

Right to the City: *The Metropolis and Gangnam Style*

Julie CHOI

Abstract

Psy's Gangnam Style was the first YouTube video ever to reach one and then two billion hits. This paper examines how and why it succeeded in speaking to and for so many in its time. Psy's Gangnam Style is best understood as a multi-media, digital representation of the metropolitan experience, a cityscape. If traditional pastoral represents a yearning to flee to the country to escape the alienation of the city, Psy's song and dance is an invitation to recreate an alternative pastoral in the city. Daily life is transposed into leisure as festivity becomes possible in city spaces planned and developed for entirely different purposes. In the tradition of the modernist flâneur, Psy narrates the city from the perspective of the scavenger or ragpicker making his way through the glorious detritus of contemporary commodity culture. Carnival, mass ornament, flâneur—these are the tropes I borrow from classical cultural studies to examine Gangnam Style's different facets of engagement with urban issues. In the conclusion, I lean on Jacques Rancière on the distribution of the sensible to argue that it is ultimately through the expansion of the aesthetic through play that Gangnam Style seeks to recuperate the right to the city.

Keywords: Psy, *Gangnam Style*, carnival, flâneur, mass ornament, right to the city

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Introduction

First uploaded on July 15, 2012, Psy's *Gangnam Style* was the first YouTube video ever to reach one and then two billion hits.¹ Gangnam, as most everyone in the world now knows, is the glitzy area south of the Han River in Seoul. Born into a family in Gangnam and educated in America, Park Jaesang (a.k.a. Psy, a self-abbreviation for Psycho) grew up with all the privileges of the newly moneyed class in South Korea. The success of the video that made it a truly global phenomenon invites us to consider why it may have become the most widely successful song and dance hit of its moment. The parody videos that rapidly followed suit revealed that re-enacting its mood and moves generated a particular happiness with seemingly universal appeal.² The visual content of the video and the lyrics themselves were decidedly indifferent. The famous horse dance was described by Psy himself as "cheesy."³ But in its digital moment, Psy had created indifferent content that touched a universal chord. This paper seeks to examine how and why such a mediocre product succeeded in speaking to and for so many in its time.

Psy's *Gangnam Style* is best understood as a multi-media, digital representation of the metropolitan experience, a cityscape. The idealized landscape of pastoral or sublime natural setting which long held a prestigious place in artistic representation has been replaced by the preeminence of the metropolitan experience at the core of modern life

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1. After three days, the video was getting a million hits per day, reaching nine million hits per day two months after its release. It broke the YouTube counter for keeping track and forced the company to devise a new way to count how many times a video was viewed. To date (September 2018), the video has over three billion hits.
 2. Flash mobs of tens of thousands gathered in prominent public places such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris and the Piazza del Popolo in Rome, and 2013 was rung in at New York's Times Square with Psy and M. C. Hammer singing and horse dancing together. Over a million viewers participated through video streaming, and the masses on site and online joined to form one giant mass ornament. As the 2012 season premiere *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) skit demonstrated, for some reason the horse dance made people crazily happy.
 3. Psy described the ethos of *Gangnam Style* to Britney Spears as "dress classy, dance cheesy" at the Ellen DeGeneres Show.

demanding new parameters of representation (Gelley 1993). Disrobing the mystique of privileged spaces, Psy's *Gangnam Style* engages in a calculated contestation of Gangnam spaces, such as riversides, glass towers, stables—the lifestyle symbolizing the horse-riding set. Psy's horse dance is a tasteless parody of such “class.” Psy explodes the ideal of aristocratic privilege and reveals that pastoral is neither an achievable dream nor a desirable destination. If traditional pastoral represents a yearning to flee to the country to escape the alienation of the city, Psy's song and dance is an invitation to recreate an alternative pastoral in the city. Psy is not content merely to offer a memorial to the spectacle of the city. His work is both a representation and an obfuscation, a participation and an intervention, a celebration and a defamation of the experience of the city, not as theme but as the paradigmatic condition of modern existence, a text that defies any easy articulation. Different city locations are re-interpreted as spaces for play and use value, while productive time is suspended by the rambunctious energies of the horse dance imitated and enjoyed “en masse” in cities across the globe.

In *The Right to the City*,⁴ Lefebvre (1996) reflects on how the domination of space as private property, upheld by the state and other forms of class and social power, contributes to the permanent loss of the absolute qualities of place as locus or oeuvre when exchange value comes to override any potential use value. The psychedelic spectacle that denominates itself “Gangnam Style” offers up a rich and colorful array of metropolitan experience that starkly distinguishes itself from the monotony of the rational workday. Psy presents himself as a party crasher who appropriates the city and uses its spaces without consideration for the exchange values they represent. Daily life is transposed into leisure as festivity becomes possible in city spaces planned and developed for entirely different purposes. The perfectly synchronized horse dance performed by Psy and the citizens he encounters in his journey across the metropolis provide the core content that appealed to the global masses. In the tradition of the modernist *flâneur*, Psy narrates the city from

4. Lefebvre's manifesto written to mark the centenary anniversary of Marx's *Capital* serves as a guiding light for my reading of *Gangnam Style*.

the perspective of the scavenger or ragpicker making his way through the glorious detritus of contemporary commodity culture.

Carnival, mass ornament, *flâneur*—these are the tropes I borrow from classical cultural studies to examine *Gangnam Style*'s different facets of engagement with urban issues. I begin in section I by setting up my argument within the framework of Bakhtin's (1994) carnivalesque. In section II, I turn to the mechanical system and rigor of the choreographed dance that complicates the energy of carnival aided by Kracauer's (1995) observations on the mass ornament and factory production. Kracauer foresaw that consumption would become the necessary correlate of rationalized production and I seek to show how the mass ornament of the digital era represents not only factory production but consumption itself as the new labor. The cheesiness of the horse dance, however, and Psy's outrageous fashion undermines the logic of rationalized action, introducing the possibility of a knowing self-distancing from the system of exploitation. In section III, I trace in Psy's gestures and antics the dandyism of Benjamin's (1997a; 1997b) *flâneur* who seeks to distance himself from the rationale of capitalist production but is ultimately doomed to become a consumed commodity himself. In the concluding and final section IV, I return to Lefebvre's (1996) Manifesto supplemented by observations made by Rancière (2004; 2009) on the distribution of the sensible to argue that it is ultimately through the expansion of the aesthetic through play that *Gangnam Style* manages to recuperate the right to the city.⁵

Carnival and the World Upside Down

The carnivalesque Gangnam of the hit tune represents itself as a place where folk humor prevails in the form of festive laughter. Bakhtin's (1994) work on the "carnival" in *Rabelais and His World* foregrounds the opposition of the official and the unofficial, folk culture, and institutions of power. The physical materiality of the human body represented through grotesque

5. "His Style is Gangnam, and Viral Too," *New York Times*, October 11, 2012.

exaggeration contests the official order through laughter and celebration of the communal body.⁶ And indeed it is this spirit of the carnival that “does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators” (Bakhtin 1994, 198) that we most readily witness in the spontaneous horse-dancing flash mobs that materialized across the globe in 2012. The grotesque realism of the carnival tradition works through its vulgar, emphatic language and rhythms that function almost as incantation. The phrase, “Oppa’n Gangnam Style,” achieved the status of an obnoxious lingua franca in the months following the song’s release, mouthed by prisoners in the Philippines, brass bands in the United States, and even leftist intellectuals like Noam Chomsky in an unending series of parodies that celebrated the rambunctious energy of the horse dance.

The modern metropolitan subject is trapped in the net of money, space, and time in ways that inevitably feel like exploitation and domination, and Psy’s *Gangnam Style* can be approached in the first instance as a utopian bucking of such limitations. This sentiment is best expressed in the song’s refrain, “Ttwineun nom, Geu wi-e na-neun nom” (뛰는 놈, 그 위에 나는 놈), which translates roughly as “the guy who runs, but above him the guy who flies.” In colloquial Korean, “the guy who flies” signals extreme competence and a willingness to break the rules, connoting both power and pleasure. In contrast, the guy who runs signals the exemplary citizen driven by the proper work ethic in a society that promotes hard work, discipline, and obedience to the rules. The dandy in shorts and tux with the sunglasses that mirror back the world exemplifies the aggressive bravado of one who would be the flying man.

The motif of flying opens the video in the shot of an airplane reflected in what turns out to be Psy’s sunglasses. The little plane is flying an ad banner that reads in inverse, GANGNAM STYLE, which serves as a visual clue: *Gangnam style* backwards, in reverse, upside down. The tacky

6. Bakhtin’s celebration of the carnivalesque has been vulnerable to the criticism that it is perhaps overly utopian, especially since the objects of carnivalesque laughter could as easily be the powerless and marginalized as those in positions of authority and power. For an overview of discussions of the impact of his work on the carnivalesque, see Morris (1994).

advertisement for his own tune in the form of the flying banner captures the many ironies and paradoxes of the ultimate consumer who proclaims his power to go against the flow of time and money in an urban setting strictly driven by the logic of capital. As the camera draws back from the close-up of the image of the plane in the sunglasses, we are treated to the familiar physique of Psy, a plump, short Asian man in perfect dress, lying on the beach. A longer take reveals that his bottom half does not match the top. Shorts and rubber slippers complete the outfit of the man soaking in the rays in a sandpit. Instead of the luxurious beachfront property in a world where “Nature” has become the choicest real estate, the camera pans out onto a children’s playground in an apartment complex of ordinary and identical middle-income housing units. The first-person narrator masquerading under the self-bestowed title *Oppa* is not the Gangnam guy in any sense except the parodic.

The playground sequence featuring an uncanny miniature Psy-child performing the horse dance in the sandbox abruptly gives way to the stables of an exclusive private riding club on the outskirts of Seoul. Suited up in a tuxedo and bowtie, Psy defiantly strides past stalls of thoroughbreds but never mounts a real horse. Rather, he engages in the now famous horse dance on an imaginary steed amidst an anonymous crowd. The ensuing video is a collage of different urban locations where the character Psy, dressed in different variations of outrageous formal attire deconstructed, flaunts his ability to master the varying urban terrain through song and dance. Psy encounters his “Sexy Lady” on the subway, and their romping takes place in the glimmering caverns of an underground station. The encore-worthy performance of the famous reality television star, Yoo Jae-suk, in a neon yellow suit emerging from a scarlet sportscar in the parking garage to rise to the challenge of a dance-out with Psy in blue, serves as candied icing on a visual spectacle that celebrates the riotous and euphoric overthrow of proper boundaries of place and time.

The garish use of color in the video flouts the colorlessness of the city. In his highly regarded work on the urban experience, Harvey (1989) invokes Georg Simmel’s thesis on the colorlessness of money that reduces every value into the same abstract system to illustrate the reduction of both time and

space into abstract units in modern life.⁷ Profitable production and exchange over space made it possible to tighten the chronological net around daily life, and as time became the measure of capitalist value and productivity, space too “came to be represented, like time and value, as abstract, objective, homogeneous, and universal in its qualities.” Space and time were thus both reduced into freely alienable parcels that could be bought and sold on the marketplace. As Harvey notes, efforts to overcome the repressive constraints of “intersecting spatial, chronological, and monetary nets,” almost always attempt to portray “different modes of operation in time and space from those that have increasingly come to dominate all aspects of social life” (Harvey 1989, 180).⁸ By adopting the figure of the garish dandy, Psy presents himself as heroic party crasher. The co-opting of upper-class codes such as horse-riding and formal attire mark a suspension of hierarchical precedence, much like in carnival time celebrated by Bakhtin. By breaking dress codes, Psy generates distinction amidst the sameness that goes by the name of taste. Liberation from ordinary norms of etiquette and decency create the space for festive laughter.

In one of the more tasteless scenes of the video, Psy’s signature bathroom humor prevails with *Oppa* in formal dinner jacket seated on a toilet, pants down, defiantly gesticulating that he is the “man who flies.” The obscene gyration of the celebrity comedian Noh Hong-chul in the hotel elevator over the recumbent figure of Psy marks the climax in crassness of a video that so openly revels in the vulgar.⁹ These scenes place

7. See Harvey (1989, 165) for his explanation on how the interconnected abstractions of money, space, and time combine to create interlocking and repressive sources of social regulation that “precludes liberation from the more repressive aspects of class-domination and all of the urban pathology and restless incoherence that goes with it.” Harvey’s insights throughout his work are greatly indebted to the writings of Georg Simmel, in particular, *The Philosophy of Money* (1900).

8. The signature Mondrian grid with the primary color blocks can be read as an intellectual modernist grappling with such a reduction. Psy’s colorful metropolis is an attempt to crash through the grid itself.

9. Both Noh and Yoo are world-famous-stars with global followings, as documented in their respective Wikipedia entries. Korean popular entertainment has gained an impressive foothold in the universe of nonsensical reality-style-entertainment. Noh’s famous pelvic

the defecating, sexual body unequivocally centerstage. Bakhtin reads the celebration of the grotesque body as the triumph of the communal body over the individualized body: “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin 1994, 205). The lowest denominator here is not money but the human body that will eventually be brought down to earth. Sexuality like defecation is celebrated as part and parcel of the human experience, not to be policed and hidden. Psy’s defiance is lubricated by an abundance of self-mockery that informs the spirit of carnival. As Bakhtin emphasizes, carnival laughter is directed not least at the participants themselves, “...it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival” (Bakhtin 1994, 200). Much of Psy’s bravado derives from his clear glee in making a mockery of himself.

Psy as master of self-deflation is both defiant and bathetic. *Oppa*, loosely translatable as big brother, is both an appropriation of power and a ventriloquizing of the enemy. Mark Greif comments that the sublimity of pop relies at least partially in internalizing that which threatens to destroy you, “the drawing of the inhuman into yourself; and also a loss of your own feelings and words and voice to an outer order that has come to possess them” (Greif 2016, 111). We could say of Psy what Greif says about Radio Head, whose “song turns into an alternation, in exactly the same repeated words, between the forces that would defy intrusive power and the intrusive power itself, between hopeful individuals and the tyrant ventriloquized” (Greif 2016, 112). The pathos of the powerless ventriloquist merges with the strident dissonance of he who would defy his dehumanization to create a refrain infinitely translatable across all borders.

thrusting dance is his trademark and is officially known as “*Jeojil*-dance” signifying low-class dancing.

Mass Ornament and the Logic of Consumption

In stark contrast to the breaking down of everyday rules of carnival, the extremely precise and synchronized dance moves of K-pop mark a mechanical sublime that needs to be explored in contradistinction to the world upside down. In his essay, “The Mass Ornament,” Siegfried Kracauer describes the phenomenon of the mass ornament of the early 20th century epitomized by the symmetrical movement of the legs of the “Tiller Girls” as the mirroring of hands in the factory joyously affirming the progress of rationalization.¹⁰ He views in the spectacle of the mass ornament a perfect mirroring of the rational process of production:

Community and personality perish when what is demanded is calculability; it is only as a tiny piece of the mass that the individual can clamber up charts and can service machines without any friction. A system oblivious to differences in form leads on its own to the blurring of national characteristics and to the production of worker masses that can be employed equally well at any point on the globe.—Like the mass ornament, the capitalist production process is an end in itself.¹¹ (Kracauer 1995, 78)

There is no attempt to convey any spiritual content in the mass gymnastics of the “Tiller Girls” whose legs parallel the hands in the factory, reflecting “the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires” (Kracauer 1995, 79). The order and abstraction of movement in the dance rips apart any false sense of organic unity or individuality in the

10. The “Tiller Girls” were highly trained precision dancing troupes who enjoyed great popular success starting at the end of the 19th century. John Tiller of Manchester had the idea of having the girls matched by height and training them to link arms and kick high to create the effect of machine-like precision of the mass ornament. They performed in many locales including the Folies Bergère in Paris and the London Palladium.

11. “The Mass Ornament” is the lead piece in a self-collected edition of his early Weimar works published in 1963. Levin’s introduction provides a fine overview of Kracauer’s career and a good analysis of the importance and brilliance of the early work. Student of Georg Simmel and friend of Walter Benjamin, Kracauer escaped rising anti-semitism and made it to the New World to join friends and former colleagues from the Institute for Social Research including Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.

modern world. The popular appeal of the mass ornament is an undeniable source of its power though it may only be a crass manifestation of an exploitative logic. For Kracauer, intellectuals who privilege more elite forms are not superior to the masses who at least have the virtue of acknowledging the reduction of reason to the bare rationality imposed by the prevailing economic system. Kracauer is interested in such “surface-level expressions” of the culture, which, “by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of things” (Kracauer 1995, 75). Through a close attention to popular culture, he seeks to achieve a more accurate diagnosis of the contemporary condition, without reverting to archaic myths of power such as “the organic connection of nature with something the all too modest temperament takes to be soul or spirit” (Kracauer 1995, 86). Comprehensive and romantic meta-narratives cannot help us understand the broken nature of the modern experience.

If Kracauer found the movement of the “Tiller Girls” to reflect the regulated bodily movements of the factory line, the perfectly synchronized routines of K-Pop choreography can be comprehended as incorporation of the additional compulsion of consumption as the new labor. Writing a century ago, Kracauer already saw consumerism as the enforced result of a system of production that “spews forth” commodities. Consuming, like producing, is subsumed in a rational system whose logic is endless profit without commitment to any value beyond that of exchange. More recently, Jean Baudrillard has brilliantly exposed the character of the “Ego consumans” as the epitome of modern exploitation. Consuming is the new labor and it must be performed in no less rigorous and scientific a manner than the Fordism of yore. Baudrillard comments that the “rationalist mythology of needs and satisfactions is as naive and helpless as traditional medicine when faced with hysterical or psychosomatic symptoms” (Baudrillard 1998, 76). The field of desire itself has become “a ‘function of production’ and, hence, like all material production, not an individual function, but ‘an immediately and totally collective one’” that is imposed as “both a morality (a system of ideological values) and a communication system, a structure of exchange” (Baudrillard 1998, 78). No longer bound by the fiction of fulfilling needs, objects are freed to signify other values such as prestige, indifference, exclusivity. Such is the object’s liberation into the field of

consumption proper. Objects and needs are not bound by any rational logic, but rather float freely in a field of hysterical lack and desire. Desire is imposed by a system of production that properly renders consumption not a matter of choice, but of compulsion, in itself exclusive of enjoyment, “the ‘duty’ of the citizen” who “regards enjoyment as an obligation; he sees himself as an enjoyment and satisfaction business” (Baudrillard 1998, 80).

Having a good time Gangnam-style then, is at least in part to be on top of the business of consumption as prescribed and enforced “pleasure.” Passion and action, discipline and desire fuel the boss, the guy who flies if not the guy who merely runs very fast. The hyper-activity demanded by the new “fun morality” presents itself guilelessly as an opportunity to fulfill one’s potential. The psychotic frenzy of Psy exemplifies the intensity required to succeed in the new competition. If the horse dance seemed to mark liberation from traditional constraints, it simultaneously reveals that Utopia is not so easily achieved. Affluence and consumption do not represent a new freedom from production but rather a more advanced stage in the same process whereby the laborer is forced to consume all the products of his or her own labor. Baudrillard (1998) finds it difficult to imagine consumers generating any sense of solidarity because consumption is atomizing and consumer objects produce distinctions and status stratification.

The mass ornament in the renewed context of digital culture, however, can be read as a manifestation of a newly imagined solidarity of consumers who mobilize their bodies in syncopated order to demonstrate their communal power despite their subjection to the forces of production. One of the most memorable aspects of K-Pop events around the world is audience participation. Girls in Europe and America, but also across Southeast Asia and the Middle East have been entranced by groups like Girls Generation and spent inordinate amounts of time and energy reproducing their fashion and dance moves. Fashion allows a subject to adopt a new and more confident persona without abandoning the security of the general trend.¹²

12. Georg Simmel’s *The Philosophy of Fashion* (1905) provides a strong analytical framework for understanding the new social formations of individual and group identity that are mobilized through fashion. See Simmel (1997).

Euphoria stems from complete mirroring of idols as fans perfectly reproduce the scripted and choreographed routines in the imagined community of the “idol republic.”¹³ However derivative, imitation is experienced as an empowering act of agency in the disciplined performance of a desired identity. K-pop groups speak to the disenfranchised to whom they seem to give voice and a sense of active participation.

Elite audiences of a century ago were baffled by the popular pleasure taken by the crowds in response to the spectacle of the “Tiller Girls,” just as they were taken aback by the horse dance that took the world by storm in 2012. Kracauer (1995) claimed that the mass ornament was superior to anachronistic attempts to sustain an older more noble aesthetics that no longer had any connection to lived reality. Similarly, there is “truth” in a phenomenon like *Gangnam Style* that exceeds any elite theory of cultural value. There is in the gesture of the mass ornament an attempt to express power, pleasure, and control; seeking to speak, not merely make noise. No figure in cultural theory more accurately captures the bathos of such ambition than Walter Benjamin’s (1997a; 1997b) *flâneur*, who begins by seeking to establish his distinction from the crowd but ends up becoming a mere commodity himself. *Oppa*’s translation of *flânerie* is explored in the next section.

Flânerie and Fashion

Benjamin’s (1997a; 1997b) exploration of the paradigmatic modern man, the *flâneur*, is central to his uncompleted Paris Arcades project, a study of 19th-century Paris, which preoccupied him for well over a decade until his death in 1940. In 1938, he published a part of this work as *The Paris of the Second Empire* in Baudelaire, which was to be the middle of three sections of a book on Baudelaire. The middle chapter of this work, “The *Flâneur*,” was re-written

13. See Kim (2011). Kim remarks, “...in the current global convergence, fans do not merely want the interpretive appreciation but, rather, a whole world in which they can immerse themselves and perform and recreate the codes and practices their idols embody” (Kim 2011, 338).

based on Adorno's critical comments and re-published as "Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in 1939.¹⁴ Benjamin recognized in the figure of the *flâneur* the modern Odysseus navigating the seascape of the modern metropolis. He read in the self-positioning of the *flâneur* a self-proclaimed challenge to the masses and mass production, the rigorous efficiency of Taylorism. Although the *flâneur* would eventually succumb to the commodity, it is in his role as collector of trivial pieces—the very essence of the Arcades project—that he can view things freed from the compulsion of being useful:

His leisurely appearance as a personality is his protest against the division of labour which makes people into specialists. It is also his protest against their industriousness. Around 1840 it was briefly fashionable to take turtles to walk in the arcades. The *flâneurs* liked to have the turtles set the pace for them. If they had had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace. But this attitude did not prevail; Taylor, who popularized the watchword 'Down with dawdling!' carried the day. (Benjamin 1997a, 55)

The *flâneur* sets himself apart by his dress and his attitude, and he makes a deliberate point of flaunting his disregard for the time and space constraints of productive labor. The elegant fashion of taking a turtle on a walk is a memorable cameo.

Benjamin (1999) claims that the enjoyment of the spectacle of the crowd worked as a kind of narcotic on the *flâneur*. He quotes Baudelaire in the notes for the Arcades project celebrating the *flâneur* as an incognito prince who is spectator and partaker of the ebb and flow of the metropolitan multitude:

14. Walter Benjamin, *Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (1938) and *The Flâneur* (1939) from *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, both published in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (1997). I will be citing from these two texts published in his lifetime as Benjamin (1997a) and Benjamin (1997b), respectively. I will also quote from the scattered notes published for the first time in full in English as *The Arcades Project* (1999), which covers materials from Volume 5 of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften* gathered under the title *Das Passagen-Werk*, to be quoted parenthetically as Benjamin (1999).

The lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electric energy. We might also liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which with each one of its movements, represents the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. (Baudelaire [1964] as cited in Benjamin [1999, 443])

The image of the “kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness” is particularly powerful and provides a valuable lens through which we can survey Psy’s own representation of his movement through the crowd. Benjamin claims that though Baudelaire was intoxicated by the crowd, he was never blinded by the “horrible social reality” and this “is why in Baudelaire the big city almost never finds expression in the direct presentation of its inhabitants” (Benjamin 1997a, 59), unlike in earlier writers on the city like Shelley (“Hell is a city much like London”). The “unfeeling isolation” of the big city decried by a provincial like Engels in his famous exposition of the alienating experience of the bustle of London was experienced by the *flâneur* as a charged isolation of strangers.¹⁵

One of the most remarkable moments in Benjamin’s remarks on Baudelaire occurs in his reading of “A une passante,” a sonnet from *Les Fleurs du Mal*:

Far from experiencing the crowd as an opposed, antagonistic element, this very crowd brings to the city dweller the figure that fascinates. The delight of the urban poet is love—not at first sight, but at last sight. It is a farewell forever which coincides in the poem with the moment of enchantment. Thus the sonnet supplies the figure of shock, indeed of catastrophe. But the nature of the poet’s emotions has been affected as well. What makes his body

15. Benjamin quotes extensively from Engels’ *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844* (1845) to convey the difference between the experience of the city by a newly arrived outsider and one who is at home in the crowd. The long quote is crowned by the final sentence: “The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest, becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together within a limited space” (Engels as quoted in Benjamin [1997a, 58]).

contract in a tremor—*crispé comme un extravagant*, Baudelaire says—is not the rapture of a man whose every fibre is suffused with eros; it is, rather, like the kind of sexual shock that can beset a lonely man. (Benjamin 1997b, 125)

The last line of the sonnet reads, “O toi que j’eusse aimé, o toi qui le savais” — *Oh you whom I could have loved, oh you who knew it too* (my translation). Though they will never meet, the shock of their momentary encounter is suffused with a fantasized recognition of the kindred spirit. The “Oh, Sexy Lady!” refrain of *Gangnam Style* is the manifestation of this very theme.

The episode on the subway where Psy finally encounters the Sexy Lady is strongly reminiscent of Benjamin’s (1997b) tragi-comic love at last sight account of Baudelaire’s poetic encounter with the woman in the crowd. The *Oppa* persona characterizes his lover as “warm and human in daytime, knowing how to luxuriate over a cup of coffee, but a heart burning with passion at night, the kind of woman who knows how to transform herself”:

낮에는 따사로운 인간적인 여자
 Naje-neun ttasaroun inganjeokin yeoja
 커피 한잔의 여유를 아는 품격 있는 여자
 Keopi hanjan-ui yeoyu-reul aneun pumgyeok inneun yeoja
 밤이 오면 심장이 뜨거워지는 여자
 Bami omyeon simjang-i tteugeowojineun yeoja
 그런 반전 있는 여자
 Geureon banjeon inneun yeoja

Meanwhile, he is the “sana-i, who is as warm and sweet as you in daytime, but can down his coffee in one shot while it’s hot and whose heart explodes when day turns into night”:

나는 사나이
 Naneun sana-i
 낮에는 너만큼 따사로운 그런 사나이
 Naje-neun neomankeum ttasaroun geureon sana-i
 커피 식기도 전에 원샷 때리는 사나이
 Keopi silkgido jeon-e wonsyat ttaeri-neun sana-i

밤이 오면 심장이 터져버리는 사나이
Bami omyeon simjang-i teojeobeori-neun sana-i
그런 사나이
Geureon sana-i

Sana-i connotes the machismo of the manly man. Psy's physique and his antics undercut the sheer effrontery of his boast and he is reminiscent of the figure of that other urban dandy lover, Prufrock, who measures out his life with coffee spoons. Psy's prurient fantasy goes wild in the second verse as he envisages the girl "letting down her hair when it's time, modestly covered but more sexy than those who bare their skin," while he is "the guy who looks reserved but knows when to play, the one who goes crazy when it's time, and whose ideology is more impressive than his muscles":

정숙해 보이지만 놀 땐 노는 여자
Jeongsukae boijiman nol ttaen noneun yeoja
이때다 싶으면 묶었던 머리 푸는 여자
Ittaeda sipeumyeon mukkeotteon meori puneun yeoja
가렸지만 웬만한 노출보다 야한 여자
Garyeotjiman wenmanan nochulboda yahan yeoja
그런 감각적인 여자
Geureon gamgakjeogin yeoja

나는 사나이
Na-neun sana-i
점잖아 보이지만 놀 땐 노는 사나이
Jeomjana boijiman nol ttaen noneun sana-i
때가 되면 완전 미쳐버리는 사나이
Ttaega doemyeon wanjeon michyeobyeorineun sana-i
근육보다 사상이 울퉁불퉁한 사나이
Geunyukboda sasang-i ultungbultunghan sana-i
그런 사나이
Geureon sana-i

The line about his ideology being more muscular than his physique pokes

fun at the exaggerated bravado of “Oppa.” *Oppa* is the Korean for older brother to a younger sister within the family, but is now more often used as the word of choice for men who wish to play the role of protector to their lover. *Oppa* carries many of the connotations of desired masculinity in a society where men are no longer viewed as quite so powerful and able as in more comfortably patriarchal times. “Eh Sexy Lady, the guy who runs, and above him, the guy who flies, baby, baby, I’m someone who’s got a clue (Naneun mwol jom aneun nom 나는 뭘 좀 아는 놈), Oppa’n Gangnam Style.” This is the refrain that brings the song to its close. The Sexy Lady and Psy never actually embrace. They miss each other at last glance as each is lost in the crowd that separates and makes them one again in the electric energy of the carnivalesque communal horse dance. The final group dance takes place in an anonymous empty warehouse-like interior filled with crowds dressed as representing a wide variety of professions, including nurse and taekwondo instructor. At the center are Psy and the Sexy Lady dancing in parallel but not in any direct relation to each other. Like Baudelaire’s sonnet and T. S. Eliot’s *Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock*, this song can only have been written in a big city that produces works that “reveal the stigmata which life in a metropolis inflicts upon love” (Benjamin 1997a, 125).

Benjamin quite correctly predicted that the *flâneur* could not forever keep his distance from the crowd. The *flâneur* himself cannot avoid the fate of being reduced to imitating “both the machines which push the material and the economic boom which pushes the merchandise,” the “feverish pace of material production” (Benjamin 1997a, 53). The crowd becomes a kind of opiate for those condemned to live under these new conditions and as one abandoned in the crowd, the *flâneur* “shares the situation of the commodity. He is not aware of this special situation, but this does not diminish its effect on him and it permeates him blissfully like a narcotic that can compensate him for many humiliations. The intoxication to which the *flâneur* surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers.” Just as the commodity is fetishized and can be imagined as prostituting its soul to the many who are willing to love it and take it home, “Empathy is the nature of the intoxication to which the *flâneur* abandons himself in the crowd” (Benjamin 1997a, 55).

The jerky moves of the horse dance approximate the automatization of production as also suggested by Kracauer (1995) on the mass ornament and the enjoyment of the crowd is mirrored in the mass dance. The promiscuity of the commodity as love object is a quality that the *flâneur* as Psy demonstrates in abundance, quick to break out into the love dance, not only with the Sexy Lady, but also with random men in parking lots and older ladies in tour buses, even cuddling up to the tough guy in the sauna. Quoting from Baudelaire, Benjamin comments: “that which people call love is quite small, quite limited, and quite feeble” compared with “that holy prostitution of the soul which gives itself wholly, poetry and charity, to the unexpected that appears, to the unknown that passes” (Benjamin 1997a, 56). The exuberant promiscuity of the horse dance participates in the prostitution of the soul that bathes in the exhilaration of adoption by the crowd.

Benjamin predicted that the *flâneur*'s final destination would be the department store. He would become himself the ultimate object for sale, fanning the desires of the masses to partake in a mutual pleasure of empathy: “Empathy with the commodity is fundamentally empathy with exchange value itself. The *flâneur* is the virtuoso of this empathy. He takes the concept of marketability itself for a stroll. Just as his final ambit is the department store, his last incarnation is the sandwich-man” (Benjamin 1999, 448). The flying banner advertising his song reflected in Psy's sunglasses is a perfect reincarnation of the ad of the sandwich-man wearing a signboard for a product, unwittingly revealing that he himself is for sale. Can the man for sale, himself a commodity, also be a potential figure of redemption? Despite the indifference of his “message,” his dance and song lay claim to the right to the city by temporarily suspending the everyday coordinates of time and space.

The Right to the City

The familiar transformed into the unfamiliar, the unfamiliar translated back into the everyday. The disjunctive scenes of *Gangnam Style* can be read as a deliberative montage of urban pastoral, a travel to a city re-imagined as inhabitable, partaking in an older ethos of the *oeuvre*, or work of art to be

lived and appreciated, overriding the tyranny of spatial practices that “restrict time to the time of productive work and reduce lived rhythms to rationalist and localized gestures in the division of labour” (Lefebvre 1996, 49). The song and dance allowed audiences across the world to take a break from their uncanny daily routines to transform themselves for the moment into the ludicrous persona of *Oppa*, the man who flies. The ability to participate and to celebrate that participation through uploading of parody videos from all corners of the globe then became part of the *Gangnam Style* phenomenon which is first and foremost one of participation.

Jacques Rancière takes up the topic of Plato’s artisans who cannot take part in the community of citizens, “because they do ‘not have the time’ to devote themselves to anything other than their work.” For Rancière, “le partage du sensible” is the “distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution” (Rancière 2004, 12). In Psy’s *Gangnam Style* we have the promise of the redistribution of space and time and an invitation to all those who “do not have the time” to share in the good life, the free life, by taking charge of what should be common to everyone. If, as Rancière believes, “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (Rancière 2004, 13), *Gangnam Style* is indeed entirely political. Its contents may be distinctively low-brow, mediocre, even cynical, but that is almost beside the point. The indifference to message or ethos is the mark of its democratic appeal. Psy’s indifference to message shares similarities with Flaubert’s “refusal to entrust literature with any message whatsoever” as “evidence of democratic equality” because, “the equality of all subject matter is the negation of any relationship of necessity between a determined form and a determined content.” Just as the novel as genre once brought “indifferent” content to the eyes of all, breaking down the hierarchies of representation and establishing a new community of readers “only by the random circulation of the written word” (Rancière 2004, 14), the internet has established itself as the decisive medium for circulating indifferent digital content to a universal global audience.

For Rancière, egalitarian promise is everything and perhaps the very precondition of aesthetics as politics, not as the fascist theatrical staging of power and mass mobilization, but rather as a renewal in the way space and time are partitioned, as those formerly without voice are allowed to make speech rather than merely noise:

Politics occurs when those who 'have no' time take the time necessary to front up as inhabitants of a common space and demonstrate that their mouths really do emit speech capable of making pronouncements on the common which cannot be reduced to voices signaling pain. This distribution and redistribution of places and identities, this apportioning and reapportioning of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, and of noise and speech constitutes what I call the distribution of the sensible. (Rancière 2009, 24)

Psy invites the masses to take over urban spaces that elude them, where they are not invited, and to make themselves at home in these newly pastoralized "loci." The utopian task at hand is to restore the right to the city, as concrete rights. Lefebvre wished to restore to the working class its right to "inhabit" lost to rules of production, exchange value, and private property:

Among these rights in the making features the 'right to the city' (not the ancient city, but to urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete usage of these moments and places, etc.). (Lefebvre 1996, 179)

Lost to private appropriation and tourism, the city demands its own reaffirmation as "right to urban life" of the masses who must claim the city as *oeuvre*. Only those who inhabit can replace the "Olympians of the new bourgeois aristocracy" who no longer inhabit, but "go from grand hotel to grand hotel, or from castle to castle, commanding a fleet or a country from a yacht. They are everywhere and nowhere" (Lefebvre 1996, 159).

In the tradition of the greatest *flâneurs*, Psy manages to turn the streets of the city into an "intérieur." Benjamin cites Baudelaire on the ability of the *flâneur* to make himself at home in the most unlikely of spaces: "être hors

de chez soi, et pourtant se sentir partout chez soi” (to be outside one’s home, and yet to feel everywhere at home) (Benjamin 1997a, 37).¹⁶ The playground is his living room and the parking garage his ballroom; the neighborhood bathhouse his swimming pool and the embankment his private gym where he can ogle the hottest ass. The public toilet is his throne, and the bus full of tourist ladies, his travelling harem. The emotional highlight of the song, the encounter with the Sexy Lady, happens exactly at midpoint in the video, most logically on the subway, in that subterranean underworld the modern Odysseus must navigate to get back home. The kaleidoscopic juxtaposition of mundane spaces reflects contemporary urban life in which being jolted is the norm. The deep interiority of the bourgeois subject is an outdated model. Outside and inside no longer remain distinct, much less surface and depth, reality and phantasmagoria. Psy’s signature sunglasses, which mirror back the world rather than indulge in a personal interchange of gazes, proclaim a refusal to be subjected to the nostalgia of aura.

For Rancière, the aesthetic opens up a field beyond both the ethical and the realm of representation (mimesis): aesthetic indifference and free play are a break from the sensorium of domination. Such play opens up an aesthetic regime of art that can construct forms for a new collective life:

If aesthetic ‘play’ and ‘appearance’ found a new community, then this is because they stand for the refutation, within the sensible, of this opposition between intelligent form and sensible matter which, properly speaking, is a difference between two humanities. (Rancière 2009, 31)

In its refusal to read the difference between two humanities of intellect and bare life, aesthetic play produces a revolution of sensible existence itself, bypassing the question of forms of State, investing rather in the autonomy of a new form of sensory experience that promises “the germ of a new humanity, of a new form of individual and collective life” (Rancière 2009, 32). If Psy’s *Gangnam Style* succeeds, it does so by proffering just such a

16. “The street becomes a dwelling for the *flâneur*; he is as much at home among the facades of houses as a citizen is within his four walls. To him the shiny, enameled signs of businesses are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his salon.”

challenge to the capitalist division of different humanities.

The startling fad of *Gangnam Style* flash mobs in public plazas and prison yards around the globe was strangely exhilarating if ephemeral. Centers of decision-making and public authority were temporally yielded to different publics suddenly transformed into mass ornaments. In October 2012, dissident artist Ai Weiwei posted his version of the song and dance with handcuffs to deride the Chinese regime. Ai's video was quickly blocked in China, but in a gesture of solidarity, Anish Kapoor posted from London a tribute featuring hundreds of artists, actors, and dancers horse-dancing handcuffed. For both Ai and Kapoor, Psy's video served as platform for participating in political parody with global outreach.¹⁷ It was a fashion that could not endure, and yet as *Erfahrung*, or experience that exceeded the merely lived-out, its traces endure in recesses that are still being reset to emerge as the future. Rancière points to the essential contradiction whereby the art work's promise of emancipation is achieved at the moment it becomes part of the "living tissue of experiences and common beliefs in which both the elite and the people share" (Rancière 2009, 37). Pop, Greif writes, "encourages you to hold on to and reactivate hints of personal feeling that society should have extinguished" (Greif 2016, 114). The pop song, like the poem, fashion, and the fairy tale, is extinguished the moment it participates in the construction of the festivals of the future.¹⁸

17. See Gray (2012). Gray writes in the *New Internationalist* blog: "Kapoor is quoted as saying: 'Our film aims to make a serious point about freedom of speech and freedom of expression. It is our hope that this gesture of support for Ai Weiwei and all prisoners of conscience will be wide-ranging and will help to emphasize how important these freedoms are to us all.' And it's interesting to see how a Korean pop song with banal lyrics about sexy ladies and knowing men, that invokes the name of a high-class Seoul district, has pressed people into action."

18. Rancière comments, "Even Mallarmé, the pure poet par excellence, assigned to poetry the task of organizing a different topography of common relations, of preparing the 'festivals of the future'...the poem has the inconsistency of a gesture which dissipates in the very act of instituting a common space, similar to a national holiday fireworks display" (Rancière 2009, 33–34).

Afterword

After this paper was nearly completed in 2016, flash mobs took on new meaning in Korea. At Ewha Womans University where I teach, students and faculty protested among many perceived wrongs, the admission of a horse-riding student, alleged to have received special favors through the influence of former President Park Geun Hye. The central campus area (ECC) was lit up by thousands holding up their flashlights of their mobile phones. Students occupied university headquarters for three months during which they released a *Gangnam Style* parody titled “Eonni’n Bongwan [Main Administration Building] Style.” The female students were satirically replacing the *Oppa* with *Eonni*, or “older sister.” The protests at Ewha built up to nationwide demonstrations ending with the ousting of the South Korean president herself after months of peaceful mass vigils that often felt like festivals lit up by mobile phones in the central public spaces of Seoul. Crowds have always enjoyed representations of themselves and the televised images of these scenes were conveyed around the globe. In some secret way, the flickers of Psy’s horse dance and the fashion for flash mobs may have helped light the way for these festivals of the future. It is no small irony that *Gangnam Style* had been performed in the central plaza of Seoul at the personal invitation of the former president at her own inauguration. The lesson we take away is that festivals are too easily manipulated for political purposes and so the way forward is precarious indeed.

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