

Conversation*

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Sound dialogue is not possible with such a guy bereft of reason.

- North Korean General Kim Rak-gyom, referring to President Donald J. Trump, August 9th, 2017

Sometimes, when the winds are just right, it rains USB sticks over North Korea. And not only USB sticks: also socks, candy, choco pies, empty food wrappers, pornography, instant noodles, dollar bills, radios, DVDs, and countless leaflets.

Strange weather indeed.

But not at all unprecedented. During the Korean War (1950-1953), the United Nations dropped something in the vicinity of 2.5 billion propagandistic leaflets over North Korean territory – enough to cover the entire peninsula in a layer 35 leaflets deep, one scholar estimates.¹

And since then, the aerial bombardment of the North has continued under less formal auspices. Private citizens, activists, evangelists, and NGOs have been parachuting all manner of goods north of the 38th parallel for decades. Normally, this is done using hydrogen-filled balloons that, carried by northerly winds, release their payload on a timer. But now that the technology has become more affordable and widely available, mechanical drones are being used too.²

For a government that forbids its citizens any contact with the outside world, these intrusions from the sky are an obvious inconvenience. When Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK), an organization led by North Korean defector and activist Park Sang-hak,

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¹ Yi Lee, *Bury the Enemy in Leaflets: The Psychological Warfare of the United States in the Korean War* (Seoul: Ch'ölsuwa Yönghui, 2012).

² Madison Park, "Drones Drop Films, Information into North Korea, Activists Say" *CNN*, May 26, 2016.

dropped 10,000 copies of *The Interview* (Seth Rogan and James Franco’s 2014 action comedy about the assassination of Kim Jong-un) over North Korean territory, the government called this a serious insult to “the dignity of the supreme leadership” and a “blatant” declaration of war.³

These are not just hollow words. In October of 2014, North Korean forces opened fire at balloons being released in South Korean territory, prompting return fire from the South. And there are reports that the North Korean government intentionally poisons goods dropped by balloon, in order to convince its citizens that South Koreans wish them harm. Concerned about this, Lee Min-Bok, another activist-defector, included the following message in a balloon full of socks that he released in 2012 (socks, incidentally, are a scarce and highly-valued commodity in the Hermit Kingdom):

Our dear siblings in North Korea! Hello North Korean siblings! Around the world, people are always with you. Your difficulties are well-known internationally. We hope North and South Korean people will reunite in the near future. Please live a long and healthy life! Stay strong. We love you. We miss you so much. Warning! It is possible that some bad people may have sprayed these socks with poison that could harm you. If you find the socks, do not touch them with your bare hands. Pick them up with tools and store them in plastic bags. If possible, rinse these socks under running water for at least 10 hours before wearing.

If they manage to avoid being poisoned by their own government, North Koreans who collect these goods risk various other punishments. Beginning in 2015, the North increased the minimum penalty attached to the import, distribution, or even simple possession of “decadent culture” to 5 years of imprisonment with hard labor. And reports frequently circulate of citizens, as well as party officials, being executed for watching smuggled media, including South Korean soap operas like *Scent of a Man*, a drama about a love affair between an ex-convict and his stepsister.⁴

Despite these dangers, balloon operations have been ramping up of late. With the help of a strong marketing campaign, snazzy website, and mobile installation, *Flash Drives for Freedom* – a cooperative effort between the Human Rights Foundation and Forum280 (a Silicon Valley nonprofit) – is smuggling thousands of USB drives into North Korea every year. The drives are loaded with American sitcoms, South Korean soap operas, Hollywood films, Korean-language versions of Wikipedia, and interviews

³ Ryu Hyon Sop, “Rage Simmers Over Leaflet Scattering” *The Pyongyang Times*, August 8, 2015.

⁴ Choe Sang-hun, “North Korea’s Forbidden Love? Smuggled, Illegal Soap Operas” in *The New York Times*, January 24th, 2015.

with North Korean defectors. According to the organization’s website, the goal of all this is to “DISRUPT NORTH KOREA.” Sharon Stratton, who works on the project through a partner organization, the North Korea Strategy Center, claims that these drives are “literally a key that will unlock a new world for North Koreans.”⁵

Not everyone is convinced. In a press briefing last August, a minister for the South Korean government expressed concern that the balloon drops may pointlessly derail a delicate military détente, and now diplomatic talks.⁶ We might also wonder how it is that episodes of *Friends* and *Desperate Housewives* are meant to unlock a “new world” for North Koreans. Or perhaps a more important question: is this really a world worth unlocking? And what about the grave risks all this imposes on everyday North Koreans? *Flash Drives for Freedom* has an easy answer: “access to information is a fundamental right, not a privilege.”⁷

But this simple argument won’t do, at least not on its own. Even if North Koreans do have a fundamental right to access to information, dropping illegal flash drives on their heads may not be the best way to secure it. And even if smuggled flash drives are the most sensible option here (there is, in fact, a decent case to be made for this),⁸ we might still worry about what’s loaded onto them. Are soap operas, sitcoms, and Hollywood blockbusters really the TED Talk-sized solution to North Korean totalitarianism that advocates like Stratton make them out to be? Shouldn’t the limited space available on these drives be reserved for more important content?

We tend to rank pop culture as “low” culture. But high or low, firsthand testimony suggests it can facilitate transformative encounters between North Koreans and the outside world. Kwame Anthony Appiah has referred to such encounters as “conversations.” As he points out, a conversation can be literal talk, but also a metaphor for “the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your

⁵ Andy Greenberg, “Donate Your Old USB Drives to Fight North Korean Brainwashing” in *Wired*, February 9th, 2016.

⁶ Yeon Soo, “S. Korea Reviews Policy for anti-N.K. Leaflet Campaign” *Yonhap News Agency*, August 7, 2017.

⁷ See: www.flashdrivesforfreedom.org

⁸ See: James Pearson, “The 50\$ Device That Symbolizes a Shift in North Korea” *Reuters*, March 27, 2015.

own.”⁹ It is an apt extension of the term, I think, and as we’ll see, a good deal of what Appiah has to say about such conversations is borne out by the North Korean case.

So what is it, exactly, that can happen when foreign pop culture becomes a vehicle for imaginative engagement?

We may find ourselves entertained, for one. This is particularly true for North Koreans, who possess few alternatives to state-controlled programming that is, by many accounts, “incredibly boring.”¹⁰ Indeed, the main reason smugglers fill flash drives with pop culture is to meet local demand for it. Many defectors fled the regime precisely because they took enormous risks to watch exciting foreign films or television shows – and, unfortunately, were caught.¹¹

But defectors claim that exposure to foreign pop culture can do more than just entertain. It can open hearts and minds, they say (often because it did in their own case). Moreover, it can do so in a way that challenges the elaborate cult of personality surrounding the Kim dynasty: a core pillar of the regime.

Perhaps the most well-known North Korean defector to report a story of this sort is Yeon-mi Park, who made a harrowing escape through China and then Mongolia in 2007, at the age of 13, and is now, incredibly, a student at Columbia University. When she was 7 or 8, Park watched a bootleg version of *Titanic* – an event that, she says, “changed her life.”¹² The James Cameron epic shook her understanding of the world in at least two ways.

First, she was surprised to see that people living nearly a century ago had achieved a level of technological development rarely seen in modern day North Korea. This straightforwardly conflicted with a long tradition of government propaganda that portrayed her country as something like a real-world “Wakanda”: an earthly paradise ruled by a leader with supernatural powers.¹³

Second, Park was even more surprised to see that the movie depicted a young man (Jack) sacrificing himself for “love” (Rose). As she explains, this made no sense in her childhood thought-world, which celebrated stories of love and sacrifice for the *regime*,

⁹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 85.

¹⁰ Yeonmi Park, *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl’s Journey to Freedom* (New York: Penguin, 2015), p. 51.

¹¹ See: Sang-hun 2015 (fn. 4, above).

¹² Park 2015, p. 53.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 34, 53; B. R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves – And Why It Matters* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), p. 154.

not individual persons. Because *Titanic*'s narrative departed so drastically from this, she wondered: "how can anyone make this [film] and not be killed?"¹⁴

Park's childhood reactions to *Titanic* tell us something about the possibilities unleashed by intercultural "conversations." If we use her case as an example, it looks as if such conversations can transform their participants in at least three ways.

One of the well-known cornerstones of government propaganda in North Korea is the vilification of the United States. Last summer, Kim Jung-un conducted tests of a newly-developed intercontinental ballistic missile on Independence Day, July 4th, and announced this as a "gift for the American bastards" (Americans are routinely referred to as "nom," or bastards, in domestic propaganda).¹⁵ State-sanctioned hatred towards the United States is partly rooted in the facts of history. American forces dropped 635,000 tons of explosives over North Korean cities and territories during the Korean War, which is more than they dropped in the entire Pacific theatre during World War II.¹⁶ General Curtis LeMay, commander of the U.S. Air Force at the time, later admitted to targeting "everything that moved in North Korea" and estimated that this "killed off 20 percent of the population"¹⁷ – undoubtedly a war crime.

Nowadays, of course, North Koreans very rarely come into contact with Americans (apart from Dennis Rodman).¹⁸ And much of the contact they do have is through demonic representations of American crimes committed against them, both past and present (since 2006, for example, the U.S. is regularly maligned for strangling the regime with punishing international sanctions). In this polarized environment, it is not unreasonable to imagine that exposure to American pop culture might provide North Koreans with a window – however small, obnoxious, and imperfect – onto the humanity of their sworn enemy. As Appiah puts it, conversation "helps people get used to one another."¹⁹ In a recent interview with *Wired* magazine, another prominent North Korean defector and USB smuggler, Kang Chol-hwan, affirms just that:

¹⁴ Andy Greenberg, "The Plot to Free North Korea with Episodes of 'Friends'" in *Wired*, January 3, 2015; Park 2015, p. 53.

¹⁵ Myers 2011, p. 137.

¹⁶ Charles K. Armstrong, "The Destruction and Reconstruction of North Korea, 1950-1960" in *Asia Pacific Journal* (2009), Vol. 7, No. 1.

¹⁷ This was in a 1984 interview with the Office of Air Force History. See: Blaine Harden, "The U.S. War Crime North Korea Won't Forget" in *The Washington Post*, March 24, 2015.

¹⁸ See e.g., Hunter Felt, "How Dennis Rodman Came to Stand Between the World and Nuclear War" in *The Guardian*, September 14, 2017.

¹⁹ Appiah 2006, p. 85.

When North Koreans watch *Desperate Housewives*, they see that Americans aren't all war-loving imperialists... They're just people having affairs or whatever. They see the leisure, the freedom. They realize that this isn't the enemy; it's what they want for themselves. It cancels out everything they've been told. And when that happens, it starts a revolution in their mind.²⁰

This change in perspective can work both ways. For outsiders, and particularly Americans, discovering that so many North Koreans are watching the same movies and television shows, listening to the same jokes, and enjoying the same characters, etc., can be a revelation. As Stratton suggests, it makes North Korea seem less "monolithic, impenetrable, and unknowable."²¹ All this is part of what flash drives may be able to achieve: a change in perspective, or sympathy, amongst strangers. An exchange of generalities for particulars. How can you hate all Americans once you know that *Dennis Rodman* is one of them?

This is closely connected to a second point. Park tells us that watching *Titanic* changed her life because, in her own words, it offered "me a glimpse of a larger world very different from the one I occupied."²² She is careful to qualify this statement: "I never imagined I could live like the characters in those movies. I couldn't look at the people on the screen and think they were real, or allow myself to envy their lives. The propaganda we were fed inoculated me from any lessons I might apply to my own life."²³ Still, the glimpse she refers to had some kind of lasting impact. Perhaps it did so by enlarging her sense of what was thinkable (but not yet fully believable) at the time, so that this came to include the possibility of things like romantic love and North Korean destitution.

Eventually, under the weight of mounting evidence, these possibilities became more than just thinkable. And that is precisely what balloon drops aim to achieve. They are, in a sense, evidence drops, designed to "DISRUPT" North Korean propaganda under their cumulative weight. They force ordinary North Koreans to confront an increasing number of datum (particularly about the lives of others) that don't fit government narratives, engendering cognitive dissonance. Of course, it would be pointless if this just replaced one kind of brainwashing with another. And it's certainly not obvious that banal sitcoms, Hollywood blockbusters, and melodramas will avoid this. But, as Park's case demonstrates, these forms of entertainment can sometimes set

²⁰ Greenberg 2015.

²¹ Greenberg 2016.

²² Park 2015, p. 53.

²³ Idem.

profound critical thoughts in motion – revealing “values we had not previously recognized or [undermining] our commitment to values that we had settled into.”²⁴

Finally, there is something else (something beyond changing minds by confronting them with new evidence) that can happen along the way. When Park “glimpsed” a larger, very different world from the one she knew, this inadvertently shone a light on her own deeply-held assumptions, forcing them into consciousness. Witnessing the surprising opulence of first class accommodations on a 100-year-old ocean liner suddenly made her realize, for the first time, that this wasn’t something she thought possible. This set off a chain reaction: why didn’t she think it was possible? And watching a movie that treats a devastating collective tragedy as a mere backdrop for a teenage love story forced her to confront what it was, within her own ordinary way of seeing the world, that made this seem so profoundly odd and sacrilegious. There is an increase in awareness about the world, but there is also an increase in *self*-awareness.

This can be wildly disorienting. Many of the things we believe, we believe unconsciously or automatically, without much thought. We adopt beliefs on hearsay. We navigate life through a web of unspoken assumptions (that gravity will hold, the car will start, the neighbor can be trusted, a certain question will be understood, etc.). This saves us valuable time and energy. But when all of a sudden reality disobeys, and these beliefs burst into consciousness without their prior air of thoughtless inevitability, this can induce a kind of vertigo. The familiar comes to seem alien, or unwieldy – no longer the only possibility. In Heideggerian terms, our beliefs about the world suddenly become present because they are no longer “ready-to-hand.” We bear witness to them in a newly detached form because we are no longer sure how to use them, or whether we should.²⁵

This too, it seems, is one of the powers of stupid American entertainment. And why shouldn’t it be? Culture is everywhere. And, as Appiah says, conversation is inevitable.²⁶ There is nowhere to hide, especially not with USB drives falling overhead. If all goes to plan, sometime in the next two months (at the date of writing: April 16th, 2018) Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un and President Donald J. Trump will put the powers of cultural exchange to the test, in an unprecedented diplomatic effort. I hope their conversation goes well.

²⁴ Appiah 2006, p. 30.

²⁵ For a fascinating exploration of this kind of phenomenon, and its possible role in self-examination, see: Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

²⁶ Appiah 2006, p. xix.