



The Global Village and Its Others: 'Squid Game' and Subaltern Mediality

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Abstract

This paper opens a dialogue between Marshall McLuhan and *Squid Game*, the hit 2021 Netflix series. I argue that *Squid Game* both exposes and reproduces the repressed libidinal economy that underwrites media studies' understandings of political economy and of the global circulation of media. Many media theorists after McLuhan have extended his "global village" thesis, according to which globalization has birthed a nascent universal consciousness. What are we to make, then, of McLuhan's affirmation that "it is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner" when, roughly six decades later, "we" in the West are witnessing a decidedly "aloof and dissociated" VIP audience spectate, alongside us, the suffering of South Korean subalterns (4)? My paper critically questions McLuhan's "global village" by reflecting on the contradictions inherent in *Squid Game*'s anti-capitalist desire to expose the suffering of subaltern masses for the pleasure of bourgeois voyeurs, given that the show's own audience is composed of many such Western bourgeois voyeurs. If "we," like "Gganbu" in *Squid Game*, seek pleasure and above all *fun* as we consume the violent objectification of the Other, perhaps the "global village" is not so peaceful after all. After considering how the show may be read both through and against McLuhan's analysis of violent "retribalization" in "our" (post)modern electric age, I conclude that the political economy of the global village runs on a hidden structure of desire that only produces an elite few (VIPs) as full human subjects by brutally reducing subaltern masses to objects. It is this libidinal economy that *Squid Game* forcefully brings into view, so forcefully that its own mass appeal may feed the violent desires of Netflix audiences rather than vanquish them. The question, ultimately, will be: can subaltern media(lity) speak?

Keywords

Squid Game; Marshall McLuhan; Global Village; Subaltern; Media Economy; Libidinal Economy



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Глобальная деревня и её Другие: «Игра в кальмара» и медиальность малых групп

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Аннотация

Эта статья открывает диалог между Маршаллом Маклюэном и «Игрой в кальмара», популярным сериалом Netflix 2021 года. Я утверждаю, что «Игра в кальмара» одновременно разоблачает и воспроизводит подавленную либидинальную экономику, лежащую в основе понимания политической экономии и глобальной циркуляции медиа в медиаисследованиях. Многие теоретики медиа после Маклюэна расширили его тезис о «глобальной деревне», согласно которому глобализация дала толчок к зарождению универсального сознания. Что же нам тогда делать с утверждением Маклюэна о том, что «более невозможно принимать отчужденную и разобщенную роль грамотного жителя Запада», когда примерно шесть десятилетий спустя «мы» на Западе являемся свидетелями того, как явно «отчужденная и разобщенная» VIP-аудитория вместе с нами наблюдает за страданиями бедствующих южных корейцев. Моя статья подвергает критическому сомнению «глобальную деревню» Маклюэна, размышляя о противоречиях, присущих антикапиталистическому стремлению «Игры в кальмара» выставлять напоказ страдания подчиненных масс ради удовольствия буржуазных вуайеристов, учитывая, что собственная аудитория шоу состоит из многих таких западных буржуазных вуайеристов. Если «мы», подобно «Ганбу» в «Игре кальмаров», ищем удовольствия и, прежде всего, веселья, потребляя жестокую объективацию Другого, возможно, «глобальная деревня» не так уж и миролюбива. Рассмотрев, как это шоу может быть прочитано как при помощи, так и в противовес анализу Маклюэном насильственной «ретрайбализации» в «нашу» (пост)современную электрическую эпоху, я прихожу к выводу, что политическая экономия глобальной деревни работает на скрытой структуре желания, которая только производит элитное меньшинство (VIP) как полноправных людей, жестоко превращая низшие массы в объекты. Именно эту либидинальную экономику настойчиво демонстрирует «Игра в кальмара», настолько мощно, что ее собственная массовая привлекательность может подпитывать бурные желания зрителей Netflix, а не побеждать их. Вопрос, в конечном счете, будет заключаться в следующем: может ли вспомогательное средство / подчиненное меньшинство говорить?

Ключевые слова

«Игра в кальмара»; Маршалл Маклюэн; глобальная деревня; подчиненные; медиаэкономика; либидинальная экономика



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Introduction

“Trust me,” one VIP tells fellow spectators (on episode 7) of *Squid Game*, “the screens we have at home are plenty big, but nothing beats seeing it with your own eyes.” This essay will suggest that the VIP’s stated desire reflects, rather disturbingly, the mass desire that drove *Squid Game* to become the largest original series in Netflix history (Hirwani 2021). The desire in question looks to take in — to hold up close and relish in the flesh, with the maximum degree of reality and the minimum mediation possible — the suffering of the subaltern: in this case, the naked strife of indebted masses competing to the death, by playing children’s games, for an unimaginable sum of money which only grows with each additional player’s “elimination.” For students of media studies, such desire might recall Don Ihde’s account of “Man”’s desire to enjoy all the new capabilities made possible by technology, such as the voyeuristic capacity to watch the Other suffer on the big screen, *without* thereby taking on the inconvenience of technological mediation, in all its impure presence. Here I am more concerned, though, with the ways in which the VIP’s desire — and no doubt also “our” desire, as the show’s audience — play out, or fail to play out, the media theory of Marshall McLuhan. My contention, ultimately, will be that media studies’ understandings of media economy as well as political economy, after McLuhan, are underwritten by a repressed *libidinal* economy that desires the endless recirculation of the subaltern’s suffering, as simultaneously exposed and performed by *Squid Game*.

I. *Squid Game* in the “Global Village”

It has now been almost 60 years since McLuhan declared, in *Understanding Media* (1964), that “we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned” (3). This paper was initially conceived as a takedown of McLuhan’s now-(in)famous “global village” thesis, which holds that globalization, and particularly global interconnectivity as facilitated by electric networks, have birthed a nascent universal consciousness. I find this thesis particularly important to contest as it continues to resonate across time and space today; to take just one example, German sociologist Ulrich Beck has become renowned for his own analysis of “global interconnectivity” as spelling out “the end of the ‘global other’”: as though riffing on McLuhan, Beck claims, “Everybody is connected and confronted with everybody” (Beck, 2011, 1348). The plan was to pit *Squid Game* against McLuhan, Beck, and their countless peers — as though to reproduce in essay form the same sort of childish match that director Hwang Dong-hyuk has so successfully televised. I wanted to ask: What are we to make of McLuhan’s affirmation that “it is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner” when, roughly six decades later, “we” in the West are witnessing — via our own “plenty big” screens from on far —



a decidedly “aloof and dissociated” VIP audience spectate, alongside us, the suffering of the South Korean subaltern (4)? If it must be admitted that some of us are indeed sitting in the VIP section as we consume this most popular show on the most popular streaming service in the world, then we must further admit that not only is *Squid Game* more or less complicit in the very capitalist violence it decries (Pitcher 2021); furthermore, this violent complicity demonstrates that Western epistemology, hegemony, and individualism are still alive and kicking today, no matter how far into the “electric age” “we” may have advanced – or descended. This is what I wanted to intimate: If VIP audience and Netflix audience alike could be seen to get off on seeing *Squid Game*’s gory violence on screen, or better yet “with [their] own eyes,” then perhaps TV’s technological extension of “our” senses has not “involve[d] us in the whole of mankind,” let alone “incorporate[d] the whole of mankind in us,” quite as much as McLuhan might have liked (4). Whereas McLuhan testified that “the position[s] of the Negro, the teen-ager, and some other groups” have now been radically altered (such that “they can no longer be *contained*, in the political sense,” but “are now *involved* in our lives, as we in theirs, thanks to the electric media”), *Squid Game* would seem to bear out the inverse of this universal humanist hypothesis (5). On a first reading, Hwang’s series performatively shows how “electric media” may work to further distance or dissociate “us” Western spectators from the violently marginalized global periphery, who remain the objects of such televised mediations rather than mutual subjects intimately “involved in our lives.”

The problem, of course, is that McLuhan’s vision turned out to be (at least) as dystopian as it could be considered utopian. On the one hand, I remain comfortable calling the McLuhan of *Understanding Media* a technological optimist – though the book’s introduction specifically avoids answering the question of “whether the [technological] extension of consciousness ... will be ‘a good thing’” (4), this ambivalent stance already begins to fall apart not even two pages later, when McLuhan confesses that “this book has been written” in the very same “deep faith” it diagnoses in “our” “electric age”: that is, “a faith that concerns the ultimate harmony of all being” (5-6). It is unsurprising, then, that the “global village” has so often been read as a utopian prophesy; even without taking into account McLuhan’s fervent Catholicism, it is hard to miss the teleological or even eschatological overtones of his professed “faith” in this universal harmony that is supposed to come online in the “electric age.” On the other hand, McLuhan would appear to have adopted a more pessimistic outlook on technology, no more than five years after publishing *Understanding Media* – in a 1969 interview with *Playboy*, of all magazines/media, McLuhan warned that the “decentralizing” force of electric media may well precipitate an identity crisis “which generates tremendous violence” (239). This is to say that “the global village” is by no means a peaceful one. (What then remains of its “ultimate harmony”?) Already in 1964, McLuhan had observed that the “electric age” effects a “retribalization,” the third step in his linear schema of



“Man’s” History. First there was the “tribal” stage, which centered around orality and which McLuhan still found in his contemporary Africa; then Western Man was “detrified” through the invention of the phonetic alphabet, which extended the sense of sight and so privileged it over all other senses, establishing a culture of *visuality* over and against orality, which is also to say a culture of *individuality* over and against (tribal) community; and now, the “electric age” would be in the process of “retribalizing” “us” by undoing the boundaries of national and individual identity built up over centuries of individualistic, ocularcentric Western culture. And already in *Understanding Media*, McLuhan displayed at least a minimal awareness of the dangers posed by electric retribalization; not only did he caution that radio possesses the “power to turn the globe into a single echo chamber” (137), but he even went so far as to blame Hitler’s rise to power on the medium of the radio (for “had TV come first there would have been no Hitler at all”: 299). In the first instance, we might be tempted to understand the “tribe” in “retribalization” as the global “tribe” that now extends to all of humanity, and so risks turning the entire globe into one big echo chamber. What McLuhan would increasingly highlight in the wake of *Understanding Media*, however, is a different sense of the “tribe” in “retribalization”: insofar as the universal “tribe” of the globalized human comes to subsume, and moreover to dissolve, the identities that “we” in the West have established for “ourselves” over millennia of “tribalization” and then “detrification,” “we” now cling to “our” established (de/tribal) identities all the more dearly. Retribalization can also be read, then, as a violent reassertion of the very national and individual boundaries of identity that the electric age is deconstructing all around “us.” As McLuhan tells *Playboy*, “we all become Chicken Littles, scurrying around frantically in search of our former identities, and in the process unleash tremendous violence” (239). Eight years later, on his final television appearance, McLuhan was even more explicit, going out of his way to mock the inference that “the closer you get together, the more you like each other”; on the contrary, he asserted, “when people get close together, they get more and more savage” (McLuhan 1977). By this time, the “global village” had become “a place of very arduous interfaces and very abrasive situations” (1977).

Does *Squid Game*, on further consideration, simply treat us to the darker underside of McLuhan’s “global village”? To be sure, there is some reason to read the series as playing out the violent contradictions of retribalization in the electric age. The point bears repeating that this is a show about South Korean adults, all saddled with impossibly high debts, who “consent” to play children’s games, on pain of death, not only for the increasing cash prize, but also because most of them “don’t have a home; in here, [they] stand a chance; but out there? [They] got nothing out there.” (Episode 2) Hwang Dong-hyuk himself has confirmed that the story is “an allegory or fable about modern capitalist society,” a society in which the poor are divided and conquered, practically killing each other for the scraps off the table of the bourgeoisie, who watch on eagerly (Hwang, quoted in Mistry 2021).



In McLuhan's "history" of "Man," capitalist society corresponds to the later period of detribalized Man's existence, a period McLuhan prefers to define by literacy, individualism, and nationalism. Even as these self-same values should, presumably, be fading away as "we" enter the electric age, McLuhan has already demonstrated how electric deterritorialization may incur further reterritorialization — and in *Squid Game*, we witness just such a violent drive to fix, for once and for all, the unfixed and unfixable boundaries of Self and Other. Whence the individualism overtly promoted by the game; "players" are monetarily incentivized to backstab or even kill each other, as money is added to the cash prize for every player that dies, and perhaps most extremely, they are made to play a game of marbles with a partner of their choice — for most, a dear friend or loved one — only for the losing partner to be eliminated, forever. I would be hard pressed to find a better illustration of how (post)modernity compels subjects to cling to their individual Selves/identities at all costs, in the face of unbound chaos. For the show also forces "us" to confront the inevitable instability of the borders that constitute the Self/identity. To begin with, one might recall that the VIPs mostly sound American; the very fact of their presence on this South Korean island attests to the phenomenon of globalization that McLuhan attributes to the electric age — not to mention a whole history of American imperialism in Korea that escapes McLuhan. As one critic has written, "they speak English and Mandarin, but their wealth erases every national and moral boundary" (Kim 2021). As late capitalism, in "our" "electric age," continuously (re)erases *and* (re)instates such boundaries, we might ask: does the VIPs' spectatorship speak to a violently nostalgic desire to police the lost boundaries that capital itself has effaced, and continues to efface — all while holding themselves at a safe distance, yet not too far from the real *thing itself*? What are we to make of the golden animal masks (reindeers, tigers, cougars, and more abound) that cover the VIPs' faces — how to read these masks, if not as some nostalgic return to the tribal by retribalized "Man"? All while watching a most "savage" competition unfold... As though to play out Renato Rosaldo's concept of "imperialist nostalgia," the VIPs gather to spectate the violent restaging of the bounded tribal identities supposed to differentiate Self and Other, West and the rest, even as their gathering is only made possible by the partial dissolution of these very boundaries under conditions of globalization.

But again, how then to understand our own spectatorship, as the Netflix audience? Not for nothing is the phrase "the medium is the message" one of McLuhan's key contributions to media studies, to say nothing of pop culture — and perhaps my analysis so far has overfocused on the *content* of *Squid Game*, overlooking the medial *form* that alone allows the show to mass communicate its "message," which is nothing other than this very mediality (according to McLuhan). What are "we" to make of *Squid Game*'s mediality, if "we" agree with McLuhan that media primarily affect human experience, not through their content, but through their technical and formal properties, insofar as these properties extend "our" very



senses/sensory experience of the world? A lengthier paper might inquire more thoroughly into the particular medial qualities that contributed to *Squid Game*'s instant hit status. (I might start by contextualizing the show's popularity within the rising genre of South Korean class-divide dramas, from *Snowpiercer* [2013] to *Parasite* [2019]. Some harsher critics have also suggested that *Squid Game* owes as much to Hollywood as to such Korean drama: "The central group of game players is straight out of the Hollywood war-movie playbook: the strong and silent leader, the moody outsider, the violent thug, the kindly old guy and the gentle naïf who serves as audience surrogate." [Hale 2021] It would be interesting to analyze how the series' reproduction of this repertoire of stock characters, who nearly qualify as serial figures, might be related to both its mass appeal, as well as the global electric networks that facilitate media's international circulation, much as McLuhan predicted. However, it is also important to avoid reducing South Korean directors' engagements with various Hollywood tropes to uncritical regurgitations; as Christina Klein has pointed out, South Korean filmmakers have often taken up Hollywood themes critically, as "a reservoir of symbolic resources from which Korean filmmakers draw as they navigate their way through their own globalized cultural economy" [Klein, 2008, 873]. *Squid Game*'s mass appeal must be understood within the context of this "globalized cultural" — and, I would add, *medial* — economy, which is defined by exchanges between Hollywood and South Korean film industries [among others] on the levels of theme, form, and serial figures [again, among others].)

In any case, what is most essential for my argument here is that this media economy is equally marked by relations of power — relations that *Squid Game*'s mediation at once resists and reinforces. On the one hand, these power relations are never unidirectional; as Klein argues, even South Korean media that explicitly mimes Hollywood blockbusters often does so critically, speaking back to Western norms by reiterating them otherwise and foregrounding Korean differences that the West might prefer to efface (874). In this respect, *Squid Game* might be celebrated as resisting American narratives that heroize neoliberal capitalism, by thematizing its devastating effects on the South Korean proletariat. And if Hwang Dong-hyuk borrows some pages from "the Hollywood war-movie playbook," he only does so to localize and deconstruct their core Western values. (Is this localization of Hollywood yet another instance of retribalization, this time from within South Korea?) On the other hand, the "de-Westernizing potential" of "localizing Hollywood" in this way is ultimately limited by the simple fact that its condition of possibility is the globalization of Hollywood. As Nikki J.Y. Lee has put it: "In the contemporary South Korean context, localizing Hollywood does not de-Westernize the practice of making blockbusters so much as it globalizes the domestic film industry. Globalization in this sense refers to how the Korean film industry has been reorganized and integrated into an internationally standardized system established and promulgated by 'global Hollywood.'" (Lee, 2011, 46)



Lee's invaluable analysis of how the Korean film industry has participated in the globalization of Hollywood returns us to McLuhan's "global village," reminding us that the global circulation of media upsets any boundaries between national and international film/televisual industries, as well as the boundaries between resistant and hegemonic media.

Again, though, McLuhan readily observed the ways in which global media economies ceaselessly reinstate the very national/"tribal" boundaries they disrupt. In this context, it is worth recalling that *Squid Game* comes to us via the world's largest streaming service, Netflix — a key player in the globalization of Hollywood-style media, but also a company whose international operations are grounded on U.S. soil. Moreover, *Squid Game* has generated a staggering amount of value for Netflix — almost \$900 million to date (Shaw 2021). What does it mean that *Squid Game*'s mediation works to directly profit this (inter)national conglomerate, one that has faced numerous strikes over trans issues and labor exploitation in recent years (Musil and Solsman 2021)? I want to argue that this condition of the show's mediation immediately complicates its anti-capitalist potential, as imagined by its director. And in spite of Hwang Dong-hyuk's best anti-capitalist wishes, the show's impacts have remained far short of sparking global revolution. Rather, the primary effects of the series' instantaneous roll-out across the globe seem to be limited, at least so far, to generating (admittedly hilarious) anti-capitalist memes, on the one hand, and generating the notorious "SQUID" cryptocurrency scam, on the other (Britton 2021). (Though the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions did organize a workers' strike in which many South Koreans donned *Squid Game*-themed costumes, in fall of 2021, it would be tremendously reductive to understand that strike as a causal outcome of the series; if the strikes are tied to the long and complex history of labor organizing in South Korea, the *Squid Game* apparel reads more like a strategic reference to pop culture, meant to popularize the workers' cause, rather than their catalyst or organizing principle. [Kwon 2021]) My suspicion, ultimately, is that the series' online mediation via Netflix hinders any revolutionary potential that could be ascribed to its content. While I can only speculate about the specific reasons *why* the show has enjoyed such popularity, I think we can safely conclude that the undeniable fact of its popularity, on Netflix, reflects the simultaneous detribalization and retribalization of the globe effected by modern media economies.

II. From Media Economy to Libidinal Economy

But I would insist, at this point, that the "retribalization" reading fails to exhaust either the form or the content of *Squid Game*. The basic problem is that McLuhan presupposes a universal capacity for subjectivity; even if the electric age is understood to generate conflict among the unstable identities it brings together, it remains a guiding presupposition that "our" global age allows, at least potentially, "the creative process of knowing" to "be collectively and corporately extended



to the whole of human society” (*Understanding Media* 3-4). To be sure, this creative, rational subjectivity is unevenly distributed; as I have mentioned, McLuhan holds the racist belief that his contemporary (tribal) Africa is where (detribal) Europe once *was*, and where Europe *will* return as it “retribalizes.” Yet even as the Global South is consigned to the periphery of not-quite-subjects, McLuhan still seems to see a potential for such “subaltern” (non)subjects to acquire subjectivity, as their creations and knowledge *will* one day be mutually recognized in the global electric network interconnecting all human subjects.

No such luck in *Squid Game*. At no point could the “players” be seen as agential subjects; assembled from the dregs of society and made to kill each other for show, they are hardly imbued with much agency (the “choice” to partake in the Squid Game is no choice at all, severely constrained as it remains by economic necessity and spiritual homelessness). The game is not interested in their subjective interiority, desires, or past, but rather positions them as the objects of the VIPs’ (subjects’) gaze. In lieu of mutual recognition, all but one — Seong Gi-Hun, the main character — meet with death. Any attempts at resistance or reversal are quickly squashed. Two quick examples will suffice on this point. Recall, first of all, the fate of Officer Hwang Jun-ho’s effort to turn the media apparatus against the operators of the Squid Game: in search of his missing brother, Jun-ho infiltrates their camp, takes on their equipment/extensions, and even films evidence of their crimes on his phone — only to be killed by his own brother, who has become the “Front Man” presenting the Squid Game. Jun-ho’s attempt to subvert the media apparatus, then, is quickly thwarted by the powers that be, who have absorbed even his own family. To take another example, we might consider Gi-Hun’s bond with Yeong-su Oh, the sick old man with whom Gi-Hun partners for the aforementioned marbles game. More utopian viewers might, initially, be tempted to see their comradeship as a reclaiming of marginalized agency (“Gganbu,” Oh calls them: “neighborhood best friends”); queer utopians, for instance, have long celebrated this sort of collective agency as resisting the divide-and-conquer, individualizing tactics of neoliberalism. But in *Squid Game*, of course, “Gganbu” comradeship turns out to be no more than a fresh deceit, as Oh too is not only affiliated with the game-masters, but is in fact their leader (the final episode reveals that Yeong-su Oh’s real name is Oh Il-Nam, and that he is the host of the game, playing in disguise). Again and again, attempted reclamations or reimaginings of subjectivity are turned back against themselves, twisting further and further back into the objectifying machinery of the game.

To understand this recurring objectification, I would conclude that we need to turn away from the levels of media and political economy that McLuhan sketched for us, toward the underlying *libidinal* economy that only produces a privileged few (VIPs) as mutually recognized subjects by positioning others (players) as the objects of their desire. It is Yeong-su Oh/Oh Il-Nam who reveals that it is *desire* that has been running the show all along; when the gloves are off in the final episode, he tells



Gi-Hun that he and some wealthy “clients” of his — fellow *subjects* — started the game because they “had no joy in life anymore,” and so they “all got together and did some pondering. What can we do to have some fun?” Gi-Hun is incredulous, unwilling or unable to accept that there is no deeper justification for *Squid Game*’s mass atrocities and unimaginable flows of capital than “fun.” After all, how many hundreds of Gi-Hun’s peers have been reduced to fungible, disposable, and finally dead objects so that these privileged few subjects could have their “fun”? But Il-Nam makes it clear that the irreducible desire for “joy” or “fun” has always been primary in relation to the complex technological and economic realities of the game. Making an almost psychoanalytic case for the priority of desire/libidinal economy over capital/material economy, Il-Nam asks Gi-Hun: “Do you know what someone with no money has in common with someone with too much money? Living is no fun for them.” The psychoanalytic resonances do not stop there; the “fun” sought out in *Squid Game* hearkens back to a lost presence projected on to childhood: “When I was a child,” Il-Nam goes on, “no matter what I did with my friends, I had so much fun that I lost track of time. I wanted to feel the same thing one more time before I die.” It is in pursuit of this childish, time-shattering “fun” — what Lacanians might call *jouissance* — that Il-Nam decided to join the game himself, to feel “something,” some overwhelming presence, that “you can never feel if you’re in the audience as a spectator.” We could read this desire as the extreme point of the same drive for unmediated “realness” voiced by the VIPs; for Il-Nam, not even “seeing it with your own eyes” is “real” — or “fun” — enough, when he can join in on the games himself. Never has the desire to suppress mediation, to accede directly to pure content/presence, stood forth so clearly. At the same time, neither Il-Nam nor the VIPs are ready to give up the benefits afforded them by the game’s mediation — neither wants things to get too real, and so when Il-Nam loses the game of marbles, he is not shot like all other “eliminated” players, but is instead escorted off-screen. The libidinal economy in question offers these privileged subjects moments of self-undoing, but the subject always emerges whole on the other side of its shattering. The objectified subaltern masses, on the other hand, are not afforded any such fluidity. The spectacular circulation and appropriation of their suffering thus remain essential to the smooth functioning of civil society.

It should be clear that my understanding of libidinal economy here owes more to Lacan than to Lyotard, though I owe the most to Jared Sexton, who defines the psychoanalytic concept as “the economy, or distribution and arrangement, of desire and identification (their condensation and displacement), and the complex relationship between sexuality and the unconscious” (Sexton, quoted in Wilderson, 2010, p. 7). The violent desires that drive *Squid Game* clearly show why the libidinal economy “is linked not only to forms of attraction, affection and alliance, but also to aggression, destruction, and the violence of lethal consumption” (7). Moreover, *Squid Game* dramatizes the inherent racialization of this often-destructive play of desire and identification, as our white VIP subjects are identified primarily through



the scopophilic pleasures they derive from their literally “lethal consumption” of poor South Koreans’ suffering.¹ We have seen how this racialized specificity of *Squid Game*’s libidinal economy, in my analysis, intervenes in the egalitarian assumptions central to media studies à la McLuhan – in this violent globalized distribution of desire, not all are permitted access to subjectivity, and those who are subjects exist only in relation to others’ objectification. In this way, libidinal economy conditions media economy; and if the latter is now claimed to “incorporate the whole of mankind in us,” the former (pre)determines the racialized and exclusionary contours of “mankind” in the first place (McLuhan, 2011, 4).

While my analysis has also drawn upon the notion of scopophilia that has been central to feminist film theory, I would insist that film and media studies attend to the *racialization* of scopophilia, which feminist film theorists have at times sidelined. Certainly, I have been taking for granted Laura Mulvey’s foundational insight that “the cinema,” and television after it, “pose questions of ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking” (Mulvey, 1999, 834). My thinking is also informed by Mulvey’s insistence that cinematic – and, we could add, televisual – scopophilia oscillates between the spectator’s separation from objects on the screen and their identification with certain on-screen subjects. The VIPs in *Squid Game* exhibit both of these “two contradictory aspects of the pleasures of looking in the conventional cinematic situation” (836). In the first instance, their subjectivity is differentiated from the South Korean proletarians whom they take “as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (835). Yet this libidinal separation between subjects and objects of the gaze is immediately complicated insofar as these subjects are equally driven by a certain “identification ... with the object on the screen through the spectator’s fascination with and recognition of his like” (837). We could read Oh Il-Nam’s entrance into the *Squid Game* as an extreme form of this contradiction between libido and ego – while we have seen how he chases after the voyeuristic pleasure of ego-loss, it is only temporarily that he forgets himself, as he is equally driven by an ego-idealization whereby he emerges unscathed at the end of the game. And on another level, Oh Il-Nam’s participation in the game allows the show’s spectators – us – to temporarily forget themselves/ourselves, only to re-fortify their/our egos as they/we can identify with Il-Nam, who survives over and against the hundreds of poor South Koreans whom he puts to death. In this respect, we might read the VIPs’ presence in *Squid Game* as a *mise en abyme*, whereby the spectator’s

1 In borrowing from Afropessimist accounts of libidinal economy to analyze *Squid Game*, my intention is not to suggest that the show’s South Korean characters inhabit quite the same position of abjection as Blackness, in Afropessimist analyses. While I take to heart Wilderson’s point that the socio-ontological position of Blackness is not analogous to contingent categories of racial identity, I also appreciate his acknowledgement that certain identities may become subject, contingently, to the violence of social death (though such violence is not what calls other identities into being, unlike in the case of Blackness: cf. Wilderson, 2010, 37–38). It is this analysis of desire’s distribution, as that which positions Human subjects in relation to the violent objectification of racialized others, that I find most useful in Wilderson and Sexton’s elaboration of “libidinal economy,” for my own purposes here.



gaze is staged within the series' diegesis so that that gaze — our gaze — is effectively sutured to that of the bourgeois voyeurs. Then again, the libidinal economy of the gaze must be understood in its racialized and classed particularity — it is not so much the male gaze (à la Mulvey) that is at stake here as it is the gaze of a bourgeois Western(ized) elite. For that reason, my analysis of *Squid Game* has also been informed by Jane Gaines' critical observation that "white privilege" operates in and through cinematic "looking relations" — an insight that has sparked decades of academic inquiry into the racialization of scopophilia (Gaines, 1986, 65).

To return one last time to the series' form, we could now say that the message of *Squid Game* as a medium consists in its extension of the Western subject's scopophilic consumption of subaltern suffering. In a longer essay, I would like to further unpack the show's rehearsal of the very voyeuristic desires it depicts, especially by contrasting its *realistic*, gory scenes of violence — which McLuhan might consider "hot" media ("hot" in the sense of sensory overload, requiring little imagination on behalf of the audience) — with its rather sparse and stereotypical characterization of most *dramatis personae* — "cold" media, perhaps? I would also like to delve deeper into the following lines of inquiry: How might *Squid Game*'s cinematic decisions reproduce the subject/object dichotomy at the heart of its narrative? And how might the stubborn return of that repressed dichotomy trouble McLuhan and co.'s "faith" in the universal inclusion of subaltern groups in the "global village"? If the subaltern is only ever mediated as object — even in the most critical South Korean re-stagings of globalized Hollywood tropes — then just what kind of medium/media is the subaltern? How does the libidinal media(lity) of the subaltern precondition the whole media economy that unites McLuhan's subjects? And, ultimately, can subaltern media speak?

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