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NOW WE SEE BUT A POOR REFLECTION AS IN A MIRROR...

...then we shall see face to face

Opening speech for IETM Satellite meeting in Gwangju, September 2015



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Distinguished guests from Europe and Asia. Good afternoon. 'Om Mani Padme Hum.' 'Assalamu 'Alaikum.' 'If a man hears the Way in the morning, he may die in the evening without regret.' 'Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.'

Hi, my name is Kim Nam-soo from South Korea in Asia, and I am a dance critic. I started my keynote speech with Asia's representative religious mantras - my favorite ones, to be precise. I would like to thank all of you for coming to the IETM Asian Satellite Meeting and I hope this event will be held with great hospitality by Gwangju.

There are many great mantras of different religions, but let me focus on the sentence from the Bible, 'Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.' This sentence is not only beautiful but excellent in its meaning. What kind of mirror do you think it is? The mirror described by St. Paul is nothing but a copper mirror. A mirror made of copper does not reflect images clearly. Therefore, the sentence means that for the present we see things vaguely, but then we will see them clearly: face to face.

In the deserts and grasslands of Southwest Asia where the sentence was written, the sense felt through the copper mirror was not necessarily inferior. The Hidden Dimension by American anthropologist Edward T. Hall tells us that Arabs caught the horizon and put it in their houses until the 1960s at least. The horizon in the house was dim and faint, and left an unidentified area between sight and non-sight. This sense worked as a power that shamans in North Asia or Northeast Asia used to foretell the future. Through the power they traveled back in time and read some faint but keen signs. They had a copper mirror in their heart.

A copper mirror in the body and the horizon in the house. This structure is just an example of an Asian visionary, which was generated between the visible and the invisible.

I would like to tell you a few episodes today, not some big topics such as

post-colonialism or political aesthetics that are frequently talked about at international events. What I want to do here is to present some Asian visionaries and provide an open space where we can all think about the vision of the near future of the Asia Culture Theater. I think this new space that can open through our physical presence is more important than an obvious and void space given in advance.

I believe there is 'a given void space' vs. 'a pushed open space' in performing arts, and now I'm trying to deal with the pushed open space.

What could we bring up first?

At the request of the Vatican in the 13th century, Flemish Franciscan monk William Rubruck visited the Mongol capital of Karakorum after traveling across Europe and Asia. He was warmly received by a local nomad and guided to a big tent where he saw an amazing scene: people of all the world's religions gathered and talked about the superiority of their own religion and discussed one another. A Christian had debates with a Lamaist and an Islamist had debates with a shaman. They did not insult or provoke each other and had intellectual and logical conversations. William Rubruck marvelled at their dignified attitudes when they talked face to face.

Om Mani Padme Hum: 'Assalamu 'Alaikum.' 'If a man hears the Way in the morning, he may die in the evening without regret.' 'Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.'

There was one condition there: you should worship none other than the sky because the blue, limitless and eternal sky is looking down upon you. Then every religion was tolerated and exempt from taxes. This was the secret of the sky.

There is an expression which no longer exists in South Korea: 'The heaven knows, the earth knows and I know.' The weight of these words is now swept away by capitalism. We do not accept the equation of 'sky = universe' anymore. Or, rather, we do not sense it anymore. That is why today's SF films try to go to the outer space and show

NAMSOO KIM

Namsoo Kim began his career as dance critic by receiving the dance criticism award at the 9th Dance Arts Award in 2001. In 2003, he became editor in chief of the monthly magazine Momm ('Body') and in 2006 created performing arts magazine Pan, where he is still the editor in chief. He was visiting scholar for three years at the Nam June Paik Art Center in 2008 and served as standing research member for one year at the National Theater Company of Korea in 2011. He compiled the books Paik Nam June: From Horse to Christo and The Homecoming of Park Nam June and published other works. He also created the magazine Quarterly Drama.

the principles of this world in a sublime way. In other words, it is no different from another version of worshipping the sky.

This was the basis of the Mongol Law, once compatible with the Roman Law but now forgotten, that ruled the Mongolian Empire and became the source of Asian laws. The prominent religious people in the big tent were having conversations under the banner of sky worship. This is such a beautiful sight and an ideal/idea that still cannot be achieved with the human wisdom in the 21st century. This is the ancient future; this is the global network. If this was Pax Mongolica, it is time to set up the big tent where Europe and Asia can get together with the very peace of the past.

South Korean politicians have different opinions with strong individuality, which makes people say they have to be together in a big tent. But this is not easy. The big tent refers to a nomad's camp that helps people make friends with each other while eating together, build friendship by moving toward the same direction and become co-workers by working together. If they set their minds on the same thing, they do

it fast and briskly, but their shared minds and emotions last long. There is a say in Mongolia, 'Once you have said something is good, don't talk pain about it later.'

As Gayatri C. Spivak said, 'There are too many Asias and they are all different'; the plural form of Asia should be appropriate to describe the region. Asia needs to properly re-position itself internally before facing Europe as Asia's 'other' of modern times. Asia is divided into several large cultural blocks by azimuth angles such as southwest, south, southeast, central, north and northeast. The Eurasian continent has too many border lines to let people enjoy its blank space on earth properly. There are many people dreaming about crossing over the continent like William Rubruck, but it is not easy to realise it again. There are just too many visas to get.

Asia needs the big tent. Although there are people belonging to a big category of Asia as Europe calls it, the so-called 'Asia awareness', or awareness as Asians, is very weak among them. Asia still does not have the same unified movement or common mindset the EU pursues. Asia seems to be nothing other than a title. Is it really so?

About 65 million years ago, the planet Earth faced the risk of being destroyed. Throughout its history, the Earth was on the verge of extinction almost six times. So, it can be said that you and I living today have stocked inside persevering times of resilient life that overcame severe adversities and rose again and again. There was a tough mammal in the past that got over all the hardships of going extinct. When a comet collided with the Earth and everything seemed to be over, it jumped into the ocean and never returned to the land. This species evolved into a whale throughout 10 million years. Its evolution refused the arrow of time and chose to swim against it. This can be a kind of time travel but it can also be the repetition of time, which created a mysterious phenomenon: whales maximized their cognitive capability through singing in a single medium environment, the sea. Vocalizing at the extremely low-pitched tone of 20 Hertz in the deep sea, whales are able to convey their profound messages to the oceans around the

globe. Their songs presumed to be great epic poems like the Iliad and the Odyssey transformed the sea into a vast resonating space.

This is the first big tent of the earth. A message sung by a whale from the Antarctic is heard in the Aleutian Islands, the North Sea, or the Indian Ocean, as if Rubruck heard in the big tent of the 13th century the most profound thoughts of the world in the form of religions. Asia would enjoy bringing the vision of the sea or the vision of whales to the land as it is. Arnold Toynbee used to compare the steppes of Asia to one great ocean. And as a starting point, the Pacific Ocean plays a role as a theater.

Artist Paik Nam-june once presented this theater through a whale performance.

Play in San Francisco:

the left-hand part of the Fugue No. 1 (C. Major) of the *Wohltemperiertes 1* (J. S. Bach)

Play in Shanghai:

the right-hand part of the Fugue No. 1 (C. Major) of the *Wohltemperiertes 1* (J. S. Bach)

Commencing exactly at 12 noon 3rd of March (Greenwich mean time) at Metronome tempo = 80

It can be said that if a whale sings in the Pacific Ocean, this can be broadcasted at the same time from both sides of the ocean. Well, I think it is a good idea to try to imagine and hear imaginary voices of this vision here today. Just close your eyes and say, 'Listen to the sound of the Pacific Ocean flowing.' Of course, this is a parody of Yoko Ono's *Listen to the sound of the earth turning* in 1963.

Meanwhile, Korea has two models of the resonance of whales traditionally. One is that people gamble inside whales' stomachs. A pottery jar seller was swallowed by a whale, and there was a big gamble going on among the villagers when he got to the whale's stomach. Nam June Paik famously said that 'Art is just fraud.' The real implication of this is that 'Art is a fraud gamble.' And that kind of gamble is going on inside

a whale's stomach. The other one is that the ocean the whales live in actually exists between two horns of a shrimp. Everything happens in a whale's stomach. The whale's stomach becomes a macro-world. But then, this macro-world is caught in a tiny world which is between two horns of a shrimp. A macro-world is stuck in a micro-world. This idea seems to exist in each and every block of Asia.

If you see Apichatpong Weerasethakul's movies, pay attention to his outlook on the jungle. A Thai proverb says that 'At high tide fish eat ants; at low tide ants eat fish.' Micro and macro keep switching over. One of the most important notions appearing in a Chinese traditional book titled *The Book of the Change* is 'Things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme.' This notion was re-discovered as the complementarity principle by Danish physicist Niels Bohr who developed quantum mechanics.

Some say that combining all the existing parts cannot constitute the whole. In contrast, a single part is said to contain the whole, or a holistic world. What on earth does this mean? A micro-world represented by a part can contain a macro-world, but combining all the parts cannot make a macro-world, or the whole. This is very weird thinking and recognition. But it is a cultural foundation commonly found in the region of Asia that is like an ocean.

Conversations in the big tent involve voices interacting and intertwining with each other. They swirl with people being face to face. This is good enough in itself.

The book *The Sad Tropics* written by Claude Lévi-Strauss has photographs of South American women with tattoos. Strangely enough, their tattoos are painted around their mouths with a swirl coming down from above the lips and another reaching from below whirling around the mouth. How sacred words coming from such mouths they must be! They must be some kind of god's words and the tattoo should be an icon of a sound.

Ferdinand Magellan was the first person that sailed around the world. He and his

fleet of ships had a near-death experience when they traversed the turbulent strait of South America. Novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez once even said that 'storm,' an Anglo-saxon term, was not a proper word for the tempest in South America, because it is such an enormous and raging power of the nature. As a European, Magellan encountered with that violent storm for the first time, thinking that he might die. But the next moment he witnessed flowers of flashes of lightning in full bloom around his sailing ships. This is the so-called Saint Elmo's Fire: a magnificent sight of flashes of lightning swirling as if light effects of a Christmas tree were amplified.

When he finally saw a new ocean after the experience in South America, he tasted peace so sweet that he named it the Pacific. Paul Virilio once evaluated this turning point as an astronomical breakthrough. This is because the here-body has been changed, and because the sky that this moving body here - the here-body and not the (un-embodied) there-body - used to look upon has changed. In Asia, body is a moving or shaking experiential agent instead of a persona or identity. From the perspective of sky worship, the sky viewed from the Pacific Ocean is completely different. Just as the sea is boundless, so is the sky.

The Chinese character 神 or Shen is the oldest character in East Asia that bore the meaning of a god. The character was written on an image inscribed on a tortoise's shell, representing two flashes of lightning making a whirlwind by bumping into each other. Shamans used to say that their god foretold the future based on the light of the god of the sky, and thunder was a mysterious voice of the god. In the early 20th century, German art historian and cultural theorist Aby Warburg conducted an in-depth study on the gods of lightning and thunder while experiencing the culture of North American Indians.

Well, about reproducing a theater where hands-on experiences of a global network are possible through time travel to 65 million years ago in a theater space in Asia, I can tell you this: an ocean as a resonating space is translated into a continent; people in the big tent talk about their highest values

symmetrically; and the conversations have an odor of sanctity that postmodernism has lost: the sense of sanctity vocalized by the lightning god. Now it is time for us to recover that odor from the ecology of our minds, for the value is what performing arts are aiming for. I could feel that kind of sanctity from Romeo Castellucci's *The Body in Trouble* and Tsai Ming-liang's *Bodies making endless journeys*. They gave me a feeling that a flash of light was transformed into internal flashes of our bodies.

I am afraid my speech may have seemed like an incoherent series of agendas or clues, but I believe there is a holistic image inside these parts. I cannot propose how to create the big tent. This is up to each one of us. I wish all the best for the IETM meeting in Asia.

Let me conclude my speech by repeating the mantras once again.

'Om Mani Padme Hum.' 'Assalamu 'Alaikum.' 'If a man hears the Way in the morning, he may die in the evening without regret.' 'Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.'

Thank you.