



# CRITICAL APPROACHES TO TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING IN K-POP

EDITED BY NICHOLAS E. MILLER

BLOOMSBURY

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BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC  
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

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Bloomsbury Publishing Inc

Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 1359 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK

Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland, 29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

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First published in the United States of America 2026

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Cover image: © Regina Kim (@regina.graphic), 2024

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A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN: HB: 978-1-6669-7883-4

ePDF: 979-8-216-26548-1

eBook: 978-1-9787-6223-7

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

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# Acknowledgments

I am continually inspired by the contributors whose voices defined this collection and gave it depth. Curating your scholarship has been an honor, as each chapter advanced the conversation in bold, unexpected ways. Your insight and critical imagination have shaped this volume into something more compelling and theoretically sophisticated than I imagined at the start.

I was fortunate to have the guidance of Jessie Tepper at Bloomsbury, whose early enthusiasm helped transform this project from a possibility into a reality. From our first conversations, your belief in the value of this collection was both affirming and energizing. Your editorial acuity, thoughtful feedback, and unwavering support brought this volume to life—and made the process far more joyful and accessible than I anticipated.

I am indebted to Gardner Rogers, my long-running interlocutor—always willing to engage, no matter how far afield my projects stray from his own. His ability to identify what needs to be rethought in my writing is uncanny, and his generosity knows no bounds. My work has also been strengthened by Lauren Barbeau, whose rare gift for combining intellectual precision with clarity and warmth made her an essential reader of the introduction to this volume. Her insights continue to shape not only this project but the way I approach academic writing more broadly. I am equally thankful to Nayoung Bishoff for her encouragement throughout this process and for her expert help with Korean-language translations.

MICDS deserves recognition for being that rare independent school where both teaching and scholarship are genuinely valued. It is no small thing to belong to an institution that lets a middle-school teacher plaster his walls with K-pop posters, gives students space to explore K-pop through a school-sponsored club, funds research presentations on K-pop at teaching conferences, and embraces K-pop as an important cultural form and entry point into media literacy. I am grateful to be part of a community that nurtures intellectual curiosity in all its forms.

To my eighth-grade students, who tolerate (dare I say *appreciate?*) the K-pop I play in class each day—thank you for your patience and good humor. More

specifically, the students in my winter term courses on storytelling in K-pop deserve recognition for embracing every allusion, plot twist, and theory with enthusiasm and heart. I still smile thinking about how eagerly you scoured the map of MIXXTOPIA, bringing new energy to an already vivid storyworld imagined by NMIXX—and how quickly you gravitated toward the emotional and philosophical layers of the Bangtan Universe. Your enthusiasm for the storytelling possibilities in K-pop nudged me to propose this volume in the first place and to carve out more space for transmedia scholarship in the field. Your curiosity reminds me why this work matters.

I am also grateful to Alonna Robertson, who joined me as a co-teacher for these winter term courses. Your passion for K-pop storyworlds kept me energized, and your unapologetic love for iconic boy groups expanded my fandom in delightful, unexpected directions.

I owe so much to my mother, Barb, who has supported and encouraged my work for as long as I can remember. Your unwavering belief in my potential has been a steady source of strength since I first began writing in elementary school. Though my father is no longer here, his love of music and popular culture remains a guiding presence in my life and in this project.

To my children—thank you for making this journey feel like a shared adventure. Nayeli, for dancing with me to K-pop videos in Georgia while we were quarantined and looking for entertainment. Karyna, for sharing my love of screaming wildly at K-pop concerts. Brockden, for letting me capture videos of you dancing to BLACKPINK when you were young. And Lorelai, for curling up beside me to watch hours of music videos when I was tired. These moments have made this project more than an academic pursuit; they have made it a shared labor of love.

To my partner, Allison, who has shown endless patience and admirable feigned interest as I filled our home with loud music and wild theories about storytelling in contemporary K-pop—often asking, with characteristic gentleness, “Can you turn that down just a little?” Your love, support, and understanding have made all the difference.

This volume is dedicated to the fictional Billie Love, whose fragmented narratives became my unlikely muse. No figure better captures the unruly, imaginative possibilities of storytelling in K-pop. Your ongoing journey reveals the depth of this art form and continues to shape how I understand the work we do—as scholars, fans, and cultural critics.

# Introduction

Nicholas E. Miller

My personal relationship with K-pop has developed alongside the rise of its transmedia storytelling practices—proof, I think, of how a passing curiosity can become something more immersive and difficult to shake. When Girls’ Generation released “Into the New World” in 2007, I was not paying attention. That debut track, which barely registered with me at the time, is now a staple of my playlists—and widely adopted in Korea as a protest anthem. Back then, I was deep in a belated emo phase, obsessing over X-Men comics, and casting fireballs in Dungeons and Dragons—other storyworlds where identity and transformation took center stage. Those interests once felt far from K-pop. Now, they seem like early clues—signs that I was already drawn to the kinds of stories K-pop would come to tell. Looking back, it is not just my own tastes that shifted. K-pop changed, too—crossing borders, reinventing its reference points, and building unexpected bridges between media traditions and audiences (like me) who were not the focus at the start but found space in the story as it kept unfolding.

I first encountered K-pop in 2009, when the Wonder Girls opened for the Jonas Brothers on their tour through the United States. Although I was impressed by their hit “Nobody,” it did not leave a lasting impression. At the time, I would not have guessed that Sunmi’s solo career would later become a subject of my academic work. Through the early 2010s, my exposure to K-pop came mostly through appearances in Western media: Girls’ Generation collaborating with Snoop Dogg in 2011, PSY’s global breakthrough with “Gangnam Style” in 2012, and Anna Kendrick’s post-*Pitch Perfect* performance with f(x) in 2013. Those around me often framed K-pop as a spectacle—quirky, polished, and exportable—but not yet something critically or narratively deep. Still, there were signs that the phenomenon was reaching outward, testing global waters, and setting the stage for something larger. Years later, my perspective began to shift. Groups like ENHYPEN and

LOONA pulled me in with their layered storytelling, while artists such as EXO, MAMAMOO, and Red Velvet revealed the aesthetic and conceptual sophistication I had missed the first time around.

The pandemic of 2020 marked a turning point in my relationship with K-pop. With the shift to working from home, I suddenly had time to explore its cultural landscape more fully. What began as a passing interest quickly became part of my daily routine, and I often shared new discoveries with my kids as we traded YouTube recommendations. I even tried learning choreography through *Just Dance*—with enthusiasm, if not much accuracy. But what truly drew me in was the expansive storytelling. The more I watched, the more I noticed how groups built their narratives across platforms, linking music videos to social media posts, variety shows, and album packaging. These storyworlds were not just sprawling—they were participatory. Buying an album might unlock a character clue. A livestream might shift the tone of a concept. Collecting photocards or decoding teaser images felt less like fandom trivia and more like narrative work. Each piece added a new layer, and before I realized it, I was invested.

Among the groups that pulled me in—aespa, Billie, Dreamcatcher, NMIXX, PIXY, and Red Velvet—I found a kind of storytelling that felt both intricate and wide open. Their narratives went far beyond simple world-building, blending music, performance, and visual storytelling in ways that invited close reading. Following Dreamcatcher's lore from their Nightmare era onward felt less like keeping up with a concept and more like literary analysis: tracing symbols, decoding references, piecing together fragmented timelines. Billie's invocation of Jungian psychology and postmodern theory surprised me—not because pop culture cannot engage theory, but because it did so with such playfulness and style. PIXY's dark reinterpretations of fairy tales did something similar, transforming myth into a commentary on isolation, agency, and survival. These groups reminded me that popular media does not have to choose between mass appeal and interpretive potential—it can hold both at once, and sometimes do it better than the so-called canon.

My shift from casual listener to engaged fan also reflects broader changes in how K-pop is perceived and valued. I have observed how K-pop fans—including many of my students—contend with distinct social stigmas that make them hesitant to share their enthusiasm. These are students who can map narrative arcs across music videos, explain the logic of concept trailers, and trace symbolic threads through entire discographies. And yet, their knowledge

is often dismissed as trivial or childish. That dismissal tends to fall hardest on young women and Black fans, exposing how race, gender, and age continue to shape whose interpretations are taken seriously. Critics and scholars who dismiss fans' analytical practices not only underestimate a vibrant cultural form, but also reinforce traditional hierarchies that determine what counts as serious intellectual work—perpetuating systems of cultural gatekeeping grounded in taste and scholarly tradition. As Yin Yuan argues, academics studying Korean popular culture “need to be in conversation with the fans who move in that sphere” and approach them “as interlocutors in a common project” (Acosta and Yuan 2024). This call to action highlights the importance of bridging the gap between academic analysis and interpretive fan practices, acknowledging the intellectual contributions fans make to understanding K-pop as a narrative form.

The storytelling practices that define K-pop today challenge assumptions about passive fandom while revealing the limits of traditional media theories. Narrative has always played a key role in K-pop—from visual symbolism in early music videos to carefully curated group identities—but in recent years, its scale and complexity have grown dramatically. Contemporary groups now build storyworlds that invite close reading and reward the kind of theoretical attention often reserved for more “canonical” texts. These narratives are sometimes compared to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, with its strategically distributed content across platforms, but K-pop's approach differs in key ways. It integrates live performance, parasocial intimacy, and fan contributions directly into the fabric of its stories. These strategies—planned yet fluid, commercial yet creative, global yet culturally specific—reimagine what storytelling can do in contemporary media. As scholars like Michelle Cho (2017), Kim Suk-Young (2018), and CedarBough T. Saeji (2020) have shown, they mark a broader shift in narrative practice—one that values both interpretive depth and collective participation.

## Theoretical Foundations of Transmedia in K-Pop

To understand how K-pop narratives travel across platforms and contexts, it helps to begin with established ways of thinking about how texts relate to one another. Julia Kristeva's notion of intertextuality and Gérard Genette's framework of transtextuality offer useful starting points—not because they were designed

with K-pop in mind, but because they help explain how meaning emerges not in isolation, but through reference, repetition, and accumulation. Kristeva argues that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations,” and that insight rings particularly true in K-pop (1980, 66). What matters is not just an isolated song or video, but how that piece speaks to what came before, what surrounds it, and what fans bring to it. Genette later extends this idea by outlining five kinds of textual relationships—intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality, and architextuality—that help trace how narratives stretch, shift, and take shape across media. Although these models were first developed to study literature, they map surprisingly well onto the transmedia storytelling practices that define K-pop.

Genette’s definition of transtextuality—“all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts”—lands well in the world of K-pop, where stories tend to unfold not in straight lines but through chains of allusion and echo (1997, 1). These connections are not ornamental—they are how the story moves. A music video might riff on a fairy tale, a short film might introduce a new element of group lore, and a casual social media post might retroactively reframe an earlier scene. Fans do not just observe this process; they interpret, theorize, connect dots, and build maps. As Paulo F. de Castro puts it, this is a “practice of critical listening”—an interpretive method that stretches across platforms, drawing meaning from visual cues, tonal shifts, and conceptual callbacks (2021, 140). That kind of audience work is not an afterthought. It is part of how the narrative takes shape. Meaning emerges through the back-and-forth between what is offered and what fans make of it—between the told and the untold.

Genette’s five modes offer a loose but useful architecture for understanding how K-pop storyworlds are assembled. Intertextuality may be the most obvious category—especially when artists directly reference outside texts. SHINee’s allusions to Sherlock Holmes or Sunmi’s Frankenstein-inspired imagery fall squarely into this category: what Genette calls “an enunciation whose full meaning presupposes the perception of a relationship between it and another text” (1997, 2). Paratextuality, meanwhile, plays out through teaser trailers, photobooks, behind-the-scenes footage, and curated social media—content that frames the central narrative and shapes its reception without necessarily advancing it. Metatextuality emerges when idols reflect on their own stories or image, as in LOONA’s self-referential visual language or fans’ meta-commentaries on evolving concepts. Hypertextuality surfaces when K-pop reworks existing

plots into something new—EXO’s myth-infused science fiction world being one example. And architextuality helps explain how groups blend genres like horror, fantasy, and romance into hybrid forms that resist neat classification. These are not just theoretical labels. They describe how K-pop creates stories with multiple entry points, each designed to draw in casual viewers and close readers alike.

Still, the significance of transtextuality in K-pop goes beyond surface-level reference or adaptation. What de Castro describes as a potentially infinite *mise en abyme*—a system in which “what lies beyond the text is always another text” (2021, 133)—feels especially apt here. This kind of recursive layering becomes clear when a music video references a fairy tale, ties it to album artwork modeled on a classical painting, echoes a philosophical quote on social media, and folds in choreography drawn from traditional dance. None of these elements stand alone. Each one links outward, opening new interpretive paths. That complexity makes K-pop accessible on multiple levels. Many fans engage with the surface motifs—empowerment, transformation, desire. Others dig deeper, tracing obscure references or reconstructing timelines. Scholars, too, find space to ask broader questions about narrative, identity, and cultural exchange. By leaning into this kind of transtextual density, K-pop expands what popular narratives can do—turning entertainment into an open-ended process of meaning-making.

Audience interpretation is not just a side effect of K-pop’s storytelling—it is part of how these transmedia narratives take shape. As de Castro puts it, “a text necessarily requires the active cooperation of the reader,” and the “unsaid” elements of a story are often “inexhaustible” (2021, 133). Genette makes a similar point: as hypertextual connections become harder to detect, the reader’s role in making meaning becomes even more important (1997, 8). K-pop leans into that ambiguity. It leaves clues scattered across platforms—cryptic tweets, loosely connected music videos, unexplained symbols—and invites fans to begin piecing things together. They map timelines, connect images, swap theories, and trace symbols that may or may not be intentional. And sometimes, those interpretations circle back into the official content itself. K-pop does not transform fans into authors, exactly, but it does make them co-conspirators—active participants in how these storyworlds evolve.

The relationship between K-pop producers and fans complicates older models of how transmedia storytelling is supposed to work. Henry Jenkins’ idea of convergence culture—often seen as foundational to transmedia studies—defines transmedia as the planned distribution of “integral elements of a fiction” across multiple platforms, designed to create a “unified and coordinated entertainment

experience” (2006, 95–6). At first glance, that seems to align with how K-pop operates: multiple media working together, a fandom that actively participates. But Jenkins’s model assumes a degree of top-down control that does not fully capture what is happening here. K-pop creators often drop fragments—a teaser image, a vague concept film, a cryptic caption—and allow fans to fill in the blanks. The story takes shape not in advance, but in motion. Interpretations circulate, theories catch on, and in some cases, fan readings influence future content. It is not that producers hand over the narrative—they leave enough space for fans to move inside it. That feedback loop is part of how K-pop storyworlds are built.

While Jenkins’s framework highlights participatory elements, it does not capture K-pop’s intentional narrative ambiguity. Marie-Laure Ryan offers a more flexible starting point for thinking about how transmedia storytelling works. Rather than emphasizing tight plotlines, she argues that transmedia stories succeed by building immersive worlds—spaces that draw audiences in and reward them for following connections across platforms. “People are willing to look for information in many documents and across multiple platforms,” she writes, “because they are so in love with the storyworld that they cannot get enough information about it” (2015, 5). K-pop fits that description in many ways. Yet Ryan’s framework still assumes a certain level of coherence—a sense that the story holds together. And that is where things begin to diverge. As early as 2018, the *Explained* episode on K-pop described its music videos as “inscrutable”—a term clearly aimed at Western audiences, but one that unintentionally captured something real. K-pop invites interpretation through ambiguity. Its storyworlds are often fragmented, nonlinear, and deliberately unresolved. What might appear as confusion is part of the design. To fully account for this kind of storytelling, we need to move beyond older models and attend to how transtextual, transmedial, and transnational elements intersect in practice. K-pop pushes us to rethink what narrative coherence means—and to recognize that ambiguity, collaboration, and cultural specificity are not bugs in the system. They are key features.

## The Transmediatic Appeal of K-Pop

These fluid storytelling practices in K-pop call for theoretical approaches that account for its ability to navigate platforms, genres, and artistic practices seamlessly. W. J. T. Mitchell’s concept of the “transmedium,” though originally

developed through his analysis of comics, offers valuable insights into this dynamic. While Jenkins and Ryan emphasize relatively stable boundaries between media, Mitchell critiques rigid definitions, proposing that certain cultural phenomena operate across “all boundaries of performance, representation, reproduction, and inscription to find new audiences, new subjects, and new forms of expression” (2014, 255). His focus on works that resist categorization mirrors how K-pop functions: a single music video might serve simultaneously as a narrative episode, a dance performance, a fashion showcase, and a philosophical meditation. Related content often extends into social media, variety shows, live performances, and fan interpretations. Notably, Mitchell’s observation that comics incorporate “any audiovisual medium involving language, speech, writing, music, photography, cinema, architecture, painting, dance, and theater” anticipates how K-pop groups sustain coherent artistic identities while moving skillfully across diverse media (2014, 259). This framework invites scholars to position K-pop not as a musical genre but as a cultural phenomenon, with an emphasis on its resistance to categorization and its novel use of transmedia storytelling.

Mitchell’s concept of transmediatic flexibility—the “openness to multiple alternative frameworks in terms of style, form, structure, material support and technical platform”—offers a theoretical lens through which to understand how K-pop achieves coherence through constant evolution (2014, 259). K-pop artists integrate music, dance, fashion, and narrative across both physical and digital spaces, leveraging the affordances of each medium to create experiences that transcend individual platforms. When Covid-19 initially restricted live performances, for example, many groups developed hybrid formats that transformed traditional concerts into narrative-rich virtual events. Similarly, the rise of social media platforms like TikTok prompted the creation of content that functions both as platform-specific entertainment and as a narrative extension of the group’s storyworld. Rather than simply combining media forms, K-pop uses these integrations to generate new expressive possibilities—a dance break might resolve a narrative thread, a fashion choice might hint at character development, or a social media post might reframe the meaning of a music video. By embracing this flexibility, K-pop sustains artistic coherence while continually expanding its creative and technological boundaries.

This transmediatic flexibility also demonstrates how coherence can emerge through the intentional integration of hybridity. Mitchell’s discussion of Spiegelman’s “co-mix,” which he defines as “a hybrid term for the mixture of media

and genre” that emphasizes “coordination, cooptation, coincidence, collision, cooperation, comingling,” captures the essence of K-pop’s storytelling approach (2014, 260). Artists align multiple elements—performances that merge various dance traditions, visual aesthetics that draw from diverse cultural influences, narratives that span genres, and fan engagement that bridges platforms—into immersive experiences that thrive on complexity. The Bangtan Universe, for example, connects music videos, films, and webtoons with coming-of-age themes and magical realism, creating a narrative that resists simple categorization. Similarly, ATEEZ’s storyline reimagines science fiction tropes through Korean folklore, psychological theory, and philosophy, while often incorporating fan theories into its development. These practices exemplify what Mitchell describes as the ability to “host every form of mediation,” fostering distinctive identities through hybridity (2014, 263).

This narrative complexity in K-pop arises not only from media proliferation but also from its exploration of time and space. Mitchell’s observations about comics—that they function through both “temporal sequence and spatial synchronicity”—offer a valuable framework for understanding how K-pop stories likewise unfold across these dimensions (2014, 265). This dual operation enables K-pop to connect audiences across media and moments, combining immediacy with expansive storytelling. Artists sustain real-time connections with fans through social media posts and live events while crafting narratives that frequently explore nonlinear chronology and parallel timelines. LOONA exemplifies this temporal flexibility in their pre-debut project, during which twelve solo singles were released over eighteen months. Each release introduced timelines spanning past, present, and mythological realms, building an impressively complex narrative world. Similarly, aespa’s KWANGYA narrative challenges spatial boundaries, blending physical and virtual spaces to create a mythology in which members interact with digital avatars, traverse virtual landscapes, and extend their storylines into concert venues and metaverse platforms. By embracing both temporal and spatial complexity, K-pop narratives captivate diverse audiences with stories that are both widely accessible and endlessly interpretive.

This exploration of time and space also reveals how K-pop responds to cultural and technological shifts. Dreamcatcher, for instance, demonstrates adaptability through their evolution from a horror-focused debut—drawing on Asian horror cinema and gothic aesthetics—to science fiction narratives infused with dystopian themes and environmental commentary. Similarly, NMIXX

reimagines maritime mythologies to address contemporary issues, using nautical symbolism to explore identity formation and social alienation, while offering thematic touchpoints accessible even to casual audiences. Such approaches affirm Mitchell's observation that transmedia forms thrive by adapting to new contexts while preserving creative elements. LE SSERAFIM further illustrates this adaptability through campaigns that integrate albums, choreography, fashion, and social media into interconnected narrative experiences—while still leaving room for interpretation and expansion. On platforms like Weverse and YouTube, fan interactions transform K-pop's narratives into evolving texts, shaped by the dynamic interplay between official content and audience engagement. This feedback loop highlights Mitchell's concept of balancing creative control with narrative openness.

These approaches to transmedia storytelling reveal how K-pop constructs new narrative frameworks in contemporary media culture. By integrating temporal and spatial dynamics, hybrid media practices, and participatory engagement, K-pop creates storyworlds that are dynamic and ever-evolving. Rather than adhering to traditional notions of coherence, its strategies prioritize openness, fostering interpretive possibilities that engage a wide spectrum of audiences. Viewed through Mitchell's concept of the transmedium, K-pop emerges as a cultural form that integrates media platforms, genres, and artistic traditions into narrative ecosystems that are both globally accessible and deeply rooted in local contexts. This theoretical lens highlights the sophistication of K-pop's narrative strategies and positions it as a transformative site for rethinking how stories operate within convergent media landscapes.

## Transmedia Scholarship in Korean Studies

Western frameworks for transmedia storytelling, while providing useful foundations, reveal their limitations when applied to K-pop's distinctive narrative practices. Though Jenkins's emphasis on unified storytelling and Ryan's focus on coherent storyworlds offer valuable starting points, they fall short of fully capturing how transmedia practices in Korea emerge from and respond to specific cultural and technological contexts. With this in mind, scholars in Korean media and cultural studies have developed approaches that not only challenge these conventional models but also fundamentally rethink how narrative operates on a global scale. Their work highlights how cultural

specificity and hybridity—far from hindering K-pop’s global appeal—serve as catalysts for innovation. This is especially evident in how K-pop narratives adapt and transform traditional Korean storytelling practices into new, globally accessible forms.

Barbara Wall, a contributor to this volume, situates transmedia storytelling within a broader historical framework, challenging the tendency to view it solely as an emergent phenomenon. By asserting that “transmedia storytelling is not only ‘The Future of Storytelling’ [but] also part of the history of storytelling,” Wall opens theoretical space to understand K-pop’s narrative practices as extensions of Korean cultural traditions rather than mere responses to technological change (2020, 16). Her observation that “the variations that build the universe of a transmedia story can be understood as creative recombinations of integral elements that recur in the variations of the story” reveals how transmedia in K-pop moves beyond adaptation or convergence (21). These recombinations instead establish intertextual networks that derive meaning from multiplicity, echoing traditional Korean narrative modes while pushing the boundaries of contemporary media practice.

Building on Wall’s exploration of the historical foundations of Korean transmedia practices, Jaeho Kang offers insight into how these traditions inform contemporary narrative strategies. Drawing on the work of Song Hwee Lim, Kang describes Hallyu narratives in cinema as “inescapably national” yet “inadvertently nation-less,” identifying a central paradox in K-pop’s transmedia storytelling (2022, 3312; Lim 2007). This paradox arises from the way K-pop narratives are deeply rooted in Korean culture and language while simultaneously transcending national boundaries. Rather than treating this tension as a limitation, Kang argues that Korean cultural products use their specificity to achieve global appeal. This dynamic challenges traditional hierarchies that position Western industries as the dominant source of global culture. Instead, K-pop generates alternative pathways of cultural influence, illustrating how ideas and styles move fluidly between cultures rather than following a singular, top-down trajectory.

Ju Oak Kim’s study of Korean media production offers valuable insight into the strategies shaping K-pop’s transmedia storytelling. Although her analysis focuses on other media forms, it reveals critical parallels with K-pop’s narrative practices. Kim introduces the concept of “geographic gravity,” a framework for understanding how Korean producers construct narrative ecosystems that remain rooted in local sensibilities while achieving global reach (2019, 2147).

Geographic gravity, as she explains, refers to the deliberate anchoring of stories in culturally and geographically specific contexts. This approach ensures that narratives retain their distinctive identity even as they appeal to international audiences. Kim's examination of reality television programs such as *New Journey to the West* (2015–) demonstrates how these practices prioritize ecosystem-building over standalone storylines—an emphasis mirrored in K-pop's integration of music videos, social media, and virtual platforms.

Mitchell's concept of transmediatic flexibility, discussed earlier, aligns with these insights. His emphasis on openness to diverse styles and contexts helps explain how Korean media producers use hybridity not as a compromise but as a source of creativity. Mitchell's theories highlight how Kim's "geographic gravity" and Dal Yong Jin's analysis of narrative compression (2020) function within K-pop's transmedia practices—not as opposing forces but as complementary strategies that generate new creative possibilities. This dynamic is particularly evident in K-pop's ability to integrate local cultural aesthetics with globally accessible themes, ensuring that its narratives remain both distinctive and relatable. Together, these frameworks demonstrate how K-pop's transmedia storytelling maintains coherence while expanding across platforms and cultural contexts, offering a model for innovative narrative practice in a global media landscape.

Through their analysis of glocalization in Korean popular culture, Ingyu Oh and Wonho Jang reveal how transmedia practices operate fluidly across cultural boundaries. Their concept of "tacit knowledge"—a deeply rooted understanding that informs creative decisions—highlights how Korean producers navigate the interplay between local and global elements with precision (2022, 259). This tacit knowledge underpins what may appear to be mere adaptation but is, in fact, a process of cultural translation and innovation. Oh and Jang argue that this process moves beyond conventional notions of hybridity, revealing a deliberate strategy of production that preserves local authenticity while cultivating global appeal. Their work not only explains how K-pop's transmedia narratives balance specificity with accessibility but also illustrates the meticulous care producers take to ensure that multiple narrative elements resonate across a range of cultural contexts.

This emphasis on cultural reach is especially evident in analyses of K-pop's intertextual practices. CedarBough T. Saeji, another contributor to this volume, explains how these practices operate across platforms and cultural boundaries. Saeji argues that intertextuality in K-pop serves two primary purposes: "either

it is designed as a shorthand reference to connect K-pop to other media with which the audience may be familiar, or it is designed to more densely connect K-pop fans to the media products of the artists” (2020, 48). Through detailed analysis of music videos, Saeji shows how producers construct intricate networks of cultural references that operate on both local and global levels. This layering of meaning—described as “a bricolage, where items that already have a specific meaning are appropriated and recombined in unexpected and novel ways” (53)—reflects a collaborative production process in which creators incorporate references at various stages. The integration of Western cultural elements with Korean aesthetics exemplifies what Saeji identifies as a strategic effort to “overcome barriers” in reaching global audiences (50).

Returning to Dal Yong Jin’s contributions, his observation that Korean transmedia strategies “provide new stories” rather than merely adapt existing ones underscores the broader theoretical intervention this volume seeks to make (2020, 5). His emphasis on innovation over adaptation aligns with Jenkins’s concept of “additive comprehension,” as discussed by Wall, which describes how new media texts deepen and expand audience understanding by offering new perspectives or layers of meaning (Wall 2020, 16). This suggests that transmedia practices in K-pop do more than extend a narrative across platforms; they actively generate new theoretical possibilities by constructing interconnected storyworlds that sustain and reward fan engagement. Centering Korean studies perspectives reframes K-pop not as a cultural form that must be interpreted through Western frameworks, but as a vital site for rethinking how transmedia storytelling operates within a global media landscape. The scholars in this volume show why K-pop calls for new theoretical approaches—ones that account for its transnational appeal, embrace of narrative multiplicity, and commitment to audience engagement. Understanding transmedia storytelling in K-pop, then, involves not only drawing from conventional paradigms but also advancing beyond them to develop frameworks that better capture the complexities of storytelling in an interconnected world.

## Overview of Chapters

This volume, at its heart, tells a story about storytelling—one that stretches across media forms, genres, and critical vocabularies. It begins with a deceptively simple question: What does it mean to tell a story in K-pop? The responses are

anything but singular. They loop and diverge, resist resolution, and multiply in unexpected ways. Across these eleven chapters, contributors show how K-pop develops storyworlds not by resolving meaning, but by expanding it—through recursive timelines, deliberate ambiguity, emergent technologies, fan intervention, and sonic design. This collection is not concerned with defining K-pop storytelling. Rather, it considers what K-pop storytelling does, how it circulates, and what forms of affective attachment it makes possible.

## Allusive Storytelling and Transtextual Strategies

The volume opens with “Allusive Storytelling and Transtextual Strategies,” a section centered on interpretive practice—how narratives in K-pop reference, reflect, and rework themselves to prompt engagement. The storyworlds examined here take shape not through linear plots, but through echo, excess, and intertextuality. What matters is not what is stated outright, but what is implied, reassembled, or felt around the edges.

Nicholas E. Miller opens the volume with a theoretical framework that shapes much of what follows: the concept of generative unruliness. In his chapter, “Generative Unruliness: World-Becoming and the Transmedia Logic of K-Pop in the Billiverse,” Miller contends that confusion and contradiction are not narrative failures but essential features of how meaning takes shape in K-pop. Through the recursive timelines and surreal imagery of the Billiverse, he explores how formal instability functions not as a weakness, but as a sustaining force. By questioning transmedia models that equate clarity with coherence, Miller positions uncertainty as a condition for emotional investment in K-pop, setting the tone for the volume as a whole.

That idea reverberates in Courtney Lazore’s chapter, “Recursive Transmedia and the Eternal Return in BTS’s Bangtan Universe,” where narratives unfold not in sequence, but through a structure borrowed from Nietzsche: the eternal return. Lazore moves between personal experience and analytical insight to trace how the BU invites fans to reconstruct the story from dispersed, fragmentary clues spread across platforms and years. Like Miller, she centers recursion as a core aesthetic, but with particular attention to how fans become meaning-makers in a world that never quite settles. For Lazore, interpretation is more than a reading practice—it is a sustained gesture of care, an enduring attachment to narratives in motion.

That relationship between story and reader becomes even more complex in CedarBough T. Saeji and Barbara Wall's chapter, "The Role of the (Un)Knowing Audience in Transmedia Storytelling: Why Seventeen's 'Son Ogong' Should Not Be Called 'Super' but 'Monkey King' in English." Through the lens of a seemingly small translation decision, they ask what it means to catch—or miss—a cultural reference, and how such moments shape global fan experience. Drawing on theories of intertextual literacy and transnational media flows, they argue that storytelling is always shaped by assumptions about who the audience is, what they are expected to know, and how uneven that access to meaning can be. Their chapter offers a reflection on interpretation, exclusion, and the shifting terrain of cultural capital in K-pop fandom.

Sound becomes the next site of intertextual play. In "Something Borrowed: Classical Music Excerpts as Intertextual Interventions in K-Pop Restaging," Netta Huebscher shifts the focus to the sonic register, examining how classical motifs recalibrate the emotional weight of K-pop performances. Focusing especially on competitive stages like those in *Kingdom*, she traces how borrowed musical fragments function as subtle narrative devices—evoking emotional textures that may register unconsciously. These sonic references operate like narrative footnotes: quietly deepening a moment, even when their source material is not fully recognized. Her distinction between phenomenal and noumenal sound—between what characters hear and what the audience is meant to perceive—circles back to Saeji and Wall's concerns, highlighting a key thread in this section: meaning in K-pop often emerges in the half-known, the intuited, and the felt.

## Semiotic Ecosystems and Narrative Multiplicity

With these interpretive frameworks in place, the collection shifts into its second act: "Semiotic Ecosystems and Narrative Multiplicity." If the first section asks how K-pop stories are read, this one considers the systems that make such readings possible. It moves from hermeneutics to infrastructure, from interpretation to storyworld construction.

Olga V. Lazareva begins this transition in "Cracks in the Universal: Local Media Practices and the Limits of Transmedia Universality in K-Pop," where she questions whether Western models of transmedia storytelling can fully account for *segyegwan*. Drawing on East Asian frameworks such as media mix and OSMU, Lazareva argues that K-pop storyworlds revolve less around narrative

coherence or universality and more around the idol-character as a stable, franchisable figure. In her model, consistency lies not in plot, but in persona. As long as the idol-character remains legible across platforms, the storyworld can fracture, restart, or contradict itself. Lazareva thus reframes *segyegwan* as a marketing and affective ecology, showing how local media logics complicate dominant transmedia assumptions.

That shift from plot to character finds a parallel in Lila S. Roussel's chapter, "Transmedia Storytelling and the Artwork Dispersed: NCT 127's *Cherry Bomb*," which locates narrative not in a sequence of events, but in the artifact itself. To that end, Roussel introduces the concept of transmedia artifactuality to describe how meaning coheres across choreography, album design, styling, press releases, and performance—rather than within a single medium or storyline. If Lazareva demonstrates how character continuity can anchor fragmented worlds, Roussel shows how material and semiotic details can do the same. Here, the story is not something told; it is something built, pieced together across formats through repetition and accumulation. Narrative thus becomes a kind of object-oriented collage, assembled in and through the artifact.

Agnese Dionisio carries this shift further by focusing on time. In "Breaking the Linear Timeline: ATEEZ's Möbius Strip Storytelling Across Media and Meaning," Dionisio explores how the group's narrative loops back on itself, resisting traditional notions of cause and effect. Through the Möbius strip, Dionisio offers both a visual metaphor and a structural model for understanding how ATEEZ blurs the boundaries between past and future, performance and story. If Lazareva centers the idol, and Roussel the artifact, Dionisio centers temporal form—specifically, how parallel worlds connect through time in an endless loop. Like Lazore in the first section, this chapter highlights how narrative meaning can emerge from a story that moves forward while also folding back into itself.

Arpita Kar builds on these ideas with a different kind of world—one anchored in authenticity. In "Authenticity as Storytelling: Self-Production and the Transmedia Storyworld of Stray Kids," they argue that the group's self-produced music, performances, and media presence form a cohesive narrative grounded in practices of sincerity. Rather than adopt fictional concepts, Stray Kids construct their storyworld through emotional transparency, creative authorship, and intimate fan connection. Authenticity, here, is not just a theme—it is the story itself. Kar shows how this ethos operates across platforms, inviting fans to see the group not as performers in a concept, but as co-authors of a shared, evolving

narrative. The result is a transmedia storyworld built not from fantasy, but from the affective force of being—and being seen as—real.

## Digital Architectures and Participatory Design

Building on these questions of affect and authenticity, the collection turns to its final act: “Digital Architectures and Participatory Design.” While earlier chapters examine how K-pop narratives are constructed through character, artifact, temporality, and self-presentation, the chapters here ask how those narratives are shaped—and at times constrained—by the technical and institutional infrastructures that support them. This section explores the platforms, algorithms, and corporate strategies that mediate fan participation and redefine the possibilities of transmedia storytelling in K-pop and beyond. In these chapters, storyworlds become spaces that fans enter not only as interpreters but as co-creators, collaborators, and at times, commodities.

Wonseok Lee opens this section with “Next Level: aespa’s Storyworld and Cultural Significance,” a chapter that explores how avatars and alter-egos function as a self-reflexive commentary on posthuman identity. More specifically, he examines how aespa’s narrative blurs the line between character and performer, human and virtual. Through close analysis of the members’ *ae*-counterparts and the KWANGYA universe, Lee shows how their transmedia storytelling unsettles traditional boundaries between the real and the fictional, inviting fans to become both witnesses to—and participants in—a dynamic experiment in digital existence. His chapter frames aespa as a narrative inflection point in K-pop: a metafictional performance that mirrors broader anxieties surrounding algorithmic media and digital culture.

In this vein, Qingyue Sun’s “SYNK Dive into KWANGYA: Transmedia Storytelling and Emerging Technologies in K-Pop” examines SM Entertainment’s metaverse as both a fictional world and a technical infrastructure. Focusing primarily on aespa, Sun analyzes how the group’s integration into platform design, fan interaction, and immersive technologies reveals how storytelling becomes entangled with surveillance, gamification, and corporate control. Her analysis shows how concepts like “spreadability” and “drillability” function as tools of fan labor extraction, turning participation into unpaid creative work that feeds back into marketing systems. The chapter raises questions about agency:

Who gets to tell the story—and who is telling it when the tools of authorship are owned by platforms that disguise extraction as play?

Kathryn M. Frank closes the volume with a return to recursion—but with a participatory twist. In “(My) BTS Universe Story: Sanctioned and Unsanctioned Transmedia Immersion in *BTS Universe Story*,” she examines how fans used the mobile game to write their own narratives—sometimes stretching, other times breaking the boundaries of canon. Through analysis of everything from sanctioned fan fiction to shipping stories and shitposts, Frank reveals how digital platforms become contested spaces where corporate control and fan creativity intersect in unpredictable ways. Her chapter is not only about narrative as fan activity, but about the politics of permission: who gets to imagine, remix, and participate—and under what constraints. She concludes the volume with a meditation on creative possibility and corporate limitation, reminding us that authorship in the digital age is always a negotiation.

## Toward a Poetics of Distributed Meaning

Taken together, these chapters offer more than scholarly analysis. They sketch a map of how stories in K-pop are made, sustained, and reimaged. Across this volume, K-pop emerges not simply as an industry or a genre, but as a method of world-making—or, as the opening chapter suggests, *world-becoming*. It is a mode of transmedia production in which stories are not only told but performed, experienced, and assembled through recursive participation. Story here is structure, ritual, and atmosphere—sustained not by resolution, but by return.

Moreover, this collection foregrounds the cultural and affective labor of staying with stories that resist completion. These are worlds that do not ask to be solved, but inhabited. They pull us in not through closure, but through invitation—through loops, echoes, and openings. The deeper question is not just how K-pop tells stories, but how it trains us to live with narrative indeterminacy. What kind of reader does it make? What kinds of attachments does it cultivate? And what do those attachments reveal about how we make meaning—in, through, and sometimes despite the story? In tracing these questions, the chapters that follow offer a vision of narrative grounded in multiplicity, speculation, and shared imagination. It is a vision in which meaning does not reside in a single text, but

circulates among platforms, people, and performances. This is not just a story about K-pop. It is a story about how we come to care about stories at all—and what becomes possible when we follow them beyond the frame.

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