

Literature and Cultural Studies Honours Project

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Squid Game in untangling Capitalist Realism: the disruptive potential of anticapitalist literature

Introduction

Whether on social media or on official news platforms, increasing volumes of research has been indicating a growing trend towards anticapitalist ideology in popular culture, particularly among the younger generations in Western countries nowadays. For instance, several news platforms such as The Washington Post (Ehrenfreund, 2016) and The Conversation (Blasi & Kruse, 2018) have reported on the 2016 Harvard University survey that showed 51 percent of American youth (aged 18 to 29) no longer support capitalism. This was a stark contrast to a 2010 Gallup poll which found that only 38 percent of young people had a negative view of capitalism even around the time of the Great Recession (ibid.). In the UK, more younger Britons are also moving towards the leftwing spectrum with The Guardian (Jones, 2021) reporting that more than 70% of them blame capitalism for the housing crisis and climate emergency. Overall, nearly 70% of young Britons would prefer to live under a socialist economic system according to a 2021 study reported by the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA) (as cited in Jones, 2021). However, the surge of anticapitalist sentiment in popular culture has also led to its commodification with the rise of anticapitalist merchandise as well as entertainment. For instance, South Korean film *Parasite* claimed several Oscars in 2020 for its critique of class conflict and wealth inequality, one of the few non-Western films to break through the international platform with its timely themes, particularly in the time of the global Covid-19 outbreak. Netflix's Spanish TV series *Money Heist* also became the most in-demand show globally across all platforms according to Parrot Analytics (as cited in Clark, 2021).

However, among the growing number of anticapitalist entertainment shows as of today, Netflix's recent hit show *Squid Game* quickly became the most notable example when it first aired in

September, 2021, overtaking even *Money Heist*'s position as the most-watched non-English TV show of all time in the first 28 days of its release (Tejendra, 2021). Directed by Hwang Dong-Hyuk, the South Korean drama explicitly illustrates the popular negative narrative of oppressive class conditions and capitalist-driven economic desperation using the popular trope of a survival game show. The story takes place in modern day South Korea where 456 people in deep financial debt risk their lives to participate in a game show organized by wealthy VIPs and play six fatal children's games for a small chance of winning 4.56 billion won. The overt portrayal of plutocrats taking advantage of the dire economic conditions of the players to compel them into playing their games has been one of the show's selling points as it attempts to portray current social realities and anxieties that stem from predatory capitalism. Despite the more apparent references to South Korean socio-economic issues such as the local personal debt crisis exceeding that of South Korea's GDP (Kim, 2021), the unequal circumstances made possible by a hegemonic capitalist system is one even global audiences could relate to. Indeed, Hwang (Jefferies, 2021) himself stated that his intention was to convey a message of contemporary capitalism and rising global economic inequities that would resonate with the masses, particularly with its palpable effects on the impoverished during the pandemic. Hence, it is no surprise that *Squid Game* achieved international success due to its opportune and relatable themes.

However, the extent of *Squid Game*'s international popularity was unprecedented despite the underwhelming response from the domestic audiences in South Korea (Kim, 2021). While there were mixed reactions from South Korean viewers to *Squid Game*, there was seemingly an ubiquitous and enthusiastic reception from the international market as demonstrated by Netflix's public popularity charts (as cited in Solsman, 2021) that reveal that Netflix subscribers globally watched 2.1 billion total hours of *Squid Game* in the first month of its release. In comparison, the No.2 most streamed show *Bridgerton* on Netflix, at 625 million hours watched, comprised less than half of first-month viewership of *Squid Game* (ibid.). With more than 142 million subscribers tuning into the show in the first month, its popularity even outranked *Game of Thrones*' most-watched episode by more than 7 times (Evans, 2021). Other popular anti capitalist media, particularly those which use the game concept similar to *Squid Game* and the show is often compared to, such as Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* or the Japanese thriller

Battle Royale, have also captured international attention in times of their release but *Squid Game* has captured the cultural zeitgeist on an exceptional level with its memeability as well as the show inspired fashion and merchandise such as the surge of interest in Van footwear and uniforms as worn by the characters as well as Dalgona candy (Ragavan, 2021).

However, despite the show's immense popularity and the majority of articles published on *Squid Game*'s fame depicting a positive portrayal of the show as a sociopolitical critique on late stage capitalism, a growing number of journalistic criticism has also noted *Squid Game*'s role in commodifying anticapitalism. For instance, *Squid Game* was said to encourage viewers to passively engage in moralistic disdain for capitalism-as-brutality rather than inciting active resentment and the urge for resistance as felt by the South Korean laborers in the 2009 strike against car factory owners (O'Neill, 2021).

As posited by Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism* (as cited in Ikeda, 2021), "precorporation" describes the preemptive tendency of mainstream media to convert any form of political subversion into a harmless commodity, thus emptying it of any subversive potential. And as famously quoted in his book, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (p.2). Indeed, the show provides an elaborate dramatisation of capitalist economic order under the vision of juxtaposing the sadistic rich and the doomed poor. However, it doesn't offer any scene of class rebellion nor escape for the impoverished players from economic desperation or life-and-death games. Hence, there seems to be no alternative system nor economic reality provided for the characters in the story as well as us in our actuality.

This is reminiscent of Fisher's definition of capitalist realism that holds the predominant notion that the only feasible economic system is capitalism with no other conceivable alternative (Fisher, 2009) and hence, its effects involve the conversion of anticapitalism as the opposing force to capitalism to the very ideology that reinforces capitalism. As Fisher notes in *Capitalist Realism* (2009), capitalism flourishes under the media-produced gestural anti-capitalism with the notion that if we believe that "capitalism is bad", we retain the autonomy to participate in continuous capitalist exchange.

In *Squid Game*'s case, it could be argued that it serves as an example of such gestural anti-capitalist media by diminishing anti-capitalist ideology into safe-for-consumption concepts that not only allows viewers to engage in and hence satiate their anticapitalist desire on screen but also deter them from challenging the system. Ergo, even billionaires such as the likes of Jeff Bezos feel safe praising such anti-capitalist pop culture media, the irony of which hasn't been overlooked by many entertainment news platforms (Jain, 2021). Indeed, as Fisher argues, the naturalisation of socioeconomic inequities as nurtured by capitalism - and disregarding the role of the political economy - has produced a sense of "reflexive impotence" that describes people's feelings of helplessness in bringing about change despite acknowledging the flaws of capitalism (ibid.), a concept the plutocrats are aware of and often take advantage of.

Regardless of this contention, *Squid Game* has also been demonstrating its potential as an anticapitalist medium by actually witnessing its palpable influence on the political realities of the world. For instance, despite no apparent message of rebellious uprisings against the privileged elites in the show, *Squid Game* nevertheless has, to a certain degree, incited real-world political resistance among the underdogs of society exemplified by South Korean workers taking advantage of the show's immense popularity to protest for better employment conditions in *Squid Game* costumes (Kwon, 2021). Another example includes a *Squid Game* themed protest staged by climate change activists during the COP26 summit in Glasgow with a message to the world leaders: "Stop playing climate games." (Brazell, 2021). Despite the derivative "Battle Royale game" genre and the marketable anticapitalist narrative *Squid Game* follows, *Squid Game* demonstrated a direct and immediate impact on their viewers, albeit on a relatively smaller scale, unlike other anticapitalist pop culture films and television which were not as successful in expanding on their desire for political resistance beyond a commercial strategy or the screen, even many of those with better written plots and more innovative ideas. There has undoubtedly also been a certain and discernible degree of active political engagement from *Squid Game*'s viewers all around the world in response to the show, from South Korean labor protests to Glasgow's climate change activism. Hence, this raises a number of questions that this research aims to explore, such as:

- 1. To what extent does *Squid Game* represent the concept of “gestural form of anti-capitalism” as Mark Fisher states in *Capitalist Realism*?**
- 2. Why is *Squid Game* so readily adaptable to different cultural contexts?**
- 3. To what extent does *Squid Game* have the capacity to extend beyond its role of maintaining the capitalist order and serve as a genuine inspiration for political action?**

As Lois Tyson describes, the reader-response theory in the field of literary theory and criticism foregrounds the role of the readers in the meaning construction of a literary text as reader-response theorists hold 2 main convictions: “(1) that the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and (2) that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text” (Tyson, 2014). *Squid Game*’s reading can also be supplemented by John Downing’s definition of alternative media as radical media in communicating a visionary alternative to the Gramscian hegemony of politics, fundamental concerns and positions (as cited in Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010). As Sandoval & Fuchs (2010) explain, Downing does not necessitate radical media to also double as participatory media. On the other hand, Tim O’Sullivan (as cited in Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010) defines alternative media as communicative forms that attempt to resist or confront institutional politics by demanding for change or at the very least, a critical reevaluation of conventional political values. Hence, through this approach, I argue that *Squid Game*’s meaning has, to a certain scale, extended beyond the superficial and gestural form of anti-capitalist entertainment with no vision of political alternatives to the capitalist order to a more tangible and meaningful work of literature that holds political relevance to a significant portion of its audiences.

I hope to explore the research questions as stated above in the attempt to substantiate my main argument as informed by Mark Fisher’s theory of *Capitalist Realism* (2009) and Mike Watson’s *The Memeing of Mark Fisher* (2021). This will be done by firstly exploring particular aspects of the programme such as plot, characterisation and theme to determine *Squid Game*’s disruptive and/or subversive potential as an anticapitalist text and critical media in conjunction with Fisher’s concept of a “gestural form of anticapitalism”. The factors contributing to *Squid Game*’s meteoric popularity will also be examined, particularly in terms of its memeability in the increasingly globalized online landscape, in order to approach *Squid Game*’s dual role as a

critical literary medium and a meme repository that has the unique potential to agitate public consciousness from dormancy and catalyze political actions in search for alternatives.

Indeed, distinctive elements of the show such as the symbolism of *Squid Game* costumes has diversified in its meanings to its viewers, from a symbol of an ingroup identifier to a symbol of political resistance. However, despite the acknowledgement of the varied impacts of *Squid Game* on its audiences and the society, not much on the contributing factors of its effects, particularly on its relevance to political protests and resistance as well as its adaptability to different cultural contexts, has been discussed or established. Furthermore, in spite of connections drawn between *Squid Game* and other anti-capitalist pop culture texts, particularly using the Battle Royale-sque game genre, due to the recency of *Squid Game*'s release, there is still a paucity in comprehensive comparative analysis between *Squid Game* and similar shows and how *Squid Game* stands distinct in its conception and reception from them. Therefore, this research hopes to shed light on the questions as established in the introduction section that may also hopefully begin to answer where the trend of anticapitalist pop culture fiction is heading in this current sociocultural climate.

Discussion:

1. *Squid Game* as Capitalist Hell

Squid Game, according to numerous critics' claims, offers a harsh critique of modern day capitalism with a Jacobin reporter contending that "*Squid Game* Is An Allegory of Capitalist Hell" with a strong motif of Korea's extreme inequality (Clark, 2021). A New York Times review also noted its resonance with even the US public where ever widening income disparity and unaffordably high property prices render prosperity in such developed and wealthy nations as an unattainable dream (Young, 2021).

1.1 Good Participants VS Evil VIPs

Indeed, the show's creator Hwang Dong-Hyuk went to great lengths to depict a stark portrayal of what he saw to be the contemporary capitalist society as an "extreme competition of life" (Frater, 2021), most evidently by staging the main part of the series as a game show in the most literal

sense, where greatly indebted and cash strapped individuals are gambling with their lives to earn millions in cash. The show, particularly known for its overt notion of wealth disparity, is abundant with glaring symbols of capitalist excess - such as the lavish decor of the box where the gold masked VIPs sat to spectate and bet on the games or even the giant piggy bank filled with stacks of cash as prize money that the winner and sole survivor of the game can take home - juxtaposed with the players whose tales of destitution is made narratively explicit. These stories include that of the show's protagonist Seong Gihun, a divorced and recently unemployed gambling addict surviving off of his elderly mother's meager income, has accumulated a massive debt from loan sharks and is losing his daughter due to his inability to financially support her which forces his hand in participating in the Squid Games. Another crucial and round character, Ali Abdul, is an illegal immigrant whose exploitation from unpaid labor and desperation to support his family led him to joining the Games as well. Meanwhile, the VIP antagonists are flat characters who remain masked throughout their short scene and only serve the purpose of gambling with these financially disadvantaged contestants' lives and deriving sadistic pleasure in their suffering. In presenting the ethical dichotomy of pitiful and rounded protagonists with contemptible flat antagonists, there is an indication of the production team's underlying message that these are the villains of the story and hence, deserve no support from the show's viewers unlike the participants whose only crime was being poor - hence, arousing sympathy. Furthermore, adding these personal tragedies of economic desperation for the effect of emotional intensity to their contrast with these overt yet sterile symbols of capital surplus and the one-dimensional capitalist villain as a crude and flagrant message of such disparity.

1.2 Good Oh Il-Nam's betrayal

Even participant 001 Oh Il-Nam's character, morally complicated by the reveal of his alternate yet true identity as the host and creator of *Squid Game*, is used to manipulate and ultimately work against the participants, thus, reducing the bond he created with Gihun to a mere form of entertainment and gameplay. His motive for creating this dual identity and the games is simply due to boredom, a concept that would anger both the audience and the participants whose lives were toyed with as it implies not only the disregard for human lives but also the nonchalance for self-preservation only he could afford as both the participant and host of this game. Hence, these depictions of an unrelenting defeat of the unfair competition is a direct invitation for viewers to

feel resentment against the unjust capitalist society that fosters exploitation, poverty, subjugation and desperation of the impoverished on their behalf.

1.3.1 Squid Game as Capitalist Realism

However, an interesting aspect to note about *Squid Game* is not only its attempts to depict an unfair capitalist society but also the reality it has built to maintain the existing ideology and systems in place. As Mark Fisher famously quotes Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek in *Capitalist Realism* (2009), “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (p.2), referring to how our current state of the world cannot even imagine a coherent political-economic alternative to capitalism which has established itself as the only viable system. Indeed, *Squid Game* is an exemplary portrayal of a system-as-game designed to keep you in your place and offering you no other alternatives to mindless participation in its play. In the show, despite the various injustices and torment imposed upon the game participants both in the real world and within the game, *Squid Game*’s narrative never challenges the system and the players don’t even reveal an inkling of consideration for changing their situation. They’re completely trapped in a dystopian landscape where leaving their world of debt and poverty is unimaginable to the point where Cho Sang-Woo nearly commits suicide before being offered the alternative to rejoining the *Squid Game*. Even when presented as an alternative, *Squid Game* seeks to confine and model the real-world capitalist system wherein the rich control the narrative of the contestants’ reality by reducing their identity to a collective of identical uniforms and numbers, keeping civilian control with armed masked guards in their symbolic pink uniforms and using deathly games to dehumanize them to nothing more than spectacles for entertainment. Fisher goes on to describe capitalist realism as a reality that brings forth a “deeper, far more pervasive, sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility.” This is certainly demonstrated in the elaborate yet sterile setup of the hallways as a big, convoluted maze that appears to serve the purpose of distraction and disorientation so as to demoralize and even suppress ideas of escape or resistance. The big empty dorms, bereft of any sense of homeliness and comfort, and the fast procession of games that often pit friends and loved ones against each other, particularly in the game of marbles, deprive people of friendship and support as well as render any feelings of hope or action pointless. In fact, the theme of hopelessness under capitalist subjugation becomes more pronounced as ingroup fighting is even encouraged when Jang Deok-su and his

gang of the game come to realize personal elimination of other participants will speed up the pace of the games. The gangster, in his act of killing and subordinating other players, only ends up as another pawn maintaining the order of the game.

However, one distinctive feature about *Squid Game* separating it from other similar anticapitalist pop culture texts that critics have noted is the game's offer of ostensible voluntary participation with contractual binding rather than direct coercion to involve the participants and the liberty to leave with a majority vote. However, this fails to note the subtle coercion and control at play in the careful selection of the most underprivileged, and hence, powerless players and how they are stalked until their weakest moments to offer them a chance to return to the game when they had all left. For instance, the *Squid Game* card slides under the door for Sang-Woo during the scene of his attempted suicide after the news of the possible government seizure of all his mother's assets or for Gihun whose mother is in urgent need for surgery, both of whose circumstances force them back into the game. Here, we perhaps see the most likely example of *Squid Game* as an allegory of the capitalist system which purports the ideals of the free market and will but also toils away at removing that very choice from the disadvantaged.

1.3.2 Passive consumers of Capitalist Realism

Indeed, whatever the degree of the anticapitalist principle a pop culture text attempts to demonstrate, Fisher argues that contrary to subverting capitalism, these examples of gestural anti-capitalism rather feed into it (p.12). In the case of *Squid Game*, just like how Mark Fisher pointed out the role of the cinema audience as the object of the satire in his example of Wall-E as a gestural anti-capitalist text (p.12), *Squid Game*'s viewers are also invited to interact with the story as the VIPs, participating in the spectatorship of the unknowing participants from a distance and prompting us to ponder over the act of deriving pleasure from watching this show as well as the role of the VIPs and the capitalist society in the suffering and harm done to the game participants. After all, we too, as VIPs and as the audience, are betting on who is going to win and survive these brutal games at the expense of morality and humanity. However, the audience's participation in the anticapitalist media doesn't challenge capitalist realism but actually reinforces it. As Robert Pfaller describes the state of 'interpassivity' (as cited in Fisher, 2009, p.12), in performing our anti-capitalist ideals for us, the film enables us to continue our

consumption with impunity. Or as Fisher maintains about Slavoj Žižek's enlightening view, "as long as we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange"(ibid. p.13). Just as Žižek predicted, no massive structural changes to the status quo have emerged since the release of all these anticapitalist pop culture texts including *Squid Game*. Hence, in this sense, *Squid Game* can be regarded as only a gestural form of anticapitalism due to the majority audiences whose values of passive political engagement and impunitive consumption remain mostly unchanged.

1.4 Squid Game as resisting Capitalist Realism

On the other hand, despite *Squid Game* not offering any alternative vision to replace the oppressive capitalist reality, its critique of the existing societal conditions, which also facilitated by its popularity, has at least generated discussions that problematise the capitalist hegemony as it remains. This is particularly prevalent in South Korea but also the global imagination as seen online. For instance, Ali Abdul's representation of an exploited migrant worker in South Korea has opened up a platform for conversation regarding the exploitation and abuse of the migrant laborer population, particularly in the mainstream media (Chen, 2021; Renka, 2021; Venkatraman, 2021). Concurrently, Cho Sang-Woo's story of a suicidal debt-ridden man on the run from the police has also rendered the massive personal debt crisis in South Korea more visible, with local citizens sharing their stories of the familiar debt traps they fell into and the struggle to stay afloat (Kim & McCurry, 2021; "No Squid Game", 2021). On one hand, these stories can be seen as a tacit acceptance of the harsh capitalist reality as they never seem to resist the very systems that subdue them, and hence, we as the audience should internalize our lack of capacity for resistance against our existing socioeconomic order as well. On the other hand, it is this very portrayal of a miserable existence under such conditions that has the potential to discomfort the viewers in the complacency of the systems in place. Perhaps *Squid Game*'s strength lies not in that it offers an alternative to capitalism but in that it resists the system by presenting its failures in the harrowingly revealing of ways. After all, despite how performative anticapitalism has been on the rise, so has our potential to subvert this very narrative. And hence, the first step of subversion is realizing that real change is only possible with overcoming the sense of helplessness integral to maintaining capitalist realism.

1.5.1 Netflix's role as producer

While *Squid Game* is lauded for its critique of the current capitalist state, a number of critics have also highlighted its ironic role as a curated commodity of the culture industry, designed for the sole purpose of generating profit. Hence, an illuminating question arises from this discussion: what are the reasons behind Netflix, a multibillionaire production company and certainly part of the capitalist elite, opting to produce an evidently anticapitalist pop culture text antithetical to their operation?

A Refinery29 (Pitcher, 2021) review answers a part of it by noting *Squid Game*'s success following those with a similar radically anticapitalist message: there's indubitably a growing market demand for this genre. Indeed, it is not surprising to witness growing resentment in the midst of the globally rising economic inequality and ecological catastrophes and currently, the pandemic as well, and therefore, facilitating the growth in popularity of anticapitalist mentality. Just as Fisher pointed out hip hop's easy assimilation into "the reality of late capitalist economic instability" (p.10) due to its promise of disseminating the uncompromising truth about the world that has proven highly marketable, that same anticapitalist sentiment touting authenticity has taken such root in mainstream pop culture nowadays that it has become even more profitable for media corporations to essentially sell this repackaged ideology-as-commodity back to us. After all, "nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV", an idea of anticapitalist media's success that Netflix, the largest streaming corporation, was careful to take advantage of and recreate their own pastiche of it of what previous shows like the Hunger Games or the SnowPiercer have offered.

1.5.2 Netflix production vs critical media

However, does *Squid Game*'s connection to Netflix in terms of production process and economic interest devalue its central theme of capitalist critique? This is one possible interpretation as numerous critical political economists do insist that media can hardly assume the simultaneous role of being a commercial commodity and critical content (Garnham, 2006; Knoche, 2003). After all, corporate financing, as they argue, can result in standardized ideological content that preempts potential resistance, due to the dependencies on the elite class for production and

distribution. However, Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) posited that the framework of this argument lies on a basic “deterministic cause effect model of base-superstructure” where culture is entirely shaped by the economic base (P.20). In contrast, a “dialectical model of base-superstructure” determines both positions to be mutually productive, interdependent and, to a certain degree, self-determining (Fuchs, 2008, P. 62-71). Hence, commercial funding as the base and critical content as superstructure need not necessarily be incompatible (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010). In this sense, *Squid Game*’s integral economic affiliation with Netflix does not need to detract from its anticapitalist narrative of our modern day societal conditions.

1.6 Double role of Squid Game

Marcuse acknowledged that the notion of “working against the established institutions, while working in them” (as cited in Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010, P.21) carries the risk of falling into the interests of these very establishments. However, under the existing conditions of capitalist hegemony, using these financial resources offers the only possible solution to leave their marginalized position and expand the socio-political influence of alternative media. As Marcuse asserted, the development of radical, autonomous media necessitates its competitive capacity in order to acquire sufficient funds to manage effective “counterinstitutions”; this inevitably requires “compromises” (as cited in Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010, P.22). It is undoubtedly true that *Squid Game*’s critical content is, to a certain extent, mediated by the economic interests of their producers but the argument that commercial media such as *Squid Game* cannot be considered critical as well also reduces every other anticapitalist text and media down to a commodity and its theoretical and subversive potential not worth beyond its entertainment value. This is debatable considering popular anticapitalist texts with a more explicitly critical and complex content such as the *Hunger Games* and *Parasite* generated a lot of discussion about capitalism and class struggle and even *Squid Game* has been adapted as an inspiration for numerous political protests. However, more fundamentally, this undermines the transformative potential of literature itself by reducing it to its economic value, and hence, implying that it is not worth critically engaging with. As Northrop Fyre insisted, the study of literature is the fundamental method through which we can “educate the imagination” (as cited in Tally, 2022, p.1). Only by liberating and engaging the imagination, Fyre argued, can we improve our lives and the world by challenging the repressive and tedious effects of the government and the economic systems so as

to reinforce our autonomy as individuals and, in a broader sense, community (ibid. p.1). Hence, by yielding to the attempts of restricting the imagination or impairing literature's ability to empower the imagination, one would be capitulating to the foe of literary criticism that argues for everything to be taken at face value (ibid. p.2). But more importantly, one would also be opposing the very ideals for which Fisher felt incentivized to write *Capitalist Realism*; in understanding that the capitalist reality has become unescapable, one must contend with the structure from within and our complicity in maintaining it through critique which can, hence, galvanize us to demand for concrete change.

2. Reasons behind Squid Game's unprecedented success

Even so, the common verdict of *Squid Game* remains that of a pastiche of previous anticapitalist pop culture shows and with perhaps an even weaker direction as it lacks the class struggle or rebellion narrative portrayed in *Hunger Games* or *Parasite*. If this was the case, why was its success then so indisputably groundbreaking and ubiquitous on a global scale?

2.1 Global resonance of anticapitalist sentiment

As stated previously, numerous news sources point to the relatability and timeliness of the show's central theme of economic inequality and unpredictability for its meteoric rise, such as South Korea's battle with its local personal debt crisis and the international community contending with record economic disparity, particularly in times of a global pandemic (Frater, 2021; Kim, 2021). Indeed, the show's efforts to resonate with the masses is also exemplified in the detailed accounts of the characters' backgrounds. For instance, the vivid visual imagery of Gihun's story of unresolved trauma presented in a flashback sequence from the time of his involvement at a labor strike at his old automobile company occupation aims to reflect the composite experience of the laid-off workers at the 2009 SSangyang Motors strike who were met with violent suppression and even death (Lee, 2021). Meanwhile, Ali's story of a struggling foreign immigrant attracts visibility to the rather significant problem of migrant labor exploitation and poor working conditions (Venkatraman, 2021).

2.2 Squid Game's memeability

However, another illuminating dimension to *Squid Game*'s explosive virality that has caught the attention of mainstream media - albeit to a slightly lesser degree - is its memeability. According to Richard Dawkins (1976) who is credited with the first conception of the term, a meme is a unit of information including ideas and cultural phenomena that is often transmitted via self-replication and transformation within a community and, nowadays due to the rise of interconnectivity via the internet, across cultures. Webster's New World College Dictionary (as cited in Denveniste, 2022) supplements the definition of the meme by noting its potential to mutate due to influences "in a way analogous to natural selection". As Jennifer Nycz, an associate professor of linguistic studies at Georgetown University, asserts, memes are essentially a form of communication or knowledge creation as their development, particularly in semantics, also depend on the co-construction by users in the social context of the online world. She elaborates that the communicative purpose of memes is particularly crucial in the understanding of it as they are specifically constructed to be posted on a global platform for commentary. Indeed, this form of mimetic capacity was particularly notable in the case of *Squid Game* as exemplified in NBC News's reporting of (Rosenblatt, 2021) *Squid Game*'s snowball effect of popularity that emerged with word-of-mouth exposure on social media quickly followed by an outburst of memes. However, although *Parasite*'s success followed a similar trajectory of viva voce dissemination and high critic and audience praise that offered it a social media presence (Lodge, 2019), the extent of its mimetic quality lagged behind *Squid Game*'s which even saw to the internet breakdown in South Korea and a consequential lawsuit against Netflix due to the overwhelming traffic surge due to *Squid Game* (Pesce, 2021). For instance, numerous *Squid Game*-inspired TikTok and Twitter challenges emerged as masses of fans attempted to replicate the games including the dalgona candy game and even led to the conception of a dalgona candy TikTok filter where users can try out the game themselves. The Red Light, Green Light game also inspired many filters and videos on Instagram and TikTok, and there were countless more out-of-context memes and GIFs based on *Squid Game* scenes and characters cropping out all over social media, signaling its ascent to a sensation status worth far more than its \$21.4 million production budget — and indeed Netflix has estimated earnings of approximately \$900 million from the show.

According to The New York Times (Benveniste, 2022), the act of meme creation and distribution fosters an impression of community for the show's fans while simultaneously maintaining a sense of exclusivity. Indeed, this was also reflected in the case of *Squid Game*, where memes brought together an international community of fans through humor and also provided an impetus for the emergence of social and political commentary. For instance, a majority of the *Squid Game* memes were created for light humor, some poking fun at the characters and others appropriating scenes from the show to fit another relatable context while others attempted to produce political commentary about the show as well as the current state of world affairs. After all, as Saint Hoax states, memes hold the capacity to encapsulate insight that is in total alignment with the zeitgeist with humor (ibid.). On the other hand, *Squid Game*-inspired memes also did serve a possibly contradictory function of inevitably promoting exclusivity, as it did exclude the minority non-viewers of *Squid Game* from understanding and hence, participating in the mainstream meme production and circulation. However, a likely impact of *Squid Game*'s exclusivity was the stimulation of non-viewers' curiosity and interest, inciting them to watch the show rather than not due to the innate human desire to belong to the exclusive community as well, particularly for the younger generation who are constantly online and familiar with the internet meme culture and in-group exclusivity of online communities.

As expected, large corporations and influencers also sought to capitalize on *Squid Game*'s fame as well, with big brands such as Heineken and Pepsi adding their logo to the dalgona candy game on social media, with the latter captioning "IYKYK" on their post (Andrews, 2021). For the corporations, this could be argued to serve dual functions of: 1. advocating an authentic and relatable brand personality that demonstrated solidarity with the younger crowd of millennials and Gen Z and 2. distracting consumers from the commodification of this parasocial interaction. This is not a new cultural phenomenon as many have noted the shift of brand ideals to create emotional connections with their customers in order to gain customer loyalty in an increasingly competitive market other than wanting to enter a new market (Taylor, 2016). Developing a brand personality where they can be identified as a friend rather than a corporation has been facilitated more so by subtly immersing the youth culture of meme production and circulation. To what extent these brands succeeded in achieving their goals is debatable, however, this arouses the

question of the factors behind *Squid Game*'s high mimetic quality that facilitated its exponential growth in popularity.

2.2.1 Factors behind *Squid Game*'s memeability

2.2.1.1 Recognisable and replicable imagery

Part of it may be due to its striking and distinguishable yet highly replicable imagery and symbols, according to the senior editor of Pop Insider (as cited in Pesce, 2021), for instance, the easily recognisable teal green players' tracksuits with their numbers stamped on the back, the hot-pink jumpsuit uniforms of the guards whose masks also share the same three circle/triangle/square shapes on the enigmatic recruitment card and the show's logo. As she elaborates, "[t]his makes 'Squid Game' perfect fodder for fan tributes, social media challenges, cosplay, and merchandise." Notwithstanding *Parasite*'s high memeability that also saw to the insurgence of its memes on social media, for instance, the "Jessica Jingle" chant-turned-ringtones (Lodge, 2019), *Squid Game* encompassed the true essence of being meme fodder, with *Squid Game* being the most Google-searched for Halloween costumes in 2021 and Netflix even featuring its own official *Squid Game* merchandise. According to Areum Jeong (as cited in Pesce, 2021), assistant professor of humanities at Sichuan University-Pittsburgh Institute, other than word-of-mouth publicity, "eye-catching memes and TikTok challenges posted by 'Squid Game's' marketing team and early viewers" attracted the attention of the public previously unacquainted with the show, and hence, converting "the striking costumes, objects and symbols" into in-group visual references they could then completely comprehend despite language barriers for most and enjoy on social media after watching it.

2.2.1.2 Adaptability of the game concept

Another aspect to the success of *Squid Game*'s mimetic virality is its ubiquitous adaptability and thrill of the game concept. Described as "gamification" of the world in *Squid Game* by a CNN review (Lowe, 2021), the Korean children's games, though presented as high stakes in the show, are actually quite simple and easy to recreate, and the element of child-like fun is more pronounced without the sense of looming danger. This holds particularly true for the more viral games such as Red Light, Green Light and the Dalgona candy challenges, games already known

to entertain well even before the release of the show. Indeed, what *Squid Game* excels at here is adapting these tried-and-true children's games to fit their narrative of the show which are also highly effective at entertaining their players beyond the context of the show and perhaps even sans the familiarity and nostalgia they may induce for some Korean viewers. What also facilitated the show's mimetic aspect of the game concept was its incorporation of the visual identity of the iconic yet simple circle/triangle/square shapes that was already associated with gaming, which reinforced viewers' memory and capacity to remember the show.

2.2.1.3 Globalization of pop culture and memes

But ultimately, the bigger picture of what makes *Squid Game* a universally adaptable show is the ever expanding globalized pop cultural landscape and the very nature of memes itself as contagious and borderless. Saint Hoax, a well-known meme creator, asserts “[t]he power of a meme lies in its transmissibility and unique knack for being cross-cultural” (Benveniste, 2022) while another streaming source points to the growing phenomenon of younger audiences who grew up with the internet seeing geographical borders differently than how people once used to (Horner, 2021). Indeed, it is the convergence and interaction of these two facets that produce the appropriate conditions for the unique cross-cultural online environment that *Squid Game* flourishes in, as meme culture accelerates the development of the latter. In other words, the growing internationalization of the pop cultural landscape is escalated by social media platforms such as TikTok in which the mimetic culture of sharing pop cultural references and recommendations among its global audience thrives (ibid.). In the case of *Squid Game*, the immense popularity of the Dalgona candy challenge on Tiktok that amassed over 58 million views also inevitably helped catapult *Squid Game*'s success, particularly among its younger user base. Hence, if memes serve as a contemporary and cross-cultural mode of communication, *Squid Game*'s success on a global scale is hardly perplexing, given its high degree of mimetic quality and relatability.

3. *Squid Game*'s capacity for political inspiration

Considering *Squid Game*'s dramatic international success, it is hardly surprising to find its immediate adaptation as an inspiration for recently staged anti-establishment protests despite the contested notion of the show serving largely as a gestural form of anti-capitalism. However, as I

have also previously discussed, *Squid Game* has the potential to be contended as a critical media in that it forces us to reevaluate our traditional values of complacency with the capitalist hegemony, and hence, resist it. As Sandoval & Fuchs (2010, p.24) insist, reaching a wide public visibility for their critical ideas is vital to the success of alternative media. Indeed, as Herbert Marcuse asserted, societal transformation requires the pessimism of the prevailing societal relations to be vigorously nullified by critical political measures (as cited in Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010, p.24). Such critical political actions can only occur if general public awareness of the repressive nature of the existing capitalist system is present, and hence, so is the need to negate these relations (ibid. p.24). Hence, it can be argued that *Squid Game*, even as a commercial media, contains the critical content that can act as the driving force to inspire such critical political actions. Indeed, what those protests really needed to push forward with their political movements was a catalyst for attracting international attention and therefore, driving the possibility for actual change. Hence, what better way to capture the political zeitgeist than to capitalize on a popular show's success already known for its anti-capitalist messaging?

3.1 *Squid Game*'s role as political influence

Take the South Korean labor protests that occurred back in October of last year as an example. According to CBS News (Kwon, 2021), thousands of frustrated workers took to the streets of Seoul to stage demonstrations dressed in the show's uniforms and masks of guards - who were also victims of the games themselves - to publicize their demands for improved working conditions and changes to the government's labor policies. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), responsible for organizing the rallies, selected "Squid Game," their central theme, even producing a "Squid Game"-esque promotional video to post on social media platforms, which featured South Korean workers touting support for the multitude of local labor unions and appealing for government assistance (ibid.). Considering the worsening economic situation in South Korea where citizens have been facing job insecurity due to reduction in new recruitment and the increasing need to acquire more jobs to deal with unstable low-hour, limited contract or no-contract work with little employee protection, employing *Squid Game*'s narrative to reflect the current status quo of South Korean society that leaves many of its residents vulnerable to predatory capitalism is relevant and provocative. Another *Squid Game*-themed protest was held by climate change activists during the COP26 summit in Glasgow with the same

intention of drawing public attention to their demands of taking action sooner to hinder the worst impacts of climate change (Brazell, 2021). Activists took a more humorous yet equally resonant approach with the protest by donning masks of the world leaders and staging a *Squid Game*-inspired tug of war game demonstration with the slogan “World Leaders: stop playing climate change games”, perhaps in an attempt to reflect the priorities of the world leaders who often value their economies over the planet, and thus, resulting in delays to climate change agreements which render them almost ineffective and produce little change in the escalation of global ecological destruction - the consequences of which are mainly faced by all except the plutocracy. As Gerlach (as cited in Benett, 2003) described regarding the emerging forms of global activism, the dissemination of such activist notions of global threats occurs through personal networks, print media but particularly the Internet. The activists, hence informed, use important and large-scale global meetings of international diplomats as forums to assemble in political demonstrations and openly communicate the threats as they sense (ibid, p.12). Indeed, these *Squid Game*-inspired protests were also aided by the anticapitalist political messaging of the immensely popular *Squid Game* and the limitless boundaries of the Internet in promulgating their own political campaigns on a global scale.

3.2 Squid Game: empowering the imagination?

However, despite the efforts invested by dedicated communities into organizing both of these protests, were they really effective in subverting the capitalist narrative or at least making a real difference in their spheres of influence? In one regard, perhaps not, as supplemented by Fisher’s assertion (2009), the aim of these protests were not to substitute capitalism but only to dilute its worst excesses; and in the cases of these protests, there was a sense of producing a list of “hysterical demands which [weren’t expected] to be met” (p.14) as rather than attempting to stage a political organization that would uproot the source of the problem, in this case, the unfair capitalist systems in place, the form of its anti-establishment activities were rather staged as protests. Hence, we witness governments undermining these protests, with the Blue House spokesperson referring to the South Korean worker rallies as “disappointing” (Kwon, 2021) and should have been downscaled in times of the pandemic or no real acknowledgment from the global elites in the case of the climate change protests. However, as Gerlach insisted on the empowering direction of global activism (as cited in Benett, 2003, p.12), their often

confrontational protests compel reactions from police and local governments, hence, offering novel oppositions against which they can unite. This is a far more illustrative example of the subversive potential of literature and related cultural media forms in empowering the imagination to resist the overbearing systems in place, and hence, is worth a critical discussion.

3.3 *Squid Game*'s unique potential

Regardless of the question of whether *Squid Game* managed to propel the political trajectory of these protests that took inspiration from the show, I would argue that *Squid Game* still has potential to mobilize a genuine anticapitalist movement despite its contested representation of anti-capitalism through its high mimetic value. As mentioned before, memes are part of the communication process in their immediate transmissibility and well refined adaptation to the internet culture and *Squid Game* has demonstrated a strong sense of memeability capable of reaching the globalized virtual landscape, a phenomenon that could prove useful in the dissemination of political causes. Indeed, as Gupta (2021) pointed out, the global popularity of *Squid Game* foregrounds the emerging role of “media-inspired social activity” in influencing international politics. For instance, an embassy cable of the South Korean State Department released a statement underscoring the show’s portrayal of the “grim economic prospects ... at the center of Korean society’s woes” (ibid.). They also note that this form of societal critique will contribute to the reconstruction of the eventual “public diplomacy engagement for Mission Korea” (ibid.). Gupta (ibid.) went on to argue that the show has resonated with the Korean population due to its pertinence to the nation’s recent presidential election campaign. For instance, Foreign Policy (Gramer, Detsch & Mackinnon, 2021) reported that major presidential candidates in the running were involved in corruption scandals that resulted in many South Korean citizens creating memes and political cartoons that reflected the parallels between the TV series and the election. Meanwhile, Telegraph (Bowman, 2021) highlighted that Lee Jae-Myung, the center-left Democratic Party candidate, even condemned the conservative party opponents using *Squid Game*. Hence, Gupta (ibid.) asserts that the show’s principal message has emerged as a tool to unify the public and transform the paradigm for national and global politics.

3.4 Memetic influence in political success

However, in the case of ring-wing movements, their memetic facet proved to play an even larger role in organizing large-scale political actions. For instance, the QAnon conspiracy theory about a group of elite Satan-worshipping pedophiles that were targeting Trump — during his term of office as the US president — evolved into a political movement, which hence eventually caused the 2021 US Capitol Attack (Watson, 2021). According to Mike Watson (2021), what made QAnon a highly successful meme movement with real-world political impact is its high and dedicated memetic spread by followers, effectively rendering the QAnon backstory and main narrative “a meme with considerable longevity, adaptability, and fidelity to original posts.” Indeed, in the case of contemporary political movements, the capacity of the Internet’s interconnectedness to foster a “leaderless and virtually anonymous social communication” debilitates efforts to suppress or dispose of widely disseminated communication even if closely supervised (Benett, 2003).

3.5 Meme potential in leftist movements

In fact, this is the type of successful online political movement that Watson envisions for the future direction of leftist political movement in online spaces, where there is already a growing presence of the leftist communities, albeit more so due to their capacity to provide data to capitalize on for internet corporations. Hence, following the same logic, in his book ‘The Memeing of Mark Fisher’ (2021), Watson proposes a “slow meme” movement that endorses employing the internet’s vast resources in a premeditated manner with the aims of challenging the data economy while also constructing a leftist community that can also operate and gather offline. For instance, this can take the form of “online reading groups, quote memes, and the vaporwave movement, which in its abstraction leads to contemplation” and eventually promote class consciousness and constructive dialog over new leftist institutions and cooperatives (p.29). He highlights the need for deceleration of the “breakneck aggressive tendencies of the internet” encapsulated in the nature of memes to allow for linear thought and reflection previously dissuaded from forming due to perpetual information overload (p.29). In his explanation of using memes for a leftist movements, he presents the notion of meme as a dialectical image reminiscent of Adorno’s “shudder”, which shocks the viewer out of their complacency with the false conditions of capitalism as they struggle to understand the abstract art piece, a reaction that memes can also induce. As D. Andrew Price, the head of content at Memes.com, asserts, “A

meme is just an idea that rips through the public consciousness.” And as Fisher argues, capitalist realism is the dominant image of the world that constitutes itself by suppressing the Real, which is the unrepresentable void only able to be glimpsed through the fissures of the apparent reality. For Fisher, our current state of ecological catastrophe is one version of the Real that capitalist realism couldn’t assimilate into its reality without people realizing capitalism is actually set to wreck the entire planetary environment.

3.6 Squid Game’s disruptive meme potential

In the case of *Squid Game*, take the discomfort of witnessing large corporations attempting to capitalize on *Squid Game*’s success through memes for example. Crystal Andrews from Z Feed (2021) points out the absurdity and lack of self-awareness of brand names such as Hyundai posting the Dalgona meme with their car models when the show’s protagonist’s background — as a laid-off labourer of a car manufacturing factory who suffers from PTSD and debt after a workers strike there turned deadly — parallels that of Hyundai’s history of worker mistreatment and suppression of pay raises. Meanwhile, Youtube content creator MrBeast represents the group of influencers attempting to profit from *Squid Game*’s popularity with his production of a real-life – albeit not murderous — version of the games, hence, directly placing himself in the role of the VIPs who gamble away money to watch people compete for it for the sake of entertainment (ibid.). This sense of unease and revulsion felt at witnessing the phenomenon of brand memes leveraging *Squid Game*’s success is in fact the perception of the rupture in the image of capitalist realism. What we can do is leverage this image-rupturing or shudder-inducing capacity of memes onto online leftist movements as one Watson has suggested to creatively channel it to the challenging of the data economy and nurturing of a communitarian society that can produce the right conditions for a proletarian movement offline.

In the case of contemporary social-political causes, Benett (2003) argues that the popular political lexicon of such movements is already full of memes – easily replicable and propagated images that transcend public networks as they connect with everyday experiences. While ideological communication limits the transmission of ideas to specific locations, communities, time periods and areas such as nation states, parties, elections and party meetings respectively, memes traverse the more liberating time and space alternatives created by social media networks

and the WorldWideWeb (Benett, 2003). Indeed, the mutually symbiotic relationship of memes and political movements in the context of global activism is the reason behind the use of *Squid Game*'s political message in political events in the form of political memes. Hence, other than the disruptive potential of the show, *Squid Game* has already demonstrated its capacity to subvert, to a certain degree, the political climate by critiquing existing societal problems and advocating for change. However, to truly foster an activist community as one Watson proposes, this is perhaps where the limitations of *Squid Game*'s utopian potential lies. Indeed, it is true that *Squid Game* beyond all other anticapitalist texts is situated in a unique position where it is not only considered literature that through the critical lens can provoke people into action but its distinctive memetic virality is also one that can be employed to communicate their concerns and to contest the power of corporations and transnational economic order. However, the current socio-political climate has yet to acknowledge the empirical connection between literature's capacity in "imagining otherwise" in its active facilitation of empowering emerging political solidarities. Perhaps, we need not interpret this as literature's incapacity to do so and place the sole burden on it of being a means to a definite end. But rather, we need to reframe the notion of literary and cultural productions as instruments to measurably gauge its disruptive effects in society to a political terrain of active struggle. Hence, in terms of inspiring genuine political organizations, it may be up to *Squid Game*'s sequel or many other anticapitalist pop cultural texts to inspire change to the current narrative of the global political landscape.

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