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Adorno, *Gangnam Style*, and the Regressiveness
of Contemporary Mass Culture

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It is quite clear that Adorno would have regarded *Gangnam Style*, and indeed the whole cultural phenomenon of the pop music video, with great disdain.¹ Although his rebuffs of popular culture are well-known, what I wish to focus on in this essay is whether his ideas remain relevant to the mass culture of the present day – a context quite different to the period in which he was writing. I have chosen to analyse the 2012 hit, *Gangnam Style* by Psy; due to its extreme popularity, it encapsulates not just the nature of pop music videos, but also the general trends in mass culture today. The video's sheer number of views should demand the attention of any sociologist who is interested in the effects of commercial music. Currently at 1,980,351,358 views at the time of writing this essay, it is by far the most viewed YouTube video of all time. Even if we account for the fact that an individual can view a YouTube video multiple times (this has certainly been the case, otherwise it would mean that it has been viewed by almost a third of the world's population), the scale of its popularity is immense nevertheless. Music videos such as this have of course been a prominent feature of Western culture since the 1980s. However, their current dissemination through social media and various other online outlets such as YouTube makes them a significant part of mass culture today. Using *Gangnam Style*, I intend to assess whether Adorno's claim concerning the

¹ 'PSY - GANGNAM STYLE (강남스타일) M/V', *YouTube*, July 15th, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bZkp7q19f0> (1st May, 2014).

regressive nature of mass culture remains pertinent. My main focus will be his collection of essays entitled *The Culture Industry*, and I will also draw on the work of writers such as Ben Watson and Andrew Dell' Antonio.² These other writers will serve to either reinforce or refute Adorno's arguments, with the aim of developing a balanced view regarding the music video's role in contemporary society.

At a glance, *Gangnam Style* appears rife with the kinds of fetishistic attributes that typify Adorno's notion of regressive art. In his 'On the Fetish Character' essay he writes:

The familiarity of the piece is a surrogate for the quality ascribed to it. To like it is almost the same thing as to recognise it. An approach in terms of value judgements has become a fiction for the person who finds himself hemmed in by standardized musical goods.³

From an aesthetical perspective, *Gangnam Style* thoroughly confirms his view that mass culture relies on the recycling of old forms, leading to a situation whereby the quality of a product is assessed through its relation to previous commodities. Its musical material – 4/4 time, a reliance of standard tonal devices to create harmonic tension, and a structure based on a sequence of climaxes – is akin to an immense proportion of pop chart music of the last decade or so. What makes Adorno's statement particularly pertinent is his view that those who deride the song purely on grounds of taste, such as those who profess the superiority of other commercial music that more prominently features traditional musical instruments, are missing the point. While to many people *Gangnam Style*'s tastelessness may seem blatantly obvious, objections on the grounds of taste reflect an obscuration and a lack of insight into the producer-consumer relations that create this kind of music.⁴ From Adorno's perspective,

2 Theodor W. Adorno, J. M. Bernstein (ed.), *The Culture Industry* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 1991).

3 Adorno, 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening', *The Culture Industry*, 30.

4 'The bigots who complain to the radio station in pathetic-sadistic letters of the jazzing up of holy things and the youth who delights in such exhibitions are of one mind.' *Ibid.*, 56.

Gangnam Style would essentially be no different to any other type of commercial music – the inevitable result of a music industry subject to the forces of monopoly capitalism.

To compensate for this standardisation, Adorno claims that the culture industry is able to maintain a demand for its products by making them appear new and unique. It fosters an illusory sense of choice whilst masking an 'eternal sameness' that serves to uphold exploitative capitalist practices.⁵ There is an aspect of *Gangnam Style* which is seemingly unique in the field of Western pop music, and which may even account for the video's abnormally large amount of views. That is that the song's artist Psy, is a South Korean singer. Pop music is also irrefutably a dominant feature of Asian culture (particularly Korean pop, or K-Pop as it is known), but for a South Korean to have this much of an international impact is a sizeable feat (an impact that resulted in U.S. President Barack Obama citing it as a positive example of the global proliferation of Korean culture).⁶ It could be that as foreign commercial product possessing a familiar musical form, *Gangnam Style* contains the optimum amount of pseudo-uniqueness needed to create such immense consumer demand. Since digital dissemination mass-produces media on a never-before-seen scale, resulting in a saturation of videos that have a greater disposability, YouTube itself may also account for a need to create a greater sense of pseudo-uniqueness.

An undeniable factor in its success has also been the video's distinctive dance move – arguably its most fetishistic feature. This essentially makes it a three-pronged commodity as the music, the video, and the dance move all become marketable exports that the masses can not only consume, but in the case of the dance move, actively engage with through its replication. As the song garnered global popularity, celebrities lined up to emulate the dance

5 Adorno, 'The Culture Industry Reconsidered', *The Culture Industry*, 99.

6 'And of course, around the world, people are being swept up by Korean culture – the Korean Wave. And as I mentioned to President Park, my daughters have taught me a pretty good Gangnam Style. (Laughter.)', 'Remarks by President Barack Obama and President Park of South Korea in a Joint Press Conference', Office of the Press Secretary, *The White House*, 7th May, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/07/remarks-president-obama-and-president-park-south-korea-joint-press-confe> (2nd May, 2014).

on various talk shows, in a clear indication of the dance's commodified status. The idea of the masses being whipped into a state of near-hysteria over something so light-hearted, is alluded to by Adorno when he writes:

The representatives of the opposition to the authoritarian schema become witnesses to the authority of commercial success. The delight in the moment and the gay façade becomes an excuse for absolving the listener from the thought of the whole, whose claim is comprised in proper listening. The listener is converted, along his line of least resistance, into the acquiescent purchaser.⁷

The 'gay façade' that Adorno mentions has palpable resonances with *Gangnam Style's* dance routine, and with this in mind, it can be argued that this commodity fetish serves to obscure the inner workings of capitalism – namely, the contradictions that comprise its 'whole'.

Adorno suggests that this occurs even to the extent where those who oppose the established order become 'converted', since the commercial product is of such a light-hearted nature. This notion of assigning great cultural importance to commercial products that obscure present-day economic crises, makes *Gangnam Style* an accurate example of the type of sociologically regressive art that Adorno attacks.

However, a major aspect of the video's light-heartedness is its satirical subject matter, which makes it somewhat problematic in relation to this critique. What typifies much of Adorno's polemic against both popular and classical music, is the charge that they possess no relevance to modern-day demands. He found the recontextualisation of romantic music in the form of neo-Romanticism for instance, to be particularly deceptive as its sensual nature was inappropriate to the socio-economic struggles of the time.⁸ *Gangnam Style* on the other hand, does in fact possess a relevance to the present; it is actually a satire of the materialistic

⁷ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 32.

⁸ Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2003), 13.

lifestyle associated with the affluent residents in the Gangnam district of Seoul. In the video, Psy's claim to possess a 'Gangnam style' life is offset by what he actually does. For example, the opening shot shows him relaxing on what appears to be a luxury beach – an oft-used signifier of pop glamour. The camera then pans out to reveal that this is in fact a sandpit from a children's playground. Other scenes include him dancing on a coach filled with elderly people, and a close-up of him emerging from some water pans out to reveal that this is in fact a public swimming pool. This parody appears to show an understanding of class relations, and the absurdity of pursuing a materialistic lifestyle in an effort to project a particular stylistic image. However, there are many ways in which Adorno's writings fail to redeem this satire as an example of progressive art. Firstly, if we refer back to the Adorno quote previously, the opening sentence is of great significance; those that oppose authority 'become witnesses to the authority of commercial success'. Psy opposes the authoritarian schema concerning class relations and the worshipping of lifestyle commodities, while embracing another kind of authority in the form of the music industry – itself, a product of monopoly capitalism's ethos. It is not its commercial alone that makes it regressive, however. Ben Watson describes how popular music can in fact fulfil Adorno's demands for progressive art, despite his uncompromising attitude towards it. He argues that the music of Hendrix and Coltrane for example, was socially relevant in the allusion to the Vietnam war in the former, and to racial tensions in the latter.⁹ Furthermore, these artists utilised the existing technologies of the time in a progressive way, with Hendrix creating new technical possibilities for the electric guitar, and Coltrane contributing to the expanding harmonic language of jazz, whilst subverting the stylistic conventions of Bebop. Despite *Gangnam Style's* social relevance, it lacks the technical innovation that would allow it to antagonise the culture industry's fixed notion categories.

9 Ben Watson, 'Music, Violence, Truth' (2001), *Honesty Is Explosive!: Selected Music Journalism*, salvaged and sorted by W.C. Bamberger (Borgo Press 2010), 208.

Secondly, *Gangnam Style*'s absurdity is concordant with Adorno's 'play as duty' principle:

[On mass music] Its bestial seriousness consist in the fact that instead of remaining faithful to the dream of freedom by getting away from purposiveness, the treatment of play as duty puts it among useful purposes and thereby wipes the trace of freedom in it.¹⁰

In other words, its playfulness and apparent lack of meaningful purpose would make it harmless, if it wasn't for the fact that its meaninglessness is advertised with such insistence, so that conversely, it actually acquires a useful function in serving to maintain the culture industry's economic relations. The Dada movement in art may provide a contrasting example; its purposeless and humour served to question the very definitions of art, without a loud insistence on its own consumption.

One could argue that *Gangnam Style* is also regressive in a way that isn't defined explicitly by Adorno – it features the kind of sexism that tends to typify most contemporary pop music, in that every woman in the video is fetishised as a sexual object. Given the satirical nature of the song, one might conclude that this is some kind of ironic gesture designed to highlight the absurdity of gender stereotypes in pop music (and in some ways it is – Psy himself, a 36 year-old, slightly overweight South Korean is a rather unconventional pop star). However, it is significant that the only English lyric is the line 'Eh, sexy lady', which is sang over the choruses, and followed up by a 'middle-eight' section with 'Beautiful, lovely / Yes, you are, hey!' sang in Korean.¹¹ Furthermore, its satirical content is not nearly explicit enough for a Western audience. The satire requires a prior knowledge of the Gangnam district

¹⁰ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 57.

¹¹ Translated and subtitled by Onsemiro, 'PSY "Gangnam Style" 싸이 강남스타일 (English Subtitles)', *YouTube*, August 7th, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUK69c72UIY>, (2nd May, 2014).

that Psy is parodying (this point additionally reinforces the critique of its satire discussed previously). If it were the case that Psy attempts a genuine parody through an ironical portrayal of patriarchal sexuality, this message would undoubtedly be lost on the video's younger viewers – even those who understand Korean. The pseudo-bravado that Psy embodies (one lyric boasts that he can down boiling hot coffee in one gulp – in reference to the frequenting of trendy coffee shops typified by the 'Gangnam style' life), thus becomes actual bravado in the eyes of the uninformed viewer. Moreover, the fact that he ends up with countless women dancing around him in the video's concluding scenes, means that any possible attempts to subvert stereotypical gender portrayals become empty gestures. A relevant point can be found in Helene Cixous' famous polemic, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' – when alluding to the portrayal of women in culture, she demonstrates how Western patriarchal societies views them as the absence of male traits, rather than as individuals of equal value.¹² The fact that the only significant role given to a woman in *Gangnam Style* is as Psy's lover, is demonstrative of this sentiment. Thus, given its popularity, *Gangnam Style* could certainly be seen to demonstrate the regressiveness of mass culture from a feminist perspective.

An important aspect only touched on so far, is the nature of the medium itself. YouTube has become an integral part of not only our internet culture, but also of the way in which we consume music. Whilst the fact that anybody is able to broadcast a video themselves is undeniably democratic, one could argue that the dominance of commercial music videos reproduces the same type of corporate domination that exemplifies late capitalism. Adorno writes that:

To the objection that these are already a drug on the market, one is ready with the reply that this is what they wanted, an argument which can be finally invalidated by a diagnosis of the situation of listeners, but only through insight into the whole process

12 Helene Cixous, Keith Cohen, Paula Cohen (trans.), 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs, Vol 1, No. 4* (The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 875–893.

which unites producers and consumers in diabolical harmony.¹³

Viewers of course have the freedom to watch whatever they want on YouTube, in a situation considerably different from the one at Adorno's time of writing. In viewing videos, viewers are also not purchasing the music (although the *Gangnam Style* video, as is the case with every popular music video, has inevitably led to mass sales of the record), so the producer-consumer relations are also of a different nature. However, YouTube has become a tool exploited by not just the masses, but also by those who have economic investments in the culture industry. Therefore, while YouTube permits a certain freedom in allowing people to consume music for free, at the same time, it undoubtedly constitutes an important aid to bolstering record sales. The argument that 'this is what they wanted' initially appears to have added pertinence given the freedom that YouTube allows. However, Adorno's argument is that this displays an ignorance of the inner workings that drive cultural consumption. The fact that out of all of YouTube's immense content, *Gangnam Style* is the most viewed video to this date, only confirms his notion that consumption is driven by formulaic clichés and fetishistic stimuli (a further confirmation can be found in the way that practically all of the runners-up to the most viewed YouTube video feature commercial music).

One of the problems with this kind of analysis is that we can equate a notion of regressiveness with what Adorno wrote on mass culture, but proving it in practice becomes more difficult. Watching *Gangnam Style*, in all its absurdity, makes one question whether this really is as sociologically detrimental as Adorno would have claimed. However, whether or not this is the case, one cannot deny his perceptiveness in the way that his descriptions of the culture industry, written in 1938, continue to resonate with the situation of mass culture in the present day. Although such resonances must certainly contain a locus of truth, Andrew Dell'

¹³ Adorno. *The Culture Industry*, 44.

Antonio's analysis of the music video provides an alternative perspective. One of the aspects of mass culture that Adorno bemoans is the decline of contemplative, or 'structural listening', whereby one comprehends the essence of a work of art through a personalised analysis of its integral components. Dell' Antonio argues that since the music video is designed to be listened to collectively, the kind of one-to-one listening process that Adorno advocates is inappropriate.¹⁴ He suggests that the music video's 'Ideal Appraiser' is a Deleuzian assemblage that is able to collectively assess its multi-layered webs of meaning, and ultimately claims that the music video offers opportunities for new kinds of critical and evaluative discourse. He is careful to assure the reader that he is well aware of its profit motive, sarcastically writing that it would be naive to think of MTV as a humanitarian organisation.¹⁵ However, he rejects Adorno's analysis of mass culture on the basis that due to the semiotical complexity of the music video, the producers cannot accurately predict the consumptive outcome. It is certainly the case that the producers of *Gangnam Style*, in basing the video's material around such a specific geographical location, clearly did not anticipate the extent of its international success.

Although, as unpredictable as their popularity may be, there is no doubt that the most successful videos seem to rely on the type of fetishistic devices that Adorno outlines. Perhaps, had the *Gangnam Style* producers had a greater insight into the culture industry's workings on a global scale, they may have realised that its balance between familiar form and apparent 'newness' was perfect for facilitating this kind of demand. Contrary to Dell' Antonio's argument, Adorno is in fact aware of the notion that the consumptive pattern of mass culture seems too unpredictable to envision a single, totalitarian author who purposefully creates regressive art to maintain existing economic relations. His writings on television can equally

14 Andrew Dell' Antonio, 'Collective Listening – Postmodern Critical Processes and MTV', *Beyond Structural Listening?: Postmodern Modes of Hearing* (University of California Press, 2004), 201–232.

15 *Ibid.*, 228.

apply to the music video when he writes:

Here, an objection may be raised: is such a sinister effect of the hidden message of television known to those who control, plan and direct shows? Or it may even be asked: are those traits possible projections of the unconscious of the decision makers' own minds according to the widespread assumption that works of art can be properly understood in terms of psychological projections of their authors?¹⁶

Adorno then acknowledges the fact that, being the result of a collective collaboration, a study of television necessitates an alternative approach. He suggests that while the author's own motivations undeniably play some part in the creation of the television show, their artistic self-expression is obscured by the collectivised productive process, which is subject to the rules and requirements set by the culture industry. In other words, no matter what the original intent, in order to be successful a product of the culture industry, one must adhere to particular principles (in *Gangnam Style*, it may be argued that this is illustrated in the rigidity of its musical material). Furthermore, he acknowledges the notion that authorial projection in art has since been discredited, and writes that to study the psychology of the television show producer, would be akin to studying Ford cars through a psychoanalysis of Henry Ford.¹⁷ Adorno thus asserts that a video's meaning is inscribed more from the guidelines that drive production, than from a derivation through the collective interpretation of its consumers.

Dell' Antonio's argument that new technological mediums in the form of the music video provide an opportunity to expand existing aesthetical discourses, has parallels with Walter Benjamin's suggestion that mass productive technologies, in creating new ways of

¹⁶ Adorno, 'How to Look at Television', *The Culture Industry*, 168.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

consuming art, are endowed with the potential to enlighten the masses.¹⁸ These claims would undoubtedly be derided by a writer such as Ben Watson, who attacks the postmodernist tendency that tries to celebrate 'every facet of commercial music'.¹⁹ While it may be the case that some artists have utilised new technological mediums in a progressive manner, the idea that MTV should be thought of as meritable simply because it encourages a new kind of listening seems dubious. Although Dell' Antonio is cautious in his argument, his refrain from making aesthetic judgements is indicative of the postmodern tendency that Watson describes. There is no doubt that MTV's dissemination of music is worthy of study, but following the points that Adorno makes, this worthiness seems due to the significance of its pervasion in mass culture from a wider sociological perspective; not because the music video medium automatically represents a legitimate form of artistic expression. The way in which Dell' Antonio repeatedly insists that he understands MTV's profit motive, only serves to paint him as an apologist defender of the type of regressive art Adorno rails against. Perhaps in the case of *Gangnam Style*, the fact that collective interpretative processes largely fail to identify the satirical content that partially redeems it (as a consequence of its foreign language and younger viewers), highlights the importance of a more thorough approach to consumption that at least attempts to attain a basic knowledge of its cultural context. It appears that neither Dell' Antonio's notion of a collectivised interpretation, nor a structural listening approach is sufficient in deriving meaning; this seems instead to be best derived from Adorno's method of drawing attention to the socio-economic processes that lie at the heart of commercial music production. It may be a fact, that the producers of *Gangnam Style* would have been unable to predict its commercial success, due in part to the music video's inherently complex layers of meaning as a commercial form – however, the fact that it is operating firmly within the culture industry's parameters makes it an example of the regressive art Adorno describes

18 Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt (ed.) and Harry Zohn (trans.), 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

19 Ben Watson, *Adorno for Revolutionaries* (London: Unkant Publishers, 2011), 10.

nevertheless.

I will conclude by commenting on a particularly notable aspect of the *Gangnam Style* phenomenon. Multiple sources verify that this video, as well as many other products of South Korea's entertainment industry, have permeated the totalitarian state of North Korea, particularly in the northern cities that border with China.²⁰ Reports like the one from the Yonhap News Agency, suggest that South Korean culture is covertly disseminated in the hope of convincing those in North Korea to oppose its regime – a regime in which a far more aggressively regulated culture industry serves to reinforce its infallible image. This situation problematises Adorno's claims. Even if *Gangnam Style* is a perfect example of the regressive art he describes, does not the fact that it may be contributing to the liberation of people from a brutal totalitarian regime, negate its supposed sociological regressiveness? His allusions to the authoritarianism of the music industry certainly seem to pale in comparison with the far more evidently oppressive nature of the North Korean state. A solution to this problem might be found if we consider both types of authority on a global scale. The authority of the North Korean regime is such that, any cultural artefact deviating from its government-planned cultural dissemination would be seen as, at least from the state's perspective, a form of dissidence. *Gangnam Style* however, has particular pertinence in this situation as it is clearly meant to reflect both the global success of the South Korean music industry, as well the freedom that South Koreans are permitted in choosing to consume whatever they please. Whilst the positive aspect of liberating people from the North Korean regime should not be ignored, if one looks at the wider picture of global capitalism, this aspect is arguably not enough to completely dispel its sociological regressiveness in regard to Adorno's writings. If it is the case that *Gangnam Style* is a product of monopoly capitalism, and thus serves to uphold existing producer-consumer relations, it means that it is essentially part of the same system

²⁰ 'Latest S. Korean pop culture penetrates N. Korea', *Yonhap News Agency*, February 13th, 2013, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2013/02/13/60/0200000000AEN20130213012000315F.HTML> (May 4th, 2014).

that relies on imperialist practices to maintain its commodity production for Western consumers. As Ben Watson writes:

Capitalism-as-usual may not exhibit the genocidal frenzy of Nazism (inhabitants of impoverished or bombed third world countries may disagree), but commodification nevertheless wrenches artistic products from the milieu which produced them.²¹

Having been 'wrenched' from the district of Gangnam in Seoul, *Gangnam Style* seems to have become a part of the Western culture industry's apparatus; its reliance upon fetishistic devices, its treatment of 'play as duty', and its resulting mystification of capitalist consumer-producer relations, is an apparent testament to this notion. Furthermore, it appears that, as a reflection of the present state of mass culture, *Gangnam Style* demonstrates how Adorno's writings remain relevant to the situation today. While far from exhibiting the 'genocidal frenzy of Nazism' or indeed the brutal suppression of the North Korean state, as a product of globalised capitalism, *Gangnam Style* is nevertheless the embodiment of an exploitative and regressive culture – the imperialist practices of which continue to be detrimental on a global scale.

Word count = 3961

²¹ Ben Watson, 'Noise as Permanent Revolution or, Why Culture is a Sow Which Devours its Own Farrow', in Mattin and Iles (eds.), *Noise and Capitalism*, 117.

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