

## Oppan Gangnam Style

*"With this new album, I just wanted to make something that was purely comedic — something that could make people laugh like crazy even in the midst of all this global economic slowdown..."<sup>1</sup> - PSY*

### **The World of the Text: It's a Gangnam World & We Just Live In It**

I'm not certain where I first got the link to the Youtube video, but all I can remember is my first reaction. I sat, jaw-dropped -mouth open, not knowing whether to laugh, cry, dance, immediately re-post it to my Facebook page, or click off the video hoping to never see or hear it again. The rhyming of the foreign language (Korean), the guttural beats combined with explosions both lyrically, electronically and literally; the random hilarious scenes of dancing with horse riding movements, and the symbols and images of lavishness familiar in the wider hip-hop genre. My response was simply...what is this? Turns out that "this" was "Gangnam Style," and this little video has been viewed close to a billion times and is now the most liked and viewed YouTube viral video ever.<sup>2</sup> That might not seem like an important fact to the few who might be unaware of the wider trend that is "YouTube," but this Korean rapper has punched above his weight in arguably the world's biggest pop culture generator. Recent statistics show that over 3 billion hours of videos are viewed each month on YouTube, 4 million videos are viewed everyday, 60 hours of videos are uploaded every minute, with 70% of the

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<sup>1</sup> "PSY's "Gangnam Style" Dominates YouTube and Pop Culture," n.p. [cited 6 Dec. 2012]. Online: <http://news.yahoo.com/psys-gangnam-style-dominates-youtube-050000197.html>

<sup>2</sup> George Arnett, "From Gangnam Style to Nick Clegg's apology song: The top viral videos of 2012," n.p. [cited 15 Dec. 2012]. Online: <http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2012/12/14/from-gangnam-style-to-nick-cleggs-apology-song-the-top-viral-videos-of-2012/>

traffic coming from outside the USA (where it was founded) and localised in 39 countries and 54 languages.<sup>3</sup>

Released in July of 2012, “Gangnam Style”(GS for the rest of this analysis) is where my exposure to “K-pop”<sup>4</sup> began –and will most likely end. GS is the brainchild of Park Jae Sung (PSY), the recording artist seen in the GS video seemingly attempting to live a lavish lifestyle amidst shots of the crisp and clean urban sprawl, offices, playgrounds, & leisure centres in urban South Korea. His pop song, originally released for a Korean audience, has spawned a myriad of spoofs internationally including everything from Mitt Romney style, Gandalf style, Eton Style, British Army style, a plethora of poorly styled homemade versions, as well as various political commentary performances of the song by people such as the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei.

The lyrics of the song themselves present an indulgent world where the main protagonist is a man looking for a woman. The song says, when translated, that the man is looking for a woman who is sensible and nice during the day but parties at night. He proclaims himself as an older man<sup>5</sup> who knows a thing or two, and is able to meet her needs because he is “Gangnam style,” (very wealthy and respected). The funny bit is that really the song and video together is Psy’s parody of the culture itself with extremely absurd scenes, dances, and lyrics to make the point that he doesn’t fit into GS. Hopefully I will avoid laughing out loud for hours at this parody as I take my one exposure to K-pop under the 3 dimensional lens of cultural analysis.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jeff Bullas, “35 Mind Numbing YouTube Facts, Figures and Statistics – Infographic,” n.p. [cited 14 Dec. 2012]. Online: <http://www.jeffbullas.com/2012/05/23/35-mind-numbing-youtube-facts-figures-and-statistics-infographic/>

<sup>4</sup> “K-pop,” n.p. [cited 15 Dec. 2012]. Online: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K-pop>. “K-pop (Korean: *kayo*) an abbreviation of Korean pop or Korean popular music is a musical genre consisting of pop, bubblegum pop, dance, electronic, electropop, hip hop, rock, and R&B music originating in South Korea. In addition to music, K-pop has grown into a popular subculture among teenagers and young adults around the world.”

<sup>5</sup> Tao Jones, “Gangnam Style’s U.S. Popularity Has Koreans Puzzled, Gratified,” n.p. [cited 16 Dec. 2012]. Online: <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2012/08/28/gangnam-style-viral-popularity-in-u-s-has-koreans-puzzled-gratified/>. “Oppa [essentially, 'big brother'].” This term is a title and a form of traditional respectful speech in South Korean culture.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Strange. Lecture 5 “Theological cultural analysis: Step-by-step Instructions for Assembly,” 20 Nov., 2012.

Having looked at the world of the text and made some observations about the song and trend of “Gangnam style,” I want to dig deeper.

### **The World Behind the Text: Dress Classy & Dance Cheesy**

At first glance it might seem like PSY is another “one-hit wonder” to hit the pop charts in the U.S. the U.K. and in other western nations. But in reality Psy has a compelling narrative going back to his early life and shaping in the Gangnam province of Seoul, South Korea. Gangnam was the first area in Seoul to be developed as a residential community and has become the centre of high-class snobbery in Korea. Some even call the country as a whole the “Republic of Gangnam,” due to its overall monetary, business, and educational influence in the nation.<sup>7</sup> Growing up as the wealthy son of the director of a highly successful company had its advantages and Psy eventually made it to the USA to study business at Boston University, and then later music at the Berklee College of Music.<sup>8</sup> However the same lack of desire to study that was evidenced in his younger years appeared again whilst he was at both universities and he eventually made his way back to S. Korea without a degree of any kind. It appears that his penchant for influencing people with a sense of the dramatic paid off despite his failures at school and he released his first album “PSY from the PSYcho World” in 2001.<sup>9</sup> This is where we begin to get a hint a the worldview that shaped Psy...

South Korean Governmental Authorities reacted negatively to the blunt lyrics in Psy’s first album and fined him.<sup>10</sup> In the subsequent releases of “Sa 2,” “3 PSY,” “Sa Jib,” & “PSY Five,” he had an adversarial relationship with the government for both the content and style of his artistry. It appears that Psy was upsetting the applecart of the more traditionally conservative Korean

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<sup>7</sup> “Gangnam, epicenter of real-estate boom,” n.p. [cited 12 Dec. 2012]. Online: <http://nwww.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20050926000008&cpv=0>

<sup>8</sup> Jaeyeon Woo, “Psy Reveals All About ‘Gangnam Style’,” n.p. [cited 13 Dec. 2012]. Online: <http://blogs.wsj.com/korearealtime/2012/08/09/psy-reveals-all-about-gangnam-style/>

<sup>9</sup> “Psy,” n.p. [cited 12 Dec. 2012]. Online: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PSY\\_\(entertainer\)#cite\\_note-21](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PSY_(entertainer)#cite_note-21)

<sup>10</sup> “Psy,” n.p. [cited 12 Dec. 2012]. Online: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PSY\\_\(entertainer\)#cite\\_note-21](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PSY_(entertainer)#cite_note-21)

culture. He time and again had to walk the tightrope of artistic expression in the midst of a culture that highly values respect, harmony & order, and is willing to moralistically enforce it. Interweaved with Confucian philosophy<sup>11</sup> and still a very religiously saturated population (49% “Christian,” and “47%” Buddhist), the Korean context has shaped Psy to both apologise and seek forgiveness from the community, and to rebel against it.<sup>12</sup> This same shaping influence is revealed in the wider K-pop genre as the artists live out their freedom of expression in an even more highly integrated way than Western pop stars. Their careers, reality shows, & musical development all are magnified in a context where community and not the individual is a more powerful presupposition.<sup>13</sup>

The very birth of K-pop and its influence on Psy are steeped in this tension. In the 1990’s, the Korean government relaxed its censorship laws to “allow” this underground music movement to go mainstream.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that K-pop and later GS are embedded in a culture of ancient traditionalism and moral community that is coming to terms with the postmodern world. The very phrase in the song “Oppan Gangnam Style” uses a traditional way to respectfully refer to an older man (Oppa) as a big brother alongside a new coined phrase – GS.

### **The World in Front of the Text: Psy Just Wants to Have Fun**

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<sup>11</sup> Weol Soon Kim–Rupnow, Ph.D., “An Introduction to Korean Culture for Rehabilitation Service Providers,” n.p. [cited 17 Dec. 2012]. Online: <http://cirrie.buffalo.edu/culture/monographs/korea/>. Confucian philosophy is the “belief that human beings are teachable, improvable and perfectible through personal and communal endeavour especially including self-cultivation and self-creation.”

<sup>12</sup> Tom Peck, “Psy has the Oxford Union in raptures, Gangnam style” n.p. [cited 20 Dec. 2012]. Online: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/psy-has-the-oxford-union-in-raptures-gangnam-style-8293994.html>

<sup>13</sup> Robert Barry, “Gangnam Style & How The World Woke Up To The Genius Of K-Pop” n.p. [cited 19 Dec. 2012]. Online: <http://thequietus.com/articles/11001-psy-gangnam-style-k-pop>

<sup>14</sup> Robert Barry, “Gangnam Style & How The World Woke Up To The Genius Of K-Pop” n.p. [cited 19 Dec. 2012]. Online: <http://thequietus.com/articles/11001-psy-gangnam-style-k-pop>

It is a strange tension then that GS has been so well received in both the Western world and indeed all over the world. Psy states that he simply wanted to make a fun song for his Korean audience.<sup>15</sup> The worldview of Psy's shaping holds very conservative presuppositions like male leadership communal decisions, etc as the root of the view. However it seems that like many people, Psy has an inconsistent "worldview tree" whose trunk lives out of a story that says he is free from traditionalism to express himself. Like many in the comedic hip hop genre descended from the likes of Queen, Psy wants to put on a good show. The branches of his life philosophy seem to be that creative energy and fun are the whole reason for living. His own personal history from being the class clown in high school, to years of partying and rebellion (along with very little effort at school), and even the approach he takes to music show the fruit of his life being to simply have a good time. He wants us to believe that in spite of the economy, the answer to happiness lies in a little song and dance mixed with a little comedy...and it has been well received. Not only has Psy now toured all over the USA & the UK, but he has met president Barack Obama, UN general secretary Ban Ki-Moon, and spoken to a group of students at Oxford University. Clearly the world is hearing the message Psy is selling. When taken in context with the wider rise of bands such LMFAO with their anthem "Sorry for Party Rocking," we see that the world wants a distraction. With the worldwide recession, wealth disparity, and the interconnectedness of societies it is actually no wonder that GS has been so widely received. Though he mocks the lifestyle in Gangnam with his absurd video, Psy actually has been born and bred in it and with the success of his song & video is selling a little piece of GS to those who can at least laugh if they can't obtain it. So, is it wrong to have a good time, or to have a fun distraction from the real issues of South Korea, or those in the wider world today? We can tell by putting it up to the lens of the bigger story in the world – God's story.

### **The Text in the Uber-Text: A Theology of Fun**

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<sup>15</sup> Jaeyeon Woo, "Psy Reveals All About 'Gangnam Style'" n.p. [cited 18 Dec. 2012]. Online: <http://blogs.wsj.com/korearealtime/2012/08/09/psy-reveals-all-about-'gangnam-style'/>

“We are a people made for treasure. From our first breath, we seek joy, delight and satisfaction wherever we can find it. It’s what we were made to do. We were created to behold beauty, experience pleasure and desire what is best. But all too often what we think is treasure turns out to be counterfeit, and we’re left empty and aching.”<sup>16</sup> It is true that God made us for a good time. One look at the Garden of Eden and we see that it was a paradise, a “pleasure park.” God the good Creator expressed His goodness and made man the object of it in order to image Him and enjoy His creation. There is a very real sense in which we as humans are made for fun. This applies after the garden as well. The Book of Ecclesiastes says “And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.”<sup>17</sup> Psy is yearning for the common grace of God and expressing the truth that humankind was made for God and the pleasures at His right hand. The first experience of enjoying GS amplifies our senses and the revelation of the good God who made us as His creatures. If we understand the parody, we also celebrate this song as a call to see opulence as an unworthy treasure to live for.

Sadly though, Psy and GS leave us empty. After we have danced at a few parties and enjoyed the laughter of the moment (ok, many moments), the party always comes to an end. Ironically Psy placed himself as a Messiah of fun of sorts and he becomes a slave to very culture of excess he parodies and becomes himself a parody trapped within his own expression. Some call him “Messiah”, while they are dancing and singing, but certainly not for real.<sup>18</sup> There is a sense in which we grieve for him as we watch him perform the same song and dance at every interview, in every public appearance. Psy becomes the idol but a joke of an idol that many in the Western world are just having a good laugh at (with a hint of racism at that). GS also mutes God’s

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<sup>16</sup> “City On A Hill: Study Guide,” *The Village Church*. Online: [www.thevillagechurch.net](http://www.thevillagechurch.net) (2012) 52.

<sup>17</sup> Eccl. 8:15 (ESV)

<sup>18</sup> Robert Barry, “Gangnam Style & How The World Woke Up To The Genius Of K-Pop” n.p. [cited 19 Dec. 2012]. Online: <http://thequietus.com/articles/11001-psy-gangnam-style-k-pop>

revelation by essentially lowering man to a creature below the dignity of personhood as we find our joy in mindlessly dancing like a horse, and laughing at cultural expressions we don't even understand. We have unwittingly worshipped the creature rather than the Creator who is blessed forever. As C.S. Lewis has said, "we are far too easily pleased."<sup>19</sup> GS is funny, random, and a good laugh.... but it doesn't give an "everlasting passion that will blow your mind."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids, Michigan.: Eerdmans, 1972), Online: <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1629232>. The full quote is: "It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

<sup>20</sup> CD: *The Cross Movement "Solo Cristo"* (Cross Movement Records, 1997), Track 11

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