



Analyzing Parasite: Abstract Meaning within Emblematic Framing

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In 2019, South Korean director Bong Joon Ho shared his blockbuster take on what it means to be a human parasite during the 21st century. Focusing on economic inequality, *Parasite* tackles the ever-growing divide between the upper and lower classes in the modern capitalist system. Featuring an all-star cast in front and behind the camera, the film went on to become South Korea's highest grossing film of all time and even influenced federal politics within the country.

Abstract

Film is a unique source of storytelling, one which allows stories that evoke empathy to be shared among the masses. It displays the power of narrative and transcends the fictional world with real-world implications. Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* has received universal praise for its presentation of classism among contemporary South Koreans. *Parasite* showcases the universal concept of class division through different filmmaking techniques and Ho's craftsmanship won the film four Oscars, including a historical win for the 2020 Best Picture, the first foreign film to do so. As the first foreign film to ever win Best Picture, *Parasite* has opened the door for foreign filmmakers at the Academy and paved a path for more diverse, socially conscious stories to be told in the American market. Based on my analysis of the film's success, *Parasite* has the potential to open doors in and outside of the film industry, including new opportunities for foreign filmmakers to a modern housing reform in South Korea.

In order to fully understand the scale of *Parasite*'s impact, we need to dive deeper into the film's content first. *Parasite* tells the tale of a lower-class family (the Kim's) slowly making their way into an upper-class family's (the Parks) life. In this movie, the Kim family begins to work for the Park family one-by-one until the entire household is employed by the Park's. The subtle and not so subtle narrative showcases the differences between the poor and the elite, resulting in a bloody finale between the opposing classes. Of course, there is so much more to the narrative than this, but for the sake of time and

space, I will assume that the reader has already viewed the film. In case the reader has not, I will summarize appropriate scenes and details when necessary.

Literature Review

Parasite was of course the main focus of our research. Director interviews were also incorporated into the study, adding direct input from the film's creator. The reviews of credited film critics were considered as well, which gave unique viewpoints on different scenes. Other sources included ethical theory from Franz Fanon, Sigmund Freud, and others. Additional textbooks were consulted for literature criticism theory and review. Film theorists and makers were also included, such as Gustavo Mercado and Alfred Hitchcock, to give an industry perspective on the work.

Methodology

An initial viewing of Parasite was conducted without previous research considered, just to get a feel for the film and understand it at an audience level. Next, I found relative articles that critiqued the film and expanded on the plot's narrative. I then reviewed film theory that I thought Parasite utilized particularly well and compared it to ethical theory. The comparison led to the conclusion that Bong Joon Ho displayed ethical and post-colonialism theory using different filmmaking and narrative techniques. Lastly, I researched the success Parasite had gained leading up and following the Oscars and studied how the film affected the movie industry and beyond.

Results/Findings

Parasite tells the tale of class division among South Koreans from a pessimistic perspective, holding nothing back against the upper class as the poor protagonists struggle through the narrative. Here is an analysis I conducted of a few different pivotal scenes from the film:

Parasite tells the tale of a lower-class family, the Kim's, slowly making their way into an upper-class family, the Park's, life. In this movie, the Kim family begins to work for the Park family one-by-one until the entire household is employed by the Park's. The subtle and not so subtle narrative showcases the differences between the poor and the elite and results in a bloody finale between the opposing classes.

Parasite is riddled with Emblematic Shots throughout its entire 2 hour and 12-minute run time. Gustavo Mercado, author of *The Filmmaker's Eye*, defines emblematic shots as powerful, abstract shots that can almost "tell a story" with a single frame. The example he uses in the book is Luke Skywalker looking towards the double suns setting on the Tatooine horizon. Generally, a character looking towards the horizon is a movie trope that signifies hope and looking towards the future. He will later use this trope to subvert the audience. These emblematic shots encourage people to look deeper into the film, and Bong Joon Ho utilizes this technique to really emphasize the personalities of his characters in Parasite. I grabbed four emblematic shots from the film that really stood

out to me and used them on my poster here, which was pretty difficult to do, because this film was loaded with abstract cinematography, to the point where entire scenes felt emblematic. For example, one shot that is repeatedly shown throughout the film is of a rock that is given to protagonist Ki-Woo. Ki-Woo says again and again that things are “so metaphorical,” including the rock. I think that’s Bong Joon Ho’s sense of humor creeping through by poking fun at people who over-analyze films, like myself. Anyway, this rock follows Ki-Woo throughout the film, and at one point he even says that the rock is a part of him. It is only in the final moments of the film that we see him place the rock in the river and ascend from poverty. Bong Joon Ho frames this rock in the film using Hitchcock’s rule, which implies that the bigger the object in a frame, the more importance it carries in the film’s narrative. Ho frames this object multiple times throughout the film, but always in the same style, center framed. This abstract shot implies the importance and connection the rock has to the Kim family and, as I said before, only once its removed from the family do the Kim’s go free from their lower-class shackles.

In the opening scenes of the film, we see the Kim family’s housing situation, which isn’t really a house, but instead a basement-apartment. Already Bong Joon Ho is framing the Kim family as a literal lower class, living beneath the streets of the city in a cold, dark basement. The family is so impoverished that they can’t afford their own phone and Wi-Fi bills, so they leech off other networks, which they can only do from their bathroom, to check their emails for job applications. Immediately, Ho shows the audience the unattractive lifestyle the Kim family is forced to live in, scurrying around their basement home like insects and leeching off others.

Another key emblematic shot is when Ki-Woo is first introduced the Park family. Bong Joon Ho sets up the scene so that the audience is already subconsciously dividing the rich from the poor. In the shot included on the poster, the glass walls literally divide the poor from the rich, with Ki-Woo and the housekeeper on one side and the Park mother on the other. The composition of the scene isn’t the only thing that frames the differences between the rich and poor, as even the costume design emphasizes the contrast between the two classes, with the poor wearing dark, bleak colors such as brown and black while the elite are sleeping comfortably, dressed in an all-white, perfect dress. One could even analyze further to say that the composition is off balanced, with the poor doubling in population compared to the rich minority.

The third frame selected emphasizes the struggle of the lower class. In this scene, the Kim clan fights the former housekeeper and her husband over a cellphone that contains a video of the Kim family caught in a lie. The luxurious lifestyle the Kim family has acquired has turned them against the other lower-class family, to the point where they end up killing their “neighbor in need.” After taking a closer look, the viewer may realize that the families are fighting over nothing but a job, a job where they are still in servitude to the rich, highlighting just how money-crazed and desperate the unfortunate lower-class can be at times.

The final shot analyzed was the frame of the Kim family returning home after their dispute with the former housekeeper. After an unexpected storm comes and “ruins” the Park family’s camping trip, the Kim’s are forced to leave their dream lifestyle and descend back to their basement housing reality. I particularly enjoyed this scene because Bong Joon Ho really draws out the walk home, putting emphasis on how far away the poor Kim family is to the literal upper-class Park family.

Upon reaching their home, the Kim’s discover that their apartment has been flooded and they’re forced to evacuate, grabbing only what they can carry in their arms. Waist high in sewage and stormwater, the Kim’s are forced to stay in a shelter for the night, only to be called back to work by the Park family. The following scenes build up to the climatic finale, with Bong Joon Ho throwing away the subtlety he had been utilizing throughout the first two acts. The scene opens with the Kim and Park family directly comparing their experiences, with Mrs. Park saying how horrible the rain was for ruining their trip, but then the next day being grateful for it as it cleared the smog in the city, while the Kim family lost all of their personal belongings to the storm and had to sleep in a shelter. The comparisons continue until finally the film reaches its climax. After the poor Kim daughter is murdered by the housekeeper’s husband in an act of revenge, the wealthy Park son begins to have a seizure. Mr. Park, seeing that his son needs to leave the scene, flips over the limp body of poor Mr. Kim’s daughter and grabs the car keys, but not before making a face of disgust of the smell of the poor. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Bong Joon Ho says “These [are the] moments where the basic respect you have for another human being is being shattered. Smell really reflects your life. It shows if you’re struggling, what kind of work you do. Even when you sense the smell of someone else, you don’t talk about it in the open, because it can be rude” (Lawless).

This is the breaking point for Mr. Kim, as he grabs the knife in a rage of fury and stabs Mr. Park, killing him. Realizing what he’s done, Mr. Kim goes into hiding in the Park family’s hidden basement bunker, forced to live out the rest of his days there. The house he once desired is now the prison in which he resides.

The final scenes wrap up the narrative quite well, with Ki-Woo saying that he had suffered permanent brain damage from an attack by the housekeeper’s husband, his sister had died, and his father had “gone missing.” The final moments of the film show Ki-Woo’s aspiration to save his father by saving money, attending college, getting a degree, obtaining a well-paying job, and then finally buying the Park family house and freeing his father from the bunker. In other words, the American dream.

And with that final scene, Bong Joon Ho’s message is clear: the rich are born rich, live rich, and will die rich, while the poor are born poor, struggle poor, and will die poor.

The finale tells the tale of a world where the poor, tired of fighting over the scraps of the wealthy, seek their revenge in a justified blood bath. Unfortunately, Bong Joon Ho

tells the story as if it were a true reflection to our current society, where the poor end up suffering the most in the end while the rich will go free, with nothing but a bad memory to show for it. The rich will move on, but the poor are left broken, separated, trapped in their lower-class hole in society, or even dead. Once again, the rich live rich, and the poor die poor.

The final scene where the son looks towards the horizon and dreams of buying the house to set his father free is just that. A dream. Bong Joon Ho uses this common film trope of looking into the horizon and being optimistic, but unlike Luke Skywalker, Ki-Woo lives in our real world. Although the film finishes with hope of economic equilibrium, Bong Joon Ho makes it clear that the final scene is nothing but a pipe dream in our money-driven society.

The film's massive critical and financial success has led to many innovations inside and outside the film industry. Our research has helped shape a discussion for what may be possible in the coming years for the film industry. Other outcomes include increased understandings of Parasite and how class is perceived in film. Parasite's success is not only a win for Korean filmmakers, but for the film industry as a whole – opening the doors for more foreign films to be accepted among the American audience and encouraging studio executives to take more risks on smaller, more human stories from diverse voices.

Discussion/Conclusion

As I say in my poster, this movie was a huge success, both critically and financially. It became so popular that it sparked a government housing reform for sub-basement apartments in Korea, which I believe is incredible. The idea that a piece of art such as a movie can spark such change is amazing to me. Of course, this paper doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of all of the implications from Parasite and the greater film industry as a whole, but I believe that it is a good starting point to further research how the art we create reflects the values that we hold so dearly. I believe that we as a film industry have a personal responsibility to tell these stories of underrepresented groups, and if we're not telling them, then we as an audience must support these stories by going and watching and listening to the storytellers that are making these films. I believe that these past few years, with movements such as BLM, #OscarsSoWhite, the Me-Too movement, and now Parasite, have paved the way for a more diverse, inclusive film industry that will tell better, more original stories that are sure to pay off critically, financially, and socially.

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