

Why has *Squid Game* resonated with a global audience?

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Squid Game, a Korean survival drama series written and directed by Hwang Dong-hyuk, has become an international phenomenon. On Tuesday, Netflix reported that it had officially become the most widely viewed series ever for the platform, with more than 111 million viewers worldwide. It is currently the top show on Netflix in at least 90 countries, from Argentina and Australia, to Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the United States.

The plot is centered around a series of children's games in which hundreds of adult contestants compete for the chance to win unimaginable money. However, the price of losing is death. The contestants, chosen by the mysterious game makers, are the most deeply indebted and desperate individuals. A handful of billionaires, known as the VIPs, watch the game and bet on the success and failure of the various contestants.

What lies behind the enormous and global response? No doubt there are many factors, but the central one is clear—its depiction of desperate individuals put in desperate situations, the consequences of a society riven by social inequality, the greed and criminality of the rich, and associated themes. The series is clearly a critique of capitalist society, and generally deals with the issues confronting the characters in a humane way—in spite of the brutal and violent premise.

The individuals who compete in the games are, with a few exceptions, sympathetic characters. Abdul Ali (played by Anupam Tripathi), for example, is an immigrant worker from Pakistan, who feels compelled to participate in the game to provide for his family after his employer refuses to pay him for months. Kang Sae-byeok (played by Jung Ho-yeon) is a North Korean defector who hopes to support her little brother and retrieve the rest of her family members who are still across the border. The main character, Seong Gi-hun (played by Lee Jung-jae), is struggling to provide for his daughter and assist his ailing mother, while combating a gambling addiction.

Writer and director Hwang Dong-hyuk recently explained in an interview with IndieWire his motivation for writing the series: “I conceived of the theories for the show in 2008. At the time, there was the Lehman Brothers crisis; the Korean economy was badly affected, and I was also economically struggling.”

He continued: “Over the past 10 years, there were a lot of

issues: There was the cryptocurrency boom, where people around the world, especially young people in Korea, would go all-in and invest all their money into cryptocurrencies. And there was the rise of IT giants like Facebook, Google, and in Korea, there's Naver, and they are just restructuring our lives. It's innovative but these IT giants also got very rich.”

Dong-hyuk added, however, that it was the election of Trump in the US that prompted him to put it into production. “I think he kind of resembles one of the VIPs in the *Squid Game*,” he said. “It's almost like he's running a game show, not a country, like giving people horror.”

Squid Game is one of a number of interesting films and productions coming out of South Korea, of a left-wing and anti-capitalist character, and certainly the series speaks to the social catastrophe in that country. The development of the South Korean economy—one of the “Asian Tigers”—has made fortunes for the ruling elite within the country and internationally. The working class, on the other hand, was made to suffer the brunt of the economic crises that would follow, first in 1997-98 and later in the aftermath of 2008.

South Korea has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, especially among the elderly. Unemployment for young people in 2020 stood at a staggering 22 percent. Household debt, at over 1,800 trillion won (\$1.5 trillion), now exceeds the country's annual economic output. South Korean workers have their own unique history, one that includes dictatorship, war, government repression (the Gwangju massacre among the most prominent).

In one episode it is revealed that the main character, Gi-hun, ran into financial troubles after he was laid off from Motor warehouse. In a flashback, the audience sees strikebreakers busting down doors and brutally assaulting striking workers, killing at least one. Dong-hyuk has said that the character was inspired by the 2009 Ssangyong Motors plant strike.

The inclusion of this episode was clearly a conscious decision, inspired by the bravery and determination of workers' struggles in South Korea, of which there have been many.

But the aspect that is most powerfully expressed by *Squid Game* is not the uniqueness of the story of South Korean workers, but the commonality of life and the conditions of the working class throughout the world.

It is no doubt that it is this element that underlies the vitriolic response from some of the leading media mouthpieces in the US. The *New York Times* recently ran a piece in their “Critics Notebook” section titled: “Haven’t Watched ‘Squid Game?’ Here’s What You’re Not Missing.” Author Mike Hale explains that what he disliked most about the show is “its pretense of contemporary social relevance.”

He goes on: “The setup is a commentary on the rigid class stratification of South Korea, and a pretty obvious allegory: Losers in the rigged game of the Korean economy, the players have a chance to win in the (supposedly) more merit-based, egalitarian arena of the squid game, but at the risk of almost certain death.”

For the *Times*, the themes of the series hit too close to home—not just in relation to the “rigged game of the *Korean* economy” (emphasis added)—but for capitalist society as a whole.

The mother of the main character is forced at one point to go into the hospital, knowing full well for some time that she is likely dying. She leaves the hospital against the direction of the doctors because she knows she cannot afford the bills associated with treatment. One need not live in South Korea to recognize the situation. How many millions of workers struggle to afford healthcare around the world?

Every contestant in the show is in a financial hole, with no options available to get out no matter how hard they try or what they are willing to sacrifice. One may argue that no feeling could be more relatable, and practically universal among workers.

In the US, outstanding student loan debt lies somewhere between \$902 billion and \$1 trillion. Many workers die having never paid it all off. Paid plasma donations have tripled from 12 million per year in 2006 to 38 million per year in 2016. That is, young people in particular have taken to selling their blood, a process that takes a serious toll on the health of the donor, especially for long-term, repeated donors, in order to pay their bills.

There is no doubt that these themes are ones that resonate with workers regardless of their ethnic or national background, or their gender or race. In the age of globalization, workers are able to see more easily than ever the similarities in their experiences, and also in their exploiters. Perhaps at no point has this been clearer than in the last year and a half, as the world staggered through a global pandemic that has impacted in one form or another every person on the planet.

Any series that addresses such issues is certainly off to a good start. But one must ask, is it the case that perhaps the bar has been set far too low?

It is true that generally speaking, the series finds a hopeful conclusion... but just barely. In many scenes the message seems clear: “Ordinary people” are not naturally cruel or uncaring. But other scenes and conclusions muddy the waters. It appears that the director himself is not fully confident as to what side he

comes down on.

So many films are dominated by the narratives of masochism and misanthropy. Not only are these stories set on a false and dangerous premise, but they produce wildly simplistic and predictable narratives that are not at all relatable. But the truth is that life is much more complex. People are not born good or evil. Barbarism is not the natural condition of mankind.

Squid Game is trending toward a different outlook, but it does not always hit the mark. The contestants, for example, are given a choice at the beginning or at any point throughout to end the game if a majority votes to do so. After the first game, in which hundreds die, the contestants, appalled by the inhumanity of the game, vote—by a one vote majority—to leave. But, facing a hopeless situation at home, they decide to return, and then proceed to participate in games that not only risk their own lives, but at times require that they “win” by ensuring that others die.

Is it really the case that people, no matter how desperate their situations, will willfully and knowingly participate in a game of mass slaughter and barbarity in the hope that, in the end, they might come out on top and resolve all their problems with a mountain of cash? If so, what does this say about the director’s view of humanity?

This element of the plot tends to undermine the more basic message the series tries to convey, that despite the savage conditions forced upon them, most fight valiantly to keep their humanity, refusing to give in to the brutality of it all.

Then there is the fact that the social catastrophe faced by the contestants is generally presented in individual terms, with individual solutions. Everyone participating in the game is left to their own devices, with the exception of some of their fellow contestants, most of whom end up dead.

While one would not know from watching the mainstream press, we are living amid an emergence of the largest strike movement in the US in decades. This movement of the working class in the center of world capitalism is part of a broader trend internationally. It is still in its early stages, and immense confusion exists among workers on all sorts of social and cultural questions. But there is every reason for optimism and not despair.

The ending of season 1 of *Squid Game* is promising. Seong Gi-hun appears determined to end the games for good. How he will go about it is still to be determined. Perhaps the director will turn his attention to stirrings of the working class for inspiration.



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