

Comedian Comedy: The Intertextuality of North Korean Film Culture*

Immanuel Kim

(The George Washington University)

Abstract

This article discusses the idea of comedian comedy, a cinematic genre in which actors reference themselves and each other and thereby highlight the interconnected nature of their careers and performances for the pleasure of the audience. I argue that North Korean cinema has fostered a culture of comedian comedy through which actors recognize and acknowledge each other in the filmic world as a way of affirming their history of working together for the viewers in society. *Our Meaningful Life* [보람찬 우리 생활] (1979) presents North Korean audiences with an entertaining and self-reflexive spectacle in which a famous comedian plays the role of an awkward and ignorant visitor to the film studio in Pyongyang. The film celebrates in a playful manner the performers of the North Korean film industry by having them play themselves in brief appearances where they engage with the disruptive and naïve elderly man played by Kim Se-yŏng, one of the most recognizable stars of North Korean cinema. *Our Meaningful Life* abounds in references to earlier North Korean films, restaging some of their most iconic scenes. In addition to being successful and popular comedy for North Korean moviegoers, it also serves as a repository of collective consciousness of North Korean film history.

Keywords: film industry, comedian comedy, extrafictionality, self-referencing, intertextuality, Kim Se-yŏng, Kim Jong-il

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Introduction

Comedians and their roles are iconic and indispensable in the everyday life of North Koreans. North Korean comedy films are not simply intended to relay ideological messages intended to educate and construct a subject that supports the state. Instead, the popularity and appeal of these comedians and their works are integral elements of North Korean society, shaping a familiar and multi-faceted relationship between the actors and the viewers. In many North Korean comedies, the ideologically didactic message is artificially woven into the narrative to announce the denouement of the film, as the popular appeal of these films arises from showcasing the talent of the comedians in an entertaining spectacle. While it would be a mistake to discount entirely the ideological messages of these comedies, this article argues that these films in North Korea exceed the didactic purpose which the party charges them to fulfill.

The strongest evidence that North Korean comedies prioritize entertainment over ideology is found in films that make references to earlier films as a form of homage to their actors. Indeed, as I will show, the self-referential character of these comedies reflect a conscious effort on the part of the North Korean film industry to break down the conceptual space between the fictional world and the viewers. A comedian in a film draws in viewers who expect to see a certain kind of performance from the actor because the viewers are familiar with the other films in which the comedian has appeared. The recognition of comedians from other films constitutes a form of intertextuality, which situates the actors within the larger world of film culture and also defines these films as commodities intended for mass consumption.¹

The notion of self-referencing of actors, or what Steve Seidman calls “extrafictionality,” blends the fictional world with the real world that they inhabit with the viewers. In his book *Comedian Comedy*, Seidman explores the long and expansive tradition of comedian comedy in American culture. From Charlie Chaplin to Bob Hope and Woody Allen, he argues that comedian comedy comprises a cinematic genre of its own in which actors made famous by the movies were recognizable to audiences: “They can be seen as filmically generated icons, by which I mean they

had a particular cultural function, one correlatable to an identified world of filmic codes.”² The popularity of these comedians in these films represents the iconicity of their persona by the frequent movie-goers. In short, viewers come to watch a well-known comedian in a film because the extrafictional status and intertextual identity of the comedian and his or her world of stardom have become objects of spectatorial desire.

In Hollywood, there has been a long tradition of this style of filmmaking called comedian comedy, where popular actors reference themselves, other actors, or other films, knowing that the audience comprehends the “inside jokes” of the filmic world. In other words, the audience is very much part of the fictional world because of the connection to the extrafictional world of famous actors. Much like Hollywood, the North Korean film industry has established a culture of comedian comedy through which actors recognize and acknowledge each other in the filmic world as a way of affirming their popularity for the viewers in society. In this article, I will examine comedy film *Our Meaningful Life* [보람찬 우리 생활] (1979), which exhibits the concept of comedian comedy, as an entertaining genre through which the audience consumes and popularizes the familiar faces on the silver screen.³ At the same time, this film goes beyond Seidman’s notion of comedian comedy, as there are differences between Hollywood and North Korean film production. I argue that the self-referencing of famous actors and the intertextualization of familiar films interrupt the flow of the narrative trajectory and distract the audience from conceptualizing the political message that this film is supposed to convey.

The Pedagogical Element in North Korean Comedy Films

North Korean comedy films poke fun at Americans, Japanese, and South Koreans, but many of the films in the 1960s began portraying the everyday citizen who possessed minor flaws in their moral and political attitudes that could be rectified and reformed with appropriate educational measures. North Korean film director and critic, Kim Yŏng, says, “A negative aspect of our society would be someone who tries to follow the Party’s demands but still retains the past ideologies.”⁴ North

Korean comedy aims its criticism to citizens who failed to live according to Party directives. Thus, a new comic genre called lighthearted comedy, *kyŏnghŭigŭk* [경희극], was born.

North Korean film critics have countless identified these minor flaws as the product of negative or backward ideologies *nalgŭn sasang* [낡은 사상], which include reactionary beliefs, dogmatism, subjectivism, empiricism, conservatism, negativism, and bureaucratism. Kim Yŏng asserts that lighthearted comedy is a new artistic form of the DPRK that criticizes and reforms characters with ideological flaws in a comical way. Kim says, “Comic laughter exposes the falsity and hypocrisy of old and reactionary elements, and it ridicules and mocks the essence of the reactionary.”⁵ This filmic form, according to Kim Yŏng, reflects the aesthetic sensitivity of North Koreans who are attempting to indigenize this new filmic production as something intrinsically Korean. He argues that *Rumbling Mountains* [산울림] (1962) was the first lighthearted comedy film in the DPRK that showed characters bearing the remnants of negative ideologies who undergo an ideological transformation with the help from the larger society.⁶

One of the characteristics of lighthearted comedy films in North Korea is the fusion of drama and comedy: the dramedy. During the 1970s, Kim Jong-il had warned filmmakers to refrain from creating comedy films for the sole purpose of entertainment. All films produced thereafter in North Korea were obliged to contain an educational narrative, which meant that the ending must always draw on hyperbolic sentimentality to move the audience emotionally to engage in self-criticism and self-correction. Starting from the 1970s, such formulaic denouements became a staple of North Korean comedies.

Such a prescriptive message is quite apparent in *Our Meaningful Life*. The film demystifies the enchantments of the cinematic world, but it also reinforces the magic of filmmaking as various components—the set, sound, music, costume, makeup, lights, actors, and special effects—come together to expand the horizon of the imagination. By going behind the scenes where movies are made and where North Korean actors work daily, the film exposes the secrets behind filmmaking at the largest movie set in Pyongyang. The world of filmmaking comes to life for the

characters and the audience alike as the camera pans across the studio from the inside to outside using the over-the-shoulder camera angles.

Our Meaningful Life combines a documentary-style technique with a fictional narrative—a docufiction—that educates the audience about the past and present of the Korean Film Studio along with an entertaining plot to keep the audience engaged.⁷ The camera takes in the entire studio and different sets in the form and style of a documentary film. The viewer is shown the buildings where the films are shot and edited, the dormitory where the actors reside, and the statue honoring Kim Il-sung. We are taken inside as well to view the interiors of the studio: the make-up room, the costume and dressing rooms, the sound and special effects room, the music and soundtrack recording room, editing room, dance hall, and the equipment that the state has provided for the actors. The camera guides the audience on a magical journey through the fantastic world of cinema production in its depiction of the spaces and instruments that go into filmmaking.

Of course, a mere tour of the film studio would not fulfill the requirements that North Korean films that educate the audience in a political manner. A film's message has to be clear and direct so that the audience may understand clearly the purpose of the work. The acclaimed actor, Kim Ryong-nin, who plays himself, gives a tour of the studio for Elder Kim (played by the veteran comedian Kim Se-yŏng). He recounts that in December 1964, Kim Il-sung held a Party meeting at the studio to help the filmmakers overcome the obstacles keeping them from producing excellent films. He declares that Kim Il-sung went into every room in the studio to see what improvements could be made and provided the actors with specially designated buses for commuting to the studio. Kim Ryong-nin's claims are given support by North Korean film critic Kim Yŏng who writes, "This film is about our leader establishing the Korean Film Studio so that our actors could produce quality films with their talent."⁸ Thus, the educational message in the film is to recognize and celebrate Kim Il-sung's gifts to the film industry.

However, *Our Meaningful Life* diverts the attention of the audience away from the educational message as Elder Kim disrupts film production at the studio and becomes distracted with identifying

famous actors on the set. The film does not unfold according to the typical formula of comedies that Kim Jong-il had laid out. Instead, it is an exhibition of comedians and dramatic actors from various films who come together to liven up the big screen for their audience.

The Other Meaning of *Our Meaningful Life*

The film begins with Myöng-su and Ok-son who are both actors working at the Korean Film Studio and are also engaged to be married. Myöng-su's father, Elder Kim, and Ok-son's mother (played by Hyön Mi-sun), come to the studio to visit their children.

Elder Kim hops on a bus that is reserved for actors and arrives at the Korean Film Studio. He is given a tour of the studio and runs into a myriad of actors whom he recognizes from the films he has seen. Ok-son's mother also takes a bus to the studio and encounters Elder Kim at the studio without knowing that he is the father of Myöng-su. Of course, Elder Kim does not realize that the woman is in fact Ok-son's mother. The two roam the studio lot in search for Myöng-su and Ok-son. Elder Kim and Ok-son's mother disturb a shooting and cause a set to be ruined. When the two find their respective son and daughter, they realize that the other is the future in-law. The film ends with the future in-laws taking a ride out of the studio, waving farewell to the actors of the Korean Film Studio.

The humorous aspect of *Our Meaningful Life* is how Elder Kim disrupts the work of filmmaking process in the very rooms that Kim Il-sung had entered and consecrated. Despite the fact that Elder Kim is at the Korean Film Studio, he cannot differentiate fiction from reality. He mistakenly enters a room and finds an interrogation session in progress. Frightened by the intensity of the interrogation, Elder Kim leaves the room. He wanders the studio lot and hears explosions for a war movie. He sees soldiers rushing toward him and runs for safety, not realizing that the camera crew is shooting a scene. He then enters the editing room where editors are in the process of editing the combat scene. On the screen monitor, Elder Kim sees himself on the battlefield but does not understand how he ended up on the monitor. The editors get upset

with how Elder Kim got into the shot and says the film is ruined. He continues to ruin the special effects recording session, movie soundtrack recording session, and many others.

The plot of the film unfolds through Elder Kim's desire for his son Myŏng-su to become a great movie star. Since Elder Kim cannot distinguish fiction from reality at the studio, he does not realize that the actors are playing fictional roles. For example, he runs into a group of actors dressed as South Koreans and Americans. Their identities are denoted by flashy clothes and blonde wigs. When these actors pass by Elder Kim, he spits at them, showing his disapproval of them as detestable human beings. Likewise, he disrupts a scene when he recognizes the evil landlord from his childhood some forty years ago. Thinking that the landlord is the actual landlord from his past, Elder Kim takes a cane and starts beating him, not realizing that the landlord is a role played by his son. When Myŏng-su reveals himself to his father, Elder Kim falls to ground in disappointment that his son must have been a terrible actor for having received the role of a villain. The other actors later console Elder Kim by speaking highly of Myŏng-su's acting ability. Elder Kim finally realizes the political necessity for Myŏng-su to play the role of a landlord. Before he leaves the studio, he declares that the purpose of making revolutionary films is to educate the next generation of North Koreans about the importance of class struggle. He makes this claim in the presence of famous actors playing themselves, and they all burst into laughter at his announcement.

This scene is the critical moment in *Our Meaningful Life* that shows the self-reflexivity of the comedy film genre. That is, the film is not only trying to make the audience laugh, but it is also directing the laughter at itself and at the enterprise of filmmaking in North Korea. In other North Korean films, when the main character explains the political ideology of the Party or the leader, he does so in a grave and serious tone, and the other characters respond by nodding reverently to his words. However, in *Our Meaningful Life*, the actors who hear Elder Kim's statement laugh at him. The diegetic laughter is aimed at the entire institution of filmmaking in North Korea where themes of class struggle and the value of the collective are emphasized to the point of exhaustion. *Sea of Blood* [㉑]

바다] and *Flower Girl* [꽃파는 처녀]—two films that Kim Jong-il claims to be masterpieces because of their treatment of the theme of class struggle—are considered representative films that all other films are supposed to emulate. In the last scene of *Our Meaningful Life*, the actors, who are playing themselves, snicker at North Korea’s most renowned comedian, Kim Se-yŏng, for making such a “silly” statement. None of the actors take Elder Kim seriously and instead encourage him to get in the car and leave the studio lot. Elder Kim then promptly responds, “Why are you laughing?” The actors continue to laugh at Elder Kim, causing him to laugh at himself out of embarrassment for making, in retrospect, an absurd statement. He then turns to one of the actors and says, “This is a serious matter,” to which all the actors burst into laughter again.

The diegetic laughter, at this point, has several layers. First, the actors laugh at Elder Kim’s didactic remark insisting that films always have to be about class struggle, a statement which would not have been meaningless in other North Korean films. Indeed, it is in these other instances, an unironically serious issue that has been a recurring element in North Korean cinema. The laughter of the actors, however, breaks with the conventions required of politically didactic films. Moreover, the actors regard Elder Kim’s gesture as silly and undeserving of their respect. Elder Kim’s comical persona cannot be taken seriously, just as most of the other roles played by comedian Kim Se-yŏng are viewed by audiences as light-hearted and satirical. Had Elder Kim’s part been played by North Korea’s renowned dramatic actor, Kim Ryong-nin, then the viewers would have taken the character seriously. The critical edge of the laughter is nevertheless diminished by how it goes on for an unusually long duration for a film. The actors persist in their laughter when the aghast Elder Kim asks, “Why are you laughing?” By this point, the laughter takes on a life of its own and strikes the viewer as scathing when it first broke out over Elder Kim’s earnest words about the importance of the political message of cinema. There is an added layer of irony as the actors snicker at the very idea of taking political ideology seriously when Elder Kim himself has disrupted the work at the studio where Kim Il-sung had anointed with his gracious presence. This is no laughing matter, but the actors cannot seem to stop.

The filmmakers of *Our Meaningful Life* also take one more jab at the conventional dialogue found in North Korean cinema. Elder Kim invites the actors to come to his village in the mountains. He says that the Great Leader Kim Il-sung had visited once and turned the village into a thriving agricultural town. The actors laugh again. The film parodies the importance of producing ideological films by having Elder Kim ruin the set and by having the actors laugh at the political imperative of taking seriously the ideological message contained in North Korean cinema. Using the style of docufiction, *Our Meaningful Life* may present the great leader's everlasting love for the film industry by exhibiting the wonderful gifts, film equipment, and studio sets that he bestowed to it. The performances of popular actors—the extrafictional nature of comedian comedy—was in my view the driving impulse behind the film, which was powerful enough to treat lightly the ideological mandates that have guided North Korean cinema.

Intertextuality of Actors and Films as Distraction

It is the general practice of North Korean cinema to eschew the use of credits, whether at the beginning or at the end of the film. As a result, audiences in North Korea find it difficult to know the names of the actors. Instead, these actors are recognized by their roles in films, such as the chief of the Post Office, the selfish elder from *Flourishing Village* [꽃피는 마을] (Han Pok-gyu, 1970), the daughter-in-law from *To the End of the World* [이 세상 끝까지] (Ri Ch'un-gu, 1977) and so on. Some actors' performances have left such a strong impression on the audience that the characters are remembered more than the film itself. Kim Jong-il, however, reflects that familiarity with an actor's name can make for a more engaged audience:

People cannot immediately become familiar with the name of a character on the screen, but if they are told that the part is played by a certain well-known actor, then they find it easy to identify the character. And, after a time, they forget the various details of a production; but when they are reminded that such-and-such an

actor played the hero, they instantly recall the film quite vividly.⁹

Kim Jong-il believes that the recognizability of actors will enable the people to recall the narrative and thereby the educational value of the film. While this might be the case for some North Koreans, this remark overlooks the culture of fandom that arises when performers become well-known among audiences.

Our Meaningful Life, as a celebration of the careers of renowned actors, would give support to the view that North Koreans are drawn to their performances than the political messages they express on screen. Indeed, the cameo of various actors playing themselves in this film has strong appeal for viewers. On the other hand, for those viewers who are not so familiar with these actors but are familiar with acclaimed films can make the connection—putting the name to the face, so to speak—and walk out of the theater with a more familiar sense of the performers who define the industry. That is, those who had been unfamiliar with the actors are thereafter able to participate in conversations about the actors and their prior roles. Elder Kim occupies the position of the ordinary North Korean citizen who learns the identities of the actors, which involves the audience in his experience of recognition and wonderment. Much like how fans crowd around a celebrity for a snapshot or an autograph, Elder Kim's gesture of acknowledging the actors invites the audience to participate in the culture of film. *Our Meaningful Life* stresses the point that North Korean film industry exists for the sake of the audience.

Let us begin with, perhaps, the most important actor in North Korea comedy films: Kim Se-yŏng. Born on September 17, 1923 in the town of Ch'ŏngwŏn in North Ch'ungch'ŏng Province in South Korea, Kim Se-yŏng grew up as an orphan after losing his parents to a tragic accident. He lived with his extended family and attended elementary school [보통학교] until he dropped out of school after he was no longer able to pay tuition. After Liberation in 1945, Kim joined the Seoul Performing Arts Troupe and began his acting career. According to Kim Se-yŏng, the group he joined was politically leftist and embraced the leadership of Kim Il-sung.¹⁰ He remembered how, in one instance, the theater was bombed moments before the curtain went up, and, in another instance, how the

police disbanded the group during a performance.¹¹ According to an article in the May 1986 issue of *Joseon Film* [조선 영화], Kim was not able to carry out his acting career in South Korea because of the oppressive regime supported by the United States. Dreaming of pursuing his acting career in the North, he took the advantage of the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 to flee to the North.¹² He enlisted in the People's Army in October of 1950, and later joined the Korean Film Studio to launch his career as a comedian actor.¹³ Kim Se-yŏng debuted in the film *Youth Partisan League* [소년빨찌산] (1951). In the following year, he appeared in *Toward the Frontline Again* [또다시 전선으로] (Ch'ŏn Sang-in, screenwriter Kang Ho, 1952), which then enabled him to land the lead role in *The Tale of Hŭngbu* [흥부전] (Kim Sŏng-gyo, screenwriter Song Yŏng, 1963). His comical role in *Jolly Stage* [명랑한 무대] (Kim Yŏng, 1966) provided a memorable glimpse of his comic talent. Kim's first major role as the lead comedian was in the film *Reserve Soldier* [보충병] (1969), followed by *Boasting Too Much* [자랑끝에 있는 일] (1970).¹⁴ These latter two films enabled Kim's career as a comedian to take off, so that he became a household name in North Korea.

According to the May 1986 issue of *Joseon Film*, Kim Se-yŏng is one of the most renowned comedians in North Korea, having performed in over one hundred films.¹⁵ Although his role as the "bicycle leader [자전거 반장]" in *When We Pick Apples* [사과밭 때] (Kim Yŏng-ho, 1971) brought him stardom, his most celebrated role was that of the chief of the Post Office [우편국장] in *My Family's Problem* [우리 집 문제] (Kim Yŏng, screenwriter Ri Hŭi-ch'an, 1973).¹⁶

Kim Se-yŏng received the coveted title of People's Actor in 1975 for his devotion and service to the country as the nation's leading comedian. He was lauded as a "very special actor with multiple comic talents and for his creative approach to each film in which he appeared."¹⁷ His cultural influence extended beyond North Korea; he traveled to Japan in 1985 to film *Snow Melts in Spring* [봄날의 눈석이] (Rim Ch'ang-bŏm, screenwriter Ri Ch'un-gu, 1985) and *Silver Hairpin* [은비녀] (Ko Hak-rim, screenwriter Kim Su-jung, 1985) with a Korean *zainichi* film crew. His roles in these two films were small, but his presence in Tokyo was a source of delight for his local fanbase. The North Korean government

also allowed Kim Se-yŏng to visit Seoul in 1985 for one of the first of many family reunions between North and South Korea.¹⁸ The state not only trusted Kim, but he also served as a celebrity ambassador to represent the families from the North.¹⁹ In May of 1989, Kim represented Korea during the Thirteenth World Festival of Youth and Students held in Pyongyang, which would be his last major public appearance.²⁰ On October 23, 1989, Kim Se-yŏng passed away after a long and successful career as North Korea's leading comedian.

In the opening scene of *Our Meaningful Life*, Elder Kim, the character played by Kim Se-yŏng, misses the bus, but is soon picked up by a commuter bus on the way to the Korean Film Studio that had been specially established by the Party for those working in the film industry. Into the camera appears the People's Actor Kim Ryong-nin, who is perhaps the most recognizable and celebrated dramatic actor in North Korea. Embarking on his acting career in 1963, he landed the lead roles in such major productions as *Working-class Family* [로동가정] (Ryu Ho-son, 1971), *Five Guerrilla Brothers* [유격대의 오형제] (Ch'oe Ik-gyu, screenwriter Pak Sŭng-su, 1968), *Sea of Blood* (Ch'oe Ik-gyu, 1969), *Flower Girl* (Ch'oe Ik-gyu, 1972), and many other films. He was awarded the title of People's Actor in 1979. He would not be considered a comic actor by any reckoning, and his appearance as himself in *Our Meaningful Life* as a calm, dignified, and gracious persona is what the North Koreans are accustomed to seeing.²¹ He was so revered as a dramatic actor that when he passed away in 2015, Kim Jong Un sent flowers to his funeral service.²²

As Elder Kim is escorted onto the commuter bus, he stares at Kim Ryong-nin and says that he looks awfully familiar. The character's ignorance is humorous because everyone in North Korea would be expected to recognize Kim Ryong-nin. Elder Kim finally recognizes Kim Ryong-nin as the lead in *Five Guerrilla Brothers* and declares that it was a great film, affirming to the viewers what they already know. It contains an added layer of irony because Kim Se-yŏng also appeared in *Five Guerrilla Brothers* in the role of Kim Ryong-nin's arch-nemesis. Two People's Actors from two different filmic genres—immensely popular in their own right—light up the screen for the amusement of the audience.

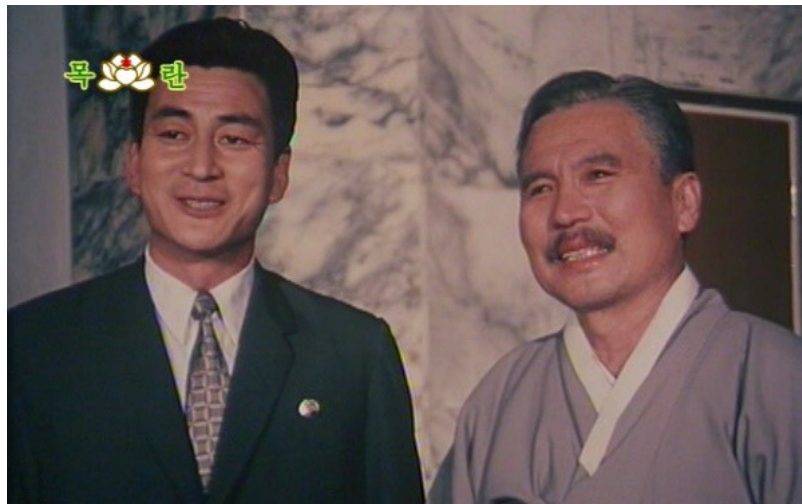


Figure 1. Kim Ryong-nin (left) and Kim Se-yŏng (right) in the Korean Film Studio, appreciating what Kim Il-sung had provided for the actors in the DPRK. Source: *Our Meaningful Life*.

Just as Kim Se-yŏng and Kim Ryong-nin are the two most prominent male actors in North Korea, Hyŏn Mi-sun and Han Kil-myŏng are the industry's two leading comedienne. Hyŏn Mi-sun began her career at age sixteen and became one of the most recognizable performers in North Korean film.²³ She appeared as the wife of Kim Se-yŏng's character in *Boasting Too Much* before taking on a lead role herself in *Wedding Day in the City* [잔치날 도시편] (screenwriter Ri Hŭi-ch'an, 1974). She would win acclaim as the ambitious wife and mother in *Our Upstairs Neighbor's Problem* [우리 웃집 문제] (Yun Ki-ch'an, screenwriter Ri Hŭi-ch'an, 1980).

Han Kil-myŏng is also an easily recognizable figure for the North Korean audience.²⁴ One of her earliest roles was in *Jolly Stage*, where she met Kim Se-yŏng. The two would become a comedic duo for a twelve-part series, *My Family's Problem*, which spanned over a decade from the 1970s to 1980s. Her performance as an unfriendly and problematic wife won her strong praise among North Koreans. Her character became an iconic figure, so that in the opening scene of *Our Meaningful Life*, when Han, playing herself, encounters Hyŏn at the bus stop, Hyŏn declares that her companion looks strangely familiar. Hyŏn then recognizes Han Kil-myŏng as the wife of Kim Se-yŏng in *My Family's Problem*, observing that her performance was widely popular among the women in North Korea. Boarding the bus, Hyŏn Mi-sun recognizes another prominent



Figure 2. Hyön Mi-sun (left) recognizes Han Kil-myöng (right) at the bus stop. Source: *Our Meaningful Life*.

actress, Son Pyöng-ok, who starred in *Flower Girl* as the woman at the marketplace. Hyön Mi-sun's statement comes across as especially humorous because she appeared alongside Son Pyöng-ok in *Boasting Too Much*. The intertextuality and self-referencing of these actors and their films emphasize the lasting impact they have had in North Korean popular culture.

The process of recognizing famous actors in *Our Meaningful Life* has the effect of distracting the audience from registering the intended political message of the film. That is because the sheer enjoyment of watching cameos of favorite actors supersedes any overarching ideological purpose. To be clear, comedian comedy is not simply showcasing famous actors in a role they played in a film, but rather they play themselves, with the exception of the fictional characters of Elder Kim and Mother.

Our Meaningful Life encourages the audience to make connections to other North Korean films in a way that reinforces the people's consciousness of the film industry. For example, Elder Kim interrupts a room full of famous female actors singing. After the number ends, Elder Kim greets Chöng Yöng-ja, who played the heroine Chöng-ok alongside Kim Se-yöng in *When We Pick Apples*. Chöng Yöng-ja and Kim Se-yöng also starred together in a comedy titled *Day at the Amusement Park* [유원지의 하루] in 1977. He greets prominent actress Kim Ok-hüi, who played the

lead role in *Female Supervisor* [처녀지배인] (Pak Ryöng-bo, 1973). Elder Kim also recognizes the two women who played the lead roles in *Two Bereaved Families* [두 유가족에 대한 이야기] (Han Pok-gyu, 1974). The starstruck protagonist shouts, “I know everyone here!” This statement provokes laughter because Elder Kim is playing a character who only knows the actors from the films he has watched, but also because the actor Kim Se-yöng has appeared in all the films with them. The North Korean viewers are thus able to take delight in their knowledge of their cinema, mediated through the fictional character played by one of North Korean cinema’s best-known performers.

As Elder Kim wanders through the studio, he runs into Pak Min, who starred in a comedy film called *Wedding Day in the Village* [잔치날 농촌편] (Ri Hüi-ch’an, 1973). Pak Min had enjoyed a partnership with Kim Se-yöng, appearing in several comedy films together, which turned them as North Korea’s comic duo. He also encounters young rising comedian Hwang Hak-yun and says, “Wow, a comedian,” saluting Hwang’s gifts and recognizing his bright future. The humor of the statement arises in part from the close professional relationship between the veteran comedian and the new star: Kim Se-yöng had taken Hwang Hak-yun under his wing, helping Hwang take roles in such films as *I Will Play the Drums* [북은 내가 치겠소] (1977) and *Hello* [안녕하십니까] (Kim Se-ryun, 1979). What *Our Meaningful Life* shows is not only what the audience already knows about the comic duo but also the behind-the-scenes efforts of veteran comedians to support junior performers.

Another comic giant is Hyön Mi-sun, who plays the role of the Mother in *Our Meaningful Life*. Much like Elder Kim, Hyön interrupts a recording session as she identifies one of the biggest stars in North Korea. She mistakenly walks into a sound recording room and sees the renowned Mun Ye-bong recording a voice-over. Mun’s career began during the colonial period with a starring role in *Sweet Dream* [미몽] (Yang Chu-nam, 1936). She became renowned for her performance in *My Home Village* [내 고향] (Kim Süng-gu, 1949), the first feature produced in North Korea. Mun Ye-bong, who was granted the title of People’s Actor, is perhaps one of the most iconic female actors in both North and South Korea. She is found standing in front of a microphone and recording

lines for the film that is projected in front of her. Hyŏn Mi-sun is fascinated with the technology of sound effects and sound recording, but she is more awestruck by the fact that it is Mun Ye-bong who is present in the room. The mother overcomes her surprise to bow respectfully to the venerable performer. What makes self-referencing important here is not Mun Ye-bong playing a character but that she is playing herself, which is a necessary precondition of the film.

The final and perhaps the most critical instance of self-referentiality in *Our Meaningful Life* is when Elder Kim interrupts a shooting of a scene of what appears to be a remake of North Korea's classic film, *Flower Girl*. The scene is of a peasant mother and her young daughter being harassed by a greedy landlord. A close-up shot that frames the peasant mother reveals to the audience one of the most familiar images from North Korean cinema. The scene is then ruined by Elder Kim, who cannot distinguish fantasy from reality, and appears oblivious to the importance of *Flower Girl* as an ideological classic.

Conclusion

The North Korean comedians in *Our Meaningful Life* are taken into a fictional universe, or rather, a fictional universe is built around the comedian, thereby showcasing the comedian through the film's narrative.²⁵ As much as comedian comedy is a familiar genre in Hollywood, this form takes a distinctive form in North Korean cinema. It provides a striking departure from other North Korean films. Frank Krutnik observes that comedian comedy "parades the specialty performer *as* a performer rather than subjugating his or her presentation to the demands of character construction."²⁶ According to Geoff King, "Much of what we are offered is the immediacy of the performance of the star comedian, regardless of plot contrivance."²⁷ Elder Kim's constant interruptions of the narrative of *Our Meaningful Life* to recognize North Korea's best-known actors and actresses is both a recurring element of the genre of comedian comedy and a reminder to the audience that this film is about something else. This "something else" relays the intertextuality of actors and films that the audience already knows.

This “something else” also blurs of the lines between the fictional and extrafictional world of actors, between filmic fantasy and the audience’s reality, and between the didactic message and an entertaining spectacle.

In comedian comedy films, actors are not cast into a film, but rather a film is made for them. The narrative structure, characterization, and overall motif are designed to exhibit the comedian. King says, “The existing comic persona of the star is used to shape the fictional character.”²⁸ In the case of comedian Kim Se-yŏng, it is safe to say that most of his films were made for him, knowing that North Koreans would come watch films that feature their favorite comic actor. Kim Se-yŏng’s impact as a performer exceeds the film industry and into the larger culture, helping shape the desires and aspirations of the people.

It is evident that the pedagogical message is not necessarily the driving force behind all film production. North Korean filmmakers try to appeal to the audience by casting the same actors and working from storylines that are similar to those from previously successful films. For example, *I Will Play the Drums* was so popular and entertaining that the same filmmakers produced a near-replica feature called *Hello*. North Korean director and film critic Kim Yŏng criticized the director for having produced two films with the same narrative structure and a cast full of the same actors. Although Kim understands the comforts of working with the same actors, he warns the director of the dangers of typecasting and limiting the actors with respect to their range.²⁹ In theory, Kim Yŏng is correct, and most actors might not want to be cast in a certain role simply because of the way one looks, talks, and behaves. In fact, the comedian Kim Se-yŏng himself wondered if he could ever land a role that is anything other than a comic one.³⁰ As film critic Matt Zoller Seitz notes, “It happens all the time, typecasting. No actor wants it, but it’s a fact of life in show business. And who knows how many great, surprising performances we’ve been deprived of as a result of it?”³¹ Seitz’s interviews with actors and directors over the course of decades have produced the same conclusion: typecasting has become a deadening convention in Hollywood, but it is nearly impossible to break free from it.

The North Korean film industry is not very different from Hollywood when it comes to typecasting. Kim Ryong-nin always plays the hero in

such films as *Five Guerrilla Brothers*, and Ri Kyöng-hwan mostly plays the spineless stool pigeon as he did in *Sea of Blood*. Kim Yöng-suk always plays the elegant heroine, such as Ch'unhyang in *The Tale of Ch'unhyang* [춘향전] (Kim Süng-gu, 1980), Han Kye-söng mostly plays the evil mother as she did in *Hong Kildong* [홍길동] (Kim Se-ryun, 1986), and Kim Ryön-sil always plays the kind grandmother such as in *I Will Play the Drums*. And, of course, the great Kim Se-yöng always plays the buffoon in nearly every one of his films. Typecasting limits an actor's potential to become more than what he or she has performed, but on a positive note, it has fostered a culture of the comedian comedy genre in the film industry that has had a lasting impact on the North Korean society, creating a following among the people that the state had not anticipated.

It may be, therefore, reductive to think that North Koreans hoard to the theaters to receive their weekly dosage of political ideology by watching films. Insofar as films in North Korea are supposed to educate the people with some semblance to Kim Jong-il's cinematic theory, films such as *Our Meaningful Life* prioritize entertainment and the exhibition of famous actors over political message. This film shows a playful celebration of actors in the film industry that allows the audience to participate in the controlled chaos by identifying them on the screen and connecting them to previous films, constituting a collective experience for North Korean moviegoers.

Notes

¹ Steve Seidman, *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), 45.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

³ Many North Korean films do not have opening credits or closing credits that inform the audience of the individuals involved in the production. Many titles in this article will not have the director's name because it is either unknown or because the film was a collaboration. Moreover, the North Korean film industry does not put much emphasis on the director as much as it does on the screenwriter. The screenwriter is perhaps the most important member of film production as he or she is the one to articulate the educational and ideological message in the film. For this reason, I list the screenwriter in relation to each film.

⁴ Kim Yŏng, *Film Comedies and Laughter* [희극 영화와 웃음] (Pyongyang: Literary Arts Publishing House, 1993), 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶ According to Dima Mironenko, *My Son-in-law, My Daughter-in-law* [우리 사위, 우리 며느리] (1958) was the first genuine comedy in the DPRK. However, this film received negative reviews from both viewers and critics, and thus was not acknowledged by Kim Yŏng in his analysis.

⁷ Documentary films are an interesting category in North Korea as they are nothing like documentary films from other countries. They closely resemble news reels or news footage without a strong narrative or political perspective of the director. They document the leader's on-the-spot guidance, Party meetings, revolutionary individuals, or any other topic that would reinforce the collective identity of the people, nationalism, and devotion to the leader. South Korean film scholar Min Pyŏng-uk says, "North Korean documentary films record the events and reality of life and presents a reasonable understanding of reality and truthfulness." These films can be understood as cinematic journalism that show to viewers the events unfolding before them, guiding them through the actual space of the event. To put it in another way, these films are very much like news reports without a reporter but with a narrator, who provides the viewers with historical background and necessary contexts. Sometimes, the video footage does not have any narration.

⁸ Kim Yŏng, *Film Comedies and Laughter*, 48.

⁹ Kim Jong-il, *On the Art of the Cinema* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1989), 169.

¹⁰ Kim Se-yŏng, "Laughter and My Life as an Actor" [웃음과 나의 배우생활], *Chŏllima* 4 (1978): 78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹² Anonymous, "Biography of Kim Se-yŏng," *Joseon Film* [조선 영화] 5 (1986): 62.

¹³ North Korean Human Geography, Entry name: Kim Se-yŏng, <http://www.cybernk.net/infoText/InfoHumanDetail.aspx>.

¹⁴ Kim Se-yŏng, "The Bicycle Leader and the Chief of the Post Office [자전거 반장과 우편국장]," *Joseon Film* 9 (1985): 36.

¹⁵ Anonymous, "Biography of Kim Se-yŏng," 62.

¹⁶ Kim Se-yŏng, "The Bicycle Leader and the Chief of the Post Office," 36.

¹⁷ Chŏng Yŏn-sik, "North Korean Actor Who Used His Talents to Become Popular [자신만의 끼로 인기 끈 북배우]," *Unification News* [통일뉴스], May 19, 2005, <http://www.tongilnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=54917>.

¹⁸ Paek Wŏn-myŏng, "In the Arms of the Republic [공화국의 품속에서]," *Joseon Film* 9 (1988): 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Digital Dictionary of North Korean Names* [디지털 북한 인명사전], accessed January 10,

2020, http://kppeople.com/print_popup.aspx?no=6140.

²¹ Kim Ryong-nin, however, changed his dramatic persona into a comic one in the comedy film *People We've Met on Taedong River* [대동강에서 만난 사람들] (1993).

²² Kim Yǒng-nan, "The Popularity of Nameless Heroes for the Past Forty Years [40년 동안 인기 있는 북 영화 '이름 없는 영웅들]," *Jajusibo*, May 31, 2019, accessed January 10, 2020, <http://m.jajusibo/45747>.

²³ *Joseon Film 10* (1986): 45.

²⁴ Han Kil-myǒng has appeared in many comedy films, the latest one being *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* (2012) as the grandmother of the aspiring acrobat.

²⁵ Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 33.

²⁶ Frank Krutnik, *Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 7.

²⁷ King, *Film Comedy*, 32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁹ Kim Yǒng, *Film Comedies and Laughter*, 150.

³⁰ Kim Se-yǒng, "Words and Laughter [말과 웃음]," *Cultural Linguistics* [문화어학습] 4 (1988): 21–22.

³¹ Matt Zoller Seitz, "Why More Actors Should be Cast Against Type," *Vulture*, November 4, 2015, accessed on June 7, 2018, <http://www.vulture.com/2015/11/actors-should-be-cast-against-type.html>.

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