



Korean Screen Culture II:

Oct 31, 2018 (Wednesdays) 6-8pm, Wilhelmstraße 133, Room 30

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“From the Writing to Speaking Subject: Korean ‘Comfort Women’ and Girlhood”

Abstract:

From *Snowy Road* (*Nungil*, dir. Lee Na-jeong, 2015) and *Spirits' Homecoming* (*Gwihyang*, dir. Cho Jung-rae, 2016), to *I Can Speak* (*Ai kaen seupikeu*, dir. Kim Hyun-seok, 2017) and *Herstory* (*Heostori*, dir. Min Kyu-dong, 2018), contemporary Korean film cycles explore the experience of former “comfort women,” (*wianbu* in Korean; *ianfu* in Japanese), those who were drafted to work as military sexual slaves during WWII. Korean feminists, however, have been critical of the victimhood accentuated by the rendering of former wartime sexual slaves as girls in *Snowy Road* and *Spirits' Homecoming*, the two films often being paired and contrasted. Despite their diverging aesthetics, girls' bodies ravaged at the comfort station allude to a national body whose sovereignty was lost during the colonial era (1910-1945); and further embody the object of national guilt—the nation's inability to protect them.

In this presentation, I will pay attention to girls' sensibility as manifest in *Snowy Road* in particular, and the extent to which it provides limited agency to the protagonists. I examine the female protagonists' status as the ‘writing’ subject, one of the tropes that have long been associated with girls' culture.

With the varying film cycles on “comfort women” in the Korean film industry, the mode of representation of historical trauma, especially that of women, has begun to diversify. The films' scope and focus on former “comfort women” have shifted from the traumatic past that needs to be cured, to their present struggle and everydayness. I trace the transformation of girls' sensibility from *Snowy Road* to *I Can Speak*, with the protagonists' changing status from the ‘writing’ to ‘speaking’ subject: how the girls' sensibilities and tropes of private ‘writing’ in the former is replaced with the urge and ability to speak in public in the latter.

