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Affective Protest Symbols: Public Dissent in the Mass Commemoration of the Sewöl Ferry's Victims in Seoul

Liora Sarfati^a and Bora Chung^b

^aTel Aviv University; ^bYonsei University

ABSTRACT

Symbols used in the Sewöl protests in downtown Seoul from 2014 onwards proved effective in soliciting public engagement for three years. After the sinking of the Sewöl ferry that took 304 lives, most of them high school students, objects such as yellow ribbons gained iconic status as signifiers of the demand to investigate the ferry's sinking and honour the memory of the victims. New visual indexes that created and articulated this emotionally laden discourse formed a common visual language of grief and anger towards the Korean authorities. This ethnography-based article explores the development of the protest's affective aestheticism, its main agents and semiotics, and how it produced affect, which had strong cultural, social and emotional impacts. In 2016, the Sewöl movement became the core of larger protests against the ruling elites.

KEYWORDS

South Korea; Sewöl ferry; yellow ribbon; commemoration; protest symbols

Umbrellas are known as objects that offer protection from the rain, but the symbolic meaning of yellow umbrellas in South Korea shifted from the summer of 2014 to denote civil unrest following the sinking of the Sewöl ferry in April of that year. The immense death toll of this event moved many Koreans to produce several communal visual indexes related to the mass commemoration gatherings that evolved into political protests. This massive discontent resulted from suspicions that corruption had led to the scope of the tragedy and was delaying its proper investigation. Protesters in the rainy summer of 2014 began using yellow umbrellas, along with yellow ribbons, and similar umbrellas were used later that year in Hong Kong in the protest events that were dubbed the Umbrella Protests (Leung, 2014; Lim, 2015). On 16 April 2016, the second anniversary of the Sewöl tragedy was marked with a campaign that used printed umbrellas known as Spread the Memory of Sewöl. The campaign was initiated by a number of talented high-school students from Ghandi School for alternative education, who sold the umbrellas through social media. Some of these umbrellas are yellow with a black image of a paper boat lying on flowers. Another version shows a teardrop with the date of the sinking, a yellow ribbon, and a question mark, as if asking “Why did this happen?”. Other umbrellas are black with a yellow ribbon featuring a schematic sad face, and the word *remember*. Another black version shows a yellow boat with the name Sewöl in English and

butterflies tied to its top like balloons (Figure 1). The latter design denotes the concern about salvaging the shipwreck from underwater to hopefully find the bodies of the missing passengers and learn the reasons for the sinking. The umbrella project is but one example that shows the creative promotion of Sewol protest symbols by small groups of committed activists.¹ The protests have continued for more than three years, including the bitterly cold winters, when umbrellas were not in use.

In this article, we wish to explore what processes turn emotions into materials, and how material symbols impact the emotions of random and dedicated observers and users. In order to discuss these questions in an ethnographically grounded manner, we first establish the emotional impact of the disaster through analysis of in-depth interviews and media discourses; second, we discuss how certain protest symbols became effective in soliciting emotion and moving to social activism. We look mainly at connections between the choices made by individuals about how to visualise their feelings, and the processes that transformed these visuals into mass-consumed artefacts. Circulating these images online allowed strangers to create a sense of mutual understanding and attachment, of the kind that Yael Navaro (2017, p. 212) calls serendipitous, even while living in a metropolis like Seoul. The protest camp formed a place where such feelings of a new target-oriented community could materialise in the offline world.



Figure 1. A sample black umbrella from the online sales campaign.

As theories that emphasise object agency, such as Navaro's and those of other acclaimed scholars, such as Latour (1993) and Gell (1998) state, understanding the affective persuasive power of images and symbolic objects is crucial to any arena where visual and tangible objects' meanings are negotiated. To study affect beyond the scope of human subjectivity has become an important means to discuss materiality and symbolism. Inspired by Gilles Deleuze's suggestion to study emotions beyond the conscious elaboration of personal cognitive understanding, we can attempt to understand sensual intensities that people experience even when such intensities are produced by objects (Navaro, 2009, pp. 11–13). In Navaro's research she finds that objects can exude an affect of melancholy. In Navaro's usage, "affect" is the energy discharged upon people by others, human or non-human. In this respect, artefacts are seen as significant agents in the human response to them (2009, p. 4). We have seen such an affect manifested on visitors to the Sewöl protest camp upon seeing the endless rows of photographs of the drowned students. Other observers demonstrated anger and frustration upon seeing their then-president's photograph.

While Navaro studied affect through objects left by fleeing Greek Cypriots who moved south in 1974 following the Turkish invasion, we study symbols that are used to commemorate casualties of a disaster. The two kinds of objects have in common that they are indexes of people who no longer exist in the places where such objects are found. As Navaro shows, objects can create emotional energy without the need for human mediation. They create affect just by being there and being observed and used. In contrast, the material symbols of the Sewöl protest were not just left in place but were meant to create emotional responses that would lead to public mobilisation, and they did. The protest volunteers reflected on their initial involvement in demonstrations and commemorative activities in relation to their emotional response to images and artefacts that enhanced their despair upon hearing the sad news. This is a manifestation of the convergence between the social, the cultural and the psychological (Navaro, 2009). Navaro (2009, p. 8) asks: Is the "affect of melancholy experienced in relation to [the objects in her research] a projection of their users' subjectivities onto the objects or an energy discharged out of these objects themselves?". This question can be asked in the Korean case, where the same artefacts were contemplated differently by protesters and their antagonists.

We agree with Navaro that objects must be studied in context, and that their agency and affect vary according to specific historic-cultural moments. Her insistence on connecting the notion of object agency with language is in contrast with other theories that mark the *material turn* in anthropology. Navaro suggests that objects work within symbolic language networks. In the Sewöl movement case, as we shall see below, a thorough ethnographic exploration reveals how the significance of the symbols and objects used by the protesters and commemoration volunteers is constructed in their verbal discourses. Intersections between subjectivity and affect appear around the Sewöl symbols, when language and materiality are entwined in people's reaction to the protest. Words that frame the material aspects of the symbols as dissent oriented or commemorative are expressed in face-to-face communication and online representations, and engraved in protest-related objects. Thus, the objects are "discursively qualified" (Navaro, 2009, p. 10). Moreover, the same objects were perceived in contrasting manners by the Sewöl families' supporters and by supporters of former president Park Geun-hye (Pak Kün-hye).

Cultural fields where such material symbolic expressions, combined with accompanying written and iterated verbal texts, are harnessed to channel the emotions of the masses include politics, education and advertising, and these three spheres were involved in the Sewöl protest movement. We explore the affective symbols of the Sewöl ferry protests by asking who fashioned and distributed the symbols, how the symbols became central agents in spreading the spirit of protest, and how their indexes transformed over time from heightened emotional anxiety to anger and an urge to become proactive in commemoration and protest.

While cultural production is a complex process to trace, the Sewöl symbols offer rich data for this investigation as they evolved around several distinct complexities including: (1) the psychological and spiritual complexity resulting from the death of 304 people, among them many young people, and the feeling of helplessness that it created, (2) the social complexity related to status gaps between the ferry's victims and its operators and owners, (3) the cultural complexity of symbols' creation and their affect in a huge metropolis, and (4) the political complexity related to resenting tyranny and corruption while aspiring to strong governance and a strong economy. Therefore, this case is different from commemoration of the dead as a unifying element in society, as was explained by Durkheim, Shils and other thinkers. In this respect, of commemoration that leads to social fragmentation, the Sewöl commemoration is more similar to the commemoration of the Vietnam War veterans than the commemoration of other dead in Korea (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991, p. 379). Despite the central role that material symbols have played in this commemoration/protest movement in Korea, their roles and aestheticism have not yet been thoroughly analysed.

The Research Information Sharing Service, a database supported by the Korean Ministry of Education, shows 1,128 research articles related to the key word *Sewölho* in Korean (Riss, 2018). Among these, only seven mention the yellow ribbon as a symbol of any significance (without analysing it), whereas the rest focus on maritime rescue procedures and psychological trauma. A recent edited volume in English discussed the reasons for the disaster, focusing mainly on political and social factors (Suh & Kim, 2017). Kim Nan (2017) discussed the presidential impeachment demonstrations in 2016 as re-democratisation of Korea and related them to the candlelight vigils as a symbol of democratisation. She described the political meanings of the yellow ribbon and its usage in the 2017 election campaign. The articulation of the effect that the Sewöl disaster had on regular Koreans, especially in the form of symbolic visual expressions, is an important topic that needs further investigation, as offered here.

Affective Aestheticism is used here to denote the significance and agency of the visual conventions that were created during the protests. The yellow ribbon, umbrella and folded paper boat became iconic as signifiers of the quest for justice and eradication of corruption. Such symbols served as interpretational indexes through which people could express sympathy, grief and anger toward different actors in the situation. None of these images had a clear political implication before the protesters harnessed them to express their demand for action. Aestheticism here is not discussed as necessarily related to beauty or norms of proportional features of images and objects, but rather as a common visual language and repertoire with implicit and explicit cultural, social and emotional impacts. The Greek roots of the term "aesthetics" imply "sense perception", and the Sewöl protest icons have become increasingly involved with the senses.

They are examples of what Brandt Plate (2015a, p. 2) suggests by stating, “there is no one-to-one correspondence between the world and the world viewed. Instead the aesthetic body-mind creates meaning through interpretive processes occurring along visual channels”.

Body-mind interpretations, in the case discussed here, are especially sensual because volunteers have been standing long hours in the blazing sun to solicit signatures for their petitions; incense has been constantly burning at the altars; loudspeakers announced slogans and played memorial songs; and images from the students’ salvaged mobile phones were printed on posters along with other colourful, conspicuous and large symbolic designs. All of the senses were harnessed to persuade the public to participate in this dissent. The symbols’ affectiveness will also be explained through the dynamics of dissent movements, relationships between individual and collective expression of emotion, the materialisation of social memory through symbols, and the ensuing power of objects and visuals.

Research Methods

We chose urban ethnography as the methodology for this research, which began in the summer of 2014, when the Sewöl protests in downtown Seoul were at their height. During that summer, the protest camps were established, and hundreds of people slept in them each night to accompany the mourning families of the passengers (Figure 2). Furthermore, temporary protest sites were set up in many other central locations to solicit passers-by to sign petitions for a special law to enable an independent investigation of the Sewöl’s sinking. Later, most of the protest sites dwindled and disappeared,



Figure 2. The protest camp in Kwanghwamun Square. Photography by author.

while the Kwanghwamun camp, under the protection of Seoul's mayor, became semi-permanent with wooden huts and electricity. That site has hosted weekly gatherings of all sorts, from public Christian masses to the massive protests against the president in 2016–17. There was no time during these three years that the protest camp was abandoned or inactive.

We have attended at least a hundred demonstrations related to the Sewöl cause since 2014 and have taken part in various volunteer efforts to support the bereaved families. Our research became more theoretical and planned by conducting 20 recorded and numerous spontaneous interviews with protest participants. We documented in photography and video the events that occurred, and archived media and online discourses on the Sewöl issue. Elsewhere (Sarfati & Chung, 2018) we have discussed the media's depiction of this protest, including its political implications, and a particular team of volunteers and its online projects (Sarfati & Chung, 2016).

The Emotional Impact of the Sewöl's Sinking

Research and theory on collective memory and mass mourning after disasters have delved into the debates around symbols used in public manifestations of grief and dissent. Such debates attract public attention because the commemorated event is the object of contradictory interpretations and explanations, and often commemorative events and memorial structures become politicised when certain groups or people with power are blamed for the deaths of many. Such is the case with both the Vietnam War, which has been manifested in the complex process of designating a commemoration monument for the dead soldiers (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991), and the devastating 2008 earthquake in Sichuan (Xu, 2017), which resulted in the collapse of many school buildings. In both cases, as with the Sewöl's sinking, politicians and governments were held responsible for massive death tolls. Furthermore, in these cases the political opposition and the general public suggested that many of the deaths were avoidable had the responsible parties acted differently. The debates over the Vietnam War memorial and the Sichuan earthquake victims' commemoration materialised into discussions over the form and content of monuments, and the symbolism of the commemoration structures was tied strongly to the political opinions expressed by various interest groups and individuals. The manner in which the Sewöl commemoration protests have manifested a heated political discourse in symbols exhibits similarities and differences when compared to the Vietnam War's memorial and the Sichuan commemorations.

The entwinement of mourning and protest through material icons has proven effective in soliciting social activism beyond the direct event's commemoration in many other cases, and this is worth further exploration. As we will show below, deep grief can be channelled into anger, and a wish to prevent similar disasters in the future can attract multitudes of people to the protest. The Sewöl protesters did not necessarily know the victims before the disaster, but the symbols created a shared identity between many, were at the centre of the newly created activist groups, reminded others about the disaster, and enlisted to action many who were not yet engaged in the public dissent. The role of images in persuading so many to devote time and effort to this quest cannot be overlooked. Moreover, we suggest that the material symbolism

encapsulated and maintained the public's emotional alertness for more than three years. The symbols produced a significant effect.

Disasters and events that produce mass deaths often result in various commemoration projects beyond the individual level of the direct mourners. Whole groups and countries harness considerable effort to produce proper memorial structures, rituals and tokens of emotional dedication to the victims of disasters. Such memorials are entwined with debates over the responsibilities of people and groups for the extent of damage and the necessary reactions to it, for example in the Sichuan and Fukushima earthquakes (Xu, 2017; Bestor, 2013), wars such as the Vietnam War (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991), cases of ethnic extermination such as the holocaust (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2015), and school shootings such as Columbine (Doss, 2011). Moreover, the traumatic effect of death can sometimes involve the death of only one significant individual, such as in the case of Princess Diana (Brennan, 2008) or Che Guevara (Larson & Lizardo, 2007). All of these commemoration projects were entwined with emotionally heightened debates over guilt and responsibility, and critical assessments of reactions to the disasters. These disagreements were reflected in the objects used to express the social memory of the events. The Vietnam memorial planners avoided direct references to the war, and instead focused on the human aspect of the soldiers' deaths. Even so, visitors to the monument often chose to express their political opinions (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991). In contrast to this officially sanctioned memorial structure, the Che Guevara commemoration has changed over time from demonstrations and political manifestos in his memory to commercialised products such as t-shirts (Larson & Lizardo, 2007).

Each disastrous event draws a different set of commemorative devices, and these evolve with time beyond their original plan. Xu (2017, p. 2) suggests that each distinctive disaster's features shape its commemoration's content and form. In the Sichuan case that he explores, natural and unnatural explanations for the massive death toll were the issues debated in relation to the causes of, responses to, and consequences of the disaster. While many mourned their dead and the destruction of their homes, the government attempted to erase the memory of the damage caused by the quake in favour of the narrative "No difficulty can overwhelm the heroic Chinese people!" (Xu, 2017, p. 6). These contested opinions materialised in the mnemonic and material aspects of the commemoration projects, demonstrating that collective memory is created by the "aggregated patterns of recall of ordinary individuals" (Larson & Lizardo, 2007, p. 427). The Sewöl disaster presents another case in which studying the mechanisms of mass commemoration and the role of emotion-extracting symbolic artefacts used in the process is especially telling.

On 16 April 2014, the 6,825-ton Sewöl ferry sank on its way from Inchön to Cheju Island. Consequently, 304 people died, among them 250 students from Ansan's Tanwön High, who were on a fieldtrip. Initial investigations suggested that the cargo had shifted abruptly, causing the sinking (Yönhap, 2014). Most of the 174 survivors had not obeyed the order to "Stay where you are!" that had sounded over the loudspeakers. Korea's Coast Guard did not manage to save the passengers trapped in their rooms as the vessel slowly sank over the course of four days. Confused government statements and media reporting added to the agony of the missing passengers' families (Chosön, 2014). The school's vice-principal, who survived the disaster, committed suicide the next day

(Mackay, 2014). All of this was broadly covered by the media, and thousands of people flocked to downtown Seoul to light candles and pray for survivors. Others travelled to the high school in Ansan, around 40 kilometres from the city, and to Jindo, the coastal town closest to the sunken ferry, a six-hour drive from Seoul. In these collective mourning gatherings, emotions became material representations that affected Seoul's city-dwellers in ever-expanding circles and gained iconic status as representatives of a justified dissent. The initial reason for the mourners' anger was that the president and government officials did not communicate meaningfully with the families or the public in the first hours after the sinking, and were later reluctant to order a thorough investigation and alter safety laws to prevent future disasters. The anger was exacerbated when the ferry was left at the bottom of the ocean for three years.

While the Sewöl was still visible, television crews constantly broadcast the empty rescue boats and the slowly sinking tip of the stern. They also interviewed the anguished parents of the 250 missing high-school students and 11 teachers, who comprised the majority of the drowned. This media coverage increased the response of people not directly related to the event. The power of such documentation was beyond the textual coverage. A woman in her late fifties told us, "after seeing the boat still half sunken on TV, I could not hold back. I took to the streets to demand that the rescue be more efficient. But for many days I could just scream and watch the tragedy as it happened. I felt helpless and anguished about this government". The public sentiment combined political and religious responses to what was shown on screen. This is but one example of many interviewees who emphasised that watching the boat slowly sink resulted in feelings that were much stronger than simply hearing about the accident and loss of lives. The fact that Korea is a very screen-oriented society explains the rapid and widespread viewership of such visual representations and why screen culture has come to play a major role in this protest. All sides have harnessed it to promote their causes. The victims' families, who felt abandoned and betrayed by the state, launched independent broadcast channels online. The government used supportive media outlets to showcase speeches and favourable commentary that shifted the responsibility for the disaster to the private hands of the corrupt marine transport company owners. Religious organisations promoted their resolve to ease human suffering through televised prayer and ritual. Groups related to previous tragedies also joined the Sewöl parents in their demand for justice. Notably, the families of the victims of the Kwangju massacre (during democratisation protests in 1980) visited Jindo in April 2014. The visitors hung a banner that read "From a May 18 mother to an April 16 mother, I know your pain and sorrow, stay strong, don't give up" (Yönhap, 2015). In return, in 2016 the Sewöl families visited Kwangju for the 35th anniversary of the massacre (Yönhap, 2016).

South Korea has been a democracy since 1988, but when its government is known to be right wing, as was the case with the Park regime in 2014, there is greater public concern about citizens' rights and issues of social stratification and governance transparency. The Sewöl movement developed from hope for survivors to commemoration of the disaster's casualties and dissent over governmental corruption. The history of protest movements in Korea demonstrates that they can be effective (Manela, 2009; Shin, 2014; Tangherlini, 1998; Lee, 2014). Moreover, the symbols of various historic protests in Korea have been effectively utilised in other dissent movements, and attest to the longevity of materialised manifestations of public emotion. For example, the colour

yellow was also used in protests following the deaths of students in pro-democracy demonstrations in Seoul during the late 1980s; and thousands of burning candles have been used in various past protests that were not related to deaths, including those opposing a free trade agreement with the US in 2007–08.

Some of the earlier yellow ribbon campaigns attracted little attention. For example, the campaign to free Korean missionaries held captive in Afghanistan in 2007 had only a few thousand adherents because the prisoners were perceived as radical Christians who chose to engage in risky ventures (Yi, 2007). In contrast, the Sewöl's casualties were perceived as innocent victims of larger forces, and the yellow ribbon marked its users as general humanists rather than identifying them with a minority extremist group such as the Afghanistan prisoners. When weeks went by and the authorities' response to the ferry's sinking seemed totally inadequate, protesters turned their grief into rage aimed at the government. They called for an independent investigation committee. Many felt remorse for not acting on these issues earlier. The candles and ribbons were augmented by petition-signing booths staffed by volunteers who aimed to reach 10,000,000 signatures. These tangible expressions of protest were also reflected and produced in Korea's online culture.

In comparison to other ongoing protests in Korea, the Sewöl demonstrations have attracted larger crowds with more diverse backgrounds, political views and lifestyles. Other private dissent organisations, including the Milyang grandmothers protesting against the construction of new electricity transmission towers (Su, 2016) and local protesters objecting to the new naval base in Cheju Island (Koleilat, 2016), attracted much less public and media attention. These were also covered by the media and included images of protesting grandmothers (in the Milyang case) and citizens on strike being pushed back by the police (in the Cheju case), but these visuals produced a weaker affect and less mobilisation. These protests focused on presumed future losses of health and quality of life, while the Sewöl images were about actual deaths. The news of the sinking made it explicit that children were drowning as people watched the ferry go underwater on live broadcasts. The emotional impact was immense.

Since 2014, the symbols used in the Sewöl protests have been utilised in various related and unrelated contexts, notoriously in the recent protests calling for the impeachment of President Park. For many Saturday nights in the winter of 2016–17, Seoul's downtown around the Sewöl protest camp was flooded by up to 2 million protesters at a time demanding that the president be dismissed (N. Kim, 2017). These protests proved effective, and she was impeached and placed under arrest for corruption (Lee & Berlinger, 2017; Sin, 2017; Sö & Ch'oi, 2017). Regardless of the actual legal investigation that led to this result, the impeachment was celebrated as the "bittersweet victory for families of Sewol ferry victims" (Griffiths & Han, 2017). On the day of the impeachment several people placed newspapers with reports on the impeachment at the Kwanghwamun altar below the photographs of the deceased, as if to tell the victims that Park had been removed from power. Others sent flowers to the altar with inscribed ribbons that read "Congratulations on the Impeachment" and "We Love You, We Remember You".

During the well-attended impeachment demonstrations, the yellow symbols of the Sewöl commemoration combined with political slogans were clearly visible, the organisers always included a speech by one of the Sewöl family members, and the Sewöl

families always led the marches. The Sewöl disaster and its symbols have become markers of anti-corruption and representations of the public's anger. A unique art installation called *huimang chotbul* (the candle of hope) that was placed in Kwanghwamun Square in 2016 combined the impeachment and Sewöl issues. It was a 30-foot-tall candle statue with its base covered in yellow ribbons on which people wrote their dreams for a better society and messages to the victims' spirits. The yellow ribbons were aesthetic signifiers that the Sewöl incident was a motivating factor for the impeachment protests. For the supporters of former president Park, the candle symbolised their leader's demise and produced a different kind of strong emotion. They were also mobilised by this object, but instead of sympathising with the victims' families they were moved to destroy it. On 1 March 2018, during a national holiday (*Samiljöl*), two days after one of Park's court hearings, Park supporters marched to the huge candle statue and dismantled it completely. They were protesting against the prosecutor's demand that Park be given a 30-year sentence and targeted the sculpture with the yellow ribbons as an outlet for their emotions.

Over the past three years, various specific issues related to the ferry's sinking have resulted in strong feelings that have led to demonstrations and dissent. One notorious debate was related to the ten abandoned classrooms of the drowned students that were a constant tangible reminder of the disaster. The students' desks have been turned into altars and the blackboards are full of drawings and messages by classmates and relatives. The yellow ribbon was always present in these commemoration monuments. Family members and friends visited the rooms often, and the funerals of some of the deceased students included the casket passing the classrooms, as a final opportunity for the students to say farewell to their short lives. The school and education ministry sought to remove the deceased students' personal items and the improvised altars from the school, but the families and their supporters objected. The mourning of parents for their children is perceived in modern society as unnatural and unfair (Walter & Hass, 2001), so it is not surprising that so many have joined the parents in their protests. In August 2016, the classrooms issue reached a conclusion when, despite fierce protests, the entire contents of the classrooms were moved to the annexe building of the Ansan Department of Education, where each classroom was allocated space to set up the desks. The significance and affect of the desk altars was acknowledged by the state in the preparation of the permanent commemorative classroom exhibition, and the same objects that were in the original desks were used.

The latest development in the Sewöl tragedy is the salvage of the wreck, which after many reschedulings finally took place in March 2017. The manner in which it was discussed by the grieving families, protesters and the media is telling of the mistrust of many Koreans for the sincerity of their past president and government's assertions that they were determined to find out why the ferry had sunk (E. Kim & D. Kim, 2017). On 31 March, the same day that the ousted president was arrested, the wreck was moved to Mokpo port (Smith, 2017). By November 2017, the remains of four missing passengers were found, and official funerals for all of the missing victims were held. The port at Mokpo became a pilgrimage site for the bereaved families, social activists and many others. The barbed-wire fence through which visitors can peek at the wreck is covered with yellow ribbons, like those that were tied to every pole and fence in downtown Seoul in 2014. On the sidewalk leading to the place closest to the wreck, several altars

and commemoration installations are positioned. A large television screen broadcasts a loop of documentary videos related to the disaster and the president's impeachment. More than three years have passed since the disaster, but the commemoration/protest has not faded. On one weekend in the summer of 2017, we counted more than a thousand visitors to Mokpo port, who came especially to express their feelings at this symbolic site. Most of them had driven a few hours to get there. During planned protest events such as the Mokpo-Sewöl Group Visitation Day on 26 August 2017, buses bring more people from various regions to Mokpo port. Many still hope to learn more about the reasons for the sinking. Since the Special Investigations Committee was granted a second term in the National Assembly on 24 November 2017 (K. Kim, 2017b), both the Sewöl families and activists and supporters are waiting in expectation that the truth may finally come to light.

Pak Ju-min, a member of the National Assembly known as the "Sewöl lawyer", explained that this particular disaster had attracted such attention because the majority of the victims were teenagers. He added that media coverage resulted in a large number of people witnessing the suffering and deaths in real time. In Mr Pak's opinion, the Sewöl protest had been sustained for such a long time because many people felt compelled to do something to prevent other helpless people from future preventable catastrophes brought about by corruption and neglect.

Producing Affective Aestheticism through Symbols

Since the 1980s, scholars have increasingly begun to examine visual artefacts not merely as illustrations to texts and ideologies but as affective agents in constructing personal perspectives and social actions. In fact, many have lamented the scant attention that the material dimensions of culture have received, and that they have not been explored adequately in relation to their effect on societies and individuals (Mitchell, 2015; Plate, 2015a). Mitchell took the path of interdisciplinary investigation of the power of images, both sensual and cognitive, and their resulting agency in various kinds of interactions with people. Plate (2015b) extended the discussion of the visual to include the written word as an affective image rather than merely a vehicle to transmit textual content. This approach was also shared by LaMarre when he explored the hidden meanings of Japanese texts from the tenth century through the documents' visual puzzles rather than verbal iterations per se (2000).

These researchers demonstrate convincingly what we assert in our investigation of the Sewöl protests: that by overlooking the subtexts carried by material symbols and images, social research might reach wrong understandings. Aitken (2014) discussed visual culture in youth protests in various locations, concluding that protest texts were always embedded inseparably in material expressiveness. The visual and material dimensions of human activity produce aesthetics, as the work that combines various senses to embody emotion. The effect of icons on human emotions has often been studied as important in precipitating and propagating actions and group formation in religious groups (Morgan, 2012; Freeberg, 1989). These examples of the material turn match Navaro's theory discussed above about the effect that objects and texts can produce together.

While the Sewōl protests were not centred on religious issues, the fact that they were related to mass deaths resulted in the involvement of many religious denominations who prayed for the spirits of the victims and offered to guide them to a better afterlife. Thus, religious symbols such as crosses, Buddhist lotus flowers and shamanic amulets were always present in the commemoration installations and intensified the emotional reactions of visitors. They, in turn, expressed their sentiments in thousands of yellow notes and ribbons attached to cardboard and the walls of the protest huts, on which they wrote things like “rest in heaven”, “may your next incarnation be better” and “safe travel to the afterworld”. Masses of these ribbons produced an overwhelming impact on the urban aestheticism of Seoul during the many months of the protests.

The unique power of aesthetics is encapsulated in mundane objects that are interpreted as symbols of central ideas in society (Rancière, 2006, pp. 124–127). This idea has been explored since the eighteenth century, but mainly in relation to art or to objects deemed beautiful. Birgit Meyer (2010) broadened the scope of this terminology when she discussed the aesthetics of persuasion in her study of Pentecostal Christianity, where images are used to create links between believers. Meyer shows how aestheticism changes while creating new religious and ideological trends and behaviours. The persuasion process includes repetition of certain forms that come to be related to a political or ideological stance. Their recurrence helps viewers of such forms to shed their doubts gradually as the material form is recapped in various contexts and usages. It is a rhetoric that is embodied in objects rather than in words. Kevin Deluca (1999) coins the term “image event” for image-centred cultural constructions that manifest various loosely flowing elements of certain events in a manner that forms understandings beyond those created by the verbal discourse. Since South Korea is a very media-oriented culture, many events, including this tragedy, should be discussed from this perspective. In the printed press, television and Internet platforms that pervade Korean personal and public spaces, images are crucial for effective knowledge transmission. Even more than verbal discourses, image events contain various layers of sub-contexts, intertextualities and emotion-soliciting opportunities. In this way, broadcast media adds magnitude to the affect that the tangible objects create.

In the case of the Sewōl victims’ commemoration and protests, images both expressed and formed personal feelings and agendas. Chosen symbols engaged local and global traditions in an active discourse that was handled through various transmission platforms. The daily landscapes, tangible and virtual, through which Seoul’s residents navigate their bodies and consciousness have been immersed in this discourse. It was constantly broadcast in the media in the weeks after the ferry’s sinking, pervaded the downtown squares for several months, and is visible online and in Kwanghwamun Square to this day. As mentioned above, the most recurrent symbol used by the Korean public to express sympathy for the 304 Sewōl disaster victims has been the yellow ribbon. Thousands of such images replaced the social media personal icons of famous and ordinary people in Korea, were hung all over Seoul and other locations, and were produced as pins and mobile phone decorations. The ribbon was also painted on various objects such as shirts, posters and hats, and was erected in the form of a 6-foot-tall paper lantern in the downtown protest camp in Kwanghwamun Square and at the entrance to the Ansan Memorial Hall.

The colour yellow became symbolically tied to sites of commemoration and protest, such as Kwanghwamun Square. Before this event, the main protest site in Seoul was the City Hall, a few hundred yards down the same main road, but when the bereaved families began their hunger strike in Kwanghwamun, it was established as the centre of dissent movements' activities and has remained so ever since. This choice of a new protest location following the individual decision of the families corresponds with Halbwachs' thesis that human memory can only function within a collective context and in relation to specific sites (Halbwachs, 1992). This serendipitous mutual understanding was attractive to many volunteers, who found themselves coming time after time to Kwanghwamun's protest camp (Navaro, 2017). Such collectivity is not a given in a metropolis such as Seoul. The symbols used in the Sewöl protests marked the boundaries of a new collective, separating those who used the ribbons from those who refused to use them and continued to support Park's regime. The demonstrations' centre, rather than sites closer to the sunken ferry or the homes of the families, became a place of public cultural production where collective memory was produced. Choosing to frame the commemoration in downtown Seoul marks this protest as broader than the demands related to the disaster. It is at the heart of Korean society in geographical, symbolic and ideological terms. The protest aims to touch every Korean and the symbols' creators seek to make them affective.

Symbols are usually interpreted in ethnographies through what Turner (1970) discussed as "exegetical meaning", which includes how they are used, how they are positioned in relation to other symbols, and how people feel about them. In the Sewöl's case, symbols advanced the commemoration's development. The mass gatherings began as night vigils that expressed hope for survivors, and featured yellow ribbons, flowers and candles. This hope then turned to grief and mourning expressed on yellow ribbons with Buddhist, shamanic and Christian wishes that the spirits of the deceased would find peace in the afterworld. They then became an anti-government index. This diverse usage of the yellow ribbon is an example of how a few people initiated a symbol that later came to be consumed by the masses.

A few days after the sinking, a small group of university students known as Active Autonomous Alter Life Together (ALT) expressed the idea that a yellow ribbon symbolised hope for the ferry's survivors and their safe return. The original design featured a simple bow outlined in black on a yellow background, with the caption, "May One Small Movement Bring a Great Miracle" (Alt, 2014). Many people changed their Internet profile images accordingly, and the symbol went viral. Downtown ribbon tying transformed Seoul's railings and street lights into a huge yellow memorial (Dong-a, 2014). The students' campaign was successful because they were viewed as innocent representatives of the young public and their use of the yellow ribbon as a symbol captured the most fundamental and instinctive of all wishes: that for life.

In the summer of 2014, the ribbon campaign gained further momentum as the victims' families accepted it as their symbol for respecting life, and an expression of support for their cause (K. Kim, 2017a). When they set up a hunger strike camp in Kwanghwamun Square, their supporters began to make yellow ribbons for mass distribution. A volunteer from the "Ribbon Factory" (desks where volunteers cut and glue small yellow strings that are handed to passers-by) at the Kwanghwamun protest camp, who calls herself Maūmi (the heart), told us in June 2016 that the victims reminded her

of her own grandchildren. She has no acquaintances among the victims but she spontaneously came to Kwanghwamun thinking of her grandson. She smiled as she confessed that her family did not want to get involved in such political matters and that she therefore would not tell them where she was volunteering. People who sympathise with this cause have worn these yellow ribbons on their bags and their person, thus broadening the visible circle of yellow ribbon mourning and commemoration beyond the downtown areas.

One moment that might have triggered the yellow ribbon's transformation from sign of mourning to symbol of political dissent was 9 May 2014. The bereaved parents marched to the Korean Broadcast System (KBS) offices in Yōido to express their anger at the news department's director, who had stated that the number of casualties of the Sewōl disaster was not particularly outstanding when compared to the number of car crash victims. After being moved on from Yōido by the police, the families marched to the Blue House (M. Kim, 2015). They sat on the ground in front of the gate, hugging their dead children's photographs, some of them folding pieces of yellow paper into boats. Surrounded by police buses, they began attaching these boats to the buses. When this was broadcast over independent Internet media, many people began folding boats in support of the parents. Large signs made up of hundreds of these boats were erected in several central sites in the city. On the same afternoon, students in Ansan marched holding yellow signs to condemn the aforementioned KBS comment. From that point on, yellow symbols were strongly associated with protest, to the extent that people who sympathised with the government would not wear them. After the Kwanghwamun protest camp was set up in July 2014, government supporters began a counter protest in front of the plaza. Their colours were red and black, but this choice did not coalesce into a widely acknowledged symbol related to the Sewōl debate; nor were ribbons in these colours produced.

Colourful ribbons are a global symbol of social activism, beyond the original use of the yellow ribbon as a symbol of waiting for missing soldiers in a 1950s American film, and during the 1980s hostage crisis in Iran (Parsons, 1991). In recent campaigns for autism awareness, multi-coloured ribbons were used to symbolise hope for social diversity, and pink ribbons have been used extensively in breast cancer awareness campaigns. These worldwide appearances of the ribbon show how the symbol has evolved, become more widely used, and spread. In the Sewōl movement, the original locally-promoted design of a black bow on a yellow background evolved into one similar to those used in these global awareness campaigns, with a yellow ribbon on a white background. This symbol has since been used in other dissent movements in Korea. For example, in March 2016, the yellow handkerchief was used to express opposition to agreements signed between Korea and Japan for what was deemed to be meagre compensation for women who had been used as sex slaves 75 years ago by Japanese colonisers. The protesters clad the famous brass statue of a "comfort woman" located near the Japanese embassy in Seoul in a yellow hat and scarf to indicate their resentment.

In the past three years, Sewōl yellow ribbons have circulated in Korea mostly in three forms: virtual ones, small portable ones, and large monumental ones. They have produced the overall "yellow effect" of the protest. Wearing yellow ribbons has been categorised as a form of activism (Chu, 2015), symbolising anger at "the disappearance

and failure of the state” (Pak, 2015, p. 18). The Korean Ministry of Education issued a ban on yellow ribbons in schools (No, 2015), prompting a group of teenagers to submit an official complaint to the National Human Rights Committee arguing that this ban restricted freedom of expression and conscience. Their complaint was rejected based on the assertion that the ban only applied to acts that could be mistaken for the official stance of institutions, such as hanging yellow ribbons around schools (No, 2015, p. 448). This official assertion shows that the yellow ribbon has come to be interpreted by the authorities as an affective political symbol rather than an emotional expression of individual commemoration.

Among the various forms of tangible yellow ribbons, virtual images and yellow ribbons made of cloth or Styrofoam are easy to create. Metal pins, however, must be specially ordered at a foundry and are more expensive. Still, various individual artists have manufactured and distributed these pins. The second-year anniversary brooches depicting a paper boat and a yellow ribbon symbolised the shipwreck waiting to be salvaged. Slightly larger than the simple yellow ribbon pin, this brooch was more conspicuous, and was popular among activists and labour unions. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (*Minjunoch'ong*) purchased these brooches in bulk to be worn on their signature navy-blue vests.

Wearing yellow brooches and bracelets became a social marker and an identity symbol. Kim Ji-yŏng, a stage actress and activist, told us how an unexpected encounter on a subway convinced her that the ribbon mattered. In 2016, during a daily commute, a middle-aged woman who was looking at her yellow ribbon asked why she was still wearing it after two years. Kim answered that the truth had not yet been determined and the victims needed to be memorialised. The woman then started crying and told Kim that one of the victims was her niece, whom she loved like a daughter, and upon seeing a yellow ribbon or a bracelet she felt relief and comfort that others were somehow “on her side”.

Online activism also played a significant role in turning the protest symbols into widely-recognised artefacts. The most famous example is the production of the Memory Bracelet (*kiök p'aljji*), a yellow silicon bracelet with the words “REMEMBER20140416” in intaglio. Kim Hyŏn-ho, an Anglican priest, started this project in May 2014 using an online crowd-funding platform to raise the necessary funds for 50,000 bracelets. These were given to donors and Sewŏl families for distribution at Kwanghwamun, Ansan Memorial Hall and other locations. Originally planned as a one-off event, the fundraising was re-opened ten times due to popular demand. The participants commented that “There are other Sewŏl bracelets but this one seems the prettiest”. This aesthetic consideration demonstrates that, for the mourners and protesters, the forms used in the process have significant value both in personal usage and in public presentations. Several rare versions of the protest symbols have even become collectables for activists.

This newly created aestheticism proved affective in the process of mobilising thousands of protesters daily for more than three years. The demonstrations culminated in the first anniversary. Thousands gathered in downtown Seoul carrying chrysanthemums, to commemorate the dead and mourn their loss, and called on the government to conduct a thorough investigation of the sinking. The police reacted by using water cannons and pepper spray to disperse the crowd. With the police confronting the protesters with aggression, the clashes turned violent and lasted well into the night.

The following three anniversaries were more peaceful, after Seoul's mayor prohibited the police from using fire hydrant water to quash the protests. Thousands of people attended these events.

Emotional Masses and Affective Aestheticism

In the Sewöl commemorations, the emotional response of people to the sight of certain images, such as photographs of the deceased passengers, was especially emphasised. David Freeberg (1989, p. 1) shows how people react to religious images by beginning to “kiss them, cry before them, and go on journeys to them”. Similar emotional responses have been documented in other cases of unexpected mass deaths. Erika Doss (2011) discusses temporary commemoration monuments for tragic and traumatic events such as the attack on the World Trade Center towers on 11 September 2001 and shootings at Columbine and other schools in the US. Although there was no explicit religious or other authority that directed these monuments, aesthetic conventions were created and observed by most participants. The process of formation, acknowledgment and acceptance of aesthetic norms can also be seen in the Sewöl protest.

The Sewöl memorials were created and consumed by masses of people. The estimated number of yellow ribbons tied to downtown poles and fences has reached several hundred thousand. The individual reaction to the events has been interpretative, a behaviour that requires and enhances personal agency within the social contexts of Seoul's residents. Around seven million people agreed to engage with the protests and signed the petitions; others disagreed and initiated counter-protests; some chose to perceive the images only as religious metaphors and bowed in front of the altars to pay respect to the spirits; and some protest images were also appreciated as artworks per se. Certain widely-circulated images, such as the tip of the submerged ferry before it sank completely, and the photograph of a hunger striking father shaking hands with the visiting Pope in the summer of 2014, became so recognisable that they might be considered image events, as their ability to solicit emotion went far beyond the verbal discourse (Deluca, 1999, pp. 5–9). The artefacts and images related to the Sewöl protest are therefore objects of affecting presence, in the sense that their mere existence changes something in the world.

Objects of affecting presence are discussed extensively by Robert Plant Armstrong (1981), who demonstrates how the value of things is decided in accordance with human interactions and interests related to artefacts of invocation or virtuosity (Armstrong, 1981, p. 20). Objects of affecting presence can inspire people to partake in unplanned actions and generate strong emotional responses. An altar in Kwanghwamun Square, with rows of school yearbook photographs featuring all of the victims of the sinking, is one such powerful object (Figure 3). Many passers-by have found themselves removing their shoes to enter the altar's hut, bowing in respect for the spirits and offering a white chrysanthemum from the bucket outside the hut. While some told us that they had intentionally come to pay their respects to the dead, others said that they had just happened to be passing through the central downtown area. The agency of the object as manifested by initiating attraction to this commemoration installation can be viewed almost every minute in this location. The visuals and the objects have increased the



Figure 3. Altar at Kwanghwamun Square. Photography by author.

circles of people who have become aware of the protest, and their feelings have been altered by the experience provided by this installation.

The Sewöl movement is a case of collective mourning that was transformed into a political protest by many different loosely-organised groups of social activists, who have worked to foster dissent through the dissemination of affective symbols. By utilising visual culture, protests manage to achieve visibility and affectivity, even when they are not strongly supported by official organisations. Many neighbourhood groups, churches and student organisations stood out in their consistent participation in the Sewöl protest and commemoration events, while the opposition parties were often criticised for appearing mainly at large protests and anti-government events.

Our observations demonstrate that the Sewöl protest movement was not organised coherently by the Park regime's political opposition as some pro-government activists and media alleged. Large workers' unions, religious denominations and political parties participated in the protest at times, but were not the main force that led to its enduring affect and uniqueness. In our participant observations and in-depth interviews, we heard different volunteers of varying ages, statuses and occupations tell similar narratives about how they happened to see the protest camp during their commute or went there after seeing in the media how the bereaved families were protesting. They all described specific images that had persuaded them to become activists. One such powerful image was the photographs of the students. The photographs were usually arranged as funeral icons used in Korea's vernacular rituals for the dead, framed with a black ribbon, and set on a yellow background or decorated with a yellow ribbon. A volunteer at the Kwanghwamun petition booth said that she was in the last year of high school when the Sewöl sank. Although she was extremely busy with college applications, her mother asked her to visit the Memorial

Hall in Ansan with her. After seeing the long lines of victims' photographs, she cried all the way home and decided to begin volunteering (Bae & Jöng, 2017).

The Sewöl movement is unique in the history of civil protests in Korea for several reasons, which all tie into the affectiveness of the visual articulation of the protest goals. First, this protest has managed to sustain public attention in the mainstream media and daily discourse for three years. Second, the Sewöl protest has maintained its ground in downtown Seoul for all this time. The protest camp in Kwanghwamun Square has remained visible even as other major events have taken place there, such as the visit of the Pope in 2014, the broadcasting of the soccer World Cup on a giant screen in 2014, and the Olympic Games celebrations in 2016 and 2018. Third, the Seoul municipality has incorporated the Sewöl protest into the city's daily life by allowing semi-permanent structures and monuments in the centre of the city. Being the centre of a civic protest has become one of the defining characteristics that the city's government intentionally embraced in 2015, as a new museum-like historical exhibition in the public library states. Unlike the Sewöl protest, the aforementioned local protests remained minor. While other urban demonstrations, such as that by the sacked Ssangyong Motors workers who set up a protest camp in front of Töksu Palace from 2009 to 2013 (until the court ruled the workers' dismissals illegal), attracted public attention, they were not backed by so many people. Their meanings and symbols produced only a negligible affect.

Conclusion

Our data suggest that collective memory can be produced, maintained and harnessed for political dissent through the mass distribution of symbolic objects. We cannot claim to assess exactly the degree to which symbolic images and objects enhance the impact produced by strong emotions about a disastrous event. Rather, we have attempted to unfold and analyse the complicated exchanges between the actions of many unrelated individuals and the processes of symbol creation and usage. Objects and subjects exerted agency that entwined in this case to mobilise massive protests.

The Sewöl victims' commemoration project has taken various on-site and virtual forms of material expression, which articulate broader social issues in South Korea, including norms of democracy, social hierarchies, corruption and governance transparency. The yellow ribbon produced an affect that managed to tie together the personal grief and shock from the disaster with broader public concerns such as personal safety and corruption. The protest has been strong and enduring thanks to the creation, manipulation and public acceptance of several potent symbols and images, which have since been incorporated increasingly into other social injustice debates and demonstrations. The affectivity of such images and objects was manifested in promoting public awareness and mobilising the masses in support of debated discourses. Such a broadly felt affect promises that they will not be forgotten.

Notes

1. Other Sewöl umbrella campaigns were launched in Cheju, Ilsan and Niagara Falls.

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