



**Learning Korean Culture: Embodied
Visuality**



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Our goals are to introduce embodied approaches to visual learning and to show how embodied visibility can help people learn Korean culture.

We start with a schematic history (Figure 1) of embodiment, which shows how the views of educationalists like Dewey evolve from Aristotelian, Confucian and other classic traditions. Dewey spent several years in China, and his predecessors in American Transcendentalism read Asian texts. Unsurprisingly, then, American and

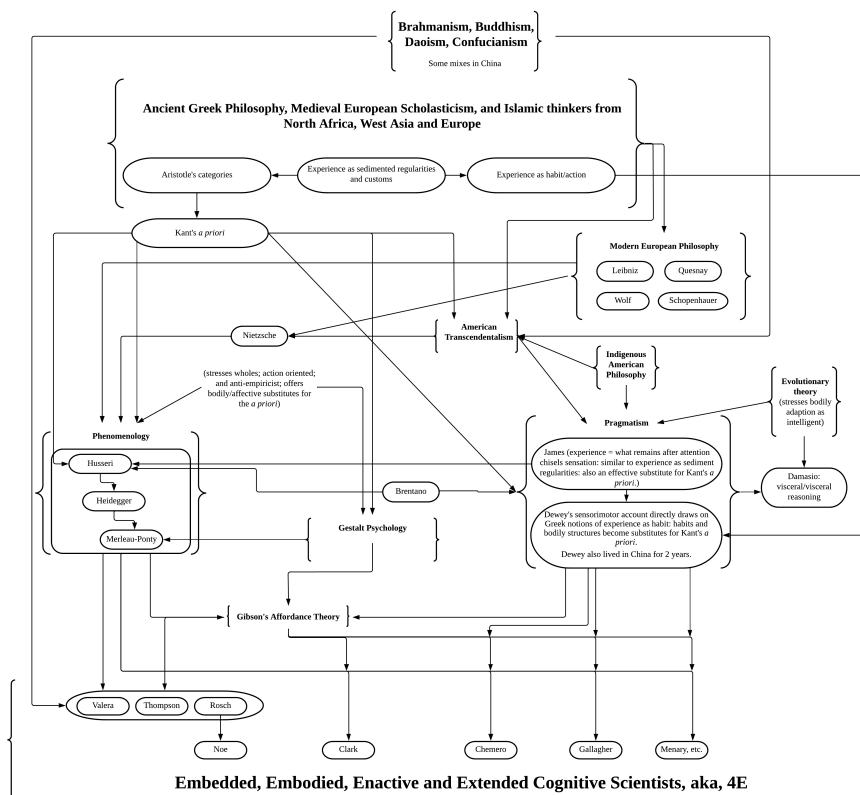


Figure 1

and Asian outlooks (e.g., Buddhism, Daoism) jointly advance the principle that things and their properties and even agents are inter-

dependent and such that they only show up together. Dewey also held our contact with the world occurs through a multi-faculty fusion. For example, to see solid ice as weight-bearing and thin ice less so is to perceive and cognize ice as emotionally safe or threatening, hence as affording walking or not.

Likewise, seeing a candle flame as such is more than registering a yellow smear; it means seeing warm waxiness, an intimate emotional resonance and quite a bit more.

So seeing always involves more than seeing, which has implications on learning. It explains, among other things, why images on smart phones can match the intensity of cinema: because we engage with mobile devices with our hands, rotating or adjusting image sizes with our fingers. *Embodied* visualization aids even highly cognitive learning. This is illustrated in Figure 2, which visually symbolizes Hangul (Korean) script in terms of things we do (e.g., mouthing words, skiing, hefting buckets) or in terms of what viscerally affects us (e.g., rattlesnakes).

한국어-Korean	
CONSONANTS	VOWELS
ㅁ - Bucket	ㅣ - Tree (이)
ㄴ - Nose	ㅏ - after
ㄱ - Gun	ㅑ - before (어)
ㅍ - Mouth	ㅓ - over
ㅇ - Nothing	ㅕ - brook (uhn)
ㄷ - Ski	ㅗ - under
ㅈ - Joy	ㅛ - Energy
ㅊ - Champion	ㅜ - Play
ㅊ - Rattle Snake	Two lines? Add Y:
ㅌ - Door	ㅟ - Ya
ㅍ - Part II	ㅠ - Yo
ㅅ - Hole	Compound Vowels: W
	ㅘ - Weo
	ㅙ - Wa

Figure 2
Illustration by Mareike Joleen Timm

An aspect of Korean culture that interests us is *uri*, a word connoting that social existence or “we-self” precedes individual psy-

chological existence (the premise gets close to what Western scholars such as Joel Krueger have advanced). Merleau-Ponty and Dewey likewise defend this claim, as does the psychologist Colwyn Trevarthen, who is influenced by process philosophy. All of these scholars assert that infants' minds are scaffolded by their caregiver's gaze, movements and voices. Koreans think this continues through life, a view oriented by Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and local Shamanistic understandings that stress the primacy of interrelations, whether social, metaphysical or epistemological. *Uri* highlights that importantly human practices like talking, cooking, religion and technological know-how are fundamentally social. *Uri* also captures the East Asian sense that self is formed out of layers comprised of family, friends and the social-political community, and if we strip all this away, there's nothing left.

Uri can be difficult to verbally convey to Westerners, who do not *live* Korean culture. One reason, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that 1) primary experience – like the practical know-how of using a hammer – arises through bodily comportment; and 2) this primary experience cannot readily be communicated by conventional abstract means such as language, even though primary experience underlies abstraction.

With Merleau-Ponty's challenge in mind, we suggest *embodied visual* methods for teaching *uri*. Patrick Nalepka's experiments reinforce the idea. Nalepka's team (which includes Anthony Chemero, influenced by pragmatism and phenomenology) had pairs of participants engage in "sheep herding" tasks through an embodied visual interface, e.g., using VR setups that require the movement of their entire bodies (Figure 3) or else using something like an air hockey paddle (Figure 4).

Nalepka has more recently discussed speculative evidence that joint activity can be expressed in terms of what's called "pink noise" or " $1/f$ noise," which mathematically characterizes self-organizing systems. This suggests that people in groups can integrate to form a larger self, in line with the concept of *uri*. By this means, participants controlled cursors (the herders) with the aim of repelling dots (the sheep), keeping them inside a circle (Figure 5).

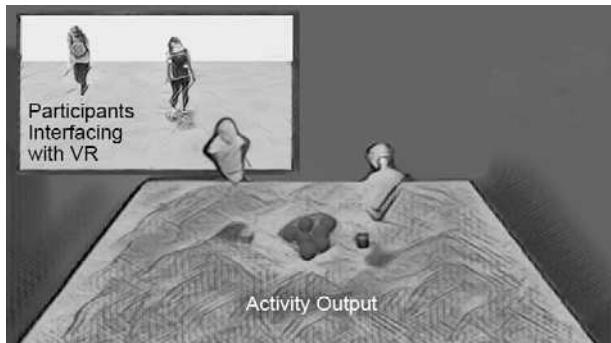


Figure 3

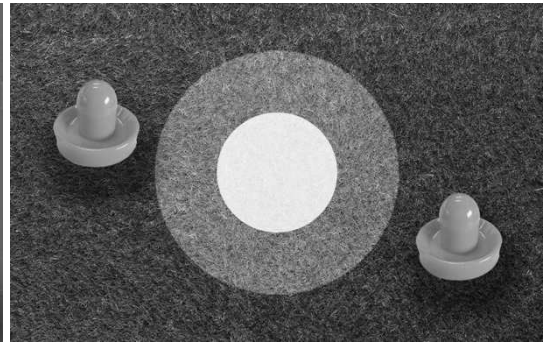


Figure 4

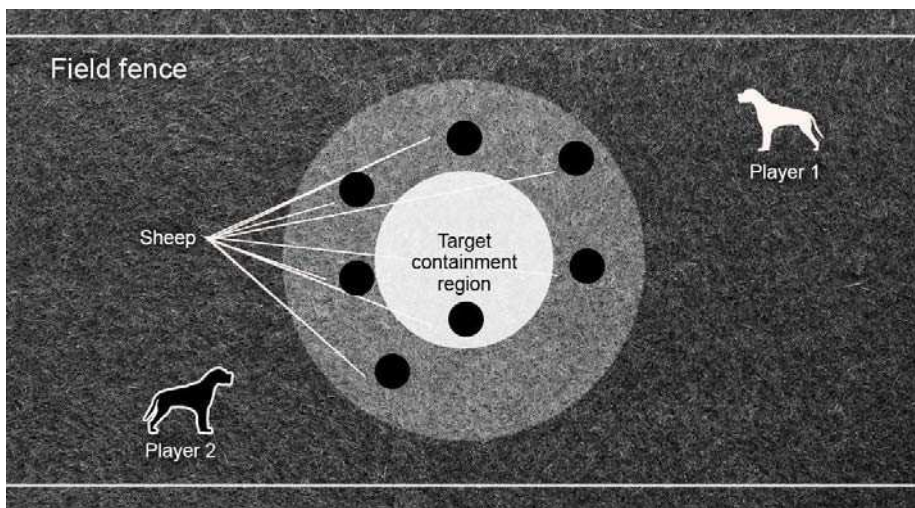


Figure 5

Talking was not allowed and most started by acting individually, an approach that fails. Rapidly, however, they went on to synchronize with their partners, in either phase or anti-phase patterns (Figure 6), both tactics effective for keeping the “sheep” penned.

This brings us to our own interactive visual and audio exercise intended to teach *uri* and also something about embodiment. Through rhythms of light and electronic music set up to respond to audience

feedback (dancing, etc.), we can teach the basic lesson that the body is a synergic system that achieves greater unity by coordinating around environmental contours. Insofar as each individual synchron-

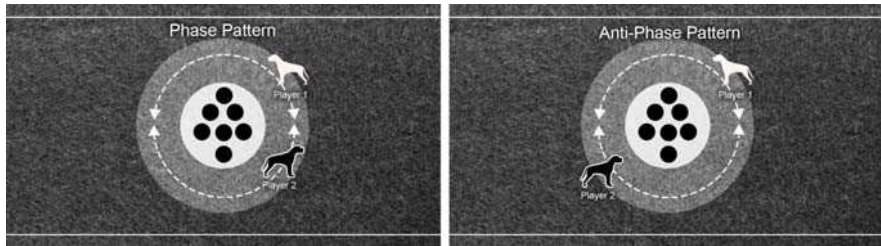


Figure 6

izes into self-feeding rhythms of light and music, the experience can instill a sense of communal consciousness or shared experience.

While *uri* is a primary experience for Koreans, it's typically foreign to Westerners. Broadly, we hope that our interactive visual and audio event opens a sense of Korean oneness to Westerners.