

Book Review

Theodore Hughes, *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea: Freedom's Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. xiv, 271.

Kelly S. Walsh (Yonsei University)

The fundamental claim of Theodore Hughes's impressive cultural history is that the South Korean cultural field, in the first thirty years of the Cold War, was formed in relation to three central and interrelated disavowals: "the ban ... on colonial-period proletarian works, the institutionalized forgetting of the late-colonial-period mass culture of mobilization and imperialization, and the effacement of contemporary North Korean cultural production."¹ Hughes's emphasis is on visual culture, in particular, the "verbal-visual text," which is (rather broadly) defined as any literary work providing "verbal representations of the visual."² As such, *Literature and Film* provides close readings of several dozen literary and filmic texts produced between the late 1910s and early 1970s—some canonical, others neglected or only recently "discovered"—to show how verbal-visual techniques developed in the colonial period, used then to contest "the imperial staging of the real in colonial Korea,"³ were afterwards appropriated and rearticulated by South Korean artists and intellectuals to surreptitiously critique the evolving Cold War order on the peninsula. Confronted by state censorship and the National Security Law, Cold War writers and filmmakers engaged what Hughes, borrowing from Rancière, calls the "distribution of the sensible." In self-reflexively drawing attention to the limits of what could safely be said or shown, their works provoke a sort of counterfocalization, making intelligible that which, officially, was to remain forgotten, unsaid, unseen. In this, Hughes's inquiry serves as a corrective to prevailing notions, especially in English-language scholarship, about the "draconian anticommunist culture" of 1950s and 1960s South Korea and the supposed lack of dissent among artists and intellectuals to the

“overlapping U.S./South Korean Cold War statisms/developmentalisms.”⁴

Literature and Film's first chapter concerns four interconnected colonial-period movements: the proletarian culture movement, nativism, modernism, and wartime mass mobilization. These movements, Hughes stresses, had great significance for the postcolonial cultural field beyond their total or partial erasure; they all forged new “ways of seeing and writing that would inform the later distribution of the visible and invisible that make up the Cold War politics of division on the Korean peninsula.”⁵ For instance, writers associated with the KAPF (Korean Artists Proletarian Federation, 1925–1935), frequently employed “the technics of visual and print culture” in their efforts to contest “colonial-capitalist relations,”⁶ awaken class consciousness in a mass audience, and circumvent the imperial censors. Nativism, with its representations of the traditional and rural, has usually been situated in opposition to the contemporaneous experimentations of Korean modernism. Hughes shows, however, that both presupposed an urban audience, that both, through a variety of verbal-visual techniques, self-reflexively grappled with 1930s colonial modernity and sought “to locate a space other than that produced by capitalist relations.”⁷ Finally, he indicates how the mass mobilization films of the late 1930s and early 1940s promised the overcoming of modernity, capitalism, and colonialism “via the incorporation of the colonized as true imperial subjects.”⁸ Importantly, these wartime efforts to summon an imperial subject, and engineer a coincidence between colonial and imperial desire, involved a dual affiliation with the peninsula and the greater Japanese empire. While this late colonial period was soon to be stricken from the official historical record, it would, Hughes argues, provide the model for a different kind of summoning and dual identification in postcolonial South Korea.

The Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945 brought with it what scholars came to call the “liberation space” (*haebang konggan*). While the immediate postliberation period (1945–1948), the second chapter's focus, has received significant scholarly attention from English-language historians, Hughes notes the “relative absence of work on cultural production,” which “has led to an elision of important shifts that took place with the sudden end of late colonial wartime mobilization and the

move to the postcolonial Cold War order.”⁹ This period saw the brief reemergence of colonial-era proletarian writers on the Seoul cultural scene, while former modernists, such as Yi T’ae-jun and Pak T’ae-wŏn, turned to the left. Proletarian writers were quick to denounce what they viewed as the neocolonial U.S. military occupation, “the refashioning of collaborators into anticommunists, and the formation of a rightist satellite state.”¹⁰ Such dissent, however, was soon suppressed by the U.S. military government; by 1947, the works of proletarian and leftist writers—many of whom fled to the Soviet-occupied North, becoming *wŏlbuk chakka* (“writers who went north”)—essentially vanished from the South. The eradication of the left, along with the excision of colonial Korean Japanese-language texts, was not only decisive in the formation of “South Korean literature” (*Han’guk munhak*) and its official canon, it “occurred in tandem with the distancing and othering of the North.”¹¹ For Hughes, the 1945–1948 writer who did the most to shape the emerging contours of *Han’guk munhak* was Yŏm Sang-sŏp, whose *Dawn Wind* (*Hyop’ung*, 1948) addresses the “crisis of legitimacy” felt by many in the South, the fact they were once again ruled by a foreign power. Yŏm’s literary response was to call for the construction of an ethical “bourgeois national subject,” one distinguished “both from the proletarian revolutionary and the formerly pro-Japanese, now pro-U.S. collaborative bourgeoisie.”¹² The formation of this subject necessitated the continuing erasure of the North; it also, Hughes suggests, instantiated the tensions between the nationalist and developmentalist narratives that would afflict the South Korean state for decades to come.

In the aftermath of the Korean War, South Korea embarked on the path of what Hughes terms “ethnodevelopmentalism,” or a conjoining of “the health of the nation to the health of the economy.”¹³ The ethnodevelopmentalist narrative, then, reworked the late-colonial dual affiliation: “The local became South Korea, while the U.S.-led anticommunist, democratic free world took the place of the Japanese imperium.”¹⁴ Focusing on the 1950s, *Literature and Film*’s third chapter rejects claims that cultural productions at this time were monolithically anticommunist. Instead, Hughes emphasizes what he sees as a “politics of nonalignment,” attempts in literature and film, many bearing the

trace of colonial-era proletarian critique, “to construct a postcolonial space outside the Cold War order.”¹⁵ While an anticommunist film like *The Hand of Fate* (1954) presents the North and its communist agents as an omnipresent, because invisible, threat, in other cultural productions, it tends to become an absence, a receding memory—or, as in the film *P’iagol* (1955), figured as a living corpse. Hughes’s interpretation of *P’iagol*, which concerns a group of communist partisans fighting in Ch’olla Province, frames their gradual killing off as an erasure of North Korean remnants from the South. At the same time, its depictions of necrophilia literally betray a lingering attachment to the corpse, a refusal to acknowledge the erasure, revealing “the ways in which imagining of the North . . . comes to involve a relation with the living dead.”¹⁶ In this chapter, it is also interesting to learn the extent to which existentialism influenced cultural debate, allowing for “a critique of postcolonial ethnonationalism . . . by delinking human sovereignty from territorial integrity.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, Hughes’s account of 1950s existential thinkers, such as Ch’ong Pong-nae and Ch’ong Ha-ün, suffers due to the translation of “*siljon i ponjil poda ap’sönda*” as “existence *over* essence,” which significantly distorts Sartre’s famous dictum “existence *precedes* essence.” The analysis of the existentialist author Son Ch’ang-söp is much more compelling, as it elucidates the peculiar logic of the distribution of the sensible. Son’s allegorizing of “South Korea/U.S. relations as rape of the nation,” Hughes writes, “falls safely within the bounds of the South Korean cultural field, a displacement of domestic, ‘internal’ tensions.”¹⁸ In displaying the field’s limits, though, Son renders perceptible the relation of knowledge and power, the reality that the state’s internal structure remains proscribed for the critical gaze.

In *Literature and Film*’s fourth and fifth chapters, Hughes examines the cultural scene during Park Chung Hee’s dictatorship, paying close attention to Nam Ch’ong-hyön, “the representative ‘anti-American’ writer of the 1960s”¹⁹ (one who was prosecuted by the Park regime), and Ch’oe In-hun, whose works return to the imperial past in order to “unpack . . . a multilayered coloniality informing the Cold War Koreas.”²⁰ Hughes presents Nam’s stories as a “talking back” to the Park regime’s “articulation of statist, ethnonational developmentalism . . . and

U.S. metropolitan representations of its free-world developmentalist mission.²¹ Targeted and emasculated by extensions of South Korean-U.S. state power, Nam's male protagonists make visible the violence underpinning the enforcement of the Cold War order, as well as the process by which "free-world" anticommunism racializes and primitivizes the figure of the communist or developing-world dissenter. Ch'oe's return to the colonial, as in his rewriting of Pak T'ae-wŏn's 1934 novella *A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist* (*Sosŏlga Kubossi ūi iril*, 1970-1972), is understood as an effort to forge a nonaligned position from which to critique the contemporary ethnodevelopmentalist narrative and division of the peninsula. Because Pak was a *wŏlbuk chakka*, living and writing in Pyongyang, his *Kubo* was then banned in the South. The restaging of *Kubo* in early 1970s Seoul thus enables Ch'oe to simultaneously resurrect Pak's colonial capital in the midst of Park Chung Hee's "modern" Seoul and enact a sort of clandestine border crossing, invoking "the unnamable place and time of Pak himself in Pyongyang."²² In his "illicit reading of Pak's unseen text, one that makes it visible,"²³ Ch'oe deftly challenges the visual regime of the state, both the highly selective remembering of the colonial past and the erasure of the North. In very different ways, then, Ch'oe's and Nam's works instantiate a politics of the visible in order to contest anticommunist ethnodevelopmentalism, while subversively pointing to South Korea's problematic location on "freedom's frontier."

Literature and Film is at its best when Hughes closely engages the primary texts and skillfully weaves his readings into a larger cultural history of the ways in which the Cold War South Korean cultural field was molded through erasures and elisions—and contested through verbal-visual techniques that made them intelligible. One slight critique is that some of the theoretical frames he inserts into this history (e.g., mourning and melancholia) and imposes upon individual texts (e.g., Pak's *Kubo* and Saussure) feel forced and unnecessary. Nevertheless, this is a formidable work of scholarship, one that should remain topical for some time. With the status quo still entrenched on the Korean peninsula, it seems fair to say that *Literature and Film* can also be considered "a verbal-visual history that is not of the past but of the present."²⁴

Notes

¹ Theodore Hughes, *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea: Freedom's Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 82.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 165.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

²² *Ibid.*, 183.

²³ *Ibid.*, 185.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.