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# Modular Geometric Organism: The Amoebic Movement in K-Pop Performance

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## Abstract

In this article I consider K-Pop music videos a newly contagious amoeba to explore how K-Pop performance moves us and how its amoebic body moves in and out of the screen. Using research drawn from Posthumanism, I argue that technics opens up the border of human body through programmability, promoting the cyborgian assemblage that suggests the mobility of technics and the technicity of human bodies. In particular, I focus on the choreography of K-Pop, which I argue is a modular geometric organism that consists of human prosthesis and shares the same quality of the amoebic movement, in order to suggest that this contagious media is able to extend its pseudopods to engulf viewers while listening, watching, and recreating the performance. Due to the immersiveness of K-Pop performance videos, their amoebic movement is perceived more easily, and reshapes the relationship between the viewers and the videos, creating a new organism in their digital circulation.

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K-Pop, as one of the strongest popular cultural trends, breaks the obstacle of language and creates a newly contagious vibe through its catchy songs and synchronization of memorable choreographies. The visuals of K-Pop performance is known to be orderly arranged, creating a symmetrical, harmonic movement that reshapes human bodies, and the extreme measures that allow for this presentation are intense training or strict diet plans executed by the entertainment agency. As the entertainment agency periodically releases a K-Pop group's music video, this video itself goes through a media transformation based on its original soundtrack and choreography on various media platforms, especially YouTube, which showcase Korean broadcast music programs such as M Countdown, SBS Inkigayo, or dance practice version performed by original artist and dance cover covered by fans worldwide. More specifically, a live recording can also turn into a FanCam version, recorded by fans who attend the live show, or a Stage mix version, which compiles and edits performances into a single video, creating a magical image by presenting the

same choreography, soundtrack, facial expressions of the artists, and camera movement, while the only difference is the outfits on the performers that marks the distinction of space and time.

As Steven Shaviro stated in *Connected, Or What it Means to Live in the Network Society*, “a network is a self-generating, self-organizing, self-sustaining system.”<sup>1</sup> This system functions like an organism that passes on its genetically identical form to the next and makes connection. Despite the multiple versions of videos mentioned above are uploaded onto mediascape by different users, these K-Pop videos inherit the genetic traits of the original soundtrack and choreography. For a viewer in front of the screen, this sequence of performance videos builds up like a reproduction of organisms embodied in the dancing shapes. These dancing shapes, consisting of human bodies, resemble the movement of a living cell, with each moving component creating an organic unity. While K-Pop artists perform with the same choreography on different music programs, this organism, programmed from their bodies into

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an audiovisual element, is reproduced through the recording media with exactitude and widely spread on video platforms. Furthermore, different screens that act as key factors of duplication have become a mirror to reflect the sameness of an organic unity of these bodies, enabling the viewers to mimic the planned choreography, creating the exact composition of the organism-to-organism conjunction. The articulation of K-pop as a process of contagion requires consideration of the body in the condition of becoming a component, and of media environment and screens to serve as an attachment surface for such body-components to contact. K-Pop has demonstrated and epitomized the posthuman body within the context of digital circulation. This paper aims to discuss how K-Pop creates a modular geometric organism that redefines the human as a self-complete system and how K-pop as a media system reveals its amoebic tendency to extend its body and form a living organism. In particular, I will focus on the chapter “Who? What? The Invention of the Human” of Bernard Stiegler’s *Technics and Time I*, to examine how technics opens up the boundaries of the body and creates not only “this body *qua* human” but also “this body *qua* dance” in the K-Pop context.

The choreographed dance routines, artificially crafted beauty, and the mechanical training process usually makes K-Pop be thought of as a factory-made product under industrial management. In accordance to this presentation, The Tiller Troupe at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be seen a precursor to the embodiment of mediated individuality in a technologically developing era. Established by the English choreographer John Tiller, the Tiller Troupe consisted of female dancers with similar body figures. The group shared the goal of diminishing individuality, becoming a “non-human,” as Ramsey Burt depicts, for whom the choreography was “demanding a precision that in its day was called military,”<sup>2</sup> and eventually developing a perfect dance design. Here, a dance performance is no longer an expression to present individual expression, but to turn bodies into fragmental pieces of the choreography. Siegfried Kracauer described the Tiller girls as “no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, “Tiller” happened to hide the message of

“Taylor” or “Taylorism,” a system that precisely rendered the human body into small components; hands on the assembly line in the Taylor system became legs in the geometric shapes in the Tiller Troupe’s performance.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Kracauer gave an outlook on Tiller Girls as a “mass ornament” that “ends in itself,” concerning that it would lead to the discarding of individuality.<sup>5</sup> A century has passed; the dancers that stood beside the assemblage line have evolved into a newly designed cyborgian assemblage called K-Pop groups.

### Cyborgian Body in the Digital Circulation

Despite the fact that there are similarities between Tiller Girls and K-Pop groups, stating that members of K-pop groups like Girls’ Generation are “factory girls” or “factory-made products” being manipulated by their entertainment agency,<sup>6</sup> configuring K-Pop groups as “the body of human in the age of its digital reproducibility”<sup>7</sup> requires a more complex circulation system rather than a simple and linear one like assembly line on which Tiller Girls stood. Walter Benjamin brings up the idea that the new technology has already liberated the way people perceive art through mechanically mediated techniques.<sup>8</sup> Hence, considering the “start-to-end” assembly line system as a process of reproduction should no longer be the modern process in the digital context. Instead, one should rethink how the viewers or participants, when they project their perception while seeing, listening, mimicking, or covering the K-Pop performance, reshape the concept of singularity in the age of digital reproducibility.

In 2015, Red Velvet from SM Entertainment released their single with a music video named “Dumb Dumb,” annotating a posthuman body in the digital era.<sup>9</sup> This music video is set in a classic setting of Taylor System, juxtaposing Red Velvet performers with the operating machines to imply the similarity between human and technical instruments. (See Fig. 1: Red Velvet as a gear of an operating machine.) We witness the members of Red Velvet on the linear assembly line. (See Fig. 2: Red Velvet members being reproduced by themselves)



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The products are the copies of the original Red Velvet, and the models from the other scenes are the copies of the copies. However, when the operators of the assembly line are reproduced in large numbers, we may ask: are they the original Red Velvet? In fact, the packing procedure here is a mere metaphor of dissemination. In the age of digitality, Red Velvet has spread throughout various media outlets, signaled to simulation and delivered toward the world within the bits of 0 and 1 voltage. There is never a physical but simulated Red Velvet for the viewers. When stepping into the design of the choreography, viewers continue the reproduction of this simulation, constantly becoming the member Irene, Wendy, Seulgi, Joy and Yeri. By digitalizing themselves with cover videos uploaded to video platforms, they create the same modular organism, diminishing their own singularity, and taking part in an endless digital circulation.

In this digital circulation, participants are the cyborgs *a la* Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto,” created through asexual reproduction, or anti-reproduction. This can be seen in the scene of dropping eggs and smashing the infant baby on the ground. The cyborg community originates as Red Velvet and participants constantly reproduce themselves. (See Fig. 3) The reproducibility of cyborgian bodies has left the organic ovum and germ cells malfunctioning, shaping what Haraway had suggested as the “technological polis” that topples the *oikos* and embodies a cyborgian hybrid space and the ductility of media.<sup>10</sup>

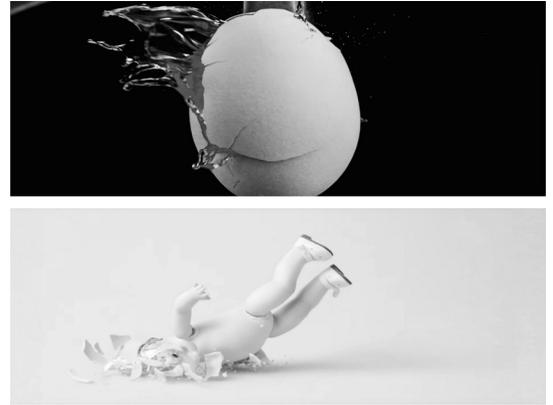


Fig. 3

The posthuman potential that lies in K-Pop performance is that its aesthetics has broken the body’s unity into fragmented pieces as components of an organism. The individuality extends through the conjunction of movements. It challenges the concept of the human body or the fixed identity demonstrated by classical humanism, the classical ideal of “Man.” According to Haraway, “the relation between organism and machine has been a border war;”<sup>11</sup> we are all cyborgs that live in a hybrid form. A cyborgian body is the initial requirement in the K-Pop digital circulation, and what makes it a cyborgian body could be considered in different ways. Firstly, at a material level, the cosmetic technology such as plastic surgery or cosmetic products dissolves the facial border to create a certain sameness that follows the design concept of each group and music video, which means there is no stable look that determines individual identity,

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and viewers could join this simulacrum production by practicing the celebrity routine. After enhancing the homogeneity, it comes to the forge of habitual body that enables other bodies to join. Members of K-Pop groups are routinely trained by repeatedly intense practices in order to diminish the singularity and create a completely modular organism: the dance. Once every individual has reached in close proximity of sameness, each body is ready to serve as prosthesis of the modular organism.

This is the process of creating a new subject by becoming an object (prosthesis); moreover, the prosthesis of dance organism does not share the same quality as the limbs attached to the human. The precision and integrity are promoted by its prostheticity. As Bernard Stiegler has argued, “A ‘prosthesis’ does not supplement something, does not replace what would have been there before it and would have been lost: it is added.”<sup>12</sup> The human body is the addition to the organism, and it is not a replacement of any deficiency. It is, to a certain degree, replaceable and also moveable, and it leads to a posthuman tendency that challenges the stable idea of “Man” by becoming “non-human.” Drawn from the basic concept of botany, the “modular” anatomical structure of plant allows it to be far away from the risk of instant death while being partially eaten or damaged. Instead, due to the “modular” quality, plants do not have centralized organ such as brain, heart or stomach of human that would result in the death of the whole plant due to the damage or removal of it.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, a K-Pop composition with modular characteristic redefines the unit of human by emphasizing that bodies will always be a dispensable part of an organism. This modular organism that K-Pop dance demonstrates remains an integrated system rather than a complete one because it is a fluid form that exists within the stage of “has-already-been” and “always-becoming.” Human body as a prosthetic addition has already been a composition consisting of complex units of components, and through the process of human body becoming prosthesis, it becomes a unit that assembles and disassembles into various geometric forms for different purposes.

Based on this characteristic, and according to Haraway, cyborgs are “needy for connection”<sup>14</sup> and calls for “affinity-coalition”<sup>15</sup> to destroy the fiction

of original unity or completeness. The organism that K-Pop presents exemplifies Haraway’s idea of “fractured identities,” which attempt to assemble randomly and disassemble flexibly. The border of the human body turns out to be a junction that opens up for any connections, seeking to build up a new subject or organism whose mobility is based on the complex movements and its various lines and shapes, and dance composition.

While the Tiller Troupe’s performance was too mechanical to remain individually singular and the dancers retained the status of objects, K-Pop performance stands in the situation where a human subject becomes an object, or where a human subject creates a new subject (organism). To clearly elaborate the oscillating process, it is necessary to discuss the relationship between human and technics involved. Can an individual body be the prosthesis of human and object, and promote both the mobility of technics and the materiality of human bodies?

### “This body qua ‘dance’”

In *Natural-Born Cyborg*, Andy Clark indicates that the hybrid form of cyborgs not only exists in recent technological context, but also in the historical procession of technology, from speech to written text, and printing to digital encodings.<sup>16</sup> Clark suggests that “it is an aspect of humanity ... to enter into deep and complex relationships with nonbiological constructs, props, and aids.”<sup>17</sup> Humans are always ready to connect their minds deeply with tools as exteriorization in order to link to the world we inhabit.<sup>18</sup> That is to say, without technics, humanity could not possibly exist; it is because human bodies are always open to nonbiological resources, we are already natural-born cyborgs. However, the process of exteriorization that originates in mind still overly emphasizes the priority of interior mind. Is there an absolute boundary or sequential order between the interior and the exterior? More specifically, is human the inventor of technics, or does technics invent human?

Chiu-hua Su has already excavated the posthuman potential in Bernard Stiegler’s *Technics and Time*.<sup>19</sup> Stiegler suggests that technology precedes human by stating how the techniques of

stonecutting contributed to the corticalization of Zinjanthropian brain.<sup>20</sup> In other words, technics happens to be the “inventor” of human. The erect posture that began with the feet gradually lead to the “freeing of the hand” and made it “necessarily call for tools.”<sup>21</sup> To make it clear, it was the brain that benefited greatly by this process of liberation. As a result, “with the advent of exteriorization, the body of living individual is no longer only a body: it can only function with its tools.”<sup>22</sup> Stiegler indicates that human nature is based on “technicity” and “denaturalization,” which means there is no clear boundary between body and technics. Moreover, “the prosthesis is not a mere extension of the human body, it is the constitution of this body *qua* ‘human.’”<sup>23</sup> The relationship between human and technics is not the question of who invents whom, but mutually constituted just like the “mirror proto-stage” that Stiegler suggests: “the exteriorization without a preceding interior, the interior is constituted in exteriorization.”<sup>24</sup>

Stiegler also suggests that we should not restrict technics into specific tools; “politeness, elegance, and cooking are skills... Dance is *tekhne*.”<sup>25</sup> Back to the discussion of K-Pop performance, the technique of dance is a prosthesis that enhances the human body and promotes the exactitude and integrity of the modular organism. However, as a modular organism that consists of human bodies, not only does the dance technique serve as an extension of the human body to create an organism, but each human body has become a tool being called upon for another component, and connected to each other. It becomes the prosthesis of the modular organism. We found that technics is not a mere exteriorization of human body; the relations between human bodies are also mutually exteriorized. Moreover, dance technique as prosthesis is not a mere extension of human body, but also renders “this body *qua* ‘human.’” The human body as prosthesis is not a mere extension of modular organism, but also becomes “this body *qua* ‘dance.’” In the practice of K-Pop group dance, the birth of human and technics happens at the same time, both of them constituted mutually as a reflection in mirror proto-stage; the interior never precedes exterior, and is always constituting within the exterior. As a result, although dance-as-technique might be an invention of the human in other performance

contexts, within the performance by K-Pop artists, human and technics are mutually constituted. Technics has fully appeared to be active and shown its mobility, while the human body has shown its technicity and became the prosthesis of a new form of subject.

### The Cell Movement of Amoebic Body

“This body *qua* ‘human’” and “this body *qua* ‘dance’” develop the notion of the human body to redefine the position of the interior mind and the exterior body and technics, now mutually constituted in the movement of K-Pop choreography. “Man” in K-Pop is always an individual of creation and also a creation of individuals. However, if we see into the process of becoming a “Man,” the idea of mutually constituted being is never new, especially while looking at it in a microbiological way. David S. Goodsell considers the components of life a machine that “perform[s] specific tasks efficiently and accurately,”<sup>26</sup> and it is “a mechanism where parts fits together, move, interact to perform a given job.” In fact, these given tasks that perform mechanically are never operated by the mind or the brain since it is an inner working that occurs in a nanoscale world. As a component, a cell is simultaneously an interior part of a body but an exterior part of molecules. The logic follows that the molecular being is mutually constituted as a cell or atoms. Every element is programmed to move and interact with each other. It is a process that is full of “bodies” connecting, and diffusing, then connecting again. The molecular movement, or “molecular diffusion,” is both purposive and random; it bounces back and forth between place to place and “will encounter every other molecule in a matter of seconds.”<sup>27</sup> In this micro-perspective, every layer of components shares the same characteristic of becoming a modular organism. They are randomly assembled and flexibly disassembled under certain given jobs; they are the prostheses that supplement and enhance a new organism while being part of the interior or the exterior body. They are all individuals that will become part of a new form or have already become a new form. As Goodsell indicates, “individual molecules are captured and sorted, and individual atoms in these molecules are

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shuffled from place to place, building entirely new molecules.”<sup>28</sup>

Amoeba consists of cells whose movement operates by protruding a portion of the cell to the very side of direction, and to “form a new adhesion, and to discard the old adhesions (or anchorages),” according to molecular biology.<sup>29</sup> This process involves a pseudopod that is filled with cytoplasm to project for motility or to ingest the prey through its extension or contraction. K-Pop performance resembles this amoebic movement since it is a de-centered organism that extends and retracts its prosthesis (human bodies). Take K-Pop boy group NCT U’s choreography video “The 7<sup>th</sup> Sense” as a case study.<sup>30</sup> In the beginning, each dancer, or the prosthesis, of the modular organism, the group of dancers, stands in different positions. As the music starts, this organism starts working by moving each prosthesis. After that, the prosthesis extends its tentacle for the first coalition to join, creating an eyeball-like form (See Fig. 4: NCT U extends its prosthesis and forms its amoebic body in the video, “The 7<sup>th</sup> Sense”). The movement of this organism is



Fig. 4

also based on the formation of a new adhesion and the discarding of the old adhesions.

The amoebic movement is not merely about the choreographed movement of K-Pop, but also its characteristics as a form of media. As mentioned before, the K-Pop groups should not be understood

as the creation of the linear assembly line, but a circulation system that involves viewers in it. The potential of an amoeba is that it produces a boundary but blurs it at the same time. In a linear assembly line, the production ends at the border of the screen for the viewers’ consumption. However, as the digital circulation of K-pop suggests, its amoebic tendency opens up its borders and redefines the meaning of an integrated organism. It protrudes its pseudopod and engulfs the viewer into its musical body with its catchy vibe and memorable choreography, making the viewers join the organism as its partial body. In “Screen as Skin: The Somatechnics of Touchscreen Music Media,” Laura Glitsos challenges the bodily border by thinking touchscreen as a “fleshy interface between bodies and worlds,”<sup>31</sup> suggesting that “music becomes embodied – it can be touched, seen, and be moved around as an extension of one’s own body.”<sup>32</sup> Not only is the touchscreen a skin that can be touched, “the earphones work as vein, ‘pumping the music’ though the body of the device of the subject.”<sup>33</sup> As the screen is dissolved, the K-Pop modular geometric organism becomes a digital skin, being touched by and connected to the viewers who perceive this process of “amoebization.” The music video or performance seen, touched, listened does not only affect the viewer’s body; the viewer is also taking “part” in this amoebic body by singing, covering, mimicking the performance.

Every time a K-Pop group releases its music video, the cell-like, molecule-like, and atom-like viewers also upload numerous dance cover videos on YouTube, energetically participating in this digital circulation and becoming part of the modular organism. Viewers reshape their bodies and develop new bodies by operating the choreography. With the cyborgian bodies calling for a new coalition and affinity, like Haraway suggested, a newly modular organism that consists of human prosthesis are created, and becomes “this body *qua* human” and “this body *qua* dance” in this digital circulation.

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## Notes

- 1 Steven Shaviro, *Connected, or What it Means to Live in the Network Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 10.
- 2 Ramsay Burt, "The Chorus Line and the Efficiency Engineers," in *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, 'Race', and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 72.
- 3 Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998), 76.
- 4 Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," 79.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 91, 76.
- 6 John Searbrook, "Factory Girls: Cultural Technology and the Making of K-pop," in *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory* (W.W Norton & Company: New York, 2015), 149-167.
- 7 See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002), 101-133.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 101-133.
- 9 See the music video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGdbaEDVWp0>
- 10 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in *The Cybercultures Reader*, eds. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2000), 293.
- 11 Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," 291.
- 12 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 152. (Just curious -- Why is only this section cited?)
- 13 Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola, "Introduction" in *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence* (Island Press, 2015), 34.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 292.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 296.
- 16 Andy Clark, "Introduction" in *Natural-Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.
- 17 Clark, "Introduction," 4-5.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 3-8.
- 19 Chiu-hua Su, "From Everydayness to Programmability, A Discussion of the Posthuman Tendency in Stiegler's Theory via the Nineteenth Century Magic Theatre," *Review of English and American Literature* Vol. 18 (2011): 33-69.
- 20 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 134.
- 21 Stiegler, "Who? What? The Invention of the Human," 145-146.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 23 *Ibid.*.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 26 David S. Goodsell, "Molecular Machines" in *The Machinery of Life* (Copernicus Books, 2009), 9.
- 27 Goodsell, "Introduction," 5.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 29 J.M. Lackie, "Crawling Movement" in *Cell Movement and Cell Behavior* (London; Allen & Unwin, 1986), 149.
- 30 See their performance here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTmR-ogUXqo>
- 31 Laura Glitsos, "Screen as Skin: The Somatechnics of Touchscreen Music Media," *Somatechnics* Vol. 7 Issue 1 (2017): 144.
- 32 Glitsos, "Screen as Skin: The Somatechnics of Touchscreen Music Media," 152.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 153.