

"SQUID GAME": Fulgurance and authenticity

Philippe Li – 이준

The Netflix series "Squid Game" launched on September 17, 2021 has met with unprecedented success, breaking all audience records of various television platforms. Within a few weeks, it has managed to enthuse viewers of all ages around the world. We have analyzed the reasons for the success of "Squid Game" and have identified different ways of reading Korean society based on several themes covered by the series (without spoilers).

"Squid Game": a global success

A Korean series without any international stars shot entirely in Korean, which could have been a simple success - everyone immediately thought of "Parasite". However, it was the extent of the phenomenon that surprised the most. As soon as it was launched, "Squid Game" generated an immense craze.

On October 12, the series became Netflix's best-ever launch with 111 million views in 17 days, ranking #1 in more than 90 countries (by the end of 2021, the total number of Netflix subscribers was 221 million). Netflix estimates that it has gained as many as 4.4 million additional subscribers thanks to "Squid Game". According to Bloomberg estimates, the series could have generated more than 780 million Euros in "impact value" for Netflix.

The series has also turned out to be a social phenomenon all over the world; everyone has heard about it, even in North Korea. A young North Korean boy was reportedly sentenced to death for smuggling the series and selling it to other students.

The basic plot of "Squid Game" is relatively simple: 456 people in desperate financial situations find themselves on a clandestine site in order to participate in six competitions, the winner of which will receive the astronomical sum of 45.6 million won (the equivalent of 32 million Euros). For all the other participants, the penalty of defeat will simply be death.

The main protagonist of the series, Seong Gi Hun, is played by the actor Lee Jung Jae. He is the most famous star in the cast. Lee Jung Jae plays the role of a debt-ridden outsider living off his mother, who runs a small vegetable business in a market.

Cho Sang Hoo is played by the actor Park Hae Soo. He symbolizes the archetype of the Korean elite in the world of finance. However, Sang Hoo has gone down the wrong path, compromising himself in risky schemes, leading him to various breaches of trust and to build up an astronomical and irrecoverable debt.

The role of Kang Sae Byeok is played by Ho Yeon Jung. She plays a North Korean defector who wants to win the jackpot to allow her family to escape from North Korea and ensure a future for her little brother, who is being raised in an orphanage. Ho Yeon Jung is a model by profession. This is her first time on screen as an actress, but you never get the impression that she is a novice.

Oh Yong Soo, who plays the senior of the group suffering from a brain tumor, is played by Oh

Il Nam.

Ali Abdul, who plays the role of Anupam Tripathi is the other revelation of the series. He plays a Pakistani illegal worker on the run for unintentionally causing an accident to his boss.

At the US Screen Actors Guild Awards on February 27, 2022, "Squid Game" won no less than three awards. The first award was the "Outstanding Action Performance by a Stunt Ensemble in a TV Series Award". Jung Ho Yeon and Lee Jung Jae took home the trophies for Best Actress (while competing with Jennifer Aniston and Resse Whisperspoon) and Best Actor. This is the first time in the history of these awards that such honors have been given to non-English speaking performers.

Genesis of the series

The director Hwang Dong Hyuck is also the scriptwriter. In 2008, he had proposed his script to different producers but without success. The plot was too dark and did not receive any attention. So he had put it in his drawers until recently. It was with the success of "webtoons", and the world becoming harsher, that he began to believe he would be able to find a more receptive audience for his project. He contacted Netflix, which had just launched in Korea, and turned his film idea into a series. Hwang says he drew on his own memories of the 2008 crisis, during which he was heavily in debt, to describe the precarious situation in which the protagonists find themselves. In addition, he did not hide having drawn his inspiration from survival game comics or Japanese animation films.

The reasons for success

Internationally, the series "Squid Game" has been very well received, although the scenes of violence have been the subject of much criticism. According to "The Guardian", the series highlights the nature of a horrific thriller that captivates the audience by highlighting social inequalities in Korea.

According to "Télérama", "The sense of drama typical of Korean series hits the mark once again... One comes to wish that a game of massacre continues, provoking a slight unease here and there, but which is followed to the end with a delightful feeling of guilt".

The Korean film critic Kang Yoo Jung explains the success of the series by the realism of the realization and its opposition to the stereotypes of Hollywood blockbusters. There are no superheroes and no happy endings.

The "Squid Game" phenomenon was so powerful and the themes conveyed by the series were so striking that they almost ended up overshadowing what the series owed to the talent of filmmaker Hwang Dong Hyuck, because the success of Squid Game is primarily his own. Hwang Dong Hyuk previously directed five films, the latest of which were "수상한그녀" ("Miss Granny") and "남한산성" ("The Fortress").

"Miss Granny" tells the story of a Korean grandmother who finds herself through the effect of

a miraculous mutation with the physical envelope of a young woman while retaining her consciousness as an elderly person. Starting as a hilarious comedy, the film gradually shifts into a bitter-sweet register, and develops a melancholic reflection on the passing of time. A historical film based on real events, "The Fortress" tells the story of the siege of Namhansong Fortress (located south of Seoul and still open to the public) by Qing troops in the 17th century. There are hardly any real action scenes, except for the finale, but the film is captivating throughout with its dramatic tension.

When you see "Squid Game" and these two films, you'd be hard pressed to believe that they were made by the same person, which demonstrates the director's great eclecticism.

New media, new audiences

The extent of the success of "Squid Game" can be explained by the emergence of new media and television platforms.

In the past, the distribution of a film or series was done in a progressive way and the career of a film or series could be spread over long periods.

Today, the use of the Internet and social networks means that information of any kind is spread instantly around the world. Symmetrically, for television platforms like Netflix that have adopted a policy of global coverage, no lag between territories is conceivable. Subscribers to these platforms are eager for information and news and want to be able to exchange their impressions without any form of restriction. This impatient and demanding public must be satisfied instantly.

Thus, the success of a film or a series launched on a platform is determined in a few days and when the public responds, the product will spread exponentially.

What is so special about "Squid Game"?

At the beginning, the main asset of "Squid Game" was that it succeeded in arousing a very strong curiosity in the public. Everyone was intrigued by the creation of an atypical universe (through the title, the decorum and the costumes) and wanted to know more. From then on, the scripting and directing skills specific to the series allowed to captivate the public because "Squid Game" was obviously built according to the rules of the genre; that is to say with a plot based on enigmas and a suspense going crescendo until the twist at the end of each episode.

Moreover, the series was obviously designed to appeal to the Netflix target audience.

According to various studies, 70% of subscribers belong to Generation Z, and 10% to Millennials; 15-34 year olds represent more than 75% of subscribers in the US and 50% in France. The Netflix audience has no preconceived notions and is open to all genres or types of productions. The unlimited self-service at home means that all productions have a chance. A Korean film can reach the whole world as well as an American blockbuster.

The viewer will also recognize the world of video games that has already been found in films like "Black Mirror" or "Hunger Games" but in an extremely dramatized form. The plot of the

series also gives an impression of déjà-vu for fans of reality TV shows (like "Survivor" in the United States, Koh Lanta in France or "Running Man" in Korea) with added tragedy and violence.

Korean quality

The director explained that the series also owes its success to the popularity of Korean cultural productions, which now constitute a market of their own. Now, fans know that if they go to a Korean production, they will find a very specific quality. Moreover, the success of "Parasite" has undeniably played a catalytic role. "Squid Game" might never have been so successful if "Parasite" had not existed. "Parasite" also helped to arouse the curiosity of the audience who expected a mysterious plot full of surprises.

The series also offers a patchwork of themes that we have seen recently in various Korean films and series (thriller, darkness, action, violence, gore, gangsters ...). We also find in "Squid Game" the characteristics of Korean cinematographic or television productions (Kingdom, Dr Brain, Hellbound...): realism, originality, speed, percussion and a dramatic intensity that keeps the spectator under tension, so much so that after having seen a Korean production, we sometimes feel a sense of dullness when we see a film or a series from another country.

The Korean film style also reflects the country's lifestyle and vitality, which is reflected on screen by speed, flexibility and a form of fulgurance.

Just like Korean technological innovation, audiovisual creation also relies on being en par with modernity, to have a fine reading of the world and to provide a production perfectly in tune with its time.

Authenticity

When asked about the reasons for the success of the series, Hwang said he was inspired by very intimate things from his personal life and childhood (the market, games, including the famous "Squid Game" ...), convinced that the authenticity of the subject would allow him to reach a wider audience.

Today, authenticity is key. The public is looking for real experiences of otherness, and it is no longer necessary to try to show oneself as different from what one is, to want to seduce or to put a filter on for an international public. It is not so long ago that the Seoul City Council (in 2015) paid the Avengers production a sum close to 4 million USD so that part of the filming would take place in Seoul and to make the city appear high tech and modern, but the result was very disappointing. "Parasite", through the immersion in a working class district of Seoul not necessarily appearing very glamorous, has certainly done more for the image of Seoul than "Avengers".

We can say that Korean audiovisual creation is the opposite of glocalization. It starts from a fundamentally Korean product to conquer and captivate international audiences without trying to bury its essence.

A Means of understanding Korea

Many commentators have been tempted to see "Squid Game" as a critique of the Korean system and a capitalism based on social inequality, and have been tempted to make an amalgam with "Parasite". The director replied that he did not try to focus on Korea, but rather wanted to show that the global economic order was unequal. Nevertheless, many other themes that run through the series offer different ways of reading Korean society.

Spirit of competition (경쟁)

The central theme of "Squid Game" is competition. Korea's accelerated economic development owes much to the competitive spirit that drove the country and is still an engine of growth today. To survive in the Korean environment, no one can afford not to be competitive. In the show as in real life, competition is often ruthless. There is no room for losers.

Success (성공)

There is also an underlying obsession with success, which is largely associated with wealth in Korea. In order to succeed, everyone must devote every conceivable resource to it. However, some will not hesitate to use any means, as the series shows through the spinelessness of some protagonists.

Collective spirit (공동의식)

The participants will at some point have to band together and form teams to pass a test, a situation well known in Korea where people are conditioned to work together. "Squid Game" shows in this episode that the secret of collective success lies in the ability to act in a coordinated manner.

Exacerbation (극단론)

The series also illustrates the Korean sense of exacerbation. Desperation leads the protagonists to put their lives on the line to compete. One is often struck by the level of commitment Koreans have to their resolutions, which seems to have no limits. The flip side of exacerbation is the excesses that leave no room for balance (violence of certain conflicts, desperate acts, suicides...). The outrageous violence of "Squid Game" also reflects this exacerbation.

Reunification of Korea (통일)

The theme of North Korea is not essential, but through the role of the defector who aspires to reconstitute her family unit, we can see a parable of the old dream of reunification.

Sacrifice (희생)

In one episode of the series, some participants will be asked to sacrifice themselves for others. In the past, children from disadvantaged families have been known to give up their education to work so that their younger siblings can continue their education. During the financial crisis of '97, employees also agreed not to be paid to give their company a chance to recover.

Sexism (성차별)

In one episode of the show, women are openly portrayed as disadvantaged compared to men. Sexism is unfortunately a well-known reality in Korea, as evidenced by the heated debates on feminism that have been seen recently

A step forward for Korean soft power

The Duolingo Inc. app reported that in the two weeks following the broadcast of the series, interest in learning the Korean language increased by 76% in the UK and 40% in the US.

In addition, Netflix has announced that it will spend \$500 million on original content in Korea in 2022 (with "Squid Game 2" already announced).

The triumph of "Squid Game", like that of "Parasite", has become a consecration for Korea as a whole and is a new step forward for Korean soft power. Once again, we could observe that "Squid Game" had served the political agenda of the Korean government aiming at making cultural and artistic successes become part of the national heritage and that they could serve as a standard for the whole nation.

Following a well-tested mechanism, the State has come to appropriate the successes of artists, aggregating them to give meaning to the construction of a national image and to use them as a source of inspiration to allow the country to move forward.

This tendency is also relayed by the population. Indeed, for Koreans, beyond the feeling of national pride, this phenomenon of "appropriation" is similar and even tends to a form of identification with the works and artists. This propensity makes it possible to amplify the successes and has the effect that notoriety and prestige thus caused is reflected on the whole nation, as if each Korean had directly contributed to the development of the work or the product.