The Transmedial Aesthetics of K-pop Music Videos: Hints to Western Film Culture

Abstract

K-Pop has become a worldwide phenomenon due to the dynamic processes of transnationalization in its aesthetics and contents. While the mechanisms of the music industry ensure successful products by constructing models and icons that answer the demand of a large local and global market, few bands have developed an individual style. In this context, it is of particular interest to see that the aesthetics of many music videos are undergoing considerable changes. This paper focuses on these changes by considering two transmedial phenomena. The first concerns quotations from Western feature films in Korean music videos that open up a dialogue with other aesthetics and thematic foci, such as Fantastic Baby by Big Bang and Nilili Mambo by Block B. The second is more structural, as many music videos use generic and aesthetic elements of feature films as well as a set of recurrent motifs, for example One Shot and Badman by BAP. These music videos take the form of short films that enter into a dialogue with Western narratives using icons that mainly carry critiques towards restrictive societal structures regarding individuality. The music videos discussed in this paper draw mainly on Hip-Hop and Rap genres and their associated life styles, building a kind of a subversive subtext. Via such transmedial dialogues, the music videos and their texts propose alternative models for Korean youth facing the pressure of a society built on values of competition and community.

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Author Bio

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Introduction and background

There is an increasing number of publications on various aspects of the K-Pop Wave, reflecting the growing importance in the global spread of the phenomenon during the last ten to fifteen years and the consequent flourishing cultural economy it has engendered. Marketing strategies fuelling K-Pop focus mainly on the iconic value of artists and performance, including choreographies and fashions highlighting the visual aesthetic of the groups. Music videos have therefore become a crucial component of sales strategies while constructing a particular aesthetic for a domestic and international public. This paper will focus on those music videos as an important interface between the product and the international public by analyzing clips that strive to begin an intercultural and intermedial dialogue in their use of aesthetic and visual references to Western film culture.

Youna Kim gives a short overview of the evolution of the Korean Wave since the 1990s. The term “Korean wave” or “Hallyu” was first used by Chinese media in 1998, and served as a concept for transnational popular culture products like music, TV dramas and films that were first exported to Asian countries and America, then later Europe and Australia (Kim 2013: 1–3). In the 1990s, the Korean government set out to “[...] sell a dynamic image of the nation through soft power” (Kim and Rioo 2007: 122–123), which coincided with a broader plan, as Kim (2013: 5) stresses:

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1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the Korean Screen Culture Conference at Sheffield Hallam University in June 2014. I would like to thank Chi-Yun Shin and Andrew Jackson for this opportunity and also thank Stephen Epstein and Taeju Kim for their comments and references.
[...] the current focus on “culture” by governments in Northeast Asia is the product of a neoliberal ideology espousing a global free market and the linking of globalized consumerism to individual freedom and social well-being.

It is important to keep in mind the dual evolution of popular music in South Korea, namely the planning and designing of trends to represent and sell an image of a modern and dynamic state highly canalized by political settings and the economic interests of liberalized markets.

The first Korean artist to hold a concert in New York was Rain in February 2006. His performance was mainly based on American models such as Michael Jackson and Usher, and was engineered so that the similarity in style eased his entry to the US market (Kim and Rioo 2007: 131–132). Eu Min Kim and Jiwon Rioo have examined the different steps in K-pop’s evolution from a positive reception in Asia based on cultural similarities to a growing acceptance in western countries, where audiences will relate to the exotic and unknown aspects of K-pop transmitted more easily using pre-existing and well-known Western musical tropes:

Hallyu represents a culture from outside of the core that has gained popularity because it offered a cultural alternative in a region led by two superpowers with tainted historical memories. […] Hallyu is more a hybrid culture that contains elements of both the Western and Asian cultures. Hallyu is neither a rejection nor reaction to the US- and Western Europe-oriented culture, and it represents a new hybrid culture that has captured the influences of both the West and the East. Thus, it is not surprising that Rain has in it elements of Asian and Korean martial arts combined with Michael Jackson’s moonwalk. This appears to be the winning formula for
some of the Hallyu hits—i.e., a skillful mixing of the East and the West, and in the end brewing something quite distinct (Kim and Rioo 2007: 145–6).

The ongoing and growing success of K-pop is therefore the result of an underlying process of “transculturalization”, which is echoed by the dynamism of popular music, which allows the integration of a range of cultural practices as long as they can find sympathetic resonances. These, in the case of K-pop, are outlined by Kim Chang Nam:

K-pop is perceived to possess the full range of elements typical of “pop”, such as attractive performers, dynamic and spectacular choreography, and light, brisk rhythms and melodies that make it simple to follow and sing. […] the appearance and style of idol stars have significantly evolved, and stage performances including group dancing have become more elaborate and impactful. […]

Korean popular music is primarily characterized by hybridity, as it has grown within a stew of imported elements, such as from Japan and the United States, blended with indigenous cultural qualities (Kim 2012: 12).

Ready accessibility and pattern repetition are characteristics of pop music that make it easier to allow the integration of different elements, providing the platform on which the interaction between various cultural positions and values takes place.

K-pop is a complex phenomenon that we can approach via Appadurai’s concept of mediascape, as it deals with a dense network of production, distribution, reception and aesthetic conditions (1990: 7 and 295). ² Combining music with the artist’s good looks—highlighted by fashionable design and well-staged performances—music

² See also Howard 2006: 82–98.
videos have become an ever more important part of a production system highlighting the hybridity of K-pop and reflecting the strong economic interests behind it. As Kim Chang Nam (2012: 83) has emphasized, the most recent evolution of K-pop is “an idol group that is meticulously managed through a production system that maximizes commercial profits”.

Due to its grounding in popular culture and strong underlying economic interests, critical appreciation of the K-pop phenomenon ranges greatly. Negative judgments of the poor vocal and choreographic skills follow arguments that the production company creates the image at the cost of artistic integrity, but more positive perceptions have appeared recently concerning idols who were independent artists before joining the system, or who started individual careers based on their own dancing and singing skills. A further criticism of K-pop concerns foreign influences on Korean music that reflect concern for the preservation of traditional music against a complex history of various waves of foreign control or colonization. The major influences in music are recognized as being Japanese and American, but K-pop is now also acknowledging its indebtedness to hip-hop and rap. Keith Howard (2006: 91) stated that ‘Between 1992 and 1994, Koreans appropriated foreign styles. Any style became Korean as acculturation collapsed the foreign into a vernacular expression.’ He concludes that Korean pop turned into a standardized industry in the mid-nineties. It seems, though, that the K-pop wave that has grown since the mid 1990s is about to face a major change in direction from within. Several boy bands founded after 2011 have tried to import African-American genres and their associated dance and fashion styles, representing a lifestyle bound to a certain rebellious attitude in relation to mainstream society. One could argue that this is part of a marketing strategy or that alternative concepts lose their potential as soon as they are turned into.
mainstream cultural marketing strategies (Berger 1980: 143-151), but it is striking that some bands are questioning their major-company contracts and are asking for greater artistic expression and independence. The hypothesis underlying the analysis of a number of recent music videos is therefore that boy bands that claim an affiliation to hip-hop and rap cultures contribute to the transnationalization process by bringing in a subversive tone via African-American culture. Gloria Lee Pak makes a strong argument linking imitation procedures to the post-colonial debate, summarizing her findings as follows:

A commonly acknowledged aspect of Korean popular music is its imitation of foreign musical styles. Critics have always been quick to judge Korean popular music as lacking its own identity because it is based on Japanese (in the case of ppongtchak), American (as in rock, rap and R&B), or French, Spanish, Jamaican, Brazilian, Cuban and numerous other musics (Pak 2006: 71).

She concludes by claiming a reconsideration of the history of imitation, taking into account the potential of rebelliousness (Pak 2006: 71).

The K-pop phenomenon is thus highly hybridized in terms of drawing on various music styles and economic and marketing strategies reaching out to international markets. The media space is one in which a diversity of roles can co-exist via a projection from that space into society so that new models can be imagined which could help instigate the creation of new identities.³ At the same time, music videos

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³ Gender also plays a prominent role in this context, as Epstein and Joo (2012: 17) have shown—how the body is presented in performances and music videos, for example. The exposure of the male body, especially a well defined torso, would reflect the neo-liberal politics that enabled Korea to become a global player and to exist at the same level as the former colonizing powers such as Japan and China. A highly ambiguous process is under way which encourages work for community and nation as well as underlining the growing importance of...
grow in importance, increase in quantity and improve in quality. The strong iconic impact of K-pop idols also contributes to changing identifiers of the public space in its interaction with the media space. It is against this very complex mediascape that K-pop culture must be seen. The music videos, which will be discussed in more detail later, contribute to the creation of an imaginary identity drawing on a multitude of cultural values and representations, and strongly influence transcultural processes that began some two decades ago.

**Music Videos**

Popular music linked to fashion and consumerism is closely related to ideas of individual freedom, which can clash with predesigned market orientated concepts. In contrast to the idea of individual freedom, big entertainment production companies have introduced a “trainee system” since the 2000s to recruit and train young talent for K-pop idol groups. Heavy investment over years of brand creation bring lengthy contracts to ensure the return of investments once the groups become successful. In this context, the importance of music videos is constantly growing as they contribute to creating a brand by performances that will stir a high commitment by the fan communities. Youna Kim underlines this aspect as well:

> [...] Korean popular music is driven by the visual, not only via live performance on television but in music videos […] too. As Hoon-Soon Kim notes, “The music video has captivated the younger generation… and has changed the notion of music from that of something primarily auditory to something to watch as well” (Kim 2013:316).

the individual. National and individual identities carry a stronger influence in the international public space which embodies a narcissistic tendency that could question values related to gender as well as to the community.
H A Willoughby (2006: 106) stressed some years ago, that “the image is everything”. Youna Kim (2013:84) follows her argument that South Korea is the first nation “becoming a dream society of icons and aesthetic experience” that constructs intentionally a sellable concept of a dream using icons that appeal to a global public.

The preponderance of images in the popular music industry is taken into consideration by the trainee system by aiming at perfectionism in the idols’ performances. 4 Stephen Epstein and James Turnbull go even further in their appreciation of the performance of K-pop idols:

[...] with the collapse of recorded music scales success has come to depend not so much on vocal talent as dancing ability, physical attractiveness, and the projection of image through appearance in live performances, television programs, advertisements, and so on. In this environment, music videos become not an autonomous expression of performer sensibility but a marketing tactic concocted by managers to sell a cultural product. In order to be effective, a music video (M/V) must resonate with the zeitgeist in the way it conforms to, or in some cases challenges, normative expectations; [...] in this sense it becomes part of a discourse “that is socially constructed by the interplay among mainstream mores and values, consumption practices, and subjective interpretation of its meanings by its audiences.” (Vannini and Myers quoted in Epstein and Turnbull 2014: 317).

4 “K-pop performers exemplify a sort of pop perfectionism – catchy tunes, good singing, attractive bodies, cool clothes, mesmerizing movements, and other attractive attributers in a non-threatening, pleasant package. This pleasurable experience can make international fans feel how difficult it is not to enjoy it, even when they may be fully aware of its addictiveness and extremely photogenic, visual illusion.” Kim 2013: 8.
Vannini and Myers claim the importance of music videos as “cultural agents”:

As such, its producers and consumers are interpreters belonging to the same social context in which music content and cultural values interplay to constitute socially constructed realities. It is this dual capacity of music to be at one time both reflective of common popular beliefs and influential in moving and shaping the same beliefs that makes it such an important cultural agent (Vannini and Myers 2002).

In spite of the strong control—economically and conceptually—the construction of meaning always forms part of a dialogue between the producers and the potential public. Willoughby has underlined the impact of the experience of music and performance:

Simon Frith goes further, arguing that a given social group does more than simply internalize the norms of a mediated image or sound. ‘Music, an aesthetic practice,’ he writes, ‘articulates in itself an understanding of both group relations and individuality, on the basis of which ethical codes and social ideologies are understood (Frith quoted in Willoughby 2006: 106).

The consequence of basing a concept on economic interests is always building the interaction between that concept and the receiver, so that the transmitted messages—even concerning love songs—impact on collective imagery and in the medium term even on behavior, as Willoughby explicates in her conclusion:

Music can, and does, affect the society that creates and listens to it. […] TV offers a space of freedom, a means whereby a group of people can act out fantasies of the ‘common man’. This is the impact of Korean pop musicians on the public. It
is not only a fashion statement that is portrayed on stage; rather it is an ideology of freedom, particularly of sexual freedom. Whether or not women act and dance in a sexually provocative manner, or men are androgynous, pop music offers emancipation from traditional norms. (107)\(^5\)

Although Epstein and Turnbull question this freedom in their recent article on Girl’s Generation, the interdependency of production and reception, and the construction of concepts and needs with existing dreams and longings, are underlined in various articles. Kent A. Ono and Jungmin Kwon, for example, stress aspects of the continual reconsideration of production and reception:

Their voices, even though they may be manipulated and mediated by the artistic and business moguls of the music, film, and TV industries, are needed to invigorate the global popular culture that is then fed back to them and to everyone else (Ono and Kwon 2013: 199-214).\(^6\)

This interdependence between music video and audience is crucial to the corpus of videos that will be discussed later on, as they all deal with the idea of the liberating strength of music and of individual freedom.

The format of music videos has been developed with the rise in number of television stations, greater access to the internet and the sharing of images and videos on YouTube and other sites. In the meantime, two main categories can be distinguished. The first covers most productions. The clips accompanying the release

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\(^5\) The representation of gender roles is a subject that has stirred large debates. See for example Sun 2010.

\(^6\) Youna Kim goes a step further in underlining the dynamism that springs from this interdependency that could bring about changes at the long run: “The interface between cultural change and globalization today is more complex than it appears in the popular imagination; rather than reinforcing old, historically anchored hegemonies, the forces of globalization are also helping to destabilize them, the interaction has become dynamic […]. Kim 2013: 18.
of a new album present the concept of the album or of songs that might range from being “cute”, “sexy”, or “dangerous”. Whatever style is deemed fashionable is given added value by presenting a different music genre and/or visual performance to previous productions. Such music videos are part of a larger marketing concept that aims to sell the band to diverse target groups, and these videos seldom include a storyline and pay no particular attention to filmic aspects. They usually offer a set of stages on which the groups perform each time in different outfits, showcasing of the group’s brand and that of the production company⁷. The second category consists of a smaller number of videos comprising productions which again allow the groups to perform in varying settings but focus on a more developed storyline. The most outstanding characteristic in these cases is the high quality of the video production, combined with a cinematographic approach that pays particular attention to camera, direction and lighting. This is particularly important in the Korean context, as Korean cinema has gained a much greater international reputation in genre cinema as well as cinema d’auteur since the 1990s, to the point where Korean film directors have joined forces with the US market.⁸ The massive investment by some producers in high quality music videos can be seen as a marketing strategy to attract larger international audiences.

**Music videos and Intermediality**

The music videos that will be analyzed here have a certain cinematographic pretention and refer to other films. Theoretical reflections on textual referentiality in a broader

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⁷ See for example the boy band VIXX with songs and videos like Super Hero (2012), On and On (2013), Hyde (2013) and Error (2014). Also Super Junior with Sorry Sorry (2009), Mr. Simple (2011) and Sexy, free and single (2012).

context can be found in the concepts of intertextuality and intermediality. Intertextuality draws on Bakhtin’s concept of “dialogicity” which builds, among other things, on the appearance of silenced or marginalized voices in a monolithic community with specific reference to groups that differ from the dominating culture. In these cases, the presence of a silenced voice can subvert the dominant discourse. With the growing variety of media and formats, intermediality became a factor as the need was felt to express dialogue between different facets of the media—text, film, radio, music, television, internet and so on. In this paper, the concept of intermediality will therefore be used to deal with a dialogic set of references that link music videos and song texts with film plots, settings and cinematographic styles.

As regards the references cinematographic film format and its connection with music videos, I will discuss various aspects of productions from 2012-4 that seem to announce a shift in the concept of individuality, and in which intermedial procedures open a dialogic space.

**Fantastic Baby (2012) by Big Bang**

Big Bang is a boy band founded in 2006 under the patronage of YG Entertainment. Of the five members, three previously worked as solo artists and have re-kindled their solo careers from 2012/13 onwards—G-Dragon, the leader of the band, as a rapper, T.O.P. as a rapper and actor, and Tae Yang as a dancer and R&B singer (Russell 2014: 34–37; Kim 2012: 101–105). The music video *Fantastic Baby*, released in 2012, has won several awards, including the 2013 Japan MTV Music Video Awards. *Fantastic Baby* is about the pleasure of dancing, the heat of the moment and the

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9 Irina Rajewsky offers an overview of the complex procedures of intertextuality, which range from using the same genre to the appearance of a character or a literal quotation. Rajewsky 2002.
atmosphere, and the point at which they come together and claim the dance floor. The video starts with G-Dragon sitting on a throne looking straight to camera and inviting the audience to join in with the dancing. There is a strong visual message of rebellious intent. Special police forces protect a territory behind a high fence where signs indicate the prohibition of music. On the other side of the fence, there are people wearing what look like gas masks but which might also allude to the appearance of “aliens” or outsiders. The masked rebels intend to bring the fence down and attack the police forces to reclaim “free music” and dance. During these sequences, the refrain “I wanna dance” repeats, while the four stanzas emphasizing the concept of freeing oneself from conventions and restrictions in order to dance is linked with the concept of youth, strength and performance.

This idea of freedom is strengthened by the mise-en-scène of the opening sequence which evokes the setting of the South African film District 9 (2009) by Neill Blomkamp, in which aliens live in an isolated suburb that looks like an apocalyptic setting in an end-of-the-world scenario. The film was read as a metaphor for the Apartheid system. If the reference were explicit in the video of Fantastic Baby, it would represent a significant metaphor for a free space created by music and dance in the face of a strong and oppressive system, an aspect that is reinforced by sequences where one band member tries to free himself from heavy chains and another is brought back to life as white frost on his frozen body slowly melts away. The message of the music video is that the power of music can create a free space for music, for dance and for individual styles by referring to the five members of the group who are all very distinct in style and appearance. This is reinforced during the closing sequence, in which the rebels remove their masks and become recognizable individuals within a group of dancers. In this closing part, the melody and rhythm change, growing closer.
to the type of folk song appropriate for a dance, and two bearers of traditional lion masks join in the dancing, an aspect of the video with links to the *Bukcheong sajanoreum* ceremony, a ritual to chase away bad spirits by dancing and singing during the night of the full moon of the New Year. The folk song is *Da gachi nolja*, a popular children’s song that translates as “let’s all play and dance together”.  

*Fantastic Baby* closes by linking back to traditional music and dance, evoking the spirit of Korean resistance to centuries of colonization and oppressive politics.

**Nilili Mambo (2012) by Block B**

Block B was founded in 2011, and released the music video *Nilili Mambo* in October 2012. The title refers to an old Korean folk song inviting people to dance, suggesting that the music will impart energy, life and enjoyment.  

This message is also expressed in the lyrics as the band invites the audience to join in the dancing as they “take it to the next level” as the “gritty boys are back”. The visual narrative of the music video, however, picks up the rebellious elements of the “gritty guys” challenging the music scene as the band members appear as modern pirates in a Vietnamese harbour city dealing with diamonds, gambling and violent encounters with dealers.

The opening sequence shows the band leader Zico sitting in a beauty salon, a wanted poster with his portrait next to the mirror. A parallel montage of Zico and of men dressed in black suits with diamonds in dark cases sets a thriller tone for the video before the insert announces the title of the film followed by “Blockbuster”, the name of the band—accompanied by the sound of crossing knife blades. The following

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10 I am grateful to Park Sang Mi for the references to the song and the ritual.

11 Park Sang-Mi (2012) confirmed the vague information about the folk song spread in blogs. A presentation of the folk song can be seen on [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uBLP8WbnZA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uBLP8WbnZA) accessed 27 February 2015.
establishing shot presents a panorama in high angle on a ship leaving a harbour, followed by a medium long shot showing the band members from behind, and then a medium shot in a low angle showing the band/gang on the boat’s bridge shouting. This series of shots picks up the ideas of “being loud”, “let’s shout”, “lift the anchor” to start something new to raise attention. At the same time, this sequence evokes the film *Pirates of the Caribbean*, even going as far as providing the main motif for the song. The songwriter and band leader Zico, with blond dreadlocks, resembles Jack Sparrow, the iconic captain played by Johnny Depp. The personage of Jack Sparrow is a positive figure situated as rebel and outcast who—in his sometimes clumsy way—parodies the outlaw who could also evoke Robin Hood, a rogue who subverts the system.

Another film reference comes in later, when Kyung sharpens a knife, but ironically in this context not for a fight but for killing a chicken that escapes. This sequence brings to mind the opening scene of the Brazilian film *City of God* (2002) by Fernando Mereilles, in which a chicken is chased by the members of the gang from the favelas. This motif announces the chasing of men at various levels during the film: citizens by the gangs, gang members by rivals or by the police. It also sets the fast pace of the rhythm of the film and a life always lived on the run. The video uses similar extreme camera perspectives (high low angle) in narrow spaces like corridors or staircases which visualizes the feeling of being blocked or imprisoned as in *City of God*. This reference places the video within the tradition of films that deal with the injustice of neo-liberal and post-colonial societies, creating parallel communities forced into illegality and violence.

The lyrics of *Nilili Mambo* propagate the idea that dancing can help you to forget state control for a while and dance away some of your energy (“get frantic instead of
being calm”). Here again, music and dance create a space where the individual can be free and show emotions. On the visual level, the band members need to subvert conventions in order to feel free, to become themselves. At the same time, the reference to a parody on pirate films might suggest a link to the ironic tone of the music video as well as to piracy in the Asian region, which could be seen as a metaphor of American Wild West practices that seem to reach out to the common dream of wealth and freedom. This invites parallels between emerging states which all share the same objectives and sacrifice social peace for a fast economic development. The refrain “Ooh yeah, everyone’s surprised and intimidated/ Everyone wake up! Get frantic instead of being calm” is underlain with close-up shots from a low angle of the singers performing in a narrow staircase that gives the impression that they are being imprisoned or controlled. The song would then also act as an incitement to break free from control, from a prison-like space.

The main message linking the lyrics and the videos of both Nilili Mambo and Fantastic Baby is an invitation to join the dance to free oneself, to rebel, either against police forces or by joining marginalized groups. Music and dance turns into a channel conveying messages of pursuing individual freedom. In this respect, the references to iconic films from the so-called Global South have some impact on the contextualization of the song texts; both deal with music as an artform aiming towards building social consciousness and as an invitation to dance, to move as part of a project that can transgress social boundaries. It is also remarkable that both songs refer to folk songs that embody traditional values not influenced by the political epoch of the post-war period.
**Warrior and Power (2012) by B.A.P.**

B.A.P. (an acronym for the English words Best Absolute Perfect) is a boy band comprising six members who have been with TS Entertainment since 2012. At the start of their career, they released two music videos with a commitment to social justice: *Warrior* (01/2012) and *Power* (04/2012), both dealing with the injustice of the current social status. The texts are explicit, and although the videos do not refer to specific Western films they do use a set of canonical cinematic tropes—mainly from Hollywood productions—about soldiers and suburban gang warfare. The setting of *Warrior* is dominated by dark colours, graffiti, fire behind cracked windows and broken down cars, recalling the settings of socially disadvantaged neighborhoods. In the background are installed rows of television screens that all show skulls like the posters on the walls insinuating a state of total control that brings the disappearance of individuality. The lyrics call for a “revolution” against a system that will betray and kill, echoed in the choreography that uses a lot of action that suggests fighting, integrating moves from martial arts as well as shooting, marching and dancing in the streets as part of demonstrations.

*Power* functions in a very similar way, though the setting is no longer urban. Instead, a crashed spaceship in the desert provides the background for the choreography and sets the revolutionary potential in the future. The setting links the video to dystopian scenarios in Hollywood films like *The Book of Eli* (2010) or *In Time* (2011). The video opens on a setting that shows cables and pipes that resemble an engine, before the leader of the band is seen standing in a cell, locked into metallic

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12 Like John Singleton’s classic *Boyz n the Hood* (USA, 1991).

13 The second stanza says “It’s time to move and the anthem of the strong and weak will break that fight/This is a revolution, a Guernica flow/So everybody keep your head up.” [http://www.kpoplyrics.net/b-a-p-power-lyrics-english-romanized.html#ixzz3Nld2y69G](http://www.kpoplyrics.net/b-a-p-power-lyrics-english-romanized.html#ixzz3Nld2y69G)
bonds, receiving an injection into his head by a computer-controlled robot arm. Rapidly cutting reveals group members dressed in futuristic clothing, apparently standing asleep in cells, where they receive similar automatized injections. The singing starts with the band leader opening his eyes abruptly and from the next shot onwards, the members are all in front of the cells denouncing a system of social injustice ruled by the greed for money. The song calls for rebellion\textsuperscript{14} against the dehumanizing control that is stressed by the desert setting, which gets even closer to the decor of post-apocalyptic and dystopic movies such as \textit{Armageddon} (1998) so that the urgency of the action is underlined as the members of B.A.P. turn into freedom fighters and saviours of moral values. The full slow motion shot of the six band members dressed as warriors in black moving in one horizontal line towards the camera is a typical motif—in westerns as well as war and action films—of the cowboys/warriors/saviours coming home from the battle that saved the community or even the world.

Two more recent B.A.P. music videos from 2013 were produced by Zany Brothers, but focus more on narrative than on a powerful text and choreography. \textit{One Shot} is the story of a group of friends, one of whom is kidnapped. To free him, the friends rob a money transport. When paying the ransom in a metro station, the gangsters shoot the victim, and in the ensuring firefight everyone is killed. \textit{Badman} is set in an impoverished neighborhood in Detroit and focuses on the effects of social inequalities on the lower classes in which a clash between two gangs depicts violence born of aggressive frustration and shows some of the band members involved in

\textsuperscript{14} “You block out your ears and lips/You’re too busy filling your stomach up, a role of stealing everything/Like a decalcomania, a role where money, status, and honor doesn’t change/It’s time to move and the anthem of the strong and weak will break that fight/This is a revolution, a Guernica flow/So everybody keep your head up/There’s no more, there’s no more justice/It’s a world that submits under the power of money/The weak die in the shadows of the strong/No, no, no, no…”
dealing with drugs. If one sees both music videos as the evolution of a story, *Badman* could illustrate the effects on young people who are striving for wealth but are denied conventional opportunities to reach their goals. In the context of our argument, it is of interest to note that the music video draws on narrative elements of gangster and gang films in an US-American style that can be found as well in more recent Korean films. As such, both music videos are set in a larger context of narrations on marginalizing processes that exclude disadvantaged social groups. Dance and music transgress the political and social boundaries and can operate to create a spirit of protest and a will for social change.

**Dash (2013) by M.I.B.**

M.I.B. (Most Incredible Busters) is a quartet produced by the smaller company Jungle Entertainment, so that they are closer to Block B in not being part of the mainstream market, which is dominated by three big enterprises SM, YG and JYP. In their popular song *Dash* (08/2013), they also invite the audience to dance, to forget everything and allow them to free themselves from restrictions, social rules and to enjoy life for one night. The forgetting of restrictions is initiated and supported by activating a “neuralyzer” that makes people forget. This refers directly to the American blockbuster film *Men in Black* to which they also allude with the name of the band. At minute 3:11 the following lyric makes it explicit: “it’s not the movie *Men in Black* we are M.I.B.”. Besides this specific quotation, they also parody the agents in their clothing style, and

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15 It would be interesting to push the analysis further as the setting in a black neighborhood would bring the Hip-hop and Rap aspects of B.A.P.’s music kind of back to the roots and link the music to social uprising against injustice. But unfortunately the opposition between Korean good guys and Afro-American bad guys was misconstrued as embodying a racist perspective.
the appearance of an African-American in the dance sequences refers to the junior partner played by Will Smith in the film.

Before the music starts, there is an opening sequence in which the African-American speaks in close-up direct to camera, saying “I am just a figment of your imagination”, inviting us to enter a story between reality and imagination. The video follows with a series of takes that show band members in a laboratory, bound to wheelchairs receiving injections from men dressed in protective suits. The atmosphere of total control via psychotropic drugs is more reminiscent of oppressive settings that feature in Korean cinema classics such as Old Boy than it is of Men in Black. The implicit critique of a dominant system that absorbs all life stirs the need to rebel against such total control—a motif that echoes B.A.P.’s Power or Big Bang’s Fantastic Baby. The invitation in the refrain to join the party, to “dash together” and to forget everything draws attention to the creation of an alternative community that temporarily revokes the restrictive system in order to enjoy life.

A Shared Imaginary

After discussing the references used in music videos, I would like to examine the ongoing process towards a shared imaginary by referring back to the work of one of the members of Big Bang, namely T.O.P., who wrote the text and co-directed the music video Doom Dada, released in November 2013. Pre-release stills announced that the video would not appeal to = general public tastes. It was feted as a very “special music video” with a personal touch, but surprisingly the song and the music video were very successful in various charts, possibly due to T.O.P.’s popularity as an actor. The story behind the video is complex, and include references to various films and epochs and the arts in general. In the opening sequence, a group of apes finds a microphone
among a collection of bones in the sand, and in learning how to use it they take an important step in the evolution of music. This is a reference to Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which also uses apes to represent evolution. The idea is taken up with references to the silent film era in which early photographic apparatus attempted to capture single pictures and present them in a serial order to show movements representing our evolution from monkeys to human beings.

T.O.P. himself reveals his homage to Kim Jee Woon’s *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (2008), a 1930’s Manchurian Western that mixes elements of genre and film aesthetics. The riding on a zebra and on a bike might be a reference to this film, whilst the appearance of T.O.P. with a moustache riding a bicycle draws on the film *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali. While the reference to Kim Jee Woon underlines the mixing of genres in recent adaptation and transfer processes, the homage to the 1920s and 1930s stresses the link to surrealism and dadaist movements in art and film history. Both references contextualize the dream-like arrangement of sequences linked by iconic and/or symbolic connotations. There are also pieces of art such as the painting *The Deer* by the Korean artist Kim Hwan Gi or the reference in the song lyrics to the African-American painter Jean-Michel Basquiat as the expression of individual stories turns into an avant-garde montage that contributes to overcoming the diktat of production policies.

A very similar message was launched by G-Dragon with *Coup d’Etat*, two months before *Doom Dada*. *Coup d’Etat* was announced with pictures showing G-Dragon, his head covered with a turban that covered his whole face except his eyes, which emit an intensive stare like a Samurai and evoke rebellious groups making video

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16 See for example Mayer (2005: 50): “[…] he painted a calculated incoherence, calibrating the mystery of what such apparently meaning-laden pictures might ultimately mean.”
announcements such as the Zapatista Movement in Chiapas, Mexico.\textsuperscript{17} One of the advertising posters showed G-Dragon, a line saying “Coup d’Etat” beneath his profile and “coming soon” added, as if the poster was announcing a revolutionary act. This impression was reinforced by the next poster that added the date “Coup d’Etat. 2013-09-02”. The CD was released in two versions, one with posters in red, the other in black, assuming the colours of most political posters from any socialist or revolutionary movement from the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century to the Cuban revolution. The design clearly picks up on a global aesthetic, displaying iconic conventions for the call for rebellion or political upheaval.\textsuperscript{18} The music video that accompanies \textit{Coup d’Etat} is particularly interesting. Following discussions on blogs and on Facebook, most fans were impressed despite a somewhat fractured narrative line. Almost parallel to the launch of the CD, G-Dragon reinvented himself as a model for beauty products and fashion in which he appears as a very handsome man.\textsuperscript{19} In the music video, however, he shows up in the opening sequences as an ugly creeping creature whose skin is wrinkled and appears almost too big for the body it covers. In \textit{Coup d’Etat} and \textit{Doom Dada} the singers appear not only as handsome models but as ugly or even ape-like, mocking the importance of physical appearance and referring at the same time to the subversive power of music and arts in general using a wide range of concrete “quotations” in the case of \textit{Doom Dada} and index-like references in \textit{Coup d’Etat}. A fierce critique of the mass media can be found in both songs, and the videos mark a break from the official discourse and representation of K-pop by underlining the

\textsuperscript{17} The turban also reminds the viewer of the Tuareg, a nomadic group in West Africa known for its long tradition in music and dance as well as for their will for freedom that—following their warrior tradition—is often defended in armed rebellions or conflicts.

\textsuperscript{18} See King 2012; Cushing 2003.

\textsuperscript{19} See \textit{Elle} 2014.
hybridity and the ambiguity of the productions. This might again be part of a marketing strategy, but even then, the fact that questioning the concepts becomes part of the product itself adumbrates a turning point in the popular music scene from the margins which may impact upon the production approaches of other groups bearing in mind the intermedial network that already exists. Additionally, we can observe that references within music videos can also build a strong following. G-Dragon’s style as well as his music videos considerably influence other K-pop artists. Block B’s music video *Very Good* (2014) picks up sequences such as the long table bearing food, or the box sequence in G-Dragon’s music video *One of a kind* (2012). His outfit with the blond dreadlocks can be found again in Taeyang’s music video *Ringa Linga* (2013), which was co-produced by G-Dragon. The deserted ruins of a head in G-Dragon’s *Coup d’Etat* (09/2013) find a resonance in the music video of B.A.P.‘s *Angel* (02/2014).

A strong tendency towards an intermedial orientation of music videos with a cohesive narrative line results in a strong shared iconic archive, taking the form of a communicative memory that can also develop a constant dialogue with other media from various cultural and historical contexts. This imaginary context will become a shared space filled with meaningful images and icons that, in the cases discussed here, refer to a universe of music that propagates individual freedom and space.

**Concluding Remarks: Music videos, Individual Styles and K-pop Imaginaries**

The examples discussed above illustrate the width and intensity of intermedial referentiality. The videos use cinematographic aesthetics and motifs from western film culture to embed themselves into a larger context of film production, gaining increasing recognition whilst simultaneously building additional layers of meaning. The references also form part of the hybridity of Korean music videos, as they open up
opportunities for other music and dance styles and diverse modes of narration. The
music video as an art form appropriates older cinematic forms via procedures such as
the playful parodies of a wide range of iconic and music archives to build new or
different linkages as a variation or as a new perspective on inter- and transmedial
dialogue.

The examples chosen in this discussion deal with restrictive regulations
reigning in Korean society, optimizing performance against highly antagonistic
settings. Institutional control in schools and the workplace is questioned and young
people are temporarily invited to forget pressure and enjoy life. Music and dance
become the communicative channel and the vehicle for creating a gap in time and
space that allows them to step beyond the bounds of the system, reinforced by
references to films that also deal with social imbalance, state control or rebellion. In
these cases, intermedial references establish a dialogue between Korean and western
narratives that carry themes of critique and rebellion. It might therefore not be
surprising that—apart from Big Bang—groups produced by less important companies
gain better reputations comparatively more gradually. It is also striking that the majority
of the members of the bands discussed here allude to hip-hop and rap, expressing an
outspoken affinity with an underground culture making critical observations from the
margins of society. One could argue that this is part of a marketing strategy that will

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20 It might seem inadequate to speak of rebellious moments in the music videos treated in this
paper. Student protests against the regime in the 1980s were repressed violently; The
Guardian 2012. I owe this reference to CedarBough T Saeji.
The attempts to escape social control and the oppressive structures of extreme competition have
recently been critiqued by young people which appears to announce a change in shared values.
See for example the music video N.O. by Bangtan.
21 Another interesting point is that they do not use dance moves that would expose the naked
torso in their performances which—according to Epstein—refers also to the nation’s renewed
self-consciousness. Although there are good dancers in all these videos, they don’t use this
include these particular target groups, but this remains ambiguous as the use of such signifiers can be integrated into the mainstream to stir new visions\textsuperscript{22}.

\textsuperscript{22} In the case of B.A.P., one would have to mention that after the music videos that all followed a kind of “underground”, “rebellious” narrative, they also came up with love songs, the last one with the title \textit{Where are you? Where are you going} (2014) is a clip that mainly shows cute teenagers in love. In November 2014, the members of B.A.P. went on court to achieve the end of their contract with TS Entertainment. \url{http://24-7kpop.com/all-members-of-b-a-p-want-to-terminate-their-contract-with-ts-entertainment/} that is said to exploit them. It might also be the moment to gain more freedom of – artistic - expression.
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