

# Ecstatic Space

Haein Song

The head of In's Company/ The director of Korean Performing Art Development, MARO  
631-8 Minsokhaean-ro Pyoseon-myeon Seogwipo-si Jeju, Korea  
Jeju, 63629, South Korea  
[joyhaein@gmail.com](mailto:joyhaein@gmail.com)

## Abstract

The paper presents the concept of ecstatic space based on the author's earlier practice-led research exploring a marriage between digital technologies and ecstatic technologies of *kut*, a Korean shamanic ritual exerting a significant influence on the culture, art, and psyche of Korea. Ecstatic space is inspired by *kut*; it is the immersive and transitional space where is being given the potential of atmospheric change by the *kut* performer's imagination and ecstatic technologies. This paper initially offers an alternative perspective to understand techniques of ecstasy by highlighting "spatial ecstasy" of *kut* rather than "ecstatic trance" of shamans. Subsequently, the paper examines how the ecstatic space of *kut* is conceptually connected to virtual space of digital practices, discovering similarities and differences between them. Shedding new light on ecstatic space, this will open the way for future development of ecstatic space in the contemporary milieu.

## Keywords

*Kut* (Korean shamanic rituals), ecstatic space, techniques of ecstasy, digital performance, virtual reality, transitional atmospheres.

## Ecstatic space



Figure 1. *Interactive digital ritual, Miyeoji-bangdui, with a virtual soul of the dancer moving according to the shimbang's chant*, 2015, The Creative Center for Convergence Culture, Seoul, © Haein Song.

Ecstatic Space is the space inspired by *kut*, also spelt *gut* (KOR. 굿), a Korean shamanic ritual which exerts a significant influence on the culture, art, and psyche of Korea. With the development of Shamanism studies, *kut* has been known as the practice of *shimbang* (or *mudang*)<sup>1</sup>, a Korean shaman who performs a professional role by linking a variety of invisible beings and the human as a liminal being. When a *kut* is held, an everyday place is changed into *kutp'an*, a temporary stage of *kut* decorated with a variety of divine installations. Then, people enter *kutp'an* to experience shamanic rituals including playing music, singing, dancing, chanting, reciting mythical stories, consuming ritual wine and food and performing spirit-possession rituals.

*Kut* is assumed to have about a 5000-year-old history with evidence of prehistoric rock paintings in Korea<sup>2</sup>. Although ancient Korean shamanism had a strong power as a primitive religion, *shimbang* and *kut* have long been suppressed as superstition due to the influx of other religions

<sup>1</sup> Korean shamans are referred to as different names by the regions such as *shimbang* in Jeju Province, *Mudang* in Kyeongsang Provinces and *Tangol* in Jeolla Provinces (Yang 1988: 21). Although the term, *mudang*, is used most often in Korean shamanism to refer to Korean shaman, this paper uses the term *shimbang* because this research is done in Jeju area with Jeju shamans. *Kut* is performed not only by *shimbang* but also by professional *kut* performers whose ritual performances aim to bring happiness, heal the sick, and comfort the souls.

<sup>2</sup> The images of dancing shamans in *Baugudae* Rock Art (Namgung 2001: 133) as well as the several shamanic elements in *Cheojeonri* Rock Art also reveal that a *shimbang* existed in the middle of Neolithic Age or the Bronze Age (Chang, 2014: 61-62).

and the Japanese colonial policy to obliterate Korean culture (Jo 1997: 106–09). The reason that *kut* could still survive as a cultural influence in South Korea today, despite the political and religious oppression, is probably because of people's needs of *kut* to cope with the material and spiritual matters of a progressive modern society.

According to a master *shimbang*, Soon Sil Seo, one of the most significant purposes of *kut* is healing: she proposes that *kut* has played a role of what a mental hospital is doing today, solving the unfathomable personal, family, or social pains. The curing power of *kut* takes an integrated and embodied approach to mind, body and spirit due to the *shimbang*'s belief that an imbalance of the mind and body or a disharmony with spirits causes the problems of our life. *Kut* can be identified as a sort of Dionysian festival of Korea that allows people to play outside of class and status. Even in pre-modern Korean society where the idea of Elders first and androcentrism was predominant, *kut* retained equal rights and opportunities for everyone to enjoy rituals with the belief that all souls are equally important regardless of the taxonomic classification as well as the social status of real life (Kim 2009). Making people and souls vent anger, regrets, and sorrows through comforting and delighting rituals, *Kut* has been in charge of healing the psychological illness and wishing good luck to the community.

This moves us on to the question: what is the primary *kut* technique that causes the healing effect? In shamanism studies, 'the technique of ecstasy' has been raised by numerous shamanism scholars as one of the most significant elements for therapeutic efficacy (Chae 2010; Cho 2012; Eliade 1972; Kim & Choi 2013; Pratt 2007; Sorgenfrei 2010). This ecstasy has been mainly expounded in the context of the ability of the shaman (or *shimbang*), rather than that of *kut* (or shamanic rituals) in shamanism studies, ever since Mircea Eliade defined a shaman as the great master of ecstasy (Eliade 1972: 4). Eliade's *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* is regarded as the classic book of the shamanism study (Pratt, 2007: xi), opening up the different understandings on shamanism for European scholars who read shamans as a mentally deranged, disturbed and certifiable person (Cho 2012: 452-453). Eliade defines ecstasy as one of the fundamental techniques of a shaman, which always contains a trance – "a temporary abandonment of the body by the soul of the shaman" (153), or "losing one's soul" or "losing consciousness" that travels through the sky and the land by a soul leaving his or her body (154).

However, Eliade's interpretation of ecstasy seems insufficient to provide a clear ontological criterion of defining Korean shamans and *kut* since it barely corresponds to the techniques of *shimbang*. The soul of *shimbang* does not have a journey, but its body is possessed by, or cohabits with other spirits or supernatural beings at will to communicate with them (Lim 2006: 76–77). Instead of losing their consciousness, *shimbang* becomes a placatory counsellor or translator who delivers the words of spirits to help them to communicate with people or vice versa (Walraven 2008: 243). More importantly, the trance or possession is not a prerequisite for every *shimbang*. In fact, a majority of Korean shamans are *Sesup-mu* (hereditary

shaman) who do not appear to have the spiritual ability but comfort spirits and people through their highly-trained dances, songs and drums. Consequently, confusion arises due to the different forms of ecstasy. As Eliade argues, if the spiritual ability of the shaman – "Spirit Journey" – is the essence of the techniques of ecstasy, we can deductively assume that a *shimbang* without spiritual ability is no longer a shaman, and the *kut* that is not controlled by spiritual power is no longer a *kut*. This shaman-centred definition of ecstasy provides a lack of theoretical dimensions to interpret *kut* and *shimbang*.

Therefore, my research project explores the "spatial ecstasy" of *kut* rather than "ecstatic trance" of the shaman to offer an alternative perspective to understand the *technique of ecstasy*. In detail, when we go back to the root of "ecstasy", it comes from the Greek *ekstasis*, meaning "standing outside yourself" (Cresswell 2009). Eliade points out the soul journey of the shaman as the ecstatic technique because the shaman's soul is, in fact, travelling outside of oneself. However, in a broadened sense, it can be interpreted as the mental state that people feel, as if they are standing on one side of their world. Consequently, the state when people feel like they are stepping into the alternative reality escaping from their ordinary routine is the starting point to reach the ecstatic state. Given this, the ecstasy technique can be regarded as a sort of technology that lets people stand in another form of surroundings, which is different from the ordinary everyday life that they are accustomed to.



Figure 2. *Miyeoji-bangdui*, with *shimbang*, having a cleansing ritual for the virtual souls of the performer, 2015, The Creative Center for Convergence Culture, Seoul. ©Haein Song.

Regarding this, it can thus be suggested that *kut* is an art that can impart a certain ambience of the space through the ecstatic technology. *Kut* is designed to trigger the performers to cross the threshold between consciousness and unconsciousness via a deep immersion, while *shimbang* is a

master artist who can sincerely expose what they feel and imagine at the full immersion state. The movements of *shimbang* expressed through *kut* influence the tone, energy or ambience of the space, which help people to drift into the spiritual realm of *kut* and to temporarily exist there, separate from the material world. *Shimbang* sometimes evokes spatial hallucination in the ecstatic state. Whirling around the space faster and faster with a reverberating sound of gongs, the *shimbang* seems to be floating in the air, and the

stage feels like revolving around her. The purpose of this spatial ecstasy would be a spiritual, personal or communal healing; providing a place where people experience another atmosphere which enables them to think, retrospect, be happy or sad, laugh, and enjoy themselves together.

In this paper, the term 'ecstatic space' has come to be used to refer to the transitional space triggered by this spatial ecstasy – the space which is being influenced by the power of *kut* performers' imagination and ecstatic technologies, thereby being given the potential of atmospheric transformations. The focus of the ecstasy technology is thus creating the ecstatic space for people rather than presenting the ecstatic power of *shimbang*. This carries the significant overtones that the *shimbang*'s ability is dependent not only on how strong their spiritual powers are but also on how well they guide people to be engaged with and enjoy the world of *kut* through their dancing and singing rituals. This might be the reason why there are two types of *kut* performers in Korea, those who have remarkable artistic skills and those who possess a divine power.

### Ecstatic technologies & digital technologies



Figure 3. Immersive performance ritual, NEO-KUT, with the *shimbang* dancing in the kime -space created by the projection lights<sup>Cent</sup> Song.er , 2016, At Artaud Performance the Center, Little ondon, © Haeinon

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If the ecstatic techniques of *kut* serve as a vehicle for accessing the mythical worlds of *shimbang* beyond the ordinary life, current digital technologies appear to offer a modern approach for accessing the digital world. Czechborn philosopher and media theorist Vilém Flusser addresses the utopian view of digital technology as promising a 'new ontology' or 'new anthropology' in the digital age with respect to art. He asserts that people in previous ages tried to gain control over the given world (*datum*) through technologies, but now, with digital media, people can artificially produce the world (*factum*) with their imagination, becoming artists. For him, a computer is a

<sup>3</sup> The three VRs including: 1) virtual reality through interactive digital technology; 2) validated reality through reactive mechanical

medium that begins to make this change because it is not merely a machine but the device that can analyse, synthesise and thus create artificial spaces and beings (Flusser 1996: 242-243). Flusser claims that 'we are no longer the objects of a given objective world but project the alternate world' (244), and he identifies us as a projection, arising from the submissive position of subjection. Relating to Flusser's consideration of the artistic life of the future that people project their world through the combination of technologies and imaginations, Roy Ascott, one of the most important British artists in the field of cybernetics and telematics, claims that artists today could challenge and re-form our concept of reality through up-to-date digital technology. According to Ascott, digital technology currently performs a similar role to that fulfilled by shamans. For example, people can explore "double consciousness" standing between the virtual and material space, aided by computation technologies, as shamans enter the "trance" through their shamanic rituals (Ascott 2003: 357-358). Additionally, Ascott notes that people today can experience not one reality, but "three VRs" through interactive digital technology<sup>3</sup>. This projected reality offers the user a kind of mediated experience that has never before existed.

The ecstatic space and the virtual space seem conceptually analogous to each other since they are presenting the mediated world. While *shimbang* create their liminal world by projecting their mythical imagination applying ecstatic technologies, today's digital practitioners build the alternative reality by drawing their imagination into reality through digital technologies. In addition, there is something in both virtual space and ecstatic space that forms a sense of in-between-ness. While digitally mediated world produces a liminal sense, generated between the digital imagery and live users (Dixon 2007: 337), *kut* continues to explore the boundaries between consciousness and unconsciousness, or the visible and invisible worlds. Furthermore, *kut*'s ecstatic technology is paralleled to digital technology in that they both attribute to develop the presence for accessing the mediated world – a sense of being in the mediated world which is temporary or spatially remote from our real world. As the development of digital technologies contributes to the sensorial richness of the virtual world by increasing the vividness and interactivity of the virtual environments, that of ecstatic technologies offers the *shimbang* and *kut* performers to offer more detailed and sophisticated sense of perceiving the mythical world.

These interesting resemblances have inspired me to discover the conjunction between the ecstatic and digital technologies. As a *kut* performer, I am genuinely interested in the organic and analogue side of creating the mediated environments as in *kut*. Yet I am also intrigued to discover how the digital computation technologies can enhance what I can do with my own hands. Thus, my practice-led research strives towards the use of interactive digital visuals within *kut* to evoke the same mythical world of imagination which,

technology; 3) vegetal reality through psychoactive plant technology (Ascott 2011).



until now, has relied on more ancient tools – paper, bamboo, natural lights, colour coding and fabric.

However, my practices focus on exploring the ritual way of applying digital technologies to conjure the ecstasy space. It is because there are some differences in perception of the mediated environment between the virtual and ecstatic space. Most virtual realities are perceived based on visual or auditory messages. Accordingly, our cognition tends to read these audio-visual messages of virtual space and direct our consciousness to experience virtual reality. This process of perception seems to make it difficult to have embodied experiences. It may be the case that a participant who wears goggles to enter virtual reality easily loses his or her kinaesthetic control and wiggle in the space relying solely on audio-visual information. The virtual facility we enjoy to watch, listen, communicate and control is likely assisting the breakdown of the perceived need for direct human experience since it is based on a one-to-one connection between the message generated by a computer and a participant.

In contrast, the ecstatic space is usually experienced by the connection between *kut* performers (or *mudang*) and guests (or participants). As the ritual dance of bees informs other bees of the distance, direction, and amount of food, the collective movement of rituals becomes a message exploring the internal domain of ecstatic space. In my view, the performers are the ones who have the gift of kinaesthetic sensitivity to explore the unknown and unconscious realm by immersing themselves in the ecstatic space through embodied experiences. As their ritual movements guide the guest to enter the journey of *kut*, the movements become the message or messenger of the ecstatic space. In this manner, the digital or analogue audio-visual images act as a poetic or totemic element to support the exploration of the movements, which does not play as much of a subjective role as it does in virtual reality. Therefore, peoples' cognition is not applied for directing their experiences, but being aware of their spontaneous consciousness (or unconsciousness) for more visceral experiences.

Although digital technology has spawned whole new species of entertainment and communication products, which become a medium potentially more connected to today's audience than previous technologies used in the *kut*, the way of discovering the virtual world seems to accelerate the erosion of embodied and communal experiences provided by the collective experiences of *kut*. As *kut* has provided a needed antidote to loneliness and depression as well as many other increasingly common social ills, I believe that today's digital technology toward the ecstatic space might provide people with healing, communal, and embodied experiences along with more sophisticated and vivid virtual environments.



Figure 4. *NEO-KUT*, the guests participating the ritual of the threshold by holding together the long fabric symbolizing *dari*, a spiritual bridge. At Artaud Performance Center, London, 2016. © Haein Song.

As a result, my practice pursues the ecstatic space exploring a marriage between digital and ecstatic technologies. The ecstatic space is the immersive and transitional space where is being given the potential of atmospheric change by the *kut* performer's imagination and ecstatic technologies. It is also a kinaesthetically perceived space that can be conjured by the message of the movements within the ritual. In order to combine digital and ecstatic technologies, I have identified the *kut*'s ecstasy technology according to its principal design features of the space, *mugu* (Shamanic User Interface), and rituals of *kut*, and connected them with digital technology. The series of practices explores with *kut* performers and *shimbang* regarding how digital images are expressed as a shamanic medium. By linking digital technologies directly to ritual sounds, voice, instruments, and body movements, my research attempts to steer the control of this new medium towards the meaningful evocation of the ecstatic space, and thereby deliver the beauty of the world beyond in which humanity is bathed but unaware of.

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