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Squid Game and the Paradox of Capitalist Culture Industry: From Class Allegory to the Capitalized Carnival of Suffering Aesthetics

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Abstract

Since its global breakout in 2021, the Korean drama Squid Game has been widely interpreted as a profound metaphor for inequality and class rigidity in capitalist society. Through its extreme "survival game", the series constructs a highly symbolic microcosm of capitalism, presenting the structural oppression faced by the poor through visual violence and psychological dilemmas. However, as a cultural product led by Netflix and aimed at a global market, the series itself is inevitably embedded in the operational logic of the capitalist culture industry. Its critical content is gradually alienated into a spectacle of mass entertainment in the process of commodification. This paper analyzes how Squid Game creates a tension between anti-capitalist expression and absorption by capitalist logic from four dimensions: political allegory structure, cultural industry mechanism, the logic of suffering aesthetics, and the cultural paradox of global dissemination. This paper argues that the success of Squid Game precisely exposes the boundary dilemma of contemporary cultural critique: even the most intense discourse of resistance may be tamed, packaged, and resold within the global capitalist system. Therefore, it is imperative for future cultural creators and critics to explore narrative paths with greater agency and critical tension to break the cyclical logic in which "anti-capitalism becomes a commodity".

Keywords: Squid Game; capitalism; culture industry; suffering aesthetics; political allegory; globalization; Netflix; anti-capitalism; mass culture; cultural critique

"I wanted to write a story that serves as a metaphor or allegory for modern capitalist society, using extreme competition to symbolize today's survival-of-the-fittest world." ——*Hwang Dong-hyuk,* Director of *Squid Game*

1. The Structure and Significance of *Squid Game* as a Political Allegory

1.1 The Extreme Manifestation of Class Stratification

Squid Game constructs a highly compressed social model through the survival predicaments of the game participants. In this model, all players are without exception "failures" in real-life society: heavily in debt, unemployed, abandoned by their families, suffering from serious illnesses, or undocumented immigrants. They are marginalized by society and face the deprivation of their right to survive (Harvey, 2005). This setup allows viewers to project the characters' situations onto the increasingly prevalent "working poor" in reality, thereby generating a sense of class resonance (Standing, 2011). In contrast, the wealthy appear as the organizers and "spectators" of the game—seemingly removed from the bloodshed, yet in fact controlling the rules of the game and holding the power over life and death. Indifferently, they consume the survival struggles of the lower class as entertainment (Debord, 1994). This portrayal directly points to the class structure of capitalist society, revealing the extreme inequality of wealth and power. The wealthy's control over the fate of the poor symbolizes (Bauman, 2000).

not only economic oppression but also the commodification and control of life itself under capital (Marx, 1867/1990).

Moreover, the game's use of an "elimination system" reinforces the logic of social Darwinism: only the strongest and most adaptable can survive. This logic precisely echoes the neoliberal era's excessive emphasis on individual responsibility, attributing poverty to personal failure rather than structural issues, thereby obscuring systemic social injustice (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2008). The class antagonism depicted in the series is not merely a reflection of society, but also a sharp critique of the capitalist ideology's myth that "competition equals justice" (Žižek, 2011).

1.2 Spatial Symbols and Visual Metaphors

Squid Game is rich in visual metaphors, with its constructed "game space" serving as a highly symbolic model of the capitalist world. The game venues are enclosed, inescapable, and vividly colored to the point of artificiality, resembling a "capitalist maze" filled with temptation and deadly traps (Jameson, 1991). The labyrinthine staircase structure not only pays homage to Escher's art of visual illusion (Schattschneider, 2004) but also implies the confusion and entrapment of the lower class within mechanisms of social mobility—forever struggling between cycles of ascent, descent, and repetition, yet never able to escape the prison of the system
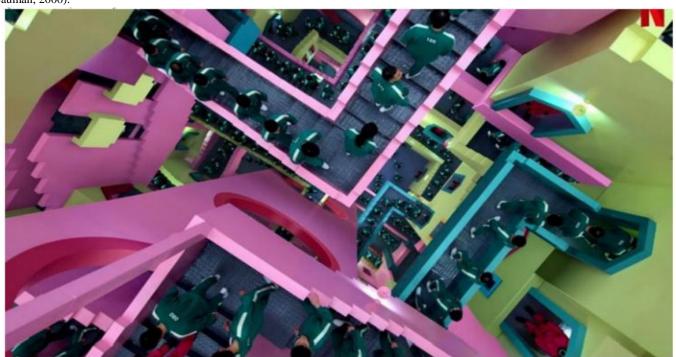

Image 1. The maze-like staircase structure in *Squid Game*
Website Source: https://www.creativebloq.com/news/squid-game-aesthetic

The standardized uniforms and masked hierarchy construct a clearly stratified and deindividualized mechanism of social control (Foucault, 1977). Participants wear identical green tracksuits, becoming "digitized life forms"; workers wear masks marked with different geometric symbols, representing distinct ranks and functions, while the wealthy who host the games possess the "privilege" of showing their faces. This visual presentation reinforces the irreversibility of power structures: the identities of the poor can be erased, while those in power retain the privilege of "authentic existence" (Han, 2017). Particularly in seemingly innocent game scenes such as "Red Light, Green Light" and "Tug-

of-War", the sudden and violent onset of death reveals how capitalist society alienates originally pure human activities into life-and-death struggles, reflecting a systemic absurdity and cruelty (Debord, 1994; Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002).

1.3 The Power Structure of "Watching" and "Being Watched"

The power relations of "watching" in *Squid Game* are deeply Foucauldian in their disciplinary implications. The entire game is monitored and recorded; the lives of the poor are fully exposed under high-definition surveillance, and their struggles become a "performance" for the consumption of the rich. This structure

profoundly reveals the modern logic of "to watch is to control" (Foucault, 1977): under the power-capital system, the poor must not only fight for survival, but also continually "perform" their suffering in exchange for resources or attention (Couldry, 2010).

Watching is not only a privilege of the rich but also a disciplinary mechanism. Through watching, the wealthy satisfy their desire for control over the fate of others; the poor, in turn, are forced to accept this "fate" of being watched, becoming objects within the discourse of power (Mulvey, 1975). This mechanism of watching echoes Guy Debord's concept of the "society of the spectacle": reality is transformed into visual symbols, whose true function is to uphold existing power structures (Debord, 1994). In the series, the power of watching is reflected not only in the rich's control over life and death, but also in their aestheticized and commodified consumption of the poor's fate—demonstrating how capitalist society transforms the suffering of the Other into its own psychological pleasure and cultural commodity (Sontag, 2003; Zuboff, 2019).

2. *Squid Game* and the Capitalist Culture Industry

2.1 The Typical Operational Logic of the Culture Industry

Although *Squid Game* has been widely praised for its strong sense of social critique, from the perspective of its production and distribution mechanisms, it is inevitably entangled in the operational logic of the capitalist culture industry. According to Adorno and Horkheimer's Dialectic of Enlightenment, the essence of the culture industry lies in the commodification of culture through standardized and homogenized production, reducing individuals to passive objects of consumption (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002). *Squid Game* embodies this very paradox: on the one hand, it depicts a society collapsing under the weight of capitalist exploitation; on the other hand, it is itself a commercial product orchestrated, funded, and distributed by Netflix, the world's largest streaming platform (Jin, 2021; Lobato, 2019).

As a representative of global cultural capital, Netflix operates through mechanisms that remain fundamentally "algorithm-driven" and "market-oriented" (Lobato, 2019; Napoli, 2019). The creation of *Squid Game* was not a purely artistic endeavor but the result of a "blockbuster logic" aligned with global audience aesthetics and narrative habits (Wayne, 2020). Its critical edge does not genuinely challenge the platform's value system; rather, it is "activated" within a specific market context and sold to global viewers as a commodity (Fisher, 2009).

Within this mechanism, even content with strong critical potential is packaged, edited, and distributed as entertainment easily consumed by the masses. The characters' emotional fluctuations, narrative twists, and violent scenes are all designed to maximize attention, extend viewing duration, and enhance user retention (Wu, 2022). This content model, centered on the "attention economy," transforms cultural works from tools of social critique into instruments for the self-replication of capital (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

2.2 Commercial Collaborations and the Proliferation of Symbols

The popularity of *Squid Game* is reflected not only in its viewership and online buzz but also in the rapid extraction, consumption, and proliferation of its "symbolic value." After the series aired, its symbolic elements—green tracksuits, the circle-triangle-square masks, the "Red Light, Green Light" doll—were swiftly commodified and became part of popular culture (Klein, 2000; Baudrillard, 1998). This phenomenon demonstrates both the culture industry's responsiveness to "viral symbols" and how anti-capitalist narratives can be reabsorbed and repurposed by capital itself (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002; Foster, 2002).

Various brands quickly engaged in collaborative ventures with *Squid Game*, producing cobranded merchandise ranging from clothing, food, and toys to Halloween costumes, phone cases, and social media filters. The symbols from the show were repeatedly "replicated—circulated— monetized" (Jin, 2021; Harvey, 2010). These peripheral products and marketing campaigns do not reinforce the original critical spirit of the series; instead, they reduce violence and suffering to visual trends, turning the symbols—once rooted in social critique—into components of fashion, entertainment, and social capital after being stripped of their context (Debord, 1994; Žižek, 2009).

For example, the "Dalgona Candy Challenge" in *Squid Game* sparked a surge in real-life sales of dalgona candies, with the challenge becoming a popular game at parties among young people. On Chinese e-commerce platforms such as Taobao and Tmall, special "kits" appeared that featured 1:1 replicas of the dalgona candies seen in *Squid Game*, complete with a needle and tin box. According to China's Time Finance (时代财经), some consumers even placed single orders for 8,000 pieces of dalgona, with buyers likely being retailers intending to resell the candies individually (ZhiHu, 2021).

Image 2 &3. The Dalgona Candy Section on China's "Taobao" Online Store

On TikTok, a digital version of the "Dalgona Candy Challenge" called Toffee Game emerged, allowing users to use the tips of their noses as virtual needles to carve patterns on a digital dalgona candy. Netflix's own merchandise platform also capitalized on the trend by launching a line of *Squid Game* products, including T-shirts and hoodies priced between $30 and $50, despite the fact that ordinary T-shirts and hoodies typically sell for only $8 to $15.

Image 4, 5 & 6. *Squid Game* merchandise on Netflix Shop
Website Source: https://www.netflix.shop/en-th/collections/squid-game

This phenomenon exemplifies how digital platforms and global retail networks participate in the rapid commodification of symbolic content, turning even scenes of survival and suffering into commercial opportunities (Baudrillard, 1998; Foster, 2002).

The narrative structure and media effect of *Squid Game* form an intriguing chain: game— competition— entertainment. Most of the challenges in *Squid Game* transform childhood games from real life into mechanisms for resource competition. Childhood play, originally aligned with what Kant referred to as the stage of "pure play" (Kant, 2000), is, in the adult world envisioned by the director of *Squid Game*, converted into brutal and bloody struggles for survival. As a result, the true face of reality—a world governed by global capitalism and deeply entrenched in class stratification—is starkly revealed to the audience (Zuboff, 2019; Han, 2017), striking them with visceral impact. Viewers, especially those in Asia, may associate this with the phenomenon of involutional education (Wang, 2021; Zhang & Yue, 2022).

Artistic activities such as music, painting, and performance also belong to Kant's aesthetic realm of "playfulness", which exists beyond utilitarian purposes (Kant, 2000; Gadamer, 1989). The pursuit of knowledge was originally intended for its own sake and to satisfy curiosity. However, involutional education has transformed all forms of "innocent play" into competition (Liu, 2021). Ancient Chinese proverbs rooted in Confucian culture— such as "those who excel in study will become officials" and "there are golden mansions in books"—have gained renewed relevance in contemporary Asian societies, becoming mottos for "strivers" seeking upward mobility through education (Lee, 2019).

Therefore, when the director of *Squid Game* ingeniously reimagines ordinary childhood games as survival challenges, he is, in fact, laying bare the true face of the world for all to see (Fisher, 2009; Jin, 2021).

However, when the critical orientation is stripped away, and the "survival levels" in the series are "transformed" into forms of amusement and entertainment, it may appear to return to the original state of childhood play, but in fact, it does not. This process, through a mode of mass celebration, once again conceals the true "face" of the world. The proliferation of peripheral products such as masks, white sneakers, T-shirts, and hoodies confirms Guy Debord's thesis in The Society of the Spectacle: the spectacle becomes the dominant mode of social life, everyday life is surrounded by spectacle, and real life is replaced by the appearance of the spectacle, creating an isolated and false world (Debord, 1994). In this way, the true "face" of the world that this phenomenal "god-tier" drama initially sought to expose becomes hidden once again, disappearing from view.

This phenomenon can be regarded as the ultimate manifestation of "cultural alienation" in capitalist society: works originally intended to reveal social injustice and human dilemmas ultimately become spokespeople and appendages of capital (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002; Jameson, 1991). The proliferation of *Squid Game*'s character symbols not only obscures its profound allegory of class but also facilitates the culture industry's manipulation of audience perception and consumer desire (Baudrillard, 1998; Foster, 2002), further weakening the power of critique itself (Žižek, 2009).

2.3 "Narrative Paradox": Critique as Consumption

One of the greatest paradoxes faced by *Squid Game* is that the critical voice it emits ultimately becomes part of the audience's consumption pleasure. This phenomenon of "critique as consumption" is precisely one of the core strategies of the capitalist culture industry—by commodifying emotions such as resistance, anger, and tragedy, it incorporates originally subversive narratives into its own circulatory system, thereby "neutralizing" dissent

(Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002; Žižek, 2009).

Many of the show's shocking scenes—such as hundreds of people being shot dead in an instant, or friends betraying each other in order to survive—while charged with moral tension and ethical dilemmas, are often driven by suspenseful pacing, plot twists, and sensory stimulation in terms of narrative strategy. This "aestheticized violence" makes it easier for viewers to treat the series as a source of spectacle and pleasure, rather than as a point of departure for serious reflection on social structures (Sontag, 2003; Kellner, 2010).

As Fredric Jameson has argued, in the postmodern context, capitalism excels at "absorbing" all voices of opposition and converting them into styles or narrative forms (Jameson, 1991). *Squid Game* is precisely the product of such "cultural inclusivity": its social critique is incorporated into the Netflix content system, becoming a symbolic label in its global strategy of "multiculturalism" and "local innovation" (Jin, 2021; Lobato, 2019). This not only weakens the show's anti-capitalist essence but also reduces critique to "a part of popular narrative"—the audience may weep bitterly, but they still press the "next episode" button (Fisher, 2009).

3. "Aestheticized Suffering" and the Ethical Dilemma of Mass Entertainment

3.1 How is suffering transformed into pleasure?

In *Squid Game*, the extreme survival challenges and intense physical violence faced by characters from the lower social strata ought to provoke empathy and critical reflection on real-world suffering. Yet, under the mediation of the culture industry, this suffering is transformed

into narrative tension and audiovisual pleasure. This is a classic manifestation of "aestheticized suffering": real pain, once packaged through visual aesthetics, narrative construction, and emotional manipulation, is artistically consumed, allowing the audience to derive psychological stimulation and aesthetic satisfaction from "watching others die" (Sontag, 2003; Chouliaraki, 2006).

The show's visual style is highly distinctive—the brightly colored spatial design, symmetrical composition, and theatrical sets contrast sharply with the brutal violence, producing an effect of "aestheticized violence" (Hanich, 2014). Immersed in dramatic conflict and narrative climaxes, the audience does not experience the pain of the tormented, but rather their own sensory pleasure. This disjunction between the visual and the ethical transforms the suffering in the show from a vehicle of social critique into an object of "curiosity-driven consumption" (Baudrillard, 1994).

In this process, suffering as content is dissolved through entertainment, resulting in a kind of "moral relaxation": viewers are not required to bear ethical responsibility for what they witness, nor are they compelled to seriously consider the social structures that enable such suffering.

Instead, they may comfortably remain in the role of "spectators," even admiring the ingenuity of the plot. This directly echoes Susan Sontag's argument in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: when images of suffering are repeatedly displayed, they cease to provoke moral reflection and may instead lead to indifference and an aestheticized gaze (Sontag, 2003). In her view, what human beings are most

adept at is modulating their emotional responses. The overexposure of photographs depicting extreme suffering ultimately produces one of two outcomes: either viewers turn away, or they become desensitized, because they are, in most cases, powerless.

What begins as horror gradually becomes "disturbing," and eventually, "What's the big deal? There are worse things" (Sontag, 2003, p. 42).

3.2 Does "Gamified Survival" Weaken Social Critique?

One of the core narrative strategies of *Squid Game* is the "gamification" of poverty, survival, and moral dilemma. In the series, socially marginalized individuals are drawn into a brutal arena modeled after childhood games. While this setup carries strong symbolic resonance, it also raises certain ethical concerns: when real-world suffering is presented in the form of a "game", does it obscure its actual social roots? (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002; Žižek, 2009)

This mode of "gamified survival" not only blurs the boundary between reality and fiction but may also lead to a "depoliticized understanding" of real social issues. Audiences become more invested in how characters win, outwit opponents, or navigate strategic dilemmas, rather than in how the setting reflects structural injustice in society. This displacement effect compresses content that could otherwise provoke action or critical awareness into consumable narrative suspense or psychological intrigue, thereby dulling its political edge (Jameson, 1991).

In other words, the suffering and violence within the narrative are de-historicized and de-socialized in a highly stylized storytelling framework, transforming them into "pure symbols"— cultural spectacles detached from reality and available for arbitrary consumption (Debord, 1994). The game of "Red Light, Green Light" is no longer a nostalgic childhood memory, nor merely a metaphor for institutional violence, but becomes a "trendy label"; character deaths no longer represent real social injustice, but simply serve as narrative beats to advance the plot. This process of "symbolic drift" leads to a loss of critical power, turning suffering into the very climax that audiences come to expect (Baudrillard, 1994).

What is even more concerning is that such entertainment mechanisms may gradually condition viewers to accept, or even desire, more works that aestheticize suffering. In this cycle, "dystopia", "poor people's game" and "violent competition" become genre conventions devoid of moral urgency, instead functioning as paradigms of popular aesthetics (Han, 2017). As a result, art that once critiqued reality now serves as a release valve for it, providing emotional compensation to viewers rather than prompting genuine engagement with change (Sontag, 2003).

4. Cultural Paradox in the Globalized Context

4.1 Global Projection of Local (Korean) Issues

Although *Squid Game* is set in South Korea, and its characters, social background, and specific conflicts are clearly rooted in South Korean social realities, the issues it unveils are far from unique to one nation. From debt-ridden individuals, soaring housing prices, and high youth unemployment, to structural inequality under chaebol dominance, the social landscape constructed in the series is rapidly identified by global audiences as a "familiar form of oppression" (Lee, 2022). This narrative mode of "glocalization" allows the series to embody both the specificity

of local issues and the emotional projection of global audiences (Robertson, 1995).

South Korea has long existed within a high-pressure competitive society where educational hypercompetition, youth precarity, wealth polarization, and family breakdown have become recurring themes in media and art (Kim, 2021). What made *Squid Game* resonate so powerfully worldwide is that it reflects not only a "Korean malaise" but also a condensed version of a "global capitalist disease." Under the hegemony of neoliberalism, more and more countries are facing middle-class collapse, weakened labor protections, and poverty mechanisms increasingly attributed to individual responsibility. Thus, the "games" in the show become vivid metaphors for the mechanics of globalized oppression (Harvey, 2005; Jameson, 1991).

However, this global projection of local struggles hides a paradox: the suffering of non-Western societies becomes an "exotic spectacle" within the global content industry, offering Western-led platforms and audiences a form of "safe-distance" viewing pleasure (Said, 1978; Debord, 1994). While immersed in the depiction of South Korean social darkness, global viewers experience emotional catharsis without bearing responsibility for confronting structural issues within their own societies. This "vicarious identification with the other" dilutes the critical force of the series in the global context, transforming its political potency into passive empathy or even aesthetic consumption (Chow, 1993; Sontag, 2003).

4.2 "Anti-Capitalist Global Hit": A Paradoxical Success

Squid Game's monumental success is itself a cultural paradox. Its core theme is anti-capitalism, yet it has become one of global cultural capitalism's most iconic success stories. The series not only transcended linguistic and geographic barriers—becoming one of Netflix's most-watched non-English shows—but also brought the platform enormous economic returns and enormous viewing figures (Mendelson, 2021; Netflix, 2021).

This phenomenon reveals how powerful global capitalism's "assimilation mechanism" is: any cultural product bearing critical consciousness, once entering the logic of global markets, can be transformed into capital's new instrument. Platforms like Netflix may invest in "dark realism" works like *Squid Game*, not because they support critique per se, but because they recognize and cater to viewers' appetites for anti-establishment narratives (Business Insider, 2025; Neira, Clares-Gavilán, & Sánchez-Navarro, 2023). Consequently, "anti-capitalism" ceases being an ideological weapon and becomes a predictable, quantifiable, and continually exploitable content category—an "IP resource."

Moreover, *Squid Game*'s global popularity further reinforces the cultural industry's disciplining of "non-Western culture." Although the series signals an export of Korean soft power, its reception and content must align with Western-dominated media structures and narrative grammars. Global audiences frequently engage with *Squid Game* through a lens of "Global South suffering," creating a "safe-distance" emotional engagement that avoids confronting analogous structural issues in their own societies (Advanced Television, 2024; Lee, Lim, Choi, & Jeong, 2025).

This paradoxical success of global anti-capitalist works thus captures the fundamental dilemma facing contemporary cultural criticism: even art that is highly politicized and critical often becomes commodified and transformed into brand assets. This dilutes its subversive potential and exposes the cultural industry's

systemic capacity to domesticate dissent.

5. Conclusion

The Predicament of Cultural Critique in the Context of Global Capitalism *Squid Game*, as a profound political allegory, not only exposes the inequalities and exploitation inherent in the capitalist system but also, through its global dissemination and commercial success, reveals the systemic paradox faced by critical culture itself. From the logic of "critique as consumption" within the cultural industry (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944/2002), to the aesthetic mechanism of "suffering as pleasure" (Sontag, 2003), and further to the phenomenon of "anti-capitalism as a global hit" (Jameson, 1991), the trajectory of the series precisely reflects the self-contradiction of cultural critique within a capitalist-dominated global cultural market (Debord, 1967/1994).

It warns us that in contemporary times, for cultural critique to avoid co-optation by capital, it must not only possess sharpness in content but also engage in deeper strategic construction in terms of form, dissemination mechanisms, and audience education. Otherwise, all "rebellions" risk being packaged as "trends," and all "suffering" may become decorative consumable spectacles (Sontag, 2003). The true challenge of cultural critique lies not in how to "voice" resistance but in how to prevent resistance itself from becoming an object of entertainment (Jameson, 1991).

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