

## **Oppa Psy Style: The West's First K-pop Superstar**

When Psy crossed into the Western pop culture frontier in 2012, “Gangnam Style” was more than a success for him. “Gangnam Style” was also the culmination of a goal set by South Korea’s entertainment industry, an achievement that paved the way for future South Korean idols. Western scholars of the day, however, could not have known the significance of Psy and the long-term importance of South Korean entertainment when “Gangnam Style” first captured so much attention. A decade later, it is time to give Psy his due. This paper seeks to secure Psy’s place in the Western pop pantheon.

Keywords: Psy; K-pop; popular music; carnivalesque; globalization, glocalization

### **Introduction**

It is clear in 2023 that Korean pop (K-pop), an industry born of Cold War era cultural exchange, has become a serious player in international business. Highly trained South Korean music groups like BTS and BLACKPINK dominate music markets in both the East and the West. The implementation of the partnership between business and government was such that K-pop fans and producers look back on its development as having occurred in distinct phases. People engaged in K-pop refer to its evolution as *generations*; every few years, a new generation of highly trained idols emerges in carefully curated groups who receive the torch from members of previous generations. The first generation of the late 1990s and early 2000s introduced K-pop as a popular music genre but was confined to South Korea, China, and Japan. The second generation, active in the 2000s and early 2010s, is less well-known in the West, owing to the sheer force of the third generation which came to prominence in the late 2010s. The fourth generation is well underway, and fans are debating already when the fifth generation will be born (gowonofficial).

Before the success of the third generation, Western scholars were mostly skeptics when it came to K-pop's potential to succeed in the West. While there was some focus on the political and economic dynamics of the K-pop industry, K-pop artists of the second generation were generally underappreciated by Western scholars. In retrospect, it is clear that K-pop secured a foothold in the West during the second generation that paved the way for the third generation's success: "Gangnam Style". Psy's 2012 hit song was not only a phenomenon in its own right but made the K-pop invasion of the West possible. Western fans joined audiences the world over who sang the Korean lyrics to "Gangnam Style" and performed Psy's signature horse-trot dance.

Psy's "Gangnam Style" deserves to secure a place in the Western popular music pantheon. Some scholars in the 2010s, however, clearly struggled to account for Psy's appeal. Joseph Cheah and Grace Ji-Sun Kim, for example, argue that "part of the appeal of 'Gangnam Style' in the United States may have to do with the fact that Psy slips easily into the stereotypes of the Asian male, a myth long ago constructed during the days of colonialism, which the American media and entertainment industry have perpetuated" (2). By contrast, Euny Hong's explanation of Psy's popularity eschews stereotypes. Hong celebrates Psy as "the paradigm shift within the paradigm shift" whose "life and bewildering rise to fame are an embodiment of the changes in Korea and Korean society over the last few decades" (*The Birth of Korean Cool* 24). Nonetheless, Hong concedes that Psy "was definitely not the conquering hero Korea wanted to lead its shock-and-awe cultural invasion. Korea had been priming more conventional, beautiful K-pop bands, like the nine-member girl group Girls' Generation, who were already deified superstars in Asia" (*The Birth of Korean Cool* 23). Other analyses attribute Psy's success to the internet and the early days of YouTube. Ryan Shin, for example, describes "wireless technologies and global networking" that made

“the world seamlessly connected for cultural consumption” (253). Shin is interested in how Psy’s “Gangnam Style” demonstrates the internet’s potential for *glocalization*, Roland Robertson’s term for how one can adjust a cultural product to different cultural contexts in order to distribute the product internationally. Shin focuses on how the audiences themselves glocalized “Gangnam Style”. His analysis, however, does not attempt to explain how Psy inspired audiences in the first place. John Lie attributes the song’s international reverence to its “memorable and reproducible lyrical refrain and dance steps” (156). A catchy composition does help explain how international audiences could participate in the song without understanding the lyrics. Composition alone, however, does not account for how the song became such a sensation. After all, South Korea had produced plenty of catchy songs before Psy’s “Gangnam Style”, songs that were viral sensations in Asia yet failed to make inroads into the West. The 2008 music video for “Tell Me” by Wonder Girls, for example, was an Asian sensation that inspired “copycat videos by students, police officers and even soldiers” (Lie 105). Western audiences’ embracing of a viral K-pop dance meme, however, would not pervade YouTube until Psy’s “Gangnam Style”, four years later — a meme that endures a decade later (LVL 19 DANCE). The history of racial stereotyping, development of the K-pop industry, early days of YouTube, and the production of a catchy composition no doubt contributed to Psy’s experience. Regardless, such explanations alone both underplay Psy’s accomplishment and fall short of identifying what specific Western cultural consideration Psy (perhaps unwittingly) tapped into.

This retrospective analysis argues that Psy not only charmed Western audiences but set the stage for the K-pop industry to take its current place in Western popular music. The paper’s first section lays the foundation for a revised perspective of Psy’s success with a literature review that addresses value structures in popular music, the

carnavalesque, and K-pop while challenging early Western academic reactions. The second section describes factors that led to the creation of South Korea's popular music industry. The third section provides a close reading of the "Gangnam Style" music video that highlights the video's sophistication and humor. The fourth section examines Psy interviews in which he interprets "Gangnam Style" for English-speaking audiences. The final section examines Psy's legacy in the West through a close reading of his 2022 music video "That That".

### **Literature Review**

Studies of K-pop in the West lend themselves to discussions about value structures in popular music. Georgina Gregory, Simon Frith, and Angela McRobbie are particularly interested in how audiences value the performance of sexuality. They point out that performances of sexuality in pop tend to be feminized and feminizing. Unlike traditional male rockers who sing about sexual dominance and gratification, "pop's protestations of love and longing reinstate their primacy by cementing a desire to be at one and possess things feminine" (Gregory 86), irrespective of the gender of the performer. Furthermore, since the 1980s, media images increasingly feature lean male bodies as objects of visual pleasure. The portrayal of the leaner, arguably feminized male physique has encroached on that of the muscular male physique's historical status as the ultimate object of female desire. Gregory explains that "[m]ale beautification has reached baroque proportions in some quarters of the boy band community – notably in K-Pop where it is exemplified via flawless skin, artificially coloured hair and kohl-lined eyes" (98). Frith and McRobbie study 1960s and 1970s teenybop idols who share feminine qualities with today's beautiful and gentle male K-pop idols. Frith and McRobbie observe that teeny bop music belongs almost exclusively to girls:

What they're buying is also a representation of male sexuality (usually in the form of teen idols) ... The teenybop idol's image is based on self-pity, vulnerability, and need. The image is of the young boy next door: sad, thoughtful, pretty, and puppylike. (320)

As with Western teenyboppers, K-pop fandom is a predominantly female force, even as it includes male fans.

On Western shores, K-pop musicians inherit Western pop musicians' struggle to prove their genre's artistic merit. The West has a history of denigrating music genres that appeal primarily to young women and girls. Furthermore, highbrow music critics and rock-centric fans alike often characterize themselves as an informed minority in contrast to what they perceive as the unsophisticated mania of hysterical masses. Typically, pop music, and the coding of its audiences as overwhelmingly female, has long been considered inferior and inauthentic compared to the traditional raw masculinity of rock music:

The rock fan's claim to 'superior' musical taste involves making serious judgements about popular music, drawing on an awareness of that music's social contexts. This awareness is seen as lacking in the fans of other mainstream music. Thus the distinctions made by rock culture effectively stratify the mainstream of popular music into 'serious' (rock) and 'trivial' (pop) components. (Keightley 111)

Keir Keightley points out, however, that the rock industry is not as distinct from the pop industry as fans might assert. Rock fans turn a blind eye to rock's commercial interests when they claim that rock musicians separate themselves from external influences. On the contrary, "[i]n celebrating authentic individualism via electronic mass media, rock seeks to produce a virtual cultural space outside of consumer capitalism – a space that is, ironically, up for sale" (Keightley 127). Nonetheless, the West has an established history of music critics and rock audiences who declare that pop's commercial appeal is

inauthentic and, therefore, inferior to other music genres, even as “pop” paradoxically derives its name from “popular”.

Philip Auslander criticizes the notion of authenticity that haunts pop music in the West. He points out that authenticity is intangible regardless of music genre because stars in every genre must perform their status “in ways that remain congruent with their musical personae, or risk alienating their original audiences. In this sense, there is actually no such thing as a popular music star; there are only rock stars, pop stars, country stars, hip-hop stars, and so on, and the audience” (Auslander 2-3). The intangibility of authenticity is not only inescapable but crucial to the maintenance of stardom. Music genres are framing influences that allow audiences to fantasize about their relationships with stars. In addition, there is a propensity for fans to bind themselves to particular music genres – a tendency that the music industry capitalizes on and promotes. Music genre frameworks allow stars to seem familiar, even as they do not have personal relationships with fans. The fan is invited to fill in the blanks about a star’s personality with fantasies about the star, which reinforces the fan’s feeling that the star is worthy of elite status. Star identity is, therefore, “an interactional accomplishment undertaken jointly by musicians and their audiences each of which has a role to play in its realization” (Auslander 12).

Simon Frith complicates discussions about the pop star image, because he demonstrates that the pop genre is difficult to define:

Pop does not have a specific or subcultural, communal market/culture. It is designed to appeal to everyone. Pop doesn’t come from any particular place or mark off any particular taste. The partial exception to this rule is teenpop which does appeal to a specific market segment (young girls) but it is misleading to conclude from this that pop is a female form or has primarily female appeal. (95)

Music critics, scholars, and record labels strive to impose their own definitions on all aspects of music. Nobody, however, can control every aspect of such a complex, ever evolving, and powerful mix of art and commerce. Commercial reward drives pop music. Pop is “not an art but a craft” mastered by professionals and “reflects the changing nature of its audience and, in particular, is a kind of musical measure of migration, demographic change and the breakdown of geographical sound barriers” (Frith 96-97). There is no single locus of pop music. The industry is timeless because it draws upon musical sounds from everywhere.

Joli Jenson reminds music scholars to respect fandom in their analyses. She criticizes the elitist undertones of past approaches to fandom analyses and calls for scholarship that “explores fandom as a normal, everyday cultural or social phenomenon” (Jenson 13). The fan should not be depicted as a mere “obsessed loner, suffering from a disease of isolation, or a frenzied crowd member, suffering from a disease of contagion. In either case, the fan is seen as being irrational, out of control, and prey to a number of external forces” (Jenson 13). Jenson points out that music scholars are not separate from or superior to music fans. She cautions that one should, therefore, avoid analytical approaches that draw a line between serious, critical listeners, and enchanted fan listeners. Instead, music scholars should embrace the interconnectedness of music culture and scholarship.

Mikhail Bakhtin also supports a sophisticated approach to analyses of large group behavior. His discussion about the carnivalesque and the grotesque lends itself to an analysis of Psy’s comedic style. Bakhtin observes that people only exist in relationship to one another and is interested in how individual voices interact in cultures. Bakhtin points out that when high and low cultures grow together and shape each other, the ideals of high culture will dominate. Low culture, in turn, will address

the imbalance of those ideals by pointing out the grotesque. Low-culture jesters, for example, mock the ideal that the human body should be kept pure and clean when they crack jokes about defecation and death. Bakhtin observes that social rituals like carnivals are especially important to culture-shaping, because carnivals bring people together from high and low classes and present an equal opportunity for everyone to participate in culture. Such social rituals allow people to acknowledge their similarities through mutual enjoyment of eccentricity. The collective embrace of absurdity is a reminder that high and low cultures ultimately share humanity. Carnivals, therefore, are “positive spaces of cultural levelling, a qualitatively distinct time and space that temporarily eliminate[s] hierarchical social structures” (Gilchrist and Ravenscroft 36). When Psy applies grotesque motifs like sexuality and defecation to his music and music videos, he engages in comedic social levelling. Comedy as an artform can lend itself to the fundamentals of the carnivalesque and the grotesque.

Globalization is a frequent concern in discussions surrounding value structures in popular music. There is a tendency to view globalization as a threat to cultural authenticity, which misses the mark when it comes to understanding K-pop. Simone Krüger Bridge, for example, typifies the idea of globalization as a cultural threat when outlining how hegemonic cultural beliefs in colonized countries “were shaped by Europeanization since the earliest beginnings of globalization. Since the late nineteenth century, popular music emerged around the world as a result of modernization or westernization as part of an historical development that had a certain degree of inevitability” (Bridge 262). The argument asserts that America’s post-World War II dominance accelerated capitalism and commercialism worldwide, which in turn affected global business and art industries alike. Bridge sees the history of capitalism as “one borne out of racism and masculine hegemony” that influenced global music industries



(Bridge 263). Hegemony is viewed as a force that convinces the dominated population that it is in their best interest to adhere to the dominant population's way of life. In Bridge's view, the resultant distorted perspective harms the dominated population's cultural authenticity. Robertson's concept of glocalization — i.e. that local cultures adapt global cultural products to suit their particular needs, beliefs, and customs — lends itself to careful discussions about globalization since it acknowledges that peripheral industries have some degree of agency. Robertson complicates the notion of agency as he points out that myriad factors affect culture. He highlights that authenticity is difficult to define; there is no direct line between outside influence and changes to a local culture, because the local culture itself is a mediator. Robertson's concept of glocalization, therefore, helps account for American pop culture's influence during the Cold War and the Korean Wave's subsequent influence on Asia, Europe, the Middle East, South America, and North America today.

Western scholarship has produced some rich literature about the K-pop industry as a force in business and politics. "The Birth of 'Rok'", for example, describes Cold War era cultural exchange between the United States and South Korea. Pil Ho Kim and Hyunjoon Shin explain that "the U.S. military camp shows and clubs collectively known as *migun mudae* (literally, 'American military scene') became a training ground for the Korean musicians playing American pop" (205). As a consequence, some see pop as a predominantly American enterprise:

Many national and local pop music outputs are recognized, classified, advertised and consumed in terms of American pop genres, such as jazz, rock, hip-hop, R & B, and so forth. In this regard, American pop remains the global reference point from which emanates enormous symbolic power. (Kim and Shin 202)

South Korea's complicated relationship with American media imperialism provides crucial context for any Western analysis of K-pop.

Hong and Lie expand on historical analyses with detailed accounts of the Korean Wave's influence on South Koreans. Hong highlights American cultural exchange as the industry's catalyst: "American pop culture was — for a time — the symbol of liberation for South Korea: American GIs introduced South Koreans to rock 'n' roll, Spam, and baseball — all of which became immensely popular and synonymous with freedom: freedom from the Japanese, freedom from communism" (*The Birth of Korean Cool* 98). Furthermore, America's cultural influence made it clear to late South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung that entertainment had incredible revenue potential. Cultural exchange and political strife form the foundation upon which South Korea's popular music industry was built. Today, K-pop's "major producers are alert to the trends and innovations of their competitors as well as to those of the United States, Japan, and other countries" (Lie 103).

Hong's 2014 book, *The Birth of Korean Cool* describes a democratic government that valued the private business sector. Her interviews with South Korean business owners highlight their prowess in a fiercely competitive international market. Unfortunately, Hong's work has been mischaracterized by some as saying that the Korean Wave is South Korean government propaganda. Hong addressed the misinterpretation in a January 2023 opinion essay published by *The New York Times*, "I May Have Started a Rumor About K-Pop, and It May Be Ruining My Life":

A website headline for a radio chat show misleadingly said that I — or rather "Euny Kong," per the host — would be discussing how South Korea "manufactured cool en masse." Another article claimed that according to Euny Hong, the popularity of all things Korean was government-fabricated. Why did people latch onto this narrative? The answer is best encapsulated by something an editor told me when he rejected my book in 2013: The "Gangnam Style" video, he said, didn't really get a billion views. The Korean government had hired 10,000 people to click on the video 100,000 times, he insisted. Like many

other people I have encountered, he recoiled at the idea that a tiny, formerly destitute Asian country could have pulled off a global cultural coup without some kind of shenanigans. (par. 8-9)

Early Western analyses of Psy help explain reductive misinterpretations of Hong's work, because such interpretations undermine Psy's talent by focusing on paradigms of power. To Sharon Heijin Lee, for example, Psy is little more than a footnote in renewing Western interest in South Korean plastic surgery:

First, such interest attests to the new visual economies arising via blogs and social media sites that have renewed fetishized interest in Korean bodies and fuel cosmetic surgery consumption in Korea itself. As attested to by PSY's YouTube phenomenon, "Gangnam Style," these visual economies have been part and parcel of Korea's global, and federally funded, projects of pop culture and plastic surgery—the former serving as global advertisements for the latter. (2)

Until recently, Western analyses of K-pop artists themselves seemed skeptical that K-pop might have a meaningful influence on Western pop culture. Jeroen de Kloet and Jaap Kooijman's 2016 analysis, for example, considers American media imperialism too significant an obstacle:

In global commercial pop culture, Anglo-American pop continues to be perceived as 'the original' to be emulated, a perspective that is reinforced by popular global television formats such as *Idol*, *X-Factor*, and *The Voice* ... When non-Western pop acts aim to achieve worldwide stardom, they face the challenge of overcoming the comparison to their Anglo-American counterparts, particularly from a Western perspective. (1)

Their concern echoes Cheah and Kim's dismissal of Psy's success as a product of racial stereotypes:

Asian male bodies have been desexualized, feminized, and emasculated in American media and society at large; Asian female bodies have been

hypersexualized and exoticized in American mainstream culture. All of these examples point to the manner in which Asian Americans in particular have been 'laughed at' by the dominant group throughout American history. (10)

Analyses of K-pop that follow BTS's ongoing mainstream success tend to be more optimistic about the potential for diversity in American pop, because it is clear that BTS is accepted by Western fans. While there was a case to be made that Psy was an outsider spectacle as he horse-trotted across social media in 2012, it is difficult to argue that BTS is a mere spectacle as they accept an invitation to the White House in 2022 (Carvajal et al.). In a 2021 study, for example, Kang et al. examine how K-pop fandoms coordinate social media efforts to support song releases. They conclude that K-pop groups' dedicated international fans significantly contribute to the "[t]he huge success of K-pop" (Kang et al. 1482). Western scholarship's early focus on K-pop as a novelty act has transmogrified into a focus on K-pop as a force that unites fans across the globe despite cultural differences, and the West is now inextricable from K-pop's international fanbase.

### **Factors That Led to the Creation of the K-pop Industry**

Following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung invested in cultural exports to revitalize South Korea's economy (Hong, *The Birth of Korean Cool* 93). His unprecedented economic strategy helped start South Korea's international cultural influence, known as Hallyu or the Korean Wave. The plan worked. In 2012, American President Barack Obama praised the international success of the South Korean entertainment industry in an address at Hankuk University: "And you know that in our digital age, we can connect and innovate across borders like never before ... It's no wonder so many people around the world have caught the Korean Wave, Hallyu" (White House Office of the Press Secretary, par. 8). A wave is an apt

metaphor for the challenge K-pop presents in the history of media imperialism. One might imagine riding the ocean surf, but one might also imagine waves of immigration or waves of soldiers in an invasion. The Korean Wave invites international audiences to focus on fun as it crashes onto international shores. President Obama's acknowledgement was especially prudent, because just four months before the address, Psy had released the K-pop viral sensation, "Gangnam Style". The song's music video was the first "to reach a billion views on You-Tube" (Osborn 152). "Gangnam Style" was the unprecedented sound of the Korean Wave crashing onto Western shores.

Although the Korean Wave encompasses broader Korean culture, K-pop has been especially influential in the West where scholars have followed South Korea's popular music industry since its early days. American and South Korean pop culture met through the United States Armed Forces stationed in South Korea during the 1950s and 1960s. South Korean musicians were hired by the military to entertain soldiers with American rock performances, and the American Forces Korea Network played on Korean radio waves. Unfortunately, in the 1970s, cultural exchange was limited by political strife. Despite the signing of the 1953 Korean War ceasefire, tensions had remained high. Consequently, the subversiveness of American youth culture drew the attention and increased the concern of South Korean lawmakers. South Korean President Park Chung Hee was concerned about North Korea "putting most of its resources into building its military" as South Korean youth grew their hair long, donned bell-bottoms, and indulged in recreational drug use (Hong, *The Birth of Korean Cool* 93). In response, he implemented strict reactionary policies to maintain "wholesome national culture" (qtd. in Kim and Shin 216). Miniskirts, long hair on men, and a myriad of American rock songs were banned. Careers of Korean rock musicians were effectively ended by President Park's authoritarian regime. By the time President Park's

regime ended with his assassination, the mainstream appetite for rock had been replaced by an appetite for disco. Nonetheless, South Korea had reopened its floodgates to global popular music, and by the late 1980s, “almost any piece of American popular music could be understood and even enjoyed by young South Koreans” (Lie 110).

Even as some South Koreans were concerned about the threat American pop culture posed to their culture, traditions, and even national security, the cross-cultural phenomenon within South Korea made it clear that popular entertainment could be a lucrative national export. The development of entertainment media did not require natural resources, which are limited in South Korea, and electronic media made entertainment increasingly easy to distribute. Furthermore, South Korea had just witnessed the effects of industrial development on middle class spending. The United States’ presence during a time when South Korea was not a wealthy global economic competitor had made the United States a symbol of wealth; the glitz and glamor of American pop culture pervaded during the development of South Korea’s middle-class. Once South Korea became a wealthier nation, therefore, the middle class was interested in spending money on aspirational American products. American influence suggested that South Korea could become an inspirational nation for underdeveloped nations if South Korea could secure an early pop culture presence (Hong, *The Birth of Korean Cool* 5). In the 1990s, President Kim Dae-Jung invested in the development of Korean cultural exports (Hong, *The Birth of Korean Cool* 93). By the 2000s, the Korean Wave was on the move to international shores. K-pop had secured a presence throughout Asia by 2010. In the West, only fringe music fans were interested until the global phenomenon of “Gangnam Style” turned mainstream Western audiences’ attention toward South Korean pop culture.

“Gangnam Style” was a sensation. Psy’s subsequent releases, however, fell short of the success “Gangnam Style” had achieved in the West. The reception suggested that while Psy might have made a splash, he was no new wave. Some Western scholars at the time wondered whether Psy’s singular success signified that K-pop as a genre would not succeed in the West. A 2016 analysis, for example, asserts that Psy “articulates the appropriation of American pop culture, simultaneously reinforcing and challenging America’s hegemonic presence, albeit for a brief moment. That PSY is a one-hit wonder novelty act is significant, as it highlights the difficulty for non-Western pop acts to get accepted as ‘real’ pop music in the Western world” (de Kloet and Kooijman 1). Today’s hugely successful K-pop industry changes this reading of Psy. During the 2010s, Psy might have seemed like nothing more than a novelty act, bordering on a grotesque freak show. Retrospective analysis, however, reveals his underappreciated role in reshaping Western pop culture. Psy is neither an independent rock musician like those who played United States military camp shows nor a highly produced K-pop icon like those who dominate the genre today, but he is the crucial link.

### **The International Appeal of Psy’s Local Gangnam Style**

Given the cultural crucible at the heart of the K-pop industry, it is noteworthy that Psy’s hit was intended initially for South Korean audiences. Curiously, “Psy had no intention of deliberately spreading his music beyond the boundaries of South Korea” (Cheah and Kim 2). The global success of the song, therefore, baffled K-pop industry professionals and Western music critics alike.

Perhaps the success outside South Korea is because of the video’s especially accessible themes and motifs, irrespective of its South Korean perspective. An epicenter of South Korea’s new money in the twenty-first century, the Gangnam district is a product of a boom in national wealth throughout the 1980s and 1990s. South Korea

developed a strong middle class during the 1980s, which meant it was poised to become a global business competitor during the first decade that transformed the world with the World Wide Web in the 1990s. Samsung, Hyundai, and other top technological companies are all based in Gangnam. South Korea saw many such companies who were eager to capitalize on technological developments related to the World Wide Web. The South Korean government understood the broader economic opportunities for their national economy and wisely financed the necessary infrastructure. Ironically, in “Gangnam Style”, Psy deliberately mocks and condemns the newly wealthy residents of Gangnam, South Korea’s richest district.

Gangnam has prospered to the point that today’s Gangnam residents have a reputation for designer fashion and surgical enhancement. Expensive restaurants, shopping centers, and luxury apartments abound. Modern Gangnam makes it easy to forget that “in 1965, South Korea’s per capita GDP was less than that of Ghana, and even less than that of North Korea. As recently as the 1970s, North and South Korea’s GDP were neck and neck” (Hong, *The Birth of Korean Cool* 2). Psy, however, has not forgotten. As with wealthy cities in developed nations world-wide, Gangnam luxury too often hides neighboring slums, “where people live in tiny, ramshackle shacks without proper streets and sidewalks. Many live in dire poverty and look over their shacks into the brightly lit area of Gangnam wondering why that area is so rich while they continue to live in poverty” (Cheah and Kim 39).

The music video and lyrics of Psy’s “Gangnam Style” satirize the materialism and egocentrism of new money. Like a timeless and playful court jester, Psy employs humor, catchy rhythms, and a foolish dance to mock the wealthy and powerful, whom an American might call *the horsey set*. Psy addresses his message specifically to South Koreans. He could not have known that international audiences would delight in his



mockery of the local excesses of wealth and power or that his quirky video would become a global sensation.

The video begins with a closeup shot of a scene reflected in Psy's sunglasses: a beautiful woman fans him as an airplane soars overhead flying a banner that says, "Gangnam Style". A crane shot reveals Psy lounging in a beach chair under an umbrella in the sand. The camera pulls further back to reveal that Psy is not lounging on a beach at all, but in a playground. Children, symbols of the future, play on wooden swing sets behind him as a young boy dressed like Psy walks up to the lounge chair and strikes a cool pose. The other children are unphased by Psy, a garish presence in their organic-looking playground. They seem willing to step past the park enclosure, to forsake the green foliage in the background for the bright manufactured candy colors of the new urban Gangnam style (officialpsy, "GANGNAM STYLE" 0:00-0:17).

The song employs a hybrid of Korean and English that helps make the song accessible to non-Korean audiences. Psy repeats, "Oppa Gangnam style," as he sunbathes (Psy, "Gangnam Style").<sup>1</sup> *Oppa* translates loosely to *older brother* but without an inherent familial connotation. Age differences and related life experience are significant in Korean culture, so people address one another by titles based on age differences. *Oppa* connotes traditional respect owed to an older man yet is flirtatious in some contexts. Throughout "Gangnam Style", Psy calls himself *Oppa* in a variety of contexts. First, he refers to himself as *Oppa* in the playground to say that he, a respectable elder, has Gangnam style. Later, he refers to himself as *Oppa* to boldly flirt with young women. His foppish portrayal of someone with Gangnam style suggests that new money elders might not deserve the dignity of the title. Furthermore, the word

---

<sup>1</sup> The English translation of "Gangnam Style" is by KPopLyrics.net, a crowd-sourced translation database for international K-pop fans.

*Oppa* sounds similar to words in European languages. To an English listener, for example, it might sound like Psy refers to the upper class as he sings “Upper Gangnam style.” To a Greek listener, it might sound like Psy is making a celebratory exclamation as he sings “Opa! Gangnam style.” The familial connotation would not be lost on speakers of German and Dutch who commonly call their grandfathers *Opa*.

The following scene introduces horses, a recurring motif in the music video. Psy struts into a large, brightly lit stable wearing a tuxedo. The horses’ well-groomed heads poke through metal bars. They stand ready for activities like horse racing and recreational riding for wealthy Gangnam residents, in stark contrast to the rural workhorses of old. Psy stands between the stalls and performs a dance that mimics a person riding a horse (officialpsy, “GANGNAM STYLE” 0:17-0:31). The Korean lyrics describe an ideal Gangnam woman as he trots: “A classy girl who know[s] how to enjoy the freedom of a cup of coffee” (Psy, “Gangnam Style”).

Parking spaces replace horses as Psy struts, each arm around the shoulders of a beautiful woman. Any rural memory that remained in scenes of children on wooden swing sets or horses in a stable is starkly replaced by the barren urban parking lot. Trash blows at Psy and the women as they canter toward the camera like red carpet superstars or supermodels on a catwalk. Glamorous excess is combined with garbage, concrete, and asphalt, but the confident human incarnations of Gangnam style remain unphased. When car wash soap replaces the flying trash, the unphased trio continues to advance toward the audience. There are no luxury cars in the empty lot, only luxurious people, and the soap coats them thoroughly. Thus, the line between material objects and materialistic people is washed away. Psy breaks with electronic dance music video convention as absurd amounts of confetti are blown onto and adhere to his face and to

the faces of the beautiful women on either side of him. Celebration turns to comical self-deprecation (officialpsy, "GANGNAM STYLE" 0:32-0:47).

In the next scene, Psy sits in a wood-clad sauna with two tough-looking men. His blue suit from the previous scene is replaced by a blue towel wrapped modestly and comically around his chest like a dress. The other men in the sauna are tattooed, which in South Korea is traditionally associated with gangsters and criminals. Psy rests his head comfortably on the shoulder of the stern-looking heavysset man who wears a gold chain and a diamond ring. Psy studies the other character, a muscular man with a full back tattoo of a flower motif, the very image of nature meeting naked corruption. An hourglass sits prominently in the foreground, partially obscuring the man seated on the bench to Psy's left. Psy and the tattooed men do not seem to care that time has run out. The old days are gone. The heat is on, and new money now effortlessly cozies up to criminal materialism (officialpsy, "GANGNAM STYLE" 0:47-0:51).

Psy reinforces the negative side of unexamined economic progress in the following scene. A pair of elderly men seated on a small wooden platform in a grassy field play Janggi, a Korean game similar to chess. Psy sings in front of the elderly men. Scenes of excess appear in flashes as the song builds to the chorus; one scene shows Psy dancing with a beautiful woman on a tennis court while the other shows him singing passionately on a tour bus of seniors. The flashing scenes stop with a break in the music. Psy walks away from the elderly men toward the camera, and the shot widens to reveal the grassy scene is actually a highway underpass. Suddenly and tragically, an explosion sends the elderly men flying away from their peaceful game of Janggi. The old make way for the new as Psy the character points confidently at the camera and declares, "Oppa Gangnam style" (Psy, "Gangnam Style"). Those with Gangnam style

carry on with confidence, yet Psy the artist is aware of the dreadful loss that that entails (officialpsy, "GANGNAM STYLE" 0:52-1:11).

After the explosion, Psy performs his horse-trot dance, now joined by beautiful women and horses alike. The crowd performs in a stable and tennis court before the video cuts to a merry-go-round where the superficial people are real but inauthentic and the plastic horses are fake. Those with Gangnam style continue to dance on the merry-go-round, cool with misplaced confidence as they travel nowhere in circles (officialpsy, "GANGNAM STYLE" 1:11-1:27).

Many scenes feature Gangnam style people oblivious to everyday life around them. In a subway car, for example, a cosmetically perfect woman performs a flirtatious dance for Psy. Neither seems to notice the other commuters. Fittingly, the commuters seem equally oblivious to the performance, with all of the young people staring blankly at their smartphones (officialpsy, "GANGNAM STYLE" 2:09-2:31).

The final scene is set in a sterile urban environment. The opening scene of children on wooden swing sets in sand has evolved into a high fashion laser-lit rave. An extreme closeup of Psy rapping aggressively to the camera cuts rapidly between shots of him singing to the cosmetically perfect woman at the rave as the song builds to the final chorus. "On top of the running man is the flying man, baby," he sings in Korean, "I'm a man who knows a thing or two." Finally, he shouts in English, "You know what I'm saying?" (Psy, "Gangnam Style") and the camera pans out to reveal Psy sitting on a toilet, tuxedo pants around his ankles (officialpsy, "GANGNAM STYLE" 3:02-3:18). Ever the jester, the shot is Psy's last jab at the superficiality of new money's pride and promises. The grotesque defecation is a bold and vulgar reminder of humanity's shared and humble condition.

The rave scene bursts into a synchronous dance in the final chorus. All horses are replaced by people performing the now iconic horse-trot dance. The crowd is clad in various costumes that depict a range of careers: maid, schoolgirl, boxer, surgeon, university graduate, waitress, police officer, soldier, construction worker, chef, and more. Gangnam style pervades every walk of life in the end (officialpsy, “GANGNAM STYLE” 3:19-3:40). The scene could be viewed as a leisure versus labor contradiction made explicit since there are wealthy Gangnam style people whose lives of leisure and consumption might be said to blind them to the realities of working-class people. In the end, for all their contradictions, Psy’s music video includes everyone.

The candy-colored imagery of “Gangnam Style” is used to highlight social and cultural contradictions in modern South Korean culture. The beach turns out to be a city. The field turns out to be a highway underpass. The song satirizes consumerism by showcasing its seductive beauty. Curiously, the multicultural accessibility of “Gangnam Style” suggests that materialism and all that it entails, is a global concern. Psy was uniquely situated to recognize that concern, because South Korea was transformed from a modest nation to one of the wealthiest nations on earth during his lifetime. Before Psy, K-pop artists and the companies that managed them were so distracted by the idea that Western nations enjoyed wealth that they did not realize Western audiences were also concerned about the possible human cost of overindulgence and materialism. Therefore, as most other K-pop artists tried to showcase beauty and wealth to signify that South Korea was a competitive, twenty-first century, global player, Psy unwittingly found the deeper meaning: wealthy nations respond to the social levelling power of the grotesque. Audiences, regardless of cultural background, seem to resonate with the essential humanity of Psy’s candy-colored but ultimately foreboding message.

## **Gangnam Style Contextualized for Western Audiences: Dress Classy and Dance Cheesy**

“Gangnam Style” is amusing, even for those who do not understand the lyrics. Not only the song but the dance and music video fit into novelty song traditions of parody, humor, and unusual subjects. A myriad of themes, therefore, contributes to the song’s international appeal. Above all, however, the appeal is that the song is funny. Psy’s mastery of humor extends beyond his music into his celebrity persona. This section explores how Psy and Western interviewers drew upon that humor to bridge cultural gaps between Western pop culture and Korean pop culture after the success of “Gangnam Style”.

Psy had been a sensation in Asia a decade before “Gangnam Style” became a global hit in 2012. He established himself as a bad boy celebrity in 2001 because of the sexual and comedic qualities of his album, *Psy From the Psycho World!*. Psy’s lyrics, dance style, and music videos frequently alluded to sex, alcohol, and cigarettes. The song “I Love Sex”, for example, criticizes South Korean culture of the day for its conservative approach to sexuality. In Korean, Psy raps, “Sober at school, sober in society, absolutely sober at your home, but when the night comes, when you’re outside, why do y’all go nuts at the first sight of that meaty stick?” and in English, he spells: “F-U-C-K-I-N-G” (Psy, “I Love Sex”).<sup>2</sup> He continues in Korean:

Yeah, it’s not necessarily a bad thing. It is the reason people meet each other. You don’t have to shut it up, do you? Kids can’t learn it properly from their childhood, end up learning from irresponsible pornographies, and they go “I don’t know, sod that,” shoot it off everywhere and say, “I don’t care, that’s not my fault.”  
(Psy, “I Love Sex”)

---

<sup>2</sup> The English translation of “I Love Sex” is by Yunjeong Heo. Her translation appears for the first time in this paper.

The themes were sufficiently controversial in South Korea at the time, and Psy was fined for “inappropriate lyrics” (Carbone par. 1). In 2010, he joined YG Entertainment, a prestigious K-pop record label and publishing house, and released “Right Now”. South Korea’s Ministry of Gender Equity and Family banned “Right Now” for audiences under nineteen because of lyrics that, in the ministry’s view, encouraged juvenile delinquency (Vitalwarning par. 1). Nonetheless, “Right Now” won an award at South Korea’s annual music award show, the *Melon Music Awards*, for Best Performance (Melon). Psy released an EP two years later, *Psy 6 (Six Rules), Part 1*, which included “Gangnam Style”. CDs were available in South Korea, and iTunes downloads were available to South Korean and international audiences alike.

Curiously, the bad boy reputation that had been Psy’s claim to fame was not part of the marketing when Psy appeared in the West. Instead, Psy and YG Entertainment marketed an image of a man who, as he said in an appearance on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, likes to “dress classy and dance cheesy” (TheEllenShow 1:33-1:38). For Western and South Korean audiences alike, high and low culture are combined in Psy himself. *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* was one of the most popular American talk shows on television when “Gangnam Style” was a hit in 2012. Comedic dance was a recurring gimmick in the light-hearted talk show as host Ellen DeGeneres regularly danced with audience members. The show complemented Psy’s comedic dancer image in the West. Furthermore, it presented an opportunity for Psy to reinforce that he was a serious player in Western popular music. No less than Britney Spears, American icon of the time, was willing to take a few dance lessons from Psy as part of a joint appearance on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* while *American Idol* celebrity judge, Simon Cowell looked on appreciatively.

During Psy's September 2012 appearance, Cowell himself enthusiastically calls Psy "amazing" when DeGeneres introduces Psy to her audience (TheEllenShow 0:37-0:38). There is, however, a controlled awkwardness after Psy dances onto DeGeneres's set to teach his signature horse-trot dance to Spears. Perhaps owing to her enthusiasm to maintain the pace of the show, DeGeneres immediately asks Psy to begin his instruction, which is clearly the premise of his appearance in the first place. Psy pauses to ask, "By the way, let me — can I introduce myself? Not just dancing. I'm Psy from Korea. How are you?" The camera cuts to a group of Asian women in the crowd who enthusiastically applaud as he smiles, bows, and claps with the audience. DeGeneres says, "Psy from Korea! We love you," and Spears nods to which Psy responds, "Oh really?" DeGeneres repeats, "We love you. You're amazing" (TheEllenShow 1:45-1:56).

Psy's remark is sometimes interpreted as his feeling snubbed rather than what was probably a gesture of modesty in public. YouTube comments on the interview typify the negative reaction:

Glad that Psy didn't hesitate to introduce himself since the host forgot to...  
more power to him (Kash T)

I was so embarrassed about Psy not being properly welcomed and introduced as more than a dance instructor. He is a hugely popular performer. Sad. Ellen usually does better. Sorry Psy. Thank you for being so gracious. (vespa2223)

I loved Psy's attitude. [H]e said 'May I introduce myself?'. Ellen was disrespectful to him because she did not introduce him. Even if Americans think that they are better, they should mind their manners (heartbeat5691)



Western audiences today are much more aware of the Korean talk show practice of guests introducing themselves and bowing to the audience as part of regular social niceties. It might well be a sign of respect on Psy's part for DeGeneres, his host, and for Spears, his putative student, to introduce himself before the lesson. He even asks DeGeneres permission to introduce himself, in deference to his host. DeGeneres perhaps misunderstood his request as criticism of failure on her part to properly introduce him in the first place, which might account for her repeated declarations of love.

Psy was the first K-pop star to contend with differences in social customs on major Western mainstream media, which could partially explain scholarly analyses of the time that reduce Psy to a caricature. The book *Theological Reflections on Gangnam Style: A Racial, Sexual, and Cultural Critique* typifies this type of analysis:

[P]erhaps Psy was able to sing a catchy tune and dance his invisible horse into the hearts of millions of Americans in part because he plays a stereotypic role of a jester who lacks sex appeal and, therefore, does not pose a threat to heterosexual women. (Cheah and Kim 9)

It is simplistic to reduce uncomfortable social interactions to manifestations of American ignorance or racism when the interactions might well have been honest efforts by members of different cultures to interact in good faith.

Psy and Western talk show hosts had to contend with the reality that Western viewers were unfamiliar with Psy as an established star in Asia and with what Gangnam itself represented — much less what the word *Gangnam* even meant. Psy was clearing the way for the cultural juggernaut that was Hallyu, and it was incumbent upon him to establish how to solve the mysteries of the myriad cultural differences that faced him and K-pop. Not only did he have to reckon with what was ahead of him, but he had

obligations to YG Entertainment and the pressure of his awareness that he had become some kind of representative of the people of South Korea themselves. There is little wonder that Psy looks back on those years as the most anxious of his life: “I had no one to ask for advice. In 2012 and 2013, I was at my happiest, but also the most anxious state. How to take in the massive success, this unrealistic reality?” (officialpsy, “That That Full Interview” 1:25-1:40).<sup>3</sup>

In the West, Psy was, in effect, a celebrity that nobody knew. Millions in Asia would know his face, his work, and his name, whereas in the West he was faced with the singular reality that while millions knew his face, very few knew his name or his work beyond the novelty song and music video, “Gangnam Style”. There seemed to be, therefore, varying levels of audience knowledge and appreciation. While DeGeneres bridged the cultural gap by including Britney Spears and Simon Cowell — both easily recognized Western celebrities with pop music credentials in their own right — British talk show host, Jonathan Ross used a different and perhaps more sophisticated strategy to bridge the gap. He began the segment by asking Psy to explain Gangnam and cracking jokes about their cultural differences. It must be noted that the *Jonathan Ross Show* clip I will now discuss was uploaded by a YouTube account that is not associated with Ross or his show’s network, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), because neither seems to have made the episode accessible online or sold rights to an on-demand service available in Canada. The episode aired on television on November 10, 2012, in the United Kingdom (Trakt).

Ross introduces Psy as “the best thing to come out of Korea since Samsung” (“PSY Interview” 0:00-0:04), which by 2012, like Psy himself, was a commodity in the

---

<sup>3</sup> The English translation of P NATION’s interview with Psy and Min Yoon-gi appears in the original YouTube video as subtitles.

Korean Wave that Western audiences would have recognized as a quality export, even if they had not known it was Korean. Ross begins the interview: “He looks just as good as he looks in the video, doesn’t he? You’ve got Gangnam style right now. Okay, well first of all, for those of us who aren’t that familiar with South Korean ways, what is Gangnam style itself? What is the song about?” Psy explains, “Gangnam is a district in South Korea, and I describe the district as calm in the daytime and crazy at the night-time, so I compare all the sexy ladies to the district” (“PSY Interview” 0:24-0:49). Psy seems aware that the West at that time is unable to be in on the gag: as I argue above, Gangnam in Psy’s famous music video represents shallow, materialistic excess and wealth, and Psy invokes a sense of nostalgia for lost relationships with essential humanity. Instead, Psy resorts to a glimmer of his bad boy background as he talks about sexy women of the crazy night-time. The audience cheers. He explains, “Usually, when people say ‘Gangnam style’ in Korea, they gotta be handsome, pretty, blah blah blah, so — which means, I’m not that handsome. I know it, so —” (“PSY Interview” 1:01-1:12). The host winces and the audience groans sympathetically. A British audience receives Psy’s self-deprecation well, especially as he is clearly not seeking pity. He has a stiff upper lip as he continues: “If I keep saying I’m Gangnam style, you know, that’s kind of a twist.” Ross assures him, “To us now, the world, you are Gangnam style personified.” Psy turns to the audience and asks, “Am I?” The audience can be heard cheering and whistling enthusiastically. He bows. The camera cuts to the other guests who are smiling (“PSY Interview” 1:12-1:23).

Ross’s comedic style is quick-witted, good-natured, and often indulges in put-down humor, but he is just as quick to put himself down. He does not condescend and instead includes Psy in his brand of quintessentially British humor as he rapidly changes the topic to Psy’s unusual socks: “I notice you are not wearing socks, Psy. Is

this a Gangnam style thing or you just forgot to pack? Oh, you got little tiny socks. You got the little, tiny — what we call lady socks” (“PSY Interview” 1:25-1:36). Psy laughs and retorts, “I don’t know why but, you know, some lady things, you know, really fits for me” and offers the host a cheeky side glance. The audience laughs and applauds at what looks like a one-up-man-ship point scored by Psy. After a comedically perfect long pause, Ross responds, “Me too.” They both laugh uproariously and high five like two players on the football pitch (“PSY Interview” 1:38-1:57).

The subtle, ironic, and sexual flirtation by Psy with the host and back again belies the reductive characterization of Psy as the embodiment of a sexless racist stereotype. Psy and Ross clearly understand each other, and the British audience loves it. Both men seem to share cosmopolitan charm even as they thrive on the awkwardness of their cultural differences. It is also noteworthy that the YouTube comments on this interview are far less judgmental of Ross than they were of DeGeneres:

[T]his interview was majestic the host is doing a great job (angel)

[P]sy seems like a really cool bloke i'm glad hes [sic] reached a level of success its hard working people that deserve it (Overlord Audiobooks)

PSY is extremely unique--right when you think you've seen every dance move ever created or choreographed--he comes up with something unique, edgy, sexy, fun all rolled into one. I think he is really charismatic, a great performer, with a good sense of humour and has a darn strong voice ... The interview was so funny and the rapport and comedy between the two of them hysterical--Monty Python-esque. Psy is a breath of fresh air and sort of sexy. (Lisa Wilder)

Scholars of the 2010s could not have known that Psy was the embodiment of the beginning of a cultural invasion any more than Psy himself could have. There were no

doubt elements of serendipity involved in Psy's success, yet scholars of today would be remiss not to acknowledge that the South Korean entertainment industry and government policy makers were astute when they implemented the overall economic strategy. The Korean Wave might never have occurred without Psy's genius and talent. Retrospective analysis of 2012 interviews with Psy illustrates the extent to which South Korea's cultural export strategy had been implemented with extraordinary success.

### **Embracing Psy's Legacy: That That**

Anyone who thinks Psy's success was entirely achieved by chance would do well to study his 2022 music video for "That That", produced by Yoon-gi of BTS. The *mise-en-scene* contends that conquering the West was an objective, because it invokes the American Wild West yet populates it with an exclusively Asian cast. The Western is a cornerstone of Americana. For Americans, as Alexandra Keller says, "The Western is a genre whose cultural meanings, both held and contested, coalesce as something oscillating between myth and history" (47). The cast wears cowboy boots, cowboy hats, and fringed leather outfits as they dance in a dusty road. It is easy to miss the fact that there are no guns in the video, with the exception of finger gunshot gestures. The arc of the narrative shows Psy humorously defeated by Yoon-gi of BTS, the new gun in town, having slapped each other outside saloon doors for their high noon showdown.

In addition to his career as lead rapper in BTS, Yoon-gi works as a music producer. He adopts the pseudonym Agust D for his solo productions. Yoon-gi's solo work as Agust D is managed by HYBE, formerly Big Hit Entertainment (Basbas par. 1), the label that formed and manages BTS. For his fans, Yoon-gi's creative control over lyrics, composition, and production as Agust D implies that his albums are more authentic. Fans embrace Agust D albums as music Yoon-gi himself wants to write and to perform, irrespective of corporate obligations, popular appeal, chart rankings, and

award shows. Agust D's seeming disregard for mainstream appeal manifests in his hardcore rap style and underground influence, a stark contrast to BTS's bright pop sound. Furthermore, while BTS songs explore sentimental motifs like love, shared humanity, and confidence, typical of pop, Agust D explores dark motifs like vulnerability, envy, and self-loathing, more often associated with rap.

The connection between Psy and Yoon-gi is more than first meets the eye. Psy and Agust D share a darkness. Both K-pop icons entered the West and were overwhelmed by the magnitude of the experience. Their songs and music videos portray an underlying sadness that is antithetical to the light-heartedness usually associated with pop music. They reveal an awareness of what is sacrificed for what South Korea gains during the Korean Wave. As artists, they explore common themes and motifs. As entrepreneurs, they collaborated on the enormous economic opportunity their shared experience presented in "That That".

"That That" began when Yoon-gi reached out to Psy to produce a song for him. Psy asked if Yoon-gi would not only produce the song but sing on the track and dance with him in the music video. Psy wanted Yoon-gi to produce a song for him not only because of BTS's legendary status in the K-pop industry, but perhaps more because he had been impressed by Agust D's edgy 2020 release, "Daechwita". Psy describes the song as "so raw yet so trendy, trendy yet so raw. It's difficult to have both. So I knew I wanted to work with him, hopefully in the near future if given the chance" (officialpsy, "That That Full Interview" 3:24-3:33).

Given that Psy had recently started P NATION, his own record label and entertainment agency, it seems unlikely that his partnership with one of the most successful artists of the decade was truly a surprise. Psy started P NATION in 2018, just four years before the partnership. The agency manages not only Psy but other artists and

K-pop groups. “That That” was to be Psy’s first release as the founder of his own agency. Yoon-gi of BTS was a wise investment for Psy, whose reputation as an artist and businessman were on the line. The contracts that secured Yoon-gi as the song’s producer are inaccessible. It is noteworthy, however, that the song “That That” appears on Psy’s album *Psy 9th*, which was released for digital download and streaming by P NATION. HYBE, the label that manages BTS and Agust D, is not associated with the release.

The video is not only a tongue-in-cheek homage to the great American Western, but an actual homage paid by Yoon-gi to Psy. The song and music video for “That That” are bright and comedic, in stark contrast to Agust D’s style. Nonetheless, there are serious undertones to the candy-colored video. The first scene shows Psy as he walks through swinging saloon doors in a tan-colored, fringed leather outfit. He takes in the Wild West scene and smiles at the high noon sun. Psy exclaims in English, “2022 Psy coming back (come hither)” and the music begins, “Long time no see huh? It’s been a minute, huh?” Psy and a group of Asian backup dancers in cowboy hats dance enthusiastically beneath a wooden shop sign that says, in English, “Saloon”, “Whiskey”, and “Liquor” (officialpsy, “That That MV” 0:13-0:22).<sup>4</sup>

In the next scene, Psy and his backup dancer cowboys walk through the streets of the Asian-populated Western town. Psy stops at the center of a group of beautiful cowgirls who join his performance. Psy is keenly aware of the role he has played within the glocalization of K-pop as he sings in Korean, “North South East West Aye, Gangnam Gangbuk Aye, Everyone gather” (officialpsy, “That That MV” 0:42-0:47). A tricked-out urban sedan roars by and kicks up dust. In the plume of dust, the scene cuts to Psy and his dancers at the center of what is obviously a film set. More Asian dancers

---

<sup>4</sup> The English translation of “That That” appears in the original YouTube video as subtitles.

in cowboy hats flood the set as the rhythm of the chorus builds. There is a crescendo as the crowd throws their hands in the air, brandishing finger pistols. The scene cuts to the sedan that had driven past. Psy emerges from the car wearing the same blue tuxedo he wore in the music video for “Gangnam Style”, which also matches the paint job on the car. A younger-looking Psy closes the car door, looks at the camera, and busts a move from his famous horse-trot dance.

After the final, English line of the first chorus, “It’s like that” (officialpsy, “That That MV” 1:32), the music stops. A man dressed in white jumps into the frame from above. An eagle’s cry can be heard, reminiscent of the tense moment before a showdown in a classic Western film. The dancers part at the center of the crowd to make room for Psy’s challenger. Cowboy Psy points with a finger gun at the challenger, fires, then crosses his arms. The scene cuts to the challenger’s face and zooms in to reveal none other than Yoon-gi himself. He addresses Psy in Korean as “Naega,” which loosely translates to *buddy* or *hey you*. To English-speaking listeners, however, the word sounds uncomfortably similar to the N-word used so frequently in American rap songs by artists as diverse as Nicki Minaj and Tyler, the Creator. The music starts again, and Yoon-gi continues in Korean, “you forget what I do for a living?” A showdown ensues. The camera swish pans repeatedly in rapid blurs between Psy and Yoon-gi as they engage in a comically exaggerated, *High Noon*, Western conflict using an Afro-diasporic rap battle between two Asian men, using multiple languages. Psy seems out-matched as he merely echoes the chorus after each of Yoon-gi’s fast-paced Korean lines: “Like that? Still here withstanding the test of time. Like that? I don’t care. I don’t care that I like that. To everyone I’ve longed and longed for. Everybody get ready set go” (officialpsy, “That That MV” 1:46-2:01).



Young Psy reappears, resplendent in urban shades and the same slick suit he wore in the original “Gangnam Style” music video. He beckons for Yoon-gi to close the distance between them, upon which Psy slaps Yoon-gi repeatedly in a stylized cartoonish manner. Yoon-gi merely raises an eyebrow, undeterred and unharmed, then stares into the Gangnam style sunglasses before striking Psy, sending him tumbling into the side of his sedan. In the dog-eat-dog entertainment industry, brutality can take many forms as careers are made and broken every day. Physical violence is perhaps the most direct way to capture and portray the negative side of the popular music industry.

The fight is over. The scene cuts to Yoon-gi standing triumphantly in the now calm and peaceful saloon with cowboy Psy behind him, an avuncular hand upon Yoon-gi’s shoulder. The next lyrics link Yoon-gi with Psy’s real name, Park Jai-sang, as he declares, “Min Yoon-gi and Park Jai-sang” and they both stare into the camera (officialpsy, “That That MV” 2:15-2:17). The Gangnam style Psy is replaced by his possible reincarnation in the form of Yoon-gi.

To reinforce the narrative for Western audiences, Psy and Yoon-gi form a *pietà* on the hood of the sedan. Blood drips from “Gangnam Style” Psy’s mouth as he dies. Suddenly, he comes back to life. As in Christian religions, the Incarnation and the Resurrection are complete. “Gangnam Style” Psy does not return. A jubilant dance erupts featuring the entire cast before a billboard of Psy’s face with angelic wings behind him. Even as they perform the same choreography, Psy performs magnificently cheesily while Yoon-gi exudes contemporary cool. The old king has given way to the new.

Western pop music can find itself renewed in K-pop, even as K-pop has become a force in its own right. Both Psy and Yoon-gi are very aware of the roles they play and the enormous cross-cultural ramifications of both K-pop and the K-pop industry. Even

as they pose questions about their identity as Koreans during the ongoing project that is the Korean Wave, a project that began when YouTube had yet to be invented, well before K-pop swept across social media, both artists are taking their place in Korean and in Western popular music. Whether comedic and brightly colored or dark and disturbing, both idols affect Western pop culture while they struggle with similar themes as members of and shapers of their own. In “That That”, it is clear that Psy is aware of himself as the old king and of Yoon-gi as the new.

## **Conclusion**

Academics of the 2010s could not have known where K-pop was headed. In light of K-pop’s present-day success, however, Western scholarship ought to extend analyses beyond the politics of race and gender. Otherwise, scholarship risks being seen as oblivious to the paradox that those who decry Western colonialism and hegemony are actually perpetrating the very thing they claim to decry. Psy defies early academic underestimation of his global success. Western academics who persist in such assessments of Psy risk undermining his artistic, cultural, and economic legitimacy. To do so also forces him, and maybe K-pop artists in general, backwards. In effect, such critics impose an ironically reactionary point of view that smacks of what those same critics might call American imperialism. In 2022, to maintain the 2016 assertion that “Psy’s chubbiness, his jovial disposition, nonpop star looks, and his status as a married, middle-aged Asian man fit into [the Asian male] stereotype” (Cheah and Kim 2), for example, would be to deny Psy’s ground-breaking originality and astonishing talent. He was not only a master of popular music, but he was able to negotiate the internet and social media in a manner far ahead of his time.

K-pop has its roots in the cross-pollination of Korean and Western cultures.

Born out of armed conflict between foreign military powers in the 1950s, K-pop is an

unlikely success story. Korean rock was crushed by government policy and intervention in the 1970s, yet a political assassination led to a renaissance in South Korean popular music beginning in the 1980s. By the late 1990s, the South Korean government backed a cultural offensive that saw a music genre in its own right come of age. Today, fans around the world welcome the Korean pop culture invaders.

In retrospect, Psy might be best characterized as a General in the Korean pop invasion of the West. Judging from his reception at a concert at Korea University in June of 2022, where armies of enthusiastic fans sang and danced to “That That” in unison (officialpsy, “That That Live Performance”), Psy is as popular as ever in South Korea. He also remains relevant in the West, as evidenced by American news network CNN’s three-minute piece about Psy’s legacy on July 5, 2022 (“Psy Reflects on ‘Gangnam Style’”). BTS is as popular as ever at home and in the West. Their 2022 Grammy Award performance of their hit song “Butter” was met with great enthusiasm in the audience and on social media. Lie provides insight for those who seek to understand K-pop’s universal appeal:

All of this is to express an indisputable reality: that many people enjoy K-pop in particular, and popular music in general, for good reasons, and that no amount of social snobbery or supercilious philosophy is going to change their tastes or their minds. K-pop fans say many things; in my translation, they are saying that K-pop can soothe and massage the soul, thus assuaging or fulfilling desires and longings, or offering (or selling) hope, or comforting and satisfying the conscious self, or providing the means of a measured resistance to overbearing parents, or stimulating the craving to be creative or grown-up or sophisticated. (155)

During the “Gangnam Style” phenomenon, pundits debated whether people were laughing at Psy or laughing with Psy. However, it turns out he was part of something bigger, and he seems to have known it. He has, therefore, much in common with the West’s beloved archetype of the wise fool: quick-witted, musical, and

perceptive in complex social environments where people of far less wit feel superior to the fool. Unlike the classic fool of the West who only comments on the action while main characters drive the narrative, Psy was the main character, the center of attention, and the engine that drove the story. Perhaps Psy would rather compare himself to On Dal, a classic fool in Korean folklore who was misshapen and ugly but pure of heart. On Dal's purity of heart won the hand of Princess Pyeonggang, and he was made a General. Befitting a man of action, On Dal the Fool died in battle.

That K-pop unites people of many nation states, cultures, languages, traditions, races, and genders is remarkable given its violent genesis in the Korean War of 1950. K-pop's story invites a narrative of peace and unity at a time when so many focus on culture wars. From the glamorous to the grotesque, K-pop music invites all audiences to attend a global carnival.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would first like to thank my academic supervisor, Dr. Keir Keightley of the Faculty of Information & Media Studies at Western University, whose passion for academia led me to pursue a Master's. From topic selection to the final paper, he bolstered my research with his knowledge and experience. It was a pleasure to study under such a wise and enthusiastic scholar.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Daniel Robinson of the Faculty of Information & Media Studies at Western University as my second reader. His thoughtful feedback elevated the quality of my research presentation, for which I am grateful.

My research could not have been done were it not for the understanding of my employer, Digital Extremes, especially Rebecca Ford, who not only shares my deep interest in popular culture and media, but who arranged a partial leave of absence for me to pursue my studies.

Finally, I must express my appreciation for my family. My father's embodiment of academic ideals inspires me, and his wisdom has been invaluable throughout my studies. I am grateful to my mother for her unwavering strength, deep compassion, and intelligent reassurance. At times, her nutritious meals sustained me in a way only a mother's love can. I also acknowledge my husband who provides a home full of encouragement, understanding, and love – a place of boundless support.

Thank you all.

Helen Heikkila

## Works Cited

- angel. "this interview was majestic." Re: *PSY Interview + Gangnam Style (Jonathan Ross Show) 10th Nov 2012*, 2016. YouTube, <https://youtu.be/LPMG-Qv1-7E>. Accessed 5 June 2022.
- Auslander, Philip. "Everybody's in Show Biz: Performing Star Identity in Popular Music." *The SAGE Handbook of Popular Music*, edited by Andy Bennett and Steve Waksman, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015, pp. 317-331. *SAGE Reference*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473910362.n18>
- Basbas, Franchesca Judine. "Big Hit Entertainment Starts Anew With HYBE, Here's What You Need to Know." *Bandwagon*, 19 Mar. 2021. <https://www.bandwagon.asia/articles/big-hit-entertainment-change-name-hybe-office-business-bts-txt-enhyphen-seventeen-korea-2021>
- Bridge, Simone Krüger. *Trajectories and Themes in World Popular Music: Globalization, Capitalism, Identity*. Sheffield, Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2018.
- Carbone, Nick. "Gangnam Rile: Psy's Past Anti-American Performances Stir Controversy." *Time*, 8 Dec. 2012. <https://newsfeed.time.com/2012/12/08/gangnam-rile-psys-past-anti-american-performances-stir-controversy/>
- Carvajal, Nikki, Betsy Klein, and Kate Sullivan. "K-pop Supergroup BTS Visits the White House." *CNN Politics*, Cable News Network (CNN), 31 May 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/31/politics/bts-white-house-press-briefing/index.html>
- Cheah, Joseph, and Grace Ji-Sun Kim. *Theological Reflections on "Gangnam Style": A Racial, Sexual, and Cultural Critique*. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014. *ProQuest*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/west/detail.action?docID=1732294>
- de Kloet, Jeroen, and Jaap Kooijman. "Karaoke Americanism Gangnam Style: K-Pop, Wonder Girls, and the Asian Unpopular." *Unpopular Culture*, edited by Martin Lüthe and Sascha Pöhlmann, Amsterdam University Press, 2016, pp. 113-128. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv157bjk.9>
- Frith, Simon, and Angela McRobbie. "Rock and Sexuality." *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, edited by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, Routledge, 2000, pp. 317-32. *ProQuest*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/west/detail.action?docID=253949>

- Frith, Simon. "Pop Music." *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, edited by Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 91-108. *CambridgeCore*,  
<https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1017/CCOL9780521553698>
- Gilchrist, Paul, and Neil Ravenscroft. "Spaces of Transgression: Governance, Discipline and Reworking the Carnavalesque." *Leisure Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2009, pp. 35-49. *Taylor & Francis*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614360802127243>
- gowonofficial. "5th generation of kpop has already started." Reddit, 26 Dec. 2021.  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/unpopularkpopopinions/comments/rp0zn9/5th\\_generation\\_of\\_kpop\\_has\\_already\\_started/](https://www.reddit.com/r/unpopularkpopopinions/comments/rp0zn9/5th_generation_of_kpop_has_already_started/)
- Gregory, Georgina. *Boy Bands and the Performance of Pop Masculinity*. Routledge, 2019. *Taylor & Francis*,  
<https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.4324/9780429027574>
- heartbeat5691. "I loved Psy's attitude." Re: *Surprise! Britney Learns 'Gangnam Style' from Psy!*, 2017. *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/QZmkU5Pg1sw>. Accessed 5 June 2022.
- Hong, Euny. *The Birth of Korean Cool: How One Nation is Conquering the World Through Pop Culture*. New York, Picador, 2014.
- Hong, Euny. "I May Have Started a Rumor About K-Pop, and It May Be Ruining My Life." *The New York Times*, 3 Jan. 2023.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/03/opinion/bts-k-pop-conspiracy.html>
- Jenson, Joli. "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization." *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, edited by Lisa A. Lewis, Routledge, 1992, pp. 9-29. *ProQuest*,  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/west/detail.action?docID=166134>
- Kang, Jiwon, Jina Kim, Migyeong Yang, Eunil Park, Minsam Ko, Munyoung Lee, and Jinyoung Han. "Behind the Scenes of K-Pop Fandom: Unveiling K-Pop Fandom Collaboration Network." *Quality & Quantity*, no. 3, 15 July 2021, pp. 1481–1502. *SpringerLink*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01189-5>
- Kash T. "Glad that Psy didn't hesitate." Re: *Surprise! Britney Learns 'Gangnam Style' from Psy!*, 2021. *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/QZmkU5Pg1sw>. Accessed 5 June 2022.
- Keightley, Keir. "Reconsidering Rock." *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, edited by Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street, Cambridge University Press,

- 2001, pp. 109-142. *CambridgeCore*,  
<https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1017/CCOL9780521553698>
- Keller, Alexandra. "Historical Discourse and American Identity in Westerns Since the Reagan Administration." *Film & History*, vol. 33, no. 1, Center for the Study of Film and History, 2003, pp. 47-54. *Gale*,  
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A156737414/AONE?u=lond95336&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=1d4f5842>
- Khondker, Habibul. "Glocalization." *The Oxford Handbook of Global Studies*, edited by Victor Faessel, Mark Juergensmeyer, Saskia Sassen, and Manfred Steger, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 92-112. *Oxford Academic*,  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190630577.001.0001>
- Kim, Pil Ho, and Hyunjoon Shin. "The Birth of 'Rok': Cultural Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Glocalization of Rock Music in South Korea, 1964–1975." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2010, pp. 199-230. *Duke University Press*, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-2009-028>
- Lee, Sharon Heijin. "Beauty Between Empires: Global Feminism, Plastic Surgery, and the Trouble with Self-Esteem." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1, University of Nebraska Press, 2016, pp. 1-31. *JSTOR*,  
<https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.37.1.0001>
- Lie, John. *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*. Oakland, University of California Press, 2015.
- Lisa Wilder. "PSY is extremely unique." Re: *PSY Interview + Gangnam Style (Jonathan Ross Show) 10th Nov 2012*, 2015. *YouTube*,  
<https://youtu.be/LPMG-QvI-7E>. Accessed 5 June 2022.
- LVL 19 DANCE. "[KPOP IN PUBLIC LONDON | ONE TAKE] PSY - 'GANGNAM STYLE (강남스타일)' || Dance Cover by LVL19." *YouTube*, 15 July 2022.  
[https://youtu.be/V7FR\\_FTpybE](https://youtu.be/V7FR_FTpybE)
- Melon. "2010 Melon Music Awards." Kakao Entertainment.  
[www.melon.com/mma/result.htm?mmaYear=2010](http://www.melon.com/mma/result.htm?mmaYear=2010)
- officialpsy. "PSY – GANGNAM STYLE(강남스타일) M/V." *YouTube*, 15 July 2012.  
<https://youtu.be/9bZkp7q19f0>
- officialpsy. "PSY - 'That That (prod. & feat. SUGA of BTS)' Full Interview." *YouTube*, 6 May 2022. [https://youtu.be/G8K\\_UxojCzM](https://youtu.be/G8K_UxojCzM)



- officialpsy. "PSY - 'That That (prod. & feat. SUGA of BTS)' Live Performance at 고려대 (Korea Uni) 220527." *YouTube*, 3 June 2022.  
<https://youtu.be/TZPjRVScdkk>
- officialpsy. "PSY - 'That That (prod. & feat. SUGA of BTS)' MV." *YouTube*, 29 April 2022. <https://youtu.be/8dJyRm2jJ-U>
- Overlord Audiobooks. "psy seems like a really cool bloke." Re: *PSY Interview + Gangnam Style (Jonathan Ross Show) 10th Nov 2012*, 2013. *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/LPMG-Qvl-7E>. Accessed 5 June 2022.
- "PSY Interview + Gangnam Style (Jonathan Ross Show) 10th Nov 2012" *The Jonathan Ross Show*, created by Jonathan Ross, season 3, episode 13, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Uploaded to YouTube by 1989NickiD, 10 Nov. 2012. <https://youtu.be/LPMG-Qvl-7E>. Accessed 2 June 2022
- Psy. Lyrics to "Gangnam Style." Translated by KPopLyrics.net.  
<https://www.kpoplyrics.net/psy-gangnam-style-lyrics-english-romanized.html>
- Psy. Lyrics to "I Love Sex." Translated by Yunjeong Heo. London, Ontario, 22 July 2022. From video uploaded to YouTube by officialpsy, 12 Dec. 2017.  
<https://youtu.be/9qpPtssK9wY>
- "Psy Reflects on 'Gangnam Style,' 10 Years Later." *CNN Style*, Cable News Network (CNN), 5 July 2022,  
[www.cnn.com/videos/arts/2022/07/05/gangnam-style-psy-interview-hk-orig.cnn](http://www.cnn.com/videos/arts/2022/07/05/gangnam-style-psy-interview-hk-orig.cnn)
- Shin, Ryan. "Gangnam Style and Global Visual Culture." *Studies in Art Education*, vol. 57, no. 3, National Art Education Association, 2016, pp. 252-264. *Taylor & Francis*, <https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1080/00393541.2016.1176784>
- TheEllenShow. "Surprise! Britney Learns 'Gangnam Style' from Psy!" *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, created by Ellen DeGeneres, season 10, episode 2, National Broadcasting Company (NBC), 10 Sep. 2012. *YouTube*,  
<https://youtu.be/QZmkU5Pg1sw>
- Trakt. "The Jonathan Ross Show."  
<https://trakt.tv/shows/the-jonathan-ross-show/seasons/all>
- vespa2223. "I was so embarrassed about Psy not being properly welcomed." Re: *Surprise! Britney Learns 'Gangnam Style' from Psy!*, 2015.  
*YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/QZmkU5Pg1sw>. Accessed 5 June 2022.
- Vitalwarning. "Psy's 'Right Now' Gets Banned by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family." *Allkpop*, 6 Sept. 2011.

[www.allkpop.com/article/2011/09/psys-right-now-gets-banned-by-the-ministry-of-gender-equality-and-family](http://www.allkpop.com/article/2011/09/psys-right-now-gets-banned-by-the-ministry-of-gender-equality-and-family)

White House Office of the Press Secretary. "Remarks by President Obama at Hankuk University." *Obama White House Archives*, 26 Mar. 2012.

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/26/remarks-president-obama-hankuk-university>