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Kingdom Cultures: Zombie Growth and Netflix Korea

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This article considers the position of Netflix Korea within Netflix's global business and in relation to South Korea's place within a transitioning world system in the early 21st century. The article will first discuss prospects for growth at corporate and geopolitical levels, with an emphasis on leadership principles. Netflix culture implies a useful strategy for stamping out weaker competition amid crisis conditions but is not one that solves the crisis itself, a fact that becomes apparent when Netflix assumes its position as an industry leader rather than a scrappy upstart. Second, this article will track the way in which *Kingdom*, Netflix Korea's first original scripted show, encompasses the contradictions of imperialist logics that ramp up precisely as the foundation for that power erodes. *Kingdom* and Netflix more broadly imagine a world that bypasses this fundamental requirement, and in so doing they risk building castles in the sand susceptible to shifting tides as *hallyu* waves begin to recede.

Keywords: Netflix, Netflix Korea, Kingdom, platform imperialism, corporate culture, zombies

At the climax of the second season of the Netflix Korea hit, *Kingdom* (*K'ingdöm*, Lee, 2019–2020), the crown prince Lee Chang (Ju Ji-hoon) makes a noble decision for the good of his kingdom against his own self-interest.² He has become aware that the infant son of the queen consort Cho (Kim Hye-jun) is really the low-born son of his deceased personal bodyguard, and that she had pretended that the stolen young boy was her own. Nevertheless, Prince Lee Chang realizes that the infant is a better choice than he is for the throne, which was vacated by his father after contracting the zombie disease that occasions the show's plot. With the infant before him in the arms of the physician, Seo-bi (Bae Doona), and his advisors urging him to kill the boy, Prince Lee Chang calmly surmises: He is "the sole legitimate heir to the throne,

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² Because of the increasing prominence of Koreans in Western discourse, Korean proper nouns will be romanized according to the way they are presented to English-speaking audiences. All other Korean words, including television show titles, will be romanized according to the McCune-Reischauer system. Dialogue quotations will be presented in English.

whereas I am . . . a bastard son guilty of high treason. . . . If I ask you which one of us this war-torn, plague-ravaged country needs more, whom will you choose?" (Kim & Park, 2020, 34:30). Since no one has the authority to challenge him, Prince Lee Chang declares, "This child is the only chance this kingdom has left" (Kim & Park, 2020, 35:10). In the context of the early 17th-century Joseon dynasty, this is a magnanimous act of sacrifice by a prince more concerned with the future of his kingdom than with his own personal claim to the throne.

The prince's assessment of what amounts to an executive personnel decision has a specific resonance with Netflix's corporate culture: The *Keeper Test*. A foundational practice of Netflix human resources, the Keeper Test asks employees to consider the question: "Would the company be better off with someone else in my role?" (Hastings & Meyer, 2020, "The Keeper Test," para. 36); or to consider from the point of view of a manager: "If a person on your team were to quit tomorrow, would you try to change their mind? Or would you accept their resignation . . . ? If the latter, you should give them a severance package now, and look for a star" (Hastings & Meyer, 2020, "The Keeper Test," para. 35). From its early years, Netflix operated like a sports team, with personnel decisions based on performance. This approach led to practices such as *sunshining*, in which employees were required to publicly discuss their mistakes, and *dissent farming*, in which workers were asked to seek contrary opinions before making decisions. In many ways, Netflix culture is nothing more than a robust neoliberal management strategy in which employees are putatively given autonomy but under the continual pressure of performance-based management (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005), but two elements are distinctive. First, Netflix culture was offered as a central piece of the company's public identity to the degree that its culture became part of its branding. The chief executive officer (CEO) and company founder, Reed Hastings, even authored (with Erin Meyer) a bestselling book on the topic, *No Rules Rules: Netflix and the Culture of Reinvention* (Hastings & Meyer, 2020). Second, Netflix culture extended the precarity usually experienced by lower-level employees to the highest levels of management. The Keeper Test led, for example, to the 2012 departure of longtime executive Patty McCord, who helped establish the very same corporate culture that would later require her dismissal. Crucially, Reed Hastings has stated plainly that the principle should apply to him as well (Hastings & Meyer, 2020).³ Prince Lee Chang's magnanimous act in *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020) precisely imagines this hypothetical possibility, applying the Keeper Test at the very highest level. Occasioned by the incapacitation and death of a monarch, the transitional power struggle that emerges manifests as a struggle over culture by various aspirants with entirely different visions for the future of the kingdom.

But while *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020) seems to have something to tell us about Netflix's corporate culture, Netflix in general remains difficult for scholars to study for the reasons that John Caldwell (2008) articulates in *Production Culture*—that industry knowledge "is usually highly coded, managed, and inflected" (p. 2). Netflix's proprietary algorithm, which determines what media content appears in its customers' feeds, is largely a secret though scholars have managed to learn its general characteristics (Alexander, 2016). Though a publicly traded company, Netflix is hesitant to disclose audience metrics; and in contrast to Nielson ratings for broadcast television or box-office receipts for motion pictures, the scale of success of individual productions remains a matter of conjecture. As Netflix regards its back catalog as retaining value after initial

³ Hasting's decision in 2023 to step down as CEO does not appear to be the result of the Keeper Test but rather a retirement (Duffy, 2023).

airing, it does not register write-downs of its biggest flops, keeping private the scale of its failures. In terms of production, the company carefully manages the outflow of information through, for example, its own in-house podcast series and media interviews with its creators, who are careful about what they reveal. Even conversations with former employees, bound by nondisclosure agreements, have limited value.

So, what can we know now? Thankfully, quality investigative journalism has begun to emerge (Kafka & Molla, 2020; Ramachandran & Flint, 2018). We know that Netflix's production teams provide their content producers with significant notes, and we certainly see a thematic coherence in much of Netflix Korea's early production efforts under the rubric of Netflix Originals. As in *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020), a dominant concern in shows like *Squid Game* (*Ojingö Keim*; Hwang, 2021) and *Hellbound* (*Chiok*; Byun, 2021) is the struggle for survival amid crisis conditions. Additionally, such shows also feature depictions of tactical decision making as a means of managing crisis, depictions that resonate with the kind of high-stakes corporate decision making that Netflix has had to engage in recently. We also know the specific challenges that circumscribe Netflix's strategy, which until 2022 focused on the growth of the subscriber base. Especially given the secretive nature of Netflix, we might look to such shows for hints about the organizational culture that it seems to narrate indirectly. Here, we note that while the company has been stingy with details about its operations, it has always been vociferous about its leadership principles.

More than most cases of corporate allegory, Netflix Korea is difficult to discern from its content production. It is a private subsidiary not required to report its finances. Unable to access even quarterly reports, researchers become dependent on well-managed flows of corporate information. Thus, rather than reading allegory narrowly—with Prince Lee Chang as a handsome stand-in for Reed Hastings—this article proposes to consider the idea of culture in relation to the biological sense of culture, as *conditions that promote growth*, as in the way a petri dish functions as a culture in which micro-organisms might flourish. To appreciate culture as something more like corporate ecology, we need to think about the emergence of global media platforms and the histories in which they develop and to appreciate larger trajectories in global capitalism. Culture in this broader sense circumscribes cultural production because it is quite fundamental not just to the specific corporate culture here of Netflix but also to the culture of the global political economy in which Netflix culture is situated.

Viewing culture in this expansive matter, we see that the challenges constraining the specific industry of media production and distribution and more generally national and global economies have intensified in recent years. I am guided by Caldwell's (2008) multivalent approach in his "cultural-industrial method," which attempts to hold textual analysis, ethnographic observation, and economic/industrial analysis in "critical tension and dialogue" (p. 4). This is a flexible approach because the various inputs here are available to different degrees in different cases. I propose to read *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020) and its preoccupation with leadership charged with attending to a diffuse domain not just narrowly as an allegory of Netflix Korea but more widely as an index for the way in which corporate culture, understood as growth conditions, dovetails with ecologies of global media and political economy. In this frame, we begin to see depictions and material examples of how neoliberal survivalism gives rise to environments in which growth strategies become strained and encounter crises of sustainability. This comes at a time when skepticism regarding globalization emerges, swinging the pendulum away from the free trade and open markets of the past several decades and toward closed borders and market protectionism. I will first consider the specific

position of Netflix Korea within both Netflix's global business and in relation, more broadly, to Korea's specific place within a transitioning world system in the first decades of the 21st century, comparing prospects for growth at corporate, national, and global levels. What emerges is a picture of Netflix culture, which, however effective in stamping out competition, fails in solving the more fundamental crisis of slowing growth, a failure that becomes apparent as Netflix rises from being a scrappy upstart to an industry leader. To explain this picture, I will track the way in which its landmark show, *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020), the first original scripted show for Netflix Korea, encompasses the contradictions of neoliberal logics that ramp up precisely as the foundation for those logics erodes.

Netflix Culture

Often celebrated as the engine of the company's dramatic growth from start-up to global leader, *Netflix Culture* (Netflix, 2022) is a set of homegrown corporate values established by the company and propagated throughout its global offices. A point of pride, a lengthy document remains available on the Netflix corporate website, describing its features in detail (Netflix, 2022). Bathed in Silicon Valley human resources rhetoric, it flattens rigid hierarchies in favor of efficient networks that empower employees to operate dexterously in a complicated global environment. The 2022 version (since changed) began: "Entertainment, like friendship, is a fundamental human need. . . . We want to entertain the world. If we succeed, there is more laughter, more empathy, more joy" (Netflix, 2022).⁴ A telling simile, the appeal toward "friendship" signals the social network ethos of this entertainment company. Friendship (like a friend on Facebook) is less the site of personal intimacy and more a connecting node in an expansive network. Indeed, there was once in fact a short-lived feature (canceled in 2010) on Netflix called "Friends," which allowed users to share information; and the principle remains central to the company's Cinematch algorithmic system, which groups viewing habits according to "customer clusters" (Alexander, 2016, pp. 86–91). Consuming media on its platform becomes akin to social interaction, which aspires ultimately for the breadth of reach more than it does for the depth of connection. Here the recurring adjective in "more laughter, more empathy, more joy" is of greater import than the nouns they modify. This is a growth culture oriented toward the growth of its culture.

Founded in 1997, Netflix began as a digital video disk (DVD) subscription company, successful in disrupting the once profitable brick-and-mortar video rental business, as most prominently manifested by Blockbuster Video. Netflix initially used not a high-tech distribution apparatus but that more old-fashioned network known as the U.S. Postal Service (Lobato & Lotz, 2020). Although the service did have a well-crafted website, the rest of its operations relied on an infrastructure that Netflix did not own, keeping Netflix's distribution costs modest. In fact, Netflix was once the U.S. Postal Service's largest single client (Misra, 2020). A company whose lore is tied to bold, controversial pivots, Netflix split off from its successful DVD rental business in 2011 to focus on the streaming service, leading to 700,000 subscription cancellations and causing the company's stock price to plummet by 70% at its lowest point. After this pivot, Netflix became hungry for content, initially purchasing back catalogs from legacy media corporations, who viewed the sales as unanticipated windfalls without realizing they were fueling a future competitor.

⁴ The statement has since been revised.

But as competition arose in the media platform sector, Netflix moved increasingly into production, and capital investments for a company historically able to keep costs low dramatically spiked. As streaming became more competitive in the 21st century, the competition for content also escalated. Netflix pursued an aggressive global strategy that aspired to make the company the world's first global streaming service. As it became more global in orientation,⁵ Netflix used earlier licensing agreements to gain a foothold in a media ecosphere focused on acquiring intellectual property that could be distributed worldwide, aided by an ambitious in-house dubbing operation to allow consumers to engage in content from all over the world in their own language (Lee, 2022; Lobato, 2019). In this regard, Netflix is distinctive among the large streaming platform businesses: Its global strategy is far more invested in global production (not just global distribution). This is in part a function of Netflix's lack of the other kind of robust revenue streams enjoyed by its major competitors (Apple, Amazon, Disney), for whom streaming is part of a larger portfolio.

Netflix Korea emerged as part of this two-pronged globalizing strategy. South Korean offices of the Silicon Valley corporation initially focused on launching the service for South Korean audiences but became more interested in local content as part of an attempt to stabilize intellectual property costs. The timing was perfect. The establishment of Netflix Korea came in the wake of Warner Brothers' decision in 2018 to shut down DramaFever, the once popular source for K-dramas, which Warner Brothers acquired in 2016. At the same time, audience interest in Korean content spiked, epitomized by the success of Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (Lee & Bong, 2019), winning the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2019 and Best Picture at the Academy Awards in 2020. Netflix had already established a foothold in Korean media with its production and distribution deals (Trumbore, 2015). Around this time, it also inked licensing deals with the South Korean cable networks JTBC and Studio Dragon and found success on its platform with this licensed content, like the tvN show *Signal* (*Shigünöl*; Lee, 2016), whose writer, Kim Eun-hee, was signed for what was to become *Kingdom*. Debuting in 2019, *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020) was the first original scripted series produced by Netflix Korea, and it was a huge success, not only in the Korean market but internationally as well. When speaking about the show in interviews, Kim Eun-hee cites the freedom that the environment offers, allowing her to explore story ideas that were not possible in the traditional Korean ecosystem (Tomada, 2020). It was not until she met with Netflix Korea that she felt the show was viable (Ahn, 2019). Netflix subsequently formalized Netflix Entertainment Korea in 2020, establishing it as a private subsidiary, for which it built two large production facilities in 2021, all this coming only a few years after the platform itself had been introduced to the Korean market in 2016 and facilitated by Netflix Services Korea (Pulse, 2020).

In this remarkable ascent, we appreciate that Netflix Culture is intended, above all, as a strategic mechanism, its rhetoric of egalitarianism notwithstanding. Its emphasis on "freedom and responsibility," a major rubric in the culture statement signals a central tactical orientation. This is a freedom born not of pure creative enthusiasm but of a rational reaction to challenges in the rapidly changing global film and television business, in which indecisive responses have disastrous consequences. With ambitions for widespread expansion amid a global media industry undergoing a vertiginous, high-stakes reorganization, Netflix could not be too centralized, needing to adjust on the fly to the vagaries of shifting costs, regulations, and audience taste as the service moved into unpredictable regional markets. Such circumstances became

⁵ On the methodological difficulty of thinking of Netflix as a global service, see Lobato and Lotz (2020, p. 135) and Lobato (2018).

even more difficult in the context of content production, not just because of the logistical challenges of operating in unfamiliar locales but also because of the complex vagaries of regional taste in the new markets the company wished to penetrate. Netflix's local and regional producers and executives were required to make fast decisions to take advantage of narrow opportunity windows, and Netflix Culture instilled organizational principles to provide guidance for entropic operations. Regional leadership was given the authority to make decisions without waiting for approval from a parent office.

For Netflix Korea, the dynamics of corporate culture are arguably more novel than in the U.S.-based offices because of the contrast with traditional Korean corporate culture and its famously Confucian heritage (Janelli & Yim, 1993). According to Netflix's internal podcast series, employees at Netflix Korea use minimal honorifics and do not take age into account when addressing each other in Korean as is common in traditional Korean corporate environments (Troxel, 2020). While this hierarchical flattening has become more common in Korean corporate life, the employees interviewed in the podcast argue that Netflix Korea is exceptional in this respect. One should always take internal, self-congratulatory reporting like Netflix's podcast series with a large grain of salt. Indeed, as outside news outlets have frequently reported, the culture of freedom and responsibility at Netflix is undergirded by a rigorous performance culture in which the lack of productivity meets harsh consequences (Ramachandran & Flint, 2018). Even so, in one of the interviews cited above, Kim Eun-hee contrasts Netflix's production culture with the obsession of K-drama producers with ratings and audience feedback, which always presses writers into changing their scripts even during production (Tomada, 2020). Netflix culture in its Korea operations contributes to the dismantling of established practices, not just in production culture but also in terms of format, as evidenced by *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020), blurring the boundary between TV and cinema. But whether we view Netflix Culture as salutary or brutal, it is built to survive increasingly difficult conditions caused by the radically expanded scale of operations, particularly as it comes to depend not just on global distribution but also global production.

Risk Culture

Netflix's growth strategy was effective in the 2010s, allowing the company's ascension to a dominant global media player, leaving it ideally positioned to take advantage of the streaming boom resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic at the end of the decade. Netflix achieved a degree of what Dal Yong Jin (2015) has described as *platform imperialism*, in which control over distribution through media platforms affords strategic leverage over content producers and audience markets. Jin (2015) glosses platform imperialism thusly, "an asymmetrical relationship of interdependence between the West, primarily in the U.S., and many developing countries. It is characterized in part by unequal technological exchanges and therefore capital flows" (p. 119), implying "a technological and symbolic domination of U.S.-based platforms that have greatly influenced the majority of peoples and countries" (p. 120, n. 1). Platform imperialism thus doubles economic imperialism. It is important, however, to recognize their uneven timing with respect to the cycle of U.S.-led globalization at the turn of the 21st century. Whereas U.S. hegemony was initially established in Asia as part of its postwar Cold War program, in which economic advantages were bestowed on client states who became bulwarks against the threat of communism, today's more expansively globalized world system of trade did not develop until the end of the century when deindustrialization and economic crisis in the United States required more extroverted strategies to stimulate economic growth that would replace declining industrial outputs in the domestic

economy. The so-called Washington Consensus and its neoliberal orientation emerged and was most fully realized in the establishment of the World Trade Organization in 1995 as the kind of interdependent asymmetrical trading network that Jin (2015) cites. The platform imperialism of U.S.-based technology companies is similarly belated, emerging toward the end of the Washington Consensus period when the fact of asymmetry begins to become apparent, and what was once sold as a mutually beneficial global village comes to be revealed as a system of exploitation by the most powerful actors. In short, platform imperialism emerges when U.S. economic imperialism begins its declension.

As a “mediation structure or intermediary that makes certain kinds of transactions possible” (Steinberg, 2017, p. 189), the contemporary media platform tends toward a rentier logic that seeks revenue streams selling access to secured property (in this case intellectual property). Rentier models function best when underwritten by sufficient power to manage the operation at scale, requiring in this case the broad enforcement of intellectual property rights. Ultimately central to the operations of platform imperialism, to risk tautology, is something akin to the dominance of empire. But because Netflix expands into a global market precisely when U.S. power declines in those same markets, the foundation for its platform imperialism also deteriorates.⁶ I emphasize this more granular historical progression to underscore how the histories of Netflix and Netflix Korea are keyed to intensifying economic crises—both national and global—that offer a crucial context for Netflix Culture, in which Netflix’s freedom is Janus-faced, both a mark of the power that underwrites expansion and as the site of anxiety about that power’s erosion. These are crises characterized by long-term slowing growth in endeavors disproportionately reliant on expansion into unfamiliar territories where strategies that worked in more circumscribed geographies are bound to meet unanticipated challenges. Here, recent debates around so-called platform capitalism are useful. Nick Srnicek (2017) views platform capitalism as a desperate response to the long downturn of deindustrializing Western economies beginning in the 1970s and the crisis of diminishing profitability therein (pp. 6, 16–17). Marc Steinberg (2019) sees it as a “variant rather than a replacement of post-Fordism” that maximizes managerial logics toward monopolistic horizons (pp. 124–125, 206). At stake here for me is not precise periodization but rather the emergence of a contradiction in which the neoliberal models of accumulation that emerge in late capitalism seem to confront a set of limits.

In this context characterized by declining U.S. global power, diminishing profits in deindustrialized economies, and crisis conditions for legacy media corporations struggling to keep up with the technological and geographical reorganization of the business, Netflix’s ascension might seem to have bucked these larger trends. It is worth pausing therefore to consider more narrowly the firm’s practices. First, Netflix has relied on massive debt financing to fuel its emergence, and even more so to fund the expansion of production capacity. Between 2011 and 2021, Netflix, nicknamed *Debtflix* by skeptics, borrowed \$15 billion, mostly through junk bonds to fund more in-house production (Epstein, 2021).⁷ While quarterly reports after 2021 suggested that new revenue streams have made further borrowing no longer necessary, most of the debt remains on the balance sheet. Critics have even suggested that Netflix’s proclaimed profitability is an

⁶ For a discussion of the end of the Washington Consensus and the structures and policies that might replace it, see Rodrik (2006, pp. 973–987).

⁷ We should recall that the \$1 billion of debt, resulting from its spin-off from Viacom in 2004, severely hampered Blockbuster Video in its original competition with Netflix.

accounting illusion, dependent on aggressive amortization (Marjanovic, 2013). Second, because it refused to sell advertisements on its platform before 2022, Netflix's growth could only be driven by either expanding the subscriber base or increasing prices. Early on, there was plenty of room for growth because of lower market penetration, but saturation and competition soon increased. The competitive environment reached a crescendo at precisely the moment that *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020) emerged, and though the show's success helped push Netflix into the lead in the competition for global streaming platforms, investments by powerful competitors not only make future growth more difficult but also increase costs for production and licensing (Nam, 2022). Third, Netflix has failed to significantly penetrate the current golden goose of global media markets, namely China (Lobato, 2019, pp. 130–133), which has tightly controlled the presence of foreign media platforms, even as Hollywood studios have found some, if short-lived, success in the market (Schwartzel, 2022).

When I first delivered a version of this article at a conference at Seoul National University in April 2022, skepticism about Netflix's future growth prospects might have seemed unwarranted, but on the release of its quarterly report just a few weeks later, the major cracks in the operation were exposed. The company reported a decline in subscribers for the first time in a decade, a foreboding sign for a model reliant on subscription growth (Bursztynsky, 2022). The stock closed 35% down on the news (even further thereafter), eliminating \$50 million of market capitalization and causing the company to engage in some reevaluation of its most time-honored practices, most notably its longtime resistance to selling advertisements on its platform. And though this downturn was in part a short-term correction for the streaming boom during the COVID-19 global pandemic, the fundamental problems standing in the way of Netflix's future growth prospects also came into focus.

If the decline of U.S. hegemony and the diminished profitability of late capitalism form the broadest contextual frame and Netflix quarterly reports the narrowest, we might now insert as an intermediate framework the precarious position of South Korea in the global economy at this moment of historical transition in which decades of neoliberalism, with its emphasis on open markets, free trade, and deregulation gradually come in conflict with an emerging prioritization of protectionism, closed borders, and tariffs, as in the cases of Brexit and the trade war between the United States and China. South Korea's development from the end of the Korean War was largely premised on state-orchestrated industrial developmentalism, which built a robust export-oriented economy whose strength would eventually be amplified by Washington Consensus trade liberalism. It remains an export-dependent economy today (International Trade Administration, 2022). But as this global neoliberal orientation has begun to give way to an environment in which some of the world's largest economies have become more protective of domestic markets and trade disputes more common, export dependency becomes a potential weakness, leaving vulnerabilities to exogenous economic shocks—which we have learned occur with regularity in late capitalism (Klein, 2007)—because of lower domestic demand (United Nations Development Programme, 2011, p. 31). Such vulnerabilities are further exacerbated in cases, like that of South Korea, where emphasis has shifted from labor to capital-intensive industries (Seth, 2017), thereby funneling less capital to domestic consumers who might augment internal markets. Furthermore, and along these lines, South Korean firms (like Netflix) have globalized production operations with facilities in Southeast Asia and the Americas among other places, seeking to replace high costs, labor and otherwise, incurred in domestic operations, further diverting wages from domestic workers. In this context, economists have sounded warning bells about a South economy

moving away from its period of rapid industrial development and the possibility of secular stagnation in the model of Japan's experience in the 1990s (Harris, 2018). Gross domestic product growth has been up and down in the past decade, but more important than the year-over-year performance is the overall downward trend since the double-digit rates during the South Korea's industrializing period (World Bank, 2021).

What Netflix as a company and South Korea as an economy have in common at this point in their respective historical trajectories is that both have a need to expand into unfamiliar markets to expand their customer bases and to globalize production to lower costs. We might thus draw an analogy between South Korea's need to grow external markets and Netflix's need to grow its subscriber base under conditions in which the hegemonic power underwriting these expansions has weakened and under the more general crisis of profitability in late capitalism. Additionally, we can think of the aggressive global marketing of Korean popular culture, not just by Netflix but also by other large Korean media corporations like CJ ENM and SM Entertainment, as an expression of this extroverted strategy. Another way of stating the same is that both Netflix and South Korea are pursuing what David Harvey (2001) terms *spatial fixes*, a geographical expansion to resolve the crisis of diminishing profits in more contained markets. Spatial fixes, however, come with their own problems. Harvey (2001) argues the spatial fix is always temporary rather than permanent, and that such solutions therefore merely defer more systematic problems. More specifically, the spatial fixes in these cases have done little to insulate against instability. On the contrary, because the models are premised on continual, large-scale growth, greater risks are encouraged to achieve greater scale.

Furthermore, expansion into international markets invariably comes with a host of local logistical and regulatory problems that can threaten the entire operation. An early indication of the challenges of Netflix Korea operations was the lawsuit filed by SK Broadband in late 2021, a major Korean telecommunications firm against Netflix for taking up an undue portion of the country's network capacity without paying for it directly (Layton, 2022). In the fourth quarter of 2021, Netflix accounted for 7.2% of all Internet traffic in South Korea, significantly more than large Korean technology firms like Naver and Kakao (2% and 1%, respectively), both of whom made significant annual payments to local Internet service providers (\$57 million and \$82 million, respectively; Yoon, 2022). SK demanded that Netflix pay fees for increased capacity, while Netflix argued that broadband was a public utility—akin to the U.S. Postal Service on which it built its initial DVD business. SK prevailed in Korean courts in early 2022 though the case was appealed. The case is crucial to Netflix because of its strategy for global expansion.⁸ A loss in the Korean context would not only significantly hurt the company's bottom line but also prompt broadband providers all over the world to demand similar payments. Appropriately, Lyell Davies (2016) describes the general problem of an open Internet as a "potential Achilles' heel of the company's business model" (p. 18). Netflix has been holding firm in international markets in its advocacy of net neutrality as an altruistic cover for its own interests, and for good reason. Netflix's dependence on network infrastructure it does not own becomes more of a problem the more it expands into global markets. Even though Netflix is often regarded as the dominant player in global media at present, its position atop the hierarchy is precarious.

⁸ For a useful comprehensive account of Netflix's infrastructural needs, positions, and weaknesses, see Lobato (2019, pp. 73–105).

Zombie Culture

Many of Netflix Korea's most successful shows have been preoccupied with survival amid catastrophic and even apocalyptic circumstances. These shows have tended to depict individuals and communities facing dire circumstances and often certain death. For the rest of this article, I will focus on *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020), which was the crucial intellectual property that paved the way for Netflix Korea's more recent success. *Kingdom* begins with the story of a kingdom in crisis, specifically with a crisis of succession, with an undead zombie king propped up on a throne by a powerful minister, Lord Cho Hak-ju, biding his time until his daughter, the queen consort, can give birth to a legitimate heir. Interested more broadly in the health of his nation, Prince Lee Chang, the king's illegitimate son, does eventually take measures to secure the throne for himself, but his actions are motivated less by a hunger for power and more by a virtuous desire to save his nation from both the zombie contagion and oligarchic greed that plague it. As previously discussed, he finally resolves the problem of succession at the end of the second season by abdicating his claim to the infant who everyone believes to be the king's legitimate son, except for the prince who knows he is actually the son of his deceased bodyguard.

The decision by Lee Chang in the second season's finale to apply the Keeper Test to himself is anticipated by a Keeper Test that he applies to the magistrate of Sangju at the end of season one when the latter decides to close the doors of the fortress and let the people outside trying to flee the zombie plague die. Prince Lee Chang tells the magistrate, "You are no longer qualified to run this place. I cannot let everyone die because of an incompetent official" (Kim & Kim, 2019b, 11:17). The moment is striking because rather than simply use his royal authority to force the official to let the people in, he insists instead on framing his order as a personnel decision. With this decision in place, Prince Lee Chang leads an effort to defend the fortress against the zombie hordes that are on their way. Operating under the assumption that the zombies only come out at night and that they seem to fear fire and water, Lee Chang orders preparations, and the makeshift army he assembles waits anxiously through the night for the zombies to arrive. When morning comes, they are all relieved, only to have that relief upset by the belated arrival of the zombies in the daytime, when they have let their guard down. We learn shortly thereafter that it is not daylight that determines the emergence of the zombies but temperature. They like it cold. The revelation of this knowledge is the crucial twist at the end of season one, and I would suggest that it narrates a kind of pivot that is analogous to the two great pivots in the history of Netflix described earlier, first the pivot toward streaming and more recently the pivot toward content production. What the end of *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020) season one articulates then is something like the rules of the games suddenly changing, forcing decision makers to adapt to chaotically shifting conditions. Such pivotal moments are what Netflix Culture and its emphasis on nimble decision making were designed for, but my point here is less to tie the plot twist from the show to a particular moment of Netflix corporate history and more to foreground the show's general interest in organizational tactics in the face of instability.

In season one we bear witness to the system through which the central palace in Hanyang communicates with the outer reaches of the sprawling kingdom and how royal authority is disseminated throughout it. In episode three, the prince orders signal fires to be lit; this order triggers a chain reaction of signal fires throughout the kingdom, which eventually reach the palace in Hanyang. Far being from a perfect system, the signal does not reach its destination until episode four, and even when it does, the court

officials are unsure about its meaning beyond the general implication of danger. They speculate that perhaps Japanese armies have invaded. This long-distance communications network is supplemented in turn by horseback messengers, which communicate in detail, but at much slower speeds. We are already aware by this point in season one that slow reactions meet with catastrophic consequences in the form of zombie hordes that only expand as they encroach on human populations.

Already aware of the disease spreading throughout the kingdom, Lord Cho acts quickly to consolidate his power, installing his daughter on the throne and then orchestrating her first royal decree, sending soldiers out to a regional border protected by walls and ordering the access gates sealed to protect the territory inside, including Hanyang, from the rapidly spreading disease. The scene cuts to a graphic visualization of a map of the kingdom with a black fog representing the encroaching zombie plague, followed by a succession of shots of guards throughout the kingdom closing the gates. Against Lord Cho's protectionism is posed the crown prince's countermanding of the magistrate's order at the Sanju fortress. But both implicitly share a similar vision of the border gates, and one that resonates with opportunities and vulnerabilities of Netflix's global business and of neoliberal trade capitalism more broadly. The open gates like open markets offer opportunities for survival but must be weighed against the exposure they also permit. In the first episode of the show, the crown prince insists on venturing far from the central palace in Hanyang to the faraway Donghae to learn the truth of the king's affliction. And from this point on in season one, he serves as a secondary source of authority located at the margins of the kingdom. His decisiveness at the Sanju wall is an impactful decision made locally at a crucial moment, saving a large crowd of refugees from the outer regions begging to be let into the fortress with the zombie hordes coming to devour them. The real site of cathexis for the show's concern for leadership is not with the centralized authority but with the leader stranded in the outer reaches of the kingdom.

If *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020) then is a show about culture, it is particularly concerned with the role executive leadership plays in propagating it. Thus, the show builds toward the climax of its second season by looking closely at the different potential leaders of the kingdom. Whereas Lord Cho and the queen consort Cho are driven by self-interest, Prince Lee Chang leads a coalition of autonomous actors who are guided less by his authority than the power of his logic. Crucially, the entire finale of season two with all its carnage occurs behind the locked gates of the palace, as if to emphasize the drama of what is ultimately an internal leadership battle. *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020) in this respect is similar in theme to the HBO show *Succession* (Armstrong, 2018–2023), which is also about the attempt by heirs to wrest authority away from an entrenched patriarch. In contrast to that show, however, in which the legacy authority figure refuses to give way to his equally greedy children despite his deteriorating health, *Kingdom's* power struggle is oddly rational. Instead of ego-driven competition, the leadership aspires to the greater good, even and especially when that greater good conflicts with individual interest.

At stake in the succession battle in *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020) is a more profound culture shift. In this context, the king's zombie affliction signals his ill-conceived affinity to the powerful Haewon Cho clan, referring not so subtly to contemporary inequality in Korean society organized around familial wealth. In the first episode of season one, Lord Cho has a group of court scholars executed for their support of the prince. As an expression of this support, these scholars had posted around the city a sign proclaiming the death of the king and that "a new wind will blow" (Kim & Kim, 2019a, 5:55) Prince Lee

Chang cosigns a covenant organized by those same scholars aimed at creating a new era in the kingdom. Forced to reckon with their actions when faced with torture by Cho, the scholars reveal that they are motivated not just by allegiance to the crown prince but more so by the shift in priorities that he represents in a kingdom that has become dominated by an elite class that exploits a starving population. In short, they want a culture shift.

This is what they get at the end of season two. The drama of a low-born crown prince deferring to an even lower-born rival registers in the context of Netflix's anti-hierarchical ethos. But even in the first episode, we get a sense of what this new wind might mean. We meet Mu-young (Kim Sang-ho), the crown prince's bodyguard and the real father to the next king, shortly after the scene with the tortured scholars. The crown prince asks him to retrieve the journal from the royal infirmary that would clarify what the king's malady actually is. To convince him to risk the danger, the crown prince reveals that he knows that Mu-young had been surreptitiously taking food from the royal table to aid the health of his pregnant wife. And though the crown prince is certainly using this knowledge as a lever, it is also clear that he has approved of these actions, concerned as he is about the well-being of his friend's family. Even when Mu-young betrays him, forced to do so by the Haewon Cho clan, which controls the well-being of his wife, the crown prince holds him fondly as Mu-young dies in his arms and weeps over his death. The crown prince's final decision to install Mu-young's son as king is in fact the final expression of affection for his friend. Contrasting against the family interest associated with Lord Cho and the queen consort, the crown prince's beneficence is keyed to friendship instead of filial loyalty. Here, leadership is oriented toward the breadth of reach characteristic of network connection rather than the consolidation of centralized power, returning us to the rubric of friendship as expressed in the Netflix Culture statement. Indeed, the love for his actual friend, Mu-young, dovetails at this moment with the anti-hierarchical network notion of friendship implied in the Netflix document. His decision enacts a culture shift benefiting the embattled subjects of the kingdom, in rejecting the power of the Haewon Cho clan, even though everyone believes the infant king to be the son of the queen. And indeed, we can think of the drama as an articulation of this cultural ethos in broader terms. To move forward, the kingdom must shed its atavistic hierarchies.

But if *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020) is utopian in its desire to repair a culture in which excessive inequality makes progress difficult, it also offers us a nightmarish vision of anti-hierarchical culture in the spectacle of the zombie horde. We should emphasize here that the flat network is not just the model for Netflix culture; it is also the principle of its business model, which requires a continual expansion of its subscriber base to sustain its growth. While zombies have become a defining trope of contemporary popular culture and are often associated with the various ailments of late capitalist society⁹—including surplus populations, homelessness, and mass insecurity—*Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020) is distinctive in its attempt to reach back in time for something more foundational. With the king himself as an origin point for the disease, the premodern interest here is in a contradiction that infects the core of the kingdom; the disease is not just at the periphery but also at the center. Though we might read the zombie plague here as an expression of Netflix's anxiety regarding a subscription business model that requires the contagion-like spread of its platform into untapped markets, without which the company cannot survive, more important than the specific referent here—that is, that zombies are subscribers—is the general principle that this is a company

⁹ See, for example, Wagner (2019, pp. 515–532).

that staked its future on a rate of growth that is not sustainable. Indeed, to express the zombie horde as a kind of ideal neoliberal figure is also to question the underpinnings of the model. As in the case of opening and closing gates in season one, sites of expansion are also sites of vulnerability.

The popularity of *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020) had a significant impact on Netflix's subscriber base, increasing the number of Netflix Korea subscribers from 1.27 million to more than 2 million in a single month (Nam, 2022), anticipating the \$891 million of impact value that *Squid Game* would bring the platform just a few years later (Lachapelle, 2021). But such successes have caused the company (until 2022) to double down on the subscription growth model. To continually succeed, Netflix needed to expand at the rate of a zombie plague even as those resulting hordes beg questions about sustainability. And in this respect, perhaps it is not surprising that Netflix Korea has continued to produce zombie stories. For Netflix, the primary source of its nourishment (expanding its subscriber base) is also the site of its vulnerability, and thus every victory in the game of survivalism it achieves makes the next one even more both necessary and precarious. We see this dyad plainly in the first episode of *Kingdom* when Seo-bi returns to her clinic from gathering medicinal herbs to find that the formerly starving patients are eating a hearty meal, their spirits lifted by the food. The tiger-hunter Yeong-shin tells Seo-bi that he had hunted a deer for the meal, but she later discovers that he had used a recently deceased human corpse instead. The scene of happy eating then turns into tragedy, with all the patients turning into zombies since the corpse had been inflicted with the disease. This quick oscillation from the simple pleasures of social reproduction in one moment to the horror of contagion in the next indexes the razor's edge on which both Netflix's business model and South Korea's export economy rest, both needing to exponentially grow external markets in which the hegemonic power underwriting these necessary expansions has significantly weakened. *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020) is an account of this basic need and the anxieties it produces, both of which shape the contours of Netflix Korea's platform culture.

Both Netflix and South Korean popular culture are entangled with attempts to manage crises within late capitalism, whether we are speaking at the scale of a declining industry (like American legacy media) or the scale of a national economy (as in the case of South Korea in its postindustrial moment). While both can be seen as success stories when viewed within smaller frames as weaker competition is vanquished, the reasons for optimism become troubled in the grander scheme. One worries about the dependence on continual expansion when prospects for that continual expansion become increasingly limited. What are we to make of models in which the ideal rate of growth can only be attained by zombie hordes? But even as Netflix Korea's shows depict the tactical decision making and risk management of leadership, depictions that resonate with Netflix's high-stakes corporate reorganization, they also further question the social order generating the risks themselves. This is an order characterized by limitless competition, inhuman inequality, and violence. Many of Netflix Korea's shows, including *Kingdom* (Lee, 2019–2020) have offered critical depictions of this social order that pervades contemporary culture, not just in Korea but in almost every corner of the world today. Its anti-hierarchical culture thus straddles a fundamental contradiction in which creators are offered the opportunity to critique the capitalist systems to which the very platform economy belongs. This paradoxical entanglement is perhaps then the true heart of Netflix culture. A precarious kingdom indeed.

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