Apparatus: Theresa Hak Kyung and the Politics of Form

Sue J. Kim

Journal of Asian American Studies, Volume 8, Number 2, June 2005, pp. 143-169 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/jaas.2005.0038

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jaas/summary/v008/8.2kim.html
THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA’S 1982 experimental novel, Dictee, has become a key text in Asian American Studies, particularly as the locus of contemporary methodologies in the field. American filmmaker, writer, and performance artist Cha developed her work in the California and New York avant-garde art communities of the late 1960s through the ‘70s, then studied semiology in France before returning to the U.S. to teach and continue her work. In 1981, she published the film anthology, Apparatus: Cinematographic Apparatus; including pieces from theorists and artists ranging from Dziga Vertov and Maya Deren, to Roland Barthes, Christian Metz, and Cha herself, the anthology examines the ideological processes of the filmic apparatus. Following her tragic death, her novel Dictee was published in 1982. After nearly a decade of neglect by scholars in Asian American Studies, as Shelley Wong notes, in the early 1990s, the poststructuralist turn in the field enabled and was spurred on by the novel’s interrogation of form, subjectivity, and ideology. Since then, numerous studies of the political significance of Dictee have appeared. While some readers choose to emphasize the cultural specificity of the text, many critics focus on the ways in which the narrative disruptions of the novel constitute political disruptions of ideological narratives and formations.

Lisa Lowe’s influential book, Immigrant Acts, best exemplifies the argument that Dictee’s formal disruptions interrogate the multiple, sometimes contradictory configurations of the ideological apparatuses of state,
church, neo-imperialism, patriarchy, and other structures of power. If mimetic realism ideologically “resolves” social contradictions by convincing readers of the ability to equate “the name and the thing,” in contrast, the “discontinuity, fragmentation, and episodic unfluency” of *Dictee* undercut this ideological function. Such readings emphasize that the novel challenges not only certain representations, such as Orientalist historical texts, hagiography, patriotic legends of martyrdom, and the interpellative processes of U.S. citizenship, but also the ideological innocence of any process of signification, including narrative, translation, dictation, collective identification, reading, and writing. In such “reading frameworks,” Sue-Im Lee explains, *Dictee* is celebrated as “suggestive of a new form of Asian American subject representation, a postmodern, anti-realist subject whose empirical substantiality is not generated through the ‘intelligible whole’ of plot nor whose social identity is categorizable within ascriptive terms of the majority culture.” Other critics, while acknowledging the novel’s formal resemblance to other postmodern texts, argue that *Dictee*’s primary political significance lies in its recovery of specific histories, contexts, and experiences. In her contribution to the 1994 collection of essays on *Dictee*, *Writing Self, Writing Nation* (which also included an early version of Lowe’s essay on Cha), Elaine Kim notes that Cha “foregrounds a highly specific cultural context, inserting Korea, Korean women, and Korean Americans into the discourse”; in a more recent essay, Kim numbers *Dictee* among important Korean American texts which recover “subjugated knowledges.” Likewise, Helena Grice argues that although the novel undoubtedly employs postmodern narrative strategies, Cha’s “primary project” is “creating a Korean (American) national identity which is gendered.” In response, others characterize such claims of “cultural ownership” as “highly irritating.”

Analyses foregrounding form or content are not mutually exclusive; rather, critical readings tend to emphasize one aspect or another. But while readers generally agree that the formal disruptions of the text constitute some kind of political resistance, there is fundamental difference about where to place the emphasis: is it *Dictee*’s challenging form, or is it Cha’s Korean American identity? Critics believe that privileging the former—nonmimetic form—can avoid the pitfalls of identity politics, but if we
emphasize the political resistance value of aesthetic strategies, then why/how is Cha’s experimentalism distinguished from European American postmodernism, which is sometimes castigated for universalizing its assumptions and “colonizing difference itself”?  

If the difference lies in her identity as a Korean American woman, this appears to be just another form of identity politics. This paradox explains the ambivalence or confusion on the part of some critics about the status of Cha’s context and life in relation to the form of her work. But if we historicize her use of form and relate it dialectically to content and context, then we can understand Cha’s historical position and concerns, as evidenced in Dictee, as new and progressive without reifying the postmodernist aesthetic forms which she uses.

Few critics would admit to reifying form, but the current of formalism becomes apparent upon examining characterizations of aesthetic realism in discussions of Dictee. Mimesis, realism, clarity, and linearity are seen as inherently problematic; Jinqui Ling characterizes this division between realism and experimental forms as “a hypothetically assumed, though rarely admitted, opposition between ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ Asian American articulations.” The notion that realism necessarily resolves cultural and ideological contradictions often assumes a passive subject-viewer/reader, who can be awakened through the disruption of form. It is not that the text actively works on a passive subject; rather, whereas mimetic realism, in teaching the subject to naturalize and resolve, helps inculcate ideological subjects, experimental aesthetics challenge the reader to become active and break out of fixed meanings. But, this is not the only way literature and art can work. For example, it has been argued that Louis Chu’s 1961 novel Eat a Bowl of Tea problematizes the narrative of American citizenship through realist narrative form. Such differentiation between realism and experimentation serves as the basis, implicitly or explicitly, for numerous readings of not only Dictee but also other experimental works by women and women of color. The history of the forms and theories that Cha engages in Apparatus and Dictee, however, suggest a more complicated picture.

The reason for this tacit debate is confusion about terms of the debate. As with any art, politics lies not in form, content, or context alone,
but in the developing dialectical relationship between these elements. An
eexamination of *Apparatus* will help us to explore this issue by historicizing
Cha’s use of form, because, as Ling argues in his reconsideration of Asian
American literary realism, we need to be attuned to the contemporary
contexts and tools that artists critically utilize for their own needs. Cha’s
selection of certain theoretical essays and artistic pieces indicates her his-
torical, aesthetic, and political contexts and orientations, and demonstrates
Cha’s active engagement with these theories. While her work clearly in-
tends to disrupt various ideological narratives (of subjectivity, citizen-
ship, history, etc.), it also shares in some of the ideological pitfalls of avant-
garde and postmodernist aesthetics. Since much has been written about
*Dictee*, I will discuss the later novel only briefly. In it, I argue, Cha re-
sponds to an increasing reification of form that limits politics to aesthet-
ics and a problematic conception of the passive subject-viewer. Seen in
this way, Cha’s work responds not only to Asian American realism, but
also to a wider field of avant-garde art and theory that is very self-con-
sciously and fitfully engaged with the relation between art and politics.
Reorienting Cha’s work in this way may help us to reconceive the terms of
the debate about the political valence of *Dictee* as well as experimental
works by writers from marginalized groups.

**Apparatus**

In her introduction to *Apparatus*, Cha writes that the anthology seeks “to
turn backwards and call upon the machinery that creates the impression
of reality whose function, inherent in its very medium, is to conceal from
its spectator the relationship of the viewer/subject to the work being
viewed.” This work is done through the “semio-psychoanalytic” film
theory of Roland Barthes, Jean-Louis Baudry, and Christian Metz, which
moves beyond the traditional focus of film criticism on content, to the
process of signification itself. These essays share an ideological analysis
of the filmic apparatus through a Lacanian reading of the processes of
meaning-production in/by the subject-viewer. Similarly, filmmaker Maya
Deren criticizes the “linear logic” of traditional criticism and art manifes-
tos, and she castigates “realists,” “sur-realists,” and “romantics” for simply
debating content, rather than engaging in substantive discussion about forms or methods of art in “semio-psychological” terms.\textsuperscript{16} The other filmmakers in the anthology—Gregory Woods, Danièle Huillet, and Jean-Marie Straub—also share this orientation.\textsuperscript{17}

Although the theorists and artists vary in specifics, they arise out of the rejection of the same things: nineteenth-century bourgeois realism; what Andreas Huyssen refers to as the “programmatic” attitude towards art, life, and the relationship between them of the early-twentieth-century leftist avant-garde (a particular pet peeve of Deren); the socialist realism espoused by the French Communist Party; the 1950s canonization and celebration of High Modernism by the culture-industry wing of the Cold War; and the pop/mass culture created, appropriated, and promulgated by increasingly corporatized publishing houses, film, television and recording companies, and art and educational institutions, all manifestations of and driving forces for the commodification of art, taste, pleasure, and desire. These developments are rejected through the critique of what they see as an overemphasis on the content, context, or referent in art and criticism. These writers and artists can be seen as part of the larger movement sharing the linguistic turn in literary and cultural theory, a critique of logocentrism, and a concern with the innovations in and the implications of postmodern art and the post-1960s (or post-1930s) “crisis of the left.” As such, we can examine the anthology as an example of and metonym for the general aesthetic and critical trends that, although still marginal in 1980, today have become commonplace in literary studies in general and Cha criticism in particular.

That the concerns of \textit{Apparatus}, however, remain tied to a socialist past is signaled by the early appearance of Dziga Vertov, the “most radical” of the early twentieth-century Russian neo-constructivists.\textsuperscript{18} Cha’s inclusion of Vertov, a generational anomaly among the contributors, reflects his influence on politicized artists and theorists of the 1960s and ’70s; Vertov’s \textit{The Man with a Movie Camera}, as Michelson notes, was “the key film-text for the generation of filmmakers who called into question the grounds and claims of cinematic representation through the political uprisings of 1968.”\textsuperscript{19} Influenced by the constructivists and futurists, in the early twentieth century, Vertov’s \textit{Kinoks} sought both to liberase
cinema from merely recording bourgeois melodramas and to foster active mental participation during and after screenings. They sought a revolution in both the production and the distribution of films. Revolutionary newsreels, montages, and “unstaged” films that used ordinary workers in lieu of actors were utilized to unmask the ideological dimensions of “staged” films and their conventions. But, formal innovation was not sufficient in itself. In order to take these new types of films to people, particularly the peasants and the working classes, the Kinoks arranged “agit-trains,” special traveling cinemas and discussion groups, to villages without cinemas. In these ways, the Kinoks and Vertov believed that it was possible, in a revolutionary context, not only to focus on the everyday (particularly of the worker) but also to enter the everyday, while simultaneously advancing art on an international scale. For Vertov, as he writes in Apparatus, “liberation” fundamentally means being “liberated from capitalist slavery,” and political revolution can enable, is enabled by, and interacts with a revolution in artistic means (technology, especially sound), methods (montage, slow-motion), and subject matter (“unstaged” events), and distribution.

Vertov, like Brecht, treats the relationship between form and content, the text and the world, form and politics, dialectically. In contrast, another innovative filmmaker, Jean-Luc Godard, whom Cha quotes in the inscription to the preface, signals the general direction of the contributors to Apparatus. Upon being asked to discuss the distinction between “making a political film” and “making a film politically,” Godard offers the following reply: “Yes, these two things are completely different. As Brecht already said, it’s not important to know what are the real things but rather how things are real. The relation is in that reality.” Godard’s language signals a subtle but fundamental shift from a dialectical understanding of the relationship between content (“what are the real things”) and form (“how things are real”), to almost a sole emphasis on form.

This deceptively small shift in emphasis manifests its practical and surprisingly significant impact in the history of Godard and Groupe Dziga Vertov. In his essay, “Godard, The Groupe Dziga Vertov, and the Myth of ‘Counter-Cinema,’” Steve Cannon recounts how the Groupe’s increasing focus of political analysis on form edged the concrete audience out of the
picture, replacing it with abstract “subject-positions,” and led to its depoliticization. Inspired by the collaboration between artists, students, and workers in May 1968, Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, and other filmmakers formed the *Groupe Dziga Vertov*. The collective’s professed goal was to create a new kind of cinema through a revolution in its processes of production. Invoking Brecht, the *Groupe* argued that the first priority was to break the induced identification with character, narrative, etc., and thereby intervene in the naturalized process of viewing film that undergirds the ideological work of mainstream films. Traditional left documentary, in claiming to be able to give the spectator direct access to “the truth,” participated in this problematic naturalization. As Cannon points out, the *Groupe* assumed that realism lulled the working-class into a state of dream-like passivity, a continuation, despite 1968, of the theory of the “passive audience.” Concerned primarily with this passive audience, they neglected to establish/maintain links with any “concrete audience,” which would have required different or more complex understandings of the audience, the subject, and politics (i.e. beyond the text).

The “failure” of the *Groupe Dziga Vertov* had several important results, many of which were not unique to the *Groupe* and its associates. Disillusioned participants rejected radical politics, turning their full attention to art and theory. As Loshitsky notes, “The greatest impact of the revolutionary spirit of the organization was registered in the arena of film theory.” In other words, disillusionment pushed the focus from politics to political aesthetic theory, from art for/of revolution to a revolution in art. And again, this development was not limited to Godard and film theory. Peter Wollen, author of the oft-cited analysis of Godard’s “counter-cinema,” points out that, in film criticism, “as poststructuralism developed, materialism and scientificity were quickly thrown out the window and replaced by discourse theory, deconstruction, and refusal of the extra-textual.” Or, put another way, the problem with Godard and the *Groupe Dziga Vertov*, and the general direction they reflected in avant-garde film theory, was that they came to see the political as formal, rather than understanding form as dialectically related to content and the social, extra-textual realm.

Cha’s invocation of Godard signals the direction that *Apparatus* takes, including, unfortunately, this tendency to formalism. This problem be-
comes pronounced when, with the advent of Lacanian psychoanalysis, “the Real” becomes explicitly problematic. The works in Apparatus reflect the shifts made by Godard and the GDV: the talk of revolution recedes, and the formal, particularly in what Baudry calls “semio-psychoanalysis,” takes precedence. Unfortunately, this trajectory turns out to be not only bad politics but also bad (i.e. incomplete) psychoanalysis. Because Cha’s conception of the relation between art and politics clearly draws on these theories, I want to examine them before turning to the ways in which Cha’s work both reflects and responds to them.

“Projection Mechanism” and the Subject of Cinema

Cha begins and ends Apparatus with two images that suggest the anthology’s desire to theorize more rigorously the ideological function of film, particularly in the processes of subject formation. The frontispiece of the anthology is a photo of an empty theater, and the final image of the anthology shows the same theater filled with spectators. The theorists and artists of the anthology attempt to re-insert the subject into consideration of the filmic apparatus via semio-psychoanalysis, but to various extents they rely on a narrow conception of the individual as abstract, passive “subject.” This notion of the subject is intimately tied to the kind of formalism that Godard’s political aesthetic evidenced. Furthermore, many contemporary readings of Dictee share some of the fundamental assumptions of these theorists.

A number of essays in the anthology demonstrate the “semio-psychoanalytic” approach of Baudry, Metz, Bertrand Augst, and Thierry Kuntzel. Because critical focus has hitherto been almost exclusively on “the effects [films] have as finished products, their content, the field of what is signified,” Baudry writes, “the technical bases on which these effects depend and the specific characteristics of these bases have been ignored.” Instead of dealing only with already-constituted signs, critics must engage with the interrelation between the filmic apparatus and the processes of the subject in producing meaning. The filmic apparatus, Baudry explains, relies on the illusion of continuity created from discontinuous elements, thus requiring difference as well as its negation. At the level of the mechanical apparatus, difference is marked as frames in a reel
and as moments in time and space, but, at the same time, projection mini-
mizes and represses difference through the rapid succession of images.
This “projection mechanism,” or “le défilement,” as Kuntzel calls it, sup-
presses the heterogeneity of the elements so that only their relationship
remains. Thus, this formal or mechanical continuity in the filmic appara-
tus enables a narrative continuity based on the repression of difference.
The apparent continuity in the constitution of meaning creates a false
continuity of/for the viewing subject, and this, of course, yields ideologi-
cal ramifications.

This imaginary continuous subject is likened to the Lacanian Mirror-
Stage in the Theater. The Imaginary Order posits itself on the basis of
a fundamental misunderstanding of the wholeness of the self and its con-
tinuity with the world. The “impression of reality” created by film is not
the Imaginary, per se, but a repetition of the desire for that state. Whereas
in the mirror-stage, the subject imagines a unification of the fragmented
body, in film the transcendental subject of the camera unites into a mean-
ingful whole the discontinuous fragments of phenomena, “lived experi-
ence,” or, at the simply mechanical level, individual frames. In other words,
viewers primarily identify not with what is represented (the spectacle, the
content, etc., which is recognized as fictional), but with the unified tran-
scendental subject of the camera, i.e. “what stages the spectacle, makes it
seen, obliging him to see what it sees.” So, in cinema, the false “reality” is
not the image onscreen but “a simulation of the condition of the subject,
a position of the subject, a subject and not of reality.” The cinematog-
graphic apparatus thus brings about a “state of artificial regression.”
The relative narcissism of the experience, and the resemblance to a state in
which reality envelopes, and in which the separation of the body and the
world has not yet been defined, help to explain the intensity of attach-
ment to the images of the film and the process of identification created
by the cinema. In other words, viewers accept this ideological control
because it feeds their unconscious desires. Augst explains that “behind
any fiction there is a second fiction: the diegetic events are fictional, that
is the first; but everyone pretends to believe they are true, and that is the
second.” According to Kuntzel, the part of the viewer that does believe is
the unconscious. The “credulous person” is the unconscious part of the
self, beneath the incredulous viewer, who wants to believe.
The subject’s unconsciously chosen credulity is problematic because it helps produce the ideologically malleable unitary subject. The cinema collapses the plural, heterogeneous, complex, analyzable subject into the unanalyzable collective subject “necessary to the dominant ideology.”

For example, the ideological output of Hollywood films far exceeds that of Eisenstein because commercial films allow the filmic apparatus to function on the subject at optimum capacity. Here, we see parallels to the characterization of literary realism’s ideological work in resolution, identification, naturalization, etc. Theorists in Apparatus see this process as the primary ideological mechanism of film. Baudry writes, “the forms of narrative adopted, the ‘contents’ of the image, are of little importance so long as an identification remains possible.” Resistance therefore lies in “disturbing cinematic elements” to make such processes visible, by means such as that of Vertov’s “The Man With a Movie Camera.” While Baudry claims the “system of repression” to which he refers is “primarily economic,” he argues that “the ideological mechanism at work in the cinema seems thus to be concentrated in the relation between camera and subject.”

Baudry is right to identify the heterogeneous, complex individual subject as the desired and/or actual state, but a wholly collective, abstract, ideologically malleable subject arguably does not actually exist. The fallacy of the passive subject-viewer leads to several others. First, it supposes that mimetic realism necessarily produces this ideologically malleable, falsely unified, unifying passive subject-viewer, and is therefore inherently problematic. While perhaps sometimes, in some cases, it may do so, this supposition also assumes that realism can have little or no positive ideological function. Furthermore, this focus on awakening the passive subject assumes that the viewer/critic of non-mimetic work cannot be manipulated ideologically or be constituted as an imaginary subject; the imagined membership into an elite group who can “view” properly (the critic who “sees?”) can just as readily become the Imaginary or a central, specular, and interpellating Subject for critics/viewers who believe themselves sophisticated. Another fallacy is the assumption that any viewer is passive. This position ignores the possibilities for and the historical evidence of audiences who were not passive with either conventional films
or ideological hegemonies but in fact created resistances (talking back to the screen, leaving the theater, creating different readings and/or different creations), individual and collective. In other words, we forget that human beings choose, and that every subject is complex and individual, as well as collective and ideologically malleable. Finally, this odd formalism, which sees the primary site of ideological work as the formal aesthetic processes constituting a certain kind of subject, leads to the privileging of experimental art as the site of political resistance. Therefore, the “disruption” of formal-ideological processes, particularly of the subject, and the identification of such disruptions, become the primary task for ideological criticism. But, as Huyssen pointed out twenty years ago, the insistence on the power of resistance, by breaking linguistic codes in the face of cultures in which every advertisement features a domesticated form of modernist aesthetics, betrays the poststructuralists’ overestimation of art’s transformative function for society.

Whereas critics of *Dictee* repeatedly point out that the political work of the novel entails taking the reader beyond the text into social realities, the theorists collected in *Apparatus* privilege the disruption of subject formation. This choice leads to a question: If the subject-viewer is passive and ideologically malleable, who is the resisting subject-viewer who can see through the ideological machinations of realism? And, is a mere change in form sufficient to change the reader/viewer? Not only the contributors to *Apparatus* but also many *Dictee* critics imply that this transformation is possible. As Cha writes in the introduction, she hopes that the anthology will be a “plural text’ making active the participating viewer/reader, making visible his/her position in the apparatus.” Her own contribution to the anthology, “Commentaire,” exemplifies faith in the power of disruptive narrative to spark activity on the part of the viewer.

“Commentaire”

“Commentaire” is an “anti-symbolic,” non-referential text, in which the processes of form are as crucial to its “comment” as its contents, as well as a critical commentary on the processes of constituting meaning in art (particularly film) and on the difficulty of making the critical comment
itself. The piece consists of sixty-five pages of primarily white words on a solid black background or black words on a solid white background, in either capitalized print or lower-case script. Interspersed are stills from Carl Dreyer’s *Vampyr* and photographs by Reese Williams and Richard Barnes. The piece breaks down and explores permutations of meaning, grammatical and reading conventions, the repression of difference and the illusion of wholeness (“projection mechanism”), framing, and time-as-frame.

From the beginning, the myriad significations possible from simple plays on words and arrangement indicate the limits of criticism as well as the ideological and critical issues tied to any creation of meaning. On the first two pages, the recto side is blank and solid white, while on the verso side the first word of the piece, “COMMENTAIRE,” appears in black letters on a solid white background.\(^42\) *Commentaire* is here both a proper noun, as the title of the piece, and a noun, the French for “comment.” The commentary is the piece itself, commenting on the rest of the anthology as well as its overall concerns: commentary on the filmic apparatus, commentary on the possibilities for making commentary. The condensation of meaning in this first word demonstrates how language works in the entire piece.

After a blank page, the word “COMMENT” appears on the recto side, at the extreme right-hand edge of the page.\(^43\) The French adverb, *comment*, typically asks a question, such as “*Comment faire?’” (“What shall we do?”). The term is also used to ask “what?” or “sorry?” and elicits as the expected response a repetition and/or clarification of what was previously missed or misunderstood. As an exclamation, the term also expresses astonishment or indignation, such as “*Comment, c’est tout ce que tu trouves à dire?’” (“What? Is that all that you can find to say?”). As a question or exclamation (“how”), the word invokes an action as an answer, a verb, and/or a description of that action, an adverb. In English, “comment” can be a noun or a verb. The juxtaposition and play of *comment* and *commentaire* indicates not only the question (What is the comment? How will the comment be made?), but also that the comment (noun) will necessarily include the manner in which the comment is made (verb/adverb), or the “how.” And, this question, how to comment not only on film but also on film’s “how,” is the central question of the anthology.
On the following page (the verso side of two open pages), the word “TAIRE” appears on the edge of the left-hand margin. The French verb means “to conceal,” to say nothing, to “hush up”; the English translation, “TO HUSH”—another word which, grammatically and connotatively, has several meanings (noun, verb, adjective, sound condition, reprimand/command, comfort, etc.)—is echoed later. In addition, when read with the preceding page, we see that “commentaire,” a noun, has been broken and split over the edge of the page leaf. The literal fracturing of the word, as well as its grammatical mutability, also suggests the breakdown of the definitiveness of “commentary.” This commentary also encompasses the content-fixated film, literature, and art criticism which Deren and the psychoanalytic critics castigate so roundly, criticism blind to the filmic apparatus in particular, and therefore blind to the ideological process (“how”) of not only film but of its own mode of commentary as well.

That is, the “breaking up” of the word “commentaire” is a symbolic anti-symbol; it self-reflexively indicates the processes of, limits on, and problems with symbolic representation, and even suggests (by indication and by its own processes) what lies in and beyond the entire realm of interpretation and mimetic art. The juxtaposition of “comment” and “taire” suggests “how to conceal,” the central modus operandi of all modern ideological apparatuses (hegemony, the commodity fetish, interpellation), concealment not only of a “thing” but more importantly of its own processes. This is also the formal imperative of the filmmaker, popular and traditional or experimental, because, as Baudry and Kuntzel demonstrate, the individual frames that constitute the film are repressed through the “projection mechanism.” Furthermore, any comment on art conceals, leaves out, due to its ideological bases, lack of information, or the always-incomplete nature of signification. In addition, the juxtaposed words invoke the inability of interpretation to say/be/do either what the artwork is itself (the exposition must be at least one step removed from its object), and/or the “meaning,” content, or experience to which the artwork refers, or from which it arises nonreferentially, or which it simply is.

The conspicuous arrangement of single words disrupts, and therefore calls attention to, Western conventions of reading (i.e. left-to-right, one page at a time). The piece conditions the reader, drawing on “old” and familiar ways of reading, to read in a “new” way. In other words, when
a word flushed to the right-hand edge of a recto page is immediately followed by a left-flushed word on a verso page, the reader shifts from a “normal” reading practice to one that literally slips off the physical page (and over to the next) as well as the “page” constructed by our expectations as readers, inculcated by conventional reading practices. In this way, the form of the piece and the experience of reading it constitute part of the answer to the question/project posed by the opening pages. The question and its answer are thus intrinsic to the comment.

In similar ways, the piece manipulates terms, images, and permutations of synchronic framing and diachronic time-as-frame. Following the opening section, a sequence features black letters against a white background with a black border around the edges of the page. The word “COMME” (“like,” “as”) faces the word “COMMENT,” and “COMMENT TAIRES” faces the word “TEAR.” Then, “ECRAN” (“screen”) faces a blank page. The frames, which vary in thickness and evenness, call attention to the “frame” in the sense of narrative, social, historical context, as well as the apparatus of film, in which the black frame around each individual shot becomes invisible in the projection. Furthermore, the “frame” of the movie camera and the screen, the “kino-eye,” always leaves something out, concealing and excluding by default even as it shows. The play on the word “TAKES” likewise draws our attention to the framed-ness of film: the many “takes” necessary to get the shot right for a certain effect, the verb “to take,” and “what it takes.”

And again, the words draw our attention to the difficulty of commentary: to be like/as a comment is to be near a comment, but not the comment itself; or, to strive for a comment as transparent and direct as a white (blanc) screen, apparently hiding nothing, but which not only hides but has as its fundamental apparatus the “how” of concealing. All the possibilities and difficulties of the permutations of framing, meaning, ways of viewing/reading/interpreting are condensed: to get at “the meaning”; to “get” not only how the film means but also how it conceals in
order to create meaning; to make a comment (which may be like/as experience); and, in understanding the how and the comment of the film and about the film, to make a commentary (non-interpretive art criticism) which is like/as the film (i.e. not the film, not a representation of it, not an “interpretation” of it). The mutability of the frames further reminds us that none of these elements remain fixed over time.

The simple words, with their surface opacity, seem endlessly overdetermined, indicating that despite the deceptive realism of the camera (“it just records reality”), film is actually an opaque art form—opaque not only in the sense that all art is opaque, but because even if one were to “tear” through the “écran,” to physically break through the surface of the image to dig deeper into its meanings (content and/or form), one would merely come out the other side of a relatively thin sheet of canvas, and the film would continue projecting on whatever lay in its path (including the clumsy interpreter’s body protruding through the screen). In other words, to tear through the screen, which is merely any blank space, one has to understand the “how” of the filmic apparatus as well as the processes of meaning-production and viewing laid bare by “semio-psychoanalysis” and ideological analyses. It is never simply a matter of, as suggested on the following two pages, looking at what is “SUR” and “ECRAN,” i.e. on the screen (“SCREEN” and “ON SCREEN” are repeated later). At the same time, however, the images-on-the-screen and the words-on-the-page are all that we have to go by. Again, the text calls our attention to the limitations and processes of viewing and reading that are usually repressed.

As the camera-eye provides/creates a synchronic frame, the manipulation of time itself provides another kind of frame, a diachronic one that guides our seeing. Later in the piece, the words “WENT / PAST / MINUTE / OR / MOMENT” appear in light grey down the middle of the verso side, followed by “ARILY” in the top-left corner of the recto page. Two pages later, the words “MINUTE / BY / MINUTE / TO / MINUTE / OR” appear, again light grey and down the center of the page. And then, we are led over onto the next page, which reads, “TWO.” This expression is followed by variations of the word “hold”: “HOLD” is followed by “TONGUE,” which faces “HOLD” again. “Hold” is a film term, meaning
to rest on an image (which by now we understand is not an ideologically innocent act); this word easily slips into the held tongue, the words kept in check by an internal and/or external authority. Then, the term “noircir” (to blacken) faces “TO ONE MORE”; “noircissure” (black spot, smudge) faces “AND MORE,” followed by “TIME.”

Once again, we have the reference to the filmic apparatus that fuses the individual frames through the manipulation of time into a unity that is both artificial and real. The film is sped up, so the film goes past “minute by minute,” and we miss the individual frames. Yet it is the relationship between the images, created through the “speeding up” of the reel, that makes the film a film. That is, the film reel is “sped up,” but that is the “normal” speed—of the film, of perception, of life. And, to simply stop the movement of film (either a “hold,” in the sense of freezing the film, or a shot that “holds” in the sequence of the film) does not necessarily reveal the apparatus of meaning-production. Yet to invoke an image that is part of a film (i.e. Vampyr) is to invoke the whole and the movements that make it “whole.”

Two photographs included in the piece also highlight issues of framing. The first shows a drive-in, featuring a large movie screen, palm trees in the background, and time-lapsed car headlights transformed into lines of white light. On the facing page is an overhead shot of a small film theater in which “spectators” appear in various states of repose, leaning over and lying down in their seats, while the blank screen glows white. These images point to two important elements of the filmic apparatus: first, the processes of desire, (false) identification, and repression by the passive viewer; and second, the importance of time in producing the meaning-effect of cinema. With only the images onscreen (content), and with the spectators lulled into sleep, the prospects for understanding are grim. These photographs also indicate the deceptiveness of visuals or signs; lest we attribute some kind of “presence” to pictures as opposed to words, the text reminds us that pictures need the chain of significations as well as the mechanical process of film to mean anything. A visual is no less overdetermined than words on a page.

By laying bare the conventions of reading/viewing in a form that does not naturalize those processes, the piece embodies and engages the ideas
of the anthology. The subject-viewer of film “sleeps,” lulled into pseudo-conscious identification with the camera’s false unity, which inculcates and reflects the false unity of the subject upon which hegemonic ideologies rely. In order to “wake” the subject/viewer/reader, “Commentaire” disrupts the conventional processes of signification, reading, and viewing. In other words, here the intervention focuses on form in order to disrupt the processes of reading and viewing, in order to provoke the putatively passive subject into active, creative engagement. This project, as with the work of Godard, the semio-psychoanalysts, and others, is not necessarily inherently problematic; what emerges as a potential danger is that this approach too often relies on an idealized, universalized viewing/reading process of subject formation that is inaccurate and increasingly detached from the world around it. An examination of a particular motif in “Commentaire” will provide insight into what I am identifying as a problematic in the anthology.

**Black & White**

Throughout the piece, terms and images of blankness, blackness, and whiteness haunt the “capitalized” terms of signification, framing, time, etc.; they can mean anything or nothing, thus enacting non-repressive/non-repressing processes of signification, but their very indeterminacy points to the risk of excluding issues of content and context. An early sequence in the piece begins with, in white lettering on black, the two nouns “blancheur” (“whiteness,” or “purity) and “COMMENTARY” facing one another, followed by “AS, LIKE” and “HOW.” The “how” leads the reader onto the next page, where the tones are again reversed (black lettering on white), and the word “blanchir” (to whiten, to turn white) is in lower-case script. On the facing recto page, “HOW TO” is flushed right, leading the reader over to the next page, which reads, “SILENCE,” flushed left. On the following page, the word “blanchiment” (whitewashing, bleaching) appears. The capitalized directive-as-question of “HOW TO SILENCE” invokes, again, the imperative of apparatuses of power as well as (and not necessarily as insidiously) of film. Such sequences highlight terms referring to the “as, like” asymptotic approach to identity with
a thing (either as mimesis, identification, or criticism), the implicit silencing, the opacity of film; the terms of whiteness seem organic parts of these projects, but they also draw attention to themselves as a distinct development in the text.

Other terms of whiteness and blackness are interspersed throughout the text. The words and backgrounds weave through the text, drawing attention to permutations of framing, meaning, ways of viewing/reading/interpreting. The words of whiteness include “blanc” (white), “blancheur” (“whiteness” or “purity”), “blanchir” (“to whiten,” “to turn white”), “blanchiment” (“whitewashing,” “bleaching”), and “blanchissement” (the adverb form of “to launder” or “to whiten”). The terms of blackness include “noir” (“black”), “noircir” (“to blacken”), and “noircissure” (“black spot” or “smudge”). Blank pages that are completely white or, more often, black also appear throughout the piece.

What do these terms suggest? White space can be read generally as absence or silence, and has been associated more particularly with unwritten (or “unshot”) women’s writing. White space, particularly in images of the North Pole, also has been related to imperialist geographies and landscapes, also gendered. Gilbert-Rolfe reads blank space in the contemporary world as a signifier in itself; instead of referring elsewhere in time or space (an act of signification to come, the inner workings of a machine), blankness itself is eloquent, mobile, active. Blankness is sublime loss, and, in particular, it is “the sign of an invisible and ubiquitous technological presence,” in which we relate to surfaces purely by discourse. The blank film screen perfectly exemplifies such depthlessness; as we have seen, we cannot “break through” the physical screen in order to decode its significations, particularly its ideological work.

Furthermore, blackness and whiteness cannot but recall race, not only because Cha’s best-known work, Dictee, foregrounds its concerns about immigration, nationalism, and translation, but also because Godard, the filmmaker invoked by Cha in the anthology, also incorporates a black, blank screen to refer to race. The Groupe’s 1970 film, Vladimir et Rosa, inserts Black Panther Bobby Seale into the Chicago Eight trial as “Bobby X.” When X is taken from the courtroom bound and gagged, the screen...
goes blank (and black) in order, Godard’s voice-over states, “to represent the absence/presence of the Black man at the trial.” This blankness becomes a quaintly earnest but fairly pointless gesture; a formal device signifying the “unrepresentable,” it assumes the immutability of the “unrepresentable,” or “ineffable.” That is, the Groupe uses a formal device to signify that which cannot be represented, but they confuse the unrepresentable in the filmic apparatus with the socially suppressed. Not only that, they literally replace the “oppressed” with the “repressed.” Filmic apparatuses and processes, which are ideologically neutral and can be broken down, and examined, and manipulated in different ways, are seen as inherently serving apparatuses of power. So, in order to disrupt these processes (and their effects on the passive subject-viewer), the filmmaker’s resistance focuses on form.

Likewise, in “Commentaire,” the terms and images of blackness and whiteness flicker in and out in total abstraction. Because the piece seeks to disrupt the passive reader/viewer by focusing on the processes of the text, signs lack any specific reference to the extratextual. The blank pages do not necessarily signal the racial absence toward which the blank screen in Vladimir et Rosa gestures, or the erasure of the human, or the modern subject’s unconcern with how things work, or the whitewashing of inequality, exploitation, and oppression, or the revelation of the ideological processes of film. Arguably, these blanknesses, white or black, can mean anything or nothing at all.

“Commentaire” stages a sophisticated and, to a large extent, non-reductive exploration of both the processes of signification in the filmic apparatus, in criticism, and in art. The text “slows down” the processes of signification so that, in a sense, the pieces become visible. Moreover, the pieces themselves reveal further pieces, and all must be read together in order to understand the whole. On a very simple level, this approach requires a dialectical process of reading—which is always, arguably, worthwhile. At the same time, “Commentaire” replicates the issues plaguing the anthology: a focus on form/process; the turning-away from/rejection of content; the lack of historical context; only oblique suggestions of or references to the outside world; the subject-viewer assumed to be passively asleep (except, presumably, the implied sophisticated reader). The black,
The blank screen can be about “blackness,” or blankness, or time, or nothing at all—the unfixity of its meaning is part of the point. While such a work can be useful (and beautiful), it is not, in itself, necessarily bad or good. Politically, it is simply ambiguous—even if it is the work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.

What “Commentaire” does point out, however, is the irony of the general reliance on the notion of a passive subject-viewer, which necessitates the focus on formal intervention. Like other avant-garde artists who want to shake viewer-subjects out of torpor, Cha relies on an implied, ideal, active viewer who nevertheless remains under-theorized. Who is this implied reader, and what makes possible his/her “process of intellection?” Although she does not say so explicitly, and although she obviously draws on the theories outlined in the anthology, Cha’s reliance on this active reader complicates the bogey of the passive viewer.

**Dictee & Otherness Postmodernism**

*Dictee* moves beyond the putative passive subject by emphasizing histories of resistance (Korean resistance to Japanese colonization; immigrants’ resistance to the interpellation of nationalisms; and the individual’s resistance to de-humanizing military, political, and social institutions) in a text that resists formally as well as in complex, dialectical relationships to the world around it. Numerous active subjectivities populate the text and the process of reading it—the viewer, the author (evidenced by the many references to *Dictee* as a postmodern autobiography), Korean American immigrants, Yu Guan Soon, Catholic saints, and even the unidentified “Laura Claxton.” Even before the advent of postmodernism, the text suggests, there is no such thing as a wholly passive viewer, but the form of the novel further works to scrutinize constructions of meaning, subjectivity, identity, etc., critically. Even if we can only know the history and reality through ideological texts, the novel suggests, there are better and truer histories, subjectivities, realities.

So, my point here is not to reject wholly the potential of avant-garde art forms; a Godard film or a piece like “Commentaire” can be and is invaluable within a given sphere (modern art, film criticism, etc.). But, I
do want to question the notion that formal innovations and the particular strategies employed to read them necessarily constitute political resistance, regardless of the identity of the author. While certain histories informing Cha’s work (Japanese occupation of Korea, ensuing anticolonial movements, Korean diasporas, the life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, etc.) have been examined, the text’s formal disruptions still tend to be read ahistorically. Placing Cha’s work in the histories of form indicated in *Apparatus* leads us, ironically, to the argument that the political intervention of *Dictee* stems less from its formal experimentation than from its emphasis on those suppressed histories. That is, the particular innovation of the novel comes from its coupling of the formal strategies, which always self-reflexively insist upon skepticism of signification, with the particular histories and contexts dealt with in the novel. In that sense, it responds not only to aesthetic realism or ideologies that depend on easy predication and identification, but also to postmodern and modernist aesthetics.

Seen in this way, we can say that Elaine Kim and others are right when they point out the importance of cultural context and even the author’s identity. Rather than relying on old forms of identity politics (*Dictee* resists because of the identity of its author) or new (the aesthetic strategies of *Dictee* are more political than the often problematic European American works that it may resemble because of the author’s subject position), we see that the text achieves effects because it is in critical dialogue with other texts, writers, theories, and histories around it. To say that *Dictee* is not disruptive merely because of its form does not necessarily have to lead to a claim of “cultural ownership,” but to a situation that developed out of debates on the politics of avant-garde art forms. In this case, if we do not think of identity as essential or determinate but as the possibility of cultural insight into problems, then we can see where the difference may lie in texts by writers from marginalized groups.63 But this distinction is not always true, and such insight is not necessarily limited to members of marginalized groups.

Focusing on the formal innovations of a text for its political valence too often leads, oddly, to the attribution to a text of things that it alone cannot do. One critic suggests that *Dictee* resists “American exceptionalism,”64
but the novel can and does become “exceptional” within literary critical institutions that value formal experimentation over literary realism. If, tomorrow, the tastes of American readers were somehow to turn to experimental novels by Korean American women writers, the publishing industry would not hesitate to make *Dictee* a book-of-the-month. The improbability of this scenario, in fact, has less to do with *Dictee’s* own formal innovations than with the social and political realities with which we all live. So, I would suggest that it is a kind of wishful thinking to suggest that the text “returns us, as readers, to the material contradictions of lived political life.” On the contrary, the notion of any form as some kind of uniform reflection of ideology risks leading artists, readers, critics, and subjects away from the material conditions that constantly interact with those forms.

This may be a subtle distinction, but I believe it is important to point out because it is often elided and, I believe, leads to confusion. Criticism of Cha’s work, particularly of *Dictee*, tends to fall into what can be thought of as a celebration of “otherness postmodernism.” While the political valences of postmodernist art have been questioned, many critics in and outside Asian American Studies attribute particular power to those contemporary experimental texts by minority and women writers, and especially by women of color. A laudatory attitude towards avant-garde texts by minority writers only makes sense when such “otherness postmodernism” relates to political and social movements, seeking to retrieve lost histories and unseat hegemonic lies, freed of simplistic notions of identity, history, or epistemology. But, such goals can and are shared with modes of aesthetic realism, and not all experimental texts (whoever the author) share these goals—which is why, as Brecht pointed out in his response to Lukács’s dismissal of avant-garde art, we can never understand the politics of a text or identify “realism” by relying solely on formal criteria. In some ways, we have returned to the essential formulation of Vertov: form and politics function dialectically. But for us, this formulation has to be understood through the sieve of contemporary theory. The historical development, telescoped into *Apparatus*, demonstrates an aesthetic and—more importantly—critical and ideological trajectory that not only puzzles (de-politicized political criticism) but is also deeply prob-
lematic and unsettling. This tendency is not limited to criticism of *Dicteet* but in fact permeates much of contemporary literary study, and as such it is important to be more critically aware of this tendency.

The critique of realist aesthetics hinges on the argument that its emphasis on sameness requires an exclusion of difference, and that, therefore, it not only mimics the logic of ideology, but also trains us to naturalize things like normative collective identities, subjecting subjectivities, exclusionary unitary histories, etc. But, such arguments betray their own tendency to homogenize. In discussing “difference,” it would be inaccurate to equate all “differences.” In fact, to reify “difference”—which is simply nonidentity—as inherently good and liberatory is to flatten all historical differences (differently historical) to formalist, idealistic sameness. This kind of empty sameness is untrue to the critics who, desiring a better world, value difference in its most liberatory forms.

**Notes**


10. I do not mean to conflate or homogenize the broad areas of postmodernism, the historical avant-garde, and modernism. Rather, in this essay I will use “postmodernism” and “experimental art” as a shorthand for the kind of art that rejects the conventions of mimetic realism in literature, film, and other arts, as ideologically problematic. Furthermore, although there are obviously many differences between film, literature, and visual art, I discuss these things together as forms of art similarly impacted by politically progressive theories of formal disruption.


12. Ibid., 53–78.


20. Ibid., xxvi.

21. Petric, Constructivism in Film, 3.


31. Ibid., 34.


33. Ibid., 56.

34. Ibid., 50, 55.

37. Ibid., 34.
38. Ibid., 34, my emphasis.
41. Cha, “Preface,” i.
43. Ibid., 265.
44. Ibid., 266, 320.
45. Ibid., 268–73.
46. Ibid., 317.
47. Susan Sontag, A Susan Sontag Reader, Elizabeth Hardwick, ed. (New York: Vintage, 1982), 99, 102. Although there is insufficient room here to discuss this further, Sontag was another significant influence on Cha. I find it interesting that, in her most recent book, Regarding the Pain of Others (New York: Farrer, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), Sontag criticizes the postmodernist emphasis on depthless “spectacle,” pointing out that many people “do not have the luxury of patronizing reality” (111). So, in a sense, her approach has shifted towards a more complex ethics of reading, even to the point of explicitly arguing against claims she made in the 1970s.
49. Ibid., 298–99.
50. Ibid., 303–4.
51. Ibid., 305–7.
52. Ibid., 308–312.
53. Ibid., 292–93.
54. Ibid., 278–79, 280–81.
55. Ibid., 282.
56. Ibid., 283–84.
57. Ibid., 264, 289, 308, 310.
61. Ibid., 162.