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## Postdramatic Theatre and Tragedy in Squid Game: A Fragmented Reading

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**Postdramatic Theatre and Tragedy in *Squid Game*:  
A Fragmented Reading**

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## 1. Introducing *Squid Game*

*Squid Game* entered the realm of media on 17<sup>th</sup> September 2021 and soon became the most popular enterprise in the history of Netflix.<sup>1</sup> The series' appeal has been accommodated by its being comprised of opulent stage displays, symmetrical overload and a frivolous colour scape, based on the premise that a number of adults are invited to a secret island off the coast of South Korea to partake in a number of games over the course of 6 days. Whoever is the winner of these games will be made the humble owner of ₩45.6 bn. – much like winning the lottery; except, the failed players end up shot and disposed of in incinerators. Not long after *Squid Game*'s release, the Oxford English Dictionary “added 26 South Korean words and revised 11”<sup>2</sup> to recognise the influence of *hallyu*, the popularity surrounding Korean culture. Economics departments were quick to add the series to their curricula<sup>3</sup> and game theorists were thrilled about the catch-22 elements.

The gist of the premises pitched by the institution arranging the spectacles on the island entails that each contestant carries the consequential burden of being heavily indebted financially, making for the basis of invitation. Once having arrived on the peninsula after being drugged unconscious, the impending structural logic set up by the institution is revealed: each player is assigned a value of ₩0.1 bn., congruent with the prize money awaiting the winner at the end. The annotation of such prompt and bold immediacy unravels an improvised positioning regarding the degrees of abstraction that is shockingly frank – drawing an immediate relation between each head and death may well be morbid, yet this did not put a halt to the popularity of the object. *Squid Game* gained much momentum due to its “colourful, iconic sets and costumes that produced the space for meme worthy viral

<sup>1</sup> Netflix considers a watch time of a minimum of two minutes to be sufficient for inclusion in household streaming statistics, according to journalist Kalhan Rosenblatt, “Netflix’s ‘Squid Game’ is a sensation. Here’s why it’s so popular,” *NBC News*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/pop-culture-news/netflix-s-squid-game-sensation-here-s-why-it-s-n1280646>.

<sup>2</sup> Tien Le, “Oxford English Dictionary rides the K-wave with a big Korean update,” *NPR*, October 14, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/14/1046105037/oxford-english-dictionary-korean-oed>.

<sup>3</sup> These include concepts such as aggregate demand, price elasticity, recession. Source: Amel Abdesslem, Julien Picault, “Using Netflix Original Series to Teach Economics: a Diversity and Inclusion Approach,” *SSRN Electronic Journal* (January 2021): 32-34, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3988985>.

spreadability,”<sup>4</sup> making no halt at the gates of TikTok and Instagram. Instead, “series-related phenomena, such as Dalgona Candy Kits, Halloween costumes, real-life Squid Games held in New York City, Squid Game-themed cafés in Seattle, Los Angeles, Paris, Dubai, Calgary, and Moscow, and the civil service exam in Indonesia supervised by the Triangles, Circles, and Squares holding replica guns”<sup>5</sup> provide a lucid hint of what the world has seen, and what it does not want to see come to an end.

Alongside series such as *Maid* (Netflix, 2021), *Squid Game* showcases the heightened affinity for productions that explore “inequality, capture the despair of poverty, and dissect class anxiety.”<sup>6</sup> If not a hardcore neoliberalist, the reader may well recoil at the meridians of meritocracy that resurfaces as a Janus-face more than a decade after the financial crisis of 2007 and exceeding two decades after the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Accompanied by least subtle hints of the ideals of liberty, equality, fraternity of the French revolution, these rhetorical adhesions by the staff on the island become a sell-off of opportunism taking advantage of the desperation of the indebted subjects – or, a solid encouragement on behalf of the institution to prevent contestants from opting out of participating in an institution that shows no signs of second thoughts about burning their bodies after eliminated and having been placed in a neat black coffin ornamented categorically with a pink ribbon.

The director Hwang Dong-huyk set out to pitch the series not long after South Korea’s economy hit rock bottom during the start of the financial crisis in 2007.<sup>7</sup> According to journalist Isha Sharma, Dong-huyk, living with his mother and grandmother at the time, pitched the idea for the project and began writing the script in his room. The financial struggles he was facing at the time were serious enough for him to be forced to sell his laptop – doing so gave him a leeway of \$675 – to no avail, the acute precarity still forced him to postpone the production process. *Squid Game*’s swooping momentum and insurmountable impact should not spoil a condensed

<sup>4</sup> David C. Oh, “The politics of representation in *Squid Game* and the promise and peril of its transnational reception,” *Communication, Culture and Critique*, no. 00, (2022): 2.

<sup>5</sup> Soo Yeon Kim, Sungjoo Park, “What’s in a game? A dialectic of competition and cooperation in *Squid Game*,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 0(0), (2022): 8.

<sup>6</sup> Elamin Abdelmahmoud, “‘Squid Game’ Works Because Capitalism Is a Global Scourge,” October 1, 2021, *Buzzfeed News*, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/elaminabdelmahmoud/squid-game-netflix-review-lupin-international>.

<sup>7</sup> Isha Sharma, “Squid Game Director Had to Sell Laptop Due to Financial Crisis, Faced Rejection for 10 Years,” *Indiatimes*, October 7, 2021, <https://www.indiatimes.com/entertainment/originals/creator-squid-game-faced-rejection-for-10-years-551020.html>.

explication. If the 2007 financial crisis was a detrimental for Western countries, the fiscal troubles faced by South Korea have been outright incomparable. The country has been grappling with an increase in youth unemployment, a rising gap in income and the explosion of urban property pricing. “Household debt in South Korea has risen in recent years and is now equivalent to more than 100% of GDP – a level not seen elsewhere in Asia.”<sup>8</sup> The impact of such cascading household debt determining the very material lives of its inhabitants has been encouraged by factors such as private sectors’ determining state measures, quantitative easing and low interest rates on loans, fiscal strategies not exclusive to South Korea’s economy.<sup>9</sup> The heightened transnational curiosity regarding the series might well be related to this recent economic crisis. As Guardian journalist Zoe Williams remarks: “It might not be an accident, 10 years after a global financial crash, that the entire globe is watching a drama whose core message is, ‘Can I ever pay back this debt?’”<sup>10</sup>

The era of financial capitalism<sup>11</sup> led to the accumulation of degrees of abstraction between fiat and finance, accompanied by trends such as the privatisation of the economy, growing class polarization and arguably the most pressing symptom, financial debt. The latter as a theme may have gained much attention since the above mentioned crisis due to its deficiency of sustainably

<sup>8</sup> Nemo Kim, Justin McCurry, “Squid Game lays bare South Korea’s real-life personal debt crisis,” *The Guardian*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/08/squid-game-lays-bare-south-koreas-real-life-personal-debt-crisis>.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew M. Fisher, “Debt and development in historical perspective: The external constraints of late industrialisation revisited through South Korea and Brazil,” *The World Economy* (2018), John Wiley & Sons Ltd. DOI: 10.1111/twec.12625

<sup>10</sup> Zoe Williams, “Squid Game owes its popularity to the anxieties of modern life,” *The Guardian*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/oct/09/netflixs-squid-game-owes-its-popularity-to-anxieties-of-modern-life>.

<sup>11</sup> The era of financial capitalism was inaugurated by U.S. president Richard Nixon’s termination of the Bretton Woods Agreement, a process spanning the duration between 1971 and 1973 that forced the consequent divorce of the dollar and gold standard. The Bretton Woods system, effective after the end of World War II, connected foreign currencies in an explicit relation to the dollar that was mediated “at the congressionally set price of 35 dollars per ounce.” State expenditure increased immensely by way of military spendings and foreign aid, in turn of which the U.S. was no longer able to maintain a direct mediation between gold and the circulating credit. The result, an overvaluation of the dollar, was met by measures to circumvent this imbalance ascribed to the presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson (i.e., curbing foreign lending and collaborations with other countries). Still, the spiralling effects of the dollar’s overvaluation led traders to assume that the U.S. would devalue the dollar as a result. International exchange markets reduced their investment in the currency and Nixon announced a New Economic Policy on 15 August 1971 in the wake of the fiscal over expenditures concurrent with the Vietnam War. His strategy entailed tax cuts, freezing wages and charge, introducing a 10% tariff on dutiable goods and eliminating the currency’s convertibility to gold. Source: “Nixon and the End of the Bretton Woods System, 1971-1973,” Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, accessed 23 February 2023, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/nixon-shock>.

steadying economies in times of turmoil, albeit, deficit spending was a logic conjunctionally facilitating colonial violence earlier in time as well. Just take the case of Haiti as an example: given that the people of Haiti responded with exasperation and revolt to being colonized, including the imposition of financial burdens (heavy taxes) to compensate for the costs of the invasions in the first place,<sup>12</sup> the French emperor Napoleon was quick to add a debt of 150 ml. Francs (roughly equivalent to \$18 bn.) to the armies he had sent to counter the revolt. The embargo, agreed to internationally, left Haiti with paying off “damages for the expropriated plantations, as well as the expenses of outfitting the failed military expeditions”<sup>13</sup> according to anthropologist David Graeber.

Once more then, one of the guiding principles for the financial crisis that hit the economy in 2007 by the media was the emblem of debt; the general conception thereof postulates that the system collapsed due to too many mortgages having been handed out. Still, the situation of South Korea was also much determined by an international dynamic.

## **2. Economic context: South-Korea and the IMF**

The global popularity of South Korean culture, captured by the term *hallyu*, is paradigmatic in itself for a relatively short amount of time in which South Korea’s cultural productions took over the country’s economy of tech export goods. In the previous century, South Korea went “from a country ravaged by war and poverty to a world-class, high-tech OECD economy known for its consumer electronics such as smartphones or flat screen TVs and its manufacture of products such as cars, ships and oil and gas platforms’ (Kohen, 2016, para. 1).”<sup>14</sup> Hallyu can be distinguished into two periods. According to Kyong Yoon Yong Jin et al., its transnationalization “since the late 2000s distinguishes itself from both its earlier wave and other transnational cultural streams – especially in its integration into new digital media and its

<sup>12</sup> David Graeber, “On the Experience of Moral Confusion,” in *Debt: the first 5,000 years* (London; New York: Melville House, 2011), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Graeber, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Inês Santos and Luana Marques, “South Korea’s Creative Economy: A Case Study on the Hallyu Wave (Korean Wave),” *E-Revista de Estudos Interculturais do CEI-ISCAP*, no. 10 (May 2022): 4.

multidirectional and extensive flows.”<sup>15</sup> The digital streaming platform Netflix has been encouraging Korean productions in recent years, exemplary of this being the film *Okja*, a monster movie directed by Bong Joon-ho, released in May 2017 and emblematic of “the increasing collaboration between Western and non-Western cultural sectors in the era of digital platforms.”<sup>16</sup> *Squid Game* belongs to this New Korean wave, a period when K-dramas are produced increasingly on a transnational basis, often yielding a momentous impact. A glance at the numeral expenditure reveals that South Korea has opted for the “export of cultural products, from \$188.9 million in 1998 to \$6,240 million in 2018 – a thirty-three times increase.”<sup>17</sup> Whereas the first wave concerned the circulation of Korean cultural productions within Asia especially – Japan, China, Taiwan, Singapore and Vietnam – the second wave reflects the rising popularity beyond the realms of Asia.

Whereas *Squid Game* can be considered as an icon of South Korean commercial success, the series simultaneously reflects on economic disasters that determine such changes to economic prioritization in the first place. South Korea was a pivotal strategic vantage point for the U.S. during the Cold War in assuring control over the Soviet Union’s ideological alliances in the context of Asia. Conversely, the credit that was funnelled into the South Korean economy by Western investors during the years of the Cold War resulted in an immensely prosperous economic boom for the country and capital was fed especially to the prosperity of tech industries. The fall of the Berlin wall led to the replacement of national strategic control in the hands of the U.S. by symptoms of fiscal control by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In the words of Sunah Lee and Jennifer Proffitt: “While market liberalization has been evident in Korea since the 1980s, the effects of global neoliberalism manifested in earnest after the 1997 crisis, which was in part the result of state policies (or the lack thereof), increased global competition that disadvantaged domestic industries, banking failures, and corporate insolvency that led to the Korean government to turn to the IMF for stability.”<sup>18</sup> The result was a

<sup>15</sup> Dal Yong Jin, Kyong Yoon, Wonjung Min (eds.), “Emerging New Wave,” in *Transnational Hallyu: the globalization of Korean digital and popular culture* (London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Jin et al., “Emerging New Wave,” 8.

<sup>17</sup> Jin et al., 5-6.

<sup>18</sup> Sunah Lee, Jennifer M. Proffitt, “‘We bet on humans; you’re our horses’. The second phase of neo-poverty in South Korea as portrayed in *Squid Game*,” *Communication, Culture and Critique* 15 (2022): 534, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/teaco36> and Lee, H., “Korea’s 1997 financial crisis: Causes, consequences and Prospects,” *Agenda - A Journal of Policy Analysis and Reform*, 6(4) (1999):



collapse of the South Korean middle class, exemplified in the decline of social welfare programs, which came to an official end by the IMF's withdrawing its fiscal support measures in 2001, yielding no improvement of the quality of living for the Korean population. The 'second phase of neo-poverty,' a term coined by the authors, describes the adherence to the neoliberal dogma by the precarious classes: "In this phase, what impoverishes underdogs is not neoliberal economic policies but rather the powerful internalized neoliberal ideology that validates the presumed merits of neoliberal capitalism, as demonstrated by the underdogs in *Squid Game*."<sup>19</sup>

The implicit imperial measures of U.S. structural violence, continued by the IMF's encouraging more loans with low interest rates in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, resulted in a profusive polarization of South Korean society coupled with inequality. Lee and Proffitt provide these words about the new face of neoliberalism immanent in the fiscal policies after the 1997 financial crisis: these entailed a "collapse of the social contract that once buttressed ordinary Koreans' lives, such as lifetime employment, strong unions, and a stable public sector that guaranteed everyone necessary services, including energy, telecommunication."<sup>20</sup> The contempt regarding the waning state support measures<sup>21</sup> resurfaces throughout *Squid Game*: the contract signed by the winner and hero Ki-hun prior to the games is

351–363, <http://doi.org/10.22459/AG.06.04.1999.05>.

<sup>19</sup> Lee and Proffitt, 534.

<sup>20</sup> Lee and Proffitt, 535.

<sup>21</sup> One of the effects of the phase of neo-poverty has been an increase in homelessness, of which *Squid Game* provides its cues as early as the opening scene: Ki-hun's mother, Oh Mal-soon (Kim Young-ok), is barely able to make a living in the district of Ssangmun-dong in Seoul; her son is left with no choice other than to reside at his mother's at 46 years of age, who is struggling with a bad back and diabetes in the meantime – so much it results in her hospitalisation. The health insurance to supposedly cover the treatment of her diabetes had been cashed in by Ki-hun years back, in order to cover the expenses of his gambling addiction to horse races. The series' amends regarding the effects of the cost of living in the metropolis to prospectively yield a belated coming of age are defeating: the protagonist is not the only one struggling with an addiction that effects the downward spiralling of financial stability. Ki-hun's childhood friend and investment banker Cho Sang-woo has bet on 'futures.' His mother Kang Cheol (Park Hye-jin) is off no better: struggling to survive and make a profit from owning a fish shop, her son Sang-woo ends up selling off her property without her knowledge.

According to the Korean Homeless Team, an initiative provisional of records of the social initiatives that were pitched shortly after the 2007 financial crisis: "Although the housing gap is closing, for many households housing prices are still too high, making homeownership unaffordable and rental options inadequate and expensive." According to Kang Seung-woo, journalist for The Korea Times, the acute aftermath of people losing their home is the consequence of the 2007 financial disaster: "Homeless people in Seoul are 54.6 years old on average, and they started living on streets or in shelters at 42.3" years of age, reflecting the toll which South Korean society has been left with as the aftermath of the collapse of the economy. Source: "Most Seoul homeless aged in mid-50s; population declines," *The Korea Times*, April 25, 2019, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/04/113\\_267765.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/04/113_267765.html).

no longer one backed up by protection of workers' rights. Its sparsity is striking, to say the least, however familiar it may be to the reader acquainted with the contractual brevity of today's gig economy. "Clause 1: A player is not allowed to stop playing. Clause 2: A player who refuses to play will be eliminated. Clause 3: Games may be terminated if the majority agrees."<sup>22</sup> Such little does Ki-hun's memory yield: his childhood friend Sang-woo ends up being the one reminding him during the final game (a staging that couples their nemesis-friendship coming-of-age with an aggressive stage display of them flying at each other's throats) that the protagonist had missed the chance of quitting.

### **3. Financial context: futures and options**

The allusions by *Squid Game* to the notion of debt are ample – they determine the fates of the characters who continue living their lives in the metropolis – they are made most explicit during the games themselves. An early exemplary exposé of the accumulation of the contestants' debts is provided by the staff on the island:

Player 218, Cho Sang-woo, 46 years, former team leader of Team Two at Joy Investments. Siphoned money off from his clients' balances, then invested it in derivatives and futures options and failed. Current loss: ₩650 million. 107, Kim Mi-ok, 540 million in debt. 118, Oh Yeong-uk, 1.02 billion in debt. 322, Jung Min-tae, 880 million in debt. 119, No Sang-hun, 1.39 billion in debt. 369, Park Ju-un, 900 million in debt.<sup>23</sup>

However, an official acknowledgement of the toll of debt for South Korean society is a late burn and occurs retrospectively after Ki-hun is the only one to survive. As late as the final episode 'Lucky Day,' *Squid Game* shifts to an acknowledgement of the embodiment of culprit of capitalism during the years of the Cold War and its aftermath: the bank. The protagonist, who is about to get a new haircut, is seated in front of a TV, the medium of the past, when the news reporter announces the following: "The country's reported household debt is rapidly on the rise, topping the

<sup>22</sup> *Squid Game*, season 1, episode 1, "Red Light, Green Light," directed by Hwang Dong-Hyuk, aired on September 17, 2021, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81262746?trackId=14170286>, 40:27.

<sup>23</sup> "Red Light, Green Light," 37:50.

current global average. Last third quarter, the Bank of Korea and the Bank for International Settlements reported that Debt to GDP ratio for households was 96.6%.<sup>24</sup> ‘Lucky day’ makes no big deal about the bitter context: the audience accompanies Ki-hun not long before the TV reporter’s verdict, into a room comprised of wooden tiling. A heavy table placed in the midst divides him from the clerk, who scolds politely about never having touched the prize he obtained – ‘why not invest?’, the clerk might be asking himself – and does in fact voice this worrisome concern to Ki-hun. After all, what is the point of the prize if it doesn’t buddy up with contributing to finance and speculation? Ki-hun’s lack of ambition regarding the dormant prize on his account is obvious, given the island’s posing an immediate congruence between its amount and the deaths.<sup>25</sup>

Ki-hun’s reservation about the clerk’s recommendation might be explained by the fate of his dear friend Sang-woo, who ends up indebted to a large extent by making bets on futures. In the words of Lee: “Sang-woo was a neighborhood legend who went from rags to riches, but his story shows that even successful managers are replaceable under the neoliberal economic system.”<sup>26</sup> It takes little more than this to become an exemplary case. The following dialogue ensues when Ki-hun bumps into Sang-woo on the streets of Seoul by accident, having momentarily returned to their usual lives after voting to end their stay on the island:

Ki-hun: “Sang-woo! What are you doing here? Is it because of your debt? Shh... Hey, come on, you’re still Ssangmun-dong’s own pride and joy. You’re still the genius who got accepted to SNU Business School. So don’t worry. You’ll make money again. Go tell your mom all about it and make a fresh start.”

Sang-woo: “Just make... ₩six billion?”

Ki-hun: “Six billion? I thought it was ₩600 million.”

Sang-woo: “They don’t know everything there is.”

Ki-hun: “And all those stocks that guy said that you lost, you did that for real?”

Sang-woo: “It wasn’t just stocks now. There was futures too.”

<sup>24</sup> “Lucky Day,” 42:50.

<sup>25</sup> Ki-hun does end up withdrawing cash once – if only the most minimal amount, the remains of which he ends up giving to an elderly lady in exchange for a red rose.

<sup>26</sup> Lee and Proffitt, “We bet on humans; you’re our horses”: the second phase of neo-poverty in South Korea as portrayed in *Squid Game*,” 535.

Ki-hun: "You bet on your future? What kind of bet was it that you used that much money? Did you get a girlfriend?"

Sang-woo: "Doesn't mean that future."<sup>27</sup>

*Squid Game* does not halt at the abovementioned creative reference to 'futures'; the series' allusion to the stock market is prominent as early as the first game entitled "Red Light, Green Light." As a most pertinent marker of the currents of economy, the course of the stock market is depicted commonly by the bull and bear. A green bull and defines a market's price for stocks increasing by a minimum of 20%. A red bear is synonymous with a market's course leading to a depreciation and loss of value of at least 20% compared to the last market downturn. For example, this was the case during the aftermath of economic crisis of 2007.<sup>28</sup>

According to film scholar Sean Cubitt, the paradigm of today's debt economy has morphed into a steady thematic companion to media. Such portrayals of debt conjugate that "death is not certain and not certainly future; and while taxes can be legislated away, what cannot is the engine of the digital finance economy: debt. Having mortgaged our future earnings to pay for present possessions, individually and socially, we owe our existence to a future whose bills we have no means or intention to pay."<sup>29</sup> Given *Squid Game*'s subtle emphasis on aspects of the economy, the following provides a brief introduction to the functioning of the stock market. The distinctions between two tendential strategies by traders will be explained below. At stake is the heavy risk that leads Sang-woo to be invited to the games – the investment banker has bet on 'futures.'

The most known function of an investor concerns the classical notion of buying stock shares at a given price – in other words, owning a certain percentage of a company or commodity. Buying stock shares can lead to a loss of investment, depending on whether the price of wheat will increase or decrease (more so, if many traders decide to sell their shares of stock at the same time, the price will decrease more rapidly). Yet, the trader can retract this input in owning the commodity selling company shares at any given stage. In other words, buying a stock is the trader's

<sup>27</sup> "Hell," 23:45.

<sup>28</sup> Mike Price, "Bull vs. Bear Market: What's the Difference?" *The Motley Fool*, March 14, 2023. <https://www.fool.com/investing/how-to-invest/bull-vs-bear-market/>.

<sup>29</sup> Sean Cubitt, "Oblivion: Of Time and Special Effects," in *Special Effects on the Screen: Faking the View from Méliès to Motion Capture*, eds. M. Lefebvre & M. Furstenau (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 445.

investment in the *thriving* of the company earnings appreciation – during the process, the investor may lose or gain a bit, but is able to opt out and sell. No trader tends to not lose everything in this scenario, should he be clever and check the balance sheet and pricing of the shares at regular intervals.

Comparatively, a future and an option contract are alternative methods to invest in a stock – the stock share or commodity is an asset. Still, these two mechanisms concern the infusion of a *temporality* in the trading process. Rather than a certain percentage of a commodity being bought, then, the object bought is the *state* of the commodity price for a specific commodity volume at a specific price and a defined point in time. Thus, both the futures contract and the option contract are bets on how an asset will perform at a fixed period of time in the future and at a predicted value. The case of the futures contract in finance is a relatively risky move, compared to the classical action of buying shares. As such, this addresses not only the trader's betting on the future value of a company or commodity (options are generally applied to stock shares, while future contracts tend to be applied to 'hard' commodities such as precious metals, oil or gas) – it is a contract which *obliges* the trader to buy or sell the asset at a fixed stage in time and an agreed upon financial amount.<sup>30</sup> Whether the trader's predictions will be confirmed is irrelevant for this agreement. Thus, the possibility of loss and profit are less controllable, compared to the classical buying of stock shares – the trader can lose all his credit and worse as a result of the futures contract leverage factor.

The case of options differs from futures in the following ways: options concern the betting on a company's or commodity's price improving or declining, in other words, wagering on a stock's share performance in the future will also make headway in the trader's gains or losses. However, the case of options concerns the buying of a *right* to take ownership of stock shares or an amount of a commodity. The investor buys the right to obtain a certain number of stock shares at a particular price. The option contract is betting on buying or selling a stock *in the future* – on the directive currents the stock will take at a further point in time. Similarly, the trader can also lose the option as soon as the stock even slightly goes off course from the prediction. An option contract designates the promise to buy shares at a particular price – if the

<sup>30</sup> Adam Hayes, "Options vs. Futures: What's the Difference?" *Investopedia*, September 29, 2022, <https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/difference-between-options-and-futures/>.

stock shares decline below the fixed option price. The option would expire, should the value of the stock depreciate below the basis price less than the price of his option.

At the same time, an option contract for publicly owned company shares commits the investor to contributing a front end fee that obliges to buy shares at a so-called 'strike price.' Moreover, the option also has a time value associated with the time length of the option contract. Therefore, as the time approaches the end of the fixed time, the value decreases as well. In other words, the case of futures contract is not only categorically more risky – it can also become an outright tragedy in case of a contract that ventures off into big financial losses. Such is not the risk case with a stock options contract, where loss is limited to the cost of the contract.

How is this related to *Squid Game*, the reader might ask, and how will I study the relation between the series and contemporary financial-economic-social realities?

#### **4. Methodology: 'thin description', schizoanalysis and feminism**

In approaching my object, I use a variant of the sociology of literature in order to instigate the relation between art and the socio-economic force field. Initially synonymous with the Birmingham school of Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams that incorporated Marxism into cultural studies, sociology of literature branched out amid the 1980s, a decade in which new disciplines integrated the approach into various fields (i.e., decolonial and queer studies). In general terms, sociology of literature is the matter of coordinating "the literary with the social: to provide an account of literary texts and practices by reference to the social forces of their production, the social meanings of their formal particulars, and the social effects of their circulation and reception."<sup>31</sup> More specifically, this thesis will explore a mode of reading by critical theorist Heather Love. Love draws attention to difficult and negative affects, so as to upheave such an impasse into sites of subversion and reassurance. In a response to Love, cultural theorist Eliza Steinbock affirms that the "corpus of trans cinema [...] testifies to the resourceful reclamation of negative affects, which is not just about 'transforming the base material of social abjection

<sup>31</sup> James F. English, "Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature and 'the Sociology of Literature,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): viii.

into the gold of political agency.”<sup>32</sup> On a methodological level, Love and Steinbock introduce the term ‘thin description’ here, which concerns the practice of locating “complexity less at the level of ‘experience, consciousness, and motivation’ than at that of ‘surfaces, operations, and interactions.’”<sup>33</sup>

The ‘descriptive turn’ is a development derived from French historian François Dosse in *Empire of Meaning*, addressing late twentieth century sociology’s “attention to action, to everyday experience and consciousness, and to things, and a tendency to validate actors’ own statements about their behavior rather than to appeal to structural explanations.”<sup>34</sup> According to Love, the setting of the humanities at the time is reminiscent of a tradition that adumbrates the longing to read for ‘richness’ in text, prescribing an interiority, depth, complexity and warmth to the cornerstones of reception. The text’s singularity is engaged with “both an access to otherness and a message or call to attention.”<sup>35</sup> The turn is observed in Williams’ work, *New Formalism* and the turn to ethics. According to Love, in “literary studies especially, richness is an undisputed—if largely uninterrogated—good.”<sup>36</sup> The past decades of literary studies’ theoretical underpinning has resulted in a decline of humanism, accompanied by the continuation of humanist ideals in new modes; close reading was its most prominent manifestation. In the words of Love, despite “intellectual and social changes, the richness of texts continues to serve as a carrier for an allegedly superannuated humanism.”<sup>37</sup> This prevalence was challenged by the retraction of classical methods in literary studies by way of instituting sociological models of approach, e.g., literary scholar Franco Moretti’s account of world literature and the activity of distant reading became an emblem of the inclusion of social-scientific models among the humanities. The result of this trend was the production of macro-sociological data about a text, prioritizing observation of “the importance of scholarship at ‘second hand.’”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering images: trans cinema, embodiment, and the aesthetics of change* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 150.

<sup>33</sup> English, “Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature and ‘the Sociology of Literature,’” xix.

<sup>34</sup> Heather Love, “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 376.

<sup>35</sup> Love, 371.

<sup>36</sup> Love, 371.

<sup>37</sup> Love, 373.

<sup>38</sup> Love, 374.

The method of microsociology stresses the pivot of procedures – in “studying such models, I suggest we can develop modes of reading that are close but not deep.”<sup>39</sup> Love does not discard closeness altogether, but arranges a distillation by which the notion of ‘close attention’ is enhanced in contrast to a humanist busyness with hermeneutics. The critical theorist’s reading is a site suffused by the sociologists Bruno Latour and Erving Goffman, both “understood as pragmatist sociologists, since they avoid discussions of underlying drives or essences and attend instead to gestures, traces, and activities.”<sup>40</sup> They provide a gateway to exploring the possibilities of a text to embrace the ‘complexities of social life.’

In Love’s reading of Latour, she notes an emphasis on description of associative networks instead of sticking to the categories of size, scale and place that are distinct in the disciplinary undertaking at Latour’s time of writing. This is why Love proposes redirecting the scholar’s attention to description. Taking into account how Latour finds empiricism a poor rendering of reality, she quotes him: “This poverty, however, is not overcome by moving away from material experience, for instance to the ‘rich human subjectivity,’ but closer to the much variegated lives materials have to offer. It’s not true that one should fight reductionism by adding some human, symbolic, subjective, or social ‘aspect’ to the description since reductionism, to begin with, does not render justice to objective facts.”<sup>41</sup> Relating her approach to Goffman, she stresses how a variety of social interactions manifest themselves in their deviance from the humanist arrangement toward interiority. Critics of Goffman have pointed out his “lack of attention to both structure and individual psychology, Anthony Giddens describes his work as ‘flat’ and ‘empty.’”<sup>42</sup> Despite Goffman’s focus “on the small worlds of face-to-face interactions, these worlds are flat: complex and variegated, but not rich, warm, or deep.”<sup>43</sup> As a consequence, Goffman’s interest localized in disciplines such as animal ethology, kinesics and game theory, and led him to emphasize micro social interactions over major humanist attributes such as motivation.

The dreamlike or hallucinatory quality of *Squid Game* also provokes a psychoanalytical reading, though not the regular Freudian or Lacanian one. Instead,

<sup>39</sup> Love, 375.

<sup>40</sup> Love, 375.

<sup>41</sup> Love, 377 and Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 11-112.

<sup>42</sup> Love, 378.

<sup>43</sup> Love, 378.



schizoanalysis appears more apt, a term coined by Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972). Instead of trying to arrive at a conclusion that would explain and solve what beset subjects, their aim was to offer a way out, an alternative to rendering the ultimate the suffering of subjects living under the conditions of capitalist modernity. As a result, they did not look for coherence, but coined possible connections, flights and escape routes. I will expand on schizoanalysis by considering *Squid Game*'s relation to Korean history a matter of connection and exit geared toward a multidirectional memory, made possible by a reading that arranges the gaps and the interstices in their revealing the significance of farce, comedy and tragedy. Instead of following Deleuze and Guattari strictly, here, I will use a Deleuzian feminist reading of the series by highlighting, in the end, the female characters' interactions rather than the male protagonist, provoked by *Squid Game*'s opening up histories via the female characters.

As a form of schizoanalysis, I will also follow a method of thin description, which is complemented by a focus on how things appear. Cultural theorist McKenzie Wark addresses the pivot of appearance in relation to the historiography of designating either the base of economism (explained above) or the commodity form to align itself with history. Phrased more eloquently in her words:

What if appearances were as real as the essence? Before addressing that, let's add just a little more nuance. There were actually two versions of the essence: appearance structure. One took the economic to be the essence, but in the sense of being the base, and everything else is built upon it. This rather vulgar version is called economism. In the other version, it's not the economic, but the commodity form that is the essence, one that has come into being in history and then becomes the essence of history, which records its forms of appearance as a false totality or as spectacle.<sup>44</sup>

The commodity form is indeed of the essence in my reading of *Squid Game*, and so is its relation to history and time. This raises the question of how I read the position of *Squid Games* a.) in relation to the distinction between modernity and postmodernity;

<sup>44</sup> McKenzie Wark, "The Sublime Language of My Century," in *Capital Is Dead* (London; New York: Verso, 2019), 26.

b.) in relation to historically determined contemporary socio-economic circumstances.

## 5. Historical context: between modernity and postmodernity

My definition of late modernity and postmodernity is derived from literary scholar Peter Zima. Here, modernity, late modernity and postmodernity are not considered solely as chronological units or styles, but as “*problematics: as social and linguistic situations* within which conflicting answers to certain questions or incompatible solutions to certain problems are proposed.”<sup>45</sup> All of modernity and late modernity did not disappear with the advent of the ready-made or performance art, for example. Neither does the juxtaposition of these periods, according to Zima, yield an “ideological dualism”<sup>46</sup> that defeats concerns of distinction in place of a “confrontation of mythical instances of ‘actants,’ one of which represents ‘evil’ while the other represents all that is ‘good.’”<sup>47</sup> In framing the periods as problematics, Zima emphasizes the involvement of postmodernity with other phases.

Modernity is historical proper (encompassing 400-500 years), whereas the time span since postmodernity’s advent after WW II becomes temporally incomparable, resulting in “almost incommensurate historical units.”<sup>48</sup> Postmodernity is a reference to the philosophical and sociological account that distinguishes the former from modernity. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is the navigation of the aesthetic or literary response to late modernity (modernism). Zima stresses the contiguity between the problematics: postmodernity is not a deafening betrayal of modernity, for which it becomes undeserving of appreciative might (i.e., Jürgen Habermas and Terry Eagleton). Zima first posits the ‘posts’ as complementation to two periods which are framed as historically distinct (modernity and late modernity, or modernism, which arose amid a change in history and consciousness during the 1950s). He then elevates the new problematics’ reach – instead of one leading to the other, they confer not solely with the problematic that immediately preceded it, but potentially also with the previous.

<sup>45</sup> Peter V., Zima, “Modernity – Modernism – Postmodernity: Attempting A Definition,” in *Modern/Postmodern: Society, Philosophy, Literature* (Bloomsbury, 2010), 12.

<sup>46</sup> Zima, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Zima, 12.

<sup>48</sup> Zima, 14.

The conferring feature of Zima's project also surfaces in the break from modern to late modern times: "modernism or late modernity could be defined as an auto-criticism of modernity, of the spirit of modern times."<sup>49</sup> Albeit exuding affinity in the problems and questions raised in relation to the different periods, the problematics' answers differ. "The homogeneity of the problematic consists in the affinity of its problems and questions, its heterogeneity in its divergent answers and solutions."<sup>50</sup> Zima assigns modernity with ambiguity, late modernity with ambivalence and postmodernity with indifference. Here, the latter is not an aloof attitude toward a contemporary, but refers to a latent interchangeability in postmodernity. In Zima's words: "After the collapse of fascism and the fading of Marxism-Leninism, whose decline seems to have discredited all secular doctrines of salvation, Lyotard defines the postmodern 'as incredulity toward metanarratives.'"<sup>51</sup>

Thus, indifference concerns an economic principle by which the exchange value has replaced a steadily persistent value system, one still found in late modernity. According to the literary scholar: "Postmodern currents in philosophy and literature confirm Marx's and Nietzsche's fundamental idea that, in a society governed by the economic principle, there is no cultural (political, moral or aesthetic) value that could successfully and durably challenge the *indifference of the exchange value*."<sup>52</sup> Here, Nietzsche's intricacy of the possibility of combining opposites into a unity during the era of ambivalence eventually leads to their effectual interchangeability. In the case of Marx, of concern is the mechanism by which capital forces heterogeneity into a "reconciliation of incompatibles."<sup>53</sup> As a result, the previously universal claim to values is replaced by their status as contingencies, yielding a particularisation and pluralism where "moral, aesthetic and political values (and entire ideologies such as the fascist and communist ones) appear as contingent, interchangeable entities, their implicit or explicit claim to universal validity is disputed." Therein, moral, aesthetic and political values continue, yet under the guise of a dominant framework by which capital determines their possible temporariness and interchangeability.

<sup>49</sup> Zima, 6.

<sup>50</sup> Zima, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Zima, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Zima, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Zima, 16.

Throughout this thesis, the modern tragic is procured in order to reflect the ambivalence prevalent in late modernity. However, the reading is made possible by the postmodern constituency that applies indifference so as to refer to the late modern. In light such a postmodern 'indifference' that is stylistically implemented by *Squid Games*' smooth sequential aesthetics and thematically in that no space is provided to acknowledge the deaths of the majority of characters, the dynamic between the discussed genres of farce, comedy and tragedy is prone to a late modern deliberation of ambivalence.

## 6. Historical realities: debt and time

Sang-woo gets into trouble through his involvement in economic futures, as mentioned above. The emphasis regarding the pivot of options is reminiscent of the series' own appeal to a financial stability yearning to be restored for South Korean subjects. In other words, *Squid Game*'s portrayal of temporality, as will be explained below, is an emblem of the result of gambling too much with unpredictable currents of an economy. The importance lies here: the object's portrayal of time passing is conveyed in those scenes to not take place on the isolated island. Ample scenarios which occur at dawn are contrasted by an arena on the island which refuses the incorporation of any such passing temporality. The reason for the above excavation of economism thus is contextualized in the following discussions regarding temporality. According to literary scholar Maria Boletsi: "For indebted subjects, [...] the future 'seem(s) to be frozen': for debt simply neutralizes time, time as the creation of new possibilities."<sup>54</sup> The reading in this thesis does so under the premise of critical theorist McKenzie Wark's pivotal remark concerning the way in which Marxism has been deployed in the past. "The challenge is to disenchant this myth of history [in which the language of the present is fastened to an imaginary future] without losing the ability to think of historical time as having other possibilities."<sup>55</sup>

The protagonist of *Squid Game* is introduced as a former employee at Dragon Motors Unit 1,<sup>56</sup> the company he worked for before owning a chicken farm and

<sup>54</sup> Maria Boletsi, "Recasting the indebted subject in the middle voice," *Social Science Information* 58, no. 3 (2019): 434.

<sup>55</sup> Wark, "Introduction," 12.

<sup>56</sup> Hwang Dong-Huyk has voiced that the strike is modelled after a workers' strike at Ssangyoong Motor Strike in 2009, during which 2,6000 employees endured 77 days to protest layoffs until police violence shut down the strike. Source: Lee Chang-Kun, "Squid Game's Strike Flashbacks Were

becoming a chauffeur. The flash-back of the brutal violence by law enforcement that led to the death of Ki-hun's colleague during a workers' strike is the only memory in colour that occurs throughout the series, raising questions such as whether *Squid Game* could be a pertinent hint towards the fatal consequential of post-trauma and depression. Is this an arrangement of a hero's tragic flash-backs in reverse, inadvertently celebrated by franchise and social media?

The present which Ki-hun gambles for on the day of Ga-yeong's birthday coincides with the day he gets invited to the island. Aided by a bright young man in the obtaining of a present, Ki-hun picks the most promising and, as a matter of fact, only packaged object in the gambling parlour headlined: 'The fun doesn't end: Crane Game'. The daughter can hardly disguise her scepticism upon opening the package: faced with a lighter disguised as a gun, Ki-hun is quick to rob Ga-yeong of the gift.

If paying close attention to the series, the audience comes to notice that Ki-hun might have pre-empted his own fate: the compact black box<sup>57</sup> is ornamented in a copper ribbon initially. This packaging resurfaces surreptitiously in the game itself, yet with a single alteration of scale and décor. The alteration of the gift becomes a prop catering variably as coffins, filing storage to the previous winners and the containment of the invitation cards, each time enwrapped in a pink ribbon.

My reading considers the box containing several functions in the series to be contiguous with the smart phone, whereby the information economy of the contemporary is alluded to subtly by the institution's detailed and inadvertent

Modelled on Our Real-Life Factory Occupation," *Jacobin*, accessed January 14, 2023, <https://jacobin.com/2021/11/squid-game-ssangyong-dragon-motor-strike-south-korea>.

<sup>57</sup> For a historiography of the black box, see media scholar David Gauthier's article "Machine Language and the Illegibility of the *Zwischen*." Gauthier discusses the historiography of machine language in New Media and Software Studies as having been between subjected to the dominant language paradigm that led to the terminology of machine language's designation to a singular symbolic order. Computer pioneer George R. Stibitz was the first to introduce the term 'machine language' in 1946, when his review of the Harvard Mark I unearthed a relationship between machine and mathematics that was made explicit by mathematics' becoming the dominant scheme of translation for computer language. In Gauthier's words: "as Albert and Daylight summarize: 'the ambition to feed mathematical functions directly to the machine came with a language metaphor: being able to talk mathematics to the machine.'" (150) This tendency was further promulgated by the advent of the first computer marketization in 1950. The product thereof adhered to the 'univac short code', a paradigm in which the computer's internal dialogues were abbreviated into emblems that became readable to humans: "the actual machine's internal addresses turned into shortened human-readable symbols, and binary code became pseudo as in *pseudo-code*, 'a rather strictly defined [meta] language or code, independent from the computer hardware, resembling a natural language, in which a problem may be stated for submission to a computer.'" (151) According to Gauthier, the symbolic regimes of terms such as IP addresses and software have been largely left unquestioned in the aftermath of code prioritization. Source: David Gauthier, "Machine Language and the Illegibility of the *Zwischen*." In *Legibility in the age of signs and machines*, edited by Pepita Hesselberth, Janna Houwen, Esther Peeren, Ruby de Vos, 147-165. Boston: Brill, 2018. DOI:10.1163/ 9789004376175\_ 011.

recording of the players' debts, among other aspects. According to Wark, the asymmetries of industrial capitalism, coercing dichotomies between the ownership of means of production and the available labour forces, have shifted into a sphere that can no longer justifiably be called financial capitalism. The previous culture industries have been replaced by 'vulture industries,' being dominated by both the banks and tech companies (e.g., Amazon, Google, Apple) extracting and monetizing information from users. In her words: "We have to entertain each other, while they collect the rent, and they collect it on all social media time, public or private, work or leisure, and (if you keep your FitBit on) even when you sleep. Which gives new meaning to a slogan invented by the Belgian surrealists: 'Remember, you are sleeping for the boss!' Not just our labour, not just our leisure – something else is being commodified here: our sociability."<sup>58</sup> This ruling class of big data is coined the 'vectoralist class', run by private sectors that are no longer based solely on profit margins that exploit labour and own the means of production, but that compound a setting in which users are producing surplus value that caters to the control of the vectors of information.

Whereas in the above I provided several contexts on which the series reflects and in which it inscribes itself, I would now like to move to the genres the series puts to work in order to not so much reflect on, but engage with contemporary situations.

## **7. Genre as event: from Marx to Berlant**

A quote by Karl Marx has circulated unboundedly over more than a century since its coinage, taken from his essay "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", written between December 1851 and March 1852, addresses two coup-d'états. The first concerns the coup d'état 18 Brumaire on 9 November 1799, whereby 18 Brumaire refers to the date as it was recorded in the French Republican calendar system of the time. Often perceived of as the event that led to the end of the French revolution, the coup d'état resulted in Napoléon I seizing power. The second event discussed by Marx refers to a self-staged coup d'état by his nephew Napoleon III in 1851, when his office had been threatened to be made void the following year. Marx's quote goes as follows:

<sup>58</sup> Wark, 3.

Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the Montagne of 1848 to 1851 for the Montagne of 1793 to 1795, the nephew for the uncle. And the same caricature occurs in the circumstances of the second edition of the Eighteenth Brumaire.<sup>59</sup>

With regard to Marx' quote, and for reasons that will become clear, I aim to link it to the consecutive reading of *Squid Game*'s as either farce or tragedy.

The Cambridge Dictionary records a 'farce' as "a humorous play or film where the characters become involved in unlikely situations."<sup>60</sup> Conversely, the OED's definition of the term describes a dramatic work using "horseplay and typically including crude characterization and ludicrously improbable situations."<sup>61</sup> Both definitions' emphasis of 'situation' will be intermingled to highlight the concern for situation in relation to genre as it was explored by cultural theorist Lauren Berlant. The OED's reference to 'horse play', adjacently, is related to *Squid Game*'s protagonist Ki-hun's actual and serious addiction to betting on horse races – Lee and Proffitt sum it up most eloquently: "After Gi-hun presumably wins it all 'fairly,' the Front Man tells him: 'You bet on horses, it's the same here. But we bet on humans. You're our horses.' However, as Gi-hun responded, humans are not horses, and that is why we must, as he ultimately does, question the systems at play."<sup>62</sup>

Cultural theorists' Soo Yeon Kim and Sungjoo Park's eloquent excavation of the means by which contemporary capitalism is responding to consumer society's tendency to wish for a 'fair sporting drama' comprises the main motivation for this thesis. The latter serves first and foremost as a complementation to the concepts introduced by the authors: their sociological study adapted to the premises of consumer capitalism; the elaboration of the notion of 'desire'; the reading for farce and tragedy. Ki-hun's poor talent regarding the management of an unstable and

<sup>59</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. pub. New York, 1994, 15.

<sup>60</sup> "Farce," *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed February 12, 2023, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/farce>.

<sup>61</sup> "Farce," *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/farce#:~:text=farce,noun,type%20of%20writing%20or%20performance>.

<sup>62</sup> Lee and Proffitt, 535.

minimal cash flow he does have is described as a “tragicomic gambling journey”<sup>63</sup> by Kim and Park, having inspired my elaboration of such a journey – however, not exclusively reserved for the protagonist Ki-hun, but by the farce and tragedy that is made possible by collective and social endeavours of other characters.

The contextual parameters here concern that Ki-hun is not an underdog in terms of the financial debt he has accumulated, speaking in strictly statistical terms – given the debts that are revealed to the audience, his is the least extensive. Neither is Ki-hun an underdog in a context that would allow *Squid Game* to be adequate for a reading concerning a sporting drama. However, Ki-hun does make us aware of the effects of the unsustainable socio-economic conditions to which subjects living under late capitalism are exposed. In this context, the thesis will deploy the reading of tragedy and farce not in relation to the dramaturgy of Marx’s quote, but will elaborate the farce firstly, in order to shed light on tragedy in Korean history. When terming the series to be a self-reflective ‘farce’, this occurs on the basis that the object reveals two historical events without explicitly dealing with them as tragedy: the Korean War and the Jeju Killings, tragedies forgotten amidst twentieth century history and cultural memory discourse. The result of reading these historical tragedies in relation to the way in which *Squid Game* makes mention of them will result in the thesis statement that, despite these series’ postmodern aesthetics and the solidarity tied to a farcical elaboration, the deployment of tragedy by the female characters is a contemporary one to be framed by the notion of empathy.

The consideration of Marx’s quote concerns a temporal span, in other words the gaps, the interstices between the revolutions, which lets him reflect on the matter of Bonaparte – the revolutions occur at intervals of half a century (1848, 1793). Marx’s telling functions by way of ‘going back in time’, which commences the reading of retrospection and an inversion of the procedure when transposed to the setting of South Korea. Marx’s procedure’s postulation that ‘first there is a tragedy, then there is a farce’ will be applied to the interstices that make for Marx’s *argument*.<sup>64</sup> My reading for the purposeful gaps in continuity in *Squid Game* is arranged in light of this distribution in Marx’s argument: the emphasis on the recurring character of farce and tragedy in the context of historical materialism. The concern for tragedy

<sup>63</sup> Soo Yeon Kim and Sungjoo Park, “What’s in a game? A dialectic of competition and cooperation in *Squid Game*,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 0(0), (2022): 4.

<sup>64</sup> Thereby, one is stressing the discipline of literary studies in reading historical Marxism.



will be conjoined, here, with the modern history and cultural memory of South Korea.

My use of thin description in this thesis leads me to explore *Squid Game* in relation to the unravelling of farce and tragedy among late capitalism. I take my cue from how Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* (2011) accounts for the ways in which the historical present is orchestrated by the unravelling of normative social conventions in relation to genre.<sup>65</sup> Scenarios of the moral-economic pursuits called ‘the good life’ cascade into aspirations that are entangled within late capitalism. The application of Berlant’s departure from dialectical accounts of neoliberalism as a “world-homogenizing sovereign, with coherent intentions”<sup>66</sup> finds instead a scene in which the present is not forced by fixation or closure of form. In other words, accounting for the aesthetic development of individual characters is replaced by introducing social situations, making affect an ethical matter.

Cruel optimism comes into being when an object that harbours the premise of attachment, consciously or unconsciously, ends up not coinciding with the expectation that has been cast. At stake here is the unfurling of an unexpected fragility, that ends up, if not replacing, then accompanying, the determinant for a generosity that engaging with an object set out to result. Optimism in scenarios can turn out to be a way of coping, if opposed to the scenarios’ cruelty. These are inhabited relations, in spite of and because of their revealing the difference between an expectation and their unapologetic being. The engagement with *Squid Game* occurs in relation to the leverage of universality that has accompanied its reception, by means of the way both farce and tragedy make claims to universality, yet my use of tragedy will be far from universal. Instead, I will consider tragedy not only in its postmodern context but also its postmodern *form*. According to performance scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann, postmodern theatre intensifies events into situations:

the term ‘situation’ designates an unstable sphere of simultaneously possible and imposed choice, as well as the virtual transformability of the situation. Theatre playfully puts us in the position where we can no longer simply ‘face’ the perceived but are participating in it, thus accepting, as Gadamer emphasized about the ‘situation’, that we are in

<sup>65</sup> Lauren Berlant, “Introduction,” in *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): 7.

<sup>66</sup> Berlant, 15.

it in such a way that ‘we are unable to have any objective knowledge of it’.<sup>67</sup>

Additionally, the emergence of cruel optimism by Berlant is referred to as a *situation* that is part of a historical present whose operations are framed by a minimal degree of their unboundedness. This situation is expressed by means of genre: “the ways the activity of being historical *finds* its genre, which is the same as finding its event,”<sup>68</sup> addresses a scenario in “which a relation of persons and worlds is sensed to be changing but the rules for habitation and the genres of storytelling about it are unstable, in chaos.”<sup>69</sup> Berlant’s transmuting of form into a minimal sustenance of the formulaic thus emphasizes a continuous subdued sociality, encountering instances that require an adjustment and persistence.

The categories proposed by Berlant to place in the midst of situation are comedy and tragedy. The former is adept at coinciding with showcasing the mechanisms by which an operation proceeds: comedy is forthcoming to cruel optimism’s reshuffling of relational stakes mentioned above – being humoured provides an instance of impending hope. On the other hand, tragedy has a disconcerted tendency to be in abashing failure with catering to optimism’s attachment to scenarios,<sup>70</sup> in addition to having been made a poster child of drama as genre in the past.

My reading aims to conjoin the interstices and postdramatic instances in *Squid Game* with what Terry Eagleton remarks in the introduction to his recent study *Tragedy* (2021): “The fact that everything carries on as normal, remarks Walter Benjamin, is the crisis. George Eliot speaks in *Middlemarch* of ‘that element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency.’”<sup>71</sup> Eagleton continues by claiming that the high end theory of tragedy ignores much of the common sorrow and pain, so that “[s]uch well-wadded insulation from pain would certainly seem the case with some traditional theorists of tragedy.”<sup>72</sup> Here, *Squid Game* is not a tragedy in which the hero dies a tragic fate whilst the other characters do not. In this case, the

<sup>67</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, “Panorama of postdramatic theatre,” in *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated by Karen Jürs-Munby, (Routledge, 2006): 106.

<sup>68</sup> Berlant, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Berlant, 6.

<sup>70</sup> Berlant, “Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal,” in *Cruel Optimism*, 177.

<sup>71</sup> Terry Eagleton, “Did Tragedy Die?,” in *Tragedy*, (Yale University Press, 2021), 39.

<sup>72</sup> Eagleton, 39.

protagonist is the only one who survives the second round of the games, yet decides to return once again. This, I think, is both a farcical and a tragic element.

## **8. Issues of (toilet) paper: comedy**

The contestants on the island are invited to the games by way of a seemingly coincidental encounter with a businessman who interrupts their day-to-day lives in Seoul. Ki-hun is approached while waiting for the metro, reflecting silently on the potential loss of emotional proximity to his daughter, of whom he has just discovered that she will emigrate soon. The salesman presents him with a chance of winning ₩100.000 – Ki-hun is glad to accept, having lost all the cash he had obtained earlier when betting on horse races to a pick pocket who nicked it. The businessman presents him with a choice to be made between two envelopes, blue and red. According to the director Dong-huyk, this invitation to the island is inspired by a Korean-Japanese procuring myth, or legend, called ‘Aka Manto’.<sup>73</sup>

Aka Manto entails that a ghost is said to appear in women’s lavatories who keeps his face hidden behind a mask. The women frequently ask the ghost to take off this mask, and one “day he supposedly kidnapped a young woman and the two were never seen again until he began to plague the girls’ washroom.”<sup>74</sup> When the ghost appears to revenge his failed affection, Aka Manto will ask them whether they want red or blue toilet paper. The colours make for the tainting of the body’s colour after the women have made their choice. According to Michele Druga: “If the answer is red, she will either be beheaded or any number of gruesome cuts will appear on her body, giving her the aforementioned ‘red cloak.’ Should her answer be blue, hands will appear to strangle her or the blood will drain from body, turning her a shade of blue.”<sup>75</sup> Its temporal origins are unknown, yet in the context of post-Japanese war and sexual liberation, the Japanese rendering of Aka Manto issued its instigation as a cautionary tale. According to the author, the story has “to take place in a space associated with one particular facet of femininity: the toilet. They accomplish this by

<sup>73</sup> “The director of Squid Game revealed the dark and terrifying meaning of the paper flipping game,” Bizoom, October 10, 2021, [https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html](https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html).

<sup>74</sup> Michele Druga, “Terrifying Toilets: Japanese Toilet Ghosts and Sexual Liberation in the Postwar Period,” *Wittenberg University East Asian Studies Journal*, Vol. XXXVIII (Spring 2013): 2.

<sup>75</sup> Druga, 2.

evoking fear in one's bodily functions; one cannot help if she has to urinate, but the fear accompanied by possibly encountering Aka Manto [...] in the process restrains one from doing so, if only in public."<sup>76</sup> The *generic* question is how the myth with toilet paper at its heart relates to the series in a comical or tragic way – or rather a farcical one.

One quote by the literary critic George Steiner is telling, here, as he is quoted by Eagleton: "If there are bathrooms in the houses of tragedy,' he writes with a splendid flourish, 'it is for Agamemnon to be murdered in.'"<sup>77</sup> Steiner further announces that tragedy is the highest mode of art, vanishing at the advent of modernity, solely reserved for "the death of princes rather than the suicide of salesmen."<sup>78</sup> The conservative introduces an 'aristocracy of suffering',<sup>79</sup> by which the currents of Marxism are too optimistic to sustain the demise of an atrocious ending. Steiner's classicist conception is contested by the series' presenting figures on the brink of exclusion from society, configuring the helpless, the homeless, the trapped, to gradually lets singular figures emerge from the matrix of doom. Therefore, *Squid Game* is arranged in light of Williams' pitting of 'tragedy' against tragedy. The former is the way in which especially modern philosophy has taken hold of the concept, the latter refers to the colloquial, mundane way in which an event in the present is referred to, an accident and order by the name of tragedy. According to Williams, "[t]ragedy is then not a single and permanent kind of fact, but a series of experiences and conventions and institutions. It is not a case of interpreting this series by reference to a permanent and unchanging human nature."<sup>80</sup>

Analogously, literary scholar Frans-Willem Korsten works out the operational frictions that occur between comedy and tragedy in a theatre performance by Elfriede Jelinek called *Ulrike Maria Stuart*. Here as well, characters do not appear as tragic universals, but to the extent to which they are grotesquely posited in relation to historically specific realms of justice and law. In this context, according to Korsten, comedy and tragedy "are in friction with one another [...]: tragedy deals with what has happened and can no longer be reversed, whilst comedy contrives to address

<sup>76</sup> Druga, 4.

<sup>77</sup> Eagleton, *Tragedy*, 14.

<sup>78</sup> Eagleton, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Eagleton, 16.

<sup>80</sup> Raymond Williams, "Tragic Ideas," in *Modern Tragedy* (Chatto & Windus London, 1966): 45-46.

what could happen and can be opened up.”<sup>81</sup> In other words, the genres’ relation is antithetical in their pitching a confrontation with “stepping ‘outside of the limits of the possible.’”<sup>82</sup> Whereas comedy could be said to provoke the real, tragedy risks too much, to the avail that the outcome is of consequence. “Tragedy brings us to the moments during which a protagonist is confronted with the consequences of a step outside of an existing order.”<sup>83</sup> The interstices in *Squid Game* are gateways to tragedy in that they bring about a provocation to the real that is nevertheless accepted as such. At the same time, the series appears to opt for a comedic stepping out of the limits of the real. Is this confrontation dealt with in a farcical way or a comedic one?

Philosopher Alenka Zupančič phrases the essence of comedy eloquently: “comedy and comic satisfaction thrive on things that do not exactly add up. They thrive on these discrepancies as a source of pleasure rather than pain.”<sup>84</sup> The suspension of the order of the myth Aka Manto is laid bare by way of a minor aspect of the story that demarcates this discrepancy: the toilet paper, which in turn is related to the game of ddjakji – the game of flipping the opponents fiche: “a folded-tile-flipping game where all that’s required to play is paper.”<sup>85</sup> In a sense I am asking, then, what the nature of the flipping is: tragic, comedic, or farcical.

The player in *Squid Game* that brings attention to the issue of toilet paper is Han-mi-nyeo (Kim Joo-Ryoung). She is the oldest of the main female contestants. Initially she makes for one of the outcasts in the various groups that form through the games’ unfolding, teams that are conjoined by way of basing the likelihood of winning on neoliberal meritocratic ideals. Han-mi-nyeo frequently interrupts this competitive strategy with dramatic improvisations regarding the obtrusive unfairness emanating from the island’s rules, in addition to enduring an array of insults from the other contestants. The ambition of her dramatic interludes is insubordinate to much of the particularity by which teaming up of the other characters takes hold. She is romantically beaten abashed by her newly found lover’s

<sup>81</sup> Frans-Willem Korsten, “Logic of Tragedy vs Logic of Comedy: Elfriede Jelinek’s Ulrike Maria Stuart and Princess-dramas,” in *Art as an Interface of Law and Justice: Affirmation, Disturbance, Disruption* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2021), 45.

<sup>82</sup> Korsten, *Art as an Interface of Law and Justice: affirmation, disturbance, disruption*, 49.

<sup>83</sup> Korsten, 49.

<sup>84</sup> Alenka Zupančič, “Structural Dynamics and Temporality of the Comical,” in *The Odd One In – On Comedy* (MIT Press, 2008), 130.

<sup>85</sup> Sam Yang, “Squid Game and the Long Shadow of American Empire,” *The Real News Network*, December 16, 2021. <https://therealnews.com/squid-game-and-the-long-shadow-of-american-empire>.

misogyny and subjected to an array of sexist and ageist gestures that gambles with the audience's sympathies.

The series is heavy on types<sup>86</sup> and in this case does so by drawing a connection between class and a contrarian stance toward physical and performative violence. Han-mi-nyeo becomes a subject to cling to in that her withstanding, surviving and subverting an array of gestural and verbal insinuations that *Squid Game* also associates with class in positioning the criminal squad as a locus of harmful slurs. The courageous lady, craving a cigarette, is set to getting her way – a visit to the lavatory might give her enough privacy to not be caught. The guards in front of the door of the hall where the contestants sleep are subdivided in yet other types indicated by a Triangle, Cubic and Circle. Initially, they do not respond to her pleading, which is no discouragement to Han-mi-nyeo and the scene is followed up by an insistent banging on the exit. Settling in sufficiently visible to guards, she's about to pull down her pants and 'make it rain'.

While Han-mi-nyeo gets her way to being guided to the bathroom stalls, the character of North Korean defector Kang Sae-bjoek (Jung Ho-yeon) would also like to go to the lavatory. Neither of the women intend to go there to relieve their bladders, however. Having made their way to the stalls, with the guard waiting outside the door, Han-mi-nyeo has found a neat spot. She pulls a small container from her vagina, abstracts the cigarette while squatting in one of the bathroom cubicles. "Don't scare me like that"<sup>87</sup> is Han-mi-nyeo's response to Sae-bjoek's barging in to the stall, yet the knife she draws is not for Han-mi-nyeo, but to disjoint the entry to the ventilation shaft that may give her a hint of what the consecutive game will be. Han-mi-nyeo becomes hooked to warding and buying them some time. The audience cannot tell whether the guard waiting outside is disorientated by the action, his eye behaviour is not revealed, yet his body's minor twitching gives way to the extemporaneous nature of being put in an uncomfortable position.

Not long after, Han-mi-nyeo and Sae-bjoek peek up at the ventilation shaft: "Are you going to go in there?" The older player is still in disbelief. "I want to see what's up there", Sae-bjoek replies and ventures on her way without a second

<sup>86</sup> According to Jennifer C. Dunn and Stephanie L. Young, the series relies on character types and a passive spectatorship. "Why are you just watching?: polyvalent Korean spectatorship and critical Western spectatorship in *Squid Game*," *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 00 (2022): 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcac034>.

<sup>87</sup> "Man with the Umbrella," 19:22.

thought. Han-mi-nyeo has realized that she needs to get more leeway and shouts to the Triangle guarding the door: “I backed a lot up in here today. It hurts a lot,” bending forward, holding her tummy and contending: “It’s like trying to push out a kid.”<sup>88</sup> “It’s time to go back,” the Triangle exclaims in his response, not knowing how far he has been dragged along together with the audience. “Just give me a second,” Han-mi-nyeo replies. With Sae-bjoek hovering above the toilet and peeking into the ventilation tract, Han-mi-nyeo resorts to a casual multitasking and concurrently speaks to the Triangle and Sae-bjoek, ushering a warning that it is time to return to the hall: “You bastard, get out. Hurry the hell up, we’re in a rush okay?”<sup>89</sup>

This is where the scene takes an unexpected twist. Han-mi-nyeo barges into an unconscious constitutive self-protection. “Stop now. They’re gone.” The “they” are not the guards, however. “All of the stalls’ wipes are gone. Ah, shit.” According to Zupančič, comedy is an instance in which the demand of an object gets overtaken by the surplus that the object realizes before the audience can come to grips with the demand. “Not only do we (or the comic characters) not get what we asked for, on top of it (and not instead of it) we get something we haven’t even asked for at all.”<sup>90</sup> Here, indeed, Han-mi-nyeo explicates the issue before the audience can encompass what is happening. After both toilet paper and wipes are nowhere to be found, she splashes water on her wrists excessively. “Yea, but I’ll use the sink. No, don’t come in. You just stay out there. Did you hear that?”<sup>91</sup> These specific repetitive instances are comedic in that they are “not an ‘empty repetition’ as revolution in the service of perpetuating the given, but a stubborn attempt to do something against all odds, which, because of its repetitious character, leaves the realm of the heroic and enters a territory closer to the comic— not because it keeps failing, but because it keeps insisting.”<sup>92</sup> Han-mi-nyeo’s insistence leads to yet another improvisation, when she shouts: “Don’t come in here, I’m not wearing pants.” Indeed, her pants drop to the ground, thus performing one of the procedures by which comedy is a “short circuit between a reality and its other side is comic acceleration or exaggeration.”<sup>93</sup>

Meanwhile the audience is given a view of the endeavours of the staff in preparing the new game by way of Sae-bjoek’s spying from the ventilation shaft

<sup>88</sup> “Man with the Umbrella,” 20:53.

<sup>89</sup> “Man with the Umbrella,” 21:28.

<sup>90</sup> Zupančič, 132.

<sup>91</sup> “Man with the Umbrella,” 21:53.

<sup>92</sup> Zupančič, 153-154.

<sup>93</sup> Zupančič, 58-59.

above. The Circle and the Square are in the midst of melting sugar in preparation for the next game. While the former gets distracted by Sae-bjoek's nosiness, the Square boss makes a sturdy proposition. "What. Keep stirring!"<sup>94</sup> Shortly afterwards, the guard outside shouts: "You have to come out," chiming into the confused ensemble of digestion tract inertia. Han-mi-nyeo improvises: "Damn, there's no toilet paper here either." As the suspense gathers that the scam might be detected by the as of yet hesitant Triangle who has seen less than the audience, the particularity of asking for both wipes and toilet paper is no longer justifiably relative to the given circumstances. The result is "not a simple 'desublimation,' a reduction of the higher intellectual content to its lower economic or libidinal cause; the aim of such an approach is, rather, the inherent decentering of the interpreted text, which brings to light its 'unthought,' its disavowed presuppositions and consequences."<sup>95</sup> Thereto, Sae-bjoek covers her nose, the Triangle guard bows his head and even Han-mi-nyeo's defaecating is only ever implied.

The subversive character reveals *Squid Game's* abjection to the above mentioned myth. Unlike the legend, Han-mi-nyeo is the one introducing the thought of toilet paper by asking for it, while no frightening ghost of the cautionary tale ends up unfolding his wrath. The missing paper lets her to buy time, which allows her ally to find out a mode of surviving the competition by knowing what the next game is about. Symbolically, the indifference prescribed to postmodernity in Zima's case – accompanied by the exchange value in late capitalism – is conjured away. However, on top of Han-mi-nyeo's adumbration of a scene in which no exchange value is possible, this scene serves yet another purpose, one which concerns language directly.

To provide some context: *Squid Game's* placing a number on a person in the advent of their impending death is morbid. The arrival at an instance of such situation can inaugurate the more commonly known 'actual' in a Deleuzian definition of the term. According to the Deleuzian feminist Elisabeth Grosz, sexual difference "implies that there are at least two ways of doing anything, without being able to specify in what ways they may develop or what form they may take."<sup>96</sup> As a result, the latter necessitates a 'revolution in thought' to occur through the virtual.

<sup>94</sup> "Man with the Umbrella," 22:25.

<sup>95</sup> Zupančič, ix-x.

<sup>96</sup> Elisabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, Duke University Press, 2005, 166.



The creative concern for this argument includes the 'virtual' in a Deleuzian feminist reading with an emphasis on 'at least two ways of doing anything'. The contiguity with Zima's definition of postmodernity's indifference is thus applied to voice not only the first two instances described above to prescribe the structural dispositions of late capitalism. Moreover, the conjugation by Han-mi-nyeo concerns indifference, quite literally, having become part of language itself.

Han-mi-nyeo's number produces the 'new' in relation to a text that surfaces later on in the series named *Theory of Desire*, in that her number '212,' momentarily sidesteps a reference to the actual. In other words, Han-mi-nyeo's number becomes 'to-want-to' compounded by phonetics, seeking "rather a renegotiation or reordering of the very concepts of order and solution,"<sup>97</sup> tailored to a disenfranchisement of the 'major' binarism that is part of language, the virtual of a feminist Deleuzian reading.

### **9. Action or production: tragedy in late modernity**

According to political theorist Richard Halpern, tragedy in capitalism has caused the end of action, to be replaced by production.<sup>98</sup> My proposal is that the characters in *Squid Game* shy away from pre-empting their fates, which occurs through putting endings into action. How do contestants act, reflected into multiple destinies that move beyond the point of mere production? The acting out of endings, in addition to the series' elements, thus is allusive of *Squid Game*'s shooting itself in the foot about form – no longer is it carried by the thrill of its story, in turn becoming a consideration of performance which gives way to tragedy. Were *Squid Game* be considered a tragedy, how to deal with the contrast between the series' postmodern inclinations and the genre of tragedy, in particular being a concern for late modernity? Interweaving tragedies from the past by way of the characters' endings, the below extrapolated the series' acting out of endings. Therefore, the endings are reminiscent of the ambivalence assigned by Zima to the era of late modernity that surfaces in the references to South Korean history.

<sup>97</sup> Grosz, 163.

<sup>98</sup> Richard Halpern, "Introduction," in *Eclipse of Action: Tragedy and Political Economy* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 1-28.

For modern philosophers such as Hegel, tragedy makes for “a *genre of transition* – a privileged form through which to think historical temporality.”<sup>99</sup> Here, first-hand assumptions about tragedy’s appeal to universality, much fostered also through the timelessness by which Greek tragedy has been templated by modern philosophy, is rudiment to a more concise definition as a form that “originates not as a timeless reflection on the human condition, but as a form in which a particular civilisation grapples for a fleeting historical moment with the conflict which beset it.”<sup>100</sup> Whilst Eagleton’s focus lies especially with late modern tragedy, *Squid Game* provokes me to add to this repertoire a contention made by literary scholar Hugh Grady, who excavates the possibility of tragedy in a postmodern context.

According to Grady, the production of tragedy over the centuries “seem to be always using the term anachronistically, to be invoking a form that in the actual plays (or other forms) claiming to be tragedies work out to be different from what the term designated prior to each new work.”<sup>101</sup> Among the productive instances of late modern philosophy, Grady distinguishes the figure of Walter Benjamin to have made pivotal contributions to the place of postmodernity among the inclinations of tragedy. In some ways, this thesis attempts to circumvent the heavy attention paid to tragedy by modern German idealist philosophers in particular, and attend to the historical tragedies that have taken place in South Korea. Marx’s distinction between farce and tragedy in a historical context will accompany this. Firstly, I will shed light on the context of late capitalism in relation to South Korea. Secondly, *Squid Game*’s allusions to tragedy as a literary enterprise will be considered, in conjunction with the object’s postdramatic instances.

The players returning to the game are driven toward the ferry that takes them to the island, while a factory’s chimneys hover amid a heavy darkness, forming the background to carry on within the premises of the game. Posed as a metaphor for modernity, I read this as the epitome of industrialization, least addition, by which to configure the relation of the impending premises to modernity. Eagleton mentions literary scholar Rita Felski here, who remarks that “democratised vision of suffering, the soul of a bank clerk or a shop girl becomes a battleground on which momentous

<sup>99</sup> Toscano, Alberto, “Tragedy.” *Oxford Research Encyclopaedias* (22 November 2019): 14. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1100>.

<sup>100</sup> Eagleton, 2.

<sup>101</sup> Hugh Grady, “The Modernity of Western Tragedy: Genealogy of a Developing Anachronism,” *PMLA* 129, no. 4 (October 2014): 792.

and incalculable forces play themselves out.”<sup>102</sup> The attributes of tragedy, in this reading liberty, necessity and fate, have been incorporated as the product of capitalism. While having been guiding principles for modern philosophy, *Squid Games*’ implementation thereof suggests that neoliberalism has incorporated modern tragedy.

Upon settling into the premises in the hall, the contestants are given a “heartfelt welcome”<sup>103</sup> by the staff of the organization. Each and all are disoriented, the initial conundrum as to waking up in an unknown, yet not outright unpleasant looking space is lifted. As the head of the staff informs: “You called and volunteered to participate in this game.”<sup>104</sup> This instant Kantian invitation sets off modernity’s conundrum with liberty, in as much as the latter becomes only possible within the constraints of a given order; an order that is necessarily following the rules of the game. Volunteering is announced within the constraints of the institution, yet is also framed by an industrious elaboration of aesthetics that developed in modern thought, related to tragedy by Eagleton. He phrases it adeptly: “It is not long before the work of art is being hailed as the place where freedom and necessity are spontaneously at one.”<sup>105</sup> ‘Art’ is momentarily conjoined with “conforming to the law,”<sup>106</sup> expressed in the series when each morning, Haydn’s trumpet concerto awakes the contestants. They sway through the stairway, a maze of soft pastel colours in pink, bright yellow and a faded blue each time they are herded to the next game. More so, Johann Strauss II’s *The Blue Danube* completes the shots each time the rules of the impending game are outlined.

Art becomes representative of the way in which tragedy’s concern with liberty finds an expression – more so, the two seem to converge here, offering “the vision of a unified political order, but a unity which works through its individual features rather than riding roughshod over them.”<sup>107</sup> The staff of *Squid Game* emphasizes: “Each and every one of you is considered an equal within the walls of this facility.”<sup>108</sup> This annotates the ideal of equality in a framework of meritocracy functional for the

<sup>102</sup> Eagleton, *Tragedy*, 9 and Rita Felski, *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>103</sup> “Red Light, Green Light,” 36:45.

<sup>104</sup> “Red Light, Green Light,” 38:45.

<sup>105</sup> Eagleton, 163.

<sup>106</sup> Eagleton, 164.

<sup>107</sup> Eagleton, 164.

<sup>108</sup> “Gganbu,” 02:34.

facilities, and is just as much a reminder that tragedy levels for infringing the boundaries within a given order: stepping outside such order shows the limit of doing so. Another example, prior to the beginning of the games, is again provided by the staff: "I'll give you one last chance to choose. Will you go back to your old and depressing lives, getting chased by your creditors, or will you act and seize this last opportunity we're offering here?"<sup>109</sup> At a later stage in the games after players have witness the unfolding of the wrath of Geol-su, an oversized doll from South Korean seventies children books, the contestants are reminded: "There seems to be a misunderstanding. We're not trying to hurt you or collect your debts. Let me remind you that we're here to give you a chance." The repetitive compulsion here lies with an attempt to convince each and every one that their possible elimination is neither punishment, nor a coercion to pay off their debts; after all, this is an opportunity – bundled in the abound language of neoliberal capitalism.

As already hinted at, the above-mentioned liberty is accompanied by its 'counter', namely necessity, in late modern tragedy. The tragic hero is not the anti-hero. Rather, the tragic hero falls prey to an innate weakness that will lead him or her to an end, a figure often trapped in a frame of inner compulsion. Sophocles' Antigone, i.e., "represents an 'unconditional fidelity to the Otherness of the Thing that disrupts the entire social edifice'".<sup>110</sup> Correspondingly, Ki-hun, one of the underdogs in the social edifice of the parameters, ends up winning. Yet against all odds of learning, Ki-hun ends up returning for another round of impending opulent massacre – to be revealed in *Squid Game's* next season.

One of the postmodern instances of drama's continuation, according to Lehmann, is by way of the colloquial use of the term 'dramatic'. Here, categories of the dramaturgical unfurling of story carry on in their being transposed from the realm of "a certain structure of events"<sup>111</sup> into a setting, inasmuch as it precipitates the audience being affectively moved by something. "With the criterion 'suspense', the classical understanding of drama, or more precisely a certain ingredient of it, lives on."<sup>112</sup>

The consequences for the definition of the tragic are vast. For instance, in response to Steiner's contention that tragedy is incompatible with modernity,

<sup>109</sup> "Red Light, Green Light," 38:49.

<sup>110</sup> Eagleton, 36.

<sup>111</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 35.

<sup>112</sup> Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 34.

Halpern argued that capitalism in modernity has induced “a crisis of action that undercuts traditional conceptions of tragedy.”<sup>113</sup> The focus on action in tragedy – Aristotle’s emblem of the “imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude”<sup>114</sup> – in modernity is replaced by the mode of production. Here, Halpern draws upon the economist Adam Smith: “Making, not doing, generates the wealth of nations”<sup>115</sup> and constitutes modernity under the guise of capitalism. “The crisis of modern tragedy is not, therefore, primarily a matter of worldview or outlook; it reflects a quite consequential crisis of action that afflicts modernity and is given its clearest intellectual form in political economy.”<sup>116</sup> In *Squid Game*, however, action is not missing due to the proliferation of production. To an extent, the series is striking in carrying out and putting endings into action.

Most pertinent is the case of Ali Abdul (Anupam Tripathi), the Pakistani migrant worker who is trying to make a living for his endeared wife and daughter. Having endured years of manual labour amidst horrifying working conditions, Ali lost two of his fingers on his left hand due to a previous accident at work. During the episode “Hell,” the audience follows Ali having momentarily returned to his life on the main land. His superior at work had stopped paying his wages six months ago – Ali had continued working for him nevertheless and after a heated discussion in the culprit’s office, the boss shows no discernment about the most basic and minimal conditions of contract. Not long afterwards, the boss’ hand gets stuck and squished in one of his own machines – the dramaturgical ending of the accident omitted to the audience, Ali’s hand being damaged, is carried out in the series’ reciprocating the gesture. Postdramatic theatre is an engagement with the deconstruction of drama, here, in as much as the above-mentioned interstices are just that, interruptions to the unfolding not only of action, but also our tendency to scramble for meaning through logic.

In relaying the prehistories of postdramatic theatre, Lehmann continues to set up trends in the history of drama that contain a premonition toward the postdramatic. The way in which *Squid Game* focuses on the replication of endings could be read as an instance of the tragic in the postmodern. Similarly, the role of insignificant characters could be considered in such a light, like Frontman (Lee

<sup>113</sup> Halpern, *The End of Action*, 2.

<sup>114</sup> Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London, Penguin Books, 1996), 23.

<sup>115</sup> Halpern, 2.

<sup>116</sup> Halpern, 3.

Byung-hun), the head of management of the premises of the island on which the games are held. According to Lee and Proffitt, he is one of the underdogs in the second phase of neo-poverty. Frontman “represents a shrinking state and the suffering of public workers due to neoliberalism problematizing government intervention”<sup>117</sup> and “his story illustrates the plight of public workers driven to betray their morals due to their declining socioeconomic status and well-being.”<sup>118</sup> His position in *Squid Game* as a person who seems to have embraced the ‘dog-eat-dog’ society ideals is daunting; after all, he orchestrates the murdering of all but two contestants. All the while, the postdramatic instances are most heavy with regard to his character. These instances make him a liminal person with regard to his reliability, which is faint and intangible.

Excavating the trends of the avantgarde and symbolism, Lehmann adds surrealism to the bunch of foreshadowers of the postdramatic. According to Lehmann, “[w]hile the Futurist movement and Dada blossomed only for a short time, the Surrealist movement was longer lasting, probably because a performance aesthetic of speed and pure negation cannot form a canon, while the new exploration of dream, phantasm and the unconscious opened up an abundance of new subject matter.”<sup>119</sup> Frontman wears a grey mask whose curvature and geometrical corners makes him blend in nicely with the decadent apartment from which he supervises the spectacles, whose walls are shaped in a way similar to his mask. A chameleon within his own dwellings, Frontman stands out among the rest, not least for the fact that he need not confine himself to the laws of physics or continuity. He makes for a figure par excellence who does not side with the logic of either-or and is revealed to be one of the former winners of the game. “Contestant no. 132 won in round 6 in 2015, Hwang In-ho,”<sup>120</sup> the files state and tell. Sufficiently adept at leading a double life, Frontman had continued paying his rent in his apartment in Seoul until a couple weeks ago, when the conversation between the police detective Hwang Jun-ho (Wi Ha-Joon) and Frontman’s mother gives no evidence that any changes had been noticed in his life since 2015. He has not been missing for long, the policeman

<sup>117</sup> Lee and Proffitt, “‘We bet on humans; you’re our horses’: the second phase of neo-poverty in South Korea as portrayed in *Squid Game*,” 535.

<sup>118</sup> Lee and Proffitt, 535.

<sup>119</sup> Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 66.

<sup>120</sup> “A Just World,” 46:33.

suggests; so does the goldfish in his apartment, whose body has not decayed enough to be post mortem for long.

According to Lehmann, the postdramatic “is not the occurrence of anything ‘real’ as such but its self-reflective use that characterizes the aesthetic of postdramatic theatre. This self-referentiality allows us to contemplate the value, the inner necessity and the significance of the extra-aesthetic in the aesthetic and thus the displacement of the concept of the latter. The aesthetic cannot be understood through a determination of content (beauty, truth, sentiments, anthropomorphizing mirror, etc.) but solely – as the theatre of the real shows – by ‘treading the borderline’, by permanently switching, not between form and content, but between ‘real’ contiguity (connection with reality) and ‘staged construct.’”<sup>121</sup> The occurrence of these interstices and plot holes gives rise to contemplating the staging in *Squid Game* as suggestive of the aesthetic as an entity that is negotiated by the audience, in conjunction with the way in which late capitalism seems to have incorporated the above-mentioned modern tragedy. Such negotiation is strongest in the affiliation that unravels between Frontman and the police detective who infiltrates the island in order to look for his brother.

#### **10. Postdramatic theatre as repetition and circulation**

Hwang In-ho is nowhere to be found since 2020, a year prior to the beginning of the 33<sup>rd</sup> game, and the police detective’s infiltrating the island during his search gives rise to an array of collections of the institution’s operations that is heavy on revealing the latter’s liminal aspects – the corruption by the staff, the perversion of the VIPs, and lastly, the current profession of his long-lost brother.

At last, Jun-ho’s presence on the island is noticed by Frontman who organizes a hunt for the infiltrator. In turn, Jun-ho escapes the island underwater with divers’ equipment to reach the shore of the main land. The detective’s attempt to forward the recordings he made of the institution’s functioning to his superior in Seoul is interrupted by the manager’s catching up.

The duel between these two ethical antitheses is cut through by a profusely decadent festive for the three remaining players, arranged around an opulent table,

<sup>121</sup> Lehmann, 103.

wine abound, a fat piece of steak residing on the plates of Ki-hun, Sang-woo and Sae-bjoek who are dressed in neat suits. Suspense gathers in the meantime on the hill. Using his gun's last bullet, the detective ends up shooting Frontman's right shoulder, whose affiliation is still an enigma at this point. Yet Frontman himself is no fan of giving up: "This is over. Now come with me. Do as I say, or you die," he administers to Jun-ho, who tip toes further toward the edge of the cliff. "Who the hell are you?"<sup>122</sup> Jun-ho replies and finds the answer himself. Having been shot, Frontman takes off his mask and reveals a face long awaited not only by the police detective but also by the audience. "In-ho," Jun-ho contends, who recognizes his brother standing in front of him, a shoulder shot by his younger sibling. The moment of recognition is the instance of anagnorisis in tragedy, revealing his face to his brother. Whereas he was shot in the right shoulder, Frontman reciprocates the gesture by shooting the police man's left shoulder, re-enacting the previous action. Thus, in putting various endings into an act, *Squid Game* has incorporated the various endings to things – upholding the closure which modern tragic relies on so heavily by repeating acts.

Yet more substantial to an examination of the series' postdramatic inclinations is the manager's vacant dwelling in Seoul, a room in an apartment block entitled 'Cyber Dormitory'. A number of texts are aligned on a desk, among them one by Nietzsche whose title is not readable to me and *Theory of Desire*. A poster is pinned to the wall, a postcard is pinned to the side of the side shelf, both of which depict Rene Magritte's "Empire of Light" (1951). The painting centres around a house positioned under the light of day, the bright blue sky's being accentuated by an arrangement of clouds. From the viewpoint of the house, however, this daylight is not distinguishable, and the street lamp is the only source of light on the otherwise dark street. It has rained sometime in the past; a puddle has gathered on the footpath in front of the house. The clouds above, cumulus humilis, indicate fair weather, of which the house as of yet ushers no sign. The positioning of two states within one image is carried out by the surrealist painting's configuring the same image twice in the private intimations of Frontman's studios abode. Through the series' rewriting of the image, this positioning also invites a claim with regard to the way in which it reconfigures the dramatic by way of surrealism's prehistory to the postdramatic. As Lehman states: "The Surrealist idea that a mutual inspiration takes place when the

<sup>122</sup> "Frontman," 14:12.



fantasies fed by the unconscious reach the unconscious of the recipient emphasizes a trait that is also of importance to the new 'Theatre of Situation' (the mutual inspiration of state and audience)."<sup>123</sup> Rather than coercing a complete claim to understanding, or carrying out interpretation to its sustained end, surrealism operates by way of positioning a non-hierarchy of arrangement between speech, action and image. The dream image is one that provokes the complacency of formerly exclusive entities without ordering them into a hermeneutical structure. "Dream thoughts' form a texture that resembles collage, montage and fragment rather than a logically structured course of events."<sup>124</sup>

At the same time, the reproductions of Magritte's painting as they are arranged in Frontman's apartment provokes a historical reading. I will read this historical repetition in light of political theorist Joshua Clover's article "Genres of the Dialectic", which explores the dialectic of comedy and tragedy in relation to capitalism. Historical refers, here, to the way in which history is told, to have been one way or the other. The author addresses historian Hayden White's claim that history is neither tragic nor farcical, but can only become either through the telling of it. White's contention comprises the background for Clover's reading, that revisits the impact of the historian's elaborations on literary studies. According to Clover, the reading of Marx's quote on the repetition of history as farce is interpreted by the author as an invitation to distinguish class subjectivities, rather than accounting for a temporal separation between the two events. Yet, according to Clover's reading of the original text, the two are not so much distinguished by the political subjectivities of the economy they represent or are contingent with, but by the fact that first "there is a tragedy *and then* there is a farce: [they are not] the same event but by a span of more than half a century".<sup>125</sup> The impactful yet questionable assertion by White then underscores, in the words of Clover: "The very thing that transforms tragedy to farce – the intervening period, the change in the total circumstance – is conjured away. Time, in a reversal of the well-known formula from the *Grundrisse*, is annihilated by space."<sup>126</sup> Additionally, White does not consider that historical tragedies have been occurring, without the procuring of mere narratives subjugated to either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. In Clover's words: "And surely the insistent historical

<sup>123</sup> Lehmann, 66.

<sup>124</sup> Lehmann, 84.

<sup>125</sup> Clover, "Genres of the Dialectic," 435.

<sup>126</sup> Clover, 436.

repetition of this fatality, repetition not of event but of sequence, provides a kind of empirical validation for the case that this unfolding is, contra White, something more obdurate than a matter of mere emplotment.”<sup>127</sup>

Clover continues by setting up the dialectical account of tragedy and farce in momentarily separating time and space here, to infuse them with the categories of production and circulation. Production is the means by which capital produces surplus value (these are the excesses that are left after accounting for costs and labour paid), whose valorisation is embedded “in a larger generalization of the wage/commodity nexus and its domination of abstract over concrete labour such that all labors can be commensurated.”<sup>128</sup> This, according to Clover, yields the following transposition: “Value’s quantitative aspect comes in packets of time.”<sup>129</sup> The postdramatic instances of *Squid Game* explicated above suggest that production has been replaced by the repeated acting out of endings.

The other part of late capitalism subsequently discussed by Clover, circulation, occurs when products that have been valorised during production “are exchanged in units of price in the sphere of circulation; there, surplus value arising in production is realized as profit. This exchange, which might lead to further trade or to consumption, must involve a changing of places (literally, metaphorically, or both) in that the commodity switches owners.”<sup>130</sup> Clover assigns this with the sphere of the spatial. Read in this framework, Magritte’s painting becomes the concurrency of several states in one, connoting how in the cycles of capital that adhere to the sphere of the spatial, commodities switch owners, in this case in the realm of the game.

The hall in which the contestants reside when awaiting the impending game makes for a space of much scheming, collaborating, hypothesizing and cognitive labour being poured into figuring out what the next game will be. Initially filled with 456 bunk beds that resemble the seating arrangement of an arena, those beds diminish in number throughout the series. Prior to the penultimate game, the audience accompanies the remaining three contestants to the hall, of whom Sae-bjoek seems to be the only one to notice: she sees the pictures summarising the gist of each game. In other words, the walls, as is the case in the panorama, tell the action and the frame reveals the gist of what each game had been about – by way of an

<sup>127</sup> Clover, 443.

<sup>128</sup> Clover, 439.

<sup>129</sup> Clover, 440.

<sup>130</sup> Clover, 440.

arrangement of images, leading to the realisation that the impending games were readable implicitly on the tiles all along. Lehmann chooses the panorama as an emblem to postdramatic theatre, and draws “a parallel between the drama in theatre and the ‘frame’ of a picture that closes the picture off to the outside and at the same time creates an internal cohesion.”<sup>131</sup> If drama is defined as a frame that encloses an image and consequently provides it with understanding, the panorama is a possibility by which the display of both image and its frame to the audience, looking at it from various angles, yet not decisively defining its beginning or end, is revealed.

Instead of entering circulation by way of which they move spatially, switching owners on the basis of price, the images on the wall, the images of time told, in Clover’s terms, become a frame for the games that happened previously. With the display of the games, this moment allows a recognition of the relation between the time it took for the panorama to be visible for the three characters. This is correlate with the contention that a depiction of capitalism in the games is constative of repetitive endings being acted out. Importantly, circulation – the produce’s switching owners, has subsided: the walls remain the same throughout the span of all rounds. According to Clover: “Capital’s being is in production, but its self-knowledge is in circulation; this is a rift within capital itself. Recognizing value only when expressed in the form of profit, it goes seeking profit otherwise.”<sup>132</sup>

When capital encounters an impasse, it reveals its tragic flaw, be it the modern tragic as part of the premises of *Squid Game*, or the postdramatic instances of reading for the staged wilfulness by which the series poses a momentary safe haven from the immediate impact of the dramatic. When capital encounters crisis (such as the economic crises of 1997 and 2007), it reveals its internal contradictions, to be carried out through tragedy *and* farce, of which *Squid Game* has provided a hitherto unsurpassed example. In Eagleton’s words: “From the beginning, in all discussions of tragedy,’ writes Helen Gardner, ‘one note is always struck: that tragedy includes, or reconciles, or preserves in tension, contraries.’”<sup>133</sup> At the same time, following Clover, crises are farcical repetitions.

The final chapter on historical tragedy in contemporary times will embed this reading in the context of South Korean history.

<sup>131</sup> Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 100.

<sup>132</sup> Clover, “Genres of the Dialectic,” 441.

<sup>133</sup> Eagleton, *Tragedy*, 156.

## 11. Korea's tragic history

I conclude this chapter on the postdramatic moments of *Squid Game* by shedding light on the instance in the series which inspired me to this reading in the first place. Given the debts of the characters that are revealed to us, Ki-hun's total amount turns out to be the least extensive – somewhat disappointing were an alignment of debt still conferring to the conjugation by which a correlative between value and the finite were arranged consecutively. In the beginning, the games assign each player's elimination with the value of ₩0.1 bn. When the majority of players vote to leave the game, all but fourteen of them end up returning. One of the staff accounts: "out of 201, 187 returned. The re-entrance rate is 93 percent."<sup>134</sup> The worth of the prize continues to be ₩45.6 bn., and the expectation would be for the impending amount lacking from the total to be re-distributed per character. In other words, each elimination would make for a more extensive worth. Instead, the absence of the fourteen former contestants is not accounted for in the equation – all the while, the institution continues to operate as if no changes had taken place.

I will mention Marx's quote concerning the fact that historical facts and personages always appear twice – first as tragedy, then as farce – introduced earlier, once more here to jog the reader's memory:

Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the Montagne of 1848 to 1851 for the Montagne of 1793 to 1795, the nephew for the uncle. And the same caricature occurs in the circumstances of the second edition of the Eighteenth Brumaire.<sup>135</sup>

My consecutive reading addresses the nature of Marx's contention transposed to a contextualization in South Korean history and cultural memory. I derive the application of Marx's quote from *Squid Game* itself: Ji-yeong (Lee You-mi), one of

<sup>134</sup> "Man with the Umbrella," 12:50.

<sup>135</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 15.

the youngest among the contestants, makes an explicit reference to the games on the island as 'tragic'. The elaborated encounter between Sae-bjoek and her occurs at the moment in which strategy and program have elided the plot – in other words, when neoliberal capitalist ideals have momentarily subsided from their proneness to interchangeability. The commitment by which the postmodern elements of the series, including its postdramatic elements, provide an encounter that upheave the classical ideation that this art work is a closed entity, thus first and foremost are forthcoming to my argument: they render manifest a highlighting of South Korean history and cultural memory.

The encounter between the two female contestants in the episode "Gganbu" (friend) has been proclaimed by critics as distant from the tendential quid pro quo that orchestrates the interactions between the characters. As cultural theorist Kyung Hyung Kim remarks, knowing "that one of the characters has only half an hour left to live, we are faced with an extraordinary, dramatic moment where neither character pretends to con the other or cheat the system that will bring death. Unlike what occurs in most contemporary American dramas or male-centric plotlines, these girls simply choose to chat."<sup>136</sup> Conversely, Jinsook Kim and Minwoo Jung produce a transnational feminist reading of *Squid Game* based on reading the sub plot of the two characters who become team mates in the context of an island determined by competition, framing an alternative to the oppressing meritocratic drive fostered by the male players. According to the authors, their story "points to the potential of homosociality to foster sociality and resistance among the oppressed, offering radical imaginaries for projecting beyond the exploitative foundations of global capitalism."<sup>137</sup>

The authors draw upon Eve Sedgwick's monograph *Between Men* (1985). Sedgwick's proposition contains the observation that heteronormative patriarchal structures promote "the use of women by men as exchangeable objects, as counters of value, for the primary purpose of cementing relationships with other men."<sup>138</sup>

<sup>136</sup> Kyung Hyung Kim, "Squid Game Hides a hopeful message within a dystopian nightmare," *Foreign Policy*, October 9, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/09/squid-game-netflix-south-korea-capitalism/>.

<sup>137</sup> Jinsook Kim and Minwoo Jung, "A tale of two homosocialities: gender, sexuality, and global political economy in Squid Game," *Communication, Culture and Critique*, no. 15 (2022): 542, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcac033>.

<sup>138</sup> Kim and Jung, "A tale of two homosocialities: gender, sexuality, and global political economy in *Squid Game*," 540.

Their reading of *Squid Game* distinguishes between the homosociality fostered by the male VIPs and the homosocialities of the female characters, ascribing perversion to the former and solidarity to the latter. In their words, “as lords of global capitalism, [the VIPs] represent the winners who keep winning while the players represent the losers who keep losing.”<sup>139</sup> The bond between Sae-bjoek and Ji-yeong has been one of the audience’s favourites, resulting in numerous fan art on media platforms like TikTok and Twitter, making possible a platform for solidarity “among workers, feminists, queer activists, and other citizens to protest layoffs, precarious work, and capitalist violence following the global financial crisis.”<sup>140</sup> Contextualized in the broad realm of Sae-bjoek’s marginalized position as the North Korean defector, the bond with Ji-yeong makes possible her ultimate gaining of trust in the other players.

Pivotal to my reading of this homosocial solidarity, where I agree with the authors, is that I make one distinction with regard to the realm of attributable acts. I assign the notion of empathy in place of solidarity to the specific scenes discussed here, which pivot when these two contestants speak of history. The importance of doing so is explicated in two ways. Firstly, in the series’ mentioning of the Korean War, secondly, in its reference of the massacre on Jeju Island. Kim and Jung’s claim that their bond makes possible solidarity as a political strategy with regard to the way in which *Squid Game* has been perceived transnationally is a pivotal contribution and the authors’ proposition is incorporated in the reading of Han-mi-nyeo’s direction of the bathroom scene dealt with earlier. Yet, I beg to differ in terms of the possibility of solidarity with regard to the specific scene which unravels between Ji-yeong and Sae-bjoek in “Gganbu” in the context of South Korean history. Rather, I propose the realm of empathy as a companion to my interweaving their encounter within a historical account of South Korea.

As the male players are opting for finding a partner most fit, the two wander about, until Ji-yeong approaches the North Korean defector casually: “Hey, wanna do this?”<sup>141</sup> The scene is scrambling the matrix in which they are in. Counter to the previous games, the game of marbles does not require ambition to be conjoined with physical strength or competitive stubbornness. Most of the contestants in this round

<sup>139</sup> Kim and Jung, 541.

<sup>140</sup> Kim and Jung, 542

pick the partner they have become attached to most, presuming that the island will pitch a scene where their team gets to compete against another. The island disappoints these expectations: the game of marbles pits the closest friends against each other, by assigning them with ten marbles each. One person takes a number of marbles from their pile and hides them in their palms, while the other person places a bet on how many marbles are contained within this palm. In other words, the degree of fortuity and luck is highest in this episode. The winner is the person whose stack of marbles is larger than the opponent's after 30 minutes. Ji-yeong and Sae-bjoek postpone the full scope of this duration and make sure they do not engage with the game of marbles until the utter end of the round, opting for a simple variation. Ji-yeong's beginning makes for the only mentioned instance of the tragic when the following dialogues ensues:

Ji-yeong: "Since the Korean War, nothing's been this sad: tragic."

Sae-bjoek: "What should we play then?"

Ji-yeong: "Wow, you're so cold, as cold as ice. So, you aspire? From the North or what?"

Sae-bjoek: "Hey, stop the dumb shit girl, what game are we gonna play?"

Ji-yeong: "You tell me. [...] Ten marbles and we can create our own game. I'll try to come up with one. [...] Let's end the game in one round. All or nothing. A simple bet. Don't tell me that you would rather do what they are."

Sae-bjoek: "Ok, playing what then?"

Ji-yeong: "Why are you in such a hurry. You're just dying to kill me huh? We're just playing one round here. And we got time left too. Let's wait till the end."

Sae-bjoek: "What are we going to do before then?"

Ji-yeong: "Talk."<sup>142</sup>

The two decide to speak and have a simple chat, amidst a setting that will leave one of them murdered at the end of the game. Ji-yeong's mentioning of the Korean War is striking – while never having experienced the war, she is the only one to explicate the tragedy by making a single mention of history. The scene introduces a subtle

contention about post-memory as a consequence – the way in which trauma and cultural memory are carried through generations to manifest in later generations.

## 12. Addressing a forgotten war

The Korean war took place from 25 June 1950 to 27 July 1953 between territories of Korea that had previously been a colony of Japan. The estimate of death toll of the Korean War differ. According to cultural theorist Daniel Y. Kim in *The Intimacies of Conflict* (2020), the war led to 2.5 million deaths and was “the first ‘hot war’ that took place during the Cold War,”<sup>143</sup> a war that would end up splitting the territory into North and South Korean, occurring only five years after the occupation by Japan had ended. The war resulted in a huge number of civilian and non-combatant casualties – according to historian Bruce Cumings, the percentage of these casualties was higher than those recorded for the Vietnam War or WW II. All the while, the air strikes led to the devastation of Korean infrastructure; as much as ‘two-fifths of Korea’s industrial facilities were destroyed and one-third of its homes devastated.’<sup>144</sup>

Kim coins it the ‘forgotten war’ in *The Intimacies of Conflict* (2020). Amidst WWII and the Cold War, the Korean War has perished from the memories of the international stages of history. In the words of Kim: “what we have left of the Korean War are mainly a handful of phrases untethered from any easily visualizable referent: the thirty-eighth parallel, the demilitarized zone (DMZ), the ‘forgotten war.’”<sup>145</sup> According to the author, the coincidence of the Korean War’s occurring merely five years after 1945 is a tragedy “and its immediate and traumatic significance – has shaped and even displaced any historical sense of the Korean War that Americans might possess.”<sup>146</sup> The author’s mentioning of multidirectional memory makes his piece an adept complementation to a term coined by cultural memory scholar Michael Rothberg: ‘multidirectional memory’.<sup>147</sup>

<sup>143</sup> Daniel Y. Kim, *The intimacies of conflict: cultural memory and the Korean War* (New York, New York University Press, 2021), 2.

<sup>144</sup> Kim, *The intimacies of conflict*, 4.

<sup>145</sup> Kim, *The intimacies of conflict*, 2.

<sup>146</sup> Kim, *The intimacies of conflict*, 3.

<sup>147</sup> According to Kim, the Korean War was the first instance for the U.S. military to address the structural racism that had been manifesting in the army. Thurgood Marshall, acting as representative of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) was sent to Korea a year prior to the Supreme Court in the United States’ being confronted with the issue of segregation inland. He was dispatched to unveil the disproportionate number of Black military personnel facing courts-martial. Marshall, who would serve as an American civil rights lawyer from 1967 to 1991, a



As a beautiful complementation, Kim makes possible a reading of the ‘forgotten’ Korean War as one that may belong in this multidirectional space. Kim makes clear that the assemblage of art works in his publication is part of the multidirectional remembering of American-Korean diaspora. In his words: “labour that goes into honoring a trauma that has shaped a generation of Korean immigrants who are also survivors of war might also become part of a more collaborative and open-ended endeavor of cultural remembrance, one that might open up a politics of identity different from that enacted by the war itself.”<sup>148</sup> In the context of South Korean politics, the cultural memory of the Korean War has been determined to a large extent by the parameters of the various governments’ political inclinations of suppressing the remembering. According to the author’s research, Seoul has been subjected particularly harshly to the ‘exigencies of neoliberalism’ and the governments over the decades have taken various stances toward North Korea.

While the postmilitary dictatorship era began with three presidents who adopted a conciliatory posture to the North – Kim Young-Sam, Kim Dae-jung, and Roh Moo-hyun – the government took a reactionary turn when Lee Myung-bak took office in 2008 and Park Geon-hye in 2013. The fact that Park was the daughter of Park Chung-hee, the autocrat who ruled the country from 1963 to 1979, and proudly claimed her father’s legacy and was elected nonetheless indicates how far to the right much of the population had swung.<sup>149</sup>

After the end of the Cold War, the War Memorial of Korea was introduced in 1994 to instantiate a more reconciliatory stance toward the North, downplaying its involvement in the atrocities. The so-called “Statue of Brothers” (1994) exemplifies the way in which South Korea has claimed a father role with regard to the North (the

figure pivotal in ending racial segregation in schools, the most known one being Marshall succeeding as associate justice of the Supreme Court in the case of the *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 officially declaring racial segregation to be unconstitutional and refusing the separate but equal doctrine. In the context of the Korean War, Marshall was pivotal in addressing the segregation of Black military personnel into separate units – the military’s racist ideology was based upon questioning the loyalty of black military men. Marshall’s dispatch was backed up by 1948’s president Harry Truman’s Executive Order 9981 to foster integration in the army. (Kim, “Introduction: The Korean War in Color,” *The intimacies of conflict*)

<sup>148</sup> Kim, *The intimacies of conflict*, 263-264.

<sup>149</sup> Kim, *The intimacies of conflict*, 265-266.

latter is depicted as the an emasculated and protected boy lying in the arms of an adult). Kim quotes the analysis of Sheila Miyoshi Jager and Jiyul Kim with regard to this statue: “‘One of its striking features,’ they note, ‘is its downplaying of anti-North Korean rhetoric,’ as such, ‘its treatment of North Korea’s role is largely abstracted from the brutal history of that conflict.’”<sup>150</sup> This conciliatory stance is to be contextualized in the Sunshine Policy during the presidency of the late Roh Moo-Hyun, followed however by the Lee Myung-bak administration that renounced the Sunshine Policy.

The president fostered a right-wing rhetoric in refurbishing the monuments – in the words of the Kim, and drew “a good deal of attention to North Korean atrocities, for example, and point[s] to documentation of communications between Kim Il Sun, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong that prefaced the invasion, thereby reiterating what Jae-Jung Suh has termed a yugio (6/25) narrative identifying South Koreans ‘first and foremost as the victims of the violence committed by communists and their puppets.’”<sup>151</sup> The Korean War monument has been adjusted to the times, then, the alterations of which clearly depict the ideological undertones.

The monument’s renovation led to the introduction of a number of new media posing as a complementation to the more orthodox depiction – these “new ones aim at a more dynamic, gripping, and immersive experience – presumably tailored to younger generations accustomed to the blockbusters that are now a staple of the Korean movie industry, PC bangs (arcades for multiplayer online computer games).”<sup>152</sup> The ideological underpinning of this technological renovation also ushers an implicit message regarding the tactics and military equipment that determined the course of the Korean War. In the words of Kim: “Instead of exploring how poor training or a lack of conviction about the cause may have played a role, the inability of South Korean forces to repel the invasion is explained as stemming from a pronounced technology gap: the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) was simply outmatched by the Soviet T-34 tanks possessed by the North Korean People’s Army.”<sup>153</sup>

The U.S. military apparatus, backed up by ideological renderings of propaganda that was highly promoted by Hollywood productions during WW II, did

<sup>150</sup> Kim, 266.

<sup>151</sup> Kim, 269.

<sup>152</sup> Kim, 270.

<sup>153</sup> Kim, 270.

not exit this constellation in the years of the Korean War. “During the fighting, a significant body of material on the conflict was generated by Hollywood and the mainstream press, very little of which questioned the war’s justness in any significant way despite its increasing unpopularity.”<sup>154</sup> Kim’s monograph is a pivotal distinction among the dominant regime of Cold War propaganda fostered by Hollywood in its collecting “an archive of cultural memory that suggests [...] various histories, both national and transnational, refracted in the Korean War – histories that have to do with the structure of race in the United States and the formations of empire that emerged during the Cold War.”<sup>155</sup>

The ubiquity of circulations of iconic media commemorations of the Vietnam War or World War II are paradigmatic of the way in which American history has shaped cultural memory in its domination of the global press in the latter half of the past century. According to the author, the iconicity of the undressed girl escaping the village bombed by Napalm in Vietnam speak of “something universal about the modern experience of war.”<sup>156</sup> In contrast, the most iconic photographic evidence that has circulated regarding the Korean War depict two men embracing each other, daunted and exhausted, resting on the side of a hill. The photograph only entered a transnational setting as a consequence of the passing of the brilliant combat photographer Al Chang, a Korean American, whose obituary in the *Washington Post* was accompanied by the image: to “the extent that he participates in the drama of shared loss that he visually records, the photographer had an interracial dimension to the male intimacy he depicts.”<sup>157</sup> The ‘apparent detachment’ registered by the author in the photograph is a reverse mirroring of Chang’s recording of the war. The background of the photograph is comprised of a figure “sifting through casualty information with apparent detachment.”<sup>158</sup> The image, taken on 28 August 1950, displays a devastated subject “who has learned that his replacement as a radio operator had been killed.”<sup>159</sup> The two men’s hands are turned inward, tilted according to the other’s contours and usher a degree of obscurity in comparison to U.S. versions of popularized war commemoration.

<sup>154</sup> Kim, 4.

<sup>155</sup> Kim, 6.

<sup>156</sup> Kim, 2.

<sup>157</sup> Kim, 5.

<sup>158</sup> Kim, 2.

<sup>159</sup> Kim, 2.

Within the context of the forgotten Korean War, the two young women in *Squid Game* are read within the parameters of this larger history. Their chat continues, their speaking ensues the relaying their family histories and their aspirations for the future. The former was invited to the game the moment she stepped out of prison for killing her father, a priest most faithful to abusing her and murdering her mother. As early as the interaction in the episode “Tug-of-War”, Ji-yeong’s responses to the vatic man praying to god for the souls of the dead in a frantic monologue is made more than explicit – any mention of the Christian faith seems to cause more harm than invite healing for Ji-yeong. The pivot of this trauma escalates in the scene shortly before the members return to the hall. Ji-yeong is a lonely figure – when read in conjunction with Susan Sontag’s description of Benjamin, the melancholy emanating from Ji-yeong reminded me of him: “If this melancholy is faithless to people, it has good reason to be faithful to things. Fidelity lies in accumulating things – which appear, mostly, in the form of fragments or ruins.”<sup>160</sup>

The scene unfolds as a site that inaugurates the bond between Sae-bjoek and Ji-yeong. Whilst chatting, Ji-yeong gets carried away and starts making plans about how the two could hang out after the game is over. “Let’s have a drink of Maldives at mojito,”<sup>161</sup> Ji-yeong exclaims, having momentarily forgotten that one of them will not survive and her forgetfulness continues to taint the mode:

“I don’t know what I would do.  
Someone was waiting at the prison the day I got out.  
I thought it was a creditor who came to collect my dad’s debt.  
But he pulled out a card.  
That weird card.  
I had nowhere else to go so I never thought about what I’d do if I got the  
money.  
Go with you to Jeju island?  
Sorry, forgot again.”<sup>162</sup>

<sup>160</sup> Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, London: Penguin Classics, 2009 (first published 1971): 120.

<sup>161</sup> According to Kyung Hyung Kim, this is a quote from the Korean film *Inside Men* (2015).

<sup>162</sup> “Gganbu,” 38:50.

Her speaking and forgetting in the midst of it becomes enigmatic of how tragedy as discord registers speech and contradiction: “Most significant in terms of the poetics of tragedy is the way in which its language registers contradictoriness. [...] As Vernant puts it in an incisive formulation: ‘the function of words used on stage is not so much to establish communication between the various characters as to indicate the blockages and barriers between them and the impermeability of their minds.’”<sup>163</sup>

Within the parameters of the forgotten Korean War, Ji-yeong’s poor memory reminds of Benjamin’s writing: “His sentences do not seem to be generated in the usual way; they do not entail. Each sentence is written as if it were the first, or the last. [...] Mental and historical processes are rendered as conceptual tableaux; ideas are transcribed in extremis and the intellectual perspectives are vertiginous.”<sup>164</sup> This being said, Ji-yeong’s speech acts – her forgetting twice – is a distinct alteration to the setting. Just this once, for the sake of the argument, the two different contexts in which Ji-yeong speaks of forgetting will be discarded, to frame the registration within the parameters of multidirectional memory. If one says one forgot, and says one forgot thereafter, the forgotten is that which is forgotten. In other words, the strictly ‘logical’ result of Ji-yeong’s speech acts results in remembering.

### **13. Trying not to forget to forget the massacre of Jeju**

The forgotten and the remembered is not only the Korean War in the parameters of history. The second speech act concerning forgetting – Ji-yeong’s brain storming on what the young women could do after the tragedy on the island is over – ushers her confirmation that she would like to take a trip to Jeju Island with Sae-bjoek. The latter, trying to frame a future in a South Korea she fled to when escaping the North, mentions Jeju Island by an air in which the island becomes reminiscent of a holiday resort. Ji-yeong’s complementation of ‘having a drink of Maldives at Mojito’, their dream of exuberance, of peaceful resting and decent sleep, is a reference that comments on another ‘forgotten’ cultural memory of South Korean history. These women’s decision to engage with only one game is what leads me to a reading of the series as a possibility to be considered in the context of late modernity. Kim and Jung

<sup>163</sup> Toscano, “Tragedy,” 6.

<sup>164</sup> Sontag, “Under the Sign of Saturn,” 129.

phrase it beautifully: “When the players form two-person teams for the next round, the men purposefully avoid the women, so Sae-Byeok and Ji-yeoung end up together, marginalized even among the other impoverished participants. Their pairing suggests the gendered nature of the Korean buzzword *yingyeo* (‘surplus’= used to describe those women the fiercely competitive neoliberal labour market fails to enrich.).”<sup>165</sup>

Jeju Island lies off the southern coast of South Korea and has been turned into a tourist site as of recent decades. Sae-bjoek’s speech act brings forth a historical event which can be traced in *Squid Game*’s postdramatic instance of the absence of 14 players – a reference which I conjoin with the historical Jeju Incident which led to the death of 14.000 inhabitants on the island. Thirdly, moreover, Jeju Island is also a site of the cultural memory of resistance to Japanese occupation: the Jocheon Independence Movement, the Beopjeongsa Movement and the Women Divers’ Anti-Japanese Movement.

According to cultural theorist Suhi Choi, international investment over recent decades has contributed to constructing the island as a tourist site, contributing to the burying of a traumatic cultural memory that occurred prior to the Korean War. Jeju was the localisation of a number of violent encounters between 1947 and 1954. The emanation of this violence has obtained various names, among them “the Jeju Rebellion, the People’s Uprising, the Communist Guerrilla Insurgency, the April 3<sup>rd</sup> Incident, the Civilian Massacre, the 4.3 Resistance.”<sup>166</sup> April 3, 1948 is the date of a guerrilla uprising on Jeju Island against right-wing forces that led to an escalation during which the intervention by the South Korean army led to the killings of civilians. According to Choi, the number of people killed by the police “was far greater than that killed by the communist guerrilla forces.”<sup>167</sup> The previous authoritative regimes, however, which “maintained a strong anticommunism campaign in South Korea,”<sup>168</sup> coerced a state that led to the public silencing of the mourners’ grief.

<sup>165</sup> Kim and Jung, “A tale of two homosocialities: gender, sexuality, and global political economy in *Squid Game*,” 542.

<sup>166</sup> Suhi Choi, “The Jeju April 3 Peace Park: An Uncanny Site of Empathy,” in *Right to Mourn: Trauma, Empathy, and Korean War Memorials* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 39. Doi: 10.1093/oso/9780190855246.003.0003.

<sup>167</sup> Choi, “The Jeju April 3 Peace Park: An Uncanny Site of Empathy,” 40.

<sup>168</sup> Choi, 40.

Jeju is the largest Korean island “in terms of its dialectics, spirituality, natural environments, cultural practices, historical myth, and even political history.”<sup>169</sup> Such alterity has been threatened in the past. The South Korean government acknowledged the atrocity publicly as late as April 3, 2014, to render the date a day of national mourning. Choi provides an account of this site as the first step to providing a physical acknowledgement by the state to let subjects grieve. As such, Ji-yeong and Sae-bjoek’s mentioning of Jeju Island instantiates the material historicism of Benjamin. In the words of the latter: “To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize ‘how it really was.’ It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes by in a moment of danger. For historical materialism it is a question of holding fast to a picture of the past, just as if it had unexpectedly thrust itself, in a moment of danger, on the historical subject.”<sup>170</sup> According to Choi, “what made such familiar gestures unfamiliar on this particular day at the Jeju April 3 Peace Park were the identities of the mourners. For more than six decades, this wartime atrocity in Jeju was neither a known nor a publicly commemorated story in Korea, and its mourners previously were but a minor presence at public memorial sites.”<sup>171</sup> Their commemoration included the improvisation of alters to be decorated or ornamented “with food, beverages and fruit they had brought.”<sup>172</sup>

In the year 2003, president Roo Moo Hyun “offered an apology for the Jeju people by officially reframing April 3 as a tragedy that was caused by the state’s power wrongdoing.”<sup>173</sup> The museum at Jeju April 3 Peace Park also includes a variety of documents showcasing the involvement of U.S. military forces in the Jeju Killings, including declassified information about the military operations on the island. The most disturbing one of these objects might be a quote from a U.S. military official: “I am not interested in the cause of the uprising. My mission is to crack down only.”<sup>174</sup> According to Choi, the Ganjung protests of 2012, involving the blasting of the Gureombi rocks that was countered by local villagers for whom these stones had made as a mnemonic spiritual site, provided a sort of flashback to the Jeju Incident, especially in the context of the South Korean governments’ silencing of the latter in the past decades. As a counteracting and expression of such concerns, “in 2017 the

<sup>169</sup> Choi, 42.

<sup>170</sup> Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” thesis v.

<sup>171</sup> Choi, “The Jeju April 3 Peace Park: An Uncanny Site of Empathy,” 38.

<sup>172</sup> Choi, 38.

<sup>173</sup> Choi, 39.

<sup>174</sup> Choi, 41.

committee for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Jeju Killings created a topography of the atrocities and distributed copies to the main tourist spots.”<sup>175</sup>

Another museum park on Jeju Island, a peninsula formed by volcanic eruption, commemorates the practice of holding dear stones, specifically lava stones. The practice is a ritualistic endeavour and Choi’s beautiful contention about empathy led me to reframe Benjamin’s contention regarding the theses on history. He assigns empathy to the realm of the historian, yet in light of the way in which the above reading locates solidarity within the principle of the postmodern indifference, I would like to assign Benjamin’s material historicism with the realm of empathy (also in light of the fact that Benjamin is addressing late modernity). Local Jeju practice circumscribes the ritual of lava stones to a belief that these stones “are inhabited by indigenous spirits who represent their identity, help them fulfil their wishes, and bring safety to their communities. Such a belief echoes the idea in Korean folk religion (animism) that inert objects like stones possess intangible spirits with whom humans can possibly interact.”<sup>176</sup> This tradition is likewise upheld at Jeju April 3 Peace Park, where the welcoming object is a propellant pagoda entitled ‘4.3 Haewon Bangsatap’. Tied to this site is a remnant of shamanism. In the context of Korean folk religion, this preserves the belief that the lives of those taken by violent acts or accidents should be commemorated by the living “to propitiate the dead to prevent them from causing trouble.”<sup>177</sup> In recent Korean history, with its authoritarian regimes, these shamanic practices made for one of the few localizations of remembering; they “have become virtually the only legitimate semipublic space in which mourners of the Jeju Killings can reveal the tragic stories of their loved ones without fear of government censorship and guilt by association. As Kim puts it, ‘when the living have to act mute and deaf, only the speech of the dead is safe.’”<sup>178</sup>

*Squid Game*, at first sight is a series that makes little instance of historical references. Its universal reception and the effective appropriation by social media has been used as a site of affirmation on a transnational basis. In the context of the age of late capitalism that was introduced in this thesis, *Squid Game* has been of utmost importance in posing as a realm of relationality that highlights the extent to which South Koreans are exposed to the currents of late capitalism. Yet, I hope to

<sup>175</sup> Choi, 42.

<sup>176</sup> Choi, 43.

<sup>177</sup> Choi, 43.

<sup>178</sup> Choi, 45.



have made clear in this section on Korean history, that what lies buried in the allure of spectacle is a traumatic past, the ushering of its instantiation by the series moves subtly toward these 'forgotten' instances of its history, in the context of twentieth century transnational trauma, and is made possible by the female characters who have a simple chat. If Ancient Greek tragedy has classically assigned the polis to be a body collective that was comprised of male citizens, the case of the object here makes possible a feminist Deleuzian reading that inverts this tradition, making the female characters a realm of understated concern and resistance, whose effectiveness of speech has touched me immensely.

In addition to the reference to the Korean War, the 14 players who are absent in the counting house of the premises of the island on which the games are held might not be missing from the cultural memory through which an international reception of the object has taken place. One site at the Jeju Peace Park, the Memorial, is comprised of a gathering space that is evocative of the remnant of a volcanic uprising. "The entire panel that physically encloses the crater is called Monument with the Victim's Names. More than 14,000 names of victims are engraved on this panel; they are subgrouped under the names of the villages where they were born."<sup>179</sup> The memorial site on Jeju thus "unmistakably communicates the most disturbing feature of the Jeju Killings: many victims are children, women, and elders who all vanished over a very brief period of time."<sup>180</sup> The series' evoking the 14 players who are absent and who do not return to the island excavates a forgotten fragment of Korean history.

The inter(con)textual reading produced above intends to highlight the multidirectional approach to South Korean history that is complemented by a feminist Deleuzian reading. If multiple cultural memories are being referenced during the meeting between Ji-yeong and Sae-bjoek, this brings me to argue that *Squid Game* should be read as a specifically modern and not a postmodern tragedy, although the series does employ many of Lehmann's postdramatic techniques. If in the historiography of Greek tragedy the polis was comprised of the male citizens, *Squid Game* alters this major conception of tragedy by making the two young women the polis – they do not only comment on the actions on the island, they exceed this commenting: they converse, however subtly so. I hope to have shown that their

<sup>179</sup> Choi, 47.

<sup>180</sup> Choi, 48.

mentioning of the Korean War and the object's reference to the Jeju Killings only one time is an alteration that is pivotal compared to the indifference relegated to the postmodern and their understated mentioning is interwoven with the postdramatic elements of *Squid Game*.

#### **14. Conclusion: the potential in drama**

The inconsolable, according to Eagleton, find no resting place within the parameters of postmodernity, the aloofness of which caters to the principle of indifference as an attitude associated with a lack of vision. "There are no death-dealing clashes of vision or conviction, since postmodern culture suspects that vision is idly utopian and all conviction incipiently dogmatic. Since it distrusts the idea of unity as falsely essentialist, the prospect of resolving hostilities has no great appeal."<sup>181</sup> I do not wish to refute Eagleton's consternation regarding postmodernity's occasionally questionable aptitude and tact. Surely, there have been moments too many where postmodernism has been "largely indifferent to the concept of political solidarity."<sup>182</sup> Yet the key to my argument was to exhibit on the basis of *Squid Game* the passing of a postmodern instance, in order to shed light on the elements of modern tragedy in South Korea's history. I stress my agreeing with Eagleton here: "Comedy in art is not far removed from comedy in life, but in the case of tragedy, as we have seen already, there is a gulf between its aesthetic and everyday senses."<sup>183</sup> This gulf, if to be breached, was rendered in my thesis to explicate a cautionary tale about comedy; if it is to be found amidst the tragedies of the inconsolable, an emblem of comedy was framed here within the parameters of solidarity, if only to make a point about the possibility of a prospective new realm to a contemporaneity framed by empathy within the parameters of a multidirectional cultural memory of the Korean War and the Jeju Killings.

*Squid Game* provoked me to reveal a path in which the indifference formerly ascribed to a subdued disdain for empathy is to be applied in a reading which includes a fractal matter which exceeds the binarism of the 'actual' by way of a feminist Deleuzian reading. My attempt was to reveal the difficulty of today's

<sup>181</sup> Eagleton, "The Inconsolable," in *Tragedy*, 219.

<sup>182</sup> Eagleton, 219.

<sup>183</sup> Eagleton, 219.

circumstances, which rests on a compulsion and coercion of a gig economy forcing workers' to produce difference out of sameness while underpaid, overworked, a concern raised by Wark in her terming of the 'hacker class'.<sup>184</sup> My providing an outline of the material effects of a gig economy in which subjects barely survive while enduring exposure to the waning of workers' protection and the detrimental effects of neoliberal capitalism, served to exact the excavation of the materialist specificities of South Korean history.

On this note, I would like to contend one last point to be made regarding South Korea's exposure to late capitalism. I beg to differ from the reading set up by Kim and Park in their article "What's in a game? A dialectic of competition and cooperation in *Squid Game*." The authors propose a reading of the series by way of the collusion of a result-oriented competition and an "equally potent wish for pure sporting drama uninflected by socioeconomic reality"<sup>185</sup> in the context of contemporary capitalism. They conjoin a "temporary utopian solution"<sup>186</sup> of the players' collaborating that reflects the tendency of non-pathological gambling in sporting drama to have "become a legitimate and even integral feature of contemporary capitalism."<sup>187</sup> Their argument applies a negative dialectics to resolute how both late capitalism and the urge for un-impinged cooperation each continue without impinging on the other. However, their reading does not explain the women's carrying out the game of marbles. Sae-bjoek and Yi-yeong's game is not based on luck; neither does it let *Squid Game* be considered a sporting drama. My objection is framed by the accommodating moment of recognition: the enigma is lifted by Ji-yeong's controlling not only the outcome of the most simple variant of the game of marbles, but in controlling also the rule. She makes a pact to Sae-bjoek prior to them being told the variants to be considered in the game when entering the staged village.

If Kim and Park use a Jamesian dialectic to arrive at a hypothesis about late capitalism, my complementation thereof is to bring forth a faithful critical companion to the Frankfurt school, Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940). The latter explores the distinction between the historian and the

<sup>184</sup> Wark, "The Sublime Language of My Century," in *Capital Is Dead* (London; New York, Verso, 2019).

<sup>185</sup> Kim and Park, "What's in a game? A dialectic of competition and cooperation in *Squid Game*," 3.

<sup>186</sup> Kim and Park, 3.

<sup>187</sup> Kim and Park, 4.

material historian, where the former is interested in the official course of history progressing through a homogenous and empty time. “Historicism justifiably culminates in universal history. Nowhere does the materialist writing of history distance itself from it more clearly than in terms of method. The former has no theoretical armature.”<sup>188</sup> The game of marbles presented to Sae-bjoek and Ji-yeong encompasses the scope of ten marbles given to each, alluding to the completion of a system – much like the historian, who tells of history as a progression of events that lead to a present. Contrastingly, in the words of Benjamin, the procedure of the material historian consists of this:

Its method is additive: it offers a mass of facts, in order to fill up a homogenous and empty time. The materialist writing of history for its part is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts but also their zero-hour [*Stillstellung*]. Where thinking suddenly halts in a constellation overflowing with tensions, there it yields a shock to the same, through which it crystallizes as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object solely and alone where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he cognizes the sign of a messianic zero-hour [*Stillstellung*] of events, or put differently, a revolutionary chance in the struggle for the suppressed past. He perceives it, in order to explode a specific epoch out of the homogenous course of history; thus exploding a specific life out of the epoch, or a specific work out of the life-work.<sup>189</sup>

As a result, history becomes the object of a precise material, whereby Benjamin can be read as one of the authors to have a premonition on cultural memory, a discourse arising in the 1980s – Benjamin himself never dared to look into the future. The focus of the material historian lies with specific material objects through which he excavates the past. In this light I read the marble scene. While the male players are busying themselves with conforming to the system, the two women take one marble each. Whereas the other players conjoin a system whereby their skills – strategic and physical – come to determine the outcome of the games, especially Ji-yeong is interested in the marble’s own weight. She barely lets it slide from her hand, the

<sup>188</sup> Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” thesis xvii.

<sup>189</sup> Benjamin, thesis xvii.

weight of itself giving rise to the outcome of the game. In other words, the material might of this marble is given a place in her story, whilst at the same time, it speaks of the cultural remembering taking place on Jeju Island.

When Ji-yeong deliberately makes a weak throw of her marble, she responds to Sae-bjoek's outrage by explaining: "I have nothing. You've got a reason to get out of this place." Sae-bjoek leaves the staged village and we glimpse a sight dipped in gentle colours. Death is not explicated, the only issuance is the shot of the rifle. The game in the episode "Gganbu", according to Kim and Jung, has a cathartic effect on Sae-bjoek: "When Ji-yeong purposely loses the round, she rejects the rule that the elimination of other players is necessary to win and survive, thereby serving as a critique of the all-against-all nature of global capitalism and suggesting that the marginalized and oppressed can, in fact, challenge the rules and even stop the game."<sup>190</sup> If this is the case, where does this bring us in defining the series as tragic, whether tragic in itself or in its references to Korean history?

Lehmann's argument for postdrama includes the ideation that classical drama settled for logos, taking as template the Aristotelian tradition of tragedy and its adherence with logic.<sup>191</sup> The Aristotelian case prioritises the rule of the completion of a plot, framed by a beginning, middle and end. That is to say: the Aristotelean case "founds the logos of a totality, in which beauty is intrinsically conceived of as a mastery of temporal progress."<sup>192</sup> This traditional approach to drama contains the premise that a text's beauty is achieved by way of logic. According to Lehmann, even those classical dramatic categories of tragedy prescriptive of upheaving the order of temporal unfolding are shown to be consistent with logic. Peripeteia, the reversal of the plot, is shown to be a logical category. Anagnorisis, the moment of recognition, "is a motif related to cognition. [...] the shock in anagnorisis ('You are my brother Orestes', 'I myself am the son and murderer of Laios!') in tragedy renders manifest the concurrence of insight and helpless loss of meaning."<sup>193</sup> In taking as exemplar tragedy conceived of by a Hegelian dialectic, Lehmann configures how the emblem of drama itself already contains its own demise: "in tragedy the strangeness of tragic fate (already inherent in the epic) as a 'subjectless power, without wisdom,

<sup>190</sup> Kim and Jung, "A tale of two homosocialities: gender, sexuality, and global political economy in *Squid Game*," 542.

<sup>191</sup> Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 40.

<sup>192</sup> Lehmann, 40.

<sup>193</sup> Lehmann, 40.

indeterminate in itself, a 'cold necessity', indicates not only a power that shatters beauty but also that the dramatic reconciliation itself already carries the poisonous kernel of its failure within it."<sup>194</sup> The transposition of this postdramatic yields "this 'other' of classical theatre [as being] already present in its own most thorough-going philosophical interrogation."<sup>195</sup>

Similarly, Cubitt announces the effects of postmodern media as they are changing and rearranging the potential scape of contemporaneity: "The temporality of these effects is not Bloch's not-yet so much as it is the not-now of potential undercutting the present on which self-identity depends. Not 'post,' therefore, the otherwise-than human is a permanent potentiality opened up in the moment when the human appears to be most fully subsumed within its programming."<sup>196</sup> In light of this quote, *Squid Game* is not just about a game, but plays a game with an amalgamation of tragic, farcical, and comedic elements in order to find the potential in a historical moment that appears to be defined precisely by the human being 'subsumed within its own programming.'

<sup>194</sup> Lehmann, 43.

<sup>195</sup> Lehmann, 44.

<sup>196</sup> Cubitt, "Oblivion: Of Time and Special Effects," 447. The reference to Bloch's not-yet is a reference to Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*, translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

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