

An Unexpected Visit - A Short Film Analysis

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Abstract: This paper discusses short film of Bianca Pamela N. Alcera, “*An Unexpected Visit*”. The paper begins by giving a plot summary of the 18-minute film, and then proceeds to explain the young director’s purpose and motivation for making the family drama. The paper also explores the film’s narrative structure and style, as well as its production process. Lastly, the paper gives an overview on how the film is currently being distributed and received.

Keywords: family, adoption, Asian, Asian American, women.

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1. Introduction

As part of her requirements to graduate with an MFA Filmmaking degree from Chung-Ang University, Seoul, South Korea, Bianca Pamela N. Alcera wrote and directed the 18-minute short film *An Unexpected Visit*. It is her second film as a director.

2. Storyline / Plot Summary

The film follows the day of Anna, a Korean adopted by an American family since birth. After being notified that her biological mother died, she goes to South Korea to attend the funeral.

On her way to the funeral from the airport, she encounters a couple of incidents that seem to forebode that her day is not going to be great. She brushes them off and focuses on getting to her destination safely.

At the funeral, she meets her biological aunt Sunja, her biological sister Minhee, and Minhee’s two sons Jihun and Junseo. Sunja immediately recognizes Anna and is overjoyed by her niece’s presence. Minhee, on the other hand, does not seem very happy about her younger sister’s unexpected return.

Anna, despite not knowing how to speak Korean and not being aware of the Korean culture, tries her best to adjust to her current environment. She tries to accommodate everyone at the funeral, and she even tries to help out when the younger of Minhee’s two sons, Junseo, gets hurt. However, Minhee consistently, openly and coldly rejects her efforts.

When Anna confronts Minhee, the latter is no longer able to contain her frustration. She reveals that before their mother had died, she tried to contact Anna to ask for help. Their mother was urgently looking for a matching donor,

but due to the complications of the tests and surgery, Anna’s adoptive mother refused to let Anna undergo the procedures.

Anna, not comprehending what her sister is venting about, assumes that she is simply not welcome at the funeral. She calms herself down by calling her adoptive mother; during which she conceals the fact that Minhee is very unwelcoming of her. Minhee witnesses this and regrets how she treated Anna.

Anna then decides to leave the funeral. As she is walking out of the funeral hall, Minhee calls her by her Korean name as if wanting to start a conversation; but Minhee does not say anything afterwards. The film ends with Anna standing alone on the street, reflecting on how her day went by.

3. Director's Statement

My good friend Molly Siddall is a Korean adopted by an American family since birth. In 2011, she came to South Korea to teach English through the *English Program in Korea* (EPIK) initiative of the government. Since she was already in South Korea, she thought it would be nice to meet her biological family. She was able to get in contact with them through her adoption agency.

When she told me about how awkward their first meeting went and how surprisingly uncomfortable she felt, I was inspired to document the uniqueness of her story.

Using her experience as basis, I wanted to create a movie that could show the culture shock experienced by a foreigner in South Korea; the awkwardness of a first meeting; and the idea that, at the end of the day, family is family.

4. Narrative Structure

The film employed a linear narrative structure and could be divided into three main parts: the exposition, the climax, and the resolution.

In the exposition, Anna and Minhee's characters were introduced. The setting and the tone of the story were also established. In the climax, the conflict culminates - Anna confronts Minhee and Minhee reveals her unhappiness. Here, chronological flashbacks were also used to aid the explanation of Minhee's position and to highlight the intensity of the scene. Lastly, in the resolution, Anna's decision to leave was shown. Her conflict with Minhee was not clearly and completely resolved, but a tinge of hope amidst all the regret was hinted.

5. Film Style

A. *Mise-en-scène*

As the story was set in South Korea, the film was shot entirely in the same country. All of the scenes were shot on-location to achieve authenticity – the airport scenes were filmed at Incheon International Airport and the funeral hall scenes were filmed at an ordinary Korean funeral hall. Props, such as the bright red packet of American candy, were also used significantly.

On the other hand, costumes were used not only to indicate that the film was set in present day, but also to establish contrast among characters. While everyone else wore black or dark-colored clothing, Anna wore a light gray top.

Aside from that, the blocking of the characters in each scene was carefully arranged in order to explain the characters' relationship with each other or to show a certain character's feelings.

B. *Lighting*

For all interior scenes, including the scenes shot in the taxi, appropriate lighting was used to help achieve the desired tone. For exterior scenes, only the night scenes were lit. All exterior day scenes used natural lighting.

For most of the film, moderate lighting was applied. For most of the flashback scenes, however, high-contrast lighting (via natural lighting) was used to depict how vivid the memory was to Minhee.

C. *Cinematography*

The film was shot entirely using a Blackmagic Design Production Camera (BMPC). Several lenses were used, as a variety of shots were needed.

For most of the film, fixed shots were used. But to emphasize the character's nervousness or anxiety, or to accentuate the intensity of the scene, hand held shots were also used. Following and panning camera movements were also employed as necessary. Furthermore, eye-level angle shots were mainly used so that the audience could relate to the characters better.

D. *Sound*

In the film, background music could be heard three times: when Anna enters the funeral hall, during Anna and Minhee's verbal argument, and when Anna leaves. All three scenes needed to convey a certain feeling, that's why appropriate music was used to help induce the same feeling from the audience.

E. *Editing*

The film was edited and color corrected using Adobe Premiere Pro CC. Adobe After Effects was also used for the title and minor CG work.

Aside from the climax, where a scene had to jump repetitively from a flashback cut to a present day cut, the cuts were generally arranged in a chronological manner. Insert cuts were sometimes used to show lapse of time or to emphasize a different aspect of a previous cut.

A fade transition effect was only used once (during the last scene) to avoid an awkward jump shot.

6. Production Process

A. *Preproduction*

As the film had to be completed in time for the preview screening of MFA Filmmaking student films on December 17, 2015, the director did not have a lot of time to prepare. Preproduction took around 2 and half months.

The director started writing the script early September 2015. With the guidance of her thesis adviser Professor Changjae Lee, she made 6 major revisions and the final version was finished only 2 days before the actual filming.

Recruiting members of the film crew started late September. Her assistant director Gayeon Shin, co-producer Seokwoo Jeong, art director Hyeonseung Kim, and editor Woosung Hwang were all MFA Filmmaking students of Chung-Ang University. On the other hand, her lighting director Seokjae An and sound mixers Sihun Lee and Cheolhun Ham were outsourced. Her friends Nelly Strickler and Molly Siddall helped her as the scripter and boom operator respectively. Her classmates Haeseong Jeong, Jemin Shin and Zhao Shuai helped her as part of the camera and lighting teams.

Casting and location hunting were done simultaneously from the last week of October. The director had a difficult time casting Anna's role because there were not a lot of Korean actresses who could speak fluent English. She also had trouble looking for a funeral hall that was inexpensive, appropriate for the script, and available for filming. Most funeral halls either cost too much or wouldn't allow filming.

Lastly, rehearsals and general staff meetings were done numerous times from the second week of November.

B. *Production*

Filming was done from November 28 to 30, 2015. Due to budget constraints, it was done over only 3 days. Instead of doing it chronologically, it was filmed in the most efficient manner possible taking the locations into

consideration. All of the interior scenes were filmed during the first day; all of the exterior scenes were filmed during the second day; all of the airport and taxi scenes were filmed during the last day.

The main actresses of the film were very cooperative and professional. Communication was not a big problem because Liz Cha (the actress who played Anna) knew how to speak fluent English and could translate for the director if the director's Korean skills were not good enough to articulate what she wanted to say. Therefore, directing the main actresses' scenes went rather smoothly.

However, it was a different case for the kids who played Jihun and Junseo's characters and the extras who played the mourners' characters. All of them were very talented, but because they were a little bit inexperienced, they were awkward at times. Thus, several retakes had to be done in order to get the desired acting. This consequently caused some delays to the already full schedule.

Although the director and her team were able to finish the filming, this was only after removing and merging some of the shots. The director originally wanted various angles and sizes of the same scene, but she had to economize and focused only on the most important shots.

C. Postproduction

The postproduction phase started soon after the filming ended. Because the movie was shot entirely in 4K Raw, the data had to be converted to mp4 files first so that editing could be done more efficiently. With almost 3TB worth of data, conversion took about 3 days.

After data conversion, the director worked closely with her editor and was able to finish the first cut of the film on December 16, 2015. This version was shown to the director's professors and peers in a preview screening of MFA Filmmaking student films in Chung-Ang University.

Because some parts of the film's narrative were weak, additional filming had to be done. After several meetings with the cast and crew, the additional filming was done on March 27, 2016. The second cut of the film (without proper sound design and color correction) was completed on April 22, 2016. This version was shown to the film's main crew. After gathering their comments and waiting for the editor to finish his own documentary project, the final version was completed on August 7, 2016.

7. Distribution and Reception

After its completion, the film has been submitted (and is continually being submitted) to various local and international film festivals. The director is still waiting for responses from those institutions, so the film has not been screened publicly anywhere except within the premises of Chung-Ang University.

According to the director's professors and peers from her major, *An Unexpected Visit* showcased great

improvement in the director's filmmaking skills. Compared to her first short film *Memories of the Heart* (2014), her storytelling and choice of shots became more sophisticated. It should be noted that the director had no prior experience in filmmaking before coming to South Korea in 2013.

8. Conclusion

Despite the challenges and difficulties experienced before, during, and after filming, *An Unexpected Visit* did not turn out as a failure. At the very least, it was able to convey the director's intended message – the culture shock experienced by a foreigner in South Korea, the awkwardness of a first meeting, and the idea that family is family.

Although the film garnered generally positive feedback from her professors and peers, the director understands that there are a lot of things she could still improve on. She was able to learn a lot from making this film and she was able to expand her network. That is why this experience was extremely valuable to her.

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Biography



Bianca Pamela N. Alcera was born on October 2, 1989 in Pasay City, Philippines. She graduated cum laude with a BS Computer Science degree from De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines in 2009. She then worked at Hewlett-Packard AP Limited as a Business Analyst / Technology Consultant for almost 4 years before coming to South Korea to pursue her dream of filmmaking. She has recently completed her MFA Filmmaking course at Chung-Ang University, Seoul, South Korea and she is currently working on her graduation film and thesis. To date, she has written, directed, and produced two short films – *Memories of the Heart* (2014) and *An Unexpected Visit* (2016) – and has participated in the production of numerous student short films.