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PRESENT

 Locarno Film Festival
Official selection



OVERSEAS

A FILM BY **SUNG-A YOON**



PRESS KIT

SYNOPSIS

In the Philippines, women get deployed abroad to work as domestic workers or nannies. In order to do so, they frequently leave their own children behind, before throwing themselves into the unknown. In one of the many training centers dedicated to domestic work that can be found in the Philippines, a group of trainees are getting ready to face both homesickness and the possible abuses lying ahead. During role playing exercises, they alternatively play both the roles of the employee and that of the employers. Bordering on fiction, *OVERSEAS* brings to light the question of modern servitude in our globalized world, while emphasizing these women's determination, their sisterhood, and the strategies they find to face the ordeals that awaits them in the near future.

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INTERVIEW WITH **SUNG-A YOON**

After your first documentary feature film, FULL OF MISSING LINKS, which depicts your journey to South Korea in search of your father whom you have not seen since childhood, and brings you to explore the mechanisms of Korean society, what brought you to the Philippines to follow these women destined to domestic work overseas? What connections do you see between the two films?

At first, there seems to be no direct connection between FULL OF MISSING LINKS and OVERSEAS. But during the shooting and then the postproduction, with hindsight, I realised that there were several echoes between the two. My desire to direct OVERSEAS came from my discovering Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot's book,

Migrant mothers without borders, which analyses the immigration of female Filipino domestic workers in France, from the angle of family separation. Indeed, most of these mothers are separated from their families who are staying behind. And family separation, enforced affective wrench and feelings of exile are at the heart of my previous film.

OVERSEAS focuses on a group of women about to leave their country, their children, their families, to throw themselves into the unknown of a new life overseas. Throughout the film, there is a tension between what it is to live here and what it is to live there. It is about the moment you leave and what you have to leave behind, just like when this woman talks about what she will not be able



to do anymore overseas: watch her favourite Korean drama, read books from her favourite author, visit her aunt's grave, etc. In these two films, one can also find the same interest for popular culture through the presence of soap opera. In FULL OF MISSING LINKS, I had imagined my being reunited with my father, shooting parts of the television screen, which was showing a drama about a girl who is reunited with her father after long years of separation. In the actual film, the places where the role play exercises happen were intentionally filmed so they would remind the spectator of soap opera settings. At last, addressing women's condition is often present in my films, and an essential aspect of my work.

So you left for the Philippines with this project in mind, but how would you define it? To travel there with the intention of depicting the migration system of the O.F.W (Overseas Filipino Workers) is ambitious. How did you come to shoot this particular centre? And what angle did you choose for it?

My first approach was essentially analytic. I read books, attended seminars and met researchers, such as Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot who is a Filipino sociologist here in Belgium, and Julien Debonneville, a sociologist from Switzerland who was writing a PhD on that topic. My meeting them was a turning point for me. And then very quickly I felt the need to go to the Philippines to get a first-hand experience of this reality in the field. I went there three times before the shooting, which allowed me to meticulously observe the whole training process and administrative procedures



that are required of any Filipino woman who wishes to leave the country to work as a domestic worker. In the film, the process seems to be limited to a certain time and space, but actually it takes place in many different places, and for a long time. There is the training centre, which you can see in the film, where you can learn about cleaning techniques, but also seminars to prepare your departure, language courses for the countries you are going to, stress management classes, medical examinations, etc. Even if this whole process is not fully depicted in the film, I absolutely wanted to get detailed observations through thorough field work. I also talked with many women who had gone through the experience of migration. I visited and observed about twenty training centres, before choosing one of them. By going

there several times, I was able to see the many differences and similarities between them. I chose that place because I could feel that people truly engaged with the project. I immediately felt that they would allow me to work in direct contact with the trainees and the instructors. And finally, we had a beautiful connection. I was also interested to see that the head and most of the instructors already had had first-hand experience of domestic work abroad. I could feel that these women really wanted to teach the trainees ways to overcome the difficulties that they had faced themselves in the past. On the one hand, they clearly stated the hard working conditions or the risks that they may have to face, and on the other hand, I could feel that they cared about the women who were trying to leave. The more I collected specific details preparing

for the film, the more I realised what was most important to me was to adopt these women's perspective as they were about to leave. Therefore, I needed a place that would facilitate our encounter. This training centre was perfect: a place that was welcoming and not too crowded.

So how was it when you met? Did everything happen the way you had imagined it? Was it easy for the trainees and the instructors to accept your presence?

Before the shooting, I was rather nervous. I had no idea what was going to happen, because apart from the instructors, I could not know in advance who I was going to shoot. At the training centre, every two weeks, a new group is formed based on the new people who have signed up. When I first arrived, of course it took some time to get to know the others: on the one hand, the

women had to meet the rest of the group, and then the employees of the training centre. But very quickly, we felt that the women truly adhered to the film and to our presence. It was one of the major concerns of the film and I was truly happy to see that they really accepted us. I would go as far as to say that they looked happier and happier with our presence! The thing is that in training centres, they are somewhat cut off from the world, because their mobile phones are taken from them when they come in, and they spend their nights over there. Unable to communicate with their families, it is as if they were already in a transitional phase before leaving. I wanted the film to make spectators feel the time of the training as a temporary step, a kind of "waiting room" for all these women about to leave their lives in the Philippines and throw themselves into the unknown of a new life overseas. I wanted



to represent this final step before departure as a pivotal moment, bearing many ambivalences: the tearing apart from their families, the fear of the employer and the necessity to complete their training in order to get their National Domestic Work Certificate, which will allow them to get a visa. They are in this in-between space, filled with feelings of anticipation, imagination, fear and hope.

Just like them, the film crew spent their nights in the centre. It was a total immersion. We never went out. We got to know them better, to know them separately. This was important to allow us not to film them as numbers from a series. The more we filmed, the more astonished we were by their ability to forget the camera. Some of them seemed to have a mystical aura. They had many things to offer to the camera, just like the best actresses would have. They had such pleasure acting in front of us and with us, that it was the

most beautiful experience to capture them on film. This seemed essential to me. Once again, there was a real connection. And it happened naturally, without us having the impression of forcing anything.

Can you tell us about your interest in the women who have already had these working experiences, the ones called the “ex-abroads”?
These women already know the work and yet, they end up following another training programme.

As I was saying, I did not have a choice concerning the women I was going to shoot. The system makes even the ex-abroads train again after a certain number of years. There were both “first-timers” [the ones leaving for the first time] and the “ex-abroads” [the ones who have already worked overseas].

The fact that we had these two different types



was productive for the film. On the one hand, the “first-timers” were fully focused on the wait and the projection of their near future. On the other hand, the “ex-abroads” had already faced homesickness, there had been cases of abuse and happy experiences. Without leaving the centre, this allowed me to suggest what happens overseas. And the role playing exercises became all the more authentic, since the sketches were directly inspired by their own experiences. The women exchanged many information continuously. They were eager to share their personal experiences. At the heart of these exchanges where they could express their emotions, assert their choices and build strategies, they appeared to be the only masters of their own future. Through this film, I wanted to refute the stereotyped depiction of the migrant

domestic worker as an uneducated, weak-willed and passive victim.

How many people were they in the film crew?

There was one DOP, one sound engineer and myself in the Belgian team. And a Filipino executive production was coordinating the shooting over there. I was collaborating closely with a Filipino assistant who played a key role on set. There also was an interpreter who was translating live, which allowed me to understand all the conversations in real time. There also were precious interns, who among other things, fetched our meals, because we were living in immersion inside the centre. The trainees woke up at 5 AM and went to bed at 11 PM.





I was also struck by the way this centre looks like a movie set. The training centre is like the setting of a house, just like a film studio.

This training centre was also chosen for its spaces and settings. When I am shooting a film, I am always thinking about the form. All centres display all the rooms of a typical employer's house - the kitchen, the living room, the bathroom, the bedroom etc. - but of course, each place has its own decoration. In the centre, the walls are yellow and apple green, which helps creating a certain atmosphere. It was a deliberate choice in the direction to enhance this idea of a "model apartment". Eventually, I chose this location for the size of its rooms, which gave me more space to move the camera back for wide shots, and more options to place it. I also had Vilhelm Hammershøi's work in mind, he was a Danish painter from the end of the

XIXth century who inspired me with his numerous paintings depicting empty apartment interiors, with minimal furniture, where you can often see the silhouette of a solitary woman with her back turned. There is an atmosphere of solitude and mystery to them, which I tried to recapture at times, to suggest the solitude these women will know in the apartment of their future employers.

What was at stake when you were filming these sketches from role playing exercises? It is quite significant in the film, and with a little emphasis, we are nearly dealing with theatrical moments. Was it natural for them to engage in this role play with all this equipment around?

The role playing exercises that we see in the film are part of a stress management class and they are supposed to prepare the women to deal with cases of abuse and with the worst conflicting

interactions with their employers abroad. The instructor was inspired by her own experiences, the "ex-abroads" stories, and other accounts to design the sketches.

When I discovered this, as a filmmaker, I was immediately intrigued. For the film, the "fiction" role playing scenes had the obvious advantage to offer a break from the academic pattern of the classes, which relied on speech only, while bringing a visual impact to the film. Then, through the stories they carried with them, they allowed their intimate thoughts to circulate freely, their internal conflicts and contradictory emotions to get out when reflecting on their future sacrifices. What I found particularly evocative and inspiring was that during these role plays, the trainees play the role of the domestic worker as well as that of the employer. In the role play, the dominated person becomes the dominant one and vice

versa. In this exercise, they reenact scenes from their past experiences abroad, which gives blunt realism to these scenes. I was extremely surprised to see how comfortable they were with playing the role of a tyrannic employer. I would even say that they enjoyed it in some way. I could not help but think of Claire and Solange, "The Maids" from Jean Genet's play, who, in the absence of their mistress, let their frustrations explode by impersonating their oppressive employer.

These sketches are also a formidable way to suggest indirectly what is happening overseas at the employer's. During exercises, instructors mainly brought them to perform situations of intense crises, violent humiliations, with all the shrieking they brought along. But in the film, I also wanted to translate situations that, even though they may seem more ordinary, were





actually a good way to reveal their suffering. So I tried to bring that to the exercises, suggesting that they could also think about experiences of ordinary violence, in order to show how varied these experiences were. For instance, this is how the scene of the employer in bed using emotional blackmail to prevent an employee to go back to the Philippines to see her child again came to light.

In a circulating movement between “here” and “there”, these scenes of “fiction” allow us to picture life overseas and the private space of the employer, this faraway, off-screen place which they keep mentioning, imagining, fantasizing and fearing.

You did not wish to make a film that would be exhaustive on this migration system that is particular to the Philippines. It is clear that we are not exposed to many informative scenes. And yet, I am thinking about this discussion among

the trainees, about the status of “heroins of the economy” that is promoted by the media. There is something informative about it, but it is carried through their conversations.

Indeed, I was not aiming at being exhaustive. But I wanted the economical and social context to be implicit, and to come out again here and there in the film. On set, when the group of women started speaking in the kitchen, bringing up the fact that O.F.W (*Overseas Filipino Workers*) are praised as the “new heroins of the economy”, I was delighted, because I knew that this informative element would help inscribing these women’s situation inside a more global context, on the scale of the whole country. Because indeed, the migration of these women is a vastly profitable to the Philippines’ economy.

And yet, they claim ownership of this official history.

Actually, I was happy to hear their personal

opinions about what the media and the government have to say about them. And what this discussion reveals is that they are not fooled by those. They do not get why they claim as “heroines” people who are making sacrifices for their families, and work abroad abandoning their children. They are rather conscious that O.F.W. are praised mainly because of the economic profits coming from their expatriation. The money sent to their families from abroad is making the Filipino foreign currencies stock larger.

It is only at the end of the film that you leave the training centre. How did you come to design these last scenes?

I never intended to remain sequestered in the training centre with a single location for the film. It was very important for me to visually capture the scope of the migration phenomenon. I did not want the spectator to believe when he left the cinema that it was just the story of a few women. It was crucial to show the administration buildings with their waiting rooms crowded with people, their corridors full of case files, in order to highlight the fact that hundreds of thousands

of people actually leave the territory each year. It was also my intention as film director to leave the training centre and to create an aesthetic contrast.

I wanted the spectator to feel empathetic with these women throughout the training, and for him or her to see them suddenly drowning in the massive flow of strangers waiting in line in administrative offices. The visual impact of that seemed stronger than a theoretical explanation. However, I had not anticipated to follow them home, and to film the moment when they leave their families. But I changed my mind over there, thanks to the trusting relationship we had built together. These women leave to work overseas at a very high price, that of a profound emotional wrench. I deemed it necessary for the film to make the spectator feel that.

Interview of **Sung-A Yoon** by **Nicolas Bras**,
programmer at the Nova Cinema





DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Sung-A Yoon is a French cinematographer and artist born in South Korea and living in Brussels. She graduated from the National Superior School of Fine Arts of Paris-Cergy in 2005, and from the INSAS, a cinema school from Brussels, in 2008. Between 2001 and 2011, she directed ten short movies mostly showed in exhibitions [L'Atelier du Jeu de Paume, the Busan's Biennale, l'Antenne du Plateau, the Bernard Anthonioz Art House, ...]. Switching to fiction, she finished in 2008 her short movie AND I'LL KEEP IN MY HEART that was selected for the Cannes Festival - cinéfondation, before travelling in a few international festivals. In 2012, she left to look for her dad, absent since her childhood, and ended up with her first documentary feature FULL OF MISSING LINKS [Courtisane-Gent Festival, London Korean Film Festival, ...]. OVERSEAS is her second documentary feature.

www.yoonsunga.com

SELECTIVE FILMOGRAPHY

OVERSEAS

2019, 90'

FULL OF MISSING LINKS

2012, 70'

LA PIANISTE

2011, 9'

ET DANS MON CŒUR J'EMPORTEAI

[And I'll keep in my heart]

2008, 24'

DE L'AUTRE CÔTÉ

[On the other side]

2005, 11'

OVERSEAS

WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY **SUNG-A YOON**

IMAGE **THOMAS SCHIRA**

SOUND **KWINTEN VAN LAETHEM**

EDITING **DIETER DIEPENDAELE**

MUSIC **FRÉDÉRIC VERRIÈRES**

SOUND EDITING & MIXING **EMMANUEL SOLAND**

COLOR GRADING **MATTHIEU WEIL**

PRODUCTION **ISABELLE TRUC (IOTA PRODUCTION), QUENTIN LAURENT
(LES FILMS DE L'ŒIL SAUVAGE) & HANNE PHLYPO (CLIN D'ŒIL FILMS)**

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AND FROM **TAX SHELTER DU GOUVERNEMENT FEDERAL BELGE - CASA KAFKA PICTURES - BELFIUS**





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