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Decolonizing the Mimetic Mechanism of Speculative Authenticity in *Narco-Saints*' Cultural Representation

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ABSTRACT

This essay critiques the workings of cultural representation in the 2022 Netflix original Korean drama series *Narco-Saints*, characterizing the manner in which the locale, culture, and people of Suriname have been depicted as being emblematic of internalized coloniality and its vicious circle of reproduction. Opening up with an exploration of the show's positioning as a true-story-based narrative that amplifies its gesture to a sense of authenticity by way of the spectacular setting and cinematography, I contend, *Narco-Saints* embodies what I call an aspiration to speculative authenticity, which in turn camouflages the biased nature of its representational politics. Drawing on thinkers and theorists, such as Walter Mignolo, Sigmund Freud, Gayathri Spivak, and Jean Baudrillard, and through close readings of specific scenes from the show and comparisons with other media content, I demonstrate how the series serves as an uncanny double to be repressed in the form of mis- and under-representation, creating a disconcerting dynamic whereby South Korean cultural production comes to perpetrate the very kind of alienation that it has long suffered, in the form of Orientalism and its varied iterations, upon a culture it now deems to be an undesirable other. What renders this mirror dynamic all the more troubling, I suggest, is the absence of authorial intent on the part of directorial and productional agency, which alludes to the fact that the practice of mimetic marginalization with regard to the Global South (and cultural communities that are considered likewise peripheral) had become a deeply ingrained and as such default baseline of perspectivization.

Key words: *Narco-Saints*, Coloniality, Mimetic Mechanism, Speculative Authenticity, Cultural Representation

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Ⅰ. Introduction

on its worldwide release in September of 2022, Netflix's original Korea drama series *Narco-Saints* (*Surinam*, in the original Korean title) instantly topped the charts in non-anglophone markets across the globe. The show boasted a stellar cast with Ha Jung-woo and Hwang Jung-min as the two main leads, the former warranting newsworthiness with his return to the screen after an extended hiatus due to a drug scandal and the latter attracting attention with yet another shapeshifting feat in his role as a vividly crafted Janusian villain. Thus armed through its make and promotion, the show received praise in terms of both its entertainment value and critical integrity to ride the resurgent tide of Hallyu in the wake of *Squid Game* (2021)'s phenomenal success. Meanwhile, the show's controversial reception also played a significant role in raising awareness. Soon after its release, the government of Suriname officially protested the country's depiction as narcotics central to the extent of initiating legal procedures against Netflix. Whilst deserving of creative leeway considering its framing as a fictional (albeit true-story-based) narrative, I contend, the historical referentiality of *Narco-Saints*' narrative arc and its discursive implications are emblematic of an ironic trend wherethrough the discontents of coloniality is effectively internalized and thereby reproduced to generate a vicious mirror dynamic of representation. The particular manner in which said dynamic is instantiated, I propose, can be understood as a claim to and propagation of what I would call *speculative authenticity* as a double entendre: a mode of representation that specifically pertains to fictional adaptations of (and therefore *speculations on*) a true-life event, with the veracity of the content being spiced up with the aid of capital-infused *spectacle*, in situ (the implication being taking the story to its originary locale, and as such, vying for an added sense of authenticity). Drawing on decolonial frameworks that trouble the politics of mimesis in the domain of

our contemporary mediascape, and placing close readings of *Narco-Saints* in conversation with the history of minority representation within and across the Global North and South, this essay critiques the manner in which the epistemic framework of coloniality becomes internalized, recycled, amplified, and is thus rendered sustainable to create a vicious circle in the mediascape.

II. Speculating Truthfulness

Narco-Saints revolves around two central figures: its namesake character Jeon Yo-hwan, a drug kingpin masquerading as a pastor, and Kang In-gu, who emigrated to Suriname in search of new business opportunities only to become entangled in the National Intelligence Service's clandestine operation to entrap Jeon. The show stylistically shutters between gritty noir and grandiose action sequences across the dilapidated backstreets of Suriname and its expansive jungle, telling an epic tale of socio-political corruption as the operative drive behind the country's economy.

Narco-Saint's success, as noted above, was a much anticipated but also guaranteed outcome in light of the path it took in the process of both design and presentation. The producers' decision to zero-in on a real-life (and also, larger-than-life, and therefore *spectacular*) criminal enterprise effectively hit the pressure points that lead to success, not only because He himself was just emerging out of a murky yet widely publicized drug scandal but also given the narcotics epidemic of late in the South Korean society. Aside from the chronic issue of propofol abuse at accommodating clinics, Ha Jung-woo's being one such case, the Burning Sun Gate brought the existence of major drug operations to light, which revolved around a group of celebrities such as Hallyu idol group BigBang's member Seungri and others within and around the orbit of stardom in 2019. The criminal charges

filed against former JYJ (and formerly TVXQ) star and actor Micky Yoochun and his social media influencer girlfriend Hwang Ha-na (2019), who also drew spotlight for her ties to a chaebol family in Korea (Giju Lee, 2023). Illicit drug use, as seen in the cases mentioned here but also countless others in the media, has become a major source of sensationalist coverage in the domain of entertainment over the past decade even as the epidemic spread far and wide, riding the synergistic effect of combining the newsworthiness of celebrity scandal and the misguided notion that drug abuse is still an exotic problem (Changwon Park, 2023). This year alone, coverage of the chronic and extensive drug use of actor Yoo Ah-in and also young members in Chaebol families papered portal newsfeeds as shocking revelations (Bae, 2023). Just this past month, reports of a blackmail scheme shook the South Korean society when a group of conspirators were exposed distributing drugged energy drinks to passers-by in Seoul's education central district in a faux-promotional event, calling the (primarily student) recipients' parents to threaten exposure (Jeong-gyu Lee, 2023). Given its scale and extent in coverage, as the manner of representation amply demonstrates, the issue of drug abuse caters to a taste for what might be verifiably labeled as *spectacle*, by way of the *speculations* they breed. *Narco-Saints* effectively capitalizes on this element in its topical framing.

With significant portions of its episodes filmed on-site in a country that appealed to the domestic (and East Asian, as a major constituent of the show's initial target market) viewership as an exotic locale of little-known and as such elastically imaginable background, moreover, *Narco-Saints* proved itself to be emblematic of Netflix's strategic inroads into regional markets through capital-backed spectacle in terms not only of topic but also visuals and scale three signature factors that legacy media can seldom emulate in their unsparing scale. As demonstrated in Netflix's past score (a successful one, at that) with its original South Korean dramas of similarly dark tenor that span over *Kingdom* (2019-2020), *My Name* (2021), *Hellbound* (2021), *Squid Game* (2021), and *All of Us Are Dead* (2022),

Narco-Saints showcases the platform's strategic solicitation of *spectacle*. Mobilizing genre aesthetics as a measure to secure the support of dedicated fan bases while ensuring appeal to the broader viewership through its cinematic scale and the sensational but also timely nature of the subject matter (Yoon, 2022; Da-woon Lee, 2021; Kang, 2022). Stylizing crime in the fashion of noir with an optimal dose of social critique to mark itself apart from legacy media content in its hard-boiled yet exploitative stance, *Surinam* faithfully follows in the footsteps of the HBO model, invoking the pioneering cable channel's roster of shows that instantiate a sense of exclusivity through the accentuation of its status as serious adult content such as *The Wire* (2002-2008), *The Newsroom* (2012), *Succession* (2018-), and more (Weeks, 2022; Vint, 2013; Atlas & Dreier, 2008, Edgerton & Jones, 2008).

A point of distinction that *Narco-Saints* particularly emphasizes closely ties back into the mechanism through which said elements of spectacle-fueled exclusivity, spiced up with gestures to critical awareness, become powerful mimetic apparatuses in the representations of sensitive social issues. Netflix's positioning as a streaming media service allows for the platform to operate with liberty, without being weighed down by the constraints of legacy media in depicting the (strategically elected) ugly underbellies of reality to the utmost degree of authenticity. Netflix's signature documentaries from Korea such as *Cyber Hell: Exposing an Internet Horror* (2022) or *In the Name of God: A Holy Betrayal* (2023) exemplify this sense of mimetic privilege which Netflix has come to flaunt. The visceral violence of the subject matter and its unconstrained depiction sends the message, with feeling; that as a global (and foreign, to boot) platform that relies on the transnational infrastructure of the web, Netflix and its ilk retain a sense of immunity from state-driven censorship that tames down and in turn camouflages the darker truths that certain ethnic, national, and cultural societies would otherwise prefer to keep under wraps. The exploitative sensationalism whether it be of aesthetic or critical nature

of Netflix's fictional content draws on this very rhetoric to foreground a sense of what I call *speculative authenticity*, which *Squid Game* fully benefits from. By stationing its searing critique of the South Korean society's neoliberal turn and its cumulative ills within the framework of a gamified parable of death matches, the show as Director Hwang Dong-hyuk noted himself in a number of interviews fleshes out a story that would be too brutal to tell through established channels of mediation because of its merciless and therefore all the more compelling aspiration to truthfulness by way of what verges on a magical realist vein of speculative authenticity (Areum Jang, 2021). Dal Yong Jin concisely captures the implication behind the hidden mastermind's apologetic description of the game as such an unacceptable incident (15-16), by explaining it as the visceral, never-ending circle of a desperate life (16).

Effectively leveraging the stylistic and topical leeway that Netflix's outsider status ironically affords across the genres of the documentary and fictional narrative in South Korea, then, *Narco-Saints* alludes to a sense of authenticity that further amplifies the spectacle of its source as a true story, its dedication to truthfulness verging on that of an expos. The show claims to be all the more authentic, indeed, because it summons an edifying facet of shameful history to an exploitative extent with its spectacular dramatization. The arch-villain's Janusian enterprise serves as an uncanny double of the trail that the South Korean society has itself tread through in its relentless march through and beyond compressed development in the wake of colonial modernity, bringing the seemingly exotic setting halfway across the globe ever closer to home. As a little known but factually existent figure of historical import, Yo-hwan is a shameful revenant of modernity that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open (132).

What initially compelled In-gu to emigrate to a country so little known and far away from home has much to do with the systemically engrained discontents of the South Korean society, their roots pointing straight back

to persistent legacies of Korea's colonial modernity. Born in Dongducheon, a small town that embody the still-pulsating scars of the Korean War in the wake of Japan's imperial rule as the host location of one of the largest U.S. military bases, In-gu's family is trapped in a hopeless state of penury (Park and Min). Their plight becomes further aggravated when his father returns injured from the Vietnam War, which is yet another glaring instance of Cold War politics that subsists on the exploitation of the downtrodden in the name of their advocacy. Having lost both of his parents in the throes of their struggle for subsistence, In-gu learns to capitalize on the American presence in Dongducheon, slowly pulling himself up by his bootstraps in his extended journey toward middle class security as the owner of a karaoke bar. Still, realizing that the meager sense of economic assurance that his business affords is by no means sustainable in light of the family's growing needs, In-gu seeks out new opportunities by devising a skate-exporting enterprise in Suriname and deploys his hard-earned lesson of greasing the bureaucratic wheels only to be grounded down by their unrelenting gears, subsequently landing in Jeon's orbit. The chain of unfortunate events that culminate toward Suriname's mean back streets are packed with unmistakable references to South Korea's colonial aftermath, from Dongducheon to the U.S. military base, the Vietnam War, systematized exploitation of low-wage labor, In-gu's English proficiency and adjacency to the base as the secret recipe for success, and even the symbolism of skate as a popular dish for the common folks because of its signature odor, which In-gu's father enjoyed in his afterhours-exhaustion (Gilsu Kim, 2022). Packed into the first episode, the tragic spectacle of said references becomes neatly superimposed onto the Latin American jungle and its grungy townships, transforming the setting of *Narco-Saints* into a compellingly authentic double of South Korean modernity to thereby ensure speculative authenticity. This very sense of mimetic truthfulness (or aspirations to it), I claim, constitutes the crux of the problem that *Narco-Saints* instantiates in the recent slew of cultural representations that South Korean media content

has come to frequent in the portrayal of cultures and countries perceived as exotic others, and South Korea's past-tense doubles. The irony here is, which I will further elaborate on in the following section, that said modality of portrayal is itself an uncanny double of the treatment that South Korea (along with countless other cultures, countries, and communities of Asian heritage) has long suffered in Orientalist representations of itself, by the hands of what it so aspired to emulating: Western, more specifically American, mainstream media.

Ⅲ. The Vicious Mirror Dynamic of Coloniality

Irrespective of its self-reflexivity, which positions *Narco-Saints* more as a story about South Korean society than some faraway land of lesser-known faculties, the undeniable fact of the matter is that the show unapologetically foregrounds its setting in Suriname as an exotic locale that immediately commands attention in its cultural alterity. Compared to Northern America (including the U.S. and Canada) and Asian countries far and close, immigrant communities in Central and Southern American nations seldom factor into depictions of the Korean diaspora in popular culture. With the exception of a handful of works such as Kim Young-ha's novel *Black Flower* (2012) or Joseph Juhn's documentary film *Jeronimo* (2019), which respectively trace the history of Korean immigration to Mexico and Cuba, Latin American culture and/or its Korean communities seldom feature in cultural representation within the South Korean mediasphere. Meanwhile, ethnically Korean Chinese (Choso?njok), Korean Americans, and Korean Japanese characters abound, with Vietnam becoming an increasingly prominent stage for expatriate life or tourist visits of late as shown in films and shows including *The Yellow Sea* (2010), *Midnight Runners* (2017), *Taxi Driver* 2 (2023), *The Outlaws* 2 (2022), *Little Women* (2022), and more (한

희정신정아, 2019; Myung-ja Lee, 2011). Unlike the above list of oft featured Asian also North American cultures and countries, which clearly share a greater degree of cultural affinity and historical entanglement with South Korea, Central and South America remain distant in the public consciousness. As such, Suriname effectively fulfills its role as a radical alterity, muting down its position as South Korea's double a double, as mentioned above, that the cultural unconscious of our here and now would rather elide, given the reclaim that South Korea currently commands in its aspiration to join the Global North. The manner in which Suriname is represented in the show is symptomatic, then, of this paradoxical drive to repress the spectacle of colonial modernity by way of its spectacular alienation more specifically, by engineering the *how* of the much-feared return of the repressed.

The *how* and *what* of cultural representation, which could be translated into method/stylistics and substance respectively, are intricately intertwined elements that gesture back and forward to the *why*, or in other words, discursive framework. In *Narco-Saint*'s case, despite or perhaps precisely because of the show's aspiration to authenticity, the *how* effectively shapes the *what* to produce the *why* in what could be described as the vicious mirror dynamic of coloniality. Here, with regard to the *what*, I am referring to the substance of the show in its description of Suriname, which largely revolves around the biased image of Central/South America as a hotbed (and hothouse) of the narcotics industry. True to its Korean title *Surinam*, which serves as an instant trigger of curiosity for the South Korean viewership thanks to the exotic nature of its setting, the series focuses its mimetic effort on the portrayal of Suriname as what Tom Gunning might call spectacular attractions; corruption is shown in theme park-like assortments where crime itself functions as the driving force behind neoliberal modernity, and vice versa. Belying (or perhaps capitalizing on) the spotlight that its original title Surinam (minus the e) sheds on its national reference and associated cultural experience, naturally,

Narco-Saint's portrayal of its main stage is hardly flattering.

Vehemently objecting to the show's use of his country as the synecdoche of drug-addled criminality, as noted in this essay's introduction, the government of Suriname issued a statement of protest on its official website on September 14 of 2022, hinting the possibility of taking legal action against Netflix (Reuters). Foreign Minister Albert Randim, in particular, pointed out that the series reinforce[s] a negative image of Suriname, which has suffered damages in recent decades in terms of crime and cross-border activities (Shim, 2022). Tensions subsided with the Korean government reaching out to Netflix with requests for redress, resulting in the modification of the show's English title from *Surinam* to *Narco-Saints*. Ironically, this development proved successful in a way that defeats the purpose of the modification. Irrespective of whether it was an inadvertent turn or the result of a carefully devised strategy, the new title directly drew on the success of Netflix's 2015-2017 show on a Columbian drug kingpin entitled *Narcos*, further reinforcing the simulacrum of the South American as an all-encompassing narco-state.

Had it not been for the Suriname government's protest, however, *Narco-Saints* may well have flown under the radar or if not with categorical immunity, at least weathered objections to its derogatory representations without becoming embroiled in such a widely publicized controversy. After all, *Narco-Saints* is only one among many recent South Korean media contents that have been subject to similar critique. *Little Women* for instance enraged the Vietnamese viewership by portraying the country as a benighted backwater, and *The Outlaws*' characterization of ethnically Korean Chinese as the South Korean society's newly arisen undesirables sparked heated discussions about the media industry's xenophobic bend. One might even go so far as to claim that *Narco-Saint*'s case deserves lenience, given how the show's key motifs institutional malfeasance such as corrupt alliances between state power and economic enterprises, and engrained class divide invoke the spectacle of Korea's own

modernity and therefore can be read more as a self-critique than belittlement of Suriname. Moreover, the show is based, after all, on a true story; the *authenticity* of the narrative source exempts the show from mimetic culpability, especially since a number of Central/South American countries are indeed global hubs of narcotics production and distribution. As evidenced by *Narcos*' case, and countless other media content in mainstream media in the (predominantly Western areas of) the Global North, the stereotypical imageries in *Narco-Saints* are hardly singular, and may therefore carries a degree of authenticity that could be hardly dismissed by its inflammatory nature. *Narco-Saints*' genre framing not only as crime fiction but also a tale of subterfuge and spycraft, the main players of which (including the criminal elements) are all Korean, may also situate the show more as a commentary on the ills of the Korean society than Suriname itself. In short, a case may well be made for *Narco-Saints*' integrity based on a range of mitigating circumstances, the crux of which converge upon two factors: the absence of malicious intent, based on which the speculative authenticity of the show may be granted creative license.

The problem however, I claim, is that these two propositions are problematic demonstrations of the deep-seated and wide-reaching harms of coloniality as the undergirding fabric of our world's modern history and its contemporary progeny, from which both the South Korean and Suriname societies are no exception. By coloniality, I am referring to Walter Mignolo's conceptualization of colonial experience as a process of inculcation, wherethrough the differential ontology of the colonizer and colonized become an epistemic, and thereby cultural and also axiological framework to survive the actuality of colonial rule (Mignolo, 2007). With the valorization of the modern condition becoming the prime dictate in the colonial system, the particular manner (*how*) and state in which said dictate is and may be actualized become the de facto object of desirability. The prevalence of racially biased algorithms for instance in our contemporary mediascape shows how the racial, national, ethnic, and cultural

demographics of the majority is equated to value, or in other words deserving of recognition thanks to their default and baseline state in the raw dataset. Recent uproars concerning leading media platforms' race-bending or nonbinary characters meanwhile, as seen in cases such as the controversy surrounding Disney's choice to opt for a black over a white red-haired and therefore a more authentic (true to the original) heroine in the upcoming live action adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), the Marvel Cinematic Universe's expansion to female, nonwhite, and/or LGBTQA+ superheroes such as Captain Marvel, Shang-Chi, and Valkyrie, Pixar outing Buzz Lightyear as possibly queer, or the introduction of nonwhite elves in Amazon Prime's *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) sequel *The Rings of Power* (2022), all speak to a deeply ingrained and therefore unconscious association of the hegemonic, imperialist, and colonial governance namely white, male, Western, and straight with the prime value of aspirational desirability (Romano, 2022). The fact that Suriname serves as a mirror image of South Korea's *dark past* and its shameful legacy, then, is less a self-reflexive critique and instead more of a celebratory affirmation. The connotation here is that South Korea must and indeed has learned its lesson from the mistakes that Suriname remains trapped in, highlighting South Korea's ascent from a Third World country to join the ranks of advanced societies in the Global North. In doing so, *Narco-Saints* conveniently elides the root cause of Suriname's socio-political instability, namely the drug trade's cultural, political, and economic indentureship to the American (U.S.) and other Global North constituents' neoliberal demands.

The absence, rather than actual presence, of malicious intent in the above dynamic carries yet another, or perhaps even more troubling connotation. Should *Narco-Saint*'s representation of Suriname is neither by design nor an isolated incident, backed by countless precedents in American mainstream media as the object of reference and also aspiration in the show's unmistakable gesture to noir aesthetics, capital-driven spectacle, and action-packed genre traits of spycraft fiction, then the implication here is

that the problematic dimensions of the show's mimesis are part and parcel of an enduring practice that has long been deemed permissible, or even natural, taken for granted.

Representation, by nature, always presupposes the intervention of perspectivization. Whether it be Plato's dismissal of representation as a partial and therefore ephemeral and untruthful rendition of transcendental ideas, M. H. Abrams's distinction of the mimetic dynamic as the mirror and/or the lamp, or Auerbach's critique of Homer's rhetorical finesse in contrast to the ironic depth of the Old Testament's simplistic and present-progressive style, modalities of representation inevitably operate through and in turn generate a power dynamic that necessitates electivity (Plato, 2013; Abrams, 1971; Auerbach; 2013). The object of representation, as such, is reshaped and constructed by the mediatory process that it becomes subject to, which is no doubt a well-worn concept for contemporary media users to whom, having ample recourse to paratextual information about the assortment of authorial intents through myriad channels, even nonfiction genres that foreground factual evidence seldom exert the kind of authority that journalistic reports or documentaries had once commanded. What often escapes their attention, however, is that said act of perspectivization (as the governing force behind representation) is neither equivalent to nor always in concurrence with conscious intent.

Even without, or in fact precisely due to the lack of authorial intent, the cumulative, pervasive, persistent, and repeated perspectivizations that typecast a given identificatory community seeps through their cultural representations. Such expressions are manifested indirectly through the mimetic mechanism, because their presence had already become an authentic slice of perceived reality for most, which Baudrillard calls a simulacrum in his reflection on the hyperreality of Disney World's Global Village: a copy without an original (Baudrillard). The absence of any noticeable rhetorical drive disarms the reader/viewers to render them susceptible to the new reality that the representation creates and offers,

which in turn settles into their own perspectives to perpetuate and amplify the implications behind the simulacrum within the mimetic ecology. Hegemony becomes an imperative and a given, and subsequently, reality. Unfortunately, *Narco-Saints* embodies this vicious cycle by actively embracing the mirror dynamic of coloniality; having overcome the less than desirable dimensions of colonial modernity, of which Suriname serves as a reminder, South Korea (or South Korean culture, with the show as its stylized expression) perpetrates the very kind of alienation that itself has struggled to ward off.

Let us return to the title's implications, with particular focus on its original iteration as a case in point. As noted even by the main characters themselves, Suriname is a little-known country in a region that is already deemed unfamiliar to the South Korean viewership. The sense of distance that the original (and enduring Korean) title *Surinam* invokes has the unquestionable effect of exciting the viewership's curiosity, not simply due to its exotic nature but primarily because it is a large-scale production with formidable star power in the backing. Its obscurity thus functioning as a key source of attraction, the image of Suriname as the *what* with the viewership's perception of it, in tow becomes almost entirely susceptible to the *how* of representation: the show's choice of what to feature, highlight, and also neglect in its depiction.

How specifically is Suriname represented in *Surinam*, then? What does the show say about the country by doing so, irrespective of or perhaps precisely because of the absence of authorial intent to that end? The main stage for the lead characters' escapade is hardly what one might call a desirable abode. The commonfolk appear to be undereducated and indigent; the state of governance is ruinous to say the least; and the only enterprise that hints at a semblance of functionality centers on narcotics. All the above, which would qualify as the *what* (substance) of representation, become *representative* of Suriname in its entirety despite the fact that they hardly represent, in their agency, the country's culture, people, and other aspects of

reality at large. Are Suriname's people indeed so benighted? Are the leaders uniformly abusive, and is the country a genuinely frightening place riddled with all sorts of crime syndicates (including but not limited to indigenous, Korean, and even Chinese) and their violent will to power? The show's answer to these questions is flatly yes, despite the absence of authorial intent toward that end. How did this happen? Or to rephrase, how did *Narco-Saints* portray Suriname to end up with such impressions? Could representation precede, defy, or bypass intent?

The specificities of the *how* is absolutely crucial to answering this query. Over the extended span of six episodes, in most of which Suriname is the main stage of action, the actual people of Suriname are circumscribed to peripheral roles that verge on the function of wall paper. A handful of figures who do command a modicum degree of weight to warrant spoken lines are corrupt officials (Ep. 1, 00:29:29; Ep. 2, 00:05:53; Ep 4, 00:19:20-00:21:00) while the rest are either singing hymns in stilted Korean pronunciation at Yo-hwan's church (Ep. 1, 00:38:55-00:39:33) or literally serving as background noise on the streets or beaches (Ep 1, 00:24:55). In the latter's case, their words are illegible, because they are not granted any subtitles, the implication of which is that the content of speech is of no semantic significance, and by extension, that the cultural/local specificity of Suriname is merely of marginal import beyond satisfying the need to signal a sense of exotic otherness. The way in which (*how*) *Narco-Saints* treats Suriname therefore can be summarized as follows. While mobilizing the symbolic double helix of Suriname's regional, and even moral unfamiliarity as the sustaining framework of its narrative, the show uses the actual meaning, value, and proprietors and habitants of the community strictly to signal a particular kind of *authentic*, and *spectacular* local color that ultimately serves to alienate them. The practice of mimetic instrumentalization that decontextualizes and subsequently devalues the very object of representation seen in *Narco-Saints* is none other than the very definition of cultural appropriation, which recent South Korean content is

increasingly being accused of perpetrating.

Narco-Saint's representation of Suriname is, in this regard, strongly reminiscent of the manner in which Vietnam is alienated by way of its representation in Francis Ford Coppola's all time classic (or so regarded) anti-war film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which Vietnamese American writer and scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen bitterly criticizes in his Pulitzer-winning novel *The Sympathizer* (2015). In the novel, Nguyen makes unmistakable gestures to the film in question, its fictionalized title being *The Hamlet* (perhaps as a reference to the extreme feel of self-centeredness of the play's iconic line To be, or not to be to which one cannot help but respond in this case, what?). Over nearly half a page, Nguyen goes on to describe how his people, his culture, and his motherland is rendered a dynamic spectacle at the expense of their own presence and value, in service of the psychological and existential turmoil of an American soldier (the Hamlet) who speaks for and thereby erases out the actual site and subject of war's evil in Gayathri Spivak's sense of agential usurpation by way of representation, which she emphatically critiques in her seminal essay Can the Subaltern Speak? (Sharp, 2008).

Nguyen's description of the moment zeroes-in on what is widely known as the helicopter scene in *Apocalypse Now*: The audience seemed to enjoy themselves thoroughly, given the cheering and clapping, and God help me if I did not also find myself caught up in the story and the sheer *spectacle* (emphasis mine). The scene the audience reacted to most strongly was the climactic battle, during which my own jet-lagged heart also beat faster. The iconic scene opens up with American soldiers descending upon a Vietnamese (Viet Cong) village on a fleet of helicopters, the camera adopting a birds-eye view (otherwise known as the god's-eye view) to then switch back and forth between distant shots of the swarm and close-ups of the soldier's faces. The diegetic music is Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries from his opera trilogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The implication here is clear, the Valkyries being the goddess of war and the score depicting their

battle-cries as they prepare to transport the fallen heroes back to their homestead. Having positioned themselves as the equivalents of heroic deity, the helicopters proceed to triumphantly and indeed as Nguyen describes spectacularly assail the village with trumpets blasting in the background. In contrast to the soldiers, meanwhile, the Vietnamese villagers are never on eye-level with the camera, always looked down upon from afar, shown as insectile little creatures whose unsubtitled, hardly audible dialogue and countenance are soon replaced by indiscriminate screams and scrambling chaos under fire. Shooting back at the controversy surrounding the messy circumstances of the film's production, Coppola declares that [m]y film is not about Vietnam. It is Vietnam. While reference to Vietnam here pertains more to the inclement conditions of filming, which took place in the jungle of the Philippines, his statement is indeed an authentic, albeit in a most ironic way, description of the way in which *Apocalypse Now* indeed *is* Vietnam as perceived by the American soldiers in the narrative, namely voiceless and insignificant, and also the viewers by dint of their heroic and mighty positioning through the cinematography and music, who are roped into literally riding and enjoying the spectacle of massacre even when its object is an uncanny double of themselves. Going on to recapitulate the above scene in similar words, Nguyen's narrator bitterly reflects: perhaps it was all these things that made me wish for a gun in my hand so I, too, could participate in the Old Testament slaughter of the Viet Cong who looked, if not exactly like me, fairly close to me. (Nguyen)

In his interview with NPR, aptly entitled Taking Revenge against Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, Nguyen revisits his objection to the Auteur (who is an obvious avatar of Coppola himself)'s mimetic politics in the narrator's voice, which deserves to be quoted in full: [d]o you not think it would be a little more believable, a little more realistic, a little more authentic for a movie set in a certain country, for the people in that country to have something to say? Instead of having your screenplay direct, as it does now, cut to villagers speaking in their own language. Could you not

have them speak heavily accented English? You know what I mean. Ching Chong English, just to pretend that they are speaking in an Asian language, that somehow American audiences can strangely understand? And don't you think it would be more compelling if your green beret had a love interest? Do these men only love and die for each other? That is the implication without a woman in the midst (Nguyen, 2016).

The Auteur snarls at the narrator's protest, of course, brandishing his experience and expertise in the capitalist economy of the film industry. What is most resonant about this moment that runs directly parallel to Suriname's representation in *Narco-Saints* however, in what could only be described as a genuinely uncanny fashion in terms of the ugly truth it betrays, is how the following description of the Vietnamese viewers (including the narrator himself) could be readily superimposed upon the South Korean viewers and makers who sit back and consume the spectacle of the show: [t]hey [the massacred Viet Cong] certainly looked exactly like my fellow spectators, who whooped and laughed as a variety of American-made weaponry vaporized, pulverized, lacerated, and splattered their not-so-distant neighbors. (Nguyen)

In Closing: The Speculative Double of the Other

Revisiting to the manner in which the modified English title Narco-Saints milks the success of Narcos by way of cultural conflation, let us consider; would the core fabric of the show be subject to any significant change, should the setting be switched over to other Latin American countries, granted that they offer similar cultural and geographic textures that warrant an authentic taste of spectacle in their exoticness? As long as there is a tropic landscape to stage the action, shady back streets to situate the criminal organizations, and provincial and impoverished villages and their residents as background visuals, how much of a difference would it make

had the narrative transpired in Colombia, Brazil, Puerto Rico, or Ecuador? Wouldn't any of these other countries do, should they serve to invoke less than fragrant shades of South Korea's not-so-distant and underdeveloped past as the show's dominant milieu, such as the National Intelligence Agency's illicit operations, the brutality and corruption of the policemen who descended upon In-gu's Karaoke bar, and all the other circumstances surrounding In-gu's ordeals that lead up to his emigration, aside from the sole fact that the actual site of the main villain's real-life model happened to be this particular country that is Suriname? That might indeed be so, I claim, especially since the series itself suggests (again, regardless of authorial intent) as much through the absence, dearth, and partiality of Suriname's representation. The people seldom have a voice, and when they do they are either illegible (sans subtitles) or criminal. Despite the centrality of Suriname's local color, viewers almost never get to see the textures of actual, daily life, as inhabited and experienced by the greater majority of the country's constituents. This biased replaceability, and the undergirding absence of conscious intent, are disconcerting self-reflections of how South Korea itself has figured for so long in the eyes of those who have so long identified this Far Eastern country as a mere facet of the exotic other that is the conflated East.

Extending George Gerbner's concept of symbolic annihilation further, Pierre Bourdieu claims that the absence of representation is a form of symbolic violence, perpetrated as one of the most powerful ways to erase out a given object from the plain of reference, rendering it an ontological cypher (Gerbner, 1976; Bourdieu, 1998). That may indeed be so, as evidenced in the acceptance speeches of the two feature characters in the Oscars' recent darling *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). Ke Huy Quan's spectacular come back as a (literally, through the narratological device of the multiverse setting) multi-faceted character is celebrated as a major triumph because of his decades-long absence, which is largely attributed to the lack of opportunity for him to appear on stage as an

average or even stereotypical Asian male (Variety, 2023). Michelle Yeoh's emphatic affirmation of her racial, gendered, and sexualized presence in the performative realm meanwhile, in a related but also slightly different vein, also speaks to the dearth of opportunities for those like her, whose limited presence may be characterized as being emblematic of two other practices in minority representation: under-, and mis-representation (ABC7, 2023). Circumscribed by gender and race/ethnicity, the positions available for the likes of her are limited to the iconic symbolism of either a mute sex slave or a gender-bending icon of Oriental mysticism in their gesture to personified yellow peril in the form of a dragon lady, mystical sage, submissive sex slave, or tiger mom, all of which Yeoh herself indeed instantiated in the roles she reprised in films such as *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (2008), and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) with her performance as Aung San Suu Kyi in the 2011 film *The Lady* as a singular exception since her Hollywood debut. In sum, as seen in the case of how Asian presence has been strategically set aside to fulfill what might be described as a service function in the narratological thrust in white, male, and anglophone mainstream American media, mimetic marginalization is a combinatory sublimation of three core practices of representation: the absence of, under-, and mis-representation. What renders this trend all the more insidious and also sustainable is the fact that in most cases, they occur not as a consciously devised ploy but more as a given, or in other words a default condition from and within the purview of hegemonic perspectivization. The lack of the intent to alienate in the portrayal of Asian presence in their representation across the expansive oeuvre of mainstream American media, with occasional exceptions that mainly involve recapitulations of the yellow peril discourse at times of socio-economic turmoil involving the Eastern proper (such as the first and second World War periods when China and Japan were respectively figured as tangible threats to the domestic labor market and national security, or

under the Cold War regime when the sleeping dragon of China posted a latent risk), is indicative of the mimetic force wherethrough the imagined figure of Asia has become cumulatively, persistently, pervasively, and repeatedly shunted aside (and down) in the ontological order of cultural value much in line with the operative dynamic of microaggression.

Given the recent spotlight it has come to enjoy and thereby having risen to the status of a global power house in the domain of cultural production, South Korea appears to be now wielding the agency to redress such discontents in representation across the parameters of their absence, dearth, and partiality. The discontents surrounding *Narco-Saints*, both of those that have been openly objected to and others that went less noticed, urge us to critically reflect on the absurdity of this development. After all, as noted above, the kind of speculative authenticity that it boasts of and capitalizes on is precisely how Asian presence and as such South Korean people and culture, have been stereotyped for so long by the show's own aspirational models media content in First World countries that have now come to constitute the Global North block. What *Narco-Saints*' transactional economy points to, in this light is a sobering reminder of Nietzsche's warning, the economy of which effectively frames the mirror dynamic of coloniality: if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you (Nietzsche, 2011). The only difference here is that, in this case, one did not initially choose to gaze into the abyss; rather, the gaze had, initially been forced upon, gradually to became one's own through the process of capitalist inculcation.

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국문초록

수리남에 드러난 문화적 재현 기제: 사변적 진정성의 모방 기제에 대한 탈식민적 분석

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본 논문은 2022년 넷플릭스의 오리지널 한국 드라마 시리즈<수리남>에 대한 비판적 고찰을 통해 수리남이라는 국가의 문화, 장소성, 그리고 국민들에 대한 문화적 재현이 내면화된 식민성의 확대 재생산이라는 악순환의 매커니즘을 체현하는 과정을 분석한다. 실화에 바탕을 둔 이야기라는 전제를 등에 업은 <수리남>은 대자본을 동원하여 미학적, 서사적 스펙터클을 앞세운 진정성을 추구하는 듯한 모습을 보인다. 그러나, 이러한 진정성의 본질은 오히려 사변성에 가깝다 할 것으로, 편향된 재현의 정치성을 은폐하는 기제로서 작용한다. 이와 같은 주장을 바탕으로, 본 논문은 월터 미뇰로, 지그문트 프로이트, 가야트리 스피박, 장 보드리야르 등의 이론과 드라마의 주요 장면 또는 요소들에 대한 텍스트 분석, 그리고 여타 미디어 콘텐츠와의 비교를 통해 <수리남>에 드러난 편향적 내지는 과소한 재현 양상이 어떻게 식민지적 경험과 그 문화 역사적 여파를 억압되어야 마땅할 기괴한 거울상으로 비화하는지 고찰한다. 그럼으로써, 서구 사회로부터 오리엔탈리즘과 그 후신이라 할 여러 담론적 프레임에 의해 차별과 억압의 대상이 되어 왔던 한국의 문화적 생산 체계가 이제는 오히려 제3세계라는 라벨을 단 타자의 문화권에 식민성을 투영하기에 이른 과정을 들여다본다. 이와 같은 힘의 역학에서 가장 주목할 점으로 저자 (감독) 또는 제작자 측의 악의적 의거성이 부재한다는 사실을 들어, 본 논문은 주변적 존재로 치부되는 글로벌 사우스 (Global South) 권역에 속한 국가들의 소외 현상이 문화적 인식의 근저에 디폴트 관점으로 자리 잡아 가는 현상에 대한 비판을 제시한다.

주제어 : 수리남, 식민성, 모방기제, 사변적 진정성, 문화적 재현

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