



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## FROM NORTH KOREA WITH LOVE: REVIEWING PYONGYANG'S ARIRANG MASS GAMES

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This year's 2018 Winter Olympics hosted in Pyeongchang, South Korea featured both a historic moment and a contemporary geopolitical breakthrough when the South Korean and North Korean Olympic delegations marched together under one flag for the opening ceremony. The *New York Times* described how as "athletes from the two Koreas marched into the stadium together less than 50 miles from the heavily fortified border between their nations [...they represented] hope of a breakthrough in a tense, geopolitical standoff that has stirred fears of nuclear conflict" (Rich 2018). This hopeful display of détente had personal resonance for me because of my connection to North Korea, which I toured eleven years earlier. As I watched the delegations parade together as one unified presence, thereby embodying the reunification hopes of a peninsula divided by history and ideology, I was brought back to my first-hand witnessing of a parallel scene similarly celebrating such reunification hopes at the Arirang Mass Games in Pyongyang.

I had the rare opportunity of touring North Korea in April 2007. During this tour, I was in a unique and privileged position to conduct original research on North Korea's library system because of my then-ongoing doctoral studies in Library and Information Science and my professional background in librarianship. The tour was of specific interest to me because it offered tightly controlled visits to the Grand People's Study House (North Korea's national library) and various other library-related settings; in fact, my subsequent publications on North Korea's library system became some of the first English-language literature on this subject. But the chance to see, first-hand, this library system was not the only reason that enticed me to enter this isolated, closed country.

The tour also presented the opportunity of attending the Arirang Mass Games, a spectacular artistic-cultural-athletic-gymnastic extravaganza performed in the capital's impressive May Day

Stadium, the world's largest with a seating capacity of 150,000 spectators (Weller 2015). The Arirang Mass Games, which involves 100,000 performers and participants, could perhaps be described as a fantastical fusion of an impossibly largescale Broadway play, West End musical, Bolshoi Ballet performance, Cirque du Soleil show, military parade, Rio de Janeiro carnival pageant, Olympic opening and closing ceremonies, and Super Bowl half-time show. This description is exaggerated but that is because this performance is on an exaggerated scale. Or as described in *The Guardian* later the same year as my repeat attendances, there is "nothing in the world—not even the Olympic opening ceremony—that can compare" (Watts 2007). Moreover, that same year in fact, the Guinness Book of World Records recognized the Arirang Mass Games as the largest event of its kind in the world (Reuters 2007). It is certainly without any contemporary comparison or equivalent.

I attended the Arirang Mass Games during the middle of my tour. My first experience was so surreal that I wanted, needed, to witness it again to not only have the once/twice in a lifetime opportunity to do so, but also to try to better understand what the performance was doing (ultimately to exalt and edify North Korea, or at least the Communist regime's peculiar idea of the country's identity). I also wanted to attend it twice to more fully appreciate and enjoy the experience, specifically because the first time was so, at the risk of sounding or being hyperbolic, mind-blowing.

Reviewing the Arirang Mass Games, eleven years later during an international spotlight on the Korean peninsula, returns me to my own first-hand experience of "one of the greatest, strangest, most awe-inspiring political spectacles on earth" (Watts 2005). It also takes me back to a different world, time, and place. On a personal level, I was younger (incidentally, I celebrated my birthday in the country that year) in the midst of my doctoral studies and still based in my homeland of Canada. On a broader geopolitical level, Kim Jong-Il was still North Korea's dictatorial Dear Leader, Pyongyang had not yet perfected nuclear bombs or intercontinental ballistic missiles, President Donald Trump had not yet threatened "fire and fury" (Baker and Shang-Hun 2017) against North Korea, and the world was not yet threatened with the imminent prospect of a nuclear war between North Korea and the USA.

Eleven years later, the hostilities between the two countries intensified to the point of a potential "nuclear-to-nuclear showdown" (Landler 2018). Although there is some reasonable hope for peace after the recent historic first-ever summit between the leaders of the two countries, an event representing "a momentous step in an improbable courtship between the world's largest nuclear power and the most reclusive one" (Landler 2018).<sup>1</sup>

### Reviewing the Arirang Mass Games

This review of North Korea's Arirang Mass Games allows me the opportunity to respond to this year's Pyeongchang Olympics by sharing some of my experiences in North Korea. With the benefit of hindsight of over a decade, this review helps me to better situate this surreal spectacle into some kind of analytical perspective. Perhaps the times that I attended the performance in person (and

maybe even for long afterwards), they were too close to engage in a sober conversation about its possible purpose or meaning. I now understand that this performance was/is more than politics or show (although it is certainly both of those things). As Andrew Bowie argues, “a decisive aspect of performance both for performer and audience is that it enables us to inhabit a world that makes sense by the very nature of our participation in it” (Bowie 2015, 56). The Arirang Mass Games arguably enables performers and spectators alike to inhabit the peculiar North Korean world. Ultimately, the event is a crucial tool for the regime’s careful construction and curation of its version of North Korean culture and identity and, simultaneously, the materialization and enactment of its political agenda for ideological living.

In the following sections, I present my experience of a performance unlike anything and unseen anywhere else in the contemporary world. As one of the few foreigners and even fewer scholars to have witnessed the event, I can contribute a privileged perspective to the beginning of a conversation about this performance that has been nearly inaccessible and unavailable to most people, including most other academic researchers or commentators, outside of North Korea.

This review, however, does not aim to provide justifications for or intend to give support to the North Korean government, nor does it argue that this performance or other artistic or athletic achievements redeem the regime from other actual or alleged abuses, atrocities, or animosities (Salam and Haag 2018, Yeo and Chubb 2018, Clemens 2016, BBC 2014, Cumming-Bruce 2014, Lankov 2014, United Nations Human Rights Council 2014, Demick 2010). The purpose instead is twofold: first, to help shed light on a spectacular performance that few people outside of North Korea have experienced in such a little known or little understood country; and second, to present a perspective on repetition established in such an isolated and mysterious place, at least compared to the relative openness of most other countries, that few other individuals have personally experienced.

As Lisa Burnett argues, the Arirang Mass Games is “an astonishingly unique work of art. The participants and organizers of the Mass Games are, so far as is known, simply human beings—musicians, athletes, dancers, college students, and even children—who have joined forces to create something wondrously beautiful (for the Mass Games are nothing if not beautiful) under extreme and challenging circumstances” (Burnett 2013, 25). It is further hoped that this review will help illuminate how this event, comprised of masses of individuals coming together to create something spectacular despite their grim circumstances, serves as both embodied ideology of the North Korean regime, and also as ideology itself as an embodied enactment.

This review is arranged into an account and then an analysis of the Arirang Mass Games. It presents a description of my attendance with emphasis on my first witnessing of the show because of its lasting impression. My second viewing on the very next evening was nearly identical to my first experience, except that there were no opening speeches.

This identity between the two live performances felt strange because of their seemingly perfect and seamless sameness. I do not necessarily expect major alterations between performances of the same live event, whether it is the Arirang Mass Games or other kinds of artistic, gymnastic,

musical, or theatrical productions. Yet, sometimes upon a second viewing of the same live performance there could possibly be some differences between them, such as a missed cue or altered lighting or some other production-related accident. There could also be a change in atmosphere because of a largely different crowd for a subsequent viewing. The point is that there sometimes is and can be room for some kind of alteration or mistake in repeat performances. But from what I could see, there were no differences between each night's performance. Both times seemed to be precisely the same—even the audience's energy and reactions seemed so similar—as though I was either watching a recorded version or I had somehow been transported back to the night before. Perhaps this seeming sameness is one reason why my memories of these repeat viewings have become largely conflated as though I attended only once.

The effect that this repeat viewing had/has on me was/is complicated both intellectually and emotionally. On the one hand, this exactitude in a live and massively complex performance was impressive. It fostered awe and respect for all those involved—the designers, organizers, choreographers, musicians, actors, gymnasts, schoolchildren, everyone—being able to seemingly perfectly repeat their parts without alteration or error. This show's beautiful complexity and perfect execution was in many ways inspiring.

On the other hand, however, this exactitude also engendered a vaguely sinister feeling. To begin, it has made my memories of the event seem to be from one experience, not two. I attended twice, I paid twice, I remember going twice, and yet, my memories of the two times have become—I guess like the event itself—the same. It is indeed strange to reflect upon two separate experiences as though they were one and consequently an almost-indistinguishable remembrance.

Additionally, watching the show for the second time, seeing it unfold exactly as before without any seeming change, made me wonder how and why such perfection was achieved. One of the purposes of the event is to illuminate the Communist collective over the self-interested individual; consequently, the performers and “the participants know that the slightest individual mistake on their part could damage the group's performance. They therefore surrender to the group and, in this way, the performers become ideologically prepared, thus becoming true Communists” (Bonner and Battsek 2004). This second viewing made me consider what these people had to go through to surrender to the group, to surrender to the Mass Games, to put on this show, and to do it over and over for a period of weeks (and then later again in the late-summer). It also made me wonder what, if any, cost there would be to them or their loved ones if they did make a slight individual mistake. What would or could happen to them if there was any perceptible imperfection in the execution of their roles? What, if any, repercussion would follow? I did not ask my North Korean guides. It seemed inappropriate to do so, especially since my female guide proudly noted how her sister was performing in the event that year.

Nevertheless, I do appreciate that my second viewing, whilst still as surreal as my first, allowed me space to experience it with more sober awareness of what was happening. I also acknowledge that because the near identity of the two nights, my memories have converged, conflated, and coloured each other over the past eleven years. Thankfully my diary accounts, photographs, videos

(our tour group was filmed by one of our government minders and, interestingly, we were given an edited documentary film about our tour), and memories of my tour helped reconstitute my experiences of the Arirang Mass Games.

This review, moreover, provides me an opportunity to reflect upon my own presence inside this country, not only as a tourist, but also as a scholar. The reason why I went to North Korea, at the risk of sounding pretentious, was as a kind of fact-finding mission of my own. I wanted to visit, research, and begin to learn about a country so willingly and unwillingly closed-off from the wider world and so vilified in the media and many other quarters. I wanted to see for myself what this place was about. I realized that my overall experience would be highly scripted and severely circumscribed (which it undoubtedly was); however, it would be a start to a deeper understanding of this so-called hermit kingdom and its atmosphere, culture, and people.

This review further provides an analysis of the Arirang Mass Games through a discussion of the materialization, enactment, and embodiment of the regime's ethnocentric Communist ideology and culture. The regime, for example, has its own version of Communism—Juche—which promotes national independence, sovereignty, and self-sufficiency within a socialist system guided by the Kim dynasty. This analysis draws upon the work of performance philosophers and the work of other scholars and journalists, who have either analyzed and/or also attended the event, to begin connecting the ways in which this performance can be regarded as the material embodiment of North Korean culture, national identity, and ideology, or at least the regime's construction and fantasy of these aspects of the country.

### **Attending the Arirang Mass Games, April 2007**

My first attendance of the Arirang Mass Games coincided with that year's opening ceremony celebration. It was a cold, crisp, but clear, early-spring evening as our tour bus approached the imposing May Day stadium. As dusk fell, the world's largest stadium was eerily illuminated by pastel-blue lights and framed by a gradually darkening blue, pink, and violet sky. The May Day Stadium is a retro-futuristic venue on the northern edges of the wide Daedong River that cleaves through central Pyongyang. A manifestation of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century fantasies of future aesthetics, the stadium resembles an alien spaceship waiting to blast off to return to its home planet. It is a gigantic white structure with massive 60m-high vaulting archways ringing its oval perimeter. We entered the stadium through one of these imposing arches that dwarfed us, reducing us to tiny ants entering a mountain.

Immediately upon entering the stadium, an exciting, electrifying energy struck us as deafening militaristic chants thundered through the cavernous corridors. Once we passed through these high hallways into the actual field, we encountered the source of these impressive sounds and an equally staggering sight. Directly across from us, covering nearly the entire opposite side of this colosseum, appeared a massive mural comprised of 20,000 seated schoolchildren rhythmically stomping their feet and roaring the names of their school districts in unison whilst forming colourful synchronized mosaics using oversized colour-coded books.

Each child had her/his own book and would seamlessly and simultaneously flip the pages according to signals given by a backdrop conductor and a giant digital screen displaying changing three-number combinations both placed on the opposite side of the stadium. The conductor and screen would signal, at the exact moment, when to turn the pages, which the children managed to do with choreographed precision. Like pixels making up a screen image, these book pages created a mammoth image. Through small binoculars, provided by our North Korean minders, I could see the top of the students' heads as they peeped above their books to read the signals and then, once flipping their pages, they'd immediately duck down in order not to interrupt the perfect solid appearance of the overall mosaic. When it was time to transition to the next image, they'd repeat the quick process over again. It created a jaw-dropping illusion of the opposite wall moving to the militaristic chants and shouts by the schoolchildren. It sounded like a military parade or inspection.

The mural itself served as the main backdrop for the show, forming around ninety different major pictures detailing the country's achievements and revolutionary history as accompaniment to the performances and tableaux on the field. When images of the Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il were displayed, the crowd erupted in enthusiastic applause of sustained devotion. Some of these huge pictures, moreover, featured dynamic and moving images, as though it was an animated screen, including a flashing sun (representing Kim Il-Sung), shimmering stars, winking eyes of smiling children, falling snow, flashing lightning, and smoke streaming from the engine of a train traversing a snowy mountain. But, at this point, the children were listing their schools' names in vertical rows featuring giant Korean block letters. The children also formed vertical or horizontal black lines cutting across the mural whilst shouting compliments about Pyongyang to the packed audience.

Above this grand backdrop was a giant electronic torch atop of the building which was lit during the performance by a bright white electronic star. On each side of this backdrop were multi-leveled manicured gardens covered in colourful lights and the years of Juche in huge block numbers: 1912 (Kim Il Sung's birth year, marking the formal start of the North Korean Juche calendar, thus making it Juche 1) on the left side the then-current year 2007 (or Juche 95) on the right side.

We were given prime seating in the centre of the stadium with ideal elevation to observe the entire spectacle unfolding in front of us. This prime seating also meant that high-ranking North Koreans in attendance were seated in our section (although their reserved area was segregated by a special concrete cantilevered viewing deck jetting out from the rows of seats). There appeared to be many such important individuals in attendance, the men dressed in dark conservative suits and the women in brightly coloured traditional Korean gowns (although, the rest of the audience were smartly dressed themselves). The sartorial choices of the North Koreans gave the impression that this show was not some rowdy event, like a soccer game or rugby match, but instead an upscale affair.

Our government minders informed us that because this night's performance was the opening ceremony it was hoped that Kim Jong-Il himself would attend. They certainly appeared excitedly expectant. This suggestion had a strange chilling effect over me, not only because I would, for the

first time in my life that I knew or was aware of, be in the same space as an actual dictator, but that he would be sitting very near to me (directly behind, slightly to the left, and only a few rows above me).

The show began promptly at 8PM. The schoolchildren's chanting and stomping subsided and their mural settled into long, thick vertical rows of different colours. The stadium became silent as a man in the reserved area for special attendees—allegedly a major-ranking Communist Party member—approached a microphone to deliver a speech to officially open the 2007 Arirang Mass Games. His voice boomed over the loudspeakers that, in turn, echoed throughout the stadium. It appeared that Kim was not attending after all. Our minders whispered to us that, because of his “regretful absence”, we were permitted to photograph the event.

Suddenly fireworks exploded above the open roof, lighting up the sky with colourful bursts, shots, and showers whilst the electronic spiderweb, crisscrossing the roof's open space, and its hanging ornaments brightly flashed and sweeping orchestral music swept over us. I became immersed in an incredible world that I'd never experienced before and most probably will never do so again. Indeed, as Scott Burgeson argues,

it would be facile to dismiss this production as mere Stalinist propaganda or Orwellian kitsch, for “Arirang” really is a case in which the sum is greater than its parts, a triumph of human creativity that on a purely aesthetic level trumps all political or ideological underpinnings. In a word, it is the ultimate *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a total work of art of the kind that Wagner or Andrew Lloyd Webber could only ever dream of replicating. From opera, ballet, and traditional Korean dance to high-wire circus routines, gymnastics and martial-arts displays, a virtual encyclopedia of theatrical forms is deployed to stunning and always seamless effect. (Burgeson 2015)

My jaw dropped and my mouth remained open whilst my eyes bulged and remained unblinking for the following ninety or so minutes, neither believing nor wanting to miss any of this over-the-top sumptuous but surreal spectacle.

The performance's theme is Arirang based on arguably the most famous Korean folk song on the Korean peninsula. The song's meaning, interestingly, has different lyrical variations and multiple interpretations without consensus of the main or original version. Yet, regardless of variation or interpretation, Arirang is ultimately a bittersweet love song expressing the longing and sorrow of two lovers tragically separated by fate. It is indeed a particularly poignant song for North Koreans who claim to yearn for reunification with South Korea. It serves as a kind of bridge that connects the show's different parts together, and eleven years later, a kind of back-to-the-future bridge that connects my experience to the scenes from the Pyeongchang Olympics.

The performance is divided into a prelude and finale and five main chapters covering the interconnecting narratives of the Kim dynasty, North Korean nationalism, the country's military and military-first policy (Songun), the Communist system of government and life, and Korean reunification. It compresses the country's past, present, and future—from its brutal colonization

under and joyous liberation from Japanese imperialists; the tragic separation of the Korean peninsula between North and South; its military, civilian, cultural, industrial, agricultural, and technological achievements; and its dream for peaceful Korean reunification—into one seemingly suspended, eternal moment that always anticipates (but has not yet fully achieved) the promised socialist paradise for the Korean people. The show, in other words, does not make any reference to the widespread famines, chronic malnutrition, electricity shortages, or economic collapse that afflicted the country in recent decades, let alone the alleged and actual human rights abuses inflicted upon the people.

Apparently, according to our government minders, this year's performance reduced the anti-American and anti-Japanese sentiments and toned down the military components that were usual for previous years' narratives and acts. They did not make clear why these changes were made but I presumed it was perhaps partly in response to the then-ongoing international six-party talks involving North Korea, South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan and the USA (Onishi 2007; Ramzy and Cochrane 2018) to reach compromise on the dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons program and, in turn, the international community's isolation and sanctioning of the country.

The event nevertheless remained, at least to me, highly militarized. If it was toned down, I wondered how more militaristic it could have been. The military and militaristic aspects were quite conspicuous. An entire chapter, for example, was devoted to the regime's Songun ('military-first') policy with many military-themed uniforms, costumes, weapons, marches, parades, movements, tableaux, music, and backdrops. One of the acts within this chapter, in fact, dramatized Kim Jong-Il's selfless devotion to military duty by displaying him travelling in the mountains, through the dark night, to inspect and inspire his brave troops.

The reigning Kim dynasty, particularly its founder Kim Il-Sung, is continuously lauded with a fervent religious devotion. The Kims are celebrated and upheld as godlike figures who are, in equal measure, the great saviours, selfless defenders, tireless builders, responsible stewards, and loving parents of the North Korean people and nation. For example, the children's part of the performance—a breathtaking gymnastics display of girls as young as seven—begins with the kids playfully running onto the field shouting, in unison, "Kim Jong-Il is our father!"

The audience, including our government minders, would energetically cheer when images of Kim Il-Sung were displayed or narratives about the Kims were enacted. This devotion was astounding to see, indeed feel, in person. Being embedded within this mostly North Korean audience, who all joyously and loudly responded to any mention of the Kims, immersed me within the live enactment of this cult of personality that is part of North Koreans' lives.

The performance's first chapter, in fact, centres on Kim Il-Sung as the bright star who brought light and hope to the North Korean nation and people. One of the first major acts, entitled the "Star of Korea", tells the pseudo-historical story of Kim Il-Sung liberating North Korea from Japan. He is represented as a shimmering star in a dark sky—displayed on the backdrop mural—leading the people out of Japanese colonial oppression. Rows of women dressed in golden-yellow gowns, holding oversized fans of the same colour, gracefully dance a mixture of Korean classical dance



and Russian ballet across the field and make complicated gestures with their fans, all in perfect unison, to the orchestra's grand rendition of "Arirang".

This act's exultant finale shows the Star of Korea, now manifested as a three-dimensional shining, silvery, stylized orb, perched on a pedestal situated high above the field near the stadium's open roof. The star rises and then ascends even higher to ignite the gigantic torch positioned at the stadium's zenith. Fire explodes from the torch in a glorious flourish. At that precise moment, the backdrop mural changes to display images of the shining torch and a fluttering red flag whilst rows of young men in red jumpsuits rush onto the field and perform complicated calisthenics routines to the upbeat militaristic song entitled "Song of Comradeship". Kim Il-Sung, in other words, has not only ignited the people's revolutionary spirit but also fulfills his divine destiny of freeing them and bringing independence and sovereignty to their nation.

The performance's ultimate conclusion celebrates a hopeful reconciliation and peaceful reunification with South Korea. It begins with the backdrop mural displaying a bleak landscape of the DMZ, the symbol of the divided peninsula, with a single booming male voice reciting a paean to the Korean people accompanied by the orchestra playing a melancholic "Arirang". As the music gradually becomes louder and fuller, a chorus and female soloist replaces the male speaker singing the song's lyrics, two large groups of women in identical flowing white gowns emerge on opposite ends of the darkened field, reaching and slowly gravitating toward each other. When their leaders reach one another, they join hands—imitating the massive Reunification Archway, of two female figures reaching toward each other, that serves as a grand entrance to Pyongyang—crying with happiness as the stadium is illuminated in bright light and the music changes to the stirringly upbeat song "We are One". The women, through their uniformity in dress, movement, and affect, seamlessly form an image of a single unified Korean peninsula as a monumental Korean-centred globe emerges in the middle of the field, the backdrop mural changes into the Star of Korea, fireworks light up the sky, and the field overflows with thousands more performers portraying overjoyed citizens of both countries celebrating their reunification.

It is an emotional scene. As Burnett argues, the Arirang Mass Games expresses the North Korean "vision of reunification in a way that is uniquely and powerfully moving, whatever one's assessment of its political and ideological underpinning" (Burnett 2013, 21–22). This hope of a single reunified Korea—or what would be their mythical Arirang nation—imparted a warm feeling. But it simultaneously cooled this warmth by making it clear that North Korea would dominate the reunified country. It is North Korean songs, slogans, and symbols—and nothing from contemporary South Korean culture or society—that fill the stadium after the two sides reunite and the people celebrate. This otherwise joyous scene left a sour aftertaste of an ethnonationalist-supremacist atmosphere of a distorted dream that can not be, at least not under then (or present) circumstances.

I attended the Arirang Mass Games for a second time the following evening. I needed to witness it again to believe that it was real and that I truly experienced it, that it was not some strange dream or hallucination. This second viewing was as surreal as my first experience, not only because of it

being so unique, but also because of its identity. It felt as though they were the exact same performances of the same event. From our travel to and arrival at the stadium, to being ushered to our prime seats, to the militaristic atmosphere of the surroundings, and to the full house of spectators. It was déjà vu. Even the weather cooperated in this exactitude, being another clear, crisp, and cold early-spring evening. The second viewing was as impactful as the first time, but I was at least somewhat more prepared for this surreal spectacle created in this very singular world. I was indeed more prepared for a sober experience than I at first anticipated because of the seeming sameness between the two nights.

### Analyzing the Arirang Mass Games, February 2018 (11 Years Later)

The Arirang Mass Games is unparalleled political propaganda. But it is more than propaganda. Merkel notes that “although outside North Korea they are often criticized as being nothing more than a blunt propaganda tool praising the communist state and its leaders, their role and meaning is much more complex and multi-layered” (Merkel 2010, 2481). There is more going on than only ideology and politics. These games also materialize North Korean culture, or at least the regime’s carefully constructed and curated concept of the country’s culture. As David P. Terry and Andrew F. Wood argue, “any understanding of North Koreans...must account for the ways in which they are embedded in particular communication systems that are materialized by the Mass Games, among other concrete performance practices” (Terry and Wood 2015, 197). Thus, while the games help propagate the regime’s political agenda, they also help constitute the regime’s version of North Korean culture through its materialization and enactment. The event further constitutes this Communist ideology and ethnocentric culture through each performer’s enacting, and by extension embodiment, of the epic show.

The event helps the regime to materialize, in extravagant form, the country’s ethnocentric Communist ideology. As Merkel describes, “this festival is primarily meant to demonstrate the uniqueness and success of the country’s political system and the popularity of its rulers, and contribute to the ongoing identity-formation processes [of the regime’s ideological paradigm]” (Merkel 2014, 383). But this demonstration does more than represent North Korean ideology. It is North Korean ideology. Because of and through its enactment, the event transforms this ideology into an embodied way of thinking about, expressing, and living the regime’s political agenda and fantasies. Laura Cull, for example, argues that performance can be a form of thought. She states that one can “see performance not as represented in another thought, but simply as thought itself—to see ‘performance as philosophy’” (Cull 2014, 20). The “grand scale of thousands of...people working in complete unison, as through a single body, reflects the philosophy that underpins both these mass spectacles as well as North Korean society” (Merkel 2010, 2487). The Arirang Mass Games is not simply a part of the regime’s propaganda, it is a materialization and enactment of the regime’s ideology itself.

This ideology in action conjoins the performance with the ideology. Cull explains how “the aim of conjoining performance and philosophy might...aspire to generate *new ideas of both* on the basis of a mutually transformative encounter, or what Isabelle Stengers calls ‘reciprocal capture’: ‘a dual

process of identity construction” (Cull 2012, 11). Philosophy and ideology are not identical approaches; the former explores aspects of the nature of life, knowledge, and reality whilst the latter establishes systems of ideas to in turn construct policies or politics. Cull’s explanation of the conjoining of performance and philosophy, however, can also help illuminate the conjoining of performance and ideology. The event has a kind of reciprocal capture between, first, the state and performance and, second, between the state, performance, and performers. It is a similar dual process of constructing the state’s version of North Korean identity as and through the event itself, whilst simultaneously helping participants construct for themselves this culture through their performance.

Terry and Wood help to shed further light on this conjoining of performance and ideology, explaining how

performers materialize this willpower through palpable energy behind and commitment to each gesture. These are not merely bodies that go where they have been told; these are bodies that move how they have been told, with a sheer physical presence of unmatched intensity. It is one thing to watch tens of thousands of people move in unison, quite another to watch tens of thousands of people simultaneously extend themselves physically and emotionally, each smiling more widely than her neighbor, each extending every gesture as far as possible, each pair of eyes seemingly overcome with joy that increases with every passing moment. (Terry and Wood 2015, 196–197)

This conjoining thus serves a dual process of constitution. First, it helps constitute the regime’s ideology as embodied lived experience by having citizens devote themselves to its enactment as though devoting themselves to North Korea and the Kims. Second, it helps constitute the regime’s version of the country’s cultural identity and way of life for citizens. The event certainly materializes and demonstrates what the regime thinks about itself (an idealized socialist paradise) and how citizens are to think about the regime (a benevolent Kim family providing an independent and sovereign socialist life).

This dual process has an underlying dual nature in which the Arirang Mass Games is both the materialization and enactment of ideology, and simultaneously the enacting and embodying/embodyment of ideology. Cull states that “performance practice might be seen to avoid application when it conceives itself as a way of thinking rather than as the mere demonstration of existing ideas” (Cull 2012, 23). She argues that performance is a kind of “embodied encounter with the resistant materiality of performance’s thinking: its embodied-thinking, participatory-thinking, or durational-thinking—encounters that generate new ideas of what thought is and where, when and how it occurs” (Cull 2012, 25). The entirety of the Arirang Mass Games—from its design, recruitment, training, staging, enactment, and viewing—not only materializes and enacts ideology but, through their enactment and ultimate display, provides a way of thinking about them.

Cull discusses Allan Kaprow’s concept of “experienced insight” to further illuminate the embodied thinking inherent in performance. She explains that Kaprow “saw little value in generating artworks

that 'remain only an illustration of thought' rather than providing participants with what he called 'experienced insight: an event of embodied thinking by the participant in the act of doing, which is not the same as the recognition of some underlying metaphorical meaning of the work determined in advance by the artist' (Cull 2012, 23). Or as Esa Kirkkopelto states, "performance makers and performers can make contact with philosophical thinking" through performance, which arguably constitutes a form of thinking that "takes place at the very level of performance practice with its material, corporeal and institutional arrangements and the related power play...these arrangements imply" (Kirkkopelto 2015, 5). Performing the event provides an embodied experience of the regime's ideology and identity; that is, through the act of doing the performance, each performer embodies the state's ideological narratives. Each person's role, in other words, is not simply an enactment of ideology but an embodiment of it, a lived material experience of it.

The event further demands that "even if [they] are aware of present shortages of food and electricity [...] to take comfort in the constant assurance that what really matters is not the gloom of the here and now, but the bright rays of sunlight that lie just beyond the horizon, where all (Koreans) will live in peace, friendship, and prosperity" (Burnett 2013, 25). Thus, the performers enact and embody its "powerfully affective images of the glorious future yet to come and the present sacrifices that must be made to bring it into being [...and, in so doing] help to obscure the differences between the utopia described by the regime and the reality on the ground" (Burnett 2013, 25).

The entire organization of the Arirang Mass Games, in fact, involves and mirrors the strict communal synchronizing of society. Lee, for example, describes how the performers

in color-coordinated outfits take the field and begin dancing, jumping, and tumbling in [perfect] synchronicity. Their bodies move to form...blooming flowers to intersecting geometric shapes that expand, collapse, and flow into each other, and every last gymnast moves in perfect time with the group. There are no missed steps, no awkward legs, and no slow individuals who are off by beat, no unseemly breaks to distract the audience from the patterns of perfection. The coordination is astonishing. (Lee 2012)

The performers "will practice [and perform the show] with severe physical and emotional stress that combines the need to please the state with the need to assure that [...] their family's overall political standing [does] not suffer" (Jimin 2012). The grand scale of the performance, coupled with the grand scale of effort required to make it a reality through intense practice and enactment, enables the individual to experience this propaganda with other people as a single collective. They must surrender their individuality to the group to promote "a single, unified collective will and effort above any individual desires or self-interest" (Merkel 2013, 1254). North Koreans of course live in the reality of a closed, isolated, and totalitarian Communist dictatorship every day. But the event provides each person with another way in which to interact with the regime's fantasies about the country as a pure Korean race living in a socialist utopia made possible by the beneficent Kim family.

Participation in the Arirang Mass Games also, significantly, extends into the daily organization and control of society. The government-appointed Mass Gymnastics Organizing Committee, for example, oversees the recruitment, training, and participation of every participant and performer thereby using the performance as an important “means to check ideological reliability and cut off any emerging recalcitrance among [...] members of society, figuratively speaking, at the roots” (Lee 2012). This infiltration directly influences the lives of Pyongyang residents (who make up the majority of the people involved in the show) who must, in turn, materially make sense of their lives and culture through “experience in drill, in subordination to the group, of veneration of a distant leader, [and] of ordering the family unit [and daily life] around political performance and political status” (Lee 2012).

The following statement by Kim Jong-Il is also worth quoting in full to help illuminate the role that this performance plays in shaping the daily lives of North Koreans, especially from a young age. He argues that

developing mass gymnastics is important in training schoolchildren to be fully developed communist people. To be a fully developed communist man, one must acquire a revolutionary ideology, the knowledge of many fields, rich cultural attainments and a healthy and strong physique. These are the basic qualities required of a man of the communist type. Mass gymnastics play an important role in training schoolchildren to acquire these communist qualities. Mass gymnastics foster particularly healthy and strong physiques, a high degree of organization, discipline and collectivism in schoolchildren. The schoolchildren, conscious that a single slip in their action may spoil their mass gymnastic performance, make every effort to subordinate all their thoughts and actions to the collective. (Kim 1987, 1)

The long reach of the Arirang Mass Games into North Koreans’ lives is oppressive and arguably repulsive. But repulsion to such personal sacrifice and ultimately anti-individualism is perhaps a “Western view. What appears to be a kind systematic indoctrination and exploitation, inhuman and repugnant, for the thousands of performers it is an honour to be chosen” (Merkel 2010, 2481). Brian Myers offers an alternative view of this performance as “not the grim Stalinist exercises in anti-individualism that foreigners [...] often misperceive them as, but joyous celebrations of the pure-bloodedness and homogeneity from which the race’s superiority derives” (Myers 2010, 83). The event, and the major commitment it demands and expects, is maybe not as repulsive to North Koreans as one might imagine. It admittedly demands personal sacrifice and applies pressure on individuals, including the expectation to surrender their individuality to the group while (contradictorily?) ensuring perfection in their individual performance so as not to undermine the group. They are also apparently pressured by the state to participate in the event or confront deleterious consequences to themselves or their families.

But North Koreans live in a dictatorial country in which the government controls and disciplines nearly every aspect of their lives. When an individual does not align or comply with state demands or expectations, they will most likely be sanctioned in some way. In other words, maybe the sacrifices and pressures of the event are not particularly unusual for North Koreans. I do not claim

to undermine the work or stress involved in this event, nor do I intend to make light of such a totalitarian system. I am trying to reconcile how participating in the event is seen as a kind of honour despite these sacrifices and pressures. As aforementioned, my own guide noted with pride her sister's involvement in the event that year. Perhaps it is an honour to participate, not to mention to do well, in order to somehow 'prove' oneself to the state and thereby rise in political status? Maybe that is where the honour originates? Maybe that is how a North Korean considers it an opportunity for state recognition more than a repulsive obligation?

Am I repulsed by the Arirang Mass Games? I am uncertain. I suppose I feel a sense of fascinated appreciation for them, not only for their unparalleled grandeur and ambition, but also for the fact that it is unlikely I will ever see them or anything like them again in this lifetime.

### From North Korea, With Love

The Arirang Mass Games is an otherworldly performance in a country unlike any other on earth. My feelings about my attendance, and indeed my overall time in North Korea, are a complicated cocktail of appreciation and awe mixed with unease and skepticism. I appreciate the creative and physical efforts of everyone involved and remain awed by its grand ambition. I am simultaneously uneasy about what this involvement entailed, on both individual and social levels, and about the sacrifices made by the performers. I am further skeptical about whether this event is a cherished cultural tradition or only another manifestation of blunt propaganda. Maybe it is both.

The aim of this review was to present a descriptive account and analyses of this event. The Arirang Mass Games certainly serves as a vehicle for the North Korean regime to help materialize and display its ethnocentric Communist ideology and culture and, in turn, for the performers to enact and embody that same sociopolitical agenda. It certainly left a major impression on me. I still, perhaps unfairly, compare many other events to it, knowing that they will not—cannot?—measure up to its grandeur.

North Korea itself imprinted a strong, strange, and surreal impression upon me. I suppose, in a way, I am haunted by that place. In fact, after all these years, I still dream about it. Perhaps that is part of its power: it digs deep into your psyche, always lurking, always impressing, and always sending you its version of love, from North Korea.

### Notes

1 As this article went to press, the United States and North Korea successfully held a historic leaders summit meeting in Singapore on 12 June 2018. This entire summit—from its sudden and unexpected announcement in March 2018, followed by its subsequent rapid preparations and successful execution less than three months later in June 2018—transpired during this article's final editing and proofreading stages.

This summit represented the first time a sitting American president formally met with a sitting North Korean

leader. The *New York Times* reported that “the summit meeting represented a turnaround that would have been inconceivable just a few months ago, when the men’s verbal sparring included threats of a nuclear conflict that rattled friend and foe alike.” The summit was “the latest twist in the international drama over the fate of the North’s nuclear program and a complete reversal by the Trump administration [...] It was also a remarkable bet by Mr. Trump that he can persuade Mr. Kim to follow through on pledges to surrender his nuclear weapons that are almost identical to those the North has made—and broken—in the past.” Trump and Kim signed a joint statement at the summit in which the former “committed to provide security guarantees” to North Korea, and the latter “reaffirmed his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. But the statement did not go much further than previous ones and was short on details, including any timetable or verification measures.”

Analysis and opinions on this summit are still emerging but, at this time, they are currently both pessimistic and optimistic. For example, Nicholas Kirstof argues that Trump was “outfoxed” by giving Kim too many concessions and received few promises in return, while Victor Cha argues that the two leaders “have just walked us back from the brink of war.” Further, many American lawmakers from both major political parties remain “deeply mistrustful” of Kim Jong-Un and “skeptical” in their assessments of the summit (Fandos 2018).

It presently remains to be seen how events will continue to unfold.

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