



# Beyond the Scene, Literally

ACADEMIC ARTICLE: ESSAY

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### ABSTRACT

BTS have several factors that have contributed to their exponentially rising popularity, but the most outstanding factor is the deeper message that they deliver through their music. Released in 2017, “Spring Day” is BTS’s longest-charting track. It goes beyond the typical love song and its music video not only includes but transcends past aesthetics. A close visual analysis of the “Spring Day” music video leads one to find a profound message that is up to interpretation. It contains visual elements, appropriately accompanying lyrics, and literary references to Christian Boltanski’s *No Man’s Land* and Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas,” all of which lead to comfort in dealing with the loss of a loved one and the overarching concept of “you never walk alone.”

### KEYWORDS

*BTS, K-pop, “Spring Day,” video, interpretation, analysis, charts, “You Never Walk Alone”*

The music industry is an industry well known for its profitability and ever-growing variety of genres and artists. According to Watson (2019), the U.S. music industry alone generated approximately 20 billion dollars in revenue in 2018, which highlights the scale of music consumption and output in the U.S. However, several reports have also emphasized the oversaturation of the music industry. Additionally, genres such as jazz, pop, and country are some of the most popular and easily recognized styles, whereas genres such as K-pop or Korean pop still belong to the category of genres with niche listeners. K-pop music is often specifically composed in a way that can easily draw attention and is complemented by its famous eye-catching flamboyant performances and concepts — for example, the girl group Orange Caramel’s (now disbanded) performances were filled with bright vibrant colors and unique outfits complete with sushi hats.

Nonetheless, K-pop has also long since reached a saturation point. Consequently, numerous Korean groups and artists frequently experiment with strategies, such as creating unique dance moves or heavily focusing on visual elements, in an effort to make themselves distinct and succeed in an oversaturated market. The companies of these artists expedite this process by hiring some of the best art directors and professionals, “so as to shape multilayered and complex conceptual art and aesthetics” (Valge & Hinsberg, 2019).

However, Western mass media oftentimes dismiss K-pop as generic and manufactured despite the well-thought-out concepts and performances. Yim (2020) – a reporter for the Korea Herald – remarked on how the industry is often labeled as manufactured and uncreative under the Western gaze and how it is hard for Western and primarily English-speaking audiences to find meaning beyond what is shown visually, most of them stating some form of, “Why do you listen to K-pop if you don’t understand what they’re saying?” Under such prejudice and scrutiny, only a handful of groups have been able to achieve notable differentiation and success in the Western music industry.

One among them is the Korean group Bangtan Sonyeondan – also known as Beyond The Scene – more commonly known as BTS. The reasons why BTS stand out from their peers are embedded in their music as well as in the visual differences of their music concepts. Their music has meaning that goes beyond typical love stories and catchy beats and covers topics ranging from mental health to societal issues. For instance, BTS’s debut single, “No More Dream,” is a track that encourages listeners to follow their own dreams rather than just comply with what is socially expected of them (Herman, 2018).

One of BTS’s tracks that has resonated with a great number of listeners is “Spring Day,” which is also their longest charting song on Korean music charts. The release of this song resulted in an exponential growth for BTS both domestically and internationally, with the group being invited to the Billboard Music Awards for the first time shortly after (Aniftos, 2017). Furthermore, the track does not stand alone and goes hand-in-hand with its official music video, which provides a wider perspective about the meaning of the song. Although a deeper analysis of the music video is necessary to fully understand the underlying message of both the video and the song, the music video undoubtedly transcends aesthetics and contains a profound message aimed towards youth and about coping with the loss of a loved one. Nonetheless, like any form of art, this music video can also be interpreted in multiple ways and can represent various ideas; thus, the analysis presented hereon is entirely based on the author’s own interpretation.

The “Spring Day” music video opens with scenes that instantly appeal to the eye – a cinematographic scenery of snowy hills and blue landscapes – but a deeper analysis indicates that many of these scenes symbolize death and loneliness. One particular scene of the music video contains a mountain of clothes and is a reference to an existing art piece titled *No Man’s Land* by Christian Boltanski. In this art piece, each clothing article – a second skin to man – represents a human life, while the pile of clothing altogether represents death. It is impossible to discern each clothing article in the pile, thereby implying the idea that there is no unique identity left, which is in line with Boltanski’s statement, “On the ‘mountain’ are other types of clothing that are all mixed up. You can’t imagine these people. There is no more individuality” (Cash, 2010). Boltanski’s intent behind *No Man’s Land* was to pose the question “Why one person survives and someone else doesn’t” (Cash, 2010). In “Spring Day,” BTS are mourning the loss of a loved one and asking why the “hand of God” so easily chose

to take a precious person away from earth, leaving the ones forsaken by Death to be shortly accompanied by loneliness. Throughout the song, the lyrics “I miss you” are repeated (“Hitman” Bang et al., 2017) and each BTS member is shown alone with a sad and listless facial expression.

In a recent interview, BTS member Jin confirmed that “Spring Day” was about a tragic event as well as about longing (Kranc, 2020). In 2017, it was revealed that BTS had donated to the Sewol Ferry Disaster 416 Family Council, which is a relief fund for the Sewol Ferry victims’ families, both in 2014 and 2017 (Lim, 2017). In the same year, it was disclosed that the 2013–2017 government of South Korea had an ongoing blacklist of numerous artists, writers, and journalists who were deemed progressive and a threat to the government solely because they had different political and ideological beliefs (Choe, 2017). Thus, BTS’s donations — especially the one made immediately after the accident in 2014 — and their open support of the Sewol Ferry victims were particularly meaningful because they were at risk of being blacklisted by their own government just a year after their debut; this shows that BTS is not afraid to stand up and speak on societal issues and incorporate them into their art.

Many have speculated about whether “Spring Day” is regarding the Sewol Ferry Tragedy since the release of its music video, largely because of the number of scenes in the music video that seem to allude to the tragedy. The first allusion can be detected in the opening scene of the music video where BTS member V lays his head down on the train tracks at an abandoned train station. This is possibly a depiction of the survivor’s guilt — feelings of guilt for being the one that survived a life-threatening event while the others did not — that many involved in the Sewol Ferry Tragedy suffered shortly after the accident, with a number of them even attempting or committing suicide (Ock, 2016). Furthermore, V also sings the line, “Will I get to you a little faster if I was the snow in the air,” that is, he is asking if he will reach his loved one in Heaven more quickly if he died now and became a part of the earth (“Hitman” Bang et al., 2017). This idea together with the imagery shown in the music video supports the theory that survivor’s guilt is referred to in the music video.

Another sequence in the video that makes an allusion to the tragedy is the one where BTS member Jimin is on a seashore, alone. Later he is shown picking up a pair of shoes that was washed up onto the shore, which most likely signifies the loss of a life. These same shoes can then be spotted in several scenes of the music video, with their final appearance being in the ending scene of the video where they are hanging on a tree branch. This is also a symbolism for death (IAC Publishing, 2020). In addition to these scenes, there are other allusions to the tragedy that typically go unnoticed. In the scene at the laundromat, a “Don’t Forget” sticker can be seen on the dryers, while in another scene, a carousel with several yellow ribbons tied onto it is shown (Big Hit Labels, 2017). Both these details may seem minor, but are in fact highly significant as they symbolize solidarity with the Sewol Ferry Tragedy’s victims and their families (Mullen, 2014).

In addition, one cannot discuss this particular music video without mentioning “*Omelas*.” Quite a few times a motel named “*Omelas*” appears in the video, which is a reference to “*The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*,” a short story written by Ursula K. Le Guin. This short philosophical fiction is a coming-of-age story told in the utopian city of *Omelas* where everything is unbelievably perfect. The narrator soon reveals that the happiness of the town depends on the suffering of a single child, that is, the child must constantly suffer in order for the town to maintain its perfection and prosperity. The existence of the child and why the child is left in perpetual misery is revealed to the children of *Omelas* when they come of age, leaving many feeling

shocked and sickened. The city will turn into a dystopia if they help the child in any way, so they are left with two choices: accept the reality for the greater good or walk away from Omelas (Le Guin, 1975).

In the “Spring Day” music video, the Omelas motel is first shown when BTS member RM walks up to it while the “No Vacancy” sign is lit up and BTS members J-Hope and Suga are standing outside it talking. However, when BTS member Jungkook comes across the motel later in the music video, it is completely abandoned and dark with the “No Vacancy” sign barely lighting up. This scene probably indicates that BTS left Omelas behind because they could empathize with the ones suffering and could not continue to live happily at the cost of another person’s welfare. Here, BTS is trying to convey to the viewer that although human beings must make sacrifices, they do not have to do it alone and can find comfort in togetherness. This also seems to be a reference to the Sewol Ferry Tragedy, as BTS uses their power of choice to stand up and protect those that are vulnerable – in this case, the victims and their families.

Throughout “Spring Day,” there are several juxtaposing scenes that either cut or zoom out to highlight the theme of “You are not alone,” which is in line with the title of the BTS album “Spring Day” belongs to –You Never Walk Alone (Figure 1). The initial scenes make the viewers think that a BTS member is alone in a particular setting, but later in the video the full shots are revealed and show all seven BTS members together, thereby conveying their message that no individual is truly alone. BTS and the music video director’s intent here, as seen in their album description, is to provide a “message of warm consolation and hope for the suffering youth of this generation” (BTS Official Site, 2017). The stills displayed in Figure 2 also highlight this theme through juxtaposition. “These people. . . walk straight out of the city of



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

**Figure 1.** Juxtaposing scenes; the BTS member is initially seen alone but is later to seen to be with the other memers.

**Figure 2.** BTS members are seen outside of ‘Omelas.’

**Figure 3.** BTS members are pictured with a thawing field.

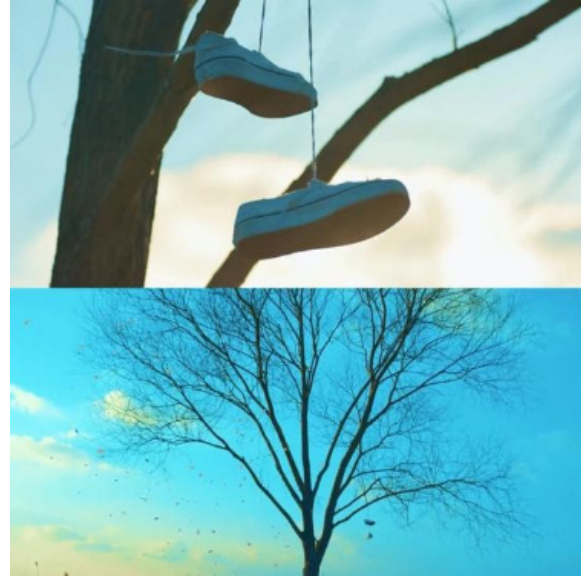
Images taken from *Spring Day Official MV*.  
Copyright 2017 by BigHit Entertainment.

Omelas, through the beautiful gates. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman” (Le Guin, 1975). In Le Guin’s short story, the ones who walk away from Omelas always go alone, whereas in the “Spring Day” music video, BTS runs away from Omelas together. The confidence in their pace implies that they know where they are going and that they have a sense of security because they have each other to depend on.

“Spring Day,” both the music video and the song, gradually shifts from a sorrowful present to a hopeful future, and the music video is skillfully shot and edited to achieve this ambience. The moving lyrics in the bridge of the song is, “The morning will come again. No darkness, no season can last forever” (“Hitman” Bang et al., 2017). These lyrics and the stills illustrated in Figures 3 and 4 represent the transition from winter to spring. The thawing of the snowy field, the bare tree sprouting new leaves and flowers, and the flower petals flowing through the wind, all signify the coming of a spring day and a brighter future. Spring represents new life and new beginnings and in the music video BTS is approaching it together, tying back to the overall theme of *You Never Walk Alone*. As mentioned earlier, hanging shoes (Figure 4) symbolize a person’s death, so through the final scenes of the music video BTS reveal to the viewer that they are choosing to cherish the life of the one that passed away by keeping them alive in their memories.

BTS’s “Spring Day” music video checks all of the boxes for characteristics that one would find in a quintessential K-pop music video – visually pleasing scenes, ambiguous storyline, combination of colors, etc. – but it can also be considered as essentially different from a typical K-pop video because of the messages within the lyrics and the video. Such messages are a standard and important feature of BTS’s discography and attest to the fact that they are not afraid to move beyond boundaries and discuss topics that are largely avoided by society. BTS’s music videos appeal to an audience that is greatly diverse in age and background primarily because they reference both classic and modern literary works and leave their music open for interpretation, which in turn provides comfort to the listeners. “Spring Day” and its relatable message about missing a loved one is a major reason for its longevity on Korean music charts. This longevity also serves as a reminder for all of us to keep the memories of loved ones alive and to remember that we never walk alone.

*Special thanks to “Italian ARMY” on YouTube for being the pioneering voice in “Spring Day” analyses.*



**Figure 4.** Shoes are hanging from a tree branch, and flower petals are seen flowing in the wind. Images taken from *Spring Day Official MV*. Copyright 2017 by BigHit Entertainment.

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The creator has no relevant conflicts of interest to disclose.

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