Research Articles

Streaming Economy

Seriality and Netflix Original Korean Series

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Abstract

Seriality is one of the most important and recognizable elements of television since its inception and has been understood in terms of gaps, interruptions, and repetitions. Seriality has also long been linked to the mode of melodrama and the soap opera genre. However, with the rise of Netflix, seriality has taken on new meanings that redefine the textualities of original Korean series. This article examines how streaming seriality must be reconsidered under the logic of lack, deviating from previous scholarship on seriality firmly grounded in the discourse of excess in terms of aesthetics and affect. To illuminate these points, I engage in a close reading of *The Glory* (2023), a popular original Korean series on Netflix, to explore how its seriality, inflected in the logic of lack, shapes its textualities and speaks to the new political economy of streaming seriality. In examining how seriality is being reconceived in the age of streaming services, I question how Korean TV dramas on Netflix prompt us to reexamine the concept of streaming seriality. The article sheds light on how seriality, as a long-standing facet of television, continues to inform the development and production of contemporary Korean TV dramas on Netflix.

Keywords: seriality, Netflix, Korean TV dramas, melodrama, streaming

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Introduction

In a 2013 interview, Beau Willimon, the creator of Netflix's first original series *House of Cards*, stated, "Rather than thinking of individual episodes, the creative team approached it all as a '13 hour movie,' and that comes across in the first two hours."[1] This response points to how original Netflix series in the age of streaming are being conceived as longer versions of films, enabling writers to fully develop characters that not only resonate with the viewers but also contribute to narrative strategies. Cultural critic A. O. Scott discusses such a shift in a roundtable conversation around contemporary seriality: "Now if we're increasingly watching these things [cinema and television] on the same apparatus [digital platforms]: is a 90-minute-long thing a feature film, or is it connected to something else?"[2] These statements not only suggest the convergence between cinema and television but how the concept of seriality, a defining trait of television, is being reimagined in the age of streaming services.

Therefore, this article examines how seriality is being reconceived in the age of streaming services while paying critical attention to how it shapes the textualities of original Korean series on Netflix. Expanding on L.S. Kim's concept of "representational economy," this article claims how streaming seriality must be understood in terms of lack, deviating from previous and existing discussions of seriality firmly grounded in the logic of excess with ties to the aesthetics of melodrama and the soap opera. In my analysis, I also illustrate how the mode of melodrama inflected in the logic of excess in terms of affect undergoes a subtle change to speak to the new political economy of streaming seriality. Analyzing the hit original Korean series *The Glory*

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1. Nathan Mattise, "House of Cards: The '13-hour Movie' Defining the Netflix Experience," *Ars Technica*, February 1 2013, https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2013/02/house-of-cards-the-13-hour-movie-defining-the-netflix-experience/?fbclid=IwAR2NsSJ-DGaVXWHoSNakJGEUUtLG_Z4htouJTYgmnNaiu2wXfLsITzF6ewSg.

2. Lev Grossman, Sharon Marcus, A.O. Scott, and Julie Snyder, "Contemporary Seriality: Roundtable," *Narrative* 27, no. 1 (January 2019): 118.

as an example, I question how Korean TV dramas on Netflix prompt us to consider the concept of streaming seriality.

Despite the plethora of research on the relationship between television and seriality, existing studies have often used Western texts, especially US television, as primary objects of analysis. For example, Sean O'Sullivan identifies segmentation, gaps, multiplicity, and momentum as critical elements of serial narratives in US television.[3] Abigail De Kosnik explains that the deep seed and long reveal, continual reverberation, and real-life temporality are the defining elements of seriality in US soap operas.[4] Seriality also has been discussed in relation to quality television in terms of narrative complexity. Specifically, Jason Mittell's work illustrates how quality television employs complex narratives while noting how it "redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration."[5]

More noteworthy is the fact that seriality in East Asian television has not received serious scholarly inquiry despite how TV dramas with their roots in soap operas and telenovelas continue to capture global audiences' hearts. As Frank Kelleter notes, despite soap operas being "very complex and highly self-reflective narratives," they "have seen so little cultural valorization, even within television studies, at least in the sense of valuing soaps in their aesthetic and formal achievements *as* serial television (rather than valuing their populist use-value)."[6] Even though seriality is considered a distinctive trait of television, I am interested in how Netflix redefines seriality in original Korean series. This not only places Korean TV dramas or what

3. Sean O'Sullivan, "Six Elements of Serial Narrative," *Narrative* 27, no. 1 (2019): 49–64, https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2019.0003.

4. Abigail De Kosnik, "One Life to Live: Soap Opera Storytelling," in *How to Watch Television*, ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell, 2nd ed. (New York University Press, 2020), 70–78.

5. Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television* (New York University Press, 2015), 18.

6. Frank Kelleter, "All About Seriality: An Interview with Frank Kelleter (Part Two)," interview by Henry Jenkins, Pop Junctions, May 8, 2017, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2017/05/all-about-seriality-an-interview-with-frank-kelleter-part-two.html.

we know as K-dramas at the center of global television studies but also illustrates how the knowledge production about seriality can come from the study of East Asian television. In other words, this article suggests toward the de-Westernizaton of television studies, which calls forth how the traditions of Korean TV dramas are in critical conversations with the concept of seriality. Silvio Waisbord explains that de-Westernization "calls western scholarship to be aware of its blindspots and to open to non-western studies."[7] That is, the de-Westernization of seriality "is not simply a geographical turn" but how discourses or ideas about it can be produced through engagements with media beyond the West.[8] This article thus aims to contribute to global television studies and encourage more scholarship focused on the question of seriality from an East Asian positionality and perspective.

Seriality and Streaming Economy

Seriality is one of the most recognizable elements of television. It can be defined as a "dynamic cultural practice"[9] or, more specifically, a continuing form that allows "a fuller development of characterization while permitting the audience to become more and more involved with the story and its people."[10] Mary Ann Doane explains that "the question of the serial narrative is generally not how to provide closure, the sense of an ending, but how to keep going, how to continue."[11] For Milly Buonanno, seriality "is constituted

7. Silvio Waisbord, "What is Next for De-Westernizing Communication Studies?" *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 17, no. 1 (2022): 26, https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2022.2041645.

8. Waisbord, "What is Next for De-Westernizing Communication Studies?" 26.

9. Jason Mittell, "Operational Seriality and the Operation of Seriality," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Narrative Theories*, ed. Zara Dinnen and Robyn Warhol (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 229.

10. De Kosnik, "One Life to Live," 146.

11. Mary Ann Doane, "Hyper-seriality: The End of the End," *Afterimage* 48, no. 2 (2021): 51, https://doi.org/10.1525/aft.2021.48.2.49, https://doi.org/10.1525/aft.2021.48.2.49.

in the synergic interplay between production, distribution, and consumption of ongoing narratives, whose segmented articulation is purposefully designed to feed a delivery system and to elicit acts of reading/viewing that follow time dynamics of *repeated and enforced interruption*."[12] These different definitions induce one to think of seriality beyond formal structures to consider the issue of temporality. Accordingly, Amy Villarejo astutely notes that "television's temporarily can be 'segmentation, repetition, seriality, frozen, paused, captured, looped, restored, lost and found.' "[13] In exploring the connection between seriality and temporality, Suk-Young Kim argues that seriality is the study of kinetic concerns—"specific temporalities"—which constitute rhythms, speeds, frequencies, the timing or nontiming of pauses, intermissions, and gaps.[14] Thus, seriality prompts us to reevaluate the seminal concept of flow in television studies through the lens of temporality as it takes on new meanings in the streaming era. Specifically, flow has guided the experiences of watching television in the form of interruptions (e.g., commercials) in the legacy television era, but with the advent of streaming services, viewers have greater control over how they want to design their own flow that accommodates their specific viewing patterns and temporal experiences in the absence of commercials, as is the case on Netflix. Jia Tan characterizes this emerging form of serial viewing practice as "platformized seriality," which she defines as "assemblages of online platform infrastructures, content regulation, generic convention, and experimentation."[15] However, the notion of platformized seriality is concerned with how the

12. Milly Buonanno, "Seriality: Development and Disruption in the Contemporary Medial and Cultural Environment," *Critical Studies in Television* 14, no. 2 (2019): 194–95, https://doi.org/10.1177/1749602019834667. Emphasis in original.

13. Amy Villarejo, *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire* (Duke University Press, 2014), 10–11.

14. Suk-Young Kim, *Surviving Squid Game: A Guide to K-Drama, Netflix, and Global Streaming Wars* (Applause, 2023), 23.

15. Jia Tan, "Platformized Seriality: Chinese Time Travel Fantasy from Prime-time Television to Online Streaming," *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images* 2, no. 1 (2022): 58, https://doi.org/10.3998/gs.2663.

different technological affordances of streaming infrastructures, such as bullet screens and pay-on-demand-in-advance service, contribute to viewers' overall viewing experience of a serial text. Hence, such study is still focused on how seriality shapes the overall viewing experience in terms of excess—technological and infrastructural affordances, information, and aesthetics.

More specifically, the interaction between seriality and temporality has been examined through the lens of excess. Temporality not only suggests the excess of time, as it suggests endlessness, infinite, or never-ending aspects of seriality, but also the abundance of time that viewers have to watch serial television. In other words, seriality "reproduces a sense of infinite futurity, without which capitalist market cultures would threaten to collapse at every crisis point."[16] Or, in the words of Frank Kelleter, "Popular seriality promises to duplicate creatively, involving contributors without number to endlessly generate its own follow-up possibilities."[17] On the contrary, Jason Mittell argues that "what makes something serialized is not its form, but how it is created, distributed, circulated, and consumed."[18] More significant is how the temporal dimensions of seriality activates audiences to "aspire to forming ongoing relationships with fictional characters and require more insight to do so," underscoring the ongoing significance of temporality to seriality.[19]

Despite the significance of how temporality shapes our understanding of seriality, its manifestation in the discourse of lack in the streaming era accrues new textual meanings. This logic of lack speaks to the streaming economy that shapes the textualities of Netflix original Korean series. Since the number of episodes of the original Netflix Korean varies between six and sixteen, often shorter than conventional Korean TV miniseries, stories must be told in the most economical manner, deviating from excess in the form

16. Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality," in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Ohio State University Press, 2017), 30.
17. Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality," 30.
18. Mittell, "Operational Seriality and the Operation of Seriality," 229.
19. Maria Sulimma, *Gender and Seriality: Practices and Politics of Contemporary US Television* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 34.

of affect and repetitions that have long been considered staple elements of Korean television serials.

In her work on race and representation in US television, L.S. Kim develops the concept of "representational economy" and defines it as "an operational mode whereby cultural production balances those images that challenge the status quo. That is, while a degree of difference from the white, middle-class, Christian, heterosexual, patriarchal 'norm' is given moments in the representational spotlight, an ideological bottom line is always apparent."[20] Kim's concept of "representational economy" points to how the political economy of television, particularly in the United States, refrains from too much or excessive difference, thus maintaining the hegemonic position of whiteness. The concept also allows us to consider how sitcoms have been the most receptive format to the representation and visibility of differences while not requiring them to fully develop racial and ethnic characters because of their episodic structure, where a problem introduced in the beginning of the episode is resolved by the end. Even though Kim's concept of representational economy is centered on the political economy of television and representational strategies, I would like to adopt the concept to coin what I describe as a *streaming economy*. Streaming economy is an operational mode of streaming platforms in which the logic of lack informs and shapes the seriality and textuality of original Korean series. Here, I define lack as an industrial practice that informs the seriality of original Korean series on Netflix where typical moments where viewers anticipate excess imbricated in melodramatic affect and aesthetics are defied, prompting the audience to ponder that there is something possibly missing, which lends them to desire for more because of this lack.

The rise of what are known today as K-dramas have their origin in 연속극 (*yeonsokkuk*). The Korean word *yeonsokkuk* was used to refer to TV dramas, often daily and weekend dramas, that were aired on terrestrial

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20. L.S. Kim, *Maid for Television: Race, Class, Gender and a Representational Economy* (Rutgers University Press, 2023), 7.

broadcast stations, such as KBS, MBC, and SBS. The word also implies the notion of seriality, further alluding to its continuity in terms of ongoing story arcs. In addition, according to my interview with a writer of an original Korean series for Netflix, Korean TV writers who made their debut in the industry in the 1990s and 2000s have been firmly instilled with the institutional knowledge that *yeonsokkuk* (serials) must continuously incite the interest of the viewers while simultaneously making them ponder what is going to happen in the next episode as they eagerly wait and anticipate the broadcast of the next episode. This is especially true for those aspiring writers trained at the Korea TV & Radio Writers Association to equip themselves for a professional career as writers in the TV industry.[21]

However, with the introduction of streaming services, the firmly instilled understanding of seriality is being amended to meet the demands of the streaming economy where it places greater value on lack over excess. In the same interview with the Korean writer, the writer pointed out how Netflix discourages the use of everyday, mundane scenes involving protagonists in a romantic relationship, such as coffee shops, which have been prominent in Korean TV dramas. Such scenes employed to depict the progression of characters' romantic relationship are manifested in the logic of excess that underscore the affective dimensions of the series. Netflix considers such scenes as excess because they are not crucial to the progression of the plot and must be minimized and even eliminated even though they have been prevalent in Korean TV dramas.[22] This shift away from the logic of "too much" information or emotions is informing the seriality of Korean TV dramas in the streaming economy where a platform like Netflix places great emphasis on the post-production of its original series. The postproduction of original Korean TV series usually occurs simultaneously during its filming, especially for the episodes that have already been filmed in advance. The filming of

21. Anonymous Writer, interview by Benjamin M. Han, November 10, 2023.
22. Anonymous Writer, interview by Benjamin M. Han, November 10, 2023.

original Korean series usually takes six months while the postproduction process takes more than six months, often involving retakes of scenes, which is an uncommon production practice in the Korean TV drama industry.[23] Such a lengthy postproduction process of original Korean series reflects Netflix's commitment to eliminating any excessive boredom, repetition, and emotions to shape both the efficiency and efficacy of its seriality within the streaming economy. In his extensive work on seriality, Sean O'Sullivan explains that there is a unique interrelationship between the methodology of poetry and serial television. He writes, "The defining idea for that argument, and the defining characteristic of all serial storytelling is 'segmentivity.'"[24] Segmentation as an essential unit of seriality in television became more pronounced due to commercial interruptions, which not only impacts the rhythm of a series but also requires the use of a cliffhanger at the end of each unit or segment within an episode. However, in the case of Korean TV dramas, commercial interruptions were not an inherent part of their seriality. Since 1973, the revised Korean Broadcasting Law has banned the inclusion of commercial interruptions during the broadcast of a program on a terrestrial television network but not cable channels. As a result, episodes of Korean TV dramas often ended on a cliffhanger followed by a brief preview of the next episode as the credits rolled with the theme song to sustain the viewers' interest. The law was recently revised in 2021, allowing terrestrial networks to include commercial interruptions within programs.[25] This change did not dramatically impact Korean TV drama writers as many were accustomed to writing without being conscious of the anticipated commercial breaks in an episode, which could also produce fragmentation within seriality. Hence, the production of original Netflix series in the absence of

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23. Anonymous Writer, interview by Benjamin M. Han, November 10, 2023.
24. O'Sullivan, "Six Elements of Serial Narrative," 50.
25. Gil Ju Lee, "[Gi-ja-su-cheob] Si-cheong-ja oe-myeon-han jung-gan-gwang-go jeon-myeon heo-yong," *Jeongbotongsinsinmun*, April 30, 2021, https://www.koit.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=83055.

commercial interruptions was rather an easy transition for many writers in terms of the seriality of Korean TV dramas.

Seriality and Melodramatic Excess

Moreover, seriality and excess are often inflected in the mode of melodrama with strong ties to the soap opera genre. As Jane Feuer reminds us, "Moments of melodramatic excess relate to the serial structure of these dramas and occur as a form of temporary closure within and between episodes and even entire seasons."[26] Accordingly, Korean TV dramas, since their inception, have employed melodramatic excess in terms of close-ups, repetitions, emotions, and music that all converge to accentuate and elicit affect from the viewers. Hence, seriality's inherent connection with melodrama has been the subject of derision primarily for "its potential excesses: too long, too complex/convoluted, too emotional."[27] Such a pervasive understanding of seriality, firmly grounded in excess, has deterred the progressive element of seriality, particularly with the rise of streaming services. Therefore, it is imperative that we disentangle seriality from excess and consider it through the logic of lack. Linda Williams writes that "melodrama has become so basic to all forms of popular moving-picture entertainment that it is futile to continue to define it as 'excess,' since these apparent excesses are not necessary for melodrama to do its work nor are they of the essence of the form."[28]

For Korean TV dramas, melodramatic excess has been closely associated with their seriality as a distinct and appealing quality to the global audience.

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26. Jane Feuer, "Melodrama, Serial Form and Television Today," *Screen* 25, no. 1 (1984): 12, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/25.1.4.
27. Linda Williams, "World and Time: Serial Television Melodrama in America," in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (Columbia University Press, 2018), 180.
28. Linda Williams, "Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the 'Classical,'" *Modern Drama* 55, no. 4 (2012): 526, https://doi.org/10.3138/md.2012-S83.

Korean TV dramas' use of melodramatic excess is most legible in what Steve Choe theorizes as the "affective interlude," which focuses on the affective dimensions of Korean TV dramas. Choe explains that the affective interlude—"moments that make a spectacle of sincere emotion while soliciting viewers to respond in kind, to feel sympathy or outrage and cry or cringe, and typically in ways that inspire the consideration of moral sentiment within the Korean cultural context"—connects feeling and the seriality of Korean TV dramas.[29] Choe's argument points toward the significance of textuality that is instrumental to the success of Korean TV dramas, while his analysis of affective interlude is still manifested in the logic of excess. For Choe, the affective interlude not only underscores timing and temporality but also "is the culmination of the dramatic tension felt in the mismatch between how things are and how they, in the realm of fantasy, should be. It operates in dialectical relation to the 'on time,' which solicits the viewer's sympathy to respond synchronically and its manifest in the moment of recognition."[30] This defining trait of Korean TV drama seriality inflected in melodramatic excess within the affective interlude speaks to "fantasies of Koreanness and of feeling Korean."[31] The use of affective interlude is also accentuated through the repetitive use of theme music and close-ups, which all attest to the value of melodramatic excess. While Korean TV dramas elicit "technics of affect" that resonate with global audiences, the seriality of original Korean series shape the affective experience of the viewer.[32] The logic of lack rather than excess informing melodrama speaks to the streaming economy as it intentionally deviates away from abundance—too much—of repetition, music, and emotionality within the textual elements of Korean TV dramas. Therefore, streaming economy that places value on

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29. Steve Choe, "Melos in the World of K-Drama," *Korea Europe Review: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Politics, Society, and Economics*, no. 3 (Autumn 2022): 1, https://doi.org/10.48770/ker.2022.no3.18.
30. Choe, "Melos in the World of K-Drama," 8.
31. Choe, 14.
32. Choe, 16.

lack as an efficacious mode of textuality with purposeful exclusions "leave[s] room for ongoing audience interpretations as a motor of the show's kind of seriality."[33] In other words, instead of capitalizing on the excess of melodramatic sentiments, such as close-ups and affect, the logic of lack informs the seriality of Korean TV dramas.

Streaming Seriality in *The Glory*

The Korean original series *The Glory* was a sensational hit when it was released on Netflix. According to "What We Watched: A Netflix Engagement Report" released in December 2023, *The Glory* ranked third among the most watched original and licensed series on Netflix between January and June, with 622.8 million viewing hours.[34] The series addresses the social issue of school bullying, which has received a lot of public attention in South Korea. Additionally, the series was written by Kim Eun-sook, one of the most prominent female TV writers working in the industry, whose hits include *Descendants of the Sun* (2016), *Guardian: The Lonely and Great God* (2016–2017), and *Mr. Sunshine* (2018). The series deviates from her previous dramas on broadcast and cable television for its grittiness, edginess, and violence that centers on the social issue of bullying. Despite its global success, the original series enables us to examine how seriality is not only being redefined but also remains a defining trait of Korean TV dramas in the streaming era.

As I discussed earlier in the article, temporality is an important element of seriality as it relates to distribution. According to Sean O'Sullivan, the serial gap is the most important quality in seriality. The temporal gap between the episodes or seasons makes seriality a critical facet of popular

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33. Sulimma, *Gender and Seriality*, 32.
34. "What We Watched: A Netflix Engagement Report," Netflix, December 12, 2023, https://about.netflix.com/en/news/what-we-watched-a-netflix-engagement-report.

culture. While the introduction of binge-watching practices via streaming platforms has undermined the notion of serial temporality in terms of gaps, Netflix continues to repurpose it to suit the demands of streaming seriality. Ryan Engley explains that "the temporal gap of traditional serial media has a more celebrated creative and critical function, but just because Netflix series lack this weekly interruption does not mean Netflix has actually achieved 'gapless' seriality."[35] This serial gap within and between episodes aligns with how Netflix distributed its highly anticipated Korean series. For example, the first eight episodes of *The Glory* were released as part 1 in December 2022, and the remaining eight episodes were released as part 2 in March 2023. This particular way of dividing and distributing the sixteen-episode series as two separate parts, which typically would be considered a standard sixteen-episode miniseries on Korean legacy and cable television, speaks to the ongoing redefinition of seriality in terms of distribution. It also prompts us to examine how seriality operates between episodes, notably the transition from the end of the episodes to the beginning of the subsequent episodes.

For instance, the last episode of part 1 ends with Yeon-jin's (Lim Ji-yeon) husband entering Dong-eun's (Song Hye-kyo) apartment to discover his wife smoking. A close-up shot of her side face reveals her surprise upon seeing him, followed by a long shot that captures them looking at each other. The proceeding overhead shot captures Dong-eun playing *baduk* (a Korean board game), followed by a fade out to black as the credits roll. Instead of ending the episode with the encounter between Yeon-jin and her husband as a pivotal moment in the series to incite viewers' interest for part 2, further acting as a cliffhanger, the *baduk* scene with Dong-eun subverts the excessive suspense of the previous scene. Interestingly, in part 2, when the story resumes where it left off, it does not begin in Dong-eun's apartment. Instead, the first episode of part 2 starts with the backstory of how

35. Ryan Engley, "To Be Continued: An Interview on Seriality (Part II)," interview by Jess Henderson, No Fun, September 5, 2020, https://nofunmag.substack.com/p/to-be-continued-an-interview-on-seriality-part2.

Figure 1: A dramatic encounter between Yeon-jin (Lim Ji-yeon) and her husband in the absence of music and shot-reverse-shots.
Source: Netflix screengrab.

Myeong-oh (Kim Gun-woo) was killed. Moreover, even though Netflix promoted *The Glory* as having two parts, the first episode of part 2 is not labeled as episode 1 but rather episode 9, which speaks to how the seriality in the form of continuity plays an important factor for the global streaming platform in terms of distribution. Again, according to Ryan Engley, "Netflix, in other words, tries to bill itself as the 'solution' to the problem of traditional narrative seriality. And yet, their narrative model makes people antsier and more impatient when it seems like they've released a 'filler' episode. This goes back to the 'ten-hour movie' problem. TV shows have down time. They often take a breath."[36]

Many episodes of *The Glory* end with the last scene fading out to black. For example, episode 1 in part 1 ends as Dong-eun watches the weather forecast featuring Yeon-jin, who has bullied her in high school. We hear Dong-eun's inner thoughts and feelings about Yeon-jin through her voice-over: "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, fracture for fracture. The one who inflected

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36. Ryan Engley, "To Be Continued."

Figure 2: The dramatic encounter (Figure 1) is followed by an anticlimactic scene in which Dong-eun (Song Hye-kyo) plays *baduk*.
Source: Netflix screengrab.

the injury must suffer the same." The voice-over is heard as the scene captures the hanging photos of Dong-eun's friends who have been accomplices in perpetrating violence against her. Dong-eun states, "That sounds too fair," and then looks directly at the camera, breaking the fourth wall while asking the viewers, "Don't you think?" The camera behind her focuses on the photos hanging on the windows of Dong-eun's dark home with only a glimmer of sunlight penetrating the apartment. The scene is accompanied by ominous music as it fades out to black while the ending credits roll with the theme music playing in the background, which signals the conclusion of the episode. Unlike typical cliffhangers, filled with anticipation for the next episode, the end of the episode offers a sense of momentary closure and disrupts its seriality without revealing much information. The way the episode ends as a serial defies what Jennifer Hayward has described as serialized fiction that "specializes in setting up *readerly expectations*, then meeting or thwarting them."[37] Particularly, the ending of the episode shies away from

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37. Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 79.

excessive affect and information, prompting the viewers to wonder whether something is lacking. Similarly, in the subsequent episode of *The Glory*, there is a temporal leap in the narrative as it goes back to the summer of 2012, where we encounter Dong-eun navigating the Facebook sites of her bullying friends. Again, at the conclusion of the episode, it employs a familiar ending where Dong-eun meets a woman, a victim of domestic violence, who would later become her accomplice in the revenge process. The camera captures the two characters looking at each other as snow falls and the scene fades out to black again while the ending credits roll, accompanied by the theme song.

Moreover, *The Glory* is not a typical Korean TV drama that focuses on the romantic relationship between the two protagonists as it is more centered on the themes of bullying, violence, and revenge. Even though *The Glory* still integrates the developing romantic relationship between Dong-eun and Yeo-jeong into its narrative, it does not employ the mode of melodrama manifested in emotional excess compared to many Korean TV dramas. For instance, in episode 1, Dong-eun waits for her drink at a coffee shop as Yeo-jeong enters with his friend. After ordering their drinks, the camera captures Dong-eun's and Yeo-jeong's backs facing each other, signaling at a possible romance between the two protagonists. Additionally, later in episode 6, one of the most melodramatic moments in the series occurs when Yeo-jeong learns about Dong-eun's plans to take revenge on her friends. When he asks her whether she would reconsider the revenge, Dong-eun does not back away but instead reveals the horrific scars and wounds on her body as proof of the degree of violence inflicted on her. As she shows the scars, wounds, and burns tied to her painful memories of being bullied to Yeo-jeong and her friends, we hear the soft instrumental version of the theme music playing in the background.

After witnessing the atrocity of violence, Yeo-jeong has a difficult time accepting the physical suffering that Dong-eun had to endure because of bullying. As tears start to drop from Dong-eun's eyes, he decides that he will do whatever it takes to protect and assist her in her revenge on her friends. The soft, sentimental instrumental music suddenly converts to the

Figure 3: Yeo-jeong.
Source: Netflix screengrab.

theme song with lyrics as it reaches its bridge, and the scene once again fades out to black while the credits roll, accompanied by the theme song. Here, perhaps defying viewers' expectations that Yeo-jeong will hug her and the scene possibly concludes with an emotional kissing scene that affirms their love for each other, the scene resists melodramatic excess as viewers question whether something is lacking. Instead, the use of melodrama in the scene shies away or deviates from excess rooted in affect while speaking to what Linda Williams characterizes as "moral legibility." In other words, borrowing E. Deidre Pribram's words, seriality in *The Glory* underscores that "moral legibility is equally a matter of emotional legibility in melodrama."[38] That is, *The Glory*'s emphasis on the lack over excess in terms of its melodramatic pathos makes moral legibility more pronounced for the viewers.

Additionally, in this scene, "melodrama is not that which opposes realism but that which becomes more modern and relevant by incorporating

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38. E. Deidre Pribram, "Ensemble Storytelling: Dramatic Television Seriality, the Melodramatic Mode, and Emotions," in *Exploring Seriality on Screen: Audiovisual Narratives in Film and Television*, ed. Ariane Hudelet and Anne Crémieux (Routledge, 2020), 39.

Figure 4: Dong-eun reveals the scars on her body.
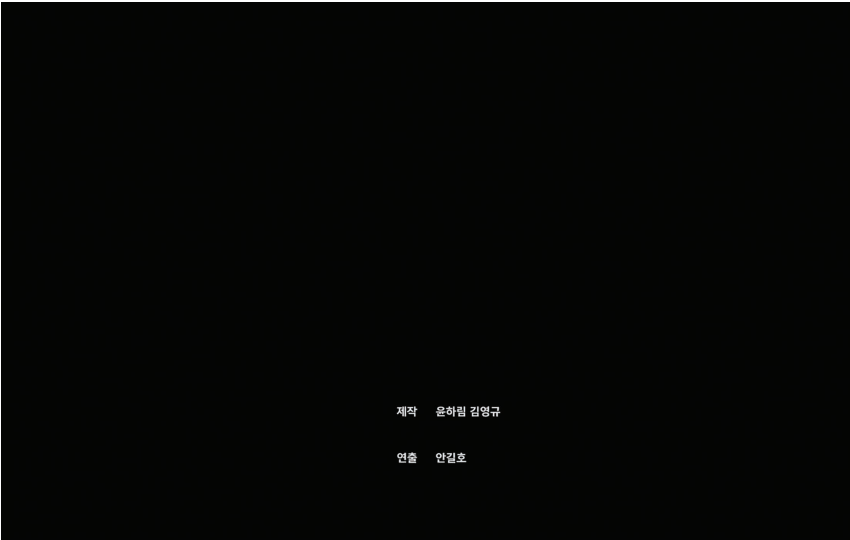*Source:* Netflix screengrab.

제작   윤하림 김영규

연출   안길호

Figure 5: The credit sequence at the end of the episode.
Source: Netflix screengrab.

realism's outward manifestations."[39] The avoidance of excess grounded in affect to reinforce realism of this particular melodramatic moment underscores the theme of "finding a more immediate, less cosmic justice."[40] This distinct textuality shaping original Korean series on Netflix illustrates how seriality inflected in the mode of melodrama does not operate under the discourse of emotional excess. Such recurring moments in *The Glory* where viewers anticipate melodramatic excess are subverted. It is only in the last episode of the series where it finally appears to succumb to melodramatic excess. Nonetheless, this is only acceptable because the seriality of the series in terms of its narrative comes to a completion. For example, in episode 16, we encounter a scene similar to one in episode 6. This time, we encounter Yeo-jeong alone in his darkly lit house. Suddenly, Dong-eun enters the house surprising him. Yeo-jeong asks why she had left him, and Dong-eun responds, "Maybe it was out of love, not revenge." During the scene, the same theme song from episode 6 plays in the background. Dong-eun responds by stating that she will now help him to get revenge on the man who killed his father who is now an inmate in prison. Then she kisses him. This scene invokes the melodramatic scenes commonly found in Korean TV dramas, further accentuated by the theme song as it reaches its bridge. While the scene visually affirms their romance, the subtle and refrained employment of melodrama throughout the series inhibits the viewers from forging a full affective identification with the relationship between Dong-eun and Yeo-jeong. The kissing scene does not culminate in the ending of the series as the narrative continues and the transmedia story-world of the series expands into other media formats. At the end of the last episode of the series, Dong-eun and Yeo-jeong are about to enter the prison to take revenge on the inmate. The scene employs a close-up shot of Yeo-jeong's face as he says, "I love you," followed by a medium close-up shot of Dong-eun as she

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39. Linda Williams, "Mega-Melodrama!" 131.
40. Linda Williams, *On The Wire* (Duke University Press, 2014), 5, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822376446.

responds, "I love you." Even though the use of close-ups and shot-reverse-shots evokes the locked gazes of melodramatic excess tied to seriality, the ambivalent open ending of the series requires that viewers momentarily disconnect with the protagonists' consummation of their relationship, thereby redirecting our attention on revenge rather than romance. As a result, the streaming economy manifested in the logic of lack requires viewers to fill in the gaps not provided in the series, and the interaction between melodrama and seriality takes on new meanings, thus ultimately shaping the serialized form and experience of the series.

Conclusion

While the discussion of streaming seriality has been limited to the analysis of the original series *The Glory*, given the space constraint of this article, the most recent original Korean series *A Killer Paradox*, a surprise hit on Netflix, exemplifies how it adopts similar elements of seriality into its visual aesthetics. In a sit-down conversation with the Korean TV producer Na Yeong-seok in *Chattering with Nah*, whose credits include many hit reality TV shows, including *2 Days & 1 Night*, the three actors of the series—Choi Wook-shik, Lee Hee-joon, and Son Suk-ku—discuss the director's unique shooting style. Lee, who plays the character of Song Chon in the series, explains that the camera zooms out in scenes involving suspense and gory violence.[41] Here, even Lee does not explicitly use the word *restraint* to describe the shooting approach, his explanation implies how the series' unique textuality can shape its seriality.

Similar to *The Glory*, the ending of the episodes in *A Killer Paradox* fades out to black, signaling a moment of temporary closure within its seriality. Even though the concept of seriality appears to lose its valence

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41. Channel fullmoon, "Chattering with Friends Who Love Acting," YouTube, 42:02, February 2, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_m8yn3L_qE.

with the advent of streaming services that reshape viewing patterns through binge-watching and other technological affordances, the introduction of a new subscription plan with ads on Netflix offers an interesting case study to explore further how commercial breaks will redefine streaming seriality. More specifically, how streaming seriality will not only acquire new meanings but also continue to shape the textualities of original series on Netflix.

While seriality has been firmly embedded in the discourse of excess with ties to the soap opera genre and melodrama, which have been labeled as specific markers of Korean TV dramas, seriality has undergone subtle changes to adhere to the new logic of lack. This shift in the textualities of Korean TV dramas in the streaming age speaks to how the new political streaming economy requires writers, directors, and editors to reimagine seriality in different ways. The newly imagined way of conceiving seriality may undermine the specific markers of Koreanness in Korean TV dramas apparent in the past while turning toward the appropriation of more subtle and ambivalent aesthetic elements from cinema that defy the serialized form of television. Therefore, the clearly defined textual boundaries between cinema and television are becoming nebulous. Nevertheless, the article has illustrated how seriality remains a critical element of streaming television through the analysis of the Korean series *The Glory* on Netflix while also suggesting the importance of de-Westernizing and decolonizing television studies. Therefore, Netflix's original Korean series as examples of global television deserve more critical attention for their role in expanding our understanding of seriality in intriguing ways.