

November 2022
Issue 2

K-Pop Destroys Science Fiction



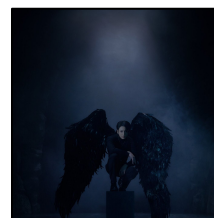


BTS by Big Hit Entertainment

Destroy

November 2022
By Jacob Juliar

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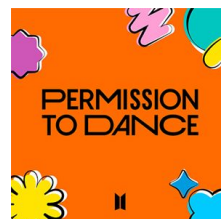
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Above photos by Big Hit Entertainment. *The Books of Earthsea*, BTS "Black Swan Art Video with the MN Dance Company, and the Big Hit Entertainment's Permission to Dance album cover



Photo by Bit Hit Entertainment

I listened to K-Pop because our small children wanted to listen to BTS. They do not have phones, so they asked my wife and I to play it on our phones through the speakers in our car and in our living room. It was background noise while we played with Legos or cleaned up after dinner or read books in the evening before bed. Music has always been background noise.

My relationship with K-Pop changed with two articles on Tor.com. The first was an article by Kali Wallace on the lasting

influence of "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" in pop culture and, the second was an article by Delia Harrington titled "The Stunning Artistry of BTS's "Black Swan".

In addition to hugely stunning music videos filmed on different continents, "Black Swan" is, perhaps more importantly, a reflection on artistic power and the physical limits of the human imagination.

Welcome to this issue of K-Pop Destroys Science Fiction.

Mental Transformations

At the start of the pandemic, I bought the complete illustrated edition of *The Books of Earthsea* by Ursula K. Le Guin. The book begins with a young adult adventure novel, *The Wizard of Earthsea*, published in 1968, and ends with a brutally violent fantasy novel, *The Other Wind*, published in 2001. Through the three-decade progression of five novels and three short stories, we see Le Guin transform the misogyny in her early stories to powerful tales of empowerment.

I have become obsessed with authors working at the very height of their artistic talent. I search out artists who have not only progressed far beyond the expected limitations of their early work but expanded into unknown depths of the human imagination.

Le Guin began her young adult fantasy career with *Ged*. Ged is a rural peasant who transforms into the greatest wizard in Earthsea by both utilizing and scorning the help of witches (women), murdering baby dragons, and ignoring every suggestion from his wizened elders.



Photo from *The Books of Earthsea*

This is a pretty standard coming of age story we have seen again and again in different variations from *Star Wars* to *Harry Potter* to *Superman*, and Le Guin became more uncomfortable with this legacy and worked extensively to correct faults in her early world building.

"In the years since I began to write about Earthsea I've changed, of course, and so have the people who read books. All times are changing times, but ours is one of massive, rapid moral and mental transformation. Archetypes turn into millstones, large simplicities get complicated, chaos becomes elegant, and what everybody knows is true turns out to be what some people used to think."

Killin' me now ... do you hear me?

The "Black Swan" art film - a lofty, highly instrumentalized version of the BTS song - begins with a lonely quote in black text on an ivory background.

"...a **dancer dies twice** - once when they stop **dancing**, and this first **death** is the more painful."
-Martha Graham

The music video following the quote is shot in the atrium of a gutted, wholly abandoned shopping mall. Bare concrete and rebar, dripping water, heavenly sunlight streaming through holes shorn in the roof, rickety broken escalators, and no handrails or walls to stop a dancer from plummeting to possible death. Seven young dancers dressed in black suit pants and jackets, one man bare chested and steaming in the cold, dance barefoot through this mess of post industrial calamity.

For the first half of the video, the bare-chested dancer tries to escape the clutches of his captors and fails again and again to find a foothold to gain his freedom. He fights and fights until he stops trying to escape the ravenous jaws of his demons and, instead, accepts how his power controls and manipulates others. There is no freedom. Only power.

The message is dark. Every time I see the video (and I've probably watched it a thousand times in the last six months), I cannot believe it comes from BTS. Can you imagine being at the very height of your artistic talents and broadcasting your worst and more horrific fears to the entire world?

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Black Swan



Stills of "Black Swan" music video by BTS and the MN Dance Company

Large Simplicities Get Complicated



Many of us in our day-to-day lives imagine ourselves in different places. We imagine ourselves with more leisure to rest, more time to empower those we love, and to see the world improve for those who follow us.

RM, in conversation with *Rolling Stone* and Pharrell Williams, talked about these pressures. "As a team, we've been to the U.N., and we also met President Biden. We never thought these things [would happen], but I think naturally we became one of the representatives from the Asian community. I'm always thinking to myself, 'Am I that good? Do I deserve all the responsibilities?' And I'm really doubting myself."

This last summer, BTS released an album, *Proof*, showcasing their early work and growth as artists through

the present day. The early work is often choppy and filled with profanity. You can hear the members playing the roles they were assigned by their production company Big Hit Entertainment. There's the ballad singer, the rapper, the bad boys, the cute ones, etc.

But as the three-disc album progresses, you hear the members become more comfortable in their own abilities and see where they made choices that expand or contradict the roles they were designated. After a series of pop dance tracks, "Spring Day" (a song of grief dealing with the lasting trauma of the Sewol ferry disaster co-written by RM and Suga) melts the heart. The album ends with the message to their fans, "The best is yet to come."

As elevated as BTS has become on the world stage, RM said they are still filled with doubt about their identities. They wonder what they are expected to do as representatives in the Asian community and how they want to use their individual talents in the world.

RM wonders, as a dancer must, if he has any place in his art any longer. "I'm sad ... Sometimes I really feel afraid - like, music, isn't not my first thing any more."

Chaos Becomes Elegant



A few years ago, when my children were beginning elementary school, we went out for ice cream after a long walk along Lake Harriet in Minneapolis. It was a second-summer, as the meteorologists now say, and the late September sun was still warm. Warm enough to melt the ice cream in the cone my son was holding.

Chocolate ice cream, artisan dark, beaded on the tip of the cone and slid down my son's thin forearm to his elbow and dripped onto the light wood pine floor milled a century ago. My wife smiled, and we locked eyes across the table in a shared moment of adoration.

My son's sodden arm must have itched because he knotted his brow and his face looked troubled. To get a better view of what itched, he raised his cone high into the air like a first-grade lady liberty. He watched the dark vein of hand-crafted chocolate slide down his tricep, past his t-shirt sleeve, into his arm pit.



His hand still raised, he squealed *Gross!* and he and his sister across the table laughed full from the gut. My wife and I laughed, too, until our son grabbed a handful of Stormtrooper-white t-shirt from his belly, lowered his arm, and wiped the chocolate from his elbow. We watched as he smeared milk, sugar, and chocolate into the freshly bleached cotton.

Later that evening, after baths and brushing teeth and stories of a time-traveler's wife, I laid next to him and sang lullabies and waited for his breathing to slow, his body to twitch, as he drifted to sleep. Groggy with sleep, I stood and took the stained shirt from the floor and bleached the mistake from the fabric in the bathroom sink.

I wished I could always erase the mistakes in his life with such ease.



When I bleached chocolate from my son's shirt, when the thought of always erasing a child's mistakes skipped across my mind, I knew that thought was, at best, unrealistic and harmful at its very worst.

I wondered, like RM said to Pharrell, what are my responsibilities in the world? I doubted my decisions and my influence, for good or bad, on those around me.

When artists complicate our world with their creations, we benefit in learning and understanding. When Ursula K. Le Guin questions her own historic worldbuilding or when RM and Suga broadcast insecurities about their own talents to millions of listeners around the world, they show audiences how to grow.

They let us know that we, too, can be vulnerable.