



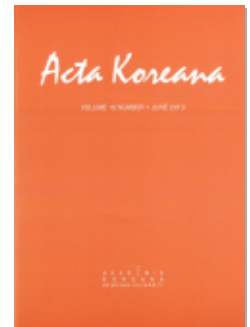
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Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea by Theodore Hughes (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea. By Theodore Hughes. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. 304 pages. (ISBN: 978-0-231-15748-3)

The last decade has witnessed a tremendous growth in English-language publications in the field of Korean cultural studies. The continued emergence of scholarly articles and the increasing number of monographs are providing invaluable contributions to both emerging scholarship as well as to undergraduate-and graduate-class syllabi. To a striking degree, much of the scholarship on contemporary Korean cultural production circulating in conferences and appearing in publications can be viewed as part of a ‘visual turn’ across disciplines. This visual turn can be seen as a combined result of the growing interest in Korean visual culture in its many forms, a blurring of boundaries between the traditionally segregated disciplines revolving around textual and visual analysis, and an attempt to come to historical and theoretical terms with the collaboration and interplay of word and image in cultural production in general. Theodore Hughes’ *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea* is the latest and most welcome addition to this growing body of scholarship. This virtuosic study takes the reader from colonial Chosŏn to postwar South Korea, and provides thought-provoking analysis of film, fiction, and non-fictional texts, analysis that is informed by critical theory written by a range of broadly defined “Western” scholars as well as established and up-and-coming Korean scholars. Hughes’ boundary-breaking approach cuts across media, space, and time, illuminating the barriers that have been established between disciplines and genres while effectively pointing to ways in which these boundaries must be eradicated or at least considered within a much larger historical and theoretical framework. In addition, Hughes penetrates the dark crevices of the established literary canon, and he foregrounds voices that have been largely excluded from Korean-language

scholarship, not to mention those anthologies of translated Korean fiction into English.

Hughes' introduction and five chapters traverse the temporal space of colonial Korea and postwar South Korea. In the introduction, Hughes sets up the terms of engagement—he brings the shifting relations of the verbal and visual to the center of his inquiry, and underscores the importance of these shifts within the larger trajectory of colonial Korea and postwar South Korea. To a large extent, what Hughes attempts to capture is not simply the problematics of the visual representation of the real but the illumination of that which has been made invisible; his inquiry is as much about absence as presence. Rather than engage in the perennial question of continuity and rupture in Korean cultural production, Hughes seeks to show how the binary of oppression and resistance remains central to the figuring—both textual and visual—of the Japanese colonial period, and that the reorganization of the cultural field in the post-1945 period is a part of the transnational Cold War circulation of words and images.

Chapter one considers how new modes of literary and visual representation—fiction, non-fiction, and cinema—are bound up with a negotiation of the colonial and the modern in the period of 1920 to the early 1940s. Foregrounded in this chapter is the way that the proletarian movement, nativism (*hyangt'o*), modernism, and mass mobilization “set in motion ways of seeing and writing that would inform the later distribution of the visible and invisible that make up the World War politics of division on the Korean peninsula.” (20) Hughes places special emphasis on the KAPF debates over popular culture, proletarian art, and the form/content relation because these set the stage for “the ways in which the modernism and mobilization movement of the 1930s and the early 1940s would negotiate the relation among technology, representation, and colonized/imperialized subjectivity” (20). Most strikingly, Hughes demonstrates that what is often attributed as a movement in art—*hyangt'o*, or nativism—is reenacted in literature as ways of seeing that not only challenged debates in intellectual and art journals of the time but also enriches the way this literature can be read today. For example, his introduction of film-novel scripts (which, as he attests, are given little attention in Korean scholarship, and none appear in English translation), as well as his convincing analysis of the painterly elements in Yi Hyo-sök's “When the Buckwheat Blooms” and Yi Sang's images that are incorporated in Pak T'ae-wön's “A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist” (reproduced in Sunyoung Park's translation in the anthology *On the Eve of the Uprising* published by the Cornell East Asia Series) underscores the light that these pieces shed on the verbal/visual relation and the debates about representations of the real.

Chapter two, “Visible and Invisible States,” takes on cultural production in the liberation space of 1945-1948. This period, as Hughes demonstrates, was the “key historical moment in the formation of the postcolonial subject and the framing of what would become the South and North Korean literary and cultural fields” (192). Hughes explains that the term ‘liberation’ obfuscates rather than illuminates the meaning-making struggles, and argues that the texts re-articulated, rather than broke away from, what he describes as multilayered spatiality. His analysis of works by Yi T’ae-jun, Ch’ae Man-sik, Kim Tong-ni and Yōm Sang-sōp (among others) illuminates the conflicting ways in which these canonical writers narrated their vision of the past and future. At the same time, his detailed review also excavates works that have not made it to the South Korean canon or into translated anthologies, drawing attention to the need to question and restructure epistemological categories of the colonial period.

In chapter three, “Ambivalent Anticommunism,” Hughes moves away from a discussion of the formations and fortifications of the North and South Korean literary fields surrounding division. Rather, he engages in an examination of visual and textual materials that formed themselves in relation to the colonial past and which largely engaged in a politics of nonalignment and grappled with existentialism. The works of Son Ch’ang-sōp are brought to bear upon the struggle to make sense of the immediate war experience without critiquing the state and risking incarceration, and Hughes’ reading of postwar films such as “P’iagol” from 1955 and “Madame Freedom” from 1956 further illuminate the ambiguity of visual and linguistic spaces of this tumultuous postwar period.

In chapter four, “Development as Devolution,” Hughes looks at the “relation between Cold War metropolitan and peripheral developmentalisms” (131) through the works of Nam Chōng-hyōn. Nam was arrested and prosecuted following the publication of “Land of Excrement” in 1965; his works have received little attention in Korean scholarship, and are almost completely absent in English. Hughes’ insightful analysis illuminates the way in which Nam seeks “to show how South Korean anticommunism relies on the normalizing function of an evolutionary economics, one that entails a visual marking, the racializing/primitivizing both of the communist other and the resistances it encounters in the “developing world” (150). In this chapter, too, Hughes is concerned with that which is made invisible—in this case, the way that “spectacularized third-world others” are made to disappear “within the free-world communication networks that call for the unimpeded, global flow of information” (131). Once again, Hughes disrupts the more familiar, mainstream narratives of postwar Korean literature and film through the introduction of works that surely demand a larger circulation in readership.

In the final chapter, Hughes revisits the distribution of the visible and invisible in the period of the 1960s and 1970s, when the task of the South Korean developmental state was to “legitimize its project via the productivist eradication of communism in the North” (165). Hughes shows how the works of Ch’oe In-hun explore the relationship between the colonial period and the present cultural field of 1960s and 1970s South Korea. Hughes’ enlightening applications of Saussure and Bakhtin underscore Ch’oe’s challenges to those fetishized universals embraced by the developmentalist discourse, re-inscribes the colonial past, reminds the reader of the effacement of North Korea, and, more generally, intervenes in the question of visual and textual material by illuminating the manner in which “ideology...also involves imaging, one that spatializes, puts into play opposing territorial sovereignties” (186). The reader is asked to contemplate the persistence of the “projection of an ethnonational body into a commodity form [that the] Cold War developmentalist world system continues to rely upon in the national marking of commodities” (202). The haunting image that Hughes introduces in his postscript—the work titled “A Questionable Death” (Ŭimuna, 1987) by Lim Ok Sang (Im Ok-sang), demands that we consider the variety of representations, the slippery signifiers, and the consequences of the production of meaning in the cultural production, both textual and visual, of pre- and post-1945 Korea.

One hopes that Hughes’ readings will motivate translators to stir up the canon of available colonial period translations and introduce to readers of English works by such as Nam Chŏng-hyŏn; Ch’oe In-hun’s seminal work, *The Square*, for example, is out of print, yet is critical to the weight it brings to bear on the complex issue of collaboration most recently investigated by Yumi Moon, who inquires “how and why a certain moral consciousness emerged within Korean society and reshaped that society into a political community with distinctive characteristics”(42).¹ In any case, with this book, Hughes has paved the way for future scholarship to explore the inextricable relationship between text and image in colonial and the post-War Korea; to address the intertextuality of the cinematic and the literary; and to overcome the considerable challenges of cross-disciplinary, trans-media analysis.

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¹ Moon, Yumi, *The American Historical Review* (2013) 118 (1): 20–44. See also her upcoming book, *Populist Collaborators: The Ilchinhoe and the Japanese Colonization of Korea, 1896–1910* (Cornell University Press, 2013).