

Can One Enchant in the Ganpan Republic? *Reading the Korean Signscapes through the Theories of Enchantment**

Seunghan PAEK

Abstract

In this article, I explore ways in which one can make relationships with the commercially saturated environments of contemporary Korea in nuanced ways, by taking the term “the Ganpan Republic” (literally, “the signboard republic”) as a threshold. In doing so, this article offers three bodies of work: first, an introduction to the theories of enchantment; second, an analysis of the recent mega-scale urban project called Design Seoul with an emphasis on the ganpan; and third, a comparison of Design Seoul with French artist Manoël Pillard’s nightscape paintings of Seoul. While Pillard, as a non-Korean, pays full attention to the minute details of the signscapes with curiosity and revitalizes them through his painterly practice, Design Seoul strives to remove it from the domain of everyday life, thereby establishing a clutter-free cityscape. Instead of simply taking up the position of either Pillard or Design Seoul, I argue that reading the two together through the notion of enchantment encourages us to be attentive to the multiple sensorial dimensions of the ganpan, thus addressing the nature of the materials that are simultaneously distracting and sense-provoking.

Keywords: enchantment, the Ganpan Republic, Korean signscapes, disenchantment, Manoël Pillard, Design Seoul, signboard

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Seunghan PAEK is a researcher in the Institute of Humanities at Yonsei University. E-mail: seunghan.paek@gmail.com.

Introduction

In his essay titled “Ganpan gonghwaguk-ui jumok tujaeng” (A Struggle for Attention in the Ganpan Republic) published in *Hankyoreh* 21, critic Kang Jun-man notes that the proliferation of street advertising, most often known as *ganpan* (literally meaning “signboard”; written as “看板” in Chinese and “간판” in Korean), is an emblematic urban phenomenon in modern and contemporary Korea (Kang 2006) (see Fig. 1).



Figure 1. A Nightscape of the Myeong-dong district in Seoul, July 2017.

Source: Author's photo.

Using the term “the Ganpan Republic” as a point of discussion, Kang claims that, in order to better understand the cultural implications of the *ganpan*, one needs to seriously consider daily commercial logic in the Korean urban context. He is particularly attentive to the tendency of shop keepers to be tempted to display their own signage in bigger and more stimulating forms than others nearby, which would probably be the only way to survive in the intense atmosphere of competi-

tion. He begins his essay with the following question: “Who would dare to twinkle in such a vulgar way?” (Kang 2006). This question demonstrates Kang’s sincere empathy for ordinary shopkeepers; it also points to a dilemma in which shopkeepers may not want to display their street signs in such “vulgar” ways but nevertheless end up doing so for practical reasons.

Kang’s essay is a general remark upon contemporary Korean culture, and as such does not offer a detailed analysis of the signscapes. However, I claim that his essay highlights the complexities and dilemmas of the sign phenomenon that has not yet been fully addressed. Kang neither criticizes nor embraces the phenomenon in a superficial way; instead, he looks at the complexity and ambiguity of the materials that exist beyond simplistic nar-

ratives of endorsement or criticism. In other words, Kang's way of seeing the *ganpan* encourages us to rethink the state of ambivalence toward the sign-scapes, when anyone experiencing Korean cities is likely to be affected by their distracting visual qualities while simultaneously resonating with the rhythms and intensities, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Calling such a dualistic mode of engagement "enchantment," which refers to an ability "to exert magical influence upon" daily life,¹ in the rest of the article I will offer a body of work investigating how commercial environments can be a field where one can find urban meaning in various ways. The two case studies that I will conduct—an institution-led urban project called Design Seoul and the serial nightscape paintings of French artist Manoël Pillard—are both in reference to the metropolis of Seoul in terms of their geographical locations. However, considering the fact that *ganpan* is omnipresent in the country, my discussion of the materials suggests broader urban implications that are not limited to the city itself. And my two cases reflect the signage phenomenon after the millennium, the period in which consumption has become not just a commercial means but a form of life instigated through what sociologist Chang Kyung-Sup (1990, 33) calls "compressed modernity" in urban Korea.

Structurally speaking, this article is comprised of four sections: (1) The historiography of the *ganpan*; (2) locating enchantment theory in the Ganpan Republic; (3) (dis)enchanting the Ganpan Republic from the inside; and (4) enchanting the Ganpan Republic from the outside. The historiography section reviews how *ganpan* has been a subject matter disputed in various academic and non-academic fields throughout the twentieth century. Much of the *ganpan* scholarship is critical of its visual incoherency and ethically undesirable aspects (heavily driven by intense competition among shopkeepers). However, some recent studies have also focused on addressing the dualistic nature of *ganpan* that is simultaneously distracting and sense-provoking. The following section is an introduction to the theories of enchantment. From Max Weber's claim of disenchantment in early twentieth

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "enchant," accessed July 19, 2013, <http://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/enchant>.

century to the growing scholarship of enchantment in recent decades, which is also deeply related to the issues of body, sense, and affect, I claim that, as sociologist George Ritzer (1999) asserts, “enchanting in a disenchanted world” is the fundamental condition of everyday life in the age of consumption (Østergaard, Fitchett, and Jantzen 2013, 338). Sociologist Richard Jenkins’ (2000) phrase “disenchanted enchantment” can also be read in a similar fashion. Diagnosing Weber’s theory of disenchantment as having been widely driven by “pessimism,” Jenkins (2000, 12–13) notes that “there are more things in the universe than are dreamed of by the rationalist epistemologies,” which include not only the structural makeup generated through administrative imperatives but also “everything from the entertainment industries to galleries, museums and exhibitions, to community arts, to night classes, to Disneyland.” Simply put, both Ritzer’s and Jenkins’ claims address the complexity of the world activated through the influences of capital on the domain of everyday life, and my study extends their claims to the *ganpan* phenomenon.

The subsequent case studies illustrate two contrasting modes in which enchantment is at play in Korea. Design Seoul implements a systematic way of redesigning street signs in consistent manners and thus strives to establish a clutter-free cityscape; whereas Pillard’s paintings reflect how a non-Korean visiting Seoul becomes enchanted by Korean signsapes without relying on a predicated idea of what an ideal cityscape should be. Instead of placing these two cases at opposite poles, I argue that both of them illustrate how ostensibly distracting Korean cityscapes bombarded by commercial signs could be a site where one can still find urban meaning.

The Historiography of the *Ganpan*

The historiography of the *ganpan* starts from roughly the beginning of the twentieth century, when the country began to be modernized through external forces. The billboard of Hanseong Electricity Company is one example illustrating Korean signsapes around the turn of the twentieth century (Huh, Ryu, and Kim 2001, 618). It was a handwritten sign placed on

the outside of the *hanok*, a traditional housing prototype that consists of wooden structures and tiled roofs. The display of a rectangular billboard upon the façade of the *hanok* is a sign of modernization in daily urban life, and the proliferation of billboards over those *hanok* structures brought forth intense criticisms due to its markedly exaggerating visual aspects.

Such criticism of street advertising was prominent in various fields. In an essay for daily newspaper *Maeil sinbo*, published on February 26, 1916, a critic analogized a billboard put on *hanok* as *pungjam*, a decoration which one used to wear on one's forehead (Huh, Ryu, and Kim 2001, 619–621). *Pungjam* is a moderate way of expressing oneself in the public realm, and its urban implication is that one needs to design elements of a cityscape such as billboard and architectural design in modest ways, in order to establish visually harmonious and consistent cityscapes. It also reflects Neo-Confucian aesthetic norms, which highlight “discipline, hierarchy, and harmony” (J. H. Kim 2009, 3). Although these norms seem outdated and thus not applicable to cases after the country's full-fledged modernization in the latter half of the century, they are still influential in multiple levels of daily commercial practice. While signboards in the country were treated as “decorative apparatuses” at best (J. I. Kim 1977), they have more often been considered a representation of “visual pollutions” that need to be either completely removed or renovated in systematic ways (SMG 2009b).

However, there have also been a growing number of scholars that read this sign phenomenon as a representation of peculiarly Korean, or more broadly “East Asian,” urban cultures. For instance, architectural historian Peter Rowe (2005, 129) has coined the term “neon environments” to explain the overpopulation of commercial signs in major Asian cities such as Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Seoul, in order to understand these commercial fabrics as a singular urban phenomenon that is not prominent in other parts of the world. Furthermore, taking such “neon environments” as a scholarly subject is not limited to the investigation of cityscape itself, but a threshold from which to explore an issue of Asian modernity from the ground up. Architectural historian Lee Sang-hun (2005, 2011) argues that ordinary commercial buildings permeating the entire urban realm of Korea represent a “non-Western [architectural] modernity.” He also points out that an excess

of signs on building exteriors reflects a peculiar form of modernity, which results from a combination of the principles of modernist architecture inspired from the West (best exemplified by Austrian architect Adolf Loos's remark that "Ornament is crime") on the one hand, and unruly expressions of commercial information in the public realm on the other (Loos 1998). Such an unlikely combination of these two elements not only generates the singularity of architecture and the city, but also shapes modernity from the ground up, in which ostensibly "vulgar" commercial logic outweighs the pristine ideas of modernist aesthetics.

The "City of the Bang," the exhibition that took place at the venue of the Korean Pavilion for the 2004 Venice Architecture Biennale is another case from which to speculate on the singularity of the Korean signscapes. Simply meaning "room," the *bang* 房 has been the primary constituent of traditional Korean housing. Despite its prevailing nature, the *bang* did not continue to be part of daily life in the modern twentieth-century era, the time period in which advanced housing prototypes such as urban houses and apartments gradually replaced the *hanok*. However, rather unexpectedly, it has reappeared in the public realm since the early 1990s, although as inflected forms of life driven through the logics of commercialism that are exemplified by entertainment facilities such as karaoke bars, pubs, public saunas, and rooms for varying forms of prostitution (K. Kim 2005, 63). The proliferation of the *bang* is a spatial phenomenon; but it is also related to the increase of commercial signs that exist beyond any deliberate controls, thus comprising the surfaces of city space in disparate but consistent manners. Although these commercial places and the accompanying advertisements are often treated as degraded forms of cityscape, as the commissioner of the Biennale Chung Guyon addressed, any simple Manichean binary would fail to grasp the very singularity of South Korean urbanism, in which multiple forms of commercial practice are complexly entangled together (Chung 2004).²

2. There is a body of literature that is critical of the unruly characteristics of the Korean signscapes, which I would like to call an essentialist point of view highlighting a binary between an idealized image of the city and the crude urban reality. The following are some of the books (and the detailed chapters) in which such a binary is prominent: Bum Choi (2008, 29–36); Bu-deuk Choi (2002, 30–35); and K. Lee (2002, 197–217).

Although not a comprehensive overview, the historiography of the *ganpan* encourages us to look at how the material has been not only part of visual culture in the country, but also a site where various strands of urban discourse are brought forth. A great deal of the *ganpan* literature is critical of the visually distracting and ethically contested qualities of the material. However, there also has been growing scholarship that pays more attention to its ambivalence and complexity in daily urban settings. Criticality still matters when it comes to understandings of the *ganpan*. Yet, what is equally crucial to note is that this sign phenomenon generates “a plane of consistency” in a Deleuzian sense whereby anyone’s judgments, affects, and the atmospheres of the surrounding world are imbricated in non hierarchical, irreducible, and improvisational ways (Parr 2005, 39, 95, 133). A resilient but critical way of reading this material would thus require a deeper understanding than a superficial reading of its visual and spatial character. For this reason, I propose to look at the term “enchantment” as a threshold.

Locating Enchantment Theory in the Ganpan Republic

One way of understanding what the term “enchantment” means is considering its counterpart: “disenchantment.” The term “disenchantment” was first notably used in sociologist Max Weber’s 1918 lecture delivered at Munich University, entitled “Science as a Vocation.” In the lecture, Weber (1946) claimed that “the fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world.” Encountering the changing academic world that had become more bureaucratic and systematic than before, he diagnosed that the modern world, particularly in the context of early twentieth-century Germany, was moving in the direction of rationality, increasingly taking command over magical and mythic values. According to Weber, what accompanies the emergence of rationality is the effacement of the mythical dimensions that were prevalent in the past (Hansen 2001, 105). Anthony Carroll (2012, 120) explains Weber’s conception of “disenchantment of the world” through terms such as “purposive rationality” and “instrumental rationality,” both of which put

emphasis on efficiency and practicality over all other aspects. In addition, what informs Weber's disenchantment is "vocation," a form of practice implying that "one is no longer charged with the task of showing 'the path of God'" but rather defines oneself through provocations in reaction to given situations (Carroll 2012, 132). Weber's theory of disenchantment addresses the rise of rational subjectivity at the dawn of the twentieth century, thereby highlighting one's ability to speak out in the public realm without being overly subjugated by religion, mysticism, and all other tradition-bound belief systems.

However, it is crucial to note that what has not fully been articulated in Weber's theory of disenchantment is how one mediates in and through the image world in subtle and different ways. Weber's disenchantment is a social critique of modernity, but does not go further in articulating its multiple dimensions that are grounded not only on rationality but also on improvisation and sensation. In other words, Weber was not attentive enough to multiple sensorial dimensions brought forth by visual culture, which shape diverse forms of urban life in both material and immaterial ways. Things like skyscrapers and arcades, billboards and neon signs, and the representation of visual media such as film and television were all crucial constituents forming the multiplicity of modernity in the public realm. There is no doubt that such evidence of material culture are all crucial parts of daily life, but, at least on a scholarly level, they were most often simply treated as "the spectacle of the society" in which one is seamlessly subjugated by the capitalist system (Debord 1994, 12). However, would it be fair to claim that such a media-driven experience merely generates distracting urban qualities or "disenchanting" atmospheres of the city? Stated in reverse, can one claim the possibility of enchantment *through* those media experiences?

In this respect, political scientist Jane Bennett's analysis of a GAP commercial titled "Khakis Swing" (originally released in 1998) encourages us to explore the sensorial dimension of media experience, thereby addressing the possibilities of enchantment *within* the realm of visual culture. In "Commodity Fetishism and Commodity Enchantment," a chapter of her book *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Bennett (2001, 111–130) analyzes the commercial in great detail. In the chapter, Bennett claims that an ex-

perience of advertising is not just a representation of commodity fetishism but also a form of engagement. The commercial runs for only 30 seconds, consisting of a series of dance performances on both the foreground and background, all of which are completely whitened out. A cheerful piece of jazz standard plays out in mid-tempo, and both female and male dancers wearing the GAP products create a lively vibe through various performances. The mid-tempo rhythm continues throughout the commercial. However, as Bennett also points out, it is also combined with intermittent scenes whereby those dancers jump out for split seconds, during which their facial expressions and gestures are captured in dramatic ways. All of those minute details are implemented through the commercial's advanced film techniques, generating a cheerful atmosphere, as if seducing viewers to become immersed in the virtual narrative without reminding them of the fact that what they are watching is just a "commercial" broadcast through television.

Through an analysis of the GAP commercial, Bennett articulates how enchantment is at play within the domain of modern life, thereby addressing the relationship between body, sense, and media in the contemporary world:

Enchantment consists of a mixed bodily state of joy and disturbance, a transitory sensuous condition dense and intense enough to stop you in your tracks and toss you onto new terrain and to move you from the actual world to its virtual possibilities (Bennett 2001, 111).

What is noticeable in Bennett's definition of enchantment is that she understands it as a "mixed bodily state of joy and disturbance," thereby inviting us to rethink the sensorial dimensions of daily experience, without relying on a Manichean model of the binaries. That is to say, according to Bennett, it is possible that one gets simultaneously disturbed and distracted but still finds oneself in joy and curiosity. Such a complexity of sensation is medium-specific, which is reflected in the experience of various forms of screen such as film and television, but the point that she makes is of a broader kind. As George Hansen (2001, 107) notes in his explanation of "the magical" in its relationship with enchantment, magic "is never actually eliminated from the world [but] only marginalized," and elements of "joy and disturbance" permeate the world of everyday life despite the predominance of

institutional modernity (Hansen 2001, 107). Further elaborating on Hansen's remarks, I argue that such magical aspects are not merely marginalized but coexist with all other dimensions shaping the world where we live.

Bennett's analysis of the GAP commercial highlights how one enchants within the world of a media-oriented society in affective ways; in other words, it encourages us to explore the term "enchantment" in relationship with affect theory, which is an emerging subfield of Cultural Studies. Roughly defined as one and everything arising in the midst of everyday world, which also disappears without leaving any explicit material traces, the term "affect" enables us to think about the multiplicity of the everyday world. According to Gregg and Seigworth (2010, 1), "[a]ffect arises in the midst of in-between-ness," which means that affect occurs between thoughts, practices, communities, and infrastructures, all of which are intricately related to each other without forming fixed hierarchies. Affect is inhuman, in the sense that it surpasses any individualized feelings and thoughts but is always imbricated in contact with the multiple strata of the everyday, whether material or immaterial, bodily oriented or technology-driven.

While overviewing various strands of affect theory is beyond the scope of this article, I insist that speculating on "color" is one way of mediating the theories of affect and enchantment, from which to explore the multi-sensorial dimensions of daily city space with wonder and curiosity. In elaborating what affect means in screen culture, Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie critically review filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard's remark, "it's not blood, it's red" (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 138). The remark addresses the fact that while the color "red" appearing on the screen might refer to "blood" in a realistic sense, it is no more than a visual trace appearing on a flat surface. With this remark, Godard suggests that he can freely break down and recompose elements of the everyday at his will for the sake of filmmaking, in ways to construct a world in creative ways. However, what Godard misses is the affective dimension of color, or various ways that such a filmic use of color impacts upon the viewers watching his film, and their daily practices that are inflected by such sensory experience. After all, affect arising in various forms of media always travels in indeterminate states and

is always ready to produce a set of other affects. Bertelsen and Murphie write on this point, “the color red always bleeds” (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 138). Their argument about color is a counterclaim to Godard, with which they argue that affects always arise at the intersections of bodily experiences and its recreations through various media, both of which are not strictly separated from each other but imbricated in complex manners.

Then how would all these theories of enchantment and affect be related to the Ganpan Republic in meaningful ways? Here Ritzer’s remark “enchanting in a disenchanted world” that I mentioned earlier is still instructive. It is true that the world of modernity is full of seductive apparatuses from which one is not completely free in his/her thinking and behavioral practices; whether walking through arcades and shopping malls or even going to public spaces such as civic squares and airports, one is to see the influences of capitalism everywhere and is possibly, and passively, “seduced” by the spectacles that are brought forth by various commercial strategies. However, it should also be noted that such strategies might not always be successful in seducing individuals. It is always left indeterminate and improvisational if one is “completely” subjugated by such a system in an unidirectional manner, or finds oneself partially enchanted despite the strong disenchanting and stratifying forces. Then, in what specific ways can one read such a complexity of daily urban experience in which both aspects of enchantment and disenchantment coexist? I will elaborate this point through the following two case studies.

(Dis)enchanting the Ganpan Republic from the Inside

The first case study is an analysis of a recent mega-scale project called Design Seoul, which is a prime example that encourages us to look at how an institution-bound urban project problematizes the *ganpan* phenomenon from the administrative point of view, and how the project is developed based on a strong sense of disenchantment. Design Seoul was an initiative taken up by Oh Se-hoon, the former city mayor of Seoul. During his administration between 2006 and 2011, he put emphasis on design as a means

of elevating the brand value of Seoul as an Asian metropolis. What is noticeable is the fact that Design Seoul was implemented not only from a critical perspective on the country's urban history, but also with consideration for the fashion of global urban design. In 2007, the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) nominated Seoul as the 2010 World Design Capital at their congress meeting held in San Francisco, which was followed by a short speech from Mayor Oh: "Design is a growth driver of the Seoul economy. We have surprised the world with the Miracle of the Han River and advancements in the IT sector. Now we would like to bring global attention to Seoul with strong design."³ In the speech, Oh refers to the so-called Miracle of the Han River and the IT industry as the crucial instances representing the country's unprecedentedly successful modernization, thereby highlighting the competitiveness of Seoul on a global scale.

Although implicit, a close reading of *Design Seoul Story*, a booklet introducing the concepts of Design Seoul, offers insights on how the city government conceptualizes an ideal image of the city. What is activated is, again, the binary between the unruly urbanization in the recent past and a set of ideal city images drawn from the country's premodern time periods. In particular, the booklet presents an explicit contrast between images of Korea's natural heritage sites such as beautiful mountain ranges and rivers on one hand, and images of mass housing blocks and commercial signs on the other, in which the latter is claimed to have "destroyed . . . [the] quality of life" (Figs. 2 and 3).

What is marginalized in *Design Seoul Story*, and the Design Seoul project broadly speaking, is any reference to the *ganpan* phenomenon, which is simply treated as an urban "problem" that needs to be solved in a systematic manner. *Signboard Design Guidebook*, another booklet related to the project, articulates a set of strategies to renovate the *ganpan*. What is particularly worth noting in the booklet is the design principles, which elaborate how to make a "good signboard" in the context of redesigning the city in a top-down manner (SMG 2008, 3-4; 2009b).

3. "Seoul Appointed World Design Capital 2010," World Design Organization, last modified October 20, 2007, wdo.org/press-realease/Seoul-appointed-world-design-capital-2010/.

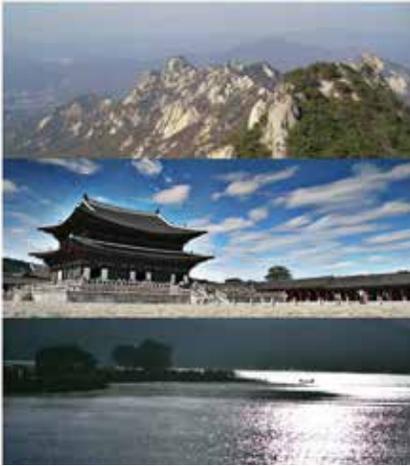


Figure 2. An assemblage of images illustrating the cultural assets of Korea.

Source: Photo courtesy of SMG (2009a).



Figure 3. An assemblage of images illustrating the industrial modernization of Seoul.

Source: Photo courtesy of SMG (2009a).

- Do not make signboards too big.
- Make signboards harmonious with the surrounding urban environment.
- Do not display too many signboards together.
- Refrain from overusing unmixed, primary colors.
- Apply letters with appropriate spacing.
- Distinguish the primary content of inscription from supplementary information.
- Utilize a building's façade as a distinct background.
- Make signboards distinct from others (in terms of the use of typeface, color, iconic image, and material).
- Avoid excessively sensuous and distracting compositions.
- Perform regular maintenance.

What is prominent in the guidelines is a sense of disenchantment critical of the *ganpan*. It strives to discipline every minute detail of signage design in terms of size, color, spacing, typography, composition, and other consider-

ations, through which to establish a clean and legible cityscape (Fig. 4). What results is a completely toned-down, less distractive kind of façade upon which any unnecessary decorative elements are eliminated. Here the clear distinction between figure and background is enacted, if “figure” represents the commercial sign and “background” the façade of a commercial building. Inspired by the Gestalt psychology that became widely accepted as an influential theory for the making of a “good city form,” most often introduced by urban scholar Kevin Lynch’s books—such as *The Image of the City* (1960) and *Good City Form* (1984)—the guideline is attentive not so much to how the façade operates in daily commercial practices, as to *what* a building should be like in the establishment of a visually coherent cityscape. Although it is uncertain whether or not such an idealized image could actually be achieved, this guideline imposes a “proper” way of signage design in the public realm from the perspective of city makers; and, in doing so, it neglects what kinds of sensibility would be brought forth and how enchanting (and/or disenchanting) it would be for those encountering it during differing situations in daily life.

In this respect, the cover page of a cartoon entitled “An Ugly City with Signboards, a Nice City with Signboards,” an image drawn by a cartoonist Lee Won-bok and produced as part of the Design Seoul project for an edu-



Figure 4. A building’s façade with newly designed signs.

Source: Photo courtesy of SMG (2008).

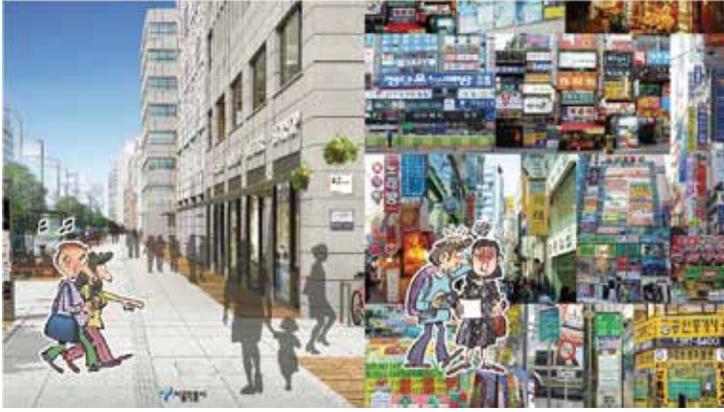


Figure 5. An image illustrating two contrasting streetscapes and modes of experience in Seoul.

Source: Lee Won-bok, “An Ugly City with Signboards, a Nice City with Signboards” (photo courtesy of SMG).

cational purpose, illustrates how the project theorizes disenchantment in relation to the *ganpan* (Fig. 5).

The image consists of two contrasting scenes of cityscape in Seoul. The left half of the image shows an imagined city space in which all the disruptive aspects of street advertising are removed and replaced by homogeneous kinds, where pedestrians walk through the streets in pleasing and relaxing moods. In contrast, the right half highlights chaotic visual aspects of the signsapes in which visitors are having difficulty finding their way due to the overpopulation of street signs. Here a classic binary opposition—which indeed permeates throughout the entire project—is at play again: the right half is meant to represent the crude reality of Seoul, whereas the left illustrates its idealized image in which foreign visitors are not disturbed by excessive sign designs. By placing those two images together, the Metropolitan Government of Seoul seems to address the urgent need to move from the reality on the right to the imagined left. With such a transition, the government tries to eliminate aspects of disenchantment as much as it can, through which to construct a world in which city strollers are not disturbed

by “vulgar” commercial traces and are thus able to find themselves enchanted in the commercial realms. However, when considered in reverse, what if one feels at home in the visually chaotic space of the everyday (the right) and instead lost in a completely disciplined cityscape (the left)? Would it really be possible to schematically make a distinction between enchantment and disenchantment according to spatial typologies as illustrated above? The case of Manoël Pillard encourages us to look at such an inquiry in a more resilient way.

Enchanting the Ganpan Republic from the Outside

If enchantment means a mode of relating oneself to the everyday world in multiple affective ways, encountering the Ganpan Republic from an outsider’s point of view is undoubtedly one way of practicing it, and French artist Manoël Pillard’s nightscape paintings of Seoul are interesting materials to look at in this respect. Pillard is originally from Paris, where he has taught fresco and mosaic at the École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (ENSAD). He first visited Seoul in the year 1998, and became “fascinated” with the city’s flamboyant nightscapes that are marked by a myriad of street advertisements such as neon signs and billboards.⁴ Deeply inspired and “enchanted” by the illumination of the nightscapes that generate entirely different atmospheres compared to the experiences of his home city of Paris, Pillard eventually held an exhibition entitled “Nuits de Seoul” (The Nightscapes of Seoul) in 2005. The exhibition took place at a gallery called Pyundonamu, located in the Insa-dong district of Seoul, where Pillard introduced nineteen different oil paintings. In those works, he focused on illustrating the nightscapes of popular commercial districts such as Jongno and Dongdaemun in great detail, in ways that give us an opportunity to look at familiar cityscapes anew.

A painting entitled *Chongno IV: I Love Seoul* (2008) is one of Pillard’s works showing how he highlights the enchanting urban mood of the com-

4. Manoël Pillard, interview by the author, June 15, 2008.

mercial district through his painterly practice (Fig. 6). Using a vertically long canvas, he draws a scene of a banal streetscape that one typically comes across without necessarily paying attention to its details. By completely darkening the background of the painting, Pillard fills out the foreground of the plane with a brightly lit nightscape, which mostly consists of a number of billboards and neon signs that flash with various colors and light intensities. The location of the painting, Jongno, which is a popular commercial district in Seoul, is supposedly a busy area where a number of pedestrians usually move around in fast tempos. But such fleeting qualities become minimized in Pillard's painting, which helps him to highlight the layers of brightly lit and flickering advertisements that endlessly vibrate.

Another characteristic of the painting is the way that he illustrates Korean characters. As a non-Korean who is not well-versed in the Korean language, Pillard was able to carefully “draw” each alphabet on canvas with the aid of his Korean students studying in Paris. But what results is more than a simple graphic representation: he aims to draw each alphabet as precisely as he can, but ends up producing a work in which those drawn characters are slightly distorted and disproportionately aligned. When reading some of the details, one can find familiar words inscribed on billboards such as “Hobak-jumak daepojip 호박-주막 대포집” (meaning “pumpkin-tavern pub”), “Jjimdak 찜닭” (meaning “steamed chicken”), and “Duldul chikin 둘둘 치킨” (meaning “two two chicken”). Most likely there may be no sophisticated meaning behind such commercial words, but what makes them interesting is not what those words denote, but *how* they are visually recreated and

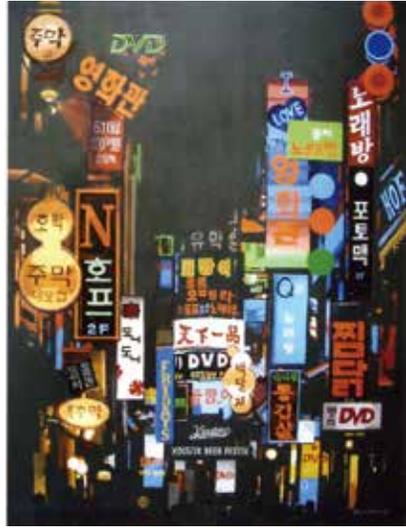


Figure 6. Manoël Pillard, *Chongno IV: I Love Seoul*, 2008. 130×97 cm.

Source: Photo courtesy of Manoël Pillard.

thus bring forth an uncanny sense of the everyday. Put differently, there is no sense of “spectacle” in Pillard’s painting, if “spectacle” is taken to mean a phenomenon in which any lively qualities of the everyday world are drastically reduced to flattened images. What is instead prominent is an urban mood that is at once extraordinary and ordinary, a spectacular cityscape that consists of banal city elements deeply related to the strata of the everyday.

Another interesting aspect to note is that Pillard repeats drawing the exact same scene at least twice. In this vein, a comparison of two paintings that look similar to each other demonstrates how Pillard captures differing moods in his work: first, *Ganpandeul* (Signboards) (2001) (Fig. 7); and second, *Hyeong! eodiga* (Brother! Where Are You Going?) (2001) (Fig. 8).

These two paintings refer to the same scene, which consists of several commercial places including a pizza restaurant (Pija Tugo 피자투고), an eye-

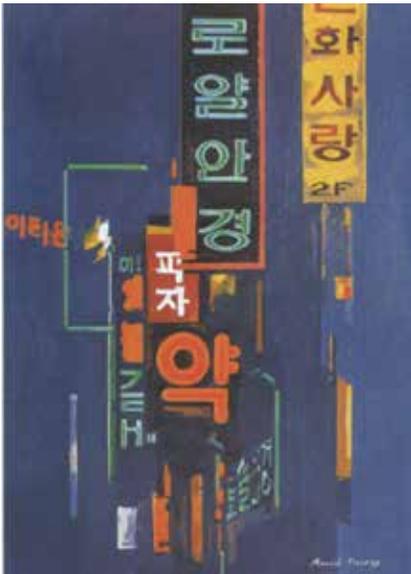


Figure 7. Manoël Pillard, *Ganpandeul* (Signboards), 2001. 46×33 cm.

Source: Photo courtesy of Manoël Pillard.



Figure 8. Manoël Pillard, *Hyeong! eodiga* (Brother! Where Are You Going?), 2001. 46×33 cm.

Source: Photo courtesy of Manoël Pillard.

wear shop (Royal Angyeong 로얄안경), a pharmacy (Yak 약), a barbecue restaurant (Mapo Sutbulgalbi 마포 숯불갈비), a pub (Hyeong! Eodiga 형! 어디가), and a few other shops whose signs are partially drawn. The tonality of the two paintings differs slightly from each other, but what is more prominent is the way that each painting has a somewhat differentiated composition from each other. While the former (*Ganpandeu*) places the sign of pharmacy at the center, the latter (*Hyeong! eodiga*) places it in the far right corner. In addition, the contours of each painting are also rendered differently: the former has a relatively brighter tonality with clearly drawn contours of each sign, whereas the latter is darkened so that what becomes emphasized is not linearity but the atmospheric quality of the place.

By recognizing these miniscule differences, one can speculate that Pillard tries to capture the sense of the banal streetscape that always differs according to one's spatial position, walking rhythm, and a number of other considerations. Put in a different way, what one can grasp through such a comparison is not just the factuality of the given nightscape, but a mood that perpetually changes in relationship with everything existing in the given milieu. Philosopher Martin Heidegger's theory of the everyday is worth reading in this context: "Facticity is," writes Heidegger, "not the factuality of the *factum brutum* of something objectively present, but is a characteristic of the being of Dasein taken on in existence, although initially thrust aside" (Heidegger 1996, 127). Heidegger's point here is that the ostensibly mundane fabrics of daily life could also be the sources of ontological practice, be they clearly legible historic monuments or fleeting city images. What is crucial for him is starting from the "groundless ground," the seemingly fragile conditions of everyday life from which one is able to make relationships with the minutia of nearby environments no matter how trivial or fleeting they may look (Heidegger 1996, 158).

Pillard's position as an outsider, who is not familiar with Korean urban cultures, as well as not having mastered the Korean language, might be a disadvantage for him in understanding the subtle nuances of sign languages and their cultural implications. However, although it may sound paradoxical, he could also be in a position to better grasp the singularities of his urban experience without prejudice, or without having predicated notions of

the materials that are widespread in *ganpan* scholarship. He gets fascinated by all the mesmerizing details of each sign, as much as becoming “disinterested” as to the practicality of signage that is deeply related to each shopkeeper’s commercial practice. Indeed, Pillard’s way of relating himself with the surrounding urban world has an aesthetic implication that goes back to the Kantian notion of “disinterestedness.” In the first part of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant (1987, 46) insists that, in order to fully grasp the beauty of things that one encounters in daily life, or to reach the level of “pure disinterested liking” as he puts it, one can take advantage of distancing oneself with any notable interests as much as one can, although momentarily and doomed to discontinue.

The point here is not a complete negation of interests by themselves, but the manner in which one temporarily delays judgments and is instead more attentive to the sensorial and affective dimensions of things around the world. Kant (1987, 105) explains such a manner through the term “reflective judgment.” By this term, Kant means an attitude of making judgments focusing on one’s sensory experience over one’s rational thinking process, although those two aspects always coexist and constitute a mutual relationship. Kant scholar Bart Vandenabeele (2001, 716) calls such a reflective judgment the “pure knowing subject.” Vandenabeele’s use of the word “pure” is not just an innocence of perception separated from the materiality of the world; instead, it means a fully paid attention to sensory faculties that are not discouraged from other minds. Although perceiving the everyday world is always a complicated process, what one can learn from the Kantian notion is that perception is not always a straightforward psychic operation. Perception is, instead, a kind of assemblage of things’ materiality, moods that are always fluctuating, individual affectivities, and someone else’s minds that do not always lead to a complete consensus.

Insofar as enchantment is not so much an individualized feeling but rather a mode of engagement in relationships with the multiplicity of the surrounding world, Pillard’s paintings illustrate how he becomes enchanted with the textures, rhythms, and moods of Seoul’s nightscapes. Despite the representational qualities, his paintings do not simply mimic what is out there. He chooses some of the places to which he got attracted from a

non-Korean's point of view, takes some photographs to retain the details, and thus looks at the familiar cityscapes afresh. A momentary delay of aesthetic judgments enables him to become immersed in the infinity of the everyday, from which to articulate ever-expanding sensory experiences through his brushstrokes. As enchantment means differing modes of engagement within the commercial realm, his paintings encourage us to speculate on how such modes are at play in the ostensibly fetishized world of commodity against which Design Seoul is critical.

Conclusion

In summary, I have focused on reading the sign-driven urban environments in contemporary Korea through enchantment theory, in particular taking the often-cited phrase “*ganpan* republic” as a threshold. In doing so, I conducted analysis of two specific case studies: one being the Design Seoul project with an emphasis on the *ganpan*, and the other being French artist Manoël Pillard's nightscape paintings of Seoul in which various images of the *ganpan* are rendered. First, what becomes prominent in Design Seoul is a century-long distaste for the *ganpan*, which is accompanied with a systematic approach to control the phenomenon on an institutional level. A set of guidelines of signage design is implemented to establish a clutter-free cityscape in a top-down manner. In addition, they provide evidence of the metropolitan government's strong sense of disenchantment against the *ganpan*. By enacting a binary between the crude reality and an idealized image of the city, Design Seoul tends to simplify the experience of street signs in daily life, as if those materials were always releasing distracting and alienating sensibilities in non-negotiable ways. However, what Design Seoul dismisses is the fact that there are always innumerable diverse experiential—and sensorial—dimensions that cannot fully be predicted. Put in a different way, the project simplifies the complex instances of enchantment inherent in the *ganpan* world, thus failing to grasp its multiplicity that is always in the process of negotiation between various city constituents and agents of power.

At the same time, Pillard's paintings are characterized by the fact that he draws the textures of the *ganpan* located in major commercial districts of Seoul in great detail, as if considering each sign to be a singular entity releasing differing instances of enchantment. As a non-Korean who is not familiar with the Korean urban culture, he is fully attentive to the sign-scapes without relying on the predicated ideas of the material, which are highly criticized due to their visually distracting qualities and ethically contested nature. His position as an outsider is thus an opportunity in looking at the ordinary fabrics anew, thereby illustrating how they can be the site where one may at times be alienated but nevertheless resonate with the multisensorial dimensions of the neon environments.

Suggesting any immediate practical solutions as to the improvement of the Korean signscapes is not the aim of my article. Instead, I have focused on offering a new way of reading the sign-driven urban environments of Korea, by grasping their subtleties and complexities that are not limited to individualized feelings or aesthetic judgments. Although Design Seoul is currently a suspended project since the former mayor left office in 2011, a strong distaste for the *ganpan* initiated by the project still prevails. Instead of either embracing the peculiarly Korean aspects of the *ganpan* or simply criticizing its visually and spatially confusing aspects, I argue that a close investigation of the phenomenon through the notion of enchantment offers a nuanced reading of the material. Ultimately, my investigation of the *ganpan* will also constitute a threshold from which to explore the intersections of consumer culture, everyday life, and city space in contemporary Korea in creative ways.

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