

The Postmodern Neurosis of Self-Imposed Dystopia: From K-Drama to Swedish Extreme Metal

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Abstract

“Squid Game” – the latest hugely successful representative of the increasingly popular K-Drama – seems to the middle ground between “Hunger Games” and “The Running Man”, but soaked in the ambivalent postmodern discourse present in “The Matrix”, “The Island” or “Truman Show”, displaying the features of a social ambitopia that cinematically metabolizes the unrest, the collective psychosis and the crippling alienation that mark today’s humanity. The same echoes of deeply disturbing adaptive emotional mechanisms, both at individual and societal level, are to be found in the latest album of a Swedish extreme metal band, Zornheym – “The Zornheym Sleep Experiment”. Regarding humans as clueless lab rats, hopelessly and endlessly doomed to aggravate their own obsessions, both “Squid Game” and “The Zornheym Sleep Experiment”, execute an almost psychiatric inquiry into the constant psychological battle between the three elements of Sigmund Freud’s model of the psyche – id, ego and superego – all wrapped in a spiraling loss of control and an erosion of humanity. The present paper aims at highlighting the postmodern evaluation of self-imposed dystopia in the two fictional environments, along the conceptual guidelines shaped by the works of Baudrillard and Jameson, using “The Island” and “Truman Show” as points of reference.

Keywords: dystopia, psychosis, addiction, Big Brother, alienation

The plotline of the series and the conceptual framework of the album both revolve around psychosis and grotesque obsession, and both focus on the degrees of addiction to self-imposed dystopia. In the TV series, alienated individuals, hopeless according to all norms and rules of society and disposable according to the same cynical society, are held captive in a demented, Big Brother-esque experiment and forced to bet their lives on kids games, like a nostalgia for the past gone rogue. The players – volunteers at first, prisoners of their own choice, eventually – gradually adhere to a hyper-

individualistic life philosophy in order to ensure their survival, animated by a gargantuan money-prize and fueled by paranoid animosities. The same rules that ensure the functionality of society in the outside world need to be broken in the micro-universe of the games, in a prison-like environment, all under the gaze of a handful of individuals enjoying the lethal human spectacle. In the metal album, subjects of an extreme sleep deprivation experiment become monsters out of a delusional need for the experiment to be continued, as living inside a trauma would render reality useless. The degradation of their consciousness quickly turns into self-mutilation and a desperate refusal to be freed from their own torment.

The design of both fictional environments – the “human laboratory” displayed by the TV series and the facility providing the setting of the metal album – follows the mechanisms of postmodern ambitopia, a conceptual space that is neither utopian, nor dystopian, but bears the mark of both. Utopias – like the ones imagined by Thomas More, William Morris, Tommaso Campanella or H. G. Wells – imply an idealization of the positive features of reality and a cancellation of the negative ones. Dystopian perspectives – the perspectives outlined by writers like Aldous Huxley, Ray Bradbury or George Orwell – use a hyperbolization of societal evils, transforming them into radically pessimistic views on humanity’s future and using them as narrative mechanisms, in an attempt to draw the attention upon the reality which is the subject of such a critique. Deprived of coherent borderlines, the functionality of postmodern utopia is based on extreme relativism, subjectivity and interpretation. Validity and truth only exist encapsulated in a certain viewpoint, and lose their meaning in another. Perspective is the flashlight focusing on one view at a time. In “Squid Game”, each player has a particular reality to face, a personal psychosis to battle. In “The Zornheym Sleep Experiment”, the focus shifts quickly from survival to addiction, and individuals go from being trapped inside an experiment to seeking refuge in the irreversible psychological disruption caused by it.

At the level of the individual, the interplay between utopia and dystopia is connected to the evolution of their

environment; the more absurd the experiment, the more intense the changes in behaviour. The micro-narrative of the individual creates a unique need for a personal utopia – or ambitopia, in this case. In the vein of postmodern subjectivity, the “I” is always at the centre of all discourses. In pre-modern and modern versions of utopianism, the space of utopia is designed for an entire community; whatever ideological, political or economic hypothetical solutions are provided by each instance of utopia, the end-result is always *communal*, irrespective of time and place.¹ In pre-modern and modern utopias, all the individuals profit, one way or the other, from the perfected social mechanisms established within each particular utopian environment. In “Squid Game”, this goes counter to the very dynamics of the games – it all becomes apparent as soon as all competitors understand that the survival of one equals the annihilation of others. Competition brings out a radical need to ignore all moral and societal norms. The very definition of dystopia includes individuals affected by nightmarish forms of control and manipulation.² But in “Squid Game” and “The Zornheim Sleep Experiment” we witness individuals insisting that their own dystopia be returned to them. In the former, players are initially released from the game and they return to their previous life. Confronted with their dreaded reality one more time, they willingly return to the lethal game. In the latter, the subjects demand that the absurd experiment be continued, despite of the trauma and injuries coming along with it. The narrative of “The Zornheim Sleep Experiment”, on display in a fictional environment (Professor Bettleheim's Asylum for the Criminally Insane) focuses on a nightmarish sleep deprivation experiment, eventually turning into a grotesque revelation³ of the thin line between normality and abnormality, as a result of forcibly attained consciousness and inescapable addiction. While attempting to study the role of sleep, scientists uncover the surreal, paralyzing effects of the lack of sleep on the human mind, erasing the borders between dream and nightmare and dissolving consciousness.

“Squid Game” shares the influence of the postmodernist discourse – that turned classical utopianism into a fragmented series of instances of individual utopia – with the giant

television studio in “The Truman Show”, where an entire micro-universe is fabricated to serve as a highly personalized utopia. It also has similarities with “The Island”, where the individuals inhabiting the fake utopia of a cloning facility only receive deceitful information about their own prison-like world, in order to make them believe they are to reach ultimate utopia *while already living in one*; also, they are actually genetically engineered – read manufactured – to populate their simulated utopia. In the case of “Squid Game”, the manufacturing process is not biological, but psychological – through terror-induced psychosis, the players are emotionally reshaped into brutes, with no empathy and no rules when it comes to out-match their competitors. The vision of utopia in “The Island” is twofold. On the one hand there is the utopian design of the facility itself, with its reality carefully designed to maintain a sense of social order and of natural functionality. On the other hand, individuals are constantly offered an even greater illusion – to promise of another utopia, an allegedly uncontaminated island, the last earthly paradise. Even though this second vision of utopia functions only as a cover-up for the cruel sacrifice awaiting each and every “citizen of utopia”, its presence in everyone’s mind is articulate enough to provide a sense of meaning and purpose for a robotic, repetitive daily life. The same repetitive – or repetitively traumatic – life is what the players in “Squid Game” try to escape from; this is their reality, in a society that has given up on them. The idea of sacrifice is overwhelmingly present in “Squid Game”, since all players are aware that only one of them is going to win the money and stay alive, after everyone else has been eliminated. While in “The Island” the death of the clones is kept secret, thus giving them a chance to experience a relative level of happiness and normality, in “Squid Game” all players constantly face the psychological terror of the graphic, inevitable end for all-but-one, as if they had escaped a communal dystopia just to plunge into an individual one. In “The Zornheim Sleep Experiment”, the ultimate utopia for the subjects is not escaping from the mental institution, but erasing their consciousness altogether just to avoid falling asleep - and, consequently, staying alive.

In a typically postmodern fashion, “The Island” questions the nature of reality through different layers of simulation. Gradually, the plot development unravels intricate levels of reality, only to eventually deconstruct them one by one along the trajectory to finding the ultimate essence of the real. The complex configuration of utopian and dystopian represents a labyrinthical structure within which the protagonists have to deal with their own manipulated perception, to get an ultimately objective perspective. “Squid Game” progressively unravels the layers of despair and the willingness to resort to norm-breaking in the players, as they get through the consecutive games and fewer players remain. Psychologically, they are suspended between two dystopias: the social reality they left and the game they chose (not just once, but twice). The idealized image of the “Island”, interpreted by the clones as their only chance to have a normal life, is the collective mental drug which gives them a reason to be, as artificial as it may be. In “Squid Game”, the prize money assumes the role of that drug, reshaping the players’ moral codes and turning them into neurotic, paranoid adults lost in children’s games. Just like the island of the clones denies the usual symbolic signification of safe haven against the “assault” of the unconscious, in Jungian terms (Cirlot 2001, 160) signaling a dystopian microuniverse, the childhood games end up representing a traumatic reiteration of all childhood fears, seen through the magnifying glass of a troubled adulthood. In “The Zornheim Sleep experiment”, one drug becomes a dead-end street to an accelerated erosion of human consciousness and to addictive trauma.

“Squid Game” also shares its cinematic perspective with another postmodernist work built around the reality-within-reality principle and the subversive, manipulative system of fabricating dreams – “The Truman Show”. Just like the protagonist of the latter is completely unaware of the “world” built around him, the players in the former are purposefully kept in the dark, not knowing which game is going to be next and what kind of demands they would face. The two cinematic tales share a common purpose of the fabricated environment: entertainment. Seemingly harmless for Truman, deadly for the

players in the Korean series, the stage on which the unsuspecting actors perform their task of entertaining unseen eyes is constructed in such a way that its reality is not questioned and the pre-programmed events only trigger authentic reactions. Truman's utopia means leaving the seemingly perfect social and personal life he has been *sentenced* to, ultimately acting against Christof's motto⁴ („We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented"). By refusing to admit the constructed reality he has been forced to live in, Truman also gives up his god-like status among the citizens in his microuniverse.⁵ In a way, his new understanding of the utopia he has been living in bears profound implications in his perception of reality as well; he cannot actually comprehend, adapt to, or be satisfied with the real, simply because he has never been subjected to it. All he knows is the carefully orchestrated imitation of a perfect society, designed to make him feel as if he were living among real people, not actors – all this, while actually inhabiting a larger-than-life version of a social laboratory testing his reflexes through manipulated interaction with the others. Like Trumans-in-reverse, the protagonists of the deadly children's games in the Korean series refuse the very possibility to leave the show, even after witnessing the horrendous deaths around them, even after being actively involved in the acute degradation of moral norms. While Truman begins to suspect the artificiality of his world, the players in "Squid Game" accept it as collateral risk, and the patients in "The Zornheim Sleep Experiment" crave for it - the unnatural means of suppressing the need to sleep and their newfound addiction to a prolonged state of consciousness turn them into desperate defenders of their own dystopian psychological universe.

The artificial environment depicted in "The Truman Show" can also be regarded as the utopia of advertising, since product placement along the show transforms its viewers into brain-washed, addicted consumers of whatever Truman unknowingly advertises. Since his fans do not seem to make the difference between Truman's genuine interest in the elements building up his daily life and the artificiality of the behaviours, beliefs and desires projected by the actors surrounding him,

advertising is used by the television apparatus as further means of manipulation. The producers of the show do not try to predict what the viewers might desire; instead, they trigger these desires, for maximum profit. Camouflaged by Truman's genuine reactions, the elaborate discourse of advertising unfolds in a manner which is constantly attenuated for the viewers, more preoccupied with their hero's reality-show-life than the fact that they are being constantly manipulated. There is no autonomous desire in the collective consciousness of the viewers, since they are more absorbed in the irreality of Truman's life than the reality of their own lives. In "Squid Game", people with absolute financial power are drawn to the adventures imposed on the players, as if that were the only chance for them to feel alive; it is an ironic metaphor for the thin line between living and existing, and a reminder that struggle is the only feature of life that makes everything worthwhile. So even if one can own anything, they invest in watching others struggle. This is also a matter of profit - but while in "The Truman Show" it is all about advertising and monetary gain, "Squid Game" investigates deeper psychological meanings of being rich and tries to decipher the coded relationship between money, happiness and ethics, as the value of the prize increases with every single death. Life and death become, in a sordid, overly-capitalistic way, countable, at least for the players.

Compared to the repetitive existence of the viewers, Truman's life-for-sale seems attractive, as he has to overcome the difficulties programmed for him by the producers. His life is *designed* to include as many personal events as possible, as many choices as possible, so that his existence can be rendered as distinguishably different – in a similar fashion, the games in the Korean series are designed to elicit the most intense emotional response, for the players and for the viewers alike. Even though Truman's every step encompasses a virtually endless litany of commodification,⁶ the *formulation* of his paradoxical life is perceived as idealistic by the viewers, who also re-interpret it, involving a certain degree of social constructivism in the process, elaborating their representation of it in individual terms, and progressively translating the

artificiality of Truman's show – of which they are all aware of – into a potentially real configuration of life, something they can all aspire to. In "Squid Game", the transition from mere entertainment to actual experience is done through direct involvement, a personification of a more menacing Big Brother.

The plot of "Squid Game" strongly resembles Fredric Jameson's theory on the postmodernist development of society, touching upon issues like personal identity, individualism and coherence in a manner which points towards schizophrenia – the same element that Jameson employs in assessing the contemporary relation with time – the individual has lost the sense of temporal continuity, becoming debilitated by his own linguistic mechanisms in stepping beyond a fragmented present. Just like in the case of the schizophrenic – perfectly personified by Doctor Bettelheim's patients as well – signifiers are isolated, disconnected, the postmodern is indissolubly tied to the present – a present with fractures in temporality, shaped by capitalist rules and mass production; the consumer society holds the set of rules for adapting to the present moment, which is, in fact, a continuous change. The rupture between external and internal reality of "Squid Game" is augmented by the subtle mind games played upon the players, distorting their principles and dissolving empathy. Accurately portraying Jameson's theory, the protagonists are trapped inside a nostalgic representation of a long-lost past, unable to design a coherent representation of the present or the future (Jameson 1991, 16). In contrast, the prisoners of the Sleep Experiment simply need their present to be endless; they cannot envision future, and cannot recollect their essential human traits before the experiment, they seek survival in a chemically-induced, terror-filled temporal loop. If consciousness were the grand narrative of humanity, these particular subjects eventually antagonize it, in a manner similar to how society metabolized and deconstructed, culturally, its great myths (Lyotard 1984), choosing the simulation provided by the drug over a reality shaped by senses, just like humanity chose representation over the actual thing (Jameson 1982).

The players trying to survive the games in the Korean series seem to exemplify Baudrillard's views on the

constructedness of reality and the shifting interplay between simulation and objective reality. Discussing the possibility of accessing, in one form or another, an integral reality, and drawing upon Nietzsche's thoughts on the real world and the world of appearances, Baudrillard sees the world not only devoid of truth, but also devoid of any intention of finding it, of any need to encompass it. Truth is no longer essential for the players; survival has remained the only goal, but only if coupled with eventually winning the prize. Otherwise, survival, on its own, has lost its meaning. In fact, Baudrillard seems to be omnipresent throughout the plot development in "Squid Game", as the ship where the games take place seems to be the perfect metaphor for his description of the process of miniaturization, the consequence of technology, with the potentialities of representation having multiplied, marked by the concept of screen as evolutionary lineage after the "disappearance" (Baudrillard 1983, 127) of the scene and the mirror. The screen on which the Front Man monitors all the movements of the players signals an utter loss of privacy and an ultimate increase of control. The physical and emotional torture of the players is turned into spectacle, into overexposure, since all their movements are carefully observed. This has the same subtextual meaning as Baudrillard's insight into the loss of privacy and an obscene "ecstasy of communication", where any sense of secrecy is dissolved, and the overexposure to a universe that has become too transparent can exacerbate the existential rhythm of the individual to a schizophrenic stage (Baudrillard 1983, 131).

"Squid Game" and "The Zornheim Sleep Experiment" investigate the neurosis of the (post)modern man and the idea of self-imposed dystopia, against a background of manipulation, control and distorted visions. They both follow the tracks of extreme alienation and a subversive interplay between captivity and absolute freedom, while also touching upon the shifting definition of happiness. In "Squid Game", the hopelessness of some translates into the entertainment of others. Basically, poor people become able to give up their very humanity for one chance of getting extremely rich, only to discover that watching poor people struggle is the only

meaningful amusement for their puppeteers. In “The Zornheym Sleep Experiment”, prisoners go from being willing to do anything for freedom to being willing to do anything to escape it, placing a devious equality sign between freedom and mind-prison. The drug provides a sensory spectacle - an oblique perspective, a sublimation of the real, a reversed rapport between image and object that makes the patients find refuge in a radically subjective perception (Debord 1970, 22). This maddening roundabout of human nature is on display through a staged spectacle in which both actors and viewers see each other as the ultimate ticket to a more fulfilled life, each according to their perception of what genuine happiness should look like, and, respectively, a delusional trance that engulfs conservation instincts and erases consciousness. If “Squid Game” reviews the haunting echoes left by childhood on adulthood and tries to pin down the extent to which individuals can still remain themselves under extreme circumstances, “The Zornheym Sleep Experiment” dwells upon the entanglements between wakefulness and consciousness, in a revelatory display of the authentically human grotesque. Both heavily engage with the concept of simulation – be it a simulation of an environment, the trap-loaded micro-universe in the K-drama, or a simulation of reality, such as the subjective, artificial mental projection of what is real in the minds of the patients subjected to the sleep experiment in the plot of the metal album. Neither provides an adequate playground for the human psyche – in both cases, the mind seems to ultimately seek one thing: self-destruction, orchestrated by addiction and senselessness. Just like the postmodern shift of the utopian vein, from the communal to the individual, the TV series and the metal album act as artistic instruments of psychiatric investigation, placing a subjective mirror in front of a neurotic self and registering survivalist possibilities in a closed universe of impossibility. Or, if we resort to a particular definition of utopia, that of a certain distance from complete distrust, their wish was utopian from the start (Jacoby 1999, 37).

NOTES

¹ One notable exception would be the Garden of Eden, which, interpreted from the perspective of utopianism, was designed for two people whose actions eventually triggered their expulsion.

² Edward Rothstein suggests that even dystopias were “specifically designed by their rulers to be *utopias*”, referring mainly to *Brave New World* and *1984* (Rothstein 2003, 4).

³ “Revelation” is also one of the songs on the album.

⁴ Christof is the producer of the show, the man who coordinates the entire industry of making Truman’s world believable.

⁵ There is a scene where Truman puts to use the observation that everyone around him seems to know exactly what he is planning to do, managing to stop cars simply by jumping in front of them, without being actually harmed.

⁶ The Truman sales catalogue includes each and every item of clothing which appears on the show, as well as pieces of furniture, tools, food and so on.

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Filmography

Squid Game. Dir. By Hwang Dong-hyuk, Netflix, 2021

The Island. Dir. by Michael Bay. Dreamworks, Warner Bros Pictures, 2005

The Truman Show. Dir. by Peter Weir. Paramount Pictures, 1998

Discography

“The Zornheym Sleep Experiment”, Zornheym, Sweden, 2021

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