Squid Game and the survival drama genre

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Squid Game, written and directed by South Korean filmmaker Hwang Dong-hyuk, is the latest entrant in the survival drama genre and a significant presence on the popular cultural landscape. Following its release in September, *Squid Game* quickly claimed the attention of millions around the globe, in October becoming the sixth show in Netflix's history to surpass three billion minutes viewed in a week.

No doubt, the mini-series owes its popularity to various factors, some healthier than others, but, as the WSWS review indicated, "the central one is clear—its [*Squid Game*'s] 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 widespread interest in the series undoubtedly reflects a growing awareness of the "rigged" character of the existing social order, as well as mounting popular anger.

In the film, hundreds of poor and working class contestants from all walks of life compete, literally, to the death in a series of warped children's games for a large sum of money, which would allow them to escape their poverty-stricken reality.

While *Squid Game* presents a unique twist on the effort to represent capitalism as a fight to the death, it is only the most recent example of the genre. Over the past two decades, there have been other films and works sounding similar themes, such as *Battle Royale* (Kinji Fukasaku, 2000), based on Koushun Takami's novel , completed in 1996 and published in 1999, and Suzanne Collins' novel *Hunger Games* (2008) and its 2012 film adaption, directed by Gary Ross. We will discuss these below.

Beyond that, however, *Squid Game* bears a relationship to film trends that developed in the US at least in the 1970s. The first "death-game" films were made at that time, such as *Death Race 2000* (Paul Bartel, 1975) and *Rollerball* (Norman Jewison, 1975), later *Deathsport* (Allan Arkush, Nicholas Niciphor, 1978) and *The Running Man* (Paul Michael Glaser, 1987)—and from Italy, *Endgame* (Joe D'Amato, 1983).

These dark, mostly unsatisfying and sometimes even unimportant films reflected social processes underway in the US and the rest of the advanced capitalist countries: economic stagnation or decline and accompanying social and political developments. To a certain extent, the artists were conscious of these phenomena. We learn from one commentator, for example, that Norman Jewison, the Canadian-born director of the most ambitious of these early works, *Rollerball*, had "become preoccupied with the sinister increase of corporate power" and "had read *Global Reach: The Power of the Multinational Corporations*, a scholarly, influential 1974 study by Richard Barnett and Robert Muller."

Certain features of the genre were established at the time and subsequently became almost "standardized." A more or less omnipotent elite, assisted by the latest in technologies, rules with an iron fist or plays an overpowering role in society. The mass of the population is downtrodden and relatively easy prey for the manipulations of those on top. The "fight to the death" games provide economic incentives to the participants and also often a means of entertaining the demoralized, debased masses or members of the elite itself.

The following summary of Jewison's *Rollerball* is instructive: "Corporate nations and their supercomputers rule humanity, shaping digitized historical records to their liking. The masses are pacified by watching rollerball, a professional sport that's like football played on a roller derby loop with motorcycles. Rollerball players have a glamorous existence: fans idolize them, executives envy them, and they're provided lavish homes, beautiful wives or girlfriends, and fancy TVs with extra screens that show smaller, differently angled shots of whatever they're watching. In return for all this, they let corporations control their lives." (*The Verge*)

Film critic Robin Wood once pointed out that the collapse of "ideological confidence that characterizes American culture throughout the Vietnam period … becomes a major defining factor of Hollywood cinema in the late 60s and 70s." Wood suggested that "disintegration and breakdown" had increasingly become "the central theme of the American cinema," reflected in the growing trend of disaster films and, more generally, by the fact that "various genres have reached their apocalyptic phase." And a great deal of water has flowed under the bridge since that time!

Indeed, the overwhelming majority of "post-apocalyptic" and "dystopian" films and television series—from the US, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Canada and Europe—have appeared since the 1970s and most of those since 1990. What began to a certain extent with "gloomy dystopias like *THX 1138* (1971), *Soylent Green* (1973) and *A Boy and His Dog* (1975)," in the words of one film historian, has become a widespread phenomenon. The amount of light these films shed on the processes involved has varied wildly. For the most part, they have tended merely to register passively, if quasi-hysterically and morbidly, the relentlessly deteriorating social and moral situation.

The supposed passivity of the mass of the population, its alleged willingness or even eagerness to be "pacified" and "entertained" by the powers that be, is a theme or, worse still, an assumption that will recur in virtually every subsequent film in the "dystopian" and related trends. That will grate on anyone familiar with real-life conditions and with the behavior of the working class in America or anywhere else, even under the most "peaceful" circumstances. Such a false notion runs counter in particular to everything in the traditions, mentality and experience of the socialist movement, whose basic idea, Plekhanov once remarked, "is the resolute and final rejection of submissiveness."

However, this failing does not come out of the blue. It has an objective basis in the decades of political reaction and stagnation and suppression of the class struggle, policed by the trade unions and other so-called labor organizations. Moreover, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the bombast about the "end of history" sharply affected the artists. For their part, the various postmodern and pseudo-left trends have done everything in their power to paint the working class as a backward and hopeless mass and create as much of a breach and a misunderstanding as possible between the artists and the workers.

Enter *Squid Game* and the more recent entrants into the genre, which has now become thoroughly globalized. Clearly, new and important elements have been added, above all, the advanced degree of economic polarization. And, to a certain extent, hints of popular rebellion.

As noted above, many commentators refer to Takami's *Battle Royale* as

the progenitor of the recent survival drama trend. The novel's release garnered substantial praise, making it one of Japan's most successful novels while also earning it condemnation from the country's government. The film adaptation, directed by Kinji Fukasaku, became Japan's highest grossing film in 2000.

Takami's book recounts an alternate history in which Japan is the dominant world superpower ruled by a fascist government that instills fear in the populace by kidnapping youth and forcing them to fight to the death. The film adaptation recontextualized the plot within Japan's economic crisis of the late 1990s. In this version, the horrific "battle royales" emerge as the Japanese republic resorts to crushing a youth rebellion.

The novel and film adaptation conclude very differently. The book ends with the surviving characters hoping to escape to an idealized democratic America. The film's finale provides a more promising twist, with the survivors beginning to organize a rebellion against the government. Unfortunately, the 2003 film sequel, *Battle Royale II: Requiem* (directed by Kenta Fukasaku, the son of Kinji Fukasaku, who died after shooting only one scene of the new film), destroys those possibilities, transforming the revolt into a terrorist group rebelling against the country's "adults."

The battle royales are seemingly intended to reference the wave of austerity measures and cuts to workers' living standards that the Japanese ruling elite carried out in the midst of a real-world recession. Yet, the films fail to connect these issues with the wave of youth rebellion and delinquency they portray. The unrest appears to be more vague disillusionment and unfocused violence than a burgeoning rebellion in need of suppression.

The next milestone in the international genre was Collins' novel *Hunger Games* and its 2012 film adaptation, directed by Ross. (*The Maze Runner* —the 2009 novel and 2014 film, the first of three in a series—and *Divergent* —the 2011 novel and 2014 film, also the first of three—are related phenomena, all aimed at "young adults.") Taking more than a handful of pages from Takami's book, Collins presents US capitalism in a fictional dystopian future. Like *Battle Royale* before it, *Hunger Games* clearly struck a chord.

The novel and film imagine a despotic government ruling over North America and its 12 impoverished working class districts. An annihilated thirteenth district is left in ruins, a warning to those considering rebellion. As a further means of oppression, each district must annually send two children to participate in a televised battle royale, the Hunger Games.

The sole survivor's district receives food rations as a prize. Though promisingly presenting rebellion as the means to transform society in its sequels, the promotion of individualism and the unconvincing character of the rebellion ultimately lead the various *Hunger Games* iterations into a blind alley. They trip over many of the same artistic and intellectual hurdles as *Battle Royale*.

A more intriguing addition to the survival drama genre arrived with Jinsei Kataoka's manga (Japanese graphic novel) *Deadman Wonderland* (2007-2013). In 2011, the series received an anime adaptation by studio Manglobe, covering the first 21 chapters of the manga.

Set in modern Japan ten years after a massive earthquake, which sank much of Tokyo underwater, the story follows 14-year-old Ganta Igarashi. Ganta's stable life falls apart when a terrorist attack on his classroom, carried out by a man in red armed with otherworldly powers, leaves him the traumatized sole survivor. Ganta is framed on trumped up charges and sentenced to death at Japan's only privately run prison, Deadman Wonderland.

The maximum security prison doubles as a theme park featuring lethal games played by the inmates. The games provide a means of profit for the prison and a path to gain prison currency for the victorious inmates. For death row inmates (known as Deadmen) like Ganta, the games serve as a means of staving off a slow poisoning death (the means of execution) through buying antidotes with their winnings.

Deadman Wonderland makes an effort to humanize its protagonists. The Deadmen, who face terrible conditions and have brutal backgrounds, ultimately prove their innate decency and reason in response to the official savagery.

Even so, *Deadman Wonderland* 's more striking socially critical elements are marred by a lack of historical and social concreteness. Its plot, while encouraging a rebellious attitude and response toward oppressive structures, tends to fall into the same individualistic trap as its predecessors. Increasingly, Ganta's powers appear as the primary means to fight the prison authorities. Regressive tropes from the anime and manga genre crop up as the story progresses, devouring much of the focus in later chapters.

Dong-Hyuk's *Squid Game* has a number of quite distinct, interrelated features. It depicts South Korea, one of the supposed "miracles" of modern globalized capitalism, as blighted by social polarization and home to widespread social misery and oppression. From this point of view alone, it is a slap in the face of the official version of contemporary life. The economic desperation of the central characters is compellingly and convincingly conveyed.

Squid Game, unlike many of its predecessors, attempts to provide these characters with social and psychological backgrounds, as well as their relationship to the larger social picture. For example, the series introduces the life and conditions of an immigrant refugee laborer and those of an autoworker who participated in a strike that was harshly suppressed.

At the same time, some of the same generalized difficulties reemerge. The "voluntary" nature of the games presents one such issue. Following the first round, which results in the brutal deaths of hundreds, the participants vote to end the games—only for most of them to return later of their own accord. This is a fable, not a naturalistic work, but still some accordance with psychological and social reality is called for. To suggest that men and women, even those financially stressed, would willingly submit to having their fellow creatures massacred is something of a libel against mankind, and provides a glimpse of the misanthropic *Lord of the Flies* strand in the filmmakers' thinking.

The extreme violence is another expression of the *Squid Game* 's problems. It is both a concession to the bloody mayhem pervading current global filmmaking and an indication of a demoralized view of humanity. It also serves as a distraction from genuine dramatic lapses and failings.

As the WSWS noted in its review of *Squid Game*, the first season's lead-in to the coming one suggests a brewing rebellion against the games. One hopes director Dong-Hyuk takes strength from the growing wave of international strikes and emerging working class opposition.

In any event, whatever the fate of *Squid Game*, the future course of the genre and of filmmaking as a whole depends, above all, on objective social developments and the reflection it finds in the thinking and activity of the artists. Ultimately, it is the conscious movement of the working class and its "struggle for freedom" that will scatter, in a great Marxist's phrase, "the clouds of skepticism and of pessimism which cover the horizon of mankind."