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Nostalgia is an Extended Feedback¹: An Anthropologist's Some Thoughts

Seongeun Kim

"History is a nullifying null ..." **Martin Heidegger**

"Nostalgia is an extended feedback ..." **Nam June Paik**

The above quotes were put in a program booklet for Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman's <<From Jail to Jungle>> held in Carnegie Hall on 10th February 1977. It featured <Opera Sextronique>, the dramatization of the scandals provoked by the concert of the same title in 1967, and the premier of <Guadalcanal Requiem>. Shot on sites in Guadalcanal of the British Solomon Islands, <Guadalcanal Requiem> revisits the history of one of the most devastating battle grounds in World War II. Historical scars left in Guadalcanal have been dealt with by such films as <Guadalcanal Diary> and <The Lost Fleet of Guadalcanal>. Media artist Paik's <Guadalcanal Requiem> differs from these filmic representations, but nevertheless

some interesting parallels can be drawn between this video of Paik's and the traditions of those filmic genres in terms of form and content. The particularly striking visual analogies between <Guadalcanal requiem> and television documentaries, ethnographic films among others, are what catches the eye of anthropologists who carry out participant observation in fieldwork for the purpose of cultural comparison and critique.

In the mid-1970s, a documentary series was broadcast on BBC, which was titled <<Tribal Eye>>. This was an anthropological travelogue of documentary filmmaker David Attenborough to visit and explore different tribal cultures around the globe. <Man Blong Custom>, which was the third of the series on air in 1976, follows Attenborough to a number of sites in the Solomon Islands including Guadalcanal. The scene where Attenborough positioning himself in a boat's prow approaches the island is typical of the Westerner in history to 'discover' the unknown world: the 'others' out there can be embraced into humanity only by being discovered by Western civilizations.

¹ This is also a title of the special exhibition with a theme of cybernetics, organized by Nam June Paik Art Center in 2012. This exhibition was to celebrate the 80th anniversary of Nam June Paik's birth.

The opening of <Guadalcanal Requiem> is similar to this. The scene of rolling waves seems to have been shot by a camera positioned in a boat's nose, which is reminiscent of Attenborough's entry to the island; at the same time, the camera is under water at some times and has to push its way through wild sea at others, which seems to represent the soldiers' gaze during wartime. Sequence 12 in <Guadalcanal Requiem> shows native women preparing food and performing ritualistic folk dance, as in <Man Blong Custom>, upon which Moorman's narration is laid. She mentions things like "the last place on earth" and "headhunters" which are tropes for the twofold perspective of Westerners towards cultural others in colonial times. On the one hand, their exotic cultures are not contaminated by industrialization and their lands are an earthly paradise and a rich repository of natural resources. On the other, they are primitive, uncivilized and menacing savages. In addition to humanitarian views on Guadalcanal as a war victim, Paik's <Guadalcanal Requiem> appropriates the Anglo-American double standard.

Moorman in this work is a narrator and interviewer. The cross-cutting of the interviews of American and Japanese war veterans and local islanders, with the archival footages of TV documentaries on the war increases a sense of 'being in the field.' She asks a question on historical facts with a journalist's hard-edged tone, leads a conversation with emotionally intense empathy, or recites metaphoric poems about Guadalcanal's nature. "We're admiring this beautiful calm river... and someone said this is Matanikau River, ... the bloody river ... How many lives were lost in this river of blood and tears?"(Sequence 4) "We encountered miles, and miles, and miles of tapes wrapped around the jungle. And now it seems to be weeping, are these raindrops, or tear drops?"(Sequence 6) Moorman's disparate voices come to sound more rhythmical due to Paik's editing. In 1976 he was conducting a study into the post-production computer system at WNET/13 TV Laboratory and as part of the research he tried different experimental methods of synthesis. In combining war documentaries, empirical interviews and art

performances, he deployed swift cutaway, image transformation and electronic colorization, which resists any attempt for a viewer to piece together all these segments under a single grand narrative. He also seems to have paid much attention to sound synthesis: Bob Edwards' words such as "safe," "as if the whole thing is splitting," "you're in limbo" and "a dream becomes less and less as you grow older" are played back repeatedly; the sounds of Moorman's cello and roaring gunfire are fast-forwarded or are coated with mechanical noise. "Truth is often hinted at in trivial behaviors, therefore I have avoided all liberal clichés and picked up the cultural conflicts that occur on the subconscious level."² To elicit the collisions in the subconscious mind of Guadalcanal, which applies to both man and nature, Paik takes the form of 'ethnographic surrealist' collage, obviously laying his artistic interventions bare.³

The surrealist qualities of <Guadalcanal Requiem> are intensified by Moorman's avant-garde performances inserted throughout the film, intercut with apparently documentary elements.

For example, in Sequence 7, Moorman is playing the cello of <Variations on a Theme by Saint Saens>⁴ in front of Marine Memorial Tower, with which the archival footages of war-time laboring soldiers are overlapped. As the performance progresses, the inter-transformation of image and sound is gradually escalated to such an extent as to create a certain tense sentiment as if reaching a climax of the first movement in music. In different places of the island, Moorman did performances, sometimes alone, sometimes together with Paik, employing a violin split in half, a leaf in place of the cello's bow, and images of bullet, helmet and skull; all these icons bring the themes of war into sharp relief. The performances are based on existing pieces by Paik, Joseph Beuys and Takehisa Kosugi, and by being played at the sites scarred by the war, the performances come to have a new dimension of meanings. "We selected seven or eight pieces from Charlotte Moorman's repertoire and shot the piece one by one in each of the accessible and interesting locations: the beach where the Japanese landed, the bloody ridge, which was the turning point of

2 At WNET/13 TV Laboratory in the 1970s Paik also organized the <<Visa>> series, of which original title was <<Peace Correspondent>>. Video artists were sent with a portapak in their hands to different countries to produce telecasts about 'other' cultures. These videos edited by Paik were broadcast on TV. The quote is from the report on the two videos from this series on China and Russia. Nam June Paik, '1977, Report on <Media Shuttle: New York – Moscow> and <You Can't Lick Stamps in China>', Box 0010-4 Series 200R, Record Group 1975–78, 1980, New York: Rockefeller Archive Center.

3 What James Clifford means by ethnographic surrealism is the juxtaposition

of incongruous elements in "a collage of fortuity and irony," which produces the effect of 'defamiliarizing the familiar.' This is the inversion of the anthropology originated from the 19th century Occident whose primary goal was to 'familiarize the unfamiliar.' James Clifford, *Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1988, pp.132, 145-6.

4 This is one of Paik's pieces, produced together with Charlotte Moorman in 1964.

the Pacific war, and at Henderson Field, the airport that Korean forced laborers constructed and the Americans captured, etc. It was the end of the last filming day and the sun was going down rapidly. We bumped into a huge World War II airplane wreck... and the only musical piece which was yet to be recorded was Beuys <Infiltration to Cello> piece.⁵ [...] This scene inside my videotape <Guadalcanal Requiem> looks like the result of a long research work done by a professional scenario writer. Pasteur said, in science “Chance favors only the prepared mind.” Yet we were not even prepared.”⁶ Here we can see that Paik did not necessarily follow the filming route of predetermined locations, and not bound by a war narrative, he took into account the improvised and spontaneous interaction with the island itself.

In Sequence 2, Paik argues, through the narration of Russell Connor, that World War II was the first oil war. In his draft report First Oil War⁷ submitted to the Rockefeller Foundation, he also sees the war through the analysis of international relations and environmental issues related to global energy, into which his

own personal experiences are interwoven in a humorous but insightful way. When the home refrigerator in his childhood became out of order, pieces of natural ice were delivered from the Han River to his house, with which he and his brothers made hand-made ice cream. He recounted this by borrowing a cybernetic notion of feedback: “We devised a double-drum bucket. The inner perimeter held cream while the outer perimeter held the mixture of salt and ice. We three boys took turns and rotated the inner drum very fast for a long time, until the cream inside became sticky. We quickly learned the law of negative feedback... the input energy was far greater than the output energy... like today’s nuclear fusion. Exhausted, we never made ice cream again.” This is a Paikian fable about technological developments, natural resources of energy, and human life. As implied in this report, Paik’s contemplation of the global issues of energy war led to the works like <Guadalcanal Requiem>, which was also derived from his social reflections as a media artist and media specialist who researched into television in the American

5 The famous aircraft crash Beuys went through in 1943 made a significant change to his art. Bearing this in mind, Paik says whether it was “by chance or by providence” for him to film <Infiltration> at the site of airplane wreck in Guadalcanal.

6 Nam June Paik, “Beuys Vox 1961-86,” Seoul: Won Gallery, pp.37-9.

7 Nam June Paik, “First Oil War (draft),” Series 200R, undated, New York: Rockefeller Archive Center.

broadcasting stations. Furthermore, he as a Korean experienced the war through the Japanese media, “yet with the cynical eyes of the third party,”⁸ which forged his unique perspective into World War II and thereby framed <Guadalcanal Requiem>.

“The main character of the Guadalcanal is neither Charlotte Moorman nor Bob Edwards [...] Main character of this show is time.”⁹

Why did he define this video as a work about time? We can find cues for this in his coinage “nostalgia is an extended feedback” appearing on the booklet of the Carnegie Hall, and also used as a title of his later essay written in 1992. “Before 1950 / Artists discovered the abstract space. / After 1960 / Video artists discovered the abstract time. / time *without* contents.”¹⁰

In Sequence 2 and Sequence 5 of <Guadalcanal Requiem>, a wristwatch is being swept back and forth by sea waves in a precarious manner. The watch seems not to do its function of indicating time but to symbolize the time without contents, the ‘empty’ time. In the same writing, Paik says that as video can handle time parameters, “video can accelerate or slow down, reverse and inverse,

warp and distort the straight arrow of time.” This is in line with the cybernetic idea of time which, seeing that time is only an abstract notion, questions the a priori objectification of time and advances the perception of temporal properties that vary depending on the dynamics of each different forms of life.¹¹

<Guadalcanal Requiem> deconstructs a historical narrative, and what come forward instead are mythological memories embedded in the whole texture of the Guadalcanal island. “Thirty-five years after, hundreds of dead trees surround the hills like, like abstract sculptures in the midst of the green vegetation.”(Sequence 16) To evoke the memories, Moorman did performances of creeping with a blue parachute and crawling with a cello on her back, all of which stressed her bodily actions so as to awaken musical resonances across the land and the sea. Historical memories represented in figures and records seem hollow, like “to describe Rembrandt to a blind man.”(Sequence 13) On the contrary, mythological memories dug up from nature are not confined to human memories and bring

8 From the letter Paik wrote in September 1979 to Charlotte Curtis, an editor of New York Times ‘Op Ed’ section. Nam June Paik, Series 200R, New York: Rockefeller Archive Center.

9 Hans Breder and Stephen C. Foster, eds., *Intermedia: Enacting the Liminal*, School of Art and Art History, Des Moines: The University of Iowa, 1978, p.135, re-quoted from Edith Decker-Phillips. *Paik Video*, Barrytown, NY: Barrytown, Ltd, 1998, p.166.

10 Nam June Paik, “Nostalgia is the Extended Feedback(‘30-‘60-‘90),” 1992, in Edith Decker and Irmeline Lebeer, eds., *Nam June Paik: Du Cheval à Christo et Autres Écrits*,

Bruxelles: Lebeer Hossmann, 1993, p.19.

11 Biologist and philosopher Humberto Maturana who played an important role in the second-order cybernetics wrote about time as follows. “As the notion of time has been generated as an abstraction of our experiences of sequences of processes in the many dimensions and forms of our human existence, it has been generated in relation to the multiplicity of forms in which we live. [...] Thus we speak of fast and slow time, passing time, letting time pass, having or not having time, time coincidence, networks of time, simultaneity, [...] Indeed, each domain has its own time dynamics as it has its own process

dynamics. [...] What becomes a problem in the long run, is the unaware adoption of the notion of time as an explanatory principle that is accepted as a matter of course giving to it a transcendental ontological status.” Humberto Maturana, *The Nature of Time*, 1995, <http://www.inteco.cl/biology/nature.htm>.

about the vibrations felt here and now.

Mythological memories are therefore able to fragmentize the present, to superimpose the present and the past, to delay the temporal perception of the present, to make irreversible time reversible, and to multiply temporal layers ad infinitum.

In Guadalcanal where tens of thousands of skulls and souls would be wandering for several decades, fancy bungalows for tourists are thriving and islanders have different political opinions about their independence from Britain. In Sequence 17, an islander talks about coconuts he planted to remember the mankind's first landing on the moon, the independence of the USA, and the boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Antonio Inoki. "I just want to tell it that way and this to remember [sic]." Video technology for Paik is equivalent to the islander's coconut, which reinvigorates historical memories by jumbling them up in the present tense. <Guadalcanal Requiem> is not a documentary reportage assuming a truth about history and discovering

and delivering that truth. It is neither a political film to level an accusation against somebody for the tragedies of the war, nor an artistic film to heal the trauma caused by the war. To nullify the null, i.e., the blank time outside 'history,' this video is a medium to let nostalgia, flowering when one looks back, make the abstract time of history more specific in the present coordinate of everyday life. Through this medium, the feedback from the past, fused with the present, becomes double, which turns our temporal experience acute and vivid.

In his field trip to Guadalcanal, Paik staged a screening of <Fist Fight> by Robert Breer and a concert of <TV Bra> by Moorman for Guadalcanal people. They were very different audiences from the New York art world, but the islanders enjoyed the performances enough. This is Paik's way of solacing the souls in <Guadalcanal Requiem>. #3

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