

CNN, Hollywood's disaster images, and terrorism's political sublime. If the sublime is an aesthetic at risk, it can also be the aesthetic of a misfortune turned into a blessing. A variety of folk belief, traditional, and new religion prospered in Sindoan, in the foothills of Gyeryongsan Mountain. They were all eclipsed in the 1970s and 1980s by the New Village Movement and the relocation of Gyeryongdae Joint Forces headquarters. There are no longer gods flying in the sky; instead, almost every hour, the sonic booms of fighter jets reverberate. There is no room left for mysticism, romanticism, and idealism. Yet I am attracted to the fact that this undeniable absence still gives us a shock. This is an encounter with something. It is not an encounter with a reality that is assumed to be there, and that can be revealed merely by overcoming "false consciousness." Rather, it is an encounter with the violence accompanying the strange absence of a reality that is presumed to be there.



One of Sindoan's religious organizations in the 1960s.  
Image provided by Kwon Tae-young, Gyeryong City Hall

Translated from Korean by Doryun Chong

## THE WOUND OF TRADITION

Patrick D. Flores

Park Chan-kyong's critical reflections on his work *Sindoan* offer a rare glimpse into how an artist thinks through the translation of aesthetic production, its formalization and materialization. In doing so, he effectively dissolves the dichotomy between intellectual and artistic labor. In fact, he braids the two so that art achieves the ecology that its potential and its public deserve. It must be noted that Park dares to converse with very difficult, if not intractable, questions of theory, and provokes us with uncanny comparisons across cultural, and therefore epistemic, schemas. In this regard, we are reminded of the Philippine's national hero Jose Rizal's novel *Noli Me Tangere* (Touch Me Not, 1887). In one of its passages, the main character Crisostomo Ibarra is confounded by a double, diabolical vision, the *demonio de las comparaciones*. To quote:

The sight of the botanical garden drove away his gay reminiscences: the devil of comparisons placed him before the botanical gardens of Europe, in the countries where much effort and much gold are needed to make a leaf bloom or a bud open; and even more, to those of the colonies, rich and well-tended, and all open to the public. Ibarra removed his gaze, looked right, and there saw old Manila, still surrounded by its walls and moats, like an anemic young woman in a dress from her grandmother's best."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> José Rizal, *Noli Me Tangere*, trans. Ma. Soledad Lacson-Locsin (Manila: Bookmark, 1996), 67.

In this particular incident, the returning native to the potential post-colony that is the Philippines would be bedeviled or bewitched by visions dissolving into each other. He would be confused in the sense of being able to mingle seemingly disparate worlds. The historian Benedict Anderson translates the Spanish phrase as “the specter of comparisons.” But the Filipino novelist Patricio Mariano has a more robust, more sanguine instinct when he proposes “the temptation of affinities” or “the enchantment of semblances.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Park’s ruminations on the sublime bears some spectral element. But more than spectral, it can be productively apprehended as animate. This is most striking when he describes the moment of shock, as if he had been terrified by something that escapes or eludes his ability to grasp in language, both culturally and again epistemologically:

One day, I had an accidental encounter with Gyeryongsan Mountain and an indescribable shock came over me. Though covered in snow, with reflection from the full moon the mountain revealed itself in its glorious fullness even in the middle of the night.<sup>3</sup>

The novelist-patriot José Rizal, however, would surmount this impasse of being petrified into speechlessness in the face of terrible glory, a fullness that is too overwhelming for intellect or for words. In a toast to the triumph of the Philippine painter-patriot Juan Luna in Madrid in 1884, in which his painting *Spoliarium* (1884) was awarded one of the three gold medals, he allegorizes the scene of gladiators being despoiled at the cellar

2 For further discussion, see Patrick D. Flores, “Polytropic Philippine: Intimating the World in Pieces,” in *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-making*, ed. Michelle Antoinette and Caroline Turner (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2014), 47–65.

3 Park Chan-kyong, “On *Sindoan*: Some Scattered Views on Tradition and ‘The Sublime,’” trans. Doryun Chong, in *Sindoan*, exh. cat. (Seoul: Atelier Hermès, 2008), 7.

of the Roman coliseum as emblematic of the colonial condition. This is one moment of the description of the prospective sublime. The other moment is the demonstration of how the nature that catalyzes the event is the same nature that crafts the metaphorical utterance:

In *El Spoliarium* through the canvas that is not mute, can be heard the tumult of the multitude, the shouting of the slaves, the metallic creaking of the armor of the corpses, the sobs of the bereaved, the murmurs of prayer, with such vigor and realism as one hears the din of thunder in the midst of the crash of the cataracts or the impressive and dreadful tremor of the earthquake. The same nature that engenders such a phenomenon intervenes also in those strokes.<sup>4</sup>

I have written elsewhere that the last line is instructive, because nature is portrayed as an artisan that enables the facture of an artifact that is cherished as art, a kind of fabrication that registers the layered sound of things and people in the charged tenor of words. Nature, therefore, does not transpire as something outside art; in fact, it is an intrinsic force that works through and on art as if it were a form of will within a will to form. This sentiment liaises with the painting acting like “natural history”: the assemblage of art as both natural and historical overcomes the duality between nature/human and object/subject. The painting *Spoliarium* becomes an inscribing and an inscription, a stroke, and contingently, a signature.<sup>5</sup>

Rizal’s translation, or better still, conversion, of the experience of the sublime as an adumbration of post-colonial allegory might partially respond to the question Park poses when

4 Patrick D. Flores, “‘Nature Intervenes in Strokes’: Sensing the End of the Colony and The Origin of the Aesthetic,” *Filozofski Vestnik* 28, no. 2 (2007): 239.

5 Ibid.

he asks: “How has the sublime manifested itself in Korean and Northeast Asian cultures? If certain traditions correspond to the sublime, in what ways might we now make works of art, and what meanings and values would such representations have?”<sup>6</sup> In this interrogation of the sublime, he implicates cultures and traditions as possibly mediating the sensuousness of the material of the sublime experience. It is a cogent perturbation on the part of Park because it clarifies the experience by complexifying it with the equivalent energy of cultural formation and the subjectivity of tradition as it intervenes in the strokes of talent.

Park comes to this intersection of the sublime and tradition through a series of gestures. First, he intuits an accidental encounter with Gyeryongsan Mountain, beholding its fullness in the middle of the night and referencing the sublime as a generative matrix of the beholding. This is a tricky philosophical premise, one that Park subjects to resemblances in terms of the “postmodern” and the “Orientalist.” The oscillation between these two registers is interesting. How can the sublime be grasped in terms of a discourse that exceeds the self-consciousness of the modern? And how can the sublime be referenced by colonial appropriation? These questions should make us realize that they are actually symptoms of the density of the affect of the sublime and its theorization: that the sublime cannot be easily reduced to the modern and the colonial. It has to be thought through in terms of its excess and its misrecognition. It is quite telling that Park points to the ritual scenes in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) as indices of the sublime via the techniques of montage. We can further complicate this argument by the fact that the supposed sublime here is some kind of a “body double,” in the words of the artist Stephanie Syjuco, in the sense that it is the Philippines that provides the locale and the persona but is not named.<sup>7</sup> Such non-naming of the source of the sublime

6 Park, “On *Sindoan*,” 7.

7 See Flores, “Polytropic Philippine: Intimating the World in Pieces.”

lays bare the politics and the poetics of the postmodern and the Orientalist.

Park then reflects on how the sublime manifests and translates in art. He asks this in relation to the specificity of the source of the sublime, which is the mountain. Such specificity may be viewed as decidedly materialist or normatively iconographic and representational. This leads him to wonder if the demand for specificity is an affirmation of Orientalism through the negation of the non-specific.

It is at this point that he foregrounds his critical response to tradition and nationalism. In light of this critique of the traditional and the nationalist, his reflections might lead him to an explication of time. The sublime may be a conceptual entry point into time. The Filipino soldier and journalist Carlos P. Romulo once proposed the idea of Asia as time. According to him:

Asia is Time. I do not mean clock of calendar time. I mean Time as a kind of passing, a movement as well as a process, a growth that has in it the ingredients of decay. It is likewise a response to seasons of change, at once passive and impassive, the outcome of which is Age. . . . How old is the Filipino nation? An impossible age, and certainly unacceptable to our national pride, if the answer goes back only to Magellan. . . . Thus the truism that we in Asia live in a number of centuries simultaneously . . . at the Conservatory of Music of the University of the Philippines, we offer studies in Mozart as well as in the ancient instrument of community and religious life, the brass gong.<sup>8</sup>

He would then propose: “What the Asian wishes to achieve is a contemporaneity and an urgency of expression preferably in his

8 Carlos P. Romulo, “Asia in the American Mind,” in *The Asian Mystique: A Clarification of Asia’s New Image* (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1970), 64.

native tongue.”<sup>9</sup>

Romulo advances the view of multiplicity or plurality of temporalities within the singularity of Asia. Park for his part wishes to postpone the consummation of the national, which may be partly derived from tradition. It is worth quoting Park at length at this point:

This is why all I do with regard to tradition is always to postpone it, like a patient not wanting to go to hospital or a student not wanting to do his homework. However, the more you postpone something, the more grave a countenance it assumes. Ultimately, like a rock that you trip over because you have neglected to put it away, it becomes something that you end up regretting somewhere down the line. Might this recurrent return of postponement and the subject of tradition be a certain obsession, or could it be a type of wisdom that has yet to be defined clearly? At least one thing is clear: Whether it is an obsession or a prediction of a certain wisdom, tradition is something that touches on “the unconscious,” a force that grabs the back of your head, a fascination that disturbs “my modernization,” and, to use recent parlance, a typical “Other.” The anxiety that I am outside of “this” seems always to take up half of my capacity for thinking and cultural reception. Therefore, what is more interesting to me than the reconstitution or modernization of tradition is the notion that tradition—as a kind of Other and in the sense that it appears like an unknowable specter—is a sort of “local wound,” which has only symptoms but no identifiable scientific diagnosis. If modernity was a traumatic experience in the recent past, then tradition is the resulting wound.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Carlos P. Romulo, “English and the Interpretation of the Asian World,” in *The Asian Mystique: A Clarification of Asia’s New Image* (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1970), 72.

<sup>10</sup> Park, “On Sindoan,” 9.

It is uncanny that Park looks to Orientalism as a possible source of the trouble of the sublime in relation to the vexing demand of an identity. As Edward W. Said points out in his reflections on the “non-European,” “Identity cannot be thought or worked through itself alone; it cannot constitute or even imagine itself without that radical originary break or flaw which will not be repressed . . . and therefore always outside the identity inside which so many have stood, and suffered—and later, perhaps, even triumphed.”<sup>11</sup> Said makes mention of a “troubling, disabling, destabilizing secular wound,” a trope that Park likewise turns towards.<sup>12</sup>

This wound evokes the trauma of colonialism and resistance. Park probes religion as the site in which this is inscribed and therefore the site of the persistent haunting. It is in religion, which in many ways is the foundation of the modern and the secular nation-state, that the contestation between repression and re-possession takes place. After all, Talal Asad has argued for the “anthropology of the secular,”<sup>13</sup> and Carl Schmitt has proposed that, “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”<sup>14</sup> Park looks at religion and culture in a very nuanced way, scanning the many turns from resistance to decline, from revival to an anticipation of a possible future for a reclaimed past, from “amazing tenacity” to “vicissitudes,” from modernization to failure, from absorption to peculiarity, and on to some kind of immunity from colonization. He offers a critique of an easy syncretism that merely assimilates an entity that succumbs to its hegemonic potency. According to Park:

More than anything else, traditional religious culture

<sup>11</sup> Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2003), 54.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1–21.

<sup>14</sup> See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 36.

is the most significant trauma. For instance, it was Donghak (Eastern Learning) that fought most fiercely against Japanese imperialism and was most tragically defeated by it. Donghak is the greatest historical wound in the course of the modernization of Korea.

How, then, does Donghak fare today? Although the philosophy of Choi Shi-hyeong (whose sobriquet is Haewol) is at times revived in the context of the ecological movement, it remains weak. The Cheondogyo Temple in Anguk-dong, Seoul, seems forlorn in contrast with those huge Gothic-style buildings of numerous mega-churches in South Korea. On the CD produced by Cheondogyo for the purpose of proselytizing, one can hear Shicheonju, the main incantation of Donghak, which is distressing to listen to because it has been sadly arranged for Western-style classical singing. How about Buddhism? These days, Buddhist temples find themselves in a pitiful state, as they have been renovated to house enormous gold-painted Buddha statues and expanded in ignorant ways that diverge from the rules of traditional temple design. That the Daoist School has managed to survive in the guise of Gukseondo and Danhak Seonwon is an incredible feat. It is questionable, however, whether it has any cultural significance beyond being a kind of fitness method. Although shamanism persists with amazing tenacity, when seen in a larger light, it seems to have caved in to its own vicissitudes, in the process becoming even more of a noncultural phenomenon than in the past. In the place of these, I anticipate that we could encounter, in the midst of the traces of the still remaining “failed (traditional) religious culture,” a culture that has not yet been colonized.

As a result, we are used to critiquing Korean folk beliefs, new religions, mountain worship, and so forth, by using the standard of sophisticated dogmas. . . . It is well

known in the fields of religious studies and folk cultural studies in South Korea that shamanistic beliefs have been absorbed by Christianity and other religions to give birth to a peculiarly “Korean religious culture” that is strongly tinged with mysticism.<sup>15</sup>

This struggle for distinction, along with the push and pull of integration and assertion for the subjectivity of a life-world, embeds contradictions within the process of modernization, the consciousness of modernity, and the form of modernism. It unhinges these three aspects of the “new” and the “now” in the sense that they are maddened. Park fleshes out this effect very acutely in the cinema when he talks about the predilections of certain Korean filmmakers that lead to pathologies: “This is also why their films do not conclude with a happy victory of modernism but rather with tragedies like violent dissolution or the self-destruction of a traditional society. Just as the film *Gyeryongsan* ends with an infatuation followed by an act of arson by a lowly man who harbors discontent with the leader, another film, *Iodo*, which was directed by Kim Ki-young and based on a story by Lee Cheong-jun, ends with the madness of necrophilia.”<sup>16</sup>

It might be interesting to conclude this text with a thought on mysticism. The sublime in the beginning of Park’s ruminations is subjected to the political economy and historiography of religious culture. In the same vein, the latter are calibrated by the anthropology and activism of a local spiritual cosmology. The condensation of these valences may be found in this volatile discourse of mysticism. According to Park:

At this stage, depictions of the past collapse into a certain unidentifiably old mysticism, while that very mysticism

<sup>15</sup> Park, “On *Sindoan*” 11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

is itself used as surface ornamentation. The past becomes a thin layer covering the present. The past is described as a society, where values of the present world are equally applicable. The only difference is that there are treasures instead of credit cards, and swords instead of guns. . . . There are no longer gods flying in the sky there. Instead, almost every hour, the sonic booms of fighter jets reverberate. There is definitely no room left for mysticism, romanticism, and idealism. Yet I am attracted to the fact that this undeniable absence still gives us a shock. This is a certain “encounter.” It is not an encounter with a reality that is assumed to be there and can be revealed merely by removing “false consciousnesses,” but rather an encounter with the violence that accompanies the strange absence of a reality that is presumed to be there.<sup>17</sup>

Let me mark some intertexts to Park’s contemplations. In 1974, Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa organized the exhibition *Towards a Mystical Reality* exhibition in Kuala Lumpur in which they endeavored to advance a “mental/meditative/mystical” viewpoint of reality as opposed to a “spatio/temporal/sensorial” viewpoint of the Western artist. In their manifesto-essay, they would proclaim:

By drawing attention to the event, we are indirectly alluding to the “essence” or “spirit” of the work which exists by virtue of the event. One is as a result conscious that the most mundane objects in our everyday situations are charged with the “essence” of events. This notion of objects possessing “spirit” (or “*semangat*”)<sup>18</sup> is not difficult to grasp if one is an Oriental. The Oriental artist has always striven to emphasize the “spiritual essence”

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 13–15.

<sup>18</sup> Editor’s note: *semangat* is Indonesian word for “spirit.”

rather than the outward form!<sup>19</sup>

In this particular case, the mystical becomes a hyperflexible term that mediates the conceptual and the modern, and simultaneously inflects the local. It flirts, as does Park’s elucidation of the sublime, with Orientalism. That being said, the artists in Malaysia try to resuscitate the spirit as the animating atmosphere of their work and their exhibition, a foil to the inveterate modern of the exasperating Western. There is both danger and delicacy in this operation. And it is at this intersection that I quote the writer Mochtar Lubis as he comments on mysticism in Indonesian politics in the Sukarno period of the fifties and sixties. In Lubis’s mind: “The Sukarno regime was the ideal model of a situation where it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain where the political leader ended and the *dukun* (the medicine man, the fortune-teller, the mystic guru) began.”<sup>20</sup> He explicates mytho-mysticism as the “combination of mysticism in its religio-mystical sense or philosophico-mystical experience with mythological and animistical beliefs.”<sup>21</sup> Lubis is suspicious of this belief and its inevitable instrumentalization by an authoritarian figure like Sukarno, who thrives on talismanic appearances and rituals, if not affectations. In his reckoning, “combined with a very strong belief in mythology and the still deeply-rooted ancient animism, the present mytho-mystical schools in Java become a potent centrifugal force, a barrier to cohesion, unity, and modernization.”<sup>22</sup> He advocates a “return to rationality” and ends with a plea, invoking the presence of Gatotkacha, an extremely

<sup>19</sup> Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, “Towards a Mystical Reality: A Documentation of Jointly Initiated Experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa,” in *Reactions—New Critical Strategies: Narratives in Malaysian Art*, vol. 2, ed. Nur Hanim Khairuddin, Beverly Yong and T. K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: Rogue Art, 2013), 50.

<sup>20</sup> Mochtar Lubis, “Mysticism in Indonesian Politics,” *Solidarity*, vol. 2, no. 10 (1967): 22.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 25.

virile stalwart of the Mahabharata who flies, gifted with magical powers, and from whom Sukarno would derive inspiration: “After defeating Communism, we must not let Gatotkacha defeat modernization.”<sup>23</sup>

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23 Ibid., 27.

COSMOTECHNIC IN DARK 20TH CENTURY:  
PARK CHAN-KYONG’S DIS-PARACOLONIAL MACHINE

Huang Chien-Hung

Park Chan-kyong continues to contemplate the history of South Korea in his artistic endeavors, specifically the period from the Japanese colonial period to the Korean War, the Cold War and the subsequent dictatorial regime, followed by democratization. Thus pondering, critiquing, and confronting colonial domination have become a pervasive “attitude” in his artistic work. However, he makes significant contributions to the comprehension and understanding of field investigations, unlike numerous narrative productions prevalent in the development of contemporary art that are based on cultural studies, European and American critical theories, or Asian historical studies. He does not habitually analyze and reconstruct relevant historical experiences and cultural meanings through dynastic history or through temporalities of a historical cross-section, but instead, applies a concept of cosmic time rooted in Korean shamanism, Asian mythology, and literati thought to delve into various events and experiences. This work of contemplating Korean history and its relationships of dominance through “cosmic time” seems to have developed in parallel to questions of the “Anthropocene” that have emerged over the past two decades<sup>1</sup>. However, as the

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1 Cf. the introduction and beginning of first part in Christophe Bonneuil, Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *Evenement Anthropocène. La terre, histoire et nous* (Paris: Seuil, 2016). “What historical narratives can we offer of the last quarter of a millennium, able to help us change our world-views and inhabit the Anthropocene more lucidly, respectfully and equitably? Such is the object of this book.” (13), then they tried to present how to apprehend the understanding based on the