

Performing the Inferno: A Multimodal and Psychoanalytic Reading of *The 8 Show* as Contemporary Asian Spectacle

Rae Francis Quilantang¹ and Kimberly Nicole P. Quilantang^{2,*}

¹Department of Communication, University of Santo Tomas, Manila 1008, Philippines

²Department of Literature, University of Santo Tomas, Manila 1008, Philippines

(*Corresponding author's e-mail: kpquilantang@ust.edu.ph)

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Abstract

This article examines *The 8 Show* (Han, 2024) as a contemporary reimagining of Dante's *Inferno*, reading its vertical architecture and spectacle of survival as an allegory of moral performativity in late capitalism. Integrating Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) with Žižekian psychoanalysis, the study examines how visual design, spatial hierarchy, and libidinal economy create an ideological system in which sin functions as performance rather than transgression. The analysis situates *The 8 Show* within post-2020 Korean survival dramas, tracing how neoliberal precarity transforms morality into an adaptive, commodified practice. Through MCDA, the essay decodes the show's multimodal semiotics of hierarchy and control; through psychoanalysis, it reveals the structures of enjoyment (*jouissance*) that sustain participation in ideological domination. The paper argues that *The 8 Show* replaces Dante's fixed moral order with a fluid spectacle in which ethical identity is contingent on visibility, pleasure, and exchange. Ultimately, it proposes that the illusion of escape—the “afterlife” beyond the game—extends Hell into everyday life, where capitalism aestheticizes survival and spectatorship becomes complicity. In reframing sin as ideological performance, the essay contributes to theoretical discussions of morality, spectacle, and media within contemporary Asian cultural production.

Keywords: The 8 Show, Dante's Inferno, Žižek, Multimodal critical discourse analysis, Ideology, Spectacle, Capitalist morality

Introduction

The 8 Show, a South Korean television series released on Netflix, exemplifies a growing genre of contemporary Asian media that blends survival drama with socioeconomic allegory. Much like its predecessor, *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021-2025), *The 8 Show* (Han, 2024) situates its narrative in a hyper-structured environment where human behavior is manipulated through mechanisms of reward, surveillance, and spectacle. Contestants burdened by financial desperation participate in a televised game where each passing minute earns them money—but only under grotesquely inflated living costs and psychological torment. The show transforms time into currency, survival into entertainment, and morality into market logic, dramatizing the internal contradictions of late

capitalism through the language of visual and performative excess.

This analysis situates *The 8 Show* within a broader wave of post-2020 Korean survival dramas—such as *Squid Game* (2021-2025) and *Hellbound* (2021)—that visualize neoliberal precarity as moral performance and collective spectacle (Jin, 2022). These works translate economic and social anxieties into ritualized games of judgment, where ethics and survival are continually negotiated under systemic pressure. Within this landscape, *The 8 Show* distinguishes itself by its explicit architectural symbolism and its integration of Western moral cosmology—specifically Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*—into an Asian capitalist context. As a Netflix production, *The 8 Show* exemplifies what Elleström

(2019) terms “transmedial mediation,” wherein narrative forms circulate across cultural and platform boundaries. This process reflects Robertson’s (1995) concept of glocalization, where global distribution adapts local narratives into universal moral spectacles—Korean capitalism framed for international consumption.

At its core, *The 8 Show* stages a moral drama that invites comparison with *Inferno*, a foundational Western text that maps eternal punishment onto a concentric moral architecture. In Dante’s vision, each circle of Hell is reserved for a distinct sin—lust, gluttony, greed, wrath, heresy, violence, fraud, and treachery—reflecting a theological order where divine justice is absolute and immutable (Alighieri, 2024). Sin, in this cosmology, is fixed: the soul’s identity is defined by its transgression, and punishment mirrors that essence.

By contrast, *The 8 Show* destabilizes this moral fixity. Its vertically stratified building—eight floors, eight contestants—appears to enforce a rigid hierarchy, yet its structure proves porous. Characters shift positions both spatially and morally: the innocent become complicit, the powerless become tyrants, and the caring become cruel. Morality here is not a static essence but a function of adaptation within a competitive system. The series thus reimagines damnation not as eternal judgment but as a continuous performance—an evolving negotiation of ethics under conditions of surveillance and scarcity.

This article asks: How does *The 8 Show* reconfigure the idea of infernal punishment and sin through the lens of capitalist spectacle? To address this question, the study draws on two interrelated theoretical frameworks. First, it employs Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), which examines how meaning is produced across semiotic modes—visual, spatial, and linguistic (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; Machin & Mayr, 2023). *The 8 Show* functions not only as narrative fiction but as a multimodal text where architecture, costume, lighting, gesture, and sound interact to materialize ideology. MCDA facilitates a nuanced examination of how these design elements construct hierarchies and perpetuate systems of control.

Second, the analysis incorporates Žižekian psychoanalysis, derived from Slavoj Žižek’s synthesis of Lacanian theory and Marxist critique. Žižek’s framework illuminates how subjects internalize

ideology not through repression but through enjoyment—*jouissance*—the paradoxical pleasure in one’s own subjection (Žižek, 1989, 2002). In *The 8 Show*, contestants are not simply victims; they are complicit performers who derive meaning and identity through participation in their own degradation. The game’s ideological power lies precisely in this fusion of pleasure and punishment.

Bringing these frameworks together, this article contends that *The 8 Show* dramatizes a mutable, performative model of morality reflective of the commodified subject in late capitalism. Here, morality is not anchored in divine law but in the spectacle’s shifting economy of visibility and desire. Greed emerges as the only universal sin—not as a personal vice, but as the structural principle of a society that monetizes even pain and virtue.

This article is not empirical in design but conceptual in orientation. It advances an interpretive analysis grounded in textual and visual reading rather than data collection, contributing to theoretical discourse on morality, ideology, and media spectacle in contemporary Asian culture.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, it outlines Dante’s moral architecture as a paradigm of fixed sin and theological determinism; second, it analyzes *The 8 Show* through multimodal and psychoanalytic lenses to reveal how morality becomes performative under capitalism; and third, it reflects on the ideological implications of this transformation, including the paradox of resistance within spectacle.

Dante’s inferno: Sin and static moral architecture

Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*, the first canto of *The Divine Comedy* (original work published 1321), offers one of the most enduring models of moral order and eternal punishment in Western thought. Written in the early fourteenth century, it imagines the afterlife as a precisely structured system of divine retribution, where the damned are eternally punished for sins committed in life. Hell is organized into nine concentric circles, each descending deeper into moral and physical degradation: Limbo, Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Wrath, Heresy, Violence, Fraud, and Treachery (Alighieri, 2024). Each sin corresponds to a punishment that mirrors or inversely

reflects the nature of the crime—a principle Dante terms *contrapasso*.

This model rests on theological determinism: a soul's position is permanent, determined by the sin that most defines it. Francesca da Rimini, condemned for adultery, is forever swept in a storm that mirrors the uncontrolled nature of her passion. At the same time, the gluttonous are submerged in fetid mire, their excess symbolized through grotesque consumption. In Dante's Hell, no one can change, repent, or transcend; identity and punishment are eternally fused (Barolini, 1992). Once judged, the sinner becomes emblematic—an allegorical figure whose suffering reaffirms divine justice rather than individual complexity.

This fixity reflects a broader medieval cosmology in which the moral order of the universe is hierarchical and absolute. As Auerbach (2003) notes, *The Divine Comedy* embodies the “figural realism” of medieval theology, where every soul and event exists within a divinely ordained framework. Hell's architecture, then, is not arbitrary but moral geometry: every circle a manifestation of cosmic balance restored through punishment.

The didactic function of *Inferno* reinforces this moral absolutism. Hawkins (1999) observes that Dante's taxonomy of sin leaves little space for ambiguity. The poem is a theological map that warns and instructs, positioning each soul as both moral lesson and eternal symbol. Through this structure, identity becomes singular and transparent—defined entirely by transgression. In Dante's cosmology, to sin is to become one's sin; the human subject is reduced to a category within divine order.

The rigidity of this system produces a vision of moral essentialism. Each sinner's fate is unchanging, each punishment perpetual. Hell, in Dante's universe, is not a site of transformation but of moral preservation: it keeps sin static to maintain the coherence of divine justice. Human complexity—contradiction, remorse, ambivalence—is extinguished in favor of theological clarity.

This theological determinism establishes the contrast against which *The 8 Show* reconfigures morality—not as fixed divine order, but as mutable capitalist performance. Where Dante's sinners are static symbols of eternal truth, *The 8 Show's* contestants mutate across moral positions, revealing how sin, in the

modern spectacle, is no longer a divine verdict but an ideological function shaped by desire, competition, and survival. This shift marks the movement from theological to ideological determination—a transition from the immovable architecture of Hell to the dynamic machinery of capitalist damnation.

Floors and circles: Spatial hierarchy in *The 8 Show*

One of the most striking features of *The 8 Show* is its architectural symbolism. Much like Dante's *Inferno*, which envisions Hell as a descent into increasingly horrific punishments, the series constructs a vertical moral and economic hierarchy encoded in its spatial design. Each of the eight floors is occupied by a single contestant, arranged from the 1st floor (lowest) to the 8th floor (highest). The following mapping operates heuristically, not as literal equivalence; its purpose is to reveal how *The 8 Show* reconfigures Dantean moral space into a spectacle of capitalist hierarchy. The building's missing ninth level—the open central square where contestants gather—becomes the true infernal core, a shared site of greed, spectacle, and moral collapse.

Floors as infernal circles

Although the show's architecture consists of only eight levels, the moral and behavioral dynamics within them can be read allegorically through Dante's infernal model. This mapping is interpretive rather than rigid, designed to trace how each space produces specific affective and ideological functions. Three examples illustrate this symbolic correspondence.

□ **1F (The Frail Elder)** evokes both Limbo's inertia and Treachery's deceit. Initially passive, the elder evolves into a manipulator whose quiet calculations betray others for personal gain, collapsing innocence into moral corruption.

□ **3F (Jin-su)** mirrors the circles of Sloth and Envy. His early apathy, framed through static camera angles and subdued lighting, contrasts sharply with later scenes where envy consumes him. As his resentment intensifies, the camera's movement becomes more erratic, and the close framing of his face—often through a fisheye lens—renders psychological distortion as visual suffocation.

□ **7F (The Strategist)** embodies Fraud, Dante's eighth circle. His calm demeanor and intellectual control are reflected in balanced compositions and low-contrast lighting, producing a deceptive serenity. When he begins scripting the suffering of others, his surroundings brighten with an artificial glow, an ironic illumination that signifies moral blindness under the guise of creative ambition.

This interpretive alignment emphasizes transformation rather than fixity. Unlike Dante's souls, confined eternally to their sin, *The 8 Show's* characters shift across moral positions. Their movement across spatial and ethical boundaries dramatizes the instability of identity under capitalist conditions, where virtue and vice are dictated by performance and survival (Žižek, 2002).

The square as the ninth circle: Greed universalized

The standard square—the vertical atrium where all contestants converge—functions as the symbolic ninth circle of Hell. In Dante's schema, this circle punishes betrayal; in *The 8 Show*, it punishes participation itself. Here, greed is no longer an individual transgression but the system's governing logic. Every act—whether negotiation, violence, or affection—becomes a commodity, evaluated for its entertainment value and monetary yield.

Han (2017) observes that under neoliberalism, freedom becomes a compulsion: individuals perform autonomy even as they reproduce subjection. The square visualizes this paradox through its cold symmetry and omnipresent surveillance screens. When contestants perform for the unseen audience, they embody the transformation of moral action into exchange value—the spectacle of damnation as profitable labor.

Multimodal design: Encoding inequality and control

Following Kress and van Leeuwen (2020), multimodality refers to meaning made through visual, spatial, and textual modes. MCDA examines how these semiotic resources interact to naturalize ideology, as Machin and Mayr (2023) note, spatial design and visual hierarchy are not merely aesthetic choices but communicative systems that reproduce power relations.

Room design and spatial inequality:

The lower floors are stark and angular, illuminated by cold fluorescent light that flattens depth and texture. The upper floors—especially the 8th floor—are saturated with warm tones and soft lighting. This chromatic contrast produces what Machin and Mayr describe as “moral color hierarchy,” where visual warmth signifies privilege and virtue while cold tonality indexes dispossession.

Interfaces and surveillance:

Scoreboards and intercoms dominate each frame, transforming private existence into measurable performance. In a key sequence, the camera tilts upward toward the scoreboard as a contestant gazes at her rising balance, her face bathed in sterile light. This upward angle reverses traditional cinematic power cues, positioning capital as the transcendent subject and the human as its object.

Micro-analysis: The elevator scene

In Episode 5, when 2F ascends to confront 8F, the camera follows her through a narrow elevator shaft lit in intermittent red. The claustrophobic framing compresses space and time, creating a visual metaphor for moral suffocation. As she rises, her reflection multiplies in the metallic walls—a multimodal representation of duplicity and fragmented selfhood. When the doors open, the saturated lighting abruptly shifts to pale gold, signaling not liberation but entry into a higher, more seductive level of control.

These visual strategies exemplify how *The 8 Show* encodes ideology through multimodal design. Architecture, color, and framing operate as moral language: they do not simply depict hierarchy but produce it.

Visualizing power and morality

Spatial and visual elements converge to communicate moral order without explicit judgment. The hierarchy of floors dramatizes inequality as both architectural and ethical truth. Even when rebellion erupts, the central square reasserts itself as the locus of judgment—a ritual space where sin is enacted for consumption. Through MCDA, *The 8 Show* can thus be read as a moral allegory of spectacle: a world where

power is spatialized, morality is performed, and damnation is sustained through visibility.

In this sense, the series transforms Dante's descent into a vertical theater of capitalism, where the audience's gaze replaces divine justice, and every floor becomes a stage in the economy of sin.

Mutable sin: Fluid morality in a spectacle society

In this discussion, *mode* refers to a communicative resource—visual, spatial, or linguistic—through which meaning is produced and circulated. *Spectacle* denotes social relations mediated by images (Debord, 2021), while *ideology* refers to the system of meanings that structures subjectivity and reproduces power (Althusser, 2016). These concepts provide the analytical foundation for understanding how *The 8 Show* transforms moral judgment into performance, revealing a world in which

ethics are neither divine nor personal, but constructed and commodified through visual and narrative design.

Fluid sins and evolving moral identities

The 8 Show reimagines sin not as a fixed transgression but as a mutable condition shaped by ideology and spectacle. Within its closed environment, characters' moral identities are fluid—shifting in response to surveillance, competition, and desire. Rather than assigning each character a single sin, the series presents morality as a dynamic process of negotiation and adaptation.

The table below serves as a conceptual heuristic, demonstrating how contestants traverse moral positions under systemic pressure. It is not a literal mapping but a symbolic tool for tracing how *The 8 Show* translates Dantean moral categories into capitalist behaviors.

Table 1 Analogical mapping of *The 8 Show*

Floor	Dantean Reference	Initial Sin	Evolved Sins	Interpretation
1F – The Frail Elder	Limbo (Circle 1)	Passivity, isolation, existential stagnation	Treachery, Pride, Self-Justification	Begins as a ghostlike, voiceless presence—evoking the unbaptized souls of Limbo. Gradually becomes a schemer, manipulating others through pity and self-sacrifice, ending in betrayal disguised as martyrdom.
2F – The Silent Worker	Heresy (Circle 6)	Rigid belief in moral order and rationalism	Pride, Authoritarianism, Strategic Aggression	A technocratic moralist who insists on order. Rejects empathy in favor of rules, reflecting Dante's heretics who elevate reason above divine truth.
3F – Jin-su (Protagonist)	Lust (Circle 2)	Desire for connection and erotic validation	Envy, Wrath, Greed, Despair	From longing for 8F's affection to acts of aggression and accumulation, Jin-su's trajectory reflects the decay of romantic desire into possessiveness and moral collapse.
4F – The Anxious Woman	Violence (Circle 7)	Psychological fragility, fear of conflict	Revenge, Deception, Self-Harm	Evolves from panic attacks to active physical and psychological violence—especially in her ambush of 8F. A case of emotional trauma turned outward.
5F – The Nurse / Caregiver	Gluttony (Circle 3)	Emotional overindulgence; compulsive nurturing	Moral Compromise, Wrath, Apathy	Her selfless care becomes an overconsumption of others' suffering. Her final violent act (castrating 6F) represents the collapse of compassion into cruelty.

Floor	Dantean Reference	Initial Sin	Evolved Sins	Interpretation
6F – The Violent Enforcer	Wrath (Circle 5)	Brute force, reactive aggression, machismo	Sadism, Misogyny, Control	Always volatile, 6F represents unrepentant anger. His violence escalates for power rather than necessity—wrath becomes identity.
7F – The Strategist / Writer	Treachery (Circle 9)	Strategic neutrality; narrative opportunism	Hypocrisy, Betrayal, Emotional Cowardice	Refuses action in the game, yet capitalizes on others' suffering for his post-show screenplay. His sin is betrayal not only of people but of truth.
8F – Song Se-ra, the Artist	Fraud (Circle 8)	Erotic deception, self-mythologizing	Sadism, Vanity, Spectacle Addiction	Master manipulator who commodifies art and intimacy. Fraud is not just her behavior—it becomes her mode of existence.
Common Square	Greed (Circle 4)	Capitalistic accumulation and survival economy	Spectacle, Commodification, Universal Complicity	The arena of collective sin. All actions—care, violence, sex—are evaluated based on profit. Greed is not an individual phenomenon; it is systemic.

Each contestant's evolution exposes how *The 8 Show* converts Dante's eternal categories into social functions. Morality becomes a market of shifting values; sin becomes a survival strategy. Under Žižek's (1989) notion of ideological interpellation, the contestants do not simply act within the system—they are *spoken by it*, their subjectivity molded by the spectacle's demands.

Moral performance and the visual economy

In *The 8 Show*, sin is not hidden but performed. Every action—sexual encounter, rebellion, confession—is staged before cameras that convert experience into image and image into currency. The show's multimodal design fuses visual and moral registers: architecture dictates hierarchy, while framing, lighting, and gesture encode ethical judgment.

In one key scene, the voting ritual crystallizes this dynamic. Contestants stand beneath the harsh white light of the central square as a digital screen projects their faces. Each gesture—a lowered gaze, a raised hand—becomes a moral signal, captured in close-up shots that isolate individual guilt within collective judgment. The alternating cuts between faces and scoreboard numbers reduce morality to data, transforming conscience into spectacle. Through this multimodal choreography of light, gaze, and gesture, the

act of voting ceases to be ethical; it becomes performative submission to ideology.

Spectacle and sin as market function

In Debord's (2021) *Society of the Spectacle*, social relations are mediated by images rather than direct experience. *The 8 Show* radicalizes this idea: sin itself is mediated, aestheticized, and traded. Every transgression yields profit. Violence is rewarded with time; seduction with attention; rebellion with viewership. What once condemned the sinner in Dante's moral universe now sustains the player in the capitalist one.

The show's ideological apparatus—its scoreboard, intercom, and omniscient host—exemplifies Althusser's (2016) concept of "interpellation" in visual form. These elements constantly position contestants as subjects who must perform to exist. As Žižek (2008) notes, capitalism depends not on obedience but on *transgression that yields a profit*. The contestants' sins are not moral failures but expected performances within an economy that transforms excess into spectacle.

Thus, morality collapses into profitability. Sin is no longer a deviation from the norm; it *is* the norm—structured, incentivized, and televised. The visible self replaces the moral self, and visibility itself becomes virtue.

Greed as structural sin

Greed, which Dante confines to the fourth circle, becomes the foundation of *The 8 Show*'s moral system. It is not merely an individual flaw but the architecture of existence. Every interaction in the standard square—every plea, kiss, or blow—is priced and broadcast, turning human relations into moral transactions. Contestants are compelled to be greedy, not out of desire but out of necessity; the system's logic demands self-interest as a means of survival.

Žižek (2002) calls this the “obscene underside of ideology”—the point at which the system's hidden truth becomes visible. Contestants may justify their greed as a strategy, care, or rebellion, but all actions are ultimately absorbed back into the economy of spectacle. In this sense, greed is not the sin that dooms them—it is the world that defines them.

Momentary resistance

While most characters succumb to the machinery of spectacle, *The 8 Show* allows fleeting glimpses of resistance. When 2F refuses to vote, her defiance halts the rhythmic flow of the scene: silence replaces sound, the lighting dims, and the camera lingers on her stillness. For a moment, the ideological apparatus loses its grip. However, this resistance is temporary—the system quickly reabsorbs it as entertainment, replayed later as part of the broadcast montage.

These moments of rebellion, however brief, expose the paradox of moral action under spectacle: even dissent becomes content. The possibility of moral choice survives only as a trace—a flicker of refusal within the endless illumination of performance. In *The 8 Show*, Hell persists not through punishment but through participation, and sin, ever mutable, remains the price of being seen.

Žižek and the enjoyment of damnation

Where MCDA decodes the show's surface semiotics, Žižekian psychoanalysis probes its libidinal economy—the structures of enjoyment that sustain ideological participation. This dual framework enables a reading of *The 8 Show* not only as a visual allegory of hierarchy, but also as a drama of desire, complicity, and pleasure. MCDA exposes how meaning is spatially and visually encoded; Žižek's psychoanalysis reveals *why* subjects remain invested in the very systems that exploit

them. This reading is not empirical, but conceptual, demonstrating how psychoanalytic categories can illuminate multimodal texts.

Enjoyment and ideological interpellation

Althusser (2018) defines ideology as the mechanism that “hails” individuals into subject positions, transforming them into compliant actors within social order. In *The 8 Show*, the game itself functions as such an apparatus, structuring not only behavior but affect: contestants eat, sleep, and perform within a closed economy where time is money and visibility is survival. However, Žižek (1989) extends Althusser's model by arguing that ideology endures not through illusion but through *enjoyment (jouissance)*. We obey systems not because we are deceived, but because they organize the forms of pleasure through which we live.

The show's libidinal economy hinges on this paradox: the contestants' humiliation is also their source of affirmation. They derive perverse satisfaction from performing obedience, from transforming pain into spectacle. As seen in the scoreboard's gaze structure (Section 3), ideology operates visually as much as psychically—the contestants' constant upward looks toward the score display embody both submission and desire. The scoreboard functions as a technological superego: an omniscient gaze that rewards suffering with symbolic recognition.

This logic finds its clearest expression in the “Talent Show” sequence. Contestants are told to entertain to earn time. 6F's violent performance, 8F's erotic self-display, and Jin-su's nervous stand-up routine all stage enjoyment as obligation. These are not spontaneous acts but ritualized gestures demanded by the apparatus. Butler (1997) reminds us that performativity is the reiterative practice through which the subject materializes within ideology; repetition is not resistance but compliance. Here, the contestants' acts of creativity are in fact acts of subjection—the pleasure of being seen replaces the freedom of being.

The king game: Power, pleasure, and perversion

In the *King Game*, one player assumes authority to command others to perform arbitrary acts. What begins as play escalates into ritualized degradation: slaps, forced apologies, and sexual dares blur the line between

pain and enjoyment. The pleasure of command and submission exposes what Žižek (1991) terms *ideological perversion*—a structure of desire in which subjects position themselves as the instruments of the Other's enjoyment.

The King Game dramatizes Žižek's (2008) concept of the "superegoic injunction to enjoy," the paradoxical command to both obey and transgress. Contestants find exhilaration in cruelty precisely because the system sanctions it. Violence becomes a medium of belonging; submission becomes a form of self-expression. Through this ritual, the spectacle transforms moral collapse into currency, turning every gesture of suffering into measurable value.

Symbolic death and the real: 1F's final act

The narrative of 1F, the frail elder, encapsulates the Žižekian notion of symbolic death. Initially a spectral figure—voiceless, barely acknowledged—he stages his own "redemption" through a suicidal performance across a tightrope above the square. His death earns applause, his body converted into content. For Žižek (1989), symbolic death precedes physical death: the subject is "dead" when reduced to a function within the symbolic order. 1F dies not as an individual but as a narrative resource.

The hallucination sequence that precedes his fall—where he imagines applause and release—embodies the encounter with *the Real*, the traumatic kernel of ideology that resists symbolization. What he mistakes for transcendence is in fact the perfect execution of the system's logic: the fantasy of freedom scripted as spectacle. His death, like the others' performances, is not a rupture but an affirmation of the order that consumes him.

Already dead: Enjoying the system

By the series' end, all contestants are symbolically dead. Their gestures, choices, and desires are pre-scripted functions of ideology. They no longer act; they are activated. As Han (2017) notes in his theory of *psychopolitics*, the neoliberal subject internalizes domination by optimizing the self; self-surveillance becomes a source of pleasure, and self-exploitation is viewed as a virtue.

Žižek (2002) identifies this as the ultimate horror of late capitalism: a world where oppression persists

without resistance because it has been transfigured into enjoyment. The contestants do not seek to escape the system; they seek to perfect their participation in it. Visibility replaces freedom, recognition replaces selfhood. In this spectacle of damnation, the body becomes currency, suffering becomes entertainment, and ideology achieves its most terrifying form—not as coercion, but as consent.

The illusion of exit: Afterlife as post-hell

The illusion of liberation in *The 8 Show* underscores Žižek's claim that ideology persists precisely when it appears to have been overcome. What seems like an ending—the contestants' emergence from the building—reveals itself as repetition in disguise. The "afterlife" of the show is no redemption but a reconfiguration of control: ideology has changed its costume.

1F's death and the paradox of refusal

Among the players, only 1F's death gestures toward rupture. His self-sacrifice across the tightrope, hallucinating an audience that applauds his fall, appears as both submission and critique. In Žižek's (2008) sense of *overidentification*, 1F obeys the spectacle's injunction to perform so entirely that he exposes its absurdity. His act becomes a symbolic suicide—a refusal to continue as a commodified subject. Choosing death over participation, he performs what Lacan (2004) calls *symbolic death*: the erasure of one's identity within the ideological order.

However, even this gesture is ambivalent. The system absorbs his death as content, his "resistance" reframed as spectacle. 1F achieves a moment of ethical clarity, but it is consumed immediately by the machinery of viewing. His liberation is genuine only in intention, not in effect.

Survivors and the aftershock of capitalist damnation

The show's closing vignettes depict the survivors outside the game, but the moral and psychic logic of the system remains intact.

□ **7F**, the writer, scripts a film based on the show's events, monetizing shared trauma. His act of artistic creation reproduces the sin of fraud: he capitalizes on suffering as a story. Žižek (2002)

describes this as a *cynical reason*: participating in ideology without believing in it.

□ **8F**, the performer, enacts rebellion through destruction—smashing walls, driving an excavator into a building. These gestures, filmed with handheld instability, signify not liberation but the continuation of performance. Her revolt is an aesthetic event, not an ethical one.

□ **3F**, the protagonist, constructs a shrine of money and stares at it in silence. The scene's slow pan and ambient hum suggest a trance rather than reflection; his faith has shifted from moral order to market symbolism.

Their exits thus mirror Dante's sinners, who never leave their circles, characterized by moral motion without transformation. The building collapses, but its logic persists within them.

Post-hell and the denial of purgatory

Dante's *Purgatorio* imagines the possibility of ascent—souls purifying themselves through contrition and effort (Alighieri, 2024; Barolini, 1992). *The 8 Show* denies such upward movement. Its survivors do not seek cleansing but perpetuate performance. In Žižek's (2020) terms, they remain trapped in the *drive*—a compulsive circuit of desire that endlessly circles its object without satisfaction.

The final imagery reinforces this post-Hell condition, characterized by subdued lighting, a washed-out color palette, and shallow focus, which dissolves the world into a state of ambiguity. There is no dawn of redemption—only the dim glow of ongoing spectacle. The “outside” offers freedom stripped of meaning, a purgatory emptied of grace.

Spectacle's afterlife and audience complicity

The 8 Show implicates not only its contestants but its spectators. If the characters cannot escape ideology, neither can the viewer who consumes their struggle as entertainment. Following Debord (1967), the spectacle is not merely an image, but a social relation mediated by images—it structures how audiences experience the world. Watching the players suffer becomes a form of participation; empathy and voyeurism converge.

Fisher's (2022) notion of *capitalist realism* illuminates this further: we can imagine the end of the

world more easily than the end of the show. The audience's gaze sustains the system precisely by mistaking recognition for critique. The pleasure of watching “moral collapse” becomes a moral act itself—condemnation as consumption.

As Asian media increasingly globalize, such spectacles invite cross-cultural spectatorship where moral critique and consumption blur. International audiences engage *The 8 Show* both as sociocultural allegory and binge-worthy content, oscillating between reflective distance and affective thrill. In AJAC's context, this duality exemplifies how contemporary Asian narratives function as global moral laboratories—sites where viewers simultaneously negotiate ethics, identity, and entertainment.

Beyond its neoliberal critique, *The 8 Show* also speaks to what Resende (2018) calls a “decolonial turn” in discourse studies—the imperative to question Eurocentric frames of morality and representation. By reworking Dante's infernal logic through a Korean cultural lens, the series performs what might be termed a transnational moral economy, where local ethics, class anxieties, and global capitalist aesthetics intersect. The result is neither Western imitation nor purely national allegory, but a hybrid spectacle that invites global audiences to confront their complicity in systems of mediated suffering.

Ambivalent Closure

The 8 Show concludes without resolution because it dramatizes the impossibility of escape from the spectacle's logic. However, the very act of representation also opens up a critical distance. To watch with awareness—to recognize the pleasure that binds us to ideology—is, perhaps, the first act of resistance.

The illusion of exit thus functions dialectically: it confirms our entrapment even as it gestures toward awakening. While ideology ensures that every rebellion becomes content, the reflective viewer may still reclaim the gaze. Hell, in this sense, is not eternal—it is maintained only as long as we keep watching without seeing.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the theorization of moral performativity in Asian media by integrating

multimodal analysis with psychoanalytic critique. Through *The 8 Show*, it has demonstrated how the moral architectures of classical allegory and the mechanisms of contemporary spectacle intersect, producing a cultural form where ethics, desire, and ideology coalesce into performance.

Three key contributions emerge from this inquiry. First, it advances a conceptual integration of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) and Žižekian psychoanalysis, bridging semiotic surface and libidinal depth. This approach allows moral meaning to be read not only through visual and spatial cues but also through the psychic investments that sustain spectatorship and participation. Second, it redefines sin as ideological performance—a mutable practice rather than a moral category. In *The 8 Show*, the transgressions that once anchored Dante's infernal hierarchy are reconfigured as roles demanded by the capitalist spectacle. Contestants do not simply fall into sin; they perform it, commodify it, and are rewarded for its visibility. Third, it situates the Asian capitalist spectacle as a distinctive cultural form, where global media aesthetics intersect with local moral economies. Within this hybrid space, moral judgment becomes a transactional event, and the spectacle becomes a shared language through which both regional and international audiences negotiate the ethics of viewing.

By synthesizing these frameworks, the study positions *The 8 Show* as more than a dystopian narrative—it is a moral allegory for late capitalism, revealing how ideology reproduces itself through pleasure, participation, and performance. The show's fluid morality exposes a world where every act of resistance risks being commodified, yet where recognition of complicity still offers a sliver of critical agency.

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Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

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CRedit author statement

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