

POLITICS, PARODIES, AND THE PARADOX OF PSY'S 'GANGNAM STYLE'

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ABSTRACT

In 2012, 'Gangnam Style' occasioned large flash mobs, three of the early ones taking place in Pasadena, Times Square in New York, and Sydney, Australia. Today, Psy, the singer of 'Gangnam Style', is regularly talked about as having brought K-pop to the world beyond East and Southeast Asia, and Korean tourism chiefs are actively planning a Korean Wave street in Gangnam, the district of Seoul lampooned by the song. But, 'Gangnam Style' has proved challenging to K-pop fans, who have resisted its gender stereotyping, its comic framing, and its simple dance moves that subsume the aesthetics of movement under a sequence of locations and action vignettes. At the same time, foreign success has given the song, and its singer, legitimacy in Korea so much so that, despite lyrics and video images that critique modern urban life and caricature the misogynistic failures of its protagonist, Psy headlined the inauguration celebrations of Korea's incoming president, Park Geun-hye, in February 2013. This paper explores the song, its reception and critique by fans and others, and notes how, in an ultimate paradox that reflects the age of social media and the individualization of consumerism, the parodies the song spawned across the globe enabled Koreans to celebrate its success while ignoring its message.

Keywords: Korean Wave, K-pop, popular music, parody, mimesis, consumerism, social media, Gangnam Style, Psy.

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, 'Gangnam Style' occasioned large flash mobs, three of the early ones taking place in Pasadena, Times Square in New York, and Sydney, Australia. Wikipedia lists additional flash mobs in October and November 2012 that each attracted between 12,000 and 20,000 participants in Seoul, Sulawesi, Milan, Paris and Rome. Psy (Park Jae-sang), the singer of 'Gangnam Style' has, not surprisingly, regularly been talked about as bringing K-pop to the world beyond East and Southeast Asia. He is said to have reinvigorated pop production, as having

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