



# The Sociology of *Hallyu* Pop Culture

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Surfing the Korean Wave

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Vincenzo Cicchelli · Sylvie Octobre

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## The Sociology of *Hallyu* Pop Culture

“Closely examining the consumption of and negotiation with media cultures from South Korea by youth in France, this book gives a fresh insights into how transnational flows of East Asian media culture has been organized by various social actors and industries, generated alternative media globalization, engendered cross-border dialogues, and fostered cosmopolitan outlook. This book is essential reading to anyone interested in the study of “Korean Wave”, cultural globalization and mediated dialogue.”

—Koichi Iwabuchi, Professor of Media and Cultural Studies, *Monash University*

“This is an exceptional work about the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) and multi-polar globalization of culture in general. While providing the context and appropriate source material surrounding the emergence, promotion, and global diffusion of *Hallyu*, the authors also address *Hallyu* in the theoretical arena, tackling such emerging concepts as aesthetic capitalism, sweet power, and the theory of cosmopolitan elective affinities. A must-read book for understanding the past, present, and future of *Hallyu*!”

—Wonho Jang, Professor of Urban Sociology, *University of Seoul*

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개천에서 용 난다  
*(A dragon rises up from a small stream)*  
*Korean proverb*

*This book is dedicated to Hipollène without whom we would never have  
thought to investigate on Hallyu*

# Preface: BTS, Riding the *Hallyu* Crest<sup>1</sup>

“I tried to jam myself into molds that other people made... No matter who you are, where you’re from, your skin color, gender identity: speak yourself. Find your name, find your voice by speaking yourself.” It was with these words that, on 24 September 2018, the musical group Bangtan Sonyeondan (usually referred to by its short name, BTS\*<sup>2</sup>) became the first K-pop band to ever speak at the United Nations. BTS took the floor during the 73rd session of the General Assembly in New York on the occasion of *Generation Unlimited*,<sup>3</sup> an international initiative launched by UNICEF to combat violence against children and promote youth education, with a view to having all young people in school or work by 2030. How did the members of a South Korean pop band (who moreover perform most of the time in their native language) come to have such significant international media coverage and thus be involved with this initiative?

Composed of seven young men who resemble *manhwa* characters<sup>4</sup>—RM and Suga the rappers; Jin the lead vocalist; J-Hope a rapper and

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<sup>1</sup>In Chinese, *hallyu* means “Korean Wave.” This term was coined at the end of the 1990s by the Chinese media to refer to the rapid rise in popularity and market penetration of Korean products. The epithet has since been translated into English as well as a variety of other languages, including Spanish (*ola coreana*) and French (*vague coréenne*).

<sup>2</sup>The South Korean cultural products referred to in this book and marked with an asterisk are presented in the glossary at the end of the book.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.generationunlimited.org>

<sup>4</sup>The name for Korean comics and print cartoons.

dancer; Jimin, V, and Jungkook singers and dancers—this group leads the pack in record sales throughout the world, including in the United States (where it is rare for a non-American, and especially a non-English-speaking musician, to top the charts). “Bangtan Sonyeondan,” the group’s name, is a combination of 방탄, signifying “bulletproof,” and 소년단, meaning “boy scouts.” The group’s seven members can thus be seen as the defenders of youth. By blending together a variety of different musical styles (including rap, pop, R&B, and moombahton<sup>5</sup>), adopting international quality standards, employing tried-and-tested marketing strategies (such as adapting songs to the styles favored by targeted geographical regions), and putting on spectacular stage shows with complex choreography and special visual effects, BTS has become a major musical phenomenon—not entirely unlike the Beatles of yesteryear.

The group’s popularity can be measured in commercial terms. In 2018, the album *Love Yourself: Tear* was at the top of the iTunes charts in over 60 countries. With that success, BTS became the most-watched South Korean boy band on YouTube, garnering more than 4 billion views (counting all of their videos combined). “Fake Love,” the single from *Love Yourself: Tear*, was released in May 2018; it was then ranked tenth on the Billboard Hot 100, making BTS the first Korean group to make the Top 10 and the first Korean artist to reach the Top 10 in the week immediately following a release. The video of their single “Dynamite,” released in August 2020, amassed more than 100 million views in 24 hours: BTS has become the first all-Korean group to reach the top of the US Billboard 100 (Cruz 2020). This shows the full extent of the BTS craze around the world.

Everywhere in the world, BTS draws huge crowds to its over-the-top shows. At first, the concert venues that the band performed in held only a few thousand people; these have now been replaced by stadiums on all continents. BTS has attracted the largest crowds in Asia (especially Japan) and Latin America (in particular Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru). However, in the fall of 2018, BTS twice filled the Bercy Arena in Paris: the 20,000 seats in this concert venue sold out just a few hours after being announced, despite a complete lack of promotion and the fact that each ticket cost several hundred euros. The same

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<sup>5</sup>This is a fusion genre that combines house and reggaetón.



excitement held for a return performance on 7 and 8 June 2019, this time in the Stade de France, which has more than 80,000 seats. Critical recognition and awards have also kept rolling in: since the beginning of its career, BTS has won more than 220 prizes and 339 nominations across the globe. It has been positively reviewed by *Rolling Stone*, which has devoted several articles and interviews to the band.

The internet plays a central role in this success: K-pop is mostly disseminated through the internet, and BTS is very active on social media. One of their accounts, @BTS\_twt, allows fans to enjoy their “personal” photos, while another, @bts\_bighit, is used by their agency to make official announcements. There is also @BTS\_trans, created by English-speaking fans to disseminate news worldwide. The group’s YouTube channel BANGTANTV,<sup>6</sup> created in 2012, presents clips and videos, while the YouTube channel ibighit,<sup>7</sup> which hosts their clips, had 61 million subscribers. BTS also streams videos on V-Life; some of the members even have their own shows. On Twitter, which created a special BTS emoji in 2016, Facebook (Bangtan.official), and Instagram (@bts.bighit-official), BTS already has more than 20 million followers of its “Bangtan Bombs,” or short videos frequently posted by group members sharing their daily lives and making jokes. In 2017, BTS members were the most commented upon celebrities on Twitter. To that number, we can also add the individual accounts of each of the group’s members, which in some cases have more than 6 million followers. BTS members are also fashion influencers on the web (on Twitter, #KimDaily is run by RM and focuses on streetwear; *Vogue US* praised the account for its unique take on style). The boy band is even the subject of a webtoon<sup>8</sup> called *On: Be the Shield*, which tells the story of seven young men who are tasked with saving the world, much like Marvel’s Avengers.

The engagement of BTS fans, who go by the acronym ARMY (for “Adorable Representative MC of Youth”), plays a key role not just in the group’s commercial success, including sales of physical CDs, with many

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/BANGTANT>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/ibighit>

<sup>8</sup> The name given to webcomics or *manhwa* published online in South Korea.

of the group's albums being marketed as collectors' items,<sup>9</sup> but also at concerts, where they sing along to lyrics they know by heart while wearing t-shirts of the band and wielding the "ARMY bombs," or light sticks, that have become ubiquitous at BTS shows. Outside of the arena, BTS enthusiasts create fan chants<sup>10</sup> in Korean, Wave banners, engage in flash mobs, and perform covers. In addition, fans lobby radio stations to play the group's music; they are moreover at the source of various artistic collaborations, promoting commercial activities and distributing original content, including fan fiction, created on fan sites (Amino, Allkpop, and Bangtan Base). While it is true that musicians and bands have in the past given rise to similar cultural obsessions, the fans behind Beatlemania or Jacksonmania simply did not have the same digital tools at their disposal. Thanks to today's social networks, young people across the world can connect to their idols with unprecedented speed, which gives them a hitherto unknown power to help disseminate musical acts and shape global success.

This global success is tied to the messages contained in BTS songs, which are ones of self-love and the promotion of a peaceful relationship with others and with society more broadly. By and large, K-pop strives to be positive and modest, thus eschewing any references to politics, sex, alcohol, or drugs, as well as any criticisms of society or the government. BTS songs specifically focus on self-acceptance, which explains their success among young people. Their songs seek to comfort fans when the latter experience trouble, anxiety, and various forms of vulnerability.<sup>11</sup> "Forget about the fear in your eyes—break it up! Break the glass ceiling that cages you," the group sings in "Not Today," a song dedicated to all minorities. Similarly, the key message in "Run" is that you should live life fully and not be afraid of falling—or of picking yourself back up again. It is therefore unsurprising that the speech given by BTS at the United Nations was chock-full of affirmations urging young people to express their individuality, to love themselves, and to share what they feel and

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<sup>9</sup> Several versions of the same album are often released in a box set, along with numerous goodies such as posters and cards signed by the singers.

<sup>10</sup> Some of these can be seen on the K-pop channel Mnet.

<sup>11</sup> These are issues that are particularly relevant to South Korean society, where social pressure leads to isolation for many, and where the suicide rate is the highest among OECD countries.

think. “I have many faults and I have many fears, but I am going to embrace myself as hard as I can, and I’m starting to love myself, little by little.”<sup>12</sup> After their win at the Billboard Music Awards in May 2018, the group spoke in almost evangelical tones: “This award belongs to all the people by the millions who shine their light and love on us and has made BTS so proud. Please remember what we say: love yourself!” While the symbol of the rainbow is generally used to defend a host of political causes, for BTS it primarily serves to promote the idea of love. Singer V thus invented the expression “I purple you” to mean “I will love you forever,” since purple is the last color in the rainbow; this expression has now trickled down into use by young people in South Korea. This is a far cry from the critical messages disseminated by youth Western counterculture in the 1960s. Indeed, they do not follow in the footsteps of the countless pop culture artists that have used their lyrics to speak for their generation and criticize the culture at large, including such topics as American imperialism, the Vietnam War, British colonialism, capitalism and the consumer society, academic indoctrination, racism, apartheid, and multiple forms of inequality. When BTS takes a position, it is to denounce school harassment and accompany young people in their adolescent transformations (as through the albums of the “school trilogy”—*2 Cool 4 Skool* (2013), *O! RUL8, 2?* (2013), and *Skool Luv Affair* (2014)), or advocate for a midler post-pandemic world (*Life Goes On*, 2020).

The power of this message with BTS fans stems at least partially from its embodiment: like all boy bands, these seven young men present a varied palette of talents and personalities. Different BTS members fulfill different roles: the life of the party, the soulful and sad one, the dancer, the rapper, the singer, and so on. For instance, Jimin studied modern dance and was the valedictorian of his class at Busan Arts College; he was recruited during a private audition. As for Jin, he was a film student and tried out as an actor before becoming a singer. Before joining BTS, RM was already performing as an underground rapper named “Runch Randa” and had several tracks to his name. Suga was also an underground rapper in Daegu, going by the name “Gloss.” Finally, J-Hope was part of a street dance troop called “Neuron,” thanks to which he had already won several

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<sup>12</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhJ-LAQ6e\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhJ-LAQ6e_Y)

festival prizes in Gwangju before entering the Gwangju Dance Academy. As is the case for all K-pop groups, the members of BTS were scouted at a very young age and trained relentlessly for years to become performers with both singing and dancing skills. All of this work culminates in precise vocal performances and spectacular visual shows that play an important role in K-pop, whether it is concerts or television appearances (note that in South Korea, musical appearances on television are live, and do not use any lip-syncing).

Due to its international success, BTS is a source of national pride. In October 2018, BTS received the medal of the prestigious *Hwagwan* Order of Cultural Merit from the acting Minister of Culture, Do Jonghwan. Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon justified the choice to confer this honor on its youngest recipients ever by referring to “their efforts at spreading South Korean culture and language throughout the world” (Herman 2018). According to the Korean Popular Culture and Arts Awards, BTS won this award for being “a global musician who has set a new milestone in the development of *Hallyu*. They have lifted the status of K-pop by becoming the first Korean artists to rank No. 1 on the Billboard 200 chart with two of their albums” (Koreaboo 2018). The band’s members were also ranked among the 25 most influential people on the internet by *Time* magazine, which had BTS on its cover in October 2018 with the title “Next Generation Leaders” (Bruner, 2018). This Korean influence is recognized throughout the world: in France, for example, BTS was used by the publisher Hatier in the 2019 *Première d’Histoire et de Géopolitique* (high school junior textbook for history and geopolitics) to illustrate the issue of soft power. In 2020, moreover, the IPO of their production company, Big Hit Entertainment (now HYBE), was boosted by their phenomenal success, bringing the full extent of South Korean soft power to the fore. Indeed, South Korea’s ambitions seem limitless: in 2021, HYBE bought Ithaca Holdings, which manages the rights to Ariana Grande, Justin Bieber, and Kanye West, among other Western pop and rap stars, to accelerate its penetration of the global market.

BTS is therefore not an isolated phenomenon. Before them, there was Rain,\* BoA,\* Se7en,\* Girls’ Generation,\* Big Bang,\* 2NE1,\* and countless other groups on the global music scene. K-pop is not just a fluke: it is a tidal wave that exemplifies the mutations of global pop culture 2.0.

Its economics is based on the idea of a participatory public, while its production incorporates the newest technological innovations. K-pop has developed an inclusive approach that multiplies and hybridizes genres, including comics, television shows, and video games. K-pop is more concerned with being “cool” and well-liked—image is everything, after all—than with being subversive or countercultural.

The success of K-pop was boosted by the pandemic, and this music even took the lead in the “feel-good music” range. Its influence, as measured by the popularity of its online concerts, has tremendously grown: for instance, KCON:TACT 2020, a week-long online concert organized in June 2020, attracted over 4 million viewers. UNESCO even suggests that K-pop has helped young people to cope with the “corona blues,” an effect never observed for a crisis at this global scale (Jin 2021).

K-pop itself is only the tip of the Korean iceberg: there is a vast ensemble of South Korean products that are popular abroad, including K-dramas whose actors have become famous around the world (like Bae Yong-Jun, the star of the television show *Winter Sonata*,\* or Lee Min-ho, one of the main actors in the series *Boys over Flowers*\*). In order to grasp the extent of this phenomenon, let us just recall that in 2004, the Japanese prime minister at the time, Junichiro Koizumi said that “Bae Yong-joon is more popular than I am in Japan” (Lee 2011). Shinzo Abe, the Japanese prime minister from September 2006 to September 2007, likewise declared that he was a fan of the Korean show. As for Lee Min-ho, in a 2014 online poll in a Chinese tabloid, he was awarded the title of “Asian male god” (Hicap 2014), receiving more than 10 million votes; the same year, he became the first South Korean celebrity to have his wax figure at Madame Tussauds (Ji-Young 2014). He was also the guest of honor at the third conference of South Korea’s Presidential Committee for Cultural Enrichment in 2014, where he was invited to represent the entertainment industry and contribute to discussions on how to further expand the reach of Korean culture abroad. Last but not least, the famous Korean actor Park Seo Joon (starring in 8 movies, including *Parasite*\*, and 14 TV shows among the most globally successful) will perform in the next Marvel movie that should be released in November 2022 in the United States.

There are many indicators that K-pop music, K-dramas, K-films, *manhwa*, webtoons, and, to a lesser extent, Korean video games now play an important role in global cultural flows, in particular finding a place in the cultural repertoires of young people around the globe.

What is known as *Hallyu* encompasses highly diverse products whose sole point in common, to a layperson, may seem to be that they were produced in South Korea and are popular internationally. However, the local reception of this global Korean pop culture highlights how fans handle the globalization of this formerly peripheral culture, and what they do with it. Indeed the whole popular Korean culture is not part of *Hallyu*: as in every national pop culture, only a part of it reaches global markets and even less a global success. With this distinction in mind, this book is devoted to the analysis of the Korean Wave—that is, the products elaborated by South Korean cultural industries that achieve global success—and the conditions of its possibilities, as well as how it comes to constitute a form of alternative pop culture globalization in the eyes of Western audiences.

Paris, France

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# 1

## Introduction: *Hallyu* as an Alternative Aestheticized Global Pop Culture

At a pace similar to South Korea's rapid and dazzling modernization—emblematic of what has been called “compressed modernity” (Kyung-Sup 1999, 2010)—the Korean Wave has conquered the world in just 30 years. Before the rise of *Hallyu*, American hegemony over pop culture was virtually unchallenged, even if certain countries could claim success in specific realms (British pop, Franco-Belgian *bandes dessinées*, Japanese animation and manga, Mexican and Brazilian telenovelas, Bollywood and Nollywood films, for instance). For the first time since its inception, the cultural industry of the United States has a formidable competitor: one that offers a wide variety of cultural products and has already conquered Asian markets, enjoying such expansion that it can be seen as a new form of global pop culture, intended here as a planetary cultural mosaic made of images and contents produced and distributed by global cultural industries, and consumed and appropriated by local consumers.

To avoid any misunderstanding, in this volume, *Hallyu* strictly refers to the global popularity of South Korea's cultural economy exporting pop culture (id est entertainment, music, TV dramas, and movies): (a) independently from how observers consider the Korean cultural system as a whole, with its own specificity and history and from how Korean life and

culture are seen, lived, and performed by Korean people itself; (b) linked to the process of aestheticization and branding of cultural artifacts marketed by Korean cultural industries and the artistic choice made by Korean artists and producers; and (c) as the result of the public policies promotion that works to maximize the overlapping success of its various products at a global scale and to export a certain image of Korea (Lie 2012; Choi 2013).

One of the reasons that the Korean Wave has attracted a significant amount of attention in the academic realm is that South Korean cultural production seemed to become a competitive player on the global stage almost overnight. Research on *Hallyu* in fact resembles the Korean Wave itself; it is abundant, diverse, international, multilingual, and interdisciplinary. As of February 2020, more than 100 articles on the subject were published on Sage, 276 on JSTOR, and approximately 1600 on Academia.edu (MacDonald 2020). Since its start about 20 years ago, the field of *Hallyu* studies—which encompasses a large number of scholars and works from a wide variety of backgrounds and disciplines (Jin and Yoon 2014)<sup>1</sup>—has helped to foster debate on the globalization of culture, the transformations of capitalism, the geopolitical issues of a multipolar world, the pervasiveness of technoculture, and the cultural participation of amateurs from the greater public. *Hallyu* studies have innovated and created their own tools to understand the dynamics of global diffusion and consumption of cultural products, drawing upon its predecessors in the fields of global, cultural, pop culture, media, communications, post-colonial, and gender studies.

Building on certain elements of this vast body of research, we shall argue that while global pop culture was necessary for its emergence, the Korean Wave has influenced the former enough to become a viable alternative imbued with a cosmopolitan aesthetic that is particularly appealing to educated, middle-class city dwellers (Kidd 2014; Cicchelli et al. 2019); we shall use the expression “alternative aestheticized global pop culture” to refer to this new phenomenon.

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<sup>1</sup>There is even an international academic association devoted to promoting *Hallyu* studies: *The World Association for Hallyu Studies* (<https://www.iwahs.org>).

In order to conduct our analysis, we shall consider *Hallyu* as a “cultural package” (Hong 2014) rather than focus on any one specific product, as many publications have previously done. In this package, several concentric circles can be distinguished, according to their network ties and their international popularity: K-pop and K-dramas are the “essential content” at the heart of the phenomenon, while a second circle includes “semi-essential content” such as films and video games. The products belonging to the two first circles mostly circulate thanks to digitalization. In the third circle, we find non-digital “para-*Hallyu* services and products” such as food, cosmetics, fashion, tourism, and language (Choi 2015a). Focusing on the products most frequently consumed by young fans in France (i.e., K-pop and K-drama), our study will primarily deal with the first circle of *Hallyu* products and will touch upon the second and third in less detail. In our considerations, we do not analyze *Hallyu* as the mirror of Korean history and culture—even though we cannot ignore that the latter provides the former with patterns, moral codes, and various sources of inspirations—but as the artifact of Korean cultural industries that create and recreate a new aestheticized and attractive imaginary of South Korea for audiences all around the world, even in very distant places with few (or no) historical links with South Korea.

## 1 Global Pop Culture

While this volume does not adopt the triumphalist tone of Euny Hong (2014), it does nonetheless take seriously the rise of the Korean Wave as one of the major cultural phenomena of the twenty-first century. *Hallyu* has allowed for a large-scale renewal of pop culture analysis in terms of how the latter helps to create shared principles, ideals, norms, and values, as well as shared cultural models and imaginaries (Chua and Hong 2008; Kim 2013; Kuwahara 2014; Kim and Choe 2014; Jin and Kwak 2018).

## 1.1 The P in Global Pop Culture

In order to describe the contribution of *Hallyu* to global pop culture, we must first outline the five major traits of the latter. While these traits are rooted in American pop culture, they can be considered as an ideal type of how pop culture functions nowadays at the global level. In other words, local pop cultures engage with the six distinctive elements discussed below to gain a global audience. As the birthplace of pop culture, the United States has also long represented its most widespread, diverse, and hegemonic form before being challenged by new powerful Asian players (such as Japan, India, South Korea, and more recently China).

First of all, since its genesis as an artistic movement—christened as such by Hubert Artus (2017) on the occasion of “This Is Tomorrow” exposition, in August 1956, at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London—global pop culture has brought together two elements that were otherwise distinct: art for art’s sake (characterized by a lack of instrumental purpose) and consumerism (which is linked to highly streamlined commercial reproducibility). “One year before his success at ‘This is Tomorrow,’ Richard Hamilton (1922–2011) had already defined the main traits of pop art. This was art that was popular, mass-produced, transitional, long-lasting, low-cost, young, spiritual, sexy, clever, glamour, and big business” (Artus 2017: 50–1).<sup>2</sup> From the beginning, pop art entertained close ties with capitalism, as shown by the example of Andy Warhol’s Factory, while still proclaiming a strong artistic dimension that incorporated elements of underground and street art (think of Jean-Michel Basquiat, for instance). The pop movement later reached music and film, all the while advocating the primacy of visual media in all aspects of production, including music thanks to the advent of video clips, dedicated television stations (MTV at the fore), and YouTube (Prins and Zameczkowski 2019). In the pop movement, the artist’s image is a key to how works are received and interpreted, to the extent that the

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<sup>2</sup>Of course, pop culture has even older roots in European history (serial novels, operetta, vaudeville, and boulevard theater are just some examples). As we know it today, however, pop culture traces its origins back to American jazz in the 1920s for music, the emergence of comic strips for the graphic art form, the rise of detective and noir novels for literature, and B movies for cinema and is tied to the rise of cultural industries and mass media that occurred in the United States.

artist's life is *part* of their work. The staging of an artist's life—a sophisticated form of storytelling—has become a significant phenomenon, becoming even more essential at the beginning of the twenty-first century thanks to the rise of digital tools and social networks. In addition, the linkages between art and industry have helped to ensure the standardization of products. In the music sector, for instance, whether we are referring to the limited recording time of 45 rpm records or the constraints of radio broadcasting, production has always followed industry standards while still attempting to attract the greatest number of listeners thanks to easily recognizable “hooks” and refrains.

Second, global pop culture justifies its “popular” epithet every step of the way, from a work's conception to its distribution and reception. In fact, the term pop culture alludes to three distinct registers. On one hand, the connotation of the adjective “popular” contained within “pop” emphasizes the fact that pop culture is construed as an alternative to high-brow culture (associated with universities, elites, legitimacy, and snobbery). On the other hand, “pop” makes us think of the expression “to pop up”—in other words, it signifies events and works that emerge on the streets and on the fringes of the established art world. Finally, the popularity of reception is implied, given that since its inception, pop culture has unabashedly sought to attract the largest number of people (see, for instance, the erstwhile success of “pulp magazines,” where the adjective “pulp” refers to the low quality of the paper on which the former were printed).

If we consider all of these associations when examining global pop culture, it makes sense that it would be strongly rooted in technologies of mass publication and diffusion, of which social networks are of course only the most recent and powerful example. This characteristic has simply become more pronounced over time, as contemporary pop culture has, thanks to the internet, gradually freed itself from the strictures of television and radio. It has slowly converged with geek culture, itself a product of Japanese video game culture. While video games—which first found immense success in Asian countries, Japan first, followed by China, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan—were not present at the genesis of pop culture, their influence on mass culture has become indisputable during the last three decades. Significant convergence has

occurred between the various genres and aesthetic languages of pop culture; today's video games are like real movies, with highly sophisticated scripts, graphics, and soundtracks that often include famous actors (in *Beyond: Two Souls*, Ellen Page and Willem Dafoe play the main characters, for instance). The aesthetics of video games has in turn heavily influenced other audiovisual products, such as *The Matrix Trilogy* (1999, 2003).

Global pop culture has also given rise to vast fan communities and, more broadly, participatory publics. Both types of groups have grown exponentially, thanks to the advent of networks and digital tools, as well as through convergence with geek and video game culture. Via the massification of distribution technologies and the emergence of participatory tools, contemporary pop culture has become an ideal vantage point from which to examine “a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process” (Jenkins 2006: 18). It has flourished in part, thanks to the shift from a world of official media to one of “spreadable media” (Jenkins et al. 2013), where consumers and amateurs interact with cultural industries and participate in the creation of economic and cultural value.

Third, global pop culture is aesthetically inclusive. It seeks coexistence and hybridization between the products of dominant aesthetic models (in the second half of the twentieth century, these were mostly American and European) and local products (Barbero 1993; Dorfman 1984 [1972]; Martinez 1998; Craig 2000; Chua and Iwabuchi 2008); the resulting innovations of which are then reintegrated into mainstream production circuits. This was the case with techno, which was invented in West Germany under American influences (with the famous group *Kraftwerk*) and first became popular in Europe before flourishing in Chicago. Bringing together musicians, producers, and club kids (Daft Punk, Laurent Garnier, Air, and other emblems of the “French Touch”), electro quickly distanced itself from its American and British roots, before being welcomed back into the fold via a number of collaborations with mainstream artists such as Madonna (Artus 2017). A similar thing occurred with Cantonese kung-fu movies, which combined Western values, narratives, and aesthetic preferences with their Chinese counterparts and thus helped to revitalize the flagging film industry in Hong Kong (Ang 1990). These films later served as an inspiration for American productions: for