The title of my talk today is "Utopias Misplaced: The Cost of Outsourcing Dystopian Poetics to North Korea."

I hope that this title has elicited questions in you, and I’d like to begin by posing a list of questions that I had in mind when I put this title together.

What exactly is the meaning of “dystopian poetics”?

What is the relationship of “dystopian poetics” to the misplacement of a utopian vision?

What does it mean to OUTSOURCE dystopian poetics?

What does it mean to outsource dystopian poetics specifically TO NORTH KOREA?

What are some concrete examples of irresponsible ways of subcontracting dystopian poetics to and from places both imagined and real?

Is it possible to outsource dystopian poetics in a manner that is conscientious, ethical, and generative?

Finally: What IS the Cost of Outsourcing Dystopian Poetics to North Korea—and are there ways of avoiding this cost?

As I will try to show toward the end of my talk, one powerful solution to this problem can be found in the vibrant artwork of North Korean exiles, defectors, and refugees, that is, in the artwork of former citizens of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

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Let me return to the first question that I posed: dystopian poetics. What is it?

I would like to propose that we approach our discussion of what I am calling “dystopian poetics” in the framework of the UNCANNY VALLEY—an aesthetic phenomenon explored by the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori.

In a 1970 article titled ("bukimi no tani," or “Eerie Valley” or “Uncanny Valley”) [“不気味の谷”], Mori offered a theory to explain how and why human beings react the way they do to various humanoid artifacts.

[SHOW GRAPH OF UNCANNY VALLEY]
Figure 1
According to Mori, humans tend to respond with increasing sympathy to a series of increasingly humanlike entities until a certain point (someplace around 70% humanlike) at which point the aesthetic response drops abruptly from affinity to profound revulsion—before ascending again (toward 100% humanlike) to create what looks, when graphically delineated, like a precipitous valley. For this reason, Mori’s theory has come to be known as the theory of the “uncanny valley.” (Figure 1)

Mori’s theory is usually applied to robots, puppets, and other humanoid creatures that elicit what Ernst Jentsch identified in his 1906 essay “On the Psychology of the Uncanny” as “intellectual uncertainty” over whether something is inanimate or alive.

* HAL from the 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey* is barely humanoid and therefore elicits little sympathy in the viewer. (Figure 2a)
* WALL-E (Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-class) from the 2008 Pixar film is significantly more humanoid, eliciting a strong sympathetic response from the viewer. (Figure 2b)

* Frankenstein’s creature from Mary Shelley’s 1818 gothic narrative is an unfortunate humanoid artifact who resides in the uncanny valley. He is, in fact, the very personification of the uncanny valley—especially in the following passage in which Victor Frankenstein recounts the moment his creation comes to life: (Figure 2c)
“How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!—Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips.”—Volume I, Chapter IV

It’s important to note that the creature has been designed to be perfect—but when brought to life (when animated) the creature’s perfect design triggers a sense of revulsion. I’m stressing this point here because it will soon become applicable in a different context.

As I mentioned, Mori’s theory is usually applied to puppets and robots—as well as mannequins, cyborgs, and eerie computer-generated images of zombies. But part of what makes Mori’s theory
of the uncanny valley so powerful is its evocativeness, its capacity to accommodate many different kinds of humanoid artifacts—including those that may not be obviously relevant.

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One such species of humanoid artifact is the body politic.

By the phrase “body politic” I have in mind a figure of speech in which the type of artifact that we often call “a nation” is likened to a human body. This is a figure that we invoke quite frequently in everyday language—for instance, when we use expressions such as “head of state” and “arm of government.”

This figurative body politic also appears in striking visual images:

* Here is one such image from a panel in Marjane Satrapi’s 2000 autobiographical graphic narrative PERSEPOLIS.

Figure 3a

As you can see, Marjane is remembering a phrase that when she was a child “struck [her] most by its gory imagery: ‘TO DIE A MARTYR IS TO INJECT BLOOD INTO THE VEINS OF SOCIETY.’” (Figure 3a)

* Another striking image of the body politic can be found in the frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes’s (1588-1679) _Leviathan (or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil)_ published in 1651. (Figure 3b)
This image is of an enormous crowned figure emerging from the landscape.

The torso and arms of the figure are composed of several hundred individual persons.

This image illustrates quite powerfully Hobbes’s views on statecraft, specifically the importance of rule by an absolute sovereign, and the importance of a social contract to a strong government.
In thinking about the humanoid body politic, I found myself sketching a graph corresponding to Mori’s graph of the uncanny valley.

[Show graph of BODY POLITIC]:

Figure 4

The Y axis and the X axis meet at a place where there is NO shape to the body politic. The point of origin “zero,” so to speak, corresponds to anarchy—by which I mean the absence of law and order. (Figure 4)

But the more and more an artificial body politic is governed by rules and harmonious design—i.e., the more and more perfectly the union is formed—the more agreeable and appealing the body politic becomes—until a certain point at which the agreement of the social contract and the agreeability of the artificial body politic MORE OR LESS match politically and aesthetically. I say “more or less” because in my account so far of the graphic delineation we still haven’t reached utopia.
In fact, any body politic that aspires to be both perfect and viable is doomed to descend into the valley of misplaced utopias, not unlike Frankenstein’s creature.

Those societies which are characterized by unnatural unanimity and uncanny conformism dwell in a valley not unlike Masahiro Mori’s uncanny valley—a valley where dystopian poetics thrive.

Think of this negative place as a space populated, for example, by narratives in which too much political “harmony” is rendered subtly and eerily dissonant by the first-person voice of a narrator who is out of place, quietly watchful, or even paranoid.

An example with which most of you are probably familiar is the 1985 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood. This classic dystopian narrative is set in the Republic of Gilead, a military dictatorship and brutal theocracy where no one can be trusted, where individual humans have been rendered eerily interchangeable by color-coded uniforms, and where human rights are violated in the most obscene manner possible.

Before I continue discussing the valley of dystopian poetics, let me explain why I’ve delineated utopia as a barely visible vertical dotted line. Etymologically, utopia is a nonplace—no place. Pure utopia is an asymptote that is by definition impossible to represent. Each and every single utopian vision is idiosyncratic. Personally, I would like to think that this space in which the valley ascends toward 100% corresponds to a society devoted to the equitable and fair distribution of sympathetic attention on planet Earth. But anecdotal evidence and conversations with various individuals have convinced me that not everyone defines utopia the way I do.

Now: to return to the uncanny valley of dystopian poetics: why would anyone wish to live here? For the fact remains that there is a demand, a market, for dystopian narratives. Recent articles in *THE NEW YORKER* and *THE NEW YORK TIMES* (among other publications) have addressed the massive popularity of dystopian franchises such as *THE HUNGER GAMES*.

The seemingly perverse and paradoxical appeal of dystopian fictional narratives is very similar, I think, to the appeal of gothic narratives.

It’s safe to say that the vast majority of people would not actually wish to live in a world full of haunted ruins, sadistic ghosts, supernatural curses...

The gothic allows us to enjoy the pleasure of fear—both temporarily and without having to engage our moral faculties.

A very similar set of claims might be applied to dystopian poetics.

Most of us would not wish to live in a real-life dystopia where everyone else is, say, an automated clone, or where constant surveillance and the everpresent threat of horrific torture and punishment render everyday living a nightmarish exercise in hypervigilance and dread.

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But apparently many people do feel a desire to live in a dystopian world without actually suffering—without paying a price beyond the price of, say, a movie ticket.

Consumers take pleasure in experiencing dystopias virtually and in manageable doses.

It is one thing, however, to appreciate dystopian narratives inspired by firsthand experiences, originality, ingenuity, and imagination.

It is another thing altogether to indulge an appetite for narratives in which the dystopian allure has been inspired by a real-life place where real suffering does happen.

North Korea is a real-life dystopia. For almost 70 years, its ideology of Juche or self-reliance has isolated the Hermit Kingdom from the rest of the world.

Since the division of Korea following World War Two and the Korean War, the reality of North Korea has evaded direct representation. Photographs and firsthand accounts of this enigmatic country are relatively scarce. At the same time, the idea of North Korea has served as a strangely rich aesthetic resource—a wealth of images, textures, metaphors, and symbols—for a number of science-fiction writers and artists.

In fact, what makes North Korea especially convenient and effective as a resource for the making of fictional dystopias is its opacity as a nation and the scarcity of facts and reliable information about reality inside the DPRK.

North Korea is an uncanny body politic, one that elicits intellectual uncertainty as to whether it is alive or dead.

In fact, there is often uncertainty and speculation as to whether its own leaders are alive or dead—though the latest news is that Kim Jong Un is still alive.

Most images of North Korea to which outsiders do have access have been carefully selected and manipulated by the regime.

Consider, for instance, this AP photograph of a recent Arirang celebration.

Figure 5
These spectacular “mass games” take place annually in stadiums where tens of thousands of performers dance and march with a choreographed precision that is both jaw-dropping and painful to behold. (Figure 5)

The most prominent humanoid artifact in this photograph is Kim Il Sung, who technically died in 1994 but who was posthumously promoted to Eternal President of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

Behind this large-scale and highly visible portrait of Kim Il Sung are many individual human beings holding placards that together make the larger-scale portrait possible.

Each individual behind this large portrait is effaced and rendered invisible by the placard that he or she has been trained to use as a mask as part of a highly mechanized ritual.  

[Cf. Hobbes’s Leviathan]

Figure 6/Figure 3b

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2 In this August 24, 2011 photo, an image of the late North Korean leader Kim Il Sung is made by individual human beings together holding placards in a stadium during an Arirang festival performance in Pyongyang. (AP Photo/David Guttenfelder)
The fact that the North Korean regime exploits its own citizens in such an uncanny way makes it vulnerable to the kind of outsourcing that I am about to discuss.

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I will analyze three texts that to varying degrees and in varying ways borrow from North Korea’s ominous mystique to generate dystopian effects.

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Such texts engage in a process whereby dystopian energies are imaginatively outsourced to North Korea and transformed into aesthetic and cultural experiences of virtual subjugation, vicarious dread, and a sense of how it might feel to inhabit a world of Juche eschatology.

The first example, which I’ll discuss only briefly, is the retro-chic dystopian videogame *Homefront* (Kaos, 2011).

Those who enter this virtual reality of *Homefront* find themselves in the year 2027, two years into the North Korean occupation of the United States.

Now called “New Korean Federation of Occupied America,” the U.S. is bisected by the Mississippi River, which North Koreans have poisoned with radioactive iodine. It is hard to overlook the similarities between this unaccessible Mississippi River and the Korean DMZ.

*Homefront* is just one of several examples of a trend in which North Korea has been hipsterized in American pop culture.

For instance: VICE magazine has recently been posting sensationalistic items about what VICE founder Shane Smith has called “the alternate universe of North Korea.” (Figures 7a-7e)

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3 INTRODUCTION: “Outsourcing” the Poetics of Dystopia; “Hallyu” (K-Pop) Out of North Korea; Imagining What Everyday Life Must Be Like Inside a World of End-Stage Juche Communism. Beyond establishing the main thesis of “Science-Fictional North Korea,” the introduction addresses the following questions. How do images of North Korea in South Korean science fiction differ from (or resemble) images of North Korea in *Korean American* science fiction? Can the Western imagination of North Korea be understood as a form of Orientalism? To what extent is “science-fictional North Korea” a synecdoche for “science-fictional Korea-as-a-whole”? In probing such questions, I examine a range of texts, including the North Korean monster film *Pulgasari* (1985); the novel *Personal Days* (2008) by the Korean American writer Ed Park; *Notes From the Divided Country* (2003) by the Korean American poet Suji Kwock Kim; the American videogame *Homefront* (2011); *Pyongyang* (2004), an Orwellian graphic novel by the Canadian artist Guy Delisle; kitschy souvenirs and brochures from the DMZ; the “Inspector O” mystery fiction of James Church; “Greetings, Earthlings,” a June 2000 cover story in *The Economist* framing Kim Jong-il as an otherworldly target of ridicule; and Adam Johnson’s 2012 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Orphan Master’s Son.*

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Figure 7c

Figure 7d
An example of dystopian outsourcing much more unsettling than HOMEFRONT can be found in the 2002 film *Die Another Day*.

As I’ve been suggesting: To outsource dystopian poetics to NK is to exploit NK’s seemingly grotesque aura while overlooking North Korea’s very bleak dystopian realities. In other words, it is to allow stereotypes about NK to perform the aesthetic and cultural work of generating the paradoxical pleasures of dystopian fiction.

What results in the case of the twentieth installment of the Bond film franchise is a movie populated by two-dimensional villains that might as well have been assembled, manufactured, and imported from North Korean factories.

*Die Another Day* feature North Korean antagonists who undergo racial disguise, and the masking occurs at a molecular level in a science-fictional narrative that in many ways is set not on Earth but in the uncanny valley.
The most spectacular villain in *Die Another Day* is Zao (played by the Korean American actor Rick Yune). Zao is injured by Bond in the film’s opening scenes: an explosion set off by 007 leaves Zao’s face scarred and studded with diamonds. Zao subsequently undergoes painful gene therapy to replace his original Korean body with the body of a Caucasian man.

The manner in which we are given visual access to Zao’s DNA transplant is quite striking. Such access happens in two ways. First, we see—through the eyes of NSA Agent Giacinta “Jinx” Johnson (played by Halle Berry)—computerized medical files detailing Zao’s patient status (Figures 8a-8d).

While the villainous behavior of our anti-hero is frequently on display, Moon/Graves does not reside in the uncanny valley. If anything, the film invites us to view Moon/Graves as a subversive yet aesthetically acceptable version of Pierce Brosnan’s 007. As Moon-as-Graves informs his nemesis during a confrontation near the movie’s end: “When your intervention forced me to present the world with a new face, I chose to model the disgusting Gustav Graves on you. That unjustifiable swagger. Your crass quips.” Deeply critical of Bond’s imperiousness and association with British imperialism, Moon has used his own “death” as an opportunity to fashion himself as a stealthy parody of Bond—one with aspirations to out-Bond Bond himself. That Moon/Graves represents a critique of British colonialism is implied earlier on in *Die Another Day*. Moments before his ostensible demise, Colonel Moon expresses to Bond his displeasure that “you British still believe you have the right to police the world”—a sentiment with which Fu-Manchu would likely have agreed.

Perhaps the closest Moon/Graves comes to approaching the uncanny valley happens in a scene where Graves is shown using the prismatic “dream machine,” a spectacular high-tech mask designed to mitigate what we soon learn is the constant insomnia he suffers as a side effect of the DNA transplant. Yet this shimmering rainbow mask is less uncanny than it is futuristically gorgeous. In its narrative context, moreover, the mask—the luminous dream machine—is intended not to conceal the wearer’s identity but to alleviate the suffering that the wearer feels. Accordingly, the mask has the counter-stereotypic outcome of calling attention to Graves’s inner experiences (rather than to his superficial exterior) and eliciting some amount of the viewer’s sympathy. Even if the viewer sees the mask as hideous, the mask is as readily separable from its wearer’s face as its own iridescent hues are capable of kaleidoscopic fluctuation. Whereas Fu-Manchu’s face is described as intrinsically masklike, implying that “face” and “mask” are inextricably the same “immobile” thing, Graves’s face does not equal the “dream machine” any more than Bruce Wayne’s face equals the mask that Batman wears. Graves’s face, in other words, is not an inert object. Instead it is an expressive visage often betraying his subjective emotions. Consequently our aesthetic response to Graves’s face is that of one human to another.
The juxtaposition of Zao’s “original” face and ethnicity (left) with his “target” face and ethnicity (right) provides us with a glimpse into an alternate future for Zao that will soon be left unrealized and rendered purely hypothetical.

At this point in the movie’s narrative, Zao has finalized the first half—“PHASE ONE”—of his metamorphosis.
Zao at this stage of the DNA transplant is suspended in a patently liminal state. He has been mostly drained of his original ethnicity. At the same time, his “target” ethnicity has begun to emerge in the form of extremely pale blue irises:

Zao has not yet, however, been thoroughly instilled with the genetic material meant to reconstruct his ethnic identity. Furthermore, the diamond-studded scar tissue on his face has not yet been repaired. As a work of medical artistry, Zao is crude and unfinished.

If the first way in which we are given visual access to Zao’s DNA transplant is through medical charts and diagrams on a computer screen, the second way is much more dramatic: Bond, having infiltrated the clinic in Cuba where Zao is undergoing gene therapy, locates Zao and interrupts the metamorphosis.

Thanks to 007, Zao’s body is left “Bonded” in a state of incomplete camouflage. Zao has become a detainee held aesthetically captive in the depths of the uncanny valley. That Zao inhabits the valley is made evident in Figures 8c and 8d by the juxtaposition of the original Zao (left) with Zao after his aborted DNA transplant.

Although his skin here is not quite yellow but more translucent and although his eyes are blue rather than Fu Manchu-green, Zao’s aborted DNA transplant embodies an updated version of Orientalist stereotypes of Yellow Peril. Vastly disparate elements clash within a single humanoid figure. Zao’s eyes look opaque, emphatically artificial, yet the veins and arteries visible beneath the pale raw skin highlight his condition as a creature made of flesh and blood. Zao’s diamond-studded scars (one character calls them “expensive acne”) evoke sharp rigidity, yet his larval complexion implies soft vulnerability. The absence of Zao’s facial or head hair makes him seem almost like a young child, yet his pronounced brow ridge, muscularity, and imposing height altogether accentuate his masculinity.

What makes Zao particularly uncanny as an incarnation of the yellow peril stereotype is the fact that Zao’s body has been visibly detained in the middle of the invisible process of masking itself at a molecular level. The artificiality of the DNA transplant exposes and frames Zao as a humanoid artifact. To look at Zao is to sense layers of synthetic textures animated by a wounded consciousness.

Insofar as Zao is a stereotype of North Koreans, what does Zao reveal about outsider perceptions of the DPRK? As I have already suggested, North Korea can be thought of as an uncanny body politic that elicits in many observers intellectual uncertainty as to whether its people, its government, its version of communism, its leaders are alive or dead.

Perhaps what is being oversimplified and exaggerated in Zao’s features is a mystified sense of North Korea’s eerie opacity.

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The mental shortcut that Zao as a stereotype enables and encourages us to take is a grossly reductive equation: North Korea equals abnormal. By adding a gratuitous aesthetic dimension to this shortcut—by making this shortcut obscenely uncanny for the purpose of entertainment—Zao-as-stereotype obscures the incredibly complicated fact that North Korea, while inaccessible to most of the world, remains a lived reality for millions of humans.

The cost of this shortcut—the cost of such outsourcing—is this: audiences—we—are deprived of richly realized human fictional characters and narratives that might enable them—us—to empathize with others—even someone as ultimately "other" as a human being of North Korean origin. Much more importantly, however: North Koreans are deprived of the opportunity and the RIGHT to be imagined and acknowledged as human beings rather than as uncanny humanoid artifacts.

As you might recall, one of the questions I posed at the outset of my talk was:

Is it possible to outsource dystopian poetics in a manner that is conscientious and ethical?

The answer is YES and the example that I will be discussing is a novel by David Mitchell, who draws from North Korea’s ominous mystique to generate compelling dystopian effects in his 2004 novel *Cloud Atlas*, parts of which are set in a futuristic Korea where South Korean hyper-capitalism and North Korean Juche totalitarianism have merged to form a dystopian corpocracy called “Nea So Copros.” (Figure 9)

(Slide of Words):

Figure 9

**Nea So Copros**

The very name of this body politic is as evocative of the uncanny valley as are the features of its dystopian society.

"Nea so copros" is an ingeniously evocative phrase that elicits the desire to anagrammatize, find fragments of words here and there

neo
corpse
corp
near
nors
poor
no
ears

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I would like you to keep these fragmentary anagram pieces in mind as I discuss the dystopian poetics of Nea So Copros. As I have already mentioned, Nea So Copros is a dystopia in which South Korean hypercapitalism and North Korean Juche ideology have somehow turned into a same pathological way of life.

In Nea So Copros, “consumers” are forced “to spend a fixed quota of dollars each month,” and saving money is “an anti-corpocratic crime” (227). Every home is adorned with a “framed Kodak of the Beloved Chairman” of the Juche regime.

More disturbing is the fact that this futuristic corpocracy is made possible by an underclass of humanoid artifacts called “fabricants.” Different types of fabricants are genomed and wombtanked to form specialized tasks. All fabricants are treated as disposable objects and literally brainwashed by edible soap.

One of the main characters of CLOUD ATLAS is a fabricant named SONMI-451 who, despite her “design” as a sub-sentient slave, mysteriously becomes sentient.

Over time SONMI-451 escapes the fast food prison in which she was raised and becomes aware that the regime of Juche Unanimity that controls Nea So Copros is being undermined by a resistance movement called the Union.

Eventually, she comes to realize that the body politic called Nea So Copros is a near corpse: it “is poisoning itself to death. Its soil is polluted, its rivers lifeless, its air toxloaded, its food supplies riddled with rogue genes” (325).

“The Juche’s rounds of new Enrichment Statutes are sticking band-aids on hemorrhages and amputations” (325). The corpocracy now smells of senility (326).

SONMI-451 ends up as a martyr who exposes the sick “economics of corpocracy” whereby sub-sentient fabricants are retired by butchers in a factory where fabricant corpses are liquefied into biomatter for new womb-tanks where new fabricants are manufactured. “Additionally, leftover

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‘reclaimed proteins’ are used to produce [...] [fast food] products, eaten by consumers in the [corpocracy’s] dineries all over Nea So Copros. It is a perfect food cycle” (343).

By the end of the novel, it is clear that SONMI-451 is the most enlightened awe-inspiring character in the novel.

David Mitchell manages to draw from North Korea’s dystopian poetics to create a trenchant commentary on human rights violations in North Korea as well as on hyper-consumerism and the culture of conformism in South Korea. Furthermore, Mitchell creates a fascinating, compelling, and nuanced character—Sonmi-451—whose lyrical voice, first-person narration of culture shock, eloquence, deep political conviction, and subtle dignity are evocative of stories told by North Korean defectors.

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In some sense, the final segment of my talk will be devoted to a discussion of two artists who are not unlike Sonmi-451.

The names of the two artists are pseudonyms meant to protect their identities.

Both Song Byeok (송벽; born c. 1969) and Sun Mu (선무; born c. 1973) are former citizens of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK).

Both men were trained as propaganda painters under the Kim regime, but defected to South Korea over a decade ago.

Each has since received international recognition for his post-defection artwork.

In the years following their defections, Song Byeok and Sun Mu have been characterized and even branded as satirists whose oeuvre parodies the style of North Korean propaganda with the aim of ridiculing Juche (주체) communism.

Figure 10

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“After Fleeing North Korea, an Artist Parodies Its Propaganda,” the New York Times states in the title of a 2009 article on Sun Mu. Similarly, a BBC headline reads: “North Korean propaganda artist Song Byeok turns satirist.” (Figure 10)

While the paintings of Song Byeok and Sun Mu are indeed susceptible to satirical interpretation, I believe that satire alone is inadequate as a framework for appreciating the full power of their art. The satirical dimensions of their paintings are complicated by the absence of a clear rhetorical target as well as by the presence of many other vital elements. Among these elements:

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Korean han, wistful speculation, whimsy, gusto, kitsch with a North Korean accent (so to speak), sincere pathos, playfulness innocent of irony, reverence for the exuberance of children, nostalgia for the sublime landscapes of North Korea in their memories, and a spiritual longing for 통일 (unification).

What emerges from this mixture of categories is a new aesthetic sensibility—one to which terms such as “satire” and “parody” do not quite do justice; one for which I do want to propose a name along the lines of “poetics of defection” (or, in Korean: 탈북시학). (Figures 11a and 11b)

The difficulty of categorizing the artwork of Song Byeok and Sun Mu is intricately thematized in the artwork itself, which is haunted by figures who exist in states of ambiguous futurity, dynamic paradox, elusive nationality, and conflicting ideologies.

In ways both literal and metaphorical, these figures are framed as in the midst or on the threshold of defecting from one type of space to another, from one page of history to the next, from one ideological side to its opposite.

As I hope to demonstrate through analyses of the images that you are about to see, post-defection artwork requires from us a quality of attention capable of similarly “defecting,” so to speak, from a North Korean to a South Korean perspective—and vice versa.

And we must be willing to defect emotionally from the pain of divided loyalties to the joy mingled with anxiety that would likely accompany reunification.

The first object of analysis is a painting by Song Byeok titled “Let Me Taste It.” (2010?) (Figure 12a)

To view this image is to defect back and forth between the two iconic images that have supplied “Let Me Taste It” with its key visual vocabulary (though not its syntax): (1) Andy Warhol’s 1962 screen-printed artwork “32 Campbell’s Soup Cans” and (2) photography by Eric Lafforgue depicting rows of mechanically choreographed North Korean soldiers. (Figures 12b and 12c)
Although they differ in vocabulary, Warhol’s prints and Lafforgue’s photograph share a paratactic syntax whereby abundantly redundant figures of nearly identical size and shape self-iterate in perfect geometric formation.

Now let us return to the painting “Let Me Taste It.”

The soldier here is individualized: the title is not “Let US taste it” but “Let ME TASTE IT” The can of soup, too, is singular rather than plural, and consequently it is framed as something rare and scarce.

Furthermore, “Let Me Taste It” is palpably asymmetrical. The can of soup is disproportionately large—as if it has taken on a surreal life of its own, one made surreal perhaps by the soldier’s hunger. Or maybe the can of soup is life-sized, and the soldier is a malnourished child. At the same time, the intertextual presence of Warhol here adds additional layers of significance.

Defecting from interpretation to interpretation, we hear multiple resonances in the painting’s title: “Let me savor the soup”; “Let me get a taste of American consumerism”; “Let ME decide for MYSELF if American pop culture is MY life and MY taste”; “Let me experience freedom of aesthetic expression.”

Notice, too, that unlike the grammar of Andy Warhol’s “32 Campbell’s Soup Cans” and Eric Lafforgue’s photograph, the grammar of “Let Me Taste It” is imperative in mood. This is important. This grammatical mood is reflected not only in the painting’s title but also in the body language of the soldier posed in the painting.

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Yet who is the addressee? What exactly is the object of the soldier’s slightly indirect gaze? To whom or to what exactly is he pointing his finger? If “Let Me Taste It” is a satire, then what exactly is the target being satirized? The absence of an unambiguous answer gives Song Byeok’s painting a vaguely troubling energy—an oblique dynamism—transcending satire or parody alone.

The second object of analysis is from “불러” by Sun Mu. Two schoolgirls—one of them North Korean, the other South Korean—are walking side by side while laughing over a shared joke. (Figure 13)

Yet first impressions of the painting are quickly modified by closer inspection: the schoolgirl whose uniform initially marks her as North Korean is holding a cup of Starbucks coffee in her right hand, and she seems completely at ease while talking and laughing with her companion, whose long hair is adorned by a baseball cap and whose t-shirt is layered over a torn denim miniskirt.
Could it be that neither schoolgirl is North Korean? Are they both South Korean? Could they even be Korean American? Is the DPRK uniform a fashion statement in a futuristic world where the DPRK no longer exists?

Where exactly are they walking? The pale green background offers no clues. Perhaps the two schoolgirls are figures from an unspecified future walking home from school in a reunified Korea. Or perhaps they are walking home from school in a future U.S. where the phrase “Korean American” has been superseded by “South Korean American” and “North Korean American.”

In any case, this painting depicts the future of Korea (embodied figuratively by the children) as already having defected from the current reality of a divided peninsula to the prospect of either a reunified Korea or a U.S. where Americans of South Korean descent and North Korean descent can attend the same schools, listen to the same music, read the same literature—and enjoy the same freedom of expression.

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I’d like to end by replacing the original title of this talk,

UTOPIAS MISPLACED: THE COST OF OUTSOURCING DYSTOPIAN POETICS TO NORTH KOREA,

with

THE UTOPIAN POETICS OF ARTWORK BY EX-NORTH KOREANS.

This artwork, by Song Byeok, is titled HOPE: (Figure 14)
Bibliography


Chu 112


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Seo-Young Chu 35


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Sun Mu. Painting of a young girl laughing in a uniform wearing a red scarf around her neck. N.d. Web. 05 Jan. 2015. Painting, https://www.google.co.kr/search?q=sun+mu+paintings&newwindow=1&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=HkrVN6jKoSZgwTFt1GQCg&ved=0CB8QsAQ&biw=979&bih=431#facr=c&imgdii=w5qzF9Do5ahEzM%3A%3BGAo0dLdSG1vddM%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Fpostfiles2.naver.net%252F20100903_289%252Fcmbbbb_1283520065550XQ1LN_jpg%252F7_cmbbbb.jpg%253Ftype%253Dw2%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Fwww.techurls.com%252Fnews%252F2308443B507%3B609 >.


***"부럼" is the North Korean word for “부러움” in Korean or “envy” in English. Nothing to Envy around the World is the title of a North Korean propaganda film, and Nothing to Envy is the title of a book by Barbara Demick published by Spiegel and Grau in 2009.


