

Representation Of Greed And Systemic Elimination In Squid Game: An Ideological Semiotic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The South Korean series Squid Game (2021) has emerged as a global cultural phenomenon that critiques harsh economic systems through a lethal survival competition. While greed is often perceived as a personal moral failure, this study argues that it is a structural product of an oppressive environment where survival necessitates the elimination of others. The research problem focuses on how visual symbols in the series construct the ideology of greed and the mechanism of systemic elimination. Consequently, this study aims to reveal the ideological power behind visual signs and demonstrate how popular media naturalizes inhumane competition. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the data consists of ten key visual markers from Season 1. The distinct novelty of this research lies in its dual-theoretical approach, analyzing data through Roland Barthes' semiotic layers denotation, connotation, and myth integrated with Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). The results indicate that symbols such as the Giant Doll, the transparent piggy bank, and the voting console function as apparatuses that interpellate participants into a logic of "profit through death". The study concludes that the series successfully exposes the "invisible hand of capital" by transforming human beings into replaceable statistical units, thereby portraying systemic elimination as an inevitable reality of late capitalism.

Keywords: *Squid Game, Semiotics, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Systemic Elimination, Greed.*

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary era, economic inequality and the debt trap have become a pressing global phenomenon that triggers social crises. The reality of modern society is often marked by a relentless struggle for survival amidst a landscape of extreme capitalism. As noted by (Fisher, 2009) there is a widespread sense that not only is

capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it. This structural entrapment has created a collective anxiety, leading to various social pathologies and systemic exclusion. This grim reality was captured by director Hwang Dong-hyuk (2021) and packaged into the Netflix original series *Squid Game* (2021). The series serves as a sharp mirror reflecting the brutal competition inherent in hyper-capitalistic societies

The series is produced by Siren Pictures Inc. and spans nine episodes. The title *Squid Game* itself is derived from a popular South Korean children's street game from the 1970s. Etymologically and culturally, the name evokes a sense of nostalgia; however, in the context of the series, this innocent childhood memory is perverted. This aligns with what Roland (Barthes, 1972) describes as the process of "myth-making," where a simple sign is hijacked to serve a secondary, often ideological, meaning transforming a game into a site of trauma.

The narrative follows 456 participants burdened by insurmountable debt. They are lured into a competition where the stakes are fatal: losing a game results in immediate execution. Due to its graphic depiction of systemic cruelty, the series carries a strong trigger warning. This portrayal reflects the "Culture Industry" critique by (Kellner, 1995) who argued that in capitalist societies, even the most brutal aspects of human struggle are commodified and turned into spectacle for mass consumption. Furthermore, media culture provides the materials out of which many people construct their sense of class, making *Squid Game* a vital object of study to understand contemporary social identity. Music and film act as powerful mediums of cultural expression that play a key role in shaping social identities such as masculinity and regional identity (Setiawan Kabkole et al., 2025; Suheri et al., 2025; Yaumi et al., 2024) Films specifically play a role as an effective medium to convey messages, ideas, and education to the public in a way that is easily understood (Larasati & Indriyani, 2022; Yuniatun & Rahman, 2025; Sabila et al., 2025)

Before this research, *Squid Game* and similar survival narratives have been the subject of various academic studies. However, most previous research tends to view the "greed" displayed by the characters as an individual moral failing. This perspective often ignores what (Zizek, 1989) calls the "sublime object of ideology," where individuals act according to a system's logic even if they claim not to believe in it. The characters' greed is not a choice, but a requirement for survival within the game's internal market.

In the context of semiotic studies within the *KLAUSA Journal*, the first relevant study by (Larasati & Indriyani, 2022) examined the representation of moral messages in the short film *Lamun Sumelang*, successfully revealing how factual phenomena are reconstructed as cultural myths through denotative and connotative meanings. Furthermore, a second study by (Fahida, 2021) explored audio-visual media as a social discourse that shapes public perception through content analysis and semiotics. Meanwhile, a third study by (Juwindah et al., 2025) demonstrated the application of semiotic layers to reveal the underlying human struggles depicted in contemporary

drama. These studies collectively emphasize that cinema acts as a mirror to social turbulence, reflecting the complexities of the human condition. (Yuniatun & Rahman, 2025) further explored how films represent cyberbullying as symbolic violence, uncovering hidden meanings through Roland Barthes' theory.

The objective of this research is to reveal the ideological power behind visual signs and demonstrate how popular media naturalizes inhumane competition. The distinct novelty of this research lies in its dual-theoretical approach, integrating (Barthes, 1972b) semiotics (Althusser, 2014) of Ideological State Apparatuses. While Barthes (1972) provides the mechanism to decode signs through denotation, connotation, and myth, Althusser (2014) provides the necessary context of power by arguing that "ideology interpellates individuals as subjects". This integration is crucial because it views the games as an apparatus that "calls" or interpellates participants into a state of ruthless competition, normalizing systemic elimination as a natural law of the market.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Previous Studies

Previous academic inquiries into Squid Game and similar survival narratives have often interpreted the "greed" displayed by characters as an individual moral failing. However, this perspective often overlooks the "sublime object of ideology," wherein individuals act according to a system's logic regardless of personal belief. In the context of the KLAUSA Journal, (Larasati & Indriyani, 2022) successfully utilized Roland Barthes' semiotics to reveal how factual social phenomena, such as high suicide rates, are reconstructed as cultural myths in film. Furthermore, (Fahida, 2021) explored audio-visual media as a social discourse that shapes public perception through content analysis. Lastly, (Juwindah et al., 2025) applied semiotic layers to reveal underlying human struggles in contemporary drama, establishing semiotics as a vital tool for unmasking social messages in cinema.

2.1.1 Theoretical Basis

The theoretical foundation of this research integrates Roland Barthes' semiotics with Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). While Barthes (1972) provides the mechanism to decode signs through denotation, connotation, and myth, Althusser (2014) provides the necessary context of power by arguing that "ideology interpellates individuals as subjects". This study positions itself by moving beyond mere meaning to examine how visual symbols function as an apparatus to produce greed

a. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study views the games as an apparatus that "calls" or interpellates participants into a state of ruthless competition. Visual language is used to normalize systemic elimination as a natural law of the market. By merging

Barthes' semiotic layers with Althusser's ISA, this research reveals the ideological power behind visual signs that naturalize inhumane competition.

b. Empirical Evidence

1. Systemic Interpellation Through Visual Symbols Evidence indicates that specific symbols, such as the Giant Doll and the transparent piggy bank, function as apparatuses that interpellate participants into a logic of "profit through death". For example, the giant doll's motion-sensor eyes represent a cold, absolute authority that monitors every movement of the subject, aligning with Althusser's concept of constant surveillance. This forces participants to suppress empathy and internalize a survival instinct that disregards human values.

2. Monetization of Human Life The transparent piggy bank serves as a material manifestation of the "cost" of survival, visualizing the link between death and capital accumulation. Denotatively a symbol of saving, it connotatively transforms human beings into mere exchange values. This creates the myth of "Zero-Sum Prosperity," where wealth is inherently built upon the tragedy of others, portraying systemic elimination as an inevitable reality of late capitalism.

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to explore and describe the representation of greed and systemic elimination in Squid Game Season 1. Qualitative research is utilized to gain a deeper understanding of social phenomena through the interpretation of visual and narrative signs. As stated by (Sugiyono, 2018) qualitative research is a method used to examine the condition of natural objects where the researcher is the key instrument. The primary object of this research is the popular Netflix original series, Squid Game, specifically focusing on key scenes that visualize the structural pressure on the subjects. The data for this research consists of visual captures (stills) and narrative sequences from the series that represent the construction of greed and the mechanism of elimination. Data collection was conducted through an observational technique by meticulously watching the series and selecting ten significant data points that reflect the research objectives. According to (Miles et al., 2014) the process of data collection in qualitative studies involves identifying information that is truly relevant to the research problem to ensure analytical depth. These data points include visual symbols such as the giant doll, the piggy bank filled with cash, and the voting system.

The data analysis follows the semiotic framework of Roland Barthes, which classifies meaning into three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. First, the denotative level describes the literal or explicit meaning of the visual sign. Second, the connotative level interprets the underlying meanings, feelings, or values associated with the sign. Third, the level of myth uncovers how these meanings become naturalized as "common sense" within society. As argued by (Barthes, 1972), semiology aims to take in

any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits, to reveal the hidden ideological messages within. To provide a critical dimension, the semiotic analysis is integrated with Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). This theoretical integration aims to reveal how popular media serves as a tool to reproduce capitalist dominance and normalize dehumanization. (Althusser, 2014) posits that ideology does not merely exist in ideas but is manifested in material practices and apparatuses. The analysis process involves identifying the visual signs, interpreting them through Barthes' three-fold layers, and then contextualizing the findings within the framework of systemic elimination and ideological reproduction.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis follows a two-stage process: identifying visual signs through Barthes' semiotic layers, and then integrating Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) to reveal the systemic power dynamics.

Data 1 The Giant Doll (Young-Hee 영희)



Sources: Squid Games Season 1, Time Code: 00:45:05

Table 1. Denotation, Connotation, Myth, ISA Integration

Denotation	Connotation	Myth	ISA Integration
A giant robotic doll in an open field equipped with motion-sensing eyes.	The perversion of childhood innocence; the doll serves as a lethal surveillance instrument.	Fairness within the "Rules"—violence is naturalized as a logical consequence for those who fail to comply.	The doll functions as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) that interpellates individuals into obedient subjects through constant surveillance. The system deliberately designs an oppressive environment to force subjects to suppress empathy for survival.

Data 1 focuses on the giant robotic doll in the "Red Light, Green Light" game, which denotatively represents Young-hee, a South Korean children's cultural icon. Connotatively, this symbol undergoes an extreme distortion where nostalgic elements are transformed into a lethal surveillance apparatus, symbolizing a cold, absolute authority that monitors every movement of the subjects. This produces the myth that "total surveillance is necessary for order," naturalizing violence as a legitimate and fair consequence for failing to comply with the rules. Within Louis Althusser's framework, the doll functions as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) that "interpellates" individuals into obedient subjects through constant surveillance. In the context of greed, this apparatus forces participants to suppress empathy and prioritize survival at the expense of others, demonstrating that their greed is not a personal moral failing but a structural product of an intentionally oppressive system designed to normalize inhumane competition.

Data 2 The Transparent Piggy Bank



Sources: Squid Games Season 1, Eps.2 Time Code: 00:05:36

Tabel 2. Denotation, Connotation, Myth, ISA Integration

Denotation	Connotation	Myth	ISA Integration
A giant transparent piggy bank hanging from the ceiling, gradually filling with cash.	The literal monetization of human life; wealth is visibly built upon the death of peers.	Zero-Sum Prosperity"—the idea that one's wealth is inherently constructed upon another's tragedy.	This material object acts as an apparatus of interpellation through capitalistic desire. The visual of money dropping after each elimination creates a psychological link between death and profit, forcing subjects to internalize the logic of late capitalism.

Data 2 focuses on the transparent piggy bank filled with cash, which denotatively serves as a universal symbol of saving and financial security. However, connotatively, the symbol shifts into a predatory representation of the monetization of human life, where the glass transparency allows participants to witness wealth being built upon the visible death of their peers. This creates the myth of "Zero-Sum Prosperity," naturalizing the idea that individual capital accumulation is inherently and inevitably built upon the tragedy of others. From the perspective of Louis Althusser, the piggy bank functions as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) that interpellates subjects through material desire, silently forcing them to internalize the logic of late capitalism. Consequently, the greed displayed by the participants is revealed not as a personal moral failing, but as a structural necessity engineered by a system that transforms the elimination of others into a rational economic opportunity.

Data 3 The Identification Numbers



Sources: Squid Games Season 1, Eps 1 Time Code: 24:02

Tabel 3. Denotation, Connotation, Myth, ISA Integration

Denotation	Connotation	Myth	ISA Integeration
White numbers (e.g., 456, 218) printed on the green tracksuits and the walls of the dormitory	The total erasure of individual identity where participants are reduced to statistical units or commodities in a global market.	Dehumanization is naturalized, suggesting that in a competitive system, individuals are replaceable and their value is determined solely by their status within the game.	Strips the "human" element to transform individuals into "subjects" that function for system needs

Data 3 focuses on the white identification numbers on green tracksuits, which denotatively serve as a systematic way for the authority to track participants as assets. Connotatively, this signifies a radical state of dehumanization where a person's

existence is reduced to a mere three-digit integer, effectively stripping away their names and histories. This creates a myth that in a hyper-competitive environment, individuals are replaceable and their value is determined solely by their numerical status within the game. From the perspective of Louis Althusser, these numbers function as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) that interpellates individuals into "subjects" by removing their human elements to suit the system's needs. Consequently, greed is further fostered because the participants begin to see others not as fellow humans, but as statistical obstacles that must be cleared from the board for their own survival.

Data 4 The Pink Soldiers' Masks (Circle, Triangle, Square)



Sources: Squid Games Season 1, Eps 1 Time Code: 00:24:22

Table 4. Denotation, Connotation, Myth, ISA Integration

Denotation	Connotation	Myth	ISA
Black masks with simple geometric shapes (○, △, □) worn by the guards in pink jumpsuits.	Represents a rigid hierarchy and the mechanical nature of bureaucracy; guards act without emotion or face.	This creates the myth of "the faceless system." It suggests that systemic cruelty is not personal; it is just "part of the job" or the "process of the system."	The guards function as a mechanical tool of power, carrying out eliminations as a function of assigned rank

Data 4 focuses on the black masks worn by the guards, which denotatively serve to hide individual identities and establish a strict functional hierarchy within the competition. Connotatively, the geometric shapes Circle, Triangle, and Square signify a rigid social stratification where individuals are turned into anonymous enforcers of the system's rules. This constructs the myth of "the faceless system," naturalizing cruelty as a mere "part of the job" rather than a human tragedy. Within Louis Althusser's framework, the guards function as both an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and a Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), committing violence not out of personal malice but as a mechanical function of their assigned rank. This imagery interpellates subjects to

realize they are fighting against an unyielding, faceless bureaucracy, further driving the participants toward ruthless competition and greed for survival.

Data 5 The Voting Console



Sources: Squid Games Season 1 Eps 2, Time Code: 00:06:57

Table 5. Denotation, Connotation, Myth, ISA Integration

Denotation	Connotation	Myth	ISA Integration
A podium with two buttons: a green button with a circle (to continue) and a red button with an 'X' (to stop).	Represents the illusion of democracy and a manipulative form of "subjectivation"	"Fair Consent," an illusion of masking the reality that external economic debt forces participants back into the game	Interpellates participants as willing subjects by providing an engineered sense of choice.

Data 5 focuses on the voting mechanism, which denotatively serves as a tool for procedural democracy, allowing participants to cast a vote to decide their collective fate. Connotatively, this represents a manipulative form of "subjectivation" where the choice to stop is rendered nearly impossible by external economic pressures like crushing debt. This produces the myth of "Fair Consent," which naturalizes the idea of free will in an unfree system and makes participants feel personally accountable for their own suffering. From the perspective of Louis Althusser's ISA theory, ideology is most effective when individuals believe they are acting out of their own free will; by providing this "choice," the system interpellates the participants as willing subjects, ensuring that their own desperation remains the primary driver for the system's reproduction.

Data 6 Front Man



Sources: Squid Games Season 1, Eps.4 Time Code: 00:04:25

Tabel 6. Denotation, Connotation, Myth, ISA Integration

Denotation	Connotation	Myth	ISA Integration
A figure in a black hooded robe wearing a dark, angular metallic mask.	Signifies absolute, untouchable power and the "invisible hand" that regulates the fate of the subjects.	"Systemic Integrity," suggesting that the competition is fair and meritocratic despite its lethal nature	The guardian of ideology who ensures participants are interpellated into believing the system is built on "equality."

Data 6 focuses on the Front Man, whose denotation is defined by his distinct black hooded robe and polygonal metallic mask, marking him as the executive authority within the game's arena. Connotatively, he represents the "invisible hand" of the market, a force that remains detached and masked while making life-or-death decisions for the participants. This constructs the myth of "Fair Competition," where the Front Man emphasizes that the game is a meritocracy that treats everyone equally regardless of their background in the outside world. Within Louis Althusser's framework, he serves as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) that ensures participants are interpellated into believing the system is fair, thereby justifying the elimination of the "weak". Consequently, greed is presented as a noble pursuit of one's potential rather than a desperate reaction to systemic murder.

Data 7 The Tug Of War Game



Sources: Squid Games Season 1, Eps. 4 Time Code: 00:42:09

Tabel 7. Denotation, Connotation, Myth, ISA Integration

Denotation	Connotation	Myth	ISA Integration
Two groups of people pulling a thick rope in opposite directions on elevated, divided platforms.	Signifies a distortion of cooperation, where teamwork is used as a tool for physical destruction of others.	the "Zero-Sum Game" myth, reinforcing the idea that survival and success require the direct downfall of another group.	the "forced competition," where social solidarity is limited only to one's immediate group.

Data 7 focuses on the Tug of War game, which denotatively is a traditional sport emphasizing teamwork and collective effort. However, connotatively, the system weaponizes cooperation, shifting the meaning into a nightmare of systemic elimination where one must work perfectly with their team to ensure the death of the opposing side. This produces the myth of the "Inevitability of Conflict," naturalizing the "kill-or-be-killed" instinct as a mathematical necessity of the system. According to Althusser, this game functions as an ISA to interpellate the subjects into a state of forced competition, where group loyalty is encouraged only to facilitate broader systemic exclusion. Thus, greed is cultivated not as an individual desire, but as a collective necessity to avoid the chasm, making the elimination of others appear as a justifiable requirement for survival.

Data 8 The Marbles Game (Gganbu)



Sources: Squid Games Season 1, Eps.6 Time Code: 00:15:12

Tabel 8. Denotation, Connotation, Myth, ISA Integration

Denotation	Connotation	Myth	ISA Integration
Participants playing marbles in a simulated traditional Korean residential setting.	The distortion of the ultimate bond of solidarity (Gganbu) into a personal death trap.	"Empathy Weakness," suggesting that human connection must be discarded for capitalistic victory.	as the setting acts as an ideological space that interpellates subjects to discard morality for survival.

Data 8 focuses on the marble game, which denotatively utilizes the Gganbu concept a Korean term for a trusted partnership within a nostalgic residential backdrop. Connotatively, the system perverts this bond by forcing participants to play against their chosen partners, transforming a symbol of solidarity into a deeply personal betrayal. This constructs the myth that empathy and human connection are structural weaknesses that must be eliminated to achieve victory. From the perspective of Louis Althusser, the nostalgic setting functions as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) that interpellates the subjects to confront the limits of their own morality. Consequently, greed is presented as a tragic, forced choice where the subject must "kill" their last human connection to avoid their own systemic elimination.

Data 9 Glass Bridge Game



Sources: Squid Games Season 1, Eps 7 Time Code: 00:27:31

Tabel 9. Denotation, Connotation, Myth, ISA Integration

Denotation	Connotation	Myth	ISA Integration
A high-altitude bridge consisting of alternating tempered and normal glass tiles.	The "fatal speculation" of the neoliberal economy, where individuals live without a safety net.	"fatal hiding the reality that the system is mathematically designed to eliminate the majority."	"Luck as Merit," The bridge interpellates subjects into accepting "risk" as an inevitable and natural part of life.

Data 9 focuses on the glass bridge game, which denotatively involves a structural challenge where participants must choose between identical-looking glass panels. Connotatively, this represents the extreme precarity of late capitalism, where subjects are forced into high-stakes speculation in a market that views them as expendable. This creates the myth of "Luck as Merit," which naturalizes the idea that success is a result of "taking a leap" while masking the rigged mathematical design of the game. Within Althusser's framework, the bridge serves as an ISA to interpellate the subjects into accepting systemic risk as a natural law. Greed is manifested here as the desperate urge to move forward by using the death of others as "data points" for one's own survival.

Data 10 Glass Bridge Game



Sources: Squid Games Season 1, Eps.7 Time Code: 00:12:30

Tabel 10. Denotation, Connotation, Myth, ISA Integration

Denotation	Connotation	Myth	ISA Integration
Golden masks shaped like animals (lion, owl, bull) worn by wealthy spectators in a luxury setting.	Signifies the existence of a "predator class" that remains detached, invisible, and profits from human suffering.	Naturalizes the myth that "Human Suffering is a Commodity," where the life and death of the lower class are treated as entertainment for the elite.	The VIPs represent the owners of the apparatus who remain faceless while ensuring the system of elimination continues.

Data 10 focuses on the VIPs, whose denotation is defined by ornate golden masks shaped like predatory animals, symbolizing their position at the top of the economic food chain. Connotatively, these masks represent the total detachment of the ruling class, who remain invisible while profiting from the brutal reality of the participants. This constructs the myth of the "Normalization of Dehumanization," where the systemic elimination of the poor is perceived as a legitimate form of entertainment for the elite. Within Louis Althusser's framework, the VIPs function as the owners of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), interpellated through absolute power to view human lives as mere betting chips. Consequently, greed is not only produced within the participants but is validated by this predatory class, who embody the ultimate outcome of capital accumulation: a complete loss of empathy and the transformation of murder into a spectator sport.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that the visual symbols across the ten analyzed data points in Squid Game serve as a cohesive apparatus that constructs the ideology of greed and facilitates the mechanism of systemic elimination. By addressing the research problem of how visual signs naturalize inhumane competition, the analysis reveals that greed is not a personal moral failure but a structural product of an oppressive environment. The findings demonstrate that key visual markers ranging from the Giant Doll and the transparent piggy bank to the identification numbers and the golden VIP masks function as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) that interpellate individuals into a "profit through death" logic. The distinct novelty of this research lies in its dual-theoretical approach, integrating Roland Barthes' semiotic layers of denotation, connotation, and myth with Louis Althusser's theory of ISA. This integration provides a necessary context of power, shifting the focus from mere meaning to how popular media functions to produce greed and normalize the dehumanization of individuals into replaceable statistical units. Ultimately, the research exposes the "invisible hand of capital" by portraying systemic elimination as an inevitable reality of late capitalism.

Despite these insights, this research is subject to certain limitations, as it employs a qualitative descriptive method focused specifically on ten significant visual markers from Season 1. The scope is limited to the internal visual discourse of the series and does not account for external factors such as audience reception across different cultural demographics or the evolution of these symbols in future seasons. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand this ideological framework to include other survival-genre media to determine if this systemic representation is a consistent trope in contemporary popular culture. Additionally, subsequent studies could utilize audience reception analysis to evaluate whether viewers successfully decode these critiques or if the "Culture Industry" successfully commodifies the message into mere spectacle. Finally, exploring the interplay between the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the ISA in greater detail could further illuminate how physical violence and ideological manipulation work in tandem to maintain social dominance.

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