

## Netflix and the Korean Wave (Hallyu): Productive and Aesthetic Metamorphoses in South Korean Drama—Squid Game as a Paradigm

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### Summary:

In recent years, the South Korean film and drama industry has achieved global acclaim, as evidenced by *Parasite* (2019), the series *Squid Game* (2021), and the film *Decision to Leave* (2022), all occurring amidst the ascent of the Netflix platform, which plays a pivotal role in reshaping this industry. This article reviews the historical and political context that contributed to the formation of Korean cinema and drama, ranging from cultural protectionist policies—such as the screen quota system—to the opening up to global markets in the era of the Netflix platform. The latter has introduced new funding models and afforded unprecedented opportunities to access a global audience. This transformation is not limited to economic aspects but encompasses the narrative and aesthetic characteristics of dramatic content.

On the applied side, this article utilizes the series *Squid Game* as an analytical model to comprehend how Korean cultural identity intersects with the exigencies of the Netflix platform, and how this intersection has produced hybrid narrative and aesthetic forms that merge the local with the global, achieving unprecedented commercial and critical success.

**Keywords:** Netflix; Drama, Hallyu; Squid Game; South Korea.

### I- Introduction :

The past few decades have borne witness to seismic shifts in the cartography of global cultural production, wherein Hollywood is no longer the sole epicenter of cinematic and dramatic production enjoying widespread global dissemination. In this context, South Korea has emerged as an ascending cultural power; its dramatic productions have realized exceptional successes that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, evolving into a global phenomenon known as the "Korean Wave" or "Hallyu".

However, this ascent was not serendipitous, but rather the corollary of historical accumulations and deliberate political, cultural, and economic policies, alongside technological transformations that have reshaped the entertainment industry on a global scale.

The film and drama industry in South Korea has undergone multiple stages of formation and transformation, influenced by local and regional political contexts—from Japanese colonization to the Korean War, and from military rule to democratic transition and economic liberalization. Government policies, particularly the screen quota system, played a pivotal role in protecting local production and enabling it to compete under the hegemony of foreign content, particularly American. Furthermore, the vertical integration model adopted by major economic conglomerates (Chaebols) contributed to building an integrated production infrastructure, controlling various stages of the content industry from financing and production to distribution and exhibition. Nevertheless, the entry of digital streaming platforms, led by Netflix, into the Korean market in the mid-2010s precipitated a qualitative shift in the dynamics of this industry.

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Netflix introduced a distinct financing and distribution model that opened new horizons for Korean creators to reach a global audience without traditional intermediaries; it also altered the nature of the content produced on both aesthetic and narrative levels. Perhaps the sweeping success achieved by the series *Squid Game*, which became the most-watched series in the platform's history, represents a watershed moment worthy of study and analysis.

This article seeks to present a historical and critical reading of the evolution of the South Korean drama industry, focusing on the impact of the Netflix platform in reshaping this industry on economic, productive, and aesthetic levels. We shall attempt to answer pivotal questions:

- How did the historical and political context contribute to shaping the identity of Korean cinema and drama?
- What role did cultural protectionist policies, such as the screen quota system, play in building a robust local industry?
- How did the Chaebol model influence the structure of dramatic production? And to what extent has Netflix changed the rules of the game in this industry?
- What are the narrative and aesthetic characteristics that distinguish Korean drama on digital platforms, and how were they manifested in *Squid Game*?

Through this approach, we hope to offer a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between national cultural policies and transnational digital capitalism, and how local cultural identities negotiate with the requirements of global markets in the platform era.

### **III- Major Legislation and Laws that Shaped the South Korean Wave Following the Democratic Transition in the Late 1980s**

South Korea witnessed periods of political instability before transforming into a democratic nation and an economic power competing with the world's strongest states. The phase of democratic transition began in 1987, representing a turning point from military authority to democratic practices, and from policies of a strong military to civil society. The Constitution of 1987 represents the actual launch of the democratic transition following a popular referendum; the amended constitution guaranteed the right to direct election, upon which Roh Moo-hyun was elected President of the Republic (Bouskran Fatima Zohra, Saghour Hisham, 2022, p. 207). This resulted in legislative liberalization that led to unprecedented artistic and economic prosperity. The 1987 Constitution is also considered the start of a radical change in the relationship between the state and the film and entertainment industry.

Prior to this date, cinema was viewed as a propaganda tool subject to strict censorship, especially during the eras of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan. The Motion Picture Law of that period was the primary instrument of government control; it was not merely a law to regulate the industry, but a comprehensive censorship mechanism. It imposed mandatory government licensing on producers to operate in the industry as a mechanism to ensure producers' loyalty to the regime. Censorship was exercised over all films before screening to preserve an ideology based on anti-communist values and the promotion of government economic development. Criticizing the military or mentioning sensitive historical events, such as the Gwangju Uprising of 1980, was forbidden.

Ethical censorship encompassed sexual or violent content. The military censorship practiced during that period significantly stifled artistic creativity, compelling directors to use symbolic and metaphorical language to critique political and social reality. Many directors who refused to submit to censorship resorted to ceasing work or emigration. The focus on "safe" and government-supported films led to a decline in the quality of artistic production in the seventies and eighties (Ahmed Fouad El-Din, 2020).

After 1987, a series of legal amendments began that radically transformed the Korean cinematic landscape, focusing on economic liberalization and freedom of expression. Restrictions on film production were eased, and production was no longer limited to a finite number of government-licensed companies. This liberalization opened the door for independent producers and small companies, leading to immense diversity in themes and styles, and allowing

for the emergence of a new generation of directors such as Hong Sang-soo, Kim Ki-duk, Park Chan-wook, and Bong Joon-ho, who had not lived under the burden of direct censorship.

Furthermore, the import of more films was permitted, and Korean films began to reach global status, starting from the Hawaii International Film Festival with a film by the famous director Im Kwon-taek titled *Mandala*. In 1988, South Korea lifted all restrictions imposed on foreign films and allowed American films to enter the local market by establishing offices there. The government mandated the allocation of screenings for local films in cinemas for no less than 146 days per year. In 1992, Samsung launched the first film produced with the participation of commercial brands, paving the way for the electronics industry to enter digital cinema through the film *Marriage Story* by director Kim Eui-suk, utilizing an integrated system for film financing, production, and distribution (Sherine Maher, 2020, p. 201).

Korean independent cinema emerged after the Asian financial crisis of 1997, when a new generation of directors expressed issues of class disparity, unemployment, and social identity (the New Korean Wave). Government subsidies via the Korean Film Council (KOFIC) and initiatives such as the "Jeonju Cinema Fund" contributed to financing these experiments and giving them the opportunity to appear at the Busan International Film Festival, which became a major platform for an alternative voice maintaining the character of independent Korean cinema in the face of market dominance (Osama Saffar, 2025). This policy resulted in a remarkable diversity of Korean cinema, encompassing four categories:

The first category included national realistic films led by director Im Kwon-taek, who focused on the prevailing tendencies of his generation of youth, relying in his films on simulating customs and traditions and consolidating cultural identity.

The second category is formed by directors of the modernist phase, represented by Hong Sang-soo and Kim Ki-duk, who presented films in a new guise with a realistic character and innovative artistic sense.

New ideas also began to emerge involving horror, thrillers, and light comedy alongside regional politics, which formed the third category that relied on the principle of qualitative innovation.

The fourth category embodies mainstream films that simulate the American style, using action and horror; among the most important directors of this category are Kang Woo-suk and Choi Dong-hoon (Sherine Maher, 2020, pp. 202, 203).

## **II- The Screen Quota System as a Cultural and Economic Protection Mechanism Against the Hegemony of American Films**

The development of the South Korean film industry was linked to strict regulation (86 films produced in 1961, 189 in 1965, 229 in 1969). By law, every production company was obliged to distribute at least 15 films annually in 1962. Furthermore, any company wishing to import a foreign film was required to ensure that the annual import figure did not exceed one-third of the national production. This system, known as "quota quickies," reduced imports while encouraging the production of "B-movies," which were filmed rapidly to meet import criteria. In 1966, a new law mandated the programming of Korean films for a period ranging between 60 and 90 days annually; these restrictions were later increased from 106 to 146 days. The Korean film market in the early 1980s remained negligible and closed compared to major global industries. Despite the adoption of the quota system in 1985, which limited the import of foreign films to 20-25 films annually (Jimmyn PARC & Patrick MESSERLI, 2022, p. 621), allowing for the emergence of a new generation of directors like Kim Ki-duk, Hong Sang-soo, Park Chan-wook, and Lee Chang-dong, this system—intended to protect the film industry in South Korea—faced a reality where imported films produced by Hollywood enjoyed immense popularity compared to local production (Nicole VULSER, 2006).

The quota system failed to support local producers who found themselves overnight competing with films coming from Hollywood. This is in contrast to Korean companies licensed to import, which achieved excessive profits estimated at 25% of Korean box office revenues in the early eighties by importing attractive American films that outperformed local competition. This led to a wave of declining profits, reaching less than 16% of the total revenues of all screened films (Ahmed Fouad El-Din, 2020).

The success and popularity of American films resulted in pressure from the United States on the Korean government, threatening to impose sanctions on Korean industrial exports unless import quotas were abolished. The Korean government chose to protect promising manufacturing industries rather than rescue films unpopular with its local audience (Nicole VULSER, 2006).

The years from 1986 to 1988 witnessed an opening of the local Korean market to cinema. This openness was reinforced in 2006, after which a limited and focused financial support program was launched by the Korean government for cinema, amounting to less than 40 million dollars, covering shared infrastructure such as film schools and studios (Jimmyn PARC & Patrick MESSERLI, 2022, p. 624). Government support in South Korea saw periods of decline from 2010 to 2016, reflecting the Korean government's desire to control subsidies and target activities that companies could not adequately undertake on their own (Jimmyn PARC & Patrick MESSERLI, 2022, p. 625).

### **III- Hallyu in Dramatic Production: A Model for the Global Dissemination of Korean Culture**

After the IMF Crisis of 1997, the Korean government realized that relying on traditional heavy industries, such as automotive manufacturing and heavy electrical machinery and equipment, was no longer sufficient. These industries had relied on borrowing funds in US dollars to fuel rapid industrial growth. Many companies suffered a financial crisis due to the drop in interest rates on these loans, rendering them unable to repay, which caused a sharp decline in securities (Wali Ibrahim Khalil, 2018, p. 129). This resulted in a strategic shift towards content industries as a new locomotive for the economy. To support this shift, institutions were established such as the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) and the Korean Film Council (KOFIC), in addition to the creation of venture capital funds dedicated to supporting and financing the production of films, drama, and games. This government support reduced investment risks for the private sector and encouraged banks to lend. Government investment also included high-speed internet infrastructure, making South Korea an ideal hub for developing electronic games and distributing digital content globally.

The current era is witnessing a qualitative shift with the rise of Hallyu as an independent cultural force. The Hallyu phenomenon (Korean Wave) refers to the global spread of Korean popular culture, which began in the late 1990s in Southeast Asia and China. This phenomenon enjoys immense popularity among youth fascinated by Korean music (K-pop), Korean drama (K-Drama), films, fashion, cuisine, and beauty culture in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, and elsewhere, exemplified by TV drama series such as *Autumn in My Heart* (2000) and *Winter Sonata* (2002). This cultural phenomenon is closely linked to movements of people, information flows, and cross-border capital in East Asia, supported by government political strategies aimed at transforming South Korea into a global cultural hub rather than relying solely on heavy industries or technology. Thanks to this robust support, Korean drama began to reach television screens in neighboring Asian countries, paving the way for the launch of 'Hallyu' as a major counter-flow of transnational popular culture with Western hegemony, as described by modern studies (Najib Mubarak, 2024).

The Korean Wave constitutes significant soft power for expanding Korea's appeal by increasing the popularity of the Korean language among foreign audiences, as Korean language learning rates have risen in both Japan and Singapore through the increase of schools teaching Korean. South Korea has also known an increase in global demand for consumer products such as food, cosmetics, etc. In this framework, President Park Geun-hye pledged to enhance South Korea's cultural policy as one of the main goals of her administration by increasing the budget of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, including building a series of mega-halls and cultural centers worldwide. This focus on cultural policy continued under Moon Jae-in; in 2020, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism announced the creation of a new Hallyu division

aimed at diversifying Hallyu content to include other industries by creating a sustainable environment for Hallyu growth (Ghazlan Mahmoud Abdel Aziz Mohamed, 2025, p. 334).

**Table No. 01: Evolution of Korean Waves by Year (Source: Ghazlan Mahmoud Abdel Aziz Mohamed, 2025, p. 336)**

| Elements                  | First Korean Wave                                                 | Second Korean Wave                                                                 | Third Korean Wave                                                                              |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Time Period</b>        | 1997 – Mid-2000s                                                  | Mid-2000s – 2010                                                                   | Early 2010s – Present                                                                          |
| <b>Mechanisms</b>         | - Emergence of the Korean Wave<br>- Focus on visual media content | - Expansion of the Korean Wave<br>- Strong focus on K-pop groups                   | - Diversification of the Korean Wave to include online gaming, fashion, cuisine, and cosmetics |
| <b>Primary Genre</b>      | Television dramas                                                 | K-pop                                                                              | Korean culture                                                                                 |
| <b>Genres</b>             | Dramas, films, K-pop                                              | Popular culture, selected arts                                                     | Traditional culture, arts, popular culture, lifestyle                                          |
| <b>Geographical Reach</b> | Asia                                                              | Asia, parts of Europe and Africa, Central and South America, and the United States | Global                                                                                         |
| <b>Media Channels</b>     | Satellite broadcasting and the internet                           | Social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter                      | All forms of social media platforms                                                            |

As the table illustrates, the spread of the Korean Wave passed through three significant stages. The first stage, prior to Netflix (between 1997 and mid-2000s), witnessed geographically limited spread (East and Southeast Asia), relying on broadcasts by local TV channels, which involved a time lag between local and international broadcasts in addition to language barriers, as translation was limited and unprofessional. The second stage (mid-2000s to early 2010s) was characterized by a focus on "K-Pop" groups, which spread in Asia and some parts of Europe, Africa, South Latin America, and the USA through the use of social media like YouTube. Finally, the third stage began from early 2010 to the present, witnessing the entry of the Netflix platform into the Korean market, which revolutionized production financing, leading to profound structural changes in the industry, especially in the field of TV drama (K-Dramas) and cinema.

#### **IV- Vertical Integration of Major Conglomerates (CJ ENM) and the Role of LOTTE Cinema on Market Dynamics and Production Quality**

The term Chaebol is derived from the Korean words chae (wealth) and bol (clan/family), indicating the familial nature of these groups. Chaebols typically consist of one large company or several groups of interconnected companies, which are often owned by a single family and subject to its control. The beginning of the growth of these companies can be traced to the post-Korean War period (1950-1953) when the South Korean government, under President Park Chung-hee, began a series of economic reforms aimed at industrialization. During these reforms, it offered various incentives such as subsidies, tax exemptions, and easy access to credit to promote the growth of key industries and compete with foreign companies, leading to the emergence of these powerful large corporations. Large family trading companies in South Korea served as the driving force behind the country's rapid economic development in the post-war period. Companies like Samsung, SK Group, Hyundai, and LG, whose roots stem from government-led industrialization efforts in the 1960s, dominated the South Korean economy, accounting for a large share of GDP and national exports. They are often maintained and controlled by the founding families, and given their vast influence in various sectors, they shape the economic prospects of South Korea (Mahdi Salami, 2021).

The Korean private sector was organized in the form of giant corporations engaging in all economic and commercial activities, acquiring a large part of total production, and consequently a large part of exports. These private companies formed the executive arm of the state, where the latter determined strategic choices and development plans, while private companies undertook execution. The latter benefited from government aid to transform from labor-intensive industries

to heavy industries in the seventies, such as electronics and advanced industries requiring capital intensity by the third millennium.

The Chaebol followed nationalist strategies for industrial development based on export-oriented industrialization. The Chaebol group (Hyundai, Daewoo, GoldStar) is ranked among the top 100 industrial companies in the world. Given the large and diverse industrial structures enjoyed by Chaebol companies in industrial fields, alongside ease of obtaining credit advantages, South Korean industry gains a large share of the global market and can worthily offset the loss in any subsidiary company through the profits of other subsidiary companies (Belajine Khaldia, 2019, p. 207).

Within this context, the Chaebol entered the film industry, with Samsung being the first to invest in the full process of vertical integration in 1992 with the film *Marriage Story* by director Kim Eui-suk. After the 1997 financial crisis, most major Chaebols withdrew from the film industry, leaving only medium-sized companies like Lotte Cinema (established in 1999), which played a pivotal role in structuring the market. It also represented part of the industrial vertical integration strategy linking production, distribution, and exhibition under the control of the giant groups (Jimmyn Parc, 2021, p. 859).

## **V- The Impact of Netflix on Global Dissemination and Financing of "Hallyu" Productions**

In studying the Korean Wave, Ji Hoon Park, Kristin April Kim, and Yongsuk Lee from Seoul National University applied the concept of "Platform Imperialism" to investigate the changes wrought by Netflix on Korean drama production practices and the theoretical implications of this influence. They noted that despite Netflix's positive contributions to increasing the reputation of Korean drama, Netflix's strong international content strategies acquire all intellectual property rights for original Korean works on Netflix and global broadcasting rights for many dramatic works (Ji Hoon Park, Kristin April Kim, Yongsuk Lee, 2023, p. 72). Within this context, Dal Yong Jin defines "Platform Imperialism" as an asymmetric relationship of interdependence between the West (primarily the United States) and many developing powers in platform technologies and political culture. The growth of mega-platforms and their decisive role in the global flow of capitalism and information has been met with criticism; they suggest a progressive and egalitarian arrangement and promise to support those who stand upon them (Dal Yong Jin, 2013, p. 154).

Netflix enjoys a reputation for providing generous production budgets and unparalleled creative freedom to producers. For instance, Netflix paid approximately 700 million USD for over 80 original Korean works from 2015 to 2020 as part of its strategy to acquire international content (Ji Hoon Park, Kristin April Kim, Yongsuk Lee, 2023, p. 73). Additionally, Netflix increased the diversity of Korean drama content by investing in story ideas and genres considered unacceptable by Korean TV stations, relying heavily on local independent production companies to create its content and on creative workers within the Korean TV industry who play an important role in creating successful content (Benjamin M. Han, 2023, p. 6937).

Korean drama in the period between 2015 and 2021 witnessed a qualitative leap in budgets allocated by Netflix. Reports indicate that the budget for the series *Sweet Home* reached 2.4 million dollars per episode in 2020 (Ji Hoon Park, Kristin April Kim, Yongsuk Lee, 2023, p. 73). The total budget for *Squid Game* Season 1 was 21.4 million dollars in 2021 (Lucas Shaw, 2021). This helped Korean drama compete with Hollywood in terms of content quality and helped attract global talent to work on Korean productions. Netflix also supported the creative visions of creators, directors, and writers who were subject to the censorship of local Korean stations. For example, the idea for *Squid Game* by director Hwang Dong-hyuk was rejected for 10 years by Korean stations, whereas Netflix approved it immediately.

In 2021, Netflix invested 463 million USD in Korean content thanks to a series of commercial successes of original "Made in Korea" series and films. Given the increasing role of Korean popular culture on Netflix in growing global subscribers, Netflix promised in April 2023 to invest 2.5 billion USD in Korean cultural industries until 2027 (Dal Yong Jin, 2023, p. 6888).

## VI- Aesthetic and Narrative Characteristics of Korean Dramatic Works: Squid Game as a Model

- **Technical Card for Squid Game:**
- **Original Title:** Ojing-eo Geim
- **English/Arabic Title:** Squid Game / لعبة الحبار
- **Genre:** Drama, Survival, Thriller, Dystopia
- **Creator and Director:** Hwang Dong-hyuk
- **Network:** Netflix
- **Release Date:** September 17, 2021 (Season 1), December 26, 2024 (Season 2), August 27, 2025 (Season 3).
- **Number of Episodes:** 9 episodes (Season 1)

**Episode Duration:** Approx. 60 minutes

**Age Rating:** 15+ (Contains violence, gore, and suicide)

**Cast (Key Actors):**

Lee Jung-jae: as Seong Gi-hun (Player 456)

Park Hae-soo: as Cho Sang-woo (Player 218)

Jung Ho-yeon: as Kang Sae-byeok (Player 067)

Oh Young-soo: as Oh Il-nam (Player 001)



[Picture No. 01: Series Poster Season 1]

### First: Summary of the Three Seasons of Squid Game

In South Korea, Seong Gi-hun, a divorced father and gambling addict drowning in debt and living with his elderly mother, is offered the chance to participate in a series of childhood games for a chance to win a massive cash prize. After accepting the offer, he is transported to an unknown location where he finds himself among 455 other players all suffering from stifling financial crises. Players are forced to wear green tracksuits and are monitored around the clock by masked guards wearing pink jumpsuits, while the games are managed by the "Front Man" who wears a black mask and a black outfit.

The players quickly discover that losing any game means death, and that every death adds 100 million Korean Won (about 87,400 USD) to the grand prize totaling 45.6 billion Won (about 39.86 million USD). Gi-hun allies with other players, including his childhood friend Cho Sang-woo and North Korean defector Kang Sae-byeok, in an attempt to survive amidst terrifying physical and psychological fluctuations. Simultaneously, police officer Hwang Jun-ho infiltrates the games disguised as a guard in search of his missing brother.

In the second season, three years after his victory, Gi-hun decides to return to the game seeking revenge against the "Front Man" and to end the game forever, joined by detective Jun-ho, the Front Man's brother. After the death of Il-nam, the game's creator, the "Front Man" takes full control, attempting to convince Gi-hun that ending the game is impossible due to the "true nature of humans."

In the third and final season, Gi-hun and the players face even more lethal and dangerous games with devastating consequences.

### Second: The Significance of Using Colors, Music, and Lighting as Narrative and Aesthetic Elements in Squid Game

Scientific research indicates that color directly affects our emotional state, behavior, and energy levels (Al-Afri Malika, Al-Hamil Amira, 2022, p. 455). The use of colors such as green, yellow, blue, red, and pink is one of the most prominent aesthetic characteristics in Squid Game. Their employment held precise symbolic significance; they are colors symbolizing life, movement, and hope in sequences that reflect the disturbing and grim reality faced by the players, such that each color narrates an unsettling contrast with the bleak reality in the series.

While all workers wear a uniform pink outfit and masks differing only in the shape drawn on them—circle, triangle, square, according to work rank—except for the leader who wears a black outfit and mask, they are not allowed to recognize each other by faces or names. Everyone works in precise regularity akin to a machine, according to pre-set schedules. Furthermore, there is no relationship between the workers and the players, as the three groups—organizers, workers, and players—seem to represent the three classes: the Aristocracy, the Bourgeoisie (represented by the Game Leader), and the Proletariat represented by the players.



**[Photogram No. 01: Entry of Players into the Game Hall (Season 2)]**

Music in cinema is a fundamental dramatic and aesthetic element that transcends mere background sound; it works to enhance emotions, embody the development of drama, and create the psychological atmosphere of the scene. It contributes to stimulating the imagination, linking shots together, and cementing scenes in the audience's memory, acting as an expressive tool clarifying what the image cannot reveal (Ammari Sharifa, Sharqi Nouria, 2020, p. 119).

The Leader and the Second Man listen, after the start of the game, to a jazz song titled "Fly Me to the Moon," a famous song written by American songwriter and composer Bart Howard. The series director, Hwang Dong-hyuk, revealed the reason for choosing this romantic song at the moment the Game Leader sits on his sofa in his private room, watching the bloody events resulting from the first game "Red Light, Green Light" on a large screen; he stated: "I had a very specific vision in my mind for the song and the scene. The song has very romantic and beautiful lyrics and melody, so it made the scene even more cruel. This embodies the increasingly polarized capitalist society we live in today in a very compressed and cynical way." On the other hand, the artist performing the song stated: "The series deals with many pressing issues such as income inequality, youth unemployment, etc. While watching the series, I could empathize completely with the people who joined the game, and I could easily connect with the harsh reality of a highly competitive society... I am truly happy with the success everyone has achieved, but as a Korean, it was difficult to watch the series because of how realistic that feeling was" (Victoria Messina, 2021).

Jazz music is not ordinary music; its roots are embedded in human suffering represented by enslaved Africans in the United States. It was a tool for communication between them, music "full of expressions of love, desire, vitality, hope, transcendence, triumph in harsh conditions, energy, joy, confidence, excitement; the stuff of life. Even the most tender expressions, darkness, sadness, and depression of jazz music—especially blues jazz styles—have a wonderful way of celebrating the dark side of life—it is about enjoying the complexity of being human."



**[Photogram No. 02: Entry of a Female Player to Challenge in a New Game (Season 1)]**

Lighting in cinema is a fundamental visual narrative language that enhances mood, defines time and space, and reveals the psychological dimensions of characters. Light and shadows are

used to direct emotions (fear, comfort, mystery) and build drama (Hassan Hashem Hassan, 2021, pp. 18, 19). Lighting played a pivotal role in the visual narrative of *Squid Game*, contributing to defining the atmosphere of the series' events and highlighting aspects of the characters and their psychological states. For example, the director employed darkness to highlight the state of despair and fear of the unknown experienced by the players.

The director also worked to make the viewer sense the change of emotions in the events by changing the lighting, such as the transition from hope to despair, reflecting the internal conflict of the characters.

### Third: Symbolic Dimensions of Characters in *Squid Game*

*Squid Game* presented the lacerations of the human psyche, placing the ordinary human in confrontation with themselves. The characters were distinguished by depth, multidimensionality, and motives; there is no absolutely "good" or "evil" character. Each character represents an aspect of contemporary Korean society and reflects moral and social conflicts. For instance, Player 456, Seong Gi-hun (main character), emerged as a kind-hearted person who loves his family and is loyal to his friends, but at the same time is weak-willed, irresponsible, and a gambler. He suffers psychologically amidst the moral conflict within the game when he witnesses the death of his friends and is torn between staying to complete the game to get the money, and morality. The director portrayed him as a victim of capitalism.



[Photogram No. 03: Main Character Player 456 "Seong Gi-hun" (Season 1)]

Unlike what Hollywood offers, Netflix did not present the protagonist as a typical superhero, but rather an ordinary failed man who possesses a kind heart. This contradiction between his failure and his moral goodness is what made him a complex and intriguing character.

### Conclusion

The phenomenon of the spread of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) is a complex cultural problematic that embodies the conflict of identities in the era of globalization, where Korean soft power conflicts with traditional patterns of hegemony on the one hand, and faces accusations of "neocolonial culture" on the other. On one hand, the Korean Wave redefines the concept of power away from the Western model based on military-economic superiority, crafting its power through the "economy of emotions" which invests in artistic aesthetics and cross-border human stories. However, this success carries within it a fundamental contradiction: while Hallyu presents itself as an alternative to Western centrality, Asian heritage is harnessed to serve the global consumption machine. On the other hand, Hallyu faces criticism for "Westernizing" Asian taste by generalizing uniform aesthetic standards.

The series *Squid Game* represents a model of the sweeping success that the Korean Wave has known over the last two decades on the Netflix platform. This success relied on radical transformations at the production and aesthetic levels, transforming it from a local product into a global phenomenon despite being in the Korean language and using children's games as a narrative framework. Furthermore, it transcended the romantic themes for which famous Korean drama (K-Drama) was known, focusing instead on complex human relationships through the class and social conflict experienced by contemporary Korean society under capitalism.

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