

Park Chan-kyong: From the Memories of the Cold War to the Sublime

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Introduction

I am honored to take part in this auspicious occasion of the exhibition of contemporary video art from South Korea, because it is a rare occasion to discuss art from a country that is also rarely in the U.S. news, apart from its conflict with the 'axis of evil,' or other catastrophic events. I take this an opportune event because we are here to discuss art of an Other, not as some exotic culture from a distant land, and hopefully not as a continuation of some essentialist discourse of Orientalism, but to explore some challenging artworks that arise from complex socio-historical circumstances. Indeed, the geopolitical predicament of two Koreas is a result of the Korean War, a proxy war, and therefore a misnomer, and the national division, for which the U.S. holds a lion's share. The War in Korea was but one part of the continuous successions of violent ruptures that took up nearly the entirety of the 20th century. In the six decades since the war, we have witnessed Korea's relentless drive for modernization, and in the course the military dictatorship undertook violent obliteration of all that they considered obstructive to that drive. Among the oppressed subjectivities are women, the social underclass, workers, physically handicapped, racially mixed, homosexuals, pro-North left-leaning intellectuals, politicians, and artists, among others. In my thinking the three artists included in *Image Clash* represent resistance to totalizing normality that overlook the violence committed in the past and present, creating fissures in our collective memories and consciousness. The exhibition is timely because the violence that has been inflicting unto the Other in Korea is not a thing of the past. Rather, we are dealing with the lapsed memories of traumas that actually and disturbingly recur these very days.

I would like to contextualize Park Chan-kyong's oeuvre over the past decade. Born in 1965, and Educated at Seoul National University and the California Institute of the Arts, Park Chan-kyong is arguably one of the most important and influential artists of his generation in South Korea. Well-versed in western art history, theory and esthetics, Park has been maintaining multiple positionality as artist, critic, and educator, and has cofounded and served on editorial boards of critical journals *forum a* and *BOL*, organized and participated in numerous panels and symposia, lectured widely at universities, museums, alternative spaces, and film festivals. He is now active as a full-fledged filmmaker.

Doryun Chong, Curator at MoMA, has made a succinct introduction on Park's complex work and his relationship to two Koreas: "Park has addressed in his work South Korea and many of its political and philosophical vicissitudes, contradictions, and pathologies." Further, for Park, North Korea "is the mirror image or the inseparable Other of South Korea. Because the former remains infinitely beyond a reliable grasp, it motivates him to dig deeper into the latter, rendering the very local situation in which he lives increasingly bizarre and impenetrable." In his work, "local specificities are never purely local and can be comprehended only through extra-local, international vectors of design and

accident.” Hence, Park’s work may be characterized by his “keen interest in finding and analyzing unexpected parallels and connections” through dialectical juxtaposition of image and text as a form of essay writing.¹

3 years ago, with *Sindoan*, Park made a decisive shift in his work: from use of still photographs to practice of experimental documentary, and from representation of extreme manifestations of geopolitics of the Cold War in Korea to exploration of the failed visions of utopias and the sublime. While Park has retained his intensive research based practice, and the use of archival materials in his clinical pursuit of “combining information and speculation,”² he has begun his foray into storytelling through cinematic reconstructions and anthropological investigations. Beginning with *Sindoan* we begin to witness his desire to tell a story that harkens back to his own childhood experience of local religious practices. *Sindoan* is pivotal because of his attention given to recuperation of Korean traditional culture without exoticizing it, but rather to articulate what he calls “Asian Gothic” through the experiences and narratives of the subalterns. His films are increasingly informed by lyricism, humor, and acknowledgment of finitude and vulnerability of mankind, and our inherent need for belief.

In order to navigate the complex oeuvre of Park, I suggest a set of key words: Minjung art (grass roots, people’s), North Korea, the Cold War, violence, trauma, the archive, memory and counter memory, media and spectacle, recuperation of histories, politics of representation, juxtaposition, tradition, Orientalism, and the sublime. Park utilizes allegory, montage, and juxtaposition as aesthetic strategies for resistance against amnesia through sublimation of the trauma, and against building monument. I will now follow the trajectory of his development through selection of his works leading up to *Sindoan*, and thereafter.

SETS

In the aftermath of Japanese colonialism and the Korean War, the autocratic regimes enforced the project of nation-building in South Korea through nationalism and anti-communism. The demise of the military regimes in the early 1990s resulted in a belated urgency and an excessive collectivization of memory, especially in the form of blockbuster action films that supposedly commemorate the painful past. The reality is that the traumatic past has lapsed into a major source for the entertainment industry, which has seized onto the public’s explosive responses. Such unprecedented enthusiasm for films like *Shiri* and *JSA* may have largely to do with the more relaxed review standards established under the democratically elected government, which now tolerates representation of the North-South relationship.³ Yet it is also indicative of the extent of repression by the government and thoroughly internalized self-censorship on the part of the citizens.

The commonality among these films is the instigation of a historical amnesia by decontextualizing the historical events and exaltation of violence. Park produced *Sets* in response to such films. In his own words:

In *Sets*, the series of photographs of the North Korean National Film Studios, the Seoul Studio Film Complex, and a “reconstructed” bomb-ridden neighborhood situated on a South Korean military training camp, are presented in chronological

order, beginning with the Japanese occupation of Korea and ending with the present... The sets of Seoul streets that are located in the North Korean National Film Studios today remind us of Seoul streets of the past... These sets appear to be faithful reconstructions of streets of former Seoul, but since they are located in North Korea none of us can visit them, and only older generations of South Koreans can feel nostalgic towards them and confirm their veracity. The design of sets of Seoul streets under siege that are used for South Korean military exercises is based on certain neighborhoods in Seoul, but it gives us the impression of a place that has been invaded and occupied by North Korea. The sets of streets in the Seoul Studio Film Complex appear to date from the '70s, and it could possibly be perceived as somewhere in North Korea today. The photographs of the parallel lines that actually exist in the DMZ were taken in the outskirts of Seoul or in the Seoul Studio Film Complex. Instead of a clearly mapped territory and a simple historical description of ordered events, a foreign space and a complex history have entered into these places. The Joint Security Area (JSA) is now everywhere. ⁴

The urban landscapes of *Sets* are characterized by the paradoxical presence of the fictitiousness of the sets and their facticity. As double representations of pictures within pictures, the way Park frames the sets are decidedly Brechtian in that he often reveals the artifice at work: the physical means by which the façades are supported. Situated between fiction and reality, the images challenge us to recognize the heterogeneity and constructed nature inherent in collective, or *collected*, memory.⁵

Drawing his interest in psychoanalytical theory, Park presents his collected images as a “repetition of the repressed as symptoms or signifier.”⁶ Park insightfully suggested, “formation of psychic wound presupposes continual training of oblivion.” He states, “A wounded memory is oppressed by consciousness. Without oppression there is no visible wound. And for the wound to be psychological, it must happen in a continuum of amnesia.”⁷ For a long time Koreans had been trained to internalize the forgetting of their own self-other: North Korea. Park sardonically refers to the images of *Sets* as “zombies” of history that will awaken us. He desires these zombies to arrive in multiple groups of constructed “ruins” of militarized modernity, and take up the fight, as it were, against the culture industry largely responsible for the lethal amnesia.

Power Passage - Mutual Porosity: Media and Ideology⁸

“Here in the South is the loss of memory, and there in the North is the excess of memory. Here is the futurism, there is the anachronism.” – from *Power Passage*

As in *SETS*, Park continues collecting, rearranging, and re-editing preexisting materials in order to formulate new meanings from the porosity and interpenetration of politics, ideology, fantasy, mass media, and science.

In 1975, a Cold War year in which the Apollo spacecraft of USA and Soyuz of the former Soviet attempted a docking project in space (Apollo-Soyuz Test Project; ASTP), the South Koreans discovered several underground tunnels intended as passageways for North Korea's invasion of the South. Here the images of the tunnels embody invisible growth. Like malignant tumors, they expand underneath the territorial surfaces. For Koreans, they represented terror, fear, and grotesquery; for the foreigners the subject of absurdity and scorn. *Power Passage* discloses such an ironic contrast in history while imagining scientific and technological collaboration between both North and South Korea, despite the continuing conflicts surrounding the nuclear arms race.

Power Passage is a two-channel video that consists of materials culled from both factual sources as well as fictional imagination. One of the channels, also entitled *Power Passage*, takes the form of a visual essay in its arrangement and juxtaposition of still photographs and text. The images include the media photographs of ASTP, the underground tunnels, and official stamps published on the occasion of the launching of satellites, among others. The texts are succinct narratives and quotations concerning the relationship between power and space. For example: Park quotes a Situationist, Eduardo Rothe: "Power, which cannot tolerate a vacuum, has never forgiven celestial regions for being open territory left open to the imagination."

The other channel of *Power Passage*, entitled *Special Passage Effects*, consists of an edited compilation of some of the Hollywood films that capitalize on the motif of such "conquest" of the universe. The films include Robert Altman's *Countdown* (1968), John Sturges' *Marooned* (1969), and Peter Hyams' *2010: The Year We Make Contact*. These fragmented filmic sequences all show encounters within "passages" in the outer space. For example, the American astronauts discover the dead Soviet counterparts on the Moon in *Countdown*; in the film *2010*, as a result of the Soviet Union's (fictional) attack on America, the passageway linking American and Soviet satellites gets blocked, and therefore interactions between the spacemen of the two nations are halted. The most telling example would be the scene depicting the rendezvous between the American and Soviet astronauts in *Countdown*. As the American is removed from his orbit, the Soviet counterpart rescues and safely re-situates him. As Park indicates in his texts, the interesting fact is that these science fiction films influenced the Apollo/Soyuz project, rather than the other way around. The imaginative explorations in the media feed the actual experiments, and they subsequently sustained the reciprocal cycles.

The connecting yet disjunctive device between the two screens amplifies a sense of disparity. *Special Passage Effect* is accompanied by a voice-over narration of a middle-aged woman sobs while recounting her guilt of leaving behind her husband in North Korea during the War. The sad conversation is juxtaposed against the image of vast universe. The historical distance and cultural gap existing between such fictional depictions of space age exploration and humanistic endeavors, including the U.S. astronaut rescuing the Soviet counterpart, and the sentimental conversation between the victims of ideology produces an indelible sense of discord and estrangement.

"A film about the past is always a search for the past."⁹ A film that deals with the past is always confined within history. Then how does Park relocate the archival in the

present? He shifts the focus from the past into the future by suggesting a project that may be possible but difficult to materialize: a rendezvous of spacecrafts between North and South Korea, like the Apollo and Soyuz. Park goes as far as suggesting that in 2010 the docking project would come to fruition. But of course this did not take place last year, and it may never happen due to the politically volatile reality of the Korean peninsula. Does Park actually believe that the two Koreas will or have to undertake such a test project in the future? Such a blurred boundary between reality and fictitiousness is a feature of this essay/film, working as a fictional documentary, or a documentary-like fiction. As such, it is located on the continuum of a form of intelligence, as a work of writing.

Flying

In Park's oeuvre, *Flying* is the last piece that deals directly with the Cold War politics. In June 2000, after 50 years of division, the first North-South summit took place. For the first time since the war, a direct flight between the two Koreas was inaugurated. President Kim Dae-jung and the South Korean delegation flew from Seoul to Pyongyang. At that time, Park was given sponsorship by several TV stations to work with the unedited source videos for this event. The edited version is twelve minutes long, with an accompanying music "Double Concerto" by Isang Yun, the Korean expatriate composer who died in his exile in Germany.¹⁰ We witness the North Korean landscape through the airplane windows and the greetings by the mobilized mass. Interrupting this seemingly auspicious occasion are the historical film footages of the American bombing that resulted in millions of civilian deaths during the War. Park conjures the images of the nightmares that may still be dormant in the unconscious of North Koreans.

THREE CEMETERIES

Three Cemeteries consists of three photographs with concise descriptions of each of the graveyard, accompanied by the ambient noise of the sites. The first image of the site is entitled: Jeokgun-myo, or The Cemeteries of the Enemies, located in Paju. The caption reads: "The cemetery contains anonymous North Korean and Chinese soldiers who died in the Korean War. North Korean armed spies who were killed in South Korea are also buried here. North Korea denies the dispatch of spies to the South. The graves face North." The second image is at Sangpae-dong Cemetery in Dongducheon. The caption states: "Officially 1,224 bodies, mostly anonymous female sex workers are buried here. They worked at the U.S. military campside town in Dongducheon. Camp Casey, Camp Hovey, Camp Castle, Camp Nimble, and Camp Gimbolds are the U.S. army bases in Dongducheon. U.S. soldiers called the area "Little California."" Finally, the last cemetery is located in Donghwa Gyeongmo Park, Paju: "This public cemetery is dedicated to those who lost their homeland in North Korea because of the division. The yard is demarcated into North Korean administrative districts. The land of North Korea is in sight from the "best spot."" The combination of the restrained images and the unemotional captions effectively remind us of the extremely convoluted politics and the human tolls on the Korean peninsula.¹¹

SINDOAN and the Sublime¹²

With *Sindoan* Park takes a major turn in his work; from critical analysis of the relationship between the politics, media, and representation during the Cold War, to engagement with the local religious traditions and the sublime. *Sindoan*, literally meaning “new capital,” sheds light on the obliterated narratives of the religious individuals and organizations that once prospered in Gyeryong Mountain area near Daejeon city.

Park explains that the impetus for making *Sindoan* stems from his encounter with Gyeryeong mountain, which he described as an overwhelmingly awe-inspiring, producing an ineffable shock. He found it to be a sublime experience, perhaps because the overall appearance of Gyeryong mountain could be perceived from a distance, unlike most other mountains in Korea that are partially covered by neighboring mountains.

Park sites the well-known film *Tropical Malady* (2004) by Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul, especially the scene in which the protagonist confronts a tiger, or the ghost of a tiger, while in search of his lover who has supposedly become a tiger in a jungle. Even though he finds it a contemporary version of Orientalism he nevertheless feels “a strong solidarity with such a sensibility.” He likens this scene with his “childhood memory of seeing golden Buddha statues and paintings of deities and mountain spirits through candlelight and incense smoke in a temple deep in the mountains,” when his parents accompanied him to the distant relative’s funeral. Park believes that, in the high technological society of Korea where velocity of development determines the quality of life, mountain is a typical ‘other.’ For someone like Park who was raised as Catholic in “high-rise apartment complex, Korean traditional culture, especially religious culture, is unfamiliar from the get-go and may be even said to belong to the realm of imagination than to that of reality.” In short, traditional culture is the Other, which Park refers to as “local wound.” Park states that “If modernity was a traumatic experience in the recent past, then tradition remains as the wound.” *Sindoan* then may be seen as Park’s attempt to face that wound.

Park narrates the history of *Sindoan* in six chapters: through retrievals of archival photographs, interviews, cinematic reconstructions, and surreal enactment of indeterminate rituals. The past in the archival photographs becomes the present moments, and vice versa; voiceover narration of the sublime encounters experienced by the select religious figures are juxtaposed with the enactments of dreamy sequences.

In the first chapter of *Sindoan*, the narrator, a female shaman who keeps Samsindang (Three-deity Hall), recounts the story in which mountain spirit enters her body, and she gains certain supernatural power to the extent that she can cure the ills of numerous people. Like the tiger scene in *Tropical Malady*, most common people living in this era would find such narrative merely as a fantastic story. Not that Park necessarily believes the story of the encounter with the sublime terror; however, he is equally critical of our immediate tendency in treating it as a sham. Instead, Park seems to argue that sublime has to do with “our inability to form a clear mental conception of” such forceful experience, which makes us realize “our own inadequacy of our imagination and of the vast gulf between [such] experience and the thought we have about it.” We cannot encompass the

experience of the sublime “by thinking, and so it remains indiscernible or unnamable, undecidable, indeterminate, and unrepresentable.”¹³

Soon after his encounter with Gyeryong mountain Park learned that the place saw proliferation of hundreds of different religious organizations. However, through research Park discovered that the spiritual traditions founded in Sindoan have largely been regarded as superstitions at worst, and mysticism at best. In South Korea, the Catholic Church and various denominations of Protestant Churches have succeeded in becoming “naturalized,” as it were, and undergone exponential growth. Curiously, Christian faiths have absorbed certain traits of Shamanism, Confucianism, and even Daoism, and manifest as hybrid forms of local and foreign religions. Thus it is ironic is that the very sources that allowed the foreign religions to become domesticated and naturalized are now largely considered to be merely superstitions.

Indeed Park points out the historical fact that shamanism and Daoism were suppressed throughout Japanese colonial and modern and contemporary periods, and that in the wake of westernization and globalization, folk beliefs and traditional religions are now viewed simply as resources for tourism or products of mysticism. Thus Park criticizes Koreans’ tendency in appreciating Thomas Moore’s *Utopia* while deprecating the utopian aspirations found in Korean intellectual history. He states that prayers and incantations are essentially the same thing, but Koreans are prejudiced only against the latter. He insists that Koreans should reflect on their quick tendencies to judge the so-called “pseudo-religions,” their own habit of appreciating God over *Sangje*, which is simply a literal translation of God, and wine over *maggoli*, the local liquor made of rice.

Interestingly, *Sindoan* is not about an explication of his own experience of the sublime, the encounter with the mountain. Rather, Park retains his social constructionist¹⁴ position in unraveling the history of the religious sects, surviving individuals, and their beliefs. Nevertheless, in making this experimental documentary, Park continues to rely on the lessons of the Marxist, psychoanalytic, and deconstructive strategies used by the artists, such as Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, Thom Andersen and Harun Farocki, while at the same time reveals his own “mutation of connection and disconnection” with the archival materials.

In the following statement Park expresses his skepticism and belief in science, religion, and superstition, alluding to the inextricable triangulation of rational, irrational, and the spiritual in the human mind:

“If there is religion on the other side of modern science and technology, there is superstition on the other side of religion. I do not like modern science and technology, nor do I like organized religion. That does not mean that I can follow “superstitions.” The materialist’s cool brain is not my lot, either. Nevertheless, I like religion when it warns against the dangers of modern science and technology. I like superstitions that touch upon the unconscious of religions. I also like rational thinking when it rejects superstitions. For me, Gyeryong mountain stands proudly, or vaguely, in the midst of such thinking of mine.”

In other words, *Sindoan* is Park's way of expressing his experience of self-transcendence in confronting Gyeryong mountain, being neither "dependent on a pre-modern concept of essences – notions of a higher and essential reality – nor on scientifically verifiable criteria."¹⁵

From the perspective of reception of *Sindoan* outside of Korea, the most important question for me centers round the notion of Orientalism. Again, in discussing the tiger scene in *Tropical Malady*, why did Park call it a contemporary version of Orientalism, yet simultaneously he enthusiastically embraced it? To my mind that is not only because the motifs calls for new forms of narratives, but also due to the relatively impenetrable specificities of the cultural references that defy easy consumption on the part of the western minds.

In many ways I see Park resisting against reduction of local references for the sake of the "universal", or the abuse of the clichéd dictum "what is locally authentic is universal." In *Sindoan* I recognize the universality of the sublime experience, but the film would require greater effort on the part of the audience for its nuanced positioning in regard to the claim for the universal and the particular. To my mind, the use of traditional motifs that are employed by some of the renowned contemporary Korean artists, such as traditional Korean architecture, embroidered fabrics, and so on, run the risk of rendering Korean culture exotic, and their work vulnerable to Orientalism.¹⁶

Orientalism may be summed up as a "pervasive Western tradition of prejudiced outsider interpretations of the East, shaped by the attitudes of European imperialism." In other words, it implies that the non-West lacks the ability to interpret its own culture, while the West retains the power to interpret and control the non-West. In my opinion, the sheer force and complexity of the sublime experience that are represented in *Sindoan* defies the interpretation in the part of the viewer. That is, the film *Sindoan* itself may be interpreted, but the experience of the sublime depicted *in it* occupies the realm beyond our rational thinking and control. Hence, the foreignness and the potentially exotic aspects in the film become subsumed in the viewers' awareness of their own lack of ability to arrive at resolution with the subject of the film. Although Park relies on the deconstructive method of archival materials, constructed narratives, and juxtapositions, his take on what he calls "good Orientalism" that I see evident in the film alone is a major accomplishment.

Contemporary artists tend to shy away from identifying their work in terms of sublime, largely due to two reasons: given the history of totalitarian abuse of the "sublime effects" in modern times, and the tainted image of sublime in mass media and spectacle due to the vulgar depictions of sublime transcendence in promotion of various types of commodities.¹⁷ Despite this, Park openly claims the sublime through *Sindoan*, because he sees that the sublime experience is predicated on death, nature and the infinity of the universe, and as such it is a universal for all humanity. In fact Park insists on his claim on the sublime despite the fact that Kant "distinguished between peoples who are close to the sublime and those who are distant from it." Indeed Park is compelled to explore the sublime in the context of Korea and Northeast Asia.¹⁸ Thus *Sindoan* may be seen as Park's counter narrative to the dominant monoculture of sublime that has largely been discussed in terms of Western aesthetics and cultures.¹⁹ But that is not to say that Park is up to setting up an

East vs. West dichotomy in aesthetics here. Rather, Park is calling our attention to what he calls an encounter, an “encounter with the violence that accompanies the strange absence of a reality that is presumed to be there,” the violence that eradicated the old *Sindoan*, the violence that has left no room for “mysticism, romanticism, and idealism” in the psyche of contemporary Koreans.²⁰ In *Sindoan* today there is no gods flying in the sky but only sonic boom reverberates at every hour.

Sindoan as a Representation of Subalterns

Shifting gears, I would like to discuss *Sindoan* and his later films in the context of Park’s positionality in relation to minjung art movement. After the establishment of democratically elected government in the early 1990s, discussion of the oppressed and marginalized Other has become a common discourse. However, Park argues that it is perhaps the local religions that have suffered the greatest oppression in the history of modernization in South Korea. In his thinking, traditional religion has suffered the greatest trauma, especially *Donghak*, or Eastern Learning, which fought most fiercely against Japanese imperialism and was most tragically defeated by it.

Park considers himself having arrived at the last phase of minjung art movement. His recent attempt to delineate a genealogy between minjung art and post-minjung art was received by certain degree of antagonism and raised heated debates on the notion of the political in regards to visual art in South Korea. Even though Park speaks of *Sindoan* largely in terms of the sublime and spiritual tradition, and even if one might find it limiting to read *Sindoan* or his more recent film *Anyang Paradise City* of 2010 in the lineage of minjung art, I would argue that both films do grapple with the task of representing subalterns, the histories of the forgotten subjectivities in the militarized modernity²¹ in South Korea. In fact, Park’s representation of subalterns goes back to his early work *Koreans who went to Germany*. In this documentary photo essay and text that he eventually published, Park chronicles the lives of the miners and nurses who had been dispatched to Germany during the post-War reconstruction era under Park Chung Hee. Deutsch Marks that the miners and nurses sent home were important resources for earning the foreign currency, and an important strategy in overcoming the severe job crisis in the early 1960s.

Anyang Paradise City is a self-reflexive experimental documentary in which PCK the filmmaker himself and his crew pursue the victims of fire during the relentless drive for modernization in the 1970s. As such, the film engages the *ghosts* of the subalterns. In the film Park’s crew searches for documents and memories of the workers who perished in a disaster because they had been locked in in the factory dormitory for their sustained exploitation.

As we speak Park is completing his newest film entitled *The Day*, whose subject is a contemporary shaman in her 80s, *Kim Keum Hwa*. While Park Chung Hee regime in the 1970s has forcefully imposed silence on female factory workers, shamans, on the other hand, like the most of the religious organizations in *Sindoan*, were considered dangerous and thus marginalized for their potential to “contaminate” the people. In fact, shamans

suffered from the Park regime's implementation of the "anti-superstition" propaganda as part of the New Village movement.

As the social scientist Kim Won summarizes, subalterns are not fixed and integrated subjects like class, ethnic group, or even minjung, but rather a situational concept that refers to the subordinate social groups in non-western society.²² In the Korean context, subalterns were not even the protagonists of the resistance movement of the minjung history. Ironically, subalterns are simultaneously the object of desire for minjung history to integrate and absorb under the name of 'revolutionary and rational minjung', as well as the subjects considered by the leaders of minjung not even worthy of inclusion in the history of minjung.²³

In *Sindoan*, *Anyang*, and *The Day*, I see the "irreducible subjectivities" of marginal social Others and minorities, rather than people who belong to the entity called minjung *per se*. However, it seems clear to me that Park situates his own work in the legacy of minjung art. To my mind Park's films operate in a realm that is beyond the scope of the historical minjung art movement of the 1980s in the sense that the movement precluded the subalterns. Given his conscious effort to reference images of minjung art in his representation of subalterns,²⁴ I would argue that Park intends to situate his own films in the genealogy of minjung art, perhaps as a belated corrective measure.

Death-drive and Mourning

In sum, Park's work boils down to the politics of memory of the Cold War, how the media informs our understanding of the Cold War, and the possibilities in proffering counter memory. Starting with *Sindoan* he began to focus on the difficult question of representing the tradition and the sublime, and by implication engaged the politics of Orientalism. Also, with the recent films he simultaneously engaged the task of remembrance of the ghost-like presence of subalterns of the Cold War. As his exploration of information and speculation rested on deconstructive analysis and archival impulse informed by Marxist and psychoanalytic bent, *Sindoan* was constructed as a form of essay film. Like the nature of all archives we find in his work both found materials and constructive organization, facts and imagination, clarity and obscurity, and insight and fantasy.

Although one can hardly recall images of explicit violence or death in Park's work, along with the archival impulse, running concurrently throughout all his works is death-drive. Insofar as the national division and the mirror images of North and South Korea during the Cold War are the overarching context of his work, there is always an implication of death-drive in his work. *Sets*, *Power Passage*, and *Flying* allude to the millions of deaths during the internecine war and the Cold War. With *Three Cemeteries* we are at last given indexical imprints of deaths. The spiritual explorations in *Sindoan* certainly rest on humankind's inherent fear of death and the unknown, the imagined realm after death. Many hybrid forms of religions flourished in Sindoan during the height of the military regime perhaps because people needed to turn to religion for solace under the brutal oppression of the autocratic regimes. It is ironic that destruction of Sindoan was determined by the construction of military headquarter in defense against the threat of North Korea. Even in

Anyang, the driving engine of the narrative is the search for the victims of fire disaster, and the film culminates with a commemorative shamanistic ritual for the deceased. I would argue that the recent shift in his work, then, is a shift in the context of death drive, from that of political realm to spiritual realm, or shift from the terror of political sublime in the militarized modernity, to be replaced by transcendental sublime, or, at least an attempt to reclaim the latter, and from repetition compulsion to working through trauma.

I would like to end my talk with a discussion of the final scene of *Sindoan* and the opening scene of *Anyang*. In the final scene of *Sindoan* a group of youths climb up the Gyeryong Mountain, suggesting ritualistic scene but with no particular ritual involved. The opening sequence of *Anyang* involves many women of various ages engage in the traditional dance *Ganggangsullae*. There are two origins of *Ganggangsullae*: First, “the dance is thought to have originated around 5,000 years ago when the Koreans believed that the Sun, Moon, and Earth controlled the universe. Participants would dance under the brightest full moon of the year in order to bring about a good harvest.” Secondly, “in the 16th century, during the Japanese invasion of Korea, Admiral Yi Sun-sin ordered women to do this dance in military uniform to intimidate the Japanese. The Japanese scouts thus overestimated the strength of the Korean troops and retreated.²⁵ The meaning of the term “Be cautious of the surroundings” emerges from this historical anecdote.²⁶ Then it is logical that the film begins with wishful dance for peace, as the meaning of the name of the city Anyang means ‘paradise’ in Buddhism.

Upon seeing this sequence I recognized that the young folks in *Sindoan* were holding each other’s hands, vaguely evoking the same circle dance of *Ganggangsullae*. That is to say, *Anyang* seems to pick up where *Sindoan* has left off. However, in *Sindoan* the folks never quite form a circle. For Park, the circle dance is a quintessential image of utopia, as well, an object of his affection. In the final scene of *Sindoan*, the dance is vaguely suggestive of the circle dance performed by young folks addressed in unlikely attires. The scene represents an improbable dance in paradise, an attempt to merge secular young people and holy images within a failed utopia. Park wanted to express his conundrum: that he cannot quite accept the Korean tradition of religious sublime, but cannot abandon it either.

In *Anyang*, Park was more concerned about the relationships among women, sisterhood, traditional culture, and the image of paradise in the afterlife.²⁷ Park confessed that he would like to attain a certain kind of naïveté, the kind of naïveté that he finds in Pasolini’s films *Arabian Nights*, or *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*.²⁸

In *Anyang*, indeed, the search for the graves of the fire victims and survivors is interspersed by the occasional scenes of another search for a 500-year old, a very twisted large tree, locally known as the “Grandma Tree.” Park’s assistant hopped in a taxicab in search of the tree but the cab driver has never even heard of it. When the assistant asks Park why he was looking for the Grandma Tree, Park answers that the tree “was the center of the community.” With the sound of traditional Korean music intermittently heard on the car radio, the film closes with a night view of the Grandma tree, replanted after a major flood but in a rather obscure area of the city, thereby illuminating on the crude and inconsiderate ways in which Koreans regard shamanism and local beliefs.²⁹

At the risk of sounding naïve, Park expresses his yearning, a longing for a pure world, for wanting to become naïve without worrying about being so; or, naïve in the sense of wishing for peaceful rest for the spirits, for an inclusive yet heterogeneous community. Park's work represents in varying degrees the task of mourning for all deceased who faced catastrophic deaths through disasters, violence, and wars. What is unseen in the final sequence in *Sindoan* is the implication of an apocalypse. *Ganggangsullae* in *Anyang*, despite its celebratory mood, foreshadows the impending losses. With these films Park treads between the apocalyptic and hopes for a better future in the militarized modernity of Korea, which remains a ruin of the local spiritual tradition.

¹ Doryun Chong, *The Brinksmanship: Park Chan-kyong and Sean Snyder*, exhibition brochure, REDCAT, 2010.

² Ibid.

³ The earliest attempt to engage with the North-South conflict took place as early as 1965 by the director Yi Man Hui, who was imprisoned and whose film excised. It took nearly three decades for Korean filmmakers to reengage with the theme. See Kyung Hyun Kim, *Remaculization of Korean Cinema* (Duke University Press, 2004), 79. While the films such as *Silver Stallion* and *Spring in My Hometown* were released in the early 1990s, it is with the unprecedented box-office successes of *Shiri* and *JSA*, which even exceed the net incomes of Hollywood imports, that the North-South Korean conflict finally became one of the main staples of the Korean film industry.

⁴ Park Chan-kyong, *4 Years 2000-2004*, Korea Culture and Arts Council, Insa Art Center, 2004, 50-51.

⁵ Young Min Moon, "Composition of Social Memories," in *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action* (Seoul: Insa Art Space, 2009), 29.

⁶ Hal Foster, *Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 136.

⁷ Park Chan-kyong, *4 Years*, Ibid.

⁸ This is an edited version of the essay that originally appeared in my publication, *Incongruent: Contemporary Art from South Korea*, Seoul: Hyunsil, 2006.

⁹ Young Min Moon, *Incongruent*, 98.

¹⁰ Isang Yun's 1977 composition "Double Concerto" was inspired by the myth of Gyeonu and Jiknyeo, which he related to North-South relations and his hope for reunification.

¹¹ Chong, *ibid.*

¹² The quoted parts in this section are drawn from the artist's own insightful essay on *Sindoan*, entitled "On *Sindoan*: Some Scattered Views on Tradition and "The Sublime," in *Park Chan-kyong: Sindoan*, in Seoul: Atelier Hermes, 2008.

¹³ Simon Morley, Introduction, in *The Sublime*, London: Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press, 16.

¹⁴ Here it would be useful to note that much of the work that Park has had engrossed himself with during his studies at CalArts was theoretical underpinnings of Marxist and Freudian psychoanalytic reading of contemporary culture and cultural values. Hence, as the main conceptual apparatus of his work over the past decade leading up to *Sindoan* Park utilizes Marxist and psychoanalytic readings to investigate how cultural signs, codes, and representations in the media inform our understanding and memories of the Cold War. In this context the concept of the sublime becomes crucial as it "addresses the unresolved problem within this social constructionist" approach, for social constructionist approach is inadequate to explain the sublime experience, including Park's own encounter with Gyeryong Mountain. See Morley 17.

¹⁵ Morley, 18.

¹⁶ I view that artists such as Do-Ho Suh and Kimsooja ostensibly claim their work in terms of nomadic way of life, but essentially there work embodies the notion of “the clash of culture” expounded by Samuel Huntington.

¹⁷ Morley, 19.

¹⁸ Park, *Sindoan* (Seoul: Atelier Hermes, 2008), 7.

¹⁹ Similarly Apichatpong says that “We have become too much of a monoculture, with the same logic of narrative. Minority cultures have been prevented from discovering their own ways of doing things. The movies we make now are so shallow. It becomes harder and harder to make this kind of personal cinema.”

http://www.salon.com/entertainment/movies/film_salon/2010/05/23/palme_dor_cannes

Accessed Sept. 18, 2011

²⁰ Park, (Seoul: Atelier Hermes, 2008), 15.

²¹ U.S.-based sociologist Seungsook Moon has coined the term “militarized modernity” in her book *Militarized Modernity and the Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, Duke University Press, 2005.

²² Kim Won, *The Specters of Park Chung Hee Era (Bahcjeoghee Shidae-eui Euryungdeul)*, Seoul: Hyunsil, 2011, 21.

²³ To my surprise, Park has spoken of his intention to make a horror film. This is an area of inquiry that needs another occasion for further elaboration. Park is presently preoccupied with this as exemplified by his short film *Night Fishing*, and the recent series of lectures that he gave on the sublime and the possibilities of what he calls Northeast Asian Gothic. Among other things, he has been interested in Lafcadio Hearn’s Kwaidan, Japanese horror stories, and horror films. In fact Japanese horror films have influenced the horror films of South Korea from the 1960s. As Kim Won points out, these films recuperated the marginalized oral tradition of horror stories, shamanism, Buddhism, and women. Despite the censorship during the military regime, such fantastic films of the 60s and 70s transgressed the mode of censorship and repression through, surprisingly, the depictions of incest, homosexuality, necrophilia, and excessive representation of corporeality. Although now largely forgotten, the women characters represented the status of marginalization of women in the modernization process, thus rendering them unworthy of independent subjectivities. However, the women characters in these films were invariably threatening presences that challenged the patriarchal social order. See Kim Won, 23.

Another strand of thought might be related to his early work of the politics of memory of the Cold War. Insofar as North Korea and communism remain the repressed memories in the unconscious of South Koreans, representation of the North Korean communist may well be another source for his horror film. This is my wild guess, but perhaps Park’s horror film might be a strange combination of communism and horror film that feature subalterns who are also subversive female characters.

²⁴ In his publication of *Sindoan* in a book form, Park juxtaposes the film still of the young man and woman embracing each other in the final sequence, along with the painting entitled “Embrace” of 1981, by one of the major minjung artists Min Jung-ki.

²⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ganggangsullae>, accessed Sept. 26, 2011.

²⁶ <http://ko.wikipedia.org/wiki/강강술래>, accessed Sept. 26, 2011.

²⁷ The artist’s email to the author, September 26, 2011.

²⁸ The author’s interview with the artist, Seoul, August 2011.

²⁹ The artist’s email to the author, September 27, 2011.