Eleni Alexandri (2022). K-Pop as (mis)representation of Korean culture. *International Journal of Marketing Semiotics & Discourse Studies* Vol. X, pp.1-20.
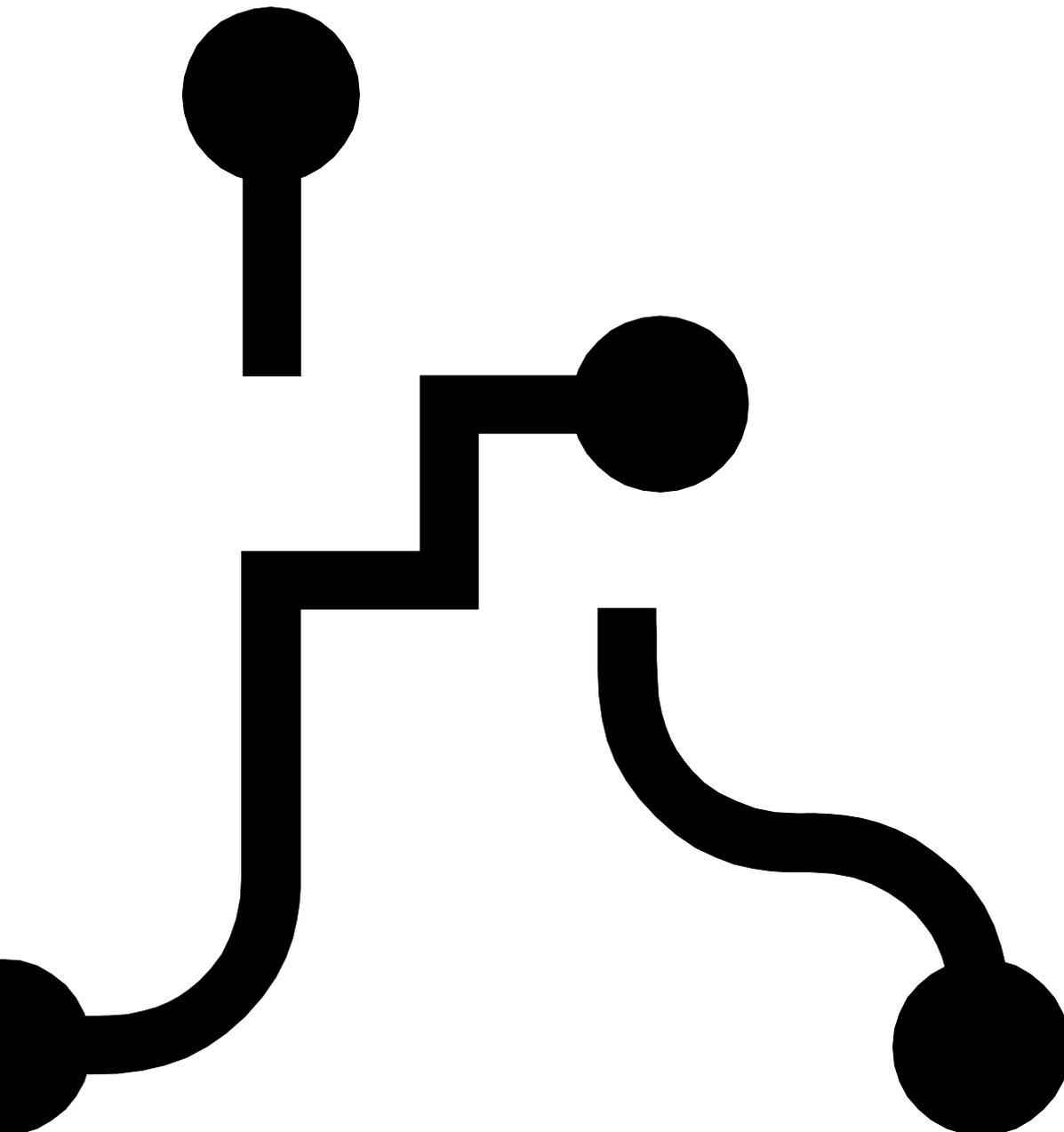
K-Pop as (mis)representation of Korean culture

Eleni Alexandri, University of Tartu, Estonia (email: eleni@ut.ee)

Abstract

K-Pop, short for Korean popular music, is a genre that has grown into a global phenomenon over the last few decades, influencing not only the international music scene, but also social and cultural issues that extend beyond the realm of the music industry. Apart from the various academic studies regarding its model of success, its financial contribution to Korea's economy, and the behavioral patterns of its fandom, K-Pop offers fertile ground for semiotic research, and harbors many aspects yet to be uncovered and further examined. The current article explores the issue of Korean cultural representation and misrepresentation through K-Pop, by examining the two diametrically opposed perspectives within the framework of history and cultural identity. The study suggests that the divergent vantage points between the proponents of each stance consist in their understanding and interpretation of culture itself.

*Eleni Alexandri is a Ph.D. candidate in Semiotics at the University of Tartu. Her research covers the field of Eastern Asian forms of art and entertainment, as well as Eastern Asian Mythology. Her current work focuses on Korean popular music (K-Pop) and Korean music videos, communication with an international audience, global perception, marketing tactics, and their impact on popular culture.

0. Introduction

The abbreviation K-Pop stands for Korean popular music, a genre that has gained increasing popularity during the last decades, and has evolved into a global phenomenon. K-Pop is part of the Korean wave (*Hallyu*, in Korean), a kind of soft power which was adopted by the South Korean government as a rescue plan from the Asian economic crisis of 1997. Even after the beneficial contributions that managed to save Korea from the aforementioned economic period, *Hallyu* continues to export local culture, and as a national concept, today it includes music, television series (K-dramas), movies, online games and computer software, even e-government models (Rhyu 2015).

Most of the studies in the available English-speaking literature on this topic aim at elucidating the success of Korean Wave in general, or K-Pop music more specifically, with a focus on the growth of Korean GDP, statistics about the increase of income from tourism, and the impact of byproducts of the industrial development on society (Bae et al. 2017; Huang 2019; Lim & Giouvris 2020; Messerlin & Shin 2017; Oh & Lee 2014; Seo & Kim 2020; Shin & Kim 2013). Other studies concentrate on the analysis of the followers and supporters of different K-Pop idols; the establishment of these organized groups, and their contribution in promoting the music genre and their favorite artists. There is a great number of socially oriented studies on the description and examination of the formation and functioning of local fandoms (Jung 2011; Jung & Shim 2014; Marinescu & Balica 2013; Otmazgin & Lyan 2013; Siriyuvasak & Shin 2007; Sung 2013; Yoon 2018), the reaction videos mainly on YouTube, and the importance of Korean speaking fans in spreading K-Pop (Aisyah et al. 2019; Cruz et al. 2021; Lynch 2020; Magoncia 2014; Oh 2017; Swan 2017,2018; Yoon 2017). Additionally, there are studies on the issues of masculinity of K-Pop idols, and gender inequalities (Almqvist-Ingersoll 2019; Lin & Rudolf 2017; Maliangkay 2013; Oh 2015; Oh & Oh 2017; Sari 2016).

Insofar as K-Pop is almost like a living organism which is growing and constantly evolving, a year-long gap between studies provides the researcher with new materials, worthy of further investigation and new opportunities for the exploration of meaning-making mechanisms and communicative actions in the Korean music industry. This article aims to cover the topic of representation and misrepresentation of Korean culture through K-Pop, an issue that has been increasingly scrutinized over the last few years, although remaining as yet unaddressed from a semiotic point of view. Hence, the questions to be asked are how the inherent hybridity of K-Pop can lead to cultural and national misrepresentation, and how K-Pop as part of the Korean Wave has managed to expand national branding and promote the Korean culture.

The results of this investigation are expected to provide a thorough understanding of the meaning-making mechanisms in K-Pop, and to shed light on the issues of cultural representation and identity that exceed the boundaries of the music genre. For this analysis, it is essential to begin by briefly looking into the history of Korea, Korean music and performing arts through time, as well as how they help define national and cultural identity.

1. History of Korea and Korean culture

Looking through the history of Korea, it becomes apparent that the country has undergone various occupations. Starting from 108 BC, *Gojoseon*, the first kingdom, was conquered by the Han Dynasty; following the era of the Chinese empire, many Northern nomads invaded the country from 1238 up until 1620, while around 1592, the first invasion attempt was made by Japan. Eventually, in 1910 the period of Japanese occupation begins, and Korea becomes a colony. This occupation lasted until the end of World War II, a hallmark that both signals the liberation of the Korean people, and the division of the nation. In 1950, the Korean War started; a traumatic and damaging civil war that destroyed Korean families, and plunged the nation into absolute poverty (Rhyu 2015, pp.21-22).

According to Han's (2007) diachronic research on ethnic homogeneity and multiculturalism in Korea, the country has a long experience of co-existing with other cultures and civilizations. Korea not only has not been prejudiced towards foreigners, but on the contrary "had clear policies, principles and practices concerning immigration and naturalization (*hyanghwa)*" (Han 2007, p.12).

Even though Koreans managed to maintain their own vernacular language throughout the occupations, it was not until 1443 when the Korean writing system, *hangeul* (also found in different publications as *hangul*, or *hankul*) was created (Sohn 2001, p.129). People, and more specifically intellectuals, were using Chinese characters to express themselves in written form which led to the creation of three main writing systems, *Idu*, *Gugyeol*, and *Hyangchal* (Chung 2010). Interestingly, the course *Introduction to Korean Philosophy and Culture,* created by the Sungkyunkwan University of Korea, provides insights about the three main philosophical influences behind the construction of *hangeul*. These are the East Asian Trinity (*Samjae*), the cosmology of Yin and Yang, and the theory of the Five Elements, all being concepts taken from the Chinese philosophy; their usage as the basis for the creation of *hangeul*, impacted the morphology of the Korean characters, and specifically the vowels of the alphabet (Sungkyunkwan University 2013b).

Regarding philosophy, the same course claims Korean philosophy combined pan-Asian (primarily Chinese) and indigenous ideas. The Four-Seven debate is the most famous

Korean philosophical example, examining the relationship between four moral principles and seven emotional states, challenging the basis of morality and goodness (Kalton et al. 1994; Seok 2018). The debate's concepts are founded in Chinese Neo-Confucianism, however, the arguments and quest for morality were proposed by Korean thinkers (Sungkyunkwan University 2013a).

1.1 History of Korean music

As per the above presented history of Korea, the country had been culturally influenced by the various occupation regimes over the years. However, the first interaction with Western culture, and specifically with Western music, came in 1885, when the US missionary Henry Appenzeller was sent to Korea to spread the message of Methodism, and founded the Pai Chai Academy (Ahn 2005, p.2). Korean people became familiar with many hymns and foreign folk songs, which constituted the basis of the first Korean adaptations, or what we would nowadays call 'covers' (Korean Culture and Information Service 2011, p.48).

These songs were called *ch'angga*, a term that comes from the Japanese colonial period, when the empire created *ch'angga* textbooks in order to enhance and strengthen its cultural impact over Koreans. However, there are plenty of indigenous music styles, namely *p'ansori* and *arirang*. *P'ansori* is performed by a singer and a drummer and has the form of storytelling. It is characterized by its theatricality, but also the participation of the audience that is shouting encouraging words (*ch'uimsae*), along with the drummers (Fuhr 2015, p.245; Jang 2001). In 2003, *P'ansori* was added to UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2017b). Finally, the "indisputable national folk song of South (and North) Korea is "Arirang"" (Lie 2015, p.18), a vocal style with many different variations that is also listed in the intangible cultural property of UNESCO (UNESCO 2017a).

Following Appenzeller, the next wave of Western, and more specifically American influence, came with the arrival of the American forces in 1945. That was the time when music stars such as Merilyn Monroe and Louis Armstrong (among others) performed in South Korea to entertain the American troops (Korean Culture and Information Service 2011, p.50). A brief look at the following decades reveals that foreign influences continued, although they were not always welcomed by the ruling regimes. The dictatorship in Korea imposed harsh censorship, until the end of the regime, and the democratization of South Korea in 1987. Tersely, the 60s was the decade of 'group sounds', and the Beatles, while the 70s was the era of rebellious youth and hippies, marked by a preference for acoustic genres and folk music (Korean Culture and Information Service 2011, pp.52-55).

Closer attention should be paid to an artist whose contribution to the creation of the Korean Wave has been paramount, and most importantly K-Pop. Lee Soo-man created the first heavy metal band in the early 80s, and as he was strictly banned from all media, due to the nature of his music that was opposing the standards and values set by the government. He flew to Southern California, abandoning his dreams. Lee was in America in 1981, around MTV channel's debut; he was captivated by the new aesthetics and fast-paced editing of videos and realized that this could be a model worthy of migrating to Korea (Kallen 2014, pp.8-9). At that moment the idea of K-Pop was born, and Lee Soo-man became one of the three main contributors in its globalization.

Lee's idea of a reformed South Korean music industry emerged at a time when the government was seeking a way out of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, and thus it was concluded that investing in Korean cultural export would be the best option (Mason 2018). Hence, the prospect of national bankruptcy was the second element contributing to the development of K-Pop and *Hallyu*. However, for many enthusiastic fans, and analysts, the most important role in the creation of the genre was played by the boy band SeoTaijiand Boys; the group appeared in 1992 on the stage of an MBCshow, and presented the song Nan Arayo which although received a harsh critique from the judges, and the lowest points in the history of the show, it presented something so fresh and unique to the audience of South Korea, as to inaugurate a new era in the local music industry(Korean Culture and Information Service 2011, p.63; Mackenzie 2019, p.20; Mason 2018; Morelli 2001, pp. 250-251).

Although K-Pop was only recently introduced to European and then American audiences, the music genre has a far longer history and has evolved musically and aesthetically. In fact, K-Pop may be divided into generations which, depending on the analytical approach, can be split into three, four or even five different phases, all starting with the performance of SeoTaijiand Boys (cf. Mackenzie 2019, p.6). Another, much less known and discussed part of history that contributed to the formation of K-Pop, regarding mostly the industry's organizational aspects, is the emergence of Korean agencies during the 1950s thattracked and developed Korean talents for the entertainment of the U.S. military. "Trained and auditioned before American military judges, these performers would soon come to constitute the critical labor base for the entire Korean popular music industry in the years to come" (Kim 2021, p.25). These facts show that many tweaks and improvements were made to the genre's musical and visual features along the way, making K-Pop the global sensation it is today.

2. National and cultural Identity

Given that the notion of identity per se is polysemic, defining national identity is an equally convoluted and challenging endeavor. Anthony Smith tackles this issue in his works *National Identity* (1991) and *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (1999), offering insight into national identity, by highlighting its components, as well as how it has been imposed as a necessary construct. He contends that national identity can only be understood as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, spanning a wide range of factors that affect its formation, including the cultural and social spheres. Furthermore, the author claims that "today national identity is the main form of collective identifications" (1991, p.170), but it should also be interpreted as a political activity imposing, or at least implying, a unified ideology, value system, and ethnic folk culture, among other things. As a result, cultural identity can be inferred to be one facet within the sphere of national identity, a component that has a significant and fundamental influence on the establishment of nationality.

Another significant approach has been offered by Maarja Ojamaa and Peeter Torop's in their work on cultural autocommunication (2014), which investigates and expands concepts in terms of the Lotmanian semiotics of culture. In their article, they point out that in order to speak for a cultural identity, a communicative process is required which includes both an open discussion between a culture and other cultures, as well as an internal discourse within each culture. As a result, this process, characterized as autocommunication, entails the concept of self-description, which corresponds to Hall's (1996) journey of identity; cultural identification can also include the journey to discover how a culture has been communicated and represented through its dialogue with the world, as well as how it should or could potentially be represented. In a nutshell, self-description allows for the formation of a cultural self-model. Finally, the more cultural texts are being transmitted in the communicative process, as autocommunication, the more they become essential components of a culture; or in Yuri Lotman's terms, the text is achieving the process of "self-recording" (Lotman 1988, p.56)

3. K-Pop as misrepresentation of Korean culture

3.1 The Koreanness of K-Pop and the role of idols

One of the most prominent proponents and outspoken critics of K-Pop as a misrepresentation is the renowned sociologist John Lie. The author has openly stated in his article "What is the K in K-Pop" (2012), as well as in his book *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea* (2014) that the music genre, and

eventually global phenomenon of K-Pop has been cut off from Korean history, culture and tradition, but also from the Confucian values that have imbued Korean society for years.

Lie opens his book with a history of Korean music to demonstrate how unrelated K-Pop is to tradition. The author, then, accuses the authorities of embracing and founding this "newfangled soft power" (Lie 2014, p.3), while he sees local support as stemming from the "unfulfilled quest for a national hero" and a need for "national celebration" (Lie 2014, p. 90). He describes K-Pop as an industry that inflicted cultural amnesia through a process of creative destruction, while simultaneously causing "the demise of Confucian culture" (Lie 2014, p.70). However, his strongest statement stems from questioning the basis of "K" in K-Pop, claiming that the popularity and success of K-Pop is due to the fact that there is nothing Korean about it. The Korean Wave in general, and K-pop in particular, is naked commercialism, albeit adorned with cultural respectability that derives from prestigious, luxury goods. It would be too much, however, to regard this as having anything to do with traditional Confucian, Korean culture (Lie 2012, pp.361-362)

Similarly, although in a much milder tone, Kyung Hyun Kim, in his recently published book *Hegemonic Mimicry: Korean Popular Culture of the Twenty-First Century* (2021), points out how far from tradition the culture represented by *Hallyu* and K-Pop is. He describes the global phenomenon as an appropriation of a ready-made American cultural model, the result of imitation that produces disposable entertainment goods. Eventually, however, he acknowledges the success of K-Pop and recognizes that the genre is offering a new approach and perspective to the American pop industry, with this being a key element of its success, as he attempts to strike a middle ground by suggesting that after the transformation of culture, and detachment from tradition, K-Pop may be offering a cultural rebirth and ushering in a new era. The author is doing so by drawing parallels with Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), in which he describes how an oppressed society and culture goes through a process of loathing its own traditions in order to achieve a cultural regeneration.

Finally, regarding the role of idols, the work of Hark Joon Lee and Dal Yong Jin, *K-Pop Idols: Popular Culture and the Emergence of the Korean Music Industry* (2019), give documentary evidence on the harsh reality of artists and performers by documenting the everyday life of the trainee girl-group Nine Muses. By the same token, a few years earlier, Euny Hong, described K-Pop as "a paternalistic system that disciplines its stars", where "training is an education of the whole person" (2014, p.129). Especially after the beginning of the new millennium, and the genre's initial success in neighboring countries, new promotional strategies were set in motion by agencies, aiming at furthering and increasing K-Pop's

impact; this was implemented by studying foreign demographics, understanding target audiences and "tailoring Korean artists to the tastes of young people around the world" (Korean Culture and Information Service 2011, p.67). Hence, it can be observed that the K-Pop industry seems to negate both cultural and individual uniqueness, adjusting and modeling those components to achieve maximum commercial success.

4. K-Pop as representation of Korean culture

In response to the above criticisms, proponents of K-Pop as a legitimate and valid representation have responded in a number of ways. The analysis offered in the following sub-sections is based on a twofold investigation that employs Julia Shpinitskaya's concept of M-space, and Heinrich F. Plett's theory of intertextuality. In this way, the behavioral patterns of Korean society throughout history, evident in Korean culture, will be highlighted as products of an open dialogue combined with creative innovation, linking everything to the very nature of K-Pop, while the traced intertextual elements, in the second part, will point out the meaning-making mechanisms of K-Pop, as well as uncover the messages these productions try to communicate with the rest of the world.

4.1 The M-Text of K-Pop

In the work of Julia Shpinitskaya on multiculturalism (2008, pp.642-649) that is heavily influenced by the semiotics of Lotman and Kristeva, the notion of multicultural space (M-space) is introduced; more specifically, M-space is a place where intercultural communication exists, enabling the creative dialogue, cultural exchange and flow of information between different agents (cultures and sub-cultures), while as a virtual territory cannot be limited by geographical locations, thus the channels of communication can be built on a global scale. The by-product of this space is what the author calls 'M-text', which as the result of the described dialogue "must represent a minimum of two cultures", as it simultaneously "renews pre-existing information and creates new meanings" (Shpinitskaya 2008, p.643).

Shpinitskaya classifies M-texts into two categories: those that develop naturally from historical circumstances and the co-existence or confluence of cultures (and sub-cultures), and those that are the outcome of a deliberate cooperative activity that entails diversity. The author fittingly uses music as an example, describing the evolution of musical practices among co-existing societies as an organically generated M-text, and the intentional, organized collaboration between artists, who combine their cultures to create a new fresh sound, as inclusive work embracing diversity and subjectivity (Shpinitskaya 2008, p.644)

Within the scope of this theoretical framework, and in conjunction with the information presented in the first section about Korean history, philosophy and language, as well as the history of Korean music, it is possible to understand K-Pop as an M-text, and to see Korea as a cultural place that shares many similarities with what was defined as an M-space. This does not suggest that Korea lacks uniqueness, authenticity, or even genuine tradition; it rather emphasizes the spirit of acceptance, the ability to adapt, and the skillful innovation that has characterized Korean society through its history. Looking back at the long history of occupations, the historical period where the lack of a Korean alphabet gave birth to the invention of three different writing systems utilizing Chinese characters, the engagement with Pan-Asian (mostly Chinese) philosophies as a ground for Korean intellectual thinking to grow and bring up new meanings, as well as the inclusion of foreign music influences for the creation of unique Korean sounds, paints the picture of a Korean way of thinking, and defines a culture that can be recognized in Korean popular music. As a matter of fact, it seems like this way of thinking is the foundation of K-Pop which in turn follows the patterns that are defining of Koreanness.

4.2 The three phases of intertextuality

In this section, K-Pop music, the accompanying videos and stage performances of the artists will be examined through Plett's theoretical framework of intertextuality. It is important to note that the study has excluded campaigns and photo sets of cultural themes, aiming directly at the promotion of Korean culture and tradition. Such an example would be the annual photo-shoots K-Pop groups and solo performers create for Chuseok (or *Hangawi*), one of the most important holidays in Korea, dedicated to the autumn harvesting season. In this context, artists dressed in traditional clothing pose in front of traditional Korean buildings, wishing their fans "Happy Chuseok!" Even though this theme is excluded from the present analysis, it is and should not be disregarded as evidence for the role of K-Pop as a representation of Korean tradition and culture, as well as a great contributor in the expansion of nation branding.

Through the analysis of the included materials, as delimited in the preceding paragraph, two distinct phases of strategic and intentional references appear. The first concerns the inclusion of allusions to the incorporation of Western and mainly American culture, whereas the second the inclusion of traditional references from Korean culture. Subsequently, a third phase emerges which no longer regards the intertextual elements in the aforementioned materials, but rather K-Pop as a reference point.

4.2.1 Plett's approach to intertextuality

The various interpretations that have been offered for the term *intertextuality* make its comprehension extremely challenging. Heinrich Plett, in the chapter "Intertextualities" (1991, pp.3-29) presents his own inclusive theory, combining several of its features. An important note that the author makes before proceeding to his conceptualizations of intertextuality, is the difference between text, which is to be understood as an autonomous entity, with a specific structure and boundaries, and the intertext, as a dependent entity, determined by the properties of the text(s) into which it may be incorporated. Therefore, its indistinguishable nature makes it difficult to identify clearly, while running the risk of disappearance within a new textual framework (Plett 1991, pp.6-7).

Moreover, Plett mentions the element of code, entailed by the intertext. Code consists of rules, which are responsible for the structure of the text, and signs that concretize it. For the purposes of the following analysis, the features of Plett's theory to be used are the three types of intertextuality based on the components of code:

material (particularizing) intertextuality – i.e. repetition of signs, structural (generalizing) intertextuality – i.e. repetition of rules, material-structural (particularizing-generalizing) intertextuality – i.e. repetition of signs and rules in two or more texts (Plett 1991, p.7)

This seemingly simple, yet efficient theoretical framework will allow for describing the emergence of different intertextual types in K-Pop, and for acquiring a better understanding of the messages K-Pop sends to the world, while shedding light onto the meaning-making mechanisms as identified in production materials.

4.2.2 International influences in K-Pop: Material (particularizing) Intertextuality

The material intertextuality that is used in K-Pop music videos ranges from basic forms such as references to internationally acclaimed bands, like Nirvana, in posters, graffiti, or even T-shirt stamps worn by K-Pop idols, up until more creative types of intertextuality.

In 2017, the South Korean girl group Dreamcatcher released a music video titled "Chase me" (Digipedi 2017), and K-Pop fans were excited to recognize the very obvious references to one of the most popular and classic films in the history of cinema, *The Shining* (Kubrick 1980). The video includes various sign repetitions, such as the replication of the scene with the twin girls standing in the hotel corridor, the smashing of the hotel door with an axe, performed by the male co-protagonist, while the ghosts of the movie are portrayed by the band members.

Furthermore, another type of intertextuality can be recognized, that is, the material-structural one. Apart from the repetition of signs, the incorporation of the signature framing of Kubrick can be identified, known as one-point perspective; hence, this intertextual element incorporates and duplicates the rules governing the shooting style of the renowned director, along with the aforementioned signs.

Another Korean music video that is rich in references to iconic films is "What is Love" (Naive Creative Production 2018) by the girl group Twice. The plot of the music video is a group of girls, watching scenes from famous movies, wondering "what is love". All of the scenes are recreated by the members of the band, in a repetition of signs taken from *The ghost* (Zucker 1990), *La la land* (Chazelle 2016), *Léon* (Besson 1994), *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino 1994), and *Romeo & Juliet* (Luhrmann 1996).

The list of material intertextual references to foreign cultures may continue, but these few examples suffice to provide an understanding of how intertextual elements referencing international (mainly American) pop cultural elements have been used to establish a common communication code, to appeal to sentiment and nostalgia, and to demonstrate through their iconography that K-Pop is not alienated from the global cultural terrain.

4.2.3 International influences in K-Pop: Structural (generalizing) intertextuality
Whereas the material (particularizing) intertextuality consists of signs' repetition, in structural (generalizing) intertextuality there are no distinct unities that appear within the new text, but intertextuality lies in abiding by a specific set of rules.

A prominent example is the song "I Got a Boy" by the Korean girl band Girls' Generation released in 2013, which includes (at least) nine different music genres such as hip-hop, pop, rock, EDM, and more (Mason 2018). However, there is a plethora of songs that could exemplify this argument. For instance, the song "Really Really" by the boy band Winner (2017) that encompasses latin hip-hop, hip-hop, reggae and of course pop; or the song "Obsession" by the well-known boy band EXO (2019). This song uses a repetitive sample of music through the entire song that can be described by the genres of house and reggaeton, while the main body of the song moves from house, to trap, to hip-hop, makes a break during the bridge, and then slows down into almost a ballad, all of the above against a pop background.

The reason why the presented examples fall under the category of structural (generalizing) intertextuality, is because during the process of creating an original audio, the allusion to other music genres is made through the repetition of their rules, comprising tempo, beat,

melody and occasionally sound effects. However, there can also be a case of material (particularizing) intertextuality in music, and that is when a sample (a distinct unit) is used within the new song. An example of samples' usage is the song "Dope", by the boy band BTS (2015), that is using as a sample the song "GDFR" by the artists Flo Rida featuring The Gemini and Lookas (2014).

Finally, an example of material-structural intertextuality is the category of cover songs. The producers follow the rules of the original song to recreate something new, while in most of the cases the tempo, beat and key of the original song are slightly altered. The artists perform the cover song in their personal singing style, adjusting it to their own (artistic) identity. However, the end result remains a recreation of the original, and the lyrics (in the majority of cases) remain the same, thus it is a type of quotation as repetition of signs. Hence, covers are at the same time a type of material intertextuality.

4.2.4 Korean tradition reflected in K-Pop

Since the establishment of the relationship with the receivers and the cultivation of their interest in K-Pop, producers had the ability to communicate their national and cultural identity with the world. Before the beginning of the genre's success across the continent, the incorporation of traditional sounds in the songs was timid, and unsupported by visual elements in the accompanying video clips (e.g. the song "Coming of Age Ceremony" by Park Ji-yoon, released in 2000).

After 2021, and in light of of Psy's success with the song and music video "Gangnam Style" (Cho 2012), which successfully penetrated the global music scene, Korean agencies took advantage of the interest towards the music genre and embarked on a more intense effort to integrate Korean traditional elements to K-Pop music, and videos of the songs. That being said, in the first K-Pop convention (KCON) in France, in 2016, a line-up of artists (BTS, Block B, SHINee, and others) opened the concert by performing the song medley "Arirang", a tribute to Korean tradition. The performance was not supported by other traditional elements, such as clothes, or traditional dances, and it should be considered a type of material-structural intertextuality. A more recent and element-rich performance linked to the Korean national folk song is the video performance of the song "Arirang (Prehistory)" by the Korean boy-band A.C.E (Kakao Entertainment 2021); apart from the structural intertextuality following the rules of *arirang* folk songs and the performing art of *seungmu*, a Korean traditional dance act usually performed by Buddhist monks (Lim &Yoon 2008, p.308), the material intertextualities include the modernized traditional clothing, and the national flag of

Korea appearing at the end of the video (along with the colors of white, black, red, and blue that were used throughout the video).

Other examples include the song, and video clip "Idol" by the band BTS (Choi 2018), as well as the group's live performance of the song at the Melon Music Awards (MMA) in 2018; the original version of the song, and even more so the stage performance, include various forms of intertextualities, integrating the sounds of Korean traditional instruments, such as *gayageum*, *haegeum*, *taepyengso*, and the four instrument musical arrangement of *samulnori*. Regarding the performing act, in this case, *seungmu* appears once more, along with many other Korean traditional dances. Moreover, the band members are dressed in (modernized) traditional clothing, while the music video is incorporated through material intertextuality, Korean folk stories and traditional architecture create a repetition of Korean traditional landscape paintings[1]. By the same token, one might look at the music videos of the boy band ONEUS, "Lit" (RBW 2009) and "Luna" (RBW 2021) that include a plethora of intertextual elements with reference to Korean culture and tradition, as well as the song and music video "Hanryang" (Shin 2020), performed by Min Kyung Hoon, Kim Heechul, and BIBI.

All of these examples of material, structural, or in most cases combined intertextuality, support the viewpoint of K-Pop being a valid representation of Korean culture and tradition. By utilizing established channels of communication, K-Pop is trying to find a balance between universality and particularity, uniqueness without alienation, in order to introduce to the rest of the world its cultural identity. By that logic, K-Pop can be seen as a form of self-description encapsulated in an autocommunicative act.

4.2.5 K-Pop as intertextual assemblage

During the last few years, and following the great and gradually increasing popularity of the music genre, there is sufficient evidence of K-Pop's being referenced by American or Western productions, including its appearance in various films' and TV-series' soundtracks. Additionally, slightly more prominent cases can be found in movies that incorporate K-Pop as a more distinctive element that contributes to character development. For example, in the movie *Justice League* (Snyder 2017), Flash was portrayed as a K-Pop enthusiast, an element that added to the uniqueness and quirkiness of the character.

---

[1] A particularly insightful analysis of BTS's "Idol" stage performance in the Melon Music Awards 2018, is offered on YouTube, created by ByStorm, Costo, and Lee Woongbin, examining the act in the context of Korean history and tradition. As locals, or "insiders" they provide an additional explanation of the importance of this performance, by offering an interpretation that links the stage act, but also the message communicated through BTS and K-Pop, to Korean philosophy: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TA5X24c2FhI

However, the most outstanding example that presents thoroughly the use of K-Pop as an intertextual element is the music video of the song "POP/STARS" by the group K/DA (Fortiche Production 2018). K/DA is a fictional group, created by the marketing team of Riot Company; their hit song "POP/STARS", along with its accompanying music video, were made to follow the release of the brand new skins for the characters of Riot's online game "League of Legends". K/DA is, supposedly, a Korean girl band, consisting of four of the already known characters of the online game. The formation of this fictional band, as well as the initial decision of RIOT Company to create special skins for the game's characters, was marked as a tribute to K-Pop.

Analyzing the material through the theoretical framework of Plett, this music video can be considered an example of material-structural (particularizing-generalizing) intertextuality, since, even if there are signs of repetition and recreation, the entire production, including the creation of the song and its visualization, follow certain codes and rules, that is, the aesthetic identity of the genre and its depictions. Regarding the material intertextuality of the video, there are various elements that can be spotted in the clip as a reference to K-Pop, enriching aesthetic similarities such as the presence of luxurious sport cars, the laundry room and subway train locations, the hand gesture forming the iconic "Korean heart", and lastly the graffiti of a dragon drawn in an almost traditional style (a mythical creature that is highly valued in Korean culture). Finally, in relation to the music, and the audio track, the intertextuality should be regarded as structural, since there is no repetition of a quotation (sample), however the rules and morphology of K-Pop music have been applied to this original song.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to investigate the two opposing perspectives on K-Pop as a representation of Korean culture. Starting from a brief history of Korea, since culture cannot be detached from history, and proceeding with the delimitation of what is meant by the terms national and cultural identity, the following sections further examined these two opposing viewpoints. Identity and representation, as well as the underlying communication activities and meaning-making practices, are fundamentally objects of semiotic inquiry. Each of the theoretical perspectives used in this study contributes to our understanding of the cultural function of K-Pop.

In conclusion, modern Korean popular music presents, on the one hand, a hybrid, multilayered product that has been commercialized and commodified as part of an industry, in order to compete in the global market. *Hallyu*, on the other hand, as a form of self-

description began a dialogue between Korea and the rest of the world, while the initial phase of intertextuality established a common code for the effective formation of communicative action. Through this newly formed discourse, South Korea was able to expand its national branding, international fans were given the opportunity to learn more about the country's history, culture, and traditions, beyond the reach of K-Pop, academics from all over the world examined the global phenomenon, and locals found a way to introduce Korean culture and society through the eyes of an insider, utilizing technological advancements and the Internet.

Having said that, an important observation is that supporting arguments of either position could be used by the opposite side, for example, the issue of hybridity could signify the distortion of identity and negation of authenticity and uniqueness, but it could also be considered as the result of a creative imagination, and cultural exchange that follows the patterns of Koreanness. This statement can serve as a springboard for further thought. It may be argued that K-Pop, through self-recording, managed to become an integral part of Korean cultural identity, and should no longer be regarded as a representation (accurate or inaccurate). Subsequently, it became apparent that the primary difference between the two opposing sides of this debate is their understanding of culture itself, rather than the problem of representation.

References

Ahn, Choong-sik 2005.*The story of Western music in Korea: a social history, 1885-1950*. Morgan Hill, California: EBookstand Books.

Aisyah, Aznur, Intan Safinaz Zainudin& Rou Seung Yoan(2019): Social Media Translational Action: Translation Activities by K-Pop Fans in Twitter. *International Journal of Virtual and Personal Learning Environments* .IGI Global. 9(2). 32–54. doi:10.4018/IJVPLE.2019070103.

Almqvist-Ingersoll, Petter 2019. *Conceptually androgynous : The production and commodification of gender in Korean pop music*. Umeå, Sweden: Master thesis for the Umeå University.

Bae, Eun-song, Meehyang Chang, Eung-Suk Park & Dae-cheol Kim 2017.The effect of Hallyu on tourism in Korea. *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity* 3(1). 1–12.doi:10.1186/s40852-017-0075-y.

Besson, Luc 1994. *Léon*. Les Films du Dauphin, Columbia Pictures.

Chazelle, Damien 2016. *La La Land*. Summit Entertainment, Black Label Media, TIK Films.

Cho, Soo-hyun 2012. *Gangnam style* .https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bZkp7q19f0 (accessed 28 December 2021).

Choi, Yongseok 2018.*Idol*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBuZEGYXA6E (accessed 28

December 2021).

Chung, Jaeyoung 2010. The Use of Chinese Characters in Ancient Korea: With a Focus on Texts Transcribed with Chinese-Borrowed Characters. *Korea journal* 50. 35–71. doi:10.25024/kj.2010.50.2.35.

Cruz, Angela Gracia B., Yuri Seo & Itir Binay 2021. Cultural globalization from the periphery: Translation practices of English-speaking K-pop fans. *Journal of Consumer Culture*. 21(3). 638–659.doi:10.1177/1469540519846215.

Digipedi 2017.*Chase me* .https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zihoyz0u_cs (accessed 28 December 2021).

Fortiche Production 2018. *Pop/star* .https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOxkGD8qRB4 (accessed 28 December 2021).

Fuhr, Michael 2015. *Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding Out K-Pop*. New York: Routledge.

Hall, Stuart 1996. Introduction: Who needs 'identity'?. In Stuart Hall, Paul du Gay (eds.) *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1-17. Reprint edition. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Han, Kyung-Koo 2007.The Archaeology of the Ethnically Homogeneous Nation-State and Multiculturalism in Korea. *Korea Journal* 47.8–31. doi:10.25024/kj.2007.47.4.8.

Hong, Euny 2014.*The Birth of Korean Cool: How One Nation Is Conquering the World Through Pop Culture*. London; New York; Sydney; Toronto; New Delhi: Simon and Schuster.

Huang, Xiaowei 2009. "Korean Wave" — The Popular Culture, Comes as Both Cultural and Economic Imperialism in the East Asia. *Asian Social Science* 5(8).123–130. doi:10.5539/ASS.V5N8P123.

Jang, Yeonok 2001.P'ansori Performance Style: Audience Responses and Singers' Perspectives. *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*. British Forum for Ethnomusicology. 10(2). 99–121.

Jung, Sun & Doobo Shim 2014. Social distribution: K-pop fan practices in Indonesia and the 'Gangnam Style' phenomenon. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*.17(5). 485–501.doi:10.1177/1367877913505173.

Jung, Sun 2011. K-pop, Indonesian fandom, and social media. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 8(1) doi:10.3983/twc.2011.0289.

Kakao Entertainment 2021. *Arirang*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKKovHtL0wk (accessed 28 December 2021).

Kallen, Stuart A. 2014. *K-pop : Korea's musical explosion*. Minneapolis, MN : Twenty-First Century Books.

Kalton, Michael C., Oaksook C. Kim, Sung Bae Park, Youngehan Ro, Tu Wei-ming &

Samuel Yamashita 1994. *The Four-Seven Debate: An Annotated Translation of the Most Famous Controversy in Korean Neo-Confucian Thought*. Annotated edition. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Kim, Kyung Hyun 2021.*Hegemonic Mimicry: Korean Popular Culture of the Twenty-First Century*. Durham: Duke University Press Books.

Korean Culture and Information Service 2011.*K-POP: A New Force in Pop Music*. Republic of Korea: Korean Culture and Information Service, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

Kubrick, Stanley 1980. *The Shining*. Warner Bros., Hawk Films, Peregrine.

Lee, Hark Joon & Dal Yong Jin (2019): *K-Pop Idols: Popular Culture and the Emergence of the Korean Music Industry*. Lanham; Boulder; New York; London: Lexington Books.

Lie, John 2012. What Is the K in K-pop? South Korean Popular Music, the Culture Industry, and National Identity. *Korea Observer* 43(3).339–363.

Lie, John 2014. *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea*. Oakland. California: University of California Press.

Lim, Kyungho & Joonsung Yoon 2008. Media Art Using Korean Traditional Cultural Archetype. *Proceedings of ISEA 2008*, 305–308. Singapore: ISEA2008 Pte Ltd.

Lim, Sung Kyu & Evangelos Giouvris 2020. Tourist arrivals in Korea: Hallyu as a pull factor. *Current Issues in Tourism*. 23(1). 99–130. doi:10.1080/13683500.2017.1372391.

Lin, Xi & Robert Rudolf 2017. Does K-pop Reinforce Gender Inequalities? Empirical Evidence from a New Data Set. *Asian Women* 33(4). 27–54. doi:10.14431/aw.2017.12.33.4.27.

Lotman, Yuri M. 1988. The Semiotics of Culture and the Concept of a Text. *Soviet Psychology*.26(3).52–58.doi:10.2753/RPO1061-0405260352.

Luhrmann, Baz 1997. *Romeo + Juliet*. Drama, Romance Bazmark Films, Estudios Churubusco Azteca S.A., Twentieth Century Fox.

Lynch, Kimery S 2020. Fans as transcultural gatekeepers: The hierarchy of BTS' Anglophone Reddit fandom and the digital East-West media flow. *New Media & Society*. 1–17.doi:10.1177/1461444820962109.

Mackenzie, Malcolm 2019. *Idols of K-Pop: Your Must-Have Guide to Who's Who*. London: Egmont.

Magoncia, Jeremiah Estela 2014.*OMG! Reaction Videos on YouTube: Meanings to Fandom and to K-Pop Community*. Seoul: Master Thesis for the Department of Communication, Seoul National University.

Maliangkay, Roald 2013.Catering to the Female Gaze: The Semiotics of Masculinity in Korean Advertising. *Situations: Cultural Studies in the Asian Context* 7. 43–61.

Marinescu, Valentina & Ecaterina Balica 2013. Korean Cultural Products in Eastern Europe:

A Case Study of the K-Pop Impact in Romania. *Region: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia*. Slavica Publishers. 2(1). 113–135. doi:10.1353/reg.2013.0000.

Mason, Samantha 2018. K-Pop.*Explained*. Vox Media, Netflix.

Mbembe, Achille 2017.*Critique of Black Reason*. Paris: Duke University Press.

Messerlin, Patrick A. & Wonkyu Shin 2017. The Success of K-pop: Haw Big and Why So Fast? *Asian Journal of Social Science*. Brill. 45(4/5). 409–439.

Morelli, Sarah 2001. "Who needs a dancing hero?" Rap, hip-hop, and dance in Korean popupular culture. In: Tony Mitchell (ed.) *Global noise : rap and hip-hop outside the USA*, 248-258. Middletown, Connecticut : Wesleyan University Press.

Naive Creative Production 2018. *What is love?* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0p1bmr0EmE (accessed 28 December 2021)

Oh, Chuyun & David C. Oh 2017. Unmasking Queerness: Blurring and Solidifying Queer Lines through K-Pop Cross-Dressing. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 50(1). 9–29. doi:10.1111/jpcu.12506.

Oh, Chuyun 2015. Queering spectatorship in K-pop: The androgynous male dancing body and western female fandom. *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 3(1). 59–78.doi:10.1386/jfs.3.1.59_1.

Oh, David C. 2017. Korean Wave| K-Pop Fans React: Hybridity and the White Celebrity-Fan on YouTube. *International Journal of Communication* 11(0). 18.

Oh, Ingyu & Hyo-Jung Lee 2014. K-pop in Korea: How the Pop Music Industry Is Changing a Post-Developmental Society. *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 3(3). 72–93. doi:10.1353/ach.2014.0007.

Ojamaa, Maarja & Peeter Torop 2014. Transmediality of cultural autocommunication. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18(1). 61–78. doi:10.1177/1367877914528119.

Otmazgin, Nissim & Irina Lyan 2013. Hallyu across the Desert: K-pop Fandom in Israel and Palestine. *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 1(9). 68–89.

Plett, Heinrich F. 1991. *Intertextuality*. Berlin; New York: W. de Gruyter.

RBW 2019. *Lit*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggPF6Wb8A50 (accessed 28 December 2021)

RBW 2021. *Luna* .https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oe2_BrZx9mc (accessed 28 December 2021)

Rhyu, Sang Young 2015. *The Spirit of Korean Development*. First edition. Seoul: Yonsei University Press.

Sari, Nur Fita 2016.*The hybridization of masculinity in g-dragon's crayon movie video: a semiotics analysis repository - unair repository*. Surabaya: Thesis for the University of

Airlangga.

Seo, Joo Hwan & Bumsoo Kim 2020. The "Hallyu" phenomenon: Utilizing tourism destination as product placement in K-POP culture. *Tourism Economics*. 26 (4). 719–728.doi:10.1177/1354816619837111.

Seok, Bongrae 2018. The Four–Seven Debate of Korean Neo-Confucianism and the Moral Psychological and Theistic Turn in Korean Philosophy. *Religions* 9 (11). 374. doi:10.3390/rel9110374.

Shin, Dong-hee 2020.*Hanryang* .https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufb8ucTf9mE (accessed 28 December 2021).

Shin, Solee I. & Lanu Kim 2013. Organizing K-Pop: Emergence and Market Making of Large Korean Entertainment Houses, 1980–2010. *East Asia* 30. 255–272. doi:10.1007/s12140-013-9200-0.

Shpinitskaya, Julia 2008. In EeroTarasti, Paul Forsell and Richard Littlefield (eds.) *Global signs: proceedings from the ISI Summer Congresses at Imatra in 2003-2006* (Acta Semiotica Fennica 29), 642-649. Imatra: Helsinki: International Semiotics Institute; Semiotic Society of Finland.

Siriyuvasak, Ubonrat & Shin Hyunjoon 2007.Asianizing K-pop: production, consumption and identification patterns among Thai youth. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. 8(1).109–136.doi:10.1080/14649370601119113.

Smith, Anthony D. 1991. *National identity* (Ethnonationalism in comparative perspective). Reno: University of Nevada Press.

Smith, Anthony D. 1999. *Myths and memories of the nation*. Repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Snyder, Zack 2017.*Justice League*. Fantasy Warner Bros., RatPac Entertainment, DC Entertainment.

Sohn, Ho-Min 2001.*The Korean Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sung, Sang-Yeon 2013. K-pop Reception and Participatory Fan Culture in Austria. *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 1(9).90–104.

Sungkyunkwan University 2013a. More details on the Four-Seven debate. *FutureLearn* https://www.futurelearn.com/info/blog (accessed 28 December 2021).

Sungkyunkwan University 2013b. Three Important Ingredients of Hangeul. *Future Learn* https://www.futurelearn.com/info/blog (accessed 28 December 2021).

Swan, Anna Lee 2017.*Situated Knowledge, Transnational Identities: Place and Embodiment in K-pop Fan Reaction Videos*. Seattle, Washington: Master Thesis for the University of Washington.

Swan, Anna Lee 2018. Transnational Identities and Feeling in Fandom: Place and Embodiment in K-pop Fan Reaction Videos. *Communication, Culture and Critique*

11(4). 548–565. doi:10.1093/ccc/tcy026.

Tarantino, Quentin 1995. *Pulp Fiction*. Miramax, A Band Apart, Jersey Films.

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2017a.Arirang, lyrical folk song in the Republic of Korea.https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/arirang-lyrical-folk-song-in-the-republic-of-korea-00445 (accessed 28 December 2021).

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2017b. Pansori epic chant. https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/pansori-epic-chant-0 (accessed 28 December 2021).

Yoon, Kyong 2017. Cultural Translation of K-Pop Among Asian Canadian Fans. *International Journal of Communication* 11. 2350–2366.

Yoon, Kyong 2018. Global Imagination of K-Pop: Pop Music Fans' Lived Experiences of Cultural Hybridity. *Popular Music and Society* 41 (4). 373–389. doi:10.1080/03007766.2017.1292819.

Zucker, Jerry 1990. *Ghost*. Paramount Pictures, Howard W. Koch Productions.