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## Towards a Visual Sociology and Anthropology of North Korea: South Korean, North Korean, and External Filmic Representations\*

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*A variety of films of various genres depict the “real” North Korea, or otherwise claim to show viewers aspects of North Korea that have been hidden before. The films to be analyzed here are 1) UK documentary A State of Mind, 2) UK-North Korea-Belgium co-produced fictional film Comrade Kim Goes Flying, 3) Russian documentary Under the Sun, and 4) South Korean fictional film Over the Border. I argue that together these films advance a visual sociology and anthropology of 2000s and 2010s North Korea through a balance of reflecting and amplifying North Korean social ideals for a foreign audience (1 and 2), and introducing contradictions and hybridity (3 and 4). After addressing the positionalities of the filmmakers, the sociocultural conditions at the times of the films’ productions, and the ways that each film illustrates “reality” through narrative qualities and indexical and iconic visuals, I conclude with a brief discussion of the educational value of showing these films separately or in combination for teaching a visual anthropology or sociology of North Korea.*

**Keywords:** North Korea, visual sociology, visual anthropology, documentary film, fictional film

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## Introduction

Although it has been described in the US media as an “axis of evil,” been vilified in the Japanese media for nuclear tests and civilian kidnappings, and hung over South Korean politics for the last sixty-plus years, North Korea remains simply a mystery to most of the world. Even as multiple visual records exist in the form of amateur footage and documentaries for most places worldwide, there are relatively few of North Korea. For many years, university educators who wanted to include North Korea in East Asian Studies courses were limited to grainy videos of defectors fleeing North Korea put out by international human rights organizations such as LiNK, which contain an important record but certainly cannot be *the* definitive record of North Korea.<sup>2</sup> South Korea has also been far from neutral when it comes to images of the North, shaped as it is by general anti-communist ideology and the specific Anti-Communist Act, which has made sympathizing with the North in certain ways problematic. Filmmakers from other countries both close and far from North Korea have weighed in, with heartfelt and complex accounts about the abductions and coercions of Koreans in Japan and the China-North Korea border from Japanese and Chinese filmmakers, and more distant accounts from Western filmmakers. This article analyzes several films about North Korea from the perspectives of visual anthropology and visual sociology, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of using these films to teach about North Korean society.

For anthropologists, documentaries have been a tried-and-true way to show societies of study to students in the classroom. Visual anthropologist David MacDougall writes that “visual media allow us to construct knowledge not by ‘description’...but by a form of ‘acquaintance’” (1997, p. 286). Since anthropology emphasizes deep rather than superficial engagement with society, documentaries that present a focused “slice of life” of some of that society’s members are ideal, as opposed to general journalistic accounts. In the case of North Korea, which documentaries gets us closest to North

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<sup>2</sup> LiNK stands for “Liberty in North Korea,” and it is an international non-profit organization devoted to North Korean human rights. Without minimizing the work they do, I am merely noting the kind of footage that used to be available—recently their video styles also seem more diverse. LiNK’s work—which is deeply necessary but also somewhat black-and-white—connects to the broader issue of “defector testimony” about abuses in North Korea and concerns about their accuracy. Defectors in South Korea are often pressured to tell stories South Korean audiences want to hear, and discouraged from voicing more nuanced narratives.

Korean reality, or at least somewhat authentic “acquaintance”? Given the constraints placed on filmmakers making documentaries in North Korea, is a fictional film perhaps an equally “real” artifact? While anthropology has long been associated with ethnographic filmmaking closest to the documentary genre, some anthropologists and other ethnographers have called for feature films to be integrated into our ethnographic understanding of places as well, as these films showcase the filmmakers’ interpretations of society and their evaluations of national moods and interests. Both Anagnost (1997) and Rey Chow (1995) have argued for the importance of studying Chinese film by directors such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige with a focus on ethnographic detail. Chow’s “translation of culture” in the context of Chinese film also applies to Hyangjin Lee’s analysis of Korean national cinema as a medium possessing “thick description” as defined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, writing that “[the] potential [for film] as a subject for sociological research is indeed rich precisely because of its complexity as a cultural text” (2000, p. 188). Here we can see the concepts of “visual anthropology” and “visual sociology” used quite loosely, pointing to a methodological framework rather than a strict definition of disciplinary boundaries.

Despite the rise of both visual anthropology and sociology in the late twentieth century—following the diverse work of scholars from Pierre Bourdieu to Erving Goffman to Trinh Minh-ha—the fields of both disciplines have remained largely textual, even as people’s everyday lives become increasingly visual-centric with the ubiquity of social media and video streaming. Visual anthropologists and sociologists have attempted to delineate the boundaries and methods of the field, but as our interaction with visual media in particular changes with developments in visual technology, it remains a challenging proposition. Pauwels diagnoses an overemphasis of “the iconic (the high ‘resemblance’ of the depiction to the depicted) and indexical (the perceived ‘natural’ or ‘causal’ link with the depicted object) aspects of camera images at the expense of developing a visual language and methodology to produce and process visual data” (2010, p. 547). Pauwels includes “found materials” as potential sociological artifacts, and emphasizes the broad methodological usefulness of visual sociology, writing, “It is not just a ‘sociology of the visual’ (as subject), but also a method for sociology in general....and a way of thinking, conceptualizing, and presenting ideas and findings” (2010, p. 559). Grady also attempted such an inventory of visual sociology at an earlier moment, classifying film—whether documentary, ethnographic, or fiction—as “iconic communication,” “the study of how spontaneous and deliberate construction of images and imagery

communicate information and can be used to manage relationships in society” (1996, p. 10). Here we find a tension in the concept of “iconic” visuals, as though Grady focuses on communicative potential, Pauwels seems to question facile “resemblance” of that which is depicted in ethnographic film or photographs to reality. Harper also addresses this in his article on visual ethnographic narrative, dividing visual ethnographic types into scientific, narrative, reflexive, and phenomenological (1987, p. 4). Heeding Pauwels’ suspicion of “iconic communication” but sharing Grady and Harper’s desire for a more open inventory of visual sociological and anthropological methods, I propose a consideration of the ways that both non-fiction ethnographic or documentary film and fictional film constitute “narrative,” even as I open up the meaning of “narrative” to be relevant in a sociological or anthropological context. I further suggest that rather than provide a window into a society as in an “iconic communication” model, both fiction and non-fiction films operate according to narrative conventions to reflect the social analyses and aspirational critiques of the filmmakers. Finally, these narrative conventions can be further opened to social analyses using sociological and anthropological lenses.

With these possibilities of both documentary and fictional film in mind, I analyze four films for their potential contributions to a visual anthropology and sociology of 2000s and 2010s North Korea. The four films can be divided into two broad categories: 1) films that *reflect* and *amplify* North Korean social ideals for a foreign audience (*A State of Mind* and *Comrade Kim Goes Flying*) and 2) films that introduce *contradictions* and *hybridity* (*Under the Sun* and *Over the Border*). Together, these films build a cognitive geography of North Korea, and interpreted in dialogue with one another remind us that in “solving a problem like North Korea,” it matters “who you are” (Choi 2015, p. 209). The respectful reflections and amplifications of Western European filmmakers in *A State of Mind* and *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* are not possible for post-Soviet or South Korean film-makers engaging from their more complex subjectivities vis-à-vis North Korea (in *Under the Sun* and *Over the Border*, respectively). In understanding North Korea through visual materials, multiple perspectives are helpful. The films chosen here are representative of visual media about North Korea that use narrative frameworks external to North Korea’s own narrative conventions—with the partial exception of *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* due to its transnational co-production—in order to educate a non-North Korean audience about North Korea. Ideally, in an educational context they could be analyzed alongside available North Korean native media. These four films were chosen

for their rigorous attempts to reflect some aspect of North Korean social reality, even as they differ in terms of the national backgrounds of the filmmakers and generic structure as documentary or fictional drama. However, I argue that in reading these films together, a piecemeal yet compelling picture of North Korea emerges that can gently but firmly push against the official “theater state” version of North Korean reality produced by official North Korean channels.

### Reflecting North Korean Ideals: *A State of Mind*

*A State of Mind* (2004), directed by Daniel Gordon and produced by Nicholas Bonner, is a British documentary following a period in the lives of two young North Korean gymnasts. The film adopts a “slice-of-life” tone, with a British English voiceover narrating the girls’ trips to and from school, gymnastics rehearsals, and around the streets of Pyongyang. During striking footage of the Mass Games, electronic music enhances the excitement of the performance. Suhi Choi (2011) has analyzed the documentary as being relatively “fair and balanced” in its treatment of North Korea’s political ideology and the broader historical context of the Korean War and division, but also as having “blinded viewers to a filmic reality that was constantly created through the interplay among the film crew, the film’s subjects, and the regime within the specific context of the North Korean theater...” (2011, p. 302). In other words, the neatly packaged story of two girls preparing for the Mass Games directs attention away from questions about the film-makers’ positionality in relation to their subject. Early in the film, the narrator’s smooth male British voice announces that “For the first time North Korea, the secret state, would reveal itself to outsiders.” Together, the visuals and narration create the sense that North Korea is “revealing itself,” minimizing the role of the camera crew and filmmaker in the revealing. The camera presents two sides of North Korea in seamless duality: following the 11-year-old and 13-year-old gymnasts around, viewers see that the girls are “just like” girls anywhere: laughing with friends, getting jealous of classmates, and acting goofy around their doting parents. And yet these moments that inspire a visceral sympathy for the teenage North Korean “everygirl” are interrupted by a statement by one or another of the girls that “they can keep practicing through their exhaustion because of the love of the general (Kim Jong Il),” and the narrator remarks several times that the training for the Mass Games is making the girls into “perfect Communists,” or that they are ideologically

submitting themselves to the group to become “true Communists.” Gordon’s film inspires sympathy in viewers through relatable glimpses of the lives of the girls and their own words in interviews, but then makes the familiar strange by cutting to Mass Games sequences and grueling rehearsals, as well as the canned-sounding ideological statements by family members. The film reflects North Korean socio-ideological ideals but also culturally translates the young protagonists for a foreign audience, making them relatable.

*A State of Mind* has received praise over the years for presenting its North Korean subjects in a non-sensationalized and even-handed way. It is especially praised in comparison to the Western mockumentary/satire genre of films poking fun at North Korea, with the Hollywood comedy *The Interview* (2014) the most egregious offender, but including documentaries by directors of various Western nationalities, including *Aim High in Creation* (2013), *The Juche Idea* (2009), and *Red Chapel* (2009). Erickson evaluates both *A State of Mind* and Mansky’s *Under the Sun* as not falling into this problematic mockumentary/satire trap, but points out that “all these films exist on the permeable barrier between fiction and non-fiction, where reality and a projected idealized reality meet” (2015, p. 41). In interviews, Daniel Gordon has been self-aware of the line between reality and non-reality, and has stressed the importance of being upfront and respectful in working with North Korean authorities. In discussing the crew’s filming of the two families of the girls showcased in *A State of Mind*, Gordon said, “We gave them the right to stop at any point...they stood to lose an awful lot if it had gone wrong.” Gordon also elaborated on the popularity of his three North Korea-focused documentaries on North Korean television, attributing this to the fact that they “show an alternative look at North Korea...they’re not judgmental and don’t damn it outright. I’m allowed back in, so I think that is approval” (Bell 2009, p. 35). Historian of North Korea Suzy Kim also praises Gordon in passing, comparing *A State of Mind* to yet another North Korea-related documentary by a Western observer in the same year, Pieter Fleury’s *North Korea: A Day in the Life* (2004). Kim compares the documentaries to books of the 2000s that interpret defector testimonies in vastly different ways; she argues that Gordon is able to put his subjects into broader context in a way that many other Western documentaries about North Korea have not been able to do: “Despite the same material from which filmmakers make their documentaries, the mood conveyed is radically different in Fleury’s film from that in Daniel Gordon’s *A State of Mind*” (Kim 2010, p. 485).

Relating Gordon’s documentary to certain international relations approaches, it is apparent that even as Gordon accentuates the unfamiliar

for Western viewers by referring to the girl gymnasts becoming “true Communists,” he is attentive to respecting North Korea’s “identity, dignity and status,” which Moon and Hwang identify as an ideal “contextualized cultural approach” to international engagement with North Korea (2014, p. 29). Gordon emphasizes the value of providing alternate framings of North Korea while at the same time taking care not to offend with content or wording. He focuses on North Korea “revealing itself,” minimizing his own role in the revealing. In some ways this minimizing of the maker’s own role has parallels with the Mass Games itself, which the young gymnasts are working towards throughout the film. The totalizing performance effect of the Mass Games is analyzed by Terry and Wood (2015), who also briefly refer to *A State of Mind*’s framing of Hyunseon’s (the older girl’s) disappointment when General Kim Jong Il does not attend the Mass Games that year. Hyunseon accepts Kim Jong Il’s absence even while registering her disappointment, because “he is working hard for our country.” North Korea “reveals itself” through the Mass Games, and the North Korean audience in attendance becomes one with the spectacle. Terry and Wood write that in their attendance at the 2012 Mass Games, as Americans they “learned to perform an earnest nonpresence” (2015, p. 183). Gordon’s presentation of the Mass Games portrays this totalizing spectacle to international viewers but showcases two parts of the whole—the two girl gymnasts—in order to provide an effective cultural translation. The end result is that North Korean ideals are respected—to the extent that Gordon is able to return repeatedly to North Korea to film—and individual North Koreans are humanized in a way that is relatable to Western viewers. The documentary has also been screened regularly on South Korean television since its release in 2004. Overall, the early 2000s were an optimistic time in North-South Korea relations, following the Sunshine Policy announced by then-South Korean president Kim Dae-jung in 1998 and the first inter-Korea summit in 2000. Then-US President George W. Bush’s declaration of North as part of an “axis of evil” in 2002 somewhat dampened the mood, but at the same time, increased South Korean sympathy for North Koreans in the face of a US stance that was widely viewed as neo-imperialist. In his documentary, Gordon rejects the contemporary US stance and expresses an optimistic desire for inter-Korean reconciliation.



## Amplifying North Korean Ideals: *Comrade Kim Goes Flying*

After acting as producer on three films with Daniel Gordon—including *A State of Mind*—Nicholas Bonner next worked with Belgian director Anja Daelemans and North Korean director Kim Gwang-hun to make *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* in 2012, billed as North Korea's "first rom-com." In Bonner's interviews about the film, he links *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* and his three previous documentaries with his company Koryo Tours, which has been leading sightseeing trips to North Korea since the late 1990s. On the tour company's website there is also information about all the films on the company's "timeline," which indicates that Bonner attributes his access to famously closed-off North Korea to the trust and rapport he has incurred over his decades of experience in the country. In the company's claims to show tourists the "real North Korea" (or at least the real Pyongyang) despite the obligatory 24-7 guides and handlers, there is an implicit linking of the ethnographic enterprise, the documentary films, and the fictional film—since tourism substitutes for ethnography in a country where real ethnographic research access will not be granted. In response to criticism that the film was escapist and too removed from the difficult realities of North Korea, Bonner responded that the rom-com was revolutionary because "it was the first film North Korean audiences had seen that was *not* propaganda." Due to the film being so removed from politics—other than periodic perky announcements that someone's work is being done not for themselves but for the nation, or for the leader, or that the unit has happily exceeded their production quota—the film was also the first North Korean film to screen in South Korea, at the Busan International Film Festival, in over a decade.

The film's plot is simple: it follows a young woman from the countryside who is a hard-working coal miner; despite her lowly roots, she has dreamed of flying since she was a little girl, and has taught herself acrobatics. When she has the opportunity to go to Pyongyang for a year as part of the Construction Brigade, she takes the opportunity to follow her dreams and audition for the Pyongyang acrobatic troupe in the circus. Although she fails the first time due to her lack of formal training and fear of heights, she perseveres and is eventually able to join the troupe. The male acrobat who at first mocked her for being a coal miner who wanted to fly is soon won over by her perseverance, and eventually directly supports her training to audition for the troupe. Here there are several impassioned pronouncements that he is helping her for the good of the troupe and the nation, but the implication is

that the two will marry. The plot and character development are both incredibly simple and formulaic, but there is no denying the energy of the film, the chemistry between the characters, and the pleasure of seeing various sites in Pyongyang through the film. Moving on one step from the reflection of North Korean values of *A State of Mind*, *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* amplifies these ideals, making not only the lives of the characters legible to a foreign audience through cultural translation, but translating the classic worker story of sacrifice and growth into the genre of rom-com. This generic transposition makes possible a co-existence—rather than the vacillation seen in *A State of Mind*—of collectivist ideals and individualist growth that would have been more difficult to illustrate in documentary format. This is not because documentaries lack their own narrative structure—indeed a comparison of *A State of Mind* and *Under the Sun* demonstrates differing conventions of a “slice-of-life” approach and cinema verité approach, respectively—but rather because of the “film-cultural, film-historical importance” of a film like *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* within the context of North Korea’s film history (Dong Hoon Kim 2020, p. 25).

While Bonner has called *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* “North Korea’s first rom-com,” Immanuel Kim clarifies that both romance and comedy have existed for decades in North Korean cinema, but the category of “romantic comedy” has not. He writes: “Much like Hollywood, North Korean romantic comedy casts iconic actors in fashionable clothes and urban lifestyles. The actors recite revolutionary ideas—sure. But in romantic comedies, they are part of a larger apparatus that connects their popularity to the greater-than-life events in a romantic setting, creating a spectacle for the viewers” (2020, p. 95). Kim concedes that the transnational co-production of *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* makes it unique in North Korean cinema thus far, and particularly highlights a scene in which the male acrobat (Chang-p’il) drinks excessively to make sense of his feelings for the film’s heroine (Yong-mi) (2020, p. 122). These kinds of private feelings have rarely been seen on North Korean screens, but it seems only natural that prevalence will increase, in an era when North Korean film and television has to compete with smuggled South Korean media (Epstein and Green 2020).

It is worth noting that both of the documentaries analyzed here have children as their subjects, and both of the feature films have grown women. Both *A State of Mind* and *Under the Sun* feature girls in either physical or mental training—Jin-mi in *Under the Sun* is preparing to enter the Socialist Youth League, which involves both bodily discipline and memorization—and, one imagines, seem like relatively safe, “blank slates” to allow foreigners

to make documentaries about. Yong-mi in *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* is a young woman, and her relative maturity is necessitated by the romantic plotline. (North Korean audiences did apparently find it unbelievable that a character already in her late twenties could become a professional acrobat, but there was pleasure in seeing this farfetched character played by real-life trapeze artist Han Jong Sim). Likewise, the love interest in *Over the Border* is a young woman, and while she and the male protagonist cannot maintain their love after defecting separately to the south, she conforms to the rules of melodrama and marries another by the end of the film. In a short analysis of women in North Korean cinema, Mayer notes that *Comrade Kim Goes Flying*, with its self-confident woman protagonist, stands apart from earlier North Korean domestic films featuring young girls and their revolutionary awakenings—such as the film version of the revolutionary opera *The Flower Girl* (1972) or *A Schoolgirl's Diary* (2006). Mayer negatively evaluates the female empowerment potential of *Comrade Kim Goes Flying*, however, writing “[a]s with Kotpun and all other North Korean celluloid female protagonists, Yong-mi’s fate lies firmly in the hands of men” (2018, p. 66). But Bonner himself expressed the opposite view in an interview, calling the film a “feel-good story about a girl who goes against her father’s wishes and succeeds on her own” (Cummings 2013). Bonner elaborates, “North Korean films have female protagonists, but there’s always a strong male lead behind them, so it’s almost like the female is doing it but the male is there, whether it be a coach or a Party member.”<sup>3</sup> While Mayer suggests that Yong-mi cannot accomplish anything without the cooperation of men in the film, Bonner insists that it is Yong-mi’s choice to go against her father’s initial wishes that is key to understanding the film as being about female empowerment. While it is true that the men in the film ultimately offer little resistance—so charmed are they by Yong-mi’s pure motivations and upright character—Yong-mi’s statements about her goals do seem to suggest that she is ready to pursue them with or without the help of her father, boss, and love interest.

Whereas *A State of Mind* shows the international viewing public what North Korea is—that is, both a product of great individual sacrifice by young gymnasts like Hyunseon and Seonyoung, and a powerful collective as evidenced by the Mass Games—*Comrade Kim Goes Flying* shows what North Korea wants the world to see. In her review of several recent texts on North Korea, Fahy analyzed Kwon and Chung’s anthropological work in particular

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.laweekly.com/comrade-kim-goes-flying-is-the-first-fiction-film-shot-in-north-korea-and-co-produced-with-the-west-how-did-it-happen/>

as effectively “demonstrating how the people of North Korea view the political agenda, as it functions within North Korea, as rational and beyond reproach” (2014, p. 208). In turn, in his review of Fahy, Lie notes Fahy’s suggestion that “defectors are outliers unrepresentative of the North Korean population: bearing with suffering, not escaping, was and remains the norm” (2016, p. 81). *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* is a romantic comedy, but the pride for North Korean industry and the arts, in the form of coal mining and the acrobatic troupe, comes through strongly. Yong-mi’s suffering in pursuit of her dream also encapsulates North Korean ideals of bearing with suffering. Following Kwon and Chung’s conceptualization of North Korea as a “theater state,” we can understand “North Korea’s first rom-com” as a message to domestic and international viewers alike that the “charismatic politics” of the Kim family legacy are not diluted by new mediums or genres, but rather strengthened by them.

As with *A State of Mind*, *Comrade Kim* was produced with viewers outside of North Korea in mind; unlike *A State of Mind*, the UK-Belgium-North Korea transnational production element meant that any controversial elements had been vetted by the North Korean side even as the film was designed to enthrall external viewers. Inter-Korea relations could hardly be described as warm at the tail end of the conservative Lee Myung-bak administration, yet the transnational collaboration element likely contributed to the decision to screen the film at the Busan International Film Festival. In contrast, *A Schoolgirl’s Diary* (2006) was not screened in South Korea even during a relatively “warm” time in North-South relations, despite garnering interest worldwide. Dong Hoon Kim compares *A Schoolgirl’s Diary* and *Comrade Kim*, noting that global audiences wanted to read the earlier film for “symptoms of North Korean society” while showing “indifference to the film’s formal aspects, as essential markers of changing image politics of North Korean cinema and a main attraction for domestic audiences” (2020, p. 25). The screenwriter for *Comrade Kim*, noting *A Schoolgirl’s Diary*’s global success, crafted a script with a strong agenda to “present the greatness of North Korea’s communal society where everyone supports one another and roots for every member of society” (Kim 2020, p. 35), but ironically global viewers tended to distrust the film’s cheery tone and dismiss it as “propaganda,” simultaneously rejecting its truth-value as a social and cultural artifact and disregarding its formal aspects as a revival of classic Juche films but with international awareness. To return to visual sociology and anthropology concerns, the “narrative” of *Comrade Kim* lies somewhere in between the indexical and iconic images of North Korean society and the

“changing image politics” produced by filmmakers and connected to North Korea’s film history.

### Contradictions: *Under the Sun*

Whereas the first two films attempt to reflect and amplify North Korean ideals while translating for a foreign audience, the next two films discussed break down that possibility and suggest contradictions and hybridity. Russian filmmaker Vitaly Mansky, like Gordon before him, set out to make a documentary about North Korean life through the eyes of a child. The result, *Under the Sun* (2015), is markedly different in tone than *A State of Mind*, as Mansky followed the instructions of his handlers, but kept the camera rolling in between takes and edited the footage once he had left the country, producing a very different film than the North Korean authorities had intended. He sets out to expose the contradictions between what the North Korean government wants to project about itself as “the best country on earth” and what it is actually like to live there. Like *A State of Mind*, *Under the Sun* follows a schoolgirl, an eight-year-old preparing to enter the Socialist Youth League. The film starts with a slideshow of photos of the girl, Jin-mi, as she has grown up, with the film’s melancholy, stark score of piano and violin accompanying the images. As in *A State of Mind*, viewers are treated to images of Pyongyang streets and buildings, but the façade begins to break down during the first substantial scene, when we hear the handlers yell instructions off screen, and then see the men in suits enter and interrupt the family dinner table scene to tell little Jin-mi not to stick her legs out a certain way while she’s eating dinner, and coaching the family on exactly how much enthusiasm to project when discussing the virtues of kimchi. The contradictions between the real and the unreal are highlighted in the film, at first through the presence of the handlers and censors, and then eventually in the ways viewers start to notice the self-censoring of the North Koreans on screen. Jin-mi’s parents have been given more camera-worthy jobs for the purposes of the documentary (Seo 2016), and the children at school are coached on when to clap when a military general comes to speak to them. Long takes of schoolgirls biting their lips, struggling to stay awake, and looking alternately bored and terrified punctuate the film. There is no narration in the film, but every so often a line of text alerts viewers that what they are seeing was manufactured for the film. This cinema verité approach creates a very different viewing experience than for *A State of Mind*. At the

end of the film, Jin-mi breaks down crying in exhaustion from playing this role. We hear the director's voice, in Russian, ask if she can think of something happy to stop her crying. Jin-mi can only think of a poem about Kim Jong Il; the implication is that the North Korean state's control has made it so that this is as far as her imagination extends.

Seo, in a review of the film from an educational standpoint, evaluates *Under the Sun* more favorably than Gordon's North Korea-focused documentaries, describing the latter as only reflecting "sterile reality" (2016, p. 64). (He also recommends *zainichi* (Korean-Japanese) filmmaker Yang Yong-hi's documentaries *Dear Pyongyang* (2006) and *Good-bye Pyongyang* (2009) for their focus on the small family moments of people left behind between Japan, South Korea, and North Korea (see also Park 2017)). In another review, Pfeifer questions Kwon and Chung's conceptualization of North Korea's "theater state" as uniting public and private spheres, suggesting that North Koreans surely must behave differently to each other than foreign audiences. Foreign observers—such as Gordon, or Bonner—"sustain the fourth wall" of North Korea's theater state. Pfeifer praises Mansky for breaking the fourth wall by keeping the camera rolling; in the film "private acts' such as sadness and boredom contradict with other scenes in the film that give the impression of people's deeply felt respect towards their nation and past leaders.... They grimace, frown, cry, cover their eyes or doze off" (2016, p. 2). Mansky's film captures the contradictions of a society in which private life is censored, and ironically in the censoring reveals the cracks under the public face.

Of the three films discussed so far, Mansky's captured images of Pyongyang are perhaps the most striking, as they introduce a spatial authenticity that is lacking in *A State of Mind* or *Comrade Kim Goes Flying*. In *Comrade Kim*, viewers are aware that the Pyongyang onscreen is a hybrid created out of shots of actual Pyongyang buildings and sets constructed for the fictional film; scenes in the coal mine outside of Pyongyang were deemed to be too "sensitive" for the foreign co-directors and were shot by the North Korean director alone. In *A State of Mind* scenes of the young gymnasts practicing in the square are certainly captivating, but are pre-authorized. In contrast, *Under the Sun* provides a startling contrast between spatial organization of groups, facial expressions, and postures when the camera is rolling, and when the camera is thought to *not* be rolling. Groups straggle in exhaustion or boredom when the camera is perceived to be off, Jin-mi's mother shifts her body in subtle exasperation when a handler instructs her to deliver a line differently, and a female worker in the factory who is being

lectured by Jin-mi's father smirks in annoyance for an almost imperceptible second. Unlike *A State of Mind*—or more transparently, *Comrade Kim Goes Flying*—which focuses on the power of a collective will and perseverance, *Under the Sun* presents a far bleaker Pyongyang through shots of anxious eyes on the Pyongyang subway or in imposing squares. Chanan reminds us that “[d]ocumentary cinema... is a representational space which is loosely structured by three levels of inscription: the ostensive content of the image on the screen, the implied relationships produced by montage (the ‘language’ of cinema), and the implicit but hidden categories of the ideological” (2010, p. 148). Chanan further elaborates that these three levels of inscription combined create a “cognitive geography” of the place being filmed, which should then ideally create empathy for the figures contained on screen in the documentary. The two documentaries discussed so far, read together with the upbeat technicolor *Comrade Kim Goes Flying*, create different kinds of empathy and connection.

Mansky is a Russian—and in his own characterization a “post-Soviet”—filmmaker, which informs his decision to go against official filming rules. In interviews he admits his fascination for North Korea as a place where some of the social ideals of the Soviet Union of his youth still remain. Gabriel, in his analysis of the film, writes that “Mansky suggests that in fact nothing lies beneath the surface of official images except the unrealized potential of so many North Koreans who find themselves conscripted into a life of pure stagecraft” (2020, p. 86). However, in his efforts to expose the lack below the surface of North Korean life and the desperation of the North Korean people, he joins a long list of other trust-breakers, including undercover journalist Suki Kim's book *Without You There Is No Us* (2014). Even as Gordon's *A State of Mind* has been criticized as being too soft on the North Korean regime in order to maintain filming access, it is worth questioning what is accomplished with Mansky's expose. Fleeting glances and behaviors of participants when they think cameras are off is interesting, but not inherently revealing. Gabriel urges overcoming the “bifocal framework of a subjugated people versus a tyrannical state,” looking clearly “with eyes neither entirely entranced by nor impulsively closed to the spectacle that lies before us” (2020, p. 90). Viewers should instead observe the spectacle with awareness of both the “theater state” and the agendas and backgrounds of the filmmakers.



## Hybridity: *Over the Border*

The final film discussed here, unassuming feature film *Over the Border* (2006), is a South Korean film produced during the so-called “Sunshine period” of thaw in North-South relations starting during the Kim Dae-Jung presidency of the late 1990s. It is unique in its focus on hybridity, reflecting an already nascently multicultural South Korean society that includes thousands of defectors who have made their way to South Korea over decades. In the beginning of the film, which employs a realistic-looking set of Pyongyang, Sun-ho enjoys his elite social position: watching TV in a comfortable apartment, walking along riverbanks and visiting an amusement park with his fiancée Yeon-hwa, and eating at a *naengmyŏn* (cold noodle) restaurant. Their smooth life trajectory is shattered when Sun-ho’s father receives the news that his war-hero father was not killed in the war as previously thought; in fact, Sun-ho’s grandfather has been living in South Korea and has suddenly sent a letter. Simultaneously anxious over the consequences for getting caught communicating across the border, and desperate to reunite with their family patriarch who has not died after all, Sun-ho’s father decides to move his family to South Korea, via China. The remainder of *Over the Border* is set in South Korea, where a new world awaits but the family is reduced to “refugee” status. Years pass, and Sun-ho’s sister reports news from her correspondence with a missionary from their time in China: Yeon-hwa has married. Heartbroken, Sun-ho marries a kind South Korean woman and together they open a popular North Korean restaurant that also showcases North Korean cultural performances. Sun-ho is happy—until the arc of melodrama plays out and Yeon-hwa arrives in the south, and of course she is not in fact married. The two attempt to renew their romance over a few short days, but they have both transformed in their transition from north to south. Sitting looking out at the sea at Sokcho, Yeon-hwa tells Sun-ho she loves him, but the next morning she is gone, and they do not meet again.

In his review of the film, Kyu Hyun Kim regards *Over the Border* as a timely film for an increasingly globalized South Korea of the mid-2000s, continuing, “This openly clichéd tragic romance, completely bereft of clever plot twists and agonizing reflections by the characters on their national identities, frees itself from the ideological baggage that has burdened other Korean films dealing with the division, by doing the right thing—rendering its ears to the stories of the thousand-plus Northerners already living in



South Korea.” To return to Chanan’s discussion of “cognitive geography” and the documentary, the Pyongyang of *Over the Border* is shown with neither the excited tourist gaze of *Comrade Kim Goes Flying*, the spectacle-centric gaze of *A State of Mind*, nor the critical gaze of *Under the Sun*. The ethnographic impulse in *Over the Border* creates a nostalgic Pyongyang out of the conflicted memories of defectors (as filtered through the more generalized nostalgia for a unified Korea by a South Korean director), before the film turns its attention to the inherent hybridity of North Korea on screen. *Over the Border* goes beyond illustrating contradictions in North Korean life, and shows that the Pyongyang we see on screen is always co-constructed by a combination of nostalgic memories of defectors and the critical, sometimes Orientalizing gaze of outsiders.

Chung’s review of the film in 2006 notes the “close to reality” reconstruction of Pyongyang, from the amusement park to the street festival, made possible by the guidance of defectors. Defectors have continued to advise on South Korean cultural productions depicting North Korea, with the most recent example being the television drama *Crash Landing on You* (tvN, 2019–2020). Of this drama, Epstein and Green write that “the show strives for a romanticized and vaguely exotic hero as an object of fantasy, but then seeks to render the country as a concrete and realistic backdrop and humanize its populace, all whilst accentuating North Korea’s idiosyncratic aspects for dramatic effect” (2020, p. 6). Pyongyang is reconstructed in the drama, but so too are smaller towns, which many defectors from the lower rungs of North Korean society came from.<sup>4</sup> Unsurprisingly, North Korea dismissed the drama as a provocation, accusing the show of “profiteering” from the tragedy of division of the Korean peninsula.<sup>5</sup> While Epstein and Green would not critique the drama in such black-and-white terms as North Korean authorities, they too recognize that “*Crash Landing* also demonstrates that the North Korean experience has been co-opted and transformed into a bankable commodity that functions as an element of *Hallyu* and the expansion of South Korean soft power” (2020, p. 14). For all Kim Jong Un’s apparent appreciation for television dramas and sitcoms focusing on “civilian family life and social issues” (Mayer 2016, p. 67)—as opposed to the films his father

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<sup>4</sup> There is a divide between North Korean defectors in South Korea, with some “elite” defectors and others from the much larger economically marginalized population. Elite defectors are more often able to leverage their experiences to become minor celebrities (such as Youtube stars) in South Korea, or get book deals.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.philstar.com/entertainment/2020/03/06/1998684/north-korea-reportedly-slams-crash-landing-you-atrocious-provocation>.

Kim Jong Il emphasized as integral to national sovereignty—*Crash Landing's* combination of a fantastical love story and non-glamorized depictions of North Korean life did not impress in North Korea. Its carefully-researched set and defector input into production is similar to *Over the Border's*, but *Over the Border* attracted far less attention in South Korea in 2006 than *Crash Landing* in 2020. One critic attributes the lack of interest to the relatively smooth North-South relationship at the time, arguing that is precisely these moments of “thaw” that encourage social reflection on more serious issues—rather than the love-centric plot of *Over the Border* (Tilland 2020, p. 232). In contrast, North-South relations were quite complicated during *Crash Landing's* broadcast in 2019-2020, following a regression in communication after the hope of the Moon-Kim Summit of 2018. The fluffy love story with realistic visuals became a hit in South Korea and worldwide, even as it was dismissed by the North Korean government.

Shine Choi, in her analysis of *Over the Border*, also notes the “ethnographic” qualities of the film, but problematizes the relationships: “If the scenes in Pyongyang are rich ethnographic ‘realistic’ recreations of North Korea, the social relations do not receive a similar reconstructive research-driven, bank-breaking recreation.... What I want to highlight in [director] Ahn’s statement [in the notes to the DVD of the film] is how ideas about universality of emotion overwrite the need for attention to social reality (and the differences we experience)” (2015). The film produces “thick description” and highlights the reality of hybridity in South Korea, but ultimately uses North Korea and North Koreans as “cultural material to bring a fresh and new space to enact domestic drama, family, love and everyday life” in South Korea (Choi 2015, p. 157). While *Over the Border* attempted some new images and affect, little had changed since blockbusters in the early 2000s—and this is no less true now than it was at *Over the Border's* release in 2006. North Korea is still understood in hierarchical terms and excluded from visions of a future unified Korea. Here too the filmmaker’s positionality is inescapable, as the perpetuation of Cold War stasis on the Korean peninsula make a South Korean film highlighting points of fundamental difference between North and South Korean social realities highly unlikely, if not impossible.

## Conclusion

In this article I have discussed four films about North Korea made from

different viewpoints and according to different generic conventions. The two films that reflect and amplify North Korean ideals produce an overall positive effect; it is noteworthy that both of these films focus on sports and physical training, seeking universality in training montages even as the particular spectacle of the Mass Games is unfamiliar. The two films that raise contradictions and point out hybridity produce an overall more negative picture of North Korea; it is notable that both these films focus on relationships, suggesting that robust family or romantic relationships are difficult to maintain in the face of extreme social control (in the case of *Under the Sun*) or defection for political reasons (in the case of *Over the Border*). In terms of divisions according to genre, both documentaries showcase various sides of Pyongyang, and both take schoolgirls as their subjects—likely because children are a compelling documentary topic, but also possibly because children may be perceived as less politically-tinged and more controllable by North Korean authorities. Both of the fictional films feature adult women, as in both romantic coupling is crucial for plotlines emphasizing the “national family.”

To return to a visual anthropology and sociology of North Korea and the question of which kind of film about North Korea is most “authentic,” I would again emphasize that it is productive to read documentaries and fictional film alongside one another, staying attentive to the positionality of the filmmaker. In an article on developing a university course for South Koreans about the experiences of North Koreans, Lee and Lee (2019) stress that a focus on the “everyday life of North Koreans” is most important, as so much media attention is devoted to political conflict. This focus on the everyday is important in the East Asian Studies university classroom outside of South Korea as well, as North Korean politics and social values are vilified and oversimplified around the world. Shine Choi urges that “it is our task as consumers from our different positions to enact attachments that are questioning, troubling and disruptive of the international, South Korea, or Japan” (2015, p. 168). In the conclusion of her book, she asks, “How do you solve a problem like North Korea?” and answers provocatively, “It depends on who you are.” Choi notes astutely that when it comes to observers of North Korea, “Whether it is a solitary traveler, an empathetic onlooker, a distraught lover or a selfless savior (among others), these seemingly diverging identities singularly occupy a privileged position in relation to a changing cast of North Korea(ns)” (2015, p. 212).

Among the films discussed in this article, several of the roles Choi identifies are present: the presentation of the distraught lover in Ahn’s South

Korean melodrama *Over the Border*, Gordon of *A State of Mind* as an empathetic onlooker to the girls training for the Mass Games, and Mansky as a solitary traveler documenting North Korean social control for a Russian audience who are looking for similarities and differences between North Korea and Stalinist Russia in *Under the Sun*. All of these present a partial picture, and North Korean co-production *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* introduces some of North Korea's "own terms" for understanding its society. Together these films get us closer to understanding who North Koreans are, what they want, and how the international community might live alongside them with greater empathy, making "acquaintance" without jumping to judgment.

The four films analyzed here produce narratives about North Korea partly dictated by their genre—documentary or fictional film—and partly influenced by the national backgrounds of the filmmakers. As Shine Choi uncomfortably but accurately points out, they are privileged outside voices—often working to understand and amplify the voices of North Koreans, but outsiders nonetheless—juxtaposed against a "changing cast of North Koreans." Yet not only the analyses but also the aspirations of the filmmakers must be accounted for; all in various ways reject the bluster of the "theater state" with its blurred public and private boundaries, and insist that there are stories of ordinary North Koreans to be told. These films, which present nuanced accounts of trauma and even sometimes break down the fourth wall, encourage a "cosmopolitan outlook" from the international community (Soh and Connolly 2017). Even as North Korean defector voices gain power in South Korea, there is value in introducing the lives of a more diverse group of North Koreans, including those who stayed behind. If used to educate, the four films discussed here introduce an ethnographic sensibility to North Korea studies, furthering possibilities for international empathy and more nuanced engagement.

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