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Impossible speech: the politics of representation in contemporary Korean literature and film

by Christopher P. Hanscom, Columbia University Press, 2024, 225 pp., US $30.00 (paperback)

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BOOK REVIEW

Impossible speech: the politics of representation in contemporary Korean literature and film, by Christopher P. Hanscom, Columbia University Press, 2024, 225 pp., US$30.00 (paperback)

South Korea's formal democratisation heralded a major reckoning with the question of literature's heretofore privileged place in society. The hegemony of the minjung movement, which had underscored the heroic struggles of the downtrodden, gave way to quieter fictions of everyday life. The rise of postmodernism evolved into a wider acceptance of genre-melding narratives, both broadening Korean fiction's appeal and heightening the sense that literature had been besieged by commodification. But South Korea's apparent arrival as a wealthy, democratic, and increasingly multiethnic nation-state gave rise to a host of new challenges. How would the nation be re-articulated in a globalising society? Who would replace the minjung as the privileged subject of marginalisation? And how would literature's political authority be reclaimed?

Impossible Speech focuses on four figures of marginalisation – the migrant labourer, the witness of state violence, the North Korean refugee, and the pathologised precariat – to provide a compelling account of how works of contemporary literature and film have navigated these challenges. Hanscom also tracks three forms of narratological normativity that constitute the realist regime on which a new politics of representation of postmillennial literature is predicated. The first is the memorialisation of trauma; the second is the deployment of the biographical or confessional mode to render the narrative 'verisimilar'; and the third is a 'soteriological' tendency that emplots the subject on a path to some kind of salvation. All three submit supposedly fictional works to the 'historiographic imperative' in which major events must conform to grand narratives of nationalist history (4). What may appear as a recounting of trauma in the name of recognition and redress is revealed to be part of an ongoing ritual that legitimises the status quo. For instance, the repeated commemoration of the Gwangju Uprising shores up the neoliberal narrative of economic growth and democratic progress, which minimises enduring problems of socioeconomic inequality.

Crucial to the book is a critique of how acts of speech can paradoxically entail subtle, even insidious, forms of silencing by putting marginalised subjects in their place. To wit, the marginalised may speak 'politically' but only according to a script that befits their positionality. This almost inclusive principle can be found in the logic of testimonies by victims of state-sanctioned violence from North and South Korea alike. Hanscom draws from Jacques Ranciére to formulate an alternative form of politics that operates not through statements or testimonies but through a set of 'operations that work to establish the domain of the sayable and the visible' (9). These operations reveal how 'the part of those who have no part' is constitutive of one's community, a set of relations inherently dangerous to those still wedded to ethnonationalist ideations. In this vein, Hanscom privileges art that highlights 'the limits of what can be said, seen, or heard' (7).

The first chapter tracks how the multiculturalisation in narrative accounts of migrant ethnic Others belies a stubborn 'culturalist impulse' in which the 'tie of language' anchors the ethnonationalist imaginary (27). The second analyses how Han Kang's *A Boy is Coming* (2014), which is about Gwangju, negotiates with the 'historiographic imperative' by arguing that the tragedy cannot be made sense of while

simultaneously demanding 'repeated attempts at interpretation' (17). Han refuses to facilitate the neoliberal appropriation of Gwangju by showing that its temporality is still unfolding, rather than a past event 'over and done with' (79). The third chapter examines Adam Johnson's *The Orphan Master's Son* (2012), which operates as a deliberate subversion of the biography and the confession; rather than guaranteeing 'truth', they reveal 'the arbitrariness at the base of the production of systematic knowledge about North Korea' (18). The final chapter analyses the protagonists of the films *I'm a Cyborg, But That's Okay* (2006) and *Castaway on the Moon* (2009) as socially marginalised subjects. Contrary to the migrant-labourer fiction in the first chapter, where 'the status of speech is never threatened', the films show how 'language is constantly in the process of becoming something else' by communicating 'through miscommunication and . . . the sharing of symptoms' (19).

Impossible Speech is a welcome contribution to the ongoing inquiry into the meaning of political art in the neoliberal era. Except for the posthumanist intimation in the treatment of *I'm a Cyborg*, the book does not address the recent turn towards speculative genres (most notably, science fiction) found across South Korean media and its impact on the political imagination. Yet, Hanscom's theorisation on the resilience of the verisimilar boasts great explanatory power and range. Consider the numerous South Korean films in the last decade that restage periods of the Japanese occupation and postwar authoritarian rule. Even beyond his deeply attentive readings, the arguments in the book hold tantalising implications for works as varied as Hwang Sok-yong's *Princess Bari* (2007), Lee Chang-dong's *Poetry* (2010), and Bandi's *The Accusation* (2014).

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