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A Children's Game /A Dystopian Nightmare: A Psychoanalytic and Hermeneutic Study of the Doll of Doom in the Moral Landscape of the Netflix Series *Squid Game*

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Abstract

The present study provides a nuanced analysis of Young-hee, the enigmatic animatronic doll, featured within the Netflix South Korean dystopian survival thriller, Squid Game. Young-hee's initial childlike appearance – starkly juxtaposed with her subsequent lethal role – creates a profound psychological impact. Her shocking betrayal of the contestants' expectations and trust induces fear and anxiety among the contestants, adds complexity to their experiences and decisions, and highlights the unforgiving nature of the competition. Capturing the various dimensions of her character – from her cultural resonance and aesthetic significance to her psychological impact and narrative function, the study highlights how this figure serves as a potent dissonant symbol, evoking innocence on the one hand, and terror on the other hand. For this purpose, the study draws on the psychoanalytic approach to understand how Young-hee's duality and the fear she induces relate to notions of the Uncanny and the Return of the Repressed and explore the mental and emotional toll of the game on both the contestants and audience. The study also draws on the hermeneutic approach to deconstruct the visual and cultural symbols embedded within Young-hee and provide insights into the contribution of these elements to the narrative and thematic depth of the series. The study finally reaches the conclusion that Young-hee is a multidimensional figure whose significance extends beyond her immediate actions. It offers a rich tapestry of meanings, reflecting the series' visual outlook, thematic depth, and emotional resonance and commenting on the precarious cultural, psychological, ethical, and existential dimensions of South Korea.

لعبة أطفال أم كابوس مزعج:
دراسة نفسية وتأويلية لدمية الرعب في المشهد الأخلاقي لمسلسل "لعبة الحبار" على نيتفلكس

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المستخلص

تتعلق الدراسة الحالية بشكل أساسي بتقديم تحليل دقيق لشخصية "يونج هي"، الدمية الروبوتية الغامضة، التي تظهر في مسلسل نيتفلكس الكوري البائس "لعبة الحبار". يكشف المظهر الطفولي الأولي لـ"يونج هي" وملابسها التقليدية الكورية ـ التي تتناقض بشكل صارخ مع دورها القاتل اللاحق ـ عن ابعاد نفسيةً عميقةً. تحولها غير المتوقع وخيانتها الصادمة لتوقعات وثقة المتسابقين، أثار الخوف والقلق بينهم، أضاف تعقيدًا لتجاربهم وقراراتهم، أجبرهم على مواجهة الموت، كما سلط الضوء على الطبيعة غير الرحيمة للعبة. بتحليل ازدواجية "يونج هي" ، تلتقط الدراسة الأبعاد المختلفة لشخصيتها ـ من صدًى ثقافي وأهمية جمالية، إلى تأثير نفسي ووظيفة روائية. بمعنى آخر، تسلط الدراسة الضوء على هذه الدمية كرمز متناقض قوي ـ يعطي في البداية إحساسًا زائفًا بالأمان و البراءة والحنين والمعرفة ، ثم يخلق في النهاية إحساسًا بالرعب والمراقبة والسيطرة المجتمعية. لهذا الغرض، تستند الدراسة إلى نهجين نظريين: النهج التحليلي النفسي من اجل فهم التلاعب النفسي الجاري، ودراسة ارتباط تناقض "يونج هي" ـوالخوف الذي تثيره ـ بمفاهيم "المألوف الغريب" و"عودة المكبوت"، واستكشاف العبء العقلي والنفسي للعبة على كل من المتسابقين والمشاهدين . و تستند الدراسة أيضًا إلى النهج التأويلي لفك الرموز البصرية والثقافية المدمجة في شخصيتها، وفهم مدى إسهام هذه العناصر في العمق السردي والموضوعي للمسلسل. و تصل الدراسة في النهاية إلى استنتاج مفاده أن "يونج هي" شخصية متعددة الأبعاد ، تقدم نسيجًا غنيًا من المعاني التي تعكس الرؤية البصرية ، والعمق الموضوعي والصدى النفسي للمسلسل ، كما تلفت النظر إلى الأبعاد الثقافية والنفسية والأخلاقية والوجودية المتذبذبة في مجتمع كوريا الجنوبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية

ديستوبيا ـ النهج التحليلي النفسي ـ النهج التأويلي ـ لعبة الحبار ـ يونج هي ـ النجاة ـ الازدواجية ـ المألوف الغريب

A Children's Game /A Dystopian Nightmare:
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1. Introduction
1.1. Research Problem
The Transformative Journey of South Korea and the Ensuing Precarious Moral Landscape
1.1.1. The Economic Growth, Strategic Focus, and Global Influence of South Korea

South Korea's remarkable ascent on the global stage is a story of resilience, innovation, and strategic vision. Emerging from the experiences of Japanese colonial rule and the devastation of Korean War in the early 1950s, South Korea- serving as an inspiring example of how a country can overcome adversity- has transformed itself from a war-torn nation into a global leader. Ascending to become the 11th largest economy globally, South Korea has achieved a remarkable economic growth - often referred to as the *Miracle of the Han River*, that has positioned it as one of the world's leading economies and cultural powerhouses (Kleiner 2001). It has become renowned for its rapid industrialization, high levels of innovation, significant research, and substantial investments in education and smart technologies . Its strategic focus – i.e., commitment to fostering a highly educated workforce, technological capabilities, and high-tech infrastructure – has propelled it to the forefront of various industries, including electronics, automotive, and telecommunications. Prominent corporations establishing themselves as global leaders in their respective industries – such as Samsung, LG, Hyundai, and Kia – have become major exporters of goods and services, exemplifying South Korea's technological and manufacturing prowess (Min Lee 2024). Further boosting its economic growth and making it a pivotal player on the global stage is the global influence of the South Korean culture, often termed as the *Korean Wave* or *Ha llyu* (Ananad & Baek 2024). K-pop music and Korean dramas to cuisine and fashion have not only boosted South Korea's soft power and enhanced its cultural influence worldwide, but also contributed to its economic growth through

tourism and entertainment industries. Expanding its influence in Asia and beyond, South Korea's strategic diplomacy has also played a crucial role in its ascent. Its strong economic and political ties with major global powers, active participation in international organizations , and role in global issues -such as climate change and peacekeeping- have further solidified its position on the world stage (Kim 2022) .

1.1.2. The Ensuing Precarious Moral Landscape of South Korea

Though South Korea's rapid industrialization, continued focus on innovation, education, and strategic partnerships, and remarkable exposure to diverse cultural influences have brought acclaim, South Korea's swift societal shift has introduced novel challenges, which in turn, have given rise to complex psychological phenomena. In other words, underneath this veneer of progress is intricately woven a complex interplay of historical legacies and modern influences that impact the unique cultural fabric, moral landscape, and promising future of South Korea.

Historical Legacies: The Legacy of Confucianism - Educational Pressure, Hyper-Competitive Culture, and Mental Health Implications

To begin with, South Korea's rapid transformation from a war-torn country to a global economic powerhouse has played a crucial role in shaping the culture of competition. More precisely speaking, its economic progress has brought about societal pressures – including intense academic stress, demanding work environments, high societal expectations, and lifestyle changes. A complex issue with deep historical, cultural, and economic roots, this hyper-competitive culture and its relentless pursuit of academic excellence can be traced back to Confucianism, which has historically played a pivotal role in shaping the moral and psychological landscape of South Korea.

A combination of traditional, deeply rooted core values which have left deep imprints on the collective psyche and interpersonal dynamics of South Koreans, Confucianism prioritizes academic success as a means of securing a prosperous future. Creating a rigid societal expectation and pressure that individuals must excel academically to achieve personal honor and social mobility, this cultural backdrop emphasizes the importance of education, collectivism, filial piety (respect for authority and hierarchical relationships), faithfulness to social norms, and adherence to the demands of a modern, highly competitive global economy (Huang & Gove 2015). Evident in various aspects of Korean life and contributing to a strong sense of duty and responsibility within families and communities, these Confucian cultural underpinnings shape

not only the construction of self-identity, educational pursuits, and career choices, but also have direct implications on family dynamics, social interactions, and workplace relationships (Sleziak 2013).

Influenced by the Confucian traditions, the rigorous competitive job market contributes to the precarious moral condition of South Korea. The significant challenge known as the *Exam Hell Phenomenon* – the intense high-stakes entrance exams students go through in East Asian countries to gain admission to prestigious universities and secure future job opportunities – contributes to creating a highly competitive environment .Apart from driving notions of success and well-being among students, forcing them to endure long hours of study to achieve economic success and social mobility , the meritocratic job market exacerbates the fierce academic competition by offering students from wealthier backgrounds an advantage over their less privileged peers. Perpetuating social inequalities, the job market limits secure, well-paying jobs and prestigious positions to students with degrees from top universities, who can afford better resources and private tutoring (Choi & Nieminen 2012).

Worth mentioning as well, the Confucian emphasis on academic excellence extends beyond the grueling nature of the education system, influencing various aspects of the South Korean society. This emphasis creates major challenges, particularly in terms of mental health and social well-being. Highlighting the darker side of this competitive culture, the fierce competition for coveted university placements affects family dynamics, rendering parents prioritize the needs and goals of the family and community over the individual desires of their children. It drives parents to invest substantial resources and place immense pressure on their children, who feel disillusioned and overwhelmed by the constant pressure to supplement their studies, endure long hours of study, and attend private tutoring sessions (*hagwons*) in the evenings (Levent & Pehlivan 2017). Add to this, the societal pressure to succeed and excel academically has become so intense that it has been linked to significant mental health implications - high levels of stress, anxiety, and high rates of suicide. A critical societal factor, the rigorous academic demand also impacts the workplace, as it has made academic success a critical determinant of one's career prospects. I.e., it has created a meritocratic culture forcing millions of workers – who are driven by the pressures of modern life, fear of failure, lack of upward mobility, and narrow focus on excellence and achievement – to have long working hours, be frustrated, desperate, and unable to escape their financial woes (Mofatteh2020).

Modern Influences: Rapid Urbanization, Globalization, and a Country's Economic Unease

With urban areas becoming centers of economic activity and cultural exchange, urbanization has transformed the South Korean social dynamics, family structures, and social interactions (Chun & Kim 2022). In addition, the South Korean society – navigating a cultural landscape that is evolving rapidly – has been influenced by the emergence of new media, global pop culture, and digital communication platforms. Increasingly permeating the South Korean society, this cultural exposure to new western values, ideas and practices, such as individualism and consumerism – while clashing with traditional collectivist values – has created a dynamic cultural landscape that prompts younger generations to re-evaluate traditional norms and reconcile societal expectations with individual aspirations (Young 2023).

Moreover, despite South Korea's rapid economic development, high standard of living, and its being one of the largest economies in the world, it has been also marred by financial instabilities, rising rates of poverty, and a growing wage gap. With the top 20% of earners having a net worth 166 times that of the bottom 20%, South Korea has significant wealth disparities, exacerbating social tensions and economic instability (Hong et.al 2024). Besides, rising costs of living, growing inequality, unemployment, and economic turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have driven millions of South Koreans into taking out ruinous loans, which can have interest rates as high as over 200% (Lee & Yang 2022). As noted by Kim and McCurry, indebtedness – driving individuals to desperate measures – "has gone hand in hand with a dramatically widening income gap, exacerbated by rising youth unemployment and property prices in big cities beyond the means of most ordinary workers (2021)." According to Lee In-cheol, the chief executive of the think tank *Real Good Economic Research Institute*:

> In individual terms, it means that even if you saved every single penny you earned for an entire year, you would still be unable to repay your debt. And the number of people with debt problems is rising at an exponential rate (2021).

1.1.3. The Viral, Brutal, and Enigmatic South Korean Phenomenon known as *Squid Game* and the Creative Vision of Hwang Dong-hyuk

Among the notable Netflix productions, the South Korean dystopian survival thriller, *Squid Game* - released worldwide in 2021 and created by the renowned South Korean visionary filmmaker, producer, and screenwriter, Hwang Dong-hyuk- stands out as a groundbreaking series mirroring the real-life struggles of many South Koreans who face exploitation, job insecurity, debt, lack of social safety nets, and extreme economic inequality. Breaking barriers for non-English language content in mainstream media, *Squid Game* – since its release – has taken the world by storm. It has become a global cultural phenomenon, captivating audiences worldwide with its intense narrative, striking visuals, thrilling and unsettling atmosphere, dark and violent themes, and profound social commentary.

> *Squid Game* became Netflix's most-watched series, attracting more than 142 million member households and 1.65 billion viewing hours in its first four weeks. It topped the charts in 94 countries and received critical acclaim for its storytelling, performances, and social commentary (Holmes 2023).

Inspired by Hwang's own financial struggles and the stark economic disparities in South Korea, the series revolves around a contest where 456 debt-ridden players risk their lives to compete in a series of children's games for a chance to win a cash prize of 45.6 billion Korean Won. Characterized by his simplicity in storytelling and relatability with characters, Hwang conceived *Squid Game* as a powerful allegory that reflects the precarious moral dilemmas and ethical compromises people make when pushed to the brink (Jefferies 2021) . Critiquing the capitalist system , precarious financial pressures, and the myth that academic excellence and hard work alone can lead to prosperity, *Squid Game* fosters a unique global dialogue through entertainment and sparking discussions on profound themes that make it more than just a survival thriller.

> Like the "Hunger Games," "Squid Game" holds its audience with its violent tone, cynical plot and a willingness to kill off fan-favorite

characters. But it has also tapped a familiar sense that prosperity in nominally rich countries has become increasingly difficult to achieve, as wealth disparities widen and home prices rise (Young2021).

A key element of Hwang's *Squid Game*, a testament to its thoughtful message- the lengths to which people will go to survive in a system that often seems stacked against them, the intricate character of Young-hee serves as a stark reminder of the fragility of life, and the ever-present danger of sudden arbitrary death. A large motion-sensing animatronic doll, Young-hee - featured prominently in the first deadly game, *Red Light, Green Light* - stands out as a particularly enigmatic and multifaceted figure, meticulously crafted to create a powerful, chilling and immersive experience for the players and audience alike. Brought to life using advanced animatronics and highly motion-sensing technology, Young-hee – the study maintains – embodies the human cost of economic disparity, the unpredictable and uncontrollable existential threats, and the contemporary subconscious fears and desires that loom over modern life.

1.2. **Objectives**

For this purpose, the present study is mainly concerned with tracing the unique aspects of the rich and thought-provoking moral landscape of *Squid Game* – its reflection of the harsh realities of modern society and its use of a seemingly innocent doll to challenge the audience to reflect on their own values and the ethical implications of societal structures. As such, the following objectives guide the present study: First, consider the background, influences, and socio-political context in which *Squid Game* is situated. Second, provide a comprehensive overview of the interconnected factors that contribute to the success and influence of *Squid Game* and its creator. Third, examine the dual nature of Young-hee as both an innocent, childlike figure and a lethal executioner or a harbinger of doom. Fourth, explore Young-hee's cultural resonance and aesthetic significance within the context of the South Korean society. Fifth, assess the subconscious fears and desires represented by Young-hee and the emotional and psychological manipulation exerted by her presence on the contestants and the audience. Finally, identify, interpret, and deconstruct the visual, cultural and societal symbols embedded in Young-hee's character and analyze how these symbols contribute to the overall dystopian themes of *Squid Game*.

1.3. Research Questions

For a nuanced and comprehensive exploration of Young-hee's multifaceted role in *Squid Game*, the study addresses the following key questions: First, how does *Squid Game* bridge cultural gaps and create a universal appeal despite its specific cultural context? Second, in what way has Young-hee become a global phenomenon, or what factors contribute to her widespread recognition? I.e., how Young-hee – as a traditional childlike figure with specific visual and auditory elements – is reinterpreted in the context of the series? Third, what does Young-hee reveal about human psychology and the South Korean moral landscape? Precisely speaking, how does Young-hee's transformation from a benign figure to an executioner contribute to the psychological horror and tension among the contestants, add complexity to their experiences and decisions, influence the audiences' perceptions of dystopian realities, evoke their moral questioning, shape their expectations of *Squid Game*, and contribute to its overall impact? Fourth, how does Young-hee contribute to the thematic depth, psychological complexity, narrative progression, and cultural resonance of *Squid Game*? Fifth, do the hermeneutic and psychological approaches offer a nuanced interpretation of Young-hee's character beyond surface-level traits and actions? I.e., do both approaches render us appreciate her as a compelling and multidimensional figure?

Theoretical Approach

To explore the complexities of Young-hee's character, the present study employs two theoretical approaches: The psychoanalytic approach and hermeneutic approach. The psychoanalytic approach explores how Young-hee's duality and the fear she induces relate to notions of the uncanny, repression, and the return of the repressed. Delving into the psychological impact of Young-hee, the study uncovers the psychological manipulation at play, precisely, the mental and emotional toll of the game on both the contestants and the audience. Moreover, it highlights the series' exploration of human behavior under extreme stress and the psychological consequences of societal exploitation and dehumanization.

Meanwhile, the hermeneutic approach considers the context in which Young-hee exists, the cultural and social dynamics at play, the complexities, contradictions, visual and cultural symbols, underlying meanings, and socio-cultural commentaries embedded in her portrayal. Revealing how her societal context, traditional attire, childlike appearance, and lethal role contribute to the narrative and thematic depth of *Squid Game*, the hermeneutic approach also provides insights into how visual and cultural symbols are used to enhance the emotional resonance

of the series. More precisely speaking, it lays bare the richness, depth, and significance of Young-hee as a dissonant symbol, evoking a false sense of security while simultaneously representing terror and societal control.

1.4. Rationale

The researcher's premises for selecting this groundbreaking series, enigmatic figure, and thought-provoking area of study is driven by several key factors. First of all, having broken the record for best debut on Netflix, *Squid Game* has not only ranked at the top of Netflix charts in 90 countries, captivated audiences worldwide, and took an unprecedented critical acclaim, but has also become a global cultural phenomenon. This broad appeal, or worldwide buzz, has undoubtedly left an indelible mark on the world of television and provided a rich context for the researcher to examine contemporary social and cultural issues. Moreover, solidifying its status as a cutting edge series, *Squid Game* has offered a wealth of material for academic study, from captivating dystopian themes, striking psychological and emotional impact, to unique visual style, and distinctive narrative structure.

Apart from its immense global popularity on the streaming platform *Netflix* and becoming its most-watched series premiere to date, *Squid Game is* noted for its thematic depth and relevance. It resonates widely for exploring dystopian themes through the lens of Young-hee's character. Themes like economic disparity, societal exploitation, dehumanization, desperation, survival, and the loss of innocence are relevant to current global discussions and provide valuable insights into human behavior and societal structures. The series resonates deeply with the researcher, also, for delving into the psychological and emotional experiences of its characters, offering a profound commentary on human behavior and morality. This aspect is crucial for understanding the mental and emotional manipulation within the narrative. *Squid Game* is selected, as well, for its unique visual style which enhances its thematic and emotional impact. Studying its visual elements – the researcher believes – can reveal how aesthetics contribute to storytelling and audience engagement. Moreover, *Squid Game* employs innovative narrative structure, combining suspense, drama, and social commentary. Analyzing these narrative strategies can provide insights into modern storytelling techniques and film-making practices. All this richness cements *Squid Game*'s place as a significant cultural artifact worthy of academic exploration and scholarly analysis. Finally, the underlying reason for choosing this area of study is the researcher's eagerness to uncover the true nature of Young - hee – the source of intrigue, suspense, and thrill

within the series. The multifaceted role, cultural resonance, psychological impact, narrative function, and aesthetic significance of this enigmatic figure have all made her storyline a point of fascination. Piquing the researcher's curiosity, Young-hee's duality (her initial innocence and subsequent betrayal and lethal role) makes her a potent and compelling figure for in-depth analysis and psychological exploration.

Significance

Expanding on *Squid Game*'s cultural resonance, particularly its reflection of South Korean culture and its global impact, the study deepens our appreciation of the series' thematic depth, providing valuable insights into the broader implications of cultural and psychological narratives in modern media. By addressing pressing contemporary issues such as societal control, exploitation, and the loss of innocence, the study enriches our understanding of current societal dynamics. By highlighting the importance of Young-hee – a secondary character often overlooked in favor of main protagonists, the study provides a fresh perspective on *Squid Game*. Hermeneutically, the study enhances our understanding of the intricate layers of visual symbols and cultural commentary embedded within Young-hee that contribute to *Squid Game*'s narrative depth, thematic development, and emotional impact. Psychoanalytically, the study provides insights into the psychological manipulation at play and the emotional toll of Young-hee's presence on both the contestants and audience. By bridging hermeneutic and psychoanalytic approaches, the study – hopefully– contributes to academic discourse, offering interdisciplinary insights into literature, media analysis, cultural studies, and psychology. Overall, the study lays groundwork for future research on the role and significance of secondary characters in dystopian narratives and encourages further exploration of interdisciplinary methodologies in literary, media, and cultural studies.

2. Theoretical Approach

2.1. Sigmund Freud and the Psychoanalytic Elements of the *Uncanny*

The Psychoanalytic approach, pioneered by Sigmund Freud – with its focus on the unconscious mind, the uncanny, the return of the repressed, and other key concepts – has influenced various fields including cultural studies and artistic contexts, from literature and film to visual art and performance. By embracing these facets of our psychological landscape, the researcher – does believe – one would embark on a journey of self-discovery, healing, and transformation. For this purpose, the study draws on Freud's concept of the *Uncanny*, in particular, as a rich framework for unlocking the uncharted territories of

the conscious and unconscious mind, unearthing the hidden dynamics and external manifestations of suppressed emotions, and enriching our understanding of the mysteries and darker aspects of the psyche and the deeper psychological dimensions of creative works.

Explored extensively across a wide range of disciplines and discourses, the *Uncanny* remains a powerful and intriguing concept that continues to captivate contemporary scholars and creators alike for probing the complexities of human nature, societal taboos, and existential dilemmas. It is celebrated for creating a sense of unsettling strangeness or eerie familiarity, mixed with cognitive dissonance, mystery, tension, and discomfort. It is celebrated as well for evoking our deep-seated fears, confronting our innermost desires, and challenging our assumptions about the nature of reality and representation (Smith 2023). These abilities make the *Uncanny* a rich area for exploration in both academic and creative contexts, especially when delving into the psychological dimensions, symbolic meanings, and unconscious processes represented by a complex character like Young-hee – the giant animatronic doll, whose role in the deadly game embodies the *Uncanny*.

Basically, the term '*Canny'* is from the Anglo-Saxon root '*ken'*: "knowledge, understanding, or cognizance; mental perception: an idea beyond one's ken" (Dictionary.com). Thus the '*Uncanny'* is something outside one's familiar knowledge or perceptions. Its direct translation from the German expression '*Das Unheimliche'* is "the opposite of what is familiar (Freud1919)."

To begin with, though the history of aesthetics has to do with feelings, sensations, and emotional impulses, it has neglected to study the *Uncanny* – which is something fearful and frightening, preferring to concentrate on beauty and other more positive emotions: the attractive, the sublime, etc (Elmazi 2020). Freud, however, makes a contribution, or a turn in aesthetics in general, by his fascination with the ugly, the grotesque, or by examining what we might call a kind of 'negative' aesthetics – the aesthetics of the 'fearful,' the aesthetics of anxiety (1919,123). This Freudian fascination means that

> the *Uncanny* can involve the combination of beauty and fear, perhaps occurring most commonly in the absence of sound, light and the presence of others. It often involves a fleeting sense of a secret encounter, perhaps with something that should have remained hidden, causing a momentary sense of uncertainty and apprehension (Lussana 2013).

In Heidegger's philosophy, the *Uncanny* (Unheimlichkeit) signifies a fundamental existential anxiety, or a sense of not feeling at home, emphasizing the alienation from one's usual sense of being in the world. The *Uncanny* explores the deeper, often unsettling realization of the true nature of existence, revealing the inherent strangeness of being itself (Withy2015). In Gothic literature, the *Uncanny* emerges as a disquieting mix of the familiar and the strange, creating an eerie or unsettling atmosphere. It frequently involves elements like ghosts, shadows, guardian spirits, doppelgängers (mutilated figures), waxwork dolls, mirrors, severed limbs, or animated objects that closely resemble humans, but are not quite lifelike (Smith 2023). This use of the *Uncanny* in Gothic literature aims to elicit strong emotional responses – suspense, fear, and mysterious unease, to reveal hidden aspects of the psyche and to provide insights into unconscious motivations while challenging the reader's familiar knowledge and perceptions.

> As soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality… He takes advantage, as it were, of our supposedly surmounted [or overcome] superstitious-ness; he deceives us into thinking that he is giving us the sober truth, and then after all oversteps the bounds of possibility (Malewitz 2020).

In other words, the *Uncanny* in Gothic literature arises from the gap between real events and fantastical elements in the story. The author initially promises truth and verisimilitude, but then breaks this promise.

The term *Uncanny* was first introduced by the German psychiatrist, Ernst Jentsch, in his essay *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* (1906), where he refers to it in German as *Das Unheimliche* (Unhomely) – something new and unknown that can often be seen as negative at first (1997). Focusing on the intellectual uncertainty and ambiguity that arise when something familiar is perceived in an unfamiliar way, Jentsch defines the *Uncanny* as

> being a product of...intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does not know one's way about in. The better oriented in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it (ibid.).

Expanding upon its use in fiction, Jentsch emphasizes the role of cognitive dissonance in creating the uncanny feeling. Hence, he maintains that one effective way to create an uncanny effect in storytelling is to keep the reader uncertain about whether a character is human or an automaton. This should be done subtly, so that the reader's attention is not directly drawn to this uncertainty, preventing him/her from resolving this ambiguity immediately(ibid.).

The concept of the *Uncanny*, or 'familiar yet foreign' is, however, repositioned, popularized, and notably analyzed by the German psychologist, Sigmund Freud, in his most iconic essay *The Uncanny (German: Das Unheimliche)*, where he delves into the psychological underpinnings of this phenomenon (1919). Concentrating on the unusual semantics of the two German terms *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich*, Freud stresses the fact that the term *Unheimlich* (unhomely, unfamiliar, un tame, uncomfortable, eerie, weird, etc.) is the negation of *Heimlich* (friendly, familiar, tame, intimate, comfortable, secure, domestic, and hospitable) (124-132). Freud also maintains that the *Unheimlich* is the inadvertent revelation of what is private, secret, or hidden; hidden not only from others, but also from the self. It is "the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light (199)." In Freudian terminology, the *Unheimlich* – related to what is frightening, repulsive and distressing – thus blurs the boundaries between the known and the unknown, the real and the imaginary, the animate and the inanimate, the human and the non-human, life and death (200). Tapping into our deep-seated fears and anxieties, the *Uncanny* becomes a kind of surprising, unexpected, unwilling, and mistaken self-exposure, or the mark of the return of the repressed infantile material that has been overcome and forgotten (217).

> What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*. [...] In general we are reminded that the word *heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight (2).

According to Freud, the *Uncanny* is a familiar yet disquieting experience. Located in the strangeness of the ordinary and "belonging to

all that is terrible – to all that arouses dread and creeping horror…" (1), it arises when something that is usually known, safe, recognizable, and familiar appears inexplicably in an unusual or distorted way or an alien, unsettling, or mysterious context, resulting in a feeling of it being comfortably strange or uncomfortably familiar (ibid.).

> The *Uncanny* is the psychological experience of an event or thing that is unsettling in a way that feels oddly familiar, rather than simply mysterious. This phenomenon is used to describe incidents where a familiar entity is encountered in a frightening, eerie, or taboo context (Royle2003,vii).

Typically associated with feelings of discomfort and eeriness, the *Uncanny* for Freud is not just the unknown, the unhomely or the unfamiliar. The uncanny – he argues – is the dread we experience in adulthood when buried elements of the psyche – primitive beliefs, childhood fears, sad memories, unresolved traumas, unconscious conflicts, unacceptable desires, and forbidden wishes that were long forgotten, hidden, or repressed – do not simply disappear but are suddenly revealed, resurfaced, and come to light. Freud calls it 'the return of the repressed' ("Uncanny" 217).

> *Uncanny* is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression ("Uncanny" 241).

To illustrate, Freud suggests that social taboos create in us a mix of reverence and horror. And, our super-ego – feeling guilty and fearing punishment for breaking societal norms – sees these repressed desires as threats. As a result, we project these fears onto objects and people, turning them into uncanny monsters and scapegoats for our problems (Freud 1930, 57-146).

> Our demons lose their power when we pull them out of the depths where they hide and look them in the face in broad daylight(Berman2023).

A reminder of earlier psychic stages, the *Uncanny* thus – for Freud – is something superseded in our psychic life. Confronting us with the uncanny within ourselves, Freud calls it aspects of our unconscious life or "unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways(ibid,)."

Expanding on Freud's foundational work, the psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan delves into the *Uncanny* as a phenomenon that disrupts our sense of reality and questions our identities. Often linked to the concept of the '*Real*' in his psychoanalytic theory, the *Uncanny* – for Lacan – is the unsettling encounter with the *Real* as it places us "in the field where we do not know how to distinguish bad and good, pleasure from displeasure", resulting in an irreducible anxiety that gestures to the *Real* (2005). Lacan, also, suggests that the *Uncanny* is related to the '*Extimate*' — a term he coined to describe something that is simultaneously intimate and external. Revealing the 'divided subject', where the boundaries between the self and the other or the conscious and the unconscious become blurred, this paradoxical experience — Lacan suggests — occurs when something familiar becomes alien, evoking a sense of discomfort and anxiety. Lacan, also, relates intricately the experience of the *Uncanny* to the concept of the '*Gaze*' — the unsettling feeling that the object of our look seems to look back at us, creating a disturbing sense of being observed by an inanimate entity. In essence, disrupting our sense of control and mastery over our perception, Lacan's *Gaze* emphasizes the 'lack' at the heart of the symbolic order, fragility of our constructed reality, and ever-present potential for its disruption by the *Real* (1979).

Continuing to explore the *Uncanny* and examining how it reveals the hidden depths of the unconscious, **Masahiro Mori**, a Japanese roboticist, introduced the concept of the *Uncanny Valley* in 1970 . Mori's *Uncanny Valley* is a psychological concept that explains the fear, discomfort, eeriness, or unsettling feeling people experience when they encounter humanoid objects (entities that appear nearly human, or that imperfectly resemble humans, but have subtle abnormalities that signal something potentially harmful or diseased). This dip in emotional response is what Mori termed the *Uncanny Valley* (2012).

2.2. Friedrich Schleiermacher and the Key Concepts of the Hermeneutic Approach

Though a distinct philosophical approach serving different purposes, hermeneutics, the study that focuses on interpretation, understanding, and communication, overlaps with – and complements – the psychoanalytic approach in rendering us appreciate Youbg-hee's character beyond surface-level traits and actions and gain a deeper understanding of the thematic depth and broader narrative of *Squid Game*.

Derived from the Greek word ἑρμηνεύω (*hermēneuō,* "translate, interpret") (Klein2000:344)) which means to interpret, hermeneutics is a rich, powerful, and multidisciplinary analytical framework originated from the nuanced interpretation of religious texts, wisdom literature, and philosophical texts (Reese1980,221). However, it expanded to encompass a wide range of disciplines, such as art, music, literature, visual media, including films and television series, and even daily interactions. Including the art of understanding and communication (Zimmermann2015,2), modern hermeneutics continues to expand our intellectual horizons by including both verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as semiotics, presuppositions, and pre-understandings (The Routledge Companion2015,113).

Grasped as the philosophy of interpretation, the hermeneutic analysis shapes our understanding of the world, uncovers hidden connections and symbolic dimensions of human expression, and deepens our appreciation of the intricate tapestry of symbols and gestures that surround us in our daily lives. More focused on contextual interpretation, hermeneutics involves exploring the cultural, historical, and societal contexts that shape texts. It provides a robust framework for dissecting, interpreting, and critically engaging with the broader themes, visual and symbolic elements, deeper layers of meaning, ethical and moral implications of the characters' actions, and embedded social and cultural critiques within texts (George 2021). Most of all, it is concerned with how all these elements construct and reflect our understanding of reality and contribute to the overall message of texts.

Hermeneutics traces its roots to the German philosopher, Friedrich Schleiermacher, who is often regarded as the father of modern hermeneutics. Significantly shaping the field with innovative ideas and methodologies, Schleiermacher's contributions to hermeneutics have had

a lasting impact, making him a pivotal figure in the field and laying the groundwork for later developments in hermeneutics by thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer (Forster2022). Departing from the traditional view that hermeneutics was primarily for interpreting religious or classical texts, Schleiermacher's modern approach emphasizes that hermeneutics should not be limited to specific texts or disciplines, but should be a universal method applicable to all forms of communication (ibid.). Primarily concerned with developing a universal method of interpretation that could be applied to all forms of communication, Schleiermacher thus has introduced a dual approach to reconstruct the original meaning of the text. This approach is based on the idea that understanding a text involves both grammatical and psychological interpretation. The grammatical interpretation focuses on the language and structure of the narrative - that often carry its cultural and historical significance and contribute to its overall meaning and impact. Meanwhile, the psychological interpretation considers the author's background, influences, intentions, thought processes, perspectives, and socio-political environment as valuable aspects for interpretation (Pfau1990, 51-73). Schleiermacher's key concerns include, as well, the concept of the *Hermeneutic Circle*. This concept involves the idea that understanding the whole text requires understanding its parts and vice versa. I.e., each part informs the whole, and the whole, in turn, provides context for understanding the parts (Grondin 2016, 299–305). This continuous interplay, or iterative process of moving back and forth between the whole and the parts – Schleiermacher maintains – deepens our comprehension and uncovers the full meaning of a text.

Among the key figures who contribute uniquely to the evolution of hermeneutics is Wilhelm Dilthey. Moving beyond Schleiermacher's initial framework to address broader philosophical questions about human understanding, Dilthey emphasizes the importance of considering the historical and cultural context in which a text is produced and consumed. According to him, understanding the context that shapes the meanings of symbols and themes as well as the ways in which the audience interpret them – or fully grasping the time, culture, and circumstances in which a text is created – help uncover the deeper meanings of a text and clarify the intentions of its author (Nelson 2019). Dilthey's modern approach, thus, lays the ground for a more comprehensive and historically aware hermeneutics.

Influenced by the broader tradition of hermeneutics that Schleiermacher helped to establish, Martin Heidegger – a highly influential German philosopher – represents a significant development beyond Schleiermacher's initial framework. He has transformed hermeneutics by integrating it with existential phenomenology. In his seminal work, *Being and Time*, Heidegger introduces the concept of '*Dasein*' (Being-there) to explore the fundamental structures of human existence and how they relate to understanding. He focuses on the existential conditions of understanding, emphasizing that interpretation is rooted in our being-in-the-world; or more precisely speaking, emanates from our everyday experiences and interactions with the world (1962). Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics, thus, shifts the focus from understanding texts to understanding the conditions or fundamental structures of human existence, thus broadening the scope of hermeneutics beyond textual interpretation.

Building on Schleiermacher's foundational ideas, the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer – a student of Heidegger and another key figure in the development of hermeneutics – introduces the concept of the *Fusion of Horizon* in his work *Truth and Method*. This fusion – where the perspective of the interpreter and the historical context of the text merge to create understanding – allows for a deeper, more nuanced understanding that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries. It emphasizes – Gadamer maintains – that our understanding of ourselves, others, and the world is always shaped by pre-existing beliefs, values, and cultural norms, and that interpretation is influenced by the interpreters who bring their own experiences, knowledge, preconceptions, and biases which influence their understanding to the text (Prakoso & Khasanah 2018). Hence, recognizing and being aware of these preconceptions and critically examining them – Gadamer argues – is crucial for achieving a more objective interpretation.

3. Content Analysis
3.1. Young-hee as a Prime Example of the *Uncanny*

Dolls are typically associated with childhood innocence and purity. However, when these benign entities are placed in violent contexts and suddenly shift from comforting figures to sources of terror, they shatter the inherent trust and safety they represent and trigger intense fear and anxiety. In other words, the simultaneous presence of the familiar and the alien contributes to the *Uncanny*, creating cognitive dissonance, where the mind struggles to grapple with the conflicting emotions of recognition

and repulsion. Reminiscent of childhood toys, Young-hee is a rich embodiment of the *Uncanny,* offering a deep well of psychological, symbolic, and unconscious elements to explore. Her unexpected inversion from innocence into malevolence effectively enhances tension and horror, disrupts the players' normal perception of reality, challenges the audience's understanding of good and evil, innocence and guilt, and blurs the boundaries between these dichotomies, creating a profound sense of unease and moral ambiguity. The uncanny nature of Young-hee arises from the unsettling blend of her familiar childlike appearance, alien mechanical movements, and emotionless execution of violence.

As the players enter the game arena for *Red Light, Green Light*, they encounter Young-hee, who is positioned at one end of the field and initially appears as a familiar, childlike doll. The players – who must reach her side within a set time limit– can only move when her back is turned; and any player caught moving when she turns around is eliminated by unseen snipers. Starting to sing (*Mugunghwa-kkochi pieot-seumnida*) – which roughly translates to (*The Mugungha Flower has bloomed)* and refers to the hibiscus syriacus, the national flower of South Korea, Young-hee abruptly stops and turns her head to face the players. (Player 324) and (player 250) are caught moving and immediately shot. The brutal elimination of hundreds of players who fail to stay still triggers mass panic. It reveals primal fear, instinct for survival, desperate attempts to escape, and how quickly order – under extreme stress – can dissolve into chaos. Realizing the deadly stakes of the game, the surviving players such as Cho Sang-woo and Kang Sae-byeok show intense concentration and become more cautious and deliberate in their movements. Despite their fear, they learn to stop precisely when Young-hee turns around, and are able to exploit her sensors – by using others as shields – which therefore made it more difficult for Young-hee to notice them. When the game concludes, the ceiling descends, shrouding the bewildered faces of both the traumatized survivors and the fallen players – who are killed by either being detected by Young-hee or failing to reach the end in time (Dong-hyuk 2021).

The players' initial reaction to Young-hee's presence is one of curiosity and amusement. Modeled after a traditional character from Korean children's textbook and playing on this idealization, Young-hee's bright, childlike colors and appearance are inherently familiar. Her peach-colored face, perfectly tied black hair split into low short pigtails with faded purple beads, barrette, yellow collared T-shirt, bright orange dress

above the knee, pair of knee-high white socks, and black shoes – all play on nostalgic memories and evoke a sense of innocence and purity. However, as the game progresses, the deadly stakes of the game are revealed, lethal nature of Young-hee becomes apparent, and players' initial familiarity, naivety, and underestimation of the game's severity turn into shock, vulnerability, and mass panic. Deepening the sense of betrayal and making her appearance even more jarring for Korean audience, Young-hee's transition from innocence to fear – from a beloved childhood figure to a symbol of terror – is "a wild spin on what many kids around the world are familiar with playing (Bobic 2021)."

Despite her human-like appearance, Young-hee's design immediately disrupts the sense of familiarity. Her blank, expressionless face, emphasizes her life-like yet artificial features. Her sheer size, towering over the players; mechanical black eyes, with pupils turning red when detecting movement; and high-pitched and unsettling childlike voice, repeatedly saying the creepy and ominous song ("Mugunghwa-kkochi pieot-seumnida") and stopping abruptly – all create a sense of discomfort. Adding to her menacing presence and to the psychological tension, Young-hee's head rotation 180 degrees, her jerky, mechanical, and distinctly robotic movements, and the mechanical sounds associated with her movements – such as the whirring of gears and the clicking of her eyes – emphasize her artificial nature and further enhance the eerie feeling. Not smooth, these unnatural movements are stark reminders that she is a lifeless automaton- almost human but not quite.

The initial familiarity of Young-hee's appearance is shattered also by her capacity for lethal violence. Creating a deeply unsettling atmosphere, the sight of a familiar childhood figure – a seemingly harmless schoolgirl – in a deadly context can be particularly jarring and traumatic. Amplifying the uncanny effect is the doll's emotionless execution of violence while performing such violent acts. Her precise robotic movements and blank expressions – even as she oversees the brutal elimination of players who fail to stop in time – emphasize her role as an enforcer of strict rules and highlight the fear of a world increasingly mediated by violence. Deeply disturbing and contributing to the sense of unease, this precision and lack of emotional response to violence add to the fear she instills in the players, as any slight movement can lead to immediate elimination. As Cho succinctly posits, "For many shows, violence is a gimmick. In "Squid Game," violence is the point (2021)."

Apart from Young-hee's fake innocent appearance, the design of the game arena – with its bright, childlike colors; stark, open space; walls decorated with fields of reeds; and a clear sky reminiscent of a storybook scene – contrasts with the deadly nature of the game. This juxtaposition creates a surreal, illusory, and unsettling atmosphere. Moreover, the strategic use of silence, especially before Young-hee turns around, heightens the tension. The sudden shift from silence to the sound of her voice or her mechanical movements creates a jarring effect that keeps the audience on edge. The camera movement, as well, creates a powerful sense of the uncanny and highlights the psychological impact of Young-hee's presence. Besides, the frequent use of close-up shots of Young-hee's expressionless face and mechanical eyes emphasizes her lifelike yet artificial features, creating a sense of unease and discomfort. Meanwhile, the wide shots – showing the scale of the game, Young-hee's positioning at the end of the field dominating the frame, and the players' vulnerability – reinforce her role as an omnipresent enforcer. Contrasting with the players' frantic attempts to stay still, the static shots – used during moments of high tension – amplify the suspense. Heightening the tension and fear, the tracking shots often track the players' movements, mirroring Young-hee's surveillance and the players' sense of being constantly watched. Likewise, the visual effects used to simulate Young-hee's motion detection capabilities – such as the scanning lines and the red glow – enhance the sense of surveillance and control.

3.2. Young-hee as a Compelling Exploration of Human Behavior under Extreme Conditions

Young-hee's presence creates extreme conditions that emphasize Squid *Game's* exploration of human nature under pressure. Her strict enforcement of rules and the lethal consequences of breaking these rules create an atmosphere of intense fear, stress, and mistrust. As soon as the game begins, the players realize that any movement during the *Red Light* phase results in instant death. Thus, their initial shock of seeing their fellow participants being shot causes widespread chaos: They are seen panicking, crying, freezing in terror, and running in all directions, trying to escape the deadly consequences. This chaotic response amplifies the stress and fear among the remaining players, who must now navigate the deadly game while witnessing the violent deaths of others. This initial trauma sets the stage for the ongoing psychological challenges the players will face.

The extreme conditions of the game lead also to a rapid breakdown of social bonds. Becoming more isolated and self-serving and fearing it might cost them their lives, the players – in such a high-stress environment – become wary and hesitant to help each other. Prioritizing their survival over social bonds and ethical considerations, they turn against each other, betraying friends and allies. Highlighting how the instinct to survive often overrides the desire to maintain relationships, Gi-hun (Player 456) is initially confused and scared when the first player is being shot. Capturing his initial confusion, fear, shock and disbelief, Gi-hun's words – "What is this? What's happening?" (Dong-hyuk 2021) – quickly turn into a desperate attempt to survive. On the other hand, Cho Sang-woo (Player 218) – quickly realizing the mechanics of the game – uses others as shields to avoid detection. His calculated and cold approach is evident when he tells Gi-hun: "Don't move. Stay still." (2021). This advice to Gi-hun highlights his quick thinking and understanding of the game's deadly rules and his ability to remain calm and strategic under pressure. Further exemplifying the breakdown of social bonds through aggressive behaviors, Jang Deok-su (Player 101), a gangster, shows a complete disregard for others' lives. He reaches the extent of sacrificing others to ensure his own survival: He pushes other players in front of him, or out of his way, to test if the doll will detect movement. This profound erosion of trust becomes a recurring theme, complicating relationships throughout the series and mirroring the loss of autonomy and the pressure to conform to the rules.

Another direct result of the pressure and fear instilled by Young-hee's presence is that the players' initial trauma compels them to compromise their moral values. Actions that would be considered unethical or immoral in normal circumstances become justifiable in the context of survival. The constant exposure to violent deaths and the normalization of lethal consequences desensitize the players to moral considerations and to the value of human life. More precisely speaking, the continuous sight of people being eliminated numbs the players' sense of horror, rendering them more willing to engage in violent and ruthless behavior to survive. "Just keep moving. Don't look back" (Dong-hyuk 2021) – a player advising another, indicating his growing desensitization and sole focus on survival. This desensitization is a defense mechanism against the overwhelming fear and stress, but also signifies the diminished value of human life and the breakdown of moral values. On a psychological level, this moral compromise highlights how extreme conditions can erode ethical considerations, leading to actions driven

purely by the instinct to survive. On a broader sociological level, the breakdown of social bonds and moral values in such extreme conditions can be seen as a critique of societal structures that prioritize competition and value individual success over communal well-being.

Worth mentioning, the above mentioned breakdown of social bonds and moral values creates a psychological environment where normal ethical considerations are suspended, leading to significant psychological traumas or actions that the players might deeply regret. In other words, the sudden brutal nature of eliminations has left lasting psychological scars on the players. Gi-hun, the protagonist, experiences profound guilt and helplessness as he witnesses the deaths of other players. Despite his initial attempts to help others, the sheer brutality of the game forces him to focus on his own survival. This internal conflict between wanting to help and needing to survive creates Gi-hun's deep sense of guilt. Frozen in place and unable to comprehend the brutality and traumatic experience of the situation, Gi-hun is haunted later on by flashbacks and nightmares of the game. These nightmares often depict the moment when players are shot and the blood splatters, haunting him even when he is awake. Confiding in another player about his traumatic memories, Gi-hun maintains: "I can't get it out of my head… the sound of the gunshots, the people falling (Dong-hyuk 2021)." Gi-hun's constant exposure to violence and his need to make life-or-death decisions take a toll on his mental health, leading to symptoms of PTSD.

3.3. Young-hee's as a Powerful Reflection of the Unsettling Realities of Modern Society

One of the most significant repressed fears that Young-hee embodies is the fear of constant surveillance. Highlighting the power dynamics of omnipresent authoritarian surveillance and control mechanisms prevalent in highly regulated and monitored societies, Young-hee's head rotation 180 degrees to scan the players creates a psychological state where players are always being watched and scrutinized, even when they are not directly in Young-hee's line of sight. Inducing self-regulation and compliance and mirroring the pervasive surveillance technologies in modern society where individuals are perpetually watched, monitored, and judged through CCTV cameras, social media, and data tracking, Young-hee – whose all-seeing eyes are equipped with sensors that detect even the slightest movement – brings the fear of pervasive monitoring to the forefront, tapping into the

potential dehumanization and loss of individuality and privacy that can come with unchecked technological power.

Described as the 'mascot' of the series enforcing the strict rules of the game with lethal precision (Bobic 2021), Young-hee represents another repressed fear – the fear or the existential challenge of societal control and loss of personal autonomy. Her mechanical nature underscores these fears as she treats all players with the same severe consequences regardless of their unique identities or personal stories. Their dehumanization – being stripped of their individuality, identified by numbers rather than names, and reduced to mere pawns in the game – mirrors the audiences' repressed fear of being erased as individuals in favor of efficiency and control. It is a stark reminder of the loss of personal identities in highly regulated environments, such as schools, workplaces, and even social media platforms and of the players' struggle to maintain their individuality in the face of these pressures. Hence, Young-hee's mechanical and emotionless enforcement of arbitrary rules and the players' desperate strict adherence to these rules under the threat of death are psychologically distressing. Young-hee's control and the players' loss of personal agency reflect how real-world societal systems – government regulations, corporate policies, or societal norms – can exert control over individuals who often feel powerless against institutional control and reduced to mere subjects of a system.

Another repressed fear represented by Young-hee is the corruption of innocence. A typical symbol of innocence, purity, and safety, Young-hee subverts the expectations associated with dolls. It becomes an instrument of death – a terrifying symbol reflecting the harsh realities of life that can corrupt purity and strip away innocence. Her brutal transformation from a familiar, comforting childhood figure into a source of terror is a powerful symbolic act that highlights how innocence can be lost, corrupted, and weaponized through exposure to violence and harsh realities. Her inversion from innocence into malevolence challenges the players' perceptions of safety and trust, tapping into deep-seated fears about the unpredictability of the world, the potential for familiar trusted entities to become threats, and the possibility for corruption and violence in even the most innocent-seeming aspects of life. Seeing innocent pastimes transformed into lethal challenges, the audience – much like the players – are forced to confront the fragility of innocence in a world filled with violence and exploitation.

Moreover, Young-hee's role – as an enforcer of the game's rules delivering immediate and severe punishments for any violation – brings to light the collective repressed desire for immediate and unquestionable punishment and justice. Tapping into the subconscious craving for fairness and order – for a system that enforces rules, ensures accountability, and metes out punishment, Young-hee's brings to the surface the repressed desire for a just world where actions have clear and immediate repercussions. Her actions are severe, swift and unambiguous, providing a stark contrast to the often slow and complicated processes of real-world justice systems in a world where injustices and wrongdoings often go unpunished. On the other hand, while Young-hee's actions may satisfy a desire for immediate justice, they also challenge the audience to confront their own beliefs about justice. Her enforcement of the rules without hesitation and the fear she instills reflects a fear, not just of punishment, but of the loss of humanity in the pursuit of justice. This fear reflects societal anxieties about the brutality and inhumanity of such a system that prioritizes punishment over rehabilitation and understanding. This duality makes Young-hee a compelling and thought-provoking figure.

Creating a dissonance that is deeply unsettling, Young-hee's strikingly life-like appearance – combined with her mechanical nature and malevolent actions – serve as symbols of humanity's hubris in creating life-like machines. I.e., Young-hee's dissonance makes the deep-seated societal fear of technology and automation becoming too human-like, yet remaining potentially dangerous, explicit and unavoidable. Her animatronics mirror a fundamental concern: The increasing presence and rapid advancement of technology, particularly artificial intelligence, that becomes more prevalent, outperforming humans in many areas, stripping away human qualities, creating entities that are eerily similar to us but still fundamentally different, and reducing individuals to mere cogs in a machine.

Challenging our understanding of consciousness and identity, Young-hee can mimic human emotions – think, feel, and act like humans. This ability can be both fascinating and disturbing, raising existential questions about what it means to be human and about the authenticity of interactions with AI: If machines can convincingly simulate emotions, it becomes challenging to distinguish genuine human connections from artificial ones. Young-hee's ability to make decisions autonomously can also be seen as a double-edged sword. While it

showcases the potential for AI to perform complex tasks without human intervention, it also raises fears about losing control over these systems. If AI can act independently, there is a risk that it might make decisions that are harmful or unintended. The integration of AI into various systems also poses security risks. If an AI like Young-hee is hacked or malfunctions, it could lead to significant disruptions or even physical harm. This highlights the need for robust security measures and ethical guidelines in the development and deployment of AI technologies. Fostering both admiration for and anxiety about technology, Young-hee thus represents the marvel of technological progress but also brings to the surface the fears that challenge the notion of human uniqueness and autonomy: The mechanization of human life, the potential erasure of individuality, and the unsettling possibility of a future devoid of humanity and emotional warmth – where genuine human interactions are being replaced by cold, impersonal exchanges and actions are carried out without empathy or emotional consideration.

Young-hee's school girl appearance and strict enforcement of rules also serve as powerful symbols of the intense and often rigid expectations placed on children within educational systems, particularly in East Asian cultures. Though emphasizing youth and innocence, her school uniform brings to the surface the repressed fear of enforced uniformity. It highlights the conformity, discipline, suppression, and vulnerability of children in the South Korean society where academic success is highly valued and failure is not an option. It is no wonder, therefore, that the series struck a nerve:

> The 456 contestants speak directly to many of the country's anxieties…The characters have resonated with South Korean youth who don't see a chance to advance in society (Young 2021).

On a deeper level, Young-hee's strict demeanor and role in enforcing the rules of the game, albeit in a brutal manner, can be seen as a manifestation of the disciplinary measures used to maintain control within educational systems. Evoking empathy from the audience and drawing attention to the often overlooked emotional and psychological toll of such pressures on young minds, this visual representation can be seen as a critique. It criticizes the societal pressure placed on children to excel academically at all costs, stifling creativity and critical thinking and prioritizing rote memorization and adherence to rules over independent

thought and innovation. It can also be seen as a commentary on the educational institutions that sometimes prioritize order and discipline over the mental health and well-being of students. Young-hee's character can be seen as a representation of these pressures and their impact on children's mental health.

Ultimately, Young-hee plays a pivotal role in embodying the fears of temporality and finitude. Her presence and actions highlight the fleeting nature of time and the inevitability of death. Regarding temporality, the game itself is a race against time. Young-hee's eyes are equipped with motion sensors that detect movement. This technological aspect represents the relentless march of time, as the players are constantly monitored and judged. They must move quickly during the *Green Light* phase but must stop immediately when Young-hee turns around and says *Red Light*. Mirroring the unpredictability and harshness of life itself, this constant switching between movement and stillness creates a sense of urgency and the passage of time. On the other hand, Young-hee's role – highlighting how something as simple as a game can become a matter of life and death – also underscores the finite nature of life. Her mechanical and unfeeling nature emphasizes the theme of mortality and the inevitability of death. Much like the concept of fate, Young-hee is an impartial arbitrator delivering death without hesitation or remorse. Meanwhile, the players – whose lives are literally on the line – are acutely aware of their mortality, as failing to stop in time or one wrong move under her watchful eye leads to immediate and fatal elimination. This heightened awareness of their finite existence compels the players to make existential choices, emphasizing the importance of confronting one's own mortality to live an authentic life.

In essence, Young-hee serves as a critique of the capitalist system. Her initial benign childlike appearance and familiar traditional Korean attire lull the players into a false sense of security. Much like Young-hee, capitalism often promises opportunity and security while masking the underlying harsh realities of a system that thrives on exploitation, surveillance, and control, ultimately leading to the dehumanization and psychological torment of individuals. Young-hee's unexpected transformation into an executioner emphasizes the dehumanizing aspects of capitalism, where individuals are often reduced to mere tools or disposable assets in the unyielding pursuit of profit. Her role as a monitor who observes and enforces strict rules reflects the pervasive surveillance and control mechanisms in capitalist societies, where individuals are

constantly watched and judged based on their productivity and adherence to societal norms. Meanwhile, the players' desperation and willingness to participate in deadly games for financial gain mirror the extreme measures individuals take in capitalist systems to survive economic hardships and inequality. Overall, Young-hee's presence reflects the ruthless and unforgiving nature of such systems, and the psychological toll her character takes on the players mirrors the mental and emotional strain individuals go through in capitalist societies, where the pressure to succeed and the fear of failure can lead to severe anxiety and stress.

4. Conclusion

Tracing the historical context, cultural dynamics, and evolving societal concepts of identity, success, and well-being that define the rich and thought-provoking moral landscape of South Korea, the study offers deeper insights into the complex and harsh realities of modern society. More precisely speaking, the study augments our awareness with the complexities of the human psyche in South Korea, the psychological challenges the South Koreans face, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the broader implications of navigating the complexities of a changing world.

Hence, the researcher – believing that the present study lends itself well to interdisciplinary analysis – draws on the hermeneutic as well as the psychoanalytic approach for a multidimensional analysis of Young-hee, the enigmatic animatronic doll in *Squid Game*. This interdisciplinary approach enriches our understanding with the psychological manipulation at play and with the cultural, historical, and societal contexts that shape the moral landscape of *Squid Game*. Moreover, it offers valuable insights into the elements that contribute to the narrative and thematic depth of the series and to Young-hee's significance as a complex symbol with multiple layers of meaning.

Succinctly, Hwang Dong-hyuk's utilization of the animatronic doll that enforces deadly rules – the study concludes – is crucial in establishing the psychological and moral landscape that the players will navigate throughout the series. On an unconscious level, her uncanny presence forces the audience to confront the repressed fears, hidden desires, and darker aspects of their psyche. Moreover, her lethal nature prompts the audience to reflect on broader societal fears and current anxieties, particularly those related to surveillance, societal control, justice, innocence, unchecked technology, societal expectations,

temporality and finitude. Overall, Young-hee's carefully crafted visual design, jerky movements, unsettling sounds, abrupt stops, emotionless execution of violence, Hwang's careful integration of close-up, wide, static, and tracking shots, and the cultural context in which Young-hee operates amplify the sense of the uncanny, making Young-hee a powerful, memorable, and deeply unsettling figure challenging the audience to reflect on their own values and the ethical implications of oppressive societal structures.

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