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Beauty and the Waste: Fashioning Idols and the Ethics of Recycling in Korean Pop Music Videos

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Abstract

The Korean pop music (K-pop) scene in recent years has become a fashion powerhouse where its highly visible stars exert tremendous influence on their fans' fashion practices. As K-pop content is most frequently consumed on YouTube, K-pop music videos have come to be cybernetic runway shows, whetting the fans' appetite for endless fashion consumption. This paper examines K-pop's double entendre as both a seminal player in and a critic of the fashion industry by comparing two highly influential music videos—G-Dragon's "Crooked" (2013) and BTS's "Spring Day" (2017)—that allegorically comment on the contemporary fashion practices of quick accumulation and disposal. Arguably the

most successful artists in the genre's history, both G-Dragon and the seven-member BTS exert huge influence on youth culture not just in Asia but far beyond. The article will touch upon broader calamities generated by environmental crisis and highlight the struggles of millennials around the globe who are subject to the neoliberal ethos of ruthless self-promotion, often in the form of self-fashioning practices. The article posits fashion as a significant sartorial and social practice of calibrating an individual's role in a broader context of ecocriticism.

KEYWORDS: fast fashion, recycling, K-pop, BTS, G-Dragon

What do cancer and nuclear weapons have in common? Their expansion, proliferation, is out of control. Proliferation, too, is a key principle of capitalist expansion, particularly at capitalist frontiers where accumulation is not so much primitive, that is, archaic, as savage. (Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing 2005, 27, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*)

Vivid are the displays of candy-colored hues on lifeless mannequins posed to reveal best their slender leg lines clad in lemon, fuchsia, navy blue, and red-orange skinny jeans. Like a jolly mix of confections, the display window glows with the delightful constellation of life-size figurines who magically transform into giggly young girls when the soft melody starts to overlay their frozen poses (Figure 1). Just like that, the nine members of K-pop sensation Girls' Generation transform the music video screen into a window display and again into a runway as they start showcasing their jeans in full motion with synchronized dance.

Girls' Generation is now something of a legend in the world of K-pop, but when the music video "Gee"¹ was released in 2009, it helped seal the reputation of the rookie group who had debuted just two years before. But a more decisive victory was confirming the group members' status as fashion muses, as colored skinny jeans became the hottest fashion items that year, owing to the popularity of this music video.² Not only did female consumers flock to stores to get their pair, but male consumers also subscribed to this dress code popularized by Girls' Generation (Yi 2013).

K-pop music videos, one of the most important ways for the genre to circulate globally, often become parables of fashion consumption. They resemble closely a fashion showcase—both haute couture and street fashion—as many K-pop fans follow their favorite idols to observe their style.³ "Get That K-pop Look," a vlog series on K-pop stars' fashion reviews and consultations by popular K-pop website Kpopstarz,⁴ for example, has been advising many fans to admire, emulate, and consume what they see on K-pop idols' bodies since its initial run on September 13, 2014. This is in large part due to the fact that K-pop is not just a music genre but a total performance that relies heavily on visual



Figure 1

The nine members of K-pop group Girls' Generation pose like lifeless mannequins featuring colorful hues of skinny jeans in their 2007 music video "Gee." Source: YouTube.

presentation, including clothing, hair, makeup, body grooming, gestures, and choreography (S.-Y. Kim 2018, Chap. 1; Cha 2010). K-pop idols' effect on the fashion industry became even more significant with the explosive growth of the Chinese consumerist market. K-pop stars who rise to the status of highly visible celebrity on the Chinese entertainment scene exert enormous fashion influence on the world's fastest-growing consumer group.⁵ In the eyes of the global fashion brands, K-pop stars are more influential than Hollywood celebrities for their marketing campaigns in Asia. No wonder many fashion labels have been passionately courting K-pop's shiniest stars to boost their brand recognition in Asia. K-pop stars have come to be not only front-row fixtures at haute couture fashion shows but also mighty ambassadors by sporting sponsors' goods in their music videos and Instagram postings. The relationship between K-pop and the fashion industry reached an even deeper collaborative stage when K-pop's most prominent fashion icon, G-Dragon, composed runway music for Nicola Formichetti (Lady Gaga's stylist, who works as creative director of Mugler) in 2013 and for Alexander Wang's fashion show in 2016.

In short, the K-pop scene nowadays is one of the most boisterous fashion showcases, whetting fans' appetite for endless consumption.⁶ But what created K-pop's prominence in the global fashion market is not the stars' direct engagement with ad campaigns or runway show

appearances and collaborations, but its digital omnipresence on YouTube, with mesmerizing music videos featuring a rich spread of sartorial styles in fast jump cuts that highlight quick costume and scene changes. With their hyperprofessional production quality, K-pop music videos are treated as blue chip by YouTube and have attracted billions of viewers to the platform since its creation in 2006 (S.-Y. Kim 2018, Chap. 1). Countless fans from all corners of the globe get to watch K-pop music videos on computer screens, effectively transforming them into window displays and runway acts, as in the case of “Gee.” But what lies behind this alluring façade of computer screens and other electronic gadgets? Where do the material remains of fast fashion consumption, constantly prodded by K-pop acts, end up? And how does the K-pop industry itself reflect upon the afterlife of costumes?

Ryan Yasin, who attempted to counter the growing forces of the fast fashion industry by devising a reusable children’s garment that grows up to seven sizes, noted:

The way clothing is consumed is much like a subscription model, with consumers paying low costs more frequently (and then disposing), rather than investing a large amount into a long-lasting garment. This all results in poor-quality and -performance clothing, excessive waste of our resources, and the exploitation of people ... On the surface, the world of fashion may seem like a utopia: the glamour, the ability to purchase confidence and performance, giving people the freedom of self-expression. However, many of us are masked from the dystopia that drives this industry. (Yasin 2017, 576–577)

The dystopia Yasin refers to directly concerns the unethical disposing of mass-produced, low-cost items that will have irreversible ecological consequences. Fast fashion, in particular, requires that “the retailers have rapidly increasing numbers of stores worldwide ... so that they can reach more and more customers around the globe” (Tokatli 2008, 23). Much like the fashion industry, the K-pop industry is built on pumping out ever-trendier products in a cost-efficient way at a dizzying pace. K-pop’s fierce production rate necessitates quick forgetting, or disposing of idols who have fallen out of public interest.

At times referred to as “Kleenex pop”⁷ to emphasize the industry’s obsession with producing a large volume of performers who have to present something newer and better every time they appear in public (S.-Y. Kim 2018, 9), many K-pop acts, and their costumes and props, are used once and tossed away. The extremely short lifespan of K-pop performers, usually lasting five years or so from their late teens to early twenties, is often attributed to the high pressures of the industry cultivating audiences’ insatiable appetites for newer and younger idols. For the idols, this naturally creates an ongoing threat to their own existence,

requiring them to continually reinvent themselves. One dominant way K-pop performers have resisted their fungibility is by outliving their former selves, using constant chimeric changes in their appearance to produce infinite variants. The pursuit of newness has propelled the overproduction of easily disposable selves, and with that came the proliferation of sartorially variant selves.

This practice of voracious production and consumption, in an ironic way, has come to be identified with showcasing South Korea's prosperity that emerged out of the debris of the Korea War (1950–1953). Similar to how “mass consumer markets that delivered mass-produced goods to a wide swath of Americans seemed the best route to prosperity” (Cohen 2004, 292), in the post-World War II United States, the South Korean government touted the idea of consumerist excess as the sign of the country's affluence and found it a highly attractive focal point for enhancing its soft power. But this impetus to look forward by producing and consuming at a maddening speed left behind a wasteland overshadowed by the dark trails of those who could not cope with the side effects of ruthless developmentalism.

Instead of leaving the discussion with this dead-end pessimism, this article aims to posit the K-pop industry not just as a compliant player in the fast fashion practices but also as a self-referential critic capable of turning an analytical eye toward itself. Although moments of critical self-reflection are rare in the profit-driven K-pop industry, they nevertheless offer glimpses of a new horizon for understanding K-pop's potential to showcase a better version of the world. K-pop's double entendre as both a seminal player in and a critic of the fashion industry is investigated by comparing two highly influential music videos—G-Dragon's “Crooked” (2013) and BTS's “Spring Day” (2017)—that allegorically comment on the contemporary fashion practices of quick accumulation and disposal. Arguably the most successful artists in the genre's history, both G-Dragon and the seven-member BTS exert huge influence on youth culture not just in Asia but far beyond. The article will touch upon broader calamities generated by environmental crisis and highlight the struggles of millennials around the globe who are subject to the neoliberal ethos of ruthless self-promotion, often in the form of self-fashioning practices. As Francesca Granata proposes to “view fashion, in its mainstream variety, on a continuum with a number of technologies of the self at work in neoliberal societies” (Granata 2017, 2), this article posits fashion as a significant sartorial and social practice of calibrating an individual's role within a broader context of ecocriticism.

G-Dragon's “Crooked” as a Changing Room

Wildly disheveled “Warhol-white” hair obstructs the piercing gaze of a slender youth walking straight toward the camera in the narrow back streets of East London (Caramanica 2013). Wearing tattered jeans and a



Figure 2

K-pop boyband BIGBANG's leader G-Dragon performs a troubled yet fashionable youth in East London in his 2013 music video "Crooked."
Source: YouTube.

casual Union Jack T-shirt, he sports ample tattoos on his pallid arms and neck. Before we can even register the intricate shapes of the tattoos, however, he is suddenly seen wearing a dapper powder-blue suit that coordinates sensibly with a beige tie featuring brown diamond patterns. When he runs furiously toward the camera, he is shown wearing two or three more casual T-shirts of various colors and textures in a rapid montage sequence. The scene cuts into an underground tunnel where we find him in an exaggerated, roosterlike blond mohawk while masterfully coordinating tight-fitting tattered denim shorts with an oversized coat made of black, white, and brown shaggy fur patches (Figure 2). Then the music video moves on to quite a different stylistic statement, as thick-rimmed glasses and a jewel-crusted concho bolo tie on a burgundy dress shirt demarcate his willowy silhouette. But the fast-evolving fashion bonanza does not stop there: beige and black leopard-patterned sweater, shiny black vinyl hooded jacket, royal blue and yellow-patterned silk underwear, sleeveless white cotton shirt coordinated with a gold bracelet and a snapback, amply sprayed pompadour hair to contrast with a red round-neck T-shirt and velvet slacks of the same color.

The chimeric fashionista featured in this optical marathon is G-Dragon, the leader of the luminary K-pop boyband BIGBANG, who also occasionally releases albums as a solo singer. "Crooked"⁸ was the most frequently downloaded song of his third solo album, *Coup d'Etat* (2013), and its music video was also a considerable success⁹ owing

mostly to the glittering transformation enabled by G-Dragon's sensible mixing of haute couture (Versace underwear, Vivien Westwood suits, Saint Laurent jacket, and Rick Owens sneakers) with street fashion. Jumbling the outlandish aesthetics of kitsch, rock, and punk that fit the shooting location, the music video was a condensed fashion show where music seemed to be a mere accompaniment to the overwhelming sartorial display, leaving the clothes to be the true heroes. Also central to the music video's success was G-Dragon's status as a famed dandy, which in itself became the pleasure point for spectators who wondered how many stylistic variants this fashion icon could possibly digest and make his own.

Praised as "effortlessly lissome" by *The New York Times* (Caramanica 2013), G-Dragon became the darling of the fashion world with the soaring popularity of BIGBANG, whose music videos never failed to fulfill new fashion challenges: in the video for their signature song "Fantastic Baby" (2012), the group's five members sported a motley combination of futuristic outfits (metal pectorals with ample chains, a Russian Tsar's crimson frock, leather straps reminiscent of S&M practices, fancy colored bomber jackets, and long hair extensions in hot pink, bright green, and blue); in another hit song, "Bae Bae" (2015), BIGBANG experimented with a bold mix of iconic Western masculine styles (matador jacket, purple waist jacket with cane, gaucho hat and leather vest) with *hanbok*, the traditional Korean dress. As the band's leader, G-Dragon has been known to advise his bandmates about sartorial choices since their debut in 2006, and his fans pay close attention not only to his onstage and screen costumes but also to his everyday fashion practices.

There are many instances of G-Dragon influencing sales of fashion items. When a picture of G-Dragon sporting a limited edition of MCM's backpack in 2011 surfaced in online communities, the company received overwhelming inquiries about the product and the item was sold out in an hour in Korea, prompting MCM to manufacture more of its "special edition"; in 2010, when G-Dragon was frequently spotted wearing Chrome Hearts accessories, the brand's kz bracelet was completely sold out in South Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan, so that buyers had to order it at Chrome Hearts' headquarters in New York City and wait three months to receive their merchandise. His influence on consumers was such that in 2012 Givenchy sponsored BIGBANG's Alive Galaxy Tour (2012–2013). In 2015, he attended Chanel's F/W haute couture show as the only Asian invitee. Since then, he's been spotted annually in the front rows of Chanel, Saint Laurent, and Thom Browne runway shows.

With a high fashion profile defining G-Dragon's public image, it becomes difficult to distinguish his music video costumes from his personal fashion choices. As is the case for many K-pop idols, G-Dragon's costumes and fashion constitute a fluid continuum, and in this respect

Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon's notion of "clothing as biography"¹⁰ holistically captures G-Dragon's oscillation between performing stage persona and offstage personality. Clothing becomes a way of fashioning his life trajectory, becoming a major component in his biography. The rapid clothing changes in the music video of "Crooked" also reflect the real-life necessity for the star to reinvent himself constantly in the competitive world of K-pop, where no one can permanently occupy the top position unless they can withstand the pressure to showcase newer and trendier versions of themselves. The opening lyrics of the song ("nothing is permanent") precisely reiterate such an ethos of temporality and disposability. As a metonymy of South Korea's neoliberal economy, the K-pop world is built on disposing of unfashionable selves and products in order to keep up with the constant demands of consumers. The music video of "Crooked" appears as a visual parable, capturing the consummate ideals of self-promotion and reinvention via fashion consumption.

Curiously, however, a closer reading of the music video reveals the presence of a critical intervention into its ethos. After G-Dragon has gone through an exhaustive demonstration of 21 costumes in various East London locations, the final sequence of the music video features him mindlessly headbanging and bouncing off the floor in a seedy nightclub. The video ends with him collapsing on to the floor as if he has lost all his strength and consciousness. His limp body unapologetically illustrates the inevitable depletion after excessive consumption. By turning its critical acumen on to itself, the music video becomes a parody of the precarious world of fashion—the very practice upon which the video has been built.

Such self-referential mockery was foreshadowed in another hit song released a year prior to "Crooked." As the title illustrates, "One of a Kind" (2012) builds on the myth of an individual upholding the neoliberal virtues of self-cultivation and self-sufficiency. In G-Dragon's video for "One of a Kind," once again the theme is seen mostly through fashion transformation. Conspicuous costume changes, although not as rapid as in "Crooked," mark the idiosyncrasy of G-Dragon's stardom, highlighting the irreplaceability of his iconic status. But ironically, the star's irreplaceability is predicated on the disposability of his garments that function "like a skin" (Metzger 2014, 14), as an extension of his identity. Rather than turning a blind eye to this conundrum of constructing a unique identity by virtue of discarding multiple identitarian markers, the music video of "One of a Kind" openly wrestles with it.

The first half of the music video establishes G-Dragon as a cocky and fashionable troublemaker, seen in a police lineup and directing a group of bare-legged female dancers while featuring an abundance of coveted fashion items (Yoji Yamamoto hat, and layers of accessories by Chrome Hearts, which also manufactured a skateboard for the music video). In contrast, the second half cuts into a sequence where he



Figure 3

In the 2012 music video "One of a Kind," G-Dragon appears as a serious high-fashion snob in a sleek dressing room resembling a luxury brand flagship store. Source: YouTube.

appears as a serious high-fashion snob. Seated with crossed legs in a sleek dressing room resembling an impeccable luxury brand flagship store, he shows off a high-strung attitude to a fashion model-like assistant in her small black dress. As she shows him a series of fashion items, G-Dragon nonchalantly endorses them as he talks on the phone (Figure 3). In the next scene, G-Dragon is dressed up in a black tennis outfit by Chanel (even the tennis racket and ball demonstrate the famed logo) as he smashes one by one the glass display cases where desirable garments, all of which were previously featured in his other music videos, are prominently on display. As he destroys his past sartorial profile with a Chanel tennis ball, the lyrics "imitate me" repeatedly accentuate the irony of this act. For fashion brands, G-Dragon's power in any ad campaign depends on the number of consumers who will imitate his style. Nonetheless, this particular scene plays a tongue-in-cheek trick of obfuscating the object of destruction. What precisely should consumers imitate? The desire for the Chanel logo on G-Dragon's body? Or his act of destroying coveted fashion items, prominently displayed and worshiped in glossy glass cases?

This act of self-destruction, or to be more precise the destruction of his past fashion profile on which his famed career is built, is strongly reminiscent of G-Dragon's collapse at the end of "Crooked." They both reveal the inevitable destruction that lies on the other side of pleasure-seeking consumerist culture, which an individual could either succumb to in passive silence or critically engage with. But is G-Dragon's

destructive gesture a critical engagement with the powerhouses of consumption or just a pale simulation that sardonically celebrates nothing but irony itself? Either way, the tension between corporate brands and individuals' response to them punctuates the ending of both music videos. The nihilistic attitude of youth that permeates G-Dragon's performance in "Crooked" and "One of a Kind" raises further questions. What lies beyond the shattered glass, this graveyard for outdated fashion items dismissed by the capricious whims of consumers? Likewise, where do exhausted stars fall when their charm runs out?

BTS's "Spring Day" and the Parables of Revival

The train is nowhere to be seen, but the faint sound of a chugging steam engine is to be heard when an innocent-eyed young man gently presses his ear on to the track. As he closes his eyes to hear the encroaching locomotive, the viewers are also invited to hear the tranquility that defines the scene. The world is enveloped in snow, so blindingly white as to blur the boundary between the sky and the earth. Like an island frozen in time, the small train station looks deserted in an ethereal and speechless oblivion.

In sharp contrast to most K-pop music videos, characterized by fast-paced jump cuts that induce spectators into a phenomenological maze, BTS's music video for their 2017 hit song "Spring Day"¹¹ is built on quite a different cadence. It frequently uses slow motion and zooms in for close-ups to reflect upon the events rather than focusing on the events themselves. Unlike the fast fashion consumption parade in "Crooked," "Spring Day" unfolds in a meditative tempo, allowing the visual presentation to illustrate the idea of introspective slowness and temporal suspension.

"Best described as the voice of millennial reality," BTS has rapidly risen to global fame with their socially conscious narratives that speak to the dreams and frustrations of the young generation (Herman 2017). Since their debut in 2013, without sentimental embellishment, the band has been tackling significant issues such as depression, suicide, drugs, economic inequality, and bleak visions of an uncertain future. Their raw honesty resonates deeply with their own generation as well as with struggling others from various walks of life. This trait is, according to the vast majority of K-pop critics, what sets BTS apart from other popular K-pop bands, whose music videos have been mostly built around consumptive pleasure (Hong 2017; Jang 2017).

The music video "Spring Day" slowly unfurls with the images of each member as a lonely youth attempting to find connections to the world. As they eventually find their way to one another, the music video ends with a vast open field at the seasonal border of winter and spring, glowing warmly while yielding itself to the revival of nature. As the seven members of BTS look up to the naked tree that survived the

winter snow, the sky blazes with a breathtaking sunset that exudes senses of healing and rebirth.

Many fans and critics have noted that this highly acclaimed music video¹² presented a haunting allegory of the MV *Sewol* disaster on April 16, 2014, when 306 passengers, among them 246 high school students, lost their lives as the ferry sank deep into the ocean off the southwest coast of the Korean Peninsula. Multiple factors caused this calamity, including: careless navigation by the captain and his crew; the company's greed and lack of safety measures that resulted in overloaded cargo; and the lack of immediate rescue response by the government, epitomized by the fact that then South Korean President Park Geun-hye could not be accounted for during more than seven hours after the ferry started to capsize. The catastrophic event—especially in terms of how the older generation failed so many young lives—left deep wounds in the minds of Koreans, painfully haunting the collective psyche to this day.

Many elements in the music video qualify the hypothesis that it is indeed a significant commentary on the sinking of the *Sewol* ferry. The lyrics of “Spring Day” (“I miss you, miss you even more now that I say it/Even as I stare at your photo, I miss you ... how much waiting, how many sleepless nights must pass before we meet again”) seem to long for a friend who has crossed the river of no return. The music video also features a rundown roadside motel with a bright aqua neon sign prominently displaying “Omelas”—a direct reference to Ursula LeGuin’s 1973 story, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.” Omelas is an egalitarian city with joyful inhabitants, but their happiness is based on a condition that one single child be kept in perpetual filth, darkness, and misery. The sacrifice of a single youth in the story becomes the prerequisite for the happiness of the majority, and those who realize the truth end up leaving the seemingly utopian city. South Korea’s economic miracle and prosperity, the music video seems to argue, is built on the misery of its youth, who cannot be rescued by their parents’ generation.

While most analyses of the music video have focused on these allegorical dimensions through lyrics, my goal is to illustrate how clothing in the music video serves as the central medium to make a broader commentary on social ailments as incarnated in the *Sewol* sinking incident. In particular, clothing and other wearable items here seem to exceed the status of costumes and props to attain the power of a live persona through reusing and recycling, ultimately creating the flow from death to rebirth.

The central scene to illustrate this point involves a moment when one of the BTS members, Jimin, sits alone on the sandy shore gazing at the heaving waves. He spots a pair of white sneakers washed up onshore and carefully holds them in his hands as if they are delicate live objects worthy of a tender caress (Figure 4). We see him returning the gaze of the camera when he looks up from the sneakers. These ordinary-looking



Figure 4

BTS member Jimin picks up a pair of white sneakers washed up onshore in BTS's 2017 music video "Spring Day." The sneakers here can be seen as the return of the deceased youths who lost their lives in the 2014 *Sewol* ferry sinking incident. Source: YouTube.

sneakers without a fancy logo would not have made it on to the list of extravagant sartorial props in G-Dragon's "Crooked," but here they gain a second and third life by becoming a representation of a living body that once wore them. But to whom did they belong?

The image of the sea on a chilly day does not fail to recall the heart-breaking news clips of personal belongings of the *Sewol* ferry passengers washed up on the shores. As a reminder of the all-too-short lives of their owners, they demand extended mourning in a society that is conditioned to forget and move on without ever looking back. A few minutes later, we see Jimin in a coin laundromat, where he pensively sits on top of a washing machine. Next to him are neatly arranged sneakers, keeping Jimin company (Figure 5). Besides the sneakers standing in as animated extensions of their wearers, the laundromat opens up into a significant spatial setting to uncover the music video's deeper ideological dimension. A place mostly frequented by youths who cannot afford washing machines, the laundromat primarily illustrates the precarious existence of the disenfranchised, but at the same time it is a place where their cheap clothes gain another day of usage. In "Spring Day," the cyclical movement of the machines merges with the recycling of the clothes and other wearable items, returned from the sea of death as material synecdoche of their deceased owners, establishing a reflective overlay between the reuse of material objects and the revival of the expired. One Korean blogger significantly noted that the washing machine seems to adopt the first-person perspective by looking back at one of the BTS members, Jin, who is returning the camera's gaze (Talkbox 2017). I would like to take this view further and claim that the animated perspective belongs to the clothes in the dryer, returning the gaze at humans as transferers of their corporeal identity.



Figure 5

Jimin is featured in a coin laundromat, where he pensively sits next to the salvaged sneakers. Source: YouTube.

The aura of liveness emanating from inanimate objects is further developed in other scenes in the music video. For instance, we find a BTS member Jungkook in front of a rusty metal structure abandoned on the dunes. The residue of teal paint on the junky object, all eaten up by rust and wind, barely reveals that it was a flying carousel once upon a time. Upon a closer look, the carousel shows the words “You never walk alone” fading on its structure. This, of course, is a double allusion, directly referencing BTS’s album title in which “Spring Day” was released and the song “You Will Never Walk Alone” in Rogers and Hammerstein’s 1945 musical *Carousel*.¹³ Rogers and Hammerstein’s song in the Broadway musical opens up a moment for the deceased Billy Bigelow to return to the world of the living to redeem himself by lifting up the spirit of his surviving family; likewise, the carousel scene in BTS’s music video literally brings back the phantom-like BTS bandmates to Jungkook who first stands alone in front of the carousel but ends up joining his friends in their playful pursuit of one another. This scene was shot by a long exposure camera, which creates a drag effect, creating ethereal traces out of bodily motion (Figure 6). The intertextual dialogue between the music video and the Broadway musical potentially conjures up the ghostly image of the *Sewol* ferry when it was salvaged and brought to the port nearly three years after its sinking (note that the 1945 Broadway musical was also set in the coastal village in Maine). The former passenger ferry, covered with rust and deterioration, had been transformed into a ghastly vision, barely retaining any traces of the lives it once carried. The future of the salvaged ferry has not been decided yet, but it will certainly be a powerful memorial to the events that transpired. When these waste materials are repurposed, they will gain a formidable second life, and the carousel in “Spring Day” hints at



Figure 6

A member of BTS Jungkook is surrounded by ghostly band members who run around the carousel, which directly hints at the return of the dead in Rogers and Hammerstein's 1945 Broadway musical *Carousel*. Source: YouTube.

the animated power of the salvaged objects as well as the powerful impact the deceased can create in the world of the living.

The music video's most striking commentary on the sartorial landscape appears immediately following the laundromat sequence. The group's rapper, Suga, sits on a heap of clothing piled up to appear like an enormous mountain. It would easily surpass the size of Cuban-born artists Alain Guerra and Neraldo de la Paz's installations made exclusively of recycled clothing. As the camera zooms out from Suga to showcase other BTS members sitting nearby, it captures the pile, so variegated in terms of color and patterns that it becomes nearly impossible for spectators to locate the band members (Figure 7). "Don't know if you changed, or if I changed. We both changed, like all of us do." In a husky low voice, he raps about the passage of time, which inevitably brings changes. Strangely overlapping with the material evidence of such passage, Suga is talking not only about the changing nature of friendship but also about how the flow of time creates a material graveyard through accumulation. In this regard Suga's performance, which simulates the burial of human bodies in material abundance, strongly evokes what Rob Nixon (2011, 152) has referred to as "developmental refugees," those who seek shelter from the endless cycle of material production, consumption, and accumulation. The ending of this scenario is a devastating wasteland, the music video seems to argue, that will swallow us with its endless greed.



Figure 7

The music video's most pointed criticism of fast fashion consumption comes in the form of a mountainous pile of clothing—a material graveyard created by endless accumulation and disposal. Source: YouTube.

Nonetheless, the music video's power lies in its ability to present visions of a better world beyond the desolation. The ferry sinking that has been strongly alluded to throughout the video dissolves in self-purification that allows for the continuation of vitality. As all seven boys eventually find their way to be reunited, they walk out into a wide-open field where they find a tree standing all alone. As the boys stop to look up at the bare tree, Jimin turns his gaze from a pair of sneakers held in his hands to the leafless branches. The final scene of the music video shows the sneakers hanging on a branch against the dusky sky (Figure 8). This central prop seemed to have found its final resting place, but in lieu of ending its life cycle, it now becomes an integral part of the life-regenerating organism that will live again with the arrival of spring. Just like the rusty carousel that has been repurposed, the sneakers transform from easily disposable fast fashion items into an animated extension of their deceased owner. By assuming the likeness of flowers or fruits that the tree will come to bear, the shoes become fully incorporated into the cycle of life.

In an interview conducted shortly after the release of the album *You Never Walk Alone*, the group's leader, RM, made a significant comment that underlines the philosophical orientation of their album: "It will be great to please listeners with our music, but if we can present a great worldview, that would be even better" (Son 2017). Much of BTS's worldview has been mediated through sartorial symbols that powerfully speak of the ailments of our times, such as having to face the gloomy consequences of ruthless development and ensuing environmental disaster. If G-Dragon's "Crooked" was built on the linear forward movement of a performer with endless outfits as if he walked in a runway show, "Spring Day" circles around the central images of deserted space and objects after they have reached the end of their life cycle. Masterfully



Figure 8

The sneakers hanging on a branch became an integral part of the life-regenerating tree that will live again with the arrival of spring. Source: YouTube.

intertwined with the circular notion of time and seasonal changes, the recycling of objects has intimate associations with biological rebirth.

Beyond the Wasteland

The sartorial life of millennials might be characterized by fast fashion consumption resulting in a rapid accumulation of polyester, viscose, patent leather, rayon, and acrylic. But despite this seeming abundance, they also have to cope with the indelible scars of economic precarity, spiritual vacuousness, and irreversible environmental crisis. The world of K-pop is precisely built on this fast-track economy, but as a representative genre for millennials it has also shown reflective moments to think about the world as a wasteland and a world beyond the wasteland.

BTS's social commentary on the consequences of fast consumption had several precursors in K-pop. Boyband Super Junior in 2014 released twin songs, "This is Love" and "Evanescence," shot in the same location, featuring a large, sleek urban penthouse with a grand piano and cozy lounge chairs. The only difference between the two music videos was that the set was completely trashed in the latter song, showing how the polished space of material wealth can degenerate into wasteland in a split second. The music video for BIGBANG's 2015 hit song "Loser" featured an even more bleak vision of the wasteland as its member Taeyang finds his habitat in an L.A. junkyard where he makes a self-destructive, perhaps suicidal, fall from the roof (Figure 9).

It is easy to dismiss these as isolated episodes in a series of stylistic transformations necessary to sustain the success of K-pop stars. But the material props, which seemingly appear as superficial surface items,



Figure 9

The music video for BIGBANG's 2015 hit song "Loser" featured spiritually wasted Taeyang living in a junkyard. Source: YouTube.

speak in powerful voices, alerting us to the precarity of living in this Anthropocene world. "Precarity once seemed the fate of the less fortunate. Now it seems that all our lives are precarious," argues Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015, 2), and we are in it together. We all wear clothes, and we are all influenced by our fashion heroes.

If "Crooked" best illustrated the conventional wisdom of projecting K-pop as a fashion cradle, then "Spring Day" deviated from this notion to crack open new spaces for reflecting upon the deep consequences of material accumulation and the easy disposability of goods. Nonetheless, the irony persists: despite the strong ecological message and symbiotic relations between the human and the material that marked the ideological cornerstones of their music video, BTS with global visibility is now a key player in the fast fashion industry. Whether they like it or not, when the band appeared to receive an award given to the "Top Social Artist" at the 2017 Billboard Music Awards in Las Vegas, RM wore a Havana shirt, which quickly became a sought-after item in retail clothing stores (Nam 2018). In the face of such powerful celebrity-driven fast fashion sales patterns, it might feel pointless to ask how we build sustainable consumption practices out of excess. To ask once again, how do we make beauty out of waste?

Notes

1. Girls' Generation, "Gee," June 8, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7mPqycQ0tQ>.
2. According to South Korean media reports, the sales of colored jeans skyrocketed due to the popularity of "Gee." In a South Korean online store, G-Market, sales climbed 50% in the month of February, shortly after the music video was released. Hyeon-jin Kim, "The More Colorful, the More Special," Chosun.com, March 25, 2009, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/03/24/2009032402018.html.
In another online store, Auction, the sales of colored skinny jeans rose to 2000 pairs in the same month. Jeong-hee Cha, "Girl Groups Rock," *Fashion Channel*, January 1, 2010, <http://www.fashionchannel.co.kr/main/news.php?table=papernews&query=view&uid=3715>.
3. In today's youth consumption, the distinction between high and low fashion becomes meaningless. This is evidenced by a frequent collaboration between haute couture designers and SPA (specialty retailer or private label apparel) brands. According to a 2015 article, "Consumers in their 20s have consumed brands since their birth. They consume rationally and practically. This consumption pattern naturally fosters artistry. We dubbed this 'Youth Luxury' style and we predict it will lead the consumption market in 2015." Victoria Kim, "SPA Brands and Youth's Luxury Lifestyle," *The Korea Times*, March 25, 2015, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/06/631_175854.html.
4. <https://www.kpopstarz.com/tags/get-that-k-pop-look>.
5. According to Soo Hyun Jang (2012, 99), K-pop's influence "overspilled into the lifestyles and fashions of Chinese fans. Teenagers styled themselves after Korean singers, imitating their clothing styles, wearing the same jewelry and dyeing their hair yellow, which became a social phenomenon extensively by the media." "The Korean Wave and Its Implications for the Korea–China Relationship."
6. According to an infographic produced by the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange in 2016–2017, fashion and beauty products (41%) were second only to food (47.1%) on the list of most popular Korean cultural products overseas. http://kofice.or.kr/b20industry/b20_industry_01_view.asp?seq=295&page=1&find=&search.
7. The term "Kleenex pop" takes its inspiration from Shannon Jackson's article, "Kleenex Citizens and the Performance of Undisposability," in *Performance, Politics, and Activism*, edited by Peter Lichenfels and John Rouse, 237–252. London: Palgrave Macmillan (2013). Jackson uses "Kleenex citizens" in reference to the cheap and disposable workforce in the neoliberal marketplace.

8. G-Dragon, “Crooked,” September 6, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKhsHGfrFmY>.
9. As of September 22, 2018, the music video had accumulated 145 million views.
10. In their study of superhero costumes, Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon argue that Superman’s “clothes in which he drapes his body is an extension of ... his biography” (Brownie and Graydon 2015, 18).
11. BTS, “Spring Day,” February 12, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEeFrLSkMm8>.
12. The music video was given the “Best Music Video Award” at the 2017 Melon Music Awards.
13. The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewer for pointing out the connection between BTS’s music video and the 1945 musical *Carousel*.

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