

Domestic *Hallyu*: K-Pop Metatexts and the Media’s Self-Reflexive Gesture

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Television serves as a crucial medium for shaping the South Korean public’s response to the success of *hallyu*, or the Korean Wave, in news reports, variety shows, and celebrity interview programs. Further, in the last decade, several K-pop idols have been cast in serial narrative television shows that fictionalize *hallyu* creative industries. These metatextual shows domesticate transnational idol pop celebrities by contributing layers of televisual intimacy to their star personae and by seeming to expose the inner workings of the entertainment industries. This essay focuses on two notable examples, *Dream High* (2011, KBS2) and *Answer Me 1997* (2012, tvN), to consider what this proliferation of popular narratives about media production and reception on South Korean television signifies. I argue that the intertextual presentation of K-pop on Korean television negotiates a complex relationship between popular culture and public culture in South Korea. The metatextual relay revealed in these shows—what I characterize as the media’s self-reflexive critical gesture—provides access to the ideological impasses of the attempt to produce intimate *national* publics through globalized contents.

Keywords: metatextuality, television, K-drama, K-pop, hallyu, Korean Wave

If the ideological function of mass culture is understood as a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are “managed” and defused, rechanneled and offered spurious objects, then some preliminary step must also be theorized in which these same impulses—the raw material upon which the process works—are initially awakened within the very text that seeks to still them.

—Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*

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Date submitted: 2016–09–03

¹ This article was supported by the Academy of Korean Studies Grant (AKS-2016-C01) and the Yonsei University Future-leading Research Initiative of 2015 (2016-22-0118).

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In autumn 2011, Korean pop supergroup Big Bang won the MTV Europe Music Awards title for “Worldwide Act.” This achievement affirmed official reports of the growing popularity of Korean pop culture or *hallyu*²—the Korean Wave—beyond Asia, particularly following the outpouring of support by European K-pop fans in Paris a few months earlier, which had taken *hallyu* watchers in South Korea by surprise. Throughout spring and summer 2011, South Korean media focused on the notion of “*hallyu* diplomacy” in newspapers and television, amplifying in domestic media the reverberations of the overseas reception of Korean pop culture commodities.

Following their triumph at the MTV awards, Big Bang members G-Dragon (Kwon Ji-yong) and Daesung (Kang Dae-sung) appeared on the Korean variety program *Healing Camp*—a celebrity interview show produced and broadcast by SBS (Seoul Broadcasting System), one of the three main broadcast television stations in South Korea. During the interview, band leader Kwon confessed to a surprising gaffe at the MTV Europe Music Awards ceremony: Although the show’s producers had requested that all participating performers speak English onstage, since the ceremony would be shown in multiple media markets, Kwon recounted that he had accidentally accepted his award not in English, but in American-accented Korean—the lingua franca of Korean hip-hop. Kwon redeemed himself by framing his unconscious slip in cultural-nationalist terms, stating that he must have been struck by the urge to highlight the *Koreanness* of Big Bang’s music, even in the act of addressing a primarily non-Korean audience. The fact that Kwon’s elaboration of this “slip” made for an amusing anecdote on domestic broadcast television—particularly, a show premised on celebrity confession (see also Ho, 2012)—draws attention to the K-pop idol’s constant negotiation of his rhetorical appeal to both international and domestic audiences.

Media Critique and K-Pop on Television

Korea’s idol celebrity model is based on the expectation that performers maximize their popular appeal as multiplatform entertainers; thus, most K-pop idols also serve as variety show emcees, actors, and commercial film (CF) and print advertising models. As Choi (2015) has suggested, this nonspecialization by idols is an outgrowth of the imperative to stretch the entertainment industries’ human resources, as small-scale national industries attempt to achieve broad regional and global reach. This episode of *Healing Camp*, broadcast on February 20, 2012, was orchestrated to give Kwon and Kang the opportunity to perform their contrition following a period of inactivity after Kwon was convicted of marijuana use, a serious stain on his reputation in the superficially wholesome world of K-pop, and Kang was involved in a fatal auto accident. The show staged an intimate “therapy” session to “heal” both the artists and the public, to facilitate reconciliation. Domestic broadcast television is thus an immensely important theater for K-pop celebrities, a medium in which they must constantly perform their approachability in order to maintain a semblance of intimacy with Korean viewers (see Figures 1 and 2). P. H. Kim and H. Shin (2010) outline the challenges faced by Korean rock and pop artists in connecting with Korean audiences and, in some cases, evading

² *Hallyu* is by no means a stable term, referring sometimes to the Korean pop cultural commodities that are increasingly consumed globally and other times to the reception of these commodities. JungBong Choi (2015) has cogently argued for the need to emphasize the term’s multiple meanings and the ideologies they engender, especially as he sees the term deployed in official state discourse to buttress arguments for expanding South Korean “soft power.”

ensorship by the military dictatorship. American soul, psychedelia, and rock were introduced to the Korean public via the Armed Forces Network (U.S. military radio), and musicians seeking to earn money in the lean postwar years learned American songs to play gigs on U.S. bases in a kind of whiteface. Given this history, contemporary K-pop performers face pressure to maintain their familiarity to Korean audiences, against the imperialist pull of U.S. popular culture.



Figure 1. G-Dragon (Kwon Ji-yong) and Dae Sung (Kang Dae Sung) appear as special guests on the SBS talk show Healing Camp. The intertitles in this screenshot read: "GD and Dae Sung finally open their mouths."

This essay argues that the metatextual presentation of K-pop on Korean television signals a complex, overdetermined relationship between popular culture and public culture as shaped by the commercial-public development of South Korea's media and culture industries.³ Television, in its intimacy, quotidian rhythms, and national purview, serves as a crucial medium for shaping the national public's response to the success of hallyu, in ubiquitous news reports, variety shows, and celebrity interview programs. In addition, a growing number of K-pop idols are now cast in serial narrative television shows that fictionalize the Korean entertainment industries.⁴ These conspicuously metatextual shows create

³ Both popular culture and public culture are signified by the same term: *taejung* (public) *munhwa* (culture).

⁴ K-pop idols appear on television in a number of contexts, both in fictional shows and in reality-based television. A fascinating hybrid is the "faux-reality" show *We Got Married* (*Uri Kyeolhon Haessoyo*, MBC), in which *hallyu* stars are filmed as though they are married and living together. In particular, the show focuses on scenes of the "couple" going about mundane daily tasks, such as cooking and housecleaning.

dramatic appeal by filtering the stakes of media production through an affective investment in the generic trials and tribulations of their fictional celebrity characters. They often rely on a reversal of the relation between artifice and authenticity, as fictional portrayals of the entertainment industry seem to expose its inner workings. Moreover, the appearance of stars on the familiar televisual stage offers intimate access to the performers in order to domesticate their transnational pop idol personae. As evidenced by what appears to be a practice of *direct* inquiry into their capacity to produce social fact, South Korean media seem preoccupied with their influence over public opinion. This preoccupation on the part of media producers with metacinema and metatelevision seems to have reached its apex in the film *Behind the Camera* (*Twitdamhwa: Kamdoki Michössöyo*, 2012), directed by E. J-yong, and the television drama *The Producers* (*Peurodyusa*, KBS2, 2015), a show that centers on the melodrama of producing TV content. The proliferation of narratives about media production and reception in South Korean film and television attests to what I characterize in this essay as the media's self-reflexive critical gesture, which has intensified in the last decade.



Figure 2. The pop stars' invitation of intimacy on domestic television contrasts with their typical larger-than-life stage personas, as pictured here on tour. Photo credit: YG Entertainment.

The structure of *We Got Married* shares a preoccupation with the intimate details of the celebrity's home life also exhibited by K-dramas that cast pop idols as pop idols.

The operations of this metatextual form and the ways in which broadcast television in South Korea calls into question the relationship between public and commercial broadcasting, state and consumer culture, and media literacy and cultural citizenship thus serve as my main objects of inquiry. I analyze the relationship between broadcast television in South Korea and the globalizing project of hallyu to investigate how television functions as *both* an arena of state control and public morality *and* as an engine of transnational flows of cultural commodities. I integrate the hermeneutic activity of close reading with a discussion of industry structures and practices, because I contend that the key feature of Korean television's self-reflexive critique—its narrativization—demands the former critical method. Time and again, the conditions of production and reception of Korean mass media are fictionalized so that they constitute the diegetic space of the drama series' narrative.⁵ Although these texts could be read as uncritically celebrating the culture industries and using a veil of apparent reflexivity to conceal their primarily commercial motives, I would like to suggest, as Fredric Jameson has claimed, that "the work of art does not so much express ideology as, by endowing the latter with aesthetic representation and figuration . . . [end] up enacting the latter's own virtual unmasking and self-criticism" (Jameson, 1979, p. 147). In the texts that I read here, the viewer's perceived target of critique determines the extent to which the shows' metatextuality operates as unmasking or obfuscating performance. In consideration of the metatextual critical potential of K-dramas (Korean serialized narrative television) in their domestic context, I assert that the texts' figurations of celebrity and fandom shed critical light on the mass media's own fantasies of their capacity to produce "intimate" *national* publics.⁶

If meta-entertainment television performs Korean media's self-critique, how does this performance also serve the aims of the broadcast industry? Any attempt to answer this question must start with the particularities of the South Korean television broadcast system and the ways in which it consolidates a centralized television landscape, despite the decline of public broadcasting in the context of media privatization and new media convergence cultures. In *Media and Democratic Transition in South Korea*, Ki-Sung Kwak (2012) argues that South Korean television, unlike other mass media, continues to operate much as it did during the authoritarian period. Indeed, in Kwak's analysis, television has maintained structures of governance that ensure state control and intervention. Efforts to foster a robust civil society by ensuring a free and independent press seem to have circumvented the broadcast television arena in South Korea, largely because of the historically commercial operations of KBS (Korean Broadcasting System), MBC (Munhwa Broadcasting Channel), and SBS—the nation's three major network hegemony. This has surprising implications, considering the dominance that broadcast television maintains as a purveyor of news, entertainment, and advertising. Moreover, changes in the sites of consumption have not significantly loosened the big three networks' hold on the television audience. Though viewer feedback on network websites has made space for audience participation, the transposition of television content onto the internet and mobile communications devices has effectively extended the influence of the main broadcast networks into other sites of everyday activity.

⁵ I've written elsewhere about two other such reflexive K-dramas, *Oh! My Lady (O! Mai Reidi)* and *Greatest Love (Ch'oegoŏi Sarang)*. See M. Cho (2015).

⁶ I take the phrase "intimate publics" from Lauren Berlant (2008), who theorizes the affective structures of imagined relations forged through the consumption of particular narrative genres.

In the context of media exports, K-drama has been touted as an important catalyst of the Korean Wave and has played a key role in advancing international interest in Korean celebrities and culture industries. Produced for broadcast on domestic television, yet also widely disseminated via syndication on terrestrial networks in other media markets, through online fan-subbing sites such as Viki.com, and video-hosting platforms such as YouTube, Toudou, and Dailymotion, K-dramas are simultaneously the medium for conveying the nationally identified project of globalization and a transnational convergence phenomenon. The popularity of K-drama in general, and the representation of K-pop within K-drama more specifically, thus brings into view both the transnational circulation of media *and* the contours of a national media public structured by the syncretism of its cultural objects.

In this article, I discuss K-dramas that take up the subject matter of idol celebrity and the cultures of fandom that have arisen in tandem with K-pop's development as an export commodity to examine the production of a discourse and ideology of hallyu success and the national triumph of Korean culture industries. To support my argument that hallyu's success as a transnational media convergence phenomenon requires a supplementary national discourse that reintegrates hallyu cultural commodities into a consolidated image of national prowess, this essay examines two recent K-dramas that stage this very process within their diegeses. These shows cast current or former pop entertainers as either aspiring pop artists or K-pop fans (and particularly fanatic ones at that).⁷ In so doing, these shows generate a self-critique of K-pop and, more broadly, the Korean media industries, even in the process of promoting Korean popular culture as national creative industry. This critique is important to understanding hallyu's epiphenomenon of producing a South Korean national imaginary through an externally projected gaze.

In their preoccupation with popular media, the recent series *Dream High* (KBS2, broadcast January–February 2011) and *Answer Me 1997* (tvN, broadcast July–August 2012) address the disjunctive consequences of the push to globalize as a *national* survival strategy in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, and thus tackle the incomplete transformation of state-controlled broadcast media into something like a mediatized public sphere. This essay tracks the shows' formal and narrative strategies for addressing concerns about the end of politics, generational divides, and youth disenfranchisement while shoring up the celebratory discourse of hallyu. Scholarship on hallyu tends to reflect much the same ambivalence toward the phenomenon, expressing consternation over K-pop's questionable gender politics and its harmful effects on body image (see, e.g., Epstein & Joo, 2012; Epstein & Turnbull, 2014), yet also evaluating positively its popularity abroad, for example, in overcoming antagonistic interstate relations and forging something like an East Asian pop cultural sphere (see, e.g., Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; K. Lee, 2008; Shin, 2009). What emerges in the varied assessments of hallyu is a dialectic of celebration and denigration along with an urge to synthesize clashing readings of Korean popular culture's significance.

My own endeavors here are not exempt from the latter characterization. My appreciation for the shows I examine coexists uneasily with my recognition of the ideological work they perform. I suggest, however, that producing this discomfort is an important characteristic of the dramas' metatextual strategy. Although it seems as if the shows manipulate their reflexive stance on the Korean mediascape to deceive viewers, they also cultivate viewer interest by owning up to their reliance on clichés and generic

⁷ Etymologically, *fan* is an abbreviated form of *fanatic*.

elements of melodramatic sentiment and focusing their narratives on the pleasures and perils of pop culture fantasies. I want to foreground my participation in the shows' complex economies of affect, which rely on and reveal the process of fan interpellation. I will return to a discussion of the effects of the shows' invocation of viewer reflexivity later in the essay. First, though, I turn to the relation between the national scope of television and the transnational campaigns of K-pop in *Dream High* and *Answer Me 1997*.

Pop Nationalism: *Dream High* and *Answer Me 1997*

We can start to make sense of the reduplication of meta-entertainment narratives when we look at them in the context of Korean media's double injunction to showcase its success as a sign of national prowess and to conceal its profit motives behind the rhetoric of cultural exchange. For example, Lee Soo Man, the founder and chief executive officer of SM Entertainment, the company behind such pop acts as first-generation idol groups H.O.T. and S.E.S., J-pop crossover success BoA, and regional favorites Girls' Generation and Super Junior, has freely explained his pop production strategy in the language of "cultural technology."⁸ Within domestic news media, various entertainment companies promote their relationships to their artists and trainees using metaphors of kinship and pedagogy.⁹ The idol training process has also been televised in a number of reality TV programs, and entertainment companies now routinely feature "behind-the-scenes" footage on artists' websites and as extras on concert DVDs. Against this backdrop of reality programming, where idol celebrity is mythologized via demystification, the K-drama *Dream High* enacts the fantasy that idol celebrity can be systematically deconstructed and accessible to fans yet retain its appeal—in other words, the fantasy that stars are simultaneously ordinary and auratic.

Dream High capitalizes on the auras of Park Jin-young—aka JYP, the musician and founder of JYP Entertainment and the renowned producer behind Jung Ji-hoon's transformation into global pop star Rain—and actor Bae Yong-joon—aka Yon-sama, who became a hallyu star following the tremendous popularity of his K-drama *Winter Sonata* across East Asia (see Figures 3 and 4). According to Bae, the show's executive producer, and Park (hereafter JYP), who wrote the original story and was the show's creative director, choreographer, and songwriter, *Dream High* realizes the two entertainers' own long-held "dream" to collaborate on an uplifting project that would convey their core values.¹⁰

⁸ This candor seems to strike a nerve among U.S. critics, who find it an affront to the cherished narrative of aesthetic autonomy, even in pop music. An essay in *The New Yorker* (Seabrook, 2012) profiles Lee Soo Man and his pop idol "machine" with some incredulity and not just a hint of xenophobia.

⁹ An article on Starship Entertainment conveys the public relations image of the company "parenting" its talent (Yim, 2012). The same article characterizes YG Entertainment's strategy as "teacher-student," and JYP Entertainment's approach as building "friendship" between the artists and company founder, Park Jin-young.

¹⁰ JYP and Bae made this statement at a press conference preceding *Dream High's* air dates; the statement was edited and rebroadcast on the entertainment show *StarDate* (KBS), in January 2011. JYP states, "I'd never acted before, so I was nervous. But I think we did well, since we were basically playing ourselves."



Figure 3. JYP (Park Jin Young) is a 1990s pop star, songwriter, music producer, and head of JYP Entertainment, one of the top talent management companies in South Korea.

Dream High tells the story of a group of students at a fictional performing arts high school who become the next generation of K-pop idol stars. Bae and JYP also act in the drama, with Bae as the school's visionary talent-scout founder and JYP as an earnest and dedicated music and dance teacher. Both men's characters play off versions of their star texts—JYP is a K-pop star and hit maker in his own right, and Bae is an actor-turned-producer—expanding the appeal of the show beyond the teenage target demographic. However, Bae and JYP play secondary roles to the drama's main cast, an ensemble of young talent: idol stars Bae Suzy, Ok Taecyeon, Jang Woo-young, and Ham Eun-jung from the K-pop groups Miss A, 2PM, and T-

ara; solo vocalist IU (Lee Ji-eun); and actor Kim Soo Hyun.¹¹ Though the latter is the only non-K-pop performer among the younger cast members, he, like the pop idols, symbolizes the global aspirations of Korean pop culture. With the massive success of his 2014 K-drama *My Love From the Star*, Kim, like Bae and Rain, has indeed become an "Asian idol."¹² The young stars play aspiring pop idols in *Dream High* who must overcome various challenges to become commercially successful hallyu stars (see Figure 5).



Figure 4. Bae Yong Joon rose to international stardom with the popularity of the 2002 KBS2 drama *Winter Sonata*. Bae is now considered a paradigmatic hallyu star, given *Winter Sonata*'s explosive popularity when it was broadcast by NHK in Japan in 2003 and the show's enduring cult status.

¹¹ In this essay, I romanize the names of Korean celebrities according to their most common appearances on the online *hallyu* fansites, *seoulbeats.com*, *allkpop.com*, and the celebrities' Wikipedia entries, rather than the McCune-Reischauer romanization system, to preserve the system of reference produced by *hallyu*'s transnational and transmedia exchange.

¹² Shin (2009) details Rain's rejection of the national specificity of the *hallyu* star label, preferring instead to market himself as an "Asian idol."



Figure 5. Dream High poster. The show casts well-known young pop idols as ordinary students who aspire to pop stardom.

The show begins in the future, just as the mysterious Korean pop star “K” is to perform at the 2018 Grammy Awards in Los Angeles, having won global recognition with the “Artist of the Year” award. The drama then moves into an extended flashback, recounting the characters’ journeys from their school auditions to their professional debuts, and building suspense by withholding which character grows up to be K until the drama’s finale. As a futureward projection of a new generation of hallyu stars that follow Bae Yong-joon and JYP, the show seems to articulate the loftiest dreams of the Korean entertainment industries.

This national-commercial desire for global recognition runs throughout the drama, whose primary goal is to validate pop music as social glue and as the vehicle for emotional truth and self-realization. *Dream High* grounds its improbable assertions that *artifice* is the root of authenticity, dreams and the desires that drive them are more *real* than one’s present circumstances, and pop culture clichés are the best medium for honest and sincere expression in the strength of the drama’s overarching fantasy: the viewer’s identification with the aspiring K-pop star. While the rise to fame is a familiar trope in many popular narratives, what distinguishes *Dream High* is its insistence that primary structures of relation, including romantic love, kinship, and group (i.e., national) identity *rely* on the expressive power of pop music, effectively neutralizing the narcissistic connotations of the desire for celebrity. This strategic reframing of pop music’s cultural significance emphasizes the community-building rather than commodity-producing functions of popular culture—recasting pop singles as vehicles of populist sentiment.

Symbolizing the highbrow skeptic, the show's female protagonist, Hye-mi, most benefits from discovering pop music's value as a genre of emotional truth. Early in the series, haughty, bourgeois Hye-mi views pop music with disdain. She has trained for years to be an opera singer and plans to emigrate to New York to attend Julliard, until her irresponsible father bankrupts his business, goes into hiding to evade loan sharks, and leaves her to fend for herself. At the opposite end of the class/taste spectrum, the show's other lead is a character named Sam-dong, Hye-mi's romantic interest and a rural transplant to Seoul who fortuitously turns out to be a singing and songwriting genius. Sam-dong's status as *ch'on nom*, or country bumpkin, shields him from the corrupting effects of urban striving and thus makes him an exceptionally pure figure with an organic, unsullied love of music. The world of pop music performance becomes a democratic space in which Sam-dong, even with his uncultivated sensibilities, can find creative fulfillment and success (see Figures 6 and 7).



Figure 6. Played by Bae Suzy, a member of the JYP Entertainment–managed girl group Miss A, Hye-mi is an elitist character who initially dismisses pop in favor of classical music.



Figure 7. Sam-dong is Hye-mi's opposite in class, taste, and background—a country bumpkin with no formal musical training who embodies innocence and sincerity.

At school, Hye-mi and Sam-dong belong to a group of misfits that includes Jin-guk, the illegitimate son of a rising politician who refuses to acknowledge his paternity because of the damage Jin-guk might cause to his reputation. Since Hye-mi, Sam-dong, and Jin-guk are all effectively orphans in Seoul, their teacher takes them into his home and becomes their mentor and surrogate father—the very relationship to pop idols in training claimed by entertainment companies. The three students blossom under the benevolent care of their teacher, and the pursuit of pop stardom elides the characters' class differences and family dysfunction.

Across several episodes, Hye-mi, Sam-dong, Jin-guk, and other members of the misfit group rise to the top of their class through the virtues of perseverance, optimism, and teamwork. In these episodes, the students must complete various class assignments, including perfecting their pitch, writing a pop hit, and learning to transfer emotion through vocal performance. This last task receives extended treatment by the show; the characters repeatedly learn the lesson that the purpose of pop music is to *move* the audience, to offer comfort, cheer, and inspiration. By repeatedly underscoring this lesson, *Dream High* establishes the power of pop as a measure of sincerity and as a container for emotional truth.

At the same time that the show elevates pop music performance to the extent that it serves to make honest expression possible and evokes in the young characters a kind of civic consciousness, *Dream High* presents a critical take on the exploitative conditions of the Korean pop music industry and the media frenzy that renders Korean entertainment personalities objects of public scrutiny and abuse. The show's most dramatic story arc concerns a student who is sexually assaulted by her manager as quid pro quo for a spot on the agency's roster of idols. Like her classmate, Hye-mi also suffers sexual harassment by the

loan shark who is trying to collect her father's debt by forcing her to perform as a lounge singer in his gangster-operated nightclub. In both characters' struggle to achieve pop stardom, they must constantly confront those who would exploit them as sexual labor and mere commodities. By depicting the industry's predatory and sexist aspects, the show targets the media's sensationalism as the ultimate enabler and profiteer of the performer's victimization. The show thus critiques itself by bringing this perspective on the industry into view, even if it tries to neutralize this criticism by using the context to magnify the idol characters' eventual triumph. These elements of *Dream High* emphasize the continuity between consuming the idol as commodity and the exploitative relations of prostitution and human trafficking, positing an unsettling analogy with the show's own use of the young idols' commercial appeal.

Against teen-romance expectations, *Dream High* concludes by separating its central couple, Hye-mi and Sam-dong, to support its recasting of K-pop stardom as collective endeavor. *Dream High* is a fable of hard work and collective sacrifice, which also makes it an allegory of South Korean development. Hye-mi and Sam-dong defer romantic fulfillment to realize the dream of stardom made national triumph in K's Grammy award. The show's resolution—revealing Sam-dong as K—seems to place the audience in Hye-mi's position, to cheer on Sam-dong from home as he pursues global stardom, and to sacrifice a personal (private) relationship with him for the sake of his public impact. Thus, television remediates not only K-pop idols themselves but also the relationship between fans and idols, national subjects, and their culture industries. *Dream High* calls on the viewers to give up claims to ownership over their idols yet also recuperates the emotional intensity of this sacrificial gesture through its melodramatic presentation.

Like *Dream High*, *Answer Me 1997* underscores the virtues of pop culture consumption. Also structured by extended flashback, moving between 2012 and 1997, the show examines the generational consciousness shaped by the development of telecommunications technology, broadcast media, and the Internet. The drama's young characters smoothly integrate pagers, VCRs, CDs, portable CD players, and dial-up Internet into their daily lives. Their identities emerge against the backdrop of film soundtracks, fan wars, radio contests, brand consciousness (and counterfeiting), "national dramas," and, especially, the introduction of the World Wide Web. To an extent, the show details the genealogy of the "netizen" or citizen-consumer, whose primary site of civic engagement is the realm of online social media. In so doing, the show suggests not only that the netizen and the fan are coextensive, but that participation via consumption in a mediated public sphere defines contemporary citizenship as such (see Figures 8 and 9).

Despite the show's preoccupation with the rapid development of the South Korean mediascape, *Answer Me 1997* is mostly nostalgic in its assessment of the social transformations engendered by new media. The show follows a group of high school friends and centers on the romance between best friends and neighbors Sŏng Si-wŏn and Yun Yun-je. *Answer Me* characterizes Yun-je as serious and studious, traits meant to signify his masculinity, associating his status as model student with his contempt for popular culture. In contrast, Si-wŏn is the stereotypical adolescent fangirl, disregarding her studies for her passionate fan activities. She and her girlfriends eschew schoolwork to spend their time lovingly pasting pictures of their favorite pop idols in scrapbooks, videotaping their idols' numerous television appearances, and camping out in front of their idols' homes.



Figure 8. Answer Me 1997 shares with Dream High a high school milieu and the casting of pop singers in lead roles; however, it changes focus from production to consumption—from star aspirations to passionate fandom.

As incompatible as Si-wŏn and Yun-je seem, given their contrasting attitudes toward popular culture, they are also perfectly matched according to a conservative, heteronormative gendered logic whereby fandom and pop culture consumption are feminine, as opposed to masculine sobriety, industriousness, and rationality. Against typical patriarchal norms, however, the show reverses the hierarchy of masculine over feminine traits, making Si-wŏn the model enterprising citizen-subject, and establishes Yun-je as the member of the couple stunted by the lack of an emotional vocabulary. Like *Dream High*, *Answer Me 1997* thus suggests that popular culture grants the individual emotional literacy and that the ready-made expressions provided by television and pop music give *form* to true feeling, which is also the means by which one forges genuine and satisfying social attachments. From the high school episodes set in 1997, the show advances forward to the present, tracking Si-wŏn and Yun-je's passage to adulthood as a *national* narrative of Korea's development of media infrastructures and post-International Monetary Fund globalization.

Si-wŏn's fandom is the focus of *Answer Me 1997*; thus, the show shifts attention from celebrity construction to the production of Korean fans and the role that pop culture consumption plays in shaping subjectivity and identity in the present. Tracing the genealogy of K-pop idol bands, the show revisits the reception of late-1990s groups like H.O.T.,¹³ Si-wŏn's favorite band. Now in their 30s, former H.O.T.

¹³ The term *hallyu* is said to have originated in Chinese journalists writing about H.O.T.'s popularity in the country, when a large group of Chinese fans assembled for a concert in Beijing in February 2000. H.O.T. was the first Korean pop group to perform abroad (H. Kim, 2012).

members Tony An (An Seung-ho) and Moon Hee-joon make cameo appearances on the show. Joining these former idols, current K-pop performers round out the cast. Si-wŏn is played by Jung Eun-ji, leader of the girl group A-Pink, while singer Seo In-guk, winner of the second season of the reality show *K-pop Star*, plays Yun-je. The show's casting of K-pop idol singers as teenage fans melds K-pop production and reception into a single body, epitomizing an idealized intimacy between idol and fan, product and consumer.



Figure 9. The series lead, Si-wŏn, is a crazed fan of the 1990s boy band H.O.T. (the band whose popularity in China coined the term hallyu).

Si-wŏn's obsessive devotion to H.O.T. interferes with her studies, causing her to be ranked last in her class, without any hope of postsecondary education. But, in another metatextual gesture, her fan activities also become her ticket to university, when Si-wŏn's slash fan fiction earns her special admission to a creative writing program that leads to a career in television screenwriting. Si-wŏn's adolescent passions become the basis for civic virtues, such as perseverance, resilience, passion, tenacity and a collective ethos, for example, when Si-wŏn's activities in the H.O.T. fan club help her to develop a sense of her obligation to the group and the shared identity of H.O.T. boosters.

In addition to Si-wŏn's fan activities, the show highlights shared affective experience in the viewing of hit dramas and movies from the period as well as notable sporting events, such as the September 1997 World Cup qualifying match between Korea and Japan (see Figure 10). The staging of

such media events posits popular culture as a crucial socialization mechanism: Si-wŏn and her friends bond over their love of boy bands; Yun-je and the other teenage boys bond over porn, manga, and sports; and Si-wŏn's family members share their love of TV dramas and popular songs. *Answer Me 1997* highlights the three S's of the Chun Du Hwan-controlled 1980s: sport, screen, and sex (see Nam, 2008, for further contextualization of military dictator Chun Du Hwan's 3S governing strategy). The 3S governing strategy of the repressive Chun regime also involved the establishment of the Korean professional baseball league in the 1980s; in *Answer Me 1997*, Si-wŏn's father is the coach of one of these teams, the Busan Seagulls. But, unlike in the context of authoritarian social control, in which relaxed regulations in the arena of popular entertainment were intended to distract the citizenry from political repression, popular culture consumption in the story told by *Answer Me* produces not a manipulated, but an ideal subject whose passionate national character is molded by fannish devotion.



Figure 10. Shared viewing of the Korea–Japan World Cup qualifying match unites all of Si-won's friends, family, and, by extension, an imagined national community of TV spectators, in collective euphoria.

To consider the consequences of Korean entertainment culture's cultivation of particular types of affective excess, we should pay attention to what *Answer Me 1997* excludes in its otherwise faithful rendition of the 1997 mediasphere, which it fills with indexical traces of period news footage and television programming, fashion trends, and publicity images of the characters' pop idols. Except in a brief scene in episode five and in the opening credits' montage sequence of period news footage, the show neglects to mention the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis or the devastating effects of the crash and subsequent economic restructuring on the fledgling middle-class consumer on which the show centers. In

this light, Si-wŏn's media consumption takes on a different cast: Rather than simply validating fandom, the show also validates media escapism as a means of supporting the national economic recovery. The show evinces the position that passion for pop culture can be transposed to other endeavors, because such attachments are by nature fickle—indicating a desire to desire, regardless of what the desired object may be—and that this divertible attachment cultivated by fan practices jump-started the economy and helped resolve the financial crisis. What is notable about *Answer Me 1997*'s invocation of the 3S strategy is that it completely lacks any suspicion about the possible political aims or ideological work of popular culture. Read symptomatically, this omission indicts the state's adoption of a globalization strategy that has so fully acquiesced to neoliberal economic ideologies that it has given up on its responsibility to address the nation's income disparities, class divisions, and the *chaebol*'s industrial monopolies.

If, as *Answer Me 1997* seems to suggest, hallyu is a compensatory post-IMF phenomenon that triggered an appetite for pop culture escapism that then laid a foundation for the future success of K-pop industries, *Answer Me 1997* and *Dream High* must mediate their own conditions of possibility and translate the commercial appeal of hallyu from national distraction into national virtue.¹⁴ By locating their fictitious characters in worlds that aim for verisimilitude with contemporary South Korean media industries and mainstream popular culture, the shows deliberately disregard the distinction between reality and fantasy, to preserve rather than disrupt fictional illusion in a "pop realist" mode.

Affective Politics and the "K-Pop Dream"

Through their efforts to address media's role in the rapid transformations of publicity and identity, both *Dream High* and *Answer Me 1997* exceeded their demographic targets to become part of a national conversation,¹⁵ which suggests that they contributed to a broader discourse about the implications of K-pop's success and the growing mediatization of everyday life with their multilayered intertextuality. *Dream High*'s stars' performance of their own star texts produces a reality effect, just as *Answer Me 1997*'s indexical relationship to period-specific media indicates a strong anchoring in the world outside of the narrative. Framed as depictions of the Korean media industries' recent past and near future, respectively, *Answer Me* and *Dream High* aspire to realistic representation of the development of commercialized, vernacular culture. Thus, the shows' modified realist stance, when it comes to their portrayal of the South Korean mediascape, emerges from a strategy of self-reference that is decidedly opposed to the postmodern metafictional paradigm of producing ironic distance. In modeling the convergence of form and content—the meta-entertainment spectacle—the shows also turn narratives of dreaming and achievement (*Dream High*) or fan love turned fan world-making (*Answer Me 1997*) into allegories of K-pop's success and, by extension, the nation's arduous climb toward the global, cultural stage.

¹⁴ We can see the success of this endeavor in the celebration of pop artist Psy's overseas success. The political implications of K-pop success are clearly expressed in the equation of United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon and Psy, "two of South Korea's most internationally renowned figures," according to Fisher (2012, para. 1).

¹⁵ Unexpectedly, *Dream High* became the ratings leader in its time slot, eclipsing the spy action show *Athena* and adult melodrama *Queen of Reversals*.

Although *Answer Me 1997* derives much of its emotional impact from nostalgia, the show nevertheless extends the impact of pop culture consumption beyond its entertainment value into a politics of affect. On one hand, the show expresses a preference for the lo-fi, linking old, obsolete media to youthful passion. On the other hand, it also suggests that such immersion in mediated realities is an important developmental phase in an anti-elitist politics of popular culture—Si-wŏn's devotion to her pop idols reflects fandom as a form of populism. *Answer Me 1997* thus defines fandom as a set of civic properties—passion and community orientation—that make fans model citizens. Yet this gesture also critiques South Korea's postpolitical condition, by which the diversions of popular culture have completely neutralized political resistance and consumer affiliation has co-opted political organization.

Both *Dream High* and *Answer Me 1997* reincorporate idol stars as national figures and frame their overseas success as national phenomena, while also accounting for the effects that the transformation of mass culture to popular culture has had on the generations of Koreans who have lived their entire lives under the influence of *industrialized* popular culture. *Dream High's* popular origin fable of K-pop stardom is reified on reality shows such as *Superstar K* (Mnet) and *K-pop Star* (SBS), which have helped solidify the generic parameters for the fantasy of Korean pop artists as national paragons whose lives represent South Korea's own rags-to-riches story. In this narrative of the "K-pop dream," by which an individual achieves national and international fame through his or her perseverance, work ethic, and relentless drive for self-improvement, K-pop success has also come to represent a means of achieving class mobility that is no less likely, for individuals without means or connections, than acing the college entrance exam and entering a top university. Indeed, entertainment companies' systematic training programs, which are criticized for their "manufacture" of K-pop idols,¹⁶ resemble a rigorous study schedule and demand the utmost discipline and commitment. The analogy with other highly selective professions thus already translates the virtues of K-pop stardom. Moreover, the association of K-pop as national culture industry with the developmental ideology of national progress renders K-pop stars national ambassadors whose professional activities constitute a form of national service.

The K-pop dream as national allegory rests on the shows' literalism and their blurring of the boundaries between fictional and nonfictional K-pop discourse. Nested self-references in *Dream High* denature the boundary between form and content through the drama's trope of self-representation—with Korean culture industries figured as K-pop figured as JYP Entertainment figured as JYP himself. As producer, promoter, choreographer, and songwriter for the show, JYP himself becomes a figure for the media commodity that produces its own reality, by which it captivates actual hearts and minds through its conditions of mediation. At the height of the young characters' struggle to break into the harsh world of professional pop music, Yang Jin-man—the character played by JYP—suggests that they organize a flash mob to bypass network television as the main avenue to publicity. As the video becomes a viral hit, the students gain a semblance of control over their own self-representation. Hye-mi and her friends achieve instant notoriety, which leads to their invitation to debut on a *television* music program. The ideal of self-marketing via social media thus becomes a narrative element in *Dream High*, shoring up a reality effect

¹⁶ Two essays in U.S. magazines, *The New Yorker* (Seabrook, 2012) and *Spin* (Bevan, 2012), "decode" this system for American readers.

that transfers the characters' and the show's success to JYP Entertainment and JYP's involvement in shaping the form and content of K-pop's aspirational narrative (see Figures 11 and 12).



Figure 11. The reality effect produced by Dream High's nested self-references culminates in the show's staging of a flash-mob scene, a genre of event in which the staged spontaneity of the crowd's synchronicity yields a semblance of the bodily experience of mass political action by which "the people" coalesce.

Answer Me 1997 contributes to the aims of pop realism and the K-pop dream by depicting the birth of the South Korean "netizenry" in the depoliticized spaces of Internet chat rooms and fan sites. In the Korean context, the concept of the netizen is uniquely strengthened by Korea's regulation of Internet use, indicating that the "freedom" and anonymity of the Internet in the United States and other media-liberalized states actually diminishes the potential for the net to operate as an extension of the public sphere.¹⁷ This dynamic interplay between regulation and freedom of expression makes the netizen a powerful figure of public agency, even though the netizen can hardly be pinned down as a concrete entity. The exaggerated emotionality of the netizen has generated an abstract figure of the oversensitive, juvenile, and often hysterical citizen-consumer who exercises her freedom of speech merely to state her *opinion* (often of celebrities or other commodified public figures). *Answer Me 1997* seeks to explain the originating conditions of such a subject and, further, to valorize this subject, making media consumption the normal and necessary form of social interaction and self-determination. *Answer Me* also suggests that the "right" kinds of public affect are those that produce obsessive or immoderate attachments to particular stock success stories, most notably the neoliberal dream of self-made prosperity through hard work.

¹⁷ Dean (2003, 2009) argues that the discourse of the Internet as a forum of free, civil exchange profoundly misunderstands and misrepresents the actual social mechanisms of online interaction.



Figure 12. Adding to the reality effect of *Dream High*'s representation of the South Korean mediascape is JYP's role as a pop star mentor and judge on *K-pop Star* (SBS, 2011–2016), one of several music performance reality shows that televise the competitive process to gain a contract and representation by a large entertainment management company. The three judges pictured in this image are, from L to R: Yang Hyun-suk, founder and chief executive officer of YG Entertainment, which also manages *Big Bang*; JYP of JYP Entertainment, and BoA, an SM Entertainment recording artist and industry veteran.

Conclusion: Commercial-Public Affect and the Sentimental Public Sphere

While encouraging viewers to develop affective attachments to the celebrities they feature and, by extension, the national campaign of K-pop's development, *Dream High* and *Answer Me 1997*'s attempt to valorize pop culture consumption points to an anxiety over the relationship between the public and a powerful, prescriptive, hegemonic media. That is, they articulate the fear that the commodification of everyday life has produced a form of coercive control akin to the recent authoritarian past—the disciplining of the consumer-citizen in practices that profit the corporate oligarchy.¹⁸ Read against the grain, the shows index widespread alienation arising from the replacement of political participation by

¹⁸ See Nelson (2000) for an incisive account of state-directed efforts to produce a nation of consumers as a crucial stage in South Korea's foreshortened transition from postwar ruin to economic powerhouse. Nelson focuses, in particular, on the importance of consumer debt to the national economy and the *chaebol* system as mechanisms of labor suppression and working-class disenfranchisement.

consumption in postauthoritarian South Korea. In depicting the shared affective economies of consumer-citizenship and cultural nationalism, the shows trigger viewers to critique the equation of popular culture and the public sphere.

As a powerful sector of a small but dynamic media market, South Korean narrative television harnesses viewer attachment through intense, temporary media saturation.¹⁹ For instance, in the case of a national drama,²⁰ product placement and original soundtrack tie-ins blanket the nation's mediascape with images of the lead actors with the sponsoring products. These actors are also featured in additional advertising campaigns to capitalize on the public's affective attachment to the character and the narrative that the actor embodies. Because most prime-time weekday series are between 16 and 20 episodes long, the dramas and their paratexts secure their visibility for only a single season (two to three months).²¹ Thus, K-dramas engineer an affective economy in which attachments are extremely intense yet fleeting, conducive to near-constant and immediate periodization, since a particular show will evoke not just a particular year, but a particular quarter of that year, along with its corresponding fashion trends, hairstyles, catchphrases, and technological devices. This affective economy converts affect into capital and finds its ideal institutional substrate in the public-commercial operations of Korean broadcast television and the *chaebol* model of state-subsidized crony capitalism.

The dominance of KBS, MBC, and SBS owes to the fact that these major networks have always operated mainly via advertising revenue and, thus, on the economic model of commercial broadcasting. Despite the public ownership of KBS and MBC, the three major stations present similar content given the nature of their ratings competition. Moreover, infrastructural advantages enjoyed by the main broadcasters have allowed them to dominate in the arena of original content production. As a result, cable TV stations have had difficulties acquiring the resources to produce their own television dramas to compete with the big networks.

This is rapidly changing, however, and *Answer Me 1997* is an important index of this shift. The show is a huge hit for tvN—a cable network that produces original drama content and that is challenging the big networks' monopoly on K-drama production. Gaining ratings numbers of just under 10% for its finale, *Answer Me 1997* was the most successful cable drama to date, for which ratings of 1% to 3% were the norm (S. Lee, 2012).²² *Answer Me's* success reflects the current marketability of a self-reflexive turn in

¹⁹ South Korean television presents a challenge to models of televisual production and narrative form based on the U.S. soap opera, sitcom, or even newer forms of "narratively complex television," by which narrative deferral and indeterminacy create the conditions of a perpetual "present" of televisual time, and narrative inconsistencies are sutured by familiarity and intimacy with characters established through repeated exposure over multiple "seasons."

²⁰ This designation depends on the average viewer ratings from the drama's run; though accounts differ slightly, shows that hit the 35% mark are generally included in this illustrious category.

²¹ Exceptions to this standard length are differentiated by genre and time slot, with daytime, daily sitcoms running into the hundreds of episodes.

²² tvN has since produced two more installments of the *Answer Me* franchise, *Answer Me 1994* (2013) and *Answer Me 1988* (2015–2016), as part of a broader 1990s nostalgia boom.

South Korean entertainment, which is quickly becoming the latter's defining characteristic. As such, *Answer Me* also signals a growing audience awareness of the media as an immensely powerful institution, wedded to the interests of the state and corporate capital. If convergence phenomena have become the manifest content of broadcast television to produce a particular type of media citizenship, this practice of self-reference reveals television as a media institution of domestic control and economic development through mass mobilization of citizens toward media consumption and informatization.

Given this context, self-critique and commercialism are precariously interdependent, placing network television in the position of revealing its institutional limits in order to maintain its hegemony, since self-critique invites viewer involvement, which serves the ratings emphasis of the television networks. As K-drama becomes more like reality TV, narrative television must surrender to the chiasmus of market control in public broadcasting and political censorship in commercial broadcasting. Across media and platforms, politics are increasingly framed according to market legitimacy, which is an enduring legacy of the IMF crisis, along with the conflation of the citizen and the consumer as the main ideological framework for democratization in the contemporary moment. Yet the naturalized connection between the public and the consumer comes undone in the common appeal to pure sentiment and an antic cosmopolitan identity.

At the end of *Dream High*, Sam-dong and Hye-mi discuss what it would be like to be "the best singer in the world." Sam-dong admits that he believes it would be a lonely and anxious position, yet decides to sacrifice himself for the sake of a national public that would be able to share in his victory on the competitive global stage. Sam-dong's self-sacrificing gesture is the mirror image of Hye-mi's, who forgoes her own desire for romantic love by tearfully sending Sam-dong off to the United States. Both characters hold to a collective goal through their education in true love, an emotion that uses pop music as its generic form, but which nevertheless maintains its national and unmediated character. K-dramas commodify sentiment, and in the K-drama about K-pop, the act of consumption knits ever more tightly the intimate public engendered by sentimental television. The meta-entertainment spectacle's implicit critique suggests that collective sentiment becomes a commodity precisely when pop culture cliché has become its only viable form.

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