

economy of those who participated in the official communal rituals—they participated as a matter of survival, as part of a pure egoist strategy of avoiding state terror. A recent docu-fiction book (based on interviews with refugees) describes the moment when Jun-sang, a privileged student at a Pyŏngyang university, after encountering a starving homeless child, suddenly realized that he no longer believed in the North Korean official ideology:

He now knew for sure that he didn't believe. It was an enormous moment of self-revelation, like deciding one was an atheist. It made him feel alone. He was different from everybody else, burdened by a secret he had discovered about himself.

At first he thought his life would be dramatically different with his newfound clarity. In fact, it was much the same as ever before. He went through the motions of being a loyal subject. On Saturday mornings he showed up punctually at the ideological lectures at the university.⁶⁵

However, he then noticed that the faces of his fellow students

were still and expressionless, as blank as mannequins in a department store window.

He realized suddenly he wore the same vacant expression on his face. In fact, they all probably felt exactly the same way he did about the contents of the lecture.

"They know! They all know!" he nearly screamed, he was so certain ... Jun-sang realized he was not the only nonbeliever out there. He was even convinced that he could recognize a form of silent communication that was so subtle it didn't even rise to the level of a wink or a nod.⁶⁶

One should read these lines literally: far from experiencing a loss of individuality through immersion in a primordial collective identity, the individuals who participated in the obligatory ideological rituals were absolutely alone, reduced to a punctual individuality, unable to communicate their true inner subjective stance, totally divorced from the ideological big Other. What we encounter here is one of the purest examples of the shift from alienation to separation as developed by Lacan in his seminar on the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis: radical alienation in the public ideological order, where people seem to lose their individuality and act like puppets, is no less a form of radical separation, the total withdrawal of subjects into their mute singularity excluded from any symbolic collective—it was this singularity produced by the state-ideological machine which exploded in North Korea when the state servicing of goods ceased to function. (Perspicuous analysts of Stalinism had already

65 Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, New York: Spiegel & Grau 2009, pp. 195–6.

66 Ibid., p. 196.