



# BLENDING CULTURES IN BTS'S "BLOOD SWEAT & TEARS"

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## Abstract

Pop culture often functions as a vehicle for what is deemed "high culture," either through mentions and representations, or adaptations and recontextualizations. Hallyu, the wave of Korean cultural products overtaking the world market, including emerging markets such as the Romanian one, abounds in examples of cultural blending or hybridization. BTS, the Korean band who have made K-pop a truly global phenomenon, exemplify the blending of high culture with pop culture, as well as the blending of Eastern and Western cultures, especially in the video to their 2016 song "Blood Sweat & Tears."

**Keywords:** *metaphor; K-pop; Korean wave; hallyu; BTS; Herman Hesse; Demian; Blood Sweat & Tears.*

## INTRODUCTION: POP CULTURE AS CULTURAL SITE OF CONVERGENCE

Even as the digital age has seen a democratization of culture, where access to it is much easier than ever, the divide between high and pop culture still exists; just by calling it "pop," the inference is that it comes in opposition to some other type of culture. "Popular culture is always defined, implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories: folk culture, mass culture, high culture, dominant

culture, working-class culture” (Storey, *Cultural Theory* 20). Pop culture is most often seen as something to be consumed and digested easily, having low aesthetic or moral value, and with very few chances to withstand time. Most people engage in casual viewings of movies or TV shows, listening to hit songs and reading easy fiction, but they would probably not consider it “art” or intrinsically valuable beyond the easy entertainment it offers.

Pop culture is often seen as formulaic, commercial and superficial. This is also the case of K-pop, seen as overly-produced, with little to no authenticity (Ahn et al. 13). However, pop culture, just as any other cultural item, is the product of intertextuality, of varied influences and circumstances. The boundary between the traditional academic categories of culture is no longer easy to discern – at which point is a song considered a “classic,” therefore part of high(er) culture? Is a fairytale part of folk culture or high culture, and what difference does it make? Pop culture, hard to define as it is, has the capacity to incorporate elements from the other culture categories, as it recontextualizes and adapts them into itself. Many cultural elements are often brought to new and wider audiences through pop culture – from classical music in cartoons (e.g. Looney Tunes), to classical European literature in K-pop songs (e.g. *Demian* in BTS’s *Blood Sweat & Tears*).

This convergence of cultural categories is clearer within the framework of globalization, or, as Storey calls it, “time-space compression” (*Inventing popular culture* 108). As modern means of travel and communication enable the transference of information to be unhindered by time and space, this “compression brings into close contact images, meanings, ways of life, cultural practices, which would otherwise have remained separated by time and space” (Storey, *Inventing popular culture* 108). This may lead to a “a mixing of cultures, producing forms of ‘hybridization’” (108). Pop culture, as consumed transnationally, especially by the youth, is highly prone to hybridization, as it carries within it influences from other national cultures, but also from other cultural categories.

A great example is BTS’s 2018 Melon Music Awards performance of their song *Idol*, in which they mixed multiple cultures and cultural categories. “The original album version of the song is known for its usage of diverse cultural elements, such as *Gqom* (a subgenre of Kwaito, a South African style of house music), *gwara-gwara* (South African dance), *chuimsae* (traditional Korean musical

verbal expressions), and *hanbok*" (Lee 37). Besides this already eclectic mix, the live performance itself incorporated traditional Korean elements (dances, instruments, and outfits) which brought member Jimin an "award from the Kim Baek Bong Fan Dance Conservation Society for his reinterpretation of the form and 'contribution in raising the status and aesthetic value of the Korean fan dance globally'" (Lee 38). The performance is an example of how pop culture can be the site of convergence for multiple cultures (Korean, South-African, American) and cultural categories (folk and pop).

### A GLOBALIZED HALLYU

Interestingly enough, while K-pop is probably the first and foremost cultural product of Korea which comes to mind, Korean culture exports are vast and varied, with products spanning all culture categories. Korean culture has been recognized for its exceptional filmography, for such movies as director Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003), director Yeon Sang-ho's *Train to Busan* (2016) and culminating with the Best Motion Picture win at the 2020 Academy Awards for director Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019). Furthermore, Korean cuisine has become a staple for younger generations, with such dishes as *tteokbokki*, *kimchi* or *jjajangmyeon* being offered in Korean and Asian restaurants all over the world. Even more popular are the iconic instant noodles (*ramyeon*), and such Korean brands as *Jin Ramen* or *Buldak*, which are available in grocers and specialty shops worldwide; for example, shops with names like *KJ Centre* (Korea-Japan) and *K-Food* have been opened in most major cities in Romania in the past ten years. K-dramas, however, were often the "icebreaker" cultural product in many of the cultures where Korean cultural exchange would not have normally been as likely to thrive. In her 2014 book, *The Birth of Korean Cool*, Euny Hong enumerates some of the first dramas to break different markets, and lists *Dae Jang Geum*, *The Jewel in the Palace* (4), as the drama to have broken some of the EMEA<sup>1</sup> emergent markets in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Talking about the same phenomenon, but specific to the Romanian market, Marinescu and Balica specify that *The Jewel in the Palace* was the first K-drama to be broadcast by a Romanian television channel, back in 2009 (90). In fact, it was the public TV

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<sup>1</sup> EMEA = Europe, Middle East and Africa

channel TVR 1, at prime time no less, which ensured the largest segment of TV audience watched it. The Lee Byung-hoon historical drama was shortly followed by 3 others broadcast by public channels TVR 1 and TVR 2, and between 2010 and 2014 no less than 72 K-dramas were aired on public and private TV channels with nationwide coverage (Marinescu and Balica 91), not accounting for internet and streaming platform consumption. Since then, the popularity of K-dramas has greatly increased, such shows often making it in the top 10 most popular shows on a weekly basis on Netflix Romania<sup>2</sup>. As of December 2024, the most successful K-drama according to Netflix's public datasets was the 2023 SBS limited series *My Demon*, which topped the Romanian Weekly charts for six consecutive weeks between November and December 2023. If in 2016, Buja was talking about a mere "Korean breeze" in Romania, with some of the respondents expressing the opinion that "little by little [K-pop in Romania] will fade away, like many other music genres" (187), we can confidently talk about a full-blown tsunami in 2024. Not only do thousands of K-fans gather in Facebook groups such as *Hallyu Romania*, *K-Pop Romania*, or *BTS Army Romania*, but dozens of independent cinemas and cinema chains across Romania have hurried to screen K-pop concerts and documentaries such as BTS's last concert in Busan before they started enlisting in 2022, Suga's *D-Day* concert in April 2024, Blackpink's *Born Pink* concert in July 2024, Seventeen's *Follow Again* concert in August 2024, as well as the *Seventeen Right Here* concert in December 2024, and the Busan Film Festival awarded documentary *Right Place, Wrong Person* about how BTS's leader RM developed the album with the same name, aired at the beginning of December 2024. It is worth mentioning that the documentary was partially filmed in Romania, including the entirety of the music video for the song *Lost* on the album with the same name<sup>3</sup>.

The success of Hallyu, the Korean Wave, in Romania does not seem to be a matter of chance, but rather one of politics and economics. While there are many reasons for the successful breakthrough of Korean cultural exports, the

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<sup>2</sup> Public dataset, weekly updated by Netflix at <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/top10/romania/tv>. Accessed on Aug. 10, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> According to <https://www.euronews.ro/articole/namjoon-liderul-bts-a-filmat-in-romania-videoclip-lost-interviu-producatoare-reactii-army>. Accessed on Nov. 20, 2024.

alignment of the cultural and political agenda in Korea seems to be one of the more important factors.

That the Hallyu has unfolded in this way is neither a surprise nor a coincidence. Instead, just as in the case of the first phase of the rapid economic development, the conditions for development were put in place by the state and its agencies while private sector corporations and individuals have taken advantage of those conditions in inventive and sometimes unexpected ways. (Walsh 14)

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, having come out of an economic crisis following multiple wars that ravaged the Korean peninsula, the newly named state Republic of Korea – ROK – and dubbed South Korea, rapidly grew economically into a powerhouse, and seems to have decided that the 21<sup>st</sup> century would belong to them, much in the same way the 20<sup>th</sup> century belonged to the U.S. The systematic investments the ROK government made in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into the entertainment and ICT industry (Buja 186), which was further doubled down on in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Hong 173), contributed to the creation of Hallyu, the Korean wave, which Walsh calls a “government construct” (13). Furthermore, Lee insists that “South Korea’s cultural policy is unique because it has institutionally embraced globalization and neoliberalism as part of its national agenda” (34-35). As government strategy, Hong claims that the primary interest rested on yet untapped emerging economies, such as those of South-East Asia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East, Africa and South America:

It’s about getting the crucial but still dormant third-world market hooked on Korean pop culture [...]. This is where Korea has a peculiar, unreproducible advantage over every single other nation that has been a global pop culture power: it was once a third-world country. Thus Korea understands the stages of other nations’ development; it has carefully studied these cultures to determine what kinds of “K-culture” products would be most favored there. (Hong 4)

What Hong could not have predicted back in 2014 was the amplitude of success Hallyu would actually enjoy. “I don’t think that Koreans, if they’re being honest with themselves, believe their music will take up significant market share in the United States or Western Europe” (Hong 4). Despite the success of K-pop

artist Psy's *Gangnam Style* in 2012, the U.S. market, arguably the trendsetter in matters of music then, was impenetrable. It was not until a few years later, when BTS's 2015 album *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life, Pt. 2* first made its appearance on the Billboard 200 chart, on the 171<sup>st</sup> place, that K-pop managed to get a foothold in the U.S. music market. Three years later, their 2018 album *Love Yourself: Tear* debuted on the first position of the Billboard 200<sup>4</sup>. The rest is history.

Another element that Hong could not have predicted was the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. As the world went into lockdown and people began feeling isolated and lonely, the parasocial element of K-pop fandom found root in an even larger audience, aided by the population's forced dependency on the digital. Both the kinship element of fandom between its members, and the admiration for the idols played an important role in the explosion of Hallyu globally. In 2020 and 2021 respectively, two survival shows aired, which aimed at the formation of two groups – boyband Enhypen through the show *I-Land* (a collaboration between HYBE and CJ ENT) and girlband Kep1er through the show *Girls Planet 999* (Mnet). Both were successful enough to go on for second seasons in 2022 and 2023 – *Boys Planet* resulted in the boyband ZeroBase1, while *I-Land 2* resulted in the girl band Izna (yet to debut as of December 2024). The format of a survival music show is not new to Korea, or even the west. However, the success and strategy behind these shows, aided by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, came from the fact that they opened the choice of the final members of the band to the international community, as well as to the Korean public via apps through which viewers could vote live. Consequently, Enhypen was the first K-pop group to have an international following even before they debuted, as worldwide audiences had already been invested in the members since they were participants in the survival show. For the same reasons, ZeroBase1, the product of *Boys Planet* (2023), are the first K-pop band in history whose debut album made the top of the Korean music chart the week after it came out, as well as being included in Billboard 200 the same week. Even as Hallyu was on the rise in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the onset of the third decade saw an even sharper ascent largely due to the pandemic-related general lockdowns.

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<sup>4</sup> According to the official Billboard dataset found at <https://www.billboard.com/artist/bts/> accessed on 15 August 2024.

While Hallyu is a markedly Korean set of phenomena, globalization and trans-national cultural exchange have also played a part in its success. "Another possible explanation for the great success of K-POP artists abroad could be the fact that they are trained by multinational specialists: the songwriters may be European or American, while the dance choreographers are from everywhere" (Buja 187). While the Korean specific element of Hallyu is now greatly appreciated, and the success of the pop culture led to great interest in the folk and high culture of Korea (cuisine, language, literature, history, etc.), one of the reasons for its success is the digestibility of its pop culture, which is arguably westernized. Ahn et al. argue that Korean pop culture is largely influenced by the U.S. historically, but that the idol culture has its roots in the Japanese concept of idol, blended with Korea's own corporatist (*chaebol*) values and systems (8). They also argue that K-pop is so successful exactly because of the propensity for blending cultures and its openness towards the global market: "This talent for remixing—for reinvention through repetition—and this mode of intertextuality laced with self-reference, homage, appropriation, and critique is a practice of worlding that continues to characterize the South Korean pop culture landscape as much now as it did at the turn of the millennium" (Ahn et al. 6).

The global aspect of K-pop also implies its ability to impact communities. Probably the biggest examples of impact are BTS's two interventions in front of the U.N. (once in 2018, on behalf of UNICEF, and the second time in 2021 as they addressed the council as Korea's designated presidential envoy for future generations and culture). Another band, Seventeen, became UNESCO's first-ever Goodwill Ambassador for Youth in 2023. These are some of the most impactful stages on which K-pop representatives have stood. Such opportunities have been used as messages for positive change, love and self-acceptance, especially by BTS, whose discography is invariably inlaid with such themes.

## **BTS, CHAPTER I, AND THE BTS UNIVERSE**

BTS (short for *Bangtan Sonyeondan* – Korean for "Bulletproof Boy Scouts") are probably the peak of the Korean wave so far. The band debuted in 2013 under the label BigHit (now founding part of the HYBE corporation), produced mainly by Bang Si-Hyuk (stage name Hitman Bang or Bang PD), and is formed of seven members: leader RM (Kim Namjoon), Jin (Kim Seokjin), Suga (Min Yoongi, who

also operates under the pseudonym Agust D), j-hope (Jung Hoseok, also known as Jay or Jack), Jimin (Park Jimin), V (Kim Taehyung), and Jungkook (Jeon Jeongguk). By November 2024 all members have also debuted as solo acts, Jin's EP *Happy* marking him as the last to debut solo.

Over the years, BTS has become one of the biggest and most influential musical phenomena globally, having a significant impact both on the musical industry and outside of it. With numerous singles and albums topping world charts, BTS repeatedly established and overcame their own records in the music industry, including the most single-day video visualizations on YouTube. They have earned multiple certified albums based on sales, have performed in multiple sold-out stadium world tours, and have been awarded numerous awards globally, including Billboard Music Awards and MTV VMA Awards; they were also the first K-pop band to be Grammy nominated. BTS are known for dealing with profound and relevant themes in their music, such as mental health, social pressure, self-love and acceptance. From their very debut, they presented themselves as “anti-system” by promoting the values mentioned earlier. Korean youth, especially, deals with a lot of academic pressure as the education system expects them to study more than sixteen hours a day, and there is very little tolerance for failure and low grades; the university they get accepted into determines the jobs and the salaries Koreans can aspire to. This often leads to mental health issues due to overwork, tensions in schools which lead to bullying and all of it is topped with unreasonable beauty expectations, just to enumerate a few of the issues tackled by BTS in their debut albums. By using their platform in such a way, BTS have become models for youth the world over, not only for their music, but also for the values and the messages they promote. They are seen as a voice of their generation, and their fans, known as ARMY, have proven multiple times that their love for BTS impacts the world around them; a good example comes from 2020, when BTS, through their label BigHit, donated \$1 million to the Black Lives Matter Foundation, Inc. In less than 24 hours, through Internet mobilization, ARMY matched their donation<sup>5</sup>, with similar events repeating multiple times across the years. Further proving the influence they exert, BTS became a “soft power” symbol for the ROK, representing the country

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<sup>5</sup> According to <https://www.grammy.com/news/bts-big-hit-entertainment-and-bts-army-donate-over-2-million-black-lives-matter>. Accessed on 15 August 2024.



on multiple occasions, the latest as of the end of 2024 being Kim Seokjin, recently returned from serving mandatory enlistment in the South Korean army, representing his country as an Olympic torch bearer at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games.

In a successful marketing effort, BigHit created a narrative thread or a unifying timeline for BTS's activity, dividing it in "Chapters". So far, Chapter One has been titled "Reflections of Youth" and represents the first decade of the band's activity, creating a narrative which connects the eras and concepts they have used across the nine years from their debut to their enlistment. The connecting theme is the portrait of growing youth<sup>6</sup>, explaining the succession of albums, with their concepts and themes, as the record of their youth, of their experiences becoming artists and finding themselves, struggling with stardom, expectations and dreams. Chapter two is currently ongoing and is represented by their individual growth while they act, perform and create individually, and the way in which BTS the group is re-created as they bring together these separate experiences.

The narrative of Chapter One is complex, as it encompasses the totality of their music, but also the so-called BTS Universe, a fictional narrative universe in which the seven members are each represented by a character in a coming-of-age mystery story. The narrative was developed across multiple media through their music videos, short story videos produced for some of their albums, "notes" that came with their albums in the form of diary entries (the notes were not released chronologically, so the fans had to piece together hints like a puzzle), a video-game following the story line, a 2019 webtoon of the same, titled *Save Me*, a 2024 K-drama called *Begins ≠ Youth*, and through complex social-media storytelling. The story debuted with their 2015 music video for the single *I NEED U* and reached a possible completion in the 2019 webtoon and the 2024 K-drama (the endings seem to be hinting towards a continuation, but HYBE has yet to announce anything about it). The story is heavily influenced by such narratives as Ursula K. le Guin's *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, psychoanalyst Murray Stein's book *Jung's Map of the Soul* (which gives the title to two albums launched by BTS in 2019 and 2020), and especially by Hermann Hesse's *Demian*, from

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<sup>6</sup> According to <https://www.behance.net/gallery/55324473/BTS-Brand-eXperience-Design-Renewal>. Accessed on 10 August 2024.

which numerous symbols were taken, appearing throughout the lyrics and music videos of the albums produced between 2015 and 2019. Jung's view of the psyche becomes a central element which defines their Chapter One activity, as most of their songs are about self-discovery and acceptance. Putting together some Jungian concepts in a systematic manner, Murray Stein proposed *Jung's Map of the Soul*, a model of the psyche as a dynamic system including such elements as the *persona* (the social mask or roles people play to fit societal expectations), the *ego* (the center of consciousness, responsible for self-awareness and decision-making), and the *shadow* (the unconscious part of the psyche that holds repressed desires, weaknesses, and fears), among others, all part of the self's journey of individuation, a process of achieving balance and a sense of wholeness (Stein 143). Some of the songs from the albums titled *Map of the Soul* are fashioned according to individual elements of Jung's model of the psyche such as *Intro: Persona* (a solo rap song by RM, who loudly asks "who the hell am I," in relation to the multiple roles and personas he must perform as BTS's leader), Suga's *Interlude: Shadow*, and J-Hope's *Outro: Ego*. At the same time, story elements from Hermann Hesse's *Demian*, a bildungsroman, give structure to some of the early threads of the BTS Universe narrative. Many other references round up a fascinating puzzle to be discovered, including classical paintings, statues and architecture, myth and biblical references, as well as contemporary Korean and world events.

### **"BLOOD SWEAT & TEARS"**

The Wings era (2016-2017) is the second segment of the timeline in which the BTS universe story was built, and it is here that the connection with *Demian* was made. It debuted with a series of seven short concept films which were published on YouTube between September 4 and September 13, showcasing snippets of each of the seven characters' stories. From the very first one, *Begin*, which showcases Jungkook's story, a series of snippets seem to be taken directly from *Demian*: the sparrowhawk (identified in *Demian* as the Mark of Cain, the sign of the Seekers of truth and the god Abraxas' emissary, as well as cursed people who cannot find their identity in society and through inter-personal relations), the painting of a figure which simultaneously looks like Damian and Sinclair turning into the sparrowhawk and being burned, Jungkook's Shadow (from

Jung's theory of the psyche) getting wings, becoming liberated. Similarly, the following six short films depict reinterpreted scenes from *Demian*, representing stages in his becoming, and deal with such issues as confronting your fears and traumas (hidden within the Shadows), being caged by your own circumstances and breaking free, friendship and loneliness, and, overall, facing temptation and embracing it, which is also the main theme in the first music video of this era, accompanying the title track *Blood Sweat & Tears*.

The MV (music video) for *Blood Sweat & Tears* was released on 10 October 2017 and, to this day, it is one of the most stunning MVs in K-pop, with an exceptional baroque aesthetic (Kwon 70) and packed full of references to paintings, sculptures, myths, and the BTS universe. It is important to note that the BTS songs of this era must be understood on multiple levels, which can be taken independently or in concert. At a first look, the songs are independent and often relate either to an experience or an event. *Blood Sweat & Tears* can be easily understood as a love song, and surely it was meant to be taken as one as well. At the same time, it can be a love song from BTS to their fans, or even refer to the fans' experience of BTS. Another layer refers to BTS' experience with fame and being idols, and their relationship with the industry. In the context of the album and of Chapter One, it is a stage in the process of their individuation, a moment from their map of the soul, a necessary point in their youth. In the context of the BTS Universe, it furthers the narrative and gives insight into the lives, thoughts and experiences of the fictional characters which each of the members represents. At the same time, it can be interpreted individually, creating a unique storyline specific only to the universe of this MV, a story of identity, art, temptation, acceptance, and growth.

The MV begins with the seven members walking into a museum in a rambunctious manner, signaling their youth and innocence, after which they separate in pairs (one of the older members paired with one of the younger, which again reflects a theme in *Demian*, that of mentorship), as Jin is transfixed by the famous painting *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* by Dutch renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder. This theme is recurring throughout the MV, with other famous Western artworks making appearances, such as *Landscape with the Fall Of Icarus* by the same painter, *The Lament of Icarus* by English neoclassicist Herbert James Draper and the *Madonna della Pietà* by Italian renaissance artist Michelangelo. All these have to do with symbolic death and falling from grace or

giving in to temptation. As Jin is looking at the painting by Bruegel, surrounded by light and in a pure white shirt, the scene cuts to a different set, cast in shadows and neon lights, the boys dressed in extravagant costumes, and the song starts, as Suga covers and uncovers Jimin's eyes. The costume change indicates their different Personas as idols, for which they have often been ridiculed. In their 2019 song *Idol*, they make note of "the derogatory connotations of the word *idol* as manufactured product, an object of false worship, and the opposite of a true artist" (Kwon 72). That itself is also something to be embraced and accepted, if not undermined. Another lyric says "the grail was poisoned but I drank it anyway" (BTS 2:58), suggesting the sacrifices that the boys/artists must make on their path.

The different sets indicate two different worlds, which is a recurring theme throughout the video, and it is taken directly from Hesse's philosophy as illustrated in *Demian*. The two worlds are differentiated using lighting, sets, and color inversions. *Demian* tells the coming-of-age story of Emil Sinclair as he struggles between two worlds – the illusory world of the society in which he lived and one of spiritual awakening. Throughout the book he is guided by mentors, foremost of which is Demian, a boy his own age who introduces him to the possibility of there being more than what he is living. An important step in Sinclair's "awakening" (what Jung would call the process of individuation) is accepting the good and the bad of himself, the good in the bad and the bad in the good. This is a theme which permeates the *Blood Sweat & Tears* MV, the key being a passage which RM reads from *Demian*: "He too was a tempter. He too was a link to the second. The evil world with which I no longer wanted to have anything to do" (BTS 4:03-4:17). In the book, this is said by Sinclair about Demian himself. In the MV, this is recited as Jin, a black silhouette against a bright crimson backdrop, releases a balloon into the air. The theme is that of giving into temptation as the truth about the world is revealed and accepted. The members lose their innocence and must escape the cage of their existence (depicted in the video through blindfolds and chains) by opening their eyes to the truth of the world: in Jungian terms, the shadow, the repressed elements of the self, must be understood, accepted, and reintegrated.

The other world, of spiritual awakening, seems to be synonymous with that of art, as the members get lost in the paintings themselves, or mimic and interact with the statues. This world represents temptation: the tension between

their identities as artists, idols, and boys transitioning to adulthood (BTS members were between 19 and 24 years old at the moment of the video). They willingly embrace it, as they mention in the lyrics, but it is at the same time a poisoned chalice, bringing about identity crises. Jumping into the world of art is concomitantly an ecstatic moment, as Jungkook ascends towards the heavens of Giulio Quaglio the Younger's painting of the ceiling of the Ljubljana Cathedral, and a great risk, as we see V jumping from the balcony in Bruegel's *Landscape*. Falling represents both giving into temptation, as well as falling from grace. BTS's dedication to their art, their music, their fandom is both rewarding and dangerous. Kwon proposes that the gesture of going into the art symbolizes that "he is the viewer who willingly enters art's crafted world and cares not whether it is 'fictive' or 'true.' He is, in other words, a K-Pop stan" (73). This suggests that *Blood Sweat & Tears* is as much about BTS as it is about their fans, the ARMY. Just as BTS give in to their art, so do their fans. However, their fans never do interact with the real members, but with the multitude of Personas (masks) they perform. Ultimately, how could their fans know them, when they themselves struggle with the tension in their identities? BTS themselves take on the role of the art for their fans – but are they part of ARMY's illusory world or that of spiritual awakening? Perhaps both.

Two important moments in the MV are the interlude in which Suga is playing the organ, which is the same song that Pistorious, Sinclair's guide to the god Abraxas (a gnostic god-demon, symbol of balance between good and bad, often represented with wings and snake legs), plays in the book. This happens immediately after Jin's release of the balloon, which concomitantly indicates enlightenment and the fall into temptation. Also, at the very end of the MV, Jin is seen reaching towards a huge statue of a crouching man with wings and kissing it on the lips, after which, looking in the mirror, he sees his own face cracking. The kiss is also taken from the final scene in *Demian*, where the title character kisses Sinclair on the lips and disappears, a sealing of the main character's path as he achieves enlightenment, an indication that the only guide he needs is himself, or rather can be found in himself. *Demian* is therefore just an aspect of Sinclair's consciousness, the kiss indicating the (re-)integration of Jung's concepts of the shadow and the ego into the self, achieving individuation. The cracking indicates that Jin's version in the realm of light, illusory, can no longer exist by itself, as he embraces the Jin of the realm of temptation, of

awakening, as well. Just like a mask, a persona in Jungian terms, Jin's version in the realm of the light is just a façade. However, the video stops at the cracking; the fans can never know what is behind that mask, perhaps because Jin is still discovering himself.

The music video is full of symbols and meanings, relating to a variety of dimensions of understanding – from the BTS Universe, to the MV's direct relationship with *Demian*, and the band's overall message of self-acceptance and their experience with the music industry and stardom.

My blood, sweat and tears  
My last dance  
Take it all  
My blood, sweat and tears  
My cold breath  
Take it all (BTS 0:52-1:17)

As they are seen drinking green poison (also absinthe, as they see hallucinations of the god Abraxas, a form of escaping from their cage) and singing the lines rendered above, BTS are in the process of embracing themselves. A later line says “Kiss me, I don't care if it hurts me” (BTS 1:48), the kiss being yet another form of temptation, while the hurting refers to the hard work, the bad in the good of stardom, the pain on the path of becoming, the many roles they have to play; all these are realities BTS must accept and embrace willingly and openly in order to achieve their dreams, and that is exactly what they invite the fans to do as well.

### **EASTERN INFLUENCES IN HESSE'S *DEMIAN***

While BTS's work is clearly inspired by Hesse's *Demian* and Jung's psychological concepts, both representatives of the Western canon, it must be said that, somehow, it fits well within the East-Asian aesthetic as well. Achieving enlightenment through bringing together the two worlds, embracing both good and bad, finding within yourself the answers that you are looking for outside, seeking balance... All these are concepts resonating with Eastern philosophy as well.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a revival of Western philosophy through the means of the Eastern one, predominantly Indian, but also Buddhist. Some of the greatest philosophers, anthropologists and mythologists were well versed in Hindu and Buddhist thought: Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, the American transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade to name a few. Orientalism, the fascination and study of Oriental religions, philosophy, and thought, was an influential trend in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and had an impact on both Jung and Hesse.

Hugo Ball informs us that in Switzerland, in 1916, Hesse suffered an acute nervous crisis. Psychoanalytic treatment, administered by a student of C.G. Jung, provided relief. Between May 1916 and November 1917 there were more than seventy sessions. The fruit of this period was *Demian*: release of new creative power and depth perception. (Curtius 7)

Hesse published *Demian* in 1919, and it represents the crystallization of his experiences with analytical psychology in the tradition of C.G. Jung. The same year, he would actually meet with Jung and discuss his philosophies. Hesse's parents had been to India, which meant that his childhood was steeped with stories of the country, fascinating him. He ended up visiting it, which resulted in two different books – *Aud Indien*, in 1913, and *Siddharta*, in 1922 (Curtius 8), the latter being his recreation of the story of Buddha. Hesse was therefore a scholar of both Hindu and Buddhist thought, and these influences can be seen in *Damien*.

Incidentally, the psychoanalytical instruments with which he worked in the writing of *Demian* were also heavily influenced by Eastern thought. Harold Coward, in his 1985 book *Jung and Eastern Thought* “explored the influence of Indian concepts such as *karma*, *citta*, *buddhitattvat*, *apas*, and *mandala* on the development of Carl Jung's notions of ‘archetype,’ ‘psyche,’ the ‘collective unconscious,’ ‘active imagination,’ and ‘circumambulation’” (477). While Jung's concepts are largely the results of his own experiments and first-hand experience as psychotherapist (Stein 5), he often drew inspiration from a variety of spiritual experiences, including Chinese Taoism, which helped him develop the concept of the Self, completing his map of the psyche. According to Coward,

the process stemmed from his experiences with the Chinese Taoist text *I Ching*, “with which Jung experimented for a whole summer in 1920” (177). Hesse’s *Demian* then, benefits from Eastern influences from two directions: Hesse’s own experiences with India and Buddhism, and Jung’s psychoanalytic concepts.

Both *Demian* and Jung’s theories of the psyche (as presented in Murray Stein’s book *Jung’s Map of the Soul*) played important roles in BTS’s discography and activity. While they are clearly manifestations and representations of Western culture, their Eastern influences make the Korean band’s judicious use of the two sources more in-tune with their Asian origins. BTS’ recontextualization of the two sources is apparently just another step in a cycle of East-West cultural exchanges, perhaps even a harmonization of the two cultures.

The cycle continues, as BTS brought the final product to the world stage, rejuvenating interest in the sources as well. A Google trends analysis<sup>7</sup> of Hesse’s *Demian* in comparison to his most famous two novels *Siddhartha* (1922) and *Steppenwolf* (1927) shows relatively little interest in *Demian* in the past two decades, with two exceptions: September 2016 and June 2017.

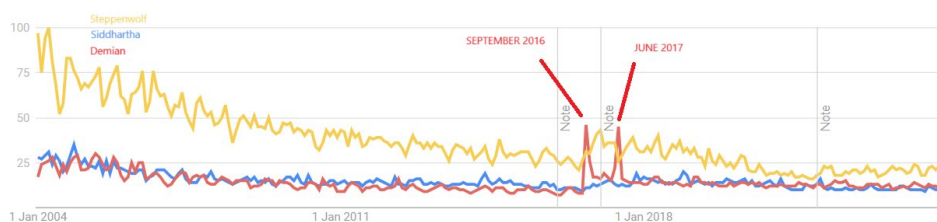


Figure 1: Worldwide Google trends for the books *Steppenwolf*, *Siddhartha* and *Demian* between 2004 and 2024

The two spikes coincide with the Wings teaser videos, and with the Wings world tour announcement videos, respectively. While *Demian* flew relatively under the radar in the English-speaking world in comparison to *Steppenwolf*, BTS’ influence renewed interest in it. In this way, a product of high culture was brought to global “masses” through pop culture.

<sup>7</sup> Google trends worldwide comparative analysis of *Siddhartha* (Novel by Hermann Hesse), *Steppenwolf* (Novel by Hermann Hesse), and *Demian* (Novel by Hermann Hesse), set to from 2004 until Nov. 2024.

<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=%2Fm%2Fo1wvrl.%2Fm%2Fo16hw2,%2Fm%2Fo36vv4&hl=en-GB>. Accessed 1 Dec 2024.



## DEMIAN IN HALLYU

It is important to mention that *Demian* is not foreign to the Korean population. While the Western world might be more familiar with Hesse's later works, *Siddhartha* and *Der Steppenwolf*, *Demian* is apparently the author's foothold in Korean society.

In the 2017 article *Why Do Koreans Love Hermann Hesse's Demian Above All Other Western Novels?*, Collin Marshall explains that *Demian* has been in the Korean school curriculum for long enough that most Koreans have read it. "Ask a Korean about *Demian*, and of the many who've read it (just this morning I had a conversation about Abraxas, the Gnostic 'god who was both god and devil' Hesse has Emil discover as he comes of age, with the lady who cuts my hair), most will add that they first did so in their teens" (Marshall 2017). The appeal, Marshall claims, is multi-faceted, but mostly has to do with the issue of living in different, seemingly dissonant worlds, and the protagonist's (transgressive, but celebrated) journey to self-enlightenment. Much like BTS's welcoming of pain and being hurt in the lyrics of *Blood Sweat & Tears*, the last paragraph in *Demian* reads:

The dressing was a painful business. So was everything else that happened to me afterwards. But when on the many such occasions I find the key and look deep down into myself where the images of destiny lie slumbering in the dark mirror, I only need to bend my head over the black mirror to see my own image which now wholly resembles him, my friend and leader. (Hesse 184)

The crux of the Koreans' infatuation with the book, Marshall claims, seems to lie in the idea that life should hurt in the path of becoming (or individuation, in Jungian terminology). Korean work and school culture are some of the most spartan systems in the world, where students will study up to 16 hours a day, and workers are expected to do numerous unpaid overtime hours. Sacrifice (often momentarily unrewarded and unrewarding) is seen as normal and expected in the hopes of some future success. These social issues are frequently depicted and discussed in Korean pop culture, and it is no wonder

that *Demian*, whose main character insists on achieving individuation through untraditional means, became the symbol of such struggles.

In 2020, the survival show *I-Land* used the metaphor of the egg from *Demian* as the center theme of the show. The idea was that the contestants must overcome their condition, push themselves harder to achieve their dreams and to transform from trainees into idols. This, however, seems more like a denaturation of the main ideas of *Demian*, as corporations take over the symbol. The fact that Bang Si-Hyuk, the mind behind BTS, was one of the judges and creators of the show, suggests that there is a link between BTS's use of the novel and *I-Land*. In the show, a giant egg acts as a doorway between two worlds – that of the successful candidates, who live together in extremely lush conditions, and that of the failing ones, who must commute home and work in the “Ground,” a simple dance studio with no amenities. Throughout the show, the egg sequence from the book is recited like a mantra: “The bird is struggling out of the egg. The egg is the world. Whoever wants to be born must first destroy a world. The bird is flying to God. The name of the God is called Abraxas” (Hesse 100).

The quote seems to be the most popular moment from the book, as it appears again and again in Korean pop culture. Some of the most recent examples include the hit K-drama *My Demon* (2023-2024), in which a mythological *daemon* must reconcile his human roots and experiences with his supernatural ones in order to achieve balance and continued existence. God herself, seen as an avatar of the universe in this drama, is both his opponent and helper. The quote from *Demian* expresses how his goals can only be achieved when he lets himself, his identity as *daemon* which had become his cage and “egg”, be destroyed and reborn. The book was also referenced in the 2022 hit thriller K-drama *The Glory*, in which the quote is used again, this time to reference how abusive situations become the “egg” or a cage and must be destroyed for the sake of advancing. The woman in that situation further mentions that her daughter was studying the book in school.

## CONCLUSION

Korean pop culture has seen a monumental rise in the past decades and has taken the world by whirlwind. At the top of it stand the septet BTS, who, even as most of them are enlisted in the military, are still topping charts and winning

awards. Much like any other pop culture products, K-pop and K-dramas were met with discrimination and the people involved in creating them (from the companies to the idols and the actors themselves) have had to work hard in order to achieve world-wide recognition. Furthermore, much as in the case of other pop culture products, Korean dramas and music again and again prove to be thought-provoking vehicles for what may be called "high culture," either through mentions, representations or even adaptations.

An interesting manifestation of this effect are the representations and recontextualizations of Western cultural elements in K-pop and K-dramas, which form a bridge between the two cultures. In the case of *Demian*, we see in fact a cyclical cultural exchange of influences and adaptations between East and West, which results in products harmoniously balancing, or even blending, the two cultures, as was exemplified through BTS's use of the book. Such products are more easily palatable to international audiences as they balance enough familiarity and exoticism to generate and maintain interest. BTS manages to blend the academic categories of "high" and "pop culture", as well as the organic categories of "East" and "West" cultures.

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## BIONOTE

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