Camera as Weapon: Military Values in the 1988 Seoul Olympics

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Just a year after Ronald Reagan proposed the Strategic Defense Initiative in 1983 (also known as Star Wars), Paul Virilio published *War and Cinema* (1984). In this influential book, he examines the close relationship between war and cinema, as he writes, "For men at war, the function of the weapon is the function of the eye."[1] Addressing the ways in which cinema is materially connected to war in a period of advanced radar systems, satellite imagery, and smart missiles, Virilio argues that the technologies of military and cinema become increasingly intertwined. He states, "The Americans prepared future operations in the Pacific by sending in film-makers who were supposed to look as though they were on a location-finding mission, taking aerial views for future film production."[2] The technology of cinema, or more specifically the camera's ability to *capture*, not only articulates and adheres to military technology, but also transforms the world into, in Rey Chow's word, a target.[3]

[1] Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (1984), trans by Patrick Camiller (New York and London: Verson, 1989), 20.
[2] Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* (1988), trans by Julie Rose (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 49.
[3] Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

It is within this charged context of technology, implicated in the politics of militarism and imperialism, from which I engage with the images of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The Seoul Olympics marks a watershed moment in Korean history. After over three decades of Japanese colonial domination (1910-1945), the Korean War (1950-1953), the military *coup d'état* of Park Chung-hee (1961), and the dictatorship period from Park Chung-hee to Chun Doo-hwan (1961-88), the Seoul Olympics took place during a turbulent period of social reforms for democratization in South Korea. Simultaneously, it signaled the shifting political and economic landscape in Korea – a turn towards globalization. With the increasing liberalization of economic and political policies (that include but are not limited to the relaxation of citizens' overseas travels and the importation of foreign goods), the 1988 Olympics became an international platform where South Korea established and presented its new national identity. In other words, the Seoul Olympics became a spectacle that captured, in Youjeong Oh's words, "the gaze of foreigners."[4] My line of inquiry emerges from the dynamic ways that a new Korea was documented – or captured - during the 1988 Olympic Games: what exactly was captured? Who captured it? And what were the political implications of this "capture?"

[4] In *Pop City: Korean Popular Culture and the Selling of Place* (2018), Youjeong Oh writes, "the gaze of the foreigners has been a persistent theme in South Korean development. In pursuing export-oriented economic development, the developmental state cultivated a mentality of consciousness of the foreign gaze: an outlook that emphasizes the extent to which the international community is paying attention to the performance of South Korea, a postcolonial latecomer on the world stage. To verify the extent of this gaze, domestic media have competed with one another to deliver overseas responses to major sporting events such as the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988 and the Korea-Japan World Cup in 2002."

The opening ceremony for the Seoul Olympics demonstrates an impressive synchronized movement of masses of people. The camera oscillates between the aerial view and the ground view, contrasting the seamlessly synchronized choreography and the rigorous and rapid movement of individuals who perform it. Along with the theme song of the 1988 Olympics performed by singing group Koreana, *Hand in Hand*, the aerial view of the mass is intended to evoke a sense of harmony, a word that is literally visualized by the crowd that holds up differently colored paper to create each letter of the word (Indeed, the motto of the 1988 Seoul Olympics was Harmony and Progress). Despite Korea's attempt to promote a theme of harmony, Western reception highlights the dynamics of power within the racializing foreigner's gaze, exposing the impossibility of the Olympic institution's expressed ideals of multiculturalism. In a

Rolling Stone article "Seoul Brothers," P.J. O'Rourke writes about "pie-plate" faces, "identical anthracite eyes," and Kimchi breath that could "clean your oven."[5] In an article, "Jingo Olympics," published by the *New York Review of Books*, Ian Buruma compares the 1988 games to those Hitler sponsored in 1936, as he writes that Korea is "one of the few countries that combine capitalist economy with the militant patriotism and obsession with folk culture more often seen in Communist states."[6]

The hostile, if not blatantly racist, comments made by the West (more specifically the United States) allude to the lingering tension and anxieties of the Cold War, an asymmetric partnership in which Korea serves as a ground for the US to enact its imperialist (disguised as anticommunist) fight in exchange for economic and military support. Along with his comment on "[Korea's] militant patriotism […] often seen in Communist states," Buruma further wrote of a government spokesman who privately criticized the "crass attitude of Americans" and their insensitivity towards Korean culture, comparing it against German viewers who "understood the symbolic depth" of the opening ceremony. In response, Buruma proclaims, "Well, I thought with an element of spite: they would, wouldn't they."[7] Buruma's implicit (perhaps explicit?) categorization of the synchronized movement seen in the opening ceremony as "Communist" registers sharply with the ideologies of the Cold War, in which the notion of American individualism triumphs over the communist collective. (It should also be noted that the binary of individualism and collective is highly racialized, as it often aligns the Western culture with individualism and the Eastern culture with collaboration.)

In consideration of this contentious and precarious political position of South Korea in the global world in the 1980s, the 1988 Olympics becomes, then, a site that articulates the

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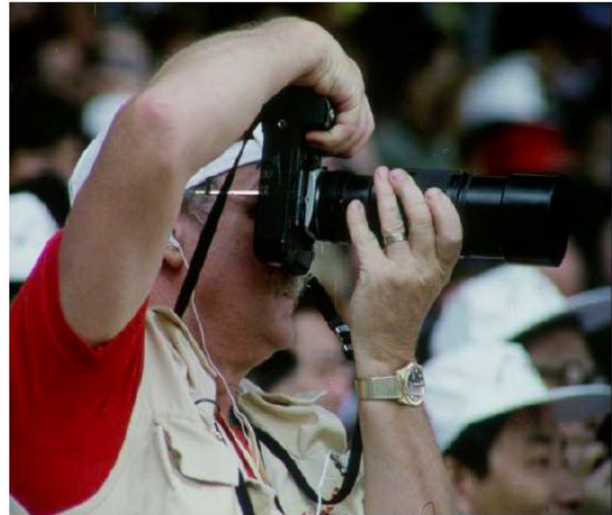
[5] P.J. O'Rourke, "Seoul Brothers," *Rolling Stone,* (Oct. 1988).
[6] Ian Buruma, "Jingo Olympics," *New York Review of Books*, (Nov. 10, 1988).
[7] Buruma, "Jingo Olympics, 1998

dis-harmonious structures of power, charged with the geopolitics of race and nation-state. In other words, the aerial views that capture the opening ceremony can be understood not simply as a form of entertainment, but as a sight/site of power struggle, one where military technology surveys and evaluates its target, South Korea.

The inherent nature of the Olympics, indeed, echoes the logic of war. Its supposedly "friendly" competitions not only evoke but also demand a sense of patriotism, reinforcing the boundaries of nation-state. And perhaps more importantly, it celebrates the same set of skills and abilities that is often expected of soldiers at war. For example, Kim Soo-nyung (South Korea) won an individual and team gold medal in archery at the 1988 Olympics. Her nickname, "Viper," suggests her abilities as an archer to attack precisely, aggressively, and dangerously. In a picture of Kim Soo-nyung, her attention is focused as she aims for the target. Positioned on the foreground, she becomes the focus of our attention even as the viewer is denied a frontal view. The clear and sharp image of her form contrasts the blurred image of a target in the background, allowing the viewer to visually target her just as she aims at her target. With her back straight and her right arm stretched out back, the Korean flag logo on her jacket clearly marks her national identity and association. The prominent Korean flag logo, along with a profile view that

hinges on her back, deindividualizes her, constructing her as a representative of South Korea who metaphorically and literally shoots for her country.



The photograph of Kim Soo-nyung illustrates how the rhetoric of the military unfolds in the Olympics in two distinct ways: 1) the value placed on a set of militaristic skills in sport; 2) the photographic technology that captures the event. In consideration of the inherently militaristic nature of the Olympics, one must question, then, the ways in which Korea's (re)presentation of its military prowess was harshly criticized and categorized as "Communist." The synchronized movement shown in the opening ceremony for the Seoul Olympics parallels more closely to the language of the military, and less to the characteristics of Communism. Why was Korea's "militant patriotism," a value that the Olympic institution demands and celebrates, perceived as a source of contention and anxiety? How can Korea's exhibition of "militant patriotism" be understood in the context of the inherently militaristic nature of the Olympics? Subsequently, can it be understood as a defensive (and even perhaps appropriate) response to camera technology that *captures* South Korea (or in Chow's word, a target)? Despite its disguise as a harmonious international sporting event, the 1988 Seoul Olympics stands as an allegory that

exposes the contentious geopolitics of nationhood. After all, the value and technology of the military is much more intimately embraced than anyone would like to admit.

Bio

Eunice Uhm is a PhD candidate who studies modern and contemporary art, with a transnational focus on the United States and East Asia. Her dissertation examines the conditions of migration and the diasporic subjectivities in the works of contemporary Japanese and South Korean art from the 1960s to the present.