

Analysing visual representations in the North Korean Refugee Movement for Social Change and Justice

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Abstract

Art can play an important role in the communication and transfer of knowledge by creating powerful emotions and providing a voice to the otherwise voiceless. My ComDev Project Work, on which this article is based, focuses on the plight of North Korean refugees and how they are communicating their fight for freedom and personal experience through paintings and film. A mixed-analysis approach is used to examine three selected examples of visual representations created by the North Korean diaspora in order to attain a deep understanding of how the specific texts are *produced* and *consumed*. The examination of the intended and received messages illustrates how visual representations can be used strategically by social movements in the area of C4D to reinforce or create a collective identity, and aid in movement participation by enhancing solidarity and self-assurance while creating motivation for collective action.

Keywords: art, social movements, North Korea, refugees

Introduction

The use of art in social movements is particularly important as it can be strategically used to support social change by highlighting a particular social issue or message to a larger audience and create public debate; and thereby empower marginalized groups to engage in collective action and further enhance social mobilization. By looking at the cultural meanings these images produce, along with the ways in which viewers respond to them, an analysis of how images create meaning and knowledge can be established (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p.6).

Visual texts and the North Korean Refugee Movement

North Korea functions as a totalitarian socialist nation that “infringes on the basic rights of their people by tightly controlling political, social and cultural sectors in the name of national security” (KINU, 2002, p.14). Under constant supervision, the majority of North Koreans live without knowledge or recognition of basic human rights and freedoms, unable to establish a viable movement for social change and justice within the borders of their country without risk of severe punishment. If found guilty of disloyalty to the state, North Koreans face up to three generations of ‘cleansing’ through execution, torture or hard labor at one of many political prison camps around the country. It is therefore up to those that escape, the *defectors/refugees*, to work in conjunction with the global community and secure a movement to empower the people and facilitate meaningful change.

Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, over 25,000 North Koreans have sought refuge in South Korea (Strother, 2013), with a handful of others finding homes in Canada, the United States, and various countries throughout Europe. Despite this figure, the number of defectors that willingly become involved in movement activities is relatively small. Although many feel strongly about issues in North Korea, such as human rights, most defectors are hesitant in participating in movement activities “out of fear that their friends and families back home may be punished by the state” (PSCORE, 2013, pp.8-9). Retaliation by the North Korean state against the relatives and associates of defectors is a reality that must be faced. As a result many defectors struggle with survivor guilt, and the feeling of helplessness at not being able to protect or save those they left behind. Among those that do join the movement, many assume pseudonyms and wear disguises so as to remain hidden from the public view and keep their identities unknown to North Korean authorities.

As the North Korean defector community expands, so will the feeling of safety, and with it a growing sense of duty to speak out against the Kim regime and for those still living under its rule, and to use their talents to raise awareness and give ‘a face’ to the movement in order to speak out for freedom, social justice and change. As North Korean artists gain international recognition, be it as authors, public speakers, painters, or filmmakers, it becomes increasingly important to look at how their texts are being received and if/how they may be enabling the North Korean movement for social change and justice.

Theoretical Framework

The main theories that structure my research include the framing of movements and movement identity; movement mobility; and the use of art in the communication of knowledge. There has been little research into the relationship between framing and identity construction processes and, although it can be said that “actors follow certain lines of collective action rather than others based, in part, on their perceptions of the parameters implied by particular framing and identity constructions” (Hunt et. al., 2009, pp.203-4), more studies into their interconnectedness need to be done. This is particularly true when looking at the North Korean refugee community, which in many ways shadows the diaspora of the Jewish people. Having what Faist (2010) considers the three characteristics of diaspora, i.e. the dispersal of a people from their homeland, a desire to return to their homeland, and difficulties with integration into the country of settlement, North Koreans often struggle with different identities: Korean/North Korean/Defector/Refugee. By building a collective community, the North Korean refugee movement moves to facilitate a unified bond of ideas and national identity, while at the same time securing a social movement that functions transnationally.

Artistic forms can serve to increase media awareness and ultimately “narrow the gap between actors and a politically remote audience” (Teune, 2005, p.13). This is especially important for the North Korean Refugee Movement as many outsiders know very little about the true situation in North Korea. Their knowledge system is based on what is reported by mainstream media, which more often than not focuses on the eccentricities of the Kim leaders and on the looming dangers of the North Korean nuclear program. Through art, be it literature, paintings or film, North

Koreans are able to better communicate the true nature of the problems they face in society and thereby give the audience a better understanding of the movement itself.

In North Korea, propaganda artists are trained to fulfill a function: to use images to portray the *Great Leader*, and later the *Dear Leader*- as god-like beings; pictured in vibrant colors, smiling and grandiose, bringing peace and prosperity to the North Korean people. In the face of economic hardships, art has been used by the state to rally the masses in support of the regime with images depicting life far from reality; images of “chubby children, tractors and pylons [...] designed to provide an artistic and propagandistic counterbalance to malnutrition, lack of fuel and of electricity” (Rüdiger, 2011, p.19). Art has therefore become an essential component of the Kim Regime; used as an instrument of knowledge to indoctrinate new realities and cement old ideologies so as to dampen any sparks of dissidence or challenges to the ruling party.

As a counterbalance, artists of the North Korean refugee movement are using visual representations to inform the world of real life experiences in North Korea. Art, in the form of paintings and film, enables artists to capture and retell a story or event in a much more powerful, emotive way. Painful memories of starvation, torture or even death, which are often difficult to speak publicly about, are more easily communicated by the movement in this way. Visual representations therefore not only help to produce knowledge systems and emotive responses in the viewer, but also function as a way of witnessing; with art enabling the healing process of the artist and other members of the movement. The healing of trauma, such as that experienced by many North Koreans, “can and does occur through the doing, the being in, or the witnessing of artistic expression” (Woodward, 2012, Arts in Healing and Identity Formation section, para.1). Artists in the movement are able to transform the unspeakable into visual testimony and in this way communicate truths about the experiences and daily lives of ordinary North Koreans to the global community. As Laub (1992) explains, through the act of bearing witness, the listener (or in this case the viewer) comes to experience and in part understand the trauma of the artist him/herself. In the same way that victims of the holocaust used art as a way of “maintain(ing) a grip on their inner reality, (as) a reminder of their cultural identity and (as) a sense of personal dignity amidst external degradation” (Woodward, 2012, Art as a Survival Strategy section, para.3), North Korean artists use art to not only confront their own tragedies, but as a way of healing the North Korean diaspora and strengthening the community through common identity.

Methodology

Images, whether still or moving, can hold immense power in -helping create emotive responses in the viewer. This power comes not only from the image itself, but rather is produced by social, cultural and or even political knowledge systems already in place (Wolff, 2012). To address those two dimensions, I chose to use a mixed-approach analysis for visual communication. Using more than one approach provides a greater breadth of information and deeper understanding of the texts being studied. By providing more evidence, arguments are better supported, and consequently, the validity of the study strengthened. When examining visual representations it is important to remember that “(w)hat is important about images is not simply the image itself, but how it is seen by particular spectators who look in particular ways” (Rose, 2012, p.13). The knowledge and meaning of codes can vary between cultures, and a certain familiarity of such

knowledge is needed in order to read codes accordingly (Gripsrud 2006). Therefore it is often necessary to look at the cultural background and experiences of both the producer and the viewer in order to compare the intended meaning and interpreted meaning. By exploring, for example, choice of color, subject placement, and imagery type, my thesis paper looks at how an artist uses his/her own experiences and knowledge to convey a specific, emotive message, and how this message is interpreted by the viewer. In order to get a better understanding of the artist's intended meaning in relation to the viewer's interpretation, both an artist interview and an audience questionnaire were administered in addition to the use of analytical tools such as visual semiotics, composition, discourse and narrative.

Cases for Study

In order to look more closely at the possible effects art can have on social movements, my project work centers around three selections of visual representations concerning the North Korean refugee movement. The first visual representation I look at is North Korean defector and former state propaganda artist, Song Byeok's painting *Take Off Your Clothes!!* (www.songbyeok.com). I then go on to examine two film selections from Jayu's North Korean Human Rights Film Festival (jayu.ca), which was held in Toronto, Canada on October 25-27, 2013. The two films under study are Marc Wiese's film, *Camp 14: Total Control* (www.camp14-film.com) and *Winter Butterfly* (Hancinema), a film by North Korean director Kim Gyu-Min.

Case 1: *Take Off Your Clothes!!* A painting by Song Byeok



Take Off Your Clothes (2010)
Courtesy of www.songbyeok.com

I chose to look at this particular painting in order to examine Song's use of art in the struggle for social change and justice. In this unique satirical painting, Song strays away from realism and makes use of iconic figures in a life-size caricature. Song has received much criticism for this painting (especially in South Korea) but continues to show it, as he believes that it holds a "great message announcing (exposing) the reality of North Korea" (2012).

Most viewers, especially those influenced by Western culture will easily recognise the iconic image of Marilyn Monroe, made famous by the Hollywood star's 1955 film, *The Seven Year Itch*. Although most Western audiences would not relate the visual sign of Monroe with freedom, in our interview, Song reveals: "The life of Marilyn Monroe is free; in her lifestyle/activities. In particular, I was inspired by the clothes she wore— her body is seen but not really seen through her skirt; it is just like Kim Jong-il's statues. He is shown but the truth is not exactly shown; therefore I used Marilyn Monroe's figure as Kim Jong-il."

As the majority of North Koreans do not have access to Hollywood films or American pop culture, it is not surprising that the artist's view of Marilyn does not fit the view of a Western audience. This clearly demonstrates how signs, regardless of their seeming popularity, can hold different meanings depending on the cultural background and experiences of the reader.

The perception of reality that Kim Jong-Il gave to the masses of ordinary North Koreans diverged enormously from reality. Known internationally for his eccentricities, he has been described as a malignant narcissist, who "drinks in the adulation of the unwashed masses" (Breen, 2012, p.87). Song uses the irony of Marilyn's dress, revealing parts of her body in the painting, to show the true nature of Kim Jong-il beyond his signature dark, glasses and painted smile. In the painting, the late North Korean leader, dressed as Marilyn, reaches down desperately to hide his genitalia, just as he hides the truth about real life in North Korea.

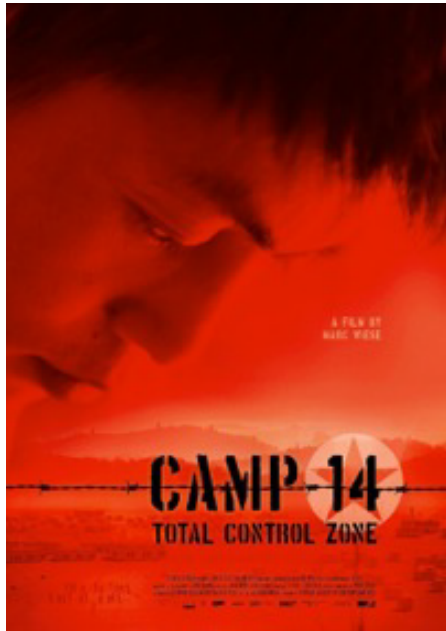
Many viewers were able to interpret a meaning similar to this, with one respondent coming to the conclusion "that underneath everything, oppressors and dictators of the world are fragile, insecure and vulnerable." While this is a valid connection, it is not a sentiment experienced by all, as one viewer responds, "On one hand it's not hard to sense the artist's disdain for Kim yet on the other hand it's not all clear as to why the artist merges him(self) with the American icon of Marilyn Monroe. Is it a critique of American politics as well?" Moreover, Song remarks that ordinary North Koreans, censored from the world outside of the one created for them, would have no idea who Marilyn Monroe was and if somehow were able to view his painting, would have difficulty in understanding the message Song is trying to communicate. These results, therefore, clearly demonstrate that the interpretation of visual texts is dependent on the viewer, and previous knowledge/cultural background or clarification by the artist (producer of the signified) is often needed for accurate analysis.

Case 2: Jayu North Korean Human Rights Film Festival

The Jayu North Korean Human Rights Festival held in Toronto, Canada has gained much recognition since its launch in 2012, including an invitation to participate in the 21st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council session in Geneva. Born from the need to raise awareness of the human struggle in North Korea, Jayu works to highlight human rights issues in

North Korea through the arts. With a variety of films and special guests, including North Korean refugees from various regions of the country, journalists, filmmakers and academics, Jayu works to provide audience members with an understanding of the intricacies of the North Korean people and the issues they face. The films that I examine from the 2013 film festival are:

Camp 14: Total Control Zone A film by Marc Wiese



Shin watching the execution of his mother and brother.
Still shot from the film. Courtesy of
www.telegraph.co.uk

Camp 14 Total Control Zone
2012 Film cover courtesy of
www.camp14-film.com

This testimonial documentary film, much like Blaine Harden's book *Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West* (2012), follows the life of North Korean defector, Shin Dong Hyuk. Born inside a North Korea prison camp, Shin spent the first two decades of his life imprisoned in a world founded on punishment, mistrust and torture. Wiese weaves together intimate interviews with Shin and two former North Korean prison guards, along with animated reenactments, to create a powerful story that strives to gain an in-depth understanding of life within the walls of prison camps scattered throughout the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Wiese is successful in producing a visual text that creates emotional connections with the viewer, and actively constructs new ways of seeing, or knowing. Although one viewer "didn't understand why there was a disconnection, lack of feelings, love for his mother", many agreed that "you got a feeling of (Shin's) thoughts and feelings about life and how his experiences affected him".

Wiese reveals that "this was never a victim story [...] (but) a film which is showing how a system is able to condition three people" (Applebaum, 2013); a sentiment which was widely understood

by viewers. When asked about what message they thought the filmmaker is trying to portray through *Camp 14: Total Control Zone*, they answered as follows: “There is more to the DPRK than most people think; freedom shouldn't be taken for granted, ideology has real consequences; the hardships felt by all sides impacted by the NK regime; we are all people; that one never gets over these experiences; how Shin had freedom physically but not emotionally. Him and the other two officers were both victims and were suffering though guilt and their pain.”

Through his film, Wiese is able to effectively communicate knowledge to the viewer and create emotional responses and new belief systems. “When we believe that what we see bears witness to the way the world is, it can form the basis for our orientation to or our action within the world” (Nichols, 2010, xvii); and subsequently aid in greater participation, better awareness and a move towards meaningful social action. One viewer states, “yes, there has to be a change and only a movement like this can realize the awareness needed to make a change”. At the JAYU film festival I attended in Toronto, Canada, the screening of *Camp 14 Total Control Zone* was followed with a Q&A session between audience members and author, Blaine Harden.

Winter Butterfly, a film by Kim Gyu-Min



Winter Butterfly 2011
Film cover courtesy of HanCinema



Jin-ho sleeps while his mother looks on. Framed photos of the Great Leader and the Dear Leader hang behind them on the bare wall. Film still courtesy of KoreaHerald.com

Based on the lives of real people from North Korean director, Kim Gyu-Min's hometown, *Winter Butterfly* follows the tragic story of mother and son living in a rural village during the famine years of the late 1990s. In the mode of melodrama, *Winter Butterfly* makes use of dualities, especially in terms of power, gender and class, to demonstrate the disastrous effects of “destructive social powers applied against weak, domestically imaged victims” (Lipkin, 2002,

p.5). These dualities of power include stark differences between high status officials and poor villagers, male authority figures and weaker females, as well as, those with food and those facing hunger and starvation. Through these dualities the question of community versus every-man-for-himself is also brought into focus.

Driven by a personal duty to tell his story to the public, Kim moves away from typical political issues highlighted in the media, and focuses instead on the human aspect of life in North Korea. When asked about the title of the film, he reveals: “When we think of butterflies, most of us would imagine something beautiful as it searches for flowers in spring. My question was, what if a butterfly was born in the winter time? Would its life be happy? In the similar context, I wondered what could’ve been different if the mother and the son were born in South Korea. So I named the movie *Winter Butterfly*” (Lee, 2011).

Although many of these symbolic elements might be lost on western audiences, the intended message of *Winter Butterfly* transcends cultural barriers; that one “should not turn away from people who are suffering” (Kim in Lee, 2011). When asked about this message, audience members responded that, “Ideology can be a huge factor in what a person perceives as a good society; That the human narrative is important” and that “civilization is fragile”. One respondent expressed the need “to expose the devastating effects the ill-conceived regime has on the population at large and (for others to understand) the kind of desperate measures it takes the individual in order to survive”.

Despite differences in social, cultural and educational backgrounds, audience members at the Jayu Film Festival were able to understand the filmmaker’s message and gain new knowledge about North Korea and the people living within its borders. Through strong narrative visualisation, *Winter Butterfly* produces powerful emotions in the viewer, with many agreeing that it is “eye opening; very emotional (and) difficult to watch”. One viewer comments that the film “gave me a deeper understanding of the human stories behind the headlines” while another says the “complexities revolving around NK are not able to be completely deciphered in a weekend. Makes me want to read (know) more”.

At the festival, the film was followed by a discussion period with out-spoken activist and North Korean defector, Kim Young-Il.

Reflections

My interpretation of *Take off Your Clothes!!* was enriched through the interview process. Without open communication with the artist, it would have been difficult to obtain a truly comprehensive understanding of the way in which the production and communication of knowledge transpires. For example, the interview revealed that the inclusion of goldfish at the bottom of the painting does not, in fact, symbolize wealth and prosperity, but rather symbolizes the people of North Korea who are trapped in a country without freedom, much like fish in an aquarium. It was also interesting to learn why Song chose to use the iconic image of Marilyn Monroe; especially as most people living in North Korea do not know who she is. Some viewers may have interpreted this sign as a representation of Western ideals, and in particular the United States of which Kim Jong-il’s regime has repeatedly publicized as an enemy of the State. This, however, is not the

case. The image of Monroe relates instead to artist's desire for liberty and freedom from the confined world Kim Jong-il and his father, Kim Il-Sung, have created and maintained for more than half a century.

Due to time restraints I was unable to conduct the questionnaire in person. I expected more online respondents but this was not the case, and I acknowledge as a limitation of my study that I would have attained greater, more detailed responses with a face-to-face approach rather than online. Despite this, I did collect interesting data to enrich the analysis of Song's painting at both levels of *intended* meaning and *interpreted* meaning.

In Case 2, the staff at Jayu facilitated the success of information gathering. I was granted full access to the event, and with the assistance of Jayu staff was able to collect questionnaires from all audience members at both film screenings. The one drawback in terms of audience size and response was the time of screening. As *Winter Butterfly* was screened during the day, there were less in attendance than at *Camp 14: Total Control Zone*, which was shown in the evening when more people were free to attend. Also as the questionnaire was in written form, rather than in person, many of the questions were left blank or the answers given lacked detail.

I found the Q&A sessions after each film extremely important in the understanding of both the films and the North Korean Refugee Movement itself. However, as the sessions were quite short due to venue time restraints, it would have been beneficial to have had personal interviews with the speakers, as well as with those involved in the movement to better appreciate their thoughts and reactions to the films being shown.

Conclusion

By visualizing memories of daily life in North Korea and illustrating hardships of starvation, persecution and torture, art is being used by participants of the North Korean Refugee Movement to create a shared identity to interlink and bind the North Korean diaspora together. As artists and filmmakers in the movement gain international recognition for their work, they create a platform for their voice to be publicized and become part of mainstream media. Moreover, through the use of ICTs, these visual texts are easily accessible to a wide-range of audience. With the power to penetrate barriers of educational, social, and to some extent, cultural backgrounds; art therefore has the ability to create or communicate new knowledge. Art has been shown to reveal new perspectives of the world to the viewer, and with it generate a deeper, more emotive response to what is being visually communicated. Artistic language enables viewers to experience complex issues that are often difficult to represent; and to better understand what cannot be said through words.

That being said, it is important to remember that the cultures of both the artists and the audience are intrinsically embedded in the practices of representation. Therefore, as cultural studies become an increasingly important part of the development process, researchers must address the question of *whose voice is being heard* and examine the processes in which culture and knowledge affect one's interpretation of experience. The examination of visual texts is a comparatively new method of research in the area of cultural studies, as emphasis has traditionally been placed on written or oral language; however, as my project work shows, it is

important for researchers to make use of visual cultural analysis and look at the meanings within images, the way in which these images are produced, and the role of the viewer at the site of interpretation.

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