

The Concept of the Gentleman

PSY's "Gentleman M V"

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Abstract

The ideal of the gentleman has been globally reborn in PSY's colossal YouTube hit "Gentleman M V". This video thematizes the concept of the gentleman, but it is also a reformulation of gentlemanly behaviour. The article analyses the ideal of the gentleman in the light of its gender aspects and its class connotations. The hypothesis of the article is that the insecure status of masculine identity in an age of post-second-generation feminism demands the seemingly parodic treatment of the concept of the gentleman, as in this video. Yet this hypothesis is also a research question. Why is there this strong element of parody in the video? The answer to the question may depend on a consideration of contemporary male identities. It may also be based on a reading of how the music video incorporates these types. Three such types are described in the article: the new man, the metrosexual male and the new lad. It is the conclusion of the article that "Gentleman M V" incorporates the last two of these.

Keywords gentleman, PSY, the new man, the metrosexual male, the new lad



Bar code link to the video.

The Music Video

The YouTube music video “Gentleman M V”¹ by the Korean star PSY has so far (January 2014) received 628,952,819 hits. Its YouTube statistics do not allow specifications according to the nationality of the hits, but another source, *Viral Video Chart (Viral Video Chart 2014)*, offers a breakdown of references to the video and sharing of the video in social media such as Facebook and Twitter based on languages.

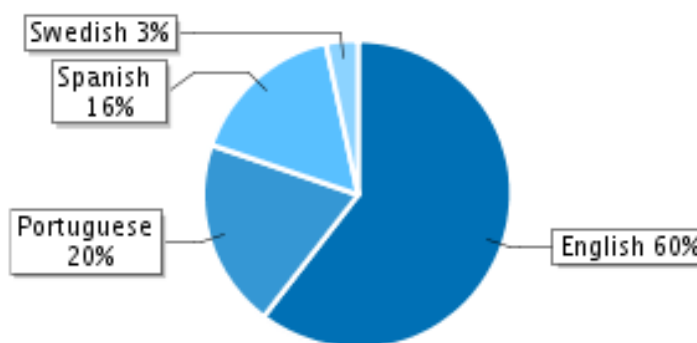


Illustration 1: Sharing of “Gentleman M V” in the social media according to language.²

From this (Illustration 1) it is clear that the reach and consumption of the video is global, and by no means a purely Asian phenomenon, though the music video belongs to the so-called K-pop or Korean-pop subgenre (Holden 2006, 144). The lyrics of the video share a corresponding mixture of Korean and English languages, which, when translated into English, read as follows:

*I don't know if you know why it needs to be hot
I don't know if you know why it needs to be clean
I don't know if you know, it'll be a problem if you're confused
I don't know if you know but we like, we we we like to party
Hey there
If I'm going to introduce myself
I'm a cool guy with courage, spirit and craziness*

What you wanna hear, what you wanna do is me

Damn! Girl! You so freakin sexy!

Ah Ah Ah Ah I'm a...

Ah Ah Ah Ah I'm a...

Ah Ah Ah Ah I'm a mother father gentleman³

The point of this article is that PSY's video can be regarded as a global cultural product, and the focus will be on its use of the term "gentleman". However, the fact that a British concept such as the gentleman is included in a music video with Korean roots cannot be ignored. Despite its inclusion of staged dance numbers, the music video is narrative with an action that can easily be perceived. Its characters and locations are distinguishable and recognizable, and its temporal progression and its causality can be characterized as continuity style. In the first 34 second-long part of the video, whose full length is almost four minutes, PSY dressed in a tuxedo and with an entourage of elderly men, is on a shopping spree buying clothes, not unlike the shopping extravaganza scene in *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990), where Vivian is carrying all her shopping bags and dresses home. During this sequence, PSY fondles the breast of a mannequin, practically without stopping his walk. The men then rest outside the shopping centre with a cup of coffee, while a woman dances behind them, and next PSY dances with another man in a playground and also inside the shopping centre again. The following part of the video is considerably longer, and it shows how the behaviour that was anticipated with the mannequin is developed into extremes, as PSY's behaviour towards the other characters turns rude and physically violent. In a fitness centre, PSY is playing a game on his mobile phone, but he then accelerates the speed of a treadmill so that the woman on it is thrown back on the floor, and he laughs and claps his hands triumphantly. This is also his reaction in the next scene, in which he is holding hands with a woman at a café table only to push her cup with hot coffee into her face. The victim of PSY's pranks in the next scene is a young man. This scene has a lift as its location, and the man needs to go to a bathroom very quickly. PSY, however, pushes all the buttons and delays the lift. The next scene in a library also employs a kind of lavatory humour. PSY farts into his hand and takes the hand with the "gas" directly into the face of a young woman reading there.

She reacts with nausea. As a transition to the next sequence, where PSY's interacts with other people, there is a brief dance scene with PSY, chorus boys and girls dancing the trademark horse-riding dance. The next victims are some young children playing football. PSY kicks their ball away, and they are dismayed. PSY now applies sun tan lotion to a girl in bikini, but he rudely unties her bikini top. Her scared reaction is also apparent here. Out of context, a totally bald man is using a hair dryer, and in a scene PSY is lying on the floor under two young men dancing closely together. At a restaurant, PSY is now leading a girl to a table, and he politely pulls out her chair to help her sit. However, he pulls the chair away under her as she is sitting down, and she falls painfully to the floor. Another man helps her up, only to pull her arm forcefully so that she falls again. He and PSY laugh uproariously as if celebrating their deed. In the third section of the video, the tables seem turned. Using the narrative technique of point of view shots, which can be characterized as the male gaze, the video shows PSY's reactions in slow motion when he observes a young woman working out. He is impressed. He takes off his jacket, throws it into her face and start to push up – but unsuccessfully. Nevertheless, the woman follows him to a market café. Here it is the woman that kicks PSY's chair away so that he falls to the ground. He is impressed, and they have a meal together flirting the whole time. They leave for a long dance sequence, also with people partying in the market café. The location and action change abruptly to an indoor swimming pool where PSY is sitting between two young women who are catapulted into the water. This scene leads to more decorative dance scenes of the Busby Berkeley type with more and more dancers of both genders at different locations, and this is apparently the climatic ending of the video. At least the music stops and there is an animated credit sign, saying "PSY GENTLE MAN". However, the music picks up again and the video continues for around 40 seconds with metafictional outtakes, one out of focus, some showing a cameraman with a steadycam, e.g. filming PSY humping a street lamp pole. Finally, PSY rushes towards a photocopying machine, pushes a woman away from it, photocopies his face, and, in the machines tray, the sign from before is shown in a close-up.

When the action of the video, as summarized above, is compared to the title and lyrics of the song, in which the word "gentleman" is

repeated sixteen times (in addition to being shown twice in the printed sign), it may seem appropriate to characterize the relationship between the lyrics and the visual action as contrapuntal or antagonistic. However, it may not be so simple. First, this relationship is not so close because of the numerous dance scenes in the video. There are more than 20 clips with only dance in them with a total duration of 68 seconds or 30 % of the running time of the video, and dance is also an integral part of many other scenes. The breakdown and interruption of the narrative with these dance sequences and the inclusion of dance in some of the narrative scenes lower the modality of the relationship between lyrics and narrative visuals. The word “gentleman” cannot be seen as contrapuntal anchorage of the visual action. There is no simultaneity between the song’s utterance of “gentleman” and ungentlemanly actions. Only four of the 16 instances of the song’s “gentleman” are timed with these: the farting scene, teasing the children, humping the lamp post, and pushing a woman at the photocopying machine.

The lyrics as a whole may be summarized as the singer’s invitation to a woman to party. His arguments are: “I’ll make you gasp and I’ll make you scream/ Damn! Girl! I’m a party mafia!”; and then “I’m a mother father gentleman”, where “mother father” may seem confusing, unless one is aware of the fact that we are not dealing with parental figures but with a Korean pronunciation of “motherfucking”⁴.

The human voice in the video is neither exclusively non-diegetic nor diegetic. In nine scenes, PSY is seen singing, but he is the only one seemingly aware of the song. In fact, his singing is addressed to the audience through the camera as he gazes directly into it and gesticulates towards it, or the singing is an integral part of the dance. Singing is never addressed towards the other characters, nor do they seem to take notice of it. In many sequences with narrative content (not the dance scenes, obviously), the song is non-diegetic. In some cases, PSY’s mouth is even full of noodles, or it is simply closed. The weak connection between lyrics, especially the word “gentleman” and the visual action seems to rule out the idea that the video is only a manifestation of ungentlemanly behaviour.

Additionally, the meaning of the term “gentleman” may be problematic. The claim that the relationship between the word and the narrative of the video is contrapuntal or antagonistic presupposes a

traditional understanding of the term “gentleman” as a man that behaves in a gentle and considerate way, especially to the other sex. This meaning may not be correct in the context of PSY’s music video “Gentleman”, and therefore the article now considers the term “gentleman”.

The Concept of the Gentleman

Next three contemporary male cultural identity types will be described, and this is in order to position the male behaviour and attitudes of PSY’s “Gentleman” in relation to them. Finally, an explanation of the seemingly parodic treatment of the gendered mores of the music video will be provided.

Etymologically, a gentleman belonged to the English gentry, as a man of gentle birth as found in the derivative word “genteel”. The *OED* defines “gentle”, registered since 1651, as “to ennoble” and “to render mild or pleasant”, but it is described as rare. A more recent dictionary such as *Collins* (1987) doesn’t mention the class aspect, and it defines “gentle” as “kind, mild and pleasantly calm”. In an introductory chapter, “The Gentleman – An Elusive Term”, Christine Berberich questions the meaning of the term: “When we hear the term, we might think of Englishness; of class; of masculinity; of elegant fashions; of manners and morals. But we might also think of hypocrisy; of repression; of outdated behaviour befitting the characters of a Victorian novel, but which no longer holds any value in today’s society” (Berberich 2007, 3). Nevertheless, it becomes clear that the meaning of the term contains two defining aspects, one of class and one of social morals and behaviour. Other sources add to this that it is a British national concept: “A man regarded as having the best British characteristics” (Room 1987, 117). Similarly, Berberich quotes the *Encyclopædia Britannica* from 1929 to point out that the term is lacking in other languages: “the word “gentleman” has supplied a gap in more than one foreign language.” (Berberich 2007, 5) (This is of course relevant to the video, where the word has been inserted into a largely Korean-language text.) This edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* locates the term in the class system: “By courtesy this title is generally accorded to all persons above the rank of common tradesmen”, but also states that the term was moving away from being a distinction of class, to one of social manners:

the Reform Bill of 1832 has done its work; the “middle classes” have come into their own; and the word “gentleman” has come in common use to signify not a distinction of blood but a distinction of position, education and manners. The test is no longer good birth, or the right to bear arms, but the capacity to mingle on equal terms in good society. In its best use, moreover, “gentleman” involves a certain superior standard of conduct, due ... to “that self-respect and intellectual refinement which manifest themselves in unrestrained yet delicate manners”. (Berberich 2007, 9)

Though the term has moved downward in the class system, it nevertheless contains class-defining signals.

Bernhard Roetzel writes in his 360-page coffee table book *Gentleman: A Timeless Guide to Fashion*: “dressing like a gentleman costs not only time, but money as well. An investment in a good garment generally entails further expenditure” (Roetzel 2013, 11), and the book is exclusively about “dressing like a gentleman”, while not being one. In this sense, the concept of the gentleman has moved into fashion and conspicuous consumption. Today the concept of the gentleman can be related to the commercialisation of masculinity.

When the behavioural aspect of the taste and manners of a gentleman is applied to the main character in the music video, glaring discrepancies surface. Compare the video to this description of a gentleman: “The idea of the gentleman comprises so many values – from behaviour and morals to education, social background, the correct attire and table manners” as well as “ancestry, accent, education, deportment, mode of dress, patterns of recreation, type of housing and style of life” (Berberich 2007, p. 5), and PSY’s gentleman does not fulfil these ideals: for instance his table manners consist of pulling a chair away from under a woman. The sartorial aspects of the video, which dominate its prelude and first 30 seconds, are the only characteristics of these retained in “Gentleman M V”, and they are a sign of the kind of upper-class life style that PSY satirized as well as celebrated in his first global hit “Gangnam Style” from 2012⁵. Like Christine Berberich, Philip Mason (Mason 1993) has conducted a survey of the development of the concept of the gentleman. Mason’s empirical sources, like Berberich’s, are not

sociological, but literary, and as in Berberich's work, Mason's conclusion is that the term is changeable. However, he points to the sociological function of the concept, namely that it is an ideal that unifies a nation that is divided by class. Both upper classes and the lower classes have it as an ideal for themselves separately. Nevertheless, it was primarily a necessary attitude for the ruling classes, in order for them to be accepted as rulers, not only in Britain, but it also became an imperial ideal and necessity (Beynon 2002, 29) with long historical roots. In Britain, the history of the concept goes at least back to Chaucer, and the insecure combination of class and morals are included in it:

This the Victorians found ready-made in Chaucer's *gentillesse*, a constellation of morals qualities which ought to go with gentle birth – but doesn't always. Among these were courtesy to women, and more than courtesy, some idealization of women; also generosity, openheartedness, magnanimity. The Victorians added the requirement that the gentleman must be responsible; he must fulfil his obligations and live up to his own standards. (Mason 1993, 12-13).

This description with the demands made to a man to characterize him as a gentleman is negated by the main character in PSY's music video and his actions and behaviour. The question now regards how it is possible to combine the actual content of the video with its lyrics and its title's insistence on the term gentleman. In order to answer this question, the video must be historically contextualized in contemporary male identity roles.

Contemporary Male Identities

In their chapter "Men and Postfeminism", Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon conclude that the contemporary male or "postfeminist man", as they call him, has since the 1980s "display[ed] a compound identity, revealing the fact that numerous representations of masculinity may coexist in new, hybrid forms" (Genz and Brabon 2009, 143) or "bricolage masculinity" (137). This compound is made up of three male types, which share a common denominator: commercialised masculinity (136). These are the new man, the metro-

sexual male and the new lad, and we are going to read PSYs “Gentleman” music video in the light of these male types.

The new man is a further development of the new, nappy-changing and bottle-feeding, caring man of the 1970s, who seemed to have been influenced by and accepting of feminism, so that he participated in the parts of everyday life traditionally placed in a feminine sphere, such a child upbringing and housework. This male type was predominantly Western and middle-class (137). The later development of this new man was that he became a surface phenomenon riding on a wave of changes that had already occurred, so that the newness had become an empty lifestyle signal and a legitimation of consumption.

The metrosexual male, dating from 1994, is described by Mark Simpson as “a young man with money to spend, living within easy reach of a metropolis... He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference” (Simpson 2002). Late capitalism became the period of the metrosexual male, and David Beckham became the icon of this male type. The description of the metrosexual male stressed the consumerist and narcissist aspects more than actual sexual mores. It was the male gaze directed at a brand-conscious self-representation in the mirror more than one directed at other men or at women. The above example from the book *Gentleman: A Timeless Guide to Fashion* illustrates a contemporary relationship based on consumption between the metrosexual male and the gentleman.

The new lad may be regarded as a reaction to second-generation feminism in the sense that this male identity became what may be called pre-feminist in its outlook. This is, however, to simplify matters, as the new lad may also be seen as a reaction against the new man, and it may also be seen as a stratificational as well as a gendered social phenomenon. New lad subculture may be described as post-industrial just as it may be described as pre-feminist. The lifestyle, social manners and characteristics of new laddism can be compared to historical industrial working-class, male culture, as chronicled by Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy*, from 1957. Hoggart described a close-knit working-class culture as it was disappearing, with its pubs, football matches, and working-man clubs, but also its

regressive tendencies such as domestic and neighbourhood violence in a chapter called “‘Us’ - *The Best and the Worst of It*”:

We frequently hear that the English working-classes are gentle, gentler than those of almost any other country, gentler today than their own parents and grandparents. Undoubtedly there has been a decrease in the amount of sheer brutality in the towns during the last fifty years, a decline in the rough and savage stuff which sometimes made the streets at night and particularly at week-ends places to avoid. The hooliganism and rowdyism, which caused the police to work in pairs in several areas of many towns have almost gone. We no longer hear, except very occasionally, of bare-fist fights on bits of wasteground, of broken-bottle fights inside bars, of regular assaults by gangs on girls at fairgrounds, of so much animal drunkenness. (Hoggart 1957/1973, 86-87)

Though the new lad has adopted some of these early and historical male attitudes and behaviour, he has also assimilated postmodern irony in his social signalling of them, so that he can celebrate super-annuated patriarchal social mores and privileges without embracing responsibilities, as for instance signing up as a family breadwinner. The magazine *Loaded* (<http://loaded.co.uk/>) illustrates the cultural preferences of this male subculture with articles such as “Casino Royale: Who’s Your Favourite Bond Girl?”⁶ and features such as “Hot Girls with Fantasy Derrieres!”⁷ combined with considerably more images than text. (In fact, the text for this feature is “Martin Luther King had a dream once. It wasn’t about women’s backsides though. We also have a dream. And in our world it’s definitely okay if they contain fantasy derrieres. That is all.”)

Conclusion: The Post-feminist Man as a Gentleman

It is the argument of this article that PSY’s “Gentleman” is a conglomerate of the last two of these contemporary male identity types, the metrosexual male and the new lad. It is overstating the point to claim that PSY is a global representative of what Genz and Brabon calls the postfeminist man:

In many ways, the “postfeminist man” could be described as the “new lad” grown up or a less sensitive “new man”. Moreover, although the “postfeminist man” is heterosexual, he is style- and brand-conscious, while being slightly bitter about the “wounded” status of his masculinity, which has been affected by second wave feminism. He is a melting pot of masculinities, blending a variety of contested positions, as well as a chameleon figure still negotiating the ongoing impact of feminism on his identity. (2009, 143)

Rather, a more nuanced understanding of PSY’s gentleman can be reached if we return to the patriarchal or pre-feminist concept of the gentleman that had two sides or aspects, the social and the moral. Socially and stratificationally, a gentleman belonged to the upper classes. This allowed a habitus and life style where attire and other signs of wealth were conspicuous and iconic. This aspect of the gentleman is repeated in the metrosexual male, and it is repeated in the video with its shopping spree and most of its settings of consumption. The other aspect of the gentleman, the moral one, described as involving “a certain superior standard of conduct, due ... to that self-respect and intellectual refinement which manifest themselves in unrestrained yet delicate manners” (Berberich 2007, 9) is glaringly absent from the video. It has been replaced by the morals and manners of the new lad. Understood in this way, the version of the ‘post-feminist man’ represented in PSY’s “Gentleman” music video manages to incorporate these two contemporary male identities so that the result is a negation of the gentleman. The video is “negotiating the ongoing impact of feminism on... male identity” (Genz and Brabon 2009, 143). The “gentleman” in PSY’s video does not only celebrate consumption, while attacking women, also physically, on the way; he is also a parodic manifestation on the moral manners of a superannuated gentleman, replacing him with a new lad, which is the bearer of commodification of masculinity.

Conspicuous consumption unites the three contemporary male types described in the article, and the upper-class Gangnam style of shopping and luxurious leisure depicted in PSY’s “Gentleman M V” may be said to reflect and even promote this kind of life style so that it overshadows the moral aspects of gentlemanly behaviour.

The form of the video with its interrupted narrative progression gives low modality to its content through the constant insertion of around twenty dance scenes. Because of this low modality, the relationship between the lyrics and the visuals cannot be characterized as one of direct anchorage, and it cannot be seen as antagonistic or contrapuntal either. The video is not just a manifestation of ungentlemanly behaviour. It actually manages to have it both ways: it promotes the metrosexual male through consumption, and it also celebrates the new lad through the behaviour of PSY. Through this combination, it negates the class aspect of the traditional gentleman. Where the narrative form of the music video reformulates the concept of the gentleman in this way, its mode of distribution with a Korean music video on YouTube also changes the gentleman from a national British icon to a global one. "Gentleman M V" has managed to produce a new kind of gentleman that reflects the ongoing negotiation of different male, social identities.

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- 2 http://viralvideochart.unrulymedia.com/youtube?id=ASO_zypdnsQ, accessed 25 January 2014.
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