na-yeong*, her daughter, also works, she has an administrative role in the post office. However, the work experiences of these women are not experienced with gratitude. Due to their traditional values, they would have preferred a man being the head of

the family and having the obligation and responsibility of maintaining the house structure. In the second film mentioned, young women (*Mi-ra* and *Sun-kyung*) and a middle-aged woman (the mother of *Sun-kyung*) work in different jobs (one cooks in a school buffet, the other one is a tour guide, and the last one sells accessories in a shop) and also have additional responsibilities in their homes and families. Instead, *A Good Lawyer's Wife* represents a middle-class woman who is married to a professional and carries out a comfortable life in economic terms, without the need of inserting herself in the labor market.

Women adapt to modern life either by necessity or due to a personal quest, but in many cases, they still have expectations concerning gender roles for men and women established by the Confucian tradition. Women are not seen working in professional jobs, and this absence in the representation may be associated with the fact that women that have high levels of education withdraw themselves from this area after getting married and becoming mothers (Seth, 2008).

Integrative reflections

The fictionalization of the experiences of women isn't new, since women have historically been represented and narrated by the different expressions of art and culture. The truth is that they have been gaining different spaces as subjects of action, although in certain contexts and situations they continue assuming a role that defines them as an object of decoration and desire, reproducing this way the the traditional female stereotype.

Women analyzed in the NKC are part of a new family model. However, the reference to certain cultural values –deeply established in the Confucian ideology – are expressed by the female characters in the stories: social pressure

on women to marry young, motherhood as a personal fulfilling act, the preference for sons, etc. The characters we observe in the films illustrate good mothers, respectful daughters, sacrificed sisters, and applied and loyal workers. The traditional ideal of women persists, but with new meanings in the actual social scenario (Doménech del Río, 2006; Iadevito, 2011; Moon Okpyo, 2007). Regarding the representations of women in the labor sphere, we observe female inclusion fundamentally linked to business and services. These representations are not random if we consider that, despite the formal right to work for men and women; there is a strong discrimination against women in terms of employment status and salary in the current Korean society (Chang Pil-wha, 1994).

The view of the chosen directors reveal 'something' belonging to a feminist perspective that makes them 'differ' from the social order and hegemonic gender. However, it does not mean that we are facing filmic representations of women that are seen as free spirits and are not associated with the traditional gender representation model of Korea. But the fact is that in some conscious way the representations and narratives of the experiences of 'Korean women' who are shown in the films, differ with the concept of 'feminine' and 'masculine' practiced by the classic film, and with the dominant gender culture in both traditional and modern society.

The characters and filmic narratives that were analyzed questioned the natural way of representing gender relations and social family ties. We observe that the 'women of fiction' –placed in an open, contingent and changing narrative positions– express heterogeneity as an inherent trait of the subject and identity. Following Braidotti, we could say that female identity in our film selection is a *nomadic identity*, which - [...] is (sexual, rational, social), but not a fixed identity, valid for all times (2004:67).

The female experiences seen in the films are many and varied, and are

immersed in the tension between tradition and modernity, constituting this way a female subject-being in different contexts, situations and relationships. In a past/present dialectic, films recover footprints of what has 'been lost' updating and recycling it from the present. Through the characters and stories the past and the memories emerge forming what Richard (2000) defines as the conjunction between the 'not anymore' and 'still being'. The generational transmission, perpetuation of the ancient and the apparent repetition of what was lived defines – with different degrees of intensity and/or conflict – the evolution of the female subject in a current context where tradition and modernity are in constant tension.

Finally, we could state that the behavior of 'Korean women' in modernity has changed, eventhough these changes are limited due to the existence of traditional ideological patterns. Women are still thinking in terms of family and not in their own individual interests. This is due to the internalization in which the difference between men and women continue maintaining a culture of sexual segregation promoted and endorsed by Confucianism and by the model of sexual work division that capitalism establishes.

4. Women of fiction: Dilemmas regarding a narrative identity

We can ensure from the analysis of films that the discursive creations are a representative manifestation of identities, a sort of mirror which reflects and re-creates, that allows us to glimpse – in detail but also broadly – the subject and its reality. This means, that the subject has certain attributes that may change or remain unchanged, but always has the ability to reinvent itself through the fictional worlds, in our case, from the fiction of the *New Korean Cinema*.

In the selected films we were able to observe – through the construction

of the characters and ways of relating the stories of each character in the different plots – that dynamism and a dose of ambiguity are part of the state of transformation (still in process) of the South Korean society. The identity of the ‘Korean women’ has been changing in the context of the modernization of family and society. As Giddens would say: “The self identity will be created and reorder more or less continuously due to the background of the changing experiences of daily life and the fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions” (1997 [1991]: 236).

We were able to analyze in the films that the represented female subject is shown according to the dilemmas and tensions of the modern world. The difference between tradition-modernity is expressed in the plots of the NKC. Also the represented and narrated experiences of women demonstrate identity traits during times of crisis.. Bauman proposes the concept of liquid identity to name this process where “[...] living forever with the ‘problem of identity’ unresolved, is the general condition of contemporary men and women in our kind of society” (2001: 37). Consequently to think Korean female identity in terms of ‘liquid identity’ (or ‘nomadic identity’) refers to a figure of change and transience.¹⁸⁾ And in this unfinished process of identity, social discourses that shape and build the concept of identity, including the cinematographic discourse, play a key role (Verón, 1987).

Based on the idea that films form a narrative, which is an exercise of identity construction, we can state, at first glance, that WOMEN occupy the place of otherness, this means they are defined in negativity regarding the identity

18) The Bauman’s metaphor of liquidity tries to describe the wakeness of human bonds in individualistic societies where the sense of responsibility towards the other is strongly devalued. For this reason we highlight here a broader sense of what is ‘modern’ that, in any case, is radicalized in the contemporary social scene. The so-called ‘liquid society’, ever-changing and uncertain, still remains surrounded by tensions between tradition and modernity in the Korean case

of MAN and therefore they carry the label of otherness regarding gender. However, the identifications that are temporally articulated at certain nodal points are beyond the identities of fiction. As Arfuch stated, "Identification is always defined regarding a certain view of the Other, so when in presence of a model image imitation, one might ask the question for who is the subject acting that role for and what view is considered when the subject identifies himself with an image" (2002: 64). Through a reading that seeks to 'exit' the logic of the production of identities that naturalizes the arbitraries and makes them seem as if they would have a certain essence, we were able to detect that the only valid reference of the 'women of fiction' were not just men, since there are other terms of reference – equally valid and productive – in the constitution of that identity, like other women, children, seniors, couples, men in non-traditional ways of thinking and acting, etcetera, that complete the constitutive emptiness of self identity (Hall, 1996).

This constitutive heterogeneity of fictionalized female subject is defined by a multiplicity of factors: social class, age, the family model of membership, the degree of integration and social participation, personal life stories defined by the models and social mandates, and the interference of history and tradition in their thoughts and actions, among others, which means, women are determined not only by the sexual status and motherhood. The experiences of women are widely represented and narrated in fiction and, while the social factors were modified with the historical coming or had the potential to do so, they have been expressing, creating and reinventing in scriptures of the world and, more recently, in images and visual elements.

5. Conclusion

The first general conclusion we can state is that film, understood as a space of subjectivity and narrative construction of reality, operates reflecting social processes but also generates them, allowing this way the appearance of new effects regarding sense. Concerning this main idea, we state that filmic representations are the result of historical creations based on a particular form of cultural vision, and that the tendency to reproduce and standardize certain figures of woman – according to social and traditional gender stereotypes – is questioned and presents contradictions from the moment that a variety of voices appear, voices that inhabit in each text and in the interpretation that is done when analyzing these texts.

Regarding the cultural changes in South Korea that have impacted in family scenarios and gender roles since the mid-twentieth century, we find that the experiences of female represented and narrated in different films tend to show the incorporation of women into the modern world. However, in parallel, we found that certain values taught by the Confucian tradition and family ideology are reinforced and lived again through the representations of the NKC. In other words, we were able to figure out through (female) characters how cultural traditions, ancient beliefs, customs and rituals, as well as certain ways of production and organizational structures are recycled and updated within the behaviors that emerge with new cultural patterns belonging to the Western modernity.

Even though the analyzed female film characters are crossed by aspects of the traditional gender stereotype, they mature into a modern version of femininity concerning the cultural changes of society in its most flamboyant and contemporary expressions.

We confirm that the fiction environment is revealed as a cultural field that enables meanings and senses which operate questioning the homogeneity and

coherency of 'pure' and 'finished' social models. It highlights the constitute diversity of those models expressing the tradition-modernity dynamism that fiction does not only reflect but also (re)creates and (re) invents. The degree of this dynamism depends on the historical, political, social and cultural production, but also of the personal touch that every filmmaker [receiver] prints in their own creation.

Our analytical journey allows us to state then, that the *New Korean Cinema* is betting on building an open cinematic space, free of labels, without narrative limits and where contemporary dilemmas and tensions are part of the narrative plots. The films investigated show – in a believable way – the everyday reality of a variety of characters made out of flesh and blood, and tell minimal stories of men and women, who are far away of presenting themselves as part of a homogeneous territory. On the other hand they allow us to see the heterogeneity of individual and collective experiences.

Faced with the earlier ways of representation of archetypal film models which enhance arbitrary and symbolic relationships culturally established, the *New Korean Cinema* builds 'fictional women' who assume positions between 'old' and 'new' ways of being, this means, they appear as a kind of *medium* that synthesizes and combines traditional and modern versions of *female identity*. Thereby questioning the systems of representation and narration of the experiences of 'Korean women' in NKC, involves analyzing the process of symbolic construction of the female identity in the current South Korean society.

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정체성의 픽션

새 한국 영화에 나타난 여성의 상(像)과 추이

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1. 서론
2. '새로운' 영화적 가상
3. 새 한국 영화 읽기: 영화 내러티브 표현의 방법과 의도
4. 픽션의 여성: 내러티브 정체성의 딜레마
5. 결론

〈국문초록〉

픽션은 내러티브를 통해 정체성은 지속적으로 구성된다는 담론을 묘사한다. 이를 바탕으로 본 논문은 극영화 영역에 관한 감각과 의미에 대한 현대화의 산물로 '한국 여성'의 경험 변화에 대한 지식에 기여하고자 한다. 우선 새 한국 영화 (New Korean Cinema)의 가상적 영화 특징을 간략하게 리뷰하고, 선정된 영화의 주제와 분석을 통해 내러티브 관심 (narrative interest)과 다원적이며 문화적 다양성 경향이 복합된 사회 과정의 일환으로 여성의 경험을 나타내는 방식을 살펴본다. 본 논문은 담론적이며 상징적 개념의 '픽션의 여성'이 '역사적 여성'으로 가는 과정을 고찰하고 영화에 나타난 특수성을

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바탕으로 한국여성의 정체성 구성에 대해 다시 한번 생각해 본다.

주제어 : 한국, 여성, 영화

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