The colonial period, the war, and the twentieth century: the wound of Nam June Paik

Transcribed from simultaneous translation

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Good afternoon, as I have been introduced, my name is Seongho Haam. Well, when the Nam June Paik Art Center invited me as a lecturer I was actually hesitant to be up here. I was hesitant because I am not overly knowledgeable about Nam June Paik, but I was also hesitant because I felt that Paik became a myth without me even realizing it. There is an old saying that false is not the opposite of truth but myth is the opposite of truth. I thought about this and pondered over whether or not I should present at this seminar but I decided to sit up here, as you can see, because this is the gathering where we help each other take a step closer to Nam June Paik. That is why I am here before you today. The first time I heard the name Nam June Paik was in 1984, as you are well aware it was during the satellite broadcast titled *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*. I believe it was broadcast in the early hours of the day and I thought, "Why are people talking about it and what is it?" On screen, I saw strange pictures and strange dances blending with each other and I thought, "So is this now the taste of everyone across the globe?"

I had expected more radical performances from this broadcast given the avant-garde reputation of Paik and Fluxus. However, their actions did not even compare to those of our Confucian scholars who in the name of knowledge had cut their arms and even peeled away their eyelids.

During college I was an active participant in the college computer club and therefore considered myself more knowledgeable than Paik in skills concerning electrical circuits and systems. This was the type of naïve idea about Paik and

his practice that I had, but I really appreciated the music in his broadcast. This music was a variation of the traditional Korean music, and it was an expansion through electronic music. I was once again confused because the mechanism used in *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* is similar to the one used to monitor our lives through CCTV and was denounced for its totalitarian characteristics in George Orwell's *1984*. How could Paik celebrate this and be happy with the fact that 25 million people were watching this broadcast at the same time. 1984 was for me a turning point because of Paik's broadcast. With this in mind, in today's presentation, I would like to talk about two things: I would like to look at the linguistic habits of Paik and the historical context of the Korean peninsula.

Whether it should be called satellite art or video art or satellite broadcasting, I came across this work in 1984 at a time when the Korean political situation was not good at all. There were a lot of protests and there was a lot of political talk, and I have tried to look for a concept capable of differentiating the protests of the 70s from those of the 80s. The political resistance movements in the 70s were very raw; they had not yet completely developed their ideologies. In the 80s however, these resistance movements had become so sophisticated that their slogans, such as "For the establishment of a righteous society," were even appropriated by the military government in power. In the 80s, language became the ultimate battleground. The issues centered on who commanded certain concepts and words first. If those in power appropriated a given expression, the resistance movements had to retaliate with a counter-expression. For instance, in the 70s power presented itself as those who could offer better living conditions and food. In the 80s, however, the concepts became more abstract, notions such as righteousness, allowed power to operate within more linguistically complex and unquantifiable apparatuses that were no longer as easy to contradict.

Having seen Paik's 1984 broadcast live and now reflecting back on the given context of that era, I am able to reconsider Paik's life through this juxtaposition of an individual biography with its respective political context. Re-examining

Paik's life in light of the linguistic polarities present in the Korean political context, it seems noteworthy to consider that, given the colonial context and his family's social status, Paik was someone who had to study Japanese from childhood. Being a very wealthy family that can be considered the first Korean conglomerate meant that to benefit from this wealth, they would have had to collaborate with the Japanese colonial power. Therefore, learning Japanese would have been obligatory for Paik.

In the spirit of bringing 'myths' down to earth, I would like to recall an episode regarding his relationship with his mother. Paik once commented that as a child he felt that his mother, who did not speak Japanese, must have considered him a very mysterious and alien being. This may not be the case. Paik's mother was probably undaunted by her son's command of a foreign language. This episode may even be a mere example of Paik's high regard for himself. However, it does highlight that language is not only a vehicle for direct communication; it incorporates entire cultural practices and identities. From this simple recollection we may infer how Paik must have felt conflicted in relation to the Korean and Japanese languages.

This limbo between languages was also present in Korean literary circles. The first generation to explore literature in Korean emerged in the 1970s. Kim Seung Ok is from the generation that led the protests in the 60s that came to be known as the "April 19th movement." Things that we take for granted today, such as using the Korean language to write correspondence and literature, emerged from the 1930s and really flourished with the "April 19th" generation. Due to this, they became the main political force in modern Korean society.

For instance, Kim Seung Ok is considered the pioneer of literature that is exclusively written in Korean. One of the readers of Kim Seung Ok's novels, Kim Jiha, the father of Kim Hyun and one of Korea's most renowned contemporary writers, was shocked by this kind of pure Korean novel. Intellectuals of this generation, whose intellectual capital was expressed in the Japanese language,

realized that their era had come to an end.

Paik was born in 1932, the beginning of this revolutionary turning point in Korean culture. He grew up to see liberation fought for and achieved by Japanese speaking Korean intellectuals, but only witnessed the infiltration of the Korean language into everyday life for a short time since he left the country before it gained cultural recognition. Paik's father foresaw the Korean War, and offered his family the opportunity to flee the country in 1950. This means Paik only spent four years in a liberated Korean speaking society.

In preparation of this lecture I reviewed a lot of old material and also noticed that in his summary, Jin-Sok Kim uses the Deleuzian expression "line of flight." He will talk about this notion in Paik's life from a very philosophical perspective, so I won't be going into that today.

From Korea, Paik travels to Hong Kong, Japan, Europe and finally settles in the United States in his later life. This journey from place to place must have been an experience of the intertwining of languages and was probably only possible to this extent because neither Korean nor Japanese had ever become a mother language to Paik. Therefore, in Paik there exists a void in terms of a mother tongue. It is said that a person 'thinks' through a mother language. What happens when a person does not have a mother tongue? Does this mean that their mother tongue is every language? It is possible that this void left by the lack of a mother tongue can become the ability to use language as a medium consisting of all types of languages, a toolbox full of diverse devices. Therefore, someone devoid of a mother tongue is able to think and socialize by navigating with all these languages. Without a mother tongue, the arbitrariness of language is revealed. The slippage of the surface level of language, evidenced by the arbitrariness of the signifier-signified relationship, is echoed in Paik's use of the nature of video. Employing these characteristics of the language of video must have felt to Paik as if he had found his mother tongue, a linguistic territory within which he could operate.

Paik therefore said, “Look at what Kafka wrote in German, not in the Czech language, not in Hungarian. This was not forced upon him.” Paik emphasized Kafka and Joyce, etc. were not forced to write in languages other than their own to highlight that he had been forced to learn Japanese. He even added that he was “writing this in English and was not forced to do so”.

If we examine Korean author Yi Sang, as mentioned by Kim Suki who talked about the concrete poetry of Jung Jiyoung and Yi Sang, we realize that these poets created their own unique format, not because it was introduced to them from the West but because they were in between languages, Korean and Japanese. For Paik, the situation was similar; he was not only in between Korean and Japanese but between many different languages.

So that’s the first point I wanted to make. The second point is something that the previous speakers have already mentioned about the historical background. Paik was not this single individual that shouldered all the worries of an era. Paik, as you have already heard in other presentations, was influenced by Lee Kun Woo and other socialist musicians. He was influenced by socialist musicians, not by the music of socialism. However, when faced with North Korean soldiers he is disappointed and heads south. We presume he was disappointed because he had hoped to meet someone with similar thoughts, and when he meets the North Korean soldiers they were not people who knew about Marxism; they were not intellectuals; they were just beggars who were hungry and had come down to the South looking for beef and rice. So Paik who was this modern person, an intellectual, was not satisfied with what he saw. I want to share this: “Sometimes I felt that I was standing on the wrong side. In 1950 we were on the refugee train when the bombing began. We were escaping. I was not sure where I stood, and suddenly I thought, yes this was a sort of spiritual awakening.” But how could it be a spiritual awakening? He said, “Now I will watch everything as if it were a baseball game. This is nothing to think seriously about. I was that cynical.”

A poem by Ko Un describes the Korean landscape left in ruins by the

war. This poet is a year younger than Paik and is left distraught by the war to the point where he pours poison into his ears to try to stifle the sounds of the war. The overwhelming experience of the war is also described in a poem by Jeon Bong Kun: “There is bombing, gunshots, so the month of June is like a wet towel that no matter how much you wring does not stop dripping blood.” Jeon Bong Kun’s brother, Jeon Bong Lae killed himself in Pusan and described his last excruciating moments. This was the era when Paik said he would distance himself from everything.

Mary Bauermeister commented that the notion of a leftist nationalist is an interesting idea. In our context this is not just an interesting idea; it is an undeniable fact. Even though Paik said he decided to become aloof, I doubt he ever achieved it. Therefore the radical character of his early performances may come from this. He was simply a youngster in a colonial period whether he spoke a lot of languages, whether he had a friendship with John Cage, whether he met other people, he was simply a boy who lived through a very unfortunate colonial time. He was someone who was burdened by the guilt that he had escaped his home country during the war. This informs the radical nature we see in his early performances.

This radical feature was further triggered by the radical and grand performances of Asian monks. Nam June Paik said that on the one hand there is something called art and on the other something called communication. Sometimes these two overlap and in this space, shaped like an apple seed, is where Paik said he found his dream. He was of course familiar with Pythagorean geometry, because the apple seed, also known as *vesica piscis*, is the shape created by two circles overlapping.

Paik’s relationship with John Cage and Joseph Beuys can be seen to lie within the overlap of these two circles: Paik’s experience of the Korean War and escape from Korea, and his artistic practice. Cage, for instance, probably triggered new emotions about the land Paik left behind. Cage’s interest in Zen,

although linked to Suzuki, whom Paik did not appreciate, probably allowed Paik to redefine his own relationship to Zen. Beuys, with his experience as a soldier in the war, may have provided Paik with hints about the Korea he might one day return to. Although their life experience was very different, given Paik had escaped the war and Beuys had fought in one, their closeness probably resulted from what they saw of themselves in each other. In Paik, Beuys saw a nomad, and this must have given Paik a sense of the territory within which he operated. These influences, with their implications on Paik's conceptions of time and space, may have served as a sounding board for Paik's early video work.

Given the considerations explored thus far, what is the gift of Paik? Perusing the material sent to me by the Nam June Paik Art Center, it occurred to me that the 20th century was absolutely great. Yes, there were a lot of wars, but art in the 20th century proved greater than these wars. The work of people like James Joyce, Kafka, and Paik, in their given fields of practice, was brilliant. Paik is unquestionably a fundamental part of this and contributes to showing us that the 20th century is now over. Through his life and practice Paik is telling us, "It is all up to you now!"