

Breaking the Fourth Wall in K-Pop: Voyeurism and Talking About Reverse Panopticons

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Abstract

Objectification is common in the media and entertainment industry; if you're in the limelight, there is no way to escape objectification, irrelevant of gender. While prevalent in both Western and Eastern entertainment industries, this objectification borders on voyeurism when it comes to the Korean entertainment industry, mainly the music sector. Artists, particularly "idol" musicians live in a fishbowl environment, a reverse panopticon of sorts where every gaze is on them and their actions are scrutinised step by step, both internally by their agencies, and externally by the paparazzi and further still by their fans. This essay looks at this panopticism present in the K-pop industry, where idols are constantly under surveillance, and how they cope with the lifestyle of living in a reverse or inverse panopticon. The focus of this paper is from the other side, where artists break the fourth wall using their songs, and consequently music videos to talk about the voyeurism and objectification they face. Using three music videos, Xia Junsu's "Tarantallegra" (2012), G-Dragon's "Who You?" (2013) and FT-ISLAND's "Pray" (2015) as points of focus, this paper analyses and examines the varying degrees of voyeurism faced by idols as they live in a panopticon society.

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Introduction

The public life is one of constant scrutiny and surveillance. To paraphrase a quote that Arjun Appadurai once wrote as a reference to books, “a rolling celebrity gathers a lot of moss, in the form of fans, critics, media and their gaze”. And when we talk about gaze, we cannot leave out objectification, which whether intentional or incidental, is very much an aspect of gaze. Whether done by critics, fans, or the media, gaze ends up becoming a means of subjection by objectification when trained on a public figure, a notion that is prevalent in both the Western and Eastern media cultures, regardless of gender.

Gaze is unavoidable if you operate in a media society, particularly in the case of celebrities who live in the public eye. But when gaze lingers, it can traverse into a form of voyeurism: one that does not necessarily seek to be sexually exploitative (as voyeurism is usually defined to be) but rather one that assumes an omnipresent aspect. This is the form of objectification or voyeurism found in the South Korean music industry, home of K-Pop. That is not to say that artists are not seen in a sexual manner. A lot of the girl groups in the industry have strong sexualised elements in their concepts, choreography and music videos. A similar case can be made for male groups too, where artists are given charismatic and macho or soft masculinity concepts. But this aspect of the topic is one that I shall not be delving into much in this paper, since it requires in-depth analysis of its own.

To return to the topic at hand, the idea of voyeurism has been depicted rather interestingly in K-Pop, so this is a topic that deserves to be explored properly. Firstly, it is to be noted that the Korean entertainment industry is a highly monitored one. It is controlled tightly by the agencies and music labels on the inside and the paparazzi and media on the outside. Thus, no one is really out of surveillance. This can cause it to be labelled a panopticon society, but one in reverse, where the gaze of many is focused on one or some.

This essay will be looking at the flipside of the coin: the portrayal of voyeurism and panopticism as explored by music artists themselves in their various music videos. This idea of breaking the fourth wall to talk about prevalent situations first came to me when Xia Junsu released his song ‘Tarantallegra’ in 2012. It was successively followed up by G-Dragon’s ‘Who You’ (2013) and then recently by FTISLAND’s ‘Pray’ (2015). As more and more artists get involved with the portrayal of objectification and voyeurism and this breaking of the fourth wall, it is important to analyse the movement. I am sure, if I were to go further back, I would be able to find more music videos and songs that depict these themes. However, as they have been produced in the last five years, these three videos work perfectly well to portray the current situation in the K-pop industry, and so they shall be my primary focus.

Panopticon and Reverse Panopticon in the Media Society

To understand how the society we live in today resembles a reverse panopticon, we need to first understand the concept of the panopticon itself. The idea of the panopticon was originally put forth by Jeremy Bentham in a series of letters he sent to a friend in England in 1787, “containing the idea of a new principle of construction

applicable to any sort of establishment, in which persons of any description are to be kept under inspection". This word, "inspection", is one we shall return to in a bit. The construction itself is a circular architectural structure where there is one central tower that's surrounded by rooms/cells at the periphery. The peripheral rooms have two windows, one outside and one on the inside, while the central tower has a complete 360 degree view courtesy of its windows that open up to the inner ring. The guard or supervisor at the central tower can view the prisoners all the time since he can see all the cells from his room. The light from the outside allows the silhouette of the room's occupants to be visible even if the person isn't. Given this, the prisoners in turn feel like they are being watched all the time, even if they aren't, and as a result pay attention to their actions and "behave".

This idea of the panopticon was later expanded by French philosopher Michel Foucault who applied it to modern society as a means of discipline and control. In his book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault talks about the theory of panopticism, where he discusses Bentham's Panopticon at length and talks about its application as a "compact model of the disciplinary mechanism" (1977, p 195). He argues that, "visibility is a trap", a notion I shall be returning to further below, and one that reinforces the idea of inspection that Bentham had included in his description of the panopticon. Foucault further discusses panopticism again in his book *Power/Knowledge* (1980), where he has a dialogue with Jean-Pierre Barou and Michelle Perrot. The ending of that discussion focuses on the power of the media and the application of panopticism in a media society. Media, Foucault posits, has the power to turn and shift opinion, and thereby it can cause revolts against the "gaze" if needed, which was a point that Bentham had not taken into account when he proposed the plan. Does that mean that the Panopticon and its power mechanisms cease to exist in a media society? Not really, as Foucault and Perrot discusses at the end of the chapter "The Eye of Power", "Bentham doesn't merely formulate the project of a utopian society, he also describes a society that actually exists...he describes, in the utopian form of a general system, particular mechanisms which really exists." Ergo, we can argue that it's only the "architectural" structure that changes because Bentham's Panopticon describes a society that really exists in contemporary time: the omnipresent gaze is very much a built-in feature of the current media society we live in.

Coming forward further to contemporary times, in media societies such as the ones we live in today which are highly digitalised, panopticism can be seen to work in a slightly different way. Yes, we are under constant scrutiny of the gaze, but it isn't a singular gaze upon many but rather many innumerable gazes. So instead of the one-to-many scenario of the panopticon, it's a reverse panopticon of many-to-one, and going deeper still of many-to-many. Bentham's idea of the panopticon was for "inspection". He equated the concept of inspection with control; he who inspects has control. That idea of inspection still exists in a reverse panopticon, though it is now through many gazes. But the idea of control is different. I think an example using social media works best here to illustrate this. Social media sites such as Twitter have a timeline where the tweets of everyone you "follow" updates in a continuous loop. Likewise, anyone who follows you can see what you post or tweet. Both the "follower" and the "followed" takes turn watching each other so to speak, and in a network of millions of users, many eyes follow many others, and vice versa. But in all this, there is also the question of power and control. In a normal panopticon, the

watchman has all the power, but here the surveillance is split up into multiples, and on top of that you are inviting the gaze upon yourself. So, who has the power and control? I hope to address this question when I'm discussing the videos in a subsequent section.

This brings us to the scenario in focus: the K-pop industry, whose landscape poses an interesting view. Referring back to Foucault's statement, "visibility is a trap", we can see this being played out to excruciating detail in the lives of the celebrities in the industry. The idols and artists who form the talent of the industry are **always** watched and have to live their lives under surveillance by agencies, fans and paparazzi. This attention is actually more voyeuristic than mere objectification. Having objectifying comments is an unfortunate reality of celebrity. But having your private life under microscopic scrutiny as well is another affair altogether. To cite a few examples of how voyeuristic the lives of idols are in the Korean entertainment industry, a recent article came out that revealed pictures that netizens had dug up of Song Joong-ki (a popular actor) and his ex-girlfriend from before he entered the industry. Song Joong-ki later mentioned in an interview how uncomfortable this was for him and for his non-celebrity ex. Another example can be found in the "dating scandals" as they are called. The media is deeply interested in this and paparazzi routinely try to expose dating news between celebrities, following them everywhere doggedly. They are perhaps only surpassed by the obsessive behaviour of fans where they routinely stake out homes of popular artists, as well as their agencies' offices. In fact, the derogatory term, "sasaeng" has been given to fans who go beyond the normal boundaries of being fans and take on the behavioural patterns of stalkers. Agencies have gone so far as to sometimes take out lawsuits against them to protect idols' privacies. The more popular the idols or groups, the higher the levels of voyeurism they face, such that private matters like dating, having meals with friends and even passport pictures have been leaked online.

These examples only tell about fans keeping a constant gaze on their objects of admiration (the idols), and also reveal how penetrating the gaze of the media is in keeping tabs on the movements of celebrities. But scrutiny is not limited to only them; idols actually deal with a trifecta of gazes daily. The last side of this triangle being the agencies artists belong to. A defining characteristic of the Korean music industry is the fact that it is known for grooming and training idols from scratch. It has often been called a "star factory", where the idols are "manufactured" under agencies that train kids from a young age, preparing them in all the aspects of being a star, from basics such as vocal and dance training to instructing them on clothing and mannerisms. Under contract with these agencies, artists spend a majority of their lives under their control and surveillance until they are deemed old enough, popular enough or rich enough to have a say in the decisions about their careers.

While this level of scrutiny is nothing new, in recent times though, K-Pop artists are seen breaking the fourth wall with their songs and music videos to talk about the situation and show the level of the gaze they face. In the three music videos I have chosen for the purpose, each reveals a different type of gaze, which will become clear once I discuss the videos themselves.

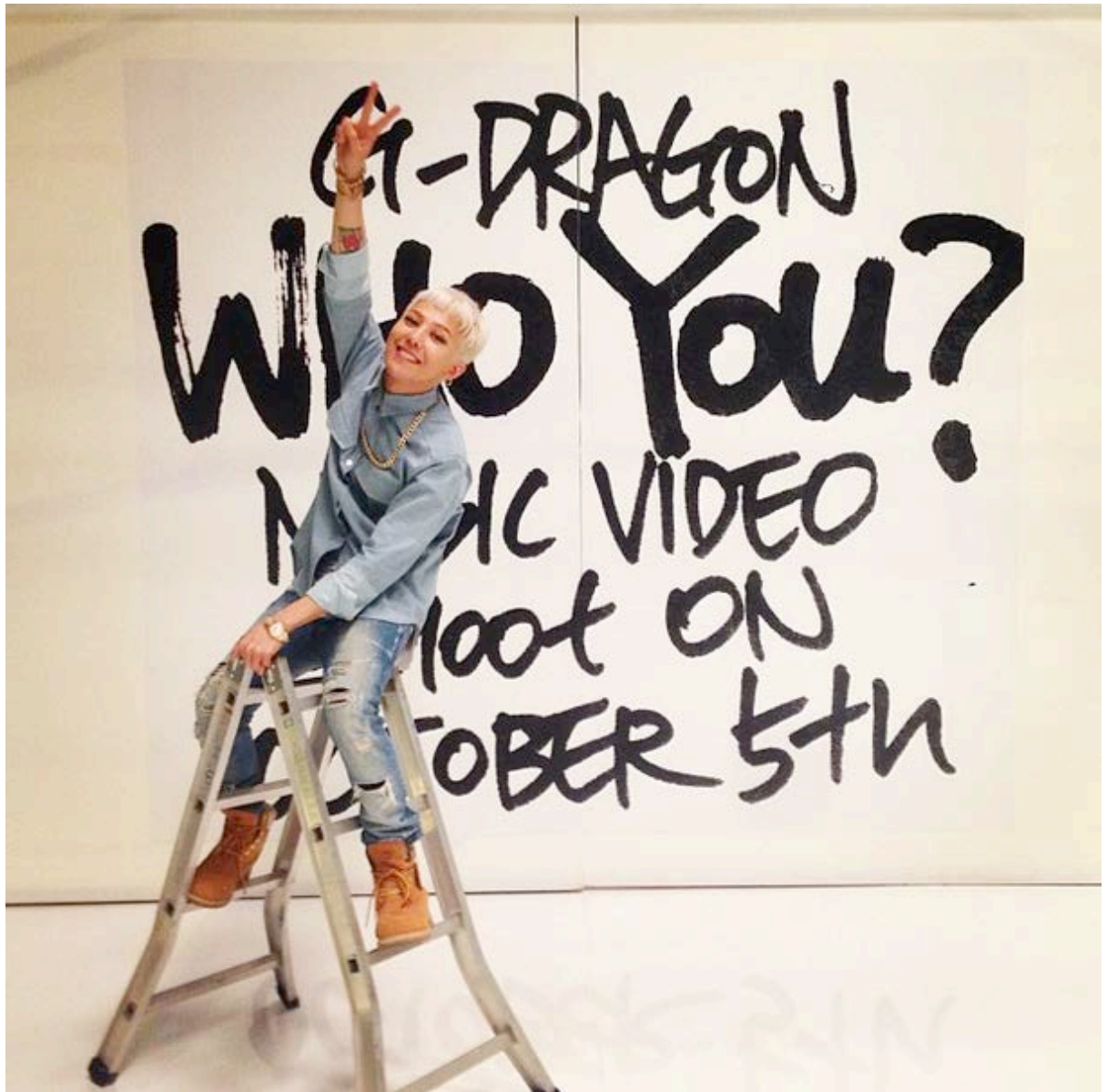
Breaking the Fourth Wall: Discussing Voyeurism and Reverse Panopticons through ‘Tarantallegra’, ‘Who You?’, and ‘Pray’

The music videos I have selected for my focus each have underlying themes and motifs they talk about, and the ideas they convey, which fans have actually analysed and dissected in their blogs, but I shall mainly be looking at the references to panopticism they contain. Before that, let’s take a cursory glance at each music video separately, since each song falls in a different genre musically and the music videos reflect that. First off, Xia Junsu’s ‘Tarantallegra’ is a highly artistic and theatrical creation, brimming with themes, symbols and images. Given Junsu’s theatre and musical background, this is not surprising, however the portrayal of his subject matter is done in a more subtle and symbolic way through the concepts and images used in the video. Unlike the other two videos, ‘Tarantallegra’ does not broach the subject of voyeurism explicitly. Rather this is weaved narratively into the MV’s concept, and is introduced in the latter half of the video, when Junsu enters the room with the sofa (images below). The idea of being constantly under scrutiny is conveyed by the video cameras following him in the chambers as he stalks around the area. His every move is monitored and recorded, but then in a reversal, he takes the camera from one of the dancers and points it at them, in turn recording their moves. This subversion of positions is curious in itself for the different elements it plays with: directing public scrutiny onto itself; transforming the watcher into the watched; and finally, keeping the audience aware of this change. It’s an interesting thought of subversion, where the watcher becomes the watched and yet at the same time remains the watcher.





In 'Who You?' the approach is rather different. The music video is shot with the artist G-Dragon performing inside a glass house surrounded on all sides by an audience comprising of his fans. One thousand fans were asked to attend the shooting for the MV with their phones and cameras and participated in the recording by sharing the footage with the crew. G-Dragon entered the warehouse and stayed inside a glass house for the song, lounging around and just playing by himself, interacting with the crowd watching him when he felt like it, taking their pictures in return before finally entering in his car and zooming off. At the end of the video, the credits roll, acknowledging and thanking all the fans who participated in the event.





In the final music video, 'Pray', FTISLAND is similarly contained inside a glass box, with the difference being that G-Dragon willingly put himself in his glass house and FTISLAND are placed there against their will, as we are made to believe since the members are seen struggling to get out. They are watched by men in suits with painted faces who jeer and leer at them. They are also seen trapped inside gridded cages and in scenes interspersed within the shots of the group performing in the box, we see the boys trying to get free from the gridded boxes that trap them. Finally, the glass box they are in is shattered when main vocal Lee Hongki throws a chair and breaks the glass.





While each of these music videos chose to portray the theme of surveillance and voyeurism, each introduces us to different type of gaze existing in the Korean music industry. Looking at how they portray the gaze, we can infer that G-Dragon's 'Who You?' looks directly at the fans, FTISLAND's 'Pray' looks at agencies, and 'Tarantallegra' shows the constant eye of the media. Starting with the latter, in 'Tarantallegra', while we can gather that the subject in reference is the media (the back dancers are seen following Xia Junsu with cameras in the distinct style of paparazzi), the idea is to also keep the audience as a participatory element. Near the climax of the music video, after being followed by cameras constantly, Junsu takes one camera from a dancer's hands and turns it on them, recording them. Furthermore Junsu is perfectly aware of what he is doing since he interacts directly with those filming him and keeps his gaze locked to the cameras in a very "in your face" manner. This depiction in the video shows awareness about the contemporary media society where the gaze is constant and omnipresent: every movement Junsu makes is tracked, and he notes it. The role of the watcher and the watched goes back and forth several times here. The dancers are being recorded by Junsu who is in his turn being recorded, and all this is being watched by the external audience who's outside the screen. This can be related to the layers of panopticism we have present in the contemporary media society. For example, as in the case of Twitter: we follow people who follow us in return and at the same time we can also view public timelines too without personally following them. Furthermore, the song's lyrics keeps asking repeatedly "what music will you listen to?" and broaches the subject of being controlled externally.

In 'Who You?' the matter is clearer when we look for the heart of G-Dragon's message: it's the fans who are the focal point. First off, G-Dragon invited them to the shooting of the music video himself and then he uses their active participation in his performance. He directly interacts with them, and some of the footage from the video itself is gathered from the videos of the fans. This is interesting because it reveals something necessary about the gaze that artists face: sometimes the attention is perpetuated by the artists themselves. G-Dragon is there in his glasshouse willingly: he put himself out there to be gazed at and he utilises this to improve his performance

and quench the curiosity fans have about the lives of idols. The use of a glasshouse is particularly a good addition because it reveals how close fans come to the personal lives of artists, a house carrying the meaning of privacy and security it does, but one which has often been invaded by *sasaengs*. Yet, G-Dragon only plays/interacts with his fans as much as he wants. When he (and the song) is done, he drives off. This reveals the level of control he exercises over his actions. Once again, using the example of Twitter, you only tweet what you want to tweet, and the public is privy only to this information. Control can be retained on the part of both parties, since you can also choose to ignore information.

Lastly, we have FTISLAND's 'Pray'. The music video is dark: from the setting, to the colours, to the theme. Along with images of the band being locked up in individual gridded cages, they are also seen performing in a glass box. In addition to that, they are surrounded by men wearing formal corporate and business attires and wearing masks to hide their faces. Throughout the video, these men are seen constantly watching, jeering, and pawing at the glass box. Given the depiction, it is quite easy to imagine what is being inferred in the video: the omnipresence of the agencies. Agencies exercise an astonishing amount of control over the lives of K-Pop artists. In all honesty, though it might sound rather brutal, they can be called puppeteers since they are in charge of pretty much all aspects of an idol's life: from training and grooming, to music production and performance, to media handling. Until idols artists can breakeven with the amount of money invested in them by agencies, they usually follow every order and whim of their management and are treated like products. High-end products but nonetheless commodified.

This brings us back to the objectification of artists in the K-Pop industry. It is quite evident from the way these themes are depicted in the videos that artists do understand the level of objectification and commodification they go through. It should also be noted that each video depicted the gaze of numerous watchers upon one person. Nonetheless, it is also obvious that each artist also tries to retain and regain back some control over their movements and actions. In G-Dragon's case, he puts himself out there, in some ways at the mercy of his fans, in other ways he only reveals as much as he wants. Junsu on the other hand, turns the tables around on the "watchman/guard" and gives them a glimpse of the constant scrutiny that depicts an idol's public life. FTISLAND's case is the most aggressive of the three: the shattering of the glass and literal "breaking free" from the cages signifies a shift in control from the agencies to the artists. Coincidentally and amusingly enough, the album 'Pray' belongs to was the first one that was produced and composed by the members of the band without agency interference. So, does this mean that the objectification of artists and the voyeuristic nature of the industry will shift and change overnight? Probabilities are low, but it does show that artists are very aware of the kinds of gazes they face and the level. And if they can start speaking out about it, then they can find some way to regain control of their own freedom.

Conclusion

As time goes on, more and more artists are daring to speak out and up about the situation in the K-Pop industry. Yes, it is a given fact that artists are objectified and sold as idols for the public. The industry runs on this revenue. Agencies create images for their idols that they must sell. Fans participate in this auction both as a consumer

and as a seller. In the middle are the artists themselves, who at once both propagate this consumerist society and make their living off it, and consequently are caught up in all the cons it presents.

I started this paper with the question of control. Who has power and control in a reverse panopticon such as that of the K-Pop industry? Is it the watchers or the celebrities? In my analysis, I came to the conclusion that control can be retained by both; it is a matter of push and pull. While artists face a constant gaze in their lives, they are well-aware of it and also invite the gaze in a bid to equalise and lower the curiosity and through that regain some control over their lives. Now the question can arise, that if the industry is as highly controlled as it seems, then are these artists really speaking up or out for themselves, or is all this merely another ruse or illusion created by the agencies? To answer that question is quite difficult, however once idols become seniors artists in the industry, they have more “freedom” of movement than rookies, and more creative input into the making of their art. For example, all the three musicians I have focused on write their own lyrics and music and partake in the production of their albums as well as in the creation of their music videos. In fact, as I have pointed out, in the case of G-Dragon’s ‘Who You?’ the fans had come at G-Dragon’s request to participate in the shooting of the music video. There is also the fact that time and again, artists have spoken up against *sasaengs* and the pressures they face when under constant scrutiny by them. Furthermore, in recent days artists are coming out with more and more creative material which reflects their ideas, world view and social awareness. Given all that, I think it is somewhat safe to make the assumption that artists are speaking up and shedding light on the pre-existing situations, even if through fourth wall breaks.

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