

Binging and Wishful Thinking: *Squid Games* and Netflix during COVID-19

With plenty of isolated time during the pandemic, “binging” or watching multiple episodes of a television program in one sitting became the norm. With so much time on our hands, it was only natural to spend it consuming media for hours on end. But before the pandemic, this binging practice held a negative connotation which was reshaped due to the popularity and supposed benefits of successively consuming television programs. In this essay, I will argue that binging remained a negative practice throughout the pandemic, despite some positive effects which increased a feeling of community. I will pull information from Tanya Horeck and Neta Alexander, writers who documented the ongoing effects of binge watching during and after the pandemic, to argue that using Netflix as a support system during the pandemic inhibited our ability to keep on touch with reality and remain conscious of the social movements in society. Furthermore I will use segments from Hwang Dong-hyuk's *Squid Game* (2021) to highlight how the show parallels feelings of isolation and connectivity that were common during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To begin, I will use Neta Alexander's article, “From Spectatorship to ‘Survivorship’ in Five Critical Propositions”, to provide a preliminary argument that Netflix binge watching remained harmful during the pandemic. Alexander's main argument is that “[o]wing to the lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, bingeing—no longer a mode of excessive, or uncontrollable, consumption—was reframed as a form of self-care,” but she also argues that the reframing of the term caused society to normalize spending hours of uninterrupted time consuming media (Alexander 52). But before she argues about the negatives of binge watching, Alexander describes some of the positives of binging, such as allowing for a communal conversation about film, and also helping bridge a gap between generations, serving as “woke therapy”. She also

mentions that binging provided a predictable method to watching shows in the time of a lot of uncertainty in the world. But in an effort to increase a viewers' sense of agency during the pandemic where one did not hold much control, some features fell short. One of these additions was the playback, which allowed viewers to set the speed of the show. She argues that the playback took away from the filmmakers' intentions and more importantly provided an option that could lead viewers to overlook or undermine problematic representations. This point is crucial considering that during the pandemic, social justice movements required that the public remained attentive and consciously observed the problematic representations in everyday life and through media. Furthermore, Alexander points out that the increase of social justice media made it easy to absorb yourself in heavy topics that lead you to constantly surround yourself with depressing media. This brings me to the aspect of binging that outweighs all the positives of binge watching. Instead of acting as a form of 'self-care,' immersing yourself in harsh media causes binge watching to take on the role of rumination.

On the other hand, Tanya Horeck, an associate professor in Film at Anglia Ruskin University argues in her article, "'Netflix and Heal': The Shifting Meanings of Binge-Watching during the COVID-19 Crisis," that binge-watching during the pandemic had a lot of healing factors that are being transferred into a post-pandemic world. Some of her main points include that through the pandemic, and even afterwards, people turned to binge watching as a way to fill their time whilst recovering from injuries or using media as a way to cope with everyday events in their lives. In Horeck's article, binging is considered as healing since TV became a communal aspect of life that dominated conversations on social media and amongst families. Once it formed into a communal experience, TV was something that people could talk about despite not being able to physically interact with each other. But as mentioned in Alexander's criticisms of

binge watching during the pandemic, Horeck also mentions the amount of social movements during the pandemic. Instead, Horeck claims that Netflix effectively highlights these social justice movements by advertising more media that was related to the movements. Although just as in Alexander's assessments of Netflix's TV shows and "Social & Cultural Docs" which discussed heavy topics, Horeck mentions that scholars argue that due to the sensitive subjects discussed in the media, their 'bingeability' was not high. Overall, I received a more positive message about Netflix from Horeck's piece. By the end of the article, she circles back to the idea that, "[a]s binge-watchers begin to lift their heads and try to imagine a postvirus world beyond screens and Zoom, there is value in reflection on television's function as an affective container for holding spectators close in times of loss and deprivation" (Horeck 39). To be clear, I understand how binging served as an "affective container" which comforted people through the tragedies of the pandemic, but I also believe that using it as a method to cope with the events outweighs the positive aspects it brought to social life. I feel this way primarily due to the introduction of the playback option which as mentioned earlier and the ruminating role that binge watching plays once the viewer is absorbing hours of heavy content typically in isolation.

One of these shows which displayed a lot of violence and provided commentary on isolation and capitalism was Hwang Dong-hyuk's *Squid Game*. This show, a 10 episode series centered around a deadly competition where the 'players' (people in lots of debt) compete in childhood games to earn money, was released on Netflix all at once. Like mentioned Horeck and Alexander's articles, TV shows that aired on Netflix during the pandemic contained an abundance of violence and commentary on social movements, which in turn had an impact on the viewers' ability to consume this media in one sitting. Personally, I split this show up once it was released, and even watching one episode was difficult to consume due to the significant

amounts of violence. Regardless, this film was exemplary of the uncertain environment and independence felt during the pandemic. Specifically during the first episodes of *Squid Games* the story lines were centered around the survival of the fittest and the main character, Seong Gi-hun (Lee Jung-jae). As the series progressed there was less emphasis on solidarity in the game arena and a switch to highlight the need for human connection. Even stylistically, episode one, “Green Light, Red Light” features no warm lighting and fewer close ups in the arena in order to show the communal experience of panic whereas the sixth episode, “Gganbu” isolates the characters in the frame as they are forced against each other in games of marbles. But instead of focusing on the competitive aspect of the show during this episode, the close ups gear the story to emphasize the building of relationships between the players. I believe that these two episodes best mirror and personify the feelings of social isolation and human connectivity of the pandemic.

Although the first episode establishes the intensity of the game along with themes of individualism, I believe that the emphasis on the connections between the characters during the sixth episode better exemplifies the emotions I personally felt during the pandemic. I will specifically pull focus to players 067 (Jung Ho-yeon) and 240 (Lee Yoo-mi), two characters that randomly pair up with each other to compete in the next game, but instead spend the allotted half hour talking about their lives.

Even throughout episode six, “Gganbu,” there is an increase in intimacy between 067 and 240 displayed through the framing of the characters. In a scene midway through the episode, through a series of individual close up shots, the players talk about what they would do with their prize money. After escaping from North Korea, player 067 (her name was later revealed to be Kan Sae-byeok) dreams of bringing her family back together away from the country she left behind. During this planning, player 240 (named Ji-yeong) whose family is no longer alive,

realizes that her prize money wouldn't have much purpose besides paying off her debt. Specifically in this scene, the characters are both sitting facing the camera head on, unable to see each other as they're speaking. This positioning is indicative of their individual lifestyles and 067's future plans of spending money on family. But along with talking about their individual future plans, the two constantly made plans to live life together, forgetful of the fact only one of them would survive by the end of this game. During these conversations, the characters also begin to face each other, 240's face filled with hope until she realizes that player 067 had always remained conscious of the fact that only one of them is making it out alive. This hopefulness for the future directly mirrors the feelings of anticipation during the pandemic when all that I wanted to do was fantasize about going to social events. In contrast to the previous episodes, this story line emphasizes the connections between the characters, intentionally partnering them together and displaying a new need of understanding for each other. Through these conversations between Kan Sae-byeok and Ji-yeong, the audience and the characters connect about their pasts and the alienation they feel from society as two women with criminal records. The connection formed between 067 and 240 throughout this episode is exemplary of the hopeful conversations that I was having throughout the pandemic.

Not only did *Squid Games* represent an optimistic attitude quickly followed by dread and realization of the present, the show also depicted the abundance of time the characters spent reflecting on themselves. The second scene from episode six that I want to bring attention to comes at the end when Kan Sae-byeok and Ji-yeong finally have to decide the game that they will play to determine who lives and who dies. To summarize this scene, Ji-yeong (player 240) realizes that she has no purpose using the prize and essentially "rigs" their game by making sure she loses so that Kan Sae-byeok (player 067) has the ability to win and provide for her family. In

this game of life and death, Ji-yeong makes the ultimate sacrifice of giving up her shot at winning to ensure that Kan Sae-byeok lives another day. In this final interaction, the characters finally share the space on the screen, player 067 towering over her partner, listening to her reasoning for rigging the game. This scene directly parallels the emotions from the COVID-19 pandemic due to the amount of time spent on self reflections and how those reflections impact future decision making. In other words, I deeply resonated with the small talk about family between 067 and 240 which started to solidify a necessary connection between them. Humans have a natural need to connect and the later episodes in *Squid Game* solidifies that even under extreme circumstances where people are pitted against each other, they will form friendships. More importantly, the dynamic between Kan Sae-byeok and Ji-yeong is representative of the temporary nature of “goodness” during the pandemic. What I mean by this is that often during the quarantine, I would get sparks of temporary joy, just like 240 while she was imagining the future with 067, but I would quickly snap back into reality where most social events were not possible.

Don’t get me wrong, I think that Netflix was a lifesaver during the pandemic. Binge watching shows and movies during the pandemic is why I decided to go to film school and I would in no way change the amount of time I spend binging. But when it comes to normalization of binge watching as a constant release and a self-care method, I believe that Alexander and Horeck clearly outline the problematic aspects of binging. Manipulation of the playback speed of shows and consuming copious amounts of violent media ultimately shifted the way I consumed TV and movies during the pandemic. The nostalgic feeling of sitting in a theater and knowing I had to pay full attention at all times since I could not actively rewind the media caused me to

deeply appreciate the product in the moment. Whereas during the pandemic, Netflix seemed to want people to fill their time with media without the level of appreciation that cinema deserves.

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