NORTH KOREA AND DOCUMENTARY FILM

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ABSTRACT

Documentary film is a potent source of knowledge production, carrying assumptions of authority and sobriety. It offers the audience "reality," even as it mediates heavily and imposes discursive judgments onto the subject matter. This subjectivity is especially problematic in documentary films about North Korea, as Western filmmakers find it difficult to escape wartime racism, anticommunist, and Orientalist frameworks, while at the same time, the DPRK resists knowledge production about itself. This essay looks at four influential films to examine how they cope with problems of subjectivity, bias, and representing reality.

Keywords: Documentary Film, North Korea, Media, Orientalism, Racism, Anticommunism, Reality, Subjectivity, Discourses of Sobriety, Neutrality

THE ROLE OF DOCUMENTARY FILM

Documentary film occupies a unique and potent role in disseminating knowledge through society. The uniquely visceral medium of film allows stories to be told in such a way that the viewer receives an intellectual and emotional experience irreproducible by any other form of text. It carries implicit agreements regarding truth and reality between the filmmaker and audience, yet struggles to move beyond its own subjective nature.

Part of this subjectivity in Western documentary-making in particular is a capacity for a form of Orientalism: the othering of Eastern societies and cultures and the situating of them in roles of passive and distorted objects to be known. This in turn allows Western viewers to define our societies as dynamic, active, and knowing. Problems associated with Orientalist approaches to North Korea are particularly acute, for several reasons. These narratives are bound up in Cold War threat discourses, stereotypes of "Confucian societies," and North Korea's very resistance to its own objectification by outside producers of knowledge.

The role of documentary and its own subjectivity, compounded with its capacity to seem authoritative, combine with Orientalism as a mode of thinking about North Korea to produce documentaries of often dubious value. As with any text, audiences must view North Korea documentaries with a critical eye.

After discussing the nature of reality in documentary and the role of Orientalist discourses, we will look at four prominent North Korea documentaries to examine the problems they both face and generate.

Discourse, Neutrality, Reality

Documentary, according to the pathbreaking work of Bill Nichols, is one of our "discourses of sobriety,"[1] a category that also includes science, economics, foreign policy, education, religion, and welfare. These tend to presuppose an internal logic under which truth claims can be judged and in which their relation to the real is nonproblematic.[2] In the case of documentary, the filtering used to craft a narrative is generally accepted to be only in the service of finding or exposing reality.

Documentary practitioners regard their craft as a process of reconstituting truth on the screen.[3] It is essentially descriptive, seeking to deliver a true story to the audience, within accepted boundaries. These boundaries can be problematic, as the filmmaking process heavily filters, alters, and informs reality. Whether an audience understands the practical choices in shot selection and editing, or moreover, the preconceptions and biases that the filmmaker brings to the external objects she encounters, is not always clear. Absolute objectivity may not be demanded, but truth is expected.

As filmmaker Jill Godmilow puts it, "The essential claim that traditional documentary films make is that there's an unmediated truth here because the materials are 'found in nature'—thus, the text built out of them is truthful as well. That truth claim is still at the center of most documentary work."[4] Unlike other forms of film, through which the audience agrees to be shown a world of the director's creation, documentary aims to show us *the* world, thus carrying a certain verisimilitude.[5]

Yet, "there are no rules in this young art form," advises Michael Rabiger, "only decisions about where to draw the line and how to remain consistent to the contract you will set up with your audience."[6] Sometimes a mutual abandonment of objectivity is clearly acknowledged between filmmaker and audience—Michael Moore's political position is well known when one buys a ticket for one of his films, to cite what is perhaps the most obvious example. In the absence of such an obvious relationship between viewer and auteur, however, the audience tends to expect an unbiased portrayal of reality, perhaps even of unmediated truth as conveyed by the authority of the auteur. This is the assumed contract on the side of the viewership. Godmilow laments that documentary films also deceptively insist on their innocence as pure description.[7]

Such objectivity is nothing more than myth. "The free choice allowed the viewer is only partly that," writes Nichols. "Rhetoric remains at work, even in the domain of the most intensely scientific discourse. Propaganda is not as far away as one might think; ideology is always in the air, and the free subject is in itself a concept of debatable soundness."[8] There are no objective positions from which to select or describe what one encounters. The best documentary film is self-reflective and consciously communicative of its role in constructing a reality.

Indeed, one must acknowledge that as important as the psychological frame of narrative itself, the physical frame of the camera constitutes a part of the reality that the film is ostensibly describing from an external position. Some events, such as those in nature, may be little affected by the presence of a camera and crew: perhaps for this reason viewers are most credulous when watching nature documentaries. (Though even nature documentaries are far more manipulated than we are led to believe, with tame animals often inserted into the wild, "chance" encounters arranged, and locations/subjects deceptively conflated.[9]) However, social events—especially the more intimate, personal human experiences—may be greatly affected by the conditions imposed by the documentary format.[10]

How does a camera's presence impact a fight, a board meeting, or a family meal? The presence of a camera and crew cannot help but alter the social environment of which they are a part.

The biases that the filmmaker brings to choosing a narrative (including the choice of subject, the script, the shot selection, and edits) combine with the physical presence of the camera itself to create a highly subjective representation of reality. One is tempted to use the word "distorted," though that implies the possibility of a pure, accurate description of reality. Rather, the point is that despite assumptions to the contrary, that position cannot exist.

Authority of Documentary

Despite this, documentary film projects an air of mere observation and carries with it an enormous sense of authority as representative of reality. Narration provides the most obvious means of interpretation; this is especially true of the "Voice-of-God" guide style, through which the narration takes place entirely off screen. Voice-of-God offers an omniscient and detached judgment, remaining aloof from the events unfolding in the frame.[11]

Narration, as Kilborn and Izod put it, also usually "presents information in a rhetorical style designed to impress the listener with the thought that the commentator is offering the only reasonable way of looking at the topic under consideration."[12] The convention of off-screen narration conveys the veracity of research and the authority and the veracity of research and experience of the filmmakers. It encourages the viewers' predilections to trust the film.

This confidence in the film's authority is exploited to nudge us towards taking a particular view of the subject matter, even while the film may be encouraging us to believe that we are free to draw our own conclusions.[13]

So while audiences assume "truth," documentary (and the other discourses of sobriety) "assume they have instrumental power; they can and should alter the world itself, they can effect action and entail consequences."[14] The power of knowledge creation is deployed to reeducate, expose, and encourage the audience. Or as Adam Kossoff puts it, "Documentary makers think of themselves as people who want to change the world. They want to change attitudes, they want to get something done, they want to show you something you would rather not see."[15]

Tragedies, Heroics, and Fulfilling the Needs of the Audience

As much as a filmmaker's goal might be to show the audience something they'd rather not see in order to inspire mobilization and "change," the viewership's needs-fulfillment tends to be rather less than action-oriented.

The first and most obvious desire that documentary fulfills is what Bill Nichols terms "epistephilia," or pleasure in knowing.[16] People, quite simply, choose to watch documentaries for the joy of learning. We can engage in the dramas of high politics, the everyday life of other groups of people, or the natural world through the medium. The educational component of finding these dramas "in nature," as it were, imbues documentary-viewing with an intellectual satisfaction that watching fiction may not deliver.

Like most fiction, however, documentary narratives tend to be affirmative rather than transformative. Godmilow claims that through viewing the dramas of other people, often far removed from our own lives through either time, geography, or both, "traditional documentary enables viewers to have the coherence, manageability, and often the moral order of their lives reaffirmed, while simultaneously allowing them to feel that they're interested in other classes, other people's tragedies, other countries."[17] She asserts that through either the characters' victimization or heroic struggles and victories the viewer is encouraged to be grateful not to be in that situation, but

isn't encouraged to reflect on the analogies, relationships, or responsibilities the viewers themselves are a part of.[18]

Indeed, documentary, much like reading the news, provides something akin to a passive outlet for guilt. Rasheed Araeen writes that interest in victims (often the subject of documentaries, in one way or another) allows the powerful to prove their humanism: "The predicament of others has always attracted the powerful, particularly the liberal section, because it is the way for the powerful to show their sympathy and charity towards those who are deprived and suffering."[19] We, the passive viewers in the West, do not have to actually *do* anything; merely knowing and empathizing is enough to assuage and validate.

Audiences seeking to learn from documentary are essentially invited to "tsk" at tragedies. Caring about issues in the abstract and offering compassion makes one feel as though one is somehow part of a solution. Lines are drawn, and social relationships involving the viewer, filmmaker, and object of study are obscured, while at the same time the audience forms a psychological bond with other viewers. "The documentary film knits us into a community of 'we,'" states Godmilow, "a special community by dint of our knowledge and compassion."[20]

This "we" separates us further from the "other," whom we are viewing on screen. Indeed, documentary "others" different groups as quickly and completely as any medium ever. "As soon as you point the camera at someone or some object, they become 'other,'" remarks documentary maker Adam Kossoff.[21] Othering by the film allows audiences to look down on the object of study in a sort of contract between filmmaker and audience. The contract says: "We aren't like them."

Representation of the other carries political dimensions that require sensitivity.[22] This sensitivity, however, is often lacking in film. Even when the object of study is described in a nonpejorative way, the dominant discourse (of which the documentary is a part) creates relationships of power and knowledge that serve to suppress and minimize the value of the other in relation to the "we." Assumptions of truth, reality, and objectivity obscure this, though it is possible to address them through what Nichols calls a "self-reflexive" documentary, where the film's epistemological and aesthetic assumptions are disclosed and interwoven with the text.[23] Unfortunately, such films are rare.

Finally, the capacity to shape discourse and in effect create landscapes of reality is especially acute given that the public is generally passive in its relation to knowledge production. The scope of public debate in civil society on a particular issue is crafted by the media to which citizens are exposed. The rise of conglomerated media, through which most documentary films must be produced and distributed in order to reach an audience, has helped create a culture- and knowledge-consumption (rather than participation) society.

A particular aspect of this passive consumerism is exploited by documentary film better than any other medium: the domain of the casually interested. For an audience engaging in Nichols' epistephilia, documentary often fills a space somewhere in between vague issue-awareness and the kind of personal research that might include reading a variety of books, taking classes, or traveling. An individual cannot research every subject in which she has an interest, but might well be able to devote an hour or two to a documentary. Longer and more involving than a news report, but shorter and quicker than a book, documentary film satisfies casual curiosity, which in turn increases its own power: a film (or two) will often be the deepest engagement a casually interested media consumer has with a particular topic.

DOCUMENTARIES AND NORTH KOREA: SPECIFIC ISSUES

When documentary film turns to North Korea as an object of study, a particular set of issues is encountered. All of the problems of objectivity, authority, and othering are brought to bear on an Asian, communist country that remains technically at war with the United States. North Korea's specific position in the world's political, economic, and social space renders it particularly vulnerable to the general problems with authority, objectivity, and othering in documentary.

Twenty-First-Century Orientalism

Something of a twenty-first-century Orientalism is observable in documentaries on North Korea. Edward Said's pathbreaking 1978 work, *Orientalism*, sought to expose Western scholarship on Eastern cultures as a part of a discourse used to justify Western dominance and support Western interests. Said's *Orientalism* shares the same epistemological roots as some of the film theorists introduced above. Under his paradigm, discourses on the "East" create a fixed entity, a static object to be studied and conceived of for the benefit of the receiver of that knowledge.[24] Knowledge generated about the East is not apolitical; it contributes to a cultural hegemony.[25] This hegemony reaffirms Eastern backwardness and distortedness in relation to Western superiority.[26]

Indeed, Orientalist knowledge producers tend to *confirm* the image of the Orient in the readers' eyes.[27] This in turn is used to situate ourselves, or as another author puts it, "Orientalism is surrogate self-definition of the dominant culture as much as deployment of the difference of an Orient."[28] By creating a simple and fixed image of another, always deficient East, Westerners define our own culture. As Bryan Turner points out, "The noun 'Orient,' which defines a geographical area is also a verb 'to orient' … Orientalism offers a political and psychological positioning which constitutes social identities in a condition of antagonism."[29] Hence, East Asians are consistently portrayed as slavish, robotic, and deferential hordes, in contrast to the free, individual, and intellectually sophisticated West. In turn, this gives way to the trope of the "despotic East."

Orientalism has changed since the nineteenth-century scholarship that Said focuses on, certainly in Northeast Asia (which Said largely ignores in order to focus on the Middle East). Rather than simply being defined as inferior and thus in need of Western domination, China and North Korea make up two key, differing parts of a threat discourse in the West. The image of a despotic China as a future threat to American military, economic, and, ultimately, cultural hegemony is one component. The other is North Korea as current and past location of resistance to that hegemony.

There is in North Korea what appears to be the total rejection of American-inspired or -encouraged values in a broad swath of social, political, and economic organization—to a greater degree than in any other society today. More importantly for documentary (and media in general) attempting to explain North Korea, the DPRK rejects the very idea of being an object of study.

Resistance to Being the Known

In bringing Orientalism to the fore of the debate in postcolonial studies, Said drew much from Michel Foucault, the key contribution being the concept of knowledge/power. Foucault argues that:

> … power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.[30]

Power generates knowledge, and knowledge in turn generates power. They are mutually constitutive. This is part of how the West came to dominate cultures in the Orient: by deploying expertise, creating static objects of study out of Oriental cultures, then deploying that knowledge in the service of Western interests.

In the twentieth century, North Korea has resisted this dynamic to an extent unseen anywhere else. This resistance to being "the known object" of inquiry has created a serious problem. The implicit agreement in media coverage of North Korea seems to be: "If you won't let us operate as we're used to, we can print whatever we like, without compunction." As Hazel Smith puts it, media that cover North Korea often operate as if "the normal rules of journalistic convention (checking sources, for instance) do not apply."[31]

This has created a situation in which certain memes about North Korean behavior, psychology, values, and desires are produced, repeated, and sustained. This kind of speculation is often merely the imposition of "our" perspectives and assumptions onto North Korea. With North Korea unable to push back (North Korea's position in global knowledge creation and the stylistic commitments of its public relations render it ineffectual, at best), these memes contribute to broad perceptions of North Korea, which in turn constrain our ability to interpret what we see.

(Cold) War and Race

North Korea's relationship (indeed, very existence) is a holdover of the Cold War, during which anticommunism was such a potent force in American political and social life that it approaches what Herman and Chomsky call a national religion.[32] The need to denounce communism in pop-cultural products has long since passed, but the position of North Korea as a lingering Cold War enemy plays a significant role in portrayals of that state in several ways.

First, the American imaginary of its role in world affairs was born of the Cold War. One part was the concept of containment—a heroic crusade to defeat a malicious social system. The other was sentimental education manifest through a universal cosmopolitanism in which America transmitted its values and way of life to others.[33] The crusade was won and education widespread, yet North Korea remains a lingering challenge to both. Though relatively insignificant by many metrics, the incessant role of enemy that North Korea plays in the American imaginary of the world is large, especially since the first nuclear crisis of 1993–94.

Second, being a wartime enemy exacerbates the rigidity in image-making and stereotyping of others. A "wartime climate can fuel the intensity of racial hatred through a hardening of boundaries along the dichotomous split between 'us' and 'them,'" writes Michael Renov.[34] The identification of the enemy as the embodiment of evil and source of all conflict creates an upward spiral as the opposing side promotes the same images of its opponent. There is a general pathology during a state of war, under which the enemy is portrayed as unfailingly corrupt as a group and cannot be seen as individuals.[35]

Racism is, of course, an intrinsic component of all forms of Orientalism. Today, however, the political incorrectness of generalizations based on race has led to something akin to "racism without races," in which cultures

are the object of stereotyping and are portrayed as insurmountable in the same way that biological heredity once was.[36] The vocabulary has changed, but the purpose remains.

"In a response to our inability to control an ever-changing environment, we limit the threat that otherness poses through the creation of fixed images," writes Renov. He continues: "The racial other as stereotype emerges as both the grounds for anxiety and the source of its relief. As an image, arrested and controlled, it serves as an inverted mirror of identity … mongrelized or fallen from grace, the other defines the purity of one's own lineage."[37]

Finally, the ongoing military standoff has led to the securitization of all issues related to the DPRK, including economic, cultural, and humanitarian policies.[38] For Hazel Smith, putting all North Korea issues into militarized terms constrains the imaginations and policies the international community can use to deal with North Korea. The complexities of the DPRK's domestic and international politics get reduced to paradigms of either "evil" or "crazy" ("mad" or "bad," in Smith's article), preventing us from seeing nuance or evolution.

THE DOCUMENTARIES

In this section, we will examine four documentaries, demonstrating how problems of documentary in general combine with North Korea issues to create specific issues. This is, of course, hardly a comprehensive list. The films were chosen for three reasons. First, they are films of some influence, with broad viewership and/or critical acclaim. Though accuracy in such matters is difficult, one could estimate fairly that the first three are the most watched North Korea documentaries online. Second, all four are of different styles and illustrate one or more of the issues previously discussed. Finally, they all attempt to reveal aspects of North Korean society or psychology, rather than focusing on high politics or international relations.

Only one of the four is U.S.-produced; obviously it is easier for non-American film crews to get access to North Korean sources. All have been included because they have been produced with an eye to international distribution systems, including film festivals or international broadcasting networks, and all are available online. All are in English and as such, can expect their largest single market to be in the United States. It is important to note that these films do not *prove* the frameworks of Orientalism, racism in wartime, or subjectivity in film; rather, in some way, they are informed by and contribute to these broader discourses on North Korea.

Welcome to North Korea

In the early 2000s, new "prosumer" camera technology was developed that allowed smallish cameras with three CCD chips to record at near-broadcast quality. Dutch filmmakers Tetteroo Media were one of the early production companies to take advantage of this technology, using it in combination with the opening of North Korea to Western tourists to create a "mostly covertly shot" travelogue/expository 2001 documentary.[39] Though others have followed suit, this approach was sufficiently original at the time to garner the international Emmy for best documentary.[40] *Welcome to North Korea* dominates search engine results for "North Korea documentary." A single posting of it on YouTube alone has been viewed over 980,000 times as of October 2010.[41] There are many other copies of it on various sites around the web.

The film follows a tour around the DPRK, though the tourists rarely appear on camera; a Voice-of-God

narrator provides explanations, combined with stock footage and occasional interviews of South Koreans and defectors. The narrator, after only a minute, makes a rather frank admission: “The only conclusion that we were able to draw at the end of this week was that we now understood even less of what goes on in this country.” This is actually the most insightful part of this film: most of the rest of it is founded on Orientalist assumptions and an exceptional shallowness in research to create a racist, patronizing film.

It begins with a flowery speech by a Korean orator telling a tale of cranes taking Kim Il-sung from Earth to Heaven and then back again. While it is certainly outside contemporary Occidental traditions to eulogize a leader in such a way, this speech is clearly a form of poetry meant to lionize a legendary leader. Tetteroo, however, informs the viewer that “most Koreans” believe he isn’t really dead, just sleeping alone in his mausoleum. Immediately, this presents Koreans as stupid and irrational, to contrast with the flat, measured tone of the narrator. The people may be primitive, but the rational filmmaker and viewer are not. The conceit of “their ignorance” in contrast with “our knowing” runs throughout the film.

“Their” ignorance and backwardness is constantly referred to. When Hyundai founder Chung Ju-yung gives a gift of 1,001 cows, it is a “gesture they understand” (46 mins), implying, of course, that they lack the sophistication to understand much beyond animal husbandry. When, from a distance, the cameraman captures hundreds of children practicing the formation “Korean characters” for the mass games, the narrator curiously claims they “probably don’t know themselves the word they are making.” What inspires this editorializing is unclear, other than a pervasive commitment to the idea that Koreans are a wholly ignorant people.

Any doubt that this assumption doesn’t extend past the DPRK’s borders to a cultural, Orientalist realm is dispelled 34 minutes in, when the narration claims: “The will to unite with the South is tangible here, even though the two countries are unaware of the many differences that separate them. Only when you visit both countries, can you experience the contrast between them.” What this sentence serves to do is elevate the authority of the documentary-maker, who is able to understand when North and South Koreans cannot. Again, the Asians remain in ignorance of a reality that is understandable only from a Western perspective. A further implication might be that foreign expertise will be needed to resolve inter-Korean issues.

Of course, when situating Koreans into a broader set of Orientalist assumptions, one would be remiss not to mention Confucianism and how it “makes Koreans extremely deferential to authority and hierarchy … which explains to a large extent why 10-year-olds can hold such firm convictions (21 mins).” Such a crass analysis tells us almost nothing about North Koreans: rather it confirms to us that “we” the members of the audience are individuals, free to think and to resist authority. This of course is a near useless monolithic division of East and West: it ignores, for example, Korea’s rich history of protesting injustice (for example, against the Japanese in 1919 or against the South’s military dictatorship in 1987).

Tetteroo’s Orientalist assumptions are also extended south of the DMZ when he explains that unification will be someday facilitated because South Koreans “worship the father figure as part of their Confucian tradition as well.” In the north it is expressed in the body politic; in the south “this unassailable status is enjoyed by the presidents and CEOs of multinationals, like Hyundai.” Founder Chung Ju-yung is “a living god” to South Koreans (45 mins).

If the obedient Confucian is one dominant theme of racist projection onto East Asians, the other is “robot-like hordes.” This trope has a tradition that is firmly rooted in the yellow-peril literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but that truly came into relief during the Korean War.[42] The image of indistinguishable Asians as robots also stretches into science-fiction imaginaries of the future through the cyberpunk genre.[43] It

doesn't take the auteur long to deploy this image: within two minutes, the narrator has accused subway riders of being "automaton-like." More curiously, and demonstrably incorrectly, he claims it is illegal for the subway riders to look the tourists in the eye. Still, if they are doing *anything,* it is because they have been told to do so. Obedience and programmability are inexorably part of the automaton image. Hence, a number of Korean tourists walking in a group "are marched off" (29 mins), and myths about the leaders are presented as facts that North Koreans "have no other choice but to swallow" (14 mins).

This is related to the final major conceit in the film, which is that North Koreans do not have individual motives for anything: they exist for the leader or—in flashes of classic Orientalism—for the Westerner. Therefore, Pyongyang "is the ideal calling card for the country" whose "sole purpose is to present an ideal picture to the visitors and uphold the morale of the population" (10 mins). While visiting the Palace of the Children, the youths there merely wait in hall after hall ready to perform for their foreign guests, having been selected because they look healthy (11 mins). That they were selected for special schooling because they displayed aptitude isn't presented as a possibility, nor is it possible that they enjoy what they do[44]. The implication is that they are forced to perform, unlike Western kids who study tap dancing or ballet. The children, indeed the whole city, merely follow orders: their orders being to impress the foreign guests. This is intellectually lazy and offers the audience nothing past our own preconceptions of essentialized "Asian-ness."

At 35 minutes, however, we are given clearer evidence of how exceptionally lazy this documentary is. The narrator claims that at the DMZ, South Korea is just paces away, but to get there, one must fly "6,000 miles via Beijing." In actuality, the two legs of the journey add up to about 1,100 miles. Such a drastic and simple error is important not because of the narrative in this case, but because of the authority documentary is imbued with. Even if we recognize the subjective nature of film, the contract with the viewer *always* assumes that facts such as historical dates or population numbers are accurate. Certainly, one would assume a film rewarded by the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences to be accurate.

Lest one think this is an isolated error, at 8:25, the film states that "Kim Il-sung also created a Juche Calendar, starting with his own birthday in 1911." The Juche Calendar didn't make its debut until July 1997, three years after Kim Il-sung's death.[45]

If the film is critically viewed as a whole, however, such errors are unsurprising. The film's biases, racist assumptions, and inaccuracies can be spotted with little effort. However, if the viewer is not looking to spot them, the authority of the narration and narrative may be overwhelming. It is unfortunate that such careless, unreflective filmmaking represents perhaps the most watched documentary on North Korea.

The Vice Guide to North Korea

The Vice Guide is in some way the inheritor of *Welcome to North Korea*, in that it is a journalists-as-tourists-style film. It is perhaps the only North Korea documentary more watched than *Welcome to North Korea*. It differs in that it doesn't feature Voice-of-God narration, but a more personal interview-style narration that guides the viewer from the inception of the idea for the film through to visa applications and travel, while also providing historical context. This is interspersed with the traditional Western reference points of North Korean videos of military parades, as well as more rarely seen tourist videos extolling various events, projects, and decisions the DPRK considers significant.

It is hosted on various video sites around the Internet, but primarily in three parts at VBS.tv, the multimedia

arm of *Vice.*[46] *Vice* began as a magazine in Montreal in 1994 and moved to New York in 1999. It is something of a bible for hipster culture and is an arbiter of cultural capital for a generation of urban young adults. “Hipsterhood” is difficult to define, but centers around middle-class malaise, indie rock music appreciation, appropriation of working-class symbols, and echoes of egoism/nihilism with a weighty concern about what one might call “the ironic life.” One author labels it the “Dead End of Western Civilization” and describes it as wholly unoriginal. He states that it represents being part of a consumer group rather than a genuine subculture and fails to mobilize its adherents to effect actual subversive acts or change.[47]

Vice’s aesthetic, both in the magazine and in other media, might be characterized as “irreverent.” Articles have included “The Vice Guide to Shagging Muslims”[48] and “Blacks vs. Whites: Who Can Drink More?”[49] As the magazine expanded into video production in 2007 with VBS, a commitment to covering more serious issues emerged, but with a nontraditional tone. “Our ethos is subjectivity with real substantiation,” said one *Vice* cofounder in an interview with *Wired.*[50] There is no traditional journalistic commitment to objectivity or storytelling convention.

Vice is important because of the credibility it has with certain demographics: not dissimilar to MTV in the 1980s, it is at the vanguard of trendiness. The *Vice Guide to North Korea* is specifically important because of how widely it has been seen since it was put online in March 2008. In an ABC News interview in 2010, the *Vice* cofounder and documentary auteur, Shane Smith, claimed roughly 45 million views of the video.[51] Smith, however, has a penchant for exaggeration and hyperbole, so this number may be inflated.[52] The site as a whole by 2010 was receiving over 4 million unique views a month.[53]

Smith’s penchant for exaggeration, combined with the “irreverent” tone, creates a dual commitment to make North Korea appear as weird as possible and to consistently boost the sense that the audience is participating in a “wild, cool adventure” with the filmmakers. This serves the audience in two ways: it reinforces common preconceptions about North Korea as well as their trust in the *Vice* brand to provide edgy, unique entertainment.

Some of the exaggeration is difficult to spot. Smith presents, for example, his entry into North Korea through the consulate in Shenyang, China, as a form of bribery, recounting that a defector recommended they bribe the officials there, then mentioning the “visa fee” in an exaggerated fashion (twice)—as if with a wink (6–7 mins). Of course, any country that requires an entry visa charges extra for rushed visas; more than likely, this is what they paid to take a tour that is open to most Westerners. Post facto, it has become part of the legend of the trip, and Smith is duly reported in various media, including the *New York Times*[54] and the *Times of London,*[55] as having “bribed his way in.”

The exaggeration continues as he describes being forbidden to bring in books, laptops, or SLR cameras. If you do, “You’re in big trouble,” he claims (pt. 1, 6 mins). In reality, you can take all of these things into North Korea, as anyone who has taken the frequently run tours can attest. In reporting disputes with the guides, the implication is always that the auteur will face jail if he continues breaking the rules.

Smith is at one point caught recording video in a place where they were expressly forbidden to do so, and then lying rather feebly about the size of his memory card in an attempt to cover it up—the guide merely looks at the card to see that it is ten times as large as Smith claims. The memory card was confiscated (pt. 2, 12 mins) and Smith apparently was threatened with further censure. This is not presented as an insensitive failure to respect the rules of the host country, but a legitimated case of “the rules are wrong, so I can break them.” No explanation of the rules is ever offered; they merely stand as symbolic characterizations of the misbegotten, invalid other.

Even when the rules are lax—which one would expect to conform to a worldview that *Vice* would generally look on with favor—it is somehow cast as illegitimate. Visiting the DMZ from South Korea is a serious, strictly

regimented affair, with a host of rules, a formal debriefing, and signing of waivers. Visiting from the North, in Smith's own words, is "a lot more laid back." However, this too is found to be wanting: "You can shoot what you want, you can point at people, you can give them the finger, you can do whatever you want, you can drink beer … basically it's a big 'fuck you' to the South, it's a big 'fuck you' to the Americans" (pt 2, 1 min).

Elsewhere, the strictness of the rules—or lack thereof—is consistently used to "other" the North Koreans. It is portrayed as a constant struggle for the freedom-loving Westerners to accept. When the rules are not in discussion, North Koreans are invariably portrayed as irredeemably stupid and pathetic—no surprise then that Smith thought that understanding the size of a memory card would be beyond his guide.

Other examples: with his typical flair for exaggeration, Smith describes the tea girl at a rest stop, who displays evident pleasure in having them—even playing table tennis and pool—in these terms: "You realize she hasn't seen anyone in six months, he says." A few seconds later, he repeats himself: "You realize she hasn't seen anyone in ten months and it's going to be another ten months before anyone comes" (18–19 mins). Even when North Koreans are having fun, it is because really they're so sad. Later, during a drinking session he describes his guides, guards, and hosts as "shaking" with joy because they get to eat, drink, and smoke when they have foreign tourists around.

As with Tetteroo's film, the school for gifted children is depressing and "so sad and so scary because they've been picked out … they're just press-ganged into service for the state to provide shows for like the two tourists who are there at any given time," says Smith (pt. 3, 7, 9 mins). A Koryo-dynasty-style meal becomes "fifty plates of little shit, you can't eat any of it," just served to say, "'look how much food we have'" (pt. 2, 4 mins).

Of course they are ignorant of their position in the world; they see Kim Il-sung as "a benevolent god" and "they think the world thinks Kim Il-sung is the best. … They don't understand that the world hates them" (pt. 2, 13 mins).

The crescendo of the tour is, inevitably, "the most insane thing you've ever seen in your life," the Mass Games, which are like an "Andrew Lloyd Webber spectacular, but on acid" (pt. 3, 12–13 mins).

In what appears to be a curious lie, in an intro-article hosted on VBS and CNN, Smith claims that "the fifteen of us who made up the audience watched from a marble dais. We were the only spectators."[56] Yet two shots show thousands of other audience members (pt. 3, 12, 14 mins). Did he mean fifteen foreigners? Or fifteen people in the most expensive section, where Kim Jong-il and Madeline Albright watched the games together? Whatever he means, the effect is to emphasize again "just how crazy" those North Koreans are. After all, what an absurd waste all the devoted training is in the service of an apparently uncaring leader and absent audience. (Mass Games, incidentally, usually run for two months or so.)

"Their" spectacle is presented as contextless absurdity: a bizarre exercise in devotion and discipline, or "brainwashing on an epic scale," according to a *Times of London* journalist who interviewed Smith.[57] Presenting it as such not only denigrates the Mass Games, but elevates our spectacles. They are passively brainwashed, we are engaged in entertainment. It doesn't take much imagination to understand that American spectacles such as football are packed full of elements that condition all participants, from athletes to TV viewers. We learn lessons in teamwork, individual success, redemption, masculinity/femininity, ritual, militarism, and strategy—"gridiron" means battlefield, and nary a Super Bowl passes without some kind of Air Force formation flyover. Yet, these are normal; whereas the Mass Games are "the weirdest thing" Smith has ever seen. No attempt to find commonality is ever made.

The sad conclusion of the film is representative of Smith's tour and his commitment to refuse to understand

or portray his hosts as anything but radically "other." While at karaoke, he discovers the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the UK" on the machine and gives the loudest, drunkest rendition possible, bemusing his company. This inspires another keen insight: "They didn't know how to deal with it and the women didn't know how to deal … they have no cultural references whatsoever." He continues: "They're all looking at me like I'm crazy and I realize," to use his catchphrase one last time, "they don't know what punk rock is. Not only do they not have rock and roll, they didn't have jazz, they didn't have fuckin' blues! They didn't have any of this shit. There are no cultural similarities whatsoever."

The *actual* poignancy of this is lost on Smith, who doesn't see that by viewing North Koreans only as a spectacle to either laugh at or pity, he leaves no room for bridges between these differing cultures. Rather, his approach to them rigidifies the differences. Such are the limited possibilities when your summation is: "It's so surreal. There's nothing normal that happens ever in this whole country" (pt. 1, 20 mins).

A State of Mind

A State of Mind is the second of British director Daniel Gordon's trilogy of North Korea documentaries. Made by his Verymuchso Productions, but in cooperation with (and thus with the distribution power of) the BBC, this documentary is an observational film that follows two young gymnasts—Pak Hyon-son and Kim Song-yon—as they prepare for the 2003 Mass Games in Pyongyang. Mass Games, as the narrator describes it, are a "Socialist-realism extravaganza and a perfect example of the state's ideology: the subordination of the individual's desires to the needs of the collective" (1 min).

It is the director's followup to 2002's *The Game of Their Lives*, about North Korea's surprisingly successful 1966 World Cup team. That film earned enough trust from the DPRK authorities that Gordon was able to enjoy unprecedented access to the two families and other sources in North Korea. It features Voice-of-God narration, interspersed with interviews of the gymnasts and families to construct the narrative of two individuals devoting a great deal of training and effort to the performance. *A State of Mind* was entered in a variety of high-profile film festivals, winning two awards at the Pyongyang International Film Festival.[58]

That the North Korean government bestows such approbation on *A State of Mind* opens it up to the charge that the film is only what the authorities want audiences to see. In order to deflect this criticism that the film is a form of North Korean propaganda, Gordon finds it necessary to make the "claims of innocence" that Godmilow decries. Quite explicitly, in a CNN interview included on the DVD, the director claims that the "film remains nonjudgmental."

In the film, the narrator quickly attempts to convey neutrality by saying that "the film crew was granted unparalleled cooperation from the authorities. There were guides and interpreters present at all times, but they neither interfered nor sought to censor the material" (2 mins). This simple dismissal is the only reference to issues of representing reality that the film faces. That this caveat comes so early testifies to the filmmaker's concern over Western audiences' perceptions of a film production that worked with North Korean authorities, but also belies the impossibility of neutrality.

After all, our vocabulary itself is not neutral. Gordon chooses to use the word "guide," while *Welcome to North Korea* and *The Vice Guide to North Korea* chose to call them "guards" or "minders." "Guide" carries connotations of helpfulness and aid, while "guard" or "minder" implies incarceration or subjugation. Gordon also avoids the word "regime" in the narration, opting for "government" or "state." Of course, in our contemporary

usage, “regime” is applied to authorities that are generally considered illegitimate and is commonly used when talking about North Korea.

The director, if unwilling to acknowledge the impossibility of neutrality, at least tries to frequently navigate an explanatory space where “both sides” are given room for interpretation. “In the West, North Korea is condemned as a repressive, totalitarian state,” says the narrator in one example. “Yet here, the high level of discipline is imposed by the perceived threat from the outside world. They see it as their struggle to build a strong country under its own principles” (6 mins).

In another example, in one of the meal scenes that always seem to feature an abundance of food, the narrator acknowledges that “Pyongyang is not representative” and that “it is a privilege to live here,” but goes no further. Similarly, in addition to showing the pervasive militarism and anti-Americanism in North Korean daily life, *A State of Mind* also shows the North Korean perspective on why those values exist, rooted in the “Victorious Fatherland Liberation War” and continuing standoff.

In a counterbalance to and direct reversal of the dominant Western media description of the DMZ (Seoul being just a few miles from the North Korean military), the film explains that “Pyongyang is just over 100 miles from the 37,000 U.S. troops based in South Korea.” Interestingly, as the protagonists speak about the conflict with the United States, the subtitles never translate the invariably used “Miguk-nom” as “American bastards,” ignoring the “nom.” Again, this might be a conscious choice to counterbalance the usual Western translation of “nom” as “bastard:” in Korean, the word “nom” is probably located somewhere in between “dude,” “jerk,” and “bastard” in terms of severity.

The key counterbalance of *A State of Mind*, however, is provided by the nonmilitary, nonsecuritized nature of the story itself: two athletes training and their families supporting them. Cross-cultural similarities of family life are evident throughout. In one scene, Song-yon resists waking up for school, forcing her mother to come into her room, shaking her and pulling at the covers (22 mins). In another example, her father, who has three daughters and no sons, jokes about how hard it is to work in a house full of girls who are always talking (49 mins). He is also shown to be thoughtfully intellectual, musing about what makes people happy across cultures, or about the imminent war in Iraq, “because we think the situation in Iraq could have a direct effect on the situation in our country in the future” (47 mins). There are frequent amusing, mundane, and ordinary daily concerns and interactions for the audience to identify with.

In the CNN interview Gordon states that with regard to the Mass Games, though “everything’s about the team, we kind of took that and flipped it. From our sort of Western perspective we wanted to find out about the individual within that team.” Indeed, the film must be commended for showing individualism in North Korea, as it truly goes against the grain of dominant Orientalist themes. Gordon’s editing choices demonstrate the commitment to do this. In one interview scene, the young Song-yon says, “when the dear Generalissimo comes to watch the Mass Games, I will definitely perform with perfect moves.” Instead of cutting away, however, the shot lingers, Song-yon looks off camera—to her mother or sisters perhaps—then breaks into an enchanting giggle and shake of her head, as if acknowledging a family joke about her own boastfulness.

While the rhetoric and visible commitment to success at a team level is evident (another group of gymnasts is shown to have failed to make the grade), individual motives are apparent throughout. Aspirations to be a key member of the squad (Hyon-son is a team leader) and to be in a prominent position at performance time because of one’s individual skill (Song-yon is eventually chosen to be in the second row) are shown. Even while the ultimate motive for both is in the context of pleasing the leader—alien to us—the twin motivations of individual and group

success ultimately point to commonalities with the audience's experience of team sports. The similarities are easily recognizable, even as the surrounding culture is foreign.

The inevitable finale of the Mass Games is largely edited to a rather haunting, ambient piece of electronic music that also emphasizes the commonalities. The performance, stripped of its revolutionary Korean soundtrack, becomes *even* more accessible to us after we've watched the two girls prepare. It becomes a series of feats of athleticism and organization, comparable to a variety of performances of sport or theater we might see in the West.

It would have been nice if Gordon had found a way to acknowledge the impact that the camera had on the scenes we are shown. In another interview included on the DVD, he does reveal concerns that the penetration of foreigners with equipment into the homes of the families would be incredibly strange for them. In the film, however, the impact of a camera on small things, such as professions of loyalty to the state in interviews, is not discussed. Nor is there acknowledgement of the camera's impact on major scenes, such as the trip to visit a collective farm on Kim Il-sung's birthday or the girls' vacation to Mount Baekdu, both of which almost certainly wouldn't have been organized if it weren't for the film production. Nonetheless, for contextualizing aspects of North Korean culture that seem most alien to us and for avoiding the common racial stereotypes and militarized frameworks under which most media covering North Korea operates, *A State of Mind* must be commended.

North Korea: A Day in the Life

This 2004 film was directed by Pieter Fluery, an accomplished Dutch filmmaker, whose previous work has included documentaries about Shanghai and Tokyo. With an interest in Asian metropolitan life, *A Day in the Life* follows Hong Sun-hui's family as they participate in activities representing their daily lives. To do so, he secured the cooperation of DPRK's Ministry of Culture, who were involved with the production. Like *A State of Mind*, this film won an award at the Pyongyang Film Festival.[59] It also won a handful of international awards, including one from Amnesty International.[60]

The main subject of the film, Hong Sun-hui, is a worker in a Pyongyang textile factory. The film follows her daily routine, but also includes aspects of her husband's, daughter's, and father-in-law's days. Her father-in-law is an aging military veteran, her husband takes English classes, and her young daughter attends kindergarten.

It is almost entirely shot in the *cinéma vérité* or "fly-on-the-wall" style, which seeks to minimize overt guidance of the audience by eliminating narration—"capturing people in action, and letting the viewer come to conclusions about them unaided by any implicit or explicit commentary."[61] Perhaps because of this style, whose popularity peaked some decades ago, this film seems to be viewed and discussed online less, compared to the other three. With the rise of reality TV, gonzo production values, and highly engaged presenters, this rather stripped-down style can seem relatively inaccessible.

However, free of narration, the style also allows the director to perhaps deflect charges of being a propagandist. Clearly, with the family chosen by DPRK authorities, audiences may be suspicious of how representative it is of North Korean life. In effect, the director can say: "This is merely what they showed me: I recorded it without comment."

The director does explain some of the conflicts he had with the authorities in an interview included on the DVD. (DVDs now provide filmmakers with a valuable tool for explaining the production—justifying the mediation and providing background can be especially useful with the vérité style.) He describes arguing about whether he could film scenes of poverty or of country people. He says, "We were allowed everything we had agreed on, nothing

else." There is clearly a background struggle over what truth to portray, though in a narration-free documentary, these struggles are difficult to perceive in the film itself.[62]

The prospects for conflict or drama in the narrative are limited compared to *A State of Mind,* which stretches over most of a year. Long-term goals, tensions, and personalities become impossible to see because *A Day in the Life*, as the title suggests, purports to follow one family on a single typical day. From the start, however, we can perceive some mediation: it is unlikely the production had four film crews, so the action would have actually unfolded over several days at the least.

As with most narrationless films, the film doesn't acknowledge its impact on the "purer" reality it purports to describe. For example, we cannot know if the retired father-in-law visits Pyongyang's landmarks on a typical day (29-30 mins). Nor can we know if their breakfast is usually as abundant as we see (2 mins) or if Sun-hui typically sings anti-American nursery rhymes with her daughter on the way to school (3 mins). (Interestingly, "Sungnyangi-Miguk Nom," which could be translated as harshly as "American wolf-bastards" is rendered "pathetic Americans" in the subtitles). In this particular fly-on–the-wall film, we can't know to what degree the "typicality" we see is altered or misrepresented by either the filmmaker or the Ministry of Culture.

There is, in fact, only one scene with a direct address to the camera, when the grandfather explains that he taught his granddaughter to hate "American dogs" (41 mins). He then recounts how American bombers destroyed his school, killing many classmates, then his home, killing his father and brother. Sun-hui follows by discussing how her father-in-law's experiences reaffirm her understanding about Americans. One is left wondering if a third generation will internalize the lessons in the same way. Without intervening narration, however, the berth for interpretation of these beliefs is wide.

The film's major intervention in mood comes from the soundtrack, which is used to create a sense of unease. During some transitional scenes, the film is accompanied by tense, electronic/orchestral music, not dissimilar to the eeriness of a psychological thriller. When it accompanies scenes of their child's kindergarten as the children are exhorted to practice hard for their "father general," it emphasizes the discomfiting nature of the educational content for the audience (12 mins). When it is overlaid with TV images of a performance for Kim Jong-il by a musical troupe, it imbues the scene with a menacing grimness. It decontextualizes the accompanying movement, especially as the director slows down the pixilated, distorted TV images of the women leaping their joyful praise for the leader (47 mins). The slow, contorted image reinforces the audience's sense of alienation from the object on screen as the image finally freezes and the documentary ends. In a way, this is the polar opposite of the technique used in *A State of Mind*, where the soundtrack is used to give the viewer increased empathy and access to the final scene.

The film would have felt drastically different with a less discordant, tense musical accompaniment. The soundtrack in effect becomes the director's interpretation of the events on screen. All is not well here, the music says. North Korean life, even for the relatively privileged of Pyongyang, is an illegitimate, distorted modernity. This invites us to reflect on our good fortune to *not* be North Korean, to look at their lives from the outside with a mixture of disdain, sympathy, and relief.

That this film was shown and honored in Pyongyang is testament not only that this reaction from audiences abroad is unimportant, but that the same images can be construed as a form of emancipated, harmonious urban family life. One wonders if the soundtrack was the same for the Pyongyang screening.

THE FUTURE OF DOCUMENTARY FILMS ON NORTH KOREA

The lingering Cold War and issues of Orientalism and race, combined with the DPRK government's continued resistance to outsiders leveraging knowledge over them, means learning about North Korea through documentary film will continue to be very difficult indeed. The issues of representing reality and dealing with the "other" are always problematic, but the potential for bias and misunderstanding to escalate beyond normal ranges is especially great in North Korea because of its unique position economically, geopolitically, and in the formation of global social discourses.

Future documentary films would do well to consider multiple explanations for interpreting their subject matter, to act cautiously in their approach to an alien culture, and most crucially, to take pains to lessen the impression that their work is either authoritative or unmediated reality. By moving beyond crude, prurient glimpses of the bizarre or spectacular, we can also move beyond filmmaking that reaffirms the simple and misleading binaries of us/them, just/unjust, and good/evil. Ultimately, if we can break down these psychological divisions, we may be able to eliminate the social divisions that can be, and have been, so fraught with peril.

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