

Reality Effects for a Dangerous Age: Projecting North Korean Youth on the International Screen

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Abstract

In an effort to reshape its international reputation, North Korea has in recent years sought to market abroad a run of documentaries and dramas featuring students and children. This essay explores the ways in which North Korean and international commentators have argued that the films in question reflect one or another reality. For the North Korean commentators, the works encapsulate life in the *sŏn'gun* or “military-first” era instituted by Kim Jong-il in the late 1990s. For the international commentators, they provide a platform on which the North Korean youth reveal themselves as not wholly supportive of the system under which they are made to live. While the films have in each case been pressed into the service of an operative politics of truth, attention to their profound ambiguity unsettles the assumption that the reality of life in North Korea can invariably be reduced to a dichotomy between the suppressed citizenry and the totalitarian state.

Keywords: documentary, Vitaly Mansky, North Korea, propaganda, *sŏn'gun* politics, youth

Introduction

In recent years North Korea has sought to market abroad a run of documentaries and dramas featuring students and children. On the whole, these offerings provide an alternative to the bleak pictures of rockets, military marches, and famine otherwise so prominent in media coverage of the country. They put on display instead fictional and non-fictional characters—the majority of them young girls—who might elicit in viewers a sense of sympathy, if not personal identification.¹ All the while, international documentarians and distribution companies involved to varying degrees in the production and circulation of these works have repeatedly advertised the opportunity to glimpse life in “the real North Korea”—that is, beyond the mendacious cover stories the state propagates in promoting itself as a veritable utopia.

The present essay takes into view two distinct iterations of this phenomenon, one a feature film and the other a documentary. Given the patent structural differences between these formats, a curious feature of the language that has circulated around the two films is that little distinction is drawn between claims to authenticity mounted through fictional cinematic images, on the one hand, and ostensibly disinterested documentary footage, on the other.² North Korean and international commentators alike have gone to great lengths to stress the alleged verisimilitude of both in representing a particular reality. For the former, the works in question encapsulate life in the *sŏn'gun* or “military-first” era instituted by Kim Jong-il in the late 1990s. For the latter, they provide a platform on which North Korean youth reveal themselves as not wholly supportive of the system under which they are made to live, even daring to express dissatisfaction with their material conditions and the rigid structuring of their lives.³

Chang In-hak's *A Schoolgirl's Diary* [한 녀학생의 일기] (2006) provides an incisive point of entry.⁴ A fictional drama, the film tracks the ideological maturation of Su-ryŏn, a teenager who habitually bemoans her family's status on the social ladder before coming to appreciate the virtue of selfless sacrifice in the service of the nation. In North Korean humanities journals, critics identified a range of symbols and cinematic effects utilized by the director, which they saw as expressing the zeitgeist of the

sŏn'gun age. Meanwhile, upon the film's commercial release in France in 2007, writers in the international press flagged the charismatic qualities of the main character, whose dreams and desires they perceived as remarkably individualistic relative to the socialist ideals inculcated by the state.

In both cases the actual plot of *A Schoolgirl's Diary* received hardly any sustained attention. Instead, critics and editorialists found themselves preoccupied with what Roland Barthes terms "reality effects," or those elements of a text that exceed any narrative function.⁵ Contributing virtually nothing to the underlying story, the *raison d'être* of these seemingly arbitrary signficatory units lies in their capacity to elicit a nebulous sense of veracity. Bracketing the programmatic structure of *A Schoolgirl's Diary*, observers in and out of North Korea concerned themselves with fixing errant details—from the idiosyncratic pronunciation of certain words, to the visual framing of fleeting gestures—squarely within a given worldview.

This effort to anchor cinematic signs in accordance with one or another take on reality assumed heightened urgency with the debut of Russian director Vitaly Mansky's *Under the Sun* (2015), a documentary which follows the daily life of North Korean elementary student Ri Jin-mi as she prepares to enter the Korean Children's Union.⁶ Although initially planned as a joint Russian–North Korean venture for international release, Pyongyang reneged on the project before Mansky could undertake the last of his three scheduled trips to the country. What authorities did not realize, however, was that Mansky had managed to conceal and carry back with him much of the footage that he had recorded during his first two visits. Using this material, he completed *Under the Sun* independently of Pyongyang, intercutting scenes that North Korea had at one time sanctioned with shots he had filmed clandestinely.

Upon its premiere, nearly every review pointed to moments in which Mansky had left his camera running between scenes, capturing the pressures placed upon Jin-mi by North Korean minders who repeatedly pushed her to act in specific ways. The work, it seemed, finally laid bare the artificial staging and choreography behind the state's claim that its

populace is the happiest in the world, a prosperous commonwealth with nothing to envy. Outraged at the film's release, and taking it as proof of a nefarious international plot, North Korea responded by publishing an appeal allegedly penned by Jin-mi's mother in which she pleaded that the filmmaker had deceived her family and taken advantage of their genuine intention in fostering cultural exchange with Russia.

The rhetoric that courses through each of these case studies betokens an operative politics of truth in which the films' reality effects are made to confirm one of two motivated conceptions about everyday life in North Korea: namely, that North Koreans either bask in the glory of the *son'gun* epoch or languish in the shadow of a totalitarian nightmare. Read against each other, however, these two discursive tracks open onto a resounding sense of indeterminacy wherein dualities such as reality versus illusion, and objectivity versus ideology prove untenable. To be sure, Su-ryŏn and Jin-mi occasionally exhibit what the state would deem ideological shortcomings, lapsing into moments of selfish desiring or lackadaisical indifference to the grand projects of the Party. But as unruly as they appear at times—their young ages no doubt licensing a degree of latitude in regard to their conduct—Su-ryŏn and Jin-mi hardly act in the manner of willful dissent or surreptitious subversion that so many viewers outside of North Korea have hoped to find in these works. Rather, they maintain an emphatically ambiguous relation to the state-instituted rituals and precepts to which, in the end, they outwardly conform. Profoundly ambivalent, the films unsettle the assumption that the reality of life in North Korea invariably decomposes into a dichotomy between the suppressed citizenry and the authoritarian regime—a view that comes to appear as ideologically constructed as the propagandistic façade engineered by the state.

North Korean *Cinéma Vérité* Between Pyongyang and Paris

On October 10, 2007, as part of celebrations underway for Foundation Day, or the anniversary of the establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Korean Central Television station (KCTV) broadcast *A Schoolgirl's Diary* nationwide. The film had premiered to

great fanfare the previous year at the Pyongyang International Film Festival, and it would ultimately become one of the most widely seen movies in North Korea, reportedly reaching an audience of over eight million.⁷ The film's domestic popularity can in large part be attributed to the impressive performance of Park Mi-hyang who plays the main character Su-ryŏn, a high school senior who begrudges her father for placing his work above his family life. Dramatizing her resentment in one emblematic scene, Su-ryŏn learns that her father has turned down an opportunity to move to a coveted high-rise apartment in the capital. From that point on, she blames her father's perpetual absence from the family home for countless misfortunes, including her mother's ailing health. In the end, however, she comes to see that her father's indefatigable dedication to discovering a means of computerizing factory production lines has resulted in an immeasurable contribution to the nation's prosperity. At its broadest, then, the film tracks Su-ryŏn's ascendancy to a higher mindset as she learns to appreciate her father's noble devotion to the country in line with the example set by the Dear Leader Kim Jong-il.

In respect to its plotline, *A Schoolgirl's Diary* appears stereotypical of North Korean propaganda, conforming to Kim Jong-il's directive that, in representing the Party's ideals, art and literature should "run ahead of reality, playing the role of a stimulus and motivating force."⁸ In keeping with this mandate, the film on one level strives to inspire audiences to emulate Su-ryŏn's eventual commitment to holding the cause of the Party and the nation above personal aspirations.

Despite its unsurprising narrative trajectory, however, the opening scene announces the work's singularity within the corpus of North Korean cinema. In a flashback sequence showing Su-ryŏn as an elementary student strolling home from school, the camera zooms in from behind so that her backpack becomes the primary object of attention—this not only because it occupies the bulk of the frame but also because it bears the unexpected image of Disney's Mickey Mouse (fig. 1). The question of why the director would feature this hyper-capitalist insignia so prominently in a film that carries a heavy-handed socialist agenda has perplexed many viewers outside of North Korea. Chang-Hee



Figure 1. Still from *A Schoolgirl's Diary*, directed by Chang In-hak, 2006.

Christine Bae and Henry Ward Richardson, for instance, find in this clip a reluctant acknowledgment of the increasing prominence of *jangmadang* markets in North Korea, at which a combination of privately produced foodstuffs and consumer products from China are bartered and sold, effectively lessening the state's grip on the economy.⁹ Elsewhere, Sherri Ter Molen suggests that the scene provides a foil for the main character's development by means of which the audience gradually comes to realize that Su-ryŏn's unhappiness cannot be ameliorated by material possessions but only by ideological edification.¹⁰ North Korean accounts support the latter conclusion. Describing the main character as typical of a "new generation who is growing up in happiness," these commentaries assert that because Su-ryŏn has not known the suffering of previous generations, she misunderstands the "painstaking road" that her father pursues.¹¹ That she eventually finds meaning in his resolve, however, is what allows the film to "[give] the answer to the question of what underlie[s] the pleasure and happiness of our people and what is the genuine ideal of the youth of a new generation in the [*sŏn'gun*] era."¹²

As evidenced by this summary review, references to *sŏn'gun* abound in North Korean commentaries on *A Schoolgirl's Diary*. Since its emergence in 1998, the term has broadly referred to a nationalist politics that, in the interest of self-preservation, prioritizes the military above even the Workers' Party of Korea.¹³ As Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho

Chung demonstrate, this outlook arose in response to the increasingly precarious position in which North Korea found itself in the early 1990s following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the adoption of market-based socialism by allies such as China and Vietnam.¹⁴ *Sŏn'gun* politics, then, requires the funneling of all necessary resources towards the military in order to ensure survival in a world hostile to the form of command-style socialism to which North Korea resiliently clings. In turn, all aspects of political and social life in the *sŏn'gun* age are said to take on a militaristic air. This is most obvious in the military parades and mass demonstrations frequently staged throughout the country.¹⁵ But as North Korean commentators on *A Schoolgirl's Diary* were keen to show, it also entails more subtle articulations at the level of everyday life, involving, for instance, the cultivation of an attitude in which individualistic concerns are made subsidiary to the needs of the national body, following the example set by military heroes.

Against this backdrop, the extraordinary appearance of Mickey Mouse in the opening sequence of *A Schoolgirl's Diary* foreshadows a welter of free-floating signifiers that crowd the film, each of which slides in and out of alignment with the overarching storyline and the contours of *sŏn'gun* ideology. North Korean critics certainly perceived the multiple and conflicting readings that might arise from such extra-narrative elements. The sheer number of interpretive commentaries published following the film's release evidences as much.¹⁶

The critic Kim Kwang-hyök, for one, undertook an analysis of the film's spoken lines in which he described the peculiarities of the dialogue in Barthesian terms, noting how certain speech acts function primarily to induce a sense of realism rather than to advance the plot. On this point he exclaims: "It is not like watching a movie, but rather makes one feel as though they are witnessing real life."¹⁷ For the critic, this blurring of fiction and real life stems principally from the fact that the actors in the film employ "speech that people use in daily life," a trait he commends and attributes to the guidance of Kim Jong-il.¹⁸ In one example, Kim dwells on discrete words detached from the larger context of the film's narrative. We learn that the characters at various points use informal language, pronouncing, for example: *maennal* instead of *maeil* (meaning

“everyday”); *tchokkomman* rather than *chogŭmman* (meaning “only a little”); and *ppallang* in lieu of *ppalli* (meaning “quickly”).¹⁹ Divorced from any syntactic configuration, the quotidian utterances isolated by Kim do not generate meaning at the level of sentences or any larger dialogical chain. Rather, Kim presents these speech acts as signifiers that bring home an elusive impression of authenticity. In effect, this mode of analysis admits that the film might be broken down into different strata of signification, from the central plot, or what Barthes calls the “predictive” dimension of a work, to single words and even individuated syllables.²⁰ It follows that one might read the film on a number of different registers, even extracting and focusing one’s attention on specific episodes in which Su-ryŏn acts in ways that are not altogether in sync with the model citizen the film endorses in its homiletic denouement.²¹

To check this potentially intractable multivalency, the critic Ch’oe Ŭi-in argues that even scenes seemingly peripheral to the central narrative embody the “spirit of the *sŏn’gun* era” in that they register on a symbolic level Su-ryŏn’s rise to ideological maturity.²² Ch’oe takes as an example a scene in which a group of researchers engage in a soccer match to celebrate the breakthrough made by Su-ryŏn’s father, drawing attention to a series of close-up shots that reflect Su-ryŏn’s shifting views of him. At a crucial point in the game Su-ryŏn is shown sitting in the stands with a dejected look on her face as she witnesses a humiliating incident wherein her father breaks his glasses and crawls around blindly scavenging for the shattered pieces (fig. 2). His associates eventually retrieve a replacement pair from his factory dormitory, however; and with his vision restored he goes on to score the winning goal. As his teammates hoist him on their shoulders, Su-ryŏn likewise receives a renewed vision, her face now gleaming as she beholds her father in a heroic light (fig. 3). In selecting a scene that could easily have been omitted without altering the plot in any significant way, Ch’oe stresses that auxiliary episodes in the film should be read as microcosms of Su-ryŏn’s ultimate revelation. More broadly, this account implies that even the most commonplace events in the *sŏn’gun* era teem with the radiance of the nation’s march towards prosperity.



Figure 2. Still from *A Schoolgirl's Diary*, directed by Chang In-hak, 2006.



Figure 3. Still from *A Schoolgirl's Diary*, directed by Chang In-hak, 2006.

Such tangential episodes also captivated the attention of international viewers, albeit for contrary reasons. Promising to reveal a side of North Korea otherwise inaccessible to outside observers, the film landed on the programs of numerous film festivals, including the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, the 2009 Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival, and the 2009 Melbourne International Film Festival.²³ Its international life had begun in October 2006 when James Velaise, president of the Paris-based distributor Pretty Pictures, acquired the rights to release the film in France. Velaise had encountered the film at the Pyongyang International

Film Festival earlier that year and, from the outset, pitched the work as offering a window onto everyday life in an otherwise shuttered state.²⁴ Distancing it from typical examples of official propaganda, he described the drama as “an honest description of everyday life in North Korea,” principally because it “portrays the average schoolgirl’s aspirations for a better life.”²⁵ Compared to the “ideological melodramas with exaggerated lyricism” that he imagined constituting the bulk of North Korea’s cinematic output, Velaise reckoned that *A Schoolgirl’s Diary* could almost be considered “cinéma vérité” in that it reveals cracks and fissures in the ideological and cultural edifice by which North Korea strives to insulate itself from the corruption of the capitalist world.²⁶

Velaise’s slant on the film extended chiefly from the disposition of the main character. Straying from the archetypal figures that so often populate North Korean films, Su-ryŏn scarcely models superior revolutionary conduct, at least throughout the majority of the work. As Suk-Young Kim discerns, “[g]iven the conventional filmic practice in North Korea of dividing characters into either heroes or villains ... [Su-ryŏn] emerges as a new kind of protagonist who defies this dichotomy. She is neither a hero nor an antihero, but simply remains an immature schoolgirl.”²⁷ This equivocality becomes most palpable in the transitory affairs that unfold between the film’s turning points, such as the petty rivalries Su-ryŏn engages in with her classmates. A school picnic, for example, becomes an embarrassing ordeal for Su-ryŏn when she realizes that her mother had forgotten about the event and had sent her with only a meager lunch compared to the other students, who boast of and compare their sumptuous victuals. One can surmise that North Korean authorities would not be inclined to encourage such competition over material goods, and this is one of the main reasons why Velaise saw the film as reflecting the reality of everyday life in North Korea. Because Su-ryŏn’s materialistic interests do not immediately square with the ideological paradigms into which she finds herself thrust, her comportment makes her all the more relatable for those uninitiated in *sŏn’gun* politics and its attendant values.

Johannes Schönherr submits that the North Korean government signed off on this curious mold of character in part because of the

perceived success of the 2004 documentary *A State of Mind*, which follows the lives of two young gymnasts as they train to take part in the 2003 Pyongyang Mass Games.²⁸ Directed by British documentarian Daniel Gordon, who received official permission to shoot the work, *A State of Mind* found wide international appeal largely because it presents the children and their families in a light that runs against the stereotypical images of mindless automatons so frequently projected onto North Korean society.²⁹ Auguring the slippage between fiction and documentary that would only become more pronounced in the years ahead, with *A Schoolgirl's Diary* director Jang In-hak and scriptwriter An Chun-bo took a lesson from *A State of Mind* and attempted to translate its charm into a fictional drama while retaining the documentary's implicit claim to represent accurately the real lives of North Koreans.

Soon after the international debut of *A Schoolgirl's Diary*, critics attuned to the cultural context of North Korea began speculating on what the state might hope to gain through this unusual media campaign. Antoine Coppola remarked, for instance: "North Korea feels it's misunderstood. ... This is the regime's way of communicating with the world, their way of setting the record straight."³⁰ Meanwhile, speaking to the state's implementation of *sŏn'gun* ideology and the concomitant acceleration of its nuclear program, others pointed out how the film's release coincided with a major nuclear test in October 2006, perhaps in an oblique effort to attenuate the anticipated blowback from the international community.³¹

While these accounts perceived the film as directed towards audiences outside of North Korea, the South Korean news media shot back, writing the work off as pure propaganda for domestic viewers. South Korea's Yonhap News Agency, for example, portrayed the work as exclusively targeting North Korean youth, and particularly those who might pose a threat to the country's internal order by pursuing acquisitive desires: "From the viewpoint of the North Korean establishment, the movie is instrumental in mitigating [the] possible side effects of the inescapable generational change and ensuring that the new generation—tempted by a more materialistic and utilitarian mentality—follow in the footsteps of the older generation, loyal to the current regime

and its official ideology.”³² Seen from this angle, Su-ryŏn stands poised to connect with a dangerous demographic whose commitment to the Party line remains significantly less certain than that of previous generations. The scenes in which Su-ryŏn exhibits materialistic preoccupations, then, amount to reality effects that encourage identification on the part of North Korean youth. All the while, the film as a whole enacts a bait-and-switch maneuver, rerouting individualistic desires towards the greater project of upholding the political status quo. In this reading, while the film does not show any open dissent, Su-ryŏn’s conduct is taken as implicitly signaling a faction of the North Korean citizenry at odds with the regime and thus requiring ideological reformation—an admission that might be seen as constituting an undercurrent of critique, however unintentional.

Perhaps in response to such international reception, Park Mi-hyang, the actress who had played Su-ryŏn, publicly insisted upon the character’s revolutionary development in an interview with the Canadian news outlet Aboriginal Peoples Television (APTN) during the 2008 Lunar New Year celebrations in Pyongyang. Placing utmost emphasis on the person Su-ryŏn becomes at the film’s conclusion rather than the scenes in which she acts in the manner of a callow teenager, Park cited Su-ryŏn as a chief influence on her own aspirations in life following her impending graduation from Pyongyang University, stating: “I will become a good film actress who loves and glorifies the motherland like [Su-ryŏn], the character in the film, does.”³³ Here, Park models how audiences within and beyond North Korea should internalize the meritorious commitments of the character, overlooking her lesser proclivities in favor of the ideologically perfected subject she eventually reveals herself to be. For Park, performing as Su-ryŏn entailed more than acting on screen. Confounding distinctions between illusion and reality, fiction and everyday life, the role involved stepping into the public realm and acting as an ideal audience of the character she had brought to life in the film. This labor continued long after the film’s technical completion in a desperate effort to keep its constituent scenes and Su-ryŏn’s symbolic import in agreement with official dogma.

As the foregoing examples demonstrate, while North Korean

reviewers and the film's lead actress strove to inject every aspect of *A Schoolgirl's Diary* with a definitive meaning, such that any potentially destabilizing scene would become subsumed in the teleological unfolding of the plot, in the international cultural sphere, critics speculated on how the main character might indicate the reality of a youth culture not fully invested in the North Korean leader cult or the *sŏn'gun* worldview. As a discursive construct, however, Su-ryŏn wavers indeterminately between the subject positions staked out for her in the divergent North Korean and international commentaries.

On the one hand, Su-ryŏn radiates what Suhi Choi describes, in a discussion of the two girls featured in *A State of Mind*, as the young protagonists' "mixed energy of fantasy, innocence, zeal, vigor, and unidentified longings."³⁴ These youthful energies are treated by the state as both productive and potentially dangerous, giving expression to the ardent dynamism with which the society should aim to spring towards an ideal socialist future, and yet always teetering on the uncontrollable and unpredictable. Thus, as Dafna Zur has shown, an immense cultural infrastructure in North Korea assumes the task of establishing a definitive moral compass and shaping the imaginative minds of the young accordingly.³⁵ The sheer necessity of this scheme indicates the degree to which the sphere of adolescent dreams and fantasies constantly threatens to drift away from the guidance of the state. Indeed, throughout *A Schoolgirl's Diary*, Su-ryŏn is shown on the verge of gliding into the realm of daydreams and musings. In one instance, while studying at a friend's house, she glances around the room at a display of medals and photographic memorials issued to commemorate the achievements of her classmate's father. As she stares off, mesmerized, the ink from her pen begins to leak onto the page of a notebook which she is about to use in order to tutor another classmate. In this scene the camera cuts to a close-up of the stain, which appears like a Rorschach ink blot, emblemizing the amorphous territory of adolescent imagination and desire (fig. 4). As Ch'oe Ŭi-in pointed out in his analysis of the scene where Su-ryŏn watches her father's soccer match, close-up shots are utilized throughout the film to underscore the main character's psychological and ideological evolution. In this instance, however,



Figure 4. Still from *A Schoolgirl's Diary*, directed by Chang In-hak, 2006.

the close-up provides no clear message to be apprehended, dwelling instead on an abstract form that exceeds any programmatic content—the bleeding ink indexing the duration of Su-ryŏn's flight into reverie.

That said, the film contrives to rein in this undefined sphere of youthful imagination, even organizing its soundtrack to influence the audience's understanding of Su-ryŏn's journey towards renewal and rebirth. A melancholic melody played on a solo harmonica recurs throughout the film, and in the majority of cases it comes in at moments where Su-ryŏn finds herself despondent, whether at learning that her family will not be moving to a new apartment, or that her father cannot manage to leave his workplace to visit his wife in the hospital. The final occurrence of the melody, however, accompanies a scene in which Su-ryŏn, following her graduation from high school, learns that her family will finally move to a new apartment gifted by the state as a reward for her father's great achievement. In the analysis of one North Korean critic, the repetition of this melancholic music throughout the film signals a shift in Su-ryŏn's mentality wherein she goes from lamenting forces that seemingly work against her desires to regretting her inability to see how all hardships and frustrations were in fact readying her to receive the gift of perfect happiness and fulfillment in accord with the master plan of the Party.³⁶

As can be divined from these examples, the claims put forth in

domestic and international discourses on the film appear equally stilted. Sitting uneasily at the crossway of these readings, Su-ryŏn never fully congeals as an exemplary revolutionary or a subversive skeptic of *sŏn'gun* ideology. Offering no convincing fulfillment on either front, the film asks whether there might be a middle interpretive ground between the search for latent vexation among the North Korean youth, and the unquestioning acceptance of propagandistic appearances.

Blinded by the Light

“I believe telling the world the real state [of] North Korean society has a certain value, so I will handle any retaliation.”³⁷ Thus affirmed Vitaly Mansky upon the release of his documentary *Under the Sun* (2015), a venture that was never supposed to see the light of day after Pyongyang backed out of a contracted joint production with Russia. When North Korea denied Mansky a visa for the last of his three slated trips to Pyongyang, however, the filmmaker dedicated himself to moving forward with the project using footage that he had shot during his first two visits and smuggled out of the country unbeknownst to state officials.

Following in the footsteps of *A State of Mind*, the proposed collaboration was, in its initial conception, set to involve a narrative focusing on an eight-year-old schoolgirl, Ri Jin-mi, as she prepares to enter the Korean Children's Union. While Mansky's completed version keeps this narrative intact, he juxtaposes scenes scrupulously scripted and choreographed by North Korean authorities with footage recorded between scenes when his North Korean minders were unaware that his camera was still running. At intervals, officials are shown directing Jin-mi on how to perform, instructing her, for instance, to act like she does at home rather than like she is performing in a movie (fig. 5). Such demands for authenticity signal how the film, like *A Schoolgirl's Diary*, was treated by the state as an opportunity to mold international perception. It provided the state a chance to engage in what Suhi Choi describes as a “symbiotic” creative relationship with a foreign director.³⁸ Certain liberties, including control over the visual framing of constituent scenes,



Figure 5. Still from *Under the Sun*, directed by Vitaly Mansky, 2015.

were granted to Mansky in order to secure international distribution for the proposed film, while precautions were likewise taken to ensure that the image of the country presented to the outside world would prove favorable to North Korea's reputation. Determined to work both with and against this arrangement, Mansky contrived to put on full display the state's interest in showcasing a highly censored image of the country and its youth, exposing the opiose labor involved in sustaining such an obvious smokescreen.³⁹

More than *A Schoolgirl's Diary*, the documentary immediately took on potent political implications at the highest levels of government. This became especially apparent when on May 5, 2015, South Korean President Park Geun-hye accompanied a group of students to a screening of *Under the Sun*. In a public statement following the viewing, Park proclaimed: "We must help the children of North Korea who have lost their hopes and dreams and are struggling to survive."⁴⁰ Based on Park's dramatic appeal, one might have assumed that the film documents conspicuous forms of violence against North Korean youth or recycles familiar images of impoverished living conditions in the country. Instead, and perhaps more poignantly, the film trades in Barthesian reality effects, an enumeration of which includes, in the words of one reviewer, "[Jin-mi's] fascinating face, her restrained gestures, her openness and

also her caution, her obvious effort to please and her occasional and barely discernible frustration.⁴¹ Like Su-ryŏn in *A Schoolgirl's Diary*, Jin-mi never explicitly vocalizes any serious complaints about life in North Korea. It is rather in her subtle and perhaps even subconscious movements, responses, and inclinations that some have detected inklings of discontent. The fascination that such moments have yielded in the international press speaks to a pervasive eagerness to confirm suspicion that the people of North Korea only submit to the dictates of the regime against their will and never out of any genuine belief in the political platitudes that they are spoon-fed by their government.⁴²

Although admittance to the Korean Children's Union is heralded as one of the chief milestones in the life of a North Korean student, marking one's start upon a revolutionary path that will ultimately lead to membership in the Workers' Party of Korea, Jin-mi frequently appears less than enthusiastic about the rituals involved in the lead-up to the ordeal.⁴³ For example, the viewer at one point witnesses a prolonged sequence in which Jin-mi struggles to master a dance routine. As her teacher stops to counsel her on how she must be more assiduous, she wipes tears from her eyes in a moment that seems to register her somber acceptance of the enormous ideological and physical expectations placed upon her. In another scene, Jin-mi and her classmates attempt numerous methods of keeping themselves awake during a seemingly interminable speech delivered by a Korean War veteran. The children demonstrate an acute awareness of performing for the elevated guest, as well as for Mansky's camera, while barely able to sustain the deportment demanded of them. Here, while enduring an elaborate articulation of the state's ideals by a venerated national hero, they appear on the brink of careening into an unbridled dream world detached from any such codes or models.

For Mansky, filming Jin-mi under such conditions provided an opportunity to grapple with his own experience coming of age in the Ukraine at a time when the nation remained under Soviet rule. As he later reflected: "[*Under the Sun*] is my attempt to understand my own past, my own country, and how humans live with this kind of limited freedom."⁴⁴ While not the first time Mansky had embarked on such a

mission—his *Motherland or Death* (2011), for instance, had taken him to Cuba—he related that his experiences in North Korea proved the most extreme of any situation he had encountered in socialist circuits, stating: “In North Korea people don’t belong to themselves.”⁴⁵

Beyond witnessing Jin-mi’s downcast passage through various formalities, the restrictions imposed upon Mansky during the filming process undoubtedly shaped his harrowing perception of the country. Indeed, the limitations he experienced throughout his visits disrupted the core principles he professedly adheres to in his work. Mansky lays out these tenets in his manifesto, where he develops the notion of “Real Cinema,” a method he conceives as continuing in the tradition of Dziga Vertov’s *Kinopravda* (Film-Truth) series and the longer trajectory of *cinéma vérité*.⁴⁶ “Real Cinema,” in Mansky’s formulation, requires that the filmmaker forego any script, and that the filming process be allowed to unfold without restraints. On the latter point, he goes as far as to recommend that any legal or ethical issues that might arise during the recording stage be dealt with only during the editing phase, after the filming has been completed. In short, Mansky endorses a mode of filmmaking that entails “no dramatization or reconstruction.”⁴⁷ Although it is doubtful whether such a scenario, in which the filmmaker gains uninhibited access to a reality divested of any and all artificiality, could ever be achieved, North Korea definitively negated any such prospect by insisting upon a heavily edited script and careful staging. Capturing the mechanics of this forced performance thus became Mansky’s project. While James Velaise had endorsed *A Schoolgirl’s Diary* as showcasing life beyond the veneer of state propaganda, Mansky suggests that in fact nothing lies beneath the surface of official images except the unrealized potential of so many North Koreans who find themselves conscripted into a life of pure stagecraft.⁴⁸

To convey this outlook, Mansky relies heavily on the manipulation of sound. The opening scene, for example, makes extensive use of Foley sound devices, or enhanced audio effects, which in Chris Cagle’s analysis of the film “suggest the uncanny of the documentary real, particularly one highly controlled by the North Korean government.”⁴⁹ Comprising a series of shots in which Jin-mi boards a city bus to school,

the scene proceeds for nearly ten minutes without any dialogue. Against melancholic piano music the audience hears only the amplified auditory impressions of passing cars and bicycles outside the frame of the camera. For Cagle, the “mismatch of sound and image challenges the voice of the North Korean versions of events, literally and figuratively, while giving the represented spaces of Pyongyang an unreal quality.”⁵⁰ The reality of North Korea, the sequence suggests, is one in which inhabitants are made to pass their lives within the unreality of a virtual Potemkin village.

This manipulation of sound works to prepare the audience for the climactic moment of the Korean Children’s Union ceremony, where Mansky creates an analogous effect through visual images. The event is held on the Day of the Sun marking Kim Il-sung’s birth on April 15, and students entering the organization each receive a gift package from Kim Jong-un. A spokesperson announces that the gifts are a token of Kim’s boundless love for the nation’s children and his deep desire that they will grow up to become the “glorious future of *sŏn’gun* Korea.” As Jin-mi stands among her classmates in a regimented formation, Mansky’s camera frames her so that we see a close-up of her face beneath both the metaphoric and the literal sun. Pictured out of focus on a mural in the background, Kim Il-sung stares over Jin-mi’s shoulder, as if a visual manifestation of the panoptic gaze that seems to order every facet of life



Figure 6. Still from *Under the Sun*, directed by Vitaly Mansky, 2015.

in North Korea (fig. 6). Staring directly into the physical sun, meanwhile, Jin-mi cups her hands over her eyes in a gesture that suggests a hesitancy to take in the ceremony underway, as well as the bodily discomfort involved in actually doing so.

As Mansky had anticipated, North Korea was infuriated at the film's release and its insinuations about life in the country. The main offense seems to have been the cooptation of the film by the South Korean government as a means of undercutting the North Korean regime and casting the nation's youth as hostages in need of rescue by the outside world. An article published on May 15, 2016 via the North Korean online news platform *Arirang Meari*, for example, bales the headline: "We Will Not Forget May 5. South Korean Authorities Must Not Insult Our Daughter."⁵¹ The article involves something of a corrective restaging of Mansky's documentary in journalistic prose. It details how, in response to Park Geun-hye's comments on the film, a North Korean reporter had been dispatched to locate Jin-mi and her family and to confirm or repudiate the claims circulating in the international media regarding the dismal state of their lives. The article is replete with overt reality effects, providing details such as the exact street on which the family lives in an effort to ground them in the here and now of the everyday. This had become necessary in order to counter international reviews of the documentary, which divulged how North Korean authorities had temporarily assigned Jin-mi's parents jobs other than their actual occupations so as to create a more esteemed impression of the family.⁵² Mansky himself voiced suspicion that the family did not actually live together, but that the father resided in a separate work dormitory, much like Su-ryŏn's father in *A Schoolgirl's Diary*.⁵³

As a rejoinder to such accusations, the article relies on photography in order to offer proof of the Ri family's living situation. The webpage features an image of Jin-mi and her parents seated together, apparently at the moment the reporter arrived at their home (fig. 7). Bearing all the markers of a candid snapshot, the grainy picture eschews any artful framing. If Mansky's representation of the family were stripped of its misleading characterizations, the image seems to imply, only the close-knit familial ties evidenced here would remain.



Figure 7. Ri Jin-mi and her parents, published on *Arirang Maeri*, May 19, 2016.

Having located their residence, the reporter goes on to relate how Jin-mi's mother could not hold back her indignation at hearing how her daughter had been portrayed in the documentary. She is quoted as proclaiming: "It's absolutely ridiculous. ... I thought we were just making a documentary film for the sake of cultural exchange. I never dreamed that my daughter would be featured in a film with an anti-republic plot."⁵⁴ Responding specifically to Mansky's inclusion of clips showing the family running through scripted lines and authorities coaching Jin-mi on her performance, the mother avers that because Jin-mi is not a professional actress she had to redo certain scenes in order to meet Mansky's expectations and was naturally instructed on how to do so. "In films that we nevertheless call documentaries," she maintains, "adults, of course, and even professional actors repeat scenes."⁵⁵ Put differently, Jin-mi's mother points out how there is always an element of acting in documentary films.⁵⁶ And yet clips of the family rehearsing were made by the outside world to operate akin to Disneyland in Jean Baudrillard's conception of simulacra, where "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation."⁵⁷ In keeping with this critique, the mother's plea accuses international viewers of clinging to the idea that everything in North Korea is an artificial front only to distract

themselves from the fact that their own lives are scarcely less mired in simulation.

While it is unlikely that the article ever achieved its objective as a confutation of *Under the Sun*, it nevertheless provides an instructive contrast to the enthusiastic reception of the documentary, demonstrating the ideological weight invested in filmic reality effects. In the documentary and the textual rebuttal, impressions of the everyday lives of the North Korean youth are made to take on an evidentiary function in the service of divergent political agendas, whether indexing the artificiality of North Korean reality, as Mansky would have it, or revealing yet another deceitful plot by international entities bent on undermining North Korea and thus necessitating military readiness, as the state asserted. If there is a lesson to be found in these diametrically opposed grand narratives, it is that moving beyond them will require that we learn to look at representations of North Korean reality without falling back on the bifocal framework of a subjugated people versus a tyrannical state. We might instead strive to look along with Jin-mi—that is, with eyes neither entirely entranced by nor impulsively closed to the spectacle that lies before us.

Conclusion

If the planned North Korean–Russian documentary that became Mansky’s *Under the Sun* backfired on Pyongyang, state authorities eventually deemed that *A Schoolgirl’s Diary* might miscarry to the same effect. In 2016 Radio Free Asia reported that North Korea had banned ten formerly approved films including *A Schoolgirl’s Diary*.⁵⁸ As we have seen, many in the international sphere had long taken the film as unwittingly critical of the North Korean regime, leaning on the idea that it might speak to a demographic of disaffected youth in the country. Perhaps the most explicit invocation of this framework came from Slavoj Žižek, who remarked on the film: “If you look at university locations or apartments in the movie, you would have thought that it was an upper-middle-class standard for everyone. In the 1990s, at least 10 percent of the people died from hunger. How did they manage it without any serious

rebellions? I know that they are extremely brutal and totalitarian.”⁵⁹ Here, in a single breath, Žižek leaps from the aggrandized optics of the film’s background settings to the assertion of a conspiracy to suppress revolt during the famine of the 1990s. In so doing he epitomizes the well-worn schematic that explains all features of North Korea in the binary terms of a discontented population scarcely subsisting beneath the hammer of a ruthless dictatorship.

While Pyongyang’s attempts to sway the international community through images of the North Korean youth have hardly played out as the state had hoped, films such as *A Schoolgirl’s Diary* and *Under the Sun* disrupt dominant perceptions of North Korea in international circles—governmental, journalistic, and scholarly alike. Foregrounding characters who go through the motions of adhering to *sŏn’gun* ideology with an uncertain degree of sincerity, they challenge us to advance frameworks that transcend the assumption that the reality of North Korea must, as a matter of course, be reduced to suppressed undercurrents of dissent stirring beneath the Orwellian surface of things.

Notes

¹ With this conceit North Korea follows the Stalinist tradition of mobilizing images of happy children as proof of the mutually loving relationship between the people and the leader. See Catriona Kelly, “Riding the Magic Carpet: Children and the Leader Cult in the Stalin Era,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 49, no. 2 (2005): 199–224.

² While outside the filmic scope of this essay, a similar tendency to draw factual claims from fictional works produced within North Korea can be found in the realm of literature. This is especially evident in international responses to a collection of subversive short stories by a North Korean writer known to the outside world only by the pseudonym Bandi. See Bandi, *The Accusation: Forbidden Stories from Inside North Korea* (New York: Grove Press, 2018). Reviews of the collection stress that each of the stories, while fictional, “is based on a factual situation,” and that “in these stories, as in life, no citizen is safe from the threat of political ruin.” See R. O. Kwon, “The Accusation by Bandi Review—Forbidden Stories from Inside North Korea,” *Guardian*, March 11, 2017.

³ While the term *youth* conventionally refers to the age range of 15 to 24, in the North Korean context the term might be applied to a more expansive age range that includes young children. This is the case, for example, with the breadth of youth-

oriented literary sources discussed in Dafna Zur, “Fantasy, the Final Frontier: Making Science Moral in Postwar North Korean Youth Culture,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 23, no. 2 (2018): 275–98.

⁴ *A Schoolgirl's Diary* [한 녀학생의 일기], directed by Chang In-hak (Pyongyang: Mongnan Video, 2006), VHS.

⁵ Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 141–48.

⁶ *Under the Sun*, directed by Vitaly Mansky (Brooklyn, NY: Icarus Films, 2015), DVD.

⁷ Sung-ho Han, “A Study on the North Korean Film *A Schoolgirl's Diary* [북한영화 “한 녀학생의 일기” 연구],” *Asian Film Studies* [아시아영화연구] 2, no. 2 (2009): 191.

⁸ Jong-il Kim, *On the Art of the Cinema* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1989), 415.

⁹ Chang-Hee Christine Bae and Harry Ward Richardson, *Regional and Urban Policy and Planning on the Korean Peninsula* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2012), 162–63.

¹⁰ Sherri Ter Molen, “Capitalist Dreams in the Communist Utopia: North Korea’s *The Schoolgirl's Diary*,” *SinoNK*, September 30, 2013, accessed January 8, 2020, <https://sinonk.com/2013/09/30/capitalist-dreams-in-the-communist-utopia-north-koreas-the-schoolgirls-diary>.

¹¹ Pam Hun, “Korean Feature Film: ‘The Schoolgirl’s Diary,’” *Democratic People’s Republic of Korea* 10 (2006): 21.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Dae-sook Suh, “Military-First Politics of Kim Jong Il,” *Asian Perspective* 26, no. 3 (2002): 145–67.

¹⁴ Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 75–83.

¹⁵ David Terry and Andrew Wood, “Presenting Juche: Audiencing North Korea’s 2012 Arirang Mass Games,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 35, no. 2–3 (2015): 177–201.

¹⁶ In addition to commentaries cited below, see “The Art Film *A Schoolgirl's Diary* [예술영화 한 녀학생의 일기],” *Korean Art* [조선예술] 10 (2006): 33; and “The Korean Art Film *A Schoolgirl's Diary* [조선예술영화 한 녀학생의 일기],” *Ch’ŏllima* [천리마] 11 (2006): 42.

¹⁷ Kwang-hyŏk Kim, “The Use of Dialogue in the Film *A Schoolgirl's Diary*” [예술영화 “한 녀학생의 일기”에서 입말체의 리용], *Cultural Language Studies* [문화어학습] 4 (2006): 19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Barthes, “Reality Effect,” 143.

²¹ In a similar direction, drawing on interviews with North Korean defectors, Hyangjin Lee asserts that a significant limitation of North Korea’s film policy is that the representation of capitalist societies at times becomes a source of intense intrigue for audiences, who find themselves enthralled by what are supposed to be undesirable elements. Hyangjin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture, Politics*

(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 40.

²² Ŭi-in Ch'oe, "A Creative Work with the New Feeling of the Times: On the Cinematography of *A Schoolgirl's Diary* [시대에 대한 새로운 감각을 가지고 창조한 조형적화폭: 예술영화 '한 녀학생의 일기'의 촬영형상을 놓고]," *Art Education* [예술교육] 2 (2008): 21–22.

²³ Ju Cheol Shin, "Several Specific Characteristics of North Korean Film," *Hrvatski Filmski Ljetopis* 20 (2014): 75.

²⁴ Held every two years since 1990, the Pyongyang International Film Festival has regularly included "market screenings" and a "film market area," but virtually no international attendees were drawn in by any of the North Korean films promoted until the premier of *A Schoolgirl's Diary*. See Johannes Schönherr, "A Permanent State of War: A Short History of North Korean Cinema," in *Film Out of Bounds: Essays and Interviews on Non-Mainstream Cinema Worldwide*, ed. Matthew Edwards (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 138–39.

²⁵ Jean Noh, "Pretty Pictures Buys North Korean Hit *Schoolgirl's Diary*," *Screen International*, October 18, 2006.

²⁶ Marie-Noëlle Tranchant, "La propagande nord-coréenne se dévoile sur les écrans français (North Korean Propaganda Revealed on French Screens)," *Le Figaro*, December 26, 2007.

²⁷ Suk-Young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 317.

²⁸ Johannes Schönherr, *North Korean Cinema: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 162.

²⁹ James Bell, "Filming in North Korea," *Sight and Sound* 19, no. 1 (2009): 35.

³⁰ Jenny Barchfield, "French Moviegoers Get Rare Glimpse at Life in Reclusive North Korea," *Canadian Press*, January 9, 2008.

³¹ Suk-Young Kim pointed this out in a lecture delivered before a screening of the film at the Wilson Center in Washington DC on April 9, 2008. For a summary of the lecture, see James Person and Christian F. Ostermann, "North Korean Film Screening *The Schoolgirl's Diary*—(with English Subtitles)," Wilson Center, North Korean International Documentaion Project, accessed February 3, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/north-korean-film-screening-the-schoolgirls-diary-english-subtitles>.

³² "North Korean Feature Film Gets International Exposure," *Radio Free Asia*, October 30, 2006.

³³ Kwang-Tae Kim, "North Koreans Pay Homage to Late Founder as They Celebrate Lunar New Year," *Associated Press International*, February 7, 2008.

³⁴ Suhi Choi, "A Filmic Reality: Images of North Korea in the British Documentary *A State of Mind*," *Asian Cinema* 22, no. 2 (2011): 295.

³⁵ Zur, "Fantasy, the Final Frontier," 291.

³⁶ Yöng-sam Chae, "Film Music that Gives Form to the Spirit of the Age: On the Art Films *A Schoolgirl's Diary* and *Wind of Pyongyang*" [시대정신을 구현한 영화음악: 예술영화 '한 녀학

생의 일기'와 '평양날파람'을 보고], *Art Education* 1 (2007): 39.

³⁷ Si-soo Park and Da-hee Kim, "Even Dreaming Is Luxury in North Korea," *Korea Times*, May 1, 2016.

³⁸ Choi, "Filmic Reality," 300.

³⁹ Journalistic accounts of the film repeatedly emphasized this aspect of the documentary. See for example, Carmen Gray, "Russian Film Exposes the Workings of North Korea's Propaganda Machine: Under the Sun Shows Behind-the-Scenes Coercion by Government Minders Trying to Construct an Image of a 'Normal' Family," *Guardian*, December 3, 2015.

⁴⁰ Julian Ryall, "Propaganda Film Project Backfires on North Korea," *Telegraph*, June 9, 2016.

⁴¹ Cynthia Fuchs, "The Essential Dilemma in 'Under the Sun' Is that No Truth Is Singular, No Story Is Simple," *PopMatters*, July 29, 2016, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://www.popmatters.com/under-the-sun-no-truth-is-singular-no-story-is-simple-2495421930.html>.

⁴² This inclination can be seen as continuous with what Shine Choi describes as "the prevailing assumption that suffering exists unambiguously in all spaces, bodies and subjectivities that constitute 'North Korea,' an assumption that sustains the notion that suffering simply demands alleviation by outside intervention." Choi finds such thinking rooted in the dualisms of "over here/over there; seer/seen; actor/acted upon; [and] benefactor/beneficiary." Shine Choi, *Re-Imagining North Korea in International Politics: Problems and Alternatives* (London: Routledge, 2016), 6.

⁴³ Upon reaching the age of 15, those in the organization are expected to move on to the Kim Il-sung Socialist Youth League before becoming members of the Korean Workers' Party. Victor Cha and Balbina Hwang, "Government and Politics," in *North Korea: A Country Study*, ed. Robert Worden (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2008), 214–15.

⁴⁴ Seven Borowiec, "'Under the Sun' Documentary Catches North Korea with Its Guard Down," *Los Angeles Times*, July 6, 2016.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Originally published in *Iskusstvo kino* (The Art of Cinema) 11 (2005), the text is reproduced on Mansky's website. See Vitaly Mansky, "Real'noe kino (Real Cinema)," accessed January 27, 2020, <http://manski-doc.com/page134648.html>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ As Mansky himself explains, "I wanted to make a film about the real [North] Korea, but there's no real life in the way that we consider. ... There is just the creation of an image of the myth of a real life. So we made a film about fake reality." Quoted in Gray, "Russian Film."

⁴⁹ Chris Cagle, "The Voice in Documentary Sound Design: A Digital Revolution," in *Vocal Projections: Voices in Documentary*, eds. Annabelle Honess Roe and Maria

Pramaggiore (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 198.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ “We Will Not Forget May 5. South Korean Authorities Must Not Insult Our Daughter” [5월 5일을 잊지 못하겠다. 남조선당국자는 내 딸을 모욕말라], *Arirang Meari*, May 19, 2016, accessed January 20, 2020, <http://arirangmeari.com/index.php?t=news&no=409>.

⁵² Robert S. Boynton, “In ‘Under the Sun,’ a Documentary Masked and Unmasked,” *New York Times*, July 1, 2016.

⁵³ Chung Min Lee, *The Hermit King: The Dangerous Game of Kim Jong Un* (New York: All Points Books, 2019), 19.

⁵⁴ “We Will Not Forget,” *Arirang Meari*, May 19, 2016.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Jin-mi’s mother here echoes the idea that devices such as performing, staging, and directing abound in documentary filmmaking as much as in fictional films, even if these supports tend to be disguised in documentaries. See Thomas Waugh, “Acting to Play Oneself: Performance in Documentary,” in *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 71–92.

⁵⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 12.

⁵⁸ “North Korea Bans Formerly Approved Films Now Deemed Sensitive,” *Radio Free Asia*, July 22, 2016. *A Schoolgirl’s Diary* no longer appears in the bilingual film almanac that North Korea regularly releases. See *Korean Film Art* [조선의 영화예술], eds. Chang-su Hong, Ŭn-gyöng Li, and Kwang-söng Kim (Pyongyang: Korean Film Export and Import Corporation, 2018).

⁵⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Demanding the Impossible* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 44–45.

Submitted: Mar. 3, 2020

Reviews Completed: Apr. 19, 2020

Accepted: May 28, 2020