

-Research Article-

The Brutal Face of the Violent Game of the Capitalist Competition: Squid Game

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Abstract

Globalization, which has gained momentum since the 1970s, is effective in almost every field, but its prominent dimension is economically based and it leads to increasing inequalities throughout the world. This inequality feeds an environment in which uncertainty, competition, risk and anxiety are intense in social life. The sense of weakness and defeat that people feel more and more, makes it easier for them to accept harsher and ruthless competition conditions and deepens the moral contradictions of modern man, who can risk everything for self-interest. Capitalist relations of production, where success is measured by money and where cooperation is replaced by competition, turns a large mass of people who fail in this game into a useless and unnecessary waste. In this study, the Squid Game series is analyzed through the concepts of capitalism, competition and game. The series, which describe people involved in a life-or-death game to solve their financial problems, shows the brutality of the competitive capitalist system in general. The study, in which the series is analyzed with descriptive analysis within the frame of the defined concepts, reveals the destruction of the exploitative system of today's modern society on people.

Keywords: Capitalism, inequality, Squid Game series, competition, game

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-Araştırma Makalesi-

Kapitalist Rekabet Oyununun Şiddete Bulanmış Acımasız Yüzü: Squid Game

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Özet

1970'li yıllardan itibaren hız kazanan küreselleşme, hemen her alanda etkili olmaktadır ancak öne çıkan boyutu ekonomik temelli olup dünya genelinde artan eşitsizliklere yol açmaktadır. Bu eşitsizlik, toplumsal hayatta ise belirsizlik, rekabet, risk ve kaygının yoğun olduğu bir ortamı beslemektedir. İnsanların giderek daha fazla oranda hissettiği zayıflık ve yenilmişlik duygusu, daha sert ve acımasız rekabet koşullarını kabullenmelerini sağlamakta ve kişisel çıkar için her şeyi göze alabilecek modern insanın ahlaki çelişkilerini de derinleştirmektedir. Başarının para ile ölçüldüğü ve dayanışmanın yerini rekabetin aldığı kapitalist üretim ilişkileri, bu oyunda başarısız olan büyük bir insan kitlesini faydasız ve gereksiz bir atığa dönüştürmektedir. Bu çalışmada Squid Game dizisi, kapitalizm, rekabet ve oyun kavramları üzerinden çözümlenmiştir. Yaşadıkları maddi problemleri çözmek için bir ölüm-kalım oyununa dahil olan insanları anlatan dizi, genel olarak rekabetçi kapitalist sistemin acımasızlığını göstermektedir. Belirlenen kavramlar çerçevesinde dizinin betimsel analiz ile çözümlenmeye tabi tutulduğu çalışma, günümüz modern toplumunun sömürüye dayalı sisteminin insanlar üzerindeki tahribatını gözler önüne sermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kapitalizm, eşitsizlik, Squid Game dizisi, rekabet, oyun

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Introduction

Fueling an endless and relentless race, capitalism also imposes a social structure that dominates every moment of human existence and requires constant competition, and these ruthless competitive conditions also reveal a human type who oppresses their rivals without recognizing any moral rules for their personal interests. Byung-Chul Han (2018) calls today's modern capitalist society the "Performance/Burnout Society" and says that in order to adapt to the rules of this society, it creates an image of a depressed and defeated individual who constantly exploits himself and others. The individual who cannot continue his life within the frame of the determined rules; becomes an objector, a loser, a reminder that the system doesn't work for everyone, and an unwelcome person (Gökçem Akyıldız, 2021, p. 5648). The advanced version of this individual type is someone who can not only exploit but also harm the other person physically or psychologically, and we find the reflection of this individual in the *Squid Game* (Hwang Dong-Hyuk, 2021) series, which tells how the brutal competitive game of modern capitalism makes people do anything for money. *Squid Game* which has managed to become the most watched TV series in the history of a digital platform where content is produced in many different languages, is frequently mentioned with its blunt critique of the capitalist system, although it is a drama that can be easily consumed by the general audience.

Jonas Huizinga (1995, p. 17) defines human beings as 'homo ludens' or people who play games and accepts game as a factor that forms the basis of culture. Play which is the central activity in flourishing societies, is basically a struggle for something or a representation of something. In the *Squid Game* series, the game is a representation of the cruelty of the real world, and the struggle between life and death in the games by the heroes in the series is a struggle not only for physical life, but also between being rich and being broke, which has become the rule of living in this world. Because in the globalizing capitalist order, being poor has become almost equivalent to non-existence. This study aims to analyze the *Squid Game* series through the concepts of capitalism, competition, inequality and game.

Income Inequality in Globalizing Capitalism

Although its origin goes back to ancient times; gaining great speed since the 1970s, the process of change which affects many areas such as economic, technological and social areas, is generally called globalization. Globalization, in its simplest definition, is the increase in money and commodity mobility in the world, and it is the process of incorporating non-Western countries into capitalist production relations and the world economy (Ünalın & Doğan, 2019, p. 5). Although globalization is a broad concept with political, technological, communicative and cultural dimensions, its most important aspect is its economic dimension. In economic terms, globalization refers to the integration of national economies in a single market (Tunalı & Çetinkaya, 2019, p. 226).

The most fundamental problem of the economic globalization is economic inequality. Social inequality has existed in different forms in every period of human history, but inequalities have increased rapidly in the era of brutal capitalism that started with the Industrial Revolution. The Keynesian Welfare State model, which was adopted for the recovery of the collapsed economies after the Second World War, decreased inequalities, but this model was gradually abandoned, first in the financial field and then in the social policy, since the 1970s. Thereby, as a result of the implementation of neoliberal policies since the 1980s, inequalities have started to increase rapidly. In this process, which Atkinson (2018) calls the "inequality turn", the changes in the production system and international division of labor with globalization have made inequality more profound and evident.

It is frequently stated that inequality has increased both within and between nations with globalization. The gap between the rich and the poor in advanced capitalist economies reached its highest level in the neoliberal era (Patnaik, 2016). It is striking that the wealth of the 200 richest people in the world is more than the income of 2 billion people (Mazur, 2000). This unjust growth has impoverished the majority of the world's population and condemned them to economic crises in an inextricable swamp of debt; and also it has increased unemployment by negatively affecting employment on a world scale, especially in underdeveloped countries. Those who claim that the gains will be higher in the globalization process argue that the transformation will have costs, but the losses of the people will be reimburse by the winners over time, and eventually the global society will tend to develop as a whole (Eddy, 1996). However, increasing inequality, unemployment and exclusion today indicate that this expected change is not very close and will never happen. The inequality and poverty, which became more evident in the 1990s, brought along discussions that the risks of globalization are more than the opportunities it offers. The most used concepts to explain the social consequences of the globalization process are uncertainty, insecurity, inequality, risk, anxiety and brutal competition.

The new form of the economy in the process of globalization is also described as the new capitalism. Capitalism is basically a system based on private ownership of the means of production, a free market economy and production for profit. The two main features of the capitalist mode of production are that the productive forces are highly developed and the means of production are in the hands of a few people. In the capitalist model, production is in private hands, regulated in accordance with the laws of contradiction and competition (Jalee, 1995, p. 78). The pursuit of maximum profit leads to unequal development, which is the stable feature of the system. The critique of capitalism reveals the dysfunctions created by the deep contradictions it contains, and accordingly its structure that prevents socialization, as well as its injustice (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, p. 138).

Pointing out that the importance of individualization has increased in the new capitalism, Ulrich Beck (2014) states that in all kinds of relations from the labor market to friendship relations, the benefit of the individual gradually overtakes the benefit of the society. Sennett (2002) draws attention to the destruction of human values caused by the risks, uncertainty, anxiety and hopelessness brought by modern life by saying that the changes in working life affect the characters of people in his work called *The Corrosion of Character*. The flexibility, uncertainty, instability, speed and destructive competition that come with the new capitalism make social life chaotic as well as economic life. Individuals and societies are increasingly confronted with feelings of division, defeat, contradiction and uncertainty. According to Bauman (2010, p. 26) who states that "the resetting of temporal and spatial distances by means of technology tends to polarize the human condition rather than homogenize it", with globalization, space and time lost their importance and became fluid. Comparing the contemporary world to a container filled to the brim with fears and disappointments that desperately look for a way out, Bauman (2007) emphasizes that everything is now uncertain with liquid modernity. According to Michael Sandel (2012, p. 10) to the extent that the capitalist market economy turns into a market society, the market penetrates more into people's personal and social living spaces and also capitalism, driven by the logic of constantly more profit, together with the pursuit of unlimited self-interest for over-consumption, has produced a consumer market society that does not respect human values. Capitalism is characterized by a tendency towards increasing social inequality and polarization. In fact, inequality in human history did not emerge with capitalism, but the free competition brought about by capitalism has led to a widening of the distance between those who are competitive and those who are not.

With the globalization after 1980's, the circulation of capital accelerated and the income distribution has changed both within the countries themselves and among each other (Sunar & Güvendi, 2020, p. 8). Income distribution is the division of the incomes of the societies from the production by the individuals living in the society. When income distribution does not occur fairly, it leads to income inequality. Income inequality means the disproportionate distribution of income over society, individuals and families (İlgün & Develi, 2020, p. 111). Income inequality in the world is handled in two dimensions: The first is the inequality between countries, which indicates the difference between the income levels of the countries, and the other one is the income inequality between different regions within the country, which is the expression of the disorder of income distribution in a country (Danışoğlu, 2007, p. 229).

At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the income inequality between the world's poorest economy and the richest was estimated to be approximately 1/2, but today this ratio has increased to 1/80 (Rodrik, 2013, p. 14). In other words, while a part of humanity has the opportunity to benefit from eighty percent of the world's wealth, the other part of the population tries to live according to only one percent of this wealth. Global inequality has reached a point where it is becoming increasingly difficult to return. Although it may decrease from time to time, it can be said that inequalities are one of the basic features of modern economy and society. According to Milanovic (2011), the distribution of total income in the world is unequal. Milanovic (2011, p. 7) states that approximately 9% of the world's population receive half of the global income, while the share of the lower income group is 7%, although the share of the population is 50%. Subaşat (2007) and Wade (2004) also state that there has been a significant deterioration in the income distribution in the world since the 1980s. The study of Cornia and Kiiski (2001) shows that in 48 of the 73 countries examined, intra-country inequality has increased since the 1980s. Taken as a whole, the combined wealth of the world's 1,000 richest people is nearly double that of the poorest 2.5 billion people. While the richest 20% of the population consumes 90% of the goods produced, this rate is only about 1% in the poorest 20% (Bauman, 2014, p. 14). The data reveal a growing picture of inequality. According to the 2020 Oxfam Report, the wealth of the world's richest 1% in 2019 was more than double the combined wealth of 6.9 billion people. According to the 2021 Oxfam Report, the total wealth of billionaires in the world increased in 2020, despite the coronavirus pandemic. According to the report, in this unequal world where almost half of the world's population earns less than \$5 a day, the richest 1% earned more than twice as much as half of the planet's population.

It is clear that unequal income distribution in a country will negatively affect the welfare of the country, leading to an increase in problems in areas such as health, nutrition and education, as well as poverty, and intensification of social and political unrest (Gönel, 2013, p. 28). According to Bauman (2013), inequality in income distribution has been reduced to a security problem rather than a social problem. Due to the gap in income distribution, the 'lowclass', which is at the bottom of this wealth distribution, has turned into a mass that does not belong to any class, that is, is actually outside the society. The closure of the poor, who are seen as a threat to the society, or the fact that they are made to work for full stomach, that is, the oppressive and exclusionary treatment of the poor, is actually an indirect warning to other members of the society. In modern capitalist society the poor have been turned into 'flawed consumers' because capitalism no longer needs mass labor for mass production. Unemployment and poverty are increasing in the consumer society. The unemployed and the poor are "fully and truly redundant, useless and disposable things in the consumer society, and there is no 'rational reason' for their continuing presence" (Bauman, 1999, p. 59).

Competition and Game

One of the main criticisms of capitalism is that it necessitates the conditions of competition that constantly recreate itself with the motive of profit improvement. Competition, which is not limited to working life, takes hold of almost every moment and area of the peoples' lives within the capitalist economic order. At the same time, it fosters a profile of human who oppresses the ones considered rivals in both business and private life, who always strives to be superior to competitors, and who believe that all is fair on the road to success. The capitalist system, paving the way for human values to be pushed aside in order not to lose gains based on self-interest, drags people into ruthless competition.

According to Coetzee (2008), who reminded that competition is the glorified form of war, but war is never inevitable, competitive economic segmentation, which is said to be 'by nature' of the world, is also not convincing and competitive economies, namely capitalism, actually emerges through people's decisions and choices. Focusing on the changes in the concept of 'individual' under global capitalism, Bauman (2007, p. 68) states that "individuals find themselves left in a race for scarce and inadequate sources when competition replaces solidarity". Workers are constantly competing to find jobs, employers to find workers, and investors to find loans or reach the market (Çelik & Dağ, 2017, p. 52). In a competitive capitalist system that seeks the cause of poverty and unemployment in the individual, stigmatizing those who lack the skills, intelligence, desire, or ambition required for success, the moral role is undertaken by the market usually emerges as the elimination of people who cannot handle the competition necessitated by business life or who are not competitive enough. Defining the capitalist society as "an anarchic galaxy of selfish worlds", Ollman (2012, p. 324) argues that human relations in the capitalist order are based only on individual interests. Dorling (2011, p. 24), highlighting that the belief that greed is beneficial for a better life, combines with the idea that despair arising from inequality is inevitable, states that the cupidity is served on a plate to all of us. The world order based on inequality and injustice, while turning people into pawns that can easily replace each other, provokes feelings of ruthless competition in all spheres. Because, in this game, "The need to win becomes dominant in conflicts so inevitably that the evil side of humanity always finds free space and considers itself entitled to use every means possible." (Huizinga, 1995, p. 128).

When the areas in which human actions are universally collective are analyzed in depth, it can be clearly seen how vital the concept of the game is to our species. All the actions performed by Homo Sapiens can be associated with the concept of the game. It can even be argued that human civilization emerged and evolved within the 'game', both on a global basis and on a community (nation, race, tribe, organization, group, etc.) basis. In this sense, the cultural function of the game concept has a much stronger constructive structure than is often supposed. In other words, a game refers to an action older and archaic than culture (Huizinga, 2000, p. 14). Byung-Chul Han states in *Psychopolitics* (2019) that the features of the gaming phenomenon such as excitement, success, reward, and not to be slow are taken over by excitement capitalism, emphasizing the gamification of business and communication. This, in turn, has subjected the player to domination. Suits (1978, p. 34) explains the concept of game playing as guided participation in an activity or a story in a guided way, only by following the allowed rules.

In the context of its function in the *Squid Game* series, it will be useful for the study to briefly touch on what the game means in the child's life. The difficulty of defining the game can also be understood from the diversity of ideas developed about the concept. Play, fun and children are concepts that are often thought of together. Discovering and making sense of the world that a child finds himself in is realized thanks to the constructive function of the game

(Sağlam & Aral, 2016). Huizinga (2018, p. 10) emphasizes that the game contains functions that can be considered positive, such as discharging excess energy, relaxation, preparation for the next stages of life, education, as well as functions that can be considered negative such as innate competition, eliminating narcissistic feelings, and dominating.

In fact it shows that, in the Roman period's gladiator fights which the games resulted in death were transformed into a public entertainment, the arena functions as a playground for people to watch a person brutally murdered, and a direct relationship was established between death, game and viewing pleasure (Huizinga, 2018, p. 14), how the concept of game is related to the dark aspects of the human spirit. It is known that in almost all periods of human history, a certain audience or a person forced people to play deadly games for entertainment purposes. In the art of cinema, the relationship between death and game has been the subject of many films. Movies such as *Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012), *Battle Royale* (Fukasaku, 2000), *Saw* (Wan, 2004), *Death Bell* (Yoon, 2008), *Funny Games* (Haneke, 1997), *Cube* (Natali, 1997) are the main films that have almost turned into a sub-genre within the cinema and contain this concept.

Method

Descriptive analysis was used in this study, which aims to show how the game and competition are connected with the capitalist economic order in the *Squid Game* series. In descriptive analysis, which is a descriptive approach based on data (Wolcott, 1994), various events and phenomena are analyzed in relation to concepts and themes related to the predetermined frame. Descriptive analysis is carried out in four stages as frame formation, data processing according to the thematic frame, identification and interpretation of findings (Altunışık et al., 2010, p. 322). The key concepts within the basic frame of this study are capitalism, competition, income inequality and game. In the light of these basic concepts, the narrative structure, ideological and metaphorical structure that emerged in the social, cultural, economic and historical contexts of the series were analyzed.

Capitalism, Competition, and Game in *Squid Game*

Theme of the Series

The story of *Squid Game* (Donk-hyuk, 2021) is about 456 people who are in great financial difficulties for various reasons trying to earn 45 billion Won (approximately thirty-eight million dollars) by playing deadly games. In this competition illegally funded by the wealthiest people in the world, people in financial difficulties are identified and invited to the games in various ways. Although the games to be played are fatal, the people invited to the competition are not aware of this fact at first. The street games played in South Korea in the 1970s and 1980s were designed in such a way that those who lost the game would be killed. At the end of all games, only one of the contestants would be rich as the winner of the game. Even though the motivation to participate in these games varies to some degree from person to person, it is seen that the competitors basically have common characteristics such as economic desperation, indebtedness, unemployment, the hope of rescuing the sick relatives, the shame of being at the bottom of the pile, the effort to quench the greed of oppression, the tendency to violence created by being economically lower class, and social exclusion. Especially the first two episodes of the series build on the impacts of neoliberalism on human psychology and psyche and the emergence of despair perception in different forms.

Analysis of the Series

Squid Game, which builds its narrative on the character of Seong Gi-Hun, is a series that creates its own universe. At the beginning of the series, the focus is on the life of Seong Gi-Hun,

a lazy, childlike, humane, and well-intentioned character who tries to live on the quite low earnings of his elderly mother. Gi-Hun is a debt-ridden gambler who constantly disappoints her daughter and her ex-wife. The fact that his wife divorced him and married a presentable, neat but cold person is also associated with these characteristics of Gi-Hun. This main character gambles with the money he stole from his mother in the first episode. He is on a roll and he wins a horse race, but he is robbed by a pickpocket. In the next scene, we see Gi-Hun, head over heels in debt, is forced to sign a contract by his creditors. The critique of neoliberalism that will span the entire series begins with these scenes. Although the main character is a good person, he is a non-starter and outcasted individual. Because achieving success in modern life requires economic success under all circumstances. The fact that making money from betting is so common can be read as a symbolic expression of how economic success is the measure of all things. In today's world, it is not important what individuals do or how much effort they put into something, but only what they have. Betting games, where mathematically there is a slight probability of winning, are considered the first way out, especially by the poor masses. Because, among their options, betting is the one that will bring earning the fastest. In this context, it is seen that the concepts emphasized in the literature review part of the study came to the fore at the very beginning of the series. The first is Bauman's (2010, p. 26) emphasis that the world today is perceived by people as a cramped container filled with fear and frustration. The second is the uncertainty derived from the first structure. The modern person, in this world where everything is uncertain, feels like a lab rat trying to escape from an interminable chaotic structure. The main character, at the very beginning of the series, signs a contract that he will give his internal organs if he cannot pay his debt. In this way, the series reveals that even one's own body cannot belong to oneself in this system.

Following these initiatory plans, the storyline of the *Squid Game* is rapidly evolving. A person who is dressed extremely stylish and looks like a human resources manager of a company approaches Gi-Hun, who is sitting helplessly at the subway station, and offers the main character to play a fairly simple children's game. In this scene, the audience also witnesses how the main character, Seong Gi-Hun, is invited to the game. The person who comes to him has two game squares, one red and one blue. In the game to be played, Gi-Hun will receive 100,000 Won per round he wins, but in return for the rounds he loses, the person offering the game will slap him.



Image 1: The main character of the film, Seong Gi-Hun, is invited to the game through red and blue envelopes.

Being in a desperate situation, the main character accepts the game as he has nothing to lose in an economic manner. In this scene, the use of blue and red colors, which became popular in the cinematic and iconic sense with the movie *Matrix* (Lana Wachowski & Lilly Wachowski, 1999), comes to the fore. In the *Matrix*, while the red pill symbolized reality, the blue pill represented the virtual, in other words, the unreal. The truth can be reached when the right choice is made in the Matrix universe.



Image 2: The scene of Neo choosing the red pill in Matrix



Image 3: Players and guards in Squid Game

In the *Squid Game*, these two colors create a double-layered representation. First of all, since the ones invited to the game are desperate people, they will enter the Squid Game universe whether they choose the color blue or the color red. They will enter the game as players if they choose the blue color while choosing red means entering the game as the guard who will kill the players. However, they will be left out of the Squid Game universe if they refuse the game. In such a case, as will be seen in the first episode, a place as challenging as the Squid Game universe awaits these people. This place is the real world referred to as *Hell* in the series.

Regarding the red and blue squares, the director of the series, Hwang Dong-Hyuk, says that these colors are inspired by an ancient Japanese legend, *Aka Manto*. According to Japanese legend, when people were sitting on the toilet, Aka Manto in a red cape appeared and asked them if they wanted red or blue toilet paper. Those who choose red are stabbed and those who choose blue are strangled to death by Aka Manto. The only way to be freed from the game is to not choose any color persistently (Challaye, 1997, p. 108). In other words, not involving in the game is seen as the best solution, in both theories. However, the game is built on characters that are impossible not to enter, in *Squid Game*. In this context, mentioning Foucault's concept of *biopolitics* will be beneficial to gain an insight into the deadlock described by the *Squid Game* series. Michel Foucault (2007, p. 103) states that the absolute and dramatic structure created by the abolition of sovereign power with the development of capitalism has evolved into a panoptic regulative power that controls life. However, in today's world, now a surplus value emerges far beyond what even governments or those who hold capital can consume.

In this sense, Baumann (2018, p. 17) defines today's society as "waste people or wasted people (surplus or redundant people, those who are excluded from the unregistered for compulsory reasons or knowingly/willingly), in his book *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*. Redundant people are also the ones who are excluded from society, whose dignity and honor are trampled down by society, who are undesirable, and who constitute a surplus. This exclusion dehumanizes the people anyway; the human is a psychosocial being. In the economic structure that emerged as a result of the transition from industrial capitalism to financial capitalism, the number and economic power of oligarchs, which are extremely individual financial structures, has increased to an unprecedented degree in history. The increase in the number of oligarchs inevitably damaged the understanding of the social state, because the gap in income inequalities has made it meaningless to serve people without financial power and left it to the discretion of those who have financial power. Baumann (2018) drew attention to unemployment, depression, and future anxiety surrounded by uncertainty in this new unrest that oppressed young people towards the end of the 20th century, stating that the unemployment is used in a way that blames the large masses who are somehow discarded and sacrificed and it emphasizes their incompetence, but this is clearly not the case. According to him, today, humanity seems to have turned its own lineage into waste in an unprecedented

way. This phenomenon which Bauman calls the ‘**human waste** disposal industry’ (emphasis in original), is at the center of the *Squid Game* and is highlighted beginning from the opening scenes of the series. The main reason for this phenomenon to occur is the ‘inequality’ in the social structure. The director of the series, Hwang Dong-Hyuk, also explains in an interview that the story basically upon the concept of inequality in a very simple way:

Dong-Hyuk: ... The series is inspired by something very simple, the fact that we struggle in very unequal conditions throughout our lives. I started thinking about the Squid Game in 2009 during the global crisis. I was in financial trouble since my mother had retired. I was reading survival games-themed comics like Battle Royal and I asked myself would I join these games if they are in real life. But this story reflects the global situation, not just South Korea. We live in a Squid Game world. (Guardian)

As the director has pointed out, we are in an era in which Foucault’s concept of biopolitics has evolved. Governments no longer even need to control the masses and people have turned into waste, as Baumann defines them. When the opening sequences of the series are analyzed, a clear representation of these phenomena related to the modern world is encountered. Gi-Hun, the main character of the *Squid Game*, gets the money promised to him by winning a game after losing the game offered to him many times and being slapped, such that the series shows the first clues that the power can exercise any control over people’s bodies for a fee. The person who suggested the game gives Gi-Hun a card with a phone number on it and offer to participate in a game that can solve all of his problems. The main character calls the number after thinking a while and agrees to participate in the game.



Image 4: *Players and guards in Squid Game*

As the plot unfolds, the audience sees those who agree to play the game, wearing uniform blue sweatpants, gathered in an unknown place reminiscent of the Nazi camps. All players wake up in a single large ward. On their clothes, sequential numbers are written. A group of men in red masks says they must play six games to win the big prize money, and whoever wins them all will get the promised prize. When one of the competitors asks why they have to play these games, the guards state that they are all in heavy debt, hence they must play these games to survive. In this episode also, a clear representation of the panoptic view, which is a Foucault concept, can be found. Power is absolutely invisible and behind masks, competitors are incapable in the face of power, in the most abstract form of even their identities, consisting of numbers. On the other hand, as the series forward, the layered structure of the point that the panoptic view has reached in the neo-liberal stage is revealed. Panoptic is defined as the surveillance mechanism of power at the first level in the Foucauldian sense. In *Squid Game*, the people who wear red dresses and different masks according to their ranks, called guards, constantly observe the contestants and point to this first-level panoptic view. However, the guards are also subjected to a panoptic control process by an advanced power. With this panoptic universe’s expansion, the highest class in the series, which can be

defined as the bosses, is elevated from a position where no one can recognize them with their sophisticated masks and they are omnipotent, to a hyper-panoptic structure where they can see and control everything with a divine gaze. In the series, this multi-layered panoptic structure is represented in four tiers. However, the symbols used highlight the formation of a neoliberal-panoptic spiral in which the 'real' power cannot be known in any way. The main reason for this panoptic structure is the inequality situation that arises with the extreme deterioration in income distribution, which can be said to constitute the core of the series.

As stated in the study, the *Squid Game* has a plot structured through the actions, past, and future of the main character Gi-Hun. In the ward they are in, Gi-Hun encounters his childhood friend Cho Sang-Woo, with whom he will establish a long-term alliance, in the games to be played. Cho Sang-Woo grew up in the same neighborhood as Gi-Hun and is known as the most intelligent person in that neighborhood. Everyone thinks that Cho Sang-Woo, who entered Korea's top university with ranking first, is a very successful businessman. However, Cho Sang-Woo is in heavy debt due to various crimes such as embezzlement and fraud, and therefore he had to agree to enter the game they were in. It is thought that the positioning of this character as the second main character in the series aims to demonstrate the structures of today's neoliberal economic order. Because capitalism was propagating that it was an egalitarian economic model through education, especially in the initial and mid-phases. In these phases, any working people could receive a university education and move up from the lower economic class into the well-off economic class called the middle class. Indeed, such a situation was valid for both capital owners who needed a qualified labor force and people who were candidates for this class. Even, for some people from the lowest economic class, it was possible to have the opportunity to move to the middle class firstly and then to the upper class, both theoretically and practically, and it did realize from time to time. However, in the advanced capitalist phase, this need decreased and even began to decline rapidly.

"Saturation Point", which is again a capitalist economic term, requiring critical analysis for companies, has now become an expression that defines the point of skilled and unskilled labor in the market. In this new phase, the market, which no longer needs skilled workforce, started to recruit skilled workforce first with a high median salary, at a phase that can be considered a historical turning point (saturation) and debited these people with loans such as a mortgage with a maturity of thirty years. Then, these people are terminated and left in various whirlpools (stock jobbing, constant reloaning, etc.) that allowed them to borrow constantly. For the global capitalist stage, this process constitutes the basic mechanism that causes the middle class to disappear and perhaps became even worse than the lower class. The Oxfam Report, which is also mentioned in the theoretical part of the study, points out that a very small part of the world's population owns a very large part of the total wealth. The vortex created by this hyper-unequal economic distribution is exhibited through the character of Cho Sang-Woo, who represents the middle class in the drama. Cho Sang-Woo is exactly what capitalism wanted for the 1990s when he started college; he entered the best school, got into the department of business administration, which was the most popular department of the period, constituting the basic workforce in terms of management and organization of the capital owners. However, the changes that took place in the capitalist economy within a very short time transformed even a person who was trained for the system into a 'waste human' in Baumann's term.

The first game that the contestants have to play in the *Squid Game* is the "Red Light, Green Light". With the playing of this game, a significant and terrible paradigm shift takes place for both the players and the audience.



Image 5: "Red Light, Green Light" game in the Squid Game

In this first game, all the contestants are in an open space and a giant doll model is standing right in front of them. The rules of the game seem quite simple; the contestants can walk when the model girl turns her back on the contestants by singing but they have to stop when the model girl suddenly stops singing and turns to face the actors. This standstill action is carried out with very sensitive measurements especially for the *Squid Game*, at the slightest movement of the players, the sensors in the eyes of the model girl come into play and eliminate the contestant. In this way, the contestants must reach the white line right in front of the model girl from their point without being caught by the sensors. *Squid Game* takes a very radical stage at this point. Because if the model girl detects one or more contestants moving through sensors, she kills them with a machine gun. At the end of this first game, the number of people reaching the finish line is almost equal to the number of dead. In other words, half of those who participated in the game died in this game. At this point, the series focuses on the shock of the participants in the competition. Then, the voting process, which is one of the rules of the *Squid Game*, starts. If more than half of the contestants decide to leave the game as a result of voting, the game will be ended.



Image 6: Voting in the Squid Game



Image 7: Oh Il-nam – Designer of the games in the Squid Game

When the voting is tied, the vote of Oh Il-Nam, number 001, the oldest of the contestants, will decide the fate of the contestants. After thinking for a long time, Oh Il-Nam votes to temporarily end the game. Following this stage, the contestants will return to their homes, and after, the second game will continue with those who want to return to the game. In the last episodes of the series, it will reveal that Oh Il-Nam is a very rich oligarch and among the head of the people who designed the game, so has a very sheltered position within this competition. However, at this stage, neither the other contestants nor the viewers have this information yet. The reason why Oh Il-Nam joined this game is that he is too rich to enjoy no longer anything and therefore he wanted to play the *Squid Game*, a simulation of the games he played when he was little. At the end of this first episode, it is understood that the area where the *Squid Game* takes place is an island just like where the *Survivor* TV show takes place. Completely isolated from the outer world, this island is a law-free zone designed to

be invisible even to satellites, aiming to quell the wild emotions of the hyper-rich. The series can be read as an irony of Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1981), one of the most important symbols of enlightenment thought. *Squid Game* discloses the bloody dystopia created at the point where the idea of enlightenment has reached. Frankfurt School intellectuals Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2010), state that technological progress does not bring about development either in a humanistic manner, modernization not only fail to realize the happiness promised to humanity but also built a bloodier world, and the capitalism also destroys rational thought such as compassion and humanity feelings as it progresses.



Image 8: After the first game is over, the island of *Squid Game* turns into a closed space, indistinguishable from the outside.

The name of the second episode of the *Squid Game* series is **Hell**. After the infernal end of the first episode, the fact that the second episode is called Hell can be read as a sign of a bloodier episode. However, the second part illustrates the everyday world rather than being bloody. Because the majority of the overwhelming contestants decide to return to the competition, thinking that their living conditions are worse than even the world of *Squid Game*. Meanwhile, the main character of the series, Seong Gi-Hun, goes to the police and tells what happened on Squid Game Island, but he cannot convince anyone. Even the attempt to spread such gossip is soon neutralized. In this sense, it is understood that those who dominate the *Squid Game* universe also dominate the current world. It is almost as if an invisible hand arranges everything the way this wealthy ruling class wishes. Of course, this invisible hand may be interpreted as a reference to the famous economist Adam Smith's (2008, p. 485) idea that "*an invisible hand* will regulate the market if the elements that make up the market act only in their own interests". The invisible hand of the market now causes only a selected minority to become completely invisible. This invisible hand forces over 200 people to enter a death game for money, in which there is only one winner and the others die.

The end of the second episode of *Squid Game* represents the entire neoliberal conceptual construction and criticism of the series, which is also mentioned in the theoretical part of the study. A total of five games are played in seven episodes, after the second episode of the series and in the end, Gi-Hun, the only survivor among 456 people, becomes the winner of the prize money. While the last two deadly games are being played, a group of VIP (who invest capital for the game's design) viewers comes to the island to watch the competition in person. These VIPs who come to the island bet on players with astronomical money. In this way, the audience comprehend also how these games are financed and designed.



Image 9: *VIP customers coming to Squid Game island*

As mentioned in the theoretical part, it is possible to find Baumann's entire analysis of neoliberal society in *Squid Game*. At the present stage, inequality in income distribution has gone beyond being a social problem. Income distribution inequality, which can be called Post-Human inequality, today extends far beyond dividing people into classes such as lower/middle/upper class and it has transformed the masses, who make up more than half of the social pyramid in terms of population, into redundant, useless, and disposable, waste people. This structure is depicted with a trenchant style in the *Squid Game*. For VIP people, the poorest, or lowest class is in a state of waste, but also the disposal of this waste has turned into a means of entertainment for the VIP class. In other words, large masses have turned into pawns in the game for the class called VIP. The game, which has a multi-layered structure, has different meanings for those who perform it and those who watch it. While the game turns into a pendulum swinging between life and death for the contestants in the series, for the VIP class, it is the object of pleasure and entertainment that can only be resolved through the death of people. This radical distinction between the spectator and the performer also points to a strong connection between the *Squid Game* universe and the Roman gladiator fights.

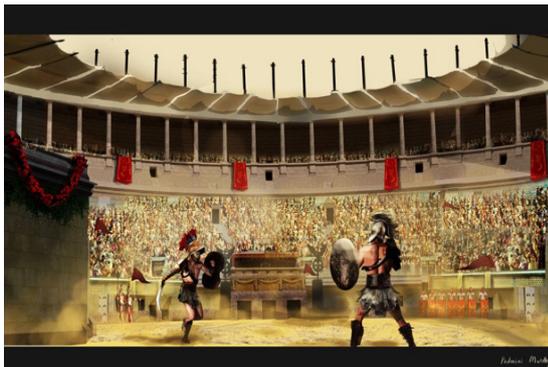


Image 10: *Gladiator fights*



Image 11: *The last game in the Squid Game series. One of the players in the arena will die and the VIPs are watching them.*

It can be said that Byung-Chul Han's conceptualization of *psychopolitics* within the scope of the analyze today's world is used together with a historical background such as the gladiator fights in Rome, creating a distinctive dramaturgical background for the series. As Han (2019) stated, a new process gamified by *excitement capitalism* has begun to dominate all of life. The person playing the game is subject to domination and therefore the titles that Huizinga defines as 'the positive functions of the game' are invalidated particularly for *Squid Game*. The fact that the positive features of the game such as teaching and exploring the world have disappeared, that the entertainment has turned into a tool only revealing the sadistic

feelings of the audience, and that the ties established between play, death, and the pleasure demonstrate the savage structuring created by the dark aspects of humanity. In this context, *Squid Game* depicts an archaic feature of humanity and how this archaic feature is structured within the neoliberal system. The subject here, on the one hand, is that there are viewers watching people when they are getting killed for pleasure, and on the other hand, there are people who risk death for money or allow or even cause the death of their opponents.

The last tie to be established between *Squid Game* and the neoliberal economic structure in connection with the theoretical part is the phenomenon of *competition*. Many capitalist thinkers argue that there is a direct relationship between human evolution and competition. According to these thinkers, the capitalist economy is compatible with human nature and evolution in this sense. In other words, there must be a constant struggle to live, and this is a sublime concept for human life. Criticizing this assumption, Coetzee (2008) emphasizes that competitive economies are the result of people's choices. Also, Baumann (2018) states that individuals who prefer competition instead of solidarity can use every means possible to reach scarce resources, and in this case, people will inevitably feel lonely and abandoned. Similarly, according to Olmann (2012), the individuation of humans strengthens the chaotic and anarchic structure of the world, while Dorling (2011) underlines that the constant release of this malignant side of humans, loaded with the desire to win, causes them to see themselves as justified to go all lengths win in the game of life. In the series, all the aforementioned theoretical approaches to competition are represented, both in the real world and within *the Squid Game*. Competitors who pay for failure with their lives do not see any harm in doing anything imaginable, such as breaking the rules, deceiving others, killing the competitor in front of them, and also making attacks during non-game times to win the game. In each game played on the Squid Game Island, the rules of the game are more or less violated, and the organizers of the games tolerate the violation of the rules to a certain extent. That this situation is also valid in the real world is made clear in the second part of the series. Therefore, it is possible to read the entire *Squid Game* universe as an analogy to the contemporary capitalist system. Competitors on the Squid Game Island have to use all means within their abilities to reach the scarce resource, which means the morality of neoliberal economics is manifested. However, the fact that Gi-Hun, who won the competition, did not withdraw the grand prize from the bank, at the final of the series and leads a miserable, depressive, and chaotic life actually symbolizes that there cannot be a winner in this game. As Baumann (2018) states, "*even the winners of this game have lost*", because this economic structure makes people feel lonely and abandoned. The most important proof of this situation is the dialogue between Oh Il-Nam, the old man who designed the game, and Gi-Hun:

Seong Gi-Hun: *Why did you do such a thing??*

Oh Il-Nam: *Do you know what a rich person and a person with no money have in common? Life is not pleasant for either of them. When you have a lot of money, everything starts to get boring eventually wherever you go, whatever you eat or drink. At a point, all my wealthy clients told me the same thing, that they no longer have any joy in life. So, we all got together and made the Squid Game to have some fun.*



Image 12: In the final episode of *Squid Game*, Oh Il-nam and Seong Gi-hun got even with.

This scene demonstrates that everything has lost its meaning in the eyes of people brutalized by wild capitalism, and even revealed human life has no value.

Conclusion

Since its release, *The Squid Game* has maintained by far the title of being the most-watched series and content of the Netflix platform, the world's largest content producer. While the total watch time of the fourth season of its closest rival, *Stranger Things* (Duffer & Duffer, 2016), is 1.325 million hours, the total watch time of *Squid Game* has reached 1.65 billion hours¹. This radical difference that *Squid Game* has created in the number of views results from a combination of many elements. The climate of fear created by the neoliberal economy is undoubtedly a leading one among these elements. While the fundamental dynamics that form the core of the capitalist economy and free market increase the number of super-rich people around the world, on the other hand, even beyond the level that can be called poor, a class described as 'human waste' has begun to appear. As mentioned in the study, this sociological phenomenon has affected many philosophers. After the Enlightenment, the phenomenon of humanism was accepted as the core of the social, at least by rooted and decisive institutions such as states and daily life was largely shaped through this intellectual structure. However, the neoliberal economy started to create a super-rich minority, especially in the 2000s, and the questions that are the main problem of philosophy such as "What is human?", "What does life mean?" have begun to be asked frequently by more people both more. The idea that humans can be seen as a surplus or waste stands at a quite critical point in terms of their existence because the emergence of a field between the two opposing groups, **the super-rich** and **the super-poor** (debtors), in which the meaning of existence must be tested will be inevitable due to this situation. The rich desire to test what money can do, while the poor feel that being rich will ensure a meaningful existence. Based on this phenomenon, the *Squid Game* series can be interpreted as the structuring of a fictional space where the super-rich and super-poor test their existence through cinematic images. At this point, it is worth emphasizing that the series is not a reality that took place anywhere in the world, but a fictional structure. Because one of the main factors that make the series so impressive is that it creates not the reality of everyday life, but the reality of the fictional and cinematic. Using the fundamental instruments of the dramatic structure effectively, the series reveals a reality that has penetrated into daily life but cannot be seen with the naked eye. For this reason, it can be stated that it has a narrative structure using the dramatic form in a classical way but strongly. As examined in the analysis chapter, the narrative of the series largely overlaps with the dramatic narrative structure, especially the storytelling strategies of Paul Joseph Gulino and Connie Shears (2019, p. 199).

¹ <https://www.cnet.com/tech/services-and-software/netflix-biggest-hit-shows-and-movies-ranked-according-to-netflix/>

Gulino and Shears's dramatic narrative form which can be summarized as the introduction, description of dramatic elements, provocative event, dramatic problem, hero's attempt to solve the problem, moments of failure, moments of crisis, the dramatic structure's getting complicated, solving the visible part of the dramatic problem, and revealing hidden truths is almost entirely implemented in the *Squid Game*. Therefore, the series does not describe reality itself as a documentary. However, by metaphorizing the deep philosophical and psychological structure of reality, it makes it visible in cinematic form.

Another factor that makes *Squid Game*² so popular is the legacy of the cinema from distant and recent history. Since its emergence, cinema has functioned as the entertainment of the working class, not the elite class (Abisel, 2003, p. 52). This phenomenon, which had existed at the beginning of the cinema, has largely preserved its impact. Hence, cinema is generally considered a mass art. Here, what is implied by the word 'mass' is the people who make up the vast majority of the population including the poor and middle class. As a natural consequence of this, cinema has been a branch of art that deals with the problems of the broad masses of the public when the problems are still current. For this reason, the sub-genre called *political cinema* has an important and prestigious position in the art of cinema. The *Squid Game* mini-series has greatly benefited from this historical vein of cinema while also contributing to it. Because, the destruction caused by the great gap in income inequality, which is the main theme of the series, on the world and people was handled at the time when it was just beginning to emerge and it was transformed into cinematic images in accordance with the viewing habits of large masses. It can be stated that the recent history of cinema has moved with the sociological and philosophical infrastructure of our age, just like in the long-term history of cinema. In the post-2000 period, the fact that daily life began to turn into a competitive environment to a large extent and people were crushed under this intense psychological pressure was reflected simultaneously in the cinema. Numerous films such as *Battle Royale* (Fukasaku, 2000), *Cube* (Natali, 1997), *Saw* (Wan, 2004), *The Method* (Pineyro, 2005), *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012), *Circle* (Hann & Miscione, 2015), *The Purge* (DeMonaco, 2013) have dealt with the themes of competition, death, play, rich, poor, and despair with similar patterns. Moreover, in recent years, political films have started to win the most important awards both in festivals dominated by artistic cinema such as Cannes Film Festival and in ceremonies dominated by popular films such as the Oscar awards. In this sense, *Parasite* (Joon Ho, 2019) which won the four most important Oscar awards, including the best film, at the 2020 Academy Awards after receiving the grand prize at the Cannes Film Festival, has become a turning point in the history of cinema. The fact that a non-English speaking South Korean film, focusing on income injustice, won the best film award for the first time in the history of the Academy Awards has brought the popularity of the subject to the extreme in the cinema. It can be stated that all these developments and accumulation in the cinema industry have prepared the sociological, philosophical, and aesthetic basis of *Squid Game*, which is also a South Korean production. The fact that the series became iconic in a very short time in almost all countries of the world and broke viewing records is also also the result of the well-structured of this intellectual and aesthetic process by the producer and director. Because *Squid Game* is among the rare productions that can combine children's games, which have a nostalgic tone in the life of anyone who has reached a certain age, with art and costume design, and also their own universe in a way that can leave a mark on the audience.

Rising income inequality around the world is the product of a corrupt and exploitative economic system and is rooted in neoliberal economics. In *Squid Game*, the extreme point of income inequality that the capitalist system can potentially create, even in economically advanced and wealthy countries with low violence rates is represented in a South Korea

² In the study, the *Squid Game* mini-series is considered a nine-hour cinematic narrative.

example. Within this context, the series *Squid Game* reveals the damage that the current indicators in the practical field have created on the psychology of the masses. The problems experienced by the heroes of the series also expose the inequality and cruelty of the system. In the series, the game of life-or-death, in which people whose main motivation is money, embarked on at the cost of their lives to get rid of their financial desperation is, in a way, a reflection of the brutal living conditions in the real world where lack of money also means death. In this sense, *Squid Game* depicts the possible structure of a dystopian society in the not-too-distant future if radical measures are not taken as soon as possible.

In the series, the moral dilemmas of today's modern capitalist society are exhibited and it is tried to be shown that the brutal and ruthless competition that has become the cornerstone of relations between people is not limited to working life. Capitalist societies are markets of self-regulating encounters where competition is more intense and more general, governed by subjective factors such as personal taste, entertainment, personality. So-called individualism, liberal hedonism means only an order in which each man for himself (Virilio, 2003, p. 36). Throughout the games in the *Squid Game* series, the players become both victims and offenders of this deadly competitive game. The moral dilemma that we often see in the games is repeated in the protagonist's inability to spend the money he obtained by cheating. The struggle is not only between death and life, but also between being human and being human.

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