



ACADEMIC ARTICLES

Connecting Pop Music & Fine Art:

An Examination of CONNECT, BTS in the Context of High & Low Art

◆ JANIECE CAMPBELL

Part-Time Artist, Full-Time Music Nerd, @cynicthinks (United States)

ABSTRACT

The worlds of visual art and pop music seem to run parallel to each other and rarely overlap on a scale accessible to the average consumer. BTS is no stranger to the concept of transcending boundaries, be it through art and music or in sociopolitical outreach. One of the group's recent global endeavors, titled "CONNECT, BTS," took on the immense task of using high art to stimulate mass culture. As an effort to reshape the cultural climate by linking narratives between contemporary fine art and pop music, it can be seen that the border between high and low art disappeared in the context of CONNECT, BTS. In dissecting this seamless cross-pollination of media, there is much to be learned about the social and artistic implications of the terms high and low.

KEYWORDS

pop music, contemporary art, interdisciplinary, global, Connect BTS

The pop music genre is an audio-visual phenomenon that exists on an unprecedented scale. The advent of the Internet during the genre's development only served to accelerate its growth into what it is today. Today, we live in a society overwhelmed with images, which accelerates our exposure to new ideas at an extraordinary rate. Pop culture icons have been able to reach new audiences on a global scale by harnessing the potential of this phenomenon. It goes without question that the group at the forefront of this is none other than BTS. One aspect of their success stems from their genius use of social media as a means of communication with their fanbase. However, from a broader view we can see that their success is due to their keen ability to resonate with so many people of immensely diverse backgrounds (The Asian Theory, 2019). The use of visual media to extend a music artist's message is certainly not new, but BTS has taken an unconventional approach with their recent endeavor titled "CONNECT, BTS." CONNECT, BTS set an exciting precedent as to how pop musicians can extend their reach beyond social media and into the world of contemporary art, thereby helping to bridge the gap between high and low culture.

In an effort to reshape the art-music relationship in the context of pre-existing creative projects, CONNECT, BTS was a global art project aimed at redefining the connections between all participants of the art world. The official website for the project states:

This project aims to redefine the relationships between art and music, the material and immaterial, artists and their audiences, artists and artists, theory and practice. . . . BTS the band offers an homage to diversity and originality, a song of special attention to the periphery and the overlooked. Their music is an empathetic vision for the world. CONNECT, BTS

reaches for a collective experience that might be only the beginning of new communication between art, music and people. (Big Hit Entertainment, 2020-b)

The project was centered around five major metropolitan centers (New York, Buenos Aires, Seoul, Berlin, and London) and involved a wide variety of artists, which enabled the project to tackle multiple aspects of connectivity. These aspects are the physical, emotional, mental, economic, and sociopolitical barriers that one might face when trying to engage in the contemporary art world. BTS has always prided itself on being a representative of youth across the globe (Calixto, 2018). From their earliest works, they have been incorporating societal issues ranging from mental health to generational economics in an effort to connect to their audience (Herman, 2018). CONNECT, BTS served this very purpose: exploring the relationships between people and their place among social, emotional, physical, and psychological environments through creative means. The curators and directors of these creative projects, as well as BTS itself, recognized the group's power to draw in a diverse global audience. This power, combined with the ability of visual art to inspire and spread ideas, allowed for a large-scale union of fine arts and popular culture. These two fields, which we can refer to as "high" and "low" art, respectively, seemingly have a strict polarity in presentation. However, through further examination, we can see that this is not the full picture.

The concepts of high and low art leave much room for debate; even the names are symbolic of the class divide from which the terms were born. Carroll (1998) opted to use the term mass art in place of low (or popular) art to account for the belief that mass-produced art is a postmodern occurrence (p. 173). The author further proposed three conditions for something to be considered mass art, which can be summed up as: reproducibility, mass appeal, and ease of access (p. 196). The third condition is especially important for an inspection of the art-music dialogue, as well as in the context of CONNECT, BTS. Though there are definitive differences

between the two, at the base level there is something that ties them conceptually: cultural canonicity. There are many examples of fine art that can be termed as culturally essential (the *Mona Lisa*, *Birth of Venus*, *Frankenstein* to name a few in the Western tradition). Fisher (2001) conversely suggests that popular music (rock, in this case) offers this same value: “Even if rock music is low art, some songs – for example, by the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and Jimi Hendrix – are surely successful and important examples of art” (p. 474). Contemporary artists, visual or otherwise, are currently creating their own canonical works that are competing to stand amongst such famous works of art in the high art realm. A shared level of importance can be observed here, and therein lies the ultimate question: why does popular music have to be differentiated into high and low art? As mentioned previously, the divide is inherently classist by design: some argue that the difficulty in experiencing and appreciating high art is a part of the aesthetic itself (Fisher, 2001, p. 480). Why would inhibiting access enhance the “beauty” of a work?

For the casual listener, fine art and pop music have had a strange and esoteric history as the two rarely wove together in a way that was fully comfortable for most consumers. The imagery found in the pop music world is not that of heavy religious iconography or contemplative abstraction. Instead, it is found in the fashion, album art, and performances, which includes not only the dance, but also the personas of the musicians themselves. There is a sense of commercial aestheticism that varies between artists and allows for a strong sense of identity that withstands time. The power of personal aesthetic is so strong that one can pick any major popular musician from the past century and there will be several images instantly conjured at the mere mention of a name. It is at the height of this phenomenon that the music and the persona become totally inseparable. *Pop Art and Pop Music: Jukebox Modernism* highlights Elvis Presley as an example of the visual power of pop icons. His presentation was not only both sexualized and controversial at the time, but also represented the state of cultural appropriation and racial

barriers in the music industry (Mednicov, 2018). All of this indicates the symbiotic relationship between art and music. *Visual Deeds in Art and Music* inspects this ever-present connection, and sheds light on various examples throughout history. One such framing comes from Lessing’s treatise on the Laocoon (a famous statue from the Hellenistic period depicting the priest and his sons entwined by serpents). Here he mentions how art is spatial, while poetry (extended to music) is temporal in nature (Shaw-Miller, 2002, p. 5). These definitions are further used in examining Jerrold Levinson’s essay “Hybrid Art Theory.” In this essay, Levinson offers three characterizations of hybrid art: juxtaposition, synthesis, and transformation (Shaw-Miller, 2002, p. 10). The second category – synthesis – can be formally termed interdisciplinary art. Shaw-Miller (2002) summarizes the relationship between temporal (poetic/musical) and spatial (visual artistic) elements by stating, “...do not have a parallel existence in the same temporal-spatial environment; they are not, so to speak, sounded together but heard as separate. Once combined, their individual identities have been modified and forged into a new whole.” This idea, combined with the social implications stated in *Jukebox Modernism*, is critical in analyzing the totality of the art-music dialogue. Both the spatial and temporal elements are integral parts to achieving a creative unity by allowing an artist to approach a concept from opposing aspects of artistic exploration.

BTS are far from the first musicians to collaborate with contemporary visual artists, but they are the first to do it on such a wide scale by going global for the sake of their message. This allows for a level of accessibility that only elevates their position as global artists. As mentioned earlier, the ease of access is a large part of what makes popular art so successful. It is an indispensable trait of pop music, which relies on familiar topics and a sonic structure that casual listeners grow accustomed to. In a wider sense, we can understand that ease of access refers to many areas: intellectually, spatially, economically, etc. CONNECT, BTS attempted to remove these barriers by making the exhibits physically available

in major metropolitan cities, as well as free to the public.

The group has always placed emphasis on interpersonal connection, be it through social media or their candid music-making process. The band has a hyper-conscious awareness of what it means to be an artist in the 21st century, and thus takes it upon themselves to be proactive in how they use their platform. Through the group's past works, they have advocated self-love, personal growth, mental health, and other topics that promote healing for the individual (Kelley, 2018). *CONNECT*, BTS offered to extend this pre-existing mission: bridging the gap between high and low art in an attempt to bring these same topics to light, albeit from a new perspective. Two projects in particular stand out as prime examples of this mission: *Rituals of Care* and *Beyond the Scene*.

Rituals of Care is an interdisciplinary approach to the practice of self-healing, in that it inspects the human condition from multiple angles (gender identity, race relations, environmental interactions, etc.). It is a series of performances that offers acts of healing, by “[exploring] the necessary conditions for coming together and tending to environments, to physical and spiritual worlds and to other beings. Through a range of somatic techniques, queer re-imaginings and indigenous perspectives, these performances offer radical acts of care and repair” (Big Hit Entertainment, 2020-c). The curator, Stephanie Rosenthal, emphasized the performance aspect of this project; she considers physical communication as a unique universal way for relaying emotion (BANGTANTV, 2020-b). The letter-to-the-artist that accompanies this project states: “Music, art, and performances may be different in form, but they are similar in that they forge connections that give comfort to fans and audiences, as well as to participating artists” (Big Hit Entertainment, 2020-c). For BTS, these connections come from being entertainers and engaging with their fans, thereby providing them with their own form of healing (Yoon, 2020). BTS's connection to *Rituals of Care* highlights the band's special symbiotic relationship with their fanbase. This illustrates that the healing power of

art goes beyond just artist-to-audience, but also has a reflexive property that makes it mutually beneficial.

Beyond the Scene offers the obvious connection to BTS, but re-imagines the group's kinetic abilities in the form of experimental performance. This project provides a different perspective of the group's choreography through large-scale projection mapping and physical performance. Over the course of 9 minutes and 30 seconds, seven dancers move behind a translucent white sheet to recreate the group's iconic moves, which are further obscured by overlaying video projections. The website further expounds on this, saying that the obscuration of the dance moves “might appear anonymous and abstract, but with time shapes and forms are brought together to populate the space – like a metaphor for how the seven band members build BTS together with the support of their fans...This projection mapping work may be understood in terms of either ‘persona’ or ‘identity’ because of the way it simultaneously conceals and reveals” (Big Hit Entertainment, 2020-a). Abstraction is always a powerful tool, and is essential to deconstruct messages across different art forms. Here, the line between fine art and pop choreography blurs, effectively allowing performance art to be explored from both poles. Therefore, the difference between high and low art is being explicitly explored in this project. In the context of serving this role, Kang goes further to explain her point of view for this project:

For a collaboration between artists and other entities, you would probably expect to see a more direct connection between the works and those who commission work. But here, BTS is the medium that connects everything. Is collaboration only a collaboration if you come together and make something together? I believe it's about the philosophical, the conceptual and the ideological basis that we share together that makes it a collaboration. (Yoon, 2020)

This specific project takes on a unique role in CONNECT, BTS because it serves the purpose of directly serving as a vector for BTS as a musical persona.

CONNECT, BTS also provides a basis for a better social understanding of the art-music dialogue. The members of BTS have shown themselves to be creatives in all types of mediums and this translates directly into their work on an individual level. Aside from that, the narrative universe of BTS assumes itself in short films, essays, poems, and even between songs and music videos. A major factor for the success of CONNECT, BTS lies with BTS's massive (and incredibly vocal) fanbase, ARMY. ARMYs are very much accustomed, and extremely open, to immersing themselves in all types of art with a greater purpose. Tomás Saraceno, the artist behind *Aerocene Pacha* (one of the highlighted portions of CONNECT, BTS), had this to say about ARMY:

I never have seen so many people from so many different backgrounds, from so many different cultures, from so many different nationalities, and from so many different ages. In that case BTS have managed, by connecting with Aerocene and connecting with the ARMY, and with all the people who are present today here, it was a really beautiful message. (BANGTANTV, 2020-a)

This is perhaps the most crucial reason for the project's success. The mobilization of fandom is an immensely powerful tool, and BTS recognizes this in its uniquely horizontal relationship with ARMY, and have acknowledged this through multiple interdisciplinary works across all spectrums of communication (and this is not limited to just CONNECT, BTS).

By blurring the divide between high and low art, BTS is taking on a mission that makes them akin to Renaissance-era patrons of the arts. For this project, the band took it upon themselves to fund and promote the fine arts to their large and (compared to the target audience of these

exhibits) mostly young fanbase. Art offers a unique method of healing that is innately physical in its design, by means of transporting the viewer (who is more so a participant in the artistic process) into a space that inspires personal growth. This self-discovery and healing process has always been a part of what BTS promotes as artists. This leads to the final point of this essay: how can other musical artists, or just mainstream figures in general, learn from this practice? BTS is not the only group preaching self-love and awareness, yet they are one of the very few contemporary groups with an active affinity for healing through visual artistic means. The group's leader, Kim Namjoon, said it best in his own words:

Some say that anyone can become an artist. I think so too. I've enjoyed being able to approach art through mediums other than music. It's not that I'm hugely inspired by it...It's more like I look at them, of course it would be great if they can impact my music, but that's not something I can really control. I think the fact that it plays an important role in my daily life alone, as a source of strength, is more than enough. (Break the Silence: Docu-Series, 2020)

Here, he highlights his personal affinity for finding a connection between his own music and visual art. What is important to note is that there is no direct emphasis on the active influence of one over the other: it is merely a natural process that happens as he passively lets art into his life. Creatives in all fields can be seen as "cultural scavengers", in the sense that they are constantly pulling in images, sounds, and ideas around them into their own work (which is not always a conscious effort). The process of creation is one that involves borrowing concepts and ideas from all aspects of life, consciously or otherwise. By letting another form of art into the group's pre-existing mythos of music and visuals, their message extends and strengthens beyond the original intent.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The creator has no relevant conflicts of interest to disclose.

AFFILIATIONS

N/A

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