

Parasocial Relationships and Fictionality, or, The Curious Case of K-Pop Idols

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Metaphysics and Semantics of Fiction
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Motivating question

What are the relations in parasocial relationships?

Why this question?

When you spend all your weekends watching episodes of Run BTS, Stray Kids Code, En'O'Clock, you start to wonder if there's anything philosophically interesting in any of this, and you realize, **Yes! And philosophers are not really talking about it at all.**

Plan of the talk

- What are parasocial relationships?
- What is K-pop, and why is it relevant?
- Three proposals for the relation of parasocial relationships
- Three approaches to the metaphysics of fictional characters
- What questions do these approaches (a) answer and (b) raise with respect to our original motivating question?
- Conclusions and areas for future work.

What are parasocial relationships? (1)

- A *parasocial relationship* is a social relationship between an audience and a target which is in some sense not a *real* relationship, but merely a “seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” [HW56, p. 215].
- Parasocial relationships (PSR) are formed out of parasocial interactions (PSI), which are interactions that involve “the emotions, thoughts, and actions that a viewer experiences during media exposure that are geared toward a specific performer or character” [TD19, p. 4] and give rise to the “illusion of a face-to-face friendship between audience members and celebrities” [CdB15, p. 45] via a “simulacrum of conversational give and take” [HW56, p. 215].
- Parasocial relationships can be distinguished from parasocial interactions on the basis of duration—the latter are short-term and the former are long-term, persisting in some cases across decades [CdB15, pp. 44, 46].

What are parasocial relationships? (2)

Well-studied from the

- psychological [Gil02, GS24]
- sociological [Ste09]
- anthropological [Cau84]

points of view, but rather overlooked by philosophers.

What little philosophical work there is tends to focus on:

- the ethics or morality of these relationships [AR25], including what obligations they engender [Med22, Tra21], or
- their phenomenology [Spi21].

Key properties of parasocial relationships (according to the literature)

PSI and PSR are often taken to be essentially

- ① *one-sided* [Med22, p. 66], “as a large audience group knows a lot about a celebrity, who hardly knows anything about them” [CdB15, p. 45],
- ② *asymmetric* “insofar as typically only the audience forms a cognitive or emotional bond with the persona” [Spi21, p. 182],
- ③ involving *pretense*, often the pretense “that there is no asymmetry” in the relationship [Spi21, p. 183].

But the essentiality of these can be challenged!

What is K-pop, and why is it relevant? (1)

Our case study: parasocial relationships with members of Korean pop (K-pop) groups, such as BTS, Blackpink, Stray Kids, Enhypen, TXT, and others.

KPop, a cultural component of Hallyu (Korean wave), is a music genre paired with fashionably dressed boy/girl bands performing choreographed dances” [MSZ⁺ 22, pp. 1–2].

What is K-pop, and why is it relevant? (2)

- Situated within a broader “idol” phenomenon, cultivated more in Asia than in western Europe and the Americas, wherein young talent is scouted, cultivated, and molded into a particular image (the idol image), usually with the intent that these people are combined into music-and-dance groups who will eventually debut.
- Highly curated process, often orchestrated through elimination-style TV show competitions, and lacking much of the organic development of a musical group that, at least up until the 90s and early 00s, was more prevalent in Western contexts.
- By its very nature is *constructed*: Each piece is carefully selected and combined with other pieces to create an artifice.

What is K-pop, and why is it relevant? (2)

- Global phenomenon / “South Korea’s most important export”
- More than just collections of singers, song-writers, rappers, musicians, etc.
- Not only producers of music (albums, concerts, tours etc.) and merchandise,
- but also actively encourage people to form parasocial relationships with them through the cultivation of their fandoms: (BTS — Army; Stray Kids — Stay; TXT — Moa; Enhypen — EnGene; etc.)
- Active via social media, including photos (Instagram), short-form video (TikTok), long-form video content (YouTube and similar platforms).
 - ▶ partly scripted and partly adlibbed,
 - ▶ ranging from silly challenges and trips to historical sites to choreography practice and behind-the-scenes views of song recordings.
- as well as live-streaming.

What are the relata? (1)

- What is it about the constitution of parasocial relationships that makes them not real?
- It's got to be something about their relata that prevents the relationships from being real.

What are the relata? (2)

It's got to be the relata!

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- Dead people
- Imaginary friends
- Fictional characters

Three approaches to the metaphysics of fictional characters

- Fictional entities are nonexistent.
- Fictional entities don't exist but could have.
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- Fictional entities don't exist but could have. This means we could look to other possible worlds to determine properties, etc., of K-pop idols. But we don't, we look to this world!
- Fictional entities do exist and are abstract artifacts. K-pop idols cannot be separated from the masks they wear: One cannot encounter the persona without also encountering the person.

Questions this approach raises

- Who is the author?
- Who is responsible for the character's actions?

Who is the author?

- The *other* relata in the relationship
- The agent/brand/agency behind the K-pop idol
- The K-pop idol themselves

Who is the author?

- The *other* relata in the relationship
- The agent/brand/agency behind the K-pop idol: “characters depend on the creative acts of their authors in order to come into existence” [Tho99, p. 7]. “Moreover, entertainment agencies manage KPop performers’ diets, public image and personalities (Pratamasari, 2017)” [MSZ⁺22, p. 4].
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Who is the author?

- The *other* relata in the relationship
- The agent/brand/agency behind the K-pop idol: “characters depend on the creative acts of their authors in order to come into existence” [Tho99, p. 7]. “Moreover, entertainment agencies manage KPop performers’ diets, public image and personalities (Pratamasari, 2017)” [MSZ⁺22, p. 4].
- The K-pop idol themselves : “The celebrity is the artist of their image,” [Wil24, p. 17].

Who is responsible for the character's actions? (1)

- Think about sequels where the character changes drastically. We have the option of getting mad at the author, for “getting the character wrong,” instead of just getting mad at the character.
- In the parasocial case, if we find out something about the real person behind our parasocial fiction that conflicts with the parasocial fiction, who do we get mad at?

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As Willard points out, “fans trust that celebrities will remain steadfast to their image” [Wil24, p. 206].

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- Think about couples who are shipped together, where no amount of their saying that nothing is going on will ever dislodge the ship from existence.

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“fans have the responsibility not to behave in ways that push a certain interpretation of a celebrity’s identity” [AR25, p. 212].

Against asymmetry/one-sidedness

- Social media connection and communication: one of the features differentiates BTS from other K-pop groups (and other musical groups more broadly) is that “BTS uses social media to communicate with and connect with fans” [LCK21, p. 1520].
- Live-streaming and co-creation: retired K-pop performers who have a successful comeback are those who “co-create value with audiences through live stream platforms” [MSZ⁺22, p. 1]. Co-creation cannot happen in an asymmetrical relationship.
- Explicit bidirectionality.

Explicit bidirectionality (1)

- Soobin (TXT): “MOA always tells us ‘You guys saved my life,’ ‘I can be happy because of you,’ . . . and we feel the exact same way about MOA” (‘The Star Chapter: TOGETHER’ Recording Behind, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0Pr-Ra3dlw>.)

*I know how it feels to be alone
I've wandered astray, oh, I've been lost
Let out all your tears, I'll keep you close
Hold on to my hands, don't give up*

“0801,” Stray Kids

Explicit bidirectionality (2)

I'm right here

I'll comfort you when you're having a hard time

I'll sing for you for the rest of your life

I'm right here, yeah

“0801,” Stray Kids

I will never make you lonely

You'll always be beside me

I'll cherish this happiness you gave me

I will never make you lonely

“#Lovestay,” Stray Kids

Explicit bidirectionality (3)

*Oh, we were only seven
But we have you all now*

*Throw stones at me, we don't fear anymore
We are, we are together bulletproof (Yeah, we have you, have
you)
Even if winter comes again, even if I'm blocked off, I will still
walk
We are, we are forever bulletproof*

“We Are Bulletproof: The Eternal,” BTS.

Concluding thoughts?

- Instead of responding to fictional characters at the same level as real people,
we are responding to real people at the same level as fictional characters.
How does this work in terms of parasocial interaction? The power of narrative realism may be sufficient to overcome the lack of reality status of the media figures—so we respond to fictional characters at the same level as real people [Gil11, p. 453].
- What about biases?

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