

**Laughing Until We Cry:  
A Reflection on the Humor and Cruelty of *Parasite***

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*“When you turn on the light, the cockroaches scatter.”<sup>1</sup>*

The first shot of *Parasite* (dir. Bong Joon Ho, 2019) focuses on the Kim family’s basement apartment. This dark and dingy living arrangement straddles the space between the above- and below-ground: what on the inside looks like ventilation windows near the ceiling, on the outside ironically aligns neatly with the drainage holes on the street. Through this shot, the status of the Kim family is apparent even to viewers who are unfamiliar with Korean urban architecture and its social implications: they are caught between two worlds. If the viewer still has doubts about their social status, the next shot of a stinkbug being flicked away unceremoniously should make it unambiguously clear what the director is aiming to get across: the Kim family is repulsive just as the stink bugs are—they can only hope to survive in the shadows.

By contrast, the Park family lives in a mansion that screams of luxuriousness. The mansion sits stately on a hill so that visitors have to climb a flight of stairs even after entering through the front gate, whereupon they arrive at a green space filled with sunlight. The minimalist furnishings and expansive floor-to-ceiling windows of the Park mansion stand in stark contrast to the clutter of the Kim basement, a reflection of their extreme differences: to reach the Parks, one must ascend the social ladder, whereas one descends to get to the Kims.

The irony of *Parasite* is that while the Kims’ social standing leaves a lot to be desired—they freeload on whatever WiFi signal overflows from the nearby café, and they open the windows whenever the sanitary department is fumigating the streets to get some free insecticide—their ingenuity does not. Four-time college entrance exam taker Ki Woo (Woo-sik Choi) becomes the Parks’ tutor by using a fake diploma that his sister Ki Jung (So-dam Park) photoshopped to gain the trust of Mrs. Park (Yeo-jeong Jo); with this, the door for the Kims’ parasitic takeover of the Parks is opened both literally and figuratively.

The Parks, on the other hand, live in prosperity thanks to Mr. Park (Sun-kyun Lee), who is the CEO of a tech company. Because of their disposable income, virtually all aspects of their lives are outsourced to outside help: in addition to the aforementioned tutor, they also employ a driver and a housekeeper (Jeong-eun Lee). Ki Woo’s ingenuity leads him to discover that these positions can all be filled by members of his own family, and he schemes to have his sister Ki Jung become the Parks’ art therapist, his mother (Hye-jin Jang) the housekeeper, and his father (Kang-ho Song) the driver, all of whom pretend not to know each other while in the Parks’ employment.

All of the above is just Act One, which ends with the Kims’ successfully taking over the Parks’ mansion, just as the stinkbug has taken over the dining table in the opening scene. Yet just as cockroaches only venture out when it is dark but scatter when the light comes on, the Kims in Acts Two and Three become bugs caught in the spotlight, whose fates take a downward turn overnight. *Parasite* does not adhere to conventional screenwriting norms, leaving the viewers in shock at its denouement.

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<sup>1</sup> *Parasite*, directed by Bong Joon Ho (Barunson E&A, 2019), <https://play.google.com/>.

“Money is the iron that smooths out all the creases.”<sup>2</sup>

Director Bong Joon Ho does not shy away from stating that *Parasite* is a film about the rich and the poor, that it is “essentially about capitalism.”<sup>3</sup> While the most obvious parasitic relationship in the film is the Kims who prey on the Parks, can it not be said that the Parks also prey on the laborers who work for them? Says Bong, “They can't even wash dishes, they can't drive themselves, so they leech off the poor family's labor.”<sup>4</sup> Both families are parasites, only that one is wealthy and so can sustain the illusion that they are not.

Yet *Parasite* is no believer in Marxist class warfare. At least in the narrative of the film, the Parks are not shown to accumulate wealth in nefarious ways, nor do they intentionally short-change the laborers. On the contrary, their wealth seems to be the result of honest work, and they are always courteous to the help, never interacting with them in a condescending way. Does *Parasite*, then, condemn the Kims? Is their poverty the result of laziness? No! For in fact the Kims in the film are a group of proactive go-getters who bond together to improve their social standing. Furthermore, objectively speaking, they do seem competent in their professional skills (Ki Woo really can teach English and Ki Jung art, Mrs. Kim cooks well and Mr. Kim is a competent driver).

So if both families do not fit the mold of traditional tragic heroes marked by fatal flaws, then wherein lies the problem? Perhaps the answer is that they are all trapped in a capitalistic society and cannot escape. Or to put it more accurately, it is the universal system that forces them to parasitize each other, sucking each other's blood.

The last shot in the entire film lingers on Ki Woo. He is writing a letter, vowing to work hard and one day buy the mansion. Yet what seems to be a passionate goal from his character's perspective, to the viewer is nothing more than a fantasy, for at the same time, the end-credits song *A Glass of Soju* plays, singing about the cost that Ki Woo must pay in order to obtain his dream: “Everyday I burn myself out / Till my muscles reduce to ash / Working day and night / Yet I clench them again / My two tough calloused hands.”<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, the original title of the song was “564 Years,” referring to the number of years Ki Woo would have to work to save enough money to buy the mansion.<sup>6</sup>

This unit of pricing might be familiar to many young people in Asian societies; faced with greater and greater wealth divides and housing-to-wages ratios, many articles also talk about the cost of purchasing real estate in whatever city in terms of how many years one must work to save enough money to do so. In truth, although Bong's films start off by following the conventions of a thriller, action, or horror film, they inevitably end in stark reality, critiquing contemporary society. Likewise, *Parasite* is a work of fiction, but its referent is as real as can be. Although the Kim family basement apartment was a movie set, many of its props—the doors, signage, windows, etc.—were in fact salvaged from real-life basement apartments in Korea slated for demolition.<sup>7</sup> The nature of these real, found objects then extend outward from the screen, resonating with the destitute in today's society, especially

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> ET Live, “Bong Joon-ho - Parasite | Golden Globes 2020 Full Backstage Interview,” YouTube video, 4:19, January 5, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v99pfLXmSN8>.

<sup>4</sup> Adele Ankers, “Parasite: Bong Joon-ho Reveals the Meaning Behind the Title of the Oscar-Nominated Film,” *IGN*, January 31, 2020, <https://www.ign.com/articles/parasite-bong-joon-ho-reveals-the-meaning-behind-the-title-of-the-oscar-nominated-film>.

<sup>5</sup> @ParasiteMovie (Twitter), Twitter post, December 17, 2019, <https://twitter.com/parasitemovie/status/1206986306414202880>.

<sup>6</sup> Hunter Harris, “Parasite's Choi Woo-shik Is Optimistic About the Movie's Overwhelming Ending,” *Vulture*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.vulture.com/2019/10/parasite-movie-choi-woo-shik-bong-joon-ho-ending.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Gabriella Paiella, “Parasite Director Bong Joon-ho on the Art of Class Warfare,” *GQ*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.gq.com/story/parasite-director-bong-joon-ho-interview>.

the young adults who are struggling.

Bong describes this kind of sentiment as a “surefire kill” (*hwag-in sa-sar*), as in how a villain in an action film might shoot someone from afar and afterwards fire again in close proximity to ensure that the victim is undoubtedly dead. Bong in effect wants the viewer to feel the same kind of anxiety and dread that he feels, regardless of whether it is about the climate crisis, human rights, or wealth inequality. “Making the audience feel something naked and raw is one of the greatest powers of cinema,” Bong says, “It’s not about telling you how to change the world or how you should act because something is bad, but rather showing you the terrible, explosive weight of reality.”<sup>8</sup>

*“I kept laughing. Yet, when I went back and watched the news reports, I didn’t laugh.”<sup>9</sup>*

*Parasite* is not a horror film. On the contrary, a dark humor pervades its frames. Yet the humor hides what is underneath—a reality that couldn’t be more cruel. Faced with such a reality—faced with those among us who are driven to despair for economic, social, or other reasons, what answer can our faith provide?

Perhaps, the Teacher (that is, Qoheleth) provides the most resonant response: “What advantage do the wise have over the foolish? Or what do the poor gain by knowing how to conduct themselves before the living?” (Ecclesiastes 6:8, CEB) Or, in the words of *Parasite*, “What advantage does the ingenious Ki Woo have over the naïve Mrs. Park? Or what does the poor Kim family have to gain in knowing how to strive by climbing upwards?”

Qoheleth sees human society for what it is, regardless of whether it is the ancient Near East 3,000 years ago or the capitalistic society today. Qoheleth remarks cruelly, not unlike the “surefire kill” of Bong, that regardless of one’s standing in life, “the same fate awaits everyone.” (Eccl 9:3) If there is anyone who understands the heavy burden hidden behind *Parasite*’s dark humor, it is Qoheleth, for there is nothing more cruel than real life.

Of course, the Teacher does not end his musings on such a note; he later teaches the people to live life to the fullest and to eat, drink, and be merry. Yet in all the times appointed for every matter under heaven, the Teacher remarks that there is “a time for crying and a time for laughing” (Eccl 3:4). *Parasite*, like a modern-day prophet, strips away the superficial garments of our contemporary capitalistic world and tells us that, faced with the undeniably cruel reality underneath, sometimes we can only laugh until we cry.

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<sup>8</sup> E. Alex Jung, “Bong Joon Ho on Why He Wanted *Parasite* to End With a ‘Surefire Kill,’” *Vulture*, January 14, 2020, <https://www.vulture.com/2020/01/parasite-ending-explained-by-bong-joon-ho.html>.

<sup>9</sup> *Parasite*.