

Washington University in St. Louis
Washington University Open Scholarship

Undergraduate Theses—Unrestricted

Summer 5-30-2013

Active, Disorienting, and Transitional: The Aesthetic of Boredom(s) in the Multimedia Works of Nam June Paik (1932-2006)

Eugene Kwon

Washington University in St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/undergrad_open



Part of the [Asian Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Contemporary Art Commons](#), [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), [German Literature Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), [Theory and Criticism Commons](#), and the [Visual Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kwon, Eugene, "Active, Disorienting, and Transitional: The Aesthetic of Boredom(s) in the Multimedia Works of Nam June Paik (1932-2006)" (2013). *Undergraduate Theses—Unrestricted*. 8.

https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/undergrad_open/8

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Theses—Unrestricted by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.

Washington University in St. Louis
The Interdisciplinary Project in the Humanities

Active, Disorienting, and Transitional: The Aesthetic of Boredom(s) in the Multimedia Works of
Nam June Paik (1932-2006)

By

Eugene Kwon

Senior thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Major in the
Interdisciplinary Project in the Humanities

Lutz Koepnick, Thesis Supervisor

February 2013

Washington University, College of Arts and Sciences

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Nam June Paik (1932-2006)	2
A Brief History of Boredom(s)	5
Rethinking Boredom as an Aesthetic Category	11
Chapter One: Active Boredom: <i>Zen for Film</i> (1964)	18
Encountering <i>Zen for Film</i>	18
Siegfried Kracauer's Boredom(s)	28
A "Hesitantly Open" Viewing Position	35
Chapter Two: Disorienting Boredom: <i>Global Groove</i> (1973)	38
Producing a TV Festival: Beginnings of <i>Global Groove</i>	38
The Analytical Value of Christian Metz's Syntagmatic Analysis	41
"Disconnections, Overlappings, and Variations": "Disorienting Boredom" and <i>Global Groove</i>	44
Conclusion: Beyond the Boundaries of Postmodern and Fluxus Aesthetics	53
Chapter Three: Transitional Boredom: <i>The More the Better</i> (1988)	57
The Historical Transition of South Korea in 1988 and the Seoul Olympics	58
A Dialectical Aesthetic: Transitional Boredom and <i>The More the Better</i> (1988), via <i>Fish Flies on Sky</i> (1975/82) and <i>Fuku/Luck, Fuku=Luck, Matrix</i> (Date Unknown)	66
Conclusion	79
<i>Bibliography</i>	81
<i>Cited Illustrations</i>	84

Introduction

My experimental TV is not always interesting but not always uninteresting.
 --Nam June Paik, commenting on the occasion of his 1963 solo exhibition in Wuppertal, Germany¹

In the sixties, many art critics employed the term boredom in order to characterize contemporary artworks forming a drastic contrast with more conventional precedents. One artist working during this period, in a curious move, did not hesitate to label his artworks as boring: Nam June Paik (July 20, 1932-January 29, 2006), an ethnically Korean artist who had shaken both hemispheres of the world with his avant-garde installations, sculptures, writings, videos, and films. In an interview titled "Colosseum TV," Paik, laughing good-humoredly at his own comment, says, "Television is banal and video is boring." His usage of the terms "banal" and the "boring" carry not so much negative connotations as an aesthetic ideal that lies at the core of video art, a genre which, in terms of broad categories, consists of video/film works and sculptural installations. In another interview profiled by Calvin Tomkins in *The New Yorker*, Paik makes a similar but a more revealing statement: "My experimental TV is not always interesting but not always uninteresting." Paik makes these two seemingly self-deprecating statements in a passing manner, but one can in fact gain a significant insight into Paik's artistic principle from them. Paik seems to view boredom as a liminal aesthetic experience, "not always interesting but not always uninteresting." In my study, I argue that Paik's various installation, video, and sculptural works express this liminal experience through a constant shift between boundaries: the viewing subject and the art object (*Zen for Film*), the aural and the visual (*Global Groove* and others), and the historical past and the political present (*The More the Better*).

¹ Calvin Tomkins, "Video Visionary," p. 46.

Nam June Paik (1932-2006)

Arguably, no other figure in contemporary art has had the dubious honor of attracting as wide a range of eclectic, profound, and often witty labels as Paik—a great visionary, the world’s most famous bad pianist,² a modern version of the Renaissance Man, a cultural terrorist,³ the father of video-art,⁴ a global nomad, the “yellow peril” of the international avant-garde,⁵ a Zen priest,⁶ the Genghis Khan of art, a Prisoner of the Cathode Ray. Blending disparate elements of German philosophy, Korean shamanism, Zen Buddhism, theories of media and technology, Paik, known for his playful and daring artistic style, encouraged the breakdown of cultural barriers not only between different individuals but different cultural groups and nations as well. His Bohemian spirit emphasized an unrestrained flow of ideas between different disciplines of thinking during the rise of avant-garde movements in the sixties and the seventies.

It is helpful to consider a few pivotal moments in Paik’s artistic career to understand the overall trajectory of Paik’s artistic development. His artistic career had its beginning in 1958 when Paik first met John Cage at the International Summer Course for New Music in Darmstadt, Germany, an encounter that propelled him into the avant-garde movements flourishing in both Europe and the United States.⁷ In 1963, Paik organized his first solo exhibition, *Exposition of*

² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 51. Dick Higgins, fellow Fluxus artist, criticized Paik for his “joy in the perverse.”

⁴ At a funeral service for Paik held in New York, February 3, 2006, Carmen Mankel declared: “I have three fathers / God / My natural father / The father of video art” (Herzogenrath/Kreul, 166-67).

⁵ Paik humorously declared “Yellow peril, c’est moi!” in 1962, a parody of Louis XIV’s “L’État, c’est moi!” The quote is taken from the following website: <http://www.njpartcenter.kr/kr/njpaik/sayings.asp>

⁶ Kyung-Ja Na recounts Paik as a relaxed professor at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, letting students call him “Nam June” and generously providing stipend for new equipments, even if it was a compensation for his frequent absences. Na reflects: “As a professor he gave us a lot of freedom and autonomy. I think this is a good lesson. You cannot teach or learn art; you must ‘illuminate’ art yourself, like philosophy or Zen. In this respect, he was more of a Zen priest” (Herzogenrath/Kreul, 152-53).

⁷ Edith Decker-Phillips, *Paik Video*, pp. 27-28.

Music-Electronic Television (1963), at Parnass Gallery in Wuppertal, Germany. Many peculiarities present at this artistic debut—the head of a freshly slaughtered dead bull hung over the entrance to the gallery, Joseph Beuys’s impromptu performance of destroying one of Paik’s prepared pianos with an axe, the disfigurement of various mediums such as audio tapes, classical instruments, and televisions, and, curiously, a dismembered mannequin immersed in a bathtub full of water, evoking the scene of a grisly murder—were a prelude to what was to manifest later in Paik’s career. Elements of the uncanny, Oriental ritual, and avant-garde experimentalism all converged together at the Parnass Gallery to form an emphatic artistic statement. In 1964, Paik met a twenty-four-year-old cellist named Charlotte Moorman, a promising Julliard-graduate uncertain of her future career as a classical musician.⁸ Moorman soon became Paik’s persona, “the Jeanne d’Arc of New Music” as the French composer Edgard Varèse referred to her.⁹ Moorman and Paik collaborated on numerous performance pieces, such as *TV-Cello* and *Variation on a Theme by Saint-Saens* (1964), which were intended to create new aesthetic experiences outside the frame of classical music. In 1984, Paik, who was finally able to return to Korea after a period of exile imposed upon him by the government,¹⁰ successfully broadcast his first work of “satellite art” titled *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* (1984) on New Year’s Day. A video-work utilizing a satellite link-up system to connect San Francisco, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and New York, *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* presented a global festival of music and dance, or what Paik calls “global groove,” featuring an eclectic cast of dancers (Merce Cunningham), pop singers (Sapho), composers (Phillip Glass and John Cage), and poets (Allen Ginsberg). A few

⁸ Calvin Tomkins, “Video Visionary,” p. 52.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁰ At least two reasons seem to account for Paik’s refusal to return to Korea for almost three decades: his status as a draft dodger, and his family’s connections with the Japanese government. Paik made the following statement concerning his family’s reputation: “We are really one of the most corrupted families in Korea” (Tomkins, 46). See Esther Kim Lee’s “Avant-garde Becomes Nationalism: Immortalizing Nam June Paik in South Korea” for both a general description of biographical background on Paik’s family.

years later in 1993, Paik he represented Germany with the German artist Hans Haake at the Venice Biennale, receiving the Golden Lion for their installations.

These moments carry a great weight of importance in Paik's artistic career, but Paik himself mentions none of them when reflecting upon the most significant event in his life. Instead, he traces back to his period of youth spent in Korea and Japan when he became interested in Marxism, the "global fad" at the time as Paik recalls, and in twentieth century music. Emphasizing the importance of these two influences, Paik says, "You don't need to be a Freudian to know that the panorama of our mind is largely defined before we are 18. I lived in Korea until I was 17 ½ . There, the two great things that I became aware of were Karl Marx and Arnold Schönberg."¹¹ Expressing pride in his acquiring of a rare recording of Schönberg's "Verklärte Nacht," a work that he came to know about in *Time* magazine, in a culturally deprived Korea in the 1950s, Paik cites the highly avant-garde quality of Schönberg's music as the source of his fascination.¹² The influences of Marx and Schönberg become translated in slightly different and almost always perverse ways throughout his career. Marx's call for the rise of the proletariat expands to the notion of a public video commune that defies national boundaries, and the avant-garde nature of Schönberg's compositions gives rise to destructive acts against various mediums (the piano, the television, the violin, and many others) and other experimental efforts. Taking liberty with other intellectual and artistic influences as well, Paik went on to produce works that came to be known for their highly experimental and always playful nature.

¹¹ Wulf Herzogenrath and Andreas Kreul, *Nam June Paik: There is no rewind button for life*, p. 92.

¹² Calvin Tomkins, "Video Visionary," p. 47.

A Brief History of Boredom(s)

The term “boredom” has a long and rich etymological history that extends as far as back to the Roman period when the term *taedium vitae* was used to connote chronic weariness. Situated among a constellation of terms such as melancholy, spleen, ennui, anomie, *taedium vitae*, and others, the term boredom, while clearly distinct from its cousins, has retained connotations of other terms throughout its evolution. As with many other terms such as “nostalgia” and “melancholy,” it is difficult to concretely define the nature of “boredom.”¹³ But what makes “boredom” unique among other emotions frequently used to describe aesthetic experiences is its very ambiguity. There is not just one singular “boredom,” but instead there are different types of “boredom,” all contingent upon the modern conditions that give rise to them. Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, who reflects on the existence of multiple boredoms, emphasizes multiple layers of emotions hidden underneath them: “Clearly, we should speak not of boredom, but of *boredoms*, because the notion itself includes a multiplicity of moods and feelings that resist analysis.”¹⁴ Before attempting to rethink boredom as an aesthetic category, one needs to understand the term “boredom” not as an ahistorical and universal phenomenon but as a uniquely modern and contingent term, whose meaning changes according to different disciplinary and historical contexts.

¹³ The question that immediately comes to the surface is: is boredom an affect, an emotion, a state of mind, a mood, or all at once? Another question rises as whether boredom is a term that describes the collective or the individual. A full investigation of these two questions, among others, will require another study that takes into account the complex network of relationships between boredom and a host of other terms (*ennui*, melancholy, and others). My argument is that boredom, redefined as an aesthetic category, can shift our emphasis away from Kantian notions of beauty and the sublime, concepts that do not wholly capture the complex aesthetic experiences that occur in the present historical moment.

¹⁴ Adam Phillips, “On Being Bored,” p. 82. Added emphasis.

Tracing the origin of the term boredom to studies on the division of labor is an important step, but certainly not the only one, in emphasizing the connection between the term and the development of new social realities. The term boredom is almost always associated with a loss of meaning, whether in the metaphysical sense lacking a particular origin (as employed by creative artists) or in the more concrete sense arising from external circumstances. The latter sense remains deeply connected with Marx's account of the division of labor. Marx's definition of "alienation," which emphasizes the negative effects of labor on the individual, is related to modern concepts of boredom in its focus on subjectivity. In Marx's view, modern subjectivity is always in a hostile relationship with the capitalist division of labor. But whereas Marx's concept of alienation does not discuss the changed notion of temporality due to the effects of modernization, recent concepts of boredom stress the relationship between "mechanized, fragmented, and ultimately emptied time" and modern subjectivity.¹⁵ According to Goodstein, the association between experience of elongated time and questions of meaning became popular only in the late eighteenth century.¹⁶ Moreover, the concept of alienation does not leave any room for salvation for the individual, who experiences the erosion of subjectivity through the process of alienation. However, concepts of boredom have more positive ramifications, allowing an "experience that distinguishes the sufferer, underlining his or her individuality."¹⁷ Modern concepts of boredom and the concept of "alienation" are clearly related to each other in their attempts to account for modern subjectivity, but a discussion of temporality, central to modern concepts of boredom, is absent in the concept of "alienation."¹⁸

¹⁵ Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani, "The Delicate Monster: Modernity and Boredom," pp. 12-13.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities*, p. 111.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁸ Discussion of temporality is also entirely absent in Émile Durkheim's concept of "anomie." The concept of "anomie," which Durkheim defines as the lack of solidarity among social organs due to the

In the realm of art criticism in the sixties, the term “boredom,” used to describe works of contemporary art, such as Minimalism and Pop Art, lacked its rich connotations, deployed instead as a simplistic term conveying value-judgment. The two terms, “boring” and “interesting,” appeared with “alarming regularity” in art criticism in the sixties, some critics even arguing that works of Minimalism and Pop Art raised boredom to an aesthetic principle.¹⁹ One debatable issue in art criticism is whether boredom is a formal aesthetic property or a state of mind induced by the artwork. Colpitt’s stance on this issue is clear, arguing that it is more a subjective state of mind than a unique aesthetic property. In Colpitt’s view, an artist cannot possibly want to produce boring art, stating that boredom “negates the possibility of any enjoyment of, or interest in, a work of art.”²⁰ Boredom, as deployed in Colpitt’s writing, seems to become a simplistic term, conveying either value judgment or the subjective experience of the audience. According to Colpitt, works of Minimalist and Pop Art cannot be boring because they have generated so much *interest*. To become boring is to be deprived of inherent value, and thus the art object will lose the interest of the viewer. Moreover, boredom is a highly subjective experience; it

absence of social regulations, highlights the role of the social collective. “But where as “alienation” holds the division of labor to be the ultimate cause of social malady, “anomie” carries a much more positive outlook on the division of labor: “The division of labor presumes that the worker, far from being hemmed in by his task, does not lose sight of his collaborators, that he acts upon them, and reacts to them” (Durkheim 1964: 372). The solution for Durkheim is not a Marxist revolution but governmental regulation, as “liberty is the subordination of external forces to social forces, for it is only in this condition that the latter can freely develop themselves” (Durkheim 1964: 387). Robert Merton, in a more culturally specific account of anomie, argues that social anomalies, such as psychopathological personalities and antisocial conducts, result from the mismatch between culturally desired goals and the lack of socially accepted means (Merton 1938: 679). Both Durkheim’s and Merton’s accounts of “anomie” emphasize the relationship between the individual and the social collective. It is open to question whether boredom, a term absent in both Durkheim’s and Merton’s writings, would qualify as a personal deviation—a mere quirk in the system—or as a larger social epidemic. Séan Desmond Healy surmises that both the early Marx and Durkheim would have regarded boredom as nothing more than an epiphenomenon of the economic system (Healy 1984: 34).

¹⁹ Frances Colpitt, “The Issue of Boredom: Is It Interesting?”, p. 360.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

“necessarily describes the spectator’s state of mind rather than any characteristic of the object.”²¹

In similar fashion, the American art critic Hilton Kramer, reflecting on the boredom issue in the sixties, emphasized the subjective nature of boredom: “Boredom was endowed with a moral imperative, and it was left for the public—rather than the art—to acquit itself of indifference.”²²

The term boredom, in the context of art criticism, suddenly becomes deprived of its historical richness. Themes closely related to boredom, such as modern subjectivity, temporality, and the relationship of the individual to the social collective, are left unmentioned in Colpitt’s writing. The devastating consequence of the term “boredom” in art criticism seems to have been not so much the devaluing of new artworks, but rather the polarizing deployment of the term.

The notion of temporality is crucial in order to concretely understand how boredom can become an aesthetic category, rather than an ambiguous concept or a value-judgment term.

Before attempting to theorize an aesthetic of boredom, Patrice Petro addresses the complex history that underlies the term “boredom”:

In philosophical, clinical, and scientific discourses, boredom seldom exists in isolation from another term or set of terms. For example, in eighteenth-century theories of the sublime, boredom is typically assumed to mask uneasiness, anxiety, or terror [...] In nineteenth-century romanticism, boredom takes on the quality of negative passion, associated both with the nothingness and the nonbeing of the sublime as well as the unbearable experience of being in the everyday [...] In the twentieth century, particularly in the discourses of psychoanalysis and clinical practice, boredom becomes inextricably linked to depression, and to anger, grief, or loss as the source of a depression which must be experienced, overcome, and worked through [...] In critical theory, particularly German critical theory of the 1920s and 1930s, boredom is understood in relation to leisure, and also to waiting, to an expectation of future orientation of subjectivity devoid of anxiety or alienation. Finally, in contemporary theories of postmodern, boredom is associated with both frustration and relief, or, in other words, with the frustration of the everyday and with the relief from frustration in the gesture of aesthetic refusal [...] ²³

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 360.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 361.

²³ Patrice Petro, “After Shock/Between Boredom and History,” p. 81.

The meaning of the term “boredom” does not become more transparent throughout its history. In light of such complex history, how does one go about theorizing an aesthetic of boredom, one that is specific and recognizable? In response to this challenge, Petro attempts to locate an aesthetic of boredom in the “temporal and psychic structures of perception itself.”²⁴ The term boredom is useful to account for these ways of looking since, unlike the term *ennui*, it entails a “visual dimension” in its primary definition: “to weary by dullness, tedious repetition, *unwelcome attentions*.”²⁵ As examples demonstrating such aesthetic of boredom, she cites both the early films of Andy Warhol and Chantal Akerman’s film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), a work that follows the everyday activities of a single-mother who prostitutes herself. Petro’s attempt at theorizing an aesthetic of boredom is especially helpful for the following two strategies: her detachment of emotions from the aesthetic of boredom, and her emphasis on its role in reestablishing the artwork’s connection with the historical past. In a similar vein to Kant’s analytical move of detaching the notion of “beauty” from “interest,”²⁶ Petro detaches the term from a tangle of emotions it has been associated with—“uneasiness,” “anxiety,” “terror,” “depression,” “anger,” “grief,” and “frustration.” By necessity, each individual will have different emotional reactions to a certain visual representation. In Petro’s view, how the specific operations of an artwork make one become aware of the passage of modern temporality is far more important than the emotion reactions of the individual. Moreover, Petro argues that an aesthetic of boredom can reestablish a new set of relationships with the historical past. Her argument is a response to Jameson’s claim that the “contemporary fascination with recycling past images and former styles merely fuels a pervasive

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83. Emphasis added.

²⁶ In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant defines “interest” as “the satisfaction that we combine with the representation of the existence of an object” (90).

sense of ahistoricity in the present.”²⁷ Petro’s claim will become important later in the third chapter of my study, where I argue that an aesthetic of boredom (what I call “transitional boredom”) helps reestablish an artwork’s ideological relationship to the past.

Paik’s writings and performance compositions seemed to anticipate Petro’s aesthetic of boredom by positing a highly flexible notion of temporality. The negative valences of the term “boredom” disappear in Paik’s writings. Reacting against the nihilistic conception of boredom in everyday usage, Paik attempted to neutralize the meaning of boredom, as reflected in one of his essays “Input Time and Output Time,” a short reflection on the relationship between time and the genre of “video-art.” In the middle of his essay, Paik states that there are two types of art today, “boring yet quality art” and “boring yet mediocre art.”²⁸ He then makes another statement that further neutralizes the negative meaning of the term: “Boredom itself is far from being a negative quality. In Asia, it is rather a sign of nobility.”²⁹ Though such statements, Paik seems to suggest that “boredom” is an inherent quality of art related to notions of temporality. The connection between “boredom” and temporality becomes more apparent in Paik’s performance-based composition *Symphony No. 5* (1965), a symphony “lasting one million years.”³⁰ To perform the piece, the player needs to engage in various activities for an infinite duration of time: playing a sustained note for an hour, contemplating one’s sexuality for a year, “counting the waves of the Rhine,” reading all of Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (or a Baudelaire anthology for seven hours) while sitting on a toilet.³¹ On the last page of his composition, Paik directs the

²⁷ Patrice Petro, “After Shock/Between Boredom and History,” p. 79.

²⁸ Nam June Paik, *Du cheval a’ christo et autres ecrits* (Nam June Paik Art Center), p. 198. All the quoted phrases are my own translations from Korean.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 302-23.

³¹ In fact, some of the descriptions in the composition do not even constitute imperative directions, such as the one following the 400th year in performing the piece: “Finally / Wolf Vostell is more famous than Pablo Picasso. George Maciunas is more famous than J.S. Bach. Christine Keeler is more famous, / than

performer(s) to watch a small rock gradually grow into a mountain boulder. At the bottom of Paik's direction is an enigmatic picture of mathematical symbols, depicting plus-minus, greater-than, and infinity signs gradually growing in both quantity and size. Paik's quote at the beginning, "the eternity-cult is the longest disease in human history," encourages us to read the infinity sign as a symbol of time, signifying its infinite elongation and reduction according to one's perception. Paik's composition realizes what Petro calls the "habitualization of renewed perception" central to the aesthetic of boredom that "opens up differences that make a difference, and refuses the ceaseless repetition of the new as the always-the-same."³² Through his composition, Paik equates the passage of time as the defining aesthetic experience, shifting our attention away from the specific directions to moments in time.

Rethinking Boredom as an Aesthetic Category

When we attempt to describe our aesthetic experience of an artwork, we refer to a complex set of elements in order to demystify some of the most basic but also the most difficult questions: just what is it that makes a certain work linger in our minds afterwards? What formal and non-formal aspects of this work make us return to it continuously in order to subject ourselves to the same, or slightly a different, aesthetic experience? The tangible qualities of the artwork—the lines, the shapes, the colors, the textures—initially guide us in answering our persistent questions. There are also other intangible factors, such as the political and cultural conditions surrounding the artwork in question and our subjective emotional responses, that

Valentina V. Tereshkova!!" (317) The footnotes on the page provide background information on Christine Keeler (1942~) and Valentina V. Tereshkova (1937~). Keeler is an English model and dancer, and Tereshkova is the first Russian woman to travel to space.

³² Patrice Petro, "After Shock/Between Boredom and History," p. 87.

undeniably influence one's aesthetic experiences regardless of which historical period one is situated within. A few issues arise from what might be called our aesthetic responses. How does one, or can one even, concretely define what an aesthetic emotion is, for instance feelings of anger or nostalgia that arise in the subject via a certain artwork? Is aesthetic emotion distinguishable from general emotion? From this question arise other accompanying issues: the problem of distinction (for instance, how does one distinguish "wistful" and "nostalgic"?) and the problem of significance (are our emotions as important as we think they are in our aesthetic experiences?).

A key question that has remained crucial in the account of emotions to describe artworks and in the discourse of aesthetics in general is the subject-objective problematic. The subjective-objective problematic centers on the question of the objective or subjective status of feelings: are aesthetic emotions, that is, emotions that arise during an aesthetic encounter, attributable to the individual or to the formal aspects of the artwork?³³ This question, as Ngai indicates, has prompted intense and creative responses from various authors such as Aristotle, John Dewey, T.S. Eliot, Edmund Burke, literary theorist Gérard Genette, and more than a few psychoanalysts. The distinction between "emotion" and "affect," which can be "traced back to the philosophy of *emotion* in general" and has become the "über-question of recent theoretical writing on feeling in particular," attempts to offer a solution to the subjective-objective problematic.³⁴ Yet, one cannot neatly separate and even conclusively identify the complex tangle of emotions that arise in the context of aesthetic experience. It is likely that in many cases, particularly in the late capitalist period, the confusion in itself, in other words one's inability to sift through one's emotional responses, characterizes the defining aesthetic experience. This

³³ Sianne Ngai, "Introduction," p. 23.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

confusion, which functions as a meta-emotion, is likely to harbor or lead to a whole host of other emotions. To be sure, the artwork's arousal of a complex network of emotions is by no means a phenomenon limited to the late capitalist period, but it is also true that many of today's contemporary artworks (film, literary, music, installations, and others) induce in us not so much immediately graspable and cathartic emotion(s) as an initially perplexing network of emotions.

While it is necessary to acknowledge the debate concerning the subjective-objective problematic, I am less concerned with solving this problematic than proposing a new aesthetic category that is better fit to describe contemporary artworks than other traditional aesthetic categories. Rather than classifying and distinguishing between emotions and affects, I focus my attention on how a certain "tone," which Sianne Ngai defines as the "dialectic of objective and subjective feeling that our aesthetic encounters inevitably produce,"³⁵ can become an effective tool in describing both the general reception and our immediate perception of artworks. Concepts such as "tone" are especially useful in describing artworks whose ambiguous quality may escape concrete and intention-driven terms such as "anger" and "sadness." As Ngai points out, locating certain aesthetic emotions, particularly in the works of contemporary art, is a challenging task and thus requires a new vocabulary in order to account for it:

For we can speak of a literary text whose global or organizing affect is disgust, without this necessarily implying that the work represents or signifies disgust, or that it will disgust the reader (though in certain cases it may also do so). Exactly "where," then, is the disgust? Similarly, the "joyous intensity" [Fredric] Jameson ascribes to the work of Duane Hanson in his aforementioned essay on postmodernism does not imply that Hanson's hyperrealistic sculptures of tired, elderly museum guards and sagging, overweight tourists *represent* or *express* joy, or that they make the viewer *feel* joyous—as opposed to, say, mildly amused or unsettled. Who is the subject, then, of the euphoria to

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

which Jameson refers? Should this feeling belong to a subject? How is it even produced by the object from which it ostensibly emanated?³⁶

The larger problem that Ngai touches upon in the passage is one that has vexed criticism generally: can language as a medium effectively describe, or “paraphrase,” a work of art? By “paraphrasing” an artwork, are we not doing a disservice to the artwork by leaving gaps in our description or focusing on only certain aspects of the artwork, thus leading to a misinterpretation of the artwork? The limitations of language in describing an artwork, grasping all its nuances and implications, become the most acute when one confronts artworks that defy our normal expectations by radically departing from previous traditions. By pointing towards the difficulties of criticism, I am not suggesting that one needs to abandon conventional critical vocabulary, but rather simply that “boredom” as a refashioned critical term can serve as a useful means in order to understand the heterogeneous body of works created by today’s contemporary artists, the current study focusing on Paik’s. The larger implication of this study is that boredom as a critical term can also highlight certain aspects of other complex artworks in other various fields such as literature and film.

The premise that underlies my study is that boredom is an aesthetic category that cannot be accounted for either by the artwork or by the viewing subject alone. While several questions relating to aesthetic emotions and to the discourse of aesthetics in general that I mentioned in the beginning are undoubtedly important, this study will be able to touch on a few of them due to its scope. Before deploying term boredom as an aesthetic category, it would be helpful to clarify

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36. As Sianne Ngai acknowledges, her concept of “tone” strikes resonance with other notions: “As the affective ‘comportment’ of a literary text, the aesthetic notion of tone we will be working with bears less resemblance to any of its New Critical formulations than it does to Susanne Langer’s notion of a ‘significant form’ whose import is ‘the feeling of the whole work,’ or Mikel Dufrenne’s concept of the ‘affective quality’ that constitutes the artwork’s ‘expressed world,’ or even Roman Ingarden’s notion of the ‘polyphonic harmony’ that holds together all of the values and perspectives generated by a literary text’s multiple ‘stratifications’” (44).

what one means when one describes a certain artwork as “boring.” In most colloquial circumstances, the person indicates either of the following aspects of the artwork: its excessively long duration (if it carries a temporal element) or its reliance upon artistic clichés (relating to themes or formal practices). The first indication has significance for the aesthetic category of boredom, while the second is negligible as it is more connected with the subject's experience than the formal aspects of the artwork itself. Throughout this study, the relevant question is not so much “does my *feeling* of boredom arise from the artwork or from myself?”, but the following question: “how do certain artworks employ boredom as an aesthetic category through their formal qualities?” At the heart of boredom as an aesthetic category is what Marcuse claims as the element that makes art in general perennial: “In all its ideality art bears witness to the truth of dialectical materialism—the permanent non-identity between subject and object, individual and individual.”³⁷

In the first chapter of my study, I claim that “active boredom” works as a mediating mechanism through which one views Paik’s *Zen for Film*, neither becoming subsumed under the film apparatus nor becoming wholly detached from it. In the second chapter, I explore the oscillation between spatial depth and surface in Paik’s video-work *Global Groove* (1973) and other video works, arguing that such strategy results in a “disorienting boredom.” In the third chapter, I argue that the transitional space of Paik’s sculptural work *The More the Better* brings together both “active” and “disorienting” boredoms through the opposition between its static form and perpetually changing content.

³⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 29.



Figure 1. Nam June Paik with his *TV-Chair* (1968/1975)



Figure 2. A photograph of an older Nam June Paik accompanying his op-ed column in the *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, a daily newspaper in South Korea. In his column, Paik makes his now often quoted statement, “Half of art is essentially fraud. It’s about fooling and getting fooled.” The caption below the photograph reads, “Mr. Paik’s sense of fashion is unique. Wearing a sweater and a scarf in the seething hot weather of August, he said, ‘It’s not really important to care about what other people think, so I like to wear [thinking] in terms of function.’”

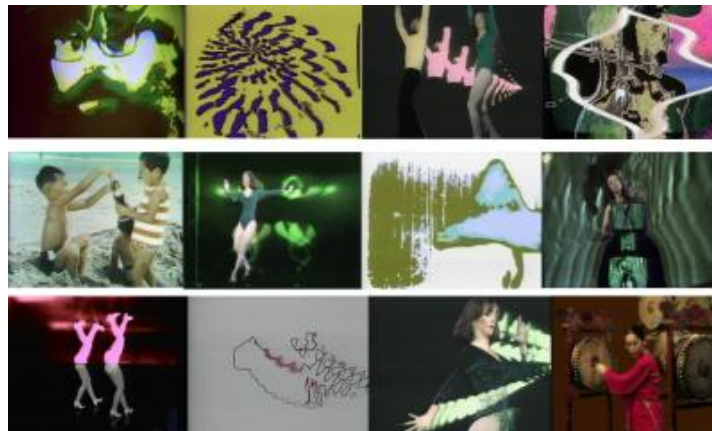


Figure 3. Various shots from *Global Groove*.³⁸ Images of all kinds—abstract, synthesized, and unedited (such as the Pepsi commercial)—appear throughout Paik’s video.

³⁸ The image is taken from the website of Pohang Museum of Art : http://poma.kr/data/file/exhibition1/760060473__C5A9B1E2BA AFC8AF_Global+Groove.jpg

Chapter 1: Active Boredom: *Zen for Film* (1964)

Encountering *Zen for Film*

An old 16 mm film projector runs in front of a blank wall onto which it projects a screen of light, appearing all the more luminous as it makes a contrast to the whiteness of the adjacent museum walls. Small enough to be covered in shadow and disappear if one were to stand in front of the projector, the blank, luminous screen nonetheless creates an intimate space around it, forming a miniature version of a movie theater. About fourteen minutes in length, the film that produces the screen is completely blank. No visual figurations appear on the screen except for the flickering presence of almost invisible shades, produced by tiny specks of dust and scratches on the film strip. No soundtrack accompanies this blank film strip. Infiltrating the viewing space are only the surrounding humdrum of museum activities, accompanied by the quietly reeling sound of the projector, almost timid in nature when compared to that of a larger commercial projector. When the film is over, it begins all over again (Fig. 6).³⁹

Paik's *Zen for Film*, a minimalist work first shown in 1964 at Filmmakers' Cinematheque in New York, seems like the most uncharacteristic among Paik's *oeuvre* for its lack of visual experimentation. *Zen for Film* consists of three formal elements: the projector, the blank screen, the surrounding space. Neither frenetic collage-videos nor aural noise, elements which stand out in many of Paik's works from the entire span of his artistic career, appear in *Zen for Film*. In place of image quotations from various sources, a Paikian practice, is a curiously blank screen. Looking at the blank screen, the viewer makes at least two interpretations. First, the blank screen

³⁹ If exhibited at a museum such as the Paik Art Center, the film plays only during certain periods during the day.

negates visual representation altogether, either coherent or incoherent, positioning itself against the figurative image as a useful form of representation. Second, it represents non-representation itself, constructing a new kind of image that requires a new kind of gaze by the viewer.

Regardless of which interpretation the viewer finds more compelling in the end, one can be certain about one effect that *Zen for Film* creates: it invites the audience to raise various issues with the problem of visual representation in the arts, namely the question of whether experimentations with visual language have been exhausted in the modern arts, and whether it is necessary for artists to invent a new kind of visual representation altogether. Indeed, Paik, throughout his *oeuvre*, relentlessly pursues this issue by adopting new visual methods that reflect changes in modern technology. For Paik, postmodernism's lament of the depletion of new forms of expression seemed to have been irrelevant. There were infinitely new possibilities in creating new ways of expressing, not merely by combining past formal strategies and actually inventing one, a hope that he harbored with his invention of a video synthesizer with the Japanese technician Shuya Abe:

This [the Paik/Abe Synthesizer] will enable us to shape the TV screen canvas
as precisely as Leonardo
as freely as Picasso
as colorfully as Renoir
as profoundly as Mondrian
as violently as Pollock and
as lyrically as Jasper Johns.⁴⁰

Even in this brief quote, one has a strong sense that Paik did not harbor an apocalyptic attitude towards visual representation in the contemporary arts. Visuality was something to be embraced, not negated, in Paik's *oeuvre*. Even though Paik's *Zen for Film* appears to assume a detached

⁴⁰ The quote comes from the Nam June Paik Art Center's website:
<http://www.njpartcenter.kr/en/njpaik/sayings.asp>

position from his other works, it in fact remains closely connected to them through raising the following: the problematic of visual representation.

But at least two characteristics of *Zen for Film* make it distinct from other works by Paik: the ambiguity of its own very nature, and the uncertainty of the subject in experiencing it. When one first encounters *Zen for Film*, the first issue that arises is a basic interpretive one: through which artistic category or genre should we experience the work? One is uncertain as to what the primary object of one's attention should be—is it the screen, the projector, the reeling sound of the film, or the whole installation site? The nature of Paik's work and, correspondingly, the audience's experience of it seem to remain insoluble. Does one experience *Zen for Film* as an installation work, a highly experimental work of *cinéma du pauvre*,⁴¹ or both at once? In experiencing *Zen for Film*, is the viewer situated as a detached subject who can step outside the boundaries of the work, or is the viewer situated as an immersed subject subsumed under the film apparatus, akin to a conventional cinematic experience? Or, as incredible as it may sound, is the viewer completely left out of the picture altogether, the work itself forming its own hermetic relationship as suggested by the self-referential title of the work? My claim is that such lack of certainty as to the nature of *Zen for Film* and to the position of the subject are not so much riddles to be solved as the work's important aesthetic qualities. Further, I claim that these ambiguities give rise to a particular state of mind, namely "active" boredom, that allows the viewer to attain a new kind of subjectivity in experiencing Paik's work.

⁴¹ Herman Asselberghs uses the term "*cinéma du pauvre*" to describe Paik's *Zen for Film* "*Zen for Film* is not about the metaphysical void or the Euro-American sublime, nor about the Big Nothing. Instead, it's about the next-to-nothing. It's Jeanne Dielman leading her compulsive life, in which nothing ever happens, in real time [...] *Zen for Film* is about the refusal to please an audience the easy way. It's about deploying an anti-spectacle of poor aesthetics, stressing the encha nothing film made of nothing about 'nothing'—exquisite *cinéma du pauvre*" (15).

Discussed in recent literature in “strict and insoluble connection with *modernity*,”⁴² boredom and the changing notion of time in modern society that it entails are particularly relevant in thinking about Paik’s *Zen for Film*. In his own writings, Paik uses the concept of boredom in order to reflect on both the changing notion of time and the role of the artist in modern society. One problem that became particularly noticeable in the realm of art criticism with the rise of minimalist art in the sixties was the polarizing usage of boredom. More than a few critics set “boring” against “interesting,” creating a juxtaposition that entirely separated the two terms. Such juxtaposition entailed a value judgment, suggesting that “boring” art did not have enough “interest,” or artistic value in itself, and therefore does not deserve our attention. Against such usage of boredom, Paik instead regarded boredom as a fundamental characteristic of contemporary arts, in particular “video art.” Reacting against the nihilistic conception of boredom in everyday usage, Paik attempted to neutralize the meaning of boredom, an effort reflected in one of his essays “Input Time and Output Time,”⁴³ a short reflection on the relationships between time, video-art, and death. Although Paik does not offer concrete definitions of “input time” and “output time,” he characterizes “input time” as one’s literal experience of time and “output time” as the reconfiguration of time in our consciousness that occurs after our experience. In the middle of his essay, Paik makes an enigmatic statement that attributes the categorical confusion within the arts to the confusion of these two types of time:

The confusion which surrounds video art today is largely the result of the absence of categories that allow one to distinguish between:

<<Boring yet quality art>>

and

<<Boring yet mediocre art>>

⁴² Barbara Dalles Pezze and Carlo Salzani, “The Delicate Monster: Modernity and Boredom,” p. 12.

⁴³ The French title of the essay reads “Temps induit et temps produit.”

Boredom itself is far from being a negative quality. In Asia, it is rather a sign of nobility. To repeat, the confusion [surrounding video art] finds its origin in our confusion of INPUT-time with OUTPUT-time.⁴⁴

What is striking in this essay is Paik's characterization of boredom as a fundamental trait of not just video art but the arts in general. By stating that boredom is not in itself a "negative quality," Paik proposes a positive view of boredom, a quality that underlies all arts concerned with the dimension of time.

In Paik's *Zen for Film*, one finds a unique way of solving the quandaries of the modern subject through its inducement of boredom as an experience. I make connections between this experience of boredom and the uncategorizability of the nature of *Zen for Film* and thereby the uncertain position of the viewer in experiencing it. I argue that *Zen for Film* establishes a space of mediation between the subject and the object, or to borrow Adorno's words a "force field." In this space of mediation, boredom acts as a restoration of faith for the disenchanting modern subject by restoring time as unified and coherent. Such a claim may seem naïve in its reading of Paik's *Zen for Film* as expressing the kind of poetic boredom formulated by thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer. For Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer, the experience of boredom was a privileged experience for the elite few, an escape from the various corruptions of the

⁴⁴ Nam June Paik, *Du cheval à christo et autres écrits*, p. 198. The original French text reads as the following : "La confusion qui entoure l'art vidéo d'aujourd'hui résulte en grande partie de l'absence de catégories qui permettraient de distinguer

<<l'art ennuyeux et de qualité>>

de

<<l'art ennuyeux et médiocre.>>

L'ennui en soi est loin d'être une qualité négative. En Asie, c'est plutôt un signe de noblesse. Répétons-le, cette confusion trouve son origine dans le fait que nous confondons INPUT-time et OUTPUT-time" (Editions Lebeer Hossmann, 124). All translations from both Korean and French are my own unless indicated otherwise.

modern world.⁴⁵ Their descriptions of an elite and poetic boredom partly evoke Benjamin's concept of the aura, a unique experience embedded within the fabric of tradition. If one were to argue that *Zen for Film* induces in us such "poetic boredom," then the work becomes an example of several artistic attempts that deny the inherent possibilities of modern experience by grafting onto it "auratic qualities," or various qualities traditionally attributed to an artwork, including the disembodied experience of poetic boredom. But against such claim, I argue that *Zen for Film* induces in us a different kind of boredom, an "active boredom." It is a boredom in which one remains lingering between the self and the object-world without becoming absorbed by either of them. Through such boredom, *Zen for Film* works as a space of mediation in which both the subject and the object, without one dominating over the other, occupy a shared space. Paik's work becomes a conciliatory space, responding to what Elizabeth S. Goodstein calls the "epistemic groundlessness of modern existence."⁴⁶

Before considering *Zen for Film's* important connections with boredom, I would like to emphasize the historical context of Paik's work. *Zen for Film* acquires quite a unique position within the history of world cinema. First shown at the Filmmakers' Cinematheque in New York (Fig. 5), *Zen for Film* served as a bridge that connected Paik's works to broader cinematic movements in vogue at the time. However, Paik's work remained somewhat of an outcast within the international cinematic avant-garde network because of its rather unusual format—the blank screen, the projector, and the surrounding space presented as a work of film. Considering the highly experimental artistic milieu of the sixties, one might have expected *Zen for Film* to degenerate into a nihilistic or perhaps even an affronting move against an international community of filmmakers, or more broadly the larger community of visual artists. On the

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities*, p. 29.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

contrary, *Zen for Film* received an enthusiastic approval from the American avant-garde artist Jonas Mekas, a representative figure of the American cinematic avant-garde in the sixties. In response to Paik's work, Mekas stated:

“I realized...when I watched Nam June Paik's evening [at the Filmmakers' Cinematheque]... his art, like the art of LaMonte Young, or that of Stan Brakhage, or Gregory Markopoulos, or Jack Smith, or even (no doubt about it) Andy Warhol, is governed by the same thousand year old aesthetic laws and can be analyzed and experienced like any other classical work of art.”⁴⁷

Mekas's appraisal had a symbolic significance, embracing Paik's film works as genuinely avant-garde. But despite Mekas's embrace of *Zen for Film* as an avant-garde film, it is an unprecedented work not just in avant-garde cinema, but in the larger history of cinema for at least two reasons. First, it presents a non-figurative image as some kind of visual representation. The blank screen, I argue, is not an instance of iconoclasm that denies the existence of visual image altogether. Susan Sontag's claim that there is always something to see even in the absence of the visual supports the interpretation of the blank screen as a type of visual representation. Just as John Cage's three-movement silent composition *4'33''* (1952) does not deny aural representation but instead opens up infinite possibilities of aural combinations, the blank screen in Paik's *Zen for Film* emphasizes the potential of the visual through, however paradoxical it may sound, visual absence. There may have been moments in the history of cinema in which films would present the blank screen as a constitutive shot, but Paik's *Zen for Film*, if one were

⁴⁷ John Hanhardt, *The Worlds of Nam June Paik*, p. 82. It is apparent that a number of Paik's filmic works, including *Zen for Film*, were shown at the Filmmakers' Cinematheque in New York, but Hanhardt does not specify which other filmic works by Paik were also presented. In her writing on *Zen for Film*, Herman Asselbergh also stresses the irony of filmmakers embracing *Zen for Film*: “Talk about strange... It is hard to decide what exactly should raise eyebrows the most: let's say, Robert Morris, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Rauschenberg and other heroes of the Judson Church, Minimalism, and Fluxus taking in white movies slack-jawed, or the Pope of experimental film adding these same radical anti-films to the pantheon of art history without so much as batting an eyelash” (11).

to pursue defining it as a cinematographic work, is the first work that incorporates the blank screen as *the* defining element. *Zen for Film* does not present the blank screen within a montage; the blank screen is in itself a *sine qua non*, forming significance in itself. Second, it challenges the cinematic apparatus by drawing our attention to the image-producing mechanism itself and the surrounding space. Considering these two traits of *Zen for Film*, it is much more compelling to see the work as an anomaly, or even a rupture, within the history of cinema.

Zen for Film's unusual status within the history of cinema becomes even more apparent when comparing it to other experimental films produced around the same period. In 1958, the American artist Bruce Conner, who worked with various mediums including photography, sculpture, painting, film, and others, presented his first film called *A Movie*, a highly self-referential work that makes usage of various found footages: a naked woman taking off her stockings, Indians riding horses, the explosion of a nuclear bomb, and others. An image signaling the end of the film appears near the beginning of the film, and images displaying the words "Movie" and "Bruce Conner" appear sporadically throughout the film. Eight years later, the experimental filmmaker Owen Land (also known as George Landow) created a 16-mm film called *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc.* (1966), which presents, as one might expect, an underdeveloped film displaying images of a blinking woman and of changing letterings for a duration of six minutes (Fig. 4). The film came to be regarded as representative of the structural film movement, which "aimed to expose and reflect on the basis of cinema."⁴⁸ Land's work is a "structural film" that serves two functions: it draws our attention to the materiality of the medium, and it imposes a recognizable structure (often through repetition) on the viewer. In *Zen for Film*, the potential viewing pleasure that can be

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

derived from either a recognizable and repetitive structure (structural) or a plenitude of images (collage) is absent. Paik's work appears to embody what Sontag calls the "soft style" of an aesthetic of silence, expressing an attitude of "ironic open-mindedness" that rejects meanings generated by bourgeois-rationalist culture.⁴⁹ However, "hesitant," rather than "ironic," is a much more appropriate word to describe the operating mechanism of *Zen for Film*, a title that immediately establishes a direct relationship between the projector and the blank screen. Denied the pleasure of seeing either a plethora of images or a recognizable visual structure, the viewer "hesitantly" walks around the installation site, attempting to find an ideal viewing position that does not exist in the first place.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," pp. 32-33.

⁵⁰ I would like to thank Professor Colin Burnett for bringing my attention to these two important works by Bruce Conner and Owen Lands. See Hanhardt's chapter "The Cinematic Avant-Garde" in *The Worlds of Nam June Paik* for a more detailed contextualization of Paik's works in the history of world cinema.



Figure 4. A shot from Owen Land's *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc.* (1966). The lettering on the white film leader rapidly changes through a repetitive structure. The whole composition remains constant throughout the film.⁵¹

Outside the context of film history, *Zen for Film* engages with two other seminal works in painting and music: Robert Rauschenberg's monochromatic *White Paintings* (1951) and Cage's *4'33''*. Paik himself did not make a statement in any press release attributing the artistic inspiration for his *Zen for Film* to Cage's *4'33''*. But Cage's role as Paik's spiritual and artistic mentor, a well-documented relationship, has led most critics and scholars to cite Cage's work, itself influenced by Rauschenberg's work, as the primary source of inspiration for Paik's *Zen for Film*. The three works by Rauschenberg, Cage, and Paik share important similarities. First, the

⁵¹ The still is taken from the website of Galerie Martin Janda: <http://www.martinjanda.at/>.

form of their presentations is unfixed. Rauschenberg's series of *White Paintings* consists of different size frames. Cage's *4'33''* does not indicate the type and the number of instruments required to perform the piece, and thus various instrumentalists, either as an individual or as an ensemble, have performed it in various settings. Paik presented *Zen for Film* using different types of films. His flexible approach towards the artistic medium has given birth to different presentations of the work, most notably a video-clip on the Internet. Second, they embrace an aesthetic of visual or aural emptiness, redirecting the audience's attention to other often neglected elements—the frame of the painting, the crowd enjoying the music, and the film apparatus. *Zen for Film*, then, is, in one sense, a work that takes the existential crises that occurred in the realms of painting and music into cinema, putting into question the definition of cinematic experience and the position of the subject within it. For the triad relationship between Paik's *Zen for Film*, Cage's *4'33''*, and Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* to be acknowledged emphatically, one must see in *Zen for Film* a dynamic relationship between the aural, the visual, and the physical space.

Siegfried Kracauer's Boredom(s)

Paik's *Zen for Film* functions as a site in which the viewer experiences a unique type of boredom. The experience of boredom involves a loss of meaning in modern conditions. If one understands boredom as an experience deeply rooted in modern conditions, then it becomes clear that one needs to understand the problem of boredom as a problem of the relationship of the modern subject to a changing world. One thinker who reflected on this very issue was Siegfried Kracauer. In his two essays "Those Who Wait" (1922) and "Boredom" (1924), Kracauer

contemplates the various ways in which people respond to modern conditions. In the first of these two essays “Those Who Wait,” Kracauer describes the chaotic state of our modern conditions, which induce “an alert sense of time,” “loneliness,” “profound sadness,” “confinement in spiritual/intellectual situation,” and, ultimately, “metaphysical suffering.”⁵² Kracauer attributes these societal characteristics, binding us in a “common fate,”⁵³ to largely three modern phenomena: the degeneration of the experience of community to a mere concept of community, the general loss of faith in absolutes and consequently the dominance of relativism, and the atomization of self into an “arbitrary chance construct.”⁵⁴ First, individuation and isolation have come to replace the organized structure of a community in our modern society. Individuals no longer associate themselves with a larger community; independent of larger associations, they become “tiny splintered-off particles in a temporal stream that is trickling away.”⁵⁵ Second, people no longer take faith in one Hegelian absolute, but they rather “traverse,” “drift along,” “wander” across realms of world history, spiritual events, or religious life.⁵⁶ Kracauer’s diagnosis of people’s relationship to the absolute is a precursor to the familiar postmodern argument, but he is in a way far more pessimistic about the general loss of faith in absolutes than future thinkers on postmodernism. In Kracauer’s thinking, the realization that one can consider all absolutes for acceptance does not solve the problem of spiritual void experienced by modern subjects. Instead it leaves them hanging in an intermediate space as they wander across spiritual and intellectual realms. Lastly, Kracauer describes the modern self as having a dialectical relationship with the object world. Kracauer does not initiate an in-depth exploration of the history of the self in relation to the transformations of society, or the “object-

⁵² Siegfried Kracauer, “Those Who Wait,” p. 129.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

world.” Consequently, Kracauer’s lack of account of the development of the self naturally leads to a Weberian diagnosis that emphasizes the material conditions’ impact on the self. But nonetheless, Kracauer states that one must consider “the social developments and a hundred other lines of development that ultimately leads to the present chaos,” which, in Kracauer’s view, result in an atomized, or non-coherent self.⁵⁷ Although Kracauer does not mention boredom at any point in the essay, boredom (the equivalent term in German being *langeweile*, literally meaning the “long whiling away of time”) nevertheless remains in the background as it is conjured up by Kracauer’s frequent usage of the words “tarrying” and “lingering.”

The modern conditions that Kracauer describes in “Those Who Wait” have prompted various responses. Kracauer argues that the act of “waiting” may be the only viable solution to surviving the chaotic conditions of modernity. In Kracauer’s view, the modern subject responds to these dismal modern conditions in three ways: an extreme Weberian skeptical approach, a “short-circuit” approach, and, lastly, the act of “waiting.” The extreme Weberian approach “fights for the disenchantment of the world” by refusing to believe in any absolutes,⁵⁸ whereas the “short-circuit” approach strives to have faith in absolutes—but only ends up “staggering into one religious realm or another” due to their unprepared and artificial faith in one realm.⁵⁹ As an alternative to these two approaches, Kracauer suggests the simple act of “waiting”:

But how is one to escape the terrible either-or of the two positions: that of the skeptic-as-a-matter-of-principle and that of the short-circuit people? Perhaps the only remaining attitude is one of *waiting*. By committing oneself to waiting, one neither blocks one’s path toward faith (like those who defiantly affirm the void) nor besieges this faith (like those whose yearning is so strong, it makes them lose all restraint). One waits, and one’s waiting is a *hesitant openness*, albeit of a sort that is difficult to explain. It can easily

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-30.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-36.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-37.

happen that someone who waits in this manner may find fulfillment in one way or another. Nevertheless, in this context one ought to think primarily of those people who have tarried and still do tarry in front of closed doors, and who thus, when they take it upon themselves to wait, are people who are waiting here and now.⁶⁰

Kracauer acknowledges that this “waiting” is similar to the Weberian approach in its almost masochistic chastisement of the self by delaying the formation of a true relationship with the absolute.⁶¹ Another important similarity between all the three approaches is that they all occur in an intermediate state between realms of absolutes. But what makes “waiting” distinct among the three approaches is one’s heightened presentness and preparedness. In Kracauer’s words, “waiting” is an active state consisting of a “tense activity” and of an “engaged self-preparation.”⁶² One waits for the “irruption of the absolute”⁶³ that can occur at any point in time.

But is this “waiting” the same thing as boredom of any kind, or are they conceptually incompatible? I would like to claim that Kracauer’s formulation of “waiting” is a certain state of “boredom,” but not the types of “boredom” which Kracauer had in mind. To be sure, “waiting” is neither the “vulgar boredom” that pervades daily existence nor the “radical boredom” (or “poetic boredom”) that allows one to experience an ecstasy if only temporarily. Kracauer’s “waiting” most closely approximates his concept of “personal boredom” described in his essay “Boredom.”⁶⁴ One experiences “personal boredom” in a quiet café, closed off from the noises of the world and content to be with oneself. However, “personal boredom” does not entail the state of “tense activity” that is an integral part of “waiting.” Providing an example of a person who desires to “roll up into a ball like a porcupine” at a café, Kracauer states that “personal boredom”

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 138. The emphasis comes from Karsten Witte, the editor of the second edition of *Das Ornament der Masse: Essays* (1977). It is retained in Thomas Levin’s translation.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-39.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁶⁴ Siegfried Kracauer, “Boredom,” p. 333.

entails the “wandering of the soul,” becoming aware of one’s insignificance within one’s surroundings.⁶⁵ But such boredom does not take into enough account the subject’s awareness of reality, or the “object-world.” Focused on the individual’s re-connection with the self through the discovery of one’s place in the world, “personal boredom” is much more introspective and thus more separated from reality than Kracauer’s concept of “waiting.”

Kracauer’s “waiting” works as an “active boredom,” making one engage not only with the self but also with one’s exterior surroundings, or the “object-world.” One can find a sketch of this “active boredom” towards the end of Kracauer’s essay “Boredom.” Kracauer proposes such boredom as a solution to the vanishing of the self in modern society, a quandary that Kracauer sums up in the beginning of his essay:

People today who still have time for boredom and yet are not bored are certainly just as boring as those who never get around to being bored. For their self has vanished—the self whose presence, particularly in this so bustling a world, would necessarily compel them to tarry for a while without a goal, neither here nor there.⁶⁶

Regardless of whether fully involved with his or her occupation, the modern subject finds it extremely difficult to “tarry for a while without a goal, neither here nor there”—a crucial phrase that captures the element of salvation in boredom for the modern subject. Before Kracauer offers his sketch of “active boredom,” he describes the material conditions that make it difficult for the modern subject to reclaim the self. According to Kracauer, the self (Kracauer alternates between “spirit,” “being,” and “self” interchangeably) is prone to forgetting itself due to the omnipresence of technological inventions, such as the electric advertisement, the movie theater, and the radio. Kracauer describes the self encountering these inventions as an experience in which the self vanishes—one’s spirit “roaming out of the night and into the night,” dazzled by the illuminating

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

signs on the advertisement; one forgetting oneself “in the process of gawking” in a movie theater; one becoming a “playground for worldwide noises” in listening to the radio. The first two instances of the advertisement and the movie theater are physically disembodying experiences, the self completely forgetting itself and becoming closer in distance with the object-world. On the other hand, the last instance of the radio is a situation in which the “worldwide noises” broadcast from London, the Eiffel Tower, and Berlin both intrude upon and dominate the realm of the self. In all three instances, the self’s importance is mitigated to the extreme by either of the two: distraction or intrusion.

Kracauer, then, proposes “active boredom” as a solution to the problem of the modernized world on the verge of devouring the selves. Kracauer describes its role in restoring presence to the self:

But what if one refuses to allow oneself to be chased away [from the boundless technological imperialism spreading across the world]? Then boredom becomes the only proper occupation, since it provides a kind of guarantee that one is, so to speak, still in control of one’s own existence. If one were never bored, one would presumably *not really be present at all* and would thus be merely one more object of boredom, as was claimed at the outset. One would light up on the rooftops or spool by as a filmstrip. *But if indeed one is present, one would have no choice but to be bored by the ubiquitous abstract racket that does not allow one to exist, and, at the same time, to find oneself boring for existing in it.*⁶⁷

What Kracauer has provided in the passage above is a sketch of a new concept of boredom, which I have called an “active boredom.” First, Kracauer defines the state of boredom as a state of being present. Being bored by one’s physical surroundings, or the “ubiquitous abstract racket that does not allow one to exist,” does not imply neglect. Instead, it implies a state of heightened awareness, strategically situating oneself in an intermediate realm between the self and the

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 334. The italics are my added emphasis.

“object-world.” Second, “active boredom” is a state of both activity and passivity, as in “to find oneself boring” and “to be bored.” In a state of “active boredom,” the subject can persist in the activity of “engaged self-preparation” for establishing a true relationship with physical reality as an absolute.⁶⁸ At the same time, “hesitant openness” of the subject towards physical reality implies that, metaphorically speaking, the door of the self is open at least partially. Unlike the “short-circuit” approach which lets the door of the self open to every possible realm of the absolute, “active boredom” allows the self to form a more balanced and mutual relationship with physical reality. Lastly, “active boredom” acknowledges a dialectical relationship between the self and the “object-world.” The “object world,” with all its dins of modern development, presents itself as a threatening force; at the same time, it is also the reason why one is able to become aware of oneself as the self becomes threatened. In other words, it is the threatening situation that prompts one to place enough distance between the self and the object-world. “Active boredom” neither denies the possibility of absolutes, a negative attitude embraced by the Weberian approach, nor prematurely accepts certain absolutes, a hasty attitude embraced by the “short-circuit” approach. Rather, “active boredom” is an intermediate state that emphasizes the mutual harmony between the self as a modern subject and physical reality, or the “object-world” of modernity.

⁶⁸ Kracauer makes his view of reality, or more precisely physical reality, as an absolute towards the end of his essay “Those Who Wait.” He contrasts *reality*, one that is “filled with incarnate things and people and that therefore demands to be seen concretely,” with the “atomized unreal world of shapeless powers and figures devoid of meaning” (139-40). Kracauer’s formulation of reality is evidently a physical reality rendered as an absolute. The “atomized unreal world” is the realm of the self which Kracauer describes as an “empty space,” a “void” throughout his essay.

A “Hesitantly Open” Viewing Position

The concept of “active boredom” helps us better understand the position of the viewing subject within Paik’s *Zen for Film*. *Zen for Film* induces an “active boredom” in the viewer because it thickens our experience of time. In other words, it allows the viewer to encounter the passing of modern time as an experience in itself. The long stretch of time leads the viewer to experience an “active boredom” through which the viewer becomes highly aware of the surrounding physical reality. In experiencing *Zen for Film*, the viewer finds him- or herself preparing for the expected visual or aural stimuli. But soon enough, the viewer realizes that the screen will remain blank. One instead hears the noises of the surrounding environment becoming an aural accompaniment to the blank screen. One realizes that *Zen for Film* is part and parcel of its physical reality; the work is not physically separated but very much integrated with its environment. Thus the viewer experiences the work from the mid-point between self and the physical reality. Neither is the viewer consumed by physical reality nor is the viewer excluded from it. *Zen for Film* becomes a mediating mechanism through which the viewer as a modern subject, via “active boredom,” reconnects with both the self and the physical reality.

A key factor that enables the viewer of *Zen for Film* to experience “active boredom” is the work’s intentionally ambiguous state. Herman Asselbergh describes the ambiguity of Paik’s work as an in-between characteristic: “The lack of fixity of this work—waving between film and anti-film, between screening and sculpture, between situation and ‘thing,’ between lark and *koan*, between zero degree and apogee—is perfectly in tune with the Fluxus philosophy of intermediality.”⁶⁹ Because of such intermedial quality, neither grounded in one specific medium

⁶⁹ Herman Asselbergh, “Beyond the Appearance of Imagelessness: Preliminary Notes on *Zen for Film*’s Enchanted Materialism,” p. 13.

or the other, *Zen for Film* does not prompt the viewer to make presumptions on what specific relationship one must form in experiencing the work. The relationship between the viewer and *Zen for Film* is much more open-ended than, for instance, one established in a movie theater. The enclosed space of a movie theater, “the huge dark hole animated with the illusion of a life that belongs to no one and exhausts everyone,”⁷⁰ renders the viewer as a helpless subject under the influence of the film apparatus. In contrast, the viewer of *Zen for Film* has a flexible mobility in experiencing the work. One is quite free to step within and outside the viewing space of *Zen for Film*. When physically situated between the projector and the screen, the viewer can have a cinematic experience, albeit an unusual one. When physically situated outside both the projector and the screen, the viewer can experience *Zen for Film* as a minimalist installation, a detached form of cinematic experience, or a hybrid of both. How one experiences *Zen for Film* also depends on the organization of the viewing space, which can be varied and thus leads to infinite possibilities of viewing. All these possibilities are different ways of forming relationship with physical reality via *Zen for Film*, and the viewer remains “hesitantly open” to all these possibilities, neither wholly rejecting nor embracing any one of them.

⁷⁰ Siegfried Kracauer, “Boredom,” p. 332.



Figure 5. *Zen for Film* (1964) performed as part of New Cinema Festival I, Filmmakers; Cinematheque, New York. According to Herman Asselbergh, a 16 mm film was used for this performance.



Figure 6. Installation of *Zen for Film* at the Paik Art Center in the 2012 exhibition “Nostalgia is an Extended Feedback.” The model of the projector is an Eiki Slim Line, a 16 mm projector. It uses a 16 mm clear leader with scratches and dust.⁷¹

⁷¹ I would like to thank Professor Colin Burnett for identifying the projector for this installation.

Chapter 2: Disorienting Boredom: *Global Groove* (1973)

If we could compile a weekly TV festival made up of music and dance from every county, and distributed it free-of-charge round the world via the proposed common video market, it would have a phenomenal effect on education and entertainment. Peace can be as exciting as a John Wayne war movie. The tired slogan of "world peace" will again become fresh and marketable.

--Nam June Paik in his essay Paik/Godfrey's *Global Groove* (1973)

Producing a TV Festival: Beginnings of *Global Groove*

A potential project had been floating in Paik's head for a few months. He envisioned the project to be a visual festival on a global scale, cutting across the boundaries of cultural and national differences. Dissatisfied with the highly nationalistic culture of media broadcasts during his time—one can easily find books by Camus and Sartre in a bookstore but cannot as easily come across French broadcasts in daily life ⁷²—Paik hoped to create a microscopic world of utopia with his idealistic vision. Politics and entertainment, classical and non-classical (atonal, performative) music, and Eastern and Western religions, among many other combinations, would come together in jovial spirit through his project. One day, a call from Fred Stein, a television producer for the United States Information Agency (USIA), presented an opportunity to realize his project. His project, Stein proposed, would be distributed in 55 different countries. Paik agreed to Stein's proposal. With the deal struck, a group of various individuals—dancers, musicians, video technicians—was assembled to begin working on the project, aptly titled *Global Groove*.

⁷² Diane English, "Profile: Nam June Paik, Creator of Global Groove," p. 5.

After reading the script that Paik penned for the project, written in typical Paikian style, “complete with doodles in the margin,”⁷³ people realized that the project was certainly not going to be normal in any sense of the word. The directions in the script resemble avant-garde writings:

Two TWA jets will take off from breasts of Lady. If two dancers agree, they can wear same color bikini and wild Paik/Abe synthesizer patterns (also op-art patterns) can be keyed into there . . . `Who is light man – will he follow me in forgetting routine lighting?’⁷⁴

Indeed, not only “routine lighting” but also video and filmic conventions were to be forgotten. The phrase ““Who is light man—will he follow me in forgetting routine lighting?””—which could be construed as a direct authorial statement, a direction to the crew, an actual dialogue, or all of these—emphasizes process rather than the product itself. The eclectic cast, including a Korean fan dancer, a TV-cellist, and choreographers, prepared themselves for shooting, rehearsing and introducing each other. On the set, one video man said, "I'd thought I'd seen every imaginable set-up, but this is incredible." In response, David Loxton, the Lab Director of Studio 46 where the shooting of *Global Groove* took place, said, "You've got to understand, we don't do things in the normal way here." The shooting continued for two days and Paik, whom everyone referred to as “that insane man,” and everyone else were satisfied with the product—except the audio man who wondered, “My wife is going to ask me what I did at work today... What am I supposed to say?” What one learns about *Global Groove* from its production history is that it was a performative work of art, forgoing conventions of lighting, sound, and editing and emphasizing the creative process.

First broadcast by WNET-TV on 30 January 1974, *Global Groove* (1973), considered to be a seminal work in the history of video art and by some to be “the most famous work of video

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

art ever made,”⁷⁵ is a layered collage. It strives towards de-nationalization of media culture by presenting various cultural events on an equal basis, each having a unique place in the fabric of the work. The following questions lie behind the work: how can we imagine “culture” without tying it to a specific national, ideological, and political entity? How can artists solve the traffic jam of information that has impeded the development of an open-access video culture?⁷⁶

Emotionally, *Global Groove* encompasses a wide range of registers—bizarre, contemplative, festive, playful, and erotic. Hanhardt describes Paik’s work as “a heady mix of popular music such as Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels as well as John Cage, Korean folk music, Allen

⁷⁵ The description comes from the following website: <http://www.css.washington.edu/emc/title/5347>

⁷⁶ Paik’s own reflection on *Global Groove* displays a practical concern for the role of art in a divided world. His reflections appear in a 1970 essay titled “Global Groove and the Video Market,” written during the recording at the studio. Paik begins the essay with his description of the Treaty of Rome (1957) which led to the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC), a predecessor to the European Union in the history of trans-European efforts to unite the markets of nation states. Although people initially thought of the prospect of creating a common market to be a hopelessly naïve idea, the EEC eventually led to phenomenal economic growth, “surpassing even the most wild imaginings in terms of growth and prosperity.” There is no doubt that the creation of the EEC is to be the model for *Global Groove*. Wryly commenting on the divided state of video culture, or the “Videoland on this Spaceship Earth,” Paik points out the irony of how a communicative medium like the television has in fact suffered from a bureaucratic, divisive, and confused culture in which “practically no one knows what to buy, to import or export.” Unnecessary regulations between TV stations around the world have impeded the traffic of information, those thousands of hours on videotapes “hoarded” away from the public. Paik laments the status quo by stating, “Should video culture stay as divided, nationalistic and protectionistic as the block economy of the Thirties, which amplified the depression, instigated Fascism and helped promote World War II?” Paik’s solution: the creation of a Video Common Market, which will “strip the hieratic monism of TV culture and promote the free flow of video information through an inexpensive barter system or convenient market.” Articulating such idealistic and Marxist notions would seem to be out-of-sync with the state of global affairs in Paik’s day when the youths were revolting against the “machine,” minorities from every direction made their voices heard in often explosive bursts, and artists refused to submit themselves to large institutions. But in light of all these already too familiar descriptions of this tumultuous period, Paik seems to have genuinely believed in the potential unification of humankind via the free-flow of information through media. The solution, Paik states, will not only have philosophical ramifications but also make the world’s cultural economy much more “cost-efficient.” In short, real-world, practical concerns lie at the heart of the *Global Groove* project. Paik did not intend *Global Groove* to be an ephemeral event. As an ephemeral event, *Global Groove* would bring people of different backgrounds together virtually through television—and then they would disperse and resume their daily lives. Rather, Paik intended *Global Groove* to permanently affect people’s lives by revolutionizing the exchange of information through media. What is important in Paik’s thinking is not its prediction value, the Internet having realized Paik’s dream in the present day, but rather his practical view of media culture as having an impact on the world.

Ginsberg, and Japanese television commercials for Pepsi-Cola.”⁷⁷ It is not only transnational in its pastiche of different cultural elements, but also escapes defined genres of art, encompassing painterly, filmic, and musical qualities.

In the previous chapter, I discussed about the aesthetic of boredom at play in Paik’s *Zen for Film*, arguing that the installation site of *Zen for Film* becomes an in-between realm in which the viewing subject can “tarry awhile,” neither becoming immersed in the installation nor becoming an objective, skeptical, and detached viewer who regards the installation with safe critical distance. In the intermediate space of *Zen for Film*, the viewer experiences an “active boredom,” a distinct subjective state in which the passing of modern time becomes experiential. A different approach to the aesthetic of boredom lies at the center of *Global Groove*. The viewer’s experience of what I call “disorienting boredom” arises from the inconsistent relationship between the aural and the visual.

The Analytical Value of Christian Metz’s Syntagmatic Analysis

In thinking about Paik’s three works, Christian Metz’s work on film semiotics, which laid the foundation for “a precise and rigorous study of the material conditions which allow cinema to function,”⁷⁸ is particularly illuminating in uncovering the latent relationship between the aural and the visual beneath Paik’s work. One might raise objections as to the usefulness of Metz’s theory of semiotics in understanding Paik’s works on two fronts. First, Metz’s theory focuses mostly on narrative films which consist of a chain of “assertions,” the most primary unit of

⁷⁷ John Hanhardt, “Nam June Paik (1932-2006): Video Art Pioneer,” p. 152.

⁷⁸ Dudley Andrew, “Christian Metz and the Semiology of the Cinema,” p.214.

cinema.⁷⁹ Rather than pondering over new possibilities for future cinema and imagining how it can overturn conventional codes underlying narrative films, Metz instead concentrates on elaborating upon narrative films' reliance upon certain visual techniques. As a film historian, Metz "marked out the pattern of the subset we call film history and determined why these possibilities rather than others have been actualized."⁸⁰ The question remains whether it is valuable to apply Metz's theoretical work deriving from narrative films to Paik's non-narrative video and "satellite art" works, which seems to defy any kind of system of signification. Second, television and cinema are different visual media that function differently in terms of signification. According to Dudley Andrew, media theorist Marshall McLuhan upholds such a view, opposing Metz's argument that images, in general, undergo the same process of signification in both cinema and television:

Curiously, Metz likes to link cinema and television at the level of material of expression. The differences between them, he feels, are cultural rather than semiotic since both employ the same five channels of material [which consist of images, graphic traces including written material, recorded speech, recorded music, and recorded sound effects]. Yet Marshall McLuhan would argue that Metz's description of the image is too general and does not take into account the fact that in one case the image is reflected (film) toward the spectator and in the other case (television) the image is projected directly at him. McLuhan sees this as a material difference; Metz does not.⁸¹

In other words, McLuhan criticizes Metz for not taking into account the following: the material differences between filmic and video images, and the difference in targeted audience (the spectator versus the individual) between the two mediums. Critics in sympathy with McLuhan's line of argument will see inherent limitations in applying semiotic analysis of works such as *Global Groove*, *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*, and *All Star Video*, since all three abandon linear

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.234.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.231.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.218.

narrative, acting, and conventional editing—necessary components of what we would consider a work of narrative cinema *par excellence*.

Despite material differences between film and video works, the value of semiotic analysis lies in helping us to analyze systematically a visual-aural relationship underpinning a visual work, whether it is a work of film or video. Unlike critics such as McLuhan, Metz is not interested in problematizing the ideologies behind the mechanisms of film language, an issue which militant critics at *Cahiers du cinéma* obsessed over particularly during the sixties and the seventies.⁸² Rather, Metz's theory, in a highly scientific manner, "hopes to isolate all the logical mechanisms which permit the raw material to speak such messages."⁸³ For Metz, a syntagmatic analysis, or the horizontal analysis of various elements of narrative films, allows such scientific analysis. Such rigorous visual analysis remains relevant in understanding non-narrative films as visual texts. McLuhan's implicit argument that the material differences between film and video become determining factors in their visual strategies essentializes these two artistic mediums by negating the possibility of medium-specific strategies overlapping in creative ways. The respective histories of both mediums prove that both video and film artists appropriate visual strategies from the other artistic domain in a highly flexible manner, for instance American films' reliance upon television aesthetics in the sixties. While individual visual elements may have different connotations in these two media, for instance a visual depiction of television in *Global Groove* would not have the same self-reflexive meaning if it were shown in a film, both film and video works create meaning through the interaction between the visual and the aural. In the following section, my syntagmatic analysis of *Global Groove* becomes an important step in demonstrating

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.237-41.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.224.

the inconsistent relationship between the aural and the visual underlying the three works and thus in tracing their aesthetic of “disorienting boredom.”

“Disconnections, Overlappings, and Variations”: **“Disorienting Boredom”** and *Global Groove*

A very succinct description of the aesthetic of “disorienting boredom” comes from presumably its staunchest opponents. Towards the end of their essay “Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” Adorno and Horkheimer analyze the dominating influence of advertisement in post-WWII society, considering it as one symptom of a larger cultural regression. They argue that the aesthetic of advertisement has not only resulted in the absolute homogeneity of all cultural forms, but also in the disfigurement of language. Advertisement, metonymically linked to the Fascist ideology, has led to the reification of language, words becoming “petrified,” “alienated,” and “disfigured.” Their description of the aesthetic of advertisement emphasizes the loss of form, the particular elements becoming separated and indistinguishable from overall form:

The montage character of the culture industry, the synthetic, controlled manner in which its products are assembled—factory-like not only in the film studio but also, virtually, in the compilation of the cheap biographies, journalistic novels, and hit songs—predisposes it to advertising: the individual moment, in being detachable, replaceable, estranged even technically from any coherence of meaning, lends itself to purposes outside the work.⁸⁴

Such aesthetic, according to the two critics, has devastating ramifications on nearly every aspect of society, most notably language. Language and experience have become severed from each other; words become merely denotative signifiers as language “takes on the coldness which hitherto was peculiar to billboards and the advertising sections of newspapers.” For Adorno and

⁸⁴ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” p. 132.

Horkheimer, there is no escape from the influence of the “culture industry” other than through the enlightenment of modern rationality. Notwithstanding the pessimism of Adorno and Horkheimer’s description of the aesthetic of advertisement, such aesthetic resonates with the aesthetic of “disorienting boredom” to a certain extent. The “montage” quality characteristic of advertisements influences nearly all of Paik’s works in video and film. All fragments of high and popular cultures come together to form video collages. However, whereas the particular and the whole elements of an artwork collapse within the style of the “culture industry,” the aesthetic of “disorienting boredom” sustains the dialectic between its disparate elements and its structure, between high and low cultures, and between seriousness and triviality.

The inconsistent and fluid style of editing at the core of Paik’s video work contributes to its disorienting aesthetic. The visual and aural tracks of *Global Groove* are multilayered, and they are often difficult to distinguish from one another due to the fluid editing that blurs them. It consists of twenty visual segments.⁸⁵ In overlapping ways, it presents to the viewer

⁸⁵ Similarly with the debate on the concept of the "sequence" in cinematic terms, the question of what a visual segment consists of is debatable. For instance, the last segment of *Global Groove* constitute three parts: an image of *Arc de Triomphe* in Paris, a frenetic synthesized version of the image with a soundtrack of automobiles, and Percival Borde’s ethnographic video *Nigeria, 1971*. These three parts disrupt and conjoin with each other, allowing us to consider them together as a whole segment. The overall structure of *Global Groove*, with each segment lasting approximately two to three minutes, can be outlined as the following:

1. Introduction
2. Dance (“Devil with a Blue Dress”)
3. Allen Ginsberg’s chant
4. Dance (“Rock Around the Clock Tonight”)
5. Jud Yalkut’s interview of Charlotte Moorman (I) / TV-Cello performance
6. Dance (“I Can’t Give You Anything but Love”)
7. Korean fan dance
8. Dance (whimsical music)
9. John Cage’s recitation of anechoic chamber experience at Harvard
10. Korean traditional dance

phantasmagoric shapes and images, the dancing of American choreographers, the chanting of the American beatnik poet Allen Ginsburg, an interview of the cellist Charlotte Moorman, Moorman's TV-Cello performances, Korean traditional dance and music, John Cage's reciting of his past experiences, a Japanese Pepsi commercial, Paik's video piece *Participation TV*, a clip of performances by The Living Theater (accompanied by Stockhausen's atonal music *Kontakte*), and, as a final segment, an extended sequence of African dancing. One visual segment transitions into another in an inconsistent way, at times abrupt and at times unexpectedly smooth. In a similarly eclectic manner, one hears various aural segments: Sient-Saens's *Le Cygne*, the adagio movement from Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," TV-Cello and cello sounds accompanying one another, and several popular American songs such as "Devil with the Blue Dress On" and "Rock Around the Clock." In *Global Groove*, the disparate segments assembled together do not convey a strong sense of irony characteristic of many postmodern literary and visual works; rather, they impart on the viewer a strong sense of disorientation that makes one forget any irony that may be implicit in the individual segments. The disorientation results not only from the editing of disparate elements, but also from variations on fields of depth. Often throughout the video, figures in the foreground will suddenly become relegated to the background through the usage of graphic effects, making one become less uncertain of the distinction between

-
11. TV-Cello performance
 12. Edited Japanese Pepsi commercial
 13. Indian drum performance / disrupted by dance ("Devil with a Blue Dress")
 14. Feather dance ("Beat Me Daddy, Eight to the Bar")
 15. Yalkut's interview of Moorman (II)
 16. Paik/Moorman performance
 17. Participation TV
 18. The Living Theater's "Paradise Now" (Stockhausen's *Kontakte*) / Cage's recitation of an anecdote
 19. Dance in split-screen (whimsical music)
 20. *Arc de Triomphe* / synthesized image / African dance with ending credits

foreground and background planes as the work progresses. Both the disjointed elements and the loss of distinction between fore- and background planes create an aesthetic of “disorienting boredom.”

Certain similarities exist between the aesthetics of “disorienting boredom” and of Fluxus. Fluxus, an international network of experimental artists that was founded by George Maciunas (1931-78) at a certain period during the sixties, embraced an “aesthetic of negation”: “negation of the art market; negation of the notion of the great individual creator, the artist as hero or redeemer, negation of the art object as reified commodity, negation of traditionally defined boundaries between music, literature, and the visual arts.”⁸⁶ Paik’s video and Fluxus works put emphasis on the process of signification rather than on the product itself by emphasizing both indeterminacy and audience participation, evoking Barthes’s notion of the “text” that places emphasis on “play, activity, production, [and] practice.”⁸⁷ One example of a Fluxus work that demonstrates Barthes’s notion is Yoko Ono’s Fluxus performance piece *Cut Piece* (1964-5), which invites the audience to cut Ono’s garments until she becomes naked—an example in which audience participation is necessary in order for the performance to be complete (if the audience does not participate, then, presumably, the performance would not even begin). Similarly, Paik’s *Global Groove* employs a continuous montage of heavily edited segments that “invites” the audience to make connections along the “syntagmatic axis,” or “the horizontal flow of messaged linked one after the other in the chain of the text.”⁸⁸ A passage from Barthes’s essay captures the endless play of signification characteristic of Paik’s and Ono’s works:

[...] the *infinity* of the signifier refers not to some idea of the ineffable (the unnameable signified) but to that of a *playing*; the generation of the perpetual signifier (after the

⁸⁶ Marjorie Perloff, “Fluxier-than-Thou,” p. 582.

⁸⁷ Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” pp. 155-64.

⁸⁸ Dudley Andrew, “Christian Metz and the Semiology of the Cinema,” pp. 228-9.

fashion of a perpetual calendar) in the field of the text (better, of which the text is the field) is realized not according to an organic progress of maturation or a hermeneutic course of deepening investigation, but, rather, according to a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations.⁸⁹

Through such movement of “disconnections, overlappings, and variations,” *Global Groove* resists being understood as a coherent and logical whole, its aesthetic seemingly aligning with postmodern and Fluxus aesthetics.

A close analysis of *Global Groove* will be helpful in order to concretely articulate how its aesthetic makes a departure from Fluxus aesthetic. While *Global Groove* does not employ logical transitions between video segments, it does employ contextualization through its prophetic announcement and its establishment of authorship in its opening segment. That the work will forgo establishing a “meta-narrative” is clear from the very beginning when the male voice-over narration announces what the video-work will reveal to us: “This is a glimpse of the video landscape of tomorrow, when you will be able to switch to any TV station on the earth, and TV Guide will be as fat as the Manhattan telephone book.” Heralding itself as a prophetic work, it sets up a context through which we view the rest of the work, allowing us to read the work as a text which contains a “prepatterned context.”⁹⁰ Importantly, the work establishes its authorship by displaying the names of Nam June Paik and John Godfrey, further setting up an additional contextualization. These two layers of contextualization, by proclaiming both the intent of the work and its authorship, directly oppose Fluxus “aesthetic of negation.”

⁸⁹ Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” pp. 155-64.

⁹⁰ Dudley Andrew, “Christian Metz and the Semiology of the Cinema,” p.228.



Figures 7 (above) and 8 (below). The above four shots constitute the opening sequence of *Global Groove*. The below four shots are taken from the eighteenth segment, in which an image of John Cage reciting his experience at the anechoic chamber becomes superimposed upon rapidly moving images of The Living Theatre's performance.

Fluxus's "aesthetic of negation" also fails to account for the cooperative relationship between words and images in *Global Groove*. For instance, the thirty-second opening sequence already employs a neat alignment between what we hear and what we see (Fig. 7). As the male voice-narrator announces, "This is a glimpse of the video landscape of tomorrow," we see an ambiguous image with green and red tints and light purple shades—"the video landscape of tomorrow." Subsequently, an image of the TV Guide booklet in English appears, matching the narrator's prophecy about TV stations and TV guides. Towards the end of the announcement, the American TV Guide booklet, through a process of smooth visual distortion, morphs into its Japanese counterpart, reinforcing the connection between the words and image by emphasizing the cosmopolitan nature of the future TV network ("when you will be able to switch to any TV station on the earth"). Such establishment of a direct audio-visual code makes it difficult to see *Global Groove* operating under Fluxus "aesthetic of negation."

Connection builds not just between words and images, but, more generally, between the aural and the visual as well. After the opening sequence, a two and a half minute dance sequence appears, a choreography by Pamela Sousa and Kenneth Urmston accompanied by Mitch Ryder's upbeat 1966 cover song "Devil with a Blue Dress On." Significantly, the aural element precedes the visual, already establishing a hierarchy between the two. The segment begins with the first note of Ryder's song and drumbeats before we even see Sousa's dancing feet. As the segment proceeds, the visual follows the aural as expected, both the flashing pop-ups of the two dancers in the foreground and the camera zoom-ins and outs corresponding to the rhythm of the music. Moreover, what triggers the transition in the segment is, unsurprisingly, the sound of the electric guitar, which cues the appearance of both blue shades and an unrelated image of a blue-colored torpedo shape set against a yellow background. In these instances the aural signifies the

introduction of the visual, creating a hierarchical relationship between these two elements. Such establishment of a hierarchical relationship between sensory elements detaches Paik from the ambition of Fluxus in creating a democracy of the senses for the experience of an artwork. The existence of segments that display such hierarchy makes it difficult to categorize *Global Groove* as a postmodern text that flattens the relative importance of its formal elements.

But the relationship between the aural and the visual elements in *Global Groove* is not as orderly and structured as it seems to be, resulting in an aesthetic of “disorienting boredom.” Disruptions occur at several junctures, destabilizing the unity of the segments and the already established aural-visual relationships in themselves. For instance, the eighteenth segment of *Global Groove*, displaying an edited performance of The Living Theater in a fast playback—a combination of fast rewind and forward—accompanied by an edited soundtrack of Stockhausen’s *Kontakte*, initially presents to the viewer a neat alignment between image and sound (Fig. 8). Stockhausen’s *Kontakte* is not directly produced by the images, as in a speech produced by an image of an enunciating speaker. But temporarily, the viewer comes to associate both the performance and *Kontakte* with each other in their evocation of a surreal mood, the rapid movements of naked performers and the atonal electronic music of *Kontakte* creating an off-kilter atmosphere. What disrupts this alignment between the visual and the aural is the sudden appearance of John Cage reciting his visit to a dentist.⁹¹ As in the segment featuring “Devil with a Blue Dress On,” Cage’s enunciation (“One day I went to the dentist.”) precedes the image of Cage that becomes superimposed upon the image of The Living Theater performances. The images of the performances, becoming more frenetic with frequent camera zoom-ins and

⁹¹ The following is a transcription of John Cage’s recount of his experience in the anechoic chamber in *Global Groove*: “I heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood incirculation.”

zoom-outs, become relegated to the background against a close-up shot of Cage. Gradually, Cage's face fills in the whole screen, and the segment ends with Cage delivering the comic punch line to his recitation, "Well, I have a hole in my sock, and, if you like, I'll take my shoes off," accompanied by the laughter of the audience. In the duration of a minute, our experience has shifted from the bizarre to the comic. The insertion of the Cage segment resembles a flashback in a noir film, but it is quite different from it. In a typical flashback, the camera zooms in on the face of a reminiscing character, both the visual (through dissolve, superimposition, and others) and the aural elements replaced by new elements. But in this disruptive moment in *Global Groove*, both the superimposed and the superimposing elements remain present, aurally and visually. Two soundtracks and two visual images run against each other simultaneously, creating a disorienting effect on the viewer.

Certain editing techniques in *Global Groove* also betray a structured quality that seems to escape the definition of Fluxus aesthetic. There are three instances in *Global Groove* in which Paik employs gradual fadeouts: between the segments of Sun-Ock Lee's traditional Korean dance, Sousa's dance, and Cage's reading of his experience in the anechoic chamber at Harvard University.⁹² In contrast to the abrupt editing of the rest of the work, such

⁹² Cage's recitation is based on one of his anecdotes, thoughts, and short stories that he wrote over the course of his career. The following is the anecdote which Cage recites in the segment:

"Just the other day I went
to the dentist.
Over the radio they said
it was the hottest day of
the year.
However, I was
wearing a jacket,
because going to a doctor
has always struck me as
a somewhat formal occasion.

gradual fadeouts make the mid-section of the work proceed in a structural and orchestrated manner. Such smooth transitions challenge the reception of *Global Groove* as a postmodern text, a frenetic assemblage of video segments. But there are also other segments in *Global Groove* that make use of a more abrupt editing. Occasional discontinuities on both aural and visual fronts occur, for instance, during a second segment of Lee's performance of traditional Korean dance. On the level of editing, Paik seems to follow Fluxus "aesthetic of negation" by emphasizing discontinuity. However, in his attempt to explore how what we hear can influence what we see, he establishes a hierarchical relationship between the aural and the visual, departing from the democratic "interplay of senses" of Fluxus aesthetic.

Conclusion: Beyond the Boundaries of Postmodern and Fluxus Aesthetics

In an interview with poet and artist Nicholas Zurbrugg, Paik mentioned that he had "no reason to hang up into one style."⁹³ True to his statement, some of Paik's works seem to form polar opposites, for instance his *Zen for Film*, a work embracing a minimalist aesthetic, and

In the
midst of his work,
Dr. Heyman stopped and said,
"Why don't you
take your jacket off?" I
said, "I have
a hole in my shirt and
that's why I have my jacket
on." He said,
"Well, I
have a hole in my sock,
and,
if you like,
I'll take my shoes off." (Cage 95)

⁹³ Nicholas Zurbrugg, *Art, Performance, Media*, p. 288.

Global Groove (1973), a fusion of a video-work presenting the viewer a collage of disparate images. By the time Paik was making *Global Groove* with producer John Godfrey, he fully immersed himself in producing works that exploit visual excess, testing the capabilities of how much the human eye can process. However, *Global Groove* is not an unrestrained visual work, as some critics, including Jameson, might argue. In uncovering the latent structure beneath *Global Groove*, one must return to Paik's artistic interest in both the visual *and* the aural.

Paik's awkward position within Fluxus, the international network of artists who resisted the institutionalization of art, makes the reading of *Global Groove* as a structured text compelling. Although Paik maintained close ties with Fluxus throughout his artistic career, his usage of television as his primary artistic medium during the sixties and the seventies suggests that he maintained a certain artistic distance from Fluxus and its aesthetic. Nevertheless, important connections did exist between Paik and Fluxus. First, both Paik and his cohorts in Fluxus harbored a strong interest in the development of experimental music pioneered by the American composer John Cage (1912-1992).⁹⁴ Second, both Paik and Fluxus members, despite the differences between their individual aesthetic ideals, emphasized the cross-over of disciplines and artistic media, freely utilizing all types of artistic medium that seemed most appropriate for each of their artistic projects. However, Paik, in his first solo artistic exhibition *Exposition of Music-Electronic Television* in 1963, emphasized his artistic detachment from Fluxus by distributing to the visitors an emphatic text stating that "he does not merely play the terrorist game of Fluxus."⁹⁵ This detachment from Fluxus aesthetic seems most evident in Paik's persistent pursuit of various forms of video art during the sixties and the seventies, an activity

⁹⁴ Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, p. 83.

⁹⁵ Hans Belting, "Beyond Iconoclasm: Nam June Paik, the Zen Gaze and the Escape from Representation," p. 401.

that went against the grain of Fluxus aesthetic in two important ways. First, by frequently employing television as his primary artistic medium, Paik made his works distinct from the works of his Fluxus cohorts, most of whom did not display a faithful adherence to (or a persistent exploitation of) a specific medium over a long period. Second, Paik did not strictly adhere to Fluxus's artistic principle of creating utopian artworks that would involve all the human senses, or the "interplay of the senses," in experiencing an artwork.⁹⁶ For Paik, the relationship between the visual and the aural still remained as his primary obsession, and his distortion of the relationship between the two elements in his video-works express this interest.

Although Paik's video-works might seem to fit the classical category of postmodern aesthetic in their content, form, and conceptual strategies, Paik's works resist being neatly categorized as a postmodern through their establishment of a recognizable pattern throughout his work. Jean-François Lyotard, in his diagnosis of the postmodern, defined as the condition of knowledge in highly developed societies, famously stated that it opposes the establishment of "grand narratives." For instance, the meta-narrative of human progress has lost its credibility due to larger historical transformations.⁹⁷ The loss of grand narrative comes into play in Lyotard's distinction of modern and postmodern aesthetics. For Lyotard, two traits, the aesthetic experience of the sublime and the consistency of form, characterize modern aesthetic. But in the postmodern period, which Lyotard describes as a "period of slackening" in which aesthetic criteria is absent,⁹⁸ a strong sense of the "unpresentable" replaces the experience of the sublime. In other words, the inherent limitation of human rationality in expressing the sublime becomes the defining trait of the postmodern artworks.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 37-38.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

A postmodern artwork in Lyotard's sense would thus resist a unifying structure, preferring diversity and local differences in terms of both thematic and formal elements. But what is striking about Paik's video-works is their structural coherence. *Global Groove* does not follow a strictly logical order, but they carry recognizable patterns, returning to previous images at certain junctures and deploying similar visual techniques throughout the whole work. Such recognizable pattern overlying the whole work does not fit easily with either postmodern or Fluxus aesthetics, the latter encouraging a totalizing "aesthetic of negation" that rejects the notion of the author and traditional boundaries between the arts.⁹⁹ The aesthetic of "disorienting boredom" arises from the occasional and unexpected moments of mismatch between structural coherence and disparate elements and between the aural and the visual.

⁹⁹ Marjorie Perloff, "Fluxier-than-Thou," p. 582.

Chapter 3: Transitional Boredom: *The More the Better* (1988)

In my previous discussions of the types of boredom that Paik's *Zen for Film* and *Global Groove* provoke in the audience, I emphasized their experiential quality. It is not so much the contents of the works themselves but our viewing position, what one could call a complete experience of wavering between subjective and objective states, that becomes a crucial point in our aesthetic experience of the works. If *Zen for Film* provides the audience with a space of "waiting," an act restoring one's awareness of the self in the hectic conditions of modernity, *The More the Better* provides a space of a different kind. In discussing the aesthetic experience of what I call "transitional boredom"¹⁰⁰ that *The More the Better* provokes in the audience, it is important to consider both the work's historicity and its embattled political conditions surrounding Paik's work in the form of space. Its reactivation of the past in relation to the present occurs through the circulation of past images from various sources on the physical surface of *The More the Better*. Simultaneously, the ideologically embattled space that surrounds Paik's work reflects the political conditions of a particular historical moment, in this case South Korea's turbulent political transition into a democratic nation in 1988. A viewer sees *The More the Better* from an ambiguous position on multiple levels, caught between the national and the universal,

¹⁰⁰ My usage of this term in part borrows from Youngmin Choe's "transitional emotions," a term she uses in her discussion of the holiday-genre films of South Korean filmmaker Hong Sang-su ("Transitional Emotions: Boredom and Distraction in Hong Sang-su's Travel Films"). In her essay, Choe attempts to historically situate Hong's films within Korea's political transition into a neoliberal country. She argues that women in Hong's works, as independent as they may be, in the end remain "objectified, would-be allegorical national figures" (18). While such reading remains unconvincing, Choe's attempt to read in Hong's films vestiges of Korea's political transitions prompted me into making a similar analysis with Paik's *The More the Better*. The "transitional" in her term also refers to Korea's historical and political transition. I retain this connotation in my concept of "transitional boredom," but no further connection is to be made between my concept and Choe's. Her definition of "transitional emotions" emphasizes what she calls the "circulation of emotion in neoliberal Korea": "Not quite itself an emotion in the strictest sense of the term, but more a mood, boredom in these films nevertheless operates as what I call a 'transitional' emotion, offering insight not so much into the emotional states of these individual characters, but rather, into the geographic circulation of emotion in neoliberal Korea" (3).

and between the historical past (in the form of images) and the political present (in the form of space). The “transition” that occurs here does not solely refer to an aesthetic transition as in “active boredom” and as in “disorienting boredom”; the “transition” here also refers a historical transition, always refracting one’s aesthetic experience of *The More the Better*. In this chapter, I first consider the historical transition facing Korea in 1988 and the role of the Olympics in facilitating this transition. I then consider Paik’s *The More the Better* as an aesthetic counterexample to the 1988 Seoul Olympics, arguing that the “transitional boredom” of *The More the Better*.¹⁰¹

The Historical Transition of South Korea in 1988 and the Seoul Olympics

During the seventies and the eighties, South Korea underwent a slow and agonizing process to a democratic nation. The two political regimes during this period, led by Park Chung Hee (1963-79) and Chun Doo-Hwan (1980-88), implemented aggressive policies in order to subdue opposing factions around the country. Political instability during this period was higher than any time in contemporary Korean history, with worker, students, intellectuals, and aristocrats demonstrating against dictator regimes and the government employing aggressive measures to suppress them. Followed by a politically stable and economically prosperous period from 1965 to 1971, a series of politically symbolic events paved the way towards establishing a genuinely democratic regime. Among these events were the self-immolation of a textile worker

¹⁰¹ Before beginning this chapter, I find it necessary to briefly elaborate upon Paik’s highly regarded reputation in South Korea. Nearly all Koreans recognize Paik’s name, if not his works, and critics from all disciplines today often refer to him as a representative and pioneering figure of the Korean avant-garde. His towering presence in both public and professional realms have led to a long process of myth-making that continue to persist today—the representation of Paik as a national and cultural hero whose name has become a metonym for Korean contemporary art. The myth-making of Paik works in subtle ways at times, but it is often quite explicit, as is the case with the exhibition of Paik’s work at the National Museum of Contemporary Art.

(1970), the massacre of hundreds of civilians by the military paratroopers in the city of Gwanju (1980), a mass movement calling for democracy (1987), and others. In his account of this politically volatile period, historian Bruce Cumings emphasizes the powerful control of the state over all public realms, with the exception of human rights organizations and churches.¹⁰² The omnipresence of state control and corresponding resistance created a “warlike atmosphere of resistance and repression.”¹⁰³

State-sponsored cultural policies during these two decades prioritized national solidarity, employing cultural activities as useful decoys to avert public attention from volatile political affairs. In 1972, Park, in response to an increasing sense of communist threats from within the nation and from North Korea as well, issued a state of emergency, establishing a “restoration constitution” that, supposedly, would unify the nation. The following year in 1973, Park stated that a nation’s cultural power would determine a nation’s fortune.¹⁰⁴ State-sponsored policies reflecting an “aestheticization of politics”¹⁰⁵ ensued, including a nationwide “citizen calisthenics” and sports events (both local and national, such as the Olympics).¹⁰⁶ Such policies worked towards not only unifying the nation through state-ideology but also, as Sang Mi Park indicates, strengthening the political authority of the incumbent government:

Social instability, economic backwardness, and, most of all, the presence of North Korea seriously threatened Park’s illegitimate presidential authority gained in a military coup. South Korean leaders perceived a need to invest heavily in cultural projects to shore up their own authority and believed that building a strong sense of shared identity and

¹⁰² Bruce Cumings, “The Democratic Movement, 1960-Present,” p. 392.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

¹⁰⁴ Sang Mi Park, “The Paradox of Postcolonial Korean Nationalism: State-Sponsored Cultural Policy in South Korea, 1965-Present,” p. 76.

¹⁰⁵ See Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

¹⁰⁶ Sang Mi Park, “The Paradox of Postcolonial Korean Nationalism: State-Sponsored Cultural Policy in South Korea, 1965-Present,” p. 84.

culture among the Korean populace would unite the nation. Thus ideas of “essential” (*koyu*) Koreanness were crafted as part of a deliberate state policy.¹⁰⁷

Even as politically divisive events flared up across the nation, cultural policies emphasizing “‘essential’ Koreanness,” Park’s regime hoped, would serve as an adequate diversion, preventing a potential political upheaval led by the masses. Chun’s regime continued the *kulturpolitik* of Park’s, initiating policies that would give birth to the famous catchphrase “3 S’s” (screen, sports, and sex): increase of control over media, acquiescence to both the distribution of adult movies and the operation of midnight theaters, and financial support for sports.¹⁰⁸ Other areas of culture also served the purpose of establishing national solidarity. Some of the most important national cultural institutions founded during Park’s and Chun’s regimes, including the Seoul Arts Center (1988) and the National Museum of Contemporary Art (founded in 1969; relocated to Gwacheon in 1986), served as sites of cultural disciplining, making Koreans into good “cultural citizens” (*munhwa simin*). The regimes’ emphasis on culture to educate and discipline citizens was, in short, an enforcement of political ideology disguised as a moral imperative.

Under such historical circumstances, the 1988 Seoul Olympics became not only a perfect occasion to bring the nation together, but also an influential factor of genuine political change. Just a year before the Olympics, President Chun chose Roh Tae-Woo of the Democratic Justice Party (DJP), Chun’s own political party, as the next presidential candidate. The decision sparked nationwide demonstrations, demanding free elections and an end to dictatorial regime. Without a significant political compromise made by the political party, these demonstrations, Chun’s regime feared, would result in a political upheaval. Another source of anxiety came from international media spotlight on South Korea, heightening in anticipation to the Olympics to be held in the following year. The media’s attention raised the political stakes of finding an

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

appropriate way to appease the demonstrations. As an “effective generator of visibility and political awareness,” the Olympics, according to Jarol Manheim, became a decisive factor in the political transition:

The Olympics were a symbol bestowed with great importance by the government--through huge countdown clocks posted around Seoul, banners and ceremonies, traffic control practice sessions, and numerous promotional campaigns--but they were a symbol over which the government lost control. *Rather than a pressure-point for sustaining the political status quo to maintain stability, they became a pressure point forcing controlled change to maintain stability.*¹⁰⁹

The clock was ticking, and soon a decision had to be reached. In response to the demonstrations, later named as the June Democracy Movement, Chun and Roh agreed to accept the demands of the public, to restore civil rights and, importantly, to hold the first direct presidential election (December 1987) in South Korea’s history.¹¹⁰ The effect of international media in this political transition was making visible Korea’s international presence, and the political regime became increasingly self-conscious in the presence of a global audience. By putting South Korea in an international spotlight, the media reminded Chun and Roh that at stake was not just their political authority but, in a larger perspective, the global reputation of their nation in an increasingly interconnected world.

The 1988 Seoul Olympics, broadcast through televisions around the world, was a phenomenal success, an impressive event of sheer spectacle that heralded a new phase of a young democratic nation-state. Lasting approximately an hour and a half, the opening ceremony

¹⁰⁹ Manheim, p. 291. Emphasis added. See Manheim’s article for a statistical analysis of how the 1988 Olympics became a “catalyst in both domestic and international exchanges” (292). Bruce Cumings also emphasizes the role of the Olympics in pressuring Chun and Roh to make a political compromise: “It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the Olympics to the Chun and the Roh governments of the 1980s, since this was to be the coming-out party for the miracle on the Han [River], just as the 1964 Olympics brought Japan’s economic prowess to the world’s attentions. It is also doubtful that Roh Tae Woo would have made the dramatic announcement about direct elections on June 29, 1987, had the Olympics not been pending” (338).

¹¹⁰ According to Cumings, the decision to reach a political compromise was a shrewd political move on Roh’s part (392).

of the Olympics embraced an unrestrained aesthetic of spectacle: thousands of high school students carrying out Korean drum performances, traditional dancers and ballerinas forming various shapes (including the Korean flag, the word “welcome,” and the number “88”), elementary school students performing choreographed jump-roping, a choreographed scene of *taekwondo* (titled “Crossing the Barrier”), and a climactic performance of an uplifting song called “Hand in Hand” celebrating the coming together of all cultures (Fig. 9). The editing of the ceremony emphasizes the effect that the spectacle has on the crowd, often cutting to impressed faces of foreigners after the execution of particularly impressive choreographies. As the ceremony progresses, the choreographed performances become more extravagant. Even as the ceremony reaches the end and emphasizes the unity of the world, South Korea is undoubtedly the show’s protagonist. The message of the opening ceremony is loud and clear to all audiences physically and virtually present: South Korea is no longer a hunger-stricken Third World country, but a nation capable enough, in terms of technical and economical resources, to impress a global audience. Like museums, galleries, and exhibitions, the spectacle of the Olympics, broadcast via worldwide television, successfully fulfilled its role in the formation of a modern democratic state.¹¹¹

Order and harmony are the guiding aesthetic principles underlying the 1988 Olympics, strategically employed in order to announce South Korea’s historical transition. During the ceremony, various colors and shapes come together in pleasing symmetrical forms. Faces of the individuals rarely come to the fore as endless choreographed movements form “mass ornaments”

¹¹¹ See Tony Bennett’s “The Exhibitionary Complex” for a historical account of how museums, galleries, and exhibitions function as disciplining and civilizing institutions.

that establish an aesthetic relation to the crowd of spectators.¹¹² However, not everyone in the audience seemed to have been impressed by the political spectacle in display:

The opening ceremony was a magnificent homage to Korean culture, both the high if constricted one of the Confucians and the low but diverse and vital one of the masses. The organic choreography of masses of people was worthy of a Kim Il Sung extravaganza (and often like it). Predictably the herd of foreign journalists who descended for a look at Korea did not like what they saw: too noisy, too spicy, too proud, too nationalistic, these people.¹¹³

Despite these foreign journalists' skeptical sentiments, the "aestheticization of politics" employed in the Olympics not only covered up the political turmoil threatening the nation, however temporarily, but also significantly improved South Korea's international reputation through the fabricated image of a unified nation. In the next section, I first briefly discuss Paik's media installations *Fish Flies on Sky* (1975/82) and *Fuku/Luck, Fuku=Luck, Matrix* and its different aesthetic qualities. I then discuss how Paik's *The More the Better* (1988), which brings together the aesthetic qualities of the two other works, constitutes an aesthetic counterexample to the 1988 Olympics ceremony.

¹¹² Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," p. 77.

¹¹³ Bruce Cumings, "Industrialization, 1953-Present," p. 338.



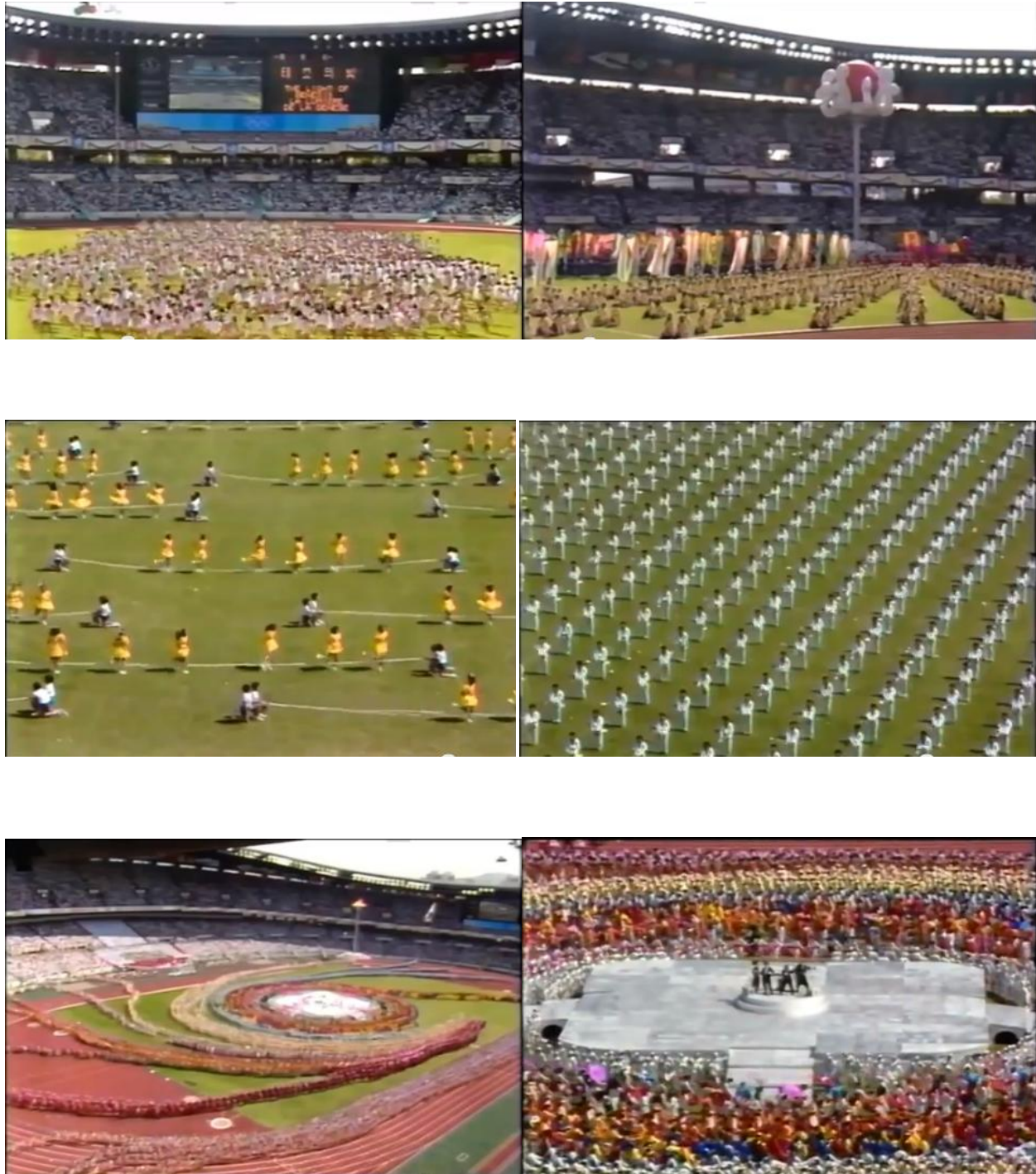


Figure 9. Various shots from the opening ceremony of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The second shot in the first row displays President Roh Tae-Woo and his wife welcoming the audience.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ The video of the opening ceremony is available in the open public video database of all Olympic ceremonies (<http://www.olympicceremony.org/>). I have taken the images directly from the video.

A Dialectical Aesthetic: Transitional Boredom and *The More the Better* (1988), via *Fish Flies on Sky* (1975/82) and *Fuku/Luck, Fuku=Luck, Matrix* (Date Unknown)

Beginning in the eighties, Paik began to make large-scale video and installation works, some of which have become defining symbols of the current digital age. Along with his “satellite art” trilogy (*Good Morning Mr. Orwell*, *Bye Bye Kipling*, and *Wrap Around the World*), Paik throughout the nineties made a series of installations consisting of multiple television monitors that display large-scale images. His two-channel video installation *Fish Flies on Sky* (1975/82) consists of dozens of televisions attached to a ceiling (Fig. 10). On the television screens appear graphic images of fish and abstract shapes, which together form a kaleidoscopic configuration. A viewer sits below the ceiling, bathing oneself in the endless circulation of images—indeed, one becomes either physically fatigued, mentally euphoric, or both. The work is an oddity in Paik's oeuvre as it subjects the viewer to a completely immersive aesthetic experience without the aspects of either critical distance or audience participation often incorporated into his works. However, *Fish Flies on Sky* does not display its surface images in a formless configuration; they appear in distinct blocs of four screens, each bloc devoted to a specific group of edited images. While the overall structure endows a certain degree of unity to the work, both the fast-paced and seemingly chaotic editing of each visual bloc and, importantly, the uneven alignment of the televisions (some displayed horizontally, others vertically) challenges this unity. A clear dialectical relationship between the surface images and the overall structure that underpins *Fish Flies on Sky* reappears in slightly different ways throughout Paik's oeuvre.

Other works similar to *Fish Flies on Sky* are installed in public spaces, forming spaces of temporary distraction. Concert halls, stadiums, and urban malls continue to serve as installation sites for works such as *Megatron/Matrix* (1995) and *Fuku/Luck, Fuku=Luck*,

Matrix,¹¹⁵ both which form large walls of television monitors.¹¹⁶ Forming a considerable size of 10 meters vertically and 18 meter horizontally, *Fuku/Luck* (Figs. 11 and 12), installed in a shopping complex called Canal City Hakata in Fukuoka, Japan amongst stores, fountains, a movie theater, and *faux*-palaces and gardens, resembles *Fish Flies on Sky* in shape only to a certain extent. Unlike *Fish Flies on Sky*, the surface of *Fuku/Luck* is not uneven but flat. If *Fish Flies on Sky* offers a separate space of distracted respite within the museum space, *Fuku/Luck* instead forms an intimate relationship with its surrounding environment, not only adding to but also constituting as a center to the flurry of distractions within the shopping complex. Situated at one of the entrances to the building, *Fuku/Luck* reflects the ideal of distraction embodied by the whole complex.

The work's full title, *Fuku/Luck, Fuku=Luck, Matrix*, makes the audience become conscious of the dialectical relationship it forms not only within the confines of the artwork but also between the artwork and its environment. Paik contrasts *Fuku* (福), which can mean several things at once (fortune, happiness, food for ancestral rites, width, and others), with one of its primary meaning: luck. *Fuku/Luck* indicates difference between the terms, while *Fuku=Luck* indicates the differences cancelling out. Paik's pithy formula helps to explain not only the artwork itself, but also its relationship to the spatial

¹¹⁵ The official website of Canal City Hakata introduces Paik's work as an example of "fabric art" (most likely a mistranslation as the English version of the website reads "public art"), emphasizing that the work forms the largest scale among all of Paik's works in Japan (<http://www.canalcity.co.jp/kr/concept/index.html>).

¹¹⁶ One version of *Megatron/Matrix* can be seen at a race stadium in South Korea.

environment. As with *Fish Flies on Sky*, an internal opposition between overall unity and individual fragmentation exists within *Fuku/Luck*. Moreover, the work, as with many of Paik's works, stand out visually even amidst distracting attractions. It heightens the distractive and distracting activities within the complex through its spatial position, but also simultaneously *distracts* the shoppers from their activities of mass consumption. It highlights one of the ideals of late capitalism: distraction. But, of course, it is a contemporary work of art situated within a shopping complex, a point that can become neglected due to the presence of other various screens within the complex. In consideration of the tensions that Paik's work generates, one might ask whether Paik's work is a work subsumed by its hostile environment (and, to exaggerate this line of interpretation, by the Spirit of the Age of Capitalism) or an avant-garde work masquerading as a commercial work. One could apply such line of thinking to many of Paik's works with very few, if at all, fruitful gains. Paik encourages us to avoid such binary interpretations in which one element dominates the other. While the elements, whether they be formal or spatial, remain distinct from each other, they nonetheless tend to mutually emphasize and cancel out each

other all simultaneously. Such dialectical relationship directly suggested by the title informs a significant body of other works by Paik as well.



Figure 10. The exhibition of Paik's *Fish Flies on Sky* (1983-85) in Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast (Düsseldorf, Germany).¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ The picture is taken from the website of Museum Kunstpalast:
<http://www.smkp.de/en/exhibitions/current/re-opening-of-the-collection.html>.



Figure 11. *Fuku/Luck, Fuku=Luck, Matrix* from an up-close view.



Figure 12. *Fuku/Luck, Fuku=Luck, Matrix* from a distance. The labyrinthine space of the shopping complex would allow one to view Paik's work from various vantage points.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Both shots in Figures 10 and 11 are taken from the following website:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/kotobato/>

The immersive and distracted modes of aesthetic experience induced by *Fish Flies in the Sky* and *Fuku/Luck*, *Fuku=Luck*, *Matrix* converge in the aesthetic experience of one particular work by Paik, *The More the Better* (1988). The most ambitious of Paik's installation and sculptural works in terms of scale, *The More the Better* (*Dadaikseon*; Figs. 15 and 16) is a tower of televisions placed in the rotunda-shaped lobby of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, the only work at display in the lobby. It is eighteen meters in height and consists of exactly 1,003 televisions, the number 1,003 representing October 3rd, South Korea's National Foundation Day (*Gaechonjeol*).¹¹⁹ The tower has the form of a five-story pagoda, complete with a finial at the top consisting of six monitors attached in slanted angles to a steel rod. The immersive aesthetic experience derives from the symmetric relationship between the work and its surrounding space. Whereas the spatial relationship between *Fuku/Luck* and the shopping district is asymmetrical, the relationship between *The More the Better* and its encircling space is symmetrical, the circular rotunda space emphasizing the overall height and magnitude of Paik's tower. In the case of *Fuku/Luck*, one has to navigate around the space of the mall to find an ideal viewing position. However, the space surrounding *The More the Better* dictates how one should view Paik's work. Furthermore, the postmodern space of the shopping complex endows *Fuku/Luck* a high degree of importance in its spatial template but does not render it as the center, whereas the rotunda space in the National Museum of Contemporary Art *revolves* around *The More the Better*. Such harmonious and direct relationship between Paik's tower and its surrounding space seems to facilitate a one-way aesthetic relationship between the viewer and the artwork.

¹¹⁹ The work consists of 198 (25-in), 99 (19-in), 93 (13-in), 545 (9-in), and 68 (5-in) televisions. This figure is based on a 1988 newspaper article published in *Hankyeorae* (1988.09.22). Even though the museum makes efforts to keep the original constitution of Paik's work intact, the figure most likely differs now than it was two decades ago.

Challenging such direct relationship, in which the viewer becomes absorbed into the artwork, is the distraction that arises from the circulation of images on the tower's surface. All the images on the televisions change at rapid and varying paces, except for a few monitors that display the image of Paik's previous work *Zen for TV*, a single white line dividing the screen into equal halves either vertically or horizontally. Only a few monitors at the top and the bottom of Paik's work display the single unchanging image of *Zen for TV*. The negative space offered by these white lines forms a stark contrast with the positive and changing space of other images, emphasizing the visual shift that occurs in the positive space. In other words, the white lines do not offer a visual respite for the viewer, but rather they bring to the fore the accelerating pace of the changing images. These changing images, charged with a sense of urgency, distract the viewer who receives a different visual impression of the work at every walking step. Neither wholly immersed nor distracted, the viewer, strolling around the tower, never feels the desired gratification of stable impression or understanding.

However, the static quality of the tower reduces, if not entirely cancels out, the frenetic quality of the images. This static quality leads to a collapse between the stability of the tower's form and the frenetic motion of the images. Two formal aspects of the work heighten this static quality. First, the opposition between its unchanging form and its changing surface of images, culled from various video works by Paik (including edited broadcast images of the Olympics and other works), emphasizes its static quality. The symmetric circulation of various images on the tower's surface—exhibiting the familiar motif of structure over disparate elements used in Paik's video works—accelerates to the extent that its unpredictable movement serves to highlight the tower's static quality. Every few seconds, the constellation of symmetries change, but the straight and rigid form of the tower remains unchanged. Second, the acute and perpendicular

angles that distinguish one story from another emphasize the tower's rigid form, contributing to the tower's static quality. The tower lacks refined curves or varying angles that might alleviate such rigidity, which even the protruding curves of the TV-monitors cannot alleviate. No matter from which vantage point one looks, the large tower's static quality is retained. Such static quality discourages one from overstressing the visually assaulting quality of the surface images. Countering the endless circulation of images, the static quality of the tower offers both critical distance and thus moments of contemplation to the viewer. The images do not hold the viewer in a state of awe forever. Instead, a much more complex aesthetic experience occurs, the viewer caught in an ambiguous state between aesthetic immersion and distraction. Such tension between aesthetic immersion and distraction becomes a precedent step for the aesthetic experience of "transitional boredom."

A second set of tension that also gives rise to "transitional boredom" occurs between universal and national ideologies. In making allusions to past historical monuments, Paik, as with many of his other works, situates his work within a lineage of historical traditions. Diverse sources such as the Parthenon, Stonehenge, Constantin Brâncuși's *The Endless Column*, and Tatlin's eventually unrealized *The Monument to the Third International* appear as images on the cover of the catalog made for the premiere of his work (Fig. 14). One common characteristic that these historical monuments share is their status as universal icons. Outside their specific national contexts, these icons have become appropriated and re-appropriated around the world in various contexts. Among these historical monuments, Brâncuși's and Tatlin's works more closely resembles Paik's work in their ambitious scales, but more important than a discussion of the visual similarities and differences between these sources and *The More the Better* is Paik's strategy of situating his work alongside these timeless historical monuments. However, the

ideological forces surrounding Paik's tower work against this strategy of universalization. In a quite explicit manner, the museum attempts to nationalize both Paik and his work, an institutional strategy reflected in the museum's placard describing *The More the Better*:

Dadaikseon (The More the Better), produced in celebration of the 24th Seoul Olympic Games in 1988, resembles a unique Korean pagoda shape with 1,003 TV monitors installed on a monumental skeleton of 18.5 x 7.5 m size. Nam June Paik, a pioneering video artist, projects his artworks on 1,003 monitors, whose number represents the Third of October, the National Foundation Day of Korea. While manifesting the artistic and technical excellence of the Korean people, this work embodies the artist's sincere hope for national prosperity.¹²⁰

The placard deliberately omits the fact that Paik himself did not intend his work to commemorate the 1988 Olympics. In fact, Paik, in a meeting held in October, 1986 to discuss the prospect of installing his work, merely expressed his hope of installing it some time after August, 1987.¹²¹ The description's reference to the Korean pagoda and its emphasis on the symbolic importance of the number of televisions installed constitute institutional efforts to nationalize Paik's work. By the last sentence of the description, Paik's work, through the museum's enforcement of its nationalist interpretation, becomes the culmination of "the artistic and technical excellence of the Korean people," and the work, stripped of all its artistic value, becomes a monument built for the sake of "national prosperity." The surrounding space becomes the aiding factor in this process of nationalization.¹²² Attached to the ceiling directly above *The More the Better* is a round shaped glass-window, around which the following statement is imprinted: "Established here is a pavilion which will become the highlight of our world of art. We raise high the roof beam to

¹²⁰ The passage is taken directly from the placard at display in front of Paik's *The More the Better*.

¹²¹ This information comes from the following study on *The More the Better*:

http://www.moca.go.kr/study/study14/study14_15.html

¹²² See Eun-hee Yang's "Memory, Desire, and Spectacle: The Making of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Korea" (in Korean) for a history of the National Museum and how its space reflects national elements.

commemorate this happy day. *In saecula saeculorum*. October 15th, 1985.”¹²³ The raise of the roof beam specifically refers to a traditional architectural practice in Korea, one of the many steps in building a traditional Korean house (*hanok*), and, again quite explicitly, the metaphorical linking of the museum and a traditional Korean house serves to nationalize the space of the lobby. While the highly ideological influences attempt to render Paik’s tower as a Korean monument, the tower itself encourages the viewer to interpret it as a universal symbol not only through its recognizable iconic form but also through its cosmopolitan surface images. The tower’s metaphorical status, in the end, remains highly ambiguous and indeterminate.

The last and third set of tension occurs between the historical past and the political present. Institutional forces and governmental efforts have made the political connection between the 1988 Olympics and Paik’s work inseparable, both operating as spectacles that improve national prestige. In a surprising move, Paik himself endeavored to strengthen the connection between his work and the Olympics through his satellite-art video *Wrap Around the World* (1988), produced in order to celebrate the 1988 Olympics. A segment of Korean drummers performing around *The More the Better* appears in the video, along with other various segments ranging from musical performances to car races. By deliberately enforcing the connection between his work and the Olympics, Paik endows historical, national, and political significance onto his work—thus its connection with the political present becomes indissoluble. At the same time, both the form and the surface images of Paik’s work continue to challenge this connection. The images are all recycled elements from various sources, which constitute “found footages” as in a film, and its iconic form is also taken from other past monuments, such as *The Monument to the Third International*, *The Endless Column*, and others. In a sense, nothing new really exists in

¹²³ This is my translation from the Korean statement. The Latin phrase, my own insertion and not included in the original text, most closely approximates the expressive phrase which literally means, “Forever develop [our art world].”

Paik's work, both in terms of content and form. Again, it is Paik himself who emphasizes the historical nature of his work by alluding to various historical monuments on the premiere catalogue. His playful gesture makes one see his work as an *über*-monument, signifying images of all historical monuments. At one end of the spectrum, *The More the Better* becomes a thoroughly historical artifact; at the other end of the spectrum, it is an effective political tool that reflects a specific historical moment in South Korea's contemporary history. Through his historicizing and politicizing interventions, Paik firmly established a dialectical pole between the historical past and the political present. *The More the Better* lies somewhere above this pole, but its position always shifts. The dialectical sets of relationships that occur on the aesthetic, ideological, and temporal levels all mirror one another.

Such dialectical aesthetic is directly antithetic to the aesthetic displayed in the opening ceremony of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Recognizable shapes and the organization of "mass ornaments" led to easy aesthetic gratification and to false national solidarity. Contrary to such convenient aesthetic relationship established between the spectacle of the Olympics and its viewer, *The More the Better* establishes a more complex and dialectic relationship with its audience, perplexing the viewer through its endless signification of images via its surface and its form. The spectacle of images on the surface changes in the frame of a few seconds, and one has to constantly readjust one's perception in order to process this change. What Petro calls the "habitualization of renewed perception"¹²⁴ applies here also. But whereas Paik's performance-based composition *Symphony No. 5* triggers the "habitualization of renewed perception" through extended time, *The More the Better* activates it on multiple levels, through a shifting aesthetic experience related to modulating notions of time, space, and ideology. Petro's concept also resonates with what Hans Belting calls a "Zen gaze," which he defines as "a way of seeing which

¹²⁴ Patrice Petro, "Between Boredom and History," p. 87.

expects the audience to see where there is nothing to see and to create perception ourselves instead of consuming it.”¹²⁵ Continuing further, Belting states that, through a “Zen Gaze,” the “*something* of the installation results in the *nothing* of its representation.”¹²⁶ In light of my analysis of *The More the Better*, I would like to revise this last statement by suggesting that Paik’s installation leads to both a plenitude and a void of representation, never fully reaching one or the other. Such dialectical tension leads to the aesthetic experience of “transitional boredom,” constantly reminding us of the historical past’s relevance and its inextricable connection with the political present.

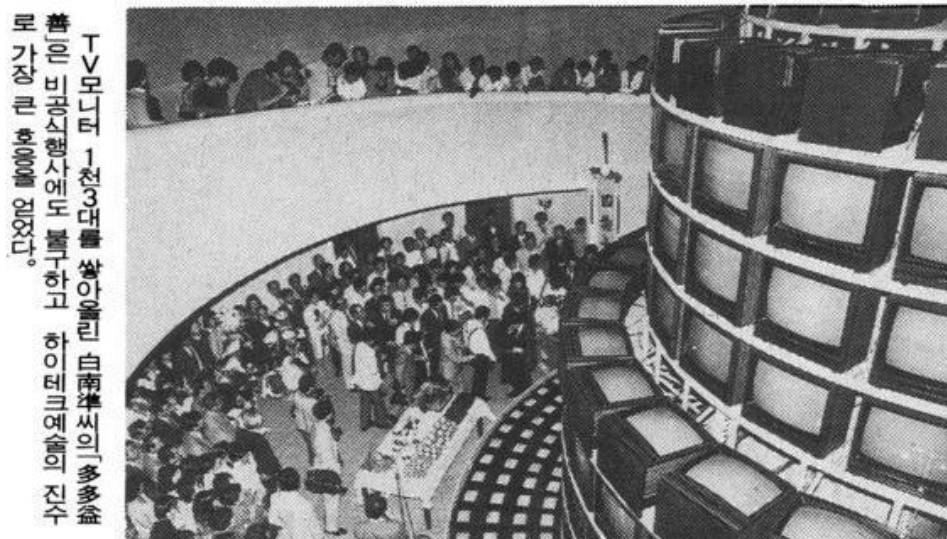


Figure 13. A picture of *The More the Better* in a 1988 article (October 4th, 1988) in the *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, a major daily newspaper in South Korea. The article does not indicate the date of the photograph, but everything in the photograph suggest that the scene of the photograph is the

¹²⁵ Hans Belting, “Beyond Iconoclasm: Nam June Paik, the Zen Gaze and the Escape from Representation,” p. 399.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

premiere of Paik's work held on September 15th, 1988: the crowd of people, the table of food for ancestry rites, and a figure who appears to be Paik himself.¹²⁷

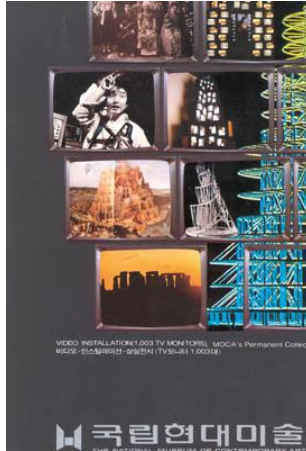
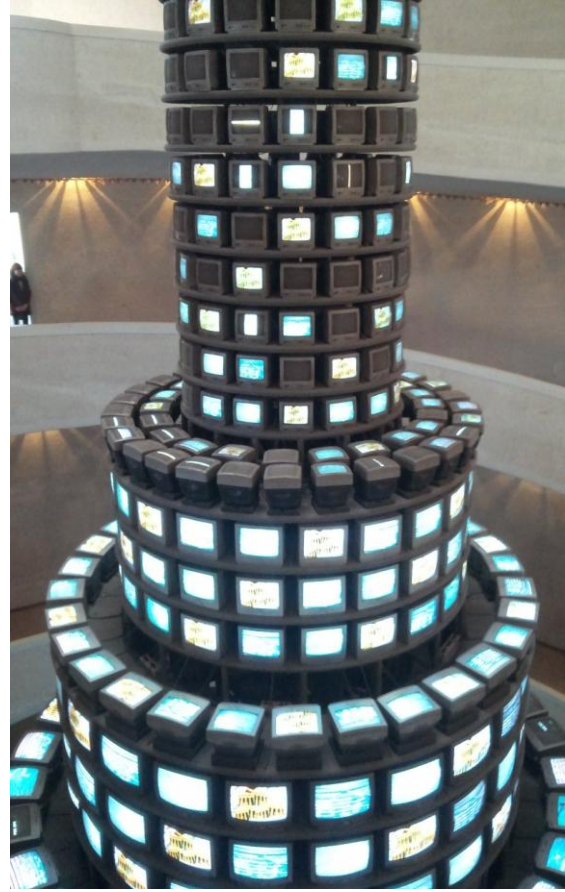


Figure 14. The cover of the museum's catalog for the premiere of *The More the Better*.¹²⁸ Various historical monuments, such as the Stonehenge and Taitlin's *The Monument to the Third International*, are displayed on the cover.

¹²⁷ The image is taken from an online database of Korean newspapers administered by NHN, a private corporation in Korea.

¹²⁸ The source of the image is the following: http://www.moca.go.kr/study/study14/study14_11.html



Figures 15 and 16. The exhibition of *The More the Better* (December 2012).

Conclusion

My current study began by seriously considering Paik's reflections on boredom, and attempted to expand his reflections of boredom into a recognizable aesthetic category. By taking a chronological approach to Paik's works, I have tried to remain sensitive to both the trajectory of Paik's career and the historical context in which each artwork came to development, without making a causal relationship between the larger artistic movements in history and Paik's works. The central and simple premise that guided my study was the following: the aesthetic experience of an artwork remains closely tied with its historical, cultural, and political conditions, and only by understanding them does one begin to grasp the role of the artwork in society. Only a careful study that combines diachronic and synchronic approaches in considering the relationship

between an artwork and the affected communities can succeed in fully illuminating both its function and its aesthetic relationship to the viewer. My concepts of active, disorienting, and transitional boredom each have tried to articulate a certain dialectical tension that arises from the following sets of elements: between the viewing subject and the art object, between the aural and the visual, and between the historical past and the political present (these three sets being most important in my discussion). Each of these concepts strives to explicate the complex aesthetic relationship that occurs between a “viewing” subject and multimedia artworks, but these concepts, with further developments, can also have important implications in our understanding of non-visual artworks as well.

One of the most important contemporary artists whose works can be seen in every corner of the world, Nam June Paik continues to attract the attention of critics and scholars from a wide range of disciplines, including anthropology, art history, media and film studies, sociology, and others. Paik’s works, always interesting, playful, perplexing, mystifying and de-mystifying, yet never boring, are especially helpful in defining an aesthetic of boredom because of their ambiguous formal qualities and their experiments with notions of temporality. His works will remain important for artists, critics, and scholars interested in the future of media and in reformulating appropriate aesthetic categories to better describe some of the most important artworks created within the present historical and cultural conditions.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford UP, 2002. 94-136. Print.

Andrew, Dudley. "Christian Metz and the Semiology of the Cinema." *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction*. London: Oxford University Press, 1976. 212-41. Print.

Asselberghs, Herman. "Beyond the Appearance of Imagelessness: Preliminary Notes on Zen for Film's Enchanted Materialism." Trans. Yasmine Van Pee. *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, Issue 22 (Autumn/Winter 2009). 5-15. Print.

Barthes, Roland. "From Work to Text." *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Noonday Press, 1988. 155-64. Print.

Belting, Hans. "Beyond Iconoclasm: Nam June Paik, the Zen Gaze and the Escape from Representation." *Iconoclasm*. Eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel. Trans. Charlotte Bigg. Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2002. 390-411. Print.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968. Print.

Bennett, Tony. "The Exhibitionary Complex." *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*. Ed. Gail Anderson. CA: Altamira Press, 2004. 59-88. Print.

Cage, John. *Silence*. CT: Wesleyan UP, 2011. Print.

Choe, Youngmin. "Transitional Emotions: Boredom and Distraction in Hong Sang-su's Travel Films." *Korean Studies*, Vol. 33 (2009), 1-28. Print.

Colpitt, Frances. "The Issue of Boredom: Is It Interesting?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Summer, 1985). 359-65. Print.

Decker-Phillips, Edith. *Paik Video*. Trans. Marie-Genviève Iselin, Karin Koppensteiner, and George Quasha. New York: Barrytown, Ltd., 1998. Print.

Durkheim, Emilé. *The Division of Labor in Society*. Trans. George Simpson. New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964. Print.

Elster, Jon. "Alienation." *Karl Marx: A Reader*. Cambridge UP, 1986. 29-78. Print.

Gann, Kyle. *No Such Thing as Silence*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2010. Print.

Geist, Sidney. "Brancusi: The 'Endless Column'." *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1990), 70-87+95. Print.

Goodstein, Elizabeth S. *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2005. Print.

Han, Sung-Joo. "The Korean Experiment." *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring 1991). 92-104. Print.

Hanhardt, John. *The Worlds of Nam June Paik*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2000. Print.

--. "Nam June Paik (1932-2006): Video Art Pioneer." *American Art*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Summer 2006). 148-53. Print.

Healy, Séan Desmond. "The Nature of Hyperboredom." *Boredom, Self, and Culture*. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1984. 58-73. Print.

Herzogenrath, Wulf, and Andreas Kreul. *Nam June Paik: There Is No Rewind Button for Life*. Köln: DuMont, 2007. Print.

Higgins, Hannah. *Fluxus Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. Print.

Jameson, Fredric. "Culture." *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1993. 1-54. Print.

Kant, Immanuel. "First Section." Ed. Paul Guyer. Trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2000. 87-159. Print.

Koepnick, Lutz. "Fluxus Television." *Framing Attention: Windows on German Culture*. Johns Hopkins University Press. 2007. 200-239. Print.

Kracauer, Siegfried. "The Mass Ornament." *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Trans. Ed. Thomas Y. Levin. Harvard UP, 1995. 75-88. Print.

--. "Those Who Wait." *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Trans. Ed. Thomas Y. Levin. Harvard UP, 1995. 129-40. Print.

Kuhn, Reinhard. "Introduction." *The Demon of Noontide*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1976. 3-14. Print.

Lee, Esther Kim. "Avant-garde Becomes Nationalism: Immortalizing Nam June Paik in South Korea." *Avant-garde Performance and Material Exchange: Vectors of the Radical*. Ed. Mike Sell. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 149-66. Print.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. Print.

Manheim, Jarol B. "Rites of Passage: The 1988 Seoul Olympics as Public Diplomacy." *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (June, 1990). 279-95. Print.

Marcuse, Herbert. Trans. Herbert Marcuse and Erica Sherover. *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.

Matravers, Derek. "Is Boring Art Just Boring?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Autumn, 1995). 425-26. Print.

Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard UP, 2007. Print.

Paik, Nam June. *Du cheval a' christo et autres ecrits*. Eds. Edith Decker and Iremeline Lebeer. Trans. Wang June Lim, Mi-ae Jung, and Moon Young Kim. Nam June Paik Art Center, 2010. Print.

--. *Du cheval a' christo et autres ecrits*. Eds. Edith Decker and Iremeline Lebeer. Trans. Yves Cantraine. Bruxelles-Hamburg-Paris: Editions Lebeer Hossmann, 1993. Print.

Park, Sang Mi. "The Paradox of Postcolonial Korean Nationalism: State-Sponsored Cultural Policy in South Korea, 1965-Present." *Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Fall 2010). 67-93. Print.

Perloff, Marjorie. "Fluxier-than-Thou." *Modernism/modernity* 11.3 (2004): 581-587. Print.

Petro, Patrice. "After Shock/Between Boredom and History." *Discourse* 16.2 (Winter, 1993-94), 77-99. Print.

Pezze, Barbara Dalle, and Carlo Salzani. "The Delicate Monster: Modernity and Boredom." *Essays on Boredom and Modernity*. Amsterdam-New York, NY: Rodopi, 2009. 5-33. Print.

Phillips, Adam. "On Being Bored." *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*. London: Faber (1993). 71-82. Print.

Sontag, Susan. "The Aesthetics of Silence." *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Picador, 2002. 3-34. Print.

Tomkins, Calvin. "Profiles: Video Visionary." *New Yorker* (May 5, 1975): 44-79. Print.

Yang, Eun-hee. "Memory, Desire, and Spectacle: The Making of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Korea." *Journal of Contemporary Art Studies*, No. 22 (December 2007): 167-98. Print.

Zurbrugg, Nicholas, ed. "Nam June Paik." *Art, Performance, Media: 31 Interviews*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. 285-94. Print.

Cited Illustrations

Land, Owen. *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc.* 1966. <http://www.martinjanda.at>

Paik, Nam June. *Fish Flies on Sky*. 1983-85. <http://www.smkp.de/en/exhibitions/current/re-opening-of-the-collection.html>

--. *Fuku/Luck, Fuku=Luck, Matrix*. Date unknown. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/kotobato/>

--. *Global Groove*. 1973.

http://poma.kr/data/file/exhibition1/760060473_C5A9B1E2BAAFC8AF_Global+Groove.jpg.

--. *TV-Chair*. 1968/75. http://dreher.netzliteratur.net/4_Medienkunst_Text.html

--. *Zen for Film*. 2012. Installation in Nam June Paik Art Center's exhibition "Nostalgia is an Extended Feedback."

--. *Zen for Film*. 1964.

<http://www.njpartcenter.kr/kr/research/collections/show.asp?id=285&pos=1&page=1&query=zen%20for%20film>.

