

BTS and Global Capitalism

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Abstract

This essay aims to discuss the “machinic enslavement” of capitalism across the globe through the illustrative example of a Korean boy band (BTS). I argue that the rise of the BTS fandom is a cultural repercussion of depthless commodification in connection with the political logic of nationalism against the capitalist nihilism. Endorsing the concept of interpassivity, my argument will suggest that the interpassivity of fandom reveals the “depthlessness” of global capitalism against nationalism. The fans do not want to act as subjects but as delegates of their desire. What they desire is not the fulfilment of their wanting but the ongoing state of desiring as such. They are not interested in the object of the desire but the craving deference of the pleasure for the desire, for they must stop desiring if they can easily own the object. Therefore, BTS is not only a cultural commodity but also an intangible object beyond the pleasure principle.

Keywords

BTS, interpassivity, nationalism, a nation-state, Deleuze, Guattari, Pfaller

1. BTS as a Global Commodity

On the 26th of October in 2018, *Tokyo Sports*, a well-known right-wing newspaper in Japan, reported that Jimin, one of the members of BTS, the mega-popular Korean boy band, wore a T-shirt, on which the image of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima during the Second World War was printed. The newspaper insisted that Japan cancel their appearance and scheduled performance at the Tokyo Dome. Jimin apologized for his ignorance regarding the perceived symbolic meaning of the shirt and promised his Japanese fans to mull over the violence of the warfare more carefully. He did not admit that he had any political aim with what was indicated in the shirt because he simply wore it out of respect for one of his fans who had sent it to him as a gift. However, the words repeatedly printed on the shirt against the image of a mushroom cloud were “Patriotism, our story, liberation, Korea,” a slogan to justify the nationalist sentiment of the country.

Whatever his real motivation was, the incident quickly boiled down to Jimin’s naivety; nevertheless, because of his apology the controversy was quickly quelled. However, I argue that the controversy about the message on Jimin’s shirt was not accidental but the consequence of a paradox between nationalism and cosmopolitanism in global capitalism.

As a global commodity, BTS should be cosmopolitan; nevertheless, as members of a nation-state, the members of BTS cannot transcend their nationality. Jimin’s performance to commemorate Korea’s National Liberation Day by wearing the shirt enraged not just Japanese nationalists, but also sparked a heated debate among BTS fans in Japan about the shirt’s message. The printed phrases appeared to encourage the United States’ deployment of atomic bombs against Japan, which pacifist Dorothy Day described as a “colossal slaughter of the innocents.”¹ At the same time, worldwide news organizations such as the BBC, CNN, and *The Guardian* were drawn to the controversy. They speculated that Jimin wore the shirt in question to express a political opinion influenced by the rising tensions between South Korea and Japan. However, Big Hit Entertainment, the company that manages BTS, stressed that Jimin’s printed shirt was not meant to convey any political message.

The company insisted that the artist was not responsible for the message because he had no intention of stirring the dispute in the first place. In short, the company seemed to confirm that Jimin was clueless about the deeper meaning of the commemorative gift, and his deviation resulted from a naive attitude towards *realpolitik*. The company's clarification is a usual response to such negative criticism, but in my opinion, their answer is the start of another problem, rather than the conclusion of the conflict. If the proclamation about Jimin's deed is correct, he is nothing else than an immature person who cannot understand the humanitarian issues concerning atomic bombing. This implies that BTS's ethical statement about their love for humanity is suspect. As is generally known, they were invited to speak before the United Nations General Assembly and were awarded the Order of Cultural Merit by the Korean government. As a result, Jimin's lack of awareness of humanistic concerns clashes with the image that BTS would like to project.

Meanwhile, things would have worsened if the announcement were wrong and Jimin had known its political implication well. It would have meant that, together with the company, he lied to people so that he could quickly extricate himself from difficulties. Both are worse. Jimin would tend to please his fans who had sent him the shirt. His deed was not politically wrong and morally right. The gesture of wearing a gift is not necessarily a politically motivated act, as it could simply be a gesture of gratitude. However, the effect of the action brought forth an unpredictable result. Why did this disturbance take place then? Of course, it is not due to Jimin's fault. In response, some journalists in South Korea argued that BTS must establish more practical strategies for the global market by diluting the touch of "Koreaness." This kind of advice for better business bluntly reveals the symbolic implication of BTS and other K-pop industries.

One could argue that Jimin is a victim of the K-pop industry, which has strategically positioned its cultural products as "global commodities" beyond national borders. Ironically, in this effort, Korean pop idols like BTS must abandon their "Koreaness." In this context, Jimin is caught at the center of the dialectical relationship between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Even

some journalists are convinced that BTS is a commodity for the global market and as such, it needs to erase its nationality, tactically. On the contrary, the controversy concerning Jimin's shirt is not caused by the lack of a musician's strategic approach to the global market but by the iron cage of the dialectical relationship between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. The dialectics of identity is where the national question arises. In this sense, the problem of BTS has nothing to do with individual moral integrity or cultural awareness but rather a structural over-determination revolving around a nation-state.

The Enlightenment idea of "cosmopolitanism" aims at the production of civil society. Immanuel Kant argues that hospitality is an essential characteristic of cosmopolitanism.² The point is that personal kindness does not rest on philanthropic generosity but the "right to visit, to which all human beings have a claim, to present oneself to society by virtue of the right of common possession of the surface of the earth."³ However, Kant did not know that nation-states would eventually control the common. After the First World War, the temporary imposition of passport controls became permanent, and the laissez-faire era of international migration ended.⁴ Nationality relies on the technical partition of the common right. Kant thought that the right to travel across the territories is self-evident, yet, the right to travel needs another right, i.e., the political right to insist on the right to visit or reside in any nation-state. The dispute with Jimin's shirt revealed the clash between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, but still, the episode does not mean the two values are incompatible. As Hannah Arendt points out, "once they had left their homeland they remained homeless, once they had left their state they became stateless; once they had been deprived of their human rights, they were rightless, the scum of the earth."⁵ In other words, a nation-state is the foundation of such a common right, the condition of humanity, which can allow anyone the legitimacy to get in or out of national borders.

2. The Problem of the Nation and the State

Two historical arguments of nation-states might be considered here. First, a conservative viewpoint that "the nation-state is the 'realized' form of the nation, that nations without corresponding states remain frozen in a form of

infancy.” And second, a Marxist one that states that “the tendency towards the articulation between the nation and the state is an effect of the development of capitalism.”⁶ Jimin’s understanding of the relationship between the nation and the state would be close to the former, i.e., the traditionalist understanding of the nation-state. However, this identification of the nation with the establishment of the state is unsuited to cosmopolitanism. Following this logic, there is no cosmopolitanism without the nation-state; the nation-state is the materialization of the nation—the juridico-political substance of an imagined community. Proceeding from this reasoning, Jimin would believe that he did the right thing when celebrating National Liberation Day. Still, the disturbing truth is revealed because this national “romance” regards Japan as the nation’s enemy. From the perspective of what might be regarded as a kind of Manichean dichotomy, any violence destroying the opposite is the best—the more ruthless to the foe, the better to us. Nationalism cannot justify its logic from within but rather gains its meaning by defining the enemy from without because the origins of any nation are not self-evident.

There is a fundamental discrepancy between the nation-state and the nation in the imaginary, yet nationalism as fantasy seals the split seamlessly. The ideological unity of the nation and the state is inevitably disrupted by capitalism. In this view, nationalism is an intellectual interpellation to develop nation-state subjects and advance the imagined basis of legal nationality.

Nationality is the pre-condition to human rights. A man’s right is not automatically given by natural law but rather obtained by the citizenship of nationality. Unlike Kant’s proposition, cosmopolitan citizenship is founded on the paradox of “human condition” in the modern age; we, human beings, have no self-evident right to reside in any place without nationality, even if we travel around the international borders. There is no such thing as the absolute right of self-determination except in the nation-state as a historical phenomenon. Nationality is the real border in the age of the nation-state. Those who have no right to reside within the boundary will be regarded as “the scum of the earth.” This stateless status is called refugees. In my opinion, the existence of refugees proves how the nation-state serves as a

form of capitalist accumulation. Refugees, who do not have any national identification, are deemed as reckless as waste. They have no legal right to allow them to work in the nation-states. They are “useless” because they are not exchangeable in the national mode of production. If refugees desire to be exchanged, they must commodify themselves. The commodification of their labor-power is the only way to exist in capitalism. Citizenship is the legal right to sell living labor in the nation-states. However, the case of BTS clarifies that the juridic-politics must approve any commodity of the nation-state. Of course, the commodity goes global, but its trade or sale must have juridical approval. As Karl Marx points out, “commodities cannot themselves go to market and perform exchanges in their own right.”⁷ This juridical relation is nothing else than but the contract between different individual wills, which depends on “the economic relation.” Based on this contract, each person exists as a representative and an owner of any commodity.

It was in the early twentieth century when there were “extraordinary upheavals concerning the form of the nation” which included “the assertion of new linguistic sovereignties and newly discovered national borders.”⁸ Establishing a common language within a specific territory is necessary for national formation. In this sense, the invention of the nation is related to the imaginary fabrication of a nationalist story. Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein point out that “the history of nations, beginning with our own, is always already presented to us in the form of a narrative which attributes to these entities the continuity of a subject.”⁹ The relationship between the nation and each subject is presented in a narrative form. However, this nation-form as a narrative is immanent in the nation’s construction. As Balibar clarifies, the nation-form is the assemblages of apparatuses and practices that initiate an individual as “*homo nationalis* from cradle to grave.”¹⁰

The nation-form is the “interpellation” of the subject or the subjectification of the individual. In this way, the history of nations is always already given in the form of a narrative. The imaginary nation or community in the past never exists but is continuously invented through the myth of origins and national continuity. Therefore, “the formation of the nation ... appears as the fulfillment of a ‘project’ stretching over centuries, in which there are

different stages and moments of coming to self-awareness.”¹¹ The establishment of the nation-states is the consequence of contingent events, which have nothing to do with the cause or destiny of each nation. Nations have no historical lineages or experiences, but their myth of national golden ages is created by nationalism. Nationalism has been used for mobilizing the “free” individuals in the modern State and their national orientation is the by-product of capitalism, even though its sentiment seems firmly rooted in mythical origins.

3. The Machinic Enslavement of Capitalism

The myth of the authentic State has given rise to the modern invention of a nation. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari conceptualize *Urstaat* for explaining the relationship between production and the State. For them, there has never been one State but rather many coexisting variations of the primal State even in a specific period. The possible proliferation of many States comes up from the desire of the *Urstaat*, “whence the variations, all the variants of the new alliance, falling nevertheless under the same category.”¹² To quote Deleuze and Guattari,

The State was not formed in progressive stages; it appears fully armed, a master stroke executed all at once; the primordial *Urstaat*, the eternal model of everything the State wants to be and desires. “Asiatic” production, with the State that expresses or constitutes its objective movement, is not a distinct formation; it is the basic formation, on the horizon throughout history. There comes back to us from all quarters the discovery of imperial machines that preceded the traditional historical forms, machines characterized by State ownership of property, with communal possession bricked into it, and collective dependence. Every form that is more “evolved” is like palimpsest: it covers a despotic inscription, a Mycenaean manuscript.¹³

In this sense, it is “a double error” to say that “the development of commodity production is enough to bring about feudalism’s collapse” and that “feudalism of itself is in opposition to the State.”¹⁴ Even though capitalist States and socialist States come to exist, the traits of the primordial despotic State still remain. Unlike much of development theory, which justifies the

beginning of capitalism as the end of feudalism, commodity production reinforces the condition of the feudalist features, or the State with the feudalist remnant retains commodities against “the decoding of flows.”¹⁵ Therefore, it is useless to list the differences between each political regime according to “the manner of conscientious historians.”¹⁶ No doubt, this point brings back Louis Althusser’s critique of Paul Ricœur about the objective knowledge of history. In opposition to Ricœur’s emphasis on a historian’s interpretation of history as the ground of objectivity, Althusser defended the objectivity of history, which already embraces such subjectivity from within.

Following Fernand Braudel’s assumption, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that capitalism came to exist through the State-form. Once capitalism attains the modern State as its models of realization, the global axiomatic of capitalism begins to be realized like “a single City, megalopolis, or ‘mega-machine’ of which the States are parts, or neighborhoods.”¹⁷ When capitalism completes an axiomatic, all States and all social formations gravitate towards “isomorphic in their capacity as models of realization.”¹⁸ This capitalist axiomatic is nothing else than a centralized market system, in which “even the socialist countries participate.”¹⁹ The *machinic enslavement* of capitalism results from its dominant State-form over diverse social formations. This rule of the central State is the way by which capitalism traps the Third World. Deleuze and Guattari clearly indicate:

Throughout a vast portion of the Third World, the general relation of production is capital—even throughout the entire Third World, in the sense that the socialized sector may utilize that relation, adopting it in this case. But the mode of production is not necessarily capitalist, either in the so-called archaic or transitional forms, or in the most productive, highly industrialized sectors. This indeed represents a third case, included in the worldwide axiomatic: when capital acts as the relation of production but in noncapitalist modes of production. We may therefore speak of a polymorphy of the Third World States in relation to the States of the center. And this dimension of the axiomatic is no less necessary than the others; it is even much more necessary, for the heteromorphy of the so-called socialist States was imposed upon capitalism, which digested it as best it could, whereas the polymorphy of the Third World States is partially organized by the center, as an axiom providing a substitute for colonization.²⁰

However, this capitalist domination always already contains its paradox from within. When its global organization turns to be the capitalist axiomatic, it cannot help implying “a heterogeneity of social formations,” which “gives rise to and organizes its ‘Third World’.”²¹ The establishment of the capitalist State is a machinic processes rather than a consequence of development. Even if its capture is dominant, there is always something that escapes from the processes such as towns or war machines. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari point out that capitalism hides the trace of the *Urstaat* beneath “the blows of private property, then of commodity production,” and thus “the State witnesses its decline.”²² The main features of capitalism (i.e., private property, wealth, commodities, and classes) are “*the breakdown of codes*.”²³ From this perspective, Deleuze and Guattari bluntly demonstrate that the advent of the State does not proceed by “progressive homonization, or by totalization, but by the taking on of consistency or the consolidation of the diverse as such.”²⁴ The triumph of capitalism has nothing to do with its inner necessity but instead, with the contingent crystallization of the machinic processes.

This observation leads us to understand the fandom around BTS. If the juridical foundation of the State is not necessary and capitalism is the contingent consequence, there might not be any legitimate contract between individual wills. Furthermore, the fans’ activities are inappropriate for the juridical relationship between BTS and the entertainment company. As a cultural commodity, consumers cannot own BTS as such, and the contract belongs to the relation between BTS and Big Hit Entertainment. The only thing that the fans can do within the monetary exchange system is to enjoy consuming the volatile moments of BTS’s performance. Today’s development of telecommunication technology, (i.e., social media and streaming services), makes it possible to retain the temporal experiences in the “digital tertiary retention” in Bernard Stiegler’s sense.²⁵ Audiences can watch what they want anytime by replaying those recorded performances. However, they do not want to give up the authentic relationship with their idols. Technology provides them with a medium that enables them to sustain their

feeling continuously. In this vein, the BTS fandom, i.e., A.R.M.Y, is contradictory to the contract. Their bond with BTS is not a profit-based but rather an affinity beyond any economic interest.

4. Re-enchantment without a Miracle

One may argue that the fans' emotional consumption of their idols is useless, and I believe such uselessness is the political implication of the BTS fandom. It is possible that, to some degree, the participation of fans is a political act depending on the social or political advocacy that the K-pop group claims to represent. In this sense, BTS is a channel through which fans practice global solidarity and recognize their trans-national citizenship. The creation of the trans-national zone is the purpose of their participation in BTS's fandom. However, far from the common opinion about this kind of fandom, I would say that BTS A.R.M.Y's enjoyment is not ascribed to interactivity but rather to interpassivity. According to Robert Pfaller, interpassive people keep away from their desire and transfer it to "other people, animals, machines and so on."²⁶ Interpassivity is how people delegate passivity to others rather than activity. It is as if they act, but they do not. Interpassivity, by which they pass on their desire to the idols, is the crucial aspect of the BTS fandom.

This transference does not mean vicarious satisfaction but instead refers to a "double delegation," which creates the representative agent of their pleasure and the rituals to hand down their belief in the illusion they have assigned to "an undefined naive other."²⁷ With interpassivity, consuming the cultural commodity does not come with any kind of belief. An example is the case of the *Squid Game*, a recent Korean drama on Netflix which will be discussed with the homeostasis of capitalist perversion in this mechanism in mind. As is well known, capitalism even sells a critique of capitalism. In fact, even Netflix produces and distributes *The Social Dilemma*, a documentary that criticizes the big data industry like Netflix itself.

However, this paradox does not mean that capitalism totalizes our unconscious. Instead, it implies that we enjoy the "interpassivity" of voluntary obedience to the regime. The concept of interpassivity explains a way by which we gain enjoyment by renouncing our freedom to choose. In terms

of interpassive arrangements in the case of *Squid Game*, its dramatic setting provides for its innate reception. We already “know” the problem of capitalism that the Netflix product is supposed to show us before we even start to watch it. In this actualization of media, (i.e., the mechanical operation of online streaming), our participation as a Netflix spectator in the process turns out to be mere excess. In other words, the inner logic of the Netflix series (the utilitarian critique of the excessive desire, such as the subduction of unfair enjoyment from the distribution of pleasure) consummates itself without the presence of audiences in its realization.

By enjoying *Squid Game*, in relation to the case of BTS, we can refrain from our surplus appreciation of capitalist obscenity and hand it over to Netflix. This disinterested mode in the process of delaying the fulfilment of our desire is the ideological entailment of the new media. The normalization of surplus desire seems to reach even higher level in interpassive arrangements of algorithmic mechanisms. Now you do not need to think about what you should watch. More than that, you do not need to desire what you really desire. This normal state of voluntary obedience is the condition for retaining the capitalist mode of production.

The interpassive behavior might be regarded as an ideological response to capitalist nihilism. This nihilism would be related to “the anarchistic turn” of capitalism in Catherine Malabou’s sense, which marks “decentralized currencies, the end of the state’s monopoly, the obsolescence of the mediating role played by banks, and the decentralization of exchanges and transaction.”²⁸ This horizontal anarchism of global capitalism arouses the hierarchical movements of populism within the nation-states, which justify its national identity or authenticity. An attempt to bring forth the depth of a nation resists the decentralization of the political economy.

Contrary to this nationalist inclination against globalization, the orientation of BTS fandom seems to take an opposite direction. The interpassivity of the fandom reveals the “depthlessness” of global capitalism against nationalism. The BTS fans do not want to act as subjects but as delegates of their desire. What they desire is not the fulfilment of their wanting but the ongoing state of desiring as such. They are not interested in the object of the

desire but the craving deference of the pleasure for the desire, for they must stop desiring if they can easily own the object. BTS is not only a cultural commodity but also an intangible object beyond the pleasure principle. Their emotional disposition to these idols is like a response to a magic show, not a participation in a religious rite. They enjoy it but do not believe any “miracle” there. They consider themselves ordinary people, but as Jacques Rancière points out, “the common people *are* the army.”²⁹

In this sense, I think the BTS A.R.M.Y is a symbolic answer to the disenchantment of commodification. They do not love BTS as a commercial product but rather wish to sustain the magical illusion they have staged through the boys’ fiction.

Notes

1. Dorothy Day, "We Go On Record: the CW Response to Hiroshima", *The Catholic Worker*, vol. 41, no. 06 (July-August 1975).
2. Immanuel Kant, *Towards Perpetual Peace and Other Writings*, trans. David L. Colclasure (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 82.
3. Ibid.
4. See John C. Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 143-144.
5. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1973). p. 267.
6. Gavin Walker, "Nationalism and the National Question," in *The SAGE Handbook of Marxism* (London: SAGE, 2022), p. 377.
7. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fawkes (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 178.
8. Walker, "Nationalism and the National Question," p. 372.
9. Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York: Verso, 1991), p. 86.
10. Ibid., p. 93.
11. Ibid., p. 86.
12. Ibid.
13. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 217-218.
14. Ibid., p. 220.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 434.
18. Ibid., p. 436.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., p. 465.
21. Ibid., p. 437.
22. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 218.
23. Ibid.
24. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 436.
25. Bernard Siegler, "Automatic society, Londres février 2015," trans. Daniel Ross, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, Vol. 15, Nos. 2-3 (2016), p. 196.
26. Robert Pfaller, *Interpassivity: The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 17-18.

27. Ibid., p. 21.
28. Catherine Malabou, "Cryptocurrencies: Anarchist Turn or Strengthening of Surveillance Capitalism? From Bitcoin to Libra," trans. Robert Boncardo, *Australian Humanities Review*, 66 (May 2020), p. 146.
29. Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 15.

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