

Park Chan-kyong's Asian Gothic as 'the Most Sublime Hysteria' in its Return

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"The accomplishment of the infinite purpose consists in sublating the illusion that it has not yet been accomplished."

Hegel, *Encyclopedia*

1. Introduction

Park Chan-kyong is now 'one of the most influential media artists in Korea' known for his films and video installations on the ideological trauma of modernizing Korea.¹ In 2014, he was invited to a conference and presented a paper with a provocative title "Asian Gothic: Return of the Repressed" (the Special Symposium of the Korean Society of Art History on 26 April 2014). This conference presentation was made a few months after his first feature-length film *Manshin: Ten Thousand Spirits* [Figure 1] was released with nation-wide critical acclaim, and just weeks before his curatorial masterwork <Ghost, Spy, Grandmother> (the 2014 SeMA Media Art Biennial, Seoul Museum of Art, directed by Park Chan-kyong) opened up with tremendous media attention. Thus the talk and its main

¹ Park Chan-kyong often collaborates with his brother, Park Chan-wook, the internationally recognized film director and Grand Prix winner of the 2004 Cannes Film Festival for his mystery thriller *Oldboy*. Chan-wook codirected many of Chan-kyong's filmic works including *Night Fishing* (2010: CK's first iPhone movie and winner of the Berlin International Film Festival's Golden Bear Award), *Day Trip* (2012), and *Bitter Sweet Seoul* (2014). The brothers' collaboration (under the family brand 'PARKing CHANce') certainly has helped the younger's rise to prominence. But as a critic notes, "Park Chan-kyong now surpasses his brother's cultural reputation" (Oh Dong-jin, *Entermedia*, March 2014) with his recent filmic and curatorial works that will be discussed in this paper.

concept 'Asian Gothic' were viewed as a sort of artistic statement on the two recent works or his artistic/curatorial attention to Korea's local cults, shamanism, and historical trauma. As he claimed in the paper, the Asian Gothic is 'a return of grotesque gothic imagery in the contemporary Korean culture that reflects what he calls 'local trauma (violence, fear, pain of Asia's modern project),' and it outlines Park's overall artistic agenda and its contemporary/symptomatic value.

Indeed, the violent, abject gothic sensibility has been increasingly explored in recent Korean culture. Crime, horror, and catastrophe have become popular topics for major art museums (eg, <Urban Legends>, Seoul Museum of Art with Palais de Tokyo, 2016 or <Catastrophology>, Arko Art Center, 2012). Fantasy films such as *The Wailing* (Na Hong-jin, 2016) and *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016) proved phenomenal success despite their gory demon and zombie characters unprecedented in Korean film history. Writer Han Kang won the Man Booker Prize for *The Vegetarian* (2016), a novel celebrated for its microscopic depictions of violence and the abject.

But under the growing attention to such gothic sentiments lies a resilient cultural norm that defies the symptomatic value of the gothic sub culture. The so-called *Korean Wave* (the rise of K-pop and other entertainments in global communities) and *Gangnam* style (a care-free lifestyle in the luxurious *Gangnan* district of Seoul as depicted in Korean singer Psy's global hit song the 'Gangnam style') have veiled nation's social problems. Local traditions have been emphasized, but largely as a national campaign for tourism; shamanism and local religions still find no place in the ever-increasing Christian dogma of Korean society. In art, there has been a growing interest in past traditions such as *Minjung* art (a South Korean political art movement of the 80s); but one cannot deny that the politics of the art market are central to these phenomenon. In fact, political pressure on the 1980s' artistic traditions have increased, as many *post-Minjung* artists have been 'blacklisted' by the nation's culture bureau.

How can we understand the gap between the Asian Gothic's return and a social reality that resists this return? Why does the grotesque thrive in a culture that is not prepared for its negative reflections? Have local traumas been relieved by the artistic return of 'ghost, spy, grandmother or *Manshin* (a

great shaman)?’ Aren’t these phantoms only making the traumas permanent? This paper explores these questions (on the uncertain and illusive rise of historical negativity in a contemporary Asian culture) to find a deeper meaning of Park’s Asian Gothic project.

2. Local Trauma

Local trauma resulting from Korea’s rapid modernization and repressive Cold War politics is an overarching theme for Park Chan-kyong from the outset. In particular, the Korean War, the nation’s split into North and South, military dictatorship (culminated in the *Gwangju Massacre*²) and numerous other socio-political disasters have outlined his artistic accounts on local trauma. Park interweaves these traumas with various ancient cult imageries (taken from local religions and shamanistic traditions) that would make a sharp contrast with his high-tech media installation. This contrast between the old contents and new media or a cacophony between the past and the present renders itself a magical value through which victims of the traumatic past are conjured up into the present consciousness. In his early work, *The Black Box: The Memory of Cold War Image* (slide projection, text, and sound, 1997) [Figure 2], historical malaises are brought back in an uncanny relay of time and contexts. *The Black Box* was an ambitious statement about “the (political) paranoia” growing out of the pressure of Cold War politics and media propaganda.³ Park collaged his own memoirs with various media images – of spies, assassins, North Korean guerrilla fighters, the shoot-down of Korean Air flight 007 in 1983 (by a Soviet fighter plane), the Korean War memorial with its eerie monumentality and so on – that collectively construct a mnemonic theater of Cold War Korea. These Cold War specters, or “anxiety-images manufactured from the enormous factory [of] Korea

² A massive riot against dictator Chun Doo-hwan’s government occurred in the city of *Gwangju* from May 18 to 27, 1980. Over 600 citizens were killed during the military intervention, and it triggered the nation-wide democratic movement.

³ Park Chan-kyong, “Art for Film- Notes on the relation between My Works and Film,” in *Perspectives on Korean Visual Art*, ed. Choi Tae-man, Dahal Media, Seoul, 2009, p 337

divided,” have bred a collective paranoia that still afflicts society with their expanded fear and doubt. The ‘empty black-box’ of flight 007 that Boris Yeltsin returned to Korean president Roh Tae-woo (in 1993, ten years after the shoot-down) symbolically recounts the absurd theatricality of Cold War politics anchored in the paranoia between trust and distrust, memory and amnesia, or as Park has put it, the Brechtian “thoughtless who never doubt” and the “thoughtful who never act.”⁴

In *Power Passage* (two-channel video, images and text, 2004), this paranoia turns into fantasy as synchronized video projections play out fictional rendezvous scenarios between Cold War rivals [Figure 3]. Park illustrates the ideological rupture between the two Koreas through a clever juxtaposition of the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project⁵ with North Korean assault tunnels beneath the inter-Korean border.⁶ As both events evince the deadlock situation between two hegemonic rivals, the sense of ‘passage’ the work repeatedly portrays (the spacecraft docking, tunnel, and again through the fictional rendezvous between the North’s *Kwang-Myung-Sung 1* and the South’s *Arirang* satellites, or between a South Korean woman and her husband left in North during the war) increases the irony of ‘power passage’ that exists only in fantasy.

What is interesting about these early works is the way Park recognizes himself in this paranoiac rupture of Korean history. He remarks in an artist statement that “my generation lived a life under two polarizing pressures: one was the physical repression of the Cold War dictatorship and the other, psychological reflex to the repression’s sudden dissolution.” Then he also notes that “this second phase of life was nothing other than the time of a collective memory loss, which was so quickly

⁴ Ibid, pp 338-339

⁵ ASTP was the spacecraft rendezvous plan in 1975 between America and the Soviet Union. John Sturge’s film <Marooned> (1969) had a substantial impact on ASTP six years later. Philip Handler of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences who visited Moscow in 1970 used the film to convince the Soviet space project team to cooperate on the docking plan.

⁶ Four infiltration tunnels have been found under the inter-Korean border (or DMZ) from 1974 to 1990. The tunnels were planned as a military invasion route by North Korea. Shafts in some tunnels are large enough to permit the passage of approximately 2000 soldiers in one hour.

developing that [it] left everything else behind, in the massive forgetfulness.”⁷

Park himself is a living example of a generation suffering from this double pressure – the ideological (often physical) pressure experienced in Cold War Korea and the cultural (psychological) pressure of the 1990s. Park started his career as an artist in the 1980s. Then he moved to theory and stayed there throughout the 90s. He made a few critical contributions to *Minjung* art (South Korean political art) as a member of *Forum A*, a left-wing culture magazine of the time, and also produced some media works for national /international venues, but still not considered to be a leading figure of the time. It was a dark age for Korean political artists. The 80s’ hegemony and military dictatorship that gave him a revolutionary agenda was dissolved by the implementation of a democratic government in 1993 (with Kim Yong-sam as the first non-military, civilian president).⁸ But the utopian, democratic cultural implosion that Park and his generation expected as a reward for their long devotion and sacrifices did not fill the vacuum. Instead, the 1990s saw the rise of a vulgar neo-capitalist culture thriving under Kim Yong-sam’s governmental promotion of an internationalization policy (*Segyehwa*). The era’s cultural decadence breached the faith of Park’s generation of *Minjung* artists and their communities, ushering in a democracy that had little room for local folk (*Minjung*) culture. While local traditions and folklores had offered subversive aesthetics capable of resisting the nation’s merciless modernizing process, they were doubly negated by *Segyehwa* policies and a new generation of citizens and artists who found the traditions worn and vapid compared to the amnesiac rush of neo-capitalism.

Park left Korea for a while and returned with a new medium (he studied photography and film at California Institute of the Arts in the mid 90’s). But his new medium was only to recount the amnesia

⁷ Park Chan-kyong, “Postscript of ‘Black Box: the Memory of Cold War Image,’” *Culture and Science* 15, September 1998, p 242

⁸ The inauguration of Kim Yong-sam (the first non-military, civilian president in over 30 years) and his massive anti-corruption campaign along with the arrest of his two predecessors brought the military dictatorship to an end.

and irony the artist felt in the past, as proved in his new work, *Sindoan* (six channel video, 2008) [Figure 4]. ‘Sindoan,’ which translates as ‘the new capital’ or ‘the ghost capital,’ is a mysterious town in the *Gyeryong* mountain (about 140 km south of Seoul). Once thought to be an ideal capital for the *Choseon* Dynasty with its prominent *feng-sui* setting, the town was also considered a spiritual refuge attracting hundreds of cult communities. In 1984, the government converted the town into a new military headquarters and deported many of these communities from the area.

Park saw the sudden deportation of Sindoan’s cult communities as a symbol of local trauma and the construction of the imperious headquarters as an allegory of the disruptive, ahistorical brutality of Korean modernization/militarization process.⁹ *Sindoan*’s first chapter opens on a sleek modern passenger airplane flying over a mountain valley, with its massive shadow brushing off the old villages underneath. A few minutes later, a series of group photos are played out showing the cult community members who are now gone. The old photos feel uncanny as they conjure up things in the past returning now in their untimely and apparitional repetition. In the third chapter (<*Yong-ga Moo-do*>), two apprentices sing the mystic chant (‘*Yong-ga*’) and dance with it (‘*Moo-do*’). *Yong-ga* then overlaps with Buddhist monks reading their text aloud, at once hypnotic and disturbing, familiar and unimaginably ancient. Its uncanny essence repeats in *Sindoan*’s final chapter, in which a group of costumed young people perform a bizarre dance on the mountaintop. A utopian allegory perhaps, and yet the idiocy of the scene constructs ‘the Hegelian farce (repeating or returning) after a tragedy,’ leveling implicit criticism at the blind faith in historical progress.

3. ‘Asian Gothic: the Return of the Repressed’

⁹ See Park Chan-kyong, “On Sindoan: Some Scattered Views on Tradition and The Sublime,” in *Park Chan-kyong: Sindoan* (exhibition catalogue). trans. Doryun Chung, Foundation d’enterprise Hermes, Paris, 2009, p 3

From *Sindoan*, Park's probe into local trauma started taking a deeper grotesque, ancient sensibility. And more importantly his grotesque art, which once appeared fractured, twisted, and incomplete (as opposed to the clear-cut modern trends of major Korean art), was finally settled in the Korean art world as Park received the Hermès award in 2004 - one of the most significant art awards in Korea – for his unique aesthetic vision. The grotesque fantasy would have been unwelcomed in the past because of the double negation that I mentioned earlier – negation first by the ideological pressure of the 80s (and its social realism that discredited fantasy) and then by the cultural pressure of the 90s (its glamorous internationalism indifferent to grotesque expressions). At the turn of the century, however, the pressures dissipated and grotesque seemed well-suited in the culture as Koreans were getting more aware of the fact that the world they arrived at after a series of dialectical processions in the earlier century was not the 'modern /international' utopia anchored in totality and eternal progress, but the self-splitting dystopia where the modern and the barbaric, pleasure and trauma, the material and the spiritual, and South and North Korea coexisted, making spectacular yet fatal mirror images to each other.

Certainly the local modern project did help the nation recover from the great trauma of the war (Korean War 1950-1953); within only half a century Korea became 'the 4th largest economy in Asia and the 11th in the world.' Its spectacular rise from the ashes to "the world's most innovative country" (the 2015 Bloomberg Innovation Index), however, is also shadowed by the project's monstrous velocity that veiled out its disastrous consequences. For the economic miracles, democracy was delayed, human rights were reduced, and the inter-Korean relationship was constantly threatened. It is into this shadow of the local modernity that the horror returns; this time however not merely as a physical harm but more as a pathological symptom. The *Sungsu* bridge fall-down in 1994 and the collapse of *Sampoong* department store in 1995 symbolically recounted the fragile structure of local modernity in Korea. 'ROKS *Cheonan* sinking' in 2010 (South Korean battleship sunken by a North Korean torpedo) and the North Korean artillery attack on South's *Yeonpyong* island in 2010 revealed the divided nation's hysteric death drive toward its traumatic origin. The recent *Sewol* ferry disaster

(in 2014, 304 people - most of them were high school students on a field trip – died in the sinking boat while the coast guard and nation’s control center failed to act quickly) also reminded of the murderous absence of political leadership in Korean history. The pain and fear from these pathological symptoms are all too great and deep to measure or understand by any logical means as Park compares them to his own experience at *Gyeryong*: the mountain and the trauma it preserves run so deep that they outstrip our ability to form a clear mental conception of such pain and fear. They evoke, according to Park, the idea of the sublime, “an ineffable feeling of fear and awe” that proves “our inadequacy [in] imagining the vast gulf between the experience and the thought we have about it.”¹⁰ As well known, Lyotard’s claim on the sublime hinges on such inadequacy upon the rise of a great disaster - the Holocaust, modernity’s greatest historical trauma.¹¹ For Lyotard, the sublime signifies “the incapacity of imagination before the absolute (terror),” and “the agitated emotion of its defection that cannot be felt through aesthesis, but only through pathos.”¹² If the ethos-driven modernism allowed no art for the sublime pathos,¹³ artists today, who live through the global outbreak of fear and pain, are eager to embrace the pathos in their grotesque, traumatic art.

Park later coined the term ‘Asian gothic’ to describe the symptomatic return of ancient grotesque imageries as a symbol of ‘the repressed,’ or traumatized local others.¹⁴ Although the term poses an

¹⁰ Park Chan-kyong, “On Sindoan,” op cit, p 1 / Moon Yong-min, “Park Chan-kyong: From the Memories of the Cold War to the Sublime,” University of Colorado Boulder, 2012, p 6

¹¹ Lyotard compares the Holocaust to an epic earthquake whose seismic power was so great that it “destroys not only lives, buildings and objects but also the very instruments used to measure it.” Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988, p 56

¹² Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the Jews,”* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1990, pp 44-45

¹³ Lyotard writes, “No one can – by writing, by painting, by anything – pretend to be witness and truthful reporter, be ‘equal’ to the sublime affection, without being rendered guilty of falsification and imposture through this very pretension.” Ibid, p 45

¹⁴ Park Chan-kyong, “Asian Gothic: Return of the Repressed” (paper presented at the Special Symposium of Korean Society of Art History – <Art and Taboo>, 26 April 2014)

overt geographic reference without actually subsuming broader Asian contexts, it somehow effectively sums up Park's overall theoretical aims. It is a rise of dark, mysterious, ancient symbolism in contemporary media culture with its distinctive Asian sensibility. It centers on 'the sublime fear and awe from local traditions, ancient history, and natural phenomena,' and therein poses "a strange fascination that unconsciously refutes the modern."¹⁵ Like the gothic subculture of the West (gothic fashion, dark makeup), the Asian Gothic invokes a unique and often disturbing visuality as a manifestation of its anti-rational, sub-cultural agendas. Artists like Cindy Sherman, Damien Hirst, Mike Kelley, Robert Gober, Douglas Gordon, and Jake and Dinos Chapman have explored this gothic sensibility, whose spirit Charles Moffat defines as "a rebellion against social norms."¹⁶ In her 2008 book, *Hell Bound*, theorist Francesca Gavin argues that contemporary art's embrace of the Gothic spirit is "a manifestation of contemporary fears—of death itself, of the war in Iraq, of serial killers, pedophiles, guns and gang culture, apocalyptic fears about environmental disaster and global warming."¹⁷ For Gavin, gothic imagery thrives in 'the culture of fear' where the experience of violence, the grotesque, and the abject in media defines our incurably sick modernity.

In Park's Asian gothic project, ancient cult imageries ('The Heavenly King, Mountain Sprits, The Great King of Hell, Medicine Buddha, and numerous other deities) are called up into Korea's own 'culture of fear,' and his *Manshin: Ten Thousand Spirits (2013)* provides a nurturing space for the gothic spirits [Figure 5]. It is a semi-documentary film in which the life of *Manshin* (a legendary shaman, Kim Kum-wha (b. 1931) who has been honored as Korea's Intangible National Treasure) unfolds through an intriguing mixture of fact and fiction. Kim is, as Park mentioned in interviews, more than a shaman; her journey into the unpredictable history of modernizing Korea, or 'her voyage

¹⁵ Ibid, pp 102-103

¹⁶ Charles Moffat, "The Neo Gothic Art Manifesto" accessed 20 February 2017, <http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/gothic/The-Neo-Gothic-Art-Manifesto.html>

¹⁷ Francesca Gavin, *Hell Bound-The New Gothic Art*, Laurence King Publishing, London, 2008, p 7

on the stormy Yellow Sea in a small boat, roping up her body with her ‘*mugu* (ritual equipment),’ reveals the deeper historical/ideological connections of her life [Figure 6]. In the film, the shaman rites and their grotesque iconographies seem remarkably modern not only because they are laid in modern events and technologies, but because the modern itself as depicted in the film (the Korean War, the nation’s modernization project, and new western religions that hassled the female shaman) is incredibly grotesque and violent. *Manshin* is an epic drama that represents how the spiritual survives the violent logic of modernity and returns to the modern world.

In *Manshin*, local deities return in strong but spectral presence through the charisma and charm of the female shaman. This return of old spirits in some way symptomizes the trauma of the present, as most Korean shaman rituals purport to cure the present by calling up the past causes. Thus, as a pathological symptom, the Asian gothic reveals a certain truth of the culture. Critic Hal Foster once viewed this pathological symptom in art – degenerated, abject, violent aspects of post-modern American art - as ‘the return of the real.’ To Foster, the contemporary fascination with trauma, or ‘the return of traumatic realism/illusionism’ in art, has to do with the cultural crisis of the late 20th century – the decline of postmodernism (of its *Symbolic* structure) and of consumerism (its *Imaginary* appeal) accelerated by “despair about the persistent AIDS crisis, invasive disease and death, systematic poverty and crime, the destroyed welfare state, [and] the broken social contract.”¹⁸ This crisis incubated an idea that “in contemporary culture, truth resides in the traumatic or abject subject, in the diseased or damaged body” as these grotesques touch the *Real* (as a primordial trauma) in their excessive expressions: “its illusionism is so excessive as to appear anxious – anxious to cover up a *traumatic* real – but this anxiety cannot help but indicate this real as well.”¹⁹ Likewise, Park considers the Asian gothic to be “the trauma of the trauma” that “touches the unconsciousness” of Koreans who

¹⁸ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, The MIT Press, Cambridge. 1996, p 166

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p 138

have struggled and resisted the violence of modernization.²⁰ It is, as Park writes, “an encounter with the violence that accompanies the strange absence of a reality that is presumed to be there”²¹ – ‘*Tuche*’ or ‘the encounter with the real in trauma’ in a Lacanian sense that “realizes our time”²²:

“[...] *the tradition touches the unconscious; it is a power to put a hard grip on my neck, a fascination that keeps me from ‘being modern’ – it is, in short, the other. The anxiety coming from my distance to the tradition seems to break my reason and cultural capacity at large. Thus, what is more interesting to me than the reconstruction or modernization of the tradition is the historical trauma’s locality in that it returns as the other, a ghost or ungraspable thing, and reveals symptoms that betray any scientific remedy. If the modernity in the past was realized upon trauma, now it is the opposite – the trauma realizes our time.*”²³

‘The trauma realizes our time’ says Park (above), as opposed to the Hegelian version of history in which ‘time resolves traumas.’ As Park insists above, there is an ‘interesting’ attraction in this reversed Hegelian historicity that justifies trauma’s return to the local modern society. In Park’s gothic world, history is reduced to its ‘locality’ not expands toward grand totality. It is through this traumatic locality, a culture’s wounded infra-ego in return, that one finds *the Real* of Asian modernity.

4. ‘Sublating the illusion’: Park as Hegelian or Lacanian

In Park’s gothic world, the Hegelian subject is derailed from its way to the Absolute Spirit, while the Lacanian ego –traumatized, misrecognized, and split (into ‘*ten thousand spirits*’) – rediscovers the track. In *Manshin*, for example, the little *Numse* (Kim’s childhood name) returns in her ‘iron-

²⁰ Park Chan-kyong, “Asian Gothic,” op cit, p 104

²¹ Park Chan-kyong, “On Sindoan,” op cit, p 5

²² Jacques Lacan, “Tuche and Automaton,” in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis – The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, Norton, New York, 1981, pp 53-55

²³ Park Chan-kyong, “Asian Gothic,” op cit, p 103

collecting ceremony²⁴ shouting out to the village, “I’ve come a hard way alone! I came to become a shaman [Figure 7].” *Numse*’s own misery in her life (her prophetic ability that scared other kids in the town, loss of parents, forced marriage, and bullying from her new family), the life ‘derailed’ from the track of Korean modernity, is finally paid off and back on track in her shamanizing process, which is nothing other than her ‘misconception’ of herself into a complete, supreme mirror persona (the *manshin*) that fills up her own lack. *Numse* is a Lacanian figure in this regard, although her life develops through a number of (pseudo) Hegelian syntheses with spectral totality. This equivalence proves Žižek’s famous claim – “Lacan is Hegelian.”²⁵ Lacan is fundamentally Hegelian not because Lacan’s symbolic unity resembles Hegelian totality or the ego’s transition to the symbolic order retraces the subject’s transition to Absolute Knowledge, but because both, “without knowing it,” emphasize ‘the lack’ or ‘a central void’ that returns to the present consciousness as an important signifier.

The Hegelian split between a thesis and antithesis comes under control when they find, almost automatically, a knot (‘the otherness, the object’ in Hegel’s terms / the ‘object *a*’ in Lacan) that pulls both toward a higher unity.²⁶ An antithesis always comes for a thesis, while the death drive which is

²⁴ An entrance-rite in Korean Shamanism in which the apprentice walk around the village soliciting a donation of metal objects that will be melting down to make her/his own ritual utensils.

²⁵ Slavoj Žižek, “Lacan: at What Point is He Hegelian?” trans. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens, accessed 18 July 2016, <http://www.lacan.com/zizlacan1.htm> (As well known, Lacan’s 1936 paper on ‘the mirror stage’ was rejected at the Congress of the International Psychoanalytical Association. Lacan left the Congress in disappointment and just stopped at Berlin to see the Olympic Games. Around this time (1934 -36), Lacan attended Alexandre Kojève’s Hegel lecture in Paris, and Kojève’s interpretation on Hegel’s master/slave theory influenced Lacan’s new ‘mirror stage’ and other psychic structure. Slavoj Žižek’s Ph.D dissertation explored the relationship between Lacan and Hegel which later published with the title, ‘The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan’)

²⁶ See, for example, Hegel’s following account: “the (dialectical) movement is the double movement of two self-consciousness” in which “each sees the other do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as the other does the same.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p 112 / for Lacan this

beyond the pleasure principle actually aims at an even greater pleasure – the *jouissance*. As the internalization of this death instinct (this pure negativity, an eternal inquiry to the real of an ego) evolves toward the real pleasure of life, ‘the negation of negation’ turns antithesis into synthesis. But as Žižek argues, this “reconciliation of the synthesis is not the act of surmounting or suspending (even in a dialectical way) the scission by passing beyond it.” Synthesis is “the retrospective recognition that there was never any scission at all – the “synthesis” retrospectively cancels the scission.”²⁷

For both Hegel and Lacan, this cancelation (*das Ungeschehenmachen*) plays an important role in the formation of the self; for the Freudian, one action must be cancelled by a second, as if none of them took place. This imaginary cancelation (of fears, of horrifying desires) keeps us going, secure in our illusions, forcing us to pursue what has been canceled – a psychic self-balancing toward ‘homeostasis’ and the death drive that brings us back to where we ran away from.²⁸ “A thing must die in its reality in order to arrive, by traversing its symbolic, at its conceptual unity” says Žižek.²⁹ Hegel also concurred it by saying “*das Ungeschehenmachen* is the supreme power of the Spirit.” The Spirit seeks Absolute Knowledge by *undoing* all that is not absolute, by *abolishing* all negativities: “[...] after losing the grave of its truth, after the abolition of its actuality is itself abolished, and after the singleness of consciousness is for it in itself Absolute Essence, it discovers the world as its new real world [...] which previously lay only in its transiency.”³⁰ It is in this magical process of *das*

‘pulling toward a unity’ is expressed in a formula ‘\$ <> a’ (\$ as a subject split, *a* as an object that entices the subject, and <> as “desire of.” See Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” in *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Norton, New York, 1977, p 313

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2014, p 75

²⁸ Jacques Lacan, “Homeostasis and insistence,” in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, Norton, New York, 1988, pp 53-63

²⁹ Žižek, “Lacan: at What Point is He Hegelian?” op cit, unpagged

³⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, op cit, p 140

Ungeschehenmachen, the “Hegelian version of death drive,”³¹ that “the self-consciousness enters the native realm of truth.” Here Žižek finds the true Lacanian meaning of what Hegel posits in his *Encyclopedia*: “The accomplishment of the infinite purpose consists only in sublating *the illusion* that it has not yet been accomplished.”³²

Park’s gothic project hinges on this illusion. His *Sindoan* and *Manshin* play on a juncture between history’s progression (now getting more spectral and incomprehensible) and its traumatic fantasy (returning as a substantial pathological symptom). This juncture creates a synthetic space where both history’s effort to realize its infinite purpose and its negative byproducts come into play. The manshin is a medium who mediates these two polarizing dialectical agents by canceling / abolishing / cleansing the negativities in her own magical ways. It is ‘sublation’ for Hegel and ‘sublimation’ for Lacan, but whatever it is, an illusion plays a crucial role in this mediation.

Park’s direction of the international media art show <Ghost, Spy, Grandmother> confirms this quasi Hegelian psychology [Figure 8]. In his curatorial statement, Park claims that the show as a whole renders “the return of tragic history to the aftermath of the Cold War and to the void of modernization through the mystic force of artist-medium.”³³ It challenges modernity itself through “the bizarre modernities of Asia” – the illusions – nurtured in a “space filled up with various cultural twists that can never be understood by any Cold War frame.”³⁴ Artist Yang Hae-gue’s mysterious bell machines (*Sonic Dances* (2013)) wake us up with their shamanistic presence; the oval-shaped rotating sculptures create both optical and acoustic illusions as they would turn bigger and noisier when it spins, making the unique rattling sound of a shaman’s bell. Eric Baudelaire’s video work, *The*

³¹ Žižek, “Lacan: at What Point is He Hegelian?” op cit, unpagged

³² G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopedia of Logic: Part I of the Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting and H. S. Harris, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1991, p 286

³³ Park Chan-Kyong, *Ghost, Spy, Grandmother: the Modernity against the Modern*, Hyunsil Munwha, Seoul, 2014, pp 10-13

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp 16-22

Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi, and 27 years without images (2011) traces the ‘imageless’ life of a terrorist’s daughter in Beirut and Tokyo; Shigenobu May who was born in Lebanon as a daughter of the Japanese Red Army terrorist (re)visits the cities following the vague memories of her revolutionary parents that now feel almost incredibly fictional. Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani’s ‘Hashima Island’ (*Spelling Dystopia*, 2008) brings us back to the horror of the monstrous past hidden under the false name of ‘the greater east Asia co-prosperity’; the island is now the UNESCO World Heritage site as it symbolizes Japan’s modernity, but during World War II, it was a notorious war crime scene where thousands of Koreans, Chinese, and other foreign nationals were killed in the coal mining pits underneath the island [Figure 9].

In the show, all the unanswered causes and effects of Asia’s tragic history are realigned in their ‘ungraspable root,’ unveiling their predestined (often derailed) dialectical courses. <Ghost, Spy, Grandmother> itself in other words constructs ‘a colossal root’ covered by such a deep-rooted faith and doubt on history, as the show was precluded by Kim Su-yong’s poem *The Colossal Roots*.³⁵ As depicted in the poem, the negative leftovers from the past - “filthy, grim, and rotten” - return to the present in their own grotesques; they are like “mammoths in horror movies with black boughs unable

³⁵ The poet Kim Su-yong (b. 1921) was influential to many modern Korean artists and intellectuals. His *The Colossal Roots* inspired Park as this poem has appeared in his major exhibitions such as <Ghost, Spy, Grandmother> and <Pa-Gyong: Last Sutra Recitation> (Iniva Gallery, London, 2016). Park will join a New York residency program in 2017 as part of the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center Award, and there he plans to work on the poem through various media forms. The following is the excerpt of the poem: “Traditions, no matter how filthy, are good. [...] History, no matter how filthy, is good. Mud, no matter how filthy, is good. When I have memories ringing more resonant than a brass rice-bowl, humanity grows eternal and love likewise. [...] Oriental colonization companies, Japanese consulates, Korean civil servants, and ice cream too, should all go suck American cocks; but chamber pots, head-bands, long pipes [...] one-eyed people, barren women, ignorant folk: all reactions are good, in order to set foot on this land. [...] Compared with those huge roots that even I cannot imagine, suggestive of mammoths in horror movies with black boughs unable to entertain magpies or crows ...” - Kim Soo-yong, Shin Kyong-nim, and Lee Si-young, *Variations: Three Korean Poets*, trans. Anthony of Taizé and Kim Young Moo, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2011, pp 87-89

to entertain magpies or crows.” But this mammoth inhabits in “memories ringing more resonant than a brass rice-bowl.” The show was this high-pitched resonance reverberating painfully and fearfully in Asia’s modern history.

Again illusions make an analogy between ‘Park as a Hegelian’ and ‘Park as a Lacanian.’ He embraces the ‘ghost, spy, and grandmother’ as an embodiment of otherness that returns to present consciousness to cure the trauma of the other. This other, in Hegelian thoughts, is bonded to his master-subject inciting him to desire what he lacks, or ‘what the other demands for him.’ “Self-consciousness is desire” says Hegel, and “self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.”³⁶ Park’s splitting between modernity and tradition, religion and cults, science and superstition, and his devotion to the latter – to the otherness of Korea and the Asian Gothic as ‘the return of the repressed (others)’ – all indicates this desire toward ‘*the object a*,’ a psychic effort of the historical subject to ‘achieve a satisfaction in another self-consciousness of the other.’ As Hegel (a Lacanian) wrote, “they recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another.”³⁷

It is not surprising that for Park, ‘the satisfaction’ as such is made only later when his question from the past (about local folk traditions in the *Minjung* art era) become an answer of the present. As I mentioned earlier, Park’s claims on local trauma remained silent during the 80s and 90s. Only later did these fractured early thoughts become an answer of the time as the trauma in question runs far enough to be canceled, to be fantasized. Again, the satisfaction (or synthesis) is always a retrospective process of canceling the scission in the later quest. The manshin (as a satisfaction, as a synthesis) cancels the scission only later when she arises as a result of the series of negations in her way to self-consciousness. The truth is, the manshin (Kim Kum-wha) never came as a manshin (shaman-healer); she was engineered retrospectively (by herself and again by Park) to validate and fulfill the desire of the traumatized local other. As Žižek argues, “one does not accomplish the end by attaining it, but

³⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, op cit, p 110

³⁷ Ibid, p 112

by proving that one has already attained it, even when the way to its realization is hidden from view.”³⁸

It is the illusion that *proves* such attainment. In other words, Asian gothic’s return to the present consciousness is secured by the illusions of the shaman and Park (through the shaman ritual and media fantasy) who have returned from the past trying to “prove that they have already attained it.” The ghost, spy and manshin then function only as an (illusory/fantasy) object of supreme otherness that provokes desire – a psychoanalytic motif that Hegel recounts again in the following: “desire and the self-certainty obtained in its gratification, are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other: in order that this supersession can take place, there must be this other.”³⁹ This mutual recognition is, according to Lacan, only ‘a process of misconception.’ It is an imaginary way to overcome the fundamental lack of a self. It leads him to the Symbolic world where this self-deceiving effort effectively controls his traumatic reality. Thus what we see in the Asian Gothic is “the structure of a missed encounter” which can only be recognized in ghost, spy, or grandmother – the illusion, the semblance, the Real that returns through fantasy (*‘la traverse du fantasme’*).⁴⁰

Fantasy has been disparaged as “the plague [that] tears apart and wounds the thinking faculty of the soul, [...] with its fatal, distracting complexity.”⁴¹ And local traumas ‘coming across the fantasy’ can beget a ‘fatal, distracting complexity’ as most of Park’s media/archival arts spin on such complexity. But fantasy also “teaches us how to desire.”⁴² In Park’s *Calling-It’s Clear* (video installation, 2006), for example, the problematic reality of three far-Eastern countries is unveiled as filmic fantasies,

³⁸ Žižek, “Lacan: at What Point is He Hegelian?” op cit, unpagged

³⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, op cit, p 109

⁴⁰ See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis - The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, Norton, New York, 1998, pp 273-274

⁴¹ Francesco Petrarca, “Secretum” accessed 20 July 2016, http://petrarca.petersadlon.com/read_secrets.html?s=dialogue_1.html. See also Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (the title of the book originated from the quote in Petrarch’s Secretum

⁴² Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, Verso, New York, 2008, p 7

teaching us “how to find a way out from the image/information inundation that engulfs our reality.”⁴³ *Flying* (video, 2005) shows unaired news footages of North Korea (from the first Inter-Korean Summit in 2000) that remind us of how wide the two Koreas’ cultural gap really is; in *Sets* (slide projection, 2000-2004), a collection of dummy street pictures taken from North and South Korean film studios as well as from military drill grounds at a South Korean army base simulates “the (fantasy) media city that is factual but empty,”⁴⁴ urging us to think of the ways to fill the void [Figure 10]. “In going through the fantasy we experience how this fantasy-object materializes the void of our desire,”⁴⁵ – the desire for the truth awaiting at the end of this fantasy-path: “When we were on the path, while we had still not yet arrived, truth drew us forward like a Ghost, a promise awaiting us at the end of the path.” Žižek then continues:

*“... But all of a sudden, we notice that we had always already had the truth. The paradoxical surplus that slips away in the missed encounter as the impossibility of the exact right moment is of course the object a. It is the pure semblant that pulls us toward the truth, up until the moment where it suddenly seems as if we’ve already overtaken the truth, that it is already behind us. It is a chimerical being that does not have its own time that exists only in the discrepancy between too early and too late.”*⁴⁶

What is returning is not the synthesis of all negativity awaiting us as the truth of history. Instead, we see the return of the scission itself: not as the remedy which is impossible and missing all the time, but as the hysteria of a ‘chimerical being’ coming ‘too early or too late’ in those weightless bodies of ‘ghost, spy, and grandmother.’ These are the negativities that we have been trying, hysterically, to repel for the past half a century. But as in Zeno’s paradox, “the more we attempt to repel the horrifying

⁴³ Park Chan-kyong, “Art for Film,” op cit, p 324

⁴⁴ Ibid, p 333

⁴⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, New York, 1989, p 65

⁴⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric*, op cit, p 75

object of desire, the more it looms frightening in front of the subject.”⁴⁷ The Asian Gothic is this ghost, a chimera ‘without substance,’ the fragile positivation of nothingness, and also the Real, the hard kernel, the rock upon which symbolization is dashed.

5. Conclusion: ‘the Most Sublime Hysteria’

This is the insight Park Chan-kyong has given to us in those ungraspable gothic visions. In ghosts, spies, and grandmother (the manshin), he emphasizes the lack, the void of the culture, or the hysteria of local others that returns again in fantasy. Sublation of these others thus results in the ‘Ten Thousand Spirits,’ not the Absolute Spirit - a stunning realization of hysterical disunity Korea has suffered for long. The Asian gothic is this hysteria. It contributes to the society not by its naïve remedial oversight, but by its symptomatic value that reveals the very trauma and repression still forcefully controlling our society. “Whenever extreme chaos erupted, Sindoan grew” Park wrote in the work. Sindoan – ‘the ghost capital’ – manifests this ever-growing trauma, still very present, though mostly intangible. It is not ‘the return of the repressed’; it is the return of the repression itself that has always been around, never quite sublimated. Park might have questioned this repression in his earlier Minjung art career, like everyone else who, at that time, investigated the remedial value of local traditions. Now this question returns as an answer in the Asian Gothic, but only as an illusion – never answered, perhaps because the trauma is unanswerably great, or because the question itself is the answer, relentlessly taking us back to the most sublime hysteria that speaks indifferently of its own ill in fantasy.

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp 15-18