



## TOTALITARIAN TEARS: Does the Crowd Really Mean It?

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The death of the North Korean leader Kim Jong-il hit the world headlines on Monday, December 19, 2011, two days after the fact. A black-clad female newsreader announced his passing on state television with, she said, “the gravest emotions” (*Las Vegas Badger* 2011). Kim Jong-il, known in his country as Dear Leader, had, it was reported, died of heart failure on a train at 8:30 in the morning on December 17 as a result of “physical and mental over-work” (Jones 2011; *Huffington Post* 2011). In grand state socialist style, Kim’s body was wrapped in red cloth and put on display in a glass coffin, with rows of medals and a pair of gold epaulettes at his feet, not far from the embalmed body of his father, the founder of communist North Korea, Kim Il-sung, otherwise known as Great Leader. A border made of hundreds of white chrysanthemums surrounded the coffin with, closer to the younger Kim’s body, two strips of a specially hybridized red begonia known as—what else?—*kimjongilia* (Silver 2011).

Judging by the images and reports pouring out of North Korea, the announcement of Kim’s death triggered a veritable hurricane of public grief. The North Korean state TV network described the people as “engulfed in incredible sadness” and “convulsing with pain and despair” (Jones 2011). Much was made in Western news media of the mourning’s corporeal intensity. Mourners seemed to be losing control, racked, collapsing on the streets and in the offices of the capital, Pyongyang, in a manner that one journalist described as “both moving and in-

credibly unnerving to witness.” This was, by one account, “wild-eyed, shaking grief . . . scenes of near-chaos: sobbing, tearing at hair, gulping for breath” and—again—“convulsing” (Chivers 2011). The persistent sense among commentators outside North Korea was one of utter incredulity. As one typical article demanded, by way of introduction: “Do they really mean it?” (Carpenter 2011).

I will not be trying to answer that question. I will be asking, rather, why it was so insistently repeated. Why should the sincerity of these tears have become such a pressing concern? What kind of sense can we make of the acute blend of fascination and unease that the spectacle of these North Korean crying crowds seemed to produce in the deluge of articles, blog postings, and incidental comments that flooded the Internet in those final days of 2011? My argument, in outline, will be that the repetition of the question “Do they really mean it?” marked an attachment to an impasse—that is to say, an investment in asking the question in such a way as to render it infuriatingly, tantalizingly, but also reassuringly unanswerable. Or to put it differently: an itch in the liberal imagination, un/pleasurably aggravated by the very act of scratching.

### AN ITCH IN THE LIBERAL IMAGINATION

What liberal imagination? I am referring here to a set of assumptions about human nature and its relation to public life that moved into something like their present-day constellation in the eighteenth century and that continue, today, to provide a basic matrix for mainstream political discourse, on both the left and right, in liberal democracies.<sup>1</sup>

Two axes within this constellation interest me here. The first axis is what Elizabeth Povinelli (2006) has usefully characterized as a tension between the autological and the genealogical dimensions of the liberal subject. Or to put it in different language, the tension between autonomy (the subject as self-made and self-determining) and heteronomy (the subject as dependently made through ties of kin, clan, nation, culture, etc.). The second axis of interest here is the tension between reason and affect as definitive indices of sincerity (what Lionel Trilling [1972, 2] calls the relation “between avowal and actual feeling”) and spontaneity (non-calculated signs of self). These two axes of the liberal imagination come together in the eighteenth century. So, for example, Immanuel Kant ([1784] 1986) imagined public reason as mediating between our human capacity for autonomous deliberation and the promise of a rational civil society in a way that would fundamentally inform twentieth-century theories of the public sphere (Habermas [1962] 1989; Koselleck [1959] 1988). But Kant ([1790] 2009) also sug-

gested that our visceral apparatus, our capacity for raw response, could, if properly cultivated as a faculty of taste, provide a sensible (as opposed to an intelligible) ground for the good society.

It is certainly no accident that these delicate and complex relations between autology and genealogy, between reason and affect, and between self-discipline and sensibility, should, in the eighteenth century, have become inextricable from the political potentials of democratic revolution and the emergent mass society. Protestant ideals of plain-speaking sincerity (Keane 2002) bumped up against the blandishments of performance and sentiment in a society of strangers. David Hume's ([1739–1740] 2000) and Adam Smith's ([1759] 1984) ruminations on sympathy were driven, to an extent perhaps not sufficiently acknowledged, by the problem of how to scale up the spontaneously empathetic responses we might have to familiar people, places, and things in such a way as to provide an affective compass for a more impersonally public morality.<sup>2</sup> Citizenship required a recipe for the rational mediation of public affect. And this generally involved cultivating a new kind of secularized vigilance against the seductions of theatrically and rhetorically *insincere* forms of public persuasion (Roach 1993; Trilling 1972).

Now why should images of crying North Korean crowds, beamed around the globe at the end of 2011, activate these tensions so acutely, so compulsively?<sup>3</sup> In the eighteenth-century constellation I have sketched here, tears are symptomatic in that they appear as both an involuntary index of self and as a potentially manipulative medium of communication. Jean-Jacques Rousseau ([1762] 1979, 65–66) noted that an infant's helplessly spontaneous tears of need were "the first link in that long chain of which the social order is formed." But as soon as the child itself realized the agentive power of crying, its tears deserved to be greeted with the utmost suspicion as to their in/sincerity, the "secret intention which dictates the gesture or the scream." But can a crowd, as opposed to an individual, be sincere? Can a crowd have secret intentions?

Crowds are inseparable from our basic images of democracy: from the *demos* physically gathered in the Athenian agora, the face-to-face prototype of the public sphere, to the multitudes of the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement.<sup>4</sup> But the figure of the crowd sits uneasily between, on the one hand, the familiarly grounded affective circuits of kin, clan, and neighborhood and, on the other, the impersonally principled commitments of civil society. As *mob*, the formidable energies of the crowd run fast and loose; as *mass*, they appear rationalized to the point of no remainder. The point is not simply that crowds are both the germinal plasma out of which upstanding autological liberal subjects emerge,

as well as the solvent in which they come apart. The point is also that if crowds are both constitutive and destitutive of liberal subjectivity, this is because they embody, quite concretely, the unstable play of autology and genealogy, of reason and affect (Borch 2012; Jonsson 2008, 2013; Mazzarella 2010; Schnapp and Tiewes 2006). Crowds may be demonized as terrifying harbingers of public disorder, or, in the shape of the multitude, they may appear redeemed as postliberal crucibles of common creativity (Hardt and Negri 2001, 2005, 2011). However they are figured, crowds remind us of the uncanny mimetic ground of the social. And as such, they call into question all the basic psychological categories commonly attached to the liberal subject—categories like individuality, intention, and sincerity—through which we are wont to distinguish between autonomy and influence, reality and theater.

On the one hand, the crying North Koreans seemed, pathetically, not to have realized that the Cold War had long since passed. On the other, they evoked not so much a past as a *past future*, an alternative project of mass industrial utopia that once constituted the telos the so-called free world had to resist at every cost (Buck-Morss 2000; Koselleck [1979] 1985; see also Ferguson 1999). The Cold War's sibling rivalry had of course at one level been pursued in terms of supposedly objective measures like GDP, industrialization, scientific advancement, athletic prowess, armament, space exploration, and so on. More important for my argument here, the Cold War allowed the liberal-democratic world to project all the anxieties that inhered in modern publics— anxieties about autology, genealogy, sincerity, spontaneity, and anonymity—onto paranoid figures of mass manipulation (brainwashing, subliminal advertising, etc.) that could then be quarantined as totalitarian tendencies against which a healthy liberal public sphere could and should inoculate itself (Acland 2012; Lemov 2005; Melley 2012).

One might suppose, perhaps, that North Korea's persistence as the last actually existing bastion of Stalinism would give rise, in the West, only to weary exasperation: When will they give up? Certainly some of those who asked, "Do they really mean it?" seemed, on the face of it, incredulous that such a self-evidently anachronistic regime should still inspire any kind of intensity at all. But I will be arguing here that, on the contrary, it was precisely North Korea's status as one last outpost that made it so itchy—that is to say, at once so infuriating and so vital to the liberal imagination.

## DON'T FORGET TO PACK YOUR LONG JOHNS: A Note on Method

I am, to put it mildly, no expert on North Korea. That being the case, some might wonder why I have chosen to rely on online postings by largely Euro-American observers, the vast majority of whom themselves appear to have no firsthand knowledge of life in North Korea. Such a strategy would appear to offer me no ethnographic ground from which to escape the feedback loop that I am trying to analyze. Should I not, rather, have heeded the advice of one online commentator: “If you really want to know what’s going on, I’m afraid you’re going to have to head straight to Pyongyang, ready for a long stay. And don’t forget to pack your long johns” (Shaw 2011, comment by Michael)? But where, really, is my field?

The real barriers that limit physical access to North Korea do, of course, make it something of a special ethnographic case. Still, in researching this essay I did read a number of journalistic accounts and memoirs of life in North Korea, variously based on firsthand experience and defector testimony (Demick 2010; Harrold 2004; Kang 2005), as well as some illuminating political and historical studies (Armstrong 2004; Cummings 2003; Kwon and Chung 2012). As absorbing and often disturbing as this literature is, I realized early on that the integrity of my analysis demanded that I rigorously resist any temptation to mine it for the truth about North Korea.<sup>5</sup> At the risk of stating the obvious, and out of respect for actually existing North Koreans, I must emphasize that I made this choice because my essay is not about North Korea. It is, rather, about how a set of narratives and images, popularly identified as North Korea, activate and trouble the liberal imagination in particularly acute ways.

Having first become alerted to the phenomenon of the crying crowds by an article on the *New York Times* website, I built an archive by means of Internet searches in the days immediately following the death and funeral of Kim Jong-il, using a small number of keyword combinations like “North Korea crying” and “North Korea tears.” The deluge of articles this produced, most of them written within just a few days of each other, confirmed my initial intuition that the passing of the Dear Leader had touched a nerve in the blogosphere. My digital archive, the main body of data for this essay, amounted to the record of an event: not the death of Kim Jong-il, not the crying as such, but rather the efflorescence of a certain anxiety, as indexed by a repetitively posed question. The speed with which these reports and reactions emerged, and the relatively offhand quality of the

reader comments quickly appended to them, gave this archive a strongly reactive aspect, which seemed particularly well suited to a symptomal reading.

Indeed, my archive differed from a hard-copy equivalent primarily because of these freewheeling, generally pseudonymous reader comments. The relation between the more formally composed articles and blog posts and the informality of the reader comments seemed, oddly, to recapitulate the distinction between sincerity and spontaneity that the debate on the tears itself thematized. And there was, it seems to me, a fitting irony in the fact that many of those voices most ardently presuming to distinguish sincerity from theatricality in the tears of North Korean mourners themselves relied, for the would-be immediacy of their sometimes quite scabrous brand of plain speaking, on the anonymizing artifice of user-names. So why were these same commentators so obsessed with whether the North Koreans really meant their tears?

### MONSTROUS SWELLING, QI POOL

Veena Das (1996, 70) notes, drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein, that an expression of pain “makes a claim asking for acknowledgment, which may be given or denied. In either case, it is not a referential statement that is simply pointing to an inner object” (see also Asad 2003). Perhaps because the politics of acknowledging the North Korean tears seemed so fraught, the commentary pushed back so insistently toward precisely the inner object that might give rise to this kind of crying, that is, the enigmatic condition of totalitarian subjectivity.

If these crying crowds had suffered so much under Kim, then why would they mourn the passing of their oppressor? But there they were. “They wept, they wailed, they doubled over in apparent pain,” remarked the *Daily Mail*, on the occasion of Kim’s funeral, and concluded: “Not a bad show for a tyrant who subjected his country to 17 years of torture, repression and mass murder” (*Mail Online* 2011). How could all this be explained? *Was* there any rational explanation? *Time* magazine commented: “As the rest of the world has watched these scenes, most people are asking a very reasonable question: Are these people nuts?” (*Powell* 2011).

Brainwashing lay ready to hand as an explanation. This was a story of thwarted citizenship, of reflexivity smothered at birth, of interiority utterly absorbed and exhausted by the magnificent leader. Facing the neatly subservient ranks of his subjects, childlike in their tutelage, the leader reserved to himself the exclusive right to capital-s Subjectivity. In all his blinding obscurity, the leader was the progenitor of his people, the master signifier, the symbolic sine qua non

of his subjects' very existence *as* subjects. No wonder that his death would seem a kind of ontological crisis. Quoting an "Asia expert," the BBC remarked: "Learning about their leader's death raises questions for the North Koreans about their identity, their security and their ability to survive" (Geoghegan 2011). One article quoted a song regularly performed by way of tribute to Kim Jong-il: "Without you there is no country. Without you there is no us" (Carroll 2011).

There was apparently no way for the people to repay the infinite gift of existence that their leader had bestowed on them. All they could do was offer him, in death as in life, an intensity of affect that outside commentators—perhaps not entirely without envy—could only call irrational and immature. "It's embarrassing. They're like children," remarked one long-distance witness to the weeping ranks (Silver 2011, comment by jd). Ruling party members and ordinary mourners reinforced the impression of infantile dependence by crying out "Father!" and demanding of journalists from the state news agency: "How can he go like this? What are we supposed to do?" (Park 2011; Jones 2011).<sup>6</sup> What could be more titillating to liberal publics than a spectacle of thwarted enlightenment in which the forced retardation of these childish citizens fed a monstrous swelling of the leader, whose overstuffed, singular subjectivity was directly proportionate to the massification of the people? In this picture, the North Korean tears might well be sincere, but they also had to be pathological—equivalent, as one response had it, to "the wailing of a beaten dog at its cruel master's demise," (Friedman 2011, comment by Bala Don 2) or, as others suggested, to the misplaced loyalty of an abused child or spouse (Shaw 2011; Silver 2011, comment by jojo).

Formally similar to the brainwashing argument was a more affirmative culturalist line of explanation, invoking various versions of the stereotype of Asian collectivism, a trope familiar all the way from Oriental despotism via Eastern communism to neoliberal Asian values (Suwanto 2011). By this logic, the crying crowd easily appeared entirely overdetermined: Korean Confucianism joined hands with state coercion and a totalitarian cult of personality in a fertile union of ritualized expressiveness and mass regimentation (Carroll 2011; Favet 2011; Friedman 2011; Martin 2011; Park 2011).<sup>7</sup> One self-styled expert who had admittedly never been to North Korea but claimed to have spent several years applying the insights of Neuro-Linguistic Programming to Asian mass emotion, concluded that "Asians (especially from India --> Japan) breath [*sic*] in unison (and probably have similar heart beats) after being in close proximity for at least 20 minutes," thereby collectively entering "the Qi Pool" (Shaw 2011, comment by davemclean). Others identified similar tendencies in the Middle East—pro-

fessional funeral mourners found mention in passing—and, indeed, in so many other locations around the world that, in the end, it was pretty much only northwestern Europe and the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant population of the United States that was exempt from this alleged cultural syndrome.<sup>8</sup>

### INNER SKEPTIC, PAID WITH HAMBURGERS

Swiftly, sanely, one no-nonsense blog respondent tried to lay the Qi Pool argument to rest: “I wouldn’t get too tangled up in the Mysterious Asian Mind-Meld thing. It’s another Western trope” (Shaw 2011, comment by tinwoman). So it was. But then so was the available alternative, the trope of the *inner skeptic*, the idea that behind the seamless public facade of totalitarian conformity, each individual in the crowd harbored private seeds of self-determination. As Alexei Yurchak (2006) has pointed out for the late Soviet context, liberal analyses insist on dividing state socialist societies into a front stage and a backstage, a fictional public world of ideological enthusiasm and a real private world of cynical pragmatism. Accordingly, when it came to North Korea, the *Globe and Mail* insisted: “These scenes of grief do not tell the entire story of how North Koreans, in spite of the myth-making, viewed the leadership of Kim Jong-il” (Chowdhry 2011). In a sense, the whole point of the trope of the inner skeptic was to save reflexive subjectivity from the pull of the crowd, to give it a little island of immunity to stand on in the midst of the contagion. As Elias Canetti famously noted: “Everyone belonging to such a crowd carries within him a small traitor who wants to eat, drink, make love and be left alone” ([1960] 1984, 23).

Presuming the existence of the inner skeptic meant that the crowd crying could be reimagined as pragmatic adaptation rather than helpless surrender to the imperatives of tyranny. It was widely surmised that the first person to stop looking sad would summarily be shipped off to one of North Korea’s infamous gulags if they were not simply shot on the spot (Mead 2011; Watson 2011). Or perhaps the people seen crying in the streets were not representative of North Korea’s starving millions; they were the Pyongyang elite, kept in a relatively cushy state by the regime, well aware on which side their bread was buttered. Or they *were* a section of the starving millions, but they had, as Bill O’Reilly of Fox News put it, been “paid with hamburgers” for their tears (Hartenstein 2011). Some speculated on sinister dramatic incentives: “Mourn or we’ll kill you! Add enough histrionics and we’ll double your rice ration to 300 grams!” (Mead 2011, comment by Drang). Still others proposed that the North Koreans really did mean it—as long as what they really meant was either their despair at having been forever

denied a chance at stringing up Kim Jong-il from a lamppost or their displaced grief at the suffering that so many of their relatives had undergone at the hands of the regime (Mead 2011, comments by Kris and Martin Berman-Gorvine).

The peculiarity of the crying-crowds debate was not so much that it insisted on purified stereotypes of influence and autonomy, but that it required both of these to be true at the same time. Even as all North Koreans were presumed, in their heart of hearts, to maintain an inner reserve vis-à-vis the regime, totalitarianism itself by its very nature had to be imagined as, well, *total*: completely hegemonic, rationalized to the point of no remainder. Many articles described North Korea as completely self-contained, a hermit kingdom entirely lacking cell phones, satellite television receivers, and computers—despite plenty of evidence that the fortress was no longer, if it ever had been, quite that impregnable. A morbid fascination with what it would be like to live in such a world—a kind of precontact dystopia—joined hands with the presumption that totalitarianism could only work if, in fact, it *was* total and the slightest chink in the structure would send the whole brittle spectacle crumbling in on itself. A polity, in other words, of complete command; a state form in which, as a BBC article neatly expressed it, “everything that isn’t forbidden is compulsory” (Geoghegan 2011).

All over the world, observers scrutinized the crowd images for signs of the inner skeptic. Wasn’t that person in the far upper-right-hand corner of the picture looking oddly unmoved? Why were the people in front more upset than the ones behind? And yet the obscene excess of crying in these same images was also taken as proof of the state’s seamlessly totalizing propaganda apparatus. The obstacle to knowing what North Koreans really thought was not just one of limited physical access, of not being able to get backstage to verify what was actually going on. Rather, North Korea-watchers demanded at one and the same time that there had to be a backstage zone in which North Koreans had real, critical thoughts *and*, because the regime had to be characterized as completely totalizing, that this backstage zone could only be imagined as a kind of Kantian *Ding an sich*: a thing-in-itself, a presumed reality that, by definition, lay beyond representation.

Here, then, lay the core of the itch. On the one hand, the North Koreans were being forced to cry—and the fact that they needed to be coerced meant that they were not entirely brainwashed, because if they had been, they would have cried spontaneously. On the other hand, the uncanny intensity of their tears was taken as proof of the fact that the North Koreans had been entirely and comprehensively brainwashed. And if the tears were spontaneous, whatever their perverse origin, then presumably no coercion was necessary. One blog discussion

comment perfectly encapsulated the contradiction, saying of the mourners both “that they’ve been *entirely conditioned* to give the proper response to the regime” and, in the very next sentence, “I’m sure many of them are *inwardly smiling*, though” (Carroll 2011, comment by mckftw; emphasis added). As a “physical mattering forth” (Povinelli 2006, 7), these totalitarian tears hovered enigmatically between naive spontaneity and cynical design. Who could really know whether these tears were sinister proof of just how far the governmentalization of affect could go or, conversely, whether they made for a hopeful index of the persistence of the seeds of self-determination *even here*: “Even people who genuinely feel sad about Kim’s death might wake up tomorrow, or next week, or a year from now, with an epiphany about their own power and their relation to the state, the germ of which was the tiny sense of empowerment and release that came from weeping in the streets” (Kennicott 2011).

#### BAD B MOVIE, HEAVEN’S GRIEF

Accusations of theatrical insincerity have long been a standard feature of liberal critiques of both feudal and totalitarian regimes.<sup>9</sup> Stagecraft and acting, the argument goes, become necessary to divert attention away from the absence of real legitimacy—that is to say, a state grounded in the freely given consent of enlightened citizens. Totalitarian polities, qua theater states, hold themselves aloft, by this reading, on the twin struts of regimented performance and unhesitating brutality. Spectacle stands in for civil society, acclamation for assent.

North Korea was, many suggested, one big Potemkin village performing as much for itself as for export. If a civic ethics existed there, outsiders argued, then it took the form of a cradle-to-grave commitment to acting. “Many of the residents of Pyongyang double as actors to impress visiting foreigners,” wrote a journalism professor. “They start as little children performing in events such as the Arirang ‘mass games’ that have been the regime’s main tourist attraction in recent years. They’re good at their work. So if you see a video showing more sobbing and tearing of hair a week from now, and are inclined to believe the mourners are really and truly torn up, you may want to think again” (Martin 2011).

In this analysis, acting skill amounted to a cunningly concealed insincerity, a skill perfected through years of participating in mass ornament-style state spectacles involving the exquisite coordination of tens of thousands of bodies (Kracauer [1927] 1995). Again, the very intensity of the crying triggered doubts outside North Korea. Why were these mourners on the streets of Pyongyang laying it on so thick? Were they auditioning for a spot in the forthcoming funeral show,

set to hit screens some ten days later? (Koffler 2011, comment by Sadie). Even the odd celebrity felt moved to evaluate North Koreans' histrionics. Mia Farrow tweeted: "North Korea: Ppl sobbing, wailing & thrashing about—as an actor I can say, they would never get hired" (Jones 2011). The idea that North Koreans were in fact embarrassingly bad actors was, again, linked to a narrative of coercion: the very exaggeration of their extravagant crying proved that they were not really feeling it; that they were, in effect, laughing up their sleeves even as they were whimpering under the gun. One blog reader remarked: "Cry, or we'll shoot you. The video sure looks fake to me. Some of the worst acting I've seen, like a bad B movie" (Favet 2011, comment by Bob).

Either way, good or bad, commentators here invariably understood acting as the opposite of sincerity. Likewise, both good and bad acting could only appear within this discourse as evidence of totalitarian oppression. The possibility, propounded by drama theorists from Diderot to Stanislavski, that an activity might be "repeated so often that it becomes automatic and therefore free" (Roach 1993, 214) was simply not compatible with an ideology of autological citizenship in which artifice could never be the royal road to truth. At most, commentators on the crying crowds were prepared to concede that the act of pretending to cry might, through some combination of dogged repetition, autosuggestion, and crowd contagion, lead to a (deluded) collective belief in the reality of the grief, effectively—but not actually—turning fake tears into real ones.

As a theater state, the regime, too, could only be accused of deploying repetition and ritual *against* history, insofar as history was presumed to be at once the terrain and the product of the self-making liberal subject. The North Korean equation, it seemed, asserted a simple string of equivalence: state = history = nature. Now of course any political formation with aspirations to universality at some point or another claims to be naturally grounded. Indeed, the classic Enlightenment discourse on the autological subject from Rousseau to Kant asks, "Given what we are, what can we become?" But the North Korean regime seemed to specialize in creating affect-intensive spectacles out of the proposition that the state was always already the fulfillment of a destiny in which politics, history, and nature marched—like those goose-stepping North Korean soldiers—in lockstep.

Roland Barthes ([1957] 1972) once wrote, and I paraphrase, that one of the definitions of ideology is history dressed up as nature. When it came to the life of Kim Jong-il, it appeared as if nature itself had decided to take Barthes at his word. Kim's birth in the early 1940s had been foretold by a swallow appearing at the foot of a sacred mountain and marked by a double rainbow and a new star.

At his death, state media proclaimed that the people's "wailing voices are rocking heaven and earth" (Friedman 2011). The heavy snow that blanketed Kim's funeral was a sign of "heaven's grief," a theme that continued in the days and weeks following, as suddenly cracking ice, glowing mountains, and unusually vivid sunsets were all greeted as hieroglyphs of cosmic loss (Choe 2011; Rundle 2012).

This quite literal naturalization of the Kim regime was greeted with predictable derision outside North Korea, even though it drew on many of the same mythical motifs that, precisely *as* myth, were also standard elements of the South Korean nationalist repertoire. Myths may of course, within the liberal imagination, quite legitimately serve as founding charters for modern nation states (Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm 1990; Schopflin and Hosking 1997). Politicians mine their poetic potential on the campaign trail, and government archaeologists assist the official extrapolation of sovereignty claims from mythical narratives by anchoring them in the ambiguous material indices of the distant past (Abu El-Haj 2002; Kohl and Fawcett 1996). Perhaps, then, precisely the unsteady interdependence of myth and history in liberal regimes requires the compensatory counterimage of totalitarian regimes that flatly deny the difference altogether.

The uncanny endurance of the embalmed bodies of dead leaders has long been a standard state socialist mode of laying a political claim to eternity (Verdery 2000; Yurchak n.d.). And when Kim Jong-un, until recently the rather obscure son of Kim Jong-il, was installed as his successor, the state news agency KCNA dubbed him "the eternally immovable mental mainstay of the Korean people" (Friedman 2011). But here it is significant that Western critics, even as they tirelessly called for the end of North Korea, also seemed strongly invested in arguing that the hermit kingdom was a land in which standard conceptions of historical time simply did not apply, where everything happened exactly as it had happened before, and exactly as it would happen again.

Indeed, one might well be forgiven for wondering who was really more anxious at the prospect of the disappearance of the last bastion of actually existing Stalinism. Who was really more attached to the repetition of these mythical images of totalitarian sovereignty? What if there was also a liberal anxiety embedded here, an anxiety that the hermit kingdom might actually come to an end, and with it the mirror in which the liberal subject could, time and again, consider itself? As the third Kim, Kim Jong-un, moved into the limelight, the Western media marked the transition by dutifully posing the obligatory question, "Is there any hope for change in North Korea?" But then they almost immediately relaxed back into the reassuring relief of being allowed to regret that, no, things would

stay exactly the way they had been—right down to those cozily anachronistic mid-twentieth century aesthetics of state socialist dictatorship.

### SO DO THEY REALLY MEAN IT?

One might say that the iron curtain that sequestered North Korea from the rest of the world revealed by hiding. To extend the theatrical metaphor, it created the illusion of a fourth wall, but one that was at once opaque and transparent, at once mirror and window. Was North Korea an enclosed dramatic space, performing for itself? Or was the intended audience the rest of the world, looking in, by means of carefully selected images, on a self-contained fictional environment?<sup>10</sup> The peculiar structure of attachment manifested in the debate on the crying crowds seemed to require that both hold true at once: that the structure of the spectacle should be understood as essentially self-referential, unaffected by the presence of the liberal gaze and, at the same time, that it should be reliably available to the outside world as a kind of inexhaustibly enigmatic ritual performance. The very question “Do they really mean it?” captures something of this double relation, since it seems to inquire about both the sincerity of the North Koreans’ intentions within their own lifeworlds (behind, as it were, the fourth wall) and, at another level, about the address of their tears to spectators in the outside world.

It is perhaps not surprising that such a double relation should take the form, on the part of those viewing the North Korean crying crowds from outside, of a complex amalgam of contempt and fascination, of outrage and desire, in which ethical and aesthetic impulses often seemed hard to disentangle. Commentators expressed outrage at the arrogance with which the Kim regime kept its people, so to speak, out of time. And yet responses to its mass ornamental spectacles veered unsteadily between a post-Soviet nostalgic attachment to communist kitsch (Barker 1999; Erjavec 2003) and the queasy anti-erotics of the recently outmoded (Benjamin 2002).

If North Korea served as a mirror/window for the liberal imagination, then it was by no means simply a reassuring one; perhaps it would be more adequate to describe it as reassuringly bewildering. One blog respondent in the debate on the crying crowds noted that totalitarian regimes hardly had a monopoly on propaganda, and that all the “awkwardly theatrical puzzlement and speculation about grieving North Koreans” was really “an opportunity to retell our own mythology and show that it is, when we compare ourselves to a place like North Korea, at least somewhat true” (Shaw 2011; comment by robert e). But the point

was not just that the misery of North Korea helped shore up the American Dream. Again, part of the unease of the North Korean mirror/window was the ambiguity of its address. What if the Kims' deployment of mass communist kitsch was not only or even primarily intended to deceive their own subjects, but was just as much a diabolically skilled manipulation of foreign liberal observers, quite deliberately designed to put pressure on that tender spot between disgust and desire? That there was no way of knowing, no way to tell the difference, was perhaps not indicative of totalitarian pathology so much as of a crisis in contemporary liberal political culture, where the line between sincerity and parody has become increasingly hard to discern (Boyer 2013; Boyer and Yurchak 2010).

As Slavoj Žižek (1989) notes, the point is not that totalitarian authority is helpless in the face of laughter. Rather, it is the discourse of liberalism that rigidly requires totalitarianism to involve earnest ideological commitment. Consequently, the uncertainty as to whether the North Koreans really meant their tears disclosed how deeply Western commentators needed the North Koreans, qua national collective, to be what Žižek (1998) calls "the subject supposed to believe"—and how mercilessly the crying crowds evaded that desire. Žižek, riffing on Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* ([1983] 1987), argues that in today's Western liberalism, the fundamental disjuncture occurs not between publicly professing sincere ideals and privately behaving with cynical self-interest. Rather, Žižek suggests, the postideological liberal subject is in fact *publicly* cynical, agnostically distanced from all forms of earnest belief, but this public cynicism finds its compensation in a desperate private investment in the belief of *another* subject, the subject supposed to believe, whose earnest belief must be protected at all costs, even as it is publicly dismissed as naive and regressive.<sup>11</sup> The Western relation to the North Korean crying crowds, however, seems to suggest a further turn of the screw: the attachment is not to a subject who is presumed to believe, but rather to a subject whose belief, given the rules of the game, simply cannot be evaluated.

Throughout this essay, I have argued that the debate on the North Korean crying crowds seemed attached to a paradoxical stance, insisting at once that the truth of these tears might be found behind the scenes of the spectacle and that, by totalitarian definition, such a backstage space could only be inferred but never actually reliably known. We are now, perhaps, in a position to situate that paradoxical stance vis-à-vis a larger structure of liberal desire. As Uday Mehta (1999) has shown, the liberal imagination has generally expressed imperial condescension toward the purported backwardness and irrationality of other lifeworlds. This

condescension has come coupled with a paternalistic pedagogics of patience, expressed in the colonial nineteenth century as the white man's burden and in the postcolonial twentieth as development and structural adjustment.

The crying crowds of North Korea fit only uneasily within this formation. On the one hand, they certainly prompted, as I have shown, the standard liberal insistence that here, too, one might find the seeds of liberal redemption (the inner skeptic, etc.). On the other hand, the spectacle of these tears also and at the same time seemed to trigger a parallel fantasy of a totalitarian world utterly and perpetually closed both to internal transformation and to outside intervention. The pedagogical-imperial impulse of liberalism—the vista of a world remade in its image—is sustained by making the world available to its interventions. But the North Korean tears seemed to prompt a different kind of liberal activation, one that, despite itself, clung almost desperately to the continued existence, somewhere in the world, of an utterly irredeemable polity.

But what, in the end, explains such a perverse attachment? Why should the North Korean crying crowds appear, if I may borrow a psychoanalytic phrase, as the symptomatic point of the liberal imagination? Here, I think, it may be instructive to line up the compulsive incredulity that greeted the North Korean crowds with the ecstatic reception of those other mass-mediated crowds of 2011: the crowds embodying grassroots democracy, reclaiming the agora all across the world from Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park.<sup>12</sup> The perceived political potential of the North Korean tears was, as we have seen, close to zero. By contrast, the widespread investment in the pure democratic immanence of the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement proved so intense that their considerable charisma seemed in danger of wilting as soon as someone brought up something as boring as concrete political demands (Graeber 2011). In one panel of this polarized crowd diptych, political subjectivity was always already thwarted; in the other, it was never quite allowed to move from virtual vitality to actual form.

This, then, is where the figure of the crowd, whether as mob or as mass, whether as myth or as multitude, embodies a deadlock of liberalism insofar as liberalism claims hegemonic status as a theory of democracy. The rigidly schematic division of the diptych is the symptom of this deadlock. From a liberal standpoint, the crowd, in all its face-to-face potentiality, constitutes at once the origin and the nemesis of democracy, though never its permanently indispensable lifeblood. In the imagined biography of the liberal subject, understood both ontogenetically and phylogenetically, the crowd represents a childish moment of savage indistinction: corporeal, affective, and irrational. Insofar as the autonomous subject is

the Archimedean stable point of a liberal conception of democracy, the fact that the crowd is at once constitutive and destitutive of this autonomous subject can only appear as an intimation of the birth and death of democracy per se, rather than of the autonomous subject as a recurrent *moment* in an dialectical dynamic of collective and democratic becoming.

The problem that absorbed the Enlightenment philosophers still very much remains with us: namely, how to come to grips with the corporeal grounds of political subjectivity in a society of strangers. And the crowd, in all its actuality, remains the mobile and enigmatic rebus of this relation. For an actual crowd, full as it is of virtual potentials, really meaning it is not, in the end, a problem of authenticity, immediacy, or sincerity. It is not a matter of surface matching depth, or of appearance coinciding with essence. Rather, it is, perhaps, a commitment to continuing to grapple with making collective sense out of a world in which we are strangers together across particular places, body to body.

#### ABSTRACT

*In this essay I explore the reaction, in Western media commentary, to the announcement of North Korean premier Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011. I focus in particular on responses to the widely circulated images of crowds crying on the streets of Pyongyang. These responses obsessively returned to a single question: Do they really mean it? I do not attempt to answer this question. Rather, by considering a series of subsidiary questions that clustered around it (Can these tears be real? Are these people insane? Why are they such good/such bad actors? Is mass crying something that Asians are particularly likely to engage in?), I ask in turn why the sincerity of the North Korean crying crowds came to seem at once so necessary and so impossible to Western observers. I argue that the obsessive return to the question about whether they really meant it expressed a deep liberal anxiety—not, as one might suppose, an anxiety that North Korean totalitarianism would continue indefinitely, but a much more profound worry that it would come to a sudden end. [totalitarianism; crowds; public affect; liberalism; North Korea]*

#### NOTES

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1. I have toyed with giving the liberal imagination I am discussing here some kind of specification by calling it, say, Western or Northern liberalism. While doing so might help forestall an impression of breezy universalism, it would also efface the fact that while political discourse in the West has certainly *claimed* this liberalism as its own (even

- as it has insisted on its universal validity), its norms and forms actually arose, to a much greater extent than generally acknowledged, out of attempts to make sense of and to manage encounters on the colonial and protocolonial periphery.
2. Hume ([1739–1740] 2000, 345) remarked, “There is no quality in human nature, which causes more fatal errors in our conduct, than that which leads us to prefer whatever is present to the distant and remote, and makes us desire objects more according to their situation than their intrinsic value.” Adam Smith’s ([1759] 1984) well-known reflections on the figure of the “impartial spectator” were intended to overcome this problem by recommending a divided self-relation that would allow us to observe our own sympathetic responses as if from a neutrally impersonal standpoint.
  3. For that matter, shifting the emphasis, why should *images* of crying North Korean crowds activate these tensions so acutely? There is, after all, no reason to presume that visual images are in themselves more affect-intensive than, say, sounds. I would argue, however, that the images of the crying crowds powerfully partook of the ability of photographs to be at once iconic and indexical—that is, to appear to be both full of (iconic) meaning *and at the same time* indubitable (indexical) traces of an event whose meaning could not be firmly established.
  4. I should clarify that I am here using *crowd* as the generic, unmarked term, with variants like *mob*, *mass*, and *multitude* standing for differently moralized visions of what crowds might be or become. For an extended discussion of the politics and potentials of these terms, see Mazzarella (2010).
  5. There is, of course, the added complication that North Korean defector testimonies, like those of Soviet bloc dissidents and defectors in the 1960s and 1970s, play an overdetermined part in organizing Western public affect around the critique of antiliberal authoritarian regimes. The exposé stance of this genre, whatever the factual accuracy of the details it reports, renders it complicit with the complex that I am trying to analyze here.
  6. The theme of communism involving a state-citizen relation understood as paternal or parental is variously explored in Dunn (2004), Kwon and Chung (2012), and Verdery (1996).
  7. It was not as if dramatic examples of collective mourning in the liberal West were not also invoked (JFK, Elvis Presley, John Lennon, Lady Diana—even Steve Jobs—were all mentioned). And the comparison was always uneasy, since it was never quite clear whether this meant that liberal mourners were just as susceptible to mass grief as totalitarian subjects or that liberal grieving was in fact even *more* irrational since it happened voluntarily.
  8. See especially the spirited and freewheeling discussion that follows Shaw (2011).
  9. A locus classicus of this strategy may be found in Thomas Paine’s ([1791] 1998) and Mary Wollstonecraft’s ([1790] 1993) defenses of natural human rights in the wake of the French Revolution, in the course of which they found it necessary to impugn what they saw as the sentimentality and theatricality of Edmund Burke’s ([1789–1790] 2006) critique of the revolutionaries.
  10. Luc Boltanski (1999) observes that the distances involved in mass-mediated images of grief have, inter alia, the effect of heightening the sense of suffering as a kind of fictional performance, all the more available for aestheticization.
  11. One of Žižek’s more playful examples of this dynamic is that of the parent desperately invested in his child’s sincere belief in Santa Claus. But of course we can recognize it as a structural feature of what anthropologists, following Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1991), call the “savage slot”—the structural position of primitiveness that is at once reviled and romanced for its horrifyingly/charmingly naive attachments.
  12. Alexei Yurchak, in a personal communication, points out that, from a crowd-dramaturgical standpoint, Kim Jong-il even appears to have chosen the ideal year in which to die.

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