

CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF LANDSCAPE: THE (REEL) KOREAN DEMILITARIZED ZONE

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ABSTRACT: *Much more than an artificial border etched into the landscape by conflict, the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) is a complex, unique space which has gone largely unexplored (literally and conceptually) since its establishment in 1953. This paper provides a cultural geography of the Korean DMZ as expressed through two American films and one South Korean film. The analysis explores the cultural meanings and dominant ideologies that shape these differing cinematic representations of the same landscape, and examines the ways these big screen images in turn reinforce the meanings and ideologies which formed them. In the American films, *Stealth* (2005) and *Die Another Day* (2002), the dominant discourse effectively marginalizes the landscape of the DMZ, and by extension, North Koreans. In the South Korean film, *JSA* (2000), the audience sees a landscape without boundaries, where the differences between North and South Koreans (like the border between them) have disappeared. This paper argues that in the sum of these contrasting cinematic place-images a sense of place emerges.*

Keywords: *Landscape, Space and place, Cinema, Korea, Demilitarized zone*

THE KOREAN DMZ: FINDING REAL MEANING IN A REEL LANDSCAPE

On July 27, 1953 General Mark W. Clark of the United States Army, Kim Il Sung of North Korea, and Peng Teh-huai of the Chinese Volunteers signed the armistice agreement, formally ceasing all combat operations of the Korean War which had devastated the Korean countryside and urban centers for three years (Fehrenbach, 1998). The truce agreement included the creation of a demilitarized zone—a swath of uninhabited territory four kilometers wide, stretching more than 243 kilometers from the west coast to the east coast. At the center of the DMZ lies the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), preserving the actual line of contact between opposing forces when the cease-fire was signed. The MDL is marked by 1,292 rusty yellow signs mounted on poles, each sign clearly visible from the next. No marker is more than 500 meters from its closest neighbor, and in some cases (where the MDL curves) the signs are only separated by 300 meters (Lee, 2001). Today, just as the first day they were erected in 1953, a series of barbed-wire fences mark the outer edges of the DMZ. In total, more than a million and a half soldiers still stand guard on their respective sides of the Korean Demilitarized Zone.

Much more than an artificial border etched into the landscape by conflict, the DMZ is a complex, unique space which has gone largely unexplored (literally and conceptually) since its construction. What is the nature of this space, delineated first on pen and paper and since reproduced by fences and mines? A physical description of the landscape (commonly found in books on the geography of Korea) fails to capture the underlying meanings of the buffer zone created at the end of the Korean War. This paper presents a cultural geography of the Korean Demilitarized Zone as expressed through cinematic image(s) of one of the last vestiges of the Cold War presented in American and South Korean films. The research therefore lies at the intersection of several subfields of geography. First, it takes a regional interest in (North and South) Korea. Second, it examines several conceptualizations of the DMZ through the lens of cultural geography. Phil Hubbard defines this as “the relationships of power and the politics of representation” (2005: 46). Third, it seeks to understand cultural and social representations of space and place in film—a crossroads which “offers a provocative research setting for geographers” (Aitken and Zonn, 1994: ix).

In recent decades, academic geographies of Korea in the English language have been rare. In the mid 1980s, David Nemeth wrote a dissertation on the peasant landscape of Cheju Island (South Korea) during the Yi dynasty, focusing on the neo-Confucian ideology which dominated the discourse of environmental planners and geomancers (1984). A number of Korean geographers have published in English in the past twenty years, but most of their work has focused on economic and developmental problems in South Korea. Few, if any, have addressed cultural representations of the Korean landscape. For example, Bae Gyoon Park examined labor regulation in the

context of the 1997 financial crisis in South Korea, the effects of globalization and economic liberalization on sovereign territoriality in South Korea, and the politics of local economic policy versus state-conditioned regional development (2001, 2003, September 2005, and December 2005). Won Bae Kim analyzed the center-periphery economic relationship between Seoul and the rest of South Korea, and concluded that local politics (not economic disparities) played a more significant role in regional schisms (2003). Sam Ock Park investigated the major triggers and consequences of the industrial restructuring of Seoul, strategies for regional development through Regional Innovation Systems, and the role of the state in forming industrial districts (1994, 1995, and 2001). While the aforementioned research is not an exhaustive list, it certainly demonstrates the need for more (English language) geographic research focusing on Korea, especially in the subfield of cultural geography.

Over the past twenty years, many cultural geographers have shifted from one view of culture and landscape to a postmodern approach, “refusing to privilege one cultural discourse above another, to see each as an equally meaningful representation...” (Cosgrove and Domosh, 1993: 27). This general departure from the cultural geographies of the past (modernism, nostalgia, Sauerian geography, etc.) is often referred to as the “cultural turn” (Scott, 2004: 24). A field that was once defined by its search for a single, coherent interpretation of culture has now become “an unfolding dialogue of meaning” (Shurmer-Smith, 2002: 3). For Pamela Shurmer-Smith, this includes:

thinking about how geographical phenomena are shaped, worked and apportioned according to ideology; how they are used when people form and express their relationships and ideas, including their sense of who they are. It also includes the ways in which place, space and environment are perceived and represented, how they are depicted in the arts, folklore and media and how these artistic uses feed back into the practical (Shurmer-Smith, 2002: 3).

Thus, cultural geography is an excellent platform from which this essay will examine the perceptions and representations of the DMZ in film. The following pages will demonstrate that while there is a single, dominant discourse which defines the DMZ, there is also a newly-emerging discourse which challenges the power structures behind the prevailing ideology. One important way in which this new discourse projects its alternate meanings is through film. Chris Lukinbeal and Stefan Zimmermann suggested that film geography has moved from the peripheries of geographic research to a central issue—a shift which merits the creation of a new subfield of the discipline (2006). Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon also noted that because of its versatility as a pedagogical tool, film has become one of the most popular areas of research in the field of geography (2002). They argue that:

geographers have deployed film as a mimetic of the real world, such that peoples and places can be represented in as authentic a manner as possible to peers and students; a series of images and sounds that relay intersubjective meanings; a medium that allows investigation of the production of dominant ideologies; and a site of resistance, in which the stability of any meaning is open to critical scrutiny (Cresswell and Dixon, 2002: 1).

Part of what makes film an interesting research medium is that it has the potential to “speak a universal visual language” to a global audience (Chapman, 2005: 126). However, as Jeff Hopkins points out, film is not neutral entertainment, objective documentation, or simply a mirror of reality—film is “an ideologically charged cultural creation whereby meanings of place and society are made, legitimized, contested, and obscured” (Hopkins, 1994: 47). Therefore, film is an excellent medium in which to study the cultural values and ideologies of the society which produces the film.

For this research, the most significant consideration in selecting films was the inclusion of at least one scene wherein the DMZ appears in the *mise-en-scène*. Very few feature films meet this criterion. Several queries using multiple movie databases yielded only five films with scenes in the DMZ: *Si Qi Shi* (1972), *JSA* (2000), *Die Another Day* (2002), *Bimujang Jidae* (2004), and *Stealth* (2005). A second consideration was the film’s country of origin. This analysis focuses on comparing the perspectives of two Cold War allies—the Americans and South Koreans. Examining the Chinese or North Korean representations of landscape would be a fascinating direction for further research, but it is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, the Hong Kong martial arts film, *Si Qi Shi*, is not addressed. The final consideration in film selection was language. For consistency throughout the analysis, only films released, subtitled, or dubbed in English were evaluated. The South Korean drama *Bimujang Jidae* is neither subtitled nor dubbed in English, and is therefore omitted from the following discussion. From the original list of five, two American films (*Die Another Day* and *Stealth*) and one South Korean film (*JSA*) meet all the research criteria.

In any movie the audience can expect to see a reflection of cultural ideals and ideologies in the images on the silver screen. This may be especially relevant to cinematic images of the DMZ—filming on location is strictly prohibited. Since he cannot use the real DMZ as the film's backdrop, the director must create a reel landscape which legitimizes his narrative and its ideology. He must convince the viewers who are looking at another location that they are *seeing* the DMZ. The location which plays the role of the DMZ in *Die Another Day* is Pinewood Studios and the surrounding countryside in Buckinghamshire, England. *Stealth's* director chose the Blue Mountains of Australia for his DMZ landscape.

JSA's DMZ scenes, on the other hand, were filmed outside the city of Asan, situated just 120 kilometers south of the real demilitarized zone. Dressed as tourists, members of the production team made several research trips to the Joint Security Area (a UN-controlled neutral negotiation site inside the DMZ) meticulously documenting every detail within its 800 square meters of land. When the team had enough photos and measurements, they constructed a full-scale reproduction of the Joint Security Area (JSA) on the lots at the Yangsuri Film Studios situated in the eastern outskirts of Seoul. Construction crews needed more than one year to build the set at the cost nearly one million (US) dollars, but the result was well-worth the investment of time and money (Tour2Korea, 2008). *JSA's* reel landscape is practically indistinguishable from the real landscape.

HOLLYWOOD'S DMZ: EMPHASIZING THE DIVIDE

Stealth (2005) is the story of the United States Navy's future unmanned fighter jet, codenamed "EDI" (Extreme Deep Invader), which was designed to replace all human pilots. New technological advances led to the development of a computer brain which has the ability to learn from humans. A U.S. Navy research program placed the artificial intelligence in a new stealth fighter jet. EDI is positioned on an aircraft carrier to learn from three human pilots during various mission profiles. On one training mission EDI is struck by lightning, which damages its circuits and causes it to disregard orders and select combat missions on its own, a personality trait it learned from one of the human pilots on a prior training mission. After EDI refuses to return to the aircraft carrier, the human pilots must locate EDI and destroy it before it attacks real targets, starting a chain reaction war of retaliation. As the pilots locate EDI and attempt to escort it back to base, one pilot crashes, and one is forced to eject from her aircraft over North Korea. The last human pilot must destroy EDI before it attacks any targets, and he must rescue his friend from North Korea before she is captured or killed.

Although the DMZ is mentioned several times either by name or simply as the border, there is only one scene in *Stealth* which depicts the landscape of the DMZ. The scene's establishing shot shows a flare rocketing into the night sky. By filming this scene under conditions of darkness, director Rob Cohen suggests the DMZ is a secretive, mysterious, and forbidden place. Before he can continue the narrative, he must provide the viewer with illumination—he must present the DMZ to those who cannot visualize it. The darkness also adds an element of anxiety for Lieutenant Wade, who can no longer see her hunter or what lies ahead. An unseen (and therefore unknown) enemy is much more fearsome. Consequently, the darkness of the DMZ subtly widens the gulf between "us" and "them." The DMZ becomes a place of the others. As the artificial illumination casts its light upon the landscape, the audience sees barren, gently-sloping hillside surrounded by trees on three sides. When the flare fades, Cohen keeps the DMZ illuminated with floodlights mounted on a barbed wire fence and a slowly moving spotlight positioned on a guard tower. The fence and the tower form the fourth edge of the visible landscape, completely closing in the space of the DMZ. As Cohen's *mise en scène* confines the landscape, the actual spatial dimensions of the DMZ (approximately 972 square kilometers) are collapsed and the DMZ becomes a prison. The four bound sides, the open space in the middle, the guards wielding automatic weapons on watchtowers, the roaming spotlight, the floodlights, and even the German shepherd suggest that Wade is a prisoner trying to escape. The monochromatic tone of the sequence also conveys a sense of bleakness and hopelessness. This scene might easily have come from a prison break movie, or perhaps a movie about the Berlin Wall.

After this ominous establishing shot, Cohen reveals more of the details of the landscape. The open area between the trees and the fence is a no man's land. Scattered across the ground are rusty hulks of various war machines, shot-up concrete slabs, enormous piles of twisted, dead trees, and the skeletal remains of buildings that were once houses. These images convey a sense of death, or in other words, a place that can no longer sustain life. The once productive vehicles which could move freely through the landscape are now anchored to ground by their immovable, useless forms. The trees which once thrived in the soil now litter its surface with lifeless limbs and branches. The concrete slabs which once served a purpose now mark the ground like pitted, weathered headstones. The silence and the fog confirm the DMZ is a graveyard. Noticeably absent from Cohen's DMZ landscape is the South Korean presence. His double fence has towers, lights, and military equipment along the north side only. He

shows the audience the North Korean flag waving from a guard tower. There are no South Korean troops, equipment, or flags. Thus, Cohen reinforces the dominance of the other in this space. It is not a neutral zone, as it is in reality. It is completely controlled by the North Koreans whose authority goes unquestioned in this space. Therefore, the DMZ is again a landscape of repression and bondage.

Die Another Day (2002) is another film in the official James Bond franchise. In this movie, Bond, who is on assignment to break up an illegal diamonds-for-weapons trade ring in North Korea, is betrayed by an unknown mole within the British intelligence community. After his mission fails due to sabotage, he is captured in North Korea and suffers repeated torture for killing a North Korean colonel. Following his exchange for a North Korean political prisoner, Bond is kept under surveillance by his own intelligence community upon suspicion of his betraying England during captivity. Bond escapes, proves his loyalty to the crown, and once again receives the assignment to dismantle the weapons trade network. In the process, he discovers a super weapon being developed by a North Korean posing as a British playboy. The weapon has the ability to destroy mine fields from space, which will aid North Korea's planned invasion of South Korea.

In *Die Another Day*'s first DMZ scene there is constant motion. Except the concrete building, the sandbags, and the tanks, everything is moving—the trucks, the soldiers, the flags, the smoke in the sky, the trees, the descending concrete barrier, and the sliding fence. Even the muddy ground moves as the truck wheels splash and scatter the mud. This is a place of motion, activity, and preparation. The stenciled red star on the gate and the North Korean flag remind the audience that communism lives here in the DMZ. And the scene's motion (especially the flag and the star) reminds the viewers that communism's war machine is not resting. The presence of a huge weapons stockpile including hovercraft shows that the North Koreans cannot be trusted and they do as they please (without recourse) in the neutral zone. The hovercraft's capabilities also suggest the North's intention to use the weapons to establish a unified Korea under communist rule. He has chosen a weapons platform to defeat a specific threat—mines. Therefore, the DMZ becomes a place of mistrust and deception. It is no longer the neutral zone the West assumes it to be—it is now a place secretly dominated by the North Korean military. Even as the communist hovercraft glide effortlessly over the landscape, the South imagines its mines will slow or stop an attacking force. The mines originally intended to deter a communist advance, however, no longer have a deterring effect. Director Lee Tamahori's DMZ (in this scene) is an open landscape with a wide, flat road and plenty of room to maneuver. Throughout a dizzying hovercraft chase he shows the viewers no images of the border and no South Korean or American presence in the DMZ. The propaganda signs on the roadside suggest to the viewer that North Korea has claimed the DMZ, where there is (literally and figuratively) no sign of the South—a message echoed in *Stealth*. By showing the open landscape (easily traversed by the communists) with no border and no defenses to oppose the North Koreans, Tamahori simultaneously calls attention to the spatial proximity of the North Korean threat and the South's (and by extension, the West's) profound vulnerability to that threat. His DMZ gives North Korea the strategic advantage.

In a later scene, the captive James Bond is brought to a run-down, uninhabited village. Here the DMZ is abandoned, occupied only temporarily by the soldiers and trucks who have come to exchange prisoners. As Bond crosses the bridge, he cannot see what is on the other side of the bridge, as it is temporarily obscured by fog (here employed as a signifier of uncertainty or confusion). By the time Bond has crossed the bridge, the audience can see across the bridge from South Korea into North Korea. The dilapidated village now has a new meaning—deceit. Here, the North Koreans can be observed by the West. Therefore, they must project the image of abandonment and dilapidation. But Tamahori's audience has already seen North Korea's active facilities in another part of the DMZ. Once again, the director suggests the DMZ is a place of deception. Tamahori presents the actual border (the MDL) as a single chain link fence with barbed wire at the top. Curiously, the MDL is not in the center of the bridge—it is at the South Korean end of the bridge. In reality, the MDL bisects the Bridge of No Return. By shifting the MDL closer to the South Korean side, Tamahori enlarges North Korea's spatial influence in the DMZ. He assigns them control of more of the landscape, subtly re-establishing their dominance in the DMZ, even in the portion which the South can observe. As Bond enters the South, there is a large white sign which reads "HALT...DMZ...DO NOT ENTER." This sign presumably marks the southern boundary of the DMZ. One or two meters behind this sign, the viewers see the fence marking the border. A yellow sign marked "MILITARY DEMARCATION LINE" hangs on the fence. Tamahori thus condenses the two kilometers between the southern boundary and the MDL to a mere two meters. While the DMZ in the north is a wide, boundless landscape, the DMZ in the south is a two meter wide strip of land. Thus, the audience sees North Koreans stockpiling illegal weapons, conducting training exercises, and maneuvering freely in their portion of the DMZ. The South can do nothing in its scrap of land. *Die Another Day*'s DMZ is lop-sided, exaggerating the North Korean threat. Both *Stealth* and *Die Another Day* feature the ideological struggle of the Cold War—capitalism versus communism, East versus West, and good versus evil.

SOUTH KOREAN CINEMA'S DMZ: LOCATING KOREANNESS

JSA (2000) is a murder mystery set almost entirely within the boundaries of the demilitarized zone. The narrative unfolds through a series of flashbacks as different characters relate the details of a shoot-out at the border. A Swiss officer (female), whose father was North Korean by birth, is the lead investigator. She immediately discovers there is much more to the story than either North or South Korea wishes to acknowledge. As the investigator pieces the truth together through forensic evidence and testimony, a tale of cross-border brotherhood and friendship begins to take shape. She uncovers a nightly pattern of illicit meetings between two South Korean soldiers and two North Korean soldiers. Finally, as she discovers how and why the shoot-out took place, one of the implicated South Korean soldiers affirms her theory. Her step-by-step discovery of the actual events, however, ends tragically as those soldiers involved in the incident eventually sacrifice their own lives (and the lives of their friends) to preserve the secret.

In addition to the militarized aspect of the landscape (the director shows us the soldiers, guns, mines, and fences); *JSA* presents the DMZ in a different light. To achieve this alternative narrative, Director Chan Wook Park's cameras venture beyond the heavily-guarded truce village and its bridge to nowhere. Outside of the impeccably reconstructed Joint Security Area set, the cinematic DMZ is practically indistinguishable from the real DMZ, a Korean wilderness. Park's sweeping landscape images evoke the old Korean term for their homeland, *keum-sugang-san*, (or "land of embroidered rivers and mountains"). The viewers are reminded that one place (and arguably the only place) on the peninsula where that landscape of old has survived unchanged through time is inside the DMZ. While most of South Korea's usable land has been developed for agriculture or industry over the past five decades, the DMZ's fences have kept development out. Inside the fences, crop fields and roads have long since been reclaimed by nature. Park's DMZ reflects this Korean nature in its purest form—but only outside of the UN area, away from the tense border village. Beyond the gaze of ideology is where Park shows the beauty of the DMZ's landscape. The lost (or perhaps only forgotten) Korean identity, he suggests, lives in the moonlit meadows and on the snow-covered mountains. Thus, his cinematic landscape scenes reconnect the misplaced Korean identity to its sense of place—a unified peninsula with no borders, no divisive ideologies, and no North or South distinctions. In experiencing the landscapes of *JSA*, the audience simultaneously longs for the beauty of a Korea past while hoping for a restoration of that beauty across a reunified peninsula in the future. Also significant is Park's portrayal of the military demarcation line. The audience's first visual image of the border comes via a nighttime shot of the Bridge of No Return, which connects the Koreas in the village of Panmunjom. Arguably the most iconic image of the DMZ, the bridge's border is represented (on film and in reality) by a strip of metal which bisects the structure widthwise. This feature is highlighted in a scene wherein two South Koreans cross to the north side of the border. A close-up shot shows two sets of boots walking together along the length of the bridge. As the camera follows the boots laterally, the metal strip enters the screen. One set of boots crosses over and disappears while the second set stops mid-step at the border, as if there were some physical force holding them on the southern side. In this shot, Park's *mise-en-scène* visually reveals the South Korean soldiers' inability to transcend the literal and ideological borders.

In another scene, a South Korean patrol stumbles across North Koreans hunting in the woods during a light snow flurry. Park shows the soldiers lined up on their respective sides, facing each other a few meters apart as the leader of each patrol advances to exchange a cigarette. Although the *mise-en-scène* allows the audience to imagine a border between the two sides separated by white open space, the deep snow covers the ground and (presumably) the MDL signs as well. There is no physical border immediately between the soldiers, and the viewers can look into the distant landscape and see no border there either. In both *Stealth* and *Die Another Day*, the border is always present and visible, shown exclusively in the form of a barbed-wire fence or series of fences. By omitting a visible political border, *JSA* not only shows an accurate physical landscape, it also suggests that there are no divisions between the North and South Korean characters when they are in the land of embroidered rivers and mountains of the DMZ. Combining a realistic image of the DMZ with his narrative, Park has created a space wherein characters, specifically the North Koreans, have the potential to act outside the bounds of political ideologies. Furthermore, Park's DMZ is an embodied space where a sense of Koreaness and a natural connection to the landscape defines identities instead of political ideologies. His near-perfect representations of the buildings, bridge, and guard shacks, mountains and meadows of the DMZ facilitate his message of reunification through Korean identity.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE (REEL) DMZ

Stealth, *Die Another Day*, and *JSA*, present three differing cinematic landscapes of the DMZ. Yet in the sum of these contrasting place-images a sense of place emerges. The DMZ becomes much more than an arbitrary line on a political map, and much more than the most militarized border in the world. Rather, it becomes a contested space wherein multiple discourses seek to project their meanings. It is simultaneously a no-man's land for Westerners who have no ties to the land, and a land of embroidered streams and mountains for those whose souls and identities are connected to that landscape. It is a place of the marginalized cold, robotic soldiers who are slaves to ideology, and a domestic space where Koreans can nurture friendship and brotherhood beyond the gaze of ideology. It is a place of division where the capitalist self meets the communist other, and a place of reconciliation where "North" and "South" becomes simply "Korean." It is the last frontier of the Cold War, and the final refuge for a reunified Korean identity.

The sub-discipline of film geography provides an excellent prism through which to study culture and ideology. This essay has demonstrated how differences in representations of landscape on the silver screen reflect differences in cultural and ideological values. It has also argued that films have the power project a clear national identity (via geopolitical perspective). Film is a valuable pedagogical tool for exploring the dominant geopolitical, cultural, and social discourses and the identities they create. But film is also a platform from which geographers can study how marginalized sectors of societies contest the (dominant) discursive meanings of their assigned identities and places on the margin. In any case, film geography deserves a permanent place in geographic curricula across the world. No other subfield in the discipline is better suited to analyze cinema's "meaningful reflection of society" at 24 frames per second (Manchel, 1990: 61).

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