

Review

The Korean War and Postmemory Generation

Contemporary Korean Arts and Films

Dong-Yeon Koh

The Korean War and Postmemory Generation

This pioneering volume navigates cultural memory of the Korean War through the lens of contemporary arts and film in South Korea for the last two decades.

Cultural memory of the Korean War has been a subject of persistent controversy in the forging of South Korean postwar national and ideological identity. Applying the theoretical notion of “postmemory,” this book examines the increasingly diversified attitudes toward memories of the Korean War and Cold War from the late 1990s and onward, particularly in the demise of military dictatorships. Chapters consider efforts from younger generation artists and filmmakers to develop new ways of representing traumatic memories by refusing to confine themselves to the tragic experiences of survivors and victims. Extensively illustrated, this is one of the first volumes in English to provide an in-depth analysis of work oriented around such themes from 12 renowned and provocative South Korean artists and filmmakers. This includes documentary photographs, participatory public arts, independent women’s documentary films, and media installations.

The Korean War and Postmemory Generation will appeal to students and scholars of film studies, contemporary art, and Korean history.

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expands the sympathetic imagination while teaching the limits of sympathy.”³⁹ The professional dancer’s body movements in *Ten Single Shots* lets the audience have distance from the real tragedy, recognizing the impossible task of contemporary viewers coming to terms with the real terrors of the War.

Jaewook Lee: *Emphatic Audition*

Compared to nonverbal communication such as written words, studies show that the human voice can efficiently convey the emotional ups and downs of narrators. “Even through speech and language no doubt constitutes humankind’s most sophisticated means of information transfer, the vocal communication of emotions extends well beyond speech-related phenomena,” neuroscientists Jorge Armony and Patrik Vuilleumier explain.⁴⁰ Speaking of subtle connotations, the human voice is a powerful means of carrying out the emotional state of the speaker. “Not only are listeners able to decode nonverbal vocalization with remarkably high accuracy (80 percent correct classifications on average across to different emotions),” but research findings also suggest that “in vocal communication some emotions might typically be expressed by short vocalization rather by speech related cues.”⁴¹

Whereas *Ten Single Shots* expands on the sound of battlefields that the artist had collected from popular movies, *Emphatic Audition* by Jaewook Lee was inspired by the letters written by the 16-year-old student soldier Woogeun Lee (Figure 4.6). Voice acting and narration is frequently used in contemporary Korean art; Wonho Lee made young actors read the transcript that he collected from seniors in their 70s and 80s, who frequently talked about their experiences during and immediately after the War.⁴² *Emphatic Audition* is, however, different from Wonho Lee’s *Dramatically Encountering One’s Own Story, Recorded behind Tapgol Park* in that the narrators’ bodily reactions to the tragic nature of the letter are also recorded by electroencephalography (hereafter EEG) while reading the young soldier’s letter written during the Korean War. EEG is a machine that records the fluctuations of human brainwaves into a graph. The audience can hear the voice of the narrators and observe the graph of EEG, which has recorded the brainwaves of the narrators. Thus, *Emphatic Audition* attests to a more systematic approach toward how our affective experiences and emotional engagement are provoked by non-visual elements of sound and voice in media installations.

Lee became interested in the Cold War in the Korean peninsula as he worked for Professor Jon Robin’s *Conflict Kitchen*, a participatory art project. It had taken place at a take-out restaurant serving dishes from countries such as Iran, Venezuela, and North Korea; these were the countries that had had military and diplomatic conflicts with the United States. Along with the food, customers on school campuses would receive handouts of basic historical and social facts about the countries. Lee had a chance to personally interview North Korean defectors to produce written materials for *Conflict Kitchen*. During the interview process, he was literally shaken by the story of a female North Korean defector: “I heard her story about how she lost her family members while she escaped the country.



Figure 4.6 Jaewook Lee, *Emphatic Audition*, 2017, Single channel video with sound, 7 min 40 sec, Installation view, Buk Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul © Courtesy of the Artist.

Hearing about her sad story shook me deeply. My interest was no longer conceptual; I felt severe pain.”⁴³

Out of his personal experience interviewing and listening to the tragic stories of North Koreans who had escaped from the regime, Lee was quite conscious of the interconnected nature of sensorial stimulations and bodily reactions—namely, the function of “mirror neurons,” which are located in both the inferior frontal and parietal regions of the human brain. The mirror neuron is responsible for many of the brain’s reactions to senses as well as for decoding the emotional states of others. In “Note on Mirror Neurons,” Lee explains that his purpose of using many different senses in his art is to expand the effects of empathy: “For example, a sound of an event can trigger visual and bodily responses in our brain. When we hear a sound of a woman screaming, we can visualize the situation and our muscles react as a response.”⁴⁴

For *Emphatic Audition*, Lee chose professional actors as voice narrators, who, as Lee believes, are more sensitive and better adapted to empathizing with other people’s situations. Lee then made the two narrators read a letter written by the student soldier Woogeun Lee. His letter is currently preserved at the War Memorial of Korea in Yongsan, Seoul, and it was originally written on August 10, 1950, just two months after the outbreak of the War.⁴⁵ During the Korean

War, a total of 275,200 student soldiers were sent to battle, including the notorious Pohang battle (also called the battle of “Pohang Women’s Middle School”), of which victory was of utmost importance for the success of Operation Chromite at Incheon in 1950. The troops at Pohang protected the southeastern part of the peninsula, the only remaining part that had not been invaded and occupied by North Korean and communist armies in 1950. In a way, the Korean armies, with extremely limited human and military resources, had sacrificed the student soldiers without proper training and weapons for Operation Chromite, which completely changed the course of the Korean War. It is known that during the two-day battle at Pohang, 48 out of 70 Third Student Unit student soldiers were sacrificed, with an additional 23 wounded or missing.⁴⁶ Woogeun Lee was one of the early victims of the Korean War and his letter was found inside of his uniform’s inner pocket as he died the day after he wrote the letter on August 10, 1950.

Lee’s letter was an interesting case as he did not shy away from expressing his fear, anxiety, loneliness, and even guilt over killing the enemy in his letter to his mother; such honest and straightforward depictions of emotions were not only rare, but also deviated from the heroic image of soldiers at the battlefield that the War Memorials and Museums advocated for decades, as will be discussed in the next chapter. The letter begins with “Mom! I killed people. I killed about 10 people across a stone wall.... I threw out a bomb called grenade. It killed them instantly.” Lee described his shame of the circumstances in which people sharing the same history, culture, and blood must kill each other. “Although they are enemies, they are also human beings. Furthermore, they are the same people, same blood, and speak the same language. I don’t know what to say. I feel heavy.” Despite his guilt, Lee also wrote of being surrounded by enemies.

They are many. We are only 71 people. I am afraid what is going to happen. I feel a little calm because I feel I am talking to you. Mom, I want to go back to you when the war is over. And call you, Mom!

Out of desperation, this young boy tried to find his emotional comfort by simply calling his mother; he honestly confessed his hope of returning home and being with his mother. The ending is, however, deeply heartbreaking, especially considering the impending death that the young soldiers would soon face. “But, my mother, I do not know why I thought about the shroud suddenly when I put on the underwear. The shroud for dead people.”

As the voice actor reads this climatic part, his eyelash is, as appeared on the screen, softened with tears (Figures 4.7 and 4.8). “Ah, they are coming. I will write again. Mom, Goodbye! Goodbye!” Prior to this, he confessed his deep fear by saying that “I might die today.” The artist juxtaposed the images of the narrators reading the very line on the screen. The facial expressions of narrators are changing from time to time, and both of them become much more immersed in emotional intensity as the letter reaches its climatic part of extreme fear and anxiety. Voice actors wear the EEG, and interestingly enough, when they read “I might die today,” the wavelength becomes flat—as if their heart rate stops and stands

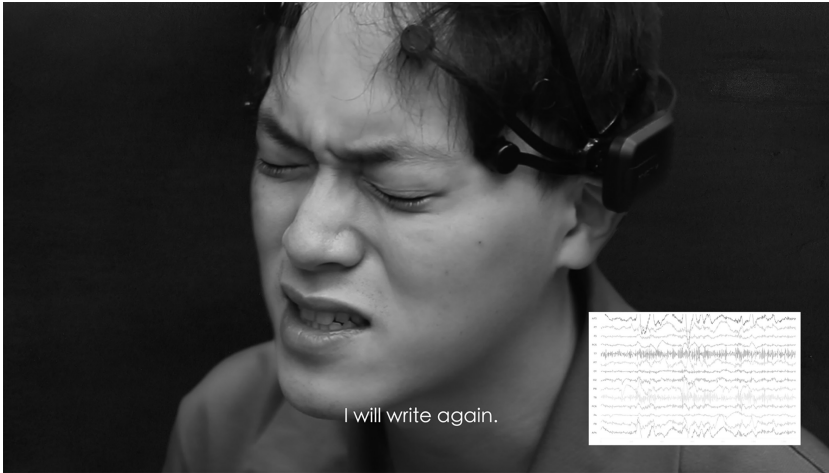


Figure 4.7 Jaewook Lee, *Emphatic Audition* (the voice narrators wearing EEG with the diagram of graph), 2017 © Courtesy of the Artist.

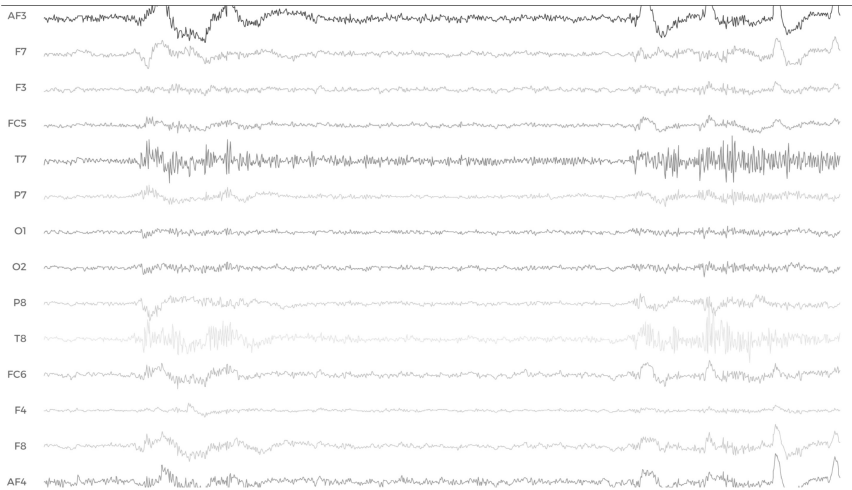


Figure 4.8 Jaewook Lee, *Emphatic Audition* (the voice narrators wearing EEG with the diagram of graph), 2017 © Courtesy of the Artist.

still. The graph is supposed to represent the emotional and bodily responses of the narrators while he is acting with his voice—perhaps similar to the artist’s own experience of listening and translating tragic stories of a Korean defector whose family was sacrificed during his escape from North Korea.

Affective memory is a crucial part of acting theory as it is believed to be assisting actors empathizing with fictional characters and circumstances to be portrayed.

“Sense memory” in particular refers to bodily sensations caused by particular emotional events and acting is a process in which actors express and represent those feelings to the audience.⁴⁷ According to the artist, the EEG-scanned image might not directly show which part of the brain reacts to particular sentences in detail, but at least it displays the brain emanating electrical waves to the audience as the narrators is, indeed, affected by the tragic circumstances of the student soldier. “I want to show the emotional (or subjective) and scientific (or quantitative) responses of these actors simultaneously.... Through its visualizations of neural activity, the EEG technology convinces us what has been unverifiable through action alone,” Lee argues, “The brainwaves being captured seem objective while the actors’ facial expressions seem quite emotional.” In this way, the artist wants to link “the subjective and the objective together, creating a sense of antithesis.”⁴⁸

Recent studies in cognitive science prove the correlation between electrical waves and emotional conditions. “Affective computing” is an area of research that focuses on the design of computer systems that respond to and exhibit human affectations such as mood and emotion.⁴⁹ Nowadays, computer systems can make use of a variety of available sensor technologies and biofeedback equipments, which are becoming increasingly affordable. Affective audio, for instance, provides information about physical activity by using biofeedback sensors, such as EEG or ECG (electrocardiography). There is also a novel equipment called the “Psych Dome,” which introduces a EEG headset to link brain activities of psychedelically altered states of consciousness to the creation of sounds and graphics.⁵⁰

While Lee’s *Emphatic Audition* is not gearing toward the people who have experienced the War, the connection between memory, emotion, and affective experience is significant in making the audience psychologically identify with victims of the War. According to Tony Buchanan, the author of “Retrieval of Emotional Memories,” affect could exert an influence over retrieval processes at the level of either the item (memory for an emotionally provocative stimulus) or the task (affective state that a participant happens to be in during retrieval attempt). At the time of retrieval, “the affect may serve as a cue, leading to a greater likelihood of retrieval.”⁵¹

The artist also introduces the moving images from his previous work *Nightmare* (2011), in which the audience sees the back of a young-looking soldier (artist) who holds a gun at night (Figure 4.9). The screen does not show any imminent dangers or violent scenes that we often find in war movies, yet the screen is full of darkness with a very vague indication of trees and a rough road ahead. *Emphatic Audition* is like a video game set as the audience may have the fantasy that they themselves are moving on the battlefields. The multisensorial elements of *Emphatic Audition* may enhance the audience’s identification with victims’ emotional and psychological state with no certain future—like Woogeun Lee, who perished during the Korean War at such a young age. Lee tries to make the audience feel that they are at the very site of the battlefields and empathize with the soldier as he moves slowly forward amidst stark darkness. Looking and following the artist figure, which seems to go astray, the audience experiences a state of uncertainty and confusion.



Figure 4.9 Jaewook Lee, *Nightmare*, 2011, Video installation © Courtesy of the Artist.

The “proper” emphatic experience is, however, not supposed to overwhelm the audience or participants. Bennett argues that emphatic experience in art should be distinguished from audiences’ emotional engagement that excludes the process of critical reckoning. In principle, “impressions forces us to look, encounters which forces us to interpret, expressions which forces us to think,” writes Bennett.⁵² According to the Chinese critic Jiaxing, Jaewook Lee treats his narrators—and for that matter, the audiences—as not only “subjects who express emotions but also objects being measured and observed.”⁵³ In *Empathic Audition*, the scanned images of the narrator’s brain on the screen help the audience witness how the narrators’ brains and bodies react to emotional stimuli. The audience can have the critical distance needed to observe how the human brain becomes activated when empathizing with war victims such as Woogeun Lee.

Jaeyoung Park: *H’s Barbershop*

Smell emerges as a powerful way of inviting more bodily and immediate effects on the audience’s part. Robert Jütte, the author of *A History of the Senses* (2005), mentions that sensory experiences become a “new buzzword of museum culture,” and are created by curators “respond[ing] to the latest popular taste.”⁵⁴ For instance, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum has introduced the room of 4,000 shoes worn by the prisoners at the concentration camp in Majdanek, Poland, under the 20-year loan. The scale and scope of these shoes demonstrates how the Jewish people diverse in gender, sex, classes, cultural background, and even tastes perished in concentration camps. According to one interviewee, as quoted in *The Washington Post* article, “I never really understood why people come here from