

Generation MZ: Trends in Culture and the Arts*

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Hipan Munhwayesul Teurendeureul Ikda [Reading Hip Trends in Culture and the Arts]. By Shin Hyung-Deok et al. Seongnam: Book Korea, 2020. 188p. ISBN 9788963246789

Nowadays, enjoying the culture and the arts is as natural as breathing. New ideas representing contemporary society have blurred boundaries and expanded in scale and scope. Culture and the arts, too, are being consumed in new ways that share the values of those new ideas. In an age undergoing rapid changes due to developments in information and technology, it would lower the value of life if we do not understand or remain indifferent to trends in culture and the arts that have penetrated our daily life. In that sense, the question of how culture and the arts have transformed over the years and how we consume and enjoy them deserves our attention.

The recently published *Reading Hip Trends in Culture and the Arts* is a compilation of essays by eight so-called trendsetters who lead and foresee trends of their time in the culture and the arts. Authors include Shin Hyung-Deok, a Professor of Business who interestedly analyzes cultural trends; Kim Min-jeong, a curator-turned-researcher in the field of culture and the arts; Park Ji-hyun, a former marketer of Samsung Electronics and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea; Na Hye-young, a jazz vocalist and Professor of Applied Music; Shin Chang-yeop, a businessman and marketer researching consumers of culture and the arts; Art Director Kim Jong-heon who travels the world researching the art market; Kim Woori, a CEO of an online shopping mall in pursuit of becoming a sellsumer of culture and the arts; and Park Joo-yeon, an educator of culture and the arts. The book is exciting and significant for introducing interdisciplinary examples that address the realities of the field. The publishing world questions whether trends

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still even exist, given the deluge of trend-related books, whatever the subject matter. Nevertheless, the eight authors claim that there is still much to say. Dealing with the latest trends in culture and the arts, their essays not only praise culture and the arts but also focus on the prospects and values of the field based on how we enjoy and consume them.

Recent dance works mix various genres such as art, music, theater, etc. Some take on an appearance of a new genre such as dancecal¹ and moviecal², and others that are beyond categorization are simply referred to as ‘performance.’ The notion of ‘performance’ is applied not only to traditional dance works performed on stage but also to performances that boldly set no limitations in terms of place; lecture performances in which dance is accompanied by spoken lines; avant-garde visual artworks that use the body as a material; and cross-over works that centralize architecture or screen images. For experimental works that are difficult to categorize as traditional genres of art, there are new attempts at deconstructing and merging various genres in a manner that is beyond mere cross-overs, that is, under the name of interdisciplinary arts. Considering such a tendency in the realm of performance arts, the book’s discussion of the value of the latest trends in culture and the arts is an excellent point of reference for creating new works and various attempts in the field.

The book introduces the usages and new values of culture and the arts made possible based on the recent “social” culture, a new mode of communication that emerged from the rapid development of social network services (SNS). One might wonder: how is it possible to bring together dance performance and social culture in which all kinds of attractions and interests including visual arts and film, tourist sites, etc. are cited and introduced? Given that dance performance in general already appears performative and interdisciplinary, the idea of drawing upon social culture might as well be applied to the field. All the more, its potential for dance performances is infinite according to how one applies the trend of cultural consumption introduced in this book.

Before looking into the cultural and arts trends discussed in the book, let us clarify who the ones leading this new culture and social phenomena are. It is none other than generation MZ, a combination of millennials and generation Z born between the 1980s and 2000s. Unlike their predecessors, this is a generation of digital natives that have experienced the internet and various IT devices since they were born.³ Using social media, shopping, watching movies, and ordering food with their smartphones and IT devices is a part of their daily life. Generation MZ’s cultural influence is recognized as more significant than that of any other group in society because of the effects of their taste and consumption trends on various areas. It is worth anticipating new notable works that understand and reflect the lives of the trend-setting generation MZ in the field of dance as well.

The book introduces trends in primarily three parts. Part 1 discusses a cultural phenomenon that pervades our life. It presents the notion of “cultural appropriation” and describes how the cultures of others are embraced

and recreated. The author argues that cultural transmission or cultural fusion is possible when supported by a sense of pride for one's own culture and respect for another's culture. The spread of Hallyu spearheaded by BTS is presented as a successful example that merged a new kind of effect with Korean culture. It is highlighted as an example of how the notion of cultural appropriation enhanced the value of Korean culture.

The dancing community was, at one point, critical of BTS's reinterpretation of *Samgomu*, a traditional drum dance. More recently, however, BTS has received critical attention for incorporating modern dance in *Black Swan*, critiqued as having sublimated pop music into high art.⁴ In the realm of fine arts, the superficial success of a performance is not enough to gauge its popular appeal; however, it is undeniable that the dancing community's concerted efforts at popularization were instantly overturned by pop culture with significant influence. Like the author's statement that the original form of culture is valuable in itself, Korean pure dance is recognized as valuable in itself. And yet, it would also be valuable to create performances that more people can relate to, based on a keen interpretation of the new perspectives in demand by the public at large.

Reading Hip Trends in Culture and the Arts also presents the notions of "instagrammable" and "meme" commonly used in social media. Befitting as neologisms dealing with the latest trends, the terms trigger the reader's curiosity. For example, instagrammable refers to "something suitable for posting on Instagram, which is a photo and video sharing social media platform."⁵ Instagram is a virtual space that is more than just a social media platform for generation MZ who search for information, communicate with others, and express themselves through the platform. The art community is increasingly incorporating such social culture, an example being instagrammable exhibitions. Here, the traditional mode of simply viewing the exhibited artworks and becoming inspired by them is not enough. In the digital media age, appreciating art includes taking photographs of the exhibition space or photographing oneself with the artworks and sharing them on the virtual space of social media.

Dance performances have made similar use of social media as well. Examples include prosumer marketing in which audience members, directly and indirectly, participate in the development and advertisement of performances by taking an active part as online supporters, writing reviews, and sharing proof shots; performances with the theme of smartphone⁶; and instances of live streaming on-stage performances due to the spread of COVID-19⁷. The dance community's use of social cultures, such as social media, is still rudimentary. Considering the performance art market, where technology is deemed the future of performance, dance performances should also do more than simply perform the dance work and have the audience appreciate it in their seats. They should use this new cultural state of mind to prepare for ways to create work that could be enjoyed further beyond.

The previously mentioned “meme,” or “jjal,” refers to a photo or short video containing a humorous message. Central to the book’s discussion of the meme is how it spreads among people and to the next generation by means of imitation. In fact, this idea was already discussed through the theory of evolution in Richard Dawkin’s *The Selfish Gene* (1976). The book argues that culture is transmitted as dominant memes, similar to how biologically superior genes—or dominant genes—are transmitted down the generations. Experienced with abbreviating and transforming existing content through creating memes, generation MZ is accustomed to summarizing long-form content and understanding its essence. The spread of such memes, then, tends to spread very rapidly.

New forms of consuming culture like instagrammable or memes have evolved in correspondence with the value system and taste of generation MZ, creating according to trends. Regarding the exemplary case of BTS from Dawkin’s perspective, I imagine that their performances were successful because inherent within the performances themselves is the value of dance as a dominant and universal cultural gene. That is, especially considering how new cultural content gets swiftly imitated, recreated, and circulated.

Part 2 of the book introduces “content curation” dominated by artificial intelligence and big data. In an age characterized by a deluge of information, finding something that exactly matches one’s taste is not easy. Nevertheless, at place in our daily life is a system that recommends music according to one’s taste or mood, suggests things one might need, and lets one know of their favorite drink or food at the same time every day. The author states that we live in an age of contents curation in which various media, which know more about us than we do ourselves, endlessly recommend what we might like and urge us to continue consuming. Based on big data and artificial intelligence, this kind of user-customized service analyzes an individual’s digital activities and is applied to a variety of areas including music, art, literature, film, tourism, finance, etc.⁸

The book also notes that “salon culture” transformed how generation MZ enjoys their hobbies. Salons began in Renaissance France as gatherings among the aristocracy to disseminate sociability and entertainment, later developed into places of conversation and debate or further transformed into a literary space and a hub of cultural and intellectual dialogue. Such a culture from the olden days has become a popular trend among the younger generations. The writer speculates that the revival of this kind of salon culture results from people fatigued by online activities switching over to offline activities, a phenomenon that is in stark contrast to content curation.

Generation MZ prioritizes psychological satisfaction through experience and enjoyment over material possession. They are a generation that reflects upon how they can live a happy and meaningful life. Considering how there is less semi-compulsory after-work drinking with coworkers, it is easier for them to pursue a community beyond their workplace. It is possible to feel a sense of accomplishment and establish a sense of

oneself through salon meetings that pursue shared interests and hobbies. Generation MZ tends to be lavish in consuming performances or other activities they take an interest in and prefer self-directed gatherings. Now there are even commercially motivated businesses that take advantage of salon culture. The book introduces examples of commercial platforms for social and cultural gatherings. Amid the spread of salon culture are dance- or ballet-themed gatherings. It is anticipated that they will play an increasingly vital role in the life of weary contemporary people.

Lastly, Part 3 deals with the pattern of consuming culture and the arts as a commercially tailored product. In the past, it was the performance level of a product that was emphasized. In this day and age marked by a co-existence of technology, design, and the artistic, it is less the insistence on high-tech performance than the “thing” that emotionally appeals to the consumers that makes a product competitive. In order to discuss whether some high-tech products are artworks or simply products, the book introduces various products considering their aesthetic elements and visual appeal. Art and technology have long been functioning in an organic manner. Elements of convenience and rationality have been added to this organic relationship between art and technology in the present day. Hence, attractive media products by global companies like Apple Inc. have come to lead the trend.

What do we make of art and design in the service of product vis-à-vis technology in the service of art throughout the history of arts? Leonardo Da Vinci’s works include a variety of elements from music, chemistry, astrology, architecture, etc.; Pablo Picasso’s paintings were inspired by Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity; and Nam June Paik contributed to modern art as a pioneer of video art that made use of video which was a relatively new media at the time.

Though not introduced in this book, there have been similarly avant-garde works grafting onto digital media in dance as well: Merce Cunningham’s *Trackers* (1991), which a computer-based dance piece. More recent examples include *Madame Freedom* (2013), which recreated Jung Biseok’s novel *Jayu Buin* (1954) in the form of media performance; dance works that utilize hologram technology in their stage art; and experimental dances that join the space and time of present reality with virtual spaces utilizing artificial reality (AR). This array of dance works attests to how it is not only the audiences but also the dance choreographers that eagerly desire something newer and more distinctive. In order to meet this demand, choreographers are introducing more technological elements.

The more commonplace online activities have become, the higher the cultural consumer sentiment among people today centered around the desire to show off where they go, what they eat, and what kind of culture they consume. The author notes the phenomenon of “limited editions,” literally products that are limited in number and period of production that take advantage of such consumer sentiment. In other words, consumers create an impression of being special by possessing and experiencing

limited editions, thereby further enhancing their value. Consumers are lured by limited editions not simply because of their limited number but for a variety of other reasons such as a sense of fame, uniqueness, high quality, and reasonable price.

Gala performances are to the realm of dance what limited editions are to the realm of art-related products. In a gala performance, outstanding dancers perform excerpts from existing dance works. It is like an assorted collection of gifts consisting of dance highlights that the audience loves. *Ballet of Summer Night*, a gala performance held at Seongnam Arts Center in the summer of 2019, featured thirteen dancers, including world-class ballerinas, Korean dancers active abroad, and dancers active within Korea. The performance was a success. It was an opportunity to see world-famous dancers in reality beyond the screen and also an opportunity to exhibit one's level of cultural appreciation online through social media. In that sense, the prospects for this kind of gala performance are bright.

Introduced next is the keyword "sellsumer." Sellsumer is a person managing a one-person market, referring to the phenomenon of consumers also becoming sellers. The book explains this through an example of a woman who initially learned handicrafts as a hobby but began selling her work as her skills improved. The precise definition of sellsumer is a market managed through social media. However, in the realm of dance, some examples share similar contexts on- and offline. In fact, some who initially approached dance as a hobby has made bold moves, quitting their original jobs to create and sell dance-related goods online or to manage a studio for dance practice. Every now and then, people who belatedly began learning dance as a hobby become specialists and educators. Now there is a dance competition for non-specialists run by the K-Community Dance Association and a ballet instructor certification program for non-specialists provided at Myongji University's Institute of Continuing Education. These examples show that the field of dance has welcomed new participants and new creations thanks to sellsumers.

Furthermore, the book writes about performances sold as part of a specially assorted package of cultural and artistic products. Today we see a striking trend of so-called "work and life balance," which seeks a balance between work and life through an attitude that focuses on relaxing and recharging oneself. Reflective on this trend, the performing industry has promoted package deals combining performance tickets with either meals or hotel vouchers so that consumers can enjoy a variety of cultural activities at once. The book also introduces examples of packaged deals that combine tickets to performances of the same genre, targeting younger generations with relatively less financial leeway. The package deals that group performances of the same genre could be seen as an extension of the multi-packaging strategy generally practiced in marketing to win consumer acceptance. This kind of multi-packaging is common to dance performances as well.

Lastly, the book concludes with a discussion of “series,” or sequels that are remakes of original works. It explains the term with a focus on movies. However, there have been remakes in the realm of dance as well, which are referred to as parodies. Choreographers known for parodies include Matthew Bourne, Mats Ek, Graeme Murphy, and Jean-Christophe Maillot. They borrow content from famous existing works, reinterpret them from a contemporary perspective, and create them anew. The author argues that the technique of parody can grab the audience’s attention with less risk through a sense of familiarity, and that it can demonstrate the power of the original work across time and culture. She adds that parody, or series, is valuable as content that people of all ages can respond to and enjoy.

Culture is a natural part of our life. Looking into cultural trends, then, can provide insight into what direction art should take. *Reading Hip Trends in Culture and the Arts* presents main keywords that have drawn much attention in this day and age, analyzes today’s culture and arts, and explains where the arts should head towards. It provides information crucial to understanding the latest trends and guides us through them. At the same time, it falls short of discussing examples of dance, making it somewhat inadequate to reflect upon the current situation in the field critically. Nevertheless, its content is not limited to a single genre, but overall encompasses the life and culture of the current generation, making it possible to apply them to the field of dance. With this book, I hope that dance can expand its horizons and one day become a well-loved form of art as a hip trend.

Notes

1. Dancecal is a term combining “dance” and “musical” that refers to a genre that foregrounds elements of dance and acting.
2. Moviecal is a term combining “movie” and “musical” that refers musicals adapted from films.
3. Ho-hyeon Kim, “Cultural Consumption of Generation MZ,” *Webzine Munhwa Gwangwang*, April, 2020.
4. Jae-hoon Lee, “Focus: BTS, “Black Swan” incorporates modern dance ... Popular Music sublimated into high art,” *Newsis*, January 17, 2020.
5. Hyung-deok Shin et al., *Reading Hip Trends in Culture and the Arts* (Seongnam: Book Korea, 2020), 23.
6. “Pin Drop: Can Hear a Pin Drop” (2017) by Dark Circles Contemporary Dance is a humorous take at a variety of situations that can happen due to a smart phone, making the performance relatable to the audience today.
7. With the spread of COVID-19, Seoul Arts Center launched a performance video content called “SAC On Screen,” attracting a total of 84,555 viewers in the first three days of the service.
8. Previously, consumption trends centered around the act of imitating taste or referring to indices of popularity such as bestsellers, box-office records, and Billboard charts. Nowadays, they are more individual-oriented, resulting in successful businesses like Melon, Korea’s biggest music streaming platform; Open Gallery, an online rental platform for artworks; Flybook and Millie, formerly offline bookstores that transformed into e-book platforms; Netflix, an on-demand over-the-top streaming service where one can enjoy film according to one’s own taste; and Shinhan Card with its hyper-individualized marketing strategy.