

The Aesthetics of Activism in Korea: The Utopian Performative and *Communitas*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the aesthetics of activism can function as a driving force of a social movement by empowering the individuals and creating a “utopian vision” among them. Two recent major movements in Korea are introduced as examples; the Ewha Womans University protest and the Candlelight Protest, both of which indicate new possibilities of aesthetic activism. There was a big protest occurred at Ewha Womans University in 2016 summer, which was one of the crucial events that elicited the nation-wide Candlelight Protest. It was a site-specific theatre located at the main building of the school, which students occupied for 86 days until their demands were met. The students enacted a range of theatrical performances, such as holding public meetings with their masquerade-like masks on, making music videos, publishing comics on SNS, writing parodic novels, and parading with flashlights at night. Then in the winter of 2016, Korea witnessed a great wave of candlelight in the central square of Seoul, leading to the

impeachment of the incumbent president. During months of Candlelight Protest, diverse groups of society—including families, teenagers, disabled people, queers, and various non-political clubs—gathered together with candles on the street every weekend.

In both Ewha Protest and Candlelight Protest, the performative and aesthetic power of the protest naturally altered the modalities of the community, transpiring a sense of communitas that emerged from the “feelings and sensibilities of utopia” which J. Dolan referred to as the “utopian performative.” Individuals were not amalgamated into a distinct community, but rather rediscovered themselves as individual beings, transformed through their solidarity, empowering themselves to transform reality. These protests show new possibilities of aesthetic activism.

INTRODUCTION

When discussing political protest, focus is usually placed on the contents of the protest, the consciousness of the participants, and social significance of the movement. However, attention is rarely placed on the aesthetics of the protest, and when they are discussed, the aesthetics are considered as a derivative of a certain “ideology” of the protest, not as a pivotal motivation to move people. This article, however, chooses to explore how the aesthetics of activism can actually function as a driving force of a social movement by empowering the individuals and creating a “utopian vision” among them. In order to do so, two recent major movements in Korea are introduced; the Ewha Womans University protest and the 2016 Candlelight Protest, both of which indicate new possibilities of aesthetic activism.

These examples are particularly relevant as they reveal the process of a fundamental transformation of activism in Korea and show significant differences from former political revolutions. The history of political protest in Korea is connected to the history of the democratization of the nation, made up of several bloodshed revolutions happened from the 40s to the 80s. These revolutionary uprisings were more physically violent, shared a clearer ideology, and were formed by stronger organizations compared to the contemporary protests. These historical revolutions were comparatively homogeneous combative

movements, premised on a sense of duty. This traditional type of protests still survives in present Korean society as a mainstream form of protest, particularly for the laborers' right to strike.

However, the examples dealt with in this article show recent new ways of protesting that generate a playful "performance" as an effective method of activism. In these movements, common citizens, not political organizations, constitute the backbone of the demonstrators. They reject a violent protest, pursue horizontal communications without an authority figure, and avoid making an ideological or political statement, rather focusing on a specific purpose of their gathering. And these new characteristics of the protests naturally necessitate a new form of aesthetics. There are much more peaceful enjoyments, festive atmosphere, and most importantly, spontaneous *communitas*. The most distinctive feature of the concept of *communitas*, which was introduced by V. Turner, compared to the established social community, is that individuals are deeply engaged in ritual time and space, wherein they escape from social identities and achieve existential status, unconfined by structural identities such as class, social status, or occupation. Individuals in *communitas*, therefore, form temporal and all-powerful bonds with other individuals, existing in the "here-and-now":

We feel that it is important to relate directly to another person as he presents himself in the here-and-now, to understand him in a sympathetic (not an empathetic—which implies some withholding, some non-giving of the self) way, free from the culturally defined encumbrances of his role, status, reputation, class, caste, sex or other structural niche. Individuals who interact with one another in the mode of spontaneous *communitas* become totally absorbed into a single synchronized, fluid event. (Turner, 1982, p.48)

Another important aspect of *communitas* is that the feeling of communal solidarity it creates does not eliminate the strong sense of individuality. Turner explained that *communitas* is essentially "a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals" (1969, p. 131). *Communitas* is a ritual community in which existential individuals, stripped of their former and social identities, create direct, immediate, and affective bonds with others while maintaining their uniqueness. Therefore, *communitas* is unsurprisingly transient. It is a community embodied with potentiality that is not revealed in the daily lives of

participants in their roles within the existing social structure, and therefore has a subjunctive mood. However, even though the existence of *communitas* is temporary, the effect it produces within the individual is not. *Communitas* provides individuals with a utopian vision for an ideal society.

These new forms of protests also exercise an enormous amount of political power, even stronger than that of violent and combative protests. This may suggest how the aesthetic of the protest should be developed and analyzed, keeping pace with changes in the ontological viewpoint of the contemporary society, whereby solidarity arises not by virtue of identity but due to temporary consensus about a certain issue. This temporality creates a liminal time and space, where people can perform themselves and connect to each other without any specific qualification. They are free to create and discover their new selves through enjoyment, rather than having the sense of sacrificing themselves for any social change. Individuals are not amalgamated into a distinct community, but rather rediscover themselves as individual beings, transformed through their solidarity, empowering themselves to transform reality.

EWHA WOMANS UNIVERSITY STUDENT PROTEST

In the summer of 2016, there was a big student protest at the Ewha Womans University in Korea, which is considered to have elicited the nationwide Candlelight protest, resulting in the impeachment of the incumbent president of Korea, Geunhye Park (Lee, 2017). Initially, this student protest was created voluntarily among the students, in order to oppose the commercialistic school policy and arbitrary governance of the then-president of the university, Kyung-Hee Choi. It was a non-violent protest occupying the main building of the university. However, problems occurred when the president of the university called the police to disperse the students in the building. There were around two hundred students in the building and the number of the police responding to the scene was around sixteen hundred (Ahn, Seol, & Choi, 2016). The students were unarmed female students and some of them got injured during the suppression process. The majority of the students criticized this kind of brutal suppression on campus as an action that should not be occurring in a democratic state. This incident made the headlines in

the major media in Korea and the protest spread among a larger group of students.

As a result, the students once again occupied the main building for 86 days, until president Choi resigned (Lee & Choi, 2016). The students enacted a range of theatrical performances which opened a new chapter in the history of protest in Korea. In order to understand the unique aesthetics of this movement, several particular characteristics of the protest should be noted. First, they refused violence. It was a peaceful demonstration. Even before the students were dragged out from the building by the police, they sang the K-pop song "Into the New World," by Girls Generation, in front of the police force (Think We, 2016). The video clip subsequently became a hit online. This is a noticeably different phenomenon compared to the student protests in the 80s and 90s in Korea, which were highly violent, with flying firebombs and using iron pipes as a weapon.

Secondly, there was no leader or leading organization of the protest. Prior to the Ewha protest, student protests were usually organized by the university student council. However, the Ewha protest occurred spontaneously and the students planned everything via an online school community. They did not ask each other's names, and always wore masks outside of the building. This anonymity policy was strictly followed by the students for two reasons. Firstly, they wanted to protect themselves. They were worried about the risks that could occur from participating in the protest, such as being subject to disciplinary action by the school, or being arrested by the police. Secondly, the students wanted to project themselves through a unified voice, not as a mere assembly of individuals. Since the protest became a huge issue in Korea, there were many reporters around the school. Following this, the students did not want their individual voices to be reported as if they were representing the whole group. As there was no leader, there were no authorized individuals to express the official opinion of the students. Therefore, the students refused to do individual interviews, but rather tried to "perform" their unified voice.

To construct a unified voice through which the students could communicate with the media and others outside of the building, they had to form their official statements together. This was a very interesting phenomenon as it showed that they were (either consciously or unconsciously) aware of the performativity of the protest beyond the naïve belief of transmitting the "truth" by individuals. Meetings took place

four times a day, and all Ewha students and graduates were authorized to participate in the meeting held in the main occupied building. Every decision was made by a direct democracy, and consequently, it took a considerable time to make any decision since each item had to be discussed and confirmed by every student who participated in the meeting. As a result, university officers, journalists, professors and others had to wait to get the “official” response of the students in case of any negotiation and inquiry. This way of decision making was named as a “snail democracy” by the media, which means a slow democracy. In addition to the official statements, the internal rules and policies of the protest were created from scratch during these meetings.

Based on this anonymous and democratic atmosphere, spontaneity became a core value of the protest. Every student of the university had access to the building, so they could come and go at any time, as long as they had their student ID cards. Some slept in the building, while others commuted. Not every student of the university participated in the protest, but anybody who wanted to participate could just walk in to the building with their ID cards. The building was occupied 24/7 by the students and the occupation was maintained by volunteer students. Some volunteers were responsible for checking ID cards and patrolling the building, while others focused on building maintenance and managing the official email and Facebook account. The large portion of financial needs was fulfilled by alumni donators. Volunteers managed the donations and were responsible for distributing meals and daily necessities in the building. The work of the volunteers was based on a shift rotating system, so anybody who wanted to volunteer could fill in the voluntary work form for their preferred time and position. It was basically open to every student.

This spontaneity and openness also stimulated creativity within the protest. There was no leader, so everybody could be a leader, free to suggest any kind of project during the meetings. If the project was confirmed upon the meeting, the proposer then became the person in charge of that project and she could gather individuals who wanted to participate in the project. Such teams were called TFs (from English “task forces”). There were numerous kinds of TFs, such as a parade TF, investigation TF, events TF, faculty meeting TF, contents production TF, etc. Some projects were huge. For example, there were parade events with flashlights at night, inviting all the members of the university, from

enrolled students to alumni and professors. There was also a diploma-return performance, in which alumni returned their diplomas at the main entrance of the school. The slogan for this performance was “The school we graduated from is not this violent university.” Some other projects were smaller and more entertaining. There was a student protest photo exhibition, an event for making calligraphy pickets for the parades, and job hunting lectures where the alumni were invited to the building in order to attract non-participants to the protest. Students also held a study-performance in the building during the mid-term period, wherein they actually studied, responding to criticism such as “the duty as a student is to study, not to protest.” Sometimes they organized dancing parties in the building for their own entertainment. They also published comics and parodic novels on their official SNS. Ewha Alumni who became mothers were allowed to come with their babies. There was a nursery room in the building decorated by the students.

As such, the protest was peaceful, democratic, creative, and artistic. The most impressive characteristic of this protest was that it greatly empowered individual participants in the process, both in a political and creative way. It became a theatre. It was not just one organized theatre, but a combination of a diverse kind of theatres taking part inside and outside of the occupied building. There was no promise back then that the president of the university would resign, and the students suffered continuous threats by the school and the police. Many students were having psychotherapy sessions because of post-traumatic stress disorders derived from the confrontation of the massive police force and the fear of participating in the protest. Nevertheless, the protest was full of joy and utopian visions, even though the students were very well aware of their tragic situation. The term they used for referring to the building they occupied was “Etopia,” denoting Ewha-utopia. They built solid feelings of connection with each other in this horizontal, open, creative community, even though they did not really know each other. It was a living example of *communitas*. However, the students did not initially intend for or design this kind of effect. It was their temporal and successive choices of aesthetics which unexpectedly changed the modality of the community.

THE 2016 KOREA CANDLELIGHT PROTEST

The goal of the Ewha student protest was simple: resignation of Kyung-

Hee Choi, who was responsible for calling the police and the violent suppression on the campus. However, she had no intention to resign and the protest lasted longer than the students expected. Therefore, the students started investigating the background of the president Choi to add more pressure to her. They were suspicious of the political power that she possessed, which allowed her to draw such a huge number of police officers into the campus. After a series of collective investigations, they finally found a dubious connection between her and Sun-Sil Choi, the closest friend of President Park (Yoo, 2016). This revealed evidence of the illicit admission of Sun-Sil Choi's daughter to Ewha. It seemed that the president of the university helped the admission process of Choi's daughter. This issue raised great anger among the public, being a critical clue to discover new dimensions of the relationship between president Park and Sun-Sil Choi. Sun-Sil Choi turned out to be an impregnable figure, who exerted great power over Park's governance, even though she held no official position in the government. People were shocked to find out that Park's political decisions were highly influenced by this unauthorized figure. When the public opinion worsened, and the situation got out of control, president Choi finally resigned. Shortly after, the nationwide Candlelight demonstration began, aiming for the impeachment of president Park, who was accused of a large amount of corruption related to Sun-Sil Choi, such as abuse of official authority, bribery charges, art industry repression, and public opinion manipulation.

This Candlelight demonstration was much larger than that of the Ewha Womans University, yet both shared fundamental principles: non-violence, spontaneity, and creativity. For over 20 weeks, until Park was finally impeached by the Constitutional Court, more than 1 million people from diverse groups of society, including families, teenagers, disabled people, LGBT groups, and various non-political clubs, such as a fan club of a K-pop star, gathered together on the street with candles every Saturday. This protest was also called the Candlelight Cultural Festival, since it was a peaceful festive gathering. Many popular singers volunteered to have concerts during the protest for free, and the public had the opportunity to speak freely on stage. Like the Ewha protest, the Candlelight protest also created space of creativity, whereby individuals can experiment with a new form of community and self-representation. They celebrated Christmas and New Year's Day on the street all

together with fireworks. People created me-medias to transmit the protest site, and “inextinguishable” Candlelight applications became popular in the winter’s strong wind. Various members of the society marched on the street with their unique flags designed by themselves, enjoying the gathering. There were cat lovers, high school teenagers, rural villagers, university students, and many other social groups.

Although the protest was impressively peaceful, it became one of the most powerful protests in Korean history, succeeding in the impeachment of the incumbent president, followed by a new president election. Jae-In Moon, the newly elected president, now advocates his government as a “Candlelight government,” acknowledging the power of the people. This occurrence of a mature culture of protesting rises as an important political and historical topic in Korea, yet there is little research on how this mechanism works. Many are still focusing on recognizing the phenomena, and not on analyzing it, perhaps as there is no certain framework by which to analyze the events. I argue these recent tendencies of protests require a fundamental shift of paradigm, to invert the ideological way of thinking. In these particular protests, ideology does not precede aesthetics.

What is important is to understand on what basis people reorganize themselves. This understanding suggests a new ontology born out of aesthetics: body constructs ideas. J. Butler (2015), in her book *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, said that “the body is less an entity than a living set of relations” (p. 65). By this statement, she points out that if the relation changes, the body itself changes too. Therefore, if we consider the world as a body and the concept of aesthetics as a way to relate oneself with the world, when we discover a new kind of aesthetics, it means we could find a new form of relationship which can change the basic principle and identity of the world itself. J. Dolan in her article “Performance, Utopia, and the Utopian Performative” (2001), affirmed that these changes are not made by hypothetical reasoning, but by a “utopian performative,” through which “feelings and sensibilities” of utopia are experienced (p. 460). Utopia does not exist on Earth, but we can “feel” its existence through aesthetic activism, which enables us to keep trying to reach utopia, despite its impossibility.

CONCLUSION

In both the Ewha Womans University protest and the Candlelight Protest, people discovered their latent power and possibilities through these performative stages of the protest. They were not just the angry public, but artistic actors on the stage, developing the ideas of presenting themselves. They did not follow a grand narrative written ahead of them. They were free to organize their individual projects through the protest. This surely empowers individuals, but at the same time, this powerful stage cannot happen without the communal and aesthetic support of the people, as in *communitas*.

This paper is an attempt to acknowledge this new phenomenon of protest in Korea. In order to focus on excavating its aesthetic power and recognizing it, the observations and discussions regarding other features of the examples of the protests are not discussed in great detail. Of course, those protests were not perfect, as every performance is. My intention is not to idealize them, but to understand their power in aesthetic terms. I hope there will be more future research based on their aesthetic features.

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