

How does global popular culture challenge neoliberal capitalism?

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Thesis: *This paper uses two recent Post-Covid Netflix serials, Money Heist and Squid Game, to exemplify how they function as anti neoliberal capitalism products. More specifically, it is aimed to manifest how they are transformative in our present society as the impact of Covid is affecting to a great degree the working class and the low middle classes, as well as the middle class.*

Introduction

These last two years the world population has experienced a shift in the consumption of information and entertainment and a relocation effect from the open work space of the urban area to the intimacy of our personal spaces as the pandemic has forced us to function from our homes. While paying attention to these new dynamics, we see how everything flows through the screen of our laptops or other devices connecting the world more than ever before. Especially, how mass digital media increasingly concentrates the frustrations of a society that takes control and decisions from the commodity of the home. What is the direction civilization is taking? According to recent popular and successful serials the answer is apparently easy: the growing neoliberal capitalist system we are ambushed in.

Globalization and the rise of mass digital media comes into play in this context as causal elements for the global massive connectivity that, at the same time, leave a space for the expansion of the sites where popular culture is displayed and consumed. The increasing accessibility to these sites becomes a privilege for the producers of culture to share their content. What a better set up to portray the frustrations of global neoliberal capitalism than use global popular culture itself? If entertainment is about culture and the way people connect with a system of symbols that are attached to their class, race, gender and politics; what a better scenario than globalization and neoliberal capitalism to carry on fictional products that bring together expanded global signs and elements to reunite a massive amount of people watching and agreeing with the same political messages from their own living rooms?

In this sense, how does global popular culture challenge neoliberal capitalism? Video on demand platforms -as distinct media forms- such as Netflix are allowing these possibilities as catalysts of global and transnational phenomena anti capitalist serials like *Money Heist* and *Squid*

Game, and also as a high global consumption platforms that are in itself systems of control of our viewings and decisions towards popular culture products. The platform integrates itself into local media systems as a transnational broadcaster and this is what defines the broad, transnational audience (Jenner, 2018: 195). But what do these serials have in common? Apart from acting as a way to externalize global political frustrations -media as a site of “resistance” (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003)- with symbolisms that emerge in the narratives crossing the barriers of fiction in local or national protests, they are two transnational products coming from two different national industries that are challenging American imperialism and class structures -when class also relates to gender and race.

The key in this analysis is to understand how these two shows are transformative in our present society -as the impact of Covid has heavily affected the working and low middle class- depicting elements and shifts in gender and race structures that they have in common while coming from different national markets but made to find each other within a global format. According to Acosta-Alzuru’s circuit of culture we are paying attention then to the representation: production of meaning through language.

Capitalism and Class

As global popular culture products, the shows provide a perspective of the way the society is changing. Labelled as Netflix’ in-house productions, they emphasize gendered and racial diversity (Jenner, 2018: 219) attracting as many national societies on perceived commonalities -the ‘global-local’ appeal- to one of the biggest media businesses in the world. The critique to neoliberal capitalism places *Money Heist* and *Squid Game* in the same tactic for the construction of political symbols around the discourse of money. Because both narratives

portray how money is the solution to escape a system embodied in social constructions of gender and race that consummate in the construction of class. But money is not a final relief, because the monetary system is cyclical and a vice. We see this in the way *Squid Game* romanticizes the idea of revenge at the end of the season as Seong Gi-hun comes back to the ‘game’ in order to destroy the system. The serial could have been finished with him getting on the plane, but metaphorically, the action has given the audience one more possible season to watch as Netflix continues to do business with the anti-capitalist ideology. And the same thing we can say about *Money Heist*. Their situation is different because they started as a cable TV show (Antena 3) in Spain that consisted of just two seasons. Netflix in 2017 bought the rights to make the product a worldwide phenomenon in which new gender dynamics and multicultural characters can be seen. There is no escape for the characters of these shows in the same way Netflix producers keep releasing new seasons to increase profit.

These characters carry the oppression of labor by private enterprises backed by the support of the capitalist government. It is very apparent the context of economical crisis that have taken place in both countries -Spain and South Korea. This is exemplified by some lines of the dialogues of the shows. “I was just about to have a baby and I had a million things to pay for. They told us to leave and I did not have an alternative. They were the ones who ruined the company but held us responsible” (*Squid Game* S01 E6). These words from one of the contestants of *Squid Game* follow the relation of power and conflict between the ruling classes and the ruled that Marx exposes in the Social Reproduction Theory as class -defined by gender and race- occurs capitalistically. The same way the Professor in *Money Heist* held Marxism ideas of capital ending in the ruin of many small capitalists, whose capitals partly pass into the hands of their conquerors (Marx, 1867): “... you know where all that money went? To the banks.

Straight from the factory to the richest. Did anyone say the European Central Bank was a thief? No” (Money Heist S02 E9). These parts of the dialogue are just a representation of how media serves as a site of ‘resistance’ for cultures and how popular culture is crucial to construct a space of ideological conflict in which power relations of gender, ethnicity, class and identity are struggled over (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003: 287).

A key point and a narrative disclosure in *Squid Game* to argue the brutal critique of capitalism principally sustained by racial capitalism is when the ‘game’ is unveiled to be ruled by the Koreans but consumed by the white American elite -the VIPS- in luxurious scenarios that is introduced in the last episodes of the show. For the whites the game is a product in which to gain more money while betting. A racial hierarchy is displayed as the show criticizes racial capitalism from Western society dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide (Kelley, 2017). Race is connected to class in this sense within an intersectionality framework as we see the representation of the Asian being the slavery for the white enjoyment at the same time we experience ‘the spectacle of the other’ advocated by Stuart Hall (1997) as Western hegemony is the normalised meaning in our heads. “You bet on horses. We do the same with humans. You are our horses” (*Squid Game* S01 E9) the creator of the game comments. But in this case it is not just humans but the Asian stereotypes as submissive and the East Asian countries being a threat to the Western nation/state in the context of Globalization and diaspora studies according to Chih-Yun Chiang (2010). It seems that the ‘game’ wrapped within a Korean serial laughs sarcastically at American imperialism as *Squid Game* exemplifies the growth and market liberalisation of South Korea .

Gender and Race

Gender and race are intersectional and driven by capitalism. How gender and race representations are globally modelled by capitalism relies on popular culture products. In the case of these two serials we can talk about its two female main characters as conduits of new shifts in gender and race visibility. We depart from the dominant discourse on globalization that presents gender and often race as invisible (Acker, 2004: 19). However, society, and especially women and minorities, are eager to see the 'resistance' and new visibilities on the screen. In this sense, Netflix brings changes in femininity and race structures using transnational products that attempt a feminine and multicultural market approach. The exoticism and strength of Kang Sae-byeok in *Squid Game* in concordance with the intelligence and authority of Tokyo in *Money Heist* seduce us. Their femininity sells and holds a lot of pressure on women. However, we see how the system -the 'game' in the case of *Squid Game* and the Capitalist State in *Money heist*- pushes them to their limits and to the point, following Bartky's ideas, where the audience experience how there is no undoing of feminism and how the Patriarchy system makes them function devoted to an obedience to femininity codes of spectacle and sexual subordination (1990) -like also in the case of Han Mi-nyeo who becomes too emotional and dependent at the end in order to survive in the 'game' in *Squid Game*.

The actors of these two feminine characters are now sites of resistance and great influence on other women, giving visibility not just to gender but to race in the case of Hyeon Jung. At the same time they challenge the idea that the female subject centred by postfeminism is 'white and middle class by default' (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 3).

Furthermore, the same could be said about men characters in both serials while sharing features in common as global and postmodern variants of masculinity conquer the global popular culture resulting in emerging versatile masculinities (Sun Jung, 2015). Some Asian masculine

stereotypes are erased by the common features shared by the two global phenomena: the Western and the East Asian representations converging in a non-hegemonic model. Resemblances can be found between the Professor and Cho Sang-woo as very intelligent, introverted and delicate characters that hide a great fierce behaviour; or between Rio and Seong Gi-hun carrying soft masculinities features.

Conclusion

Through these examples and arguments on *Money Heist* and *Squid Game* we can observe how neoliberal capitalism sets certain gender and class structures and how the global popular culture products challenge them on account of high global consumption platforms like Netflix that takes national media productions into transnational phenomenon. In this way, the Spanish and the Korean television industry challenge American imperialism and the hegemonic race and gender forces with anti neoliberal capitalism discourses as they draw new social and transnational identities.

“Do you know what a poor person and a rich person have in common? Living is not fun for either of them” (*Squid Game S01 E9*). Oh Il-nam, the creator of the game, excuses himself in this line that externally works as a call to the middle class and the redistribution of wealth; which also coincides with *Money Heist* pretext.

However, despite identifying with the discourse of both serials, we could think that they are still products from the system. Ortega & Gasset speaks about this; the way the mass does not know what the mass is but boasts about it (1929). It is something commercialized that has stuck with an anti-neoliberal capitalist discourse. So when we ask ourselves if it is the end of capitalism we need to consider the whole growing medium these products are marketed in. The system itself -embedded in the contemporary globalisation- and the very adaptation of culture in

its intersectionality is profit-oriented. The series makes you think about one thing while being trapped in it. At the end, it is the symbolic global political messages that the fictions carry what makes us dream about utopian revolutions.

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