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North Korean Realism, conservatism and ultranationalist propaganda

Culture and the aesthetic theory of Juche: a journey around North Korea through cinema, propaganda, human rights, graphic novels and contemporary art.

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In 2013, the United Nations Human Rights Council set up a committee of inquiry with the aim of shedding light on the current humanitarian emergency in North Korea, accused of committing numerous human and civil rights violations against its population. The accounts of refugees and the documents that have been gathered have led to a report of 372 pages in which the committee provides a detailed list of examples of discrimination and acts of violence. Besides the usual and, sadly, well-known forms of repression used by totalitarian regimes (social exclusion policies, kidnapping, torture, summary executions, etc.), the report does offer insights into an aspect that was unknown to the rest of the world until only a few years ago: the structure and organisation of North Korean society.

Songbun

Although the principles of equality and non-discrimination are enshrined in its constitution, North Korean society is organised into a system of 5 social castes (subdivided, in their turn, into 51 sub-categories), each of which enjoys specific privileges or restrictions on the basis of political, social and economic criteria. This system, which has a decisive effect on citizens' lives, is called *Songbun* and serves to create a small ruling class that ensures the stability of the Kim dynasty, which has been in power since the foundation of the state (1948). People born into a family with a high degree of *songbun* will be assured a better quality of life from birth: they will almost certainly live in Pyongyang (where the country's elite live), attend the best schools and universities, have the right to better healthcare and will probably obtain a prestigious position in society.

To a certain extent, the degree of *songbun* is closely related to the degree of



mobility. In North Korea, it is illegal to travel inside and outside the country without authorisation, and this is usually granted only to the ruling class and, temporarily, to workers used as manpower in foreign countries. Refugees are considered deserters and enemies of the state and, if captured, are sent to labour camps, tortured and, in many cases, killed. In the report drawn up by the committee, North Korea is defined as a society that is “physically and socio-economically isolated in which people considered faithful to the leadership live and work in favourable places, while the families of people judged to be suspect are banished to marginalised areas”.¹ In terms of mobility of information, the situation is no better. In the world league table of freedom of the press published by *Reporters Without Borders*, North Korea lies in 179th place out of a total of 180 countries included in the survey (Eritrea came last). The media, from television and radio to the Internet (which permits access to just 28 sites and to a highly restricted part of the population), are run and controlled by the state. The result is a completely closed society whose immobility is perceptible in its culture and aesthetics which, from a western perspective, inevitably appears anachronistic and reactionary, and even rather kitsch. Nevertheless, as I shall attempt to demonstrate in this analysis, this view fails to grasp the distinctive features of North Korean culture and society, and therefore risks being unfair as well as superficial and incomplete. However, before discussing contemporary art (and therefore Norko Realism), it is necessary to set artistic discourse within broader reflections that involve culture and, above all, the aesthetic theory of the country.

The aesthetic theory of Juche

North Korean contemporary culture is based on imagery which is still deeply rooted in the revolutionary values promoted by the rise to power of Kim Il-Sung, Supreme Leader of the state from 1948 to 1994. The dominant aesthetic in the country stems from a mixture of neo-Confucianism (1392-1910), Japanese colonialism (1910-'45) and pro-Soviet nationalism. The influence of this last point has had an immense impact on general reflections on the role of art and the formulation of an aesthetic theory based on the philosophical and anthropological principle of Juche. The term, which can be translated as “self-reliance”, was first used in 1955 in a speech by Kim



Il-Sung and then took on the connotations of a state ideology, based on anthropocentrism and nationalism and inspired by Communism.

According to Juche, citizens do not constitute a community of separate individuals but a compact mass of people who work together to make the nation great and independent under the guidance of the Supreme Leader. Each action is therefore aimed at attaining the common good and must be guided by morality. This discourse also includes art which, in North Korea, has an eminently didactic scope and is controlled entirely by the government and the Workers' Party. From the visual arts to performative arts and literature, each cultural manifestation has the precise aim of conveying and instilling the principles of Juche.

By adopting an approach which might in some western circles be termed anti-Crocian (going against Croce's view that art is expression), North Koreans consider beauty in art not as an autonomous value but inspired by specific political values and lofty moral ideas. In other words, the aesthetic theory of Juche nationalises and politicises aesthetic experience.

The foundations of this theory were set out by Kim Il-Sung and simultaneously by his son Kim Jong-Il, in a long series of literary works and didactic texts attributed to them. For example, *The flower girl* (1972), one of the most famous North Korean films (and a model for future films) which most clearly expresses the ideology of Juche, is a cinematographic adaptation of a work by Kim Il-Sung. The film is set in the colonial period and tells the story of a family who have fallen into abject poverty and are utterly dependent, like their fellow villagers, on a ruthless Japanese couple. The main character is a young girl who looks after her blind younger sister and her sick mother by selling bunches of flowers in the market. After her mother's death and following serious episodes of harassment, the girl decides to set off in search of her brother who had been arrested a few years previously for having sought to rebel against their landlords. Her search proves fruitless and the situation degenerates even further until the final scene when her brother, who has joined the Revolutionary Army, returns and convinces the villagers to overthrow the landlords and regain their lost freedom. One distinctive element of the oppressed characters in *The flower girl* is the constant glorification of their virtue and dignity, despite the humiliations they have endured. In one scene of the film, for example, the blind sister, after being humiliated in the square by a crowd who throw coins at her to get



her to sing, is scolded fiercely by her sister. Regardless of the fact that she is there to make money to pay for the medicines for their sick mother, humiliating oneself in front of the enemy is unacceptable. "We are poor, not beggars!" The story is not just the tale of a young flower girl and her hapless family, but is a parable of an entire people who rebelled against a ruthless enemy while maintaining their honour and dignity intact. "This is the tragedy of a stateless nation, the tragedy of a nation that has fallen into wrack and ruin", says the brother of the main character. At the end of the film, the final verses of a song ring out like a hymn to freedom. "The red flowers of revolution are coming into bloom!".

However, the text that sheds most light on North Korean aesthetic theory is undoubtedly the treatise *On Fine Art* (1991) by Kim Jong Il, "the mastermind of the propaganda machinery".² The treatise exemplifies the anthropocentric stance of Juche and its aesthetic doctrine. "Beauty is in autonomous/independent human beings";³ as David-West has pointed out,⁴ this means that beauty cannot exist without human beings. North Korean aesthetics defines beauty thus: "those objects, and phenomena which meet man's desire and aspiration for independence, and are emotionally grasped by him" and as the "qualitative definition of objects and phenomena which is expressed in their relations with man. Indeed, according to the now deceased former Supreme Leader, "Man is the most beautiful and powerful being in the world" ⁵ capable of creating beauty in society and nature.

Moving from aesthetic theory to its actual implementation, the beauty of human beings is obtained, in the arts, when 'ideological beauty' and 'plastic beauty' (the latter achieved by following the criteria of equilibrium, symmetry, rhythm, proportion, etc.)⁶ coincide harmoniously.

The official artistic style of North Korea - *Norko Realism* - is based on this harmony.
Norko Realism

When analysing official North Korean style, it is customary to use the general expression of Socialist Realism, a style that emerged during the 1920s in the countries of the former USSR and defined by a series of distinctive features which can be summarised as follows:

a) the realistic and figurative representation of reality (main media: painting, sculpture and video in cinema); b) the glorification of the proletariat, the party and ideals promoted by the Revolution; c) an optimistic view of communist society



focusing on scenes of everyday life.

However, as T. Jeppesen has observed, this term, when applied to all North Korean art, risks saying little or nothing about what it actually represents. "This is a socialist, yet also ultranationalist, 'realism' that belongs strictly to the Korean people north of the 38th parallel, and cannot be understood apart from their ideology-infused quotidian life, which has existed for a relatively brief span of time".⁷ This is why I will borrow the expression coined by Jeppesen – "Norko Realism" (North Korean Realism) to define the complex pattern of elements and aspects that distinguish the contemporary art of the country.

Firstly, "North Korean art" refers, above all, to architecture, painting, sculpture, literature (especially, the graphic novel) and other forms of artistic expression (opera, singing and dance). Photography, video art and installations, in the commonly accepted sense, are not widespread whereas cinema and other forms of entertainment (such as this) are extremely popular throughout the country.

Norko Realism is highly characterised, codified and recognisable. At first glance, the distinctive feature is the strongly propagandistic and ultranationalist spirit, accompanied by a quest for formal balance and harmony. In line with the principles expressed in the official aesthetic theory inspired by Juche, Norko Realism celebrates, in all its expressions, the greatness of the nation, its leadership and the North Korean people, in contrast to the narrow-mindedness and bad habits of enemy nations. "In Norko Realism, the dream of purity and greatness never dies".⁸

The place where most of these aesthetic and moral codes are forged and disseminated is the Mansudae Art Studio. Founded in Pyongyang in 1959, the Mansudae Art Studio is a gigantic artistic workshop covering an area of about 120,000 m² which is home to over 1000 artists – chosen from the country's leading art academies – 3000 assistant and other staff. It contains departments of painting, sculpture, wood engraving and embroidery. The various monumental works created there include the Monument to the Workers' Party and the Statues of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il, at Pyongyang, and the Monument to the African Renaissance, at Dakar (the Mansudae Art Studio sends its artists, in particular to Africa, as cheap labour to construct striking works). Its more standard output consists, above all, of paintings and sculptures of various size with a penchant for large works. The political posters are worthy of special attention; despite not being



considered “fine art”, their production and diffusion (chiefly among western purchasers) are so extensive that they represent one of the most popular and interesting forms of expression in North Korea. As mentioned in the organisation’s web site, oil painting, which is one of the crowning achievements of North Korean contemporary art, only reached the country in the 19th century, and was practised at the Mansudae Art Studio several years after its foundation after gaining the approval of Kim Il-Sung. As was the case with Socialist Realism, the posters offer a realistic and figurative representation of reality showing scenes of social and everyday life, celebratory portraits of archetypal figures (e.g. *The bride, women aviators, sailors, etc.*) and leaders (every public building contains portraits of the two former dictators which can only be made by the Mansudae Art Studio), as well as scenes of the natural world (landscapes and still life).

Landscape painting displays the most striking difference between Socialist Realism and Norko Realism. Although they are such a common feature of North Korean art, landscapes are extremely rare in Socialist Realism. Moreover, according to Jeppesen, the landscape paintings of Norko Realism are done for propaganda purposes, like political posters and portraits of leaders. For example, in *Hae Keum River*, a painting by Kim Song-gun, one of the country’s most famous landscape artists, violent waves break against the cliffs. Jeppesen observes that “Kim’s dramatic waves may pound relentlessly – just like the DPRK’s enemies, be they the United States or the natural disasters [...] – but the land, the One True Korea, will always remain solid and strong, even in the face of the greatest adversity”.⁹

Considering that this painting was in the background of a famous photograph portraying Bill Clinton – on a visit to North Korea to ask for the release of two American journalists accused of spying – together with Kim Jong Il and several officials, Jeppesen’s hypothesis should not be dismissed out of hand. In a nation which celebrates itself and its rebirth in all the arts and through its own media, even a simple landscape painting may become a fairly uncontorted allegory of its own grandeur. In order to try and appreciate the impact of ultranationalist sentiment on North Korean culture, it is interesting to explore another phenomenon – a literary one – which helps to provide a broader perspective.



The graphic novel

In North Korea, every work of literature has to be approved by a special committee that establishes its suitability before being published. Like other art forms, literature also has a specifically didactic function, as emerges in a treatise on the subject by Kim Jong Il:

“Literature is an excellent tool for providing the people with a cultural and emotional education, as well as being a powerful weapon for their political and ideological education and their understanding of life”.¹⁰ The aim remains to convey the principles expressed by Juche.

One literary genre that is especially loved by North Koreans is the graphic novel, which is equally popular among young and adult readers. The large numbers of graphic novels have a restricted range of themes, the most common of which is that of the Korean War. There are particularly interesting stories, designed for a younger audience, in which a conflict between opposing factions is presented allegorically: on the one hand, good animals (rabbits, squirrels, dogs, cats, etc. which always represent the North Korean people) and, on the other hand, ferocious beasts (foxes, jackals and, interestingly, eagles, bearing in mind that the bird is the symbol of the USA, etc.). The main characters are anthropomorphic; they speak and behave like human beings, they carry rifles and fight wars. The polarisation between good and evil is quite sharp and occasionally borders on caricature, achieved through hyperbole: the good animals are associated with graphic features and expressions that belong to the realm of cuteness. They are sweet and friendly, pleasing to the eye whereas the bad ones have a repugnant appearance. A character that belongs to one of the two categories remains there from the beginning to the end without any further psychological development: a weasel (a bad animal) may even disguise itself as a raccoon (a good animal) but sooner or later the mask will slip because of its innate wickedness since its inner nature is hereditary. On this point, viewed from a wider perspective, J. Zwetsloot has rightly observed “Juche literature has but one purpose: to reinforce that message that the Korean people are innocent and virtuous”.¹¹ He also adds “These graphic novels, which might appear to outsiders to have little to do with real life, work to reinforce the Juche worldview of a pure Korean race always under attack by bestial foreigners”.¹²



Once again, the ultranationalist tendency of Juche, an intrinsic feature of the North Korean tradition and the political programme of the Kim dynasty, shapes the country's cultural expression and linguistic codes. As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, North Korean art and culture will definitely appear to a western observer to conform more closely to the twentieth century spirit rather than the mobile, hyperconnected epoch in which we live. Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to treat its artistic and cultural output merely as reactionary and propagandistic, because this would imply a progressive view of history and thus dismiss *other* cultures as boorish and backward. The phenomenon needs to be viewed and studied within its context. Contemporary North Korean art is the faithful representation of the culture and society in which it has developed: incredibly closed, immobile and contradictory, but nonetheless with its own special grandeur.

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NOTE

[1] Human Rights Council, *Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, 7 February 2014 ([online download](#)), p. 9, par. 39 (trad. italiana del sottoscritto della versione originale in inglese).

[2] [T. Jeppesen, *Norko Realism*, «Art in America», 29 May 2014.](#)

[3] Kim Jong-il, *On Fine Art*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang 1991, p. 2. La traduzione in italiano di questo e dei successivi passi della medesima opera sono state realizzate dal sottoscritto a partire dalla versione in lingua inglese ufficiale.

[4] Cf. A. David-West, *North Korean Aesthetic Theory: Aesthetics, Beauty, and "Man"*, «The Journal of Aesthetic Education», Vol. 47, No. 1, University of Illinois Press (Spring 2013), pp. 104-110.

[5] Kim Jong-il, *cit.*, p. 9.

[6] Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[7] Jeppesen, *cit.*

[8] Jeppesen, *cit.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Kim Jong-il, *On Juche Literature*, Pyongyang, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1991, p. 17. Anche qui, la traduzione in italiano è realizzata dal sottoscritto a partire dalla versione inglese ufficiale.

[11] J. Zwetsloot, *Visual Metaphors in North Korean Graphic Novels for Children*, «Global Politics Review», vol. 2, no. 1, April 2016, p. 73.

[12] *Ivi*, p. 76.