What You See from These Survival Games Is What Machines Get and Know: *Squid Game*, Surveillance Capitalism, and Platformized Spectatorship

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This study examines the Netflix original serial *Squid Game* in light of the interdisciplinary framework of critical digital media studies and platform studies. It identifies the show's several key elements applied to the operation and management of the bloodthirsty games that it depicts, particularly the "Red Light, Green Light" game, in terms of what Shoshana Zuboff terms "surveillance capitalism," the parasitic and self-referential capitalist system based on the apparatuses aimed to mine and commodify privatized data. Unveiling how these survival plays disguised as Korean traditional games give expression to how computers and artificial intelligences see and know, I also expand my textual operation of the elements into an underlying factor of the show's global impact, namely, Netflix's platformized spectatorship composed of its personalized recommendations based on its algorithmic data mining, its hyperspecific genre categories that influence the viewers' selection of what they see, its enticing of binge-watching, and its technopsychic construction of voyeurism based on the viewers' screen intimacy.

Keywords: Squid Game, Netflix, platform studies, surveillance capitalism

A sweeping discourse on the dramatic success of the Netflix original series *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) is to label it as a poignant fable of contemporary capitalism, in which subjects are forced to and choose to participate in a series of games for survival of the fittest. A flurry of reviews and criticisms have put forward this viewpoint, emblematized by Caitlyn Clark (2021) who, for example, argues that what distinguishes the show from "other dystopian content . . . is the series' explicit focus on class and inequality, particularly in the context of modern South Korea" (para. 8). Drawing on Mark Fisher's (2009) influential concept "capitalist realism," which refers to the impossibility of imagining an alternative to the capitalist economic and social system, Elaine Chang (2021), too, ascribes the dramatic popularity of the series to its exposure of "the dehumanizing and even lethal effects of late capitalism," including that "in 2021, personal debt in South Korea climbed to 105 percent of GDP" (para. 10). To be sure, this seems to be buttressed by the series' director Hwang Dong-hyuk, who was intended to pose questions about contemporary capitalist society, in which violence to varying degrees, from to the corpses dissected by organ-harvesting agents, "mirrors people who run into a dead end after failing to survive" (B. Kim, 2021, para. 8). Scholar Kyung Hyun Kim (2021) argues that although the show's horrifying survival story is applicable to "any society

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undergoing growing class polarization in the era of neoliberal capitalism," *Squid Game* also touches on the "brutal realities that have given South Korea one of the highest suicide rates and lowest fertility rate in the world" (para. 10).

Despite their common designation of the intertwinement of the global and the local in the enormous popularity of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), what all these comments do not address is under what condition the capitalism depicted in the show works: that is, are neoliberalism and debt economy really sufficient to explaining the global conditions of contemporary capitalism that are associated with the show's transnational appeal? Bishnupriya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar's (2022) concept of the "global popular" supports the demand for raising the question as they argue that the "imaginative-aspirational sense of the global popular is thoroughly entwined with the techno-economic infrastructures and processes of what is usually referred to as globalization" (p. 3). What Ghosh and Sarkar (2022) refer to the "techno-economic infrastructures and processes" (p. 3), in my view, are two things that it is necessary to attend to understand the profound aspects of the show's global popularity linked to the peculiar contemporary conditions of capitalism. First, the correspondences between *Squid Game* and capitalism cannot totally be grasped without addressing and investigating the technological operations of capitalism that it depicts, as well as a kind of common spectatorship structured by Netflix as the streaming platform that distributes it. And second, the ways in which *Squid Game* deals with and dramatizes contemporary capitalism should be discussed not only in terms of what it represents but also in terms of how it represents the capitalism. Perhaps Peter Paik (2021) is arguably the only commentator who connects the series' textual dynamics with spectatorship in ways that are not reducible to the show's characters and storyline, namely, how it represents the hellish world of the predatory capitalism fed by the show's visceral competitions. He writes:

> *The game must go on. It is more important than the feelings of identification* that the viewer establishes with the suffering characters onscreen. *The pacing of the story . . .is determined by the game more than it is by the interest we may take in the characters.* And t*he rapidity with which the characters are killed off . . . serves to anesthetize the viewer.* (Paik, 2021, paras. 7–8; emphasis added)

Paik's attention to the show's "pacing," as well as to its "rapidity with which the characters are killed off," suggests a kind of methodological take on the interplay of the two dimensions of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021): its textual dimension—that is, its aesthetic elements—and its extratextual contexts that include Netflix as its viewing platform and the social circumstance, under which it hit the globe. What is at stake, then, is less about whether the show is anticapitalist or procapitalist than about what kind of capitalism is operated and how it cuts across and interweaves the show's diegetic world and the status quo of spectators who engage and immerse themselves in it.

In this study, I examine *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) in light of the interdisciplinary framework of critical digital media studies and platform studies. In doing so, I offer a perspective on the intersection of technology and capitalism in *Squid Game* in lieu of a flurry of pouring yet similar views on the serial's global hit, which either characterizes its diegetic world as a dystopian fable of neoliberal capitalism and debt crisis or accommodates its unprecedented success within the "soft power" discourse of *hallyu*. For this aim, I identify the show's several key elements applied to the operation and management of the bloodthirsty games that it depicts, particularly

the "Red Light, Green Light" game, in terms of what Shoshana Zuboff (2018) terms "surveillance capitalism," the parasitic and self-referential capitalist system based on the apparatuses aimed to mine and commodify privatized data. This also leads to my argument that one of the key entry points that permits different audiences across the globe to gain access to *Squid Game* is the way that its mise-en-scène and cinematography invoke their spectatorship structured by the interplay of their engagement, on the one hand, and Netflix's algorithmic recommendation and personalization, on the other, which I call "platformized spectatorship." The significance of the first episode as a key object of analysis cannot be underestimated in the show's textual and extratextual dimensions: first, the first episode not only establishes the series' key characters, their motivations to be indulged in the games, and the diegetic world as the arena for the survival for the fittest but also encapsulates the technological operation of surveillance and its asymmetric power that are applied to the all the games played in the show; and second, more than its exposition of the show's genre as dystopian survival drama, the first episode also functions as a lure that determines which shows in Netflix will survive for viewers' continual viewing of their episodes. As I demonstrate in the second section, the heightened sense of survival in the first episode fits into the mode of binge-watching as a mode of survival during the pandemic crisis, in which *Squid Game* gained global popularity.

Into *Squid Game*: Operation of Surveillance Capitalism

Zuboff's (2018) concept of "surveillance capitalism" centers on the massive mining, collection, analysis, and processing of personal data for profit-making, which involves targeting consumers and predicting their choices. This type of capitalism exerts the instrumental power, through which human identity and behavior are geared toward the ends of corporate and state apparatuses. The instrumental power, Zuboff (2018) observes, works "through the automated medium of an increasingly ubiquitous computational architecture of "smart" networked devices, things, and spaces" (p. 8). Zuboff (2018) further argues that a key operative logic of surveillance capitalism lies in the asymmetric relation between human subjects and the computational and networked machines that function to monitor them and extract their data: "Surveillance capitalists know everything about us, whereas their operations are designed to be unknowable to us" (p. 9). As an example of the trend toward the datafication of subjectivity through the fusion of instrumental and state power, Zuboff takes the Chinese government's vision of the social credit system since 2013, in which people's behaviors across various financial and social activities are tracked, and in which punishments and rewards for them are automatically assigned. Although the dream of total awareness and perfect prediction mediated by the algorithms that collect and analyze the massive flows of data from people's private and public sectors might sound too ambitious, Zuboff also does not forget to alarm that the vision of social control programs is not merely a specific case of the totalitarian regime but rather has expanded with the growth of the Internet, surveillance technology, ubiquitous digital instrumentation, and big data into daily economic and communicative lives: "We are ranked on Uber, on eBay, on Facebook, and on many other web businesses, and those are only the rankings that we see" (p. 393). Antoinette Rouvroy's (Rouvroy & Berns 2013) now influential concept of "algorithmic governmentality," which refers to the idea of a government of the social world that is based on the processing of big data sets rather than politics and social norms, echoes Zuboff's warning. For it eschews "reflexive human subjects," instead operating to "build supra-individual models of behaviors or profiles without ever involving the individual, and without ever asking them to themselves describe what they are or what they could become" (Rouvroy & Berns 2013, p. 173).

Zuboff's picture of surveillance capitalism fits well into those of other thinkers who consider the machines as constitutive of contemporary capitalism's social relation and its perceptual mode. Maurizio Lazzarato (2015) and David Graeber (2011) are highly suggestive to the affinity between *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) and surveillance capitalism for their common identification of machines as fundamental to the circulation of capital and the operation of debt economy. Lazzarato (2015) views the formation of the contemporary debt society as resulting from the "constant social capital" composed of numerous machines aimed to produce subjectivity and exert power and control:

> Capital is a social relation but it cannot be reduced to intersubjectivity. Relations are first of all machinic, in other words, composed of humans and of an ever-increasing number of non-humans. Capital is a social machine from which technical machines derive. (Lazzarrato, 2015, p. 24)

Similarly, Graeber (2011) points out that contemporary debt economy subjugates debtors to a new kind of slavery, in which they internalize the combination of policing and machine-mediated surveillance. For him, although the violence of policing and surveillance seems to be out of sight, this is because "we are no longer able to imagine what a world based on social arrangements that did not require the continual threat of Tasers and surveillance cameras would even look like" (p. 210). What both Graeber (2011) and Lazzarato (2015) commonly suggest is that the extraction, production, and collection of information about our lives are so crucial as to underpin both the functioning of the debt society and the debtor's subjugation to the capitalist power.

The trope of surveillance capitalism as integral to understanding the popularity of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), too, is also demonstrated in the context of Netflix that has hosted several cinematic or dramatic contents associated with surveillance and big data since the latter half of the 2010s. The fourth season of *House of Cards* (Fincher, 2016), for instance, positions the ambitions of a couple of fictional politicians surrounding the White House within the context of the U.S. national security and electoral practices based on high-tech surveillance and massive data mining (Bellanova & Fuster, 2018). With its capabilities to offer viewers nonlinear stories and a web of interactive selections, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (McLean, 2018) provides a "dystopian social commentary on the themes of control, punishment, surveillance, the phenomenon of public viewing, and the role technology plays in extending the scope of the state's power" (Elnahla, 2020, p. 517). In line with these two serial contents that contributed to reinforcing the public perception of Netflix as a paradigm-shifting platform that could revolutionize TV, several Netflix original documentaries, such as *The Great Hack* (Amer & Noujaim, 2019) and *Coded Bias* (Kantayya, 2020), investigate and publicize the sinister political and economic influences of big data and surveillance technologies, ranging from the scandalous data mining of the firm Cambridge Analytica to the racial and gender biases implemented in artificial intelligence (AI)–driven facial recognition systems. As I demonstrate later, the consistency of these fictional and nonfiction original contents associated with the themes of surveillance and dataveillance has to do with Netflix's formation of platformized spectatorship, through which the collection and analysis of the data from users' title selections, watch history, and search queries are intertwined with their viewing behaviors and the recommendation of contents they are encouraged to select.

Squid Game (Hwang, 2021), particular its first game "Red Light, Green Light," establishes the affinity between debt economy and surveillance capitalism. The first and second episodes do more than depict the ways in which debtors for various reasons, including the series' protagonist Seong Gi-hun (played by Lee Jung-jae) who are burdened with the debt of 160 million Korean won to loan sharks and another 255 million won to banks, are invited to engage the cataclysmic games. They abound with an array of technological apparatuses through which surveillance capitalism's instrumentalist power and asymmetrical gaze operate. The first apparatus is the body camera mounted on a salesman-looking recruiter (played by Gong Yoo) who invites precarious subjects affected by their debt crises. Gi-hun's encounter with the recruiter is initially framed within the conventional shot-reverse-shot scheme, to the extent that there seems to be nothing visually particular in the scene. The uncanny aspect of this scene, however, is highlighted as Gi-hun asks the recruiter "Who are you" and "How dare you run a background check on me?" These two questions imply both a gaze on Gi-hun, whose bearer remains unknown to him, and its asymmetrical power that has been monitoring his personal and social identity and extracting key information on him. Afterward, the scene in which all the 456 participants are grouped together in the hall surrounded by an array of beds reveals the identity of the gaze: All the participants turned out to have met with the recruiter, and the close-ups of their faces are viewed from the perspective of a body cam mounted on him. An ensuing series of shots further demonstrate that the gaze of the body cam is not limited to the perception and consciousness of the recruiter. As displayed by the massive screen mounted on the hall before the start of the first game, information on each of the 456 participants is codified into the database, in which not only his or her basic information (such as age, gender, and occupation) but also his or her amount of debt and its cause is displayed. The multiplied split-screen picture, then, catches a glimpse of the contemporary debt-oriented society that determines an individual subject's economic and existential precarity. It also emblematizes surveillance capitalism's asymmetric power of seeing and extraction, through which the subject is being seen and monitored by numerous networked optical and computational machines invisible to her. Although functioning to gather information on citizens' behavior like other surveillance technologies, what make body cams distinct from traditional CCTV or other static cameras, as Randy K. Lippert and Bryce Clayton Newell (2016) summarize, is that "they can also make their way into private homes—and anywhere else the police choose to go—and record everything they see and hear" (p. 113). In this regard, the body camera worn by the recruiter draws viewers' attention to its pervasiveness in the public and private sectors of contemporary society. All the shots viewed from the body cam encompass virtually all the spaces that the debtors inhabit or temporarily visit, from the subway platform to the park in front of an apartment complex, therefore attesting to its capabilities to go anywhere and to record anything that it sees and hears. Moreover, what these shots demonstrate is that the recruiter has all the information of the potential participants in advance and that they are eventually used to persuade the recruited that they have no choice but to participate in the games. Thus, the body cam footage of the recruitment process is portrayed as the evidence of what the invisible master of the games expects the precarious subjects to do. It alludes to the ways in which surveillance capitalism fundamentally depends on various algorithmic and monitoring technologies that "push the envelope of the public-private divide," to accumulate and analyze all human data, including the data of debts, "relevant to behavioral prediction and control" (Zuboff, 2018, p. 347)

The registration process after the display of the body cam footage videos also informs viewers of the asymmetric power that transforms the participants not only as debtors but also as datafied subjects. Each participant is invited to have his or her picture taken by the automated kiosk reminiscent of the facial

recognition machines used at the airport. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2021) has demonstrated in her recent groundbreaking *Discriminating Data*, facial recognition technology, based on the algorithm-based detection and identification of human physiognomic traits, is never neutral but rather embeds categories of social discrimination as default. In other words, the facial recognition system used to identify subjects who are recognized as potential criminals "assume in advance a stable category of individuals called 'criminals'" (Chun, 2021, p. 196). The registration process, in this context, reveals how the facial recognition and motion tracking systems applied in the first game are premised on the category of "debtors" who are forced to survive and destined to be killed, a category established by the architect of the game. In this sense, this process recalls what John Cheney-Lippold (2011) calls "soft biopolitics," through which "user identities become tethered to a set of movable, statistically-defined categorizations that then can have influence in biopolitical decisions by states and corporations" (p. 176). The information of each participant codified in his or her photo turns out to be fed into the database monitored by the numerous computer terminals in the control room. In a similar way as the body cam footage, the photos displayed on the floor of the room indicate that the debtors were already datafied as debtors whose competitive behavior in the games was expected. Because of its connection to the whole surveillance system, the mug shot archive reminds one of what Oscar H. Gandy Jr. (1993) has called the "panoptic sort." By this term, Gandy means "a kind of high-tech, cybernetic triage through which individuals and groups of people are being sorted according to their presumed economic or political value" (Gandy, 1993, p. 1) In this assemblage of all-seeing machines that discriminate a certain group of individuals from others, Gandy (1993) further observes, "the poor . . . are increasingly being treated as broken material or damaged goods to be discarded or sold at bargain prices to scavengers in the marketplace" (p. 2). As John Cheney-Lippold (2022) and Kate Crawford (2022) commonly acknowledge, the legacy of Gandy's concept of the "panoptic sort" originated in 1993 is what we see now in the operation of racial, class, and gender discriminations within the pervasive algorithmic systems in which the collection and management of data predict future knowledge, power, and subjectivity.

The first game, "Red Light, Green Light," vividly illustrates the "panoptic sort" of surveillance capitalism in terms of how its nonhuman assemblage of perceptual and operative machines treats the participant debtors as "broken material . . . to be discarded" (Gandy, 1993, p. 2). The creepy doll standing in front of the tree is implemented with the facial recognition and motion detection systems that operate to identify each participant's movement with their zoom camera eyes. If any motion is detected at a time that all the participants are required to stand still, an array of AI-controlled rifles are set in motion to shoot the subject of the motion remotely, with perfect accuracy. The information of those who were eliminated is immediately fed into the assemblage of computers and monitors that administer the progression of the game in the control room. What is striking in this game is that AI, as Changsin Lee (2021) points out, provides "a sense of fairness": for "when an AI robot detects movements and shoots, no one raises a dispute" (para. 12). The sense of fairness, however, is anything but value-neutral not only in the sense of all the survival games depicted in *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), but also in the sense of the doll's machine learning systems trained to detect the motion of the participants who were already classified as datafied debtors, as subjects destined to die or survive only by competing with or even killing others. This discriminatory aspect of the systems in the guise of fairness and neutrality resonates with Crawford's (2021) insight into how AI's machine learning increasingly implemented in the U.S. policing and prison systems represent "structural inequities . . . and . . . injustices," as she writes: "A computer vision system can detect a face or a building but not why a person was inside a police station or any of the social and historical

context surrounding that moment" (p. 94). Seen in this light, the cannibalistic and violent killing of the participants, as well as their inabilities to respond to the operation of the automated doll and AI-controlled rifles, does more than attest to the asymmetric instrumental power of the computational and data-driven technologies that underlie contemporary capitalism: It further suggests that in the computational debt economy, the operation of the panoptic sort threatens individuals' autonomy to the extent that "their representation in profiles is structured externally by others according to the others' interests rather than their own" (Gandy, 1993, p. 180). The last aerial shot viewed from above after the end of the first game, then, is read as an extension of the gaze of the surveillance capitalism that monitors and controls subjects in all directions, based on its discriminatory process that sorts them on the basis of their common value: a debtor who has no other way of surviving than competing with and winning others.

Besides the implementation of AI-controlled machines and rifles in the "Red Light, Green Light" game of the first episode, *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) is replete with other textual markers that allude to the panoptic surveillance and its process of sorting subjects. A significant scene in this regard is where Front Man (played by Lee Byung-hun), the Darth Vader-esque manager of the competitions throughout the show's episodes, watches the progression of the first game in his private room. We see him with a glass of hard liquor staring at the high-definition LED screen, in which participants are being shot dead by the rifles. The shot is repeated three times, intercut with the spectacles of the deaths and the survivors' struggle to escape from the algorithmic gaze of the automated detection system, therefore underlining the asymmetrical power relationship that characterizes surveillance capitalism. The uneasy pleasure of watching the inhuman violence from a detached viewing position of Front Man as the voyeur who monitors the participants without having himself exposed culminates in the third repetition of the shot, in which the camera slowly tracks out to display him ideally occupying the center of the frame, as well as the screen that matches the vanishing point of his gaze. What is heard here until the end of the game is the standard pop song "Fly Me to the Moon," whose romantic lyrics and tone have an ironic contrast with the catastrophic state of the competition under control. Referencing Stanley Kubrick's canonical use of "Singing in the Rain" with the group lynching of an old man in *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1971), Hwang's intentional atmospheric mismatch of image and sound amplifies the asymmetrical power relation between Front Man and the participants, or between who surveils and who is surveilled.

Another significance of this scene is that the monitoring gaze of Front Man is viewed as connected to the larger composition of the surveilling apparatuses that structure the diegetic world of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021). What he sees from the screen, the landscape of the massacre, is shot with the high-angle position of an invisible camera. This reminds one of Zuboff's observations that surveillance capitalism embraces the "God's view" as essential to its conception of instrumentalism. As she explains, "You may have experienced the sensation of the God view from the window seat of an airplane as it lifts you above the city, transforming all the joys and woes below into the mute bustle of an anthill" (Zuboff, 2018, p. 392). That kind of view pervades other key sets of the diegetic world in the show, encompassing the dorms populated with multistory bunker beds, the playground for the Dalgona Challenge, the Tug of War room, and the monochrome waiting lounge. In particular, the bird's eye view of the maze-like staircases on which both the competitors and the agents walk incarnates the surveilling gaze that is believed to exist everywhere. The ubiquity of the gaze is verified in a vignette that depicts Hwang Jun-ho, an undercover cop who sneaks onto the island to find his brother (indeed, Front Man) whom he believes was a contestant of

the games. When he takes off his mask in a small room allocated to him, it turns out that a surveillance camera is mounted on its ceiling. Here, it becomes obvious that not only participants but also agents are subject to the asymmetrical power relation of surveillance capitalism. Although they are ranked into squares (as supervisors), triangles (who are allowed to carry weapons), and circles (who clean up dead bodies), the agents are as much anonymous and alienated as the participants who are identified only as numbers. This aspect bespeaks the irony of fairness that the invisible master of the games forces the participants to succumb to. In the fifth episode of the show, "A Fair World," Front Man gives an impassioned speech portraying himself as a benevolent provider of opportunity after executing both a contestant who has cheated and his coconspirators. More than asserting the imperatives to meritocracy and infinite competition as the rules that subjects embody to survive contemporary capitalism, his speech does nothing less than to demonstrate that the concept of fairness is indeed in exchange for dispossession and inequality that surveillance capitalism imposes on both the participants and the agents.

Around *Squid Game*: Platformized Spectatorship

This textual operation of how computers and AIs see and know in favor of surveillance capitalism, I argue, is tied to an underlying factor of the show's global impact, namely, Netflix's platformized spectatorship. Here, I define platformized spectatorship as a condition of viewing in which viewers' perceptual and cognitive activities, such as their selections of contents and viewing modes, are considerably determined by the algorithmic, computational, and networked dimensions of streaming platforms. These dimensions include Netflix's algorithmic genre categories that affect the viewers' choice of what they see, Netflix's personalized recommendations based on its massive mining and analysis of users' data, and Netflix's user interface attuned to entice the viewers' binge-watching. Although it is doubtless that these dimensions arguably concern all films and shows hosted by Netflix, I would also argue that *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) is exemplary of how the concept of platformized spectatorship operates both on the textual and extratextual levels of a Netflix original show. After discussing each of the three dimensions in terms of how it is applied to *Squid Game*, I discuss how they are linked to its technopsychic construction of voyeurism, which in turn brings them back to the asymmetric gaze of surveillance capitalism.

Unlike a flurry of articles and reviews that ascribe the dramatic success of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) to the global potential of its Korean-specific storytelling and games as well as K-dramas, David Beer (2021) argues that its global popularity lies in Netflix's algorithms that offer viewers personalized recommendations based on the data of us and other users. This personalization as a driving strategy of contemporary platforms across cultural and service industries does not simply respond to the users' tastes and habits but also fundamentally shape them, as Beer (2021) further notes:

> While *Squid Game* is labeled with the genres "Korean, TV thrillers, drama" to the public, there are thousands of more specific categories in Netflix's metadata that are shaping our consumption. The personalized homepage uses algorithms to offer you certain genre categories, as well as specific shows. Because most of it is in the metadata, we may not be aware of what categories are being served to us. (para. 12)

Netflix has not revealed which genres and categories were offered to the viewers who chose to watch *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021). However, existing studies on the Netflix Recommendation System (NRS) attest to the relevance of Beer's (2021) insight. Netflix's current personalization of contents and genres that are offered on its user interface dates back to CineMatch in the late 2000s, Netflix's founding algorithm aimed to predict user ratings based on a training data set of previous ratings users gave to various movies when the company's primary service was limited to online DVD rental. As Neta Alexander (2016) summarizes, the algorithm was built on three interlocking methods, "the users' personal profile (past choices, the five-star ratings system, scrolling activity, and viewing habits); collaborative filtering via 'Costumers Clusters'; and a tagging system meant to group together closely related or 'neighboring films'" (p. 90). These methods suggest that Netflix's personalization results from the twofold process of what users know and provide and what algorithms know from it, and, from the interplay of human labor and computational data processing. As it moved on to video streaming service while amassing its products and expanding its coverage transnationally, the company has elaborated on the NRS in two ways: first, to increase the amount and scope of data that it collects and analyzes, and second, to algorithmically translate these data into personalized recommendations of contents and genres, on the other. Currently, viewers' ratings of contents supplied by Netflix are small portions of the data collected and analyzed by Netflix. According to the company's Privacy Statement (Netflix, 2017), Netflix automatically collects not only users' activities on its platform, such as title selections, search queries, watch time, scrolling behavior, connection information, and IP address, but also information from its partners associated with service activation and payment processing, and from other third-party sources (such as the posts on social media platforms and information available through public databases). The three categories of data, particularly the first, are used for content-based filtering, through which the data are combined with other data sets that are derived from the titles of films and shows offered by Netflix and that contain information on their genres, country, release dates, actors, and more (Pajkovic, 2022). Besides that filtering, the NRS also involve more sophisticated collaborative filtering, through which its algorithms constantly find correlations between users in terms of how their tastes and viewing habits are similar.

Based on these two filtering processes made by its machine learning system, Netflix (2022) has deepened its personal recommendations that "move beyond rating prediction . . . into personalized ranking, page generation, search, image selection, messaging, and much more" (Netflix, 2022, para. 1). What is key to these recommendations is the automated categorization generated through the monitoring and interpretation of the vast quantities of the data, on the one hand, and through tagging every film or show according to "a rich taxonomy of 200 different story data points" by human experts and algorithmically organizing it into what Netflix insiders have called "altgenres" (Madrigal, 2014, para. 9), on the other. As Dal Yong Jin (2021) summarizes, the user's personalized homepage that appears on TV or the mobile device to invite his or her selection of viewing content results from "intricate calculations based on user-submitted data, collaborative filtering, and manual coding of content for all conceivable metadata point" (p. 28; see also Alvino & Basilico, 2015; Lobato, 2019). In this context, Beer's (2021) observation on the algorithmic popularity of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) suggests that its viewers are read as having been subject to the improved NRS, whose categorization and recommendation for them originate from multiple variables. They definitely include the viewers' preference for either K-movies and dramas or non-Korean dystopian thrillers

hosted by Netflix, but the ways in which the show was personally recommended must have been based on a set of altgenres that are connected to their activities on Netflix but that are unknown to them.

Evidencing the relevance of platformized spectatorship, the success of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) also suggests how much technically improved the NRS' collection, classification, and analysis of users' data have been. Lucas Shaw's (2021) report from *Bloomberg* on October 17, after the dramatic rise of social engagement on the series from late September to early October, cited Netflix's internal document. Although the document specified that *Squid Game* generated about $900 million based on a metric that Netflix uses to access the performance of its individual shows, the company, according to the *Bloomberg* report, did not disclose "how many people stuck around to watch more of the show (stickiness) or how many people finished the series (completion rate)" (Shaw, 2021, para. 7). Despite the vagueness of the empirical data, however, the report also pointed to the adjusted value share (AVS) from the document, an index that "reflects not just how many people watched it but how valuable those viewers are considered" (Shaw, 2021, para. 12). This anecdote, in my view, stresses how central users' data have become the functioning of contemporary capitalism and how the success and popularity of *Squid Game* on global scale rely on Netflix as a platform whose infrastructure collects, analyzes, and intermediates the data for its business model. The AVS, then, could also be read as validating the improvement of the NRS in that it could include users' information both on their activities on Netflix and from third-party sources, such as social media platforms. A marketing report on the viewership data of *Squid Game* argues that the data of social media engagements are critical to the discovery and selection of streaming content by demonstrating a flood of reactions, videos, memes, and hashtags on TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram during the first 30 days of its release (Cicero, 2021). Although it is true that the viral success of the show encouraged audiences to subscribe to Netflix and intentionally select it for their viewing, it comes as no surprise to conjecture that the dramatic increase of social media engagements with the show was also fed into Netflix's database of the information from other platforms and extended into its personalized recommendation.

What this industrial report further suggests is that users' selection of shows from Netflix is grounded in the asymmetric differential between what they know about Netflix and what Netflix knows about them, a differential that characterizes surveillance capitalism. The AVS, then, corresponds to what Beer (2016) has called the "metric power," a power driven by the computational and algorithmic measurement of human lives, from everyday consumption to bodily routines, and the interconnected circulation of their data. For Beer (2016), the operation of metric power in data-driven capitalism structurally produces precarity and uncertainty, in that metrics indicate the extent to which subjects internalize neoliberal capitalism's demands for competition and measurement. In this regard, the sense of uncertainty stems from the automated measurement of human identity and from activities that are performed in not only machinic but also affective ways. Inasmuch as the metrics are affective measures, Beer (2016) further claims, "they lead individuals to self-monitor, to pre-empt the systems, to play the game, to act before being measured" (p. 210).

Beer's (2016) insight further suggests that spectatorship under surveillance capitalism based on the platformization and datafication of society and culture, which includes the personalized recommendation and content curation on streaming platforms, should be understood less as empowering audiences' modes of consumption than as blending two traditional binaries, such as autonomy and dependence, and control and freedom. Binge-watching, the viewing practice of watching more than one

episode of a series in one sitting, is exemplary of the dialectic of the two. Although it has been perceived as demonstrating the innovative capacity of Netflix to grant its subscribers the freedom to choose their favorite shows and to determine the temporal parameters of their viewing (including when and how long they watch the shows) unlike live television, binge-watching is, as Gerald Sim (2016) pinpoints, "etymologically associated with indulgence, compulsion, and loss of self-control—behaviors conceptually antithetical to autonomy" (p. 194). This attests to a corollary that exists between the myth of Netflix as a game changer of the film and television industry and the neoliberal economy that cultivates consumers' freedom of choice and autonomy as part of its control.

In this regard, it is highly suggestive that *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) became a killer show that appealed to binge-watching amid the pandemic crisis. Studies on binge-watching on Netflix have deemed it as a viewing practice structured by both the textual and extratextual dimensions of its shows. From textual and thematic viewpoints, what makes a Netflix original show, such as *House of Cards* (Fincher, 2016) as a "bingeable" text includes the migration of the soap narrative structure into other genres (such as political dramas and thrillers) in favor of postponing the narrative climax, complex narrative temporality that demands repeated or attentive viewing (Booth, 2012; Mittell, 2015), and the show's foregrounding of consumption and addiction that are embodied by the surrogate characters of viewers (McCormick, 2016). On the other hand, Grahame Turner (2019) and Marieke Jenner (2020) have underscored binge-watching as a viewing practice made by the interplay of the technological and the social that are involved in the distribution and consumption of Netflix shows: That is, binge-watching should be understood as a particular mode of audience practice that has been developed within a broader online culture marked by viewers' ongoing and intimate connection to social media and screen-based interfaces, as well as by their constant access to the incessant flow of information including the content of algorithmic recommendations. The COVID-19 situation that made binge-watching widespread enables it to be conceptualized as the juncture of its textual and extratextual dimensions. As Neta Alexander (2021) brilliantly observes, "to binge-watch during COVID-19 was a mixture of leisure and labor, transforming domestic viewers into obedient citizens . . . and unpaid workers training recommendation algorithms" (p. 52). She singles out as a key feature of binge-watching "survivorship," which means Netflix's metric based on "how many people who started watching the first episode have kept watching the entire season" (Alexander, 2021, p. 51). Beyond this industrial underpinning, Alexander (2021) associates survivorship with the ways in which binge-watching provided audiences with the means to increase their chance to survive the state of lockdown and uncertainty by granting them corporeal and affective encounters with imaginary diegetic worlds of the devastating reality. A typical subgenre of Netflix series that enables survivorship, according to Alexander (2021), is that of survival: "Binge-watching is often promoted by engaging viewers in survival narratives featuring a depressed protagonist, from Don Draper to Bojack Horseman to Euphoria's troubled teens" (p. 52).

Apart from the popularity of the show during the crisis of the lockdowns, *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) is armored with several textually "bingeable" features that, in turn, promote "survivorship" under surveillance capitalism. The mixture of autonomy and dependence and of control and freedom as the hallmark of the platformized spectatorship in the neoliberal system is linked to the two positions that viewers occupy in watching the games played in the diegetic world. The viewers shuffle between the viewpoint of the participants and that of the anonymous agents who monitor the progression of the

games on the array of computers and screens. Throughout its nine episodes, the show enables viewers to identify not merely with Seong Gi-hun and other characters-as-players but also with Front Man and the VIPs who are invited to watch the progression of the games remotely. This is particularly the case with the show's episodes 1 and 5, in which director Hwang employs the grammar of crosscutting so that the viewers see the progression of the "Red Light, Green Light" and "Glass Tile" games from the perspectives of both the victims and the perpetrators. The spectatorship of Front Man and the VIPs, then, demonstrates the extent to which the show's motif of surveillance capitalism is, albeit tangentially, related to the contemporary viewing environment in which various screens, different in size and surroundings, are interconnected to display every kind of moving images, ranging from theatrical films to live-streamed dramas and events. The VIPs who appear for the "Glass Tile" game capitalize on their voyeuristic mode of viewing, in which their asymmetrical gaze on the hapless contestants struggling to survive the dangerous contests is structurally at play. Built on the same kind of voyeurism, the viewing of Front Man in his private room in the first episode reminds one of the home theater setting in which the high-definition LED screen is positioned in front of a couch and surrounded by an array of speakers. As depicted in the first episode before the start of the "Red Light, Green Light" game, Front Man's spectatorial act is premised on his monitoring of all the participants through the panoply of computers and monitors, and, by extension, through the collection of their data that involves the recruiter's recording of the footage via his body cam. Thus, Front Man's act of viewing suggests that in the contemporary media environment characterized by the convergence and interconnection of different devices and their corresponding viewing practices, including monitoring, navigating, and browsing, the voyeuristic pleasure of cinematic and televisual spectatorship is, in the words of Francesco Casetti (2015), fundamentally "relocated" into other screens and surroundings than the canonical places and apparatuses (i.e., the movie theater and the TV set in the domestic space) that shaped traditional cinematic and televisual experiences: "We can recognize as cinematographic experiences those such as watching a film at home, on a trip, in a waiting room, on a DVD player, or on a computer" (p. 209).

Seen in the light of the idea of "relocation," it is possible to conjecture that ordinary viewers of any Netflix shows, including *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), watch them on a range of multiple screens: they might watch them on small screens of laptops, tablets, and smartphones, but they do so on the smart TV equipped with connectivity—in a similar way as Front Man does. This type of streaming audiovisual media spectatorship, constituted through the availability and connectedness of different digital interfaces and their corresponding user-spectator behaviors (not only watching as such but also browsing, migrating, and navigating), is also the case with binge-watching. As Vicente Rodríguez Ortega (2022) observes, binge-watching "becomes the ideal scenario for this multiscreen, partially attentive spectator that simultaneously utilizes multiple digital devices," while also being a "networked activity" through which users "share diverse experiences with other streaming media users via social networks or day-to-day, offline, interactions, partaking in diverse types of engagement that are both shared and unique" (para. 26). A 2021 article based on a poll of adults in the United States shows that 42% of *Squid Game* viewers said they found it directly on Netflix while about a half of viewers said they first heard about it on social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok (Shevenock, 2021). What should be further highlighted here, I argue, is that this viewing habit is part of the platformized spectatorship operated through Netflix's extraction and collection of user data. For the users' engagements in and outside the streaming platforms are translatable into data that are also extracted and used by their

service providers and other media companies. The social media virality of the show, as well as the dramatic increase in the data traffic after its release in South Korea and other countries, attests to the correspondence between the multiple behaviors of streaming users in the algorithmic culture and the continuous circulation of data that feeds into media platforms maintained and expanded by surveillance capitalism. Again, binge-watching as a way of surviving the COVID-19 crisis is seen as reinforcing surveillance capitalism that underlies that spectatorship. For the global situation of the lockdown suggests that the more connection time viewers invest, the more amount of data they allow to be extracted by the platforms to which they are connected. The situations that *Squid Game* dramatizes, such as the participants' compulsive indulgence in the games and their growing sense of uncertainty, are read as symptomatic of how binge-watching is practiced in the name of users' free choice yet in exchange for the platforms' control of their tastes and behaviors.

Conclusion: A Cognitive Mapping of Surveillance Capitalism

To be sure, one should consider other factors that guided the dramatic success of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), such as Netflix's industrial strategy to reinforce its impacts on both regional and global levels, the increasing social media hype and words of mouth after the first week of its initial release, the engagement of certain audiences preoccupied with K-movies, K-dramas, and the survival-game genre content similar to the show. Despite these factors, however, what makes *Squid Game* engrossing and offering multiple points of access is, I argue, the extent to which the beginning of its games entices viewers to recognize not only the operation of surveillance capitalism but also their platform-based viewing habits and positions that it constructs through invisibly collecting and analyzing their data. The extraction of the debtors' data through the body cam, the database connected to monitor the participants' behaviors, and the operation of the games are perceived as the enormous flow that sustains viewers' multiple participatory doings, from the time-controlling viewing marked by pause and fast-forward to binge-watching as a mode of survivorship amid the pandemic crisis.

Inviting the viewers to negotiate between choice and algorithmic personalization, and between the atomized and voyeuristic pleasure of viewing and the desire to access the global flow of content and information, *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) serves as an allegory of surveillance capitalism or increasing platformization in Fredric Jameson's sense. For Jameson (1992), the allegory in the postmodern popular cultural texts offers the "most satisfactory (if varied and heterogeneous) solutions to [the] form-problems" of "a particular spatial or narrative model of the social totality" inasmuch as it is built on the combination of the "social raw material" and the "aesthetic technologies" (p. 4) available for the model. In this respect, a key global reach of *Squid Game* is that it succeeds in constructing a narrative model of the social and the technological that shape our algorithmic culture, in which what we see and know is determined by what machines do. If the operation of surveillance capitalism and the pervasiveness of the debt crisis that it causes are the social raw materials that the show uses, the screen-based and algorithmic machines that it employs throughout its episodes, then, point to the aesthetic technologies that lay the groundwork for the narrative model of survivorship, which allows viewers to grasp the totality of the world in times of global crises.

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