

***Squid Game* as a Levinasian Morality Tale: The Ethics of Alterity and Empathy in a Survival-Game Narrative**

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This study seeks to provide an alternative interpretation of *Squid Game* as a Levinasian text about ethical choices made by the protagonist and his relationships with two other finalists including a North Korean defector. Challenging both popular and critical readings of *Squid Game* as a morally ambiguous or even harmful text that might have detrimental effects on impressionable young viewers, the author contends that *Squid Game* is covertly an *ethical* text that espouses Emmanuel Levinas's theory of "for-the-other" subjectivity and "infinite responsibility" for the other under the guise of an exploitative and misanthropic "death game" narrative.

Keywords: *Squid Game*, Hwang Dong-hyuk, Netflix, Emmanuel Levinas, North Korean defectors, the Holocaust, ethics, game theory

To say that the Netflix original series *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021e) has made history as the most globally popular Korean television drama ever is an understatement. In a third-quarter shareholder letter dated October 19, 2021, Netflix boasted of the "mind-boggling" performance of the program, which—reportedly seen by 142 million households worldwide within the first 28 days of release—had become the online streaming platform's "biggest show ever" (Netflix, 2021, p. 1). During that same period, *Squid Game* claimed the number-one spot among Netflix's programs in 95 countries, including the United States (Netflix, 2021). The explosive popularity of creator Hwang Dong-hyuk's high-concept series was largely responsible for the rapid increase in the number of Netflix's subscriptions in the final months of 2021, when the company gained 4.38 million paying users (reaching a total of 213.6 million worldwide). In a leaked internal memo, the streaming giant estimated that the impact value of its smash hit was \$890 million (Spangler, 2021). In a nod to his company's indebtedness to the series, chief executive officer Reed Hastings appeared in a green tracksuit—the now-iconic uniform worn by the 456 deadly game contestants in *Squid Game*—in the company's quarterly earnings interview video. The Netflix Chief Executive Officer enthused,

How something can go viral is really hard to predict but it's super powerful when it happens . . . It's hard to predict, sometimes you think you've got lightning in a bottle and you're wrong, sometimes you've got a great Korean show which turned out to be lightening in a bottle for the world. (Weiss, 2021, para. 1)

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Not everyone shared in Hastings' euphoric celebration of the button-pushing television drama and its survival-game scenario, in which the casual extermination of 400-plus people occurs over the course of nine blood-spattered episodes. Concerned parents, medical doctors, psychologists, and local school boards in the English-speaking world voiced their opposition to the show's excessive screen violence, including graphic depictions of riots, murders, mass executions, suicides, organ trafficking, and corpse mutilation, all of which was deemed harmful to impressionable children and young adults. For example, David Anderson of the Child Mild Institute warned,

The level of violence is horrifying—more than most shows . . . Watching a disturbing and suspenseful show like *Squid Game* at night can interfere with sleep, and that in turn can mess up your performance on that science test or in that soccer game the next day. (Miller, 2021, para. 6)

Beverly Hills-based psychiatrist Carole Liberman similarly argued that exposure to sensationalistic, ultraviolent content like this could lead to real-life aggression such as "road rage, air rage, domestic violence and so on" (Haupt, 2021, para. 11). Reported instances of primary schoolers' mimicry of the Korean games, which are depicted in several scenes, sparked moral panics among some parents and educators, including New York elementary school officials, who banned *Squid Game*-themed Halloween costumes, and their British counterparts, who urged parents to block their children's access to the controversial Netflix show (Blistein, 2021).

In his October 18, 2021, interview with *The New York Times*, the star of the series, Lee Jung-jae (who plays Seong Gi-hun, a debt-ridden, unemployed gambler who ends up winning 45.6 billion won [roughly \$38 million] without compromising his ethics of caring for fellow contestants, including those who are socially marginalized, such as a North Korean defector, a migrant worker, and an old man), defended the series from its detractors. Lee told his interviewer,

In Korea, people have an altruistic mind-set—you would have no friends if you weren't kind or considerate. That's because Korean people believe that their friends are very valuable and important . . . And what I think *Squid Game* has done is to tie in this theme of altruism to the storyline of the survival game. (Vineyard, 2021, para. 13)

The actor believes that, under the guise of a fairly sensationalistic premise and below the surface of its representational excess, the show poses deep philosophical questions about what it means to be human and what a person's responsibility might be in attending to or at least acknowledging the needs of others. Lee continued,

I think we pose questions to ourselves as we watch the show: Have I been forgetting anything that I should never lose sight of, as a human being? Was there anybody who needed my help, but I was unaware of them? Should I have helped them? I think if they rewatched the show, the audience will be able to notice more of these subtle elements. (Vineyard, 2021, para. 14)

Not long after his interview, the lead performer's interpretation of *Squid Game's* (Hwang, 2021e) deeper meaning was adopted as part of a Seoul metropolitan bus system's campaign (in partnership with the Korean Communications Commission and the National Information Society Agency) to foster a kinder, more considerate digital culture and online environment. Between November 11 and December 12, 2021, the campaign promoted that message through the concept of *gganbu*: a somewhat obscure slang expression once common among children that—dating back several generations and deriving from the English word “camp”—refers to close street friends or allies who share their marbles and other playthings. Not surprisingly given the popularity of *Squid Game* (whose sixth episode is titled “Gganbu,” a term that is explicitly referenced within the diegesis), that expression made a comeback, rising from obscurity and becoming suddenly ubiquitous, not only in the metropolitan bus system's promotional campaign but in other companies' advertisements throughout this and possibly other cities in South Korea. On the right side of the poster that was displayed on bus windows is an image of a marine creature with hybridized features (with a whale-like head and a penguin-like face) wearing the green *Squid Game* uniform. The cute creature lifts his pinkie, making a *ggabu* proposal (a gesture that is performed and explained in the series). The campaign copy on the left side of the poster reads: “Do you want to be my digital *gganbu*? All of us are empathetic and considerate toward each other in *gganbu* relationships. The beautiful digital world starts with me” (Figure 1). This public service announcement clearly supports Lee's alternative interpretation of the Netflix original but applies it specifically to an online digital world that children and adolescents—a demographic commonly believed to be more “vulnerable” and impressionable” than older people—have instant access to today.



Figure 1. Between November and December 2021, the Seoul metropolitan bus system ran a *Squid Game*-themed public campaign to encourage a kinder, more considerate Internet culture that respects other users as “digital *gganbu*” (the latter term, which refers to close street friends or allies who share their marbles and other playthings, is the title of the show's sixth episode). Source: Author's own photo.

Borrowing the ideas of the show's main star and the *gganbu* campaign of the Seoul bus system as a springboard, this study seeks to provide an alternative interpretation of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021e) as a Levinasian text about ethical choices made by Gi-hun and his relationships with two other finalists: Kang Sae-byeok (Jung Ho-yeon), a North Korean defector who has pickpocketed him, and Cho Sang-woo (Park Hae-soo), a childhood friend and object of neighborhood pride who has become a fugitive wanted for his financial crimes. Challenging both popular and critical readings of *Squid Game* as a morally ambiguous or even harmful text that might have detrimental effects on impressionable young viewers, I propose that the Netflix show's global appeal is as much attributable to its affirmation of universal morality as it is a result of combining immersive thriller elements, unpredictable plot twists, captivating performances, imaginative art direction, and socially relevant subject matter (related to debt crisis, immigration, etc.). Under the guise of an exploitative and misanthropic "death game" narrative,¹ *Squid Game* is covertly an *ethical* text whose hybridized genre elements and multicultural cast correlate to the productive social interactions that can result in empathy and fellow-feeling toward others both inside and outside of the diegesis.

Poised against the Cartesian intellectual tradition in which the self is defined as "the I of the *cogito*" or a "container for ideas or a center of consciousness" (Morgan, 2011, p. 120; emphasis in original), French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas defined the self in relation to responsibility and an ethics of being for and toward the other. According to him, in its face-to-face encounter with embodied alterity, "the I's egoist capacities . . . are 'reconditioned,' 'put into question,' over-exposed, such that *I* is *first* for-the-other *before* the very firstness of its being for-itself" (Levinas, 1987, p. 16; emphasis in original). Goodness, according to Levinas, involves ethical alterity or a prioritizing of "being for the other" over "being for itself." Despite its dystopian tone and controversial use of graphic violence, *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021e) is a morality tale with broad appeal that rewards the Levinasian hero Gi-hun, whose other-directed ethical conduct contrasts the selfishness of his alter ego Sang-woo (Park Hae-soo), who is ultimately punished for his betrayals. Significantly, two supporting minority characters—Sae-byeok, a North Korean pickpocket, and Ali (Anupam Tripathi), a Pakistani migrant worker—are strategically paired with the two main characters to demonstrate the former's moral triumph over the latter, who, to save his own life and attempting to win the game's huge cash prize, manipulates and backstabs Ali (despite having developed a brotherly bond with the "foreigner"). *Squid Game* premiered on Netflix on September 17, during a week when COVID-19 cases had reached 228 million (inclusive of over 4.6 million deaths worldwide). At that unprecedented time of the global pandemic, which tested Western values of autonomy and individualism, universal acceptance of a Korean-language series foregrounding altruistic acts of caring (not only for one's friends and neighbors but also one's enemies and competitors) attest to the magnitude of the current crisis and its ironic call to collective awakening and empathetic awareness of other human beings' suffering.

¹ Hwang Dong-hyuk responded to the allegation of his show's plagiarism of the Japanese "death game" genre, saying, "When I was conceiving the story in 2008, I saw Japanese survival or death game texts such as *Battle Royale* [2000] and *Kaiji* [2007–2008] and imagined 'What if I had participated in such a game' and 'What if we had made such a game in Korea?' It is true that I was inspired by these [Japanese texts]. But I would like you to take it as generic clichés. If you watched *Squid Game*, you would know that it has different premises and there are clear differentiating factors in my text" (J. Kim, 2021, para. 2).

“Being for the Other”: An Ethical Face-to-Face With the North Korean Other

The premise of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021e) is full of intrigue and mystery. Four hundred fifty-six people who are facing various setbacks or challenges in life, from crushing debt to terminal illness and criminal backgrounds, are recruited to play as many as six rounds of seemingly simple children’s games that were popular in South Korea in the 1970s and 1980s (red light, green light; sugar honeycombs; tug of war; marbles; stepping stones; and Squid Game). The participants are promised a once-in-a-lifetime cash reward if they successfully pass all the challenges. They are drugged and transported to a covert boarding-school-like bunker built on a deserted island. Upon their arrival, a phalanx of incognito “workers” and supervisors in black masks and pink jumpsuits (whose ranks are indicated by triangles, squares, and circles printed on the masks) monitor the movements and actions of the players. The secret organization’s frontman looks like he has stepped out of a Marvel comic book or a Lucasfilm production, sporting a black mask and gown that recall such internationally recognized baddies as Doctor Doom and Darth Vader. This mysterious figure is eventually shown communicating over the phone in English with a group of VIPs (wealthy foreign patrons who funded the whole operation for entertainment), ensuring them that the games are being managed fairly and in an orderly way. Mirroring the audience’s likely reaction, the contestants are shocked to learn the lethal cost of losing in the first game, when 255 players are machine-gunned to death for not remaining motionless at the “red light” call of an oversized mechanical doll. Following that chaotic massacre in a candy-colored playground, the management honors the contestants’ request for the premature termination of the game to be put to a vote (in accordance with third clause of the participants’ contract, in which they are entitled to discontinue if most players vote for it—although they cannot leave by individual choice). Nearly half of the contestants end up voting for continuation after the amount of the cash prize is dramatically revealed in the giant piggy bank suspended in the air (where an additional 1 billion won showers down from a chute in the ceiling each time a participant is eliminated) and an announcement is made that the money raised up to that point will go to bereaved families for eliminated participants if the contest is canceled. With a mere one-vote difference, the game halts and all detained players are released back into the “wild”—the hellish world they left behind—only to see them return voluntarily when a second chance of turning their lives around is offered by the mysterious gamemaster.

Five players constitute the main ensemble of the series, with their actions—individually and collectively—driving much of the narrative’s forward momentum and revealing aspects of their backstories that flesh them out more fully than other participants. Besides Gi-hun, those characters include Ali, an exploited Pakistani worker who saves Gi-hun’s life in the first game of “Red Light, Green Light”; and Il-nam (a.k.a. Player Number 1, played by O Yeong-su), an old man whom the protagonist befriends earlier on, and who is revealed to be dying of a brain tumor (before additional revelations about him emerge near the end of the first season’s narrative). Like Gi-hun, Il-nam votes against the inhumane game, representing a “being-for-the-other” subjectivity that puts him at odds with several of the other players, including two lawbreakers—Sang-woo (a graduate of Seoul National University who is wanted by police for embezzlement of client funds as a shady stockbroker) and Sae-byeok (a pickpocket who stole Gi-hun’s horserace prize money earlier, before the games began). These latter two characters embody a “being-for-itself” position, casting their votes to continue the deadly game so that they can have a shot at acquiring tremendous wealth at the expense of others.

In an early scene of the first episode, Gi-hun first encounters Sae-byeok in a way that “otherizes” her, following an accidental bump inside the betting area of a horse track where he is being pursued by a

group of knife-wielding debt collectors threatening to collect more than just the money that he owes. He has just won a bet and claimed his winnings when spotted by the gang. After crashing into a young woman headed the opposite direction, Gi-hun stops and checks on the stranger, putting her need over his. He even picks up her coffee cup and plants a straw in it before resuming his harried escape (Figure 2). In a video commentary on the show, Hwang Dong-hyuk and Lee Jung-jae stress the importance of the scene. The writer-director explains that this scripted accidental encounter actually did contain a lucky accident, when the actor, in character, ad-libbed the business with the spilled coffee. His star corroborates, saying that this “small detail . . . clearly shows the heroic side of the protagonist,” and that similarly small-yet-significant moments were sprinkled “throughout the script” (Netflix Korea, 2021, 5:06–5:11).

In this face-to-face moment, Gi-hun recognizes Sae-byeok as a kind of Levinasian other. For Levinas (1987),

The relationship with the Other, . . . the encounter with a face that at once gives and conceals the Other, is a situation in which an event happens to a subject who does not assume it, who is utterly unable in this regard, but where nonetheless in a certain way it is in front of the subject. (pp. 78–79)

The event in this scene is pickpocketing, which is initially invisible to Gi-hun but is soon detected when he is caught by debt collectors and threatened to sign a form that gives consent to trade his organs for unpaid debts within a month. When the pickpocketing victim repeatedly apologizes for bumping into her before fleeing from his chasers, Hwang’s camera lingers on an expressive close-up of her face, which conveys a mixture of several emotions, including relief and guilt (Figure 3). The tight framing of the morally ambiguous character’s face invites viewers to confront the most politically fraught of all “others” in the South Korean context: North Korean defectors. The relationship between the two Koreas can be read as an extension of Levinas’s concept of asymmetrical relationship between the self (“the rich or the powerful”) and the Other (“the weak, the poor” and “the widow and the orphan”; Levinas, 1987, p. 83).



Figure 2. Both writer-director Hwang Dong-hyuk and actor Lee Jung-jae emphasized the importance of the chase scene in which Gi-hun’s heroic side manifests in the kind, if fleeting, gesture of picking up the spilled coffee (Hwang, 2021c, 9:09).



Figure 3. The camera lingers on an expressive close-up of pickpocketer Sae-byeok (Jung Ho-yeon)'s face, which conveys a mixture of emotions, including relief and guilt. The framing of the morally ambiguous character's face invites viewers to confront the most politically fraught of all "others" in the South Korean context: North Korean defectors (Hwang, 2021c, 9:20).

According to statistics officially released by South Korea's Ministry of Unification (n.d.), as of September 2021, there are 33,800 North Korean defectors (70% of them are women) living in South Korea. The influx of northern refugees increased dramatically between 2006 and 2011, a period when 2,000–3,000 defectors arrived each year. The rate fell to a number between 1,000 and 1,500 between 2012 and 2019, and only 229 arrived in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Ministry of Unification, n.d.). Like Sae-byeok, most of these individuals fled their homelands in search of food, freedom, and a better life. However, many defectors whose families remain north of the Demilitarized Zone have experienced not only separation anxiety (being far from parents, spouses, children, and so on) but also culture shock, discrimination, and unemployment after relocating to a fiercely competitive capitalistic society. There are no official statistics of defectors who voluntarily and unlawfully returned to North Korea. In a recent National Assembly audit, however, the Ministry of Unification announced that at least 28 defectors have returned to North Korea via an unofficial route (by way of China) since 2012 (Kim, 2017). In 2017, North Korea reported to the United Nations that 6,473 women returned to their home countries between 2005 and 2016 after expatriating illegally and experiencing economic hardships and/or human trafficking (Kim, 2017). In a 2018 survey, 20% of the interviewed defectors in the South expressed a desire to go back to their country of birth (Chŏng, 2019; Pae, 2018). The average wage of defectors is approximately half to two-thirds of that of native-born South Koreans, and the defector unemployment rate is 9.7%, three times higher than the national average. Moreover, one in five defectors is a temporary worker, a situation that further jeopardizes their economic stability.

Studies by social scientists have demonstrated that South Koreans harbor complex and contradictory views of North Korean defectors. On one hand, defectors take a special place among minorities as they are "Korean people" (*dongjok*) or "compatriots" (*dongpo*), and many South Koreans feel responsible

for their well-being and survival. On the other hand, many people in the South are prejudiced against North Korean settlers, perceiving them as being too critical, self-centered, and competitive. This perception, especially when held by older Koreans, is colored by anticommunist ideology, whereas to many people born in recent decades, North Koreans are strangers more “alien” than White foreigners, migrant workers, half-Korean children, and Chosunjok (ethnic Koreans from China). Focus group studies reveal that, even among ostensibly liberal-leaning college students, negative stereotypes of North Korean defectors (who are construed as burdensome, untrustworthy, and irresponsible for abandoning their families in a totalitarian country) persist (Choi & Kim, 2013, pp. 191–192). Yoon Hyeung Choi and Su Yeon Kim’s (2013) study of 3,376 reader comments on digital articles about defectors posted by major daily newspapers from December 2011 to December 2012 exposes an overwhelmingly negative public perception of the group. Nearly half (44.7%) of the posts criticized defectors, treating them as part of a social problem. One-quarter (24.1%) of the posts were by individuals who saw the group as an object of sympathy in need of rescue, while one-fifth (20.7%) viewed them suspiciously. Only 10.5% of those comments hinted at any indication that people were willing to fully embrace and recognize defectors as fellow citizens (Choi & Kim, 2013, p. 203). Out of 222 comments that expressed strong emotions about defectors, 77% indicated negative feelings such as unease, discomfort, fear, disgust, and anger. Examples include, “I don’t like them coming here from the North and making us feel uneasy”; “I am concerned about and afraid of their crimes”; and “It is comical even to expect any type of morality from people who deserted their homeland, parents, siblings, and children to save themselves” (Choi & Kim, 2013, p. 209).

In his study on defector experiences, psychologist Lee Hyungjong (2019) calls for a “solidarity of hearts” with North Korean defectors, through empathetic means of battling stereotypes and prejudices about the group. As Lee (2019) points out,

The North Korean identity is regarded as an alien trait difficult to be accepted in South Korea and subject to suppression by training and assimilation . . . As a result, defectors themselves have mistrust in and guarding against our society that exclude them. We set boundaries after using defectors as means of proving southern superiority and defining them as object of sympathy. (pp. 108–109)

The author’s study reveals that assistance propelled by sympathy (rather than empathy) and moral obligations ironically could lead to more unfavorable views and discrimination of benefit recipients, as evidenced in the attitudes of government bureaucrats in charge of financially and logistically supporting their settlement into South Korea. In lieu of sympathy, Lee (2019) advocates for empathy, which, according to him, is “the only solution to survive a fractured and fragmented modern society and restore lost ethics” (p. 141), something that can be achieved by first treating others with sincere affection and devotion before turning one’s attention to institutional and systemic problems in need of fixing.

South Koreans’ negative perceptions and stereotypes of North Korean defectors are expressed by the show’s least ethical character, Deok-su (Heo Sung-tae), a troublemaking, underhanded thug who is not above cold-bloodedly murdering other participants just to eliminate his competition. In the first episode, he beats Sae-byeok to a bloody pulp in front of an audibly shocked-yet-passive group of onlookers, blaming her for running away from him after he had provided room and board and taught pickpocketing skills when

she had nowhere to go. Defiant and fearless, the North Korean woman corrects her former pimp, claiming that she simply “went independent” after paying him back more than what she owed. After delivering more punches and kicks, Deok-su cynically tells Sae-byeok to go and wave the flag if she thinks herself to be Yu Gwan-sun (a legendary independence movement activist from the colonial era). He then outs the defector’s identity in front of the crowd, adding, “That’s right. You’re from North Korea. Then wave theirs” (Hwang, 2021b, 35:25). In *Squid Game’s* (Hwang, 2021e) third episode, the gangster tries to make amends and makes a bid to recruit his former underling to his team, as players begin to organize into small groups before the next round of deadly games. Rejecting his offer and telling the others not to trust him, the North Korean defector swears at the South Korean goon in her hometown parlance. Provoked and enraged, Deok-su swears back at Sae-byeok with an anticommunist slur.

As the ethical counterbalance to Deok-su, who resorts to a rhetoric of hatred when humiliating and dominating Sae-byeok, Gi-hun achieves a higher level of empathy and solidarity with the North Korean other. Despite initial blame and mistrust derived from the pickpocketing incident, this Levinasian hero becomes protective of the isolated young woman when competing groups of participants turn aggressively predatory toward one another after the management encourages in-fights with poor food ration as a part of the built-in misanthropy of the game design. In anticipation of a violent nighttime riot in the common sleeping quarter, Gi-hun invites her to join his inclusive group of other marginalized characters, such as Ali and Il-nam. In the fourth episode, Gi-hun manages to persuade Sae-byeok (a loner who had earlier declared, “I don’t trust people, and that’s twice as true for anyone who’d end up in here”) with words of wisdom, telling her, “You don’t trust people because they are trustworthy. You do it because you have nowhere else to turn” (Hwang, 2021d, 11:00–11:19). The North Korean woman indeed has a good reason not to trust people. Through her backstory, featured in a previous episode, audiences learn that she has been deceived by a Chinese broker (whom she hired to bring her mother to South Korea) and has lost a large sum of money. Later, in the sixth episode, when her marble-match partner Ji-young (Lee Yoo-mi), a South Korean woman to whom she grows close, asks her why she defected, Sae-byeok replies, “I thought it was better here,” implying that her experience in South Korea has left her disillusioned and spoiled her dream of experiencing happiness (Hwang, 2021a, 26:22). An ex-convict with no family, Ji-young is another “for-the-other” character who sacrifices her life so that her new friend, Sae-byeok, will have a chance to continue her quest to be reunited with her family (a brother temporarily entrusted to an orphanage and their mother who has been captured and forcefully repatriated to the North in the process of the family’s border crossing).

By contrast, Sang-woo cheats Ali (with whom he has built an interethnic surrogate brotherhood over the course of several episodes) after losing all but one marble and getting close to being eliminated. The ex-stockbroker kneels in front of the migrant worker and guilt trips the latter by reminding him of his debts to the Korean older brother, or *hyeong*: Sang-woo’s generosity of giving 10,000 won for Ali’s bus fare to Ansan, after the two men were released temporarily after the first game and Sang-woo’s contribution of a winning strategy in the previous tug-of-war game that saved both of their lives. The native Korean man manipulates the Pakistani man’s emotions, persuading him that both could survive by not completing the game within the allotted time of 30 minutes. Sang-woo reasons that there will be follow-up games after the remaining pairs are consolidated into collaborative teams. To devise a victory plan for this hypothetical (and never-to-materialize) match, he suggests that they split up and take stock of the remaining teams. On the pretext of making a sling to carry the valuable pebbles securely, Sang-woo tricks Ali into handing over his

pouch temporarily. Though hesitant, the latter complies, putting his trust in the former. While Ali's attention is distracted by an offscreen gunshot that takes down a losing player, Sang-woo artfully switches his partner's marbles with pebbles in the landscape area where he has been making a sling out of his shirt. After his cheated partner departs, the victor hands his pouch with the team's 20 marbles to the masked guard, declaring that he has followed the rule that no matter what the game is, all of his partner's marbles need to be obtained without using any violence. When Ali returns to their play spot to report his findings three minutes before the end of the game as instructed, his Korean *hyeong* is nowhere to be seen. As his final act before his death, the Pakistani immigrant checks his pouch and confirms the devastating truth. A close-up of Ali's shocked face—tears rolling down as his executioner takes aims behind his back—is crosscut with a close-up of Sang-woo's stoic face as he callously exits the set, hearing a gunshot and the public announcement (PA) announcement that Player 199 (Ali) has been eliminated.

Contrasting Sang-woo's match with Ali is Gi-hun's game with Il-nam. In the pregame stage (when the forthcoming event is falsely presumed to be collaborative, based on the preceding tug of war), players are asked to form groups of two with partners of their choice. Sang-woo chooses Ali over Gi-hun, owing to his physical strength. Noticing that no one is willing to play with Il-nam, a septuagenarian with a brain tumor and signs of early dementia, Gi-hun offers to be the old man's partner out of compassion and goodwill. Players are taken to an artificial set where the façades of a residential neighborhood, complete with identical-looking house fronts and maze-like alleyways, have been built. As an indication of the game's time of day, a painted backdrop is infused with red, orange, and golden glows of the setting sun. The intergenerational duo appears animated, their nostalgia for a bygone era stoked by an exact replica of their childhood neighborhoods and pouches of marbles—tokens of Korean children's favorite pastime before the arrival of video games, cellular phones, and the Internet. The old man proposes that they "make a pact to become *gganbu*." To his confused younger partner, Il-nam elaborates the term, "The neighborhood friend you share marbles—and everything—with. Mine, yours . . . doesn't matter" (Hwang, 2021a, 15:30–16:00). Gi-hun's face brightens as he recollects the once-forgotten word as well as his neighborhood pal with whom he had a *gganbu*-like relationship. The two men gleefully reenact their childhood rituals by first crossing their pinkies and then stamping thumbs together (Figure 4). Their joviality is temporary, however, and is immediately replaced by the grim countenance in Gi-hun's face, shown in close-up, as the game's rule is announced via the PA system: "In this game, use your ten marbles to compete with your partner next to you. The player who takes all ten marbles from their partner wins" (Hwang, 2021a, 16:31–16:50).

Oblivious to this surprise announcement (which sends a severe blow to several friendly teams including a husband-and-wife duo), Il-nam exhibits symptoms of dementia and roams around the alleyway looking for the house where he and his family once lived. A desperate Gi-hun begs the old man to play the children's game, one that forces each player to bet whether his opponent has an odd or even number of marbles in his closed fist. Il-nam begrudgingly participates but keeps forgetting what he and his partner have just said in their bets. With an expression of combined pity and guilt on his face (foregrounded in multiple close-ups), Gi-hun lies to turn the game in his favor and takes all but one of Il-nam's marbles. After retreating to the yard of a replica house front where he reminisces about his absent son (presumably of Gi-hun's age, if he is still alive), the old man proposes a winner-takes-all final round to end their game. To an enraged Gi-hun, who calls it "nonsense," Il-nam (who appears to have been putting on an act of dementia to save Gi-hun from being killed), asks sternly, "Does fooling me and taking my marbles make sense?"

Then, the old man lifts his teary partner's hand and places his last marble on his palm, stating, "It's yours. We're *gganbu*, aren't we? With *gganbus*, mine or yours doesn't matter." As the two men embrace one last time, Gi-hun weeps while Il-nam comforts him with an assurance that "Everything will be all right" (Hwang, 2021a, 54:40–56:27). This seemingly graceful statement of a terminally ill man's resignation to the fact of his imminent demise turns out to be literal and Il-nam's unseen execution, obscured to the viewer by the prop gate, is revealed to be a sham in the final episode. Visually paralleling, if also morally contrasting, Sang-woo's resolute exit, Gi-hun trudges out of the set in tears and with deep pain etched on his face as the PA system announces the elimination of Player 1 (Il-nam) following an offscreen gunshot. An overhead crane shot of the residential neighborhood set (where corpses in green tracksuits are littered as if on a battlefield) captures Gi-hun's shoeless, diminutive figure slowly walking away, his back turned to the camera and his shoulders carrying the heavy weight of moral turmoil and survivor's guilt.



Figure 4. Il-nam (O Yeong-su) and Gi-hun make a *gganbu* pact, which ultimately saves the latter's life in the two-player marble game (Hwang, 2021a, 16:16).

The Lessons of the Holocaust in *Squid Game*

Sang-woo's and Gi-hun's respective pursuit of "self-preservation" and "moral duty"² is reminiscent of two lessons of the Holocaust put forth by Zygmunt Bauman (1989) in *Modernity and the Holocaust*. According to the Polish philosopher,

² Although Gi-hun is not above lying to turn the marble game in his favor, he chose to partner with Il-nam for a moral reason, after rejecting the tempting offer from an athletic math teacher. His *gganbu*'s apparent self-sacrifice fuels the hero's own ethical commitment to others.

The lesson of the Holocaust is the facility with which most people, put into a situation that does not contain a good choice, or renders such a good choice very costly, argue themselves away from the issue of moral duty (or fail to argue themselves toward it), adopting instead the precepts of rational interest and self-preservation. *In a system where rationality and ethics point in opposite directions, humanity is the main loser.* Evil can do its dirty work, hoping that most people most of the time will refrain from doing rash, reckless things—and resisting evil is rash and reckless. Evil needs neither enthusiastic followers nor an applauding audience—the instinct of self-preservation will do, encouraged by the comforting thought that it is not my turn yet, thank God: by lying low, I can still escape. And there is another lesson of the Holocaust, of no lesser importance. If the first lesson contained a warning, the second offers hope . . . The second lesson tells us that putting self-preservation above moral duty is in no way predetermined, inevitable and inescapable. One can be pressed to do it, but one cannot be forced to do it, and thus one cannot really shift the responsibility for doing it on to those who exerted the pressure. *It does not matter how many people chose moral duty over the rationality of self-preservation—what does matter is that some did.* Evil is not all-powerful. It can be resisted. The testimony of the few who did resist shatters the authority of the logic of self-preservation. It shows it for what it is in the end—a choice. (Bauman, 1989, pp. 217–218; emphasis in original)

After the (presumed) death of Il-nam, Gi-hun's dedication to "moral duty" is proven twice in his attempt to save the lives of his last opponents (Sae-byeok and Sang-woo) against the "rationality of self-preservation," even if such a "choice" means giving up an once-in-a-lifetime prize that will ensure proper medical care for his mother and a means of reuniting with his daughter; in other words, the personal and familial needs that motivated him to partake in the games to begin with.

Near the end of the penultimate episode, Gi-hun discovers that Sae-byeok has been severely injured by a glass fragment that pierced her abdomen during the stepping-stone contest, which concluded with the spectacle of a shattering glass bridge designed for the ocular pleasure of several VIPs—wealthy white patrons who place bets on the players as if they were racehorses. The two characters' final face-to-face encounter confirms their common goal of being for the other: a future generation represented by two 10-year-old children (Sae-byeok's brother and Gi-hun's daughter). To Gi-hun's unrealistic proposal of winning the final game as a team and splitting the prize, Sae-byeok counters by asking him to promise that whoever wins, the survivor will look after the departed one's family. When the young woman succumbs to her wound and falls into an unconscious state, Gi-hun desperately seeks medical help by banging the doors and demanding that the offscreen guards intervene to save Sae-byeok's life. Instead of a doctor, a black coffin topped with a pink bow—a recurrent visual motif of death throughout this dystopian tale—arrives to collect the fresh corpse. Gi-hun is horrified to realize that Sang-woo has cut Sae-byeok's throat and instantly killed her while his back was turned. Later, Sang-woo defends his act, telling his opponent in the last game (whose name is that of the series: "Squid Game") that it was a merciful way to end her suffering (Figure 5). Gi-hun insists that it was not too late and that her life could have been saved. His antagonist relents and admits that he did kill her to prevent him from stopping the game to get her medical help. Sang-woo's interpretation of Gi-hun's character demonstrates that his empathy with the pain of the North Korean other

is stronger than his desire to financially support his own family (including an ill mother whose surgery needs had motivated him to return to the game) and pursue his own happiness with the reward.



Figure 5. The "being-for-itself" antagonist Sang-woo (Park Hae-soo) justifies his brutal execution of Sae-byeok in the final titular game (Hwang, 2021b, 5:19).

Faced with fear—for self and other—and the specter of death, Gi-hun experiences trauma not unlike survivors of numerous historical atrocities and massacres in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In Netflix Korea's commentary video, Hwang reveals that he and his art director, Chae Kyung-sun, studied pictures of the Auschwitz concentration camp to design the underground incineration site and iron ovens for clandestine corpse disposals (Netflix Korea, 2021). This deliberately evoked image of the Holocaust is an uncanny transnational trope, which is out of place in the context of traditional Korean narrative yet effective in getting the show's moral message across beyond national borders. In a holocaustal situation, being for the other is the only ethical option for survival and humane existence in the face of the unspeakable crime against humanity. Applying Levinas's philosophy of ethics to the Holocaust, Paul Markus (2008) states,

There is considerable anecdotal evidence that indicates that a being-for-the-Other orientation in the camps was the most effective way of staying psychologically intact Most importantly, however, the central problem in the camps expressed in most survivor and scholarly accounts, is that of "remaining human" What all of these quotes [of Holocaust survivors] indicate is how closely connected the self-less-like caring for others, a form of responsibility, and maintaining one's humanity were. This would include, as analysts would conceive it, maintaining one's autonomy and integration. Whether it was the difficult but life-sustaining act of sharing one's food, or other acts of generosity, protectiveness and selflessness, these actions not only helped the recipient but . . . were probably the best way to retain one's humanity and autonomy in the camp. In the camps caring about others raised one's own self-esteem, dignity and self-respect because one was doing something morally praiseworthy, and that feeling of increased self-esteem and dignity, in itself, reinforced one's ability to survive. Also, caring about others provided a meaningful structure that transcended Nazi dehumanization and the objective of mere survival. (pp. 46–47)

Perhaps more than Gi-hun's conduct in the Squid Game camp, where he is clearly the most ethical subject (willing to put the needs of others ahead of his own, despite mortal peril), his postcontest actions further solidify Hwang's Levinasian moral lesson. As will be discussed in the following pages, Gi-hun's ultimate moral triumph is achieved toward the end of the season finale wherein the guilt-ridden prize winner is given a difficult choice between flying to the United States to be reunited with his daughter or staying in his home country to follow a lead in tracking down the Squid Game's leaders and pursue revenge on behalf of the dead as in Nazi-hunting thrillers such as *The Stranger* (Welles, 1946); *The Pursuers* (Grayson, 1961); *The Odessa File* (Forsyth, 1974); *Marathon Man* (Shlesinger, 1976); and *The Boys from Brazil* (Schaffner, 1978).

Ethics of (Non)Cooperative Games and the Winner's "Infinite Responsibility"

In his interview with *StarNews*, writer-director Hwang Dong-hyuk differentiates his series from other survival-game texts, stating that in other examples, "the protagonist is a heroic winner who solves difficult [challenges]. *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021e) is a story about losers. There are no geniuses, just ordinary people who move forward, step by step, through the help of others" (M. Kim, 2021, para. 22). As a prime example of this dynamics, Hwang singles out the penultimate game: "steppingstones." The game is set in a circus-like setting with a glass bridge in the air. There are two glass "steppingstones" side by side in each compartment of 18 tracks: one tile made of the tempered glass (strong enough to endure two adults' weight) and the other normal glass (incapable of supporting even one person's weight). There are 16 players lined up to cross the bridge (with their turn order preselected before the game is revealed). In the pregame selection process, Gi-hun is forced to choose between two unfavorable numbers (first or last) after procrastinating his decision and losing safer choices. Right before our protagonist is about to pick the number-one spot, another contestant begs him to yield, telling him that he wishes to take up the last chance to claim ownership of his life instead of hiding in the back. Kindhearted and compassionate, Gi-hun consents and this selfless act saves his life as the starting player falls to his death on his second step after making way for the others behind him by guessing the first tempered glass tile right.

Life-or-death Squid Game contests blend elements of cooperative and noncooperative game theory. Mathematician and game theorist John Nash (1951) defines the former as "an analysis of the interrelationships of the various coalitions which can be formed by the players of the game," while the latter hinges upon "contradistinction based on the absence of coalitions in that it is assumed that each participant acts independently, without collaboration or communication with any of the others" (p. 286). Applying both theories to international joint ventures, Ursula F. Ott (2006) elaborates, "The word 'non-cooperative' means that the players' choices are based only on their self-interest, in contrast to 'co-operative' behavior, which develops axioms to capture the idea of fairness and binding agreements" (p. 12). Ultimately, though, only one survivor can win the two-player final contest and leave alive with a fortune after all the other competitors have been "eliminated." However, except for a couple of two-player games (the paired marble match and the Squid Game between a couple of opponents), the challenges incorporate cooperative elements to varying degrees. For example, in the stepping-stone game, participants in the back verbally express encouragement and comradery for those in front of them as their correct guesses ensure their own safe passage. Simultaneously, because of a time limit (16 minutes), fear and indecisions of front contestants can endanger the lives of people in the back of the line. A few players who block the passage, refusing to move forward,

are pushed to their deaths by fellow contestants, including Sang-woo. Moreover, Gi-hun and Sang-woo's playing styles are respectively associated with cooperative fairness and noncooperative self-interests.

At first glance, this survival-of-the-fittest element of *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021e) seems directly opposed to the ethical universe of "infinite responsibility" for the other as preached by Levinas. Although there are direct or indirect cooperative elements in certain games (such as tug of war), in the larger scheme of things—and despite temporary alliances—all participants are each others' competitors, whose eliminations are preconditions to one's victory. An ultimate irony is that Gi-hun's ability to care for the other is what contributes to his unlikely surprise win at the end. In the marble game, as described above, he chooses Il-nam, who is avoided like the plague by other players, as his two-player game partner. This "for-the-other" act is what saves his life, as his terminally ill *gganbu* who appeared to have sacrificed his life for the younger partner (like Ji-young did for Sae-byeok) turns out not only to be alive but also the hidden-in-plain-view architect of the Squid Game contests—plot twist-style reveal toward the end of the show's first season.

For a full year after winning, Gi-hun does not touch the blood money that has been deposited in an interest-free checking account (to the bafflement of the branch manager), all the while maintaining a vagabond lifestyle. What eventually motivates him to access his funds is his unending responsibility to fulfill the others' dying wishes: taking care of Sae-byeok's brother and Sang-woo's mother. Finally, when our hero is ready to pursue his own happiness by visiting his daughter in Los Angeles (where she has settled down with his ex-wife and her second husband) to celebrate her birthday, he spots another man being accosted by the same recruiter at the airport subway station. Gi-hun dashes to the other side of the track to catch the man from the Squid Game organization but misses him. After confiscating the man's business card from the potential new recruit and warning the bewildered stranger never to contact the organization, Gi-hun phones the Front Man, Il-nam's successor and a former contest winner himself. In an earlier scene set in the limousine where the blindfolded surprise winner is about to be released to the outside world, the masked manager makes an analogy between racehorses and Squid Game players when answering Gi-hun's question why they are doing what they are doing. Evoking this conversation and speaking on behalf of every participant (most of whom are dead, save for a handful who did not return after the first game), the Levinasian protagonist talks back to the cruelty and dehumanization of recent events, declaring, "I'm not a horse. I'm a human. That is why I want to know who you are and how you can be so cruel to other human beings. I cannot forgive you for what you have done" (Hwang, 2021b, 49:33–50:40).

The Front Man calmly reasons with him to get on that plane to Los Angeles for his own good. The final shot tracks backward as Gi-hun turns around and walks away from the boarding gate to pursue what we are to assume are righteous deeds for the benefit of others, not himself (as promised by creator Hwang Dong-hyuk, in season two "Gi-hun will come back . . . and will do something for the world"; Sun, 2021, para. 7). This resolute, "being-for-the-other" departure is perhaps the closest that South Korea's small-screen hit—full of big ideas and even bigger claims to moral or spiritual uplift in the face of a worldwide, hope-shattering epidemic—has come to capturing the essence of Levinas's theory of alterity and ethical responsibility.

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