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Ute Fendler, Bayreuth University

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Ute Fendler, Bayreuth University

Abstract

In 2016 SM Entertainment announced NCT as their new strategy for the future built on expandability and localization. With the subunits like NCT 127, they set new trends in the aesthetics of music videos and in the music as well. NCT can be viewed as the most recent step in a long strategy for the development of new aesthetics and art forms to enrich the productions: they went from stage art towards a holistic integrative understanding of aesthetics integrating all art forms used in the creative process of production. The claim of pop art being art finds its manifestation in the opening of the SM Museum in 2018 which builds a canon of pop art forms via the exhibition of objects that range from albums, to costumes and to photographs.

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SM Entertainment – From Stage Art to Neo Culture Technology

K-pop has become an important industry in South Korea. One main reason is the very strategic planning and development of the “star” system. Quite some analysis has been dedicated to the idol system and the strong influence of the various companies that dominate the market. Among the three biggest enterprises is SM Entertainment which is an icon for the idol system, as well as the training and management of idols as part of a larger economic concept in the entertainment industry. The critique of the neoliberal orientation of the K-pop industry dominates the perception of the companies. The K-pop industry, however, contributes to the development of aesthetics, trends in music, fashion, and visual media. In this article, the focus will therefore be to highlight the role of aesthetics in the economy and how the convergence between economics and arts might also have an impact on the understanding of popular art in South Korea. Regarding this aspect, SM Entertainment is particularly interesting as the company disposes of a long-term strategy in the development of concepts for popular art forms that are all derivative for K-pop. Music videos are particularly important as they combine the artistic forms such as film, dance, fashion, and storytelling hereby grasping the ambiguous character of popular culture between aesthetics, identity, and economy. Frith (1996:275) stresses the importance of popular music in the construction of an identity:

“Transcendence” is as much part of the popular as of the serious music aesthetic, but in pop transcendence articulates not music’s independence of social forces but a kind of alternative experience of them. […] Music constructs our sense of identity through the experiences it offers of the body, time, and sociability experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives.
Conversely, Vannini and Myers (2002) claim the importance of music videos as “cultural agents” in the economy:

As such, its producers and consumers are interpreters belonging to the same social context in which music content and cultural values interplay to constitute socially constructed realities. It is this dual capacity of music to be at one time both reflective of common popular beliefs and influential in moving and shaping the same beliefs that makes it such an important cultural agent. (13)

SM draws on the complexity of this interaction integrating all sides to create popular culture with a high demand of aesthetic perfection and an effective commodification that can be globalized based on a long-term evolution from visual concepts via stage art to a holistic concept of pop-art. The analysis of music videos with methods of media and cultural studies allow an understanding that goes beyond the mere economic aspects which are often linked to the analysis of reception that orientated marketing strategies.

SM Entertainment (SM) was founded by Soo-man Lee in 1995 and is one of the biggest entertainment enterprises in South Korea. SM is considered the inventor of the idol system, which has been said to be a way of industrializing the celebrity making process (Jin and Ryoo, 2014). The production of K-pop groups combines neo-liberal aspects on the one hand and development of aesthetic concepts on the other. As this successful system is rigid and demands high sums of investment, the commodification has reached a point where the idol is a replaceable token. Kang (2015) stresses the hyper-commodification and replaceability that could be called “McDonaldization” of the entertainment labor force which explains to a certain extent the news about lawsuits of some artists against SM entertainment over the last years. Recurrent issues are questions of teenage exploitation, disastrous financial situation of artists, and poor working conditions which are not exclusive issues to SM as they are occurring in several companies (Fuhr, 2016). The conditions for contracts have changed over the last few of years due to legislation that was produced as a result of these lawsuits. These very strong economic interests of the entertainment industry process of extreme commodification seem to be a contradiction to the intrinsic entanglement with the development of aesthetics.

Being an earlier precursor to later debates, Dator and Seo (2004) investigated Korea as being a place where the aesthetic experience can create a “Dream Society.” The authors presented a view that conversation regarding society having an eye on future economies, with varying names and degrees of how strong a value aesthetic plays into a country’s economy (Dator and Seo, 2004). The differing views all agree on the importance of the image, about which K-pop creators are also subscribers. K-pop has contributed to the development of a concept of beauty for idols that represents the “Dream Society.” However, this dream society has been trapped in the perceived importance of visual representation. Beauty attracts and sells, but in its repetitiveness, it loses its value that is based on the idea of the unique and outstanding, and therefore beautiful. When beauty turns into a mass phenomenon, it risks losing significance. The high quality of photography and film in Korea has contributed to this ongoing process in an attempt to create the perfect image of beauty within each photo shoot and music video filming. The driving force in the economy is image; economic influence is now coming from those that control the content of the images (Sternberg, 1999). The controllers of the content
have the potential to become one of the great storytellers; as Steven Spielberg has become (Jensen, 1999).

If we look at blogs and interaction of fandoms, every detail will be scrutinized. The integration of K-pop-elements into a narrative that allows imagining the idols as real characters and to link the dream world to their real world is important to business in the way that the story is important to a novelist (Jenson, 1999). Jensen (1999) also argues the need to have “scenarios” with stories that are flexible. According to De Certeau (1999), the distinction between strategy and tactics is while strategy is a long-term concept that is often self-referential, it risks losing connection to real life, or turning into a practice that does not fit to the needs of the present or the future. In this context, De Certeau (1999) links the art of doing (art de faire) and the art of telling (art de dire), in that both need imagination to develop optional reactions towards the unknown. Following this line of arguments, the K-pop industry would have to turn towards stories and content, towards tactic and flexibility, which we find in the long-term strategy presented by SM in 2016: New Culture Technology.

Along with the economic strategies comes work on aesthetics. While all K-pop companies work with concepts, SM seems to push this procedure further developing a larger artistic concept for each group as a part of the strategy, often using narrative elements. K-pop is able to integrate storytelling, group dance, music, and fashion into popular culture, calling it augmented entertainment (Choi and Maliangkay, 2015).

Fuhr (2016) published sequences of interviews he held with the music business director of SM during his field research in Seoul, stating that they talked about promoting Korean stars in foreign countries, speaking the local language to make a value-added business strategy. While SM Entertainment has set new trends since the 1990s in the K-pop scene and has had an inestimable impact on the visual and performative aesthetics in linking music and videos with other formats, the most recent strategy is the development of aesthetics and added value in combination with an increasing entanglement of the local and the global entertainment scenes which is captured in “New Culture Technology” (“NCT”). NCT is based on concepts like expandability and localization which is a derivative development of the former strategies that focuses on a new quality in the interactive and intercultural dimension of Hallyu.

From Concepts to Stage Art: SHINee’s Everybody

According to informers at SM, making music videos is continuous work on aesthetics of a performance that combines performance and narrative elements to create a surplus of meaning. Music videos have been considered to stage arranged sceneries tableaux vivants or living pictures; paintings or photographs that come to life but that are meaningful and beautiful in their aesthetic arrangement (Keazor and Wübbena, 2010). They are a short art form that combine various artistic expressions. An example for this endeavor to create stage art with additional content through aesthetic elements is the music video Everybody by SM boy group SHINee, released in 2013. The video follows the standard formula of SM, with the opening sequence illustrating the concept of “stage art.” The prelude to the video shows the members lying on the ground, each one linked to a cable. In a fast-paced edit, a flying eagle, a masked individual is seen riding a wooden horse on a carousel, a scorpion in a close-up, and a legion of masked men in suits are shown. These items appear before the masked individual enters the hall. A high angle shot shows the members lying motionless on the ground. The door opens,
letting in a cone of light that links the outer world with the silent and dark room with the bodies. The masked person plugs in an enormous plug so that the seemingly inanimate bodies receive energy, awaking to life. They start dancing in the well-known box-like dance cube typical for SM videos. The aesthetic elements used here are close to an associative narrative line that privileges a surrealistic evolution of the narrative. One could read these images as hints to the pop world: in a positive way as the energy of music that brings the dancers to life and conversely, in a pessimistic way, that the dancers are puppets being controlled by someone. Reactions of fans on blogs and video channels show that the intriguing prelude stirred speculations about the meaning of the sequence developed in the storyline, which would be a contribution to the evolution of pop music towards storytelling based on aesthetic elements.

From Stage Art to a “Holistic Concept”: EXO

The interconnectedness of music, performance, storytelling and – not to forget promotion and business – can be best illustrated via the example of the group EXO. From December 2011 to February 2012, SM released teasers presenting each of the original twelve members of EXO for their upcoming debut. The settings and the music were continued between two music videos, History and Mama, that created a fictitious world for the group members. Mama” starts with an animated part reminiscent of anime and video games while a voice over tells the story of another universe parallel to ours from which the members have fled to Earth. The video for History refers back to the same story of origin in the lyrics as well as in the video sets. These sets alternate between a box-like stage that could refer to futuristic sci-fi films and a set with a desert like surrounding with steep stele like mountains that recall images known from moon landings. The lyrics also refer to two moons and suns and their new start on earth. The storyline of survivors who had to leave their planet to start a new life on earth, is shown in both videos and the stories to create a continuity in this parallel world which makes it more “real.” The teasers for these videos also dealt with a wider range of music styles from metal, R&B, hip hop and ballads, alternating between story-based videos and dance focused versions. In the promotion campaign, SM combined the story telling with seriality, mixing genres of animation, video games, film, and music videos, bringing together Korean and Chinese members aiming at two markets from the conception.

The story of the mythical origin is reminiscent of stories of superheroes who arrive on Earth with powers from their native planets. In Mama, the members appear and disappear as if they could move without time and space limits with hints to their supernatural powers: control of water, wind, and fire. One member can throw fire in some shots in the video, while in other views, he is seen controlling a firestorm that takes the shape of two huge wings of flames on his back, staging him as a sort of archangel travelling between different spheres. In between the spectacular demonstration of superpowers from each member, the video shows the dance setting which recalls the cube-like set typical for SM productions.

Mama is an example of a music video in this line of development towards a content orientated holistic art video: it merges formats and styles, sets the tendencies for various story lines that link with the teasers, the pre-history, and open perspectives to upcoming stories. It presents the world of the K-pop idols as another planet, linked to earth and to the fandom where they can meet. All working for and towards a peaceful reunion of the universe.
Setting, fashion, and colors contribute to a highly stylized film that accents details that will reappear in other stories in various formats. In this way, the production succeeds in building continuity beyond the single video, linking the fiction of each video or stage performance with advertisements on TV shows and concerts.

The complexity of the references between the aesthetic elements reaches such a peak that the idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a total work of art) comes to mind, which has a “tendency to efface the frontiers between an aesthetic work and reality (Marquard 1983:40).” In this case, the strive to create a continuous flow between the art – music, dance and video – and reality is also driven by the economic interest to bring into life an imagined world that the artists and the fandom share. It creates the mirage of a shared identity based on the countless details of this imagined world.

The next logical step in this evolution towards an integration of concept of art and reality is the project that Soo-Man Lee presented in January 2016: The New Culture Technology (NCT). The work was based on management, with casting, training, producing, and marketing as essential parts, to which SM adds “interactive” components such as a radio channel and “Rookies Entertainment Mobile Application” which allows fans to interact with the rookies and to turn the fan into a producer. The most recent product is the group NCT for whom the key words “expandability” and “openness” are set. NCT is meant to be an open form that can change often, admitting new members from all over the world, so that the idea of “Hallyu Localization,” bringing the local and the global together, can become true.

**Still One Step Further: NCT 127: 7th Sense**

In this larger context of an integrating economic concept with cultural content, aesthetics plays a crucial role. The group NCT, which has open formation of a group that can change, was first presented via three videos: *The Origin, Synchronization of Your Dreams,* and *7th Sense.* *The Origin* are videos that show a young boy wandering in the desert dreaming of the ocean which he finally reaches. It is a rather noble story that is close to myths of origin about the founding elements of the world: wind, earth, and fire. The *Synchronization of Your Dreams* starts with a young man lying on his bed. When the young man wakes up, he wonders about the sand that is spread upon his bed. The sand links the two fictitious worlds of the desert of the first video and the bedroom of the second one suggesting that both might be dreams as well as real. The young man gets up following the track of sand on the ground, which leads him to a room where objects lie scattered on the ground. In a long one-take, the camera sways through various rooms where group members are dancing. All the sets are bathed in a misty light underlining the dreamlike atmosphere. The camera sways through the rooms as if the spectator were following the gaze of the young man strolling through the building that seems to be abandoned except for ghostlike dancing figures. In the end, the seven members of the group dance together in the center of a vast hall flanked by two empty pools which strengthens the impression of dreams of the past.

The *7th Sense* video is a video with dance performance with Chinese member WinWin dancing in a traditional Chinese house. It ends with a fast sequence of detail shots of his ears and eyes bringing up short moments of the previous videos, as stills of the desert, the ocean, the dancing as visual moments of remembrance appear that link the three videos in the “synchronization process” in and of dreams. The final sequence shows him sitting in a big loft with a breathtaking view on a modern city with skyscrapers, which might refer to Seoul or to
any other megacity. The 7th Sense seems to refer to the intuitive force of the human being, that links real situations with dream moments, an associative chain of memories, dreams, and imaginations which is the realization to overcome the borders between reality and dream.

In April 2016, the group in its first line-up, NCT 127, releases their debut song and music video entitled The 7th Sense. The lyrics refer to the state between dream and waking, between yesterday and today, a state out of time and space, which allows to see the hidden and the secret worlds.

Visually, the video sets new standards for SM; there is no setting of a closed room like the debut of EXO. The setting for the dance is an empty space submerged in red, and later into both white and blue. The dance moves are less dynamic and precise, with the members sometimes appearing to stumble, while other moves are fluid as shown in figures 1 and 2.

The individual members are placed in box-like spaces as shown in figures 3 and 4, while the camera often turns the perspective 180 degrees or pans horizontally, which has not been used often in SM videos.

Some takes are interspersed and visualize the state in between dreaming and being awake with cross fade fillings of the silhouettes of the members as seen in figures 5 and 6.
Contrary to the close-up beauty shots which are characteristic for K-pop videos, this video adds the dreamlike layer to the narration in the video and links the individual to the overall atmosphere and community created beyond. This new aesthetic element was used by the production company FLIPEVIL to express the dreamlike state blurring the borders between reality and imagination or dream. This technique was picked up later on in videos from competing entertainment company YG, showing how the content orientated aesthetic turns into a commodified trend that has been diversified over the last three years in many videos.

The world of entertainment teased the concept of dreams that would go beyond mere reality, and therefore open up new opportunities, visions, and also link the daily life of consumers with the shiny life of artists. SM Entertainment managed to turn dreaming into a constitutive element of a global community that is no longer limited by time and space but rather can transgress all limits to share dreams and envision other worlds and futures together. The open composition of groups is part of this concept as well as the diversification of the aesthetic elements that used to be limited and therefore characteristic and recognizable as being part of the SM universe.

**NCT - Expandability and Localization - The Example Of Let’s Shut Up and Dance**

Collaborations between K-pop groups and Western, mainly American, artists, are part of the Hallyu and production companies’ strategy to conquer markets overseas and to gain recognition by the largest music market. NCT by SM is conceived to create international collaborations which they implemented via the open structure of memberships of the new upcoming groups in the realm of NCT. A recent collaboration was initiated by the production company 7SIX9 in the US to pay tribute to Michael Jackson. They brought together the American singer and dancer Jason Derulo with Lay Zhang, Chinese dancer and singer in the SM K-pop group EXO, and the members of NCT 127. The hope of 7SIX9 Entertainment is that future generations can also have the ability to appreciate the legacy of Michael Jackson.

The hope of 7SIX9 is to find its echo in the objectives of the NCT project, which is to prioritize international collaborations. Daniel Russell, an American director, cooperated with the South Korean team of Rigend Film for the video tribute which was shot in Great Britain, Jamaica, Ethiopia, and South Korea. The video shows dance crews QK from Kenya, and Versatile from Jamaica for a several sequences, bringing in dance moves from all over the world. These short sequences punctuate the continuum in space and time that binds the main dancers together, namely Derulo, Lay, and NCT. The video uses several versions of montage techniques to create the flow that strengthens the impression of parallel worlds that are simultaneous and linked to each other as if they were one world. This continuous flow between different sets is used from the beginning when Lay is dancing in a narrow street and moving towards the camera (see figure 7). The transition to the dancing of Derulo is made by a horizontal camera pan that blurs the silhouettes of the dancers. When it stops, Derulo enters the frame from below, taking up the dance moves from the previous sequence with the Asian group. The change of orientation from horizontal to vertical creates depth in the image as well as in the world created by the video that turns into one “real” universe.
The second example of the transitions between two or more sets is a parallel montage between two dance settings can be seen in figure 8. The cuts are sharp, so that the same movement in Lay’s performance seems to be the continuation of Derulo’s. The fast rhythm assures the impression that the movement could be filmed in one location where all dancers dance together, so that it creates a natural continuity in the smooth flow of the choreography.

The next example combines the two previous techniques as the dance move presented by Lay is continued by Derulo after the cut, as if both dancers were one person, or as if the cut does not interrupt the continuous flow of the movement but links the two performances as being one as shown in Figure 9.

In the last six seconds of the video, the different dance groups and sets appear again as a line-up of the participants in this video that is supposed to visualize the connectedness of different worlds via dance and music as shown in Figure 10.
There is one sequence in the music video that pays tribute to NCT 127 of SM. Thirty seconds are dedicated to the members of NCT for music video of three minutes and 28 seconds. It is the first time that Dongdaemun Design Plaza (DDP) in Seoul, designed by the international renowned architect Zana Hadid and South Korean architects Samoo, is used as a set for a music video. The DDP is also used as the location for the Seoul Fashion week and is therefore linked to a future orientated and open-minded megacity.

The sequence in figures 11 and 12 are the bridge of the song offering an outlook into a futuristic parallel world that is reminiscent of SM sets using closed spaces and cubistic forms. However, in this video, the directors used extreme camera angles and placed the dancers into the space in such a way that the spectator loses the orientation as all references that organize space in terms of top, bottom, left, and right were annulled. The camera pans up in a diagonal zooming into one of the windows of the arch in the roof of the Dongdaemun building to give insight into a tunnel like space illuminated by glistening neon lights.
The transition back into the narrative of the merging of diverse worlds into one by dance and music happens via the continuation of the luminous lines of the dance space of NCT supposedly set inside of the Dongdaemun building and of the tunnel where Derulo is dancing as shown in figure 13.

The sequence seems to be isolated in the video, and at the same time, it highlights the idea of the free combination of diverse elements to create a new ensemble; a new universe of NCT in the logics of SM.

**SM Museum - Valorizing Popular Art?**

As the concept of NCT tends towards a process of unlimited, unfinished, and open combinations, SM opened a museum in May 2018 at the COEX building of SM. Hereby, they create an institution that attempts to secure memory and to link their production to a defined space. The museum aims to create a connection from new content at a high-speed pace on a global scale, and the past where it can be linked back to the original place of creation: Seoul.

The museum represents the effort to build a memory for a very fleeting art form including pop songs and music videos that are renewed and even replaced by new creative artefacts after a couple weeks or months. After a year or two, they are old fashioned and outdated and generally the older productions fade from pop culture memory aside from the internet or in the collective memory built by a fandom. Opening a museum orientates the drive of fans to collect all items related to a certain group or artist into the offer of a collection and memory. The institution of the museum is also part of a process of canonization that is recognized by a larger community defining representative pieces for a certain epoch.

There were earlier efforts to bring together classical art and popular art exampled in several exhibitions such as “Peaceminusone” dedicated to G-Dragon at the Seoul Museum of Art in summer 2015, and ATOZ to celebrate the tenth anniversary by BigBang in autumn 2016 at the S-Factory. Both showed the idea of the convergence of popular and high arts as there was a collaboration between the curators of the museum and the gallery inviting artists to contribute pieces to the exhibition that related to the theme and works of the group members. In October 2018, the Ara Art gallery in Insadong the hosted the exhibition “Serendipity” dedicated to BTS, which seemed to join this tendency of enhancing pop art. However, it turned out to be rather a show room for still unrevealed behind the scenes photographs accompanied by objects used in the videos. The convergent moment between the exhibits and artistic pieces by other artists or by the members was missing in this case.

To link popular art to music, SM opened a museum in May 2018 on the second and third floor of their COEX building in Gangnam. The first two floors of the museum are
dedicated to merchandise, and the third and fourth floor house a museum of artist artifacts. The fifth floor, and the highest guests are allowed, houses a hall for hologram concerts. The building is therefore a materialization of a dream factory as it stages the entanglement of the economy of the company with the concepts and contents developed by the company that can be more than products for a market.

The museum gives room to the history of the company and of the groups in the form of a timeline as seen in figure 14. The museum also offers insight into the production processes as well with the images of the design for clothing (figure 15) and music video storyboards as seen in figure 16.

Arriving on the third floor of the museum, the photographs of idols in black and white (figure 17) set the tone for the remembrance of celebrities, building, and archive. In the first hall, the timeline of the founding years of groups gives the impression of a continuous evolution in the process of art production. The milestones are the releases of albums and concerts as the platform for interaction with the public. The illustration of the artistic process of the production makes the different stages visible that include work in design, aesthetics, composition and performance.

The production aspect is developed further in another room of the museum, as the example of Super Junior and the music video for Mamacita shows. There are rooms dedicated to the groups where every group member is presented individually with a second room used for the exhibition of costumes worn in music videos as well as objects used in the video. The costumes and some of the props turn into exhibits (figures 18 and 19) that testify of the different steps of the creative process. At the same time, the props are tangible objects that have been part of an imagined world beforehand as shown in figures 20 and 21, which makes the experience more intense and contributes to the construction of a shared collective memory.

Another very effective procedure of linking the exhibit with the detail of the dream world is a photo of the costume Max of TVXQ wore in the music video for “Catch me” (2012) (figure 22). The photo of the artist in the back visualizes the dream world of the idol that
becomes tangible via the costume he wore in the music video. The costume turns almost into a relic that represents the idol, the venerated person. The arrangement reminds of the usage of the visual representation of the person, so that the icon turns into the object that stands as an allegory for the absent person. The plaque at the pedestal (figure 23) gives more information about the context in the same way as it is usually done for a piece of art reading: “This is the costume that MAX wore while shooting ‘Catch Me’ music video TVXQ captures eyes with distinctive performances that almost create optical illusion, particularly with the special LED device on the arm, such as the Hulk Dance and Dragon Dance.”

While the example TVXQ uses the *mise-en-scène*, by re-staging the object, some exhibits turn into relics. The object testifies of the ‘reality’ of the dream world that becomes tangible for the spectator/fan in the moment when they could touch the relic. The chain that EXO member Baekhyun wore in the music video *Monster* (2016) is presented in an illuminated box protected by glass as shown in figure 24. The small photo, placed next to the exposing box, shows the idol wearing the chain, in order to put the object into the ‘historical’ epoch and the
context of the stories told as seen in figure 25. The chain eventually turns into the main object, the relic lends physical presence to the absent idol.

Conclusion

Entertainment companies have rarely been object of academic analysis, and would likely continue in that manner if it were not for economic aspects and the training system of K-pop idols. However, some of the companies invest into the aesthetics of the K-pop groups. SM Entertainment has been criticized for its long-term contracts and the control of the idols working in this company. Beyond this criticism, there is the crucial question of strategies that influence the development of aesthetics in large branches like fashion and music videos. The article took the presentation of the new strategy NCT (2016) as a starting point for a revision of the development of strategies in terms of aesthetics being a constitutive part of the representation of the idols and the products of SM. The consequent added value of aesthetics is evident in the concepts of stage art, towards a holistic integrative understanding of aesthetics combining art forms used in the creative process of production. The most recent tendencies are the expansion of groups towards other music scenes and the building of a memory for the ephemeral popular art forms like pop songs and music videos. The strategy NCT by SM Entertainment strives for recognition by international artists and producers as well as for the recognition of pop music and its accompanying formats as art forms.

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