

## **‘Under the Demilitarized Zone...the Beach’: or Reading Choi through Guy Debord’s ‘Society of the Spectacle’**

Shine Choi, *Re-Imagining North Korea in International Politics: Problems and Alternatives*, London: Routledge, 2015.

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“Separation is the Alpha and the Omega of the Spectacle...” (Guy Debord)

“The International problem of North Korea is that North Korea is a work of fiction...” (Shine Choi)

The Demilitarised Zone in which, within which and across which the contemporary separation and rupture of the Korean Peninsula is most distinctly, concretely and completely manifested is surely the source of much of the eloquent research focused on that painful division. Yet it cannot also be ignored that the Demilitarized Zone as the ultimate physical embodiment of the post Korean War status quo is the division system at its least eloquent. It is a space of bluntness and a space of assertive punctuation, a full stop to the political articulations of either side. In a sense it is a space of acute political theatre as the recent theorists of political ideological forms in the North, Heonik Kwon and Byung-ho Chung

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would have it, a space of political charisma. Similar this author supposes to the conception of the vast majority of readers of this review of those North Korean political forms, the theatre and charismatic output of the Zone, however is one of only tragedy, deeply unfulfilling and unrequited. It is a tragic theatric space, on and in which neither side really wishes to either perform or spectate, but which both are bound by the vagaries of historical incident and accident to participate.

But is this really the case? Shine Choi in this essentially provocative work *“Re-imagining North Korea in International Politics: Problems and Alternatives”*, suggests perhaps it is not, perhaps we can all permanently exit stage right (or left), perhaps we can all retire or retreat at the interval, perhaps we can all demand the end to the performance. If North Korea and therefore the separation between the two Koreas is a work of theatric fiction, the whole process no matter how physical or concrete in some form is a cultural production. Similarly as provocative as this work is, Choi’s reviewer here, in order to appropriately connect and engage with the terrain conceived of within it wishes to view the text through the lens provided by another provocateur. Guy Debord, a French post-structuralist philosopher, in 1967 wrote a text of complicated, obtuse verse, *“The Society of the Spectacle”* (*“La Société du Spectacle”* in its original French). Debord and his conception of the ‘Spectacle’ paved the intellectual way for the birth of Situationism, the radical cultural movement which underpinned the ruptures and displacements and almost revolution of Paris in 1968. With the assertion “Under the paving stones: the beach”, Debord and others fuelled youthful and academic assertions and conceptions that ultimately all expressions of culture, power, politics, social function etc were ultimately theatric ‘spectacle’ and all could be undone with a turning away, playful reconfiguration, ‘détournement’ and ‘derivation.’ Reading Choi in this dense, neutron star of a book through Debord’s more playful lens, this reviewer suggests might help the reader to better grasp the assertive and acerbic pulsing vigour of her words.

Readers of S/N Humanities, or in fact any reader with an academic or empirical focus upon the issues of either North Korea or the current and historical separation of the Korean Peninsula will be in some way aware of the tropes of the output and production of that focus. North Korean studies in particular revolves primarily

paradigms of what Hazel Smith has called “mad, bad or sad”. Such discursive paradigms are temporally bounded by conceptions of Pyongyang’s future longevity, conceptions which Marcus Noland and others have termed paradigms of “collapsism” or “muddle through.” Such a field of analysis has resulted in North Korea and the division system’s capture by agendas of securitisation, threat and risk, the universalist, (Neo)Liberalism of human rights and regime change advocates, and what the reviewer terms the ‘comedy-fication’ of Pyongyang. It cannot be understated that in comparison with other academic fields and subjects/terrains of study, North Korean studies has not benefited empirically or epistemically from these approaches, and the trope of cultural and media production, that matters north of the demilitarized zone are ‘unknowable’ or opaque is partly a production of this unsatisfying combination of strategies. Ultimately and in ways which Debord might well recognise, our analytic vision of North Korea, its politics, people and spaces has become a production, a construction of our own making. Essentially, as academics, analysts and interested parties we achieve through this theatre of confusion, the North Korea that we are comfortable with, an unknowable space or constructed darkness. In this way the North Korea that we encounter and understand becomes more about us, the viewer, the reader the activist, the watcher and our preconceptions, fears, desires and fantasies than it does about the grounded subject that it’s the space of sovereignty governed by Pyongyang and its people.

For a number of considered and careful analysts, more used to the empirical rigour and methodological development of other more distant fields, the myopic, facile tendencies of self-reflection and externalisation generated by much of the output of North Korean studies is truly a disappointment. Choi is undoubtedly one of these number and essentially calls the entire edifice and industry of academic and intellectual procrastination surrounding North Korea, out demanding which she terms an ‘interruption’ to the entire enterprise. Choi’s interruption is in terms which Debord would recognise from his own agitated time, if not a radical, total and in some ways violent, collapse of the empirical and epistemic status quo then at least a pause in self-reverential, circular speculations and assertions from which something else, perhaps something more authentic, grounded and embodied in a

reality of sorts might emerge. Choi's interruption demands that the 'discipline' of North Korean studies and its attendant sub-narratives perhaps rather seeing its subject through the distorting lenses of politics, security and desire or wish fulfilment, should do so through the production generated by Debord's 'spectacle.' In this way as viewers, engagers and interactors we might see, hear and think North Korea, as a culturally produced lived space of temporal reality, rather than something from an imagined a-historical zone of de-temporalization.

Choi's analysis of this produced reality fascinatingly alights on the necessity of seeing and encountering North Korea differently through the moment of this interruption. She identifies the utility and validity of using the work of seemingly disparate authors as Trinh Minh-ha, Rey Chow, James Church and Guy Delisle (among many), as exemplary eyes through which alternatives to seeing, imagining and considering North Korea might be achieved. Through the act of seeing and through the translation and mediation of that seeing and its production of alternatives to contemporary analytical status quo, Choi asserts that power is bestowed upon the process, not just to the methodological element to physical beings within it, claiming that "Drawing specifically on Rey Chow's work, I argue that all intercultural contacts require explicit negotiations with this process of mediation and with the questions of how alterations of the process and the bodies involved can occur..." (Choi, Shine, 2014, 38 – Referencing Chow, Rey, 1995, 177-179).

Choi's further seeks to interrogate and disrupt the methodologies and epistemic presumptions of the previously "seeing" community of North Korean scholars utilising the work of Trinh Minh-ha (described as a feminist film maker and political theorist). Trinh it seems seeks to break what sounds like a tyranny of objectivity, taking issue "with science as culture that encompasses all of the practices and processes that use, keep alive and fortify prevailing ideas of facticity and realism." (Choi 2014, 47) Indeed Choi insists that a reading of Trinh suggests that rather than bringing the scholar closer to the process and temporal realities of a subject's lives "Facticity and realism are predicated on a desire to bypass inter-subjectivities or relational encounters..." (Choi, Shine, 2014, 47),

Perhaps similar to Debord's conception that the key process of breaking or disempowering the spectacle is to both actually see it at all and having done so

to see it differently, Choi brings Trinh's conceptions to bear on the landscapes and visible terrains of science and scientific output (which includes that addressing North Korea). Given that Trinh in language any 'derevisté' would be familiar with, claims that the impact of new comprehensions brought on by this would be "...Re-assemblage. From silences to silences, the fragile essence of each fragment speaks..." (Choi, Shine, 2015, 48 quoting Trinh 1989, 118), Choi through her work is calling for a new framework of enquiry with regards to North Korea, truths and seeing's surrounding it, one which disrupts the subject-object binary and instead of speaking for or about something, focus on what Trinh calls speaking "nearby or together with" (Choi 2015, 47 quoting Trinh, T. Minh-ha, 1986, 33). Essentially Choi is, in the style of Paul Klee 'taking our subjectivity/objectivity relations and truth for a walk', a journey to new places and spaces, new vistas and observational positions from which perhaps other things can be seen.

The reader of course by now might be willing to suggest that Choi is suggesting or demanding a collapse into diffusion and the relativist, an artistic escapade in the face of utter tyranny and human degradation. Given Choi's expert encounters with the productive eyes of James Church and Guy Delisle, authors of a unique series of fiction and a graphic novel (respectively), focused on North Korea, whose work she suggests is representative of just new or different ways of seeing, manifestations of 'taking the object-subject for a walk' such criticism itself could be grounded in its own objective truth. However this would be to entirely discount and neglect Choi's assertive demand that rather than developing these new creative, juxtaposed, to one side (just round the corner), ways of seeing or engaging with this new un-securitized, de-objectified, 're-subjectified' reality as entertainment or pure spectacular, the audience is in no way released from the rigours of moral demand or conscience, but instead must encounter them even more greatly, run and fall head long towards them. Similar it seems, though radically different in notions (or otherwise) of the spectacular to Sandra Fahy's magnificent co-option of the field of the desperate, dark emotional world of North Korean's who have left its territory and sovereignty (and who are most commonly referred to as 'North Korean defectors' or 'North Korean escapees') as a functional, if complicated tool for empirical analysis in her recent book *Marching Through Suffering*, Choi

utilises this reframing and reconfiguration of the potential and process of our seeing and our viewing to move the spectacular and its production elsewhere.

Instead of the rather quizzical, abstruse, obtuse methodological and theoretical myopia of the academically captured seeing and considering of before, what Choi invites the reader having broken the boundaries and territories of the object/subject, to encounter instead is pure, unadulterated suffering and torment which in a most direct and certainly not diffuse manner, makes definite and determined demands of us and certainly requires an answer. It would be unlikely if the answer after all this was a continuation of separated, objectified present. Intriguingly Choi's suggestion as to the formation of any answers or assertions is to remove the field of play, seeing and experience entirely from 'tempo-reality' and to delve deeper into this realm of the spectacle, following our breaking of boundaries and new ways of seeing and relating. Again Choi connects to the terrains of the spectacle the realm of overt cultural production in order to relocate an empathetic grounded reality, perceivable and encounterable in our new framework of open eyed existence. This necessary grounding, is real experience thrust upon us in our seeing and our encounters, but upon which we can grab in what might be potentially ephemeral waters.

Of course Choi means for these encounters and this seeing to be central, core, rather than ephemeral or peripheral, the heart of the spectacle and the journey rather than the edge or corona. Utilising a further and final very careful and considered set of literary and filmic readings, Choi in the later chapters of the work encounters new possibilities for empathic, real, undivided love for North Korea, love which will ultimately break and fracture division in filmic disruption present in recent Korean productions such as 'Over the Border', 'Typhoon' and 'Our Homeland'. This is the radical love of Sonia Ryang's conception, space for the conceptual threesome between an uncomfortably imagined couple and an attendant member of the Kim dynasty, space for us to love North Korea now that we have embraced and been re-defined the breaking, collapse or disintegration of the object/subject binary and our rebirth of subjectivity as Choi puts it when referring to Yang, a key character in on 'Our Homeland'; "...This intimate relationship with her subject gains articulation in all her productions, which

crucially mediates how North Korea as an object of love is encountered and imagined” (Choi, Shine, 2015, 160).

Of course both objectivity and subjectivity in this place of encounter, seeing and engagement through spectacle are themselves reconfigured and productive in their regeneration. In this new world of seeing, empathising and encountering a 'love-space' of empathic 'spectacular' production, Choi engages Gayatri Spivak's rather radical writing on re-centered or de-centered selves, understanding them to open up "...the possibility for exploring a greater diversity of in-between spaces and translative transactions..." (Choi, Shine, 2015, 219). We arrive with Choi at this space of acute hyphenation, barriers broken, defences down, at the Omega of the Spectacle. In Spivak's 'simultaenity' a world with 'both ends', subordination and disruption, it is as if our heterogeneous production and encounter themselves become pure mobilization as much as they become actualization. In this spectacular, yet empathetic, grounded re-production, the division of North and South Korea is mobilised by its reproduction into and beyond spectacle, becoming rather than object of stasis, division or rupture, instead part, object and subject of a critical, vital act of *detournément*.

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