

## Third-Space K-Drama: Netflix, Hallyu, and the Melodramatic Mundane

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This article examines K-drama's potential as a postcolonial Third Space. I consider the impact of Netflix's profit-driven transculturalism on Hallyu by contrasting Netflix Korean Originals, particularly *Squid Game*, with K-dramas such as *Liar Game*. The latter belongs to an emergent mode of Korean TV that I call the "melodramatic mundane," which creates new forms of hybridized identity in the global arena. Analyzing K-dramas' Western reception alongside a comparative close reading of American, Japanese, and Korean TV shows, I examine alternative structures of feeling in K-dramas that challenge American narrative ideologies.

*Keywords: K-drama, Hallyu, hybridity, Netflix, Squid Game*

In January 2022, Netflix chief executive officer Ted Sarandos declared that "the 'Squid Game' universe has just begun" (White, 2022, para. 1). Not only was the South Korean (hereafter Korean) show greenlit for a second season but Netflix also announced plans for an eponymous reality competition series where "exactly 456 players will compete to win the life-changing reward of \$4.56 million" (Thao, 2022, para. 2). While critics panned Netflix for "missing the entire point" (Nolan, 2022, para. 8) of *Squid Game*'s (Hwang, 2021) capitalist critique, I suggest that the streamer's exploitation of *Squid Game* for profit perfectly captures the show's own discursive logic.

Using a cultural hybridization framework, I argue that the *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) phenomenon reveals Netflix's homogenizing influence on Korean TV programs, which dilutes K-drama's potential for achieving a genuine hybridity that "sustain[s] local identities in the global context" (Jin, 2010, p. 56). I distinguish between traditional K-dramas developed for local television, which have driven the popularity of Korean content overseas since Hallyu's earliest phases, and Korean Netflix Originals, developed exclusively by Netflix for over-the-top (OTT) streaming and targeting a global audience.<sup>1</sup> For clarity, I refer to the former as K-drama and the latter as Netflix Original. If Western audiences have begun gravitating toward K-dramas for their "unique cultural and structural elements" (H. Lee, 2018, p. 370), *Squid Game* in contrast exhibits an Americanized narrative strategy that extends even to the conspicuous signaling of its own "Koreanness."

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<sup>1</sup> For Netflix's investment in Korean content, see Park, Kim, and Lee (2023).

I compare *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) with *Liar Game* (Ryu & Kim, 2014a), a 2014 K-drama similarly situated within the battle royale genre, but which takes a radically different approach to everyday life under South Korea's neoliberal economy. Contextualizing *Liar Game* within an emergent K-drama mode that I call the "melodramatic mundane," I examine alternative structures of feeling embedded in popular contemporary K-dramas and explore their potential as a postcolonial "Third Space." While scholarship on K-drama hybridity in the West has focused on audience reception (Ju, 2020, 2022; H. Lee, 2018), I integrate reception patterns with a comparative cross-cultural analysis of different shows to examine K-drama's transcultural potential in the global arena.

### ***Squid Game and the Rejection of the Quotidian***

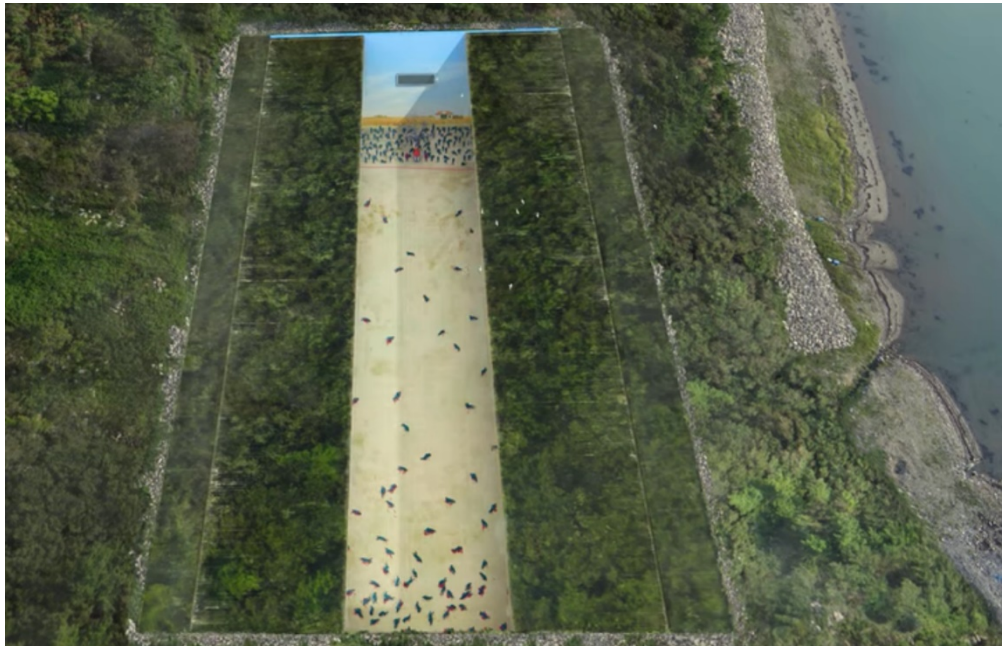
What distinguishes *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) from other battle royale shows is that participants willingly return to the deadly game.<sup>2</sup> Director Hwang Dong-hyuk explained that this plot development was his "own unique spin on the genre" (Still Watching Netflix, 2022, 10:57). In episode 2, having invoked a clause that ends the games "if the majority agrees to stop playing," contestants go home only to realize that "out here, the torture is worse" (Hwang & Hwang, 2021b, 45:29) as financial pressures bearing down on each of them boil over. The episode ends with the major characters forgoing their everyday lives to return and bet on the death games.

Narratively and cinematically, *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) emphasizes the game world's estrangement from everyday reality. The games occur on an undisclosed island. The surrealism of the space is heightened through the set, costume, and sound design, and further underscored through postproduction color grading. Scenes in the outside world are muted and dim, while game sequences are edited with high saturation to create eye-popping colors.

This separation of game from "real world" is a battle royale convention that delivers the genre's allegorical insights. But *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) goes further in underscoring one world as a spectacular copy of the other. Game sets proclaim their own artificiality. The "Red Light, Green Light" arena, for instance, simulates a field through walls painted with blue skies, green trees, and yellow grass. The episode's closing aerial shot reveals that the arena's retractable roof has been painted to camouflage with surrounding vegetation (Figure 1).

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<sup>2</sup> On *Squid Game's* battle royale genre, see Jeon (2021).



**Figure 1. Painted roof of the game arena (Hwang, 2021a, 55:02).**

The self-reflexively artificial game sets reveal spectacle to be at the heart of capitalist society, what Debord (1970) calls “the unrealism of the real” (para. 6). Yet, by insisting on the separation between game and real world, and by spotlighting the players’ own embrace of the former, *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) perversely endorses what it critiques, shutting down the revolutionary potential of its insights by signaling their lack of impact on everyday practices. The estranged game world constitutes the triumphant realization of a world where the quotidian has become impossible.

In choosing to return, contestants ironically give up their right to choose, for it means abiding by a system that spectacularizes their suffering for the entertainment of a foreign VIP audience. Chari (2015) explains that capitalist domination reproduces itself by creating within subjects “a spectatorial and unengaged form of consciousness” (p. 118). The *Squid Game* players’ capitulation to this consciousness completes their disassociation from the real world, turning them into “reified subjects” who “take themselves to be the mere observers rather than the cocreators of the society in which they live” (Chari, 2015, p. 118).

Thus, by the end, the game’s lone survivor can only passively observe while the game master plays one last round. In the scene where Gi-hun learns of Player 001’s identity, the two are high up in a building, betting on whether any passerby would help the homeless man freezing down in the streets. It never occurs to Gi-hun that he could be the one who helps; his posture of passive observation eerily recalls the VIPs watching Gi-hun and Sang-woo’s earlier showdown. These mirroring scenes reveal *Squid Game*’s (Hwang, 2021) modus operandi—its spectacular transformation of everyday crisis into an entertaining game that can only be observed, whose rules, even when critiqued, prove inviolable.

Unsurprisingly, the series concludes with its protagonist forgoing his family reunion to return to the game. Gi-hun's critical knowledge makes no difference in the real world but fuels his return to the spectacular. This ending makes business sense for Netflix. Through its ambitions to simply never end, the Netflix Original reproduces within its own audience the denial of quotidian experience, keeping viewers in thrall to its spectacular universe.

The series extension reflects the American multi-seasonal TV model (Mittell, 2015). *Squid Game's* (Hwang, 2021) narrative and meta-textual capitulation to the spectacle it would seem to interrogate also exhibits the triumph of Americanization. As media scholars have observed, digitally rendered spectacles are a Hollywood trademark (J. Kim, 2019; Ok, 2009), and visual effects are prominently displayed in *Squid Game's* sensationalist games and flashy arenas, particularly the Tug-of-War and Glass Bridge (Licuria & Dixon, 2021). Both games recall the height, dexterity, and physical strength of extreme sports. Their breathless consumption by the international VIPs *within* the show and the global audiences *of* the show allegorizes contemporary mass sporting events, long "a domain of the spectacle" and an instrument of "Americanized globalization" (Kellner, 2003, pp. 5, 69). "The Squid Game funded *and* enjoyed by the global VIPs," Kim and Park (2022) argued, "exemplifies a McDonaldized stadium" (p. 7).

Co-opted by this regime of the spectacular, *Squid Game's* (Hwang, 2021) conspicuously Korean signifiers—traditional children's games, retro street foods, and stylized stage sets like the fabricated *golmok* (alley)—reinforce rather than disrupt the logic of cultural homogenization, exemplifying Netflix's "functionalist recruitment of hybridity as an economic variable" (Kraidy, 2005, p. 90).<sup>3</sup> This "corporate transculturalism" (Kraidy, 2005, p. 90) strategy paid off. In its wake, *Squid Game* sparked a craze for dalgona candy and piqued international interest in Ddakji and Ojingeo Nori, while its flashy costumes became highly sought-after Halloween merchandise.

Such commodification of Koreanness is of a piece with the show's conversion of everyday life into a spectacle for consumption. The denial of the quotidian severs *Squid Game's* (Hwang, 2021) culturally specific attributes from their domestic contexts, reducing their potential to generate transcultural insights and turning them instead into free-floating signifiers that facilitate the fetishistic consumption of cultural difference. A comparison of *Squid Game* with *Kingdom* (S. Lee, 2019–2020), Netflix's first Korean Original Series, and *Money Heist: Korea* (Ryu & Kim, 2022), the latest Korean Netflix Original at the time of writing, reveals a broad programming trend toward a reliance on "Koreanness" as window dressing for globally marketable cultural commodities. A genuinely hybrid genre, *Kingdom* reconfigures the Western zombie, typically an allegory for "the virality of contemporary late capital" (Boluk & Lenz, 2010, p. 136), into a flesh-chomping, blood-tainting figure for Joseon-era political greed, mass starvation, Confucian hierarchy, and dynastic lineage. *Money Heist: Korea* (Ryu & Kim, 2022), in contrast, is a copy-and-paste of the Spanish original; the reimagined speculative setting of the Unified Korea Mint and the exchange of Salvador Dali masks for Korean Haehotal ones represent a superficially "Koreanizing" gesture that affects neither characterization nor plot.

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<sup>3</sup> On *Squid Game's* "cultural specificity" as marketing ploy, see also Han (2023).

Beyond the clichéd reduction of Korea's political landscape into the globally familiar tension between North and South, *Money Heist: Korea* (Ryu & Kim, 2022) barely acknowledges sociocultural realities. Though dismissive of the quotidian, *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) nevertheless dedicated a full episode to everyday life travails, while the brief character backstories in *Money Heist* operate like stylized set pieces whose tired tropes (sexually exploited femme fatale; North Korean labor camp escapee) are ungrounded by substantive analysis. Physical spaces beyond the Mint and task force command center rarely appear; when they do, they are typically empty of routine life and awash in red light, the neon-noir aesthetic serving as a techno-orientalist shorthand that invokes life in near-future unified Korea without actually attending to it (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Stylized depiction of everyday life in *Money Heist: Korea* (Ryu, Kim, Choe, & Kim, 2022, 10:18).**

Netflix's corporate transculturalism thus works by erasing the everyday. Yet, this strategy departs from the growing body of K-dramas that have, in recent years, embraced quotidian life as a site of resistance against dominant sociopolitical economies.

### ***Liar Game and the Recuperation of the Quotidian***

The differing status of the everyday becomes stark when we contrast *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) with *Liar Game* (Ryu & Kim, 2014a), a Korean remake of a Japanese television series itself adapted from Shinobu Kaitani's manga of the same name. Airing weekly on the cable channel tvN, *Liar Game* also centers around a series of exploitative games that indebted people are tricked into competing in for a hefty cash prize.<sup>4</sup> Players are given cash for use in the game, which they must pay back if eliminated. Since competitors advance by winning money from each other, losers end up in ever greater debt. The game is essentially one

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<sup>4</sup> Hwang cites the *Liar Game* manga as *Squid Game*'s inspiration (Frater, 2021, para. 8).

of leverage, where indebted contestants borrow more money for the chance of a high-risk return. The analogy here is to the 1997 Asian Debt Crisis, which resulted from the high degree of leverage that characterized Asian economies (Krugman, 1999).

While the J-drama featured an illegal underground tournament, the K-drama made its games part of a reality television program. Forced out of school to repay her father's debts, the kind-hearted Nam Da-jung is lured into the show, where she must con other participants to win 10 billion won. On the advice of Jo Dal-goo, the debt collector with whom she has struck up an unlikely friendship, Da-jung recruits the help of purported genius, Ha Woo-jin.

In its show-within-a-show setup, *Liar Game's* (Ryu & Kim, 2014a) scenes move between "real life" and reality program. Frequently the boundary is violated, as when private interactions among contestants are covertly filmed for broadcast. The "lie" in *Liar Game* thus refers to the distortions perpetuated by both the contestants and the reality show itself. The K-drama confronts its own audience with their complicity in "the spectacular subjectivity of capitalist society" (Chari, 2015, p. 121), as "real life" scenes drama viewers saw in previous episodes become heavily edited reels captivating viewers of the game show.

If *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) capitulates to spectacle as salve for capitalist alienation, *Liar Game* (Ryu & Kim, 2014a) dramatizes the spectacularization of everyday life as a problem requiring resolution. Scenes of ordinary life uncolonized by the reality show provide a regulative horizon, suggesting that the media spectacle is not the full picture. The Korean remake deviates from the Japanese original, which focuses on the tournament and pays scant attention to life beyond. In contrast, the Korean version spends significant time within Da-jung's home, the domestic space fundamental to the organization of quotidian life (de Certeau & Giard, 1998). The K-drama imagines home life as precious but precarious, threatened by crushing debt and rent. Motivated to win the prize so that she can "live an ordinary life" (Ryu & Kim, 2014b, 20:12) with her father, Da-jung's desire forms the show's aspirational horizon and is symptomatic of what Cho (2015) and Cho Han (2000) diagnosed as the annihilation of South Korea's quotidian world under compressed modernization and its contemporary neoliberal turn, which has destroyed human self-reflection and communal relationships.

The "Liar Game" reality show exposes these realities. The neoliberal workplace becomes central in the "Layoff Round," where contestants role-play as employees in a "failing company" who must evaluate each other on "performance and productivity" (Ryu & Kim, 2014c, 24:14, 24:30). Echoing the labor flexibilization policies created after the Asian Debt Crisis (Kim, 2002), the round eliminated section chief Jung, a character who in "real life" had also been laid off.

As sociologists have pointed out, crisis-occasioned neoliberal reforms only exacerbated income inequality in South Korea (Y. Lee, 2015). By participating in "Liar Game" to break out of her debt, Da-jung is misguided since the game reproduces the very logic that first entrapped her family. But as the eliminated section chief protests his reduction to expendable labor power, Da-jung surprises all by using her prize money to repay Jung's elimination penalty, releasing him from the cycle of debt. She also distributes the rest of her earnings among the remaining players. This is a turning point in the show, as Da-jung considers for the first time the possibility of subverting the system from within by reversing neoliberalism's

instrumental logic and recreating a social space built on trust. "Is it really a show made in order to deceive and be deceived?" Da-jung asks. "If we think about it differently, I think it could be a test to see if we could really trust each other" (Ryu & Kim, 2014d, 44:19–44:35).

If, for Hwang, *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) suggests "that we cannot truly escape from a system that society has created" (Still Watching Netflix, 2022, 11:34), Da-jung's strategy works not by escaping the game but by appropriating its logic in service of different ends. It is akin to what de Certeau (1984) calls a "ruse" through which ordinary people transform the "dominant cultural economy" by "adapt[ing] it to their own interests," though always "fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety" (p. xiv, xix). Such ruses emerge from the transgressive potential of everyday life, which "invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xii). Da-jung's gradual influence over other players works through an extension of the quotidian realm into the world of the game, in contrast to *Squid Game's* careful distinction between the two.

Thus, it is within her home that Da-jung first practices the art of relating differently. Repeatedly, she cooks for and eats with Dal-goo, who becomes a surrogate parent of sorts, and Woo-jin, who begrudgingly starts to trust Da-jung. The mundane partaking of food together weaves a relational intimacy that rewrites the transactional nature of their initial encounters. As communal eating is central to the practice of the family, their gathering around the table marks the creation of a found family that will eventually draw the other contestants into its folds (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Da-jung eats with other contestants, marking their growing intimacy (Ryu & Kim, 2014c, 28:23).

Returning to Da-jung's desire to "live an ordinary life," the show suggests that the quotidian realm, increasingly eviscerated by neoliberal forces, is recoverable not as end goal but as practice. To practice the everyday is to cultivate the ordinary experiences of being in the world and alongside others, and, through the unfolding of quotidian tasks, to explore personal and interpersonal meanings without instrumentalizing them. By seeing each contestant as a person worthy of trust and not an exploitable unit of capitalist society, Da-jung allows the rhythm of ordinary relationships to deconstruct the disciplinary technology of the dominant order.

This restorative power of the everyday cannot be fully unleashed, however, without confronting the historical trauma of South Korea's compressed modernity, in which dizzying postwar growth, achieved through labor exploitation, uneven wealth distribution, and eroded civil liberties, proceeded under U.S. patronage and helped benefit America's global accumulation of capital (Choi, 1993; Watson, 2007). In *Liar Game* (Ryu & Kim, 2014a), the American empire looms over a hidden adoption backstory that erupts as repressed memory only in the show's final act, revealing the childhood connections among Da-jung, Woo-jin, and the reality show host Kang Do-young, who had known each other at the orphanage run by Woo-jin's mother. Betrayals led to young Do-young's adoption by an "American foundation" that "sells children for money" (Ryu & Kim, 2014e, 33:52), and it is these same American influences that masterminded the reality show. *Liar Game's* villainous adoption plot spotlights the "transnational adoption industrial complex" that developed from American intervention in the Korean War (McKee, 2019), whose neocolonial architecture melodramatically haunts present-day South Korea. If the *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) game master exhibits a reactionary nostalgia whose aestheticization of the past turns literally fatal, Do-young's quest to make his childhood friends remember suggests that a deconstruction of neoliberal logic must begin by processing the oppressive history at its root. Da-jung's earlier insistence on "Liar Game" as "a test to see if we could really trust each other" (Ryu & Kim, 2014d, 44:33) must own up to its own historical violation, in which Koreans were traumatically sold out by their government in collaboration with the United States.

The restoration of the everyday cannot proceed without a recognition of the present as what Benjamin (2006) terms "now-time [*Jetztzeit*]," the site of a historical image that can be seized for redemptive transformation. Da-jung's persistence in trust redresses history by taking on its unfinished work as a project of the present, and her decision to continue trusting her friends despite the revelations brings the reality show to an abrupt conclusion. Instead of paying out the final prize to one winner, the disgraced show compensated each contestant with an equal amount of money. Thus liberated, the contestants return to their everyday lives, working, eating, and pursuing relationships.

### **The Melodramatic Mundane and the Problem of Everyday Life**

Despite the constraints of the battle royale genre, which relies on high-stake scenarios to create suspense, *Liar Game* (Ryu & Kim, 2014a) is strikingly preoccupied with the everyday as a fundamental problem. This interest in the quotidian remains under-examined in K-drama scholarship, which has focused on melodrama—characterized by hyperbolic plot and affect (Abelmann, 2003; Brooks, 1976; Elsaesser, 1991)—as the dominant narrative mode driving Hallyu's global success (Hartzell, 2020; K. Lee, 2004; S. Lee, 2012). Certainly, melodramatic conventions are operative in *Liar Game*, where plot twists reveal childhood secrets and mistaken identities. *Liar Game's* investment in the quotidian does not disavow the



melodramatic. Rather, it appropriates the melodramatic mode to spotlight the upheavals of Korean modernity (Abelmann, 2003) but only so as to recuperate the mundane as a redemptive space where history's grievances can be contested and set on a new path.

Nevertheless, such recuperation remains under-realized in *Liar Game* (Ryu & Kim, 2014a), whose conclusion suggests that defeating the Big Bad—the reality show—will return the characters to a trouble-free daily life. At the end, Da-jung's fugitive father returns. Equipped with prize money, the two enjoy the "ordinary life" that initially motivated Da-jung, and the show closes with this tableau of domestic bliss (Figure 4). While the quotidian acts through which Da-jung cultivated a community of trust with the other contestants facilitated this end, those acts—which perform the everyday as practice and not end goal—are superseded by a normative picture of family that exists beyond the afflictions of modernity, as Da-jung happily remarks that "everything is going back into place and restarting" (Ryu & Kim, 2014e, 55:35).



**Figure 4. Tableau of domestic bliss in *Liar Game* (Ryu & Kim, 2014e, 55:35).**

Since the release of *Liar Game* (Ryu & Kim, 2014a), however, other K-dramas have emerged that conjoin the melodramatic and the mundane to more resolutely examine how quotidian practices create and sustain livable structures within oppressive systems. Operating in the mode of what I call the "melodramatic mundane," shows such as *Misaeng* (Kim & Lee, 2014), *Reply 1988* (Lee & Shin, 2016), *Dear My Friends* (Noh & Hong, 2016a), *Because This Is My First Life* (Yoon & Park, 2017), *My Mister* (Park & Kim, 2018), *Be Melodramatic* (Lee, Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2019a), *When the Camellia Blooms* (Lim & Cha, 2019a), *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* (Shin & Yoo, 2021a), *Our Blues* (Noh & Kim, 2022), and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (Moon & Yoo, 2022) have directed attention to the everyday as an ongoing and collective site of resistance. In these shows, quotidian practices do not dismantle oppressive systems but colonize the systems from within to work out their subversive principles.

Elsewhere, using *Because This Is My First Life* (Yoon & Park, 2017) and *My Mister* (Park & Kim, 2018) as case studies, I have demonstrated how the melodramatic mundane balances overdrawn plot with a focus on daily minutiae to spotlight how quotidian routines offer valiant resistance against broader

oppressive forces (Yuan, 2023b). One quick example suffices here. Acclaimed television series *Misaeng* (Kim & Lee, 2014), dubbed “the salaryman’s bible” for its realistic portrayal of the daily travails of corporate workers (Ahn, 2014), nevertheless relies on melodramatic scenarios to create what Elsaesser (1991) describes as “an exaggerated rise-and-fall pattern in human emotions and emotional responses . . . a foreshortening of lived time in favour of intensity” (p. 76). An example is the intern presentation assessment in episode 4, where the rapid escalation of psychological crisis, interventions by key characters “in the nick of time,” and a series of affectively powerful role reversals between high performers and “victim-hero” underdogs (Williams, 1998, pp. 69, 66, respectively) all set to stirring music orchestrate appropriate emotional responses among the audience, who are moved to feel suspense, sorrow, and empathy. But unlike classical melodrama, *Misaeng*’s melodramatic affect portrays everyday life as not just oppressive but also quietly revolutionary. The narrative dignifies mundane workplace routines—organizing files, drafting proposals, preparing presentations—as heroic ways through which ordinary workers collectively resist the dehumanizing forces of neoliberalism and patriarchy.

In the melodramatic mundane, quotidian routines create communal structures that sustain life within a hostile sociocultural economy. Though it ends by reaffirming more normative ideas of the “ordinary”—ideas that, as I explain later, have become increasingly untenable in contemporary South Korea—*Liar Game* (Ryu & Kim, 2014a) contains the seeds of this utopic imagination as well. Through its structurally similar navigation between the melodramatic and the mundane, *Liar Game*’s considerable overlap with the K-dramas cited above suggests that Williams’ (1998) argument about melodrama as “not a specific genre” but “the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures” (p. 42) also helps illuminate the Korean melodramatic mundane. Instead of a fixed genre, the melodramatic mundane can be better understood as a cinematic mode that receives varying articulation in shows otherwise mapping on to different genres. The coincidence in release timing between *Liar Game* (Ryu & Kim, 2014) and *Misaeng* (Kim & Lee, 2014), in my analysis the earliest K-drama to exhibit the full-fledged features of the melodramatic mundane, suggests that around the mid-2010s, a distinctive structure of feeling pertaining to everyday life in South Korea began to emerge.

Indeed, during this period the problem of everyday life became a hotly debated topic in South Korea. In 2011, as part of a news series on the Korean welfare state, the *Kyunghyang Shinmun* coined the “Sampo Generation” concept to describe South Korean youths forced by skyrocketing living costs to give up on the normative ideals of dating, marriage, and childbirth (Yoo & Park, 2011). “Sampo,” meaning to abandon three, would over subsequent years become “opo” (to abandon five), “chilpo” (to abandon seven), and finally “n-po” (to abandon an *n* number of things), as the list of ordinary pursuits now unattainable grew to include home ownership, career, community, hope, and even life. Such precarious living conditions affect not only the younger generation. Other articles in *Kyunghyang Shinmun*’s special series delved into the “everyday poverty crisis” afflicting middle-class patriarchs after the Asian Debt Crisis (Song & Park, 2011), the steep poverty rate among the elderly (J. Kim, 2011), and the lack of a social safety net resulting from the country’s immature national pension (Song & Yoo, 2011). Kim, Baek, and Lee (2018) pointed out that in 2014, South Korea’s “elderly poverty rate [remained] the highest” among countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and that “the employment rate of Koreans over 65 years old was 31.3%” (p. 465). A significant portion of elderly workers were forced into insecure employment due to inadequate pension coverage. In 2015, “Hell Joseon” (a reference to Korea’s Joseon dynasty) gained

widespread social currency as a description of the rigged sociopolitical system that favors the rich and exploits the poor.

Hence *Liar Game's* (Ryu & Kim, 2014a) imagination of the return of "everything back into place" reflects fantasy, a narrative cop-out whose incongruence with the show's earlier commitments reveals the urgency of a sociocultural problem that demands resolution. Indeed, beginning around this period, K-dramas—which Baldacchino and Park (2020) read as "primarily domestic texts produced by and for a Korean society" (p. 21)—increasingly reckoned with the question of how one can live under such precarious conditions. As Baldacchino and Park (2020) have argued, Korean audiences have become "critical of dramas that were considered too *mello* (melodramatic)" (p. 21), desiring instead socially realistic dramas to which they could relate. The growing viability of cable TV during this time provided a platform for experimental content that "challenge[d] hegemonic visions of society" (Baldacchino & Park, 2020, p. 16). Notably, most of the K-dramas cited above as examples of the melodramatic mundane aired on cable channels.

Unlike the globally oriented *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), the melodramatic mundane constitutes a homegrown narrative mode that responds to the problem of everyday precarity not through nihilistic surrender but through engaging with its redemptive possibilities. Cho (2015) has suggested that political activism among current South Korean youths would likely manifest not as "organized social movements" but as "a form of affective politics that is based on the values of caring and solidarity" (pp. 458–459). Indeed, the melodramatic mundane suggests that quotidian tasks done with and alongside others build communities of care that can resist oppressive economic and sociopolitical systems. As Gam-ri tells Du-sik in *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* (Shin & Yoo, 2021a), whose depiction of daily communal life in a seaside village is nevertheless structured around its victim-hero's melodramatic backstory, "people should live among other people. Life may seem like a burden to you at times, but if you choose to be among others, just like you did for me, someone will carry you on their back" (Shin & Yoo, 2021b, 18:23). Or, to quote Yong-sik in *When the Camellia Blooms* (Lim & Cha, 2019a), which interweaves a sensationalist serial killer plotline with small-town neighborhood hijinks: "Miracles don't exist. It's just the little heroes inside us working together. The donations that quietly pile up. The small acts of kindness done by kind people" (Lim & Cha, 2019b, 46:18–46:47). Or, as Han-joo tells her housemates in *Be Melodramatic* (Lee, Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2019a), a show that explores how such mundane experiences as eating and cleaning together can offer ordinary 30-year-olds a space of recalibration against the psychopathologies of capitalism, "[Life is] harsh, indeed. . . . but for now, we're making good times together, and I love that" (Lee, Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2019b, 57:48–58:02).

In the global arena, this structure of feeling animating the melodramatic mundane also offers the possibility of what Bhabha (1994) calls the Third Space, wherein globally dominant cultural forms can be locally "appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (p. 55). The structural affinities between Bhabha's (1994) and de Certeau's (1984) models are noteworthy as both emphasize the creative possibilities that emerge through local appropriations of dominant economies. If quotidian gestures subvert oppressive socioeconomic orders through their idiosyncratic "signifying practices" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xviii), within a transcultural context, such wayward signification can potentially disrupt culturally hegemonic ideologies.

Here I use the 2016 tvN series *Dear My Friends* (Noh & Hong, 2016a) to illustrate what I mean, though the ways in which other melodramatic mundane shows create such a Third Space await exploration.

Centering around a group of elderly friends, the K-drama explores their quotidian pleasures and struggles in a patriarchal and ageist society through the perspective of one of their daughters, Park Wan. Seemingly ordinary lives harbor traumatic repressions as we learn about tyrannical in-laws, domestic abuse, miscarriages, deaths, and even attempted murders that desperate women resort to in a climate of gender violence and poverty.

*Dear My Friends* (Noh & Hong, 2016a) incorporates flashbacks, intergenerational storytelling, and actual historical newsreels to map each character's life story onto the nation's history of civil war, rural-urban migration, industrialization, and land development. Korea's traumatic history makes for such harrowing tales of survival and loss that during an oral history interview, Wan accuses the elderly folk of feeding her "makjang," a Korean style of television so characterized by excess that it can be considered melodrama on steroids. "Life is *makjang*," they respond, suggesting that life lived during a time of intense upheaval cannot be otherwise (Noh & Hong, 2016d, 44:20). Rather than being opposed to the quotidian, *makjang* reveals its full truth. Just as *Liar Game* (Ryu & Kim, 2014a) can only complete its redemptive arc through the melodramatic revelation of oppressive historical forces, a similar eruption of repressed memory in *Dear My Friends* reveals Hee-ja's traumatic loss of her first son many decades ago when the state's investment in growth at all costs led to untold personal casualties.

But instead of fixating on history's violence, the show focuses on the mundane ways its women negotiate exploitative systems to create their own passionate meanings. Throughout the show, they laugh, grieve, eat, cook, dance, gossip, and travel together. The last constitutes a central motif, as the practice of the road empowers the elderly folk to redeem repressed histories lost in the state-sanctioned narratives of geographical and class mobility by constructing their own experiential space. Thus, it is during the 35-mile walk that Hee-ja makes from Seoul to that "long road with trees" in Gyeonggi-do, which she had once walked down carrying her dead son, that her traumatic experience comes alive to the world (Noh & Hong, 2016e, 52:07).

True to its quotidian imagination, however, *Dear My Friends* (Noh & Hong, 2016a) resists the aesthetic reification of any single moment. The transformative power of Hee-ja's walk is foregrounded but not privileged, serving simply as one horizon of potentiality for the show's various practices of the road. Unlike *Liar Game* (Ryu & Kim, 2014a), which imagines the ordinary as an idyllic state that can be restored once and for all, *Dear My Friends* depicts the ordinary as ongoing quotidian acts that continuously "poach" on the dominant order of signification. The show ends as it began, with acts of walking, driving, and road-tripping through which the women "insinuate other routes into the functionalist and historical order of movement" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 105).

Crucially, this subversive potential of everyday life underpinning the melodramatic mundane turns *Dear My Friends* (Noh & Hong, 2016a) into a culturally hybrid site. For instance, Jeong-ah's love for the roads provides the occasion through which the globally dominant cinematic grammars of the West are adapted for local interests. After multiple miscarriages and decades of her mother-in-law's physical abuse, Jeong-ah continues to endure her husband Seok-gyun's verbal abuse because his promise that they will travel the world after retirement sustains her dream of freedom.

When Jeong-ah realizes that Seok-gyun has no intention of retiring (the emphasis on Seok-gyun's employment predicament highlights the reality of South Korea's precarious elderly labor market), she leaves the house in anger and ends up on a spontaneous night drive with Hee-ja. While watching *Thelma and Louise* (Scott, Gitlin, & Scott, 1991) earlier on, Jeong-ah had imagined herself in her favorite movie, as footage from the film turns into a computer-generated imagery (CGI) sequence with Jeong-ah and Hee-ja in their own Thunderbird superimposed on a moving desert highway backdrop (Figure 5). This pastiche effect frames Jeong-ah's departure as triumphant feminist defiance. The citation of Ridley Scott's landmark feminist road film underscores the "Euro-American ideological strain" (Laderman, 1996, p. 41) underpinning *Dear My Friends'* (Noh & Hong, 2016a) celebration of mobility and social rebellion.



**Figure 5. CGI of Jeong-ah and Hee-ja in their Thunderbird (Noh & Hong, 2016b, 58:12).**

Yet, the K-drama disrupts as it cites these genre conventions, appropriating the Western form to articulate native sentiments. Instead of the open landscapes of the American West, a Hollywood road film hallmark that aestheticizes the "freedom to roam" (Laderman, 1996, p. 43), Jeong-ah heads for her mother's nursing home, in an expression of filial piety that subverts the original's individualistic ethos. By having the friends video call Jeong-ah's mother as they drive, the show connects the pair's mobility on the road with the mother's confinement to her bed, suggesting that true freedom to roam is a movement not away from communal obligations but into deeper forms of care.

*Dear My Friends'* (Noh & Hong, 2016a) most important revision to the road film, though, comes when, after running over someone, the road buddies turn around, go home, and eventually turn themselves in for the hit-and-run. If *Thelma and Louise's* crimes on the road reiterate the genre's outlaw motif (Laderman, 1996), Jeong-ah and Hee-ja's guilty consciences supply a key corrective to the typical American narrative that glorifies violent transgression as visionary agency.

As it happened, they killed a deer, not a man. Though relieved, Jeong-ah reflects in shame over her initial decision to “run to save her [own] skin” (Noh & Hong, 2016c, 6:18). Her self-reflection occurs while she is raising her hands in the air as a supposed act of penance for slighting her husband. As Seok-gyun complains about her disrespectfulness from the edge of the frame, the camera pans in on Jeong-ah staring into the distance, engaging in a personal act of repentance far different from the one she appears to be physically performing (Figure 6).



**Figure 6. Jeong-ah raises her hands in supposed contrition but engages in a different kind of repentance (Noh & Hong, 2016c, 6:50).**

While Jeong-ah’s compliant posture reads like a resubmission to patriarchal law, the self-discovery that she is actually engaging in displaces male authority in the very act of seeming to obey it, functioning, like Da-jung’s subversion of “Liar Game” logic, as a tactical ruse that appropriates the power of the strong (de Certeau, 1984) by turning it to her own wayward signification. Notably, the impetus for Jeong-ah’s resistance derives not from the relentless pursuit of individual desire but from the modulation of that desire by communal obligation. The show’s feminism takes on a collectivist bent, as *Dear My Friends* (Noh & Hong, 2016a) creates a new form of cultural identity through its adaptation of *Thelma and Louise* (Scott, Gitlin, & Scott, 1991).

This moment in *Dear My Friends* (Noh & Hong, 2016a) functions as what Bhabha (1994), drawing on Derrida, calls double inscription, where the triumphant writ of authority is subjected to a process of unruly signification. Disrupted (because re-signified) authority here is not just patriarchal but also culturally imperial as Jeong-ah’s tactical body becomes the hybridized, in-between site through which Hollywood cultural forms and their underpinning ideologies are mimicked and transformed. *Dear My Friends* thus provides a meta-commentary on the melodramatic mundane as Third Space, where local forms of resistance not only recuperate quotidian life within South Korea but also create new modes of imagination in the global arena.

### Third Space K-Drama

The melodramatic mundane's insight into the redemptive everyday distinguishes it from most American TV, where critiques of power tend to give short shrift to the ordinary demands and pleasures of living. Consider the HBO series *Big Little Lies* (Kelley et al., 2017–2019), which, like the roughly contemporaneous *Dear My Friends*, explores motherhood, domestic abuse, and trauma. But unlike the K-drama, where characters negotiate oppressive systems by constructing their own experiential space, *Big Little Lies* cannot envision escape other than the literal murder of violent men. The women collaborating on this act are barely known beyond the singular trait or traumatic experience that defines them, so if *Dear My Friends* (Noh & Hong, 2016a) refuses to have any one life be "defined in a single sentence" (Noh & Hong, 2016c, 14:12), *Big Little Lies* traffics in that singular definition, reducing messy quotidian experience into the rigid binary opposition of identity categories (women vs. men).

*Big Little Lies* (Kelley et al., 2017–2019) is typical of the stylized, high-octane narratives that the American television industry has a penchant for, narratives that, while allegorically astute, offer little on how one is to navigate ordinary life. *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) falls in that category too. Its unprecedented popularity in the West, especially in North America where K-dramas have been slower to take off, can be attributed to a taste for exoticized sameness.

The melodramatic mundane, however, proposes a distinctive structure of feeling that cultivates different ways of being in the world. While scholarship on K-drama's transnational appeal has focused on its idealistic love (S. Lee, 2012) and fantasy structure (Han, 2019; H. Lee, 2018), there are signs suggesting that just as South Korea is undergoing a "quiet revolution in the domain of Korean drama" (Baldacchino & Park, 2020, p. 21), global audiences are gravitating toward more relatable storylines. In fan parlance, melodramatic mundane shows are broadly captured by the "slice-of-life" label, characterized by attention to ordinary life and culturally specific social issues (Jung, 2022). First used in Anglophone communities to describe Japanese anime, the consolidation of "slice-of-life" as a recognizable K-drama category can be seen in the spate of recent articles recommending it, including one by Netflix in April 2022 (Jung, 2022).<sup>5</sup>

This shift in taste is evident in the global popularity of *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* (Shin & Yoo, 2021a), which ranked second on Netflix's longest-running hits five months after its series finale (Shaw & Saito, 2022). Number 1 is, unsurprisingly, *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021). As the Korean *Sports Chosun* reports, "It is very unusual for a simple drama in a small fishing village in Korea to consistently occupy the top 10 in the global rankings while blockbuster works with colorful CG and creative worldviews continue to flow into Netflix" (Y. Lee, 2021, para. 6). Compared with *Squid Game's* worldwide triumph, *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha's* popularity is uneven—the show performed exceptionally in Asian countries like Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan, surpassing *Squid Game* in staying power, but failed to chart in a few Western countries (FlixPatrol, n.d.b). While the cultural proximity thesis might be invoked as a reason for such uneven reception, the 2021 K-drama nevertheless

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<sup>5</sup> While "slice-of-life" comes from French naturalist theater, it has lost technical specificity in contemporary usage, referring loosely to narratives about everyday characters and events. To highlight K-drama's distinctive approach to the everyday, I have coined the concept "melodramatic mundane."

bucked trends in conquering diverse markets typically thought of as distinct from each other. As Shaw and Saito (2022) note, Brazil's top 10 programs have more overlap with global tastes than the United States, while the shows that succeed within South Korea, Japan, or India typically do not travel well. Yet, *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha*, which scored first-place nationwide ratings throughout its domestic broadcast, also made Netflix top 10 in Brazil, Japan, and India, to name just a few countries.

In 2022, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (Moon & Yoo, 2022), another melodramatic mundane show whose investment in everyday work and community brings it much closer to *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* (Shin & Yoo, 2021a) than *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), achieved record domestic cable ratings while becoming a global sensation on Netflix (Yuan, 2023a). Compared with *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha*, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* achieved a wider scope of popularity across Asian, Middle-Eastern, South American, North American, and European countries (FlixPatrol, n.d.a). A structure of feeling that might have been thought of as more congenial to regional sensibilities appears to be achieving increasing resonance across borders. Significantly, the Korean production company behind *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* had turned down Netflix's offer for an original series ("*Extraordinary Attorney Woo*," 2022). Even South Korean audiences were surprised by the show's worldwide popularity. As one netizen describes,

Netflix has been able to boast its success with Korean dramas but to be honest, those Korean dramas were not what we were used to seeing on our own TVs. [*Extraordinary Attorney Woo*], however, is a representation of a very Korean-made drama, and it's shown us that it can reach a global audience with just that. (*Netizen Buzz*, 2022, para. 11)

Y. Kim (2022) has suggested that K-drama's global popularity stems from its "everyday reflexivity," which empowers audiences "to make sense of life conditions which differ from their own, and come to question the taken-for-granted social order" (p. 24). More than escapist television, it is shows that take seriously the problem of everyday life that fully actualize K-drama's potential for critical reflection and facilitate what Jin and Ryoo (2014), drawing on Bhabha's concept of hybridity, call "the creation of new others of ourselves" (p. 129). On MyDramaList, an online English-language community where international fans can review Asian dramas, commentators repeatedly note how "slice-of-life" shows move them to reflect on their own experiences and relationships. *Dear My Friends* (Noh & Hong, 2016a), one reviewer writes, "is for anyone, for everyone, for those of you who need some healing and some self-reflection. Have we treated our parents well? Are we selfish children? Am I living life correctly?" (Nicolelodeon, 2021). *My Mister* (Park & Kim, 2018), a show where the high drama of murder, illicit affair, and audio surveillance exists alongside scenes of mundane neighborhood life, inspired a similar contemplativeness in "alldramaaddict11":

I can confidently say that this drama has changed my outlook on life and humanity. I want to be a better person because of it, and I think this story will resonate with a lot of people who are going through rough times in life and comfort them. (alldramaaddict11, 2018)

"I laughed, cried, and contemplated life while watching [*Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha*]. Each little anecdote made me think about similar themes in my own life," concludes a third reviewer (jyuuri, 2021). *Our Blues* (Noh & Kim, 2022), a sustained exploration of everyday work and relationships within a Jeju



fishing community, is “another masterpiece slice-of-life drama,” writes “the\_sapio\_nerd” (2022), for it succeeds at “making us . . . think, resonate, rationalize and acknowledge the determinants life throws at us” (para. 47).

Just as Jeong-ah’s self-discovery adopts *Thelma and Louise’s* (Scott, Gitlin, & Scott, 1991) feminist ethos but disrupts its individualistic ideology, these K-drama commentaries evince subtle shifts of worldview as transcultural reviewers use these culturally specific shows to reevaluate their own ideas of the good life. One Californian reviewer describes *Dear My Friends* (Noh & Hong, 2016a) thus:

This drama tackled a lot of social prejudice issues in a very subtle way. From generational conflict, senior citizens’ mental wellbeing, domestic violence, society prejudice on people with special needs, patriarchy . . . I feel like I befriended the characters through their mundane and joyful moments, and I learned a lot from them too. (Manal, 2020, para. 1)

While MyDramaList does not consistently provide user location data, a Web traffic analysis through Similarweb reveals that the United States ranks first in the number of visitors sent to the drama database. America’s growing consumption of K-dramas is partly attributable to Netflix (Ju, 2022). On IMDb, an American database that according to Similarweb perfectly overlaps with Netflix in its visitor traffic, reviews of these same slice-of-life shows praise their focus on ordinary life while expressing gratitude toward Netflix for making them globally accessible. An *Our Blues* (Noh & Kim, 2022) IMDb review titled “Korean actors, directors have mastered the ‘small’ story” sums up the drift of these commentaries: “Korea has taken over the genre [and] Netflix has presented these to a global market” (dcnckm, 2022, para. 1).

How will *Squid Game’s* (Hwang, 2021) success impact the global landscape of Korean cultural content? Only time will tell. While the flashy *Money Heist: Korea* (Ryu & Kim, 2022) reflects a worrying trend toward “K-less hybrid cultural products” (Jin, 2021, p. 4159), the show’s lukewarm reviews—assessed by professional critics as unoriginal (Wheeler, 2022) and scoring only 5.5 on IMDb—may prompt Netflix to reconsider its strategy.<sup>6</sup> As Jin (2021) argued, Hallyu’s continued success depends on its ability “to develop politicized cultural contents” (p. 4159); J. O. Kim (2020) also reminds us that “locally encoded creativity and sensibility can be effective in attracting larger audiences in the US media markets” (p. 81). It would be a pity if, in a bid to produce the next *Squid Game* phenomenon, creators sought out flashy ways of packaging Korean cultural novelty without doing what K-dramas do so well—wrestling with the fundamental question of how one can live and be in a space deeply rooted in its own sociopolitical histories and, in the process, traversing territorial boundaries to generate diverse ways of being in an increasingly interconnected world.

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<sup>6</sup> K-drama experts are also growing wary of Netflix’s platform imperialism (Park, Kim, & Lee, 2023). Extraordinary Attorney Woo, which used Netflix’s global reach while keeping its own intellectual property, provides an important case study for how Hallyu can sustain itself through the control of distribution rights.

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