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16 December 2019

*Parasite*: Crossing the Lines of Class

In a world dictated by economic success, the system is set up to favour those with accreditation and social pedigree—anointing wealth and power into the hands of those who already possess it. How, then, do the poor break the shackles binding them to their vicious cycle of impoverishment—is persevering hope, unrelenting toil, and ambitious desire their gateway to better circumstances? In his satirical film *Parasite*, director and co-writer Bong Joon-ho attacks the lower classes' optimistic hope of upward social mobility freeing them from rigid class structures. **Although superficially presented as a parable of classism's tyranny over the poor, through the use of various cinematic techniques such as synecdoche, symbolism, mise-en-scene, and metonymy, Bong Joon-ho unveils *Parasite* to be a critique on the hope and ambition fostered by social mobility disillusioning the lower classes into believing they can escape the confines of a capitalistic system ignorant to the consequences engendered by its very existence.**

**The plot of *Parasite*, although hyperbolised to fit the conventions of the black horror-comedy genre, synecdochically portrays class struggle and the limits of social mobility by following the impoverished Kim family, the central characters, as they swindle their way into a higher class, occupied by the Park family.** The exposition of the movie begins with a shot of the window from a semi-basement house panning down to the protagonist Kim Ki-woo, the eldest son of the Kim family—the occupants of the house. Using a tracking shot, the audience is introduced to Kim Ki-jung, the youngest daughter, Kim

Ki-taek, the patriarch, and Kim Chung-sook, the matriarch of the family. From the onset of the film, the Kim family's economic standing is made apparent by their cramped semi-basement house and meagre-wage yielding part-time job of folding pizza boxes, a responsibility shared by all four formally unemployed members of the family. An unexpected visit paid by Ki-woo's affluent friend Min-hyuk marks the Kim family's turn of fortune as he gifts the family a "scholar's rock" or *suseok* (a token of material wealth) and offers Ki-woo his tutoring job at the Park household. Ambitious Ki-woo, armed with prestigious credentials forged by his sister Ki-jung, secures his place in the Park household after a performative display of his competence to the Park matriarch, Yeon-gyo. Playing on Yeon-gyo's naivete, Ki-woo plots Ki-jung's insinuation into the household, leading to the rising action in which the Kims usurp the jobs of the existing employees, all the while keeping their familial relationship concealed. Away on a camping trip, the Kims takeover the Park house, revelling in opulence and celebrating their hopeful socioeconomic ascent. This celebration is short-lived, however, as the central conflict unveils the former housekeeper Gook Moon-gwang and her husband Geun-sae to be illegal occupants of the secret bunker in the basement of the Parks' home—a metonymy for a class structure even lower than that of the Kims. The conflict unfurls as Moon-gwang discovers the Kims' familial relationship and swindling scheme, threatening to expose them to the Parks and culminates in the Kims and Gooks—the poor and poorer—scrambling to secure a means of survival at the mercy of the rich. Processing the class dissonance exemplified by the aftermath of a storm that wrecks the Kims home but gives the Parks a reason to celebrate outdoors, Ki-woo resolves to tie off the loose ends—represented by the basement occupants—threatening his class ascent. Ki-woo's failure to do so culminates in the climax in which Geun-sae, mourning Moon-gwang's death as a result of their struggle with the Kims, embarks on a murderous rampage—resulting in his

death along with that of Ki-Jung and Dong-ik's. In the falling action, Ki-woo, whom Geun-sae hit in the head with the scholar's rock, wakes up from a coma to the death of his sister, a fugitive father and a probation sentence for the Kim family's extortion of the Parks. The ending of *Parasite* comes to full-circle as the camera tilts down from the semi-basement window to Ki-woo writing Ki-taek, revealed to be occupying the Park house's basement (and by symbolic extension the Gooks' socioeconomic class), a letter about his ill-fated plan to escape the drudgeries of his socioeconomic rank.

**Alongside the symbolism of the title itself, the scholar's rock represents the Kims' desire to climb up the socioeconomic order and the hope propelling their belief that they can overcome the divides of class.** Initially, the film objectively portrays the Kims as the parasites, given the way they leech onto the Parks' life, capitalising on the Parks' naiveté and ignorance—a luxury bought by their wealth. The focal crisis, however, reveals the real parasites to be the upper class—of which the Parks are synecdochical—as they feed off the labour of the poor, taking advantage of the class inflicted labour roles the poor are pushed into whilst remaining blind to their struggle. Towards the end of the movie, though, the audience comes to realise the ultimate parasites prevailing in this narrative are the forms of ignorance exemplified by the upper class together with the ambition and desire that kills the lower class. In a twist of irony, the revelation of the multiple parasites in the film unveils the metonymy of its symbiosis with social stratification: each parasite, corresponding to each class, feeds off the other in a cycle that ultimately reinforces the existing system. Moreover, the scene in which Min-hyuk gifts the Kims a scholar's rock—the opening of the box bearing the scholar's rock paralleling the icon of the opening of Pandora's box—is analogous to the upper class feeding the lower classes the false hope of overcoming class boundaries. The composition of the frame in this scene, a shallow-focus close-up of Ki-woo staring intently at

the scholar's rock with Min-hyuk positioned between them in the background, illustrates the role of the rich as ignorant bystanders to the doomed opportunities—and corresponding consequences—they piteously donate to the poor. The deceptive nature of the desire and faith represented by the rock is exposed when Ki-woo, fatally assaulted by the rock, nevertheless survives the attack as a tragic display of how he will spend the remainder of his life enslaved to pursuing a fantasy that will never be within his reach. Both these elements work in perfect symbiosis to nourish a broken system that promises liberation from social stratification but never allows it to be realised.

**Supplementing the disenchantment of social mobility, Bong's symbolic use of water as a jarring jerk to reality brings to sharp relief the disparity in how mundane events disproportionately affect the upper and lower class.** The camera captures a long shot of the Parks running down the hillside driveway and tilts down to the sewer spewing sewage. This scene, contiguous with the shot of the Kims trudging the descent to their home to discover it deluged in sewage water, epitomises the upper class' existence necessitates—and therefore dictates—the struggles of the classes under its subjugation. This disparity is further exemplified when juxtaposed with the preceding scene of the Kims watching the storm in awe of its beauty—oblivious to the implications of this storm as a result of being cocooned in the shelter of the Parks' home. Unveiling the perils of ignorance stemming from the exclusivity of affluence, the water serves to break Ki-woo's illusion of economic ascension's attainability. When he picks up the scholar's rock from the sewage water, Ki-woo realises the only way for his ambition to come to fruition is for his well-intended desire to morph to machiavellian ambition. His desire having culminated in Geun-sae's murderous rampage, in the resolution Ki-woo puts the scholar's rock in the water

as a motif signifying him indulging in his foredoomed fantasy of buying the Park house and coming into possession of all the traits typified by the rich.

**Bong Joon-ho's use of a variety of camera movements, lighting, shot framing and balance, incorporates several juxtaposing parallels that delineate the Kim and Park families hierarchy in the class order.** The movie begins by establishing the Kim family's, the central characters', class with a medium shot of a birdcage fashioned as a drying rack for socks with the focus shifting from the drying socks in the foreground to the window of the semi-basement house in the background, finally panning down to the protagonist Kim Ki-woo. The rack focus and pan in this establishing shot connote the Kim family's state of living: the birdcage juxtaposed with the window's view of the world outside represents the sense of entrapment engendered by their destitution, as well as foreshadows the Kim family's inability to liberate themselves from the lower class despite their best efforts. This portrayal of their socio-economic status is further built upon by the use of close frame shots to depict the Kim family, complemented by dark lighting in concert with the cramped, unkempt and cluttered background of the frame they occupy. Conversely, the Park family is always depicted in open frame shots, bright lighting and in the background of the vast space of their home. Never once appearing together to occupy the same shot, the scattered depiction of the Park family further illustrates that the isolation engendered by wealth permeates not just social standing but also relationships. Additionally, in a more literal and inconspicuous interpretation of class divide, Bong Joon-ho manipulates the setting of scenes to portray an actual line dividing the upper and lower class. This staging is most notable in the scene in which Moon-gwang and Ki-woo appear on one side of the frame and Yeon-gyo on the other—the partition between them illustrated by the converging edge of the floor-to-ceiling windows. Pervading even the undercurrents of everyday life, this ubiquitous manifestation of

class divide accentuates the Kims' unrelenting hope to defy the odds despite glaring signs pointing to their inevitable failure due to classism's inescapability.

**Bong Joon-ho's use of metonymy and index depicted through the motif of staircases and smell further emphasises the omnipresence of socioeconomic hierarchy; the extremities of these motifs work in conjunction to underscore the distinctions in class.** The Kims' long ascent to the Parks' hilltop house and exhausting trudge down to their semi-basement home emblemize metonymic associations of movement along the socioeconomic ladder. By contrast, the Parks are never seen descending stairs: connoting the rich's solidification in their rank as well as insinuating the capitalistic system ensures the upper class' position in today's meritocratic society. Supplementing this distinction of socioeconomic rank is Park Dong-ik's mention of Kim Ki-taek's "smell"—an index for the limitations of the poor taken for granted by the rich as it's a presupposition bought by their privilege. In the climax, Dong-ik, never forgetting his socioeconomic dominance even amidst chaos, turns his nose against the smell of the poor when he reaches for his car keys underneath Geun-sae's corpse. This indexical gesture inundates Ki-taek with the reminder of his social standing, elucidating the efforts of the poor to prevail over social stratification will always be undermined by ingrained prejudices against the lower classes. The internalisation of this prejudice is revealed when, upon discovering the Gooks' habitation of the Parks' basement, Ki-taek rebukes Geun-sae with the question—"You don't have a plan?" The irony of this question is rooted in the idea of the poor believing they can "plan" their way out of their problems in the face of a capitalistic system that encourages the success of the less talented individual over the more resourceful one—demonstrated by the death of Ki-jung, the member of the Kim family most likely to attain social mobility. Ki-taek and Ki-woo's recurrent reference to a plan in the context of alleviating their economic struggles further

propagates the idea that socioeconomic ascent is possible; however, the metonymy of the staircases and smell juxtaposes this belief by epitomising the inescapable rigidity of social stratification.

**Conveying an unsettling sense of futility, the ending of *Parasite* harks back to the verity of social mobility's misrepresentation as attainable, despite modern society's commentary purporting the opposite.** The variety of narrative and cinematic tools employed to assert this theme is in itself evidence of the profuse propaganda engaging the hopefuls of the lower class, represented by Ki-woo, in a pipe-dream that will never be realised. The more perceptive constituents of the lower class, depicted by Geun-sae, are quick to discern the system will never recognise much less reward their effort and so numb themselves with complacency derived from the diminutive comforts of their class. Through the meticulous use of cinematic techniques and semiotics, Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* portrays the undercurrents of class disparity and the dog-eat-dog competition amongst the lower classes to ascend to a socio-economic sphere that will always remind the poor they don't belong.

Works Cited

*Parasite*. Directed by Bong Joon-ho. Performances by Song Kang-ho, Choi Woo-shik, Lee Sun-kyun, Park So-dam. Barunson E&A Corp, CJ Entertainment, Neon, 2019.