

K-Contagion

Sound, Speed, and Space in “Gangnam Style”

Marcus Tan



The Glocal Phenomenon

On 15 July 2012, a rotund, clean-cut Asian man wearing a fancy suit and riding an invisible horse startled the pop music community. His Korean pop music video featured the now-distinctive neigh of the by now all-too-familiar phrase, “Oppan Gangnam Style.” The music video’s subsequent viral race to fame was meteoric. “Gangnam Style” needs no real introduction and that itself attests to its unprecedented yet curious pop phenomenality. Written, produced, and performed by neo K-pop singer Park-Jae Sang, more popularly known as Psy, “Gangnam Style” is a conventionally timed 3 minute and 39 second K-pop dance video full of fast cars, speed boats, pretty girls, ugly men, and horses.¹ Its hybrid techno-pop beats, rap rhythms, and synth sound effects epitomize the growing popularity of bubblegum K-pop, Korean hip hop that forms part of what is now commonly known as *hallyu* (한류)—the “Korean wave” that has gained attention in Asia and the West. The video’s trite narrative of an impossible romance

1. The original video on YouTube can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bZkp7q19f0 (officialpsy 2012).

Figure 1. The glocal phenomenon: Psy’s “Gangnam Style” employs familiar visual tropes from action movies to create familiarity in difference. (Screenshot from the official music video of “Gangnam Style”; © YG Entertainment Inc. All rights reserved)

(thwarted by class differences), sung to rap rhythms and accompanied by Psy's horse-trotting moves, offers not only banal entertainment but has also been touted for its social and political activist message. Set in the glitzy district of Gangnam in Seoul, the video is, as David Futrelle of *Time* (2012) and Max Fisher (2012), who writes for *The Atlantic*, posit, a social critique of aspirants longing to belong to the "Beverly Hills" of South Korea; by extension, it is also a censure of the tendency among many South Koreans toward lavish materialistic obsessions and a desire to mimic the Western Other.²

While the musical properties, technicolor visuals, and juvenile narrative make the "Gangnam Style" video seem like just another product of this post-mechanical age of reproduction, its passage from global anonymity to glocal adoration is curiously atypical. For a song that was released primarily for a Korean market, "Gangnam Style" rapidly embraced unanticipated international acclaim and its popularity infected the digitally connected world, perforating cultural and geographical barriers. It won the MTV Europe Music Award for Best Video in 2012, topped the iTunes charts in 31 countries, and holds the infamous title of "most watched video" on YouTube (as of 21 July 2014). "Gangnam Style" spawned scores of parodic offspring, including flash mobs and burlesque performances that populated both cyberspace and real space. It generated media curiosity in the West with *CNN International* and the *Wall Street Journal* reporting on the uncanny viral phenomenon just 19 days after the video's release. Its cultural and political impact is no less astounding: the "Gangnam Style" song-and-dance number has been praised or performed by Ban Ki-moon, Barack Obama, and David Cameron; used by environmental activists; and appropriated by North Koreans to deliver a political message.³

The uncanny immediacy of the reaction and widespread appeal have inspired critical and conventional commentary: What about the music video inspires such homogeneously positive reactions that transcend cultural difference and infect viewers with a desire to mimic and replicate? While its apotheosis has commonly been attributed to musicological and technological forces that exemplify the cultural globalization of what Zygmunt Bauman calls "liquid modernity" (2000), such arguments seem insufficient in explaining the song's magnetism. As a commodity of the culture industry, "Gangnam Style" exhibits a glocal quality and apparent "universality" that engender questions about the intercultural space created by its transcultural intersections.

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2. Psy famously claims, in an interview, that his song was a parody about the "posers and wannabes" who put on airs and pretend they are from the Gangnam district (the attitude known as "Gangnam style"). It is a song about the "kinds of people who are trying very hard to be something they're not" (in Koehler 2012).
 3. The impact of "Gangnam Style" has been so significant, even politicians took notice of its global impact. Videos of Psy teaching Ban Ki Moon the "Gangnam Style" dance made headlines on 24 October 2012 and these have been uploaded by *The Telegraph* (2012b) and CNN (2012). Barack Obama revealed, in an interview with New Hampshire radio station WZID, that he did know how to do the "Gangnam Style" dance moves (Tau 2012) and has admitted that he dances it just to embarrass his daughters (Abraham 2012). London Mayor Boris Johnson revealed to the press that he and David Cameron "danced Gangnam Style the other day, you will be shocked to discover" (*The Telegraph* 2012a). Appropriated for activism, Greenpeace International produced "Going Gangnam, Greenpeace Style" on 19 December to raise awareness about unsustainable fishing and care for the oceans (Baillie 2012). "Gangnam Style" was even appropriated by the North Koreans as a means to mock the South Korean conservative party presidential-elect Park Geun-hye. Called "I'm Yushin Style!", the video features Park digitally mapped onto the video, performing the horse-dance (*The Straits Times* 2012).

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Sound

The (Musical) Language of “Gangnam Style”

Since its release, “Gangnam Style” has been extolled by music critics, industry experts, and journalists alike. On 28 August 2012, Deborah Neburn of the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed “Gangnam Style” to be “one of the greatest videos ever to be uploaded to YouTube” (Netburn 2012). On 23 December 2012, Boris Johnson of the *Telegraph* declared the song to be one of the greatest cultural masterpieces of 2012 (Johnson 2012). Just two months after its release, the song reached the number two position on the US *Billboard*’s pop chart and maintained this claim to fame for seven weeks. It topped similar charts in countries such as Australia and Britain. *Billboard.com* called the peculiar success “nothing short of a pop culture phenomenon” (Jung 2012) with top executives at YouTube declaring it “a massive hit *at a global level* unlike anything we’ve ever seen before” (Jung 2012; emphasis added). Psy’s success has inevitably garnered increasing interest in Korean pop across the world and this achievement by a non-Western pop star led Frances Moore, chief executive of the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, to state that “Gangnam Style” was the reason South Korea became one of the “most successful exporters of repertoire” (Moore 2012).

From a musicological perspective, “Gangnam Style” is minimally distinguishable from other existing K-pop songs that employ similar hip hop rhythmic patterns, synth-based electronic sounds, repetitive expressions, and token English phrases. Even as music critics have praised “Gangnam Style” for its differences, the song primarily follows the compositional formula of K-pop popularized internationally by the likes of the Wonder Girls, Rain, Super Junior, T-ara, and others. These formulaic songs use hybridized sounds that are, arguably, more acoustemologically Western than they are cross-culturally distinct. When played alongside will.i.am’s *Scream and Shout* (2012) for example, the synth-styles, electronic sonicities, interjected rhythms, melodic circularism, structural repetition, and lyrical reprise of both songs sonically interweave easily. As music critic Robert Copsey writes, “you could slap an LMFAO tag on the cover and few would know the difference” (2012).

In attempting to privilege serious music over popular music, Adorno postulates that popular music with its mass appeal (and hence artistic inferiority) is predicated on the concept of standardization and “plugging.” Plugging, as Adorno describes it in his 1941 essay, is a continuation and formal arrangement of the musical material through “ceaseless repetition” ([1941] 2002:447). From the form to the musical details, standardization defines popular music. As such, pop replicates itself with simulated difference through imitation (and imitated success); standardization pervades the tonal relationships, production, and consumer-demand of popular music. This imitation, replication, and reproduction facilitate a systematic development of the ways modern listeners consume popular music. Such a process, as Adorno observes, allows one to listen yet makes any effort in listening unnecessary since popular music is already “predigested” (443).

Mimicking the musicological tropes of K-pop, “Gangnam Style,” is afflicted by repetitions: its musical construction, with a 4/4 tempo that accentuates the syncopated upbeats, is the most notable. Furthermore, the musicality of rap is predicated on repetition, which is salient in its rhythm and end rhymes. Predictably, words in the chorus are heavily repeated and the title of the song is announced over 15 times. Notational, chordal, or scalar variation is absent and the notes D and B are emphasized, with D rapidly replicated in the bars antecedent to the chorus. While the high incidence of rhythmic and notational repetition is generic, the song’s global appeal is surprising since there is nothing significantly peculiar about its musicological composition to explain the attentive addiction it has inspired. In fact, formulaic conventions in pop lead to an “institutionalization and standardization of listening habits” (Adorno [1941] 2002:447). The outcome of this standardization and recurrence is the way in which listeners react automatically, without thought or deliberation (447).

While this automatous reaction should be similar to other K-pop responses both within and outside of Korea, the uncommon success of “Gangnam Style” was predicated upon repetition of a different sort, one founded on technological repeatability, otherwise known as social media “sharing.” Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter could be said to have been responsible for the global contagion of “Gangnam Style” more than the music itself; that is, the “Gangnam Style” video can be credited for the popularity of the “Gangnam Style” song. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the video was first introduced to the world via T-Pain who tweeted about it on 29 July 2012. It was then picked up by Neetzan Zimmerman from the social blogsite *Gawker* and was soon shared by pop stars and movie stars such as Robbie Williams, Britney Spears, and Tom Cruise. This spawned subsequent video reactions and parodies, “K-pop Music Mondays: PSY Gangnam Style” by Canadian bloggers Simon and Martina Stawski being the first (see Ramstad 2012). Such parodies consequently assumed lives of their own. As simulations of simulations, these burlesque forms gained global status, with media networks creating their own “Top 10 Gangnam Style Parodies” list.⁴ Some of these include “New York Style,” “Baby Gangnam Style,” and “MIT, Noam Chomsky Style.” This reiteration and repeatability, as citation or parody, creates a simulacrum of difference rooted in standardization and repetition, and “repetition gives a psychological importance which it [“Gangnam Style”] could otherwise never have [had]” (Adorno [1941] 2002:447).

Perhaps many would consider this contagion as less the result of the music and more the outcome of the whimsical dance. The “Gangnam Style” video is certainly remembered for its eccentric horse-trotting moves. The high incidence of mimicry, evident in the numerous parodies and performances, live or mediated, demonstrate the feverish fervor to replicate this quirky dance. Returning to Adorno’s critique of popular music, “Gangnam Style” exemplifies what the historical materialist terms “Baby Talk.” Popular music, as Adorno postulates, encourages “child-behavior” for it creates a musical language that “betokens dependence” (450). Lyrics in such pop tunes are excessively simplified and duplicated, and are characterized by ambiguous or derogatory use of children’s language (such as “Goody, Goody” or “Cry, Baby, Cry”); the melodies are limited to a select few tones, overly “sweet” sound colors “functioning like musical cookies and candies” (450). All these serve to treat the consumers of pop as children and in that representation of fun, according to Adorno, to alleviate the difficulties and responsibilities of adulthood (450). In addition to the “baby talk” consisting of “heeeeeey sexy lady!” and “O... O... O... O... oppan gangnam style,” Psy’s asinine dance is an embodiment of unadulterated child behavior; it is hollow of signification and perhaps it is in the dance’s space of absent meaning and sheer silliness—the relief of responsibility—that the song finds global appeal. Its transcultural consumption epitomizes a new cultural logic of late capitalism: the return to “Neverland.”

Space

(Inter)Culture in a Liquid Modern World

In many ways, the global quality of “Gangnam Style” and its hybrid musicality are exemplary of the fluidity of contemporary cultural and social forms. In *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (2011), Zygmunt Bauman describes what others have designated to be “late modernity,” “post-modernity,” “hypermodernity,” and “second modernity” as “liquid modernity”—a state of “self-propelling, self-intensifying, compulsive and obsessive ‘modernization’” (2011:11) as a result of which, like liquid, social life and all its manifestations are unable to retain their shape, form, or structure for any sustained period. The information revolution, the dominance of global capital, and the increasing privatization of wealth and services are reasons Bauman cites for this state of fluidity in which formerly stable compass points, such as the state, nationhood, citizenship,

4. See “Top 10 Gangnam Style parodies show our funny PSYde” (Battle 2012); “The 10 Best ‘Gangnam Style’ Parodies” (Williams 2012); “The Best ‘Gangnam Style’ Parodies (Video)” (*The Huffington Post* 2012).

culture, and family, have dissolved. With the dissolution of social and political boundaries and the deregulation and liberalization of personal behavior, identities—individual, social, political, and cultural—have become destabilized. The inclination toward rootedness and belonging is now threatened by what Bauman describes as the “revenge of nomadism”—the preference and prevalence of “an exterritorial elite over sedentarism” (2000:13). In a world where people and power can flow freely, barriers, borders, checkpoints, and frontiers need to be cleared. Today, new global powers—in whatever forms they assume—thrive on this fluidity, impermanence, and nomadism, and it is in this liquid state that such powers find a warrant for their sustained dominance.

“Gangnam Style” exemplifies this new global power that feeds on the fluidity of space (cultural and physical) and time. The influence of Psy’s work is located in the porosity of the local, the global, and other “locals.” There is no need for contextual meaning or linguistic clarity, which is exemplary of culture in liquid modernity. In this condition of fluidity, where culture and cultural identity are, according to Bauman, similar to an enormous department store, people are, first and foremost, consumers (2001:16), and, for many who do not comprehend the Korean language, the incomprehensibility of lyrics in hangul, for example, does not matter as much as the need to consume this foreign pop commodity. In this complex network of “locals” and “globals,” the throughflows of global relations inevitably define the fluid identities of the local. Yet “Gangnam Style” goes further to dissolve the distinction between global and local and repackages such solids as transcultural consumer products. The perfunctory use of English in the song (and other K-pop tunes) is a case in point. In a willing subscription to global interpellation, K-pop music has always included English phrases to assist in its “foreign” intrusion. In “Gangnam Style,” this linguistic tokenism is evident in the phrase, “Hey Sexy Lady.” Apart from exemplifying Adorno’s notion of baby talk where the linguistically dislocated phrase can be read as yet another vacuous expression common to pop music, “Hey Sexy Lady” becomes a means to make the foreign familiar and the familiar alien. As a consequence of the state of liquidity, both that which is solidly familiar and that which is foreign become liquefied; linguistic signifiers lose meaning in fluid contexts. If one subscribes to the belief that language, not merely the script but also its sounds and intonations, delineates culture and cultural identity, “Gangnam Style” seems to perform liquid culture—a world culture of diluted hybridities.

Such a liquefaction of “Koreanness” is also evidenced in the way the success of Psy’s song and video have garnered greater interest in all things “Korean.” In response, Korean authorities and representatives now measure Korea’s place in the world via these global interpolations, which include heart-wrenching soap operas, consumer kitsch, and K-pop. The “local,” as it is now defined, is called into being as a consequence of the global. Cautioning against the celebration of this mediatization and popularization of global-Korea, Mark Ravina argues that there is potential harm to Korean cultural identity when promoters or government officials determine “Koreanness” by the impact of the Korean Wave. In considering the success of this global marketing, foreign consumers become the arbiters of cultural value and “[t]his projection has the ironic impact of making Korean culture successful to the degree that it is enjoyed by non-Koreans (Ravina 2009:4). While the concepts of “Koreanness,” “Korean culture,” and “Korean” are recognizably problematic and are themselves subjects of critical debate, Ravina’s statement exemplifies how, in the condition of liquid modernity, the local exists as a fluid relation to the global; locality and “localness” are ontologically engendered from the global.

Adopting a more optimistic perspective, there are many who regard the global popularity of “Gangnam Style” as a cause for celebration. “Gangnam Style” succeeded in creating a new cultural product shared by peoples of all races, nationalities, and beliefs; it promoted a oneness that embraces an erasure of difference. In many ways, apart from its features of hangul lyrics and Asian dancing bodies, “Gangnam Style” is acultural, with modernity being its visual principle. As in its generic counterparts in American pop, hip hop, rap, and techno, the images in the video come rapid-fire. They feature iconic signifiers of acultural global modernity—the

hypermodern district of Gangnam with its skyscrapers, fast cars, subways, speedboats, and yoga classes. While there are more “local” interjections—of *janggi* (Korean chess) and a horse stable—these do not in any way establish a sense of locality or the “local.” The Gangnam of “Gangnam Style” is archetypical of a modern global metropolis. Its global appeal is located in its performance of capitalism—a neocultural selfhood that embraces transcultural (and arguably acultural) signifiers of material progress. What “Gangnam Style” performs is a pageant of modernity’s material icons even as the song purportedly parodies these symbols and attitudes to mock them. Viewed through a Marxian lens, “Gangnam Style” can be said to exemplify the one true universal: material capitalism.

This material consumption of Otherness is evident in the numerous “Gangnam Style” flash mobs that have appeared on the internet, such as Gangnam Style Flashmob Sweden 2012 (Kpop Nonstop 2012) and the “Good Morning America” Times Square mob (see Oldenburg 2012). The numerous reproductions exemplify a techno-tribalism and a rapacious desire to belong to new and larger communities that extend beyond familiar solid boundaries. More significantly, it reveals material modernity’s liquid boundaries, which ebb and flow into Other cultures, simultaneously engulfing and amalgamating them. In “Gangnam Style,” the infectious dance reifies a transcultural belief in the liquid universal qualities and appeal of rhythm and movement. For a non-Korean speaking listener, Psy’s incomprehensible rap mutterings can be ignored when bodies, regardless of nationality, gender, class, age, and ethnicity, move and mingle to the rhythms of the music. According to an article in the South Korean newspaper *Dong-a Ilbo*, people in 222 countries accessed the video from the day of its release (15 July 2012) to 28 September 2012—more countries than the 193 member countries of the United Nations! The moving body, driven by rhythm, becomes the site of the global intercultural performative. Partaking in this Gangnam community exemplifies a mode of consumption that awards importance through a sharing of physical-virtual space. As Bauman posits, such a sharing of physical space with other actors engaged in a similar task or activity grants importance and prominence to this action through an “approval of numbers” (2000:97). This approval gives the action significance through its sheer repetition and the number of people involved. The neo-universal importance of “Gangnam Style” is predicated upon such an approval of numbers. It was even endorsed by the United Nations when Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, a Korean, claimed that the song has “unlimited global reach” and could be “a force for world peace” (Agence France-Presse 2012). According to Bauman’s theory, the pop ritual of dancing the “horse trot” advances a one-world mental-



Figure 2. *Oppan Gangnam Style*: The zany horse dance that inspired many copycat videos and flash mobs around the world. (Screenshot from the official music video of “Gangnam Style”; © YG Entertainment Inc. All rights reserved)

ity akin to Coca-Cola’s 1971 advertising slogan, “I’d Like to Buy the World a Coke.” Mounting steeds and galloping to the same beats brings the world together in “perfect harmony”—just like Coke does, according to the ad’s lyrics.

Performing the “Gangnam Style” dance encourages a belief in a neocommunitarianism that seems to be desirable in this fluid postnational modernity characterized by fragile and impermanent personal identities and bonds. In such a state, the need for a utopian community is

a predictable reaction (see Bauman 2000:170). Community cleanses and distills differences and conflict; it creates a myth of solidarity and oneness (see Sennett 1996:36). This “we” feeling, however, compels a rejection and blindness to a deeper acknowledgement of difference, as Sennett argues (1996:39). While Ban Ki-moon may have expressed the sentiments of many who saw a community of horse-trotters as a neoteric utopia, it is not a utopia blind to race or culture. While some may choose to disregard the incomprehensible language, no one can ignore the phenomenological effects of listening. The persistence of the sonic qualities of the Korean language, its presence as accent and intonation, performs an Otherness that comprises the stereotypical representations of “Asianness,” which has inadvertently contributed to the success of “Gangnam Style” in the West. Images of an average-looking, rotund man accompanied by scrawny geeks dressed in yellow suits and other overweight men underscore the Asian stereotype of an inferior Other in relation to Western concepts of masculinity. With acuity, blogger and reviewer Deanna Pan describes how Psy conforms to the mainstream-friendly role of Asian male jester,

offering goofy laughs for all and, thanks to Psy’s decidedly non-pop star looks, in a very non-threatening package. Psy doesn’t even have to sing in English or be understood because it’s not the social critique offered by the lyrics that matters to the audience, but the marriage of the funny music video, goofy dance, and a rather catchy tune, of which two of the elements are comical and [...] non-threatening. Psy is “Asian man who makes it” because he fits neatly into our [America’s] pop cultural milieu where in Asia men are either kung-fu fighters, Confucius-quoting clairvoyants, or the biggest geeks in high school. (Pan 2012)

Echoing this sentiment, Perry Lam of the *South China Morning Post* posits that it is Psy’s performance of clumsiness, the spectacle of ridiculousness, and the foolish-looking dance moves that make him so endearing because he conforms to racial prejudices of the “assumed ineptitude and humdrum squareness of Asians” (Lam 2012). This, according to Lam, reassures Westerners that “the yellow peril won’t be coming any time soon” (Lam 2012).

From a metaperformative perspective, the global success of “Gangnam Style,” its “universal” appeal and exceptional reception, occurred only because of the confluence of existing typecasts and perceptions of Asians. Like the visual imagery of capitalist modernity and the musicalological familiarity of mimicked forms, the contagion in the West is the consequence of an Otherness that is consumed and made the “same.” This sameness is not one of surface identity but deeper preconceptions and predeterminations: Psy is the “feminine” Asian whose unmasculine frame, mannerisms, and personality make him easily “consumable.” In tandem, Hyuna, his female counterpart and love interest in the video, and once a member of the popular all-female K-pop band Wonder Girls, subscribes to, even as she consciously performs, the Asian archetype of a Geisha beauty.



Figure 3. *Gangnam for all: The final dance, which reflects U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s belief that “Gangnam Style” could be a force for world peace. (Screenshot from the official music video of “Gangnam Style”; © YG Entertainment Inc. All rights reserved)*

The postracial, postnationalist communitarian spirit seemingly celebrated by the multiple reproductions of the “Gangnam Style” techno-ritual is born of a consumption of foreignness. It is not simply a desire to make Otherness superficially identical to oneself but rather a formulation of Others as familiar abstractions that can be consumed like any consumer commodity. In that act of consumption, as Bauman has observed, what is “outside” is made familiar or “alike” and identical so as to repel and push back what is perceived to be the threat and danger of difference. Such a reconstruction of the “out there” made into the familiar likeness of the “in here,” a community of similarity, is essentially, then, a narcissistic venture—“a projection of *l’armour de soi* [self-love]” (Bauman 2000:181).

Speed

The Dromological Condition

In this condition of melting solids and growing fluidity, time acquires greater importance as space dissolves rapidly. As seen in “Gangnam Style,” the solidity of spaces melts and the velocity of progress liquefies cultural distinction. Far more importantly, liquidity impacts speed since fluids are, ontologically, in a state of movement; time and space, as Bauman observes, become the characterizing struggle of modernity (2000:9). Due to modern means of mobility—of information, bodies, and consciousness itself—liquidity and speed of movement have become synonymous conditions. Velocity gains greater dominance in liquid modernity and speed itself becomes prized as an objective.

The celebration of speed is evident in “Gangnam Style” not only in its portrayal of the liquid spatiality of acultural modernity but in its “thingness”—its visual vocabulary, rapid editing sequences, and musicality: the video reflects and reifies a modern obsession with speed that moves beyond arguments of cultural space, locality, and location. “Gangnam Style” propagates speed even as it *is* speed itself—both as form and content, product and process. Recognizably, it is with speed that “Gangnam Style” established its dominance in the global culture industry.

This quality of speed that is embodied in “Gangnam Style” exemplifies French cultural theorist Paul Virilio’s concept of a dromosphere—a world asphyxiated by speed and arrested by a dictatorship of movement. In Greek, “dromos” refers to the “race course.” Virilio, however, conceives it to be the process and activity of the race. Dromology is hence the science (or logic) of speed and it is concerned with how conditions of human society—the social, political, and economic—have become accelerated. As a consequence, the conception of duration, time, movement, the transference of people and objects, and the transmission of images and ideas are now compressed; a “logic of acceleration” (Armitage 2000) thus presides over the modern world and is the fundamental principle of liquid modernity. As Virilio argues in many of his works, in particular *Speed and Politics* (1977), *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* ([1980] 1991), and *Open Sky* (1997), human society is founded on a political economy of speed. Technology’s purpose is to increase speed, and society demands more technology and, hence, greater speeds. There is, as such, a predatory relationship between growth and speed; one yields more of the other where both exist symbiotically. While speed was once a necessary condition for progress, hypermodernity breaks that relationship; today, speed is valued in and of itself. Such a fracture happened when humans surpassed the speed of sound. Traveling faster than sonic speeds became insufficient. We now seek to travel as fast as light and at “warp speeds” to satisfy the insatiable desire for greater speeds. The inevitable outcome is that speed is no longer a means but “a milieu” (Virilio in Armitage 2001:71). Tele-technologies, live feeds, satellite signals, and fiber-optic communications have created a homogenization of speed that is the chief feature of contemporary society. Progress equals acceleration, yet however fast we move, we are always already behind. And so humanity’s need for speed remains voracious, and this arrested-ness to movement becomes the very structure of existence.

In such a milieu, geographical boundaries are surpassed and erased by time. In the dromosphere, speed eradicates space. The wireless internet, Web 2.0, and speed-of-light fiber optics



Figure 4. *The Dromological Condition*: “Gangnam Style” exemplifies how globalization is, as Paul Virilio posits, the speed of light. (Screenshot from the official music video of “Gangnam Style”; © YG Entertainment Inc. All rights reserved)

evidence this dromological condition. The contagion of “Gangnam Style,” predicated on these hyperspeed modes of technology, is a product of the music video’s exploitation of speed. YouTube’s ubiquity and instantaneity perfectly fit “Gangnam Style”’s revelry in speed as seen in the song’s musicological and choreographic structure. As testimony to this incredulous rate of movement, “Gangnam Style” received more than 500,000 YouTube views on the first day of its release. Two months later, it entered the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the “most liked” video, scoring an average of nine million views per day. Six months after its release, Psy’s “Gangnam Style” made history by becoming the first YouTube video with a billion views. As of 20 August 2014 the video had 2,073,581,000 hits (officialpsy 2012). This rapid accumulation of viewers over what is a relatively short period of time demonstrates the time compression in a dromosphere. More significantly, it shows how speed dissolves geographical and cultural space. “Gangnam Style”’s viral spread throughout the e-connected world is proof that speed has become “the categorical imperative of the modern world” (Armitage 2001:83).

The peer-sharing platform YouTube has not only transformed the music and film industries, it has, more significantly, radically changed the way seeing and spectatorship are performed and perceived. Its distinguishing characteristics—de-contextualized extracts, narrative segments, and the endless string of related fragments that can be played continuously and looped interminably—epitomize modernity’s extreme addiction to movement and speed. In an interview with John Armitage, Virilio observes how a shift from extensive to intensive time occurred with the advent of cinema (in Armitage 2001:76). To view a film, people had to adapt their capacity to comprehend images to 16 images per second. With developments in cinematic technology, this frame rate accelerated to 24 frames per second and, currently, it can reach up to 60 frames per second (76). YouTube has also introduced 48 and 60 frames per second videos. With YouTube time is compressed and extracted even further, with its shorter, fleeting, contextless images and video sequences. In many respects, YouTube redefines ways of comprehending time and its popularity is not due to its interactive, user-friendly nature, as is commonly believed, but rather its speed (of dissemination and reception).

The rapid-fire visual imagery of the YouTube video is insufficient in explaining “Gangnam Style”’s speed of motion. The “Gangnam Style” song itself is fast. In the numerous self-published sheet music transcriptions of “Gangnam Style” floating in cyberspace, the commonly marked tempo is 126 to 132 beats per minute.⁵ Such a rhythmic pace is certainly considered fast but the hypervelocity of “Gangnam Style,” its vigorous tempo accompanied by equally hyperactive moves, outpaces life itself: On 11 December 2012, Eamonn Kilbride, a middle-aged man from Blackburn, hyperventilated and died shortly after attempting to keep in step with “Gangnam Style”’s horse trots (see Hall 2012). While this tragicomic incident may be an isolated event, it aptly demonstrates the violence of speed.

In addition to the rapid rhythms of the song, the condition of speed is also built into the video’s editing. Images transition every two seconds, and jump cuts, contrast cuts, as well as other modes of discontinuous editing dislocate time and space as *mise-en-scènes* change swiftly. In tandem with the increasing tempo that climaxes and then grinds to a dramatic pause just before the first chorus, contrast cuts between two spaces, the interior of a tour bus and an open ground close to overhead highways (and in the second refrain, two people—Psy and Hyuna), flash in an alternating sequence until they dissolve and blend into each other. This twice-repeated editing sequence reifies conditions of the dromosphere: real space melts as the compressed time of rapidly transforming images, scenes, texts, and contexts accelerates beyond sensorial comprehension. “Gangnam Style” moves at the speed of light—and as light that persistently titillates the ocular reflex with its line-of-sight perspective.

Perhaps the most salient characteristic of “Gangnam Style” that dissolves cultural space is its imagery. Specific sequences in the video could be said to advocate speed as the new global cultural imperative. In the finale of the video, Psy dances in sync with a large crowd and as a gesture of its cultural ideology, intentional or otherwise, this diverse collective includes people from various walks of life: a Taekwondo fighter, a chambermaid, a woman in *hanbok* (traditional Korean dress), a boxer, a doctor, a university graduate, a chef, a traffic warden, as well as a variety of other types. The choreography of class diversity can be regarded as an overt, self-conscious performance of “Gangnam Style”’s universality and globalism where, beneath cosmetic differences, everyone is, disconcertingly, “Gangnam.” This reading is also paratextually similar to the song’s popular refrain: “Oppan Gangnam Style” (translated as “Big Brother is Gangnam Style,” with Psy referring to himself in the third person). While the dance’s infectious popularity seems to corroborate the video’s assertion of “one world under Psy,” the strobe lights pulsing overhead, moving to the rhythm of the music, perform meta-theatrically the converse: they punctuate the video’s intercultural narrative with a new universal value—the speed of light. As bodies move robustly and rhythmically to the song, the swerving and shimmering lights slice and sever these dancing bodies as they shoot past the virtual space of the dance to the real spaces inhabited by viewers. The lights and the speeds at which they project erase the space of communal diversity. While the rhythmized culturally diverse bodies convey an intercultural “one world,” the strobe lights corporealize bodies enslaved to, and dictated by, speed. This provocative closing sequence in the video exemplifies, with curious accuracy, Virilio’s belief that speed does not merely change the world, it “becomes the world” (in Armitage 2000).

“Gangnam Style” arguably remains one of the most evident commodities of cultural globalization brought about by high-speed tele-visual technologies. Its predication on speed illustrates how globalization not only moves at but *is* “the speed of light” (Virilio in Armitage 2000). The music video’s dissolution of real (cultural) spaces and its advocacy of speed both in its form and function prove how, in a dromospheric liquid state, globalization is not simply economic or cultural homogeneity but a drive towards a “‘one time system’ of the present instant” (Bartram 2004:291). This singular time of the intensely present is evident in the video’s viscous con-

5. For some examples see Online Sheet Music (2014) and Musicnotes, Inc. (2014).

tagion and the numerous, almost-instantaneous re-productions across the world that further establish how the history of liquid modernity collapses under a single form of temporality—a singular time of the instant present. As Virilio describes, globalization and virtualization have engendered a new universal time of the instantaneous that dissolves and erases real spaces with a global time of multimedia and cyberspace. This global time dominates and dictates local time and space, changing the way in which history unfolded in the past as local temporalities and spaces. Such an obsession with speed and the instantaneous has resulted in, as Virilio believes, the need to replace the term “global” with “glocal” (in Purser 1999)—a condition where local and global spaces collapse in the “one time” present moment.

In “Gangnam Style,” this amalgamation of the local and global as the glocal logic of speed is performed not only as the final scene of the video but, as earlier posited, in its mode of transmission. Every repetition of the dance, in various real spaces around the world, reifies the condition of a global time. What is performed is a re-enactment of this revelry in speed, a dissolution of the boundaries between scopic cyberspace and real spaces. Despite the superficial differences with the “ur text,” these parodic imitations exist as homages to the architectonic structure of technology that reaches “virtual totalization” (Hanes 1996:186) and engulfs both chronological time and real space.

Forgetting Gangnam Style

Even as Gangnam Style remains a pop cultural phenomenon, it is, recognizably, little more than another icon of the culture industry. It promotes sameness as “silliness” and contextless inanity as “universal.” Consumed by this culture of speed and propelled by endless acceleration, the music video’s instantaneous rise and demise is a reminder of a global obsession with the next bit of consumer kitsch, which is always funky, amusing, entertaining, readily consumed, and easily forgotten. Consequently, in this culture of consumerism, such speeds render forgetting imperative.

In *Open Sky* (1997), Virilio writes about modernity’s dislocated memory as a consequence of the changing nature of perspective due to the incessant developments in optical technologies. Perception has changed as large-scale optics (or what Virilio terms “active optics” [1997:35]) accompanying digital and virtual media have replaced the small-scale, passive optics of linear perspective. The human capacity for comprehending “horizons”—distances, depth of field, “near versus far,” “here and there”—have been replaced in large-scale optics with real-time images that move at the speed of light and eradicate spatial distance. The consequence of this is a “trans-apparent horizon” or “trans-appearance”—a condition in which the classical perspective of time and place, including physical and cultural horizons, is superseded by fleeting “trans-appearances” generated by electronic and digital media. Modernity’s embrace of such technologies (such as YouTube) has resulted in a radical reconfiguration of collective imagination and memory. Physical horizons, real spaces, duration, and history no longer matter; there is only the intense present or the “telepresent” (36) conjured by speed technologies, or what Virilio terms real-time technologies. The intensity of time-compression and the instantaneous disrupt serious reflection and creative imagination; it creates societies where the future and the past make no temporal sense because they no longer have the sense of space and duration to comprehend memory. The practical consequence of this trans-appearance and indirect visibility is the “incredible possibility of a ‘civilization of forgetting’” (36).

Occupying and moving in this space of speed, “Gangnam Style”’s expeditious rise to fame is a phenomenon difficult to ignore. Its dislocated time-compression, the hypermodern “here and now,” its acultural spaces and global rhythms reverberate with a telepresence—an “everywhere at once”—that dominates the real and digital worlds. More significantly, its speedy appearance and disappearance exemplify modernity’s condition of a collective forgetting and cultural dementia in a liquid global world. As a product of speed technologies, and embodying speed itself, the video’s precipitous fame always already heralded its own rapid demise; such is the

condition of forgetting that is characteristic of the liquid dromosphere. While some may believe that the song can live on “permanently” in cyberspace, the horses have since returned to their stables and the popularity of the music video has declined significantly. “Gangnam Style” fades because modernity’s compulsive fixation with what Walter Benjamin called the *jetztzeit* (here-and-now; see Benjamin 1940) compels us to forget.

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