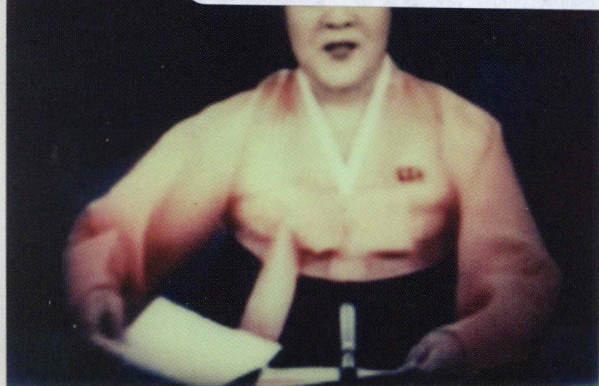


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북한의 수사학 아이콘

ICONS OF RHETORIC

CHRIS BARRETT & GIANLUCA SPEZZA

“The revolution in art and literature should not be confined to one genre of art; it must be effected in all genres of art and literature. We must revolutionize the cinema, opera, drama and all other genres, and publicize it across the world.”

Kim Jong Il ‘On the Art of Cinema’, 1973

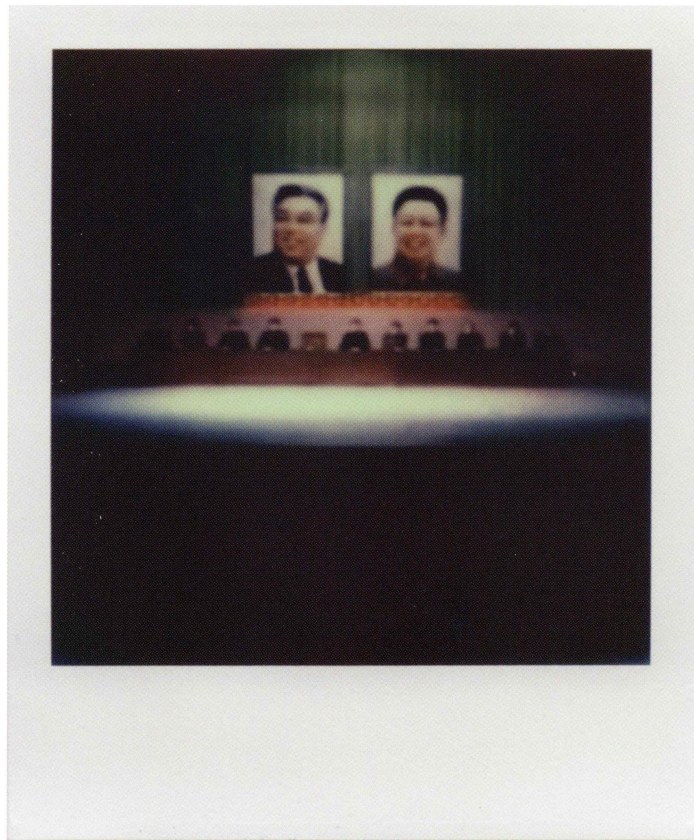
<< Ri Chun Hee, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s most aired newsreader. Ri has been the chief news presenter of Korean Central Television (KCTV), North Korea’s only TV channel, since 1974. She studied performance art at Pyongyang University of Theatre and Film and is now believed to have taken a back seat, offering advice and training to young presenters.



A symbol of loyalty and dedication to the regime and its ideals, the pin with the image of either Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il, or both, should always be worn close to the heart. North Koreans do not speak much to foreigners perhaps, as much as their clothes and accessories do to their State.



Women in the North Korean military are celebrated as heroines, almost on par with men. Fierce and fearless, they express femininity by 'doing their part' in the perennial struggle to keep the Motherland free from foreign invasions.



Leadership in contemporary North Korea is much a spiritual thing: post mortem, Kim Il Sung oversees the State as the eternal president alongside Kim Jong Il, the eternal general and military leader.



The Pungsan Dog (풍산개, Pungsan Gae) is regarded as a national treasure by North Koreans. Praised for its loyalty and strength, the dog embodies virtues of pure 'Koreaness' as perceived in North Korean culture.



A ritual state, North Korea survives by celebrating myths of uniqueness, racial purity, and revolutionary struggle for independence. Will these insulating methods last and are they needed to maintain the tenure of Kim Jong Un?



Digital Contact Sheet >>

Icons of Rhetoric stills are created by utilizing a smartphone to capture and reframe content sourced from North Korean media online. Digital images are then turned into physical objects with the use of instant film and the Impossible Instant Lab device.



INTRODUCTION

BY GIANLUCA SPEZZA

“Do they really mean it?” is arguably one of the most common questions asked about North Korea’s exploits on the world stage. Seemingly irrational, unfathomable, uber-serious to the point of being mistaken as a robot-society, The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, more commonly referred to as North Korea, continues to defy intelligence reports, academic categorisation and common sense. The intricacies of life in North Korea, in all its domestic aspects related to society, politics, and ideology, are considered ‘an impossible topic’ to research. This is partially because of the objective difficulties in conducting fieldwork in a country where academic visits are rare, interaction with the government or other institutions is considered to be cumbersome at best, and tourism can barely scratch the surface of the unknown, due to emphatic restrictions. The opinion that Western media and part of the academic world, is that of a country ruled by irrational leaders, bounded by irrational beliefs, with no official documents, data, or reliable information of any sort. A country about which we know very little, and that little cannot be trusted. However, how much of this is true? Can we be certain that what we read in western publications on North Korea is factually accurate, and a reliable presentation of the country as a whole? There is a fundamental problem with North Korean coverage in that a good number of its observers do not speak Korean, and have little familiarity with the cultural context of the country. At times, commentators operate a form of ‘selective ignorance’ about what North Korean media and official documents say, what can be trusted and what cannot be.

<< Detail of a 2004 world map printed in Pyongyang.
The map was picked up by Barrett on a visit to the DPRK in 2007.

For example, nearly all statements about the country’s nuclear ambitions are taken at face value, because the issue is indeed troubling. Nevertheless, claims by the North Korean government, and its media emphasis on national culture, and race-based nationalism, are often dismissed as something of lesser importance, as if North Koreans themselves did not fully subscribe to them. However, the evidence and the sources to support either one claim or the other are exactly the same. It is, in other words, a matter of perspectives. It’s what we choose to see, read and believe about North Korea. In most studies dedicated to the DPRK, the country’s perspective is hardly, if ever taken into account. Icons of Rhetoric (IOR) is a visual and literary project based on what the eminent North Korea scholar Han Park calls “the phenomenological approach, in the sense that North Korean perceptions constitute the reality and that these perceptions must be articulated from the standpoint of the perceiver”¹. IOR explores topics typically associated with contemporary media, daily life, social history, cultural sociology and anthropology to illustrate what are the main drivers of North Korean culture and society, and how these shape national behaviour. Through images and explanatory texts, testimonies and translations of original sources, IOR approaches North Korea in a way best described by ethnologist and North Korea expert Sonia Ryang: “to abstract the cultural logic that runs through North Korean society as an undercurrent to its human relations”², preferring an interpretative analysis to a more empirical one. Icons of Rhetoric contextualises North Korean culture as it is told to North Koreans in their daily life; it comprehends the perspective of what the DPRK tells its own citizens as if no one foreign eye were watching.



1 Park, Han S., North Korea's Perceptions of Self and Others: Implications for Policy Choices, Pacific Affairs, Vol. 73, No. 4, Special Issue: Korea in Flux (Winter, 2000-2001), p.503

2 Ryang, Sonia, Reading North Korea. An Ethnological Inquiry, Harvard University Press, 2012, p.11

Icons of Rhetoric is an on going text and image based project created by photographer Chris Barrett and researcher/writer Gianluca Spezza. The work concerns itself with the visual representation of North Korea and the contextualisation of media images. The project looks to explore the visual lexicon which permeates the often cited 'most isolated country in the world': North Korea.

For more information please follow links via the IOR twitter @iconsofrhetoric

Icons of Rhetoric has been made possible with the kind support of the-impossible-project.com & squaremag.org

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