

## North Korean Comedy of Manners : *Day at the Amusement Park*

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### Abstract

The comedy of manners is a theatrical genre that satirizes the manners and mores of pretentious characters from the upper class. Characters in *Day at the Amusement Park* disguise their true passion and desire with society's unwritten rules of decorum and allow cultural practices to dictate their behavior more than having the political ideology control them. Being conscientious of how the public might view oneself and how one ought to behave in public dominate the rationality and attitude of the characters. The comedy is found not only in the misunderstandings and mistaken identities in the plot, but also in the characters' strict observance of decorum and in the explosive revealing of their pent up desires. Comedy is one of the performative ways of revealing to the audience the blunders, internal paradoxes, and disillusionment of social and political life. The subject of social decorum and cultural practices in this film may help South Korean viewers look past the political barrier and appreciate the importance of humor and farce in the North Korean culture.

**Key words** : North Korean Cinema, Comedy of Manners, Social decorum, Arranged Marriages, Amusement Park

## 1. Introduction

One of the optimal methods of understanding the Democratic People's Republic

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of Korea (DPRK) would be through cultural productions, namely cinema—as it has had a pervasive effect on the masses nearly since the inception of the state. The DPRK has adopted the Soviet method of using film as propaganda and bringing cinema to the masses or “Mobile Film Groups” (idong yongsaban) throughout the countryside. Many viewers outside of the DPRK dismiss cinema because of its oversaturation with propaganda and the personality cult of Kim Il-Sung. More contemporary viewers may grimace at North Korean cinema for its outdated or old-fashioned methods of filmmaking, particularly when comparing to South Korea’s blockbuster films that rely heavily on action, sex, gratuitous violence, and computer graphics. There is no doubt that North Korean films contain some kind of political message, but this does not limit films from further analysis. Even after Kim Jong-Il published his magnum opus *On the Art of the Cinema* in 1973 for all North Korean films to follow suit, the film industry in the DPRK has struggled to incorporate Kim’s film theory into the narrative and the entire production. Instead of reducing North Korean films to simply propaganda, it is productive to analyze films as a media form that represents the tension between the political and the cultural amid the historical and social contexts, where individuals in the films are found having to negotiate and make sense of their living conditions amid their comrades. I argue that comedy films offer a different lens through which cultural dimensions of the North Korean society is revealed more than the political rhetoric often seen in dramatic films.

North Korean film critic Ch’oe Chŏng-Gil says that the distinctive qualities of dramatic or comedy films are imperceptible and irrelevant insofar as they both contain the ideological aesthetics that describe the way in which the viewers ought to live in the DPRK (Ch’oe, Chŏng-Gil 1987, 29). To put it in another way, dramatic films contain elements of comedy and vice versa, but the most important element that needs to be contained in each film is the correct political ideology. If this is the case, then North Korean comedy films (or all comedy films for that matter) deserve scholarly attention as they contain elements that divulge the political, social, and cultural dimensions of the nation-state. Comedy is one of the performative ways of revealing to the audience the blunders, internal paradoxes, and disillusionment of social and political life. This is the result of the comic

writer's astute sensibility of observing the society in which he lives. As Richard Duprey in "Whatever Happened to Comedy" says, "The comic writer, a sharp and perceptive man who stands on the sidelines and views the staggering gyrations of mankind, records, in his detached and facile manner the errors of humanity" (Duprey, Richard 1981, 161). More importantly, if South Korea is *serious* about unification, then a comparative study of North Korean comedy films may help identify and focus on the cultural similarities rather than on the political differences. It may be difficult to imagine laughing North Koreans, particularly with the media-saturated images of dejected citizens, but this paper analyzes comedy film *Yuwŏnji'ui haru* [Day at the Amusement Park, 1975] in order to reveal the cultural dimension of North Korean leisurely life of the mid-1970s. The theme of social decorum and cultural practices in this film may help South Korean viewers look past the political barrier and appreciate the importance of humor and farce in the North Korean culture.

## 2. Comedy of Manners

The comedy of manners is a theatrical genre that satirizes the manners and mores of pretentious characters from the upper class. The polite society in which the upper class lives dictates behavior and "constrains its members to act a part: to disguise impulse in reason, to mask passion and appetite with decorum" (Bruce, Donald 1974, 89). In addition to topics of marriage and illicit affairs and characteristics of sexual innuendoes, monetary greed, and witty dialogues, the comedy of manners portrays the aristocrats' strict observance of decorum and society's unwritten laws as the basis of their limited worldview. The members of this upper class create and observe their own rules of social behavior, perpetuating a tradition of propriety without a real intrinsic value other than for the sake of upholding the tradition.

Prima facie, *Day at the Amusement Park* may not be considered a comedy of manners in the strictest sense of the genre because of the absence of portraying the upper class, overt sexual innuendoes, and monetary greed in the plot structure.

The North Korean society is supposedly classless, devoid of sexual impurities, and selfless as any upright Communist country would claim. However, the fundamental element in the comedy of manners, after all, is one's observance of social manners. Characters in *Day at the Amusement Park* disguise their true passion and desire with society's unwritten rules of decorum and allow cultural practices to dictate their behavior more than having the political ideology control them. Being conscientious of how the public might view oneself and how one ought to behave in public dominate the rationality and attitude of the characters. The comedy is found not only in the misunderstandings and mistaken identities in the plot, but more so in the characters' strict observance of socio-political decorum and in the explosive revealing of their pent up desires. The film is set at an amusement park with thrilling rides, enthusiastic crowds, and numerous distractions, which set the parameters for the conflict between the characters' unleashing of their inhibitions and abiding by the socially prescribed manners.

*Day at the Amusement Park* is about a misunderstanding and mistaken identities between two families in regards to an arranged marriage. Söng-Min is the father, who discovers that his son, Yöng-Gil, has been dating a female colleague, Ki-Ok. Sun-Nyö is the mother, who has made arrangements for her son to marry the sister of Ki-Ch'öl, who is in fact Ki-Ok. Both Sun-Nyö and Ki-Ch'öl have agreed to go to the Amusement Park to meet and finalize the wedding plans. Söng-Min, knowing that his son has been seeing Ki-Ok, goes to the Amusement Park to prevent his wife from making any marriage arrangements with Ki-Ch'öl's family. At the park, Söng-Min has a run-in with Ki-Ch'öl and Pong-Sil (Ki-Ch'öl's wife), without knowing that they are related to Ki-Ok. When Söng-Min finally finds his wife, he tells her to call off the arranged marriage, and when Söng-Min discovers that the arranged marriage has been with Ki-Ch'öl's family, he strongly advises his wife to call off the marriage. In the end, both families realize the misunderstanding and agree to have Yöng-Gil and Ki-Ok marry.

*Day at the Amusement Park* shows the contention between political discourse and cultural norms in regards to an arranged marriage. The political message that is recited three times throughout the film is: "Love is the unification of two comrades at their workplace." The political ideology that the Party wants to impose

on the people is for the youths of the new generation, who are the torchbearers of a Kim Il-Sung-ist nation, to find their marriage partners at their workplace while doing their political duties because marriage is an ideological union between devote comrades. The humor in the two families' attempt at arranging the marriage is their ignorance to the lovers' having already met each other at the workplace. Although the lovers have abided by the political discourse, the two families neglect it and pursue cultural normativity of marriage rites. The comedy of manners occurs in the conflict between political rhetoric and socio-cultural decorum, in that, the characters know how and when to utter political discourse but behave according to how they have been taught in their family traditions. Although the characters in *Day at the Amusement Park* recite and seemingly acknowledge the political expectation of marriage, they also cannot seem to detach themselves from the cultural practice of parents arranging marriages in spite of their children's objection. When Sun-Nyŏ's daughter, Yŏng-Ae, claims that love is the unification of two comrades at their workplace, Sun-Nyŏ responds, "Love? I married your father without ever having met him once, but I've lived a happy life raising you and your brother." Yŏng-Ae is of the new generation and attempts to correct her mother's antiquated practices of marriage. However, Sun-Nyŏ questions Yŏng-Ae's concept of love and marriage and justifies the benefits of an arranged marriage, imposing cultural practice over political expectations.

Is the film, then, actually criticizing the traditional practice of arranged marriages as being antithetical to the Party's directives? In an article from *Chollima* called "Hon'in p'ungsup'eso'ui mip'ungryangsok" [The beautiful custom of marriage practices], writer Sŏn Hŭi-Ch'ang mentions the normality and ethicality of arranged marriages in Korean feudal era. Sŏn says, "Marriage without an arrangement was unethical and antithetical to tradition." Sŏn does not equate feudal times with backwardness or an antiquated tradition, but instead admires some of the cultural practices that have derived from the era of the Koguryŏ dynasty and the Three Kingdoms. The DPRK praises the Koguryŏ dynasty over the other two kingdoms because it was geographically located in present-day North Korea. Incidentally, the DPRK criticizes Silla dynasty for subjecting Koguryŏ dynasty with foreign aid from China. Sŏn claims that the tradition of arranged marriages

derives from the understanding that wedlock is based on the union of two families rather than on the union of two lovers, deeming the former as the ethical and wholesome practice of marriage rites.

*Day at the Amusement Park* centers on the custom of marriage between the approval of the two families rather than between ideologically committed comrades. The film does not ridicule or criticize the outdated practice of arranged marriages, but instead it shows the normality of a cultural tradition that has been present in the Korean society for centuries. Sun-Nyō and Ki-Ch'ōl meet at the amusement park to finalize the marriage arrangement without the presence of the marrying couple:

Sun-Nyō: Let's have the kids meet later, but let's make a decision now.

Ki-Ch'ōl: But, we have to consult your husband.

Sun-Nyō: You have nothing to worry. My husband does everything I tell him.

Ki-Ch'ōl: My wife does everything I tell her, too.

Sun-Nyō: Well, then it's settled.

Ki-Ch'ōl: I'm entrusting you with my sister.

Sun-Nyō: I'm also entrusting you with my son based on your character.

The representatives of the two families (Sun-Nyō and Ki-Ch'ōl) meet and decide on the marriage based on the understanding that the representatives know what is in the best interest for Yōng-Gil and Ki-Ok. Sun-Nyō approves of Ki-Ok—without ever having seen her—on the grounds of Ki-Ch'ōl's character. The idiom used in many North Korean comedy films regarding arranged marriages is “The child of those parents” (*kū pumo'ūi kū chasik*), which refers to the child's behavioral reflection of the parents, or what is commonly used in the western idiom, “Like father, like son.” In the case of North Korean films on arranged marriages, the son or daughter is evaluated on his/her parents' character. This, of course, is not foreign to even South Koreans, who continue the tradition of arranged marriages. In many ways, North Korean marriage rites do not differ from the South Korean tradition but confirm the similarities between the two cultures. In South Korea, the child is not only evaluated based on his/her parents' noble

character but also the family's economic status, medical conditions, and education background among others. Although the North Korean political rhetoric of lovers meeting at their workplace sounds appealing and progressive, *Day at the Amusement Park* reminds the audience that marriage is still a union between families and not only between lovers, which means that the conditions South Koreans use to decide the marriage also applies to the North Korean culture.

Sun-Nyō is not entirely innocent in terms of her accepting Ki-Ok to be her daughter-in-law simply based on Ki-Ch'ōl's good character. According to North Korean scholar Ryu T'ae-Son, arranged marriages in the past among average Koreans assessed the health, appearance, discipline, and the potentiality to do housework of the prospective daughter-in-law; whereas the upper class families, even before meeting the daughter-in-law, assessed the family pedigree, family assets, and economic conditions (Ryu, T'ae-Son 2001, 71). Ryu reassures his readers that these marriage practices were of the feudal times and that the DPRK today has overcome the antiquated custom and has created marriage practices befitting to the socialist lifestyle (Ryu, T'ae-Son 2001, 71). However, Ryu does not specify the changes made in the DPRK perhaps because many North Koreans still conduct the same marriage customs as the Koreans had done in feudal times or in South Korea. For example, all the characters in *Day at the Amusement Park* are unmistakably members of the working class in the DPRK, but this does not mean that the citizens are uniform in terms of social, economic, and political status. There are hierarchies and stratifications within the umbrella idea of the working class: Sun-Nyō's family is of the elite intellectual class and Ki-Ch'ōl is a high-ranking manager at a large industrial complex. Their social and economic class is evident in the size and type of housing, clothes, and household furniture, accessories, and appliances. When both Sun-Nyō and Ki-Ch'ōl finalize the marriage arrangement, it is another form of economic exchange—a union between two economically and socially well-respected families, and, therefore, an ethical and wholesome marriage, according to the tradition of arranged marriages. *Day at the Amusement Park* depicts characters from an elite class to project the cultural ethicality and normality of marriage rites that have been an integral component in Korean social history. Although arranged marriages are not exclusive to a

particular socio-economic class, the comedy of manners is heightened when the film reveals the blunders and paradoxes of the members of the elite class.

The tradition of the two families meeting each other for the first time and attempting to display their best behavior in order to win over the other is the grounds for comedy of manners. This is because there are specific rules of conduct and behavior when meeting the other family. *Day at the Amusement Park* is premised on the meeting of the two families, but this arrangement goes awry because of the mistaken identities and misunderstandings. Each character encounters the members from the other party without knowing who they are. The attempt at displaying their utmost behavior and refinery is revealed as only an ostensible virtue, steeped in a long tradition of arranged marriages. By the end of the film, when the two parties recognize the mistaken identities and misunderstandings, the characters present their true self without any pretense.

### 3. Mannerisms of a Patriarch

One of the major themes in North Korean comedy films is satirizing characters who misbehave in society or who lack customary etiquette. These films lay much emphasis on how one ought to carry him/herself in public and how to respect other individuals in the community. Since propaganda is supposed to educate the audience, these comedy films delineate different types of socially unacceptable behaviors as a way of promoting a healthy and virtuous nation.

In the 1970s, the DPRK announced the Speed Campaign (*sokdojŏn*) to increase the nation's industrialization and cultural production. The Party encouraged the people to consolidate their efforts to build a more perfect socialist country, very much like the Chollima national reconstruction campaign in the late 1950s and 1960s. The significant difference with the Speed Campaign was the fortification of Kim Il-Sung's personality cult. The people's allegiance to rapid industrialization meant their allegiance to the Great Leader. In this sense, North Korea's cultural production played a critical role in molding a Kim Il-Sung-ist mindset within the people.



During the 1970s Speed Campaign, Kim Jong-Il doubled the production level of filmmaking from the previous decades. In March 29, 1974, Kim Jong-Il gathered a small group of filmmakers whose sole task was to produce short films ( Kim, Yŏng 1993, 69). This was the birth of the series called *Irŏn hyŏngsangŭl ōpsaeya hamnida* [We must get rid of this phenomenon]. These low budget short films were intended to criticize North Koreans who forestalled the progress of the Speed Campaign. The stock characters in these films were not villains with evil intent to undermine the state; instead, they represented various negative attitudes and behavioral problems among the citizens of the DPRK. Some of the problematic characters were a lazy farmer who thought of himself more knowledgeable than the collective; a vainglorious urban woman who wore lavish clothes to impress her fellow comrades; and an inconsiderate office worker who did not foster a friendly working environment. These films prescribed a social and cultural decorum by which the viewers ought to live. The source of comedy comes from these characters' inability to display a certain standard of social etiquette or manners.

Reversely, the comedic character in *Day at the Amusement Park* is Sŏng-Min, who tries extremely hard to uphold social manners. It is a sweltering Sunday afternoon, and Sŏng-Min is found at home in his study wearing a wool three-piece suit. Behind him are wall-sized bookshelves completely filled with important looking yet undistinguishable books. In *Hŭigŭk yŏnghwawa ussŭm* [Comedy and Laughter, 1993] North Korean film critic Kim Yŏng criticizes Sŏng-Min for epitomizing the characteristics of a *yangban* (someone who was highly educated, well-mannered, and thought of himself as a morally superior citizen of the state during the Chosŏn period) in modern day DPRK. When he goes to the amusement park, Sŏng-Min walks leisurely with his hands behind his back in his wool three-piece suit and a wool hat. Sŏng-Min's daughter insists that he take of his coat, to which he replies, "Do you expect me to carry it?"

The *yangban* class during Chosŏn Korea was a minority group of elite state officials who monopolized the political process, economic wealth, and Confucian learning (Deuchler, Martina 1995, 12). *Yangban* refers to two ranks: the civil officers and military officers. They also abided by two governing laws: loyalty

(*ch'ung*) and filial duty (*hyo*) toward the king. Inasmuch as the *yangban* devoted himself to his official duty, he was also deeply concerned about social and cultural manners. South Korean scholar, Kūm Chang-T'ae, in *Hanguk yugyo'ui ihae* [Understanding Korean Confucianism, 1989], describes some of the social decorum with which the *yangban* men were concerned on a daily basis:

The degree to which a younger man lowers his head when he encounters an elder; the method and tone of which a younger man takes when he disagrees with an elder; the part of the face on which the younger man focuses when he looks at an elder; the distance to which the younger man needs to stand when he walks behind an elder; the methods of cooking, methods of eating, methods of greeting; methods of preparing for ritual rites, etc. (Kūm, Chang-T'ae 1989, 51-53)

Kūm Chang-T'ae further explains the *yangban's* concern for wearing his clothes and hat both in his private quarters and the public space. The elite class of Chosŏn Korea has given a term for his social etiquette: *ūgwan* (literally: clothes and hat). The proper method of wearing clothes and hat represents the man's refined dignity and honor (Kūm, Chang-T'ae 1989, 57). While the *yangban* professed that his life was devoted to the state and king, it appears that he took great pains to uphold his social/familial position through observing socially constructed Confucian standards of cultural behavior. In *Day at the Amusement Park*, Sŏng-Min presents himself as a refined nobleman by enduring the discomfort he feels in his three-piece suit and hat. To take off his coat would mean a breach of *yangban*-like standards. Sŏng-Min makes great efforts to think, feel, and show his *yangban*-like mannerisms in the public space.

The comic characteristics of Sŏng-Min continue when he encounters Ki-Ch'ŏl for the first time. Ki-Ch'ŏl accidentally steps on a bed of flowers. Sŏng-Min lectures Ki-Ch'ŏl for disrespecting the amusement park. When Ki-Ch'ŏl looks away, Sŏng-Min cries, "Comrade, look at me when I'm talking to you!" It is evident that Sŏng-Min, who is older, demands respect from Ki-Ch'ŏl. The paradox is found in Sŏng-Min's statement. He says "comrade" to denote an equal group of proletariats regardless of age or gender, but then he places himself at a superior position by instructing Ki-Ch'ŏl to look at him. Of course, Sŏng-Min is not expecting Ki-Ch'ŏl to look straight into his eyes—for that would be inappropriate

and disrespectful according to Confucian etiquette—but rather to respect him as the wise elder. Sōng-Min may have expected Ki-Ch’ōl to lower his head out of shame and ask for forgiveness; but this does not happen, which questions Sōng-Min’s authoritative position—and by authoritative I mean an elder.

It is noteworthy to mention the importance of cultural etiquette over political rhetoric in North Korean comedy films. In dramatic films, when an elderly person instructs a misbehaved character with the political ideology, the usual outcome is the misbehaved character’s penitent gesture in the form of tears, lowered head, or a deep sigh. These gestures indicate to the viewer that the individual has internalized the political ideology and regretted having lived a wrongful life. In any given moment, when one character reprimands another, it is telling sign that transformation is about to occur. While this formulaic plot happens in comedy films, as well, comic characters often dismiss or overlook the political rhetoric for a moment. When Sōng-Min scolds Ki-Ch’ōl for stepping on the flowers, he recites the political rhetoric that he is supposed to say in a situation as such. Sōng-Min says, “These flowers are the possession of the people and the treasure of the collective,” which is another way of saying that one should not take for granted what the state has given to the people. As soon as “the state” enters into the dialogue, Ki-Ch’ōl should have and would have asked for forgiveness. However, this does not happen. Instead, Ki-Ch’ōl turns his head away as a sign of conscious disregard. Ki-Ch’ōl is not repudiating the state; he is neglecting to listen any further to Sōng-Min’s lecture, at which point Sōng-Min demands respect toward an elder not because he has earned respect but because he is simply an elder. The exchange between the two men actually reveals the important role of cultural manners in the North Korean society. Showing respect for an elder simply because he is an elder was not one of the codes of conduct the Soviet Union or China imposed. In fact, for both China and North Korea, the elimination of hierarchical structure was one of the ways in which socialism entered into these countries’ political system. However, in North Korea’s case, the practice of respecting the elder has had a lasting impact on the Korean culture and may never be fully dismantled in daily interactions.

Showing respect for the other person in North Korea is disguised as a socialist

method of engaging with the other, and the official discourse on this topic has changed in the 1970s to designate it as a distinctive quality in the Korean culture dating back to the Koguryŏ era. Charles Armstrong argues that the DPRK was born from Marxist-Leninist socialism, but about the mid-1960s, its ideology has often and even predominantly been expressed through a language of family relationships, with particularly East Asian of ‘Confucian’ resonances of filial piety and maternal love. The state tries to convince the people that hierarchical respect or cultural etiquette is a positive quality that has been handed down for generations in Korean history from which modern North Koreans must learn. The state implies that a true and ardent socialist would practice traditional decorum in both private and public spaces: to his family members, friends, coworkers, elders, strangers, and, of course, the leaders of the country. North Korean scholar, Ri Che-O, cites Kim Jong-Il’s sagacious words: “Following the rules of etiquette is our people’s noble custom and tradition.” Ri Che-O argues that Kim Jong-Il considers North Korean customs and traditions to have derived from the historical lineage of Koguryŏ dynasty and not from the socially constructed hierarchical values imposed during Chosŏn Korea (although the latter seems to have had more of an impact in modern day Korea). It is nearly impossible to trace the history of Korean etiquette, and Kim Jong-Il recognized this. He ostensibly discredited Chosŏn because of its hierarchical stratification and economic class division, but he couldn’t deny the deep cultural impact Chosŏn Korea has had on modern day North Koreans and the unilateral benefits from having the masses respect the leadership.

As much as loyalty (*ch’ung*) and filial duty (*hyo*) were standards by which the *yangban* were supposed to live, they were more conscious of how others perceived them and more dedicated to avoiding any embarrassment. Saving face in public and preserving their dignity were aspects the *yangban* were concerned about on a daily basis. As Kŭm Chang-T’ae says, the elites, in the name of preserving honor and dignity, avoided any embarrassing or self-damaging situations at all cost (Kŭm, Chang-T’ae 1989, 63). The *yangban* considered public embarrassment as a dishonor to oneself and to his family; therefore, it is in his self-interest to protect himself and be vigilant to evade moments where his honor would be potentially defaced. In *Day at the Amusement Park*, a caretaker of the park catches Sŏng-Min

with flowers in his hands, assuming that he has picked them. The audience knows that Sŏng-Min was not picking the flowers but was cleaning up the mess Ki-Ch'öl had made. The caretaker drags Sŏng-Min to the main office to report the incident. Sŏng-Min recognizes the potential of being publically humiliated, so in the opportune moment, he escapes from the caretaker's purview. The irony of this scene is the juxtaposition with the previous one: Ki-Ch'öl evades Sŏng-Min, and Sŏng-Min evades the caretaker. The comedic element is Sŏng-Min's verbal rhetoric of appreciating the state but his unwillingness to testify and admit his "wrongdoings" before the Amusement Park administrators.

Repetition is a comic device that takes a situation, statement, or character and juxtaposes it in multiple contexts, revealing the incompatibility and mismatch. *Day at the Amusement Park* uses repetition in the form of disingenuous rhetoric. The first repetition is the exchange between Sŏng-Min/Ki-Ch'öl and Sŏng-Min/caretaker, where Sŏng-Min's rhetoric of being a responsible citizen of the state is hypocritical when he is found having to answer to the state. The second repetition is the empty rhetoric of patriarchal power of the husband's dominance over his wife. While Sŏng-Min was looking for his wife, he also went on some of the rides and thoroughly enjoyed them. He finally finds his wife and orders her to call off the marriage arrangements. When Sun-Nyŏ hesitates and tries to reason with him, Sŏng-Min says, "Why are you talking back to the man of the house?" In the next scene, Ki-Ch'öl and his wife discuss the same matter. Pong-Sil orders her husband to call off the marriage arrangements, to which Ki-Ch'öl responds, "Why are you talking back to the man of the house?" This single statement is repeated by two different men and attempts to impose patriarchal dominance over their wives, but the audience laughs at the empty rhetoric rather than taking it seriously.

South Korean film scholar Lee Myung-Ja argues that *Day at the Amusement Park* reifies misogyny and patriarchy in the DPRK. She claims that the film reinstated "traditional" methods to resolve North Korea's problems in the 1970s (Lee, Myung-Ja 2008, 354). The film celebrates the DPRK's advanced technology by showcasing the mechanical rides and roller coasters at the park. It is supposed to represent the wonderland of the DPRK's technological advancement, socialist pride, and gender equality. Yet, for Lee, the amusement park is the site where

gender equality and progress in women's identity have been sacrificed (Lee, Myung-Ja 2008, 363). She is perhaps referring to misogynistic and chauvinistic statements such as "Why are you talking back to the man of the house?" The film certainly contains gender specific roles and socially constructed gender identities, which will be further discussed in the last part of this paper. Lee claims that the film resorted to "traditional" values, denigrating the women throughout Korean history for the sake of increasing male dominance and justifying a patriarchal state system. I agree with Lee that North Korean cinema contains strong underlying discourses of patriarchal dominance and misogyny. However, I do not feel that the statement "Why are you talking back to the man of the house?" in this particular film reifies the patriarchal discourse, but instead criticizes the male characters who think they have any patriarchal power over the women.

Lee Myung-Ja has missed the comic form of repetition in her analysis and overlooked the humor in the male characters' attempt to stabilize patriarchal dominance, which they did not have from the very beginning. In the original Korean, both Söng-Min and Ki-Ch'öl use the word *sedaeju*, which is defined as the head of the household or someone who manages the household duties. In the opening of the film, Yöng-Ae, the daughter, criticizes Söng-Min for not caring about the family business. The audience recognizes that Söng-Min has no real interest in his family operations and that his wife has taken up the responsibility to manage the family. When Söng-Min is at the amusement park, he tries to enforce his patriarchal power over his wife. However, this is not because Söng-Min is a chauvinistic character. He has grown to enjoy the roller coasters at the park, and he uses the patriarchal rhetoric as a disguise to go on another ride. Söng-Min says, "Let's do this. I will go on that ride while you call off the marriage arrangements." Söng-Min clearly does not want to take up the responsibility of canceling the marriage arrangements, despite the fact that he claims to be the one who manages the household duties. His rhetorical claim and his desire to ride the roller coaster are asymmetrical, proving that his real desire is not to cancel the marriage arrangements but to fulfill his self-interest. However, being a noble and dignified man, Söng-Min will neither disclose his selfish motives in public nor to his wife lest he gets humiliated by her in public. The relationship between

Ki-Ch'öl and Pong-Sil is the same. It is clear to the audience that Pong-Sil runs the household in her family. At the amusement park, Pong-Sil orders Ki-Ch'öl to cancel the marriage arrangements. Ki-Ch'öl uses the patriarchal rhetoric to diffuse his wife, but to no avail, he complies with her demands. Pong-Sil emasculates her husband's patriarchal empowerment publically, making Kathleen Rowe's claim that "comedy often mocks the masculinity that tragedy ennobles" true.

#### 4. Socially (De)Constructed Manners and Repression

Much like any society, the DPRK, constructs social standards and expectations on gender behavior and mannerisms. These codes of conduct in North Korea are regulated and performed through discursive and cultural practices in the family, schools, workplaces, songs, posters, fiction, and cinema, to list a few. In the case of cinema, female and male characters on the big screen prescribe the performative behavior of desired North Korean citizens—how one ought to act/react in a given situation. Many a North Korean film portrays the state-desired gendered speech acts, bodily gestures, and desexualized characters to construct a utilitarian citizen over a sexually stimulated one—for sexual pleasure has no place in a socialist state.

The amusement park is a site that attempts to control excitement and impulses, but it is also a site of fulfilling sexual gratification for young lovers. It is a place where people get lost and cannot be found, but it is also a place where some people *do not* wish to be found. Although the amusement park is a vast open space, it is also compartmentalized for individuals to hide from the public gaze. A theme park is designed to entertain young children and allow lovers to explore their sexuality. Dark rooms, enclosed rides, and isolated areas in the park are opportunities for lovers to release their repressed desires for each other. *Day at the Amusement Park* reveals how Yöng-Gil and Ki-Ok are caught in an enclosed ride. When the ride comes to a halt for the second time, Ki-Ch'öl looks away from the lovers (not realizing that it is his sister and Yöng-Gil) and politely asks them to get off. Ki-Ch'öl looks away not because he disapproves of lovers sexual

activities in an enclosed ride, but rather because he understands that lovers are inclined and have purposely found this ride to carry out their sexual desires. Ki-Ch'öl reminds the lovers that the ride has gone around twice, which implies that Ki-Ch'öl has given them plenty of time to fulfill their carnal passion. Ki-Ch'öl's looking away from the lovers is a gesture of a well-mannered, decent individual, who is embarrassed for the lovers. When he discovers it is his sister and Yöng-Gil in the ride, Ki-Ch'öl is thrilled that the two are together. It is actually Ki-Ok who is embarrassed for being caught in the ride because a prudish young lady of the DPRK would not put herself in this situation and a prudent one would certainly not get caught.

The state has little to no control over the way these lovers would behave in a public space. Yöng-Gil and Ki-Ok keep a "safe" distance when they walk around the park amid other patrons. They understand that public display of affection is not warranted in the DPRK society of the 1970s. However, the North Korean society's unwritten laws of public sexual conduct do not eliminate the lovers' desire, but rather intensify it. As Foucault says in *History of Sexuality*, sexual desire is produced from the law or social behavior that attempts to prevent it. Much like the bourgeois elites during the Victorian era, ladies and gentlemen were to uphold their dignity and class in public. At the same time, as many of Victorian comedy plays show, these ladies and gentlemen become licentious and immoral behind closed doors or curtains, which represent the dark and repressed desires. The enclosed ride, for example, hides Yöng-Gil and Ki-Ok from the public and allows them to pursue their sexual desires.

The cultural code of conduct in a public space is to show respect for each other, as it has been customary in Korean history. Social manners control the people to behave in a way that hides their innermost desires and passions. Likewise, the amusement park is a setting not only for the North Koreans to enjoy but also for their repressed desires to surface. For example, Söng-Min is attracted to a riotous crowd, laughing at the ones riding the bumper cars. Pong-Sil and her friend, who are standing in front of Söng-Min, laugh loudly with wild gesticulations. Pong-Sil's friend accidentally elbows Söng-Min in the chest, and Pong-Sil accidentally strikes Söng-Min, knocking his hat off. In the next scene, while Pong-Sil washes



Sŏng-Min's hat out of regret and embarrassment, Sŏng-Min asks Pong-Sil's children, "Was your mother a boxer?" Pong-Sil cleans Sŏng-Min's hat because she understands socially constructed gender behavior and manners in the Korean culture: a woman is supposed to be submissive to the man. For Sŏng-Min, his bifocals (a symbol of being an intellectual) were broken and his *yangban* hat was knocked off, which indicates a blow to his pride and dignity. Sŏng-Min is surprised by Pong-Sil's unwomanly behavior and is taken aback by her physical strength. Sŏng-Min never anticipated a woman's ability to release such a heavy blow unless she had been a trained fighter. Sŏng-Min's presumptions of gender behavior are literally and physically knocked out of his head. When Sŏng-Min confronts Ki-Ch'ŏl about this matter, Ki-Ch'ŏl guffaws and says, "My wife would never do that. Her problem is being too coy." The comedy is found in the contrasting characteristics of Pong-Sil at home and in public. She understands the expectations of social decorum, but at the amusement park, she releases her inhibitions, unleashing the repressed libido that has been lying dormant within the confines of gender behavior.

In another instance, both Sŏng-Min and Ki-Ch'ŏl get on a merry-go-round that has seats in the form of a fighter jet. Their wives stand by the side gate. Sŏng-Min playfully begins to fire a machine gun at Ki-Ch'ŏl, who is sitting in front of Sŏng-Min. Ki-Ch'ŏl warns Sŏng-Min not to shoot at him, but Sŏng-Min continues. Meanwhile, Sun-Nyŏ is embarrassed at her husband's childish behavior and for shooting at Ki-Ch'ŏl, with whom she has made marriage arrangements.

Sun-Nyŏ: Don't shoot at him! He's going to be our in-law!

Pong-Sil: Shoot at him! Keep shooting!

Sun-Nyŏ: Stop shooting!

Pong-Sil: No, he needs to shoot at him more!

While Sun-Nyŏ tries to preserve her family's dignity in public, Pong-Sil finds this opportunity to release her repressed desires of shooting at her husband vicariously performed through Sŏng-Min. The two wives represent the dual and conflicting mannerisms: the first tries to observe the strict social decorum of honor

and refined dignity while the second overturns gender expectations and targets the patriarch who has normalized cultural manners in society and has repressed women.

The amusement park creates a space where individuals' repressed desires are uncontrollably released and where social and cultural manners are suspended for the duration of the ride. Much like any country, the DPRK has erected a controlled amusement park for people of all ages to enjoy. The people are expected to have a cathartic experience at the park and return home with a new sense of determination to work. The amusement park is indeed a safe house for the patrons to be *lawless*, a sanctuary from the laborious daily life. The comedy is not only found in the characters that have yielded to their repressed desires; it is also found in the characters that refuse to abandon their dignity for the sake of upholding socially and culturally constructed manners.

## 5. Conclusion

*Day at the Amusement Park* takes place in Mount Taesong Amusement Park located outside of Pyongyang, and it celebrates the DPRK's technologically advanced construction of machinery during the Speed Campaign and Six-Year Plan (1971-1976). The amusement park opened its gates to the North Koreans in 1971 and was completed in 1977. As much as the plot is central to the film, showcasing the amusement park to the viewers serves an important propagandistic purpose: to have the people feel grateful toward the state for providing a space to enjoy. The film shows numerous shots of the various rides available to the patrons: carousel, Ferris wheel, train ride, monorail, high speed roller coaster, swing ride, pendulum ride, water rides, tea cup ride, and bumper cars. The shock value, perception of danger, and hyperstimulation of the senses amplifies pleasure for the patrons in a controlled environment.

The DPRK's economic plans have exhausted the people's energy and drive to work. The amusement park was designed to rejuvenate the mind, body, and spirit so that the people can return to work with a new sense of determination. The

amusement park was simultaneously a site of wonderment and familiarity for the people. For the audience members watching *Day at the Amusement Park*, the excited and scared expressions on the patrons' face may have been desirable and pleasurable more than the shots of the rides themselves. This is because the patrons coming to the amusement park create a fantastical image of releasing their inhibitions and repressed desires for the audience members. The patrons abandon their social or cultural manners at the gate before entering the park and reclaim them when they leave.

Of course, the amusement park has its own set of morals and principles. There are rules and regulations by which the patrons must abide in order to participate in the fun. These established protocols organize and mobilize the patrons in a way that is hardly any different from the world outside of the park. The systematic waiting in line to enter and exit the rides is, what Lauren Rabinovitz argues, analogous to the patrons' industrialized labor—routinized schedule of going to and coming from work (Rabinovitz, Lauren 2012, 34). Efficiency of input and output is the determining drive behind the amusement park as much as it was for industrial factories in the DPRK of the 1970s.

*Day at the Amusement Park* as a comedy of manners reveals the confusion and disorientation of an elite class that tries to uphold social decorum for the sake of upholding rules and behaviors that have been socially and culturally constructed in Korean history. The political message that is suppose to direct and educate the characters in becoming a better socialist citizen is subsumed in the cultural rules and practices that dominate the North Koreans' daily lives. As Alexis Greene says, "These rules are essential to the members of these societies primarily because a person's comprehension of these rules dictates whether he or she is socially accepted within society" (Greene, Alexis 1992, 80). The characters rely on these rules or social manners to play an elaborate social game where the stakes involve the satisfaction of certain centralized desires (sexual, financial, ambition), and a game in which their actions are circumscribed within the social rules of a given society (Pierson, David P 2000, 51). In the case of North Korean comedy films, the characters dictate and are dictated by the cultural norms that are often at odds with the state's political agenda. The social "game" the characters play in comedy

films provides a different understanding through which North Korean cinema is analyzed.

Scholars on North Korean film have made attempts to understand the country through its film medium, only to conclude that film serves as yet another tool for raising the ideological consciousness of the viewers and for nation-building. In fact, such studies on North Korean film often examine dramatic films or melodrama, assuming that the grand narrative of the DPRK is articulated through the repository of such serious and nationalistic films. This is not only a symptom for scholars outside of the DPRK, but also for North Korean film critics. In fact, comedy films in general have not received much attention from film scholars around the world because of their “lightheartedness.” Nearly every film that has won the Oscars in Hollywood for best picture has been dramatic films, despite the fact that the production of comedy films outnumbers dramatic films each year. Conversely, the DPRK has overloaded the production of dramatic films because educating the masses is a *serious* operation rather than a facetious one. Perhaps Aristotle’s definitions of tragedy—as that which imitates action—and comedy—as that which imitates low characters—have had an indelible impression on our perception of what should be deemed worthy of national representation.

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