

Risk or Totem?: Semantics of Child in Korean Risk Society

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In a risk society, intimacy falls under the category of rational management and individual reflexivities. Children are not an exception. This article attempts to shed light on this newly emerging figure of child in risk societalization of Korean society. We propose to grasp this figure of child as a risk-totem. For this, we refer to an important concept of Luhmann called self-observation of society. According to this insight, society observes itself through the mass media, sciences (sociology), and culture. In this context, we analyzed two major forms of self-observation of contemporary Korean risk society on the subject of child in particular: child abduction films and discourses on risk society. Through the examination of these two forms of self-observation of society, the semantics of child in a risk society are determined as a risk-totem.

Keywords: Risk Society, Luhmann, Self-Observation, Child, Totem, Insurance, Abduction Films

Child Abduction Films

Korean cinema of the new millennium explored a specific theme which, hitherto, had not been prevalent as a cinematographic motive: child kidnapping. In the new millennium, numerous films were made in Korea under this theme, including the following movies: *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002) by Park Chan-Wook, *A Good Lawyer's Wife* (2003) by Im Sang-Soo, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005) by Park Chan-Wook, *A Cruel Attendance* (2006) by Kim Tae-Yun, *Voice of a Murderer* (2006) by Park Jin-Pyo, *Secret Sunshine* (2007) by Lee Chang-Dong, *Seven Days* (2007) by Won Shin-yon, *The ESP Couple* (2008) by Kim Hyung-Ju, *No Mercy* (2009) by Kim Hyung-Joon, *Midnight FM* (2010) by Kim Sang-Man, *Man of Vendetta* (2010) by Woo Min-Ho, *Heartbeat* (2010) by Yoon Jae-Kun, *The Man from Nowhere* (2010) by No Jung-Bum, *Children* (2011) by Lee Kyu-Man, and *Montage* (2013) by Jung Kun-Sop.

Although child abduction films were produced and consumed intermittently prior to the new millennium, remarkable characteristics can be seen in this unforeseen emergence of child abduction films. Firstly, the production of child-abduction films was concentrated in a particular period of time, namely from 2002 to now. Especially from 2006 on, a genuine style of child abduction films combining the genre of thriller and the theme of child abduction seems to have been invented in Korean cinematography. Secondly, with some of them actually drawing on real-life events, these films evoke a strong sense of reality in comparison with other types of movies, to the extent that they demonstrate characteristics that are usually associated with documentary films. For example, *Voice of a Murderer* is based on the murder of a boy whose name is Lee Hyung-Ho in 1991, and *Children* is based on the disappearance of five children in Daegu (Songseo Elementary School) in 1991.¹ Thirdly, most of them were well-received by the Korean audience.²

This interesting phenomenon may generate various questions from a

¹ Along with the Hwaseong serial killing, these two tragedies have been labeled as the "three eternally unsolved cases" of contemporary Korean society.

² According to the statistics from the Korean Film Council (<http://www.kofic.or.kr/cms/64.do>), *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* attracted 162,570 viewers, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* 3,174,173 viewers, *A Cruel Attendance* 362,348 viewers, *Voice of a Murderer* 3,045,726 viewers, *Secret Sunshine* 1,617,363 viewers, *Midnight FM* 1,223,352 viewers, *Man of Vendetta* 1,022,874 viewers, *Heartbeat* 1,033,746 viewers, and *Children* 1,871,486 viewers. Only two movies of this genre, *A Cruel Attendance* and *The ESP Couple*, failed at the Korean box-office.

sociological point of view. However, regardless of different perspectives one may take to approach this phenomenon, it seems certain that it is constitutive of very significant symptoms indicative of contemporary Korean society, especially with regard to the meaning of a child, more precisely, the way a child is conceived of by collective imagination because films on child abduction feature, among others, a kidnapped child: a child at risk or a child in danger. We can say that the representation of this “threatened child” dovetails in a certain way with the reality of the child in a risk society. In fact, numerous researches have been carried out to examine the correlation between the advent of risk society and child/adolescent problems such as pregnancy, childbirth, upbringing, education, child care, and anxiety of parents who raise a child (Scott, Jackson, and Backett-Millburn 1998; Jackson and Scott 1999; Lupton 1999; Kelly 2001; Wyness 2006, pp. 50-71). According to Claude Juvéau, the child becomes an object of multiple reflexivities, inasmuch as it is exposed to various risks such as accidents, sicknesses, sexual crimes, environmental contaminations, and so on (Juvéau 2006). This recurrent theme of the “threatened child” in a risk society is to be found, with striking similarity, in the aforementioned films in which a child falls prey to crime, parents are shocked by the crisis of their child’s safety, and the abductor symbolizes the most terrible hazard that can befall a child.

In this sense, these films are, to borrow the concept of Niklas Luhmann, to be considered as self-observation *par excellence* of the risk society on the subject of child. Analyzing the kidnapped child represented in the films will lead one to more clearly comprehend the semantics of the child constituted under the logic of a risk society. In this context, this article attempts to examine the semantics of child in the following three stages. Firstly, I will propose to reflect upon some essential concepts of Luhmann, such as self-observation (*Selbstbeobachtung*), meaning (*Sinn*), and semantics (*Semantik*), with a view to applying them to the interpretation of child abduction films. Secondly, I will analyze the main narratological elements of the genre, focusing on the antinomic aspects of the kidnapped child. Finally, I will investigate the semantics of child by employing another form of self-observation in a risk society, that is, discourses on risk society. The main purpose of this article is to determine the meaning of child in a risk society in a clear conceptual scheme, and furthermore, to propose it as the starting point for further empirical research in the future.

Theoretical Reflections

In this article, several concepts proposed by Luhmann are employed to put forward the following hypothetical arguments: 1) the films of child abduction are to be considered as a certain form of self-observation of a risk society,³ and 2) the child represented in those films is an indicator of a specific “semantics” of child constituted under the dominant logic of a risk society. I will try to elucidate the following three key concepts employed in my hypothetical arguments: self-observation, meaning, and semantics.

Firstly, “observation” in the Luhmannian systems theory is a technical notion defined as “any operation that makes a distinction,” or more expressly, “designation by distinction” (Luhmann 1984, p. 73). For Luhmann, it is always a system that observes itself or its environment rather than a human subject or consciousness. Observation is one of the many operations permitting the systems to conduct their self-referential and autopoietic reproductions. According to Luhmann, modern society, which is highly complex and functionally differentiated, observes itself through various forms, such as the sciences, mass media (news, advertisements, and entertainments), novels, films, works of art, etc. In particular, Luhmann enumerates two functional sub-systems, science and mass media, as the principal systems whose essential task consists of self-observation of society (Luhmann 1996, 1997, p. 1139). He says that “what we know about our society, about the world in which we live, know, we know through the mass media” (Luhmann 1996, p. 9). Accordingly, when we attempt to examine the self-observation of a “risk society,” it would be worthwhile to refer to the films of child abduction (mass media) and discourses on risk society produced by various sociologists (science), given that both sociological discourses on risk society and films with a specific risk-related theme are a legitimate part of significant self-observations of a risk society.

Secondly, as for the concept of meaning, it would not be erroneous to assert that Luhmann dissociates the notion of “meaning” from the ordinary sense of significance (*Bedeutung*) or from the canonical Weberian sense of “subjectively oriented meaning” (*subjektiv gemeinte Sinn*)⁴ (Weber 1968, p. 4).

³ There are other forms of films that we can consider specific to self-observations of risk society, for example, disaster films. In these films featuring supernatural disasters, the child is typically represented as the final hope of humanity, surviving all kinds of dangers.

⁴ “Subjectively oriented meaning” is my translation, suggesting that the Weberian meaning is always oriented toward something: intentionality. Parsons translated “*subjektiv gemeinte Sinn*” into

From the perspective of Luhmann, “meaning” resides neither in semiotic entities like words, sentences, and propositions, nor in subjective interiority, given that meaning can’t be easily assimilated as a substance that can be delivered, discovered, and handled like a physical object. To the contrary, Luhmann posits meaning strictly as a medium/form through which the systems (psychic systems and social systems) incessantly observe themselves. Defined as “unity of actualization and virtualization” (Luhmann 1984, p. 65) and based on the difference between what is and what can be, meaning necessitates selection. It stems from the gap between actuality and possibility, and therefore, to have meaning means to have distinctions in three dimensions of, according to Luhmann, the fact dimension, the temporal dimension, and the social dimension (Luhmann 1984, pp. 74-82). Hence, it is by virtue of meaning that the psychic systems can engage in reflection and the social systems can conduct communications. This concept of meaning evolves into the concept of semantics by default, because the latter is none other than the cultural stock of meanings or the supply of themes of communications:

Societal reproduction of communication must therefore progress by reproducing themes that recruit their contributions autonomously, so to speak. The themes are not created anew every time in each case, nor are they given adequate precision by language, like a vocabulary. . . . Therefore an intervening requirement mediates between language and interaction—a supply of possible themes that is available for quick and readily understandable reception in concrete communicative processes. We would like to call this supply of themes culture, and, if it is reserved specifically for the purposes of communication, semantics (Luhmann 1984, p. 163).

Fundamentally, the Luhmannian concept of semantics refers to the structure of expectations that enhances the probability of the system’s operations:

Taken abstractly, the concept of structure refers to communication or to action. The structures that link communication to communication include information, and because information relates to the world, they are

“subjective meaning.” But in this case, the verb “*meinen*” is not taken into account. In the French translation, we see the expression “*le sensvisésubjectivement*” (Weber 1995, p.28). In this case, “*meinen*” is translated into “*viser*,” that is to say, “to be directed to.” The French translation doesn’t annihilate the nuance of “intentionality.”

structures of the world. Within the system they comprehend everything that could be relevant for the system. To the extent that they hold ready forms of meaning that communication treats as worth preserving, we will at times also speak of semantics (Luhmann 1984, p. 282).

And, although the semantics is part of the culture “handed down to us by the history of concepts and ideas” (Luhmann 1984, p. 163), it is not permanent but exposed to historical changes. For example, in *Love as Passion*, Luhmann analyzes the operation of the semantics of love in each transitional phase, from ideal love to passionate love, then to romantic love, and finally to love as a problem (Luhmann 1982). Also in *Political Theory in Welfare State*, he analyzes the transition of the semantics of political inclusion, from “benevolence” to “right” (Luhmann 1981, p. 26). To investigate the semantics of child in a risk society is equivalent to examining the way in which the child is constituted as a theme of meaningful observations (perceptions and communications) peculiar to the logic of risk society. And to investigate the way in which the child is constituted in such a way is to examine the self-observation of a risk society on the subject of child, that is, child abduction films and discourses on risk society.

Semantics of Child in Films of Child Kidnapping

Double Contingency

Normally, the story commences with the abduction of a child by a kidnapper. The kidnapped child is menaced, threatened, and sometimes physically abused or killed. The child in these films is represented as utterly vulnerable and powerless, thereby subject to the demonic violence of the kidnapper who remains hidden and invisible. The most typical example of this is found in the film *Voice of a Murderer* (2006) directed by Park Jin-Pyo, in which the face of the kidnapper with a creepy, low-toned voice is kept hidden throughout the film. The criminal takes the child as hostage and starts ransom negotiations while ingeniously hiding him. He seems to mastermind the game. On the contrary, the parents in these films are bewildered and desperate. Demonstrating their inability to reason due to desperation in finding their child and alternating between hope and despair, they are depicted as having lost any sense of reality. To quote the title of a Korean film of that sort, they are literally “destroyed” (the original Korean

title of *Man of Vendetta* is the *Destroyed Man*). The police are not taken very seriously in these films. They intervene, but their performance is lackluster and without exception. The police are portrayed to be totally negligent, devoid of problem-solving skills, and even immoral at times.

Despite slight differences in the storylines of Korean child abduction films, it is hardly difficult to perceive their “ideal type,” for child abduction films usually employ a relatively simple and straightforward narrative structure. In most cases, child abduction films have two major narratological cores. The first is the missing child, in the sense that the disappearance of the child triggers the whole story. The second is the painful negotiations between the kidnapper and the parents. For, the story does not come to an end when the child returns, safe or dead, but it ends only when the negotiations between the two parties (the interaction as a type of social system) disintegrate. In this sense, I will analyze these two important apparatuses constitutive of the fundamental grammar of these films: 1) interaction between parents and abductor, 2) the missing child.

First of all, we cannot help but recognize the strange characteristics of the interaction between the parents and the abductor in that it is highly improbable for the interaction to continue, i.e., to produce itself self-referentially in Luhmannian terms insofar as the criminal remains hidden behind the creepy menacing voice over the telephone, trying to contact the parents at his own will. These two parties do not make any physical contact with each other, and there is hardly any trust between them. The parents suspect possible peril of their child, while the criminal suspects possible police intervention.

There essentially exists such a wide chasm between the two parties that their communications seem almost doomed from the beginning. They are exactly situated in what Parsons calls “double contingency,” a situation in which one social actor (ego) is confronted by another actor (alter) and also in which they are unable to penetrate the consciousness of each other, like two black boxes stacked against each other:

Thus consideration of the place of complimentary of expectations in the processes of human interaction has implications for certain categories which are central in the analysis of the origins and functions of cultural patterns. There is a *double contingency* inherent in interaction. On one hand, the ego's gratification is contingent selection among available alternatives. But in turn, the alter's reaction will be contingent on the ego's selection and will result from a complementary selection on the alter's part. Because of this

double contingency, communication, which is the precondition of cultural patterns, could not exist without both generalization from the particularity of the specific situations (which are never identical for ego and alter) and stability of meaning which can only be assured by “conventions” observed by both parties (Parsons and Shils 1951, p. 16).

The establishment of the cinematographic grammar of child abduction films should be preceded by the settlement of the problem of this double contingency. However, the situation in the films does not work in favor of this. There is no non-contractual conditions for the contract asserted by Durkheim, no probabilities (*chance*) of mutual understanding suggested by Max Weber, no ideal situation of communicative rationality on which Habermas counted, no “shared symbolic system” as Parsons puts it, no commonality like common sense, sympathy, empathy, or solidarity between the two parties (Parsons and Shils 1951, p. 16). There is no one single value or morality exercising a powerful normative influence on both parties. The reality is exactly the opposite. The values sought by them clash with each other. The parents act under the sway of parental unconditional love, while the criminal is dominated by the pursuit of his inexorable self-interest. So what continues to make the story unfold despite the presence of these contradictory elements? How do the two parties produce sustainable interactions in these films?

The Calculable and the Incalculable

It is paradoxically owing to this very difference that the interaction between the two is made possible. It is not identity but difference that facilitates the emergence and the operation of this social system. More precisely, the different “meanings” conferred respectively to the missing child make it possible for their communication to continue. The interaction between them can carry on with efficiency only when the parents remain eager to find their child safe and well, while the kidnapper remains cold-hearted and emotionally detached from the child. If the parents are indifferent to the destiny of their child (this is the case of *Cruel Attendance*) or if the kidnapper fosters human affection toward the child, the story derails, becoming a comedy or a lighthearted drama. Only when a disparity exists between the respective meanings accorded the child can bargaining (communication) continue and be reproduced operatively. In a word, double contingency is resolved by the antinomic semantics of the kidnapped child.

In fact, it is not difficult to recognize that the meaning of the child is split into two distinctively contradictory aspects. On the one hand, the victimized child is viewed by the kidnapper as a price, a calculable value, akin to that of a lifeless commodity. The child, whose value is thus measured and priced, is the very nucleus of the dead-end negotiations between the two parties. For, from the perspective of the kidnapper, the child signifies nothing more than a disposable object that can be taken, bought, sold, or exchanged. The victimized child thereby acquires a measurable quantitative value, which is materialized in ransom. As mentioned above, the ransom does not necessarily take a monetary form. Even when the kidnapper abducts not for the purpose of earning money but for some other reasons, there is always an exact calculation of the “price” or “value” of the child. The kidnapper always seeks to achieve a set objective in exchange for the child, whether it is money, vengeance, or other forms of symbolic exchange. Were it not for this fungibility of the child and of its monetary value or symbolic equivalent, the story will not unfold properly in a child abduction film. The abductor is only concerned about the instrumental potentiality of the child that can fulfill his personal objective. In this sense, for the abductor, the meaning of the child is exclusively focused on its quality of being calculable.

To the contrary, the same child is perceived by the parents in a diametrically opposing manner, i.e., as the most priceless being. In this case, the child embodies something absolute, invaluable, and nearly sacred, to the extent that the parents are willing to sacrifice anything to rescue the child. At first sight, it may seem entirely natural for the parents of a kidnapped child to act in an emotionally-charged manner. However, it should be also noted that this actualized meaning attached to the child is, in fact, just one of the many potential meanings given to the child under normal circumstances. For example, although the child may mean a source of happiness and a fruit borne of their mutual love, the same child “could” simultaneously represent a burden, a problem, or an obstacle to career success for the parents in everyday life, in late modern context in particular. However, as soon as the child is taken away by the criminal and its life threatened, the meaning of the child is circumscribed around its incomparable importance. The “meaning” of the kidnapped child is exactly based on this difference between actuality and potentiality. From this perspective of the parents, the ransomed child has no equivalent in the world. Nobody can replace the child. S/he is precious beyond measure, and likewise, his/her importance is beyond calculation. For the parents, the missing child is equal to the most valuable object of love that is incalculable and even sacred.

Logic of Insurance

It is not difficult to recognize that the semantics of child in these films partakes of a manifest contradictory duality: the child as the calculable and the child as the incalculable. This double and antinomic semantics of child permits the social system (interaction) to overcome the double contingency and to produce itself autopoietically and self-referentially. But how can the incalculable coexist with the calculable⁵ in the same figure? What is the principle of the conjunction of the calculable and the incalculable incarnated in the child? In the context of child abduction films, this question can be answered by a narratological paradox which commands the semantics of the kidnapped child. Namely, the child is treated as the most priceless (by the parents) only when s/he is treated as the most priced (by the abductor). The inverse is also true. The child is the most calculable, precisely because s/he is the most incalculable. The logical combination of these two opposing values is dependent on the narratological coexistence of two different perspectives. This interesting paradox determines the subjectivity of the abducted child represented in films. The more rationally s/he is dealt with (by the abductor), the more irrationally or emotionally s/he is dealt with (by the parents). The result is a kind of singular mixture between rationality and emotionality.

However, this bizarre antinomic semantics of child, crystallized in a magnificent manner by cinematographical imagination, is not a mere chimeric and fantastic cultural fabrication but exactly reflects the logic of a certain modern institution closely related to risk management, which is none other than insurance. The insurance is, as Mitchell Dean formulates it perspicaciously, “an attempt to make the incalculable calculable” (Dean 1999, p. 138). It is the typical apparatus of preliminary protection based on *rational calculus* against a variety of possible hazards comprising problems that would be normally considered to be *beyond calculative rationality*, such as life, health, diseases, the body, and even the soul. Once these essential qualities of human life are subsumed under the logic of the insurance, they are no longer considered to be purely dependent on the providential force such as fortune, luck, or destiny; rather, they are viewed as susceptible to control and management by rational procedures. In this sense, the insurance produces risk in the strictest sense of the word. More precisely, it is through the

⁵ The scientific tentative to evaluate a child has been done by many psychologists, economists, and anthropologists (Esterlin 1975; Zelizer 1985, p. 7; Folbre 2008; Jung and Jin 2008, p. 150).

invention and application of the technology of insurance that the dangers of modern life are transformed into the new category of perception, which is no other than the risk:

In everyday language the term 'risk' is understood as a synonym for danger or peril, for some unhappy event which may happen to someone; it designates an objective threat. In insurance the term designates neither an event nor a general kind of event occurring in reality (the unfortunate kind), but a specific mode of treatment of certain events capable of happening to a group of individuals—or, more exactly, to values or capitals possessed or represented by a collectivity of individuals: that is to say, a population. Nothing is a risk in itself; there is no risk in reality. But on the other hand, anything can be a risk; it all depends how one analyzes the danger, considers the event. As Kant might have put it, the category of risk is a category of understanding; it cannot be given in sensibility or intuition (Ewald 1991, p. 199).

As the dominant "technology of risk" (Ewald 1991, p. 198) capable of reshaping the reality with its strong performative competences, the insurance necessarily entails calculative rationality (Beck-Gernsheim 1996, p. 142), but it is thereupon applied to the very obscure regions of the possible tragedies of human lives (accidents) governed hitherto by the imaginary of divine providence, so transcending the limits of human rationalities. Insurance promises to calculate the incalculable, to recover the irrecoverable, to compensate what can't be compensated. In this promise, two different ontological dimensions merge, in the figure of the kidnapped child. On the one hand, insurance widens and deepens the rationalization of life world, inviting social agents to count on their calculative faculty to provide against contingent misfortunes. On the other hand, the same technology of insurance results in highlighting, presumably unwittingly, the indelible value of the incalculable aspects of life. For, what should be insured rationally is exactly what can't be recuperated at all, for example, parts of the body, life itself, and the child. Viviana Zelizer points out this irony, especially in her two books, *Moral and Markets* (1983) and *Pricing the Priceless Child* (1985), in which she presents the argument that the first appearance of children's life insurance triggered a public backlash in America in the late 19th century. According to her, pure rationality did not agree with the prevalent public moral sense of the era. As a result, the companies could not help but make a compromise and promote the concept of insurance as a ritual motivated by

love and care for children. That is to say, insurance is not always and necessarily based on the principle of calculating the incalculable but functions as a vehicle that voluntarily turns the calculable child into the incalculable. The incalculable child was sanctified in the very process of falling under the category of the calculable, the logic of insurance (Zelizer 1978, 1983, 1985).

In this respect, we can say that the logic of rationalization cannot be dissociated from the logic of irrationalization, particularly on the subject of the meaning of child. On the plane of life world everyday activities of the late modern period molded by the ever-expanding logic of private insurance (O'Malley 1996, pp. 198-202), child is treated semantically in an increasingly rationalized way, precisely to the extent that it is treated semantically in an increasingly irrationalized way.⁶ People try to price the priceless child (by purchasing insurance for him/her), just because the priceless can be authentically priceless only if and insofar as it is priced under the protection of rational technology of insurance. In this sense, we can say that rationality and irrationality do not exclude each other, but they are in a singular complementary and simultaneous correlation.

If we go back to the films of child abduction, it is not so difficult to observe the same movement of double logic akin to the above-mentioned operation of insurance. The perspective of the abductor represents, without any doubt, the typically calculative rationality of a risk. On the contrary, the perspective of the parents expresses what appears to be irrational infatuation with the incalculable. The first perspective views the child as a risk, and the second views the child as a totem. Child is constituted as a risk when the problems concerning him/her are dealt with and resolved in a strictly rational manner, whereas child is constituted as totem when the parents harbor emotional intensity and irrational affection for their child. What is important is that these two contradictory logics are inseparably intertwined with each other in the meaning of child. If this kind of semantics of child is the cinematographic self-observation of a risk society, it remains for us to investigate the sociological self-observation of a risk society in discourses on risk society.

⁶ In Korea, the first insurance for children appeared in November 1996, "Insurance of Love of Children" by Dae-Shin Life Insurance Company.

Semantics of Child in Discourses on Risk Society

Absence of Child in Korean Discourses on Risk Society

Following the examination of the double semantics of child represented in those films, I will now introduce another form of self-observation of a risk society, sociological discourses on risk, in an attempt to find the “functional equivalent” of the double semantics. I will look into discourses on Korean risk society first, followed by European discourses.⁷

As is well known, the concept of a risk society was introduced in the late 1990s and functioned as one of the most important and perspicacious intellectual lenses through which the Korean society of that time observed and criticized itself sociologically. In the context of Korean society, discourses on risk society, which flourished from the late '90s to the early, had a tendency to mostly focus on the explication of a variety of catastrophic incidents that happened at the time. As is well known, Korean society experienced a chain of miserable accidents during that period.⁸ In an attempt to shed light on the reasons for which these calamities happened, many

⁷ As is well known, 1986 saw the publication of two important works in Europe that proposed the concept of risk as an important perspective in the analysis of society: *Risk Society* of U. Beck and *L'État providence* (The Welfare State) of F. Ewald. There was a variety of differences between the two. For example, Beck is of the tradition of critical theory, while Ewald is a Foucauldian. Beck's concept of risk is fundamentally inspired by environmental catastrophes, while Ewald's concept of risk is strictly confined to social dimensions. But it is important to note that they evoke almost unanimously and simultaneously the new possibility of conceiving modernity under the sign of risk. Five years later, Luhmann rigorously distinguishes risk (*Risiko*) from danger (*Gefahr*). If certain damage is attributed to a decision-making, we call it a risk. On the contrary, if the damage is attributed to the environment, we call it a danger (Luhmann 1991, p. 21-8). In fact, it is Foucault who proposes the concept of risk in the analysis of the establishment of new modern governmentality named “apparatus of security” (*dispositif de sécurité*) during his lecture at the *Collège de France* in January 1978 (Cf. Foucault 2004, pp. 57-81).

⁸ A series of catastrophic events took place in Korea in 1993, including the January collapse of Uam Shopping Mall in Cheongju (28 people dead), the March derailment of a train in Busan (78 people dead), the July crash of Asiana Airlines Flight 733 (66 people dead), and the October sinking of a ferry off the coast of Wi Island (292 people dead). The year 1994 saw a fire on a cruise ship (29 people dead), the collapse of Seongsu Bridge (32 people dead), and a gas explosion in Mapo (13 people dead). The year 1995 saw a gas explosion in a subway station in Daegu (101 people dead) and the collapse of Sampung Department Store in June (502 people dead). In August 1997, Korean Air Flight 801 crashed in Guam (254 people dead) and the IMF financial crisis erupted during the same year, inflicting a social catastrophe on a large segment of the population in Korea. In June 1999, an accident in a youth training center in Hwaseong claimed the lives of 23 people, while 192 people died in a subway accident in 2003.

sociologists appealed to the notion of “risk society” proposed by Beck as a conceptual framework. Basically, numerous sociologists reached the agreement that the principal reason for the outbreak of disastrous events could be attributed to the fundamental defects of Korean modernization process (Chang 1998; Han 1998; Lee 1998). Many sociologists suggest a set of descriptive notions that qualify the specificities of Korean risk society. Kim Dae-Hwan proposes the notion of “double risk society” propelled by “reckless developmentalism,” Chang Kyung-Sup the notion of “complex risk society,” Sung Kyung-Ryung the notion of “total risk society,” Lee Dong-Hun and Chung Tae-Suk the notion of “backward risk society” (Chang 1997; Kim 1998; Sung 1998; Chung 2003).

Most of these diagnoses share as a common denominator the perception that the modernization of Korean society did not take place at a normal pace compared to the modernization of its Western counterparts, and therefore, in order to prevent similar calamities henceforth, Korean society should achieve a high level of modernity that is fundamentally founded on the technical efficacy of governing potential hazards (No 2004a, p. 209; No 2004b, pp. 99-100).

Herein lays the ironic idiosyncrasy of Korean discourses on risk society of the times. Namely, the concept of risk employed in these diagnoses was not really faithful to the original concept of risk set forth by Beck, Ewald, and Luhmann (Beck 1986; Ewald 1986; Luhmann 1991). Firstly, the concept of risk proposed by European theorists considers high modernity as the very source of problems, rather than as a solution, which signifies that a risk society results from its historical and reflexive process rather than from the lack of normal modernity (Beck 1994). Secondly, for European theorists, the concept of risk does not refer to real-life accidents or events. Instead, it indicates a form of interpretation, according to which these happenings acquire a social meaning.⁹ Although there are some polemical aspects to it, “risk society” as defined by Beck or Luhmann has nothing to do with “dangerous” society, but it points to a certain type of society where potential problems are perceived in the category of risks that is based on rational

⁹ M. Dean and A. Scot point to the fact that for Beck, the concept of risk still contains realistic connotations (Dean 1999, p. 136; Scott 2000, p. 38). It is true that the position of Beck vacillates between constructivist perspective and realistic perspective. He says in *Risk Society*, “risks have something unreal about them.... In a fundamental sense they are both real and unreal” (Beck 1986, p. 33). He considers risks as something that “cannot be experienced as such,” and also as the “objectified negative images of utopias” (Beck 1986, p. 28). In *Weltrisikogesellschaft*, Beck makes a distinction between risk and danger/catastrophe (Beck 2007, p. 29).

management of danger. In consideration of these two notable connotations, it would be fair to argue that the aforementioned discourses on Korean risk society do not conform to the original concept of risk. In the first analysis, these discourses did not penetrate the paradox of modernity that some of the successes of the first modern era returned as risks during the late modern era. Secondly, they did not regard risk as a constructivist framework functioning in a transcendental way, so to speak, as a sort of Foucauldian *épistémè*. Instead, they regard risk as a real threat happening in an empirical and phenomenal world. Discourses on Korean risk society of the '90s were not exactly based on the concept of "risk society," but on the impression of "dangerous society."

This Korean academic trend brought about the following theoretical consequences. The first theoretical consequence was that discourses on risk society declined as a major theme of public sociology. It is true that in the new millennium, Korean society seems to have transcended the abysmal state of being incapable of coping with basic safety problems that haunted Korean society in the 1990s. During that same period, however, Korean society seems to have displayed other symptoms of turning into a risk society in many facets of social life: increasing awareness of individual, familial, and social security, growing anxiety about environmental issues, including problems concerning food, air, and water, and the emergence of well-being culture that values happiness and emotional fulfillment more than material successes. Strictly speaking, it is not in the '90s but in the new millennium when Korean society was in need of acute scientific self-observation through the concept of risk. The second consequence was that discourses on Korean risk society did not comprise of intimacy. Various problems concerning intimacy were not considered to be a legitimate theme of dominant discourses on risk society: love, friendship, sexuality, marriage, divorce, pregnancy, delivery of a baby, child-rearing, aging, and pure relationships, etc. At the center of these themes that are worthy of examination under the sign of a risk society lies, in fact, the very figure of child.

The child should be perceived in terms of risk and risk society, especially in the new millennium when there appeared a variety of cultural symptoms (self-observation of society) indicating a transformation of semantics of the child. For the period of industrialization (from the 1970s to the 1980s), child was viewed as the future subject of national progress. For the period of democratization, child was viewed as a future citizen endowed with civic potentialities (from the late 1980s to the late 1990s). But in the new millennium, especially after the financial crisis of 1997, Korean society

observed the child from a different point of view under the influence of multi-dimensional structural transformations (neo-liberalization, globalization, and the advent of a risk society). According to my argument, the new semantics of the child is as risk and as totem. Unfortunately, it is not sociology but child abduction films that succeeded in observing this curious semantics of child in contemporary Korean risk society.

Child as Risk-Totem

From the outset, European theories on risk society were interested in the intimate spheres of social life absorbed in the process of “risk societalization.” We know that nearly all prominent theorists of late modernity attempted to shed light on the transformation of intimate life in contemporary society which is under the influence of de-traditionalization and individualization (Luhmann 1982b; Beck 1986, pp. 103-26; Giddens 1991, 1993). According to them, in the second modern era, intimacy itself is already reconstructed as a risk. Individualization is an important factor of this phenomenon. Each person acts as the legislator and judge of his own life. He is obliged to make free choices in selecting existential life courses, bearing responsibility for the consequences, whether positive or negative. Life in a risk society is fundamentally reconfigured as a “planning project” (Beck-Gernsheim 1996, p. 139), and all the important tasks of life (parenthood, upbringing, health, etc.) have a tendency to be attuned to the rationalization of the conduct of life and to the attribution of responsibilities to independent individuals. Comprehensively and insistently examining the infiltration of the risk semantics into the dimension of intimacy, Beck-Gernsheim indicates the transition of the child’s meaning from the traditional “Gift of God” to “a difficult object for treatment” (Beck-Gernsheim 1996, pp. 143-4). As she put it, the child becomes a problem (*Kinderfrage*) insofar as having a child becomes an important subject of reflection and decision for women in late modern society. Briefly speaking, the child embodies a risk on the semantic level (Beck-Gernsheim 1988, 1998).

However, this is merely one side of reality. In parallel to this rationalization of intimacy, we can perceive a movement that progresses in the opposite direction: sanctification of intimacy. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that in our era, love has turned into a “secular religion” and the “god of privacy” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1990, pp. 11-2). If a new religiosity springs from intimacy, especially from love, the child represents a veritable symbol of this sanctity. Although he does not make explicit use of the notion

of “totem,” Beck writes as follows in his *Risk Society*:

The Child is the source of the last *remaining, irrevocable, unexchangeable* primary relationship. Partners come and go. The child stays. Everything that is desired, but not realizable in the relationship, is directed to the child. With the increasing fragility of the relationships between the sexes the child acquires a monopoly on practical companionship, on an expression of feelings in a biological give and take that otherwise is becoming increasingly uncommon and doubtful. Here an anachronistic social experience is celebrated and cultivated which has become improbable *and* longed for precisely because of the individualization process. The excessive affection for children, the “staging of childhood” which is granted to them—the poor overloved creatures—and the nasty struggle for the children during and after divorce is some symptoms of this. The child becomes the *final alternative to loneliness* that can be built up against the vanishing possibilities of love. It is the *private type of re-enchantment*, which arises with, and derives its meaning from, disenchantment. The number of birth is declining but the importance of child is *rising* (Beck 1986, p. 118).

It would be ironic to note that in the process of individualization, reflexive modernization, consolidation of a risk society, and finally, extension and intensification of the rationalization process, the child is viewed with a very different logic, that of unconditioned love and affection containing a quasi-religious value.¹⁰ The child takes on the significance of a totem, an emblem of a certain community, just like in the Durkheimian sense of the word. The child is worshipped, sanctified, and consecrated. This kind of totemization of the child is found in many sectors of late modern societies. The child is a family totem with which its parents are almost obsessed and for which they carry heavy responsibilities (Furedi 2002). Cases of violence against children instantly arouse a strong emotionally-charged response in people, just as in the case of pedophilia, for example (Binard and Clouard 1997). The civil society raises questions about children’s rights (Hartas 2008). If the tendency to semantically treat the child as a risk goes parallel to this different tendency to semantically treat the child as a totem, we can determine the semantics of child operating in discourses on risk society in

¹⁰ Martha W. Lear describes the landscape of a modern American family as being rearranged by the introduction of the filio-centric way of life, consisting of what she calls pedocracy (rule by the children) (Lear 1965).

the following form: the child is a risk-totem.

Conclusion

So far, I have analyzed the semantics of child in a risk society by examining the two different layers of self-observation of a risk society (films on child abduction and discourses on risk society). I subsumed the semantics of child under the concept of totem-risk. That is to say, a risk society has the tendency to constitute the meaning of child as a risk-totem complex. It also means that in a risk society, the child may be conceived, understood, imagined, thought of, treated, educated, hospitalized, dreamt of, desired, and governed simultaneously as a risk and as a totem. Thus, the semantics of a “risk-totem” is a sort of medium through which meaningful observations and communications are efficiently conducted on the subject of child. In films, this semantics is embodied in the figure of the kidnapped child, who appears to the abductor as a risk (in the sense that the child is viewed in a totally calculating way) and, at the same time, to the parents as totem. In discourses on risk society, the child appears as a very important figure, because it is a symbol of the rationalization process of the intimate sphere (risk) and also of the final, remaining mythology of romantic love (totem). In this case, the character of the hyphen (-) linking the totem and the risk is not accidental or random, as it has something to do with mutual determination. Namely, the child is viewed and treated as a risk because/he is viewed and treated as a totem, and vice versa. We can make use of this semantic scheme of “risk-totem” to further investigate the way other sub-systems of late modern society semantically treat the subject of child. In order to examine the formation and operation of the semantics of child as a risk-totem in the Korean context, we should probe into various social dimensions as follows: 1) institution/jurisdiction in legal/political systems, 2) representation/discourses in the mass media and education, and 3) rituals/practices in the family. These tasks will demand subsequent researches that will be more empirical than the present theoretically-oriented research conducted on the semantics of child.

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