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### Science-Fictional North Korea: A Defective History

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## Science-Fictional North Korea: A Defective History

ammi / April 7, 2014

Seo-Young Chu |

*Kafkaesque, Orwellian, eerie, surreal, bizarre, grotesque, alien, wacky, fascinating, dystopian, illusive, theatrical, antic, haunting, apocalyptic: these are just a few of the vaguely science-fictional adjectives that are now associated with North Korea. At the same time, North Korea has become an oddly convenient trope for a certain aesthetic – an uncanny opacity, an ominous mystique – that many writers and artists have exploited to generate striking science-fictional effects in texts with little or no connection to North Korean reality. (The 2002 Bond film Die another Day, for example, draws from North Korea's science-fictional aura to animate North Korean super-villains who undergo spectacular DNA transplants that replace their original Asian bodies with deeply uncanny "Caucasian" avatars.) How did this aesthetic phenomenon originate? What are the factors behind its evolution? I explore such questions in the chronology below.*

Juche/1

Decades later, in Juche/86 (Gregorian Year 1997), time itself will have been re-calibrated anachronistically by the birth on 4/15/1912 of Kim Il-sung, future Eternal Chairman of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

Juche/30

A mystical swallow, a double rainbow, and the birth of a heavenly star predict that Kim Jong-il, North Korea's future Dear Leader, will be born in Juche/31 atop sacred Paektusan.

8/10-11/1945

Korea is carved into a Soviet fragment and a U.S. fragment. This event occurs half-a-planet away from Korea itself and half-a-day into Korea's past. The decision to split Korea along the 38th parallel is made in a matter of hours in Washington, D.C. by two inexperienced members of the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee. With little time to complete their task, and little knowledge of the soon-to-be-severed land, the two men consult a National Geographic map before choosing an intangible line as a boundary that will satisfy equally the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., both of whom recognize the geopolitically strategic location of the Korean peninsula. No Koreans are consulted.

Summer/1948

South Korea, or the Republic of Korea (ROK), formally comes into existence. North Korea, or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), formally comes into existence. A riddle emerges. Has an ancient nation been amputated? Or have two new nations – "twin siblings" – been born?

1965

President Sukarno of Indonesia presents Kim Il-sung with an unprecedented variety of orchid: 'kimilsungia'.

1973

Throughout North Korea, citizens continue to vanish into a growing network of torture camps. Later, survivors will offer testimony about unspeakable atrocities witnessed and endured in DPRK prisons. Some of the most horrific accounts describe suffering of female prisoners and children.

11/1974

The first of numerous North Korean infiltration tunnels under the DMZ (Korean Demilitarized Zone) is discovered by the South.

1978

ROK director Shin Sang-ok and ROK actress Choi Eun-hee are kidnapped by aspiring filmmaker Kim Jong-il. Shin and Choi are forced to direct and star in movies produced by Kim Jong-il. Their cinematic collaborations will end in 1986, when Shin and Choi successfully escape their captors.

1983

Future DPRK Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un is born.

1985

The monster fantasia movie Pulgasari is released in North Korea.

1987

Pyeongyang begins construction on the Ryugyong Hotel. The rocket-shaped structure will later attract epithets such as "Ghostscraper," "Hotel of Doom," and "Deathstar."

1988

Horticulturalist Kamo Molotero invents "kimjongilia", a begonia designed to bloom annually on Kim Jong-il's birthday.

1989

As the fall of the Berlin Wall dominates headlines, the DMZ continues its subtle metamorphosis from battle-scape into sanctuary for endangered wildlife.

1990

In a suburb in Northern Virginia, an American girl of Korean descent writes in her secret journal: "Dear North Korea. Why do you exist?"

1992

Kim Il-sung encourages North Koreans to view the Great Leader as their hermaphroditic progenitor.

1994

"The Secret of Frequency A" relates the discovery by elite DPRK scientists of a phenomenon engineered by Americans to subjugate North Korea and its allies. According to the DPRK scientists, a mysterious aircraft seen flying over an unnamed African country has been emitting a sinister acoustic frequency responsible for recent environmental disasters in the country's nature reserve. The scientists warn that unless the problem of "Frequency A" is resolved soon, countless species will succumb to "Frequency A's" insidious effects.

1996

Catastrophic famine continues to decimate the North Korean people while Kim Jong-il resides in opulent mansions and feasts on exotic cuisine.

Juche/86

North Korea introduces a new calendar. The year of Kim Il-sung's birth is retroactively set as Juche/1.

1998

Kim Il-sung posthumously ascends to the role of Eternal Chairman of the Republic.

1999

In the DMZ, a wildflower blossoms through the crack in a rusted helmet.

2000

Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig depict a surreal land paralyzed by illusions and fear in North Korea through the Looking Glass.

06/2000

The Economist publishes "Greetings, Earthlings," a cover story framing Kim Jong-il as an otherworldly target of ridicule.

2003

A conference meets in New York City to discuss the importance of the DMZ as a haven for rare and globally significant species.

2004

David Mitchell publishes a Cloud Atlas projecting a future in which South Korean hyper-capitalism and North Korean totalitarianism have merged to form a dystopia called 'Nea So Copros.' Among those abused by this regime: an underclass of humanoid artifacts treated as disposable objects and literally brainwashed by edible 'soap.'

2007

Cytek releases Cysis. Those who enter this virtual reality find themselves in the year 2020. Here they must battle space aliens and North Korean enemy forces.

2008

The Economist reports that most South Koreans regard North Koreans as extraterrestrials.

Juche/98

"Catalysm" introduces Dustin Kwon. Since childhood, Kwon has been subjected against his will to North Korean nanotech experimentation. Although the nanites that saturate his body give him heightened abilities, Kwon is also susceptible to cellular deterioration that the nanites can repair only by decomposing other humans' flesh.

2009

A South Korean couple spends so much time online attending to their virtual child that their flesh-and-blood infant starves to death.

Juche/99

Former DPRK propaganda artist Song Byeok daringly exposes Kim Jong-il in a portrait titled "Take Off Your Clothes." Painting the repressive dictator as Marilyn Monroe's character in The Seven Year Itch – a film that came out during the decade of the Korean War, a decade when North Korea's most notorious cinephile was coming of age – Song Byeok reveals a slice of time from an alternate history in which Korea was never divided in the first place. "Take Off Your Clothes" provides a snapshot from an eccentric counterfactual timeline where the Korean War never happened, where the DMZ has no existence, and where a movie-lover named Kim Jong-il achieves his dream of becoming a glamorous Hollywood star.

2011

Along the southern edge of the DMZ, giftshops sell keychains, T-shirts, and other DMZ kitsch. Infiltration tunnels have been Disneyfied into theme rides.

2011

Two schoolgirls, one North Korean, the other South Korean, walk side-by-side while laughing over a shared joke. Yet such initial impressions of the image – a painting titled "Bring" by former North Korean propaganda artist Sun Mu – are quickly modified by closer inspection. The schoolgirl whose uniform initially marks her as North Korean is holding a cup of Starbucks coffee, and she seems completely at ease while conversing with her companion, whose hair is adorned by a baseball cap and whose t-shirt is layered over a tom denim miniskirt. Is the DPRK uniform a fashion statement in a futuristic world where the DPRK no longer exists? Where exactly are they walking? The pale background offers no clues. Perhaps the two schoolgirls are figures from an unspecified future walking home from school in a reunified Korea. Or perhaps they live in a future U.S. where the phrase "Korean American" has been superseded by "American of South/ North Korean descent." Perhaps "Bring" depicts Korea's future as having "defected" from today's reality of a divided peninsula to the prospect of a reunited Korea and/or a United States where Americans of South and North Korean descent attend the same schools and enjoy the same freedom of expression.

2011

Kaos releases Homefront. Those who enter this virtual reality find themselves in the year 2027, two years into the North Korean occupation of the United States. Now called "New Korean Federation of Occupied America," the U.S. is bisected by a Mississippi River poisoned by North Koreans with radioactive iodine.

12/2011

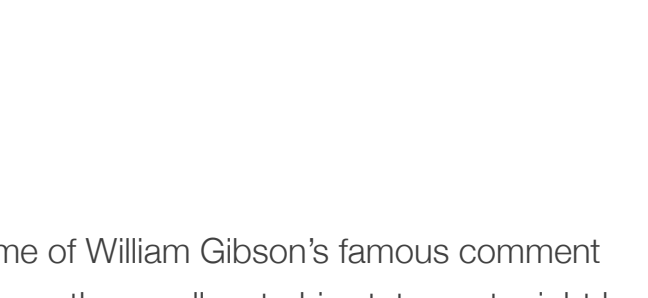
In a glass casket surrounded by snow-white chrysanthemums and blood-red 'kimjongilia', a genocidal dictator's corpse apparently awaits a fairytale ending.

2/2013

Dennis Rodman visits North Korea for a tour of basketball exhibition games.

2/2014

Satellite images of the Korean peninsula at night continue to reveal a stark contrast between the two Koreas. Time still is frozen in DPRK, which remains obscure. ROK shimmers with artificial illumination.



Juche/103

The Ryugyong Hotel remains incomplete. The "Forgotten War" abides.

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**Bio:** Seo-Young Chu is Assistant Professor of English at Queens College, City University of New York. Chu is the author of *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep? A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation*. This study argues that science fiction's dual status as both narrative and lyric art form permits the representation of objects that are otherwise difficult or impossible to describe – e.g. those that are neither purely literal nor purely figurative. Her current book project is tentatively titled *Science-Fictional North Korea*.

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### One thought on "Science-Fictional North Korea: A Defective History"

seoyoungchu April 12, 2014 at 7:07 am

I meant to mention in my post above that the two Koreas often remind me of William Gibson's famous comment about the future being "already here" but "not evenly distributed." I suppose the corollary to his statement might be: The past is "still" here but, like the future, it is unevenly distributed.

Being of Korean descent and interested in all matters Korean, I am admittedly biased here... yet I cannot help but wonder if there's something singularly science-fictional (if that's the right phrase?) about the way in which the past, the now, and the future tend to circulate throughout the Korean peninsula. So many fascinating chrono-artists and chrono-nauts seem to be Korean or Korean American: e.g. Nam June Paik, Teyoung Choi, E Roon Kang, and many others.

Thoughts?

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