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BTS other-worlds: Music video and the intermediality of the self-reflexive musical

Abstract:

This close reading of *Heartbeat*, a 2019 music video by South Korean pop group, BTS, shows how intermedial musical performance generates narrative and meaning through depictions of bodies and movement. The article begins by highlighting the delivery of *Heartbeat*'s audiovisual narrative through a hybrid set of formal devices linking the music video with cinematic language. The article makes specific intercultural and intermedial links between *Heartbeat* and self-reflexive classical Hollywood musicals that highlight spontaneity, integration and the audience. Further discussion of *Heartbeat* focuses on the music video's intimate address to viewers through song and writing, highlighting a key moment where on-screen text is made to move in a manner resembling dancing bodies – while English-language lyrics are sung in ways that permit multiple meanings. Elements within this music video – such as the use of bodies to bear musical meaning – ultimately connect with larger intermedial contexts and spin-off products, demonstrating that intermediality plays across several levels from the aesthetic to the commercial.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Intermediality, performance, music video, audiovisuality, BTS, *Heartbeat*

Introduction

The music video for *Heartbeat*, a 2019 song by South Korean pop group BTS, depicts several concepts related to performance. While mostly using the body as a medium for performance (Auslander, 2016; Sternagel et al., 2020) to visualise issues surrounding authenticity in popular music (Moore, 2002; Attias, 2016), *Heartbeat* also foregrounds moving typography as a formal device in one key moment, a performative instance of on-screen writing analogous to dancing bodies. I argue that, apart from the characteristic hybridity of the music video format (Vernallis, 2004, 2013; Korsgaard, 2017), oscillating between body-as-text and body-becoming-text (and vice versa) makes *Heartbeat* an intermedial demonstration of certain self-reflexive tendencies common to the classical Hollywood musical, with narrative structures of spontaneity, integration, and audience from that film genre (Feuer, 2012) persisting in this different context.

By closely reading a music video with its contexts, I hope to show a single audiovisual text bring together issues of bodies, performance, and authenticity through its content, thematic and narrative structures, and intermedial relations. My goal is to use *Heartbeat* to construct, from its music video aesthetics, a frame within which to ponder questions of audiovisual musical performance, accomplishing this by situating the MV alongside related media texts. The intermedial relations in and around a music video for the lead single from a video game soundtrack are replicated in its display of performing bodies and other moving, shifting, and changing images inside its frames.

Heartbeat: The music video as intermedial text

The *Heartbeat* MV – like a film but unlike most music videos – has a title screen. Appearing on-screen in large characters, *BTS WORLD* is not the title of this song but the video game to whose soundtrack the song belongs. The title appears after a brief montage of concert footage, superimposed with on-screen text. In both Korean and English, viewers of the MV are addressed as BTS fans implored to imagine: ‘If you were not there then / Would we, who were just like a lonely island, / Shine as bright as now?’ (BTS World Official, 2019, 0:02). Following this title sequence, most of *Heartbeat* features sequences where each BTS member portrays a character distinct from the others. Wearing specific outfits in naturalistic settings, members inhabit their roles and worlds, all appearing vaguely dissatisfied with their individual lives through facial expression, bodily gestures and actions.

This is maintained up until the verse right before the second chorus at 1:57 when onstage images of BTS reappear, against an improbable backdrop of stars and galaxies. The camera zooms out, returning to earlier character scenarios but with profuse astronomical imagery now appearing in the backdrop of several shots, as special environmental effects unnoticed by the characters. Such stellar vistas become visible in several incongruous places: outside a window in a hotel corridor with fish floating in the air; in the space between two buildings where a member walks; in the sky above an urban skyline as a whale swims. The earlier naturalism is disrupted by science-fictional devices and imagery. These shifting representational strategies combine the physicality of bodies in locations with post-production special effects the characters do not perceive. Functioning like on-screen text added in post-production, these

special effects and their generic attachment to science-fiction are visible to viewers of the MV but fall outside the awareness of the characters.

The world-building of this MV is destabilised, mostly as a formal device. From this point, up until the song's bridge section at 3:04, images double kaleidoscopically, landscapes and rooms mirroring each other at the top and bottom of frames that slowly rotate. Although the characters look increasingly distressed, their reactions seem to have little to do with the formal visual shifts invisible to them. Even when two characters finally (and literally) run into each other at 2:48, nothing follows their eye contact with each other. Instead, the second chorus ends with each member looking straight into the camera, eye contact made with the viewer watching the MV. In a quick succession of close-up shots from 2:57 to 3:03, the worlds each member inhabits connect with that of the viewer.

As stars and planets begin to align, the bridge-section of the song resolves at 3:25 with images of worlds colliding. What results, however, is not destruction but the restoration of the world we know, where these seven young men sing and dance together as members of the popular music group BTS, except that, from 3:54 to 4:02, we return to the individual member stories, which apparently still exist. Each member looks calmer but no more aware of the cosmic events that have transpired. This slippage between the doubling modes/genres (naturalism vs. science-fiction) takes place between media processes (profilmic events vs. post-production effects). As an audiovisual text, this MV does not resolve this slippage but maintains it through distinct film languages, invisible to the characters but revealed to viewers through the audiovisual form.

Audiovisual form and the moving image

Using the most fundamental elements of film form, the *Heartbeat* MV uses the cut to visualise connection. As a formal building block of moving-image texts, the cut both breaks and builds visual continuity. Deployed with other formal elements like location and mise-en-scène, sequences at the beginning of the MV show the members in clearly separate locations, joined together via editing into the single music video that viewers watch. Each isolated member remains unaware of this single audiovisual diegesis: in the verses, sequences mostly switch from one setting/character to another, based on which member is singing.

After the song's bridge-section, shots now connect via match cuts, this change in editing strategy signalling a shift from individual character stories to BTS performing together. Cuts now link similarity rather than difference, with individual character actions edited to match with and be completed by similar gestures from BTS as a musical group. What initially seems like a narrative-driven transformation – of individual characters into BTS members – turns out to be a diegetic integration of two distinct worlds where the members seen dancing together at the end remain distinct from the characters living separate lives. Match cuts connect two actions via resemblance: gestures in one storyworld are made visually congruent with the other. This cut becomes both a visual link and a marker of separation between one world and another. Joining these worlds is action across multiple worlds, a way to 'match...sonorous plurality with a visual plurality' (Korsgaard, 2017, p. 91) via performance.

With these two editing styles, *Heartbeat* integrates two music video subgenres: a fictional/narrative music video with individual character stories and a performance music video of BTS dancing backstage and onstage. If BTS were a band of instrumentalists, conventions of music video production might see them mime along to the song with microphones and musical instruments. As a song-and-dance group, however, scenes of the group dancing in studio spaces and on concert stages cannot help being actual performances. One can lip-sync or play air guitar, but one cannot mime dancing. In an interesting reversal of longstanding debates between rock authenticity and commercial pop artifice (Frith, 1988; Moore, 2002; Attias, 2016; Stone, 2016), pop music bodies anchor the realities of performance when foregrounded in such music videos (Sternagel et al., 2020, pp. 112-113). This is how ‘music video operates through a dual synesthetic remediation between sound and image through which music is visualized and vision musicalized’ (Korsgaard, 2017, p. 86). Such audiovisual plurality creates strongly sensorial reality-effects on viewers.

The BTS members portray both individual character roles and themselves in *Heartbeat*. In 3:54 to 4:02, each character looking away from the camera (towards something outside the frame) makes it appear they have gained awareness of a self/world beyond these scenes, where they are connected as BTS, a unit through which they in turn connect to their audience of fans. Both storyworlds in *Heartbeat* have integrated, not into a single larger one, but as two distinct worlds newly connected by music and performance, by the very mechanism of visual connection: the cinematic cut.

The music video and ‘self-reflexive musical’ performance

The instances of integration cited above are based on the work of Feuer (2012) on the self-reflexive musical. Feuer looks at film-texts from a different context, that of the classical Hollywood film and the self-reflexive musical (in the form of the backstage musical). Feuer posits ‘let’s put on a show’ as a common trope in the backstage musical (Feuer, 2012, p. 543). It foregrounds how ‘the musical inclines more readily to self-conscious artifice than other genres’ (Stam, 1992, p. 90). In *Heartbeat*, a show is ‘put on’ across separate worlds by bringing various on-screen elements together, the most important being the BTS members and the audience addressed by the on-screen text that opens the music video.

Feuer considers the musical a self-referential genre ‘structurally similar to myths, seeking to mediate contradictions in the nature of popular entertainment’ (Feuer, 2012, p. 545). The classical Hollywood musical thus reinforces fantasy through the myth of entertainment, which is further broken down into myths of spontaneity, of integration, and of audience.

The most prominent instance of spontaneity in *Heartbeat* is Jimin dancing alone at 0:42, seemingly motivated by what appears to be a spontaneous love of dance. A variant to this is Jungkook, who practises taekwondo in the MV. Although not dance, his scenes also show someone driven by bodily exertions. Both function as backstage work that shows the effort needed to train bodies to perform strenuous physical activity. When the MV gets around to showing BTS, Jungkook’s earlier taekwondo rehearsals are transformed into dance practices

through editing. In 3:32, he strikes a kick bag alone, the swinging of which wipes into a shot of him rehearsing a dance step beside Jimin.

A more complicated example of self-referential musical performance in these earlier scenes has Yoongi playing the piano. Unlike Jimin's dance, Yoongi's involvement in music here is complicated in two ways. First, he plays on a grand piano at 1:21, a musical instrument not commonly part of the performance persona (Auslander, 2015) of BTS as a song-and-dance group. Second, Yoongi's piano playing, marked by his semi-formal attire in a performance setting, where well-to-do patrons sipping cocktails pay half-hearted attention to his playing, is different from the attentive audiences of concert-hall music performances. Seated behind the piano, the visibility and mobility of Yoongi's body is limited. His performance is mere background, unlike those of Jimin and Jungkook.

Feuer calls 'the primary positive quality' of a musical performance 'its spontaneous emergence out of a joyous and responsive attitude toward life' (2012, p. 545). While the best example of this in *Heartbeat* is Jimin dancing alone, his repeated movements look more like studiously practised moves rather than the spontaneous self-expression of a classical Hollywood musical, such as Gene Kelly performing the title track in *Singin' in the Rain* (Donen, 1952). In later scenes in *Heartbeat*, we see the group rehearsing synchronised dance steps backstage. For Feuer, such behind-the-scenes sequences partially demystify the entertainment myth in musicals, showing how performances are not spontaneous after all but deliberately set up (Feuer, 2012, pp. 548-549). *Heartbeat* continuously crosscuts between backstage rehearsals and onstage performances to associate the former more strongly with the latter. Though the onstage performances lack spontaneity, the editing presents them as the eventual outcome of exerted effort. Such characterisations of popular dance visually associate it with athletic achievement, drawing parallels between Jungkook's taekwondo and the group's dancing. Instead of demystifying entertainment, backstage scenes in the *Heartbeat* MV justify the entertainment, explaining graceful choreography and flawlessly synchronised performance as the outcome of effort and hard work.

Apart from these instances of integration, Feuer's myth of the audience, which insists that 'the audience...be shown as participating in the production of entertainment' (2012, p. 554), appears in *Heartbeat*. Despite there being few audience shots in the MV, the audience is most prominently included through the opening on-screen text addressing a 'you'. Just as Feuer claims the use of self-reflexivity in the classical Hollywood musical serves 'to perpetuate rather than to deconstruct the codes of the genre' and its 'conservative texts in every sense' (Feuer, 2012, p. 556), the on-screen text, addressing viewers at the start and end of *Heartbeat*, functions like advertising pitches. Using the linguistic codes of intimate and private speech for persuasive public communication is what sociolinguist Norman Fairclough calls conversationalisation, defined as 'the colonization of the public domain by the practices of the private domain [or]...the appropriation of private domain practices by the public domain'; what results is 'often a 'synthetic personalization' associated with promotional objectives in discourse' (Fairclough, 1993, p. 140).

Pas de deux: The intimate imperatives of second-person address

In gaming and pop music, interaction from consumers – whether as players or audiences – is necessary. The very title *Heartbeat* implies closeness and intimacy, which is reinforced by emotive vocal expression. The English-language lyrics that non-Korean listeners like myself understand are repeated in lines sung with emotional breathlessness that make them sound pleading. Melodramatic refrains like ‘my heart’s on fire for your love’ (BTS World Official, 2019, 3:05) and ‘I wish that you would love me’ (BTS World Official, 2019, 0:59) sound like dramatic performances as much as musical performances. The singing of these *Heartbeat* lyrics, the members staring at the camera, and the on-screen text in the MV all demonstrate ‘the excellent suitability of second person fiction for the expression and description of intimacy’ (Fludernik, 1993, p. 239).

The apex of this is an extended English-language verse performed by RM:

When you hear my heartbeat baby
 You gave me a new life, you gave me a new birth
 I feel your heartbeat away
 I been losin’ my mind, I been cravin’ my shine
 I know me before you was a ready-made me
 But you designate me and you did resume me
 I’ve been calling your name in this whole universe
 (Now I need no space) I got universe, done (BTS World Official, 2019, 1:33)

These sung English lyrics contain linguistic irregularities, some phrases deployed more for sonic impact than syntactic adherence to orthodox English. How these lines appear is even more significant. Beyond audiovisual performance, this section of the MV performs typographically, using on-screen text differently. Dynamic typography makes these words dance in an on-screen writing performance, with a visual rhythm evoking meanings distinct from but linked to the lyrics themselves (Vernallis, 2002).

‘My heartbeat’ and ‘heartbeat away’ appear on-screen in the MV, phrases incorporating the song title in spatial movements that are verbal, graphic, and rhythmic. Near-synonymous terms like ‘new life’ and ‘new birth’ reflect each other on either side of the screen, while ‘my mind’ and ‘my shine’, joined by rhyme rather than meaning, follow each other. Especially interesting is how ‘ready-made me’ forms on-screen: ‘ready’ first appears, is replaced by ‘ready-made’, which then gives way to a larger ‘me’. Like the MV’s negotiation of alternate worlds and timelines through performance and action, these typographic movements are expressive visual displays that show the performative process of making a ‘ready-made me’ rather than presenting one as already ‘made’.

Finally, the maker ‘in this whole universe’ – the audience Feuer insists is part of the entertainment (2012, p. 54) – is addressed by the imperative syntax of ‘designate me’ and ‘resume me’ and revealed in the final on-screen text for this part of the video as ‘...youniverse’ (BTS World Official, 2019, 1:55). This wordplay adds another interesting dynamic. ‘Youniverse’ is not just a cutesy pun but a neologism that personalises a universe and collectivises the intimate you of the MV viewer into a global audience community addressed

by this extended English segment. If Fairclough (1993) claims that ‘individualized address ... simulate[s] a conversational and therefore relatively personal, informal, solidary and equal relationship’ (p. 147), ‘Youniverse’ demonstrates this through a homophonic image made possible by the integration of the auditory and the visual.

Similarly, the phrases ‘designate me’ and ‘resume me’ are complicated by hearing RM pronounce the second verb as ‘résumé’, in the sense of a CV – another idiosyncratic use of English that privileges sound even while it is visualised. From the perspective of phrasing and metric form, ‘designate me’ and ‘résumé me’ use verbs that are dactylic, the lyrics connected by sound (meter) and syntax (as imperative phrases). Even the way ‘me’ plays out visually is evocative, the two-letter word breaking apart in the ‘designate me’ and ‘résumé me’ visuals showing the split and the connection between the two worlds in *Heartbeat*.

***Heartbeat*: The music video and its intermedial spin-offs**

Like all (audio)visual texts, more may be read here. A music video is a textual artifact where neither musical nor visual elements are privileged above the other, *a priori* (Vernallis, 2004, 2013; Korsgaard, 2017). When a music video makes extensive and multiple use of on-screen text, from the superimposed titles of *Heartbeat* to its motion graphics, the music video text becomes more enticing and challenging to read textually and intermedially, requiring viewers to listen, watch, and read across different languages and semiotic registers.

Context also matters. The intermediality of *Heartbeat* extends to its production context, which partly clarifies the narrative complications in its MV while also generating other stories, (re)written across multiple media. The visual polyphony characteristic of music videos (Vernallis, 2004, 2013; Korsgaard, 2017) and deployed especially intricately by *Heartbeat*, is replicated across narrative and interactive elements found outside the MV. The two I consider here are the game and its soundtrack. Both introduce factors both intratextual (gameplay structures and mechanisms) and extratextual (release dates and promotion schedules, composition choices and meaningful sequencing in the soundtrack).

The *BTS World* mobile game was released by game developer Netmarble Corp. on 26 June 2019. Unlike *SuperStar BTS*, a rhythm game released the previous year by Dalcomsoft, Inc., *BTS World* was unique content produced by the second-largest stakeholder of Big Hit Entertainment, the entertainment company to which BTS belongs. Apart from being Netmarble’s sole music-related game, *BTS World* is also a visual novel, an interactive fiction video game genre popular in Japan. Events in *BTS World* happen in an alternate timeline, with the game designed to directly address players as a character within this fantastical narrative. Specifically, players take on the role of a BTS fan who receives a concert ticket that magically sends them back in time to 2012, a year before BTS debuted, with players taking the role of band manager. Following generic conventions of the visual novel, gameplay is minimal and rests on chance and skill in managing resources to push game events forward: following the story leads to the acquisition of collectible in-game rewards. The game designers called this mode ‘BTS Story’.

A second gameplay mode called ‘Another Story’ introduced additional narrative elements separate from the main game. Plot deviations in ‘BTS Story’ take liberties with real-life events and circumstances in the group’s history, so the game’s story cannot be considered biographically straightforward, even if one already discounts the real-world improbabilities of time travel and alternate histories. Even so, the narratives introduced by ‘Another Story’ are more explicitly ‘fictional’ and provide the basis for the individual character stories in *Heartbeat*. Like the MV, this second game mode has players handle each character separately from the others without references to BTS as a musical group. Instead, each character is a sole protagonist with specific occupations (a detective, a farmer, a hotelier) in specific stories aligned to specific genres (a mystery, a comedy, a coming-of-age story).

Even more than the MV, no attempt is made to tie together both game modes in *BTS World*, aside from how game rewards earned in ‘Another Story’ are also used for ‘BTS Story’. One could play in either mode, but not at the same time and not even in the exact same role: although players are still the same BTS fan sent to an alternate universe, they do not perform managerial duties in ‘Another Story’ like they do in ‘BTS Story’. The object of the gameplay in ‘Another Story’ is not to form the group and lead them toward a shared musical (hi)story but simply to drive each of the seven members’ stories forward. Exemplifying the visual novel genre, *BTS World* complicates narrative gameplay by imposing limits on player agency to advance its stories, even while positioning players as point-of-view characters within those very same stories (Cavallaro, 2010).

The game was followed two days later by Big Hit Entertainment releasing a soundtrack album of character-specific incidental music and four new songs. Apart from *Heartbeat*, the three other songs were collaborations with Western artists by two or three BTS members. Each of these three songs was performed by a sub-unit of the group: Jin, Jimin and Jungkook sing on ‘Dream Glow’, V and J-Hope exchange verses on ‘A Brand New Day’, and RM and Suga rap on ‘All Night’. Each sub-unit song also featured Western musical artists as guest collaborators: British singer Charli XCX, Swedish singer Zara Larsson, and the late American rapper Juice Wrld.

These three songs were released every Friday in June 2019 to build anticipation for the *BTS World* game and soundtrack. The June 26 release of the game and its complete soundtrack two days later is another instance of integration taking place, the main single *Heartbeat* featuring every BTS member. While still a promotional tool, releasing the soundtrack after the game displays a ‘sequencing...which should result in a kind of meaningful musical discourse’ (Lacasse, 2018, p. 24), one taking place across different media, extending literary models of transtextuality across the diverse forms and technologies whereby popular music is now distributed.

These intermedial forms of *Heartbeat* and *BTS World* are, at base, matters of merchandising and commercialism. Nevertheless, as intermedial artifacts, both game and music video offer gamers and audiences an intimate entanglement with multiple textualities. Such efforts expand the entertainment experience and posit worlds where audiences are imagined as co-creators, even if the roles they perform only exist in worlds of fantasy.

Conclusion

Intermediality is a useful approach for closely reading audiovisual texts to foreground intricate interplays of language and vision. Furthermore, intermediality expands such readings to reveal multifaceted connections with other texts across different media. Reading *Heartbeat* intermedially, in relation to the Hollywood musical, allows a historical contextualisation of its self-reflexivity. It enables BTS scholars to explore how bodies authenticate performance and justify entertainment, how language as rhetorical address can be expressed audiovisually, and how pop music's commercial contexts shape meaning. Intermediality's value here, and possibly elsewhere, appears in its own performance of generative inquiry and meaning-making.

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