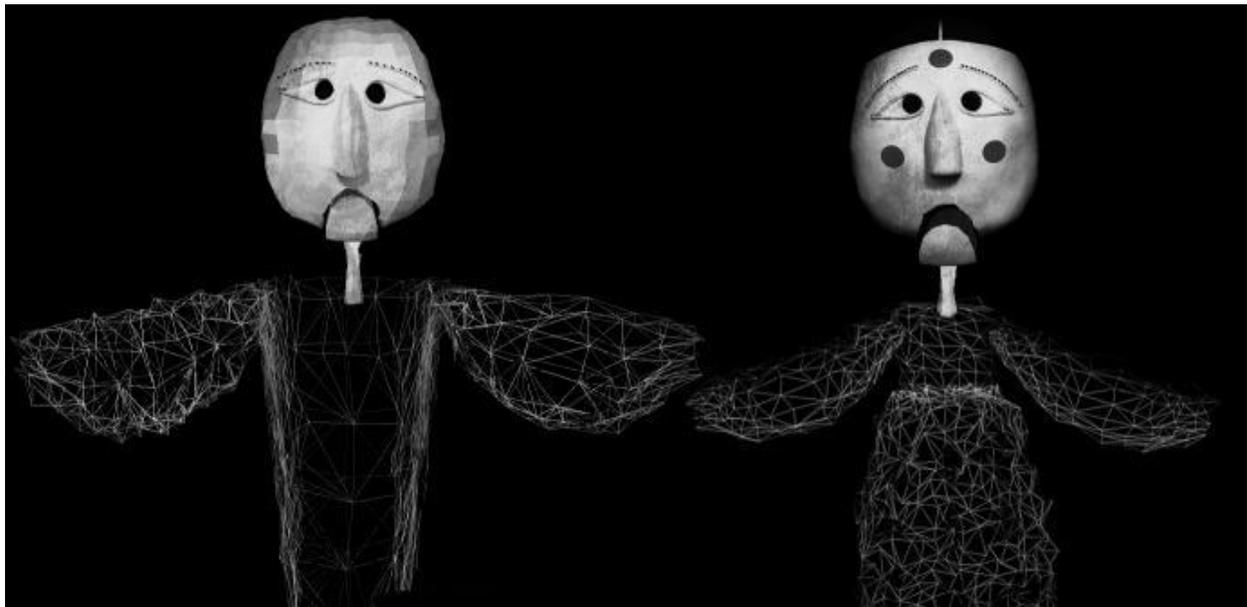


# CRYING WITH THE VIRTUAL

Semi Ryu & Stefano Faralli

This paper will deal with the ontological issue of the virtual body, exploring the rich meta sensory experience of the user with an avatar. It will explore the sensory dimension, emotional flow, and transcendental quality of the virtual body. This will be investigated in the context of Korean experiential reality and the concurrent process of gradually transforming emotional psyches.



*Parting on Z London, 2010, Semi Ryu, Interactive Media Performance, Copyright Semi Ryu and Stefano Faralli.*

## Introduction

Historically there are evidences of individuals inhabiting an alternative body in many ritual and performative contexts. Becoming a ritual body, or leaving/transcending the physical body, demonstrates the continuous emotional development and perceptual changes of body and mind over time. It provides a platform for understanding the potential of digital bodies in virtual space; what we call "avatars."

Virtual space affords an infinite depth along the Z-axis, bearing both physical and psychic dimensions. Virtual bodies traveling on such a vast Z-axis constitute new ritual bodies parting on Z, becoming increasingly remote, intangible, flexible, deconstructed, multiplied, and fragmented. Virtual bodies present us with a new challenge and distance to overcome in the process of interacting, communing, spiraling, coping or conflicting with the actual body. This paper introduces a paradoxical inquiry of seeking the full potentiality of being and experience between multiplied selves assisted by digital technology.

Korean experiential reality runs on infinite paradoxical loops, swirling like a tornado, deeply touching the human psyche and emotion. It integrates body and mind, creating a meta layer of experience and body, continuously negotiating the state of "neither-nor": neither physical nor mental, neither actual nor virtual. The emotional flow of the meta body will be explored through the perspective of Korean experiential reality—a paradoxical process of constant becoming—and through the "virtual" as the potentiality of being and experience in the digital age.

### Ritual Body, Parting on Z

In order to discuss the virtual body, we begin by discussing the alternative bodies used in ritual, such as masks, puppets, and performing objects. These ritual bodies have the essential characteristic of continuously traveling on the Z-axis in both the physical and psychic dimensions. In the history of ritual, mask, and puppetry, technological development has focused on the critical quality of the ritual body continuously parting from the actual body. Baird notes that "gradually, in the course of centuries, the hinged and jointed mask moved upward, off the head, and was held in the hands in front of the body. Later it moved farther away and was made to live by the manipulation of strings. [1] Baird's linear progression places the ritual body on an outward trajectory, leaving the performer's body and changing from a mask to a puppet. In this evolution of the ritual body, the moment of physical detachment from the performer's body is a critical shift, yielding two centers of gravity. Kaplin notes,

"The performing object has become detached from the actor's body, developing its own center of gravity, its own presence. It is at this point, where the center of gravity of the performing object and the performer are distinct from each other, that the term 'puppet' can be used." [2]

This moment of detachment and separation would be the point of farewell between the actual and ritual body, creating distance. Distance provides, in both the physical and psychic dimensions, the ability to watch one's own performance on the Cartesian Z-axis at eye level. Separation yields detachment, but also a view on one's own becoming. This separation is a tragedy, which activates the paradoxical process of the ritual of becoming, akin to an impossible love dilemma between symbolic lover. The potential body constantly parts from the actual body in farewell. Supported by virtual interactive technology, the ritual body parts on the Z-axis of the virtual realm—the metaverse—over the network. In this context, virtual space can be considered an infinite space for farewell. It becomes a space for an active void connected with Korean experiential reality initiating the ritual—tearful, but also joyful.

### Korean Experiential Reality: Active Void

Korean experiential reality is about lightening the weight of actuality in order to open the infinite space of meta realms to full potentiality. [3] Distance is created and even celebrated. If one continuously "fills" oneself, one becomes overloaded—too heavy to fly. Taoist Lao-Tze tells us to empty ourselves until we are light like a feather, and then "being itself" will find place in the void. Emptiness will take us to the sky, to the infinite space of meta realms where we may find being itself—potentiality. [4] In this space, emptiness will shift into fullness. The void will be filled. This is the paradoxical state of *Heo-Lyeong-Chang-Chang*—completely empty and completely full. [5] It is the Korean experiential reality in continuous conflict between the actual and the meta layer; the chaotic state of neither here nor there—a quantum state of paradox. This state is an "active void," an ontological journey of taking flight—continuously dreaming, desiring, and eventually transcending the sky.

This is a complicated and rich emotional psychic journey, presenting:

- *Jung*: the nostalgic dream towards infinite oneness—unconditional love
- *Han*: an extreme state of grief, distinguished by a strong wish to overcome a situation that seems impossible
- *Shin-Myeong*: the ultimate state of playfulness and joy
- *Moo-A*: a transcendent state of quiet mind and detachment from the phenomena, which moves our attention to the horizon, looking at entire quantum fields of nature.

## Jung

Jung is the Korean psychic feeling of "us" [6] It represents strong nostalgia towards infinite oneness, and the Korean sense of affecting and caring for each other. The Korean word *Ha-Na* means "one" with the added dimension of "single" or "whole," reflecting continuous movement between single and whole. [7] Jung is voluntary emotion towards other selves, transcending rational criteria of judgment or likability. [6] There are two opposing cases where Jung might be created.

*Mi-Un Jung* is created when one individual experiences difficulties and disagreements with another. Individuals may not like each other, but this situation creates Jung between the persons as they share time, place, and story together. On the other hand, *Ko-Un Jung* is generated when one individual has positive experiences and memories with another. Jung is usually mixed feelings of these opposing aspects—some of *Mi-Un Jung* and some of *Ko-Un Jung*. Even if the two Jung start from almost opposite situations, they are considered to be the same Jung. Jung is a warm and peaceful mind embracing all, beyond agreement, belief, preference, comfort or likability.

Jung is a property of connection not only between human beings but also between human beings and inanimates, such as between a human being and the sky. Jung may also be explored between the actual and virtual body, pursuing infinite oneness in potentiality. It is like the concept of Eros in Whitehead's terminology, which states that the unification of the ultimate is Eros. [8] Eros is the will for life towards which every potential being strives.

## Han

Han exists on the other side of Jung. Ironically, Jung sensitizes us to the distances we confront in our daily lives. However, there is a sense of deep frustration and incompleteness about our current situation of "not yet one," paired with a strong desire to overcome the limitation. Han emerges from the gap between potentiality and actuality. At the end of Jung, there comes Han. [9]

Han is a paradoxical state of consciousness that combines an extreme state of grief in a feeling of incompleteness with a great hope and desire for overcoming the situation that seems almost impossible. Han is the Korean psyche of the determinant of the struggle. It is created in the void we are eager to fill. It is a complicated emotion composed of a grief and a strong will to overcome that grief. Fundamentally, Han is a feeling of incompleteness and absence, activating the powerful wish to be completed or fulfilled in infinite wholeness. It is a determination of the struggle with and honest examination of the current tragedy in a fundamental level of Korean consciousness. In a romantic sense, it is a tragically impossible

love story. It is the Korean way of lightening the one's psychic weight by acknowledging one's pain in a dream of flying to full potentiality.

Han has tremendous power to turn the world upside down. What the king of the Cho-Sun dynasty of Korea feared most was to see people looking up to sky with sighs or tears, since this is the sign of Han. Han calls forth revolution, which makes people look to the sky with fearsome desire for change, wishing to fly. Han motivates people to see beyond restrictive procedures and power structures, opening their eyes to fundamental inquiries.

### Shin-Myeong and Moo-A

Shin-Myeong, the ultimate state of playfulness derived from Han, is the opposite state of tremendous constraints. Han works as a springboard, allowing us to fly higher and higher. This condition brings a synergy that cannot be explained in a logical way. It has the dynamic power of swirling movement, passing from one to another. The real potential of Shin-Myeong is driven by Han. [10]

The paradoxical relationship between Han and Shin-Myeong can be described in the Korean clown's tightrope walking: the act appears risky; the clown is unstable and unbalanced, continuously swinging left and right. The clown usually holds a fan in one hand, which seems to defy the act of balancing but actually demonstrates a different philosophy. One oscillates continuously between balancing and unbalancing in order to find the greater moment of balance. It is the cosmic "tree" connecting two separate poles—left and right. The taller the cosmic tree, the more unstable it appears, and, paradoxically, the greater its stillness also appears. We may find ultimate joy in this process of unstable walking. The deeper the Han, the more Shin-Myeong and the more powerful the ritual.

In the climax of the Shin-Myeong, the experience would move to a meta layer, detached from the phenomena. It is this shift from desire to non-desire, from mind to no-mind, which turns the world upside down. [11] It is the moment when we realize that we and the sky are parts of the entire picture; we are looking at the sky transcendently in a no-mind state. This is the Korean state of Moo-A-Ji-Kyung, or Moo-Shim, where the self is completely erased, abandoning our tedious efforts for owning or rationalizing. This state is quiet but also noisy. It welcomes the tremendous paradoxical conflicts of the actual and potential, but the frequency rate exceeds the audible range of human perception, and therefore we experience quiet, as in the eye of the storm. This is the point when our experience turns upside down, accompanied by completely different perception. Our narrowed focus shifts to the horizon, and we move from desire to non-desire. We find our entire selves looking at the sky with the ability of looking at entire fields—being itself. This state brings sensory integration, meta sensory experience, and intuition—opening space for creative imagination.

### Virtual Body

Deleuze defines the virtual as a potentiality that becomes fulfilled in the actual, adding that this state is not material, yet it is real. [12]

In Korean experiential reality, the actual and the virtual contrast and balance each other in a paradoxical context. The virtual as full potentiality of experience can only be defined "from" and "through" the actual layer in the effort of erasing the actual itself, creating an "active void." It is an ironic process of creating the problematic situation of impossible love on purpose.

In the virtual puppetry projects presented here, the word "virtual" continues to be in the context of Deleuze, but also refers to the technical terminology of 3D "virtual" interactive technology, proposing a marriage of ontological and technological issues. The physical presence of the user has been transferred to a virtual body, such as an avatar, a virtual object, or sometimes to an entire virtual space. I seek to find Jung between multiple bodies in multiple dimensions voluntarily having affection and feelings for each other. Here we can begin to process the ritual through the different entities as they are emotionally and psychologically involved.

It has been said in Korea that Jung exists between the human and the sky. [5] In the state of Jung we feel another's heart and emotions, even with inanimate things. Feeling others' hearts is a Korean way of extending one's own body, organs, and senses. Jung is a way of relocating, distributing, and expanding the body to a different dimension of reality.

### Crying with the Virtual: Performer's Perspective

My virtual puppetry projects explore the paradoxical relationship of multiple body presences in the layers of virtual, actual, and in-between, within the context of impossible love. The story of impossible love highlights the tragic component of the cosmological relationship, exploring the infinite and loving-constant process of dreaming the virtual.

Although this virtual puppetry project is still in the beginning stages of critical inquiry, my experience performing "Parting on Z" in London would be an interesting case study for future research. In collaboration with Stefano Faralli and in the context of the ritual body parting on the Z-axis, the "Parting on Z" performance explored Han in the paradoxical relationship between the virtual puppet and the puppeteer via the distance between avatar and user—symbolic lovers facing each other, continuously exchanging dialogues of love and farewell. The story chosen for this performance was the farewell scene from Chun-Hyang-Ga, the Korean impossible love story that demonstrates Han. The entire performance produced a flow of sensations, moving from Jung to Han and field consciousness. My experience as performer was emotionally overwhelming, causing my whole body to shake and weep with my lover-avatar, and the audience appeared to make an emotional connection to this performance. The performance started with an impossible relationship between two virtual lovers, and then it evolved to a relationship between the virtual body (avatar) and actual body (performer) as they faced each other and exchanged dialogue.

Speaking into a microphone and standing on a Wii Fit balance board, I played two virtual characters who are deeply in love but having to say farewell. The realtime voice input and balance signals from my body caused the virtual puppets to produce synchronized and responsive face and body movements. In the middle of the performance, I turned on two candle lights, which projected onto my face. I was dressed as Chun-Hyang, the female character, and started performing her in real space, facing Mong-Ryong, her male lover, as a virtual body on the screen. From this point forward, there was a farewell between my actual and virtual body. The process of handing Chun-Hyang's ring to Mong-Ryong and drinking from a glass in farewell was emotionally overwhelming. My body and lips were trembling violently, and I was unable to speak.

During the last scene, as I watched my lover slowly disappear beyond virtual fields, I walked with him in virtual space connected by the Balance board. I was standing on my toes, lengthening my neck and narrowing my eyes. Based on the original script of Chun-Hyang-Ga, I said, "You look as big as a moon, a star,

a butterfly, a firefly, and disappearing beyond the horizon (Z). I don't see your shadow. I don't see even a bit of shadow." This describes the constant process of parting on Z, putting this farewell in a two-dimensional perspective—a different dimension of reality which is quite humorous and poetic. I felt myself stop crying in the middle of the process, in an extreme state of grief but with a smile on my face, by the time my virtual lover was the size of firefly. I began looking at entire virtual fields connected to my walking steps. My attention had shifted from a narrowed focus to the horizon. I watched my virtual body departing over the horizon until he became a tiny bit of shadow, a tiny bit of information, slowly disappearing on the Z-axis. I maintained my gaze until his tiny bit of body was erased completely, just as Korean people wave goodbye until the other is completely out of sight. This may be a way to welcome and celebrate the full pain of farewell: grief, regret, and longing; the full process of emptying self. I left my avatar to infinity, forever walking on Z.

### Future of Virtual Puppetry

I have been working on virtual puppetry projects in collaboration with Stefano Faralli, exploring the relationship between the user and the virtual body. It started in 2002 with the simple idea of a voice-activated puppet, investigating the spiraling interaction between puppet and puppeteer. This involved a talking puppet lip-syncing with the user's words spoken into a microphone, which somehow magically drew the user into a transformative state in the process of oral storytelling. Oral storytelling has been a major component of virtual puppetry, with its roots in shamanism and traditions of mask and puppet theatre. Computer technology can support a free improvisational environment for live orality. Data analysis of human voice such as texture, volume, rhythm or tone adds more playful interactive components and fosters an interesting relationship between the actual and virtual body. Potentially, a combination of speech recognition and simple text classification techniques can produce a generic idea of the topic of the dialogue, and open the possibility of appropriate graphic and/or acoustic feedback for perceptual developments in human psyche. By deeply investigating the psychic and emotional states of the performer and spectators, virtual puppetry may benefit those who have difficulties communicating in traditional ways.

## References and Notes:

1. Bill Baird, *The Art of the Puppet* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 30.
2. Stephen Kaplin, "A Puppet Tree," in *Puppets, Masks, and Performing objects*, ed. John Bell (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2001), 23.
3. Y. Kim, *Understanding of Korean Aesthetics: Looks though Korean Habitus*(Seoul: Ewha University Press, 1998), 291-293.
4. Y. Kim, *No-Ja and 21st Century (1)* (Seoul: Tong-Na-Mu, 1999), 192.
5. S. Kim, *Donghak and Process Philosophy* (Seoul: Ji-Sik Press, 2001), 279, 309-310.
6. S. Choi, "Korean Psychology of Shim-Jung: Phenomenological understanding of Jung and Han," in *Proceedings of Daewei Symposium* (Seoul: Korean Psychological Association, 1993), 9, 15-17.
7. K. Lee, J. Park and O. Cha, *The Root of Korean Life Philosophy* (Seoul: Ewha Press, 2001), 64-65.
8. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1933/1948), 295-296.
9. M. Han and S. Han, "Cultural Psychology of Shin-Myeong," in *Korean Journal of Psychology* 26, no. 1 (2007): 85.
10. D. Cho, *Catharsis, Rasa, Shin-Myeong* (Seoul: Ji-Sik Press, 1997).
11. Steve Odin, *Artistic Detachment in Japan and the West: Psychic Distance in Comparative Aesthetics* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 36-39.
12. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 1988), 96-100.