

AN EPOCHAL ANALYSIS ON COLONIAL TRAUMA IN INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARIES: JEJU PRAYER AS STUDY CASE

Makbul Mubarak

Abstract: This paper departs from Raymond Williams' notion of 'epochal analysis,' an analysis that functions to see a cultural process as a cultural system in the dialectic of the dominant, the residual, and the emergent. It is true that what Williams meant by 'the dominant' in his proposition is either the feudal culture and the bourgeois culture and their transition, but he also says that the epochal analysis functions to sense a movement in its connection to the future and the past. Williams wrote (1978, p. 121):

"...Its methodology is preserved for the very different function of historical analysis, in which a sense of movement within what is ordinarily abstracted as a system is crucially necessary, especially if it is to connect with the future as well as with the past.

Keywords : documentary, trauma, dominant fiction, psychoanalysis

Introduction

In this paper, I will be reading one recent documentary called *Jeju Prayer* (original title: *Bi-nyeom*), directed by Im Heung-soon, by borrowing the dialectical proposition of the dominant, the residual, and the emergent as has been proposed by Williams. *Jeju Prayer* tells story about a documentarist who visits Jeju Island for a funeral of one his friend's relatives. The early set-up then gone awry. Instead of telling story of one's death, the film expands the narrative to the death of million people back in Jeju Massacre 1948. The film uses the funeral ceremony from the present as a gate to enter the collective trauma of Jeju people as a community, or even South Korea as a country. Later, the film displays some footage taken from the

demonstration protesting the construction of American naval base in Gangjeong,

Jeju Island. As a narrative, *Jeju Prayer* is basically a film about trauma, the invocation of trauma, and people's resistance towards the trauma. Therefore, this paper will combine its reading by also involving a Freudian reading especially on the theme of trauma.

The funeral of one person in early scenes of the film transforms into tracing remembrance over funeral of millions. Using the funeral of one guy as a basic loop, the narratives then jumps to Osaka, jumps to today's Gangjeong, to military footages of American intervention in Jeju, to the footage of death execution of the suspected-to-be communists in

early Rhee Syngman regime, interviews of witnesses and survivors, and so on.

If we are to read Jeju Prayer in Raymond Williams' categorization, the dominant (refers to the bourgeois in Williams' specific word) is embodied in the government's policy over the Jeju people that led to the Jeju Massacre in 1948. Then what is the residual? Williams (1978) argues that the residual refers to 'any culture includes available elements of the past, but their place in the contemporary cultural process is profoundly variable.' 'The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, as an effective element of the present (William, 1978, p. 122).' In Jeju Prayer, this residual is embodied in the memory of the survivals of the 1948's massacre, a thing that is formed in the past but still is very receptive to the cultural form of the present. The second

residual resides in the memory of place where the massacre took places in 1948. The filmmaker took footages of a lot of places where people were killed by the 'dominant' back then.

The story of the present, the new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships that are continually being created, by which the emergent is defined by Williams is what Jeju Prayer records as its main narrative. The imageries are filled with the idea that a new dominant is coming to oppress Jeju, namely Lee Myungbak's policy to build the American naval base in the island, and the new emergent here is embodied in the resistance of the Jeju people, who are also the survivors of the 1948 massacre. Hereby visible is a cultural dialectic that is basically defined with the category of the dominant, the residual, and the emergent. This cultural dialectic is visible as follows:

Jeju Massacre 1948 (dominant) ^X the survivors, the incident places, and their memory (the residual) ^X Lee Myungbak's policy to build American naval base in Jeju (a new dominant) ^X people's resistance (the emergent by combining the trauma and memory of the Jeju Massacre 1948).

The new emergent is very visible in the film. There is one banner of the demonstrators that says "through the spirit of 4:3, we stand against the construction of American naval base in Jeju." This shows how one incident in the present stimulates the memory of the past and combines them to form a new emergent, at least in the level of a movement.



Figure 1. The memory of survivals, and of places, as the residual in Jeju Prayer. Retrieved from Jeju Prayer (2012).

The Residual Trauma

Through the narrative of *Jeju Prayer*, Jeju Massacre 1948 is portrayed as an attempted repression by the government (the father figure) at the time. When the North Korean started to invade the South, the government declared a policy to kill those who are suspected as leftist. This was a very act to repress some entity, to evict them from the consciousness of South Korea as a capitalist “creature” that was just starting its “childhood” after a pre-birth era during Japanese colonization. This incident, I suggest, is an attempt to establish the dominant by forcing the repression and the oppression of the people that results in a residual trauma.



Figure 2. The Naval Base Information Center (Left), a lady is protesting the police: the possibility of the emergent. Retrieved from *Jeju Prayer* (2012).

The filmmaker of *Jeju Prayer* is attempting to see the possibility to emerge the emergent by retracing the residual in the form of trauma by using a sort of psychoanalytical method. Jeju become the patient, the filmmaker becomes the psychoanalyst, and the film text becomes the notebook of the psychoanalyst. In provoking this trauma to show itself, the filmmaker travels around the island: interviewing people, retracing graves of the victims, visiting the spots of execution, travelling to Japan to find the people who escaped the incident and then became Japanese citizens, and so on. The filmmaker did a psychoanalytic effort by finding what is being repressed in the rummage of Jeju Massacre memory.

This trauma, unlike the demonstration against American naval base, will not be shown if somebody doesn't delve deep to find it. Both happen in the present as a residual of the dominant.

Historical Trauma and The Dominant

In one of her writing, Silverman (1990) defines history as “a force capable of tearing a hole in the fabric of the dominant fiction, and so of disrupting its internal economy.” She identifies this definition with trauma (Silverman, 1990). What has to be touched firstly before grasping this definition is the notion of the ‘dominant fiction.’ Dominant fiction is a concept firstly introduced by Jacques Ranciere as a sort of “ideological reality” (Silverman, 1990), For example, the dominant fiction of America is the “birth of the nation.” In this paper, I am not going to peel what dominant fiction is for South Korea, or for Jeju, for it is not the purpose of mine. Rather, I would

like to find what kind of dominant fiction that Jeju Prayer is presenting. Hence instead of being a matter of representation, this is more of being a matter of presentation.

Jeju Prayer presents the ideological atmosphere of South Korea at the time as an “anti-communist” country hence the purpose of Jeju Massacre is to root out all the communists in the island. In its revisit

to the island and people, the film shows how the dominant fiction of “anti-communism”⁴ struggled to exclude its enemy, the disturbing nuisance on its consciousness to then repress them back to the unconsciousness, or to employ Marxist term, to oppress the residual in order to prevent them being an emergent factor. In Jeju Prayer, Jeju Massacre is seen as an event when Jeju as a dominant ideological reality that dissents the existing residual. However, this repeating dominant repression (first in the event of Jeju massacre, and second in the building of American naval base) and the people’s memory as residual don’t stand in the same line. The people are against it. The wound that was inflicted during the clash between the dominant oppression and the interexchange of residual and the memory is what comes in Jeju Prayer as trauma.

The social contradiction portrayed by Jeju Prayer seen as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind, which is embodied in an event. In Jeju Prayer, the event is Jeju Massacre, a battle between the dominant and the residual that departs from a historical trauma that is dialectical in its process. The dominant is not only a fact of the past, rather still exists at the present, for example, the government’s policy to build the naval base despite the protest from the people.

The dominant and the residual here is a combination that, as mentioned in the opening of this paper, match the epochal analysis of Williams in its criteria of relatedness to the past and the future.

A Double Reading on The Fetish

There is one thing worth noticing in the first half of the film: obsession on space. Instead of recording the face of each interviewee, the film only sounds their voice while the visual wanders in the other empty spaces. There is one scene when the filmmaker follows a family visiting the grave of their deceased relatives. Instead of recording them “live,” the filmmaker photographed them and put it on the screen as a collection of still photography. What we comprehend lively is the voice of conversation between the family members. Jeju Prayer assumes the still photos as empty space that has been consistently wandered since the film begin. Visually, what is lively recorded is space rather than people. The presence of the people is felt mostly through voices.

The second thing worth noticing is the film’s highly beautiful, almost painting-like space. Narratively speaking, the beautiful scenes don’t have a lot to share with the narrative purpose of the film to record Jeju’s historical trauma. In Jeju Prayer, the usage of space is almost like a treatment over fetish objects. The spaces it portrays mostly are places where historical events took place during Jeju massacre. The film records the hiding spots of the fugitives in Hanra Mountain, the seashores where the suspects are executed, the houses of the survivors, and so on. In order to approaching the past, the film seems to be-

lieve that the spaces it records still have what the past had, that the place seems transcended from its quotidian condition and convince itself that those spaces can leap back through time to show what was there in the past.

The treatment of spaces in the film echoes what Freud (1925) wrote about fetishism as the substitution of penis that was once there in early childhood but had later been lost, "I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost. That is to say, it should normally have been given up, but the fetish is precisely designed to preserve it from extinction. To put it more plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and - for reasons familiar to us - does not want to give up."

On its way to approach the past, Jeju Prayer doesn't concentrate on people, rather, it concentrates on taking pictures of spaces as if the space still has something. In fact, the "something" of the places only existed in the past. For example, Hanra Mountain as a hiding spot was only existing in the past and no longer in the present. To use Freudian penis as metaphor, the attribute "hiding spot" for Hanra Mountain is a maternal penis that the little boy once believed. Unfortunately, this penis had later been lost while the boy doesn't want to give up in believing. Here, the metaphor of the "little boy" is not only equal to the filmmaker, but also to the spectators.

The substitution of penis as fetishism-at-work is also embodied in the film's usage of still photographs in the scene of a family searching for their

ancestor's grave. Instead of relying on live record of its subjects, the film photographs them and only takes voices as live evidence. The still photographs transform the space of the everyday into a still object, an immobile object that the spectator can stare at for the seconds, exactly the same with the aforementioned spaces that has been explained as a fetish. In this case, the transformation of live recordings into still photographs is also a symptom of fetishism: an act of believing that the object has what it doesn't to later being disavowed. But unlike the beautiful spaces which immediately soars fetishistic fragrance, the scene of grave visitation has to be firstly transformed into still object in order to preserve its fetishistic power.

Trauma as Double Telling

The fetish and trauma in Jeju Prayer are both acts of remembering. The filmmaker surely intends to remember what was happened in the past through spatial-objective fetishization in order to address the trauma of the present. There is a gap between seeing and hearing in Jeju Prayer. The interview as the actual recording of the traumatic symptom is mostly presented in the form of voice. While the interview is happening, the camera records empty spaces, tries so hard to connect a link between the spaces today and the same spaces during the event. In contrast to the audio as the evidence of the survivor (the interviewees are mostly the actual survivors of Jeju Massacre) which implies a sympathy towards those who lives by surviving from the death, the visual struggles to immortalize the past by staring ceaselessly at the space: the only thing that remains living (or dead) since the past until the now. The visual of the film is a sympathy towards the death (the taken spaces by

the camera are mostly the places with significant connection with Jeju Massacre).

Therefore, is the trauma an encounter with the living or with the death? In her book, Caruth (1996) argues that trauma is a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival. Trauma as a double telling is exactly what *Jeju Prayer* is trying to approach by building a gap between the audial and the visual. The audial narrative tells the story of the living survivor, regardless of how much have they lost. There is a survivor tells a story about how she lost her children in the incident, how she had survived, and how her life has been in suffers since then. The only surviving child of mine, she says, is now living with her spouse who doesn't like me. The other survivors tells story about how they escaped Jeju Island to the mainland Korea with clothes full of blood. No one cared about us. It was also hard to live as mainlanders since when we talk, people immediately recognize our accent. The other survivors are interviewed in their neighborhood in Osaka. These are survivors who have renounce their belief in Korea after Jeju Massacre and renounce their nationality to later become Japanese citizens. I came to Japan without knowing any Japanese, and now I am giving only Japanese name to my children. Now Japanese pops into my head before Korean. Borrowing Cathy Caruth's categorization, the trauma in this part is a crisis of life: the story of the unbearable nature of the survival of an event.

On the other hand, this is a pessimistic complexity shown through a Williamsesque mode of reading. When the people, for the sake of their own life, renounce

their capacity to become the emergent by merely staying as the residual of the dominant by registering themselves as citizens of another country. There is an unfulfilled dialectic here, shown by the contradiction between the dominant and the residual that goes out of the dialectic. Nevertheless, the filmmaker of *Jeju Prayer* attempts to portray the emergent, in the form of resistance of the Jeju local people against the dominant order by departing from the trauma of the dominant-residual dialectic in the past.

On the other hand, the visual of *Jeju Prayer* functions as a tribute towards the death. The first twenty minutes of the film displays a shamanistic funeral ceremony in Jeju: a gate to enter the story of deaths of millions during the Jeju Massacre. Through its narrative loop, the shamanistic prayer for one deceased person is felt like a prayer for the deaths of millions. Later, every shot of spaces and visit to places are shown as a part of the tribute towards the people who couldn't make it to survive. Uniquely, the tribute towards death takes places by fetishizing the space, as if it still has what it was believed to have in the past. The treatment over the spaces is exactly what the religious fetish is all about. Freud also wrote about this in *Moses and Monotheism* (1937). The fetishization of space as a tribute to the death has its precedent in the shamanistic (religious) funeral in early scenes of the film. It makes the treatment not as a cinematic treatment per se, but as an incorporation of one specific cultural religious from where it draws reference. Above all, the usage of space in *Jeju Prayer* is another telling within the notion of trauma, which calls over the crisis of death: the story of the unbearable nature of an event. The audiovisual gap in *Jeju Prayer* is an inter-

twining of the confrontation with death and the confrontation with life.

The psychological trauma of one individual deals with the repression of memory in the unconsciousness, while the historical trauma of one big collective often deals with death that works as an inextricable event from the process of repression.

Conclusion

This double reading, namely Marxian (through Williams, 1978) and Freudian reading towards Jeju Prayer results in a complex intermingling of social struggle and psychic struggle of the Koreans (particularly the settlers of Jeju island) towards the dominant order via the terror of the trauma of the past. Through the trauma, we can see the historical dialectics of the capitalist-based South Korea's process of enforcing the dominant towards its own people, the residual it gives birth to, the risk of some elements renounces out of the cultural formation, and the potential emergent in the form of resistance.

References

Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Freud, S. (2005). *The Unconscious*. London: Penguin Books.

Silverman, K. (1990). *Historical Trauma and Male Subjectivity in Kaplan, A (eds). Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. New York: Routledge.

Williams, R. (1978). *Marxism and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.