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First submission: 3 March
2025

Acceptance: 25 September
2025

Published: 12 December 2025

 [https://doi.org/
10.38140/aa.v57i2.10211](https://doi.org/10.38140/aa.v57i2.10211)

ISSN: 0587-2405

e-ISSN: 2415-0479

Acta Academica •
2025 57(2): 15-37

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Class contexts in popular drama and horror cinema and TV

Abstract

This study aims to critically approach representations of class in specific recent popular drama/horror films and TV series, notably *Parasite*, *Joker*, *Squid Games* (Season 1) and *The Menu*, which achieved worldwide popularity and success over the last few years. Produced in times of various global crises, such as economic recession, environmental catastrophes, pandemics, and war, these productions reflect the current, critical historical conjuncture. Class is a central denominator of crisis symptomatic of late capitalist reproduction processes. Drawing on narrative analysis, class constructions are theorised through the psycho-analytical notion of the abject (Kristeva 1982). The ridiculed, feared, and loathed working-class is abjected; simultaneously though, the upper class also emerges as abject, demystified and represented as mediocre, and sinister. A political understanding of class struggle, however, remains absent in these productions. This is connected to the material and structural limitations of popular culture.

Keywords: class, popular culture, crisis, abject, biopolitics

Introduction: Crisis, class, and popular culture

This study aims to critically approach representations of class in specific recent popular drama/horror films and TV series,

notably *Parasite*, *Joker*, *Squid Game* (Season 1) and *The Menu*, which achieved worldwide popularity and success in recent years. With the 21st century being marked by deepening global crisis events and catastrophes, popular culture taps into such realities, creating relevant content and widely shared meanings.

Nancy Fraser (2022: xv) understands the current crisis conjuncture as symptomatic of “a general crisis of the entire social order”. For Fraser, capitalism is the prime factor of such a general crisis. Along with eco-feminist scholars (Mies and Shiva 2014, Shalleh 2019), Fraser presents an expanded understanding of capitalism, conceptualising all current crises as symptoms of the problem of capitalism itself. Here, the interconnection between the oppression of women and indigenous people and the exploitation of nature is highlighted. This is premised on a critical assessment of Western models of development and globalisation understood as neocolonial and neo-imperialist. Besides an economic model, capitalism is a type of society, a historical socio-political formation. The parting of economic production from social reproduction, the formal separation of the economy from polity, the division between society and nature, and the division of formal (deserving) and informal (undeserving) forms of workforces nationally and internationally constitute types of gendered, racialised, and ecologically destructive forms of exploitation and expropriation, which are constitutive of capitalism.

Culture is central in the generation and public dissemination of common meanings to process the social experience of different historical moments, present or past, and to envision plausible futures. Raymond Williams (2020, 2022) coined the term “structure of feeling”, a notion indebted to the Gramscian idea of hegemony, to discuss the ways that common meanings are produced and shared¹. The conjuncture of social change and the shifts in the social perceptions of reality make up an important dimension in the analytical deployment of the structure of feeling idea. Conjuncture analysis is concerned

1 Williams's (1978) structure of feeling concept bears similarities to the Gramscian notion of hegemony, reflecting, shaping, and challenging prevailing social meanings connected to the general historical and structural experience of specific times. Class is crucial in both theories, in explaining questions of intention and power shaping cultural forms. Williams' notion concerns a broader trajectory that foregrounds the cultural more than the political, and thus questions of political strategy in the developing of hegemonic struggles are less discussed. The structure of feeling signifies the emergent, what may be developing amidst a given crisis conjuncture (Gilbert & Williams 2022). Yet, the emergent is caught in the dominant and the residual, terms expressing the structural constraints of cultural developments.

with the cultural study of specific moments signifying change (Bennett 2016). “Located between the specificity of the moment and the *longue durée* of the epoch” (Grossberg in Gilbert 2019: 7), the conjuncture denotes the mapping of the present, the enquiry into its problematics, and the search for political threats and opportunities. The structure of feeling here becomes a notion to examine the public understandings of socio-political life by enquiring into cultural forms.

The sample studied here reflects aspects and contradictions of the current crisis conjuncture. Here, popular class anxieties are fictionalised through corporate cultural production. In their analyses of culture, Adorno and Horkheimer (1989), as well as Walter Benjamin (1936), maintained that different cultural forms, either high and exclusive or low and popular, entail both “stigmata of capitalism and elements of change” (Leslie 2002: 118). Critical theory has addressed related questions on the political dimensions of popular culture. For Walter Benjamin, the technological capacities of cultural (re)production (e.g. through film) may enable the possibility of processing the social and individual experience of modern (industrial) society in a holistic way, something which the industrial mode of production and its accelerating pace shatters (Buck-Morss 1991: 268). Commodification processes have significantly expanded in the 21st century, absorbing different contexts of living into the logics of capitalist accumulation. The advent of digital platforms, as infrastructures that any system nowadays depends upon (Gilbert & Williams 2022: 176), meant the oligopolistic control of cultural production worldwide. The US maintains its global dominance, though streaming TV nowadays offers more nuanced and culturally diverse content. Along with global cinema screens, the glocalising strategies of transnational film and TV streaming platforms like Netflix, HBO, and Mubi reach remote audiences across the world, constructing complex forms of domestication and cultural exchange (Lobato 2019; Aitaki 2024: 246). Though the social potential of the Internet and digital platforms to function as tools and structures of cooperation, voice, information, and production exists, such a potential is delimited by the capitalist structures controlling them, used for exploitative, consumerist, and demagogic ends (Fuchs 2014: 89).

The specific productions raise important socio-political issues deriving from the current crisis conjuncture. The directors of these productions have also argued that their observations of capitalism, class relations, and class struggles were formative in the storylines that they developed. Speaking about *Parasite*,

Bong Joon-ho argued that “there is no borderline between countries now because we all live in the same country, it’s called capitalism” (Verso Books 2021). Likewise, Hwang Dong-hyuk noted that “In the 21st century, I thought that maybe we were seeing the limits of capitalism... Everybody is now in this huge competition, and once you fail at the competition, then you cannot ever recover from it. You’re pushed more and more to the bottom of society (UPI 2021).” Mark Mylod noted on *The Menu* that “the pursuit of wealth leads to absolute capitalism, and absolute capitalism fails so many people” (Deadline 2022).

Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite* (2018) is a South Korean internationally acclaimed drama-horror film, awarded four Oscars and a Palme d’Or. Taking place in Seoul, working-class individuals mingle with the lives of the Korean upper-class in a complex and horrifying way. The South Korean Netflix production *Squid Game* (Season 1, 2021) a horror series (created by Hwang Dong-hyuk), is the story of a lethal competition game between indebted Koreans, staged for the entertainment of the rich. *Squid Game* became Netflix’s number one series in 94 countries, viewed by over 111 million people worldwide, and awarded at different festivals (Wikipedia n.d.a). Todd Phillips’s *Joker* (2019), an international box office success grossing more than \$1 billion dollars in 2019 and winner of multiple awards (e.g. the 92nd Academy Awards and the Venice Film Festival), is a psychological thriller focusing on a DC Comics villain, the Joker, and his proletarian background amid economic recession in 1980s America. Mark Mylod’s *The Menu* (2022) is a thriller/drama that achieved commercial success, positive criticism, and award nominations (Wikipedia n.d.b.). In *The Menu*, a young couple joins a small group of well-off people for a rare food experience at an exclusive restaurant supervised by an eccentric chef. The dinner’s menu, though, is set to include the death of all participants, customers and restaurant staff alike.

Method: genre and narrative

This study draws on Barthes’s (1979, 2002) semiotic categories of narrative analysis. Barthes’s (2002) semiotic and cultural codes analyse ideological myths as they unravel in the semiotic construction of actants and plot settings. The actants’ functions and styles (backgrounds, vocations, habits, status, dress and communication codes), the purpose of space in the plot, *mise-en-scène* semiotics, and events developing the plot – unfolding class clashes and

antagonisms – are analytically approached. Simultaneously, the study also draws from relevant literature on the class dimensions of generic features. Scholars (Williams 2007; Gandal 2007; Simmons 2017) have shown that drama and horror display class references that may question or affirm class hierarchies, and publicly function in subversive or disciplinary terms.

Gothic metaphors of (middle)class anxiety

Moments of crisis have been central in the historic rise of the gothic literary genre (Beville 2009: 23). The gothic is deployed to discuss the ways that horror films and TV series narrate contemporary crises and subsequent public fears. Class in this sense is reflected in the problems and insecurities addressed in such productions. Beville (2009: 15) speaks about gothic postmodernism as a distinct horror genre where reality and fictional worlds blend. Monstrous others, turbulent worlds, mystery, haunting and spectral presences, irrationality, hate, evil, utilitarian exploitation, isolation, fragmentation of the self, and loss of meaning and identity are some characteristics of gothic postmodern fiction. Most crucially, the postmodern aspect concerns the crisis of meaning and reason triggered by a hypermediated, consumerist (neo)liberal society, along with the actants' quest for meaning and access to the real (Beville 2009: 54). The fluid and crisis-prone late capitalist social context triggers various fears and insecurities, threatening the return of the repressed (e.g., facsim), reflecting the failure of liberal universalisms. The middle class is particularly responsive to such spectres of terror, as they may threaten the pillars of its existence, its privileges, and its future reproduction prospects (Beville 2009: 40). Threats such as indebtedness, expropriation, insurgency, captivity or death, humiliation, and abjection, posed by lurking monstrous others from below or from the top, are important aspects of the middle-class fears expressed in the horror productions studied here. The sublimated terror, referring to a constitutive danger or threat, is the source of strong affects regarding things familiar to the middle-class audiences.

'The Joker' and regressive revolt

The Joker (2019) blockbuster film taps into the above features, contextualising the plot in a crisis moment (the 1980s US recession and Reagan's neoliberal reforms). Taken from the universe of DC comic books, the Joker is originally conceived as a villain, the prime enemy of the story's noble hero, Batman. In

Phillips's film though, the Joker is the main hero, albeit a negative one. The film shows the background of the Joker before he became a villain, focusing on the circumstances that made him one. Arthur Fleck is a precarious worker, living with his ill and mentally unstable mother, and dependent on medical support, while aspiring to be a successful comedian. Arthur is obnoxious and delusional. He has a history of abuse; he lacks a father figure and lives with his elderly mother; and he has a hard time socialising and maintaining a job, while regularly being ridiculed and bullied by people in his surroundings, responding to this through uncontrollable and awkward laughing that conceals embarrassment, pain, and fear. He fantasises about achieving recognition through a popular reality show, hosted by Murray Franklin. The media thus trivialise Arthur's sense of reality, not enabling him to reflect on his individual and class experiences, cultivating fantasies of staged success and recognition. Therefore, the media are postmodern apparatuses, creating alienating senses and delusional identities connected to simulations of reality. Arthur's belief in the genius of his nonsensical humour, his fantasies of coupling with his neighbor Sophia, his belief of being fathered by Thomas Wayne, a powerful Gotham City citizen, reflect mainstream media notions of achievement that reproduce enduring bourgeois society myths.

The *mise-en-scène* of *The Joker* movie, Gotham City, is shown in sepia colours, saturated with waste, dirt, brutalist architecture, claustrophobic apartments, and rundown facilities. The living environment is thus cruel for the majority of Gotham City's inhabitants, while discontent, rage, and outbursts of violence seem standard. Hence, fear and danger are connoted by the semiotic codes of *The Joker*. The powerful ones are cynical, laughing at the grievances of the people of Gotham City, or publicly reprimanding the people in moral terms, and by promising tougher laws against crime and against welfare. A class gaze is thus cast on the working class and its living conditions, obfuscating its realities. The working class is negatively presented as violent, delimited, idiotic; it lives in dirt, has low tastes, it is captured by grudges, and succumbs to money, power, and status. The working class is abjected as the underclass (Jones 2016) that is disgusting and dangerous. The bourgeois is also presented negatively, as ignorant, arrogant, cruel, and exploitative. A middle-class gaze thus navigates the construction of the working class and the bourgeoisie, reflecting middle-class fears of recession, crime, and disorder.

A series of events formulate a point of no return for Arthur, transforming him into the villain, the Joker. These events can be summarised in the following

episodes of the plot: a colleague from work gives Arthur a gun to protect himself from being beaten up on the street during work; when attacked by three drunk businessmen in the metro late at night, Arthur shoots them dead; he loses his job and his access to health support due to budget cuts to welfare; Arthur understands that his mother was abusing him and is ignorant about his father; Arthur realises that his TV idol, the presenter Murray Franklin, laughs at and looks down on him. Arthur's criminal deeds, perpetrated while wearing the clown's mask, gain publicity and capture the revengeful fantasies of a menacing crowd triggering a revolt. The clown mask becomes a symbol of revenge against the rich. The semiotic codes of the clown-masked protesters form a postmodern sense of revolt that relies on popular culture identifications revolving around a mystified leading figure who presumably has superpowers. The revolt itself seems anarchic, vile, and destructive. Such a revolt sublimates revenge as an act of indiscriminate violence and crime, perpetrated by an underclass that is naturally inclined to reaction. This violence is not divine though (Benjamin 1996), and does not carry a restorative promise for justice. The cynical humour of power is confronted by the nihilistic humour of the Joker. Arthur achieves recognition as a villain, the Joker. The Joker himself admits on Murray's show that he is not political, before he kills Murray live on his own show. The Joker's revolt does not surpass Arthur Fleck's personal idiosyncrasies, and fulfills his quest for recognition through the spectacle, which sublimates revolt as well.

Class spite in 'The Menu'

Tyler, a young self-styled food connoisseur, and Margot, a young sex worker escorting Tyler, join as a couple a small group of people that includes the Leibbrandts, a wealthy elder couple, two established restaurant critics, a famous actor with his partner, and three young businessmen, all set to dine at an exclusive restaurant on a private island, for a rare food experience. Upon arrival, the customers are offered a tour of the island and the restaurant facilities by Elsa, the restaurant host. A personality cult aura surrounds the chef, shared both by the workers and the customers. The chef, Julian Slowik, is a successful, eccentric, and authoritarian figure. The restaurant staff responds with a militarised obedience (shouting "yes chef" to his demands). After his introduction to the menu, he advises his prestigious customers not to eat: "taste, savour, but don't eat". During the dinner, awkwardness begins to unfold, with the chef sharing personal stories of trauma, failure, and resentment, proceeding to make progressively more extreme demands of the customers,

confronting them with their private secrets exposed, and subordinating them to his totalistic menu concept. As is progressively disclosed, a spectacular death awaits all, both participants and staff members, to conclude the menu's concept.

Disturbing events develop the fabula forward, as the heroes attempt to interpret and resolve the challenges faced. The customers become agitated but remain controlled by the chef and his crew. Tyler seems fully immersed in the food experience offered and passively accepts all violence unfolding. Tyler, a false hero, represents the alienated middle-class individual, reducing life to accumulated and reified, immediate experiences of "momentary compensatory solidities of imagined contact with an imagined real" (Kornbluh 2023: 57). Margot, though, seems more concerned and resilient. Margot does not abide by the chef's rules, to his frustration. Slowik and his crew realise that Margot is a working-class, unmarried female, something that unsettles the chef's dinner conceptual project. Slowik asks Margot to choose sides, "with those who give or those who take", meaning either with the service economy workers under his command, or the conspicuous consuming bourgeois. As she cannot reach a decision, the chef eventually decides for her: "you belong here with your own breed... the shit shovelers, I know a fellow service industry worker when I see one" (55.50).

The Menu's mise-en-scène is largely based on Scandinavian interior design aesthetics, composed of minimalist spaces, transparent, formal, and sterile. The private realm of the island is fully rationalised as a pristine yet productive location that is accessible only to the entitled few, who, along with economic capital, also bear high cultural and social capital. The island itself is desolate and mysterious, resembling a secret laboratory operated by a sect-like group of devoted and potentially brainwashed workers, led by a presumably genius authority (the chef), inhabiting a remote villa which no one has access to. Despite the presumed security of a private and exclusive space bought by money, the island is eerie and threatening; common reason, norms, and laws do not apply. Meritocracy, elitism, competition, the standards of a highbrow, exclusive, neoliberal experience-scape are taken to the extreme, forming a death cult facilitated by abjected working-class others in an austere and militarised discipline. Death emerges as the peak moment of a supreme experience, as the high point of the chef's perfectionism.

Nature as a pristine entity offering nutritious, healthy, and uncontaminated food appears as rare. A source of widespread concern, climate change forms the basis for the creation of green markets related to food, service, and experience. As Huber (2022: 147) argues, middle-class guilt and “awareness” over ecological problems are related to the hegemony of depoliticised solutions connected to private, lifestyle and consumption changes, diverting the public discussion from questions of privilege and power over the material organisation of production. In this context, “pure” or pristine nature is commodified to serve a niche of wealthy connoisseurs, ‘foodies’ in our regard. Elsa’s, and later Slowik’s, long verbal engagement with nature, its delicacy, wisdom, and supremacy over humans, echoes widespread concerns over health and pollution, and environmental collapse:

Here is what you must remember about this dish; we the people on this island are not important. The island and the nutrients it provides exist in their most perfect state, without us gathering them, manipulating them, or digesting them. What happens to this room is meaningless compared to what happens outside, in nature, in the soil in the water in the air. We are but a frightened nanosecond. Nature is timeless. Enjoy (18.20).

The emphasis on the supremacy, eternity, and purity of nature, as opposed to human temporality and frailty, forms a fascist preoccupation with “natural order” (Moore & Roberts 2022). Nature is fetishised and perceived in essentialist terms, while humans appear as incomplete, insignificant, and disturbing. Death is also fetishised as a natural process that purifies and frees (Toscano 2023). Further, the fascist preoccupation with death, as a process that can immortalise higher causes, deeds, and individuals, is central in the menu’s concept that unfolds during the menu’s courses. The menu itself is an artwork to be immortalised through sacrificial and aestheticised death.

The corruption, superficiality, idleness, cowardice, incompetence, and overall moral bankruptcy of the bourgeois is slowly revealed by the chef and the articulation of his menu concept. “I allowed my work to reach the price point where only the class of people in this room can access it. And I’ve been fooled to try to satisfy people who can never be satisfied” (52.20). The chef’s discontent towards his customers unfolds aesthetically. The awkwardness and violence that begins to occur is supposed to be viewed under the lens of experience and paid service. The cutting of Leibbrandt’s ring finger by the restaurant crew, the sacrificial suicide of one of the restaurant staff members, abjected for being a

mediocre cook, are met by the customers with shock and confusion, but also with coolness, and eventual conformism: "Please sit. Calm down, this is part of the show, this is what you're paying for, an exclusive experience, please return to your seats" announces the chef in front of his cook's bleeding dead body (41.48).

Susan Buck-Morss (1992: 88) used the term *anaesthetics* to describe the ways that the commodity *phantasmagoria*² and its sensual pleasures function as a protective shield of the interests and sensibilities of the bourgeois. The commodification and spectacularisation of the public sphere enabled the achievement of social manipulation and control as *phantasmagoria* became a social norm, numbing the senses and beautifying the reality of capitalist society. Deploying this notion, the reassuring chef begins weaponising the customers' bewilderment, detachment, and general consumerist connection to the world, legitimising his grip over them. In his words, the bourgeois emerge as weak and passive, unable to fight, and lacking survival skills: "Ask yourselves, why didn't you try harder to fight back to get out of here? Honestly you probably could have. Something to think about." (1:23:22)

What appears as an intention of class vengeance unfolds as an overwhelming and nihilistic hate affect that abjects everyone, both self and others, both working class and the bourgeoisie. By tormenting and abusing his customers, the chef unfolds a project of revenge. Revenge is inherent to capitalism (Haiven 2020). Capitalism is reproduced through oppression and brutal force. The victims of capitalism, like the chef himself and his life-long social traumas, emerge as vengeful. Having succeeded in climbing up the social ladder, starting from humble, East European origins, the chef remains unhappy and alienated. Other than class solidarity and struggle, the workers strive to meet the bourgeois standards of perfection, under his supreme command. Work is sublimated, affirming bourgeois standards without subverting them. Slowik creates an exclusive environment secluded from the world; he materialises his culinary project meant to address the elites who could understand the core of his work and vision; nevertheless, his work is merely an expensive commodity, a fetish of status. Such a realisation plunges him deeper into despair. Yet, he fails to realise the core of the process, as he sustains romantic attachments to

2 *Phantasmagoria* is a term expressing the appearance of the world as the "enormous collection of commodities, where objects are invested with significations that have nothing to do with their useful properties" (Markus 2001: 16).

his work, which has the form of conceptual art, and a narcissistic regression connected to an unfulfilled sense of recognition. The menu emerges as a total work of art meant to move beyond representation: “I want you to understand something Margot. I am a monster. No, I was a monster, and a whore. But tonight, everything I do is pure. Egoless. And at last, the pain is almost gone. I can no longer be hurt” (1.22.10).

The work of art though remains a spectacle of catharsis glorifying death; a symptom of alienation and class depoliticisation.

The Parasite and class cannibalism

Parasite depicts the effort of a family (the Kims), living in abject poverty in Seoul, to work for an affluent family (the Parks). The title makes an interesting metaphor, describing the dependency of the poor on the rich; as the story develops, the metaphor also demonstrates the parasitic existence of the rich, making parasitism intrinsic to capitalist social relations. For Noh (2020), *Parasite* is a parable of today’s capitalism, with the rich living a parasitic life at the expense of the working people.

At the suggestion of Driver Yoon, a student and friend (a “donor” in Propp’s sense) who is about to go abroad, Ki-woo, the son of the Kim family, enters the household of the wealthy Parks through con acts and lies by presenting fake documents in order to teach English to their daughter, Da Hye. Ki-woo lives in a small semi-basement flat with his family in a Seoul slum. They smoke, drink alcohol, and consume junk foods. The semiotic codes of the Kims’ living space and habits connote dirty, packed, unhealthy conditions. Further, the Kims are engaged in various forms of low paid, precarious, and stupefying labour. Using the Internet and digital technologies, he establishes an alternative identity for himself, and later for his sister, Ki Jung, to appear as a distinguished teacher for Da Song, the Parks’ young son. In due course all the family members enter the Park’s household, pretending not to know each other. Yeon Kyo, the wife/mother of the affluent Park family, falls for the Kims’ fraud. By gaining her confidence, the Kim siblings plot and manage to have both the Parks’ household caretaker and the Park’s driver sacked, undermining them as unreliable. In their place, they introduce their mother, Chung-sook, as caretaker, and their father, Kim Ki-taek, as driver. As is the case with *The Joker*, the working class is here too presented as a threatening underclass developing ruthless machinations of subversion. Class solidarity is non-existent, with cruelty and competition

prevailing. The working class represents a disgusting world full of danger and fraud, abusing the Internet to simulate identities and to fake realities amid depressing living prospects. Kim Ki-taek remarks to his family members:

Anyway, aren't we lucky to worry about things like that [regarding the ways to cover their common smell of damp]? In an age like ours, when an opening for a security guard attracts 500 university graduates, our entire family got hired! If we put our four salaries together, the amount of money coming from that house to this one is immense! Let's offer a prayer of gratitude to the great Mr. Park (52.32).

Dong Ik, the husband/father figure of the Park family, has wealth and status; he is successful (a company CEO), confident, and determined. Being attentive, he begins expressing discontent over the Kims. He points to semiotic markers of class distinction, such as the unpleasant odour of Kim Ki-taek. "They all smell the same" (51.56), announces Da Song, smelling all Kim family members working at his home. The disturbing presence of the smell, its persistence and acknowledgment, cause an event pushing the fabula forward, triggering shame and spite in Kim Ki-taek, creating tensions and suspense.

Class antagonism culminates both between the proletarians themselves and between the proletarians and the rich. The watershed moment is marked by the Parks' departure on a camping trip. The Kims secretly move to the Park house to enjoy the comforts and luxuries of the Parks. The Kims' perception of the rich is partial and based on their experiences of both class subordination and deceit. Questions of class, status, and the subtle ways that the bourgeois exercise control are not understood. A storm with lightning carries worrisome signs. Soon the Kims are confronted by the former housemaid Moon Gwang, made redundant by them, who arrives unexpectedly to bring food to her husband, Geun-se. Hiding from debt collectors, Geun-se has been living for four years in a secret concrete bunker underground, unknown to the Parks, built in many affluent Korean houses out of fear of war or economic collapse. The references to Korean political and economic history, and the bunker as a hiding place for the indebted, formulate a gothic national history narrative, connected to decadence and fear.

Moon Gwang though soon exposes the Kims' plot against her, by recognising the other Kim family members who previously worked with her for the Parks. Gaining an upper hand, Moon Gwang takes photos of all Kims to expose them and their plot: "honey, this 'send' button is like a missile launcher!" (Geun-se).

It turns out that they also enjoyed the riches of the Parks in secret during Moon Gwang's service there. A fight erupts, where the Kims manage to take control. In the meantime, the heavy storm forces the Parks to return home. Chung-sook injures Moon Gwang on the head, an injury that will eventually cause her death. Kim Ki-taek ties up Geun-se, and hides them both in the bunker. Upon the Parks' arrival, the Kims are forced to hide in the living room. Dong Ik senses their smell, as he lies with his wife on the living room couch:

Dong Ik: Where is this smell coming from?

Yeon Kyo: What smell?

D.I. Mr. Kim's smell [...] you know, when you boil a rag? It smells like that. Anyway, he always seems about to cross the line, he never does cross it. That is good. But the smell crosses the line. It powers through right at the back seat.

Overhearing his boss devaluing him while hiding with his children under the coffee table, Kim Ki-taek becomes resentful. As the Kims' fraud comes to risk of exposure, they become insecure and disillusioned:

Kim Ki-taek: "Ki-woo you know what plan never fails? No plan... with no plan, nothing can go wrong. And if something spins out of control, it doesn't matter" (1.40).

Precarity thus returns with a numbing effect, as besides economic, moral, and potentially legal risks are entailed.

The aftermath of the storm is visualised in a dialectic way, stressing class divisions, sensibilities, and materialities that constitute the *mise-en-scène* of the story. The suffering poor are hopeless and divided; although the storm is a menace for the Kims, who try to reach home through the heavy rain, crossing Seoul on foot to arrive cold and soaking wet, it is a blessing for the Parks who find it refreshing. The Kims' way back home is portrayed in dark colours and with dramatic music, as they run for shelter through lonely, degrading, concrete non-spaces, such as public stairways and pedestrian passages, while descending towards their densely-built slum. Gothic style depicts contemporary proletarian realities. Their street is flooded, and their semi-basement flat filled with wastewater; the toilet is bursting, destroying all their belongings. Eventually, the Kims find refuge in a shelter, remaining sleepless. The Parks, though, find the rain pleasant; Da Song stays in the garden in his Indian hut and Yeon Kyo enjoys the fresh morning atmosphere.

The day after the storm, the Kims return to the Park house for the birthday party of Da Song. Ki woo meets with an enthralled Da Hye, hoping to eventually marry her and live in her riches. Concerned, he asks: “Da Hye, do I fit in here?” to which she nods positively, though hesitant. Kim Ki-taek is asked to dress as an Indian for the party. Ki woo opens the bunker with a purpose to kill Geun-se with a (supposedly lucky) rock but gets entrapped and seriously injured after fighting with Geun-se. Geun-se comes out of his hiding in broad daylight, apathetic and with a monstrous face covered in blood. Abjected by the economy, losing his identity, status and possessions, forced to live in secret in the bunker, and with his public presence reduced to ghostly appearances, he now invades the party holding a long kitchen knife. In the erupting chaos, he stabs Ki Jung, and tries to kill Chung-sook, who manages to kill him instead with a barbeque stick full of grilled meat. This episode bears elements of Bakhtin’s (1984) disruptive sense of the carnivalesque through disgusting features (body fluids) and practices (acts of violence) profaning order. The Parks show indifference to the bleeding Kim siblings, caring only about their own family’s escape. Seeing Dong Ik’s gestures of disgust, Kim Ki-taek kills him with a knife in revenge. The Park home is resold, with surviving Kim Ki-taek now hiding in the bunker. Kim Ki-taek is abject from bourgeois law, ghosting the same house and its new affluent tenants, from the secret bunker. The film ends with Ki woo dreaming from their semi-basement home of making money to buy the house and rejoin his father there.

The secret bunker where monstrous others reside, lurking for upheaval and violent takeover, forms a postmodern gothic metaphor (Beville 2009: 17). Home invasion is understood as a consistent theme in horror productions after the 2008 global financial crisis and the waves of neoliberal austerity that followed (Dardot & Laval 2019), expressing middle-class fear and insecurity. In *Parasite*, the bunker where the abject, indebted individuals hide makes the flip side of middle-class habitus. What lies outside the sanitised spaces of comfort, safety, success and happiness, kept excluded through control, coercion, and manipulation, may creep within as the tide of inequality rises.

‘The Squid Game as pure neoliberalism

The Squid Game (s1) series also forms a metaphor of a highly competitive and exploitative society. Here, the figure of the indebted man/woman (Lazzarato 2012) in neoliberalism, is central in the organisation of the *syuzhet* (the series’

storyline) and the representation of class relations and class subjugation. Seong Gi-hun, the main hero, is a middle-aged, working-class man with militant worker experience, who is jobless and indebted. He is kind but naïve, and a professional and personal failure; he is indebted to banks and loan sharks who are blackmailing him. He cannot provide for his daughter (who lives with his ex-wife and her rich husband and plans to move to the USA) and shares a relation of care and dependency with his aged mother, who is uninsured and in need of surgery. He shows low-brow tastes and habits, such as gambling, smoking, eating fast foods, dressing cheaply; he is also temperamental and loud. Simultaneously, he is also altruistic and generous. He is burdened with a sense of rejection and shame due to his debts and failures. Nevertheless, he is caring and compassionate, loyal to family, friends, and comrades.

After a meeting with an interlocutor (a dispatcher) in the metro who is dressed professionally (through a semiotic code of business and affluence), he agrees to participate in the squid game introduced to him, to quickly make lots of money to pay off his debts. Seong Gi-hun thus embarks on a hero's journey to the unknown, to resolve his problems and return mightier. Soon he finds himself among other indebted people in an unknown, secluded space where the squid game is to occur. All 456 participants have agreed to take the risks in participating in a game, unaware of the game's rules. They find themselves in a confusing, closed, guarded, labyrinthine space, all wearing the same outfit, and reduced to numbers. The first (out of six) game reveals that those who lose are killed; the squid game is based on popular childhood games now turned lethal. Killing increases the total sum of money to be awarded to the final winner.

The squid game's lethal character is initially resented by most of the surviving participants, forcing its temporary suspension and the return of the surviving participants to their previous lives and realities. The fabula unfolds in parallel plots, where the main actants show equivalent precarious and dead-end living circumstances, forcing them to return and resume the game, agreeing to risk their lives for the possibility of winning the money (E2). A broader failing or aspiring middle class thus consents to participate in a cannibalistic competition, driven by the promise of money. The game proves to be a staged experience for its instigator, Oh Il-nam, a rich elder man pretending to be a poor and terminally ill participant, as well as a spectacle for the VIPs, a rich, international elite group of aged men. Oh Il-nam appears nostalgic, positive, and seemingly generous. Nevertheless, in the last episode (E9) it is revealed that he is the mastermind of the squid game, admitting that he does not believe in human goodness.

Such a worldview display forms the symbolic and cultural codes of neoliberal hegemony, related to the naturalisation of competition, individualism, and predatory practices (McGuigan 2010). The VIPs join to watch the final stages of the squid game competition (E7), betting on the participants' performance, and contemplating a spectacle of death and destruction from a lavish space. Disguised in masks, the VIPs enter the luxury spaces of the squid game facilities with extravagant comforts and pleasures at their disposal, including the fetishised bodies of young men and women. The derived semiotic code relates to a reverse carnivalesque, the transcendental and hedonistic, now experienced by the rich and powerful, mediated by the exclusive, idle, decadent, and evil vices and sensibilities of the bourgeois. This use of the carnivalesque in the narrative though is potentially connoting disgust, abjecting the bourgeoisie from the audience.

The sound track of the series is based on ambient, sentimental pop music; classical music themes, and video-game sounds, are played during the game itself to the participants, and soft jazz to the spectators of the game. The game is controlled from a high-tech and militarised environment. Further, as a spectacle, it is watched from a distant, exclusive, bourgeois-bohemian, luxury space. The style of *The Squid Game* can be understood through the postmodern gothic notion (Beville 2009: 16), inhibiting unprecedented terrors related to contemporary social circumstances that may be lurking behind the everyday; indebtedness, inequality, competition, and individualism, excess and demoralisation; phenomena symptomatic of global neoliberalism are central components situating *The Squid Game's* fabula in the present. *The Squid Game's* mise-en-scène is composed of various features bearing estranging effects. The game occurs in a non-space, which, as later revealed, is located on a remote private island. The facilities resemble the form and rationale of the camp, which incorporates functions related to the factory, hospital, military barrack, prison, and the theme park (e.g. a fairground attraction). The sanitised, mall-styled environment corresponds to the postmodern social setting of the camp-as-possibility today.

The productive function of the squid game facilities is based on a thanatopolitical order, which is the basis for the exclusive entertaining spectacle offered to a rich transnational elite. Thanatopolitics is a Foucaultian-inspired notion regarding the politics of death by a sovereign power (Esposito 2008: 115). In this sense, the camp organises the biological reproduction of the indebted game-participants/workers, their surveilling and control, and the rules

according to which some are to be killed. Thanatopolitics has a necropolitical dimension as well (Mbembe 2019), regarding the management of death itself. This is expressed in the use and disposal of the dead bodies of those who lost the games, under a rationalised, utilitarian framework. Thanatopolitics form a cultural code of neoliberalism, represented in the extreme environment of the squid game.

The inmates of the game's camp-environment, however, have voluntarily chosen to participate, and were not a persecuted group in the strict sense. The main actants occasionally share their petty dreams for a future life, based on buying a home, securing their loved ones, or opening a small business. Petty bourgeois, middle-class aspirations are conformist, legitimising the supremacy of money for the achieving of the good life in capitalism, making the squid game's participants endure the risks and lower their morals. Nevertheless, such choices occur in the highly repressive context of indebtedness and neoliberalism; the participants lived precariously, socially stigmatised as failed and indebted, and often faced life threats. The indebted, who consented to participate in this game, are *homo sacer*, a term defining those individuals excluded from rights who can be killed with impunity (Agamben 2000).

As competition for survival and winning intensifies, the participants become more individualistic and dehumanised. Competition is central to the architecture and design of the squid game. Resisting it thus becomes increasingly controversial, and alienation and complicity in the death of others is central to the logic of the game. For the game instigators, the maintaining of the rules of pure competition is an epitome of justice; this way they function as regulators, ensuring that everyone is equal in competition, applying free market regulation logics to the game. The game's Front man explains:

[W]hether you sell the dead bodies' organs, or you eat them or whatever, I don't give a damn. However, you ruined the most important aspect of this place. Equality. Everyone's equal when they play this game. Here, every player gets to play a fair game under the same conditions. These people suffered from discrimination and inequality in the outside world and we're giving them one last chance to fight fair and win. But you've broken this principle [...] (E5, 39.25).

Intertextually, the Front man is iterating a pure free-market policy discourse, forming the series' symbolic and cultural codes (Barthes 2002) connected to the external realities reproduced.

Cho Sang-woo: You should be happy that there's someone who is not afraid to get his hands dirty.

Seong Gi-hun: And if it was me on that tile?

S-w: Come on! Gi-hun! Your life is so damn pathetic, and here is why: it's because you always got to open your mouth and ask something idiotic. Because you're a nosy idiot who's too slow to keep it shut. Someone who's always into trouble but somehow can't tell he's in it.

G-h : ok. That's how I got caught in all this. Because I was slow, crazy incompetent. Just a dumb lad who lives off his mother, but you're with me in this place. Isn't that interesting? Why is that? The genius Cho Sang-woo who went to SNU is here? Rolling around this shithole, slamming with us simpletons, eh? Is it my fault you're here? (E8, 4.15).

Sang-woo strives to win following the ruthless competitive norms of the free market. This way he also strives to distinguish himself from other squid game participants. Gi-hun though strives to sustain his humanity by insisting on the common, the shared living. As the game intensifies, a hopeless world of a war of all against all surfaces where all human bonds are ruined, individualism and deceit become a canon. It seems that the most ruthless are to prevail. After reading Holocaust survivor accounts, Todorov (2002 [1994]: 31) has pointed that the conditions of the concentration camps were so dire, making moral stances unattainable. To survive, one had to abandon dignity and consciousness; indeed, in fear of his life, Seong Gi-hun deceives Oh Il-nam (E6). Nevertheless, even during such circumstances, morality, class and gender solidarity, and altruism also emerge. Ji-yeong, a young, cynical woman who was recently released from prison after killing her father, after befriending Kang Sae-byeok, loses the game (and condemns herself to death) to save her and make her dream come true, saying "you have a reason to get out of this place, but I don't [...] the one who has a reason to get out, should go back there. That is right. (E6, 50.30)" Seong Gi-hun prevails and wins the money. Upon his return, he finds his mother dead in her house; devastated, he tries to take care of relatives of his fellow squid game participants. A year later (E9), he seems lost and traumatised, unable to organise his life, and fulfill his previous dreams. The experience of the squid game haunts him, something that points towards season two of the series. A moralistic and humanist cultural code thus prevails, drawing sharp lines between good and evil, abjecting fast money and riches as sources of corrupt ills, and untold suffering, while remembering and reflecting on the game as a shock.

Concluding remarks: assimilating class grievances

The class dimensions emerging in these productions are theorised with concepts such as biopolitics (Lorey 2015), and abjection (Kristeva 1982). Different studies (Papanikolaou 2021; Joeng 2023) on 21st century film production talk about the advance of biopolitical cinema referring to specific genres, movies and TV series produced across the world. The characteristics of such a cinema reflect contemporary political realities, where biopolitics are central in policy making and governing strategies. The discussion on biopolitics relates to the increasing precarisation of work and living brought by the risks and changes that neoliberalism brings in all aspects of life. Drawn from psychoanalysis, the notion of the abject (Joeng 2023: 9) is deployed in the analysis to speak about regimes of exclusion, inequality, and othering. Moreover, the notion of the abject is also deployed to see how the specific works signify the disgusting or the threatening. For Kristeva (1982), the abject is a category of being neither subject, nor object (Foster 2017: 13), where meaning collapses. The abject bears testimony of central crises and problems of a given historical era, and the effects they bear on people and their bodies. The abject concerns the reciprocal relation between the object of a gaze, and the gaze of the object. While the subject gazes on the object, the object also casts a gaze upon the subject, appealing to it and subjecting it to anxieties and insecurities concerning the self and its own image; “the abject is what a subject must get rid of to be a subject” (Foster 2017: 14). Two operations are noted here: to abject something is to look at it as abject, and to be abject. To abject is important for the maintenance of the subject and society, while to be abject is a condition of subversiveness to society and subjectivity (Foster 2017: 16).

The working class is abjected through humour, drama, and horror features, as a spectacle of failure from a middle-class point of view. Disgust, fear, and pity are class-affects generated from the abjected working class by the prevailing middle-class gaze (Skeggs 1997), affirming and reifying the structures of social exclusion and inequality as common-sense. The ridiculed, feared, and loathed working-class abject forms a self-disciplinary dispositif for the insecure middle-class, legitimising the neoliberal competitive ethos. In *Parasite*, the lumpen proletariat, secretly inhabiting the basement of a rich home, makes a postmodern gothic (Beville 2009: 17) metaphor of middle-class insecurity. What lies outside the sanitised spaces of comfort, safety, and happiness, kept excluded through control, coercion, and manipulation, may creep within, constituting a permanent threatening other, especially in times of crisis. As

precariousness is a shared condition (Lorey 2015: 19), intensified under the governing logics of neoliberalism, it becomes a separating factor that further intensifies competition between all, as the *Squid Game* demonstrates. Precarity is normalised in neoliberal society; precarity is a possibility that concerns not only marginalised populations but the middle-class, “normal” citizens as well.

The abjection of the proletariat further captures the anxieties of the middle class today, in times of low social upwards mobility. Anyone can be abjected by failing to meet the demands of neoliberal society and to prevail in the relentless competitive norms of neoliberalism. The abject represents failure and forms a condition to be avoided. Here, the upper classes also emerge as abject, demystified from their status and presented as mediocre, sinister, and at times, evil beings. The values, lifestyles, and subjectivities of the upper-classes and success in bourgeois society are also critically exposed. *The Menu* presents the idiocy of posh and exclusive consumption, as well as the limits of meritocracy. Achievement in capitalism is shown to reach a point of non-sense, emerging as anti-social and nihilistic. The bourgeois ties to fascism are exposed, as class conflict occurs in a personalised and apolitical manner. Class resentment and revenge are blended with narcissistic fantasies of creativity and self-fulfillment, where death is beautified. This further signifies the working-class inclination to fascism as well.

Although the bourgeoisie is exposed as parasitic, idle, cowardly, mediocre, and evil, the working class is also presented as alienated by the bourgeois hegemony. Though social losers, positive working class actants, such as Margot and Seong Gi-hun, remain humane, are courageous, and moral. A political understanding of class struggle, however, remains absent in these productions. This suggests a realistic affirmation of the lack of working-class politics today. Furthermore, it also shows the limits of capitalist critique formed by popular culture and the ideological constraints of the spectacle industries. An emergent class sensibility is subsumed by the dominant logics of the spectacle, solidifying middle-class audience affiliations as presumably safe (and moral) havens.

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