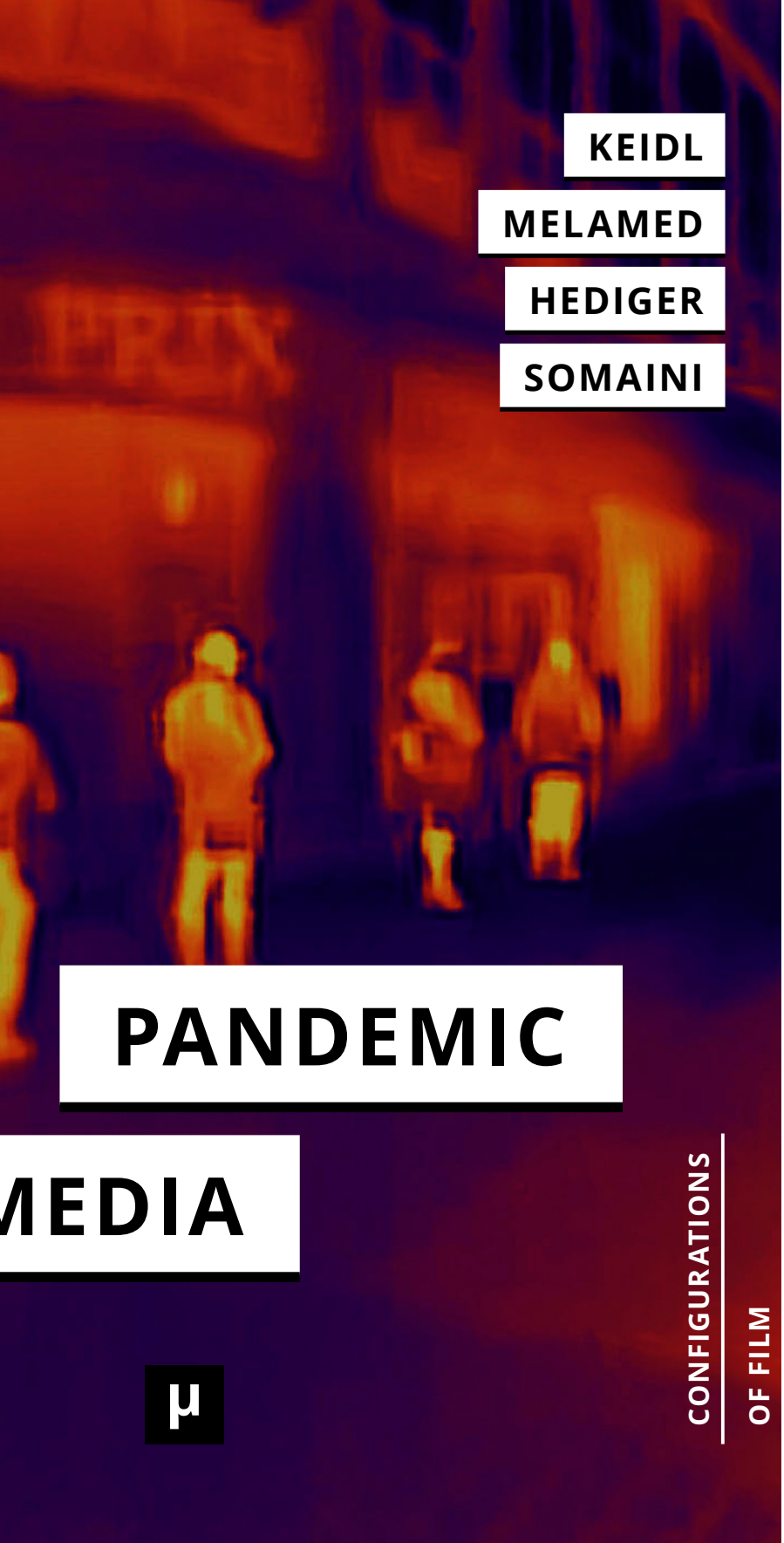

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Configurations of Film Series

Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by
Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini

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K-POP

SOCIAL MEDIA

PROTEST

FANDOM

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Pandemic Media: Protest Repertoires and K-pop's Double Visions

Michelle Cho

Starting in late May of 2020, following the protests that erupted after the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, fans of Korean idol pop (K-pop)—a loose coalition of individuals identified by their sub-cultural consumption of South Korean youth-oriented pop performance culture—found their collective identity shifting from one of an often denigrated, caricatured fandom into an activist bloc, best-equipped to respond to the intertwined conditions of police violence and the COVID-19 pandemic's intensification of structural and environmental racism in global cities in North America and Europe. This essay recounts two forms of pandemic media: K-pop fans' online, antiracist protests and transmedia K-pop content on YouTube and Twitter that has afforded K-pop a new visibility as a crossover youth culture throughout 2020, to query the ways in which COVID-19 has reoriented the global media landscape, to both

create new modes and spaces of protest and assemblage online, while also ensnaring K-pop fan protest further in a commercialized platform ecology that commodifies fans' attention and activist impulses. Overall, K-pop fan protest repertoires illustrate the ways in which contemporary media structure a dialectic of reification and resistance that delimits forms of mediated "direct action" in the U.S.—the region hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

2020 began with a bang for the Korean pop group BTS. Following weeks of anticipation and record-breaking pre-sales, their album *Map of the Soul: 7* was released to great fanfare in February 2020, becoming the biggest selling album of all time in South Korea, and topping pop music charts in over twenty countries, including Billboard's illustrious albums chart in the U.S. Despite alarmingly fast spread of a South Korean cluster of COVID-19 cases, and the government's large-scale containment efforts there, the group released multiple music videos for the album's two lead tracks, and promoted the album and forthcoming world tour on several American television shows and media outlets during February and early March.

But as the pandemic spread through North America (mainly via Europe, rather than East Asia), BTS and its powerful fandom called ARMY had to shelve their plans to gather on the group's tour, forgoing the excitement of the mass spectacles that have become a feature of live, K-pop performance. Instead, the group's international fandom were left to cling to the digital intimacies that the group has fostered with fans through a steady and robust stream of social media content on Twitter, VLive (South Korean tech company Naver's celebrity live-streaming app), and the proprietary fandom platform Weverse, developed and owned by the band's management company Big Hit Entertainment.

The period of pandemic self-isolation not only heightened digital connections between fans and their favorite groups, but also brought new initiates into the fold. One might argue that pandemic conditions have increased the power of media companies, whether broadcast or digital, since captive audiences under lockdown have grown increasingly dependent on forms of mediated connection. The prolonged period of homebound isolation seems also to have channeled vital energies of critique, especially among the young, who have been forced to suspend their lives in the face of a bleak economic forecast and public health crisis, with no relief in sight. This growing critical consciousness

erupted in the uprisings that followed the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25, 2020. As protesters surged into the streets to express their grief and rage at the unmitigated cruelty and injustice of Floyd's death, many fans across the globe contributed their efforts through the conversion of fan activities into a repertoire of anti-racist protest: hash-tag activism, attention-jacking, and online fundraising and organizing, many in the name of K-pop fandom and the BTS ARMY.

This essay proposes two forms of pandemic media: first, media released and consumed during the pandemic, which has kneecapped most brick and mortar enterprises, but invigorated digital teleconferencing, streaming, and content-sharing platforms. Indeed big tech has seen its profits grow handsomely from the shift of work and leisure, alike, to online platforms, and K-pop entertainment industries, which already cultivate multi-sited, mediated intimacies through technological means, have emerged as leaders of remote, live-streamed pop concerts that will likely transform the business of pop performance. The other form of pandemic media that I address is media that responds specifically to the intertwining pandemic conditions of the public health crisis caused by COVID-19 and the latter's unveiling of the necropolitical intersection of structural inequities of race and class, specifically the way that K-pop's media fandom swiftly joined the coalition of anti-racist protesters through their hashtag and attention-jacking activism. The first section of what follows details the citation practices characteristic of K-pop content. As a cultural form that moves across media regions and platforms, K-pop innovates on a model of polyvocality best enacted by American culture industries. Specifically, I look at BTS's music video output, released in the early days of the pandemic. In the second section, I discuss the transformative use that fans have made of the first form of pandemic media, to use the legibility and ready-made networks built through their fandom to make a deft pivot to activism.

K-pop's Double Visions

The first single from *Map of the Soul: 7* to be released with accompanying music videos was an EDM/R&B track called "Black Swan." BTS's content is famously dense with intertextual citations, and this wasn't the first time that the group paid homage to a cinematic inspiration.[1] The reference here is unmistakable—Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010)—cited in the song's title, accompanying live performance choreography, and official music video. Aronofsky's film is of course itself an adaptation of Tchaikovsky's 1877 ballet *Swan Lake*, a work centered on the trope of the doppelganger/evil twin that is found in numerous

1 The group released a series of albums in 2015–16 called "The Most Beautiful Moment in Life" trilogy. This is the English translation of the idiom *HwaYangYeonHwa,* the Korean version of 花樣年華, which is also the Chinese title of Wong Kar Wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000).

works from the romantic period, as well as SF, fantasy, and psychological thriller genres in Hollywood and abroad.[2] Aronofsky is known to be a fan of the virtuosic Japanese animator, Kon Satoshi, a fellow doppelganger-obsessed auteur, and BTS's Black Swan also ports works like Kon's *Perfect Blue* and *Paprika,* alongside Aronofsky's film.[3] The group's official music video for the single was filmed at the Los Angeles Theater, the art deco movie house that was the last to be built in the city's historic downtown in 1930, before the center of film exhibition moved to Hollywood Boulevard. Closed as a screening venue since the mid-1990s, the Los Angeles Theater now only opens its doors as a filming location and special-event rental space, serving as a dramatic setting for BTS's theatrical concept, while signaling the layered significance of inter-mediation, Hollywood's displacement, and cinema's fading glory.

Yet, if Black Swan presents an elegiac image of cinema, as defined by nostalgia for Old Hollywood glamour and its high-modernist, split psyche, the music video "Daechwita" released as a solo venture by BTS member Suga (Min Yoon-ki) in May, 2020 after months of COVID-19 isolation and just three days before George Floyd's murder, announced an altogether different approach to cinema, history, and identity. Daechwita looks to South Korean cinema for inspiration, especially its fabricated scenes of Korean history, which have been worked and reworked through the film and TV genre of *sageuk,* or Choseon period historical drama.[4] Set in the Choseon era, Daechwita is named after the highly codified, ceremonial musical accompaniment (the characters in the word Daechwita are "Dae"—large, grand, great; "Chwi"—to blow (a horn or wind instrument); "Ta"—to hit (a drum)) to the Choseon king's procession. The story told by the video is adapted from the 2012 Korean film *Masquerade* (dir. Choo Chang-min), also known by its Korean title *Gwanghae: The Man who Became King.* Constructing a doppelganger story on the scaffolding of the historical account of Gwanghae, the fifteenth ruler in the long Choseon Dynasty, *Masquerade* suggests that the cruel and paranoid King Gwanghae

2 For an incisive analysis of the doppelganger as a hallmark of Japanese film and literature, from the period of interwar modernization through the present, see Posadas 2018.

3 Fans of BTS are skilled close-readers and detectives, and often share their analyses of the group's work in articles such as Nakeisha Campbell's "All the Details You Need to Know About BTS' 'Black Swan' Music Video," which finds the visual matches from Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) and the group's music video: https://www.distractify.com/p/where-was-bts-black-swan-filmed. Accessed June 16, 2020.

4 The *Choseon* (also romanized as *Joseon* or *Choson*) period refers to the era in which the Korean peninsula was governed as a dynastic kingdom under the Choseon Dynasty from 1392 to 1897. The culture of the Choseon period is widely accepted today as synonymous with Korean traditional culture and history; the latter owes in large part to the meticulous court records that were kept in almost continuous daily logs throughout the dynasty. Most period dramas involve historical figures from these court chronicles, though a genre of "fusion *saguk*" has emerged since the mid 2000s, which fuses elements of *sageuk*—historical drama—with fictional elements.

used a commoner double in his official appearances, for fear of assassination. *Masquerade* was a major box office hit in South Korea that swept the Grand Bell Awards, South Korea's equivalent of the Oscars. Given the signal boost garnered by South Korean cinema when Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* won Hollywood's greatest accolade earlier in 2020—the Academy Award for Best Picture—it is now clear that U.S. culture industries eye South Korea, just as K-pop's double visions center Hollywood and the US market.[5] Embedded in *Masquerade's* thoroughly commercialized revisionist history is a tense contradiction between the desire to place populism at the core of Korean culture and a move to affirm the pageantry and grandeur of the royal Choseon court, the acme of a feudal society structured by caste hierarchies.

Pop Protest

Ultimately, *Masquerade's* retelling of King Gwanghae's story advocates a populist message, in keeping with South Korea's hard-won status as a dazzling twenty-first century beacon of democratic reform across a region that is otherwise overshadowed by right-wing xenophobia in Shinzo Abe's Japan and repressive Chinese state action in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, home to China's Muslim Uighur community. South Korea's emphatically liberal national character was consolidated by 2016's Candlelight Protest movement that led to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye, the daughter of the dictatorial President Park Chung-hee, who governed the country during its postwar industrialization from 1961–1979. However, despite the public's decisive rejection of Park's dynastic presidency and its embrace of direct-action protest as national character, South Korea remains deeply implicated in a neoliberal order that keeps its citizenry in a state of individualized alienation. Although South Korea and its liberal leader Moon Jae-in have been lauded for the country's swift response to the coronavirus, the management of COVID relies on a surveillance system unrivaled in the world, which operates through the ICT infrastructure of ubiquitous computing ushered in by the dream of global cities and special economic zones.[6] Pandemic conditions put a paradoxical, benevolent face on a system of control that recalls the dictatorship era and shores up the profits of multinational big data, like the mirror image of Odette and her evil doppelganger.

5 As others have also noted, *Parasite*'s story of lives of underground confinement and the crushing weight of poverty also seems to have foretold the coming catastrophe, as COVID-19 laid bare the pervasive, systemic injustices of late capitalist life. See Suzy Kim's post for the *positions* blog, "Parasites in the Time of Coronavirus," http://positionswebsite.org/episteme-2-kim/.

6 See Orit Halperin and Joseph Jeon's discussions of the smart city project of Songdo in the Prologue and Conclusion of Halperin's *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason Since 1945* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2015) and Jeon's *Vicious Circuits: Korea's IMF Cinema and the End of the American Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 116–21.

In Daechwita, BTS's Suga (Min Yoon-ki) plays two roles as both the tyrannical king and the commoner double. While the actual King Gwanghae was dethroned and exiled in a coup d'etat perpetrated by an opposing faction of court officials, Daechwita's Gwanghae is deposed in a populist revolt by his double, the commoner. Daechwita thus chooses to stage a fantasy of Choseon-era rebellion, whereas the close to 500-year dynasty dealt with intermittent peasant rebellion with a brutal hand; instead, it was definitively overcome by a modern world order that brought Japanese colonial incursions by the end of the nineteenth century, as students of Korean history will know quite well. Daechwita's fantasy scenario also turns the pauper-against-prince antagonism into a psychological struggle between Suga's current, chart-topping celebrity persona, full of arrogance and bluster, and his prior, hard-working rookie self. Daechwita's ambivalent approach to populist resistance is clear in the ways that it uses the latter as an allegory for the integration of the artist's dual image as both K-pop royalty and humble underdog that serves as the core of BTS's star text.

[Figure 1] Screenshot from *Daechwita* MV

During the first week of June, when the protests against systemic racism in the US were raging on the streets of most American cities, K-pop fans quickly mobilized to spam police snitching apps like iDallas and take over hashtags like #whitelivesmatter and #calminkirkland, the latter of which asked citizens to surveil each other and publicize video evidence of criminal activity by protesters.[7] What I saw in screenshots of K-pop fans' takedowns of the iDallas app and later instances of K-pop twitter hashtag activism on behalf of Black Lives Matter were images and clips from the Daechwita video, especially scenes from the fiery moments preceding the overthrow of the sadistic ruler. The scenes from Daechwita were often, at first glance, plausible scenes of youthful

7 For an overview of online anti-racist activism attributed to K-pop fans, see "QAnon followers melt down after K-pop fans take over their hashtags" by Parker Molloy, June 5, 2020, on the *Media Matters* site: https://www.mediamatters.org/qanon-conspiracy-theory/qanon-followers-melt-down-after-k-pop-fans-take-over-their-hashtag?fbclid=-IwAR3fhki32yB13VhUy2c6Dd5tRVwVo-nKftWdiGuam54pNnVM04xP6VZs3D8.

revolt (fig. 1), and seemed to serve as foils to the more satirical and playful stream of "fancam" clips—fan-recorded footage of pop idol performances—and GIFs of pop idols cutely mugging for the camera. The protest gesture of attention-jacking racist hashtags or snitch apps with Daechwita images conveyed both the seriousness of activist intent and an ironic, disaffected stance that adopted Daechwita's ambivalence towards revolutionary collectivity. Perhaps this is the best that commercial pop culture can offer as a source of resistance to the social institutions that preserve and protect the circulation of pop commodities in the first place.

By adapting Daechwita's commercialized images of populist, youth rebellion into the repertoire of contemporary protest techniques in pandemic conditions, BTS fans politicize their fandom and convert fan networks into a form of activist organizing. Wrestling hashtags away from white supremacists constitutes strategic fan participation in spaces that are not expressly intended as platforms for such gestures, yet there is also a potential for these activities to revert to mere amplification for the sake of promoting the celebrity idol. This seems to be the outcome of the summer of 2020, when K-pop fans became interpellated as Tik-Tok and Twitter warriors against white supremacy. In the months since the upsurge of street protests led by the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S., K-pop fans have resumed their regular activities of promoting K-pop artists' releases on global and US-based singles and albums charts. Notably for BTS, "Dynamite," their follow-up single to the *Map of the Soul: 7* album, made history as the first K-pop song to reach the #1 spot on the Billboard Hot 100 chart, demonstrating that the ARMY's growth through the summer of COVID and the consciousness-raising activities of K-pop fandom has led to the group's convincing commercial breakthrough on the pop charts. This is hardly the political victory that BLM and activists calling for defunding the police are looking for. Yet, this is perhaps an unsurprising demonstration of the power of publicity. The notion of youth rebellion against authority is both inspiring and trite, and Daechwita's incitement against authority can be both at the same time, as is the case with youth culture, at large. Nonetheless, what BTS's COVID-era music video aesthetics confirm is the mutable, and always uncertain pull of co-option in pop protest, especially the sort that coalesces around fan identity as the basis for coalition-building. What we may see from K-pop fans in the future is not fixed, however, as the duality that is built into the form continues to make the urge to visibility of the fandom available to future collective actions. The lessons of K-pop's pandemic media have coalesced into a fan-activist repertoire that may yet be mobilized, long after the resolution of COVID-19.

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Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini (eds.)
Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

With its unprecedented scale and consequences the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new configurations of media. Responding to demands for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, these "pandemic media" reorder social interactions, spaces, and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration of media technologies and the cultures and polities with which they are entangled. Highlighting media's adaptability, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in response to the global crisis and provide elements toward an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.

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