

Drama Reviews

Squid Game

The Hall of Screens in the Age of Platform Cosmopolitanism

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Abstract

The nine-episode Korean-language series *Squid Game* became a global sensation immediately upon its premiere on Netflix in September 2021. The show's popularity and critical acclaim in the anglophone world had been unprecedented for a non-English series. This review provides a symptomatic reading of *Squid Game*'s global success and a short analysis of its visual appeal. It also explores the tension between *Squid Game*'s smooth and flat aesthetics that enables the show to travel and the culturally specific contexts it references. Some argue that the aesthetics lead to an ahistorical and superficial cultural understanding that overlooks the complexities of Korea's history and US imperialism. Others argue that they challenge cultural hierarchies and democratize interactions. This reflects a broader challenge of balancing global accessibility with cultural specificity faced by East Asian serial dramas in the era of global streaming services. This review concludes by highlighting the role of platform cosmopolitanism in bridging cultural and linguistic barriers in meaningful ways.

Keywords: *Squid Game*, Global Streaming Services, K-drama, Surveillance and Spectatorship, Platform Cosmopolitanism

“We knew we wanted this show to travel,” says Minyoung Kim, Netflix’s vice president of content for the Asia-Pacific region (excluding India).¹ Invited by *The Hollywood Reporter* to explain *Squid Game*’s global appeal, Kim comments that the show is “perfect evidence that our international strategy has been right.” The nine-episode Korean-language series became a global sensation immediately upon its premiere on Netflix in September 2021. As of this review’s publication, it is the platform’s most popular show of all time based on hours viewed in the first twenty-eight days of release.² It is also the first non-English TV series to be nominated for and win Primetime Emmy Awards. Such popularity and critical acclaim in the anglophone world had been unprecedented for a non-English series.

Written and directed by filmmaker Hwang Dong-hyuk, the show revolves around a survival game where 456 destitute social outcasts compete in six children’s games for a massive 45.6 billion won (over \$30 million USD) cash prize. In the first episode, the audience follows the backstory of the protagonist Seong Gi-hun (played by Lee Jung-jae), a debt-ridden gambling addict who had lost custody of his daughter. Desperate to redeem himself and cover his mother’s medical expenses, Gi-hun finds himself lured into a lethal series of seemingly innocent children’s games. The first game resembles the classic “Red Light, Green Light,” where the contestants face an enormous motion-sensing animatronic doll that announces each violation and subsequent death with a disconcertingly childlike voice (Figure 1).

The distorted version of “Red Light, Green Light” went viral on social media, with memes flooding in under #SquidGame. The show quickly rose to fame across the world. Netflix, individual content creators, gaming

1. Patrick Brzeski, “‘Squid Game’: Netflix’s Top Exec in Asia Explains the Show’s Huge Global Appeal,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 11, 2021, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/squid-game-secret-to-global-success-1235030008/>.

2. “Most Popular TV (Non-English)” Netflix, accessed April 5, 2023, <https://top10.netflix.com/tv-non-english?week=2023-02-12>.



Figure 1: The iconic doll

Source: Screenshot from *Squid Game* on Netflix

companies, and local businesses have been swift to capitalize on its success, from themed cafés in Paris and Chengdu to replicas of the massive robot doll in Manila and Sydney, from a Minecraft live-stream attracting 200 participants to play together to hourlong immersive adventures provided by Immersive Gamebox in the US, UK, Germany, and United Arab Emirates.

Squid Game's global success may have been unexpected but certainly welcomed. During her interview, Kim attributes the success to five key elements:

1. The popularity of the survival game genre among global audiences
2. The cultural authenticity and relative simplicity of the games
3. The art, especially the mise-en-scène and the music, enabled by big budgets
4. The memorable, meme-able moments to drive conversations
5. The overarching message on the universality of social injustice, conveyed in an entertaining way

While debates continue regarding the claims of cultural authenticity and universality against the backdrop of uneven globalization, there is no doubt that *Squid Game* is cinematically well-crafted. The meticulously laid out mise-en-scène featuring surreal *Alice in Wonderland*-style visuals, the perky music and sound effects, and the mischievous graphic match cuts to add humor all help to achieve a stark contrast with the bloody and ruthless reality for each player. *Squid Game* is a darkly playful doubling of our neoliberal capitalist reality: the powerful and rich design and gain from an inherently unfair system, where cut-throat competitions are framed as games that everyone is “free” to play and to potentially win under the watching eyes of surveillance and spectatorship.

Hall of Screens: The Omnipresent Cameras and the Oscillation of Perspectives

It is interesting how *Squid Game* constantly reminds its viewers of the intricate layers between the observer and subject under the ubiquity of cameras and screens, inviting Netflix’s audience to reflect upon their own positions in the act of looking. The show provides a visceral experience of surveillance and spectatorship featuring both human and nonhuman observers. By cycling through different perspectives, *Squid Game* begs the question of with whom do we identify in each situation. A player? A worker? An on-screen or off-screen spectator? An inanimate object? As a result, the show creates a multilayered viewing experience, where the audience’s identification oscillates through multiple perspectives from looking through different lenses.

There are several levels of human observers, from the contestants to the workers to the front man to the VIPs, further complicated by the audience’s external view from the computer screen. Figure 2 is a collage showing how viewers are invited into the story world. Both shots employ the composition technique of a frame within a frame, which is often used to highlight the subject being observed. In the case of *Squid Game*, it has an additional effect



Figure 2: Frame within a frame

Source: Screenshot from *Squid Game* on Netflix

of drawing attention to the act of observation itself. In the top image, the viewer is positioned down the hall behind the front man as he monitors the contestants. The shot is a reminder that the very act of watching, regardless of sitting in a surveillant's lounge or at home on the couch, entails a certain degree of voyeurism. The bottom image from episode 7 conveys this



Figure 3: The control room as a hall of screens

Source: Screenshot from *Squid Game* on Netflix

message even more strongly, as the magnified point of view (POV) puts the audience directly in the position of a VIP looking through binoculars.

While the most explicit reference to voyeurism and spectatorship occurs within the VIP lounge, the recurring scenes of the control room highlight the theme of digital mass surveillance. Figure 3 shows a comprehensive view of the room, packed with screens from top to bottom with the photo grid floor, manned computer stations, and the panoptic surveillance monitors on the walls. The viewer watches the front man oversee the workers who monitor the contestants, forming a chain of looking. All these human observers, including the audience, are trapped in an infinite hall of screens while surrounded by myriad digital devices. In this sense, the show makes an ambivalent comment on the power dynamics of spectatorship in the age of neoliberalism as well as the totalizing power of media technology that shapes how we see and are being seen.

Compared to shots from human perspectives, the POV shots from the viewpoint of automatic machines—which I call the *posthuman shots*—are even more intriguing. The posthuman shots reverse the typical roles of who is

viewing whom in a machine-human relationship, thus evoking an uncanny feeling. Some of these shots are closely spaced during the last twenty minutes of the first episode, which is a sequence of parallel editing between the players and the front man. One of the most memorable parallels is between two shot/reverse-shot sequences one between Gi-hun and the camera at the self-service registration kiosk; the other between the front man and the door camera with a facial recognition security system (Figure 4). Conventionally, a sequence of over-the-shoulder shots/reverse shots are often used to create an emotional connection between two characters who are engaging in a conversation. As the camera alternates from one character to the other, the audience is supposed to empathize with both. In contradistinction, the shot/reverse-shot sequences here do not occur between two human or anthropomorphic characters but between people and impersonal machines. The POV shot of an automatic machine looking at a person provides a unique, nonanthropocentric perspective. The effect is a kind of posthuman intimacy,



Figure 4: The posthuman intimacy between automatic machines and humans

Source: Screenshot from *Squid Game* on Netflix

where our everyday interactions with the cameras of phones, laptops, security systems, and inspection kiosks are reconfigured into machine-human conversations. However, the show also uses posthuman shots to demonstrate the nonhuman observers' disinterest in human lives. From the eyes of the motion-sensing doll to the high angle perspective of the automatic gun turrets, human beings are reduced to mere data points (Figure 5).

It follows that with the omnipresent cameras and the oscillation of perspectives, *Squid Game* comments on the issue of looking from at least three aspects:

1. The power dynamic of voyeurism against the backdrop of global capitalism and the transnational capitalist class
2. The omnipresence of digital surveillance
3. The question of spectatorship in the age of global streaming services

While the hall of screens can be a metaphor for panoptic surveillance, it can also function as a metaphor for the thumbnail grid on video streaming platforms. In the latter interpretation, images from every corner in the world are brought together for consumption. The audience sitting in the hall of screens experiences what I call a *feeling of platform cosmopolitanism*, where a viewer digitally travels around the world unencumbered by cultural and linguistic barriers, experiencing curated tidbits of a life elsewhere.

The Platform Is the Message? East Asian Drama Series in the Age of Platform Cosmopolitanism

With the rise of global streaming services such as Netflix, travel has become something quite different. Gone are the times of *Around the World in Eighty Days* à la Jules Verne or *Around the World in Eighty Books* à la David Damrosch. In the age of platform cosmopolitanism, a Netflix user can hop around the world in eighty seconds, skipping from *Squid Game*

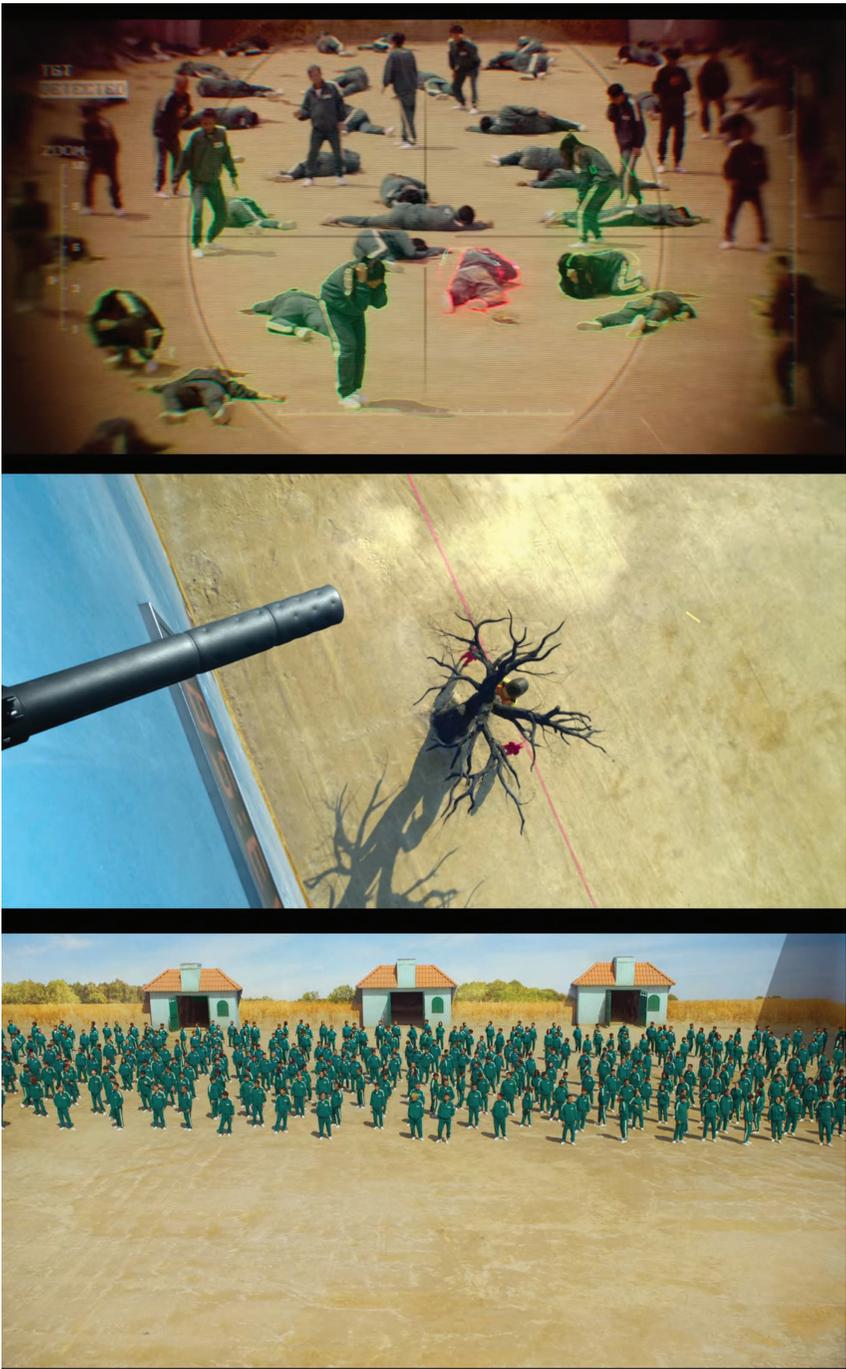


Figure 5: Posthuman shots seeing the contestants via the doll and the gun terrets

Source: Screenshot from *Squid Game* on Netflix

(contemporary South Korea) to *Stranger Things* (1980s North America) to *The Woman King* (1800s West Africa). The technology of digital streaming platforms has fundamentally changed the everyday experience of time and space by collapsing them into a feeling of right now, right here. To appropriate William Blake's famous lines in a cynical manner, browsing Netflix on a cell phone screen truly enables one to hold infinity in their hands and experience eternity in an hour. Marked by accessibility, flexibility, and seemingly endless choices, digital streaming platforms provide the audience with content that is meant to be consumed as a distraction, whether it be for entertainment or socialization purposes. Circulation value (cultural capital) thus outweighs representational value (cultural understanding), calling for content that follows the aesthetics of the smooth and flat, an aesthetics that *Squid Game* exemplifies.

Smoothness means no delay. Netflix endeavors to provide the audience with a smooth viewing experience (i.e., automatically skipping credits to encourage bingeing behavior, releasing non-English titles with multilingual options for anglophone viewers to watch in their preferred language, etc.). Flatness means bringing things of different distance onto the same plane (my term choice here is inspired by Murakami Takashi's viral concept "superflat"). It implies the superficiality of our postmodern consumer culture, aided by media technology collapsing time and space. Both the smooth and the flat indicate an erosion of cultural linguistic boundaries with the streaming platforms' global reach, achieved by a strategy of simplification. An example of this strategy would be how *Squid Game* made sure the rules of the Korean children's games featured are simple enough for people who are not familiar with those games to follow and enjoy.

Game aesthetics and video game logic, with their ability to transcend the boundaries of national markets and cultures, seem to be another common element shared by many films and drama series in this newest revival of the Korean wave. Examples include survival horrors featuring zombies and other monsters from *Train to Busan* (2016) to *Kingdom* (2019) to *Sweet Home* (2020), and, after the global success of *Parasite* (2019), the marrying

of the survival game genre to social commentary in *Squid Game*, *Hellbound* (2021), and *All of Us Are Dead* (2022). Even for *Parasite*, Bong Joon-ho comments on how the design of the Park family's house—a dungeon for the Kim family to roam around and explore—resembles a video game.³ These films and drama series are also examples of the blurring of big screen (cinema) and small screen (television) as a consequence of the rise of global streaming platforms. Digital platforms bridge the gap between cinema and TV, which leads to film aesthetics and techniques being transported into the production of popular drama series (e.g., the zombie genre from *Train to Busan* to *Kingdom*, the violence and dark humor from *Parasite* to *Squid Game*). This process is particularly visible in Netflix's strategy to harness the critically acclaimed, international image of South Korean cinema to breathe new life into K-dramas, drastically changing the latter's image from being full of romantic clichés to offering sharp social critiques.⁴

The smooth, the flat, and the blurring of boundaries are some defining features of platform cosmopolitanism, which goes hand in hand with neoliberal imaginations of global connectivity, free-flowing capital, and a cosmopolitan identity that hinges upon the feeling of relatability. Bong's famous comment that “we all live in the same country, it's called capitalism” encapsulates the media situation of platform cosmopolitanism we live in and the type of content it calls for.⁵ A non-English title's global success (*Squid Game* as a prime example) depends on how well it reduces cultural barriers to appeal to an international audience. The international audience then

3. Todd Martens, “From ‘1917’ to Yes, ‘Parasite,’ Video Games Are Even Influencing Prestige Movies,” *Herald and News*, February 13, 2020, https://www.heraldandnews.com/from-1917-to-yes-parasite-video-games-are-even-influencing-prestige-movies/article_0710ef90-4e96-5530-a4f6-87cde4445c7f.html.

4. Yaeri Kim, “‘Funny, Political and Bone-Crunchingly Violent’: *Squid Game* and the Unintended Nation Branding of South Korea” (presentation, Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference, Boston, MA, March 17, 2023).

5. Kate Hagen, “The Black List Interview: Bong Joon-ho on *Parasite*,” *Black List Blog*, October 11, 2019, <https://blog.blcklst.com/the-black-list-interview-bong-joon-ho-on-parasite-5fd0cb0baa12>.

receives a sense of relatability, a cosmopolitan identity consuming foreign media objects and navigating foreign cultures by simply browsing Netflix.

The power of the smooth and flat is evidenced by how anglophone journalists and content creators rave about *Squid Game's* relatability. However, in a special forum on *Squid Game*, Raymond Kyooyung Ra makes a pointed argument against the idea of relatability. Recounting the show's references to locally specific contexts such as the 2009 SsangYong Motor strike, which are conveniently overlooked by the Hollywood press, Ra argues that "consuming *Squid Game* with little to no background knowledge of Korea as well as the United States' imperialist influences there" makes the American spectators' viewing experience "but a pleasurable act of appropriating culture capital."⁶ Other forum contributors also express concerns over how Korea-specific contexts might get lost in translation. For example, David C. Oh points out that the Korean name of the first game does not translate to "Red Light, Green Light" but is rather based on the phrase of "the Rose of Sharon has bloomed." With the Rose of Sharon being South Korea's national flower, the name implies the Korean nation as a site of hopelessness and death.⁷ For the sake of smooth circulation, something gets lost in translation and cultural understandings become flat. At the end of his article, Ra questions *Squid Game's* complicity in aiding US viewers' ahistorical consumption, displacing South Korea's regional problems under US imperialism to universal class struggle, which implicitly challenges Minyoung Kim's claim to the show's cultural authenticity, universality, and profundity.

While these are valid concerns, it seems to go back to the long-standing question of text versus context. It sees the production and consumption of the show as a process of encoding/decoding, where area-specific knowledge is

6. Raymond Kyooyung Ra, "At the Center of Its World, the U.S. Empire Forgets itself: *Squid Game* and the Hollywood Press' Melodramatic Gaze," *Communication, Culture and Critique* 15, no. 4 (2022): 546–48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cccl/tcac040>.

7. David C. Oh "The Politics of Representation in *Squid Game* and the Promise and Peril of Its Transnational Reception," *Communication, Culture and Critique* 15, no. 4 (2022): 531–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cccl/tcac039>.

the precondition for a correct interpretation. To appropriate Nicholas Carr's famous question "Is Google making us stupid?," this argument would conclude that Netflix makes us stupid as well, as the smooth and flat leads to an ahistorical, and therefore lacking, cultural understanding. However, quoting Ani Maitra and Rey Chow's argument against the expression of "media in Asia," Thomas Lamarre sees the question of context as falling into the trap of a "methodological individualism," where platforms, cultures, creators, and audiences are all seen as separate individuals.⁸ Instead, he argues for the concept of platformativity, which adopts an infra-individual, intra-acting view where context will be part of an ecology of human-technology-society. According to Lamarre, flattening is not always bad: "It may prove equalizing in the sense of challenging hierarchies and democratizing interactions or equalizing in the sense of rendering equivalent, transforming into exchange value."⁹ In other words, the platform aesthetics of the smooth and flat might function as an equalizing force for East Asian drama series to gain international impact despite US cultural hegemony, even if their production and nonlocal reception may not provide the most sophisticated cultural understanding. The smooth and flat reducing cultural linguistic barriers might not be a bad thing as long as the smooth leaves space for contemplative moments of pausing or hesitation, whereas the flat functions as a surface with embedded hyperlinks that the audience, if intrigued while watching, can search and learn about the locally specific histories and additional context. Just like how the superflat movement can either celebrate or critically engage with the shallowness of consumer culture, Netflix shows like *Squid Game* can also function as a double-edged sword. Similar to *Parasite*, the show can be ironically interpreted as a celebration of capitalism by capitalizing on its anti-capitalist message. However, it also retains value in raising

8. Thomas Lamarre, "Platformativity: Media Studies, Area Studies," *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 4 (2017): 285–305.

9. Lamarre, "Platformativity," 302.

awareness and inspiring interests for a non-Euro-American-centric culture. In other words, although platform cosmopolitanism is ridden with the connotation of neoliberal capitalism, it could also be an opportunity for East Asian cultural products to go beyond national and regional borders to reach an impact that cinema and television could never give.

Yet, who is responsible for these attempts at countering the challenges of uneven globalization, the totalization of media's power and influence, the Orientalization of East Asian cultures, and the rather narcissistic and ahistorical nature of consumption from a foreign audience? Inspired by Lamarre's idea of platformativity, platform cosmopolitanism might provide a fundamental basis for countering the totalizing and debilitating view of the inescapability of capitalism and new media technology. Platformativity addresses the entangled set of relations among the platform, culture, content, and human, comprising an encompassing media ecology. Building on this view, platform cosmopolitanism points to a hope for the human participants in this media ecology to counter the homogenizing effects of media technology and globalization in their ways of infra-individual intra-action.

While the global success of *Squid Game* benefits the Korean entertainment industry, it also provides an opportunity to expand their reach while integrating moments of reflection. The writers and directors can incorporate appropriate context without deviating too much from the intended story through smarter and subtler means, such as offhand conversations between minor characters, news broadcasts playing in the background, and indirect references from specific props carried by the characters (newspapers, books, posters, etc.). For the audience, although they are not required to learn more about the sociohistorical context while consuming foreign media, it is an ethical act to do so. Lastly, anglophone scholars of East Asian studies are well-positioned to share knowledge by completing more public writings. East Asian dramas are owned and produced by global streaming devices that are intended to be accessible without local or specific context. However, research-sharing can enable the viewer to have a multilayered experience,

rendering the show (and any associated works) more impactful in the end. Such acts should not be viewed as the actions of excavating contextual value. Instead of economic terms, we can think of scholars as being a part of the media ecology, participating in infra-individual intra-actions through research-sharing.

It is possibly unrealistic to expect one show to change the world by overthrowing neoliberal capitalism and Euro-American-centrism. Still, content creators and viewers have some agency in the ecology of platform-content-human to maintain some profound aesthetic experience in the age of the smooth and flat. The delay, the pause, the aghast that give the audience a moment of reflection is usually associated with art—can it be provided by mass media too?

