

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “Morbid spectacle”: allegorical dialectics of mammonism, humanity, and necropower in *Squid Game* (2021)

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## Abstract

This article uses Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics as an analytical category to examine the representations of necropower in *Squid Game*. In the global “organ economy,” organ sellers decide to supply, and brokers then mediate between them and buyers. In contrast, South Korean loan sharks commodify delinquent debtors’ organs by forcing them to sign a body waiver as collateral. Recent South Korean dramas have thematized this distinctive systemization of the black economy. Borrowing Lowenstein’s “allegorical moment” concept, this article aims to illuminate representations of fluid necropower through children’s games as a hinge between reality and the imaginary that invites viewers to dialectically evaluate death problems. The contestations of money and humanity synthetically emerge as necropower constantly moves among different entities: VIPs, a frontman, players, game rules, and money. This article claims that viewers process numerous allegorical moments created by the iconography of necropower and synthetically realize necropolitics and corporeality in *Squid Game*. Organ extractions and trade in episode two in particular represent “morbid spectacle” and the culmination of mammonism. This article analyzes scenes of death, games, the technique of killing, and esthetics to connect historical examples of the necropolitics that Mbembe draws on and to discuss representations of the organ trade in this recent Korean drama.

**Keywords:** delinquent debtors; human organ trade; mammonism; necropower; *Squid Game*

## Introduction

*Squid Game* (오징어 게임 *Ojingŏ keim*, 2021, dir. Hwang Tong-hyŏk), the story of 456 desperate contenders’ survival game to win 45.6 billion won (37 billion US dollars), became the most streamed non-English-language drama in Netflix history within the first month of its release (Yonhap 2021, 17 November). Behind this phenomenal popularity was nostalgia for forgotten children’s games, which brought numerous viewers from various societies to enjoy the dalgona game and wear guardian costumes (Donga Daily 2021, 5 October). *Squid Game*’s remarkable viewing record led Netflix to strategically invest more in other Korean film and drama productions. A decade earlier, director Hwang had failed to find a production company, and his scenario was rejected numerous times as unethical, eccentric, bizarre, and inappropriate for the social norms of the time (Kim 2021, 29 September). However, ten years later, the same storyline was received differently. Although *Squid Game* has been criticized for its cruelty and violence, reminiscent of *The Hunger Games* (2012), director Hwang said that compared to his earlier works, over-the-top (OTT) production allowed him more freedom in the degree of expression of cruelty and sexuality. Additionally, the materialism

and class divide in *Squid Game* have moved viewers worldwide (Young 2021, 6 October). The actor who played the lead role, Yi Chông-chaе, said he was more strongly drawn to each character's background story than to the heinous survival game setting (tvN D ENT 2022, 12 January).

In this paper, I use necropolitics as an analytical tool based on Mbembe (2008). Mbembe claims that whoever exerts sovereignty is the main agent of necropolitics. He defines necropower as "the right to kill" (156) or "allow[ing] to live" (152), and the concept has three main characteristics. First, necropolitics deprives a person of the right to his or her own body. Second, it represents control over life and death. Third, it separates who is to be killed from who is to live. Both biopower and necropower affect human life, but the former controls the mechanisms and tactics of creating "docile bodies" (Agamben 2020, p. 10), whereas the latter directly impacts individual life and death. For Mbembe, the concept of sovereignty is a crucial factor in transforming necropower into necropolitics. He insists that the modern idea of sovereignty is based on reason (153), and sovereignty is each individual's capability "of self-understanding, self-consciousness and self-representation" (153). Human reason is "the truth of the subject and politics is the exercise of reason in the public sphere" (153–4). In other words, if a powerful agent exercises necropower, then that agent controls the very sovereignty of individuals who determine their lives and deaths. Necropolitics extends deeply into not only an individual's life and death but also his or her affections, thoughts, beliefs, and unconscious. Thus, necropolitics interferes with human value systems, including perceptions of and attitudes toward life and death.

Necropower is increasingly operating in gender-specific, location-specific, and class-specific ways. Discrimination, violence, and injustice are reinforced in the real world. Organ transplantation is a gendered structure in that the main victims are marginalized – the poor, women, the uninsured (Crowley-Matoka and Hamdy 2016; Dadiya 2017; Kierans 2018), as well as migrants, LGBTQ people, and the disabled (Lykke 2019; Mayblin, Wake, and Kazemi 2020; Núñez-Parra *et al.* 2021; Perera 2006). In conceptualizing "slow violence," Nixon (2011) investigates the "invisible death" of the socially weak through exposure to various kinds of environmental destruction. In a similar vein, Sandset (2021) discusses how governments systematically fail to provide access to proper medical treatment for poor, high-risk seniors so that they struggle with the possibility of an unwanted "slow death" in the COVID-19 pandemic era. These scholarly works discuss how necropower in the real world covertly permeates and critically affects various groups of people's lives and deaths. Although the way to exert necropower is implicit, the subject to blame is rather obvious (nation-states and medical authorities). In comparison, the way to perform necropower in *Squid Game* starts explicitly and is vulgar but proceeds in a complicated way.

In *Squid Game*, 456 participants agreed to abandon their own rights to life and death. So-called VIPs, international magnates behind masks that constitute various ethnicities, share an inhumane taste for this bizarre amusement. They offer large wagers to watch the "processes of the deaths" of 455 people (if one last contender wins). This invented game world constitutes the structure of the state – people in different classes (VIPs, a frontman, guards, and contenders), laws (game rules), and territory (the remote unpopulated island out of reach of communications), but the sovereignty rests on the game money.

The organ economy refers to the global commercialization of human organs (Lundin 2016). Lundin claims that East Europeans sell their organs to West European patients, Israeli brokers mediate between sellers and buyers, and these transactions already form an extensive international organ economy. In Korea, organ donation is strictly under the control of the state. The compensation of organ donors is illegal (Kim 2016, pp. 232–33), although the law stipulates some exceptions for cases in which the state directly pays funeral expenses, medical expenses, and compensation within certain budgetary limitations (235). Although South Korean authorities have made it a rule that the anonymity of donors in the operating organ donation system must be maintained, 95 percent of livers for transplantation are donated by family members (Ha 2019, p. 50). In regard to corporeality, morals do not apply evenly to the customs of altruism and cooperation for the public good that Koreans consider historically inherited and that have played a role in sustaining social mores in South Korean

society.<sup>1</sup> For example, the blood donation rate has remained at 5–6 percent of the total population (Korean Red Cross 2021). A possible reason is that the Confucian idea that your body is inherited from your ancestors and you should take good care of it is deeply engrained in South Korean society (Kim 2003, p. 108). Additionally, continuing controversy over euthanasia has obstructed the enactment of the law on euthanasia. In the current social atmosphere, consensus on these issues is seemingly far from being achieved.

Considering Koreans' strong traditional taboo on impairing one's body and organs, one can interpret the polar-opposite commodification of organs today as self-contradictory or self-denying. Unlike the organ trade based on providers' volitional choices in other countries, the use of body waivers between creditors and delinquent debtors in Korea illustrates that necropower strongly operates between individuals under the logic of money, or "the enchantment of capitalism" (McCarragher 2019). These conflicting ideas about corporeality and mammonism raise questions about the organ trade and increasing representations of it in the media. Does *Squid Game* simply use the organ trade as a tool to increase the degree of cruelty of the show? Or does the series represent the changing social phenomenon of contempt of life as distinctive evidence of the abusive use of necropower against delinquent debtors in Korean society?

Although cinematic<sup>2</sup> settings reflect socioeconomic issues in contemporary South Korean society, it is not sufficient to apply Mbembe's concept of necropolitics to the analysis of some scenes or characters alone. In representation studies, themes related to death include violence and trauma (Abel 2007; Lowenstein 2005). Lowenstein (2005) exemplifies the death's head or the corpse in cinema as the "allegorical moment" (2) that remains between life and death but simultaneously presents an image that causes spectators to conjure up the past in a way that Benjamin (1998) explains "blasts open" or "flashes up" the image (12–3). Lowenstein argues that the allegorical moment in films addressing historical trauma "invites the spectators to recognize" (9) and to communicate with the trauma, the past, and the present. Relying on Lowenstein's concept of the allegorical moment, I aim to examine the cinematic representation of necropower as a hinge between reality and the imaginary. I claim that the representation of necropower through children's games "invites" viewers to process various issues in relation to the organ economy and to dialectically consider the valuation of life, death, corporeality, and ethics. Yielding to one's necropower generally associates with sacrificing one's life to save others in urgent times of war or catastrophes such as soldiers' fight for homeland or firefighters' life-risking rescue of citizens. This type of betting on life is deemed moral, although taking the enemy's lives at war is not taken as immoral but as inevitable. Films and dramas are commonly used to divide good and bad characters by following socially shared moral values. However, in *Squid Game*, personal money contracts between creditors and debtors can confuse one if the same moral standards can be applied and, if so, where criminality should be drawn on. Refraining from moral judgmental endings of classical crime cinema and vividly portraying the governing power of money within this confined game world prompts viewers to recognize the meanings of life, death, and money.

Taking the allegorical moment as an operational point to connect viewers and representations, I set cinematic representations as the dialectics of three elements – (1) the organ trade as a culmination of mammonism as thesis, (2) humanity as antithesis, and (3) fluid necropower as synthesis. In the show, mammonism is depicted as enslaving both rich and poor but plays a role in stimulating the fluid moves of necropower as thesis. As McCarragher (2019) claims, capitalism is disenchantment,

<sup>1</sup>In premodern Korea, grassroots mutual aid organizations functioned as community-based covenants that sustained social cohesion, propagated shared moral values, and addressed various practical needs of entire communities. For instance, 향약 (hyangyak) was run by male members of the ruling class aristocrats (양반, yangban). In contrast, 두레 (ture, labor collective), 품앗이 (p'umasi, labor cooperative), and 계 (kye, financial collective) were egalitarian mutual support systems available to all social strata that served specific purposes: financial collection (kye) and labor exchange (ture and p'umasi).

<sup>2</sup>Although *Squid Game* is provided through the OTT service under the category of drama series, I choose to use the adjective "cinematic." First, director Hwang originally wrote the script for a feature film but later developed it as a drama series as the plot and characters expanded during revisions over ten years. Second, I assume that his career as a film director is affected by the way in which he directs the show's style in terms of plot and aesthetics.

money is the animating spirit, and mammonism is the gospel. Mammonism is “the attribution of ontological power to money and of existential sublimity to its possessors” (5). With scenes of the idolatry of money, such as players looking up at a gigantic piggy bank full of money and VIPs lying in gold-colored chairs, *Squid Game* represents how mammonism misenchants the value system, morals, and ontology and easily subjugates human dignity by the commodification of life as a game player and an organ trade supply source. However, in the show, the more necropower dominates, the more resistant players become to perceptions of mammonism. Necropower exerts, operates, and demolishes humanity among the characters but also fluidly moves around the entities.<sup>3</sup>

The scholarly discussion of *Squid Game* is vibrant. The December 2022 issue of *Communication, Culture, and Critique* offers a special forum about *Squid Game* that delves into two main areas. One is the politics of representations and locally specific readings of Korean “neoliberal capitalist precarity” (Oh 2022, p. 532), and the other is transnational receptions of the show. Although the organ economy is a departure point for analysis, I do not attempt to universalize poverty and neoliberal capitalist precarity. Rather, I examine how the organ economy and necropolitics are represented in relation to debt and corporeality in other South Korean contemporary films and dramas and in *Squid Game*. For a better understanding of the organ trade, the South Korean historical contexts of capitalism, economic structure, and class are discussed in the next section.

### Historical contexts of credit, debt, corporeality, and necropolitics

The modern South Korean history of colonial rule, the fratricidal Korean War, military dictatorship, and economic development created an economic, political, and social atmosphere that has allowed necropolitical tactics to manipulate the Korean public. Poverty has acted as a double-edged sword. A strong desire to overcome poverty combined with strong anticommunist sentiment made it easy to propagandize the public to prioritize the nation’s affluence, with the distribution of wealth occurring later. Ironically, this resembled a socialist idea but was a good excuse for cheap labor to maintain competitiveness in the international market. Similar to colonial forced laborers, industrial workers during the Park Chung Hee era bolstered the South Korean subimperial role for the US in the Vietnam War (Lee 2010) and state-run prostitution for US soldiers stationed in South Korea (Moon 1997). Many Koreans were treated as “surrogate labor” (Lee 2010, p. 9). State-first economic development grew the nation’s economy but led to the impoverishment of the urban working class and rural families. The proto-state banking system provided loans for national economic development plans but not for individual clients. Many loan applicants drew on grassroots rotating credit associations or inevitably sought private loans (Park 2022). Underground black market connections between loaners, politics, and law enforcement also increased. Therefore, today’s mounting household debt and the increasing number of delinquent debtors in contemporary South Korea can be traced back to the political and economic contexts of the 1960s–1980s.

Since the early 2000s, South Korea has been experiencing a double downward spiral – increased household debt and young delinquent debtors in their 20s and 30s (Yi and Song 2021, 13 July) – and has the highest household debt-to-GDP ratio among thirty-seven advanced countries (including all OECD nations) (Yi 2021, 20 November). Director Hwang saw the recent cryptocurrency investment fever among young Koreans and their real-life survival tactics as reflecting a shared sense of future uncertainty and instability (Lee 2021, 30 September). Before cryptocurrency, there was a pervasive social craze for investment in real estate, especially housing. The widespread bitcoin and securities investment frenzy among people in their 20s and 30s was not greatly different from the speculative housing market (KBS Sisa chikkyök 2022). These debtors believed that receiving loans for investment would offset the loans, soon result in profits, and thus give them economic freedom.

<sup>3</sup>Mies (1998) insists that as capital accumulation is constantly pursued, the degree of exploitation and colonization of three entities – nature, women, and colonies – will not end as long as humanity lives with capitalism. I am inspired by her argument and add mammonism to the next stage of human desire for capital accumulation.

However, the number of delinquent debtors has been growing, and other social problems, such as mounting rates of suicide, divorce, and family breakdown, have also shown serious escalations. Reflecting the problems caused by delinquent debtors, presidential candidates in the election in spring 2022 made campaign pledges to introduce a law to set interest caps to protect financially distressed debtors (Pak 2022, 23 January).

The conversion of human bodies into commodities in *Squid Game* takes place when debtors default on interest or debt payments. As the poor and the weak who cannot qualify for bank loans go to personal moneylenders, they unwillingly become enmeshed in selling their organs. Söng Ki-hun, the protagonist, a delinquent debtor 신용불량자 (shinyong pullyangja), is portrayed as a pathetic, immature, jobless man in his 40s living off his old mother, who lives hand-to-mouth. Obsessed with gambling on horse racing, he throws a tantrum to persuade his mother to give him money to buy a birthday gift for his daughter. In the first episode, threatening to gouge out his eyeballs with a knife, his creditor coerces him to stamp his thumbprint on the body waiver paper,<sup>4</sup> thus agreeing to transfer his physical rights. Organs and body parts, such as the liver, kidney, heart, and cornea, are treated as collateral. Söng Ki-hun takes the creditor's threat as one of the normal events in his life. The preposterousness of this interaction lays an effective foundation for the dramatic transformations of the character in the later plot.

### Mbembe's necropower and techniques of killing

If cinematic representations of deaths can be called “performed deaths,” director Hwang's plan to embody images of a massacre in the first game, green light and red light, are the intended esthetics and can be said to be the first major allegorical moments that remind viewers of the historical trauma of massacres. The slaughter in the first game effectively conveys techniques of killing, resonating with Mbembe's explanation of necropower as a subject of possession and loss in power relations.

As Mbembe defines necropower as the right to live or die, he introduces analyses of Hegel's (Hegel and Lefebvre 1991) and Bataille's (Bataille and Strauss 1990) perceptions of life and death.<sup>5</sup> Mbembe interprets that Hegel sees death as the result of a human “negating nature,” so human beings can reach the truth only when body and spirit separate, which bears some analogy with the basic concepts of Christianity. Hegel perceives death as risking human intelligence, sovereignty, and even the entirety of life (154–5), whereas Bataille understands death as a continuation of life and does not consider human intelligence as significant as Hegel does. Rather, Bataille believes that a human is self-conscious of death and that death is a “luxurious” entity (155). Mbembe analogizes Bataille's concept of death with “an expenditure without reserve” (155). He concludes that preserving sovereignty may legitimize massacres by modern states built upon the premise of “civilization.”

All three scholars seek to characterize the human relationship to death. Whereas Hegel positions death as a passage of life that a human experiences/encounters, Bataille positions death as an antithetical subject that a human risks/faces. Mbembe acknowledges these different approaches, and instead of taking a side, he focuses on how in modern history, modern states have situated life and death as objects to possess/be dispossessed of. When death is considered a power relation, as the concept of sovereignty has been universally applied as a key element for the foundation of a modern nation-state, the social contract between a nation-state and its people mandates the exchange of rights and duties. Mbembe criticizes a few powerful modern nation-states that until recently have legitimized the breach of the mandate and subjugated their people or opponents through civilization, colonization, and wars.

Mbembe points out that any nation-state, any system, any institution, and any individual can be a necropower holder. For example, civilians and mercenaries in small-scale local wars are deprived of their sovereignty in hovering between life and death, stateless and lawless situations. Plantation owners

<sup>4</sup>The thumbprint has been used as a standard means of signature in Korea.

<sup>5</sup>I put the years of the translated books of Hegel and Bataille in French that Mbembe cited here and included translated books in reference because I relied on Mbembe's analysis of Hegel and Bataille, not the original books.

who possessed full control over people and the territory acted like colonizers. The sovereignty of the nation-state did not reach those plantations (Mbembe 2008, p. 160). The hierarchical relationship between slaves and owners was maintained over their lifetimes, and subjugation was even inherited by later generations. Another example is that a soldier in a local war and another in World War II seem to have the same status, but the latter cannot be said to be under the rule of necropolitics because everyone else is under the influence of the world war. Although the periods of the two cases differ, the subjects of necropower commonly suffer from the double oppression of corporeality and mentality. Slaves suffer from an extreme amount of physical labor, whereas mercenaries or soldiers and innocent civilians in local wars become subjects of living death or slow death. Living while knowing that their death is imminent or harsh labor can kill them is like living with the constant specter of death dominating their affect and mentality.

However, Mbembe claims that limited temporal and spatial conditions suit necropolitics.

Human dread of necropower comes from the collective effects of the “technology of murder” (Mbembe 2008, p. 158) through performances, visual images, music, and even contenders’ play in games. As each stage of a game proceeds, rather than focusing on who wins or loses, viewers of *Squid Game* easily become enthralled with eerie but discordant dream-like surroundings, such as colorful but cacophonous visuals and wind instrumental music (especially the main theme song, which is played on a pipe). The fancy interiors create illusions, such as an amusement park with stairs and maze-like exits painted in brilliant colors. Spatial enclosure effectively arouses dread. Recent South Korean dramas and movies such as *부산행* (*Pusanhaeng, Train to Pusan*, 2016, dir. Yŏn Sang-ho), the Netflix drama *킹덤* (*K’ingdŏm, Kingdom*, 2019, dir. Kim Sŏng-hun), and *지금 우리 학교는* (*Chigŭm uri hakkyonŭn, All of Us Are Dead*, 2022, dir. Yi Chae-gyu) similarly maximize fear of spatial confinement within an express train, a contaminated town, and a high school, respectively. For example, *All of Us Are Dead* tells the story of a scientist and a father whose son is a victim of school bullying. The scientist misuses fatherly love in his deep anger against the indifferent school authorities and invents a self-evolving lethal virus. This high school zombie drama demonstrates how necropolitics in a “crisis” situation can become elevated to the level of war and ultimately kill innocent civilians. Additionally, it criticizes the malfunctioning/ineffectiveness of the national security and emergency system. This plot reminds viewers of the Sewol Ferry disaster on April 16, 2014, which killed 304, including 250 Tan Wŏn High School students from Ansan city.

In *Squid Game*, necropower over each contender’s life is not fixed but moves among the contenders, a frontman, and the VIPs depending on the intersectionality of the situation. Two conflicting views, “life is like a hell” and Bataille’s idea of “death as a luxury” (Mbembe 2008, p. 155), operate in the extremely confined world of survival games. As the contestants face the specter of death, solidarity strengthens them. In the drama, necropower manifests in diverse forms, from body waivers to the human organ trade, which arbitrates the transfer of necropower among the entities involved through the brutal mechanism of dehumanizing practices and the interactions among the characters through playing survival games. The conversion of human life and corporeality into monetary value illustrates that “nothing escapes money” (Hardt and Negri 2001, p. 32).

Unlike previous dramas and films that partly described the organ trade, *Squid Game* zooms into the overall process of converting human bodies into commodities. The first part of episode two depicts the cruel treatment of human bodies, from killing to defilement, dismemberment, removal, and cremation. The episode starts with a scene showing where the dead contenders’ corpses go after the deadly game, with bizarre contrasts. Coffins decorated with pink ribbons are placed side by side in cremation rooms. This collective cremation is reminiscent of the Nazi concentration camps’ cremation rooms, representing typical necropolitics. As “technologies of destruction have become more tactile, more anatomical and sensorial” (Mbembe 2008, p. 171), these morbid treatments of corpses invite viewers to connect them to the history of trauma and atrocities associated with savagery, cruelty, sadism, and inhumanity. The seemingly incongruous esthetic visual images of the pink ribbons on the coffins and guard uniforms interspersed with the horrendous visuals of the corpses create a colorful but eerie atmosphere.

To maintain the bizarre and intense atmosphere throughout the drama, Hwang carefully organizes the order of the games. He makes the first game, green light and red light, and eliminate as many contenders as possible so that the scene shows “like a massacre” (Still Watching Netflix 2021, 7 December). As Mbembe describes it, necropower in a massacre situation persists for the survivors because the “illusory rejection of a death” overwhelms them and forces them to envision the bones and fragmented bodies of the dead (Mbembe 2008, p. 172). In other words, necropower peaks when civilians in warfare who run away must step on piles of numerous dead bodies and bones. Mass running scenes are often used in Korean War films, such as *국제시장* (*Kukche sichang*, *Ode to My Father*, 2014, dir. Yun Che-gyun), or in often-cited newsreel clips of civilians running to catch trains or to cross the bridge over the Han River in Seoul. These scenes invite viewers to recognize the many massacres in modern history.

### Necropolitics and the organ trade in contemporary South Korean films and dramas

Film scholars discuss violence as a source of entertainment (Young 2009) and spectators’ intensifying “fascination with violence/terror” in horror or crime films (Goldstein 1998). Since the hybridity and convergence of different cultural media have become a new norm, many recent dramas and films have crossed genre boundaries. Similarly, *Squid Game* intended to borrow, combine, and defy genre conventions and add children’s game play to the form of entertainment. The OTT platform’s relatively fewer restrictions on the range and scope of cinematic creativity and lower investment burden helped director Hwang not only express cinematic imagination but also extend some storylines and narratives and raise the degree of violence and death over that of a common two-hour feature film. Fear of violence and bloodshed in life and death seeps into everyday life (Crane 1994) and routinizes them.

Horror or crime films usually capture death scenes in close-ups (Gibson 2001) with the aim of maximizing the brutality of the villain. However, *Squid Game* chooses to omit or shorten death scenes and focuses on the progression of the survival game. The overall focus of the drama is more on moments before and during the game moments than on the results. Frustrations, struggles, and conflicts among the contenders constantly emerge, which naturally creates anxiety, suspense, and fear in the audience. In contrast, depictions of the contestants’ failures after each game end quickly, as the screen briefly displays the immediate moment of death. Additionally, the premise that except for the one last winner, all the other game players are supposed to be killed draws the audience’s attention to the process of the game rather than the predestined result of death. Children’s games become the killer of the contenders, so the usual depiction or characterization of killers in horror and crime films is unnecessary. In this regard, the growing terror of approaching death that the audience must feel in horror and crime films is minimized, eliminated, or undermined. *Squid Game* certainly borrows the genre conventions of horror and crime films but simultaneously defies them. Thus, diverting the focus from violence to entertaining and nostalgic children’s games and erasing the anxiety about life and death contribute to the global popularity of *Squid Game*.

Kwak (2009) explains iconographic representations and receptions from popular gangster films *조폭 영화* (*Chop’ok yŏnghwa*) from the late 1990s to the early 2000s to demonstrate Korean viewers’ changing collective consciousness of routinized violence by state apparatuses such as the police and military *정치적 폭력* (*Chŏngch’ijŏk p’ongnyŏk*)<sup>6</sup> or “military gangsters” *군사 강패* (*Kunsa kkangp’ae*) and the beginning of their escape from fear (112). It is important to see not how gangster films reflect reality but how the icons of gangsters are signified (82). Similarly, recent South Korean films’ and television dramas’ increasing portrayal of necropolitics against social misfits, the marginalized, and the poor within neoliberal capitalism illuminate noticeable perceptions of iconography of necropower rather than a precise reflection of the reality of the organ trade. The consequences of economic growthism under authoritarian regimes from the 1960s to the 1980s have further fostered systematic

<sup>6</sup>Kwak expresses violence by the nation-state as political violence (*Chŏngch’ijŏk p’ongnyŏk*). Because she refers to routinized violence by state apparatuses such as the police and military, I translate it in this way to avoid confusion.

complicity among businesses, politicians, and police, which has become a typical component of the plots of many films and dramas. Loan sharks are usually portrayed as business partners of larger organized crime rings and as making more direct contact with ordinary debtors. Routinized violence toward delinquent debtors and participants in the organ trade has evolved from intimidation to a lucrative source of “bodies for sale.” To retrieve uncollected money, private lenders coerce debtors to sign a body waiver and later force them into organ sales. As the target of malicious crime shifts to normal delinquent debtors, audiences can easily empathize with the victims of loan sharks’ maltreatment and brutality<sup>7</sup> because the world depicted by gangster films is no longer a separate world where necropower is exercised; rather, necropower can now be exerted over anybody’s everyday life.

Unlike *Squid Game*, which is set on a secluded, uninhabited island, the following two works introduced here are set in similar locations that provide a stateless and lawless society as a basic precondition of necropolitics. Korean society’s power oligarchy, consisting of conglomerates, members of congress, prosecutors, and police officers, possesses an absolute hierarchical advantage for VIP clients of providers of human organs. This group is portrayed as gaining double profits as both clients of and collaborators in the illegal human organ trade. In a recent social satirical TV drama, *모범 택시* (moböm t’aekshi, *Taxi Driver*, 2021, dir. Pak Chun-u), the male protagonist, Kim To-ki, joins a private detective team to carry out personal vengeance. All members of the team aim to embody social justice without relying on law enforcement. They take their own revenge on behalf of clients who are victims of serious social ills, such as school bullying, voice phishing, and digital sex crimes. The leader of the secret detective crew, Chang Söng-ch’öl, works as a voluntary police adviser, disguising his real identity to extract classified information from police investigations for the team’s secret revenge missions. The team carries out different methods in each client’s case. They run a private prison to execute their own forms of judicial punishment. This detective agency readily performs illegal activities or collaborates with an underground loan shark, Ms. Paek Söng-mi, who has a side operation in the human organ trade. To keep the secret dungeon running 24/7, Söng-ch’öl asks her to oversee the site and inmates. The next convict is just being transferred to another jail and is kidnapped by the team. Not knowing why he is being locked up, the new convict begs for release. The lawless and stateless state of the secret prison creates a perfect setting for exerting necropower over the inmates. The detective team plans to torture the inmates until they repent. However, when Söng-ch’öl asks her to watch over the prison, Söng-mi heartlessly tries to obtain a cornea from the convict and offers it to her secret partner, the chairperson of a conglomerate. She does not express any remorse or guilt because she believes the inmate’s life is worthless, but this young cornea is worthy of being supplied to the superrich old conglomerate chairperson. A systematic monopoly or oligarchy at the top level of the social stratification of power and wealth rules the illegal human organ market.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas *Taxi Driver* deals with the illegal human organ trade in one episode, *차이나타운* (ch’aina t’aun, *Coinlocker Girl*, 2015, dir. Han Jun-hui) centers on the human organ trade in a crime genre centered on another social issue: human trafficking. Kidnapped children are raised by their “mother,” the female protagonist, Ma U-hüi (Ms. Ma, afterward), who forms a pseudofamily. Ms. Ma is a tenacious private loan shark who mercilessly employs debt collection methods against delinquent debtors. Her grown children routinely carry out their duties to run this family business. They intimidate debtors through calls and workplace visits, but the final penalty for delinquent debtors is having their organs extracted. Debtors sign body waivers, as in *Squid Game*, and those who work in this field casually mention a price for each organ as if a common market value exists: 15 million Korean won

<sup>7</sup>복수는 나의 것 (Poksu nün naüi köt, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, 2002, dir. Park Chan-wook) and 아저씨 (Ajösssi, *The Man from Nowhere*, 2010, dir. Yi Chöng-pöm) began the trend of dealing with the human organ trade in films.

<sup>8</sup>Depictions of the human organ trade in contemporary South Korean dramas and movies are expanding the scope of criticism by portraying the internationalization of human trafficking, especially of children, for the supply of racially hierarchized organs. Seemingly a simple plot of a single father’s journey to find his missing daughter, 다만 악에서 구하소서 (Taman agesö kuhasosö, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 2020, dir. Hong Wön-chan) implies that the domestically prohibited human organ trade has changed its venue to other Asian countries in order to continue. The protagonist, a hit man, Gim In-nam, goes to Thailand to find his daughter, who has been kidnapped for organ removal.



(12,500 US dollars) for a cornea and 30 million won (25,000 US dollars) for a kidney. Ms. Ma's illegal activities do not attract police investigation or prosecution because she maintains long-term collusion with a member of congress and the police commissioner. These powerful "business partners" protect her moneylending and body organ businesses. The victims of human trafficking themselves become brutal executors of necropower over delinquent debtors, which implies that the fundamental rule of capitalism, maximizing profitability, applies only to the socially weak in the lowest social strata by implementing extreme violence against their lives and deaths.

Through Ms. Ma's lifetime motto and faith, 쓸모있음 (ssülmo issüm, utility), the film shows that the horrendous human trafficking and organ trades pessimistically reflect dystopian social changes that treat corporeality merely as an expendable commodity with an exchange value. While this matriarch inculcates her children with the importance of usefulness, she hardly expresses motherly love and care for them. She feels no remorse for taking lives or selling organs. Her loyal, reserved adopted daughter Il-yöng is skillful and smart but hardly reveals emotion, thus earning the most trust from Ms. Ma. Although this exhaustively utilitarian mindset may help Ms. Ma obliterate her guilt for killing delinquent debtors, when exerting necropower over debtors, her adopted sons and daughters act like mindless robots, deeply enmeshed in the philosophy of usefulness. According to this rule, if someone is no longer useful, there is no need for them to live. The dark shadows of human trafficking and the organ trade prevent Ms. Ma from preserving a normal family. A mentally disabled adopted son, Hong-chu, regularly takes pills for anxiety, but his medications also enable him to guiltlessly play his role in committing murder and extracting organs. Hong-chu is brainwashed by Ms. Ma's "utility" misbelief and never resists her abusive commands. While he carries out her orders, he repeats, as if reciting a spell, "Mom always tells (us) that (we should) work as much as you are fed."

However, as Il-yöng falls in love with Pak Sök-hyön, who is a debtor and a cook, the seemingly firm patriarchy that Ms. Ma has built begins to rupture. Seok-hyeon has been diligently paying back his father's debt, but the loan then becomes overdue. Because Sök-hyön has already signed a body waiver, Hong-chu comes to take his cornea. Although Il-yöng tries to save Sök-hyön, he is killed by another hired killer, and his corneas and organs are removed. Ms. Ma controls her pseudofamily and business by strictly following the rule of an eye for an eye, so she must kill Il-yöng for disobedience. Instead, she saves Il-yöng's life but decides to sell her to a Japanese prostitution ring. Finally, Il-yöng manages to escape, but other family members attempt to take her life because the rule of utility that unites them has been shattered. The only option for Il-yöng is to take her mother's life. Ms. Ma anticipates the end of her life, and her last words to Il-yöng are "(I deserve to be killed because) I become useless." Ultimately, these kidnapped children serve as both objects and executors of necropower.

Both *Taxi Driver* and *Coinlocker Girl* portray the powerful and rich as treating their physical illnesses and defects by exploiting the corporeality of the poor and the weak. These two works critically represent gender and class-discriminative necropower. It is taken for granted that the authority of necropolitics is wielded above the nation and law system, reinforcing the status quo of the social class system and existing hierarchies of power. The next section discusses how necropolitics in *Squid Game* reaches the pinnacle of "morbid spectacle"<sup>9</sup> in scenes of the processes of the organ trade in episode 2.

### Morbid spectacle: images of death and the commodification of corporeality

South Korean organ trade colluded with internationally networked crime has begun to surface in news media since mid-2010 when an organ trading broker was caught after five years on the loose in China

<sup>9</sup>The phrase "morbid spectacle" comes from Mbembe's "Necropolitics," on which this paper's main arguments depend. Mbembe explains that the survivors of the Rwandan massacres suffer from an "illusory rejection of death" because they are also victims of the "morbid spectacle of (dead bodies) severing" (Mbembe 2008, p. 172). I was inspired by his explanation because I think that "morbid spectacle" expresses the situation of the contenders in *Squid Game*, who must confront imminent death but also deal with the morbid spectacle of other contenders' horrendous deaths.

(No Cut News 2016, 20 September). The crime ring reportedly arranged for patients with chronic renal failure or liver cancer to undergo illegal organ transplant operations in China. Because South Korean organ donations are comprehensively controlled under the state legal system, terminally ill patients must undergo a long wait for organ donations. Although the organ trade is illegal, supply and demand naturally form a black market. Today, online cafes make illegitimate deals easy and simple. With only one or two words, buyers and brokers convey what organs will be traded and where extraction surgery will be performed. For instance, a commonly used slang term is “helicopter,” which stands for the initials of the heart, liver, cornea, pancreas, tendon, and retina. When the helicopter is followed by any Chinese city or town name, that refers to where the organ trade and surgery will be performed. “Ghost helicopter” or “log” refers to a corpse (Pusan MBC 2019, 4 September; No Cut News 2016, 20 September). Advertisement stickers with phrases such as “buying a liver” or “a liver for sale” can easily be found on public restroom stalls or walls (No Cut News 2016, 20 September). Moneylenders determine the economic value of body parts. For example, in one criminal case, the organs of a family of four, including two children, were auctioned for two hundred million won (167,000 US dollars) (Pusan MBC 2019, 4 September). The commodification of human organs seeps into people’s daily lives far more seriously than one imagines. These appalling organ trade tactics are cunningly developing, as they are becoming lucrative global underground organ economy.

The surgery scene in episode two of the removal of organs and eyeballs is the culmination of the grisly transformation of human corporeality into commodification. By arranging disgusting organ extraction images in this early episode, the show illuminates that the organ economy inside this world feeds on the living corpses of those who lose the game but stay between life and death. In the real world, those who supply organs (those who sell their organs for money) can choose to do so, but in the show, the players are victims of the commodification of corporeality. In the show, obsessions with money feeding efficiency and productivity drive the accomplices to swiftly slash bodies and to debase human dignity. The organ economy in the show is represented as the product of the capitalist system through the division of labor. The speed of the process is directly connected to money. This process of the organ trade resembles industrial society’s systems of mass production and automation. Episode two depicts defeated players who are supposed to be dead being carried to the underground morgue and then to the cremation room. The first is the selection of a supply or a suitable participant who is not yet dead. After the tug-of-war, the guardian involved in the organ trade sneaks out of one coffin, drawing a cross on the outside to mark the body’s eligibility for the organ trade. Slowly moving fingers try to come out of the coffin, implying that the person inside is still alive, but the guardian immediately shuts it and drills screws into the lid as if this happens quite commonly. Ironically, that the red cross twists the symbolic meaning of Christian salvation and the humanitarian work of the International Red Cross into that of death. Then, other men take charge of the operating room. After the surgery, two guards swim to deliver the “fresh” organs to the buyers. Thus, the players’ use value is doubly exploited, first by the game and then by the organ economy. The collusive guards are devoid of emotions and morals and are immune to savagery, but they are also vulnerable to necropower.

What is important here is the positioning of living corpses as in-between. For the supply of organs, the accomplices commit postgame murders of seriously injured but still living players. Thus, even after the game, the players are situated differently in terms of necropower. Living corpses undergo a more painful death than contestants who immediately die. The operation scenes highlight the irony of a future victim (the surgeon) and perpetrators (guardians) working together for the organ trade. A participant, Pyöng-ki, is a surgeon who accidentally killed a patient. To earn a lawsuit fee, he collaborates with the organ trading guardians in return for being informed of the next game in advance. In the operating room, the grisly and repulsive visual images of heartlessly hacked corpses with wide-open bellies and bloody organs vividly flash allegorical moments on the screen for viewers to process powerful cinematic images into trauma. I claim that viewers can encounter the “allegorical moment,” as Lowenstein claims, in these scenes filled with images that constitute multiple visual and acoustical elements, including language, distorted voices, visuals of the room, pink uniforms, and black masks

protecting the anonymity of the faceless guardians, and the dismembered body lying on the operating table. These images invite viewers to recognize the vulgar greed for money and the complete loss of value judgment. The giggling guardians chat about a grisly episode when a still-living body that they were operating on arose and terrified them adds to the images. The apparently symbiotic relationship between the guards and the surgeon ends awfully when the doctor is finally betrayed. The accomplices lose a sense of humaneness but are trapped in the illusion of efficiency and usefulness, the very faith that Ms. Ma from *Coinlocker Girl* fervently believes in. The frontman ruthlessly kills the guards for violating the rules when he discovers that they informed the physician about the next game in advance. He does not raise the issue of their use of contenders for the organ trade but kills them for damaging the fairness of the game. Within this world, the game rules also exercise necropolitics – who is to be killed and who is to live. Once the rules are broken, the whole architecture of the game world crumbles.

### Fluid necropower in *Squid Game*: the power of humanity or the victory of mammonism?

Although viewers' dialectical processing between mammonism and humanity must not happen evenly and simultaneously with the show's progression, I find an important moment of departure in the technique of necropower in a game of slap-match between Ki-hun and a stranger, Kong Yu, in a subway station in the first episode. The game rule is simple: Ki-hun is slapped in lieu of paying a bet, and once he bears this slight pain, he earns another chance to receive a reward. Substituting money for being slapped enables Ki-hun to continue betting at no risk of losing money (technically, he has no money). His desire to continue the game exceeds his "reasoning" as he pays the cost by impairing his body but cannot recognize the degree of his physical damage (his seriously swollen and red face). However, this is the point of the allure. The rather simple corporal punishment successfully manipulates Ki-hun to gradually adapt to the tactic of necropower. The taste of winning in the game of slap-match obliterates his fear of death, leading him to voluntarily consent to bet his life in the death game. In other words, he agrees to an exchange value of 100 million won for his body and life. Minor damage to the face is a prelude to death. As Ki-hun bets his cheek on a slap-match, the necropolitical scheme is already set up.

The drama's setting and plot maximize the fluidity of necropolitics as sovereignty over each contender's life moves among the contenders, the frontman, the VIPs, and the architecture of the survival game world itself. The contenders have the leverage to control or modify the rules of the game because without participants, the survival game is not possible. All entities join in constructing the necropower. First, although the VIPs sponsor the entire game, once the game begins, they are spectators and cannot directly influence the process. Next, the frontman, a former participant and the mysterious participant number 1, Oh Il-nam, masterminds the game setting and adjusts the degree of cruelty of the games. When the frontman orchestrates the game of slap-match to recruit participants, he already anticipates the split among the participants, internal murders, and chaos. However, like the VIPs, he cannot break the rules or intervene in the results of the game. Third, the participants can subvert or resist necropower through collective bargaining against authority. The participants' perceptions of and attitudes toward death show the intersectionality of situations, emotions that arise from moment to moment, and life experiences. They capriciously oscillate between negating and accepting death. At one time, the participants are given the choice to stop the game according to the results of a majority vote. At the first vote, they choose to live by walking out of the game world. In episode two, one participant laments this result, saying, "Just as bad out there as it is in here." Another person wails, "I'd rather stay and keep on trying in here than go back to the bullshit out there." However, many return, hoping to win the reward money to swiftly solve their economic problems.

Last, once the contenders play the game, various parameters, including how well they play, whom they team up with, the order in which they play, and who knows the rules well, affect the results. The game rules, which are rather simply designed to play on the human instinct to survive for the sake of others' lives, ironically enhance the players' intuition and cognitive capabilities, restore their lost

humanity, and enable them to form strong bonds and to share friendship and affection. The game rules embolden the contenders to exercise sovereignty over their right to die in the imminent presence of death by determining to focus on how rather than when to die. Even though the means of death differ – either gunshots (Green Light and Red Light game, Dalgona game, Marble game, and Squid game) or falling from a high point (glass-ceiling walk game and tug-of-war game) – they own their necropower during the brief moments of game play. As the episodes proceed, the focus of the show shifts from who will survive to how the contenders embrace the varied moments of death, shining a light on the characters' life stories rather than the game results. However, there also exist typical characters who are only engrossed with the game, whose deaths viewers can easily anticipate. Chang Tök-su, a thug, commits unnecessary murders outside the game time to reduce the number of contestants and increase the reward money. However, other contenders fully use the brief moments before their death to make volitional choices. One contender asks Ki-hun to switch turns in the glass bridge jumping game. Playing earlier not only means a higher chance of failure but also provides other contenders with hints about where the glass is safe. Waiting for a turn, he confesses that he has lived in a cowardly way and has never made his own decisions but merely followed what others told him to do. By fully being on his own, he fulfills his wish and altruistically gives others more time to live. The scenes of players' short spark of life before their transition to death represent how they respond in three different ways – “negating death,” accepting death, or choosing to die as “expenditure without reserve” (Mbembe 2008, p. 155). Some players take advantage of the short living moment of “luxury” by acting on their wishes before dying. Director Hwang's intent to thematize triumphant humaneness over mammonism is well orchestrated by planting various elements of unexpected possibilities together that can occur while playing the children's games.

Director Hwang's intention to accentuate esthetic ferocity immediately starts with the onset of the first game in a gigantic girl figure with a clear, ringing female voice but a disproportionately large head that arouses a sense of grotesqueness. A large playground surrounded by the dome-shaped arena and by drawings on the walls appears to be a normal view of a natural landscape with a blue sky, trees, and greenery, creating the illusion that the contestants are outdoors on a field, where those who are detected moving while they are supposed to freeze are ruthlessly shot from above by the guards. When the contenders are asked to sign a consent form before playing the first game, green light and red light, they hardly imagine that the word “elimination” in the contract means death until two male friends are shot and fall on the front line. Then, a majority of the contenders ignore or forget the game rule that they should stop as they break down and run frantically toward the entrance, leading to massive slaughter. With soothing jazz music playing, Ki-hun and other desperate contenders run and trample corpses and Sang-u stands behind the bodies of the dead contenders. Some run over piles of dead bodies, and others collapse in splashing blood. The atrocities weirdly create esthetics of the colorful *mise-en-scène* of red (blood) and green (clothing) along with the grotesque but bright sets. The contrasts between the calm music, the radiant visual effects of the massacre, and the slow motion ironically accentuate the savagery of necropower and resonate with the last slow-motion killing scenes in *기생충* (Kisaengch'ung, Parasite, 2019, dir. Bong Joon-ho). The secluded ancient Roman arena-like space makes the participants more vulnerable and visually noticeable as laborers and disposable pieces in the game world's necropower.

The show also represents aspects of the processes of fissures in humanity driven by the hardcore, raw nature of necropower. As a trait of modernity and a tactic of a modern state (Mbembe 2008, pp. 157–58), the technology of killing intensifies as each game demands different dimensions of human abilities. In the tug-of-war, the participants collaborate on ways to play through collective efforts. In the dalgona game, several players save their lives by imitating Ki-hun's licking and melting tactics. Next, the marble game culminates in the destruction of human dignity and tortures the players. A strong desire for life even supersedes a desire to save a family member's life. A husband defeats his wife but later kills himself. Sang-u fools Abdul, a foreign immigrant worker with an ill baby son, who feels familial warmth for Sang-u and fully trusts him by tricking him into confusing stones with marbles. Ki-hun does not find out that Il-nam is losing his cognitive ability (in the middle of the drama,

Il-nam's dementia is getting worse, but because he seems fine) until this marble game begins. Il-nam seems confounded with game rules such as how many games are left and who wins which game. Then, Ki-hun deceives Il-nam and manipulates the game result. A Christian man's moral value system is destroyed, as he justifies killing others as inevitable and even thanks God for saving his life. Next is the glass stepping-stone game set, which director Hwang says is intended to create a "virtually sumptuous and circus-like" effect (Still Watching Netflix 2021). It is also reminiscent of the heinous human history of Roman spectatorship and public lynchings of Black people. The VIPs' inhumane spectatorship of "a live murder show" also indicates their ambivalent status. The six VIPs who appear in the later episodes are ethnically diverse – one white gay man, three other white men, and a Chinese man who seem to stay at the top of the sovereign power order, although they are not manipulators of necropower but merely spectators obsessed with observing "raw" human acts and deaths. They chat about the game subjects, judge the participants' acts, condescendingly jeer at the participants' human instincts, and call them stupid. In the end, viewers learn that no one can permanently own necropower. Every entity in this insane game world becomes a subject of constant surveillance and necropower, as when the frontman's mask is screened by the biometric verification detector when he enters the elevator. The participants' unexpected use of necropower complicates an otherwise monotonous plot and attracts viewers to the show.

Surely, the show does not explicitly demonstrate the didactic ending of the victory of humanity over mammonism but rather invites viewers to think of necropower and mammonism and the meaning of humanity. To effectively apply allegorical dialectics, diverse characters in *Squid Game* beyond the limits of class, gender, ethnicity, and nationality include marginalized people such as an illegal immigrant worker, a North Korean defector, a victim of domestic violence, a murderer, a swindler, and a gangster as well as people from all walks of life, including a math teacher, a glass factory worker, and a doctor. Chi-yŏng, who suffered from domestic violence and killed her predator father, a pastor, volitionally decides to defeat the marble game and saves Kang Sae-pyŏk, a defector who lost her parents while escaping from North Korea. Others in the group have experienced dramatic falls in life after enjoying decent jobs and social status. Cho Sang-u is charged with embezzling 650 million won of clients' money through derivatives and futures but, as Bataille claims, reserves the luxury of death and determines his time of death (rather than negating death) by participating in the game. In the last game, Squid Game, Sang-u chooses to kill himself so that Ki-hun can win the game money and asks him to help his mother. Throughout the entire series, as Hwang says, the show illustrates that affection and trust in human relationships win over greed for game money. Humanism, solidarity, and altruism across classes, genders, ethnicities, and nationalities in the extreme setting of the survival game highlight the characters' use of their volition to prevent the game results from exerting necropower over them. Regardless of what elements viewers take away from the show, allegorical moments in the show esthetically and thematically create a space for viewers to perceive necropower, mammonism, and humaneness.

## Conclusion

The representations of necropower in *Squid Game* through children's games work as a hinge between reality and the imaginary that invites viewers to dialectically appreciate death problems. The show indicates that the survival game world maximizes the manifestation of mammonism fed by the capitalistic economy, where the unending pursuit of capital accumulation commodifies human bodies and organs. The setting and protagonist, Sŏng Ki-hun, a delinquent debtor, illuminate issues such as the illegal organ trade and body waivers, and the show also leads viewers to question whether this distinctive Korean social phenomenon contradicts Korean traditional perceptions of connecting corporeality with ancestral inheritance.

The complex mechanism of necropower in *Squid Game* demonstrates ambivalence in terms of both Hegel's negating death and Bataille's squandering death as luxury. Mbembe's concept of necropolitics more apparently manifests in the technology of destruction/killing after playing children's games. For

example, the massacre in the first game (green light and red light) is reminiscent of Mbembe's example of necropolitics in mercenaries' killing of civilians in local wars within spatial limits. Next, necropower manifests in the treatment of bodies for the organ trade, a system associated with Nazi concentration camps and slave plantations. In the process of depriving a contender of necropower, the contender's body is treated, extracted, and facilitated in episode two to create a "morbid spectacle" as a climax of mammonism. The inhumane commodification of organs combines with the systemization of the black economy. As representations of the contestations of humanity and mammonism, players use "death as luxury," as Bataille claims. After necropower moves from the authorities (the VIPs and a frontman) to the contenders, it manifests in diverse ways depending on the intersections of situations, game rules, architecture, game partners, and so on. Life and death transcend different objectives of necropolitics – entertainment for the VIPs and solidarity, humanism, and self-realization for contenders. In *Squid Game*, viewers are invited to understand fluid necropower as synthesis through numerous allegorical moments.

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