Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean Literature

Yoon Sun Yang

Make noise, not war

Publication details
Evelyn Shih
Published online on: 15 Apr 2020

How to cite:
Evelyn Shih. 15 Apr 2020, Make noise, not war from: Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean Literature Routledge
Accessed on: 07 Sep 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT
The father of the first-person narrator in Yi Ch’ŏngjun’s “In a Low Voice” (Najun moksori, 1974) has a plan for making his television set invisible and, perhaps even more importantly, inaudible to the outside world. It involves the spatial arrangement of a typical Korean home: the secondhand television set sits flush against the wall on the floor of the anbang, the master or “inner” bedroom, with the volume on low so that its noise could not “overflow” past the hyŏn’gwan, or entrance foyer. If the first defense against sonic seepage is the outer door, the second is the hyŏn’gwan, and the third is the rest of the house that keeps outside visitors from the inner sanctum. The rabbit ear antenna, substituting for ostentatious outdoor wiring, are carefully hidden away from the window. And when the KBS fee collector is in the neighborhood, the entire set was to be stashed in a nearby armoire.1

Like many of Yi’s short stories, “In a Low Voice” turns on a central problem that is not what it seems at first glance. Not only is the father obsessed with keeping the television hidden and avoiding the laughably small monthly fee—less than his daily roundtrip fare to work on a shared taxi—but he also draws immense joy from his possession of this small secret. Not registering the television with broadcast authorities is one of the only pleasures allowed to those who, like the father, chafe against “the clothes of custom” and have no other outlet for their shame.2 The TV content was not the point; pleasure came from the idea that viewing was free and that the fussy KBS collector was denied his due. This principle had to be protected through the father’s tight control of his household as the patriarch: the narrator, his mother, and their maid are all mobilized for the secret mission of keeping the television receiver unregistered and hence invisible to the state.

Yi’s story makes an interesting comparison with that of television scholar Lynn Spigel, who found in her classic study of early American television (1948–55) that the sets were considered a “technological eyesore” and had to be either camouflaged or hidden in specially designed cabinets in the name of good taste. Furthermore, they were “made invisible to the outside world” by way of spatial arrangements that put them out of the line of sight from the house’s windows. Although television was sold to consumers as a portal to the world, “the view incorporated in domestic space had to be a one-way view.”3 Like Yi’s father figure, Americans of the mid-century exhibited anxieties about the new media object, especially in the ways that it created a new pathway between public and private space. The government surveillance of Korean television viewers, of putting them “on the grid” through monthly fee collection, was effectively a
Make noise, not war

The 1970s television boom in Korea may parallel an earlier moment in the United States, but here we begin to see a distinctive YSusin style. Television had technically been available in South Korea since 1961, with the founding of the state-owned Korea Broadcasting Service, but it did not truly begin to become a popular mass medium until the early 1970s. This decade was bookended politically by the initiation of Park Chung Hee’s coup of May 1961 and the declaration of YSusin law in 1972, which marked a new era of political and cultural authoritarianism. Park effectively declared himself president for life, putting aside any illusions of democratic rule that he had maintained up to that point. Meanwhile, television ownership rose exponentially, from a measly 0.7% in 1963 to 78.5% in 1979, with the rate more than tripling from 1970 (6.4%) to 1973 (20.7%). Television became an instrument of penetration for the Park administration, reaching with more and more ubiquity into domestic space: raising rates of rural television ownership became one of the objectives of the New Village Movement (Saemaül Undong), beginning in 1974. The infrastructural improvement of broadcast reception was just one of the New Village Movement developmental projects, which was aimed at modernizing all aspects of life outside of urban centers. This policy was bolstered by raised taxes against foreign television sets and raised subsidies for domestic electronics production, toward the creation of the “Saemaül TV.” In other words, the Y Susin government rapidly constructed the conditions for domestic television consumption and state-led television network broadcast in the 1970s.

Whether this was the intended effect or not, it is now impossible to think about the popular and mass culture of the Y Susin period without also thinking of it as Korea’s first television age. As much as the government hoped it would become a vehicle for cultural propaganda, television was too successful for its own good. The more Korean citizens tuned in, the more broadcast entertainment began to exceed centralized control. The flip side of the paranoia of private individuals fearful of government surveillance, as seen in Yi’s narrative, was the paranoia of the state, which had to constantly adjust media policies in the attempt to maintain a soundproof echo chamber for its ideologies. New guidelines for TV appeared in 1973 (broadcast law), again in 1976 (Unified Guidelines for Programming), and twice in 1977 (Standards for Television Dramas and the Measures to Refine Broadcasting Language). The problem, of course, was that while content could be censored, individual apprehension of the content could not, because it was by nature quotidian, spontaneous, and uneven. If Yi’s story is any clue, you can give someone a television, and you can even make them want to watch it, but you can’t control where they derive their televisual pleasure. Yi’s fiction, along with others of the era, finds and exploits this loophole in Y Susin-era media control.

This chapter will explore how the literature of the 1970s Y Susin era, amid a dramatic existential struggle, represented the new medium of television and spoke through it to evoke a network of social tensions that lay just below the surface of everyday life. Television and literature appear at first to be strange bedfellows: inasmuch as literature still possessed the aura of high culture in 1970s Korea, the new mass medium of television was a noisy reminder of the lowest common cultural denominator. However, a broad survey of different literary trends across various literary style, orientation, and gender reveals that television, a new media fixture of everyday life, was an astoundingly unifying experience.

The new medium was not always central to the conceit of the narrative, as it is with “In a Low Voice,” but it often spilled into scenes of action, appeared as a device of nonhuman interruption, and even infiltrated the minds of characters with compulsive snatchings of words and music that would appear, unbidden. The penetration of television—as literal noise passing through walls into the urban soundscape or as fragments of mental noise on the way to (but never quite arriving at) coherence—assures that it becomes a part of myriad embodied...
experiences, which overflow the limits of government regulation. The meaning that is made out of television is ultimately not the work of producers or broadcast stations but the intervention of bodies and minds that receive the broadcast and themselves become media: objects that refract a wave passing through. It is precisely during this turbulent time, when the agonistic quality of the relationship between individual and society comes to the fore, that literature discovers television as multivalent interface between the private and the public.

As a media technology, however, television always teetered on the edge between utopian possibility and deterministic dystopia. The Korean reaction to the novelty of the media object in the early 1970s again parallels that of Americans in the early 1950s. The research of television scholar Im Chongsu (Lim Jong-soo) shows the caricature of TV as an “idiot box” causing “public harm,” especially to children. One cartoon even shows a brainwashed child cheerfully jumping off a tall building, while television news plays inside a window of the edifice—as if to suggest the contents of the broadcast encouraged a fatal leap. Pak Wansŏ, one of the authors whose fiction will be discussed later, took a similar if slightly more-nuanced view of television in her personal essays on the cartoon, citing its corrupting influence on the language of children and its promulgation of negative social stereotypes. She turns the lens back toward herself in other essays, describing how television dramas fulfilled certain personal desire to engage in “man watching” (namja kugyŏng) or allowed her to forget her own ennui by imagining the people behind the creation of the spectacular drama world. As a rare female writer well received in both literary circles and specifically periodicals targeted toward women, Pak’s ambivalence is more striking than her conviction. In fact, she is ambivalent about gender roles and the feminist movement in many of the same ways that she is ambivalent about television: at the core of each is something desirable, if it could only be saved from the distasteful wrapping and kept away from those who have yet to become discerning adults. Yet discernment for Pak is a constant struggle, and she reveals her vulnerability when she describes herself trapped in a compulsive pattern of watching daily dramas and comedy shows—even when she does not find them moving or funny.

The negative and “low-culture” association of television recalls Adorno’s warning that TV, as emblem of mass culture, tends “to make for automatized reactions and to weaken the force of individual resistance.” Without vigilance, viewers quickly become “blind and passive victims” of ideology. The Frankfurt school thinker, of course, expresses his characteristic suspicion of popular mass culture from 1950s America; but he also expresses a particular intellectual suspicion of the medium. His belief in the harmful and prescriptive power of television would be upended in Marshall McLuhan’s watershed work, Understanding Media, which highlighted the participatory nature of television. As a “cool medium,” TV in McLuhan’s estimation actually offers less information than radio or cinema and requires the individual viewer to fill in the blanks. Being a heterogenous medium with a constant flow of low-definition content, TV “turned the hot American culture into a cool one that is quite unacquainted with itself.” Perhaps this is an apt description of Pak’s ambivalence: television cannot be all the things that she as a private individual, Korean society in general, or the state desires, because it does not fill in all the information. Instead, television provides a roughly defined object, around which all parties may fill in the blanks. What could be more disturbing than being confronted by your own desires, flowing unbidden toward an inanimate screen?

This cool space for ambivalence may indeed have been precisely what literary authors sought during the Yusin years, in which censorship gained a renewed force. In a recent study of literature and politics in the 1970s, Youngju Ryu makes the case for calling authors of the time “writers of the Winter Republic,” setting them apart not only for the hotness of their political engagement but also for the fact that, due to the strictures on public discourse, writing anything
at all became a profoundly political act. Those that insisted on speaking their minds were like hardy weeds in a wintry landscape. She notes, “By the early 1970s . . . the Park regime had succeeded in transforming the press into a ‘quasi-state organization’ (chun kukka kigu). . . . With the press thus incapacitated, literature increasingly became the locus of dissenting voices.” Ryu refers mostly to print culture here, but the situation becomes fuzzier when it comes to television. Certainly, “TV news” was largely a state project, and reporters had to toe the line in order to maintain their press pass privileges. Yet while daily serial dramas could be canceled or cut short by state demand, the priorities of the state often had to share consideration alongside market logic for this entertainment genre. Filmed quickly and in large volume, they gained an astounding level of cultural following and could shift direction on a dime to produce melodramatic effect. The most successful of these dramas could remain politically correct while having an enormous affective impact. Comedy and singing shows, generally considered to be “cheerful” and apolitical genres, foregrounded attraction and did not even have a narrative for censors to police. There was, however, something vaguely out of control about the “vulgar” comedy, and in 1978, the state did briefly consider banning comedy programs. Television, by nature of its variety aesthetic and fast-moving “live” tendencies, was both in and out of the sphere of what the state considered “discourse” and was a more insidious competitor with the state for the affections of the masses.

Content aside, however, the televisual medium registered a powerful social presence that could rearrange social relations. Television immediately poses several questions when it enters literature: Who is watching, and how do they change their routines to match the watching? Who is not watching or left out of watching? What new relationship forms between those who are watching and those who are not watching? And how does the presence of television change cultural and social practice, regardless of whether one watches? In short, the newness of television poses a question of communicative affordances, or “an interaction between subjective perceptions of utility and objective qualities of the technology that alter communicative practices or habits.” If television, the materiality of its network and the qualities of its transmission, such as repetitive variety, flow, and seriality, are “objective” aspects of the technology, they exist in dialectic with the subjective perceptions of its cultural status as a middle-brow form of entertainment. These dynamics, in turn, begin to alter how individuals may relate to each other, or even perceive themselves, within a television society.

As Song Eun-yong (Song Ŭnyŏng) notes, most contemporary discourse relegates television to the uneducated working class, women, and children, but literary works such as “In a Low Voice” actually show that middle-class patriarchs often controlled—and, conversely, were controlled by—the use of television. The father in Yi’s story submits to the discipline of programming, rushing home every day for the 7:20 serial drama; he controls what to watch and when, and he controls how loud the volume dial can be. In “Rooms That Resemble One Another,” Pak Wansŏ discusses the television being firmly under the control of the grandparents in a multigenerational home, indicating another level of generational hierarchy. At the limit case, however, where some urban families can afford this fixture of middle-class life and some cannot, television becomes known to some only as noise. Cho Sehŭi, in his classic allegory of poverty within developmental Korea, centers the experience of those who can barely afford to maintain a shanty, let alone a television. The poor child in Cho Sŏnjae’s “Model Essay,” as another example, does not have his own television at home and is compared to the TV comedian Pae Samnyong as a fool because he does not know the ubiquitous advertisement jingles that every child can sing by heart.

But what if, instead of creating social divisions, television dissolved them? Yi Hochŏl’s “In and Out of the Fence” takes this stance, positing a whimsical narrative in which a comedy song
Evelyn Shih

by Sŏ Yongch’un becomes the conduit for two teenagers and their father to form new affective bonds.25 Playing off a real news incident in December 1969, in which a Korean Air Lines flight was hijacked by North Korean agents and its passengers kept hostage in Wŏnsan airport, the story offers a seemingly trivial form of speculative fiction: it posits that the star comedian Sŏ Yongch’un was a hostage on the flight. This detail, which evokes an imagined scene of the comedian playing his usual slapstick tricks on North Korean agents, breaks through the tense tedium of everyday news in Seoul, which is filled with constant threat of attack from the North. Sŏ’s televised songs become a middle ground where parent and child may meet, because they share an intimacy with his mediated presence in their lives. What penetrates here, straight to the center of the family dinner table, is not a sense of heightened mobilization against North Korea after state news and propaganda but an impulse toward reparative communion.

As these examples show, the spectrum of authors whose works touch upon the new social patterns in Korea’s television society cross several divisions in the literary circles of the time. Although Yi Ch’ŏngjun’s fiction tended toward the cerebral and “pure” side of literature, he was not unconcerned with politics; similarly, Yi Hoch’ol was strongly associated with the realist activism of Ch’angjak kwa pip’yŏng (Creation and Criticism) but published frequently in older established journals such as Hyŏndae Munhak (Modern Literature) and Sasanggye (The World of Thought). Cho Sehŭi was a writer whose modernist streak sat uncomfortably with critics who wanted to read him as a gritty realist chronicler of the urban poor.26 Cho Sonjak wrote literary fiction but became associated with mass culture, in part because his breakout work, “Miss Yŏngja’s Heyday,” was made into a popular film and became a part of the emerging “hostess film” phenomenon. And finally, Pak Wansŏ’s presence reminds us of the gendered dimensions of social relations within television society. That is, her gender almost places her outside of these literary debates, though she certainly practices her own brand of realism, conceptual play, and social engagement.

To delve deeper into these literary works and to further define them as an unconventional assemblage of “television fiction” in the era of South Korea’s TV boom, I will focus on three levels of television’s penetration: television as noise; television as control; and television as innervation. Noise begins as the material manifestation of television as it resonates and penetrates through architecture into the urban soundscape and reveals the thin line between comprehensible media and media as a parasitic presence on everyday life. If the state, then, seeks to prune the raw and noisy presence of the broadcasts, literature reveals not only the individual television user’s resistance to such control but also how submission to television’s technologized discipline can bring about a sense of social freedom.

How does television move its user, psychologically or physically, toward that freedom? Here I develop a televisual take on “innervation,” a utopian concept in the work of Walter Benjamin brought to light in cinema studies by Miriam Hansen. Drawn from a cross-section of psychological and physiological studies, innervation is literally the stimulation of nerves—but when applied to mass media, and cinema in particular, it focuses on the mimetic charge passed from media experience to the human body.27 The difference with television, of course, is that it repeats every day within a time and space marked for leisure in the home. In a feedback loop between the body and mind, thus engaged in a flow of media experience, the human who submits to the televisual medium might move toward freedom from overdetermined social relations of the fascist state. Unlike the cinema, these movements are not focalized in the short duration of a feature film but spread out thinly over lived time. The new technology invites spontaneity in its coolness and in doing so returns to a human domain.

This, of course, is the most utopian interpretation, and not all of the literary works assembled here agree that it is possible to achieve this kind of mass movement toward technologized
liberation. As a whole, however, they suggest that the way out of a Yusin-era state apparatus such as broadcast television was not to avoid it but to *pass through*: to find, in the visual, sonic, spatial, and temporal experience of broadcast television the way back to a radical selfhood—ambivalent and ill-defined as that may be. The television connects all viewers on a grid at the same time that it atomizes them, contains entertainment within units of the city block while its noise penetrates the enclosures of concrete in dense urban space. This is the oscillating potentiality of television excavated by literature of the 1970s amid a long winter snow.

**Television as noise**

In Cho Sehūi’s story “Knife Blade,” an early installment in his famed linked story novel *The Dwarf Launched the Little Ball*, the protagonist, Sinae, and her family are sandwiched between two television-owning households. From the noise that spills into their living space, they can surmise what is happening: the whole family crying and laughing in front of the daily drama broadcast, singing along to pop song shows, or a sitting through a particularly loud commercial. In the house behind theirs, a tax inspector’s family watches every day, and in the house across the alley, a recently promoted advertising director’s family now competes for prominence in the nightly soundscape.

The TV begins to interfere in the private conversations of Sinae’s family, despite the fact that they have no means of purchasing this middle-class appliance. In one scene, as Sinae tries to convince her daughter to turn off the radio while studying, she is interrupted by her son’s complaints about the TV noise. When she tries to pick up the conversation again with her daughter later, television makes a more direct appearance.

"How was I wrong, in what we were talking about before?"

"Did I say that?"

"Of course you did. You said I was wrong when I told you that you should turn off the radio when you study."

Her daughter’s face flushed.

The commercial jingle coming from the televisions of the neighbors’ houses climaxed.

"I forgot about that already," her daughter said.

Even as Sinae tries to understand her daughter’s penchant for the ambient noise of pop music radio during periods of concentration, the noise of the television butts in with a constant counterargument. The sudden flare of the commercial jingle seems to undercut Sinae’s plea for her daughter to seek silence: it reminds her again that such an attempt could only end in failure, as long as the family lives in a television society with poor sound insulation. The daughter already understands this, perhaps instinctually, and produces her own flow of sound by playing pop songs on the radio. Unfortunately, this merely creates more aural dysphoria for Sinae, as she now hears foreign (English-language) music on top of the TV actors’ voices, an asymmetrical and polylingual chorus eating away at her nerves. Each member of the family is splintered off into the locus of their own sonic experience by the televisions of others, the neighborhood’s collective mass of noise.

Michel Serres conceptualizes noise, in his classic work on social relations and communication theory, in a very similar way to Cho: noise is the “parasite” that interrupts ongoing relations between actors. His insight comes from “parasite” taking on three meanings in French: the biological parasite, the social parasite, and interference in communication. The latter implies the transmission of a message from sender to receiver, with noise (or the parasite) obstructing
the arrival of information. For Serres, parasitism occurs in a chain: the interrupter can itself be interrupted, which in turn can be interrupted, and so on. Elements on the chain can shift between an interrupting, noisy parasite and the biological or social parasites. Hence, it is very much in the spirit of Serres that we find the house in the back of Sinae’s family home to be the home of a tax inspector, whose television is only momentarily silenced when a corruption scandal involving government officials breaks. If the tax inspector is a social parasite, potentially implicated in corruption, his parasitic presence penetrates Sinae’s home as television noise. It is only when Sinae becomes a parasite herself, having hired the titular dwarf of the novel to tap the neighborhood pipe for her household and get rationed water before the rest of the neighbors, that she drowns out the TV noise in the last lines of the narrative. “The televisions of the two houses fore and aft did not register the night growing late. Her daughter said something as she crouched face down. But Sinae’s ears could hear nothing but the sound of running water.”

Pak Wansŏ’s “Rooms that Resemble One Another” flips this formula on its head: the protagonist is a woman who ends up living with her natal family after getting married, and she conceives of herself and her spouse as social parasites interrupting the rest of the family’s ongoing media consumption. Upon her husband’s arrival each evening, a chain of silence spreads across the multigenerational home. “My mother supposed, of her own accord, that her son-in-law would hate the noise. First, she would lower the television volume; then she would go from room to room on her rounds, saying ‘Shh, your brother-in-law is home!’ and tamping down the guitar and FM radio.” Television again emanates out of the anbang toward the rest of the house and is controlled by the protagonist’s parents as the top of the family power structure, and it sits at the top of the chain in registering the parasite. The husband’s daily doorbell ring is the noise that interrupts “golden time” on television, and the protagonist becomes keenly aware of its distinct sonic features. This is the crucial break in the home’s soundscape that marks her parasitism in her own natal home, because her marriage—and her duty to open the door for her husband—has marked her as an outsider.

What becomes clear when examining Cho’s and Pak’s conception of television is that it creates social divisions in shared space, whether the space in question is a neighborhood or a single house. Where there was only loud conversation and radio before, television now enters as a parasite that marks the boundaries of privilege. Perhaps the reason that the mother in Pak’s narrative cares so deeply about lowering television noise is that she does not want to remind her son-in-law, a father in his own right, that he is not master of his own television set. He does not live in the anbang of the house, with all the privileges pertaining therewith. Her accommodation of the parasite, however, marks it as such, and it is this marking that becomes intolerable. Cho is more explicit in his social mapping: it is precisely the relative wealth of the two houses fore and aft that enable them to eat beef and watch television. Their privilege wafts over with the fragrance of the beef and the cascade of noise, intruding on Sinae’s domestic domain.

As television became more and more mainstream in the mid-1970s, the aspirational ownership of television is pushed to the margins, toward the poorer (or rural) neighborhoods and toward those who do not qualify for home rental or ownership. Despite the supposedly “low” nature of television, the right to control TV noise through private ownership was not equally distributed. The larger political inequity, however, was the power to decide television content in the age of three major channels and state broadcast. The hierarchical structure of television production and content management was meant to strengthen the state’s grip on popular culture—but did it succeed? In the next section, I will discuss the idea of television as a technology of surveillance and control in the Y usin era.
Make noise, not war

TV as control

Yi Ch’ŏngjun’s “In a Low Voice,” discussed in the introduction of this chapter, is not shy about characterizing the central conflict as a battle between the individual and the instruments of state control. The television fee collector is a representative of KBS, a broadcasting institution that began as an organ of the state and had the strongest stench of government control through the 1970s. Interestingly, however, it was just one year before Yi’s story was first published that KBS was relaunched as a public broadcasting service, in an attempt to shed its image as a government mouthpiece and the Yusin government’s image as unrepentantly authoritarian.

This change was a long time coming: legislative debates about maintaining a “fair and balanced” media by going public began in the mid-1950s as a conversation about state-run radio; the aftermath of the April Revolution of 1960 saw a spike of interest in democratizing media ownership, especially with the introduction of television on the near horizon; and the conversation simmered throughout the 1960s as two major private players entered the television arena. These two were the Tongyang Broadcasting Company (TBC), launched in 1966 by Samsung Group, and the Munhwa Broadcasting Company (MBC), launched by a private radio company in 1969. Along with KBS, they formed the “three-channel system,” dominating nearly all television viewership in the 1970s. KBS was not as responsive to live viewing trends and cut all advertisements in the runup to the 1971 presidential election, so that it was even more divorced from the concerns of the private sphere.

Although it seems counterintuitive that Park Chung Hee’s consolidation of power would lead to the creation of public television, it was precisely due to the establishment of Yusin in late 1972 that KBS could “safely” become a public broadcasting network. The government lost little to no oversight over the contents; the broadcasting network simply became more plugged in to local and global television trends. In addition to successful launching daily dramas that competed with TBC and MBC, the new KBS pursued what looked, at least on the surface, like forward-thinking programming. The public broadcasting structure, for example, was modeled after the BBC and other European services and represented a kind of middle ground between state guidance and private actors in the broadcast business. American television also offered lessons: the miniseries 6.25 in 1978 borrowed the format of ABC’s Roots, taking over prime time slots for an entire week to create event viewing. Ironically, the KBS production substituted a state hagiography of the South’s triumph in the Korean War for an epic reckoning with the United States’ shameful practice of slavery. The rebranding of KBS as “public” in 1973, in addition to laws limiting advertising and salacious content for all television broadcasters, evened the playing field somewhat in KBS’s favor—but it also encouraged the institution to experiment with format and to dip its toe into entertainment genres.

This was a rather sophisticated system of televiscual control that eluded most viewers during this time. However, Yi Ch’ŏngjun’s short story cleverly embodies this new public personality with all its bureaucratic weight in the character of the KBS fee collector. In his initial foray into the narrator’s household, he introduces himself in the polite register while pushing past the outer door into the hyŏngwan. Seeing only the boy, he switches to a condescending low register, until the enraged father bursts onto the scene, dressed in only his underclothes. At this point, the KBS collector “seemed to catch his breath. As if to defend his actions, he repeated what he had said to me, and produced a smile so servile that it was almost pathetic as he stood there.” If the father enacts a vulgar outburst, bullying his way into getting what he wants, the collector is a civil servant to a fault, and the mere evocation of etiquette breach strips him of his dignity. He must abide by the rules; but the rules do not account for such brazen transgressions.
When the KBS collector returns weeks later, having found proof of the unregistered television, his manner changes. The father attempts to win by sheer volume once again, but his nemesis had gained a secret power: the law was firmly on his side.

The man from the public broadcasting corporation did not move an inch. He allowed my father to gabble on as much as he liked, all the while looking as if he had all the time in the world. No matter how much my father raised his voice, he only watched as if he were in front of a fascinating spectacle, and the lingering smirk never left his face. For a short time after my father finished, he stood there as if he were a dispirited person who had forgotten what he was there for.

“How would this be, sir. Why don’t we stop there? Wouldn’t it better to just get registered? It doesn’t seem worth all the effort you put in each time to avoid getting in trouble.”

A Kafkaesque bureaucrat, the KBS collector kills with kindness. His condescending tone, wrapped in polite language, is a heavy, smothering blanket, slowly muffling all resistance. He even goes as far as to add that the father should desist because his vulgar speech “is not terribly good for the education of your pure-hearted son.” The allegory is hard to miss: the new Yusin-era media landscape closes down little pockets of freedom, as trifling as they may be, and no one is permitted to go all the way off the grid for long. The executors of this control speak the language of the era, expressing a solicitous concern for the citizen and for the purity of children, all the while relishing the limited power given to them by the system.

As interested in the structures of power represented by KBS as “In a Low Voice” may be, it does not dwell on the content of television broadcast too much, except to say that the father was so enamored of it that “it was unimaginable he would complain of the programs being vulgar.” By contrast, Pak Wansŏ provides a much sharper critique of both television content and herself as its consumer, laying bare her constant struggle between middle-class distaste and compulsive attraction.

In her personal essay “A Certain Escape,” she sets up her rumination on her present TV-watching habits by discussing the practice of daydreaming as a schoolgirl transplant in Seoul. Seeking a protagonist for her fantasies, she focuses her attention on her homeroom teacher, who becomes the hero of all her imaginings. Yet she feels paralyzed when her grandmother from the countryside arrives with treats, and it is suggested that she offer some to her teacher as a sign of the family’s appreciation: “I had idolized her to such an extent that I could not feel close to her, could not imagine her having human-like feeling or eating something as earthy as kangŏng.” This primal scene of social alienation later informs her watching of television dramas, during which she spends her time not immersed in the narrative or the characters on screen but day dreaming about the lives of the drama producers. What completely different plane do they exist on, and how do they put together all these moving parts of the ongoing story? How do they manipulate our emotions? In short, Pak finds herself gazing back at the drama in a metafictional fantasy, in which she demands that television participate in social discourse.

Pak’s demand for discourse emerges earlier in “Poor Folks,” in which she argues that dramas create unhealthy stereotypes of the very rich and the very poor. Since many of the people watching may themselves be poor, she reasons, it would behoove the dramas to provide more positive representation. She puts this critique into fictional practice as well: in stories such as “Eldest Son-in-Law” (1974), she drops satirical lines in the voice of middle-aged women who...
have become too entrenched in these stereotypes. The narrating protagonist is determined that her daughter must marry “a doctor, or if not a scion of a ch’aebŏl family” in order to enjoy a happy life. “You saw her, right? I’m talking about Chihye on Stepmom?” she says to her daughter, citing a popular MBC daily drama of 1972. “She made such a great match, didn’t she? She seemed like such a klutz and a pushover, but she nabbed the CEO of a big company, thanks to her dad. How are you not just as good as Chihye, whether in character or disposition?”46 In many ways, Pak positions herself as a critic in the vein of Adorno, who also, in his 1954 piece, identifies social stereotypes as one of the most potentially harmful products of television. The difference, however, is that Pak is more committed to describing personal experience and revealing her deepest wells of insecurity.

The starkest illustration of Pak’s private fight against TV’s control comes in her description of TV comedy. Considered to be the most vulgar genre by general consensus, comedy comes to her not as a seductive fantasy to be held at hand’s length, but as an assault:

When I’m watching an unfunny comedy, I imagine a comedian taking on the role of an awkward intimidator. “Now is the time to laugh. Laugh now, laugh! Kil kil kil . . .” he would say, fanning the laughter, laughing along, and threatening again.

Without even saying why I should laugh, he commands me to laugh. Soon, his hands will reach out of the television receiver and grab me by the collar. He will tickle me, saying, hasn’t the time come to laugh? Fortunately, oh so fortunately, it just confirms for us that our everyday lives are much more interesting than dramas or comedy shows. Like Yi Hoch’ŏl’s story, discussed in the next section, Pak’s essay conceives of comedy as something that literally moves the viewer’s body. Instead of being immersed in the comedic experience, however, Pak turns a metacognitive eye to her own perception and finds the movement coercive, not liberating. The bodily discipline of comedy, requiring the audience to laugh on cue, is so repulsive that she finds everyday life more appealing—and less alienating—than she did before. In Pak’s essays and fiction, we find that the innervation of television during the Yusin era was not always about moving through mimesis: it could equally be a move toward individuation, toward the widening of a gap between the focal characters and the self. It could even be a movement toward occupying the role of televisual producer, as Pak imagined herself doing. What we find in her own writing about television is not a mind numbed or controlled but a mind at work: a writer’s mind moving toward mastery of structures within its world.

TV as innervation

Television innervation in the mimetic sense begins with children. Pak Wansŏ, again dealing with her unshakable middle-class disgust for the medium, provides a sharp anecdote to that effect in her essay “Weighing Education.”47 The vignette turns on a simple contrast: she describes in loving detail the cleanliness and attractiveness of two well-behaved children who move in next door before revealing their shockingly vulgar vocabulary. The whiplash, she readily admits, comes from a perceived class background—they are “high class kids” with potty mouths. The culprit she identifies is the same guilty party in her own youngest child’s penchant for slang and low forms of speech: the perpetually noisy television, which has become a parasite on their proper growth and development. They are a “television generation” that has known the medium since they were “babes at the teat,” and as such, the language of TV has deeply infiltrated their “linguistic life.” They are bound to repeat what they have heard.
In this account, television is not just a passive medium. It moves children’s mouths and deforms their words; it transforms them into something completely different from what their parents envision them to be. The poor, doomed children watch entertainment and become entertainment people—the horror! While we can fully acknowledge that Pak’s view of entertainment TV and “beautiful language” (koun mal) is a defense of class boundaries in the field of symbolic capital, I argue that she has unwittingly identified TV as an innervating medium.

We need only take a look at the work of Cho Sŏnjak, which depicts juvenile innervation from a much lower social position, to magnify Pak’s discovery with inverted cultural values. Like Sinae’s children in Cho Sehŭi’s story, the child Pae Ch’anggil in “Model Essay” does not have access to his own television, but he lives in the noise of television society. Despite claiming that he does not know any commercial jingles, which helps to earn him the nickname “idiot” (p’alp’uni) among his peers, he sprinkles in the lyrics of these songs throughout his narration. Fragments of television, the songs have passed through TV receivers, other children, and Pae himself before passing into narration. As a writer, Cho Sŏnjak shows his own reception of televisual innervation as he captures its catchy rhythms:

syusyu syuga syubisyuga Ch’il’songsaida (an ad for Chilsung soda with a paean to “sugar”);
ch’ok&o ch’ok&o ch’ok’och’ip (a chocolate chip cookie chant);
ttŏjinda ttŏjinda p’arimogi (a fragment on dying flies and mosquitoes);
k’uraunmekchu masin uridiri naangman, nŏmch’imun kūrasie (on the “romance” of Crown beer) are all recreated word for word. Pae’s concern is not that TV jingles are taking over his brain so much as the fact that he cannot perform them to perfection. Consequently, he is not only ridiculed as an “idiot” and called Pae Samnyong, who plays an idiot on TV, but he is also unable to properly ask for the treats that he would like to purchase at the store. His innervation is incomplete, and yet it penetrates his everyday life. The child of a brothel madame and a disabled veteran, Ch’anggil could only dream about becoming as foul-mouthed as Pak Wansŏ’s neighbor children.

These examples from Pak and Cho do not have a strong utopian dimension but show a spectrum of innervative movement passing from television to children. For the most part, the snatches of TV language and song coming unbidden from the mouths of babes is divorced from their actual content, emerging as fragments and beats etched into perceptual and oral muscle memory. Pae Ch’anggil, for example, does not consume Crown beer, but he does compulsively sing a bar of the jingle when seeing the bottles at home. He has no desire for the commercial product, experiencing only a slight melancholy upon realizing that he cannot sing the lyrics to the end. As advertisement, the commercial seems to be mostly a failure; it does, however, deepen a generational divide between parents and children, because each group absorbs the stimulus of television at different frequencies.

Yi Hoch’ŏl’s “In and Out of the Fence,” on the contrary, posits televisual innervation as a mode of renewing communal and familial bonds, of making meaning at a moment when public discourse has been made absurd. The great contrast in the story is not between class appearance and class behavior, as in Pak’s analysis, but between TV news and TV entertainment. The news (on both TV and radio) constantly bombards the protagonist, Hyŏno, and his family with news of escalating tensions with North Korea and interminable reports of global Cold War crises. They are desensitized, each in their own way, to the “clichéd nature” (sangt’usŏng) of news: although each event reported is new, they blend into more and more of the same. Hyŏno, through whom the narrative is focalized, detests this endless repetition but feels helpless against it. The entertainment variety show on TV (syo), however, with its mix of music with comedy, is both instantly forgettable and instantly memorable, just like a commercial jingle. It may be just as clichéd—and trades in rough stereotypes—but presents as a cooler media object: it becomes whatever its viewer wants it to be.
The comedy song “Seoul Visitor” becomes the crucial interface that allows the teenagers Yŏngok and Yŏnghwan to relate to their father, who migrated south from North Korea after national division. When news of Sŏ Yŏngch’’un’s capture is released, it is specifically noted that the plane has been taken to Wŏnsan, which is Hyŏno’s home town. Having grown up in South Korea, however, the children cannot imagine their father’s different structures of feeling. While they have difficulty imagining or relating to the city of Wŏnsan, he still feels nostalgic about his home town whenever it appears in the news, and he seeks out his drinking buddy to share in his sorrow. Their distance is both generational and political; but when the children perform the comedy song, word for word, at the dinner table, the gap begins to shrink.

As Yŏng-ok explains, Sŏ Yŏngch’’un’s presence amid the crisis makes both the crisis and the city of Wŏnsan seem more real. As if to prove her point, she and her brother spontaneously perform one of Sŏ’s trademark songs, making a point of repeating the onomatopoeic laughter (transliterated as ŭ a a a a a a a, ŭ ha ha ha a a . . .) with a virtuosic thirty syllables per verse in order to achieve mimetic realism. By conjuring up Sŏ’s comedic presence with great energy and commitment, the teens shift their parents from news consumers, paralyzed by dread, into laughing viewers of comedic performance. Through this enactment, they begin to share a common sense of futurity, through the idea that that a comic experience could somehow transcend and heal the trenchant political impasse. “They’ll laugh, they’ll laugh I say. Those bastards (the North Koreans) will laugh, too, if they’re human,” remarks the younger brother Yŏng-hwan, picturing the comedian on site. Although the parents resist, they cannot help submitting to the fantasy: “It’d be great if it is as you two say,” admits the mother. “If you were right, we’d have reunification already.” When the state is constantly drumming up enmity against the North, this family of Northern descent dares to claim common humanity.

By discussing Sŏ’s capture and summoning his comedic presence to their dinner table, the family not only move mimetically, passing through TV comedy, but also move the song toward their own understanding. They share a sense of absurdity bred by the apocalyptic tone of news reports, from which they, much like Pak Wansŏ watching TV, feel alienated. Instead of Pak’s isolated alienation, however, they come to the consensus that they are alienated together, a condition that allows a ludicrous, miraculous modicum of hope to survive. Television in its most utopian sense is still “clichéd” and vulgar, but it also creates a new means of communication that breaks through the wall of noise created by daily news broadcasts.

The family does not fight against state bureaucracy, or turn a critical eye to TV’s low-class language. They own a TV, and they are comfortable in their mundane, middle-class life. They are politically static, lodged into the predetermined space allotted to them in Pak Chung Hee’s Korea. Where they find the possibility of movement, however, is in taking the comedic song into their own bodies; they not only take in the noise but also become a part of the noise. The charge that passes from Sŏ Yŏngch’’un through the broadcast and into their bodies now passes through, marking them as members of an alternative non-state collectivity. Instead of feeling alarmed or angered by the hijacking incident, as the state news broadcast suggests they should, the family members feel a new connection to each other in a relentlessly cool television society.

Yi Hoch’ŏl’s intervention, like that of the other authors discussed in this article, is to conceive of television and its attendant qualities as an agentic object in itself, not a transparent conduit for broadcast content. The daily ritual of television, with its ubiquitous and noisy presence, penetrates but does not control. Instead, it creates new avenues for human communication and affect, through which each individual could move, sometimes unwittingly, toward a new manifestation of selfhood. Whether it is the bullying, transgressive energy of the patriarch in “In a Low Voice,” Pak Wansŏ’s physical sense of disgust, or Hyŏno and his wife’s glimmer of hope, the charge to define and protect the self despite the demands of the state shines forth as a radical,
innervative movement. As sophisticated as state cultural policy may have become during the Yusin era, it never managed to capture television society in its totality—and it may have undermined itself by being too successful. At least, this is the hope expressed in television fiction of the era: mass culture is not one mass but multitudes.

Notes

1 Yi Ch’ŏnjun, “Najin moksoriro.”
2 Ibid., 147
4 Im Chongsu, “1960–70 nyŏndae t’el’ebijŏn pum,” 85. These numbers were released by the Ministry of Culture and Information in 1979.
5 Ibid., 89.
6 Ibid.
8 Im Chongsu, “1970 nyŏndae t’el’ebijŏn munhwa wa bimunhwahui yanggasŏng,” 61.
9 Pak Wansô, “Chŏchulchi kyoyuk.” This and the next essay were both collected in Pak’s 1977 volume, Hongja pumunin hapch’ang.
10 Pak Wansô, “Kanabangi”
11 Pak Wansô, “Namja ka namjadaul ttac.” This essay was from Pak’s 1978 volume, Yŏjawa namjaga innin p’unggyŏng.
12 Pak Wansô, “Ŏttŏn t’al’ch’ul.” This essay was from Pak’s 1977 volume, Kkolchiege ponaen in kalch’ae.
13 Ibid.
14 Adorno, “How to Look at Television.”
15 McLuhan, Understanding Media, 27.
16 Ryu, Writers of the Winter Republic, 17.
17 Cho Hangje, Han’guk pangsŏng ui yoksa wa chŏnmang, 178.
18 Ibid., 201–7.
19 Song Unyŏng, “1960–70 Nyŏndae hanguk ŭi taejung sahoeohwa wa taejung munhwa ŭi chŏngch’ijok ŭimi,” 214.
20 Schrock, “Communicative Affordances of Mobile Media.”
22 Pak Wansô, “Talmŭn Pangdŭl.”
23 Cho Sehŭi, “K’alnal.”
24 Cho Sŏnjak, “Mobŏm changmun.”
25 Yi Hoch’ŏl, “Ul an kwa ul pak.”
26 Ryu, Writers of the Winter Republic, 108.
27 Charles, “Secret Signals from Another World.” Charles adds to Hansen’s interpretation by exploring other sources for Benjamin’s concept, including “Asja Laci’s proletarian children’s theater, Vsevolod Meyerhold’s biomechanical training, Sergei Eisenstein and Sergei Tretyakov’s theory of expressive movements, and V. M. Bekhterev’s collective reflexology in the Soviet Union, as well as debates about bodily rhythm associated with the reactionary, anticapitalist Lebensphilosophie of Rudolf Bode and Ludwig Klages in Germany.” 40.
28 Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics.” I am thinking here of Buck-Morss’s interpretation here: “[Benjamin] is demanding of art a task far more difficult—that is, to undo the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity’s self-preservation, and to do this not by avoiding the new technologies but by passing through them” (original emphasis). 5.
29 Cho Sehŭi, “K’alnal,” 44. This story was first published in December 1975 in Munhak Sasang.
30 Serres, The Parasite.
33 Ch’ŏe Yongmuk and Songmin Yun, Kongyong pangsŏng ui ihac, 94–7.
34 Ibid.
Make noise, not war

36 Ibid., 23–6.
37 Ibid., 100.
38 Kim, “The Race to Appropriate ‘Koreanness’."
39 Yi Ch’ŏnjun, “Najŭn moksonoro,” 133.
40 Ibid., 144.
41 Ibid., 144–5.
42 Ibid., 139.
43 Pak Wansŏ, “Ŏttŏn t’alch’ul,” 279.
44 Ibid., 279–80.
45 Pak Wansŏ, “Kananbaengi.”
46 Pak Wansŏ, “Matsawi,” 176.
47 Pak Wansŏ, “Chŏulchil kyoyuk.”
48 Cho Sŏnjak, “Mobŏm changmun.”
49 Yi Hoch’ŏl, “Ul an kwa ul pak,” 360.
50 Ibid., 362.
51 Ibid.

Works cited


305


