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Critical Analysis of *Parasite* (2019)

Parasite (Natively titled 기생충, and romanized as *Gisaengchung*) is a South Korean thriller film written by director Bong Joon-Ho and producer Han Jin-Won released in 2019. The film follows a lower-class South Korean family in Seoul as they conspire to become employed by a wealthy, upper-class family through subterfuge and forgery. The film particularly touches on and explores themes of capitalism, greed, class-conflict and blindness to it, and social inequality. The film uses careful implementation of storytelling and mise-en-scene to explore these themes and topics.

Parasite's story opens to the Kim family, an impoverished family of unemployed Koreans living in a basement apartment in Seoul, downstairs of the street itself, lamenting the loss of their access to the free wifi provided by their neighbor, which renders them unable to access Whatsapp for responding to employment opportunities. Through a lead provided by a friend of the family, the Kim family's son, Ki-Woo, conspires to pose as a student of Yongsei University interning as an english tutor in order to gain employment from the wealthy, upper class Park family, teaching their daughter Da-Hye. The Parks, in contrast with the Kims, live in a walled mansion on top of a steep hill, in which entrants must scale at least 3 different staircases to get to the ground floor after scaling the hill. Through subterfuge and forgery, Ki-Woo brings the rest of the Kim family into the employ of the Park family, forging their relationships as being

unrelated by blood and only connected professionally, causing other lower-class workers' employment with the Parks to be terminated in the process, culminating in the Kims finding a bunker beneath the Parks' home in which a family they conspired to have terminated lives. As the film progresses, the Kims' parasitic relationship with the Parks begins to be aggravated by occasional Faux Pas from the Parks.

The story of Parasite works in several ways to touch upon the tropes the film specifically seeks to explore. The Kims' situation in relation to the Parks is established quickly through the script, with the film immediately opening to the consequences of the dire financial situation the Kims find themselves in. When the Parks are introduced, Ki-Woo does not immediately meet them, instead first being met by their housekeeper, who expounds upon the history of the house that the Parks own, speaking eagerly and almost fanatically about the prior owner of the home having been it's architect, a presumably celebrated man in South Korea. Later, the housekeeper, Gook Moon-Gwang, and her husband, Oh Guen-Sae, expound upon their own socioeconomic standing. When the Kims discover Guen-Sae's bunker underneath the Parks' home, they find themselves in an uncomfortable parallel to the lower class family that they had forced out of employment for their own gain, as Guen-sae speaks about his inability to find employment after having lost his own business, reminding the Kims' patriarch, Ki-taek, of his own inability to find employment. As the confrontation between the two families comes to a head, the two families violently strike at each other, and are only prevented from concluding their violence against one another by the sudden arrival of the Parks. With the arrival of the Parks, the Kims return to their home in a monsoon, only to find their home drowned and ruined by sewer-water and overflow from the streets outside. This prompts the family to respond quickly when they are requested as

labor by the comparatively untouched Park family, whose home is totally untouched by the flood. The Kims, during their time with the Park family once more, further experience aggravation as they recall their conflict with Guen-sae and Moon-Gwang and are forced to serve their employers' opulent lifestyle after theirs had been devastated by the prior monsoon. Guen-sae later returns, murdering the Kim family's daughter, Ki-Jung, before dying in his attack. The Park family patriarch, Dong-ik, or "Mr. Park," then attempts to tend to his son, Da-song, who is suffering a seizure from the stress of the attack, but in his attempt to triage his son, makes a faux pas by grimacing at the smell of Guen-sae's corpse, after having earlier made another faux pas by commenting on the scent of Ki-taek as "crossing the line," a similar offense to some of the issues Mr. Park sees in other lower class workers. Having watched his daughter be murdered by a fellow "parasite," having lost his home, and now seeing his employer offended by the scent of lower class workers such as him, Ki-taek murders Mr. Park, before retreating to the hidden bunker to avoid arrest, ending the film in the same place where Guen-sae found himself trapped when he was introduced.

Throughout the film, the script establishes the struggle between the Kims and their desire for upward socioeconomic mobility, and the inherent difficulty of that, while at the same time portraying their relationship with the Parks as a parasitic one. At the same time, the Kims find themselves in near constant conflict with other members of their own place in South Korea's economic system, having multiple other workers fired so they can take their place, and even directly murdering some to protect themselves. Within this system, not only are the Kims required to parasitize the Park family, but they also parasitize other workers. However, the film also establishes that the Park family cannot do without lower class workers. The Park matriarch,

Choi Yeon-gyo, finds herself unable to cook a proper meal, and cannot do dishes, and Mr. Park cannot drive himself. In this way, the Parks themselves are parasites of the lower classes.

In addition to the script, the mise-en-scène of the film also creates a deeper meaning and more extensively emphasizes the socioeconomic status of the characters and context of the film. Stairways, for example, play a significant role in establishing the social and economic hierarchy of the characters of the film. The “downstairs” positioning of the Kim family’s home compared to the Park family’s home is a literal manifestation of the metaphorical positioning of the families within the class structure of the South Korean economic system. As the Kims and Guen-sae must rise temporarily to the dwelling of the Parks to feed like parasites, the Parks must also drag the Kims from their lower dwelling to their own higher one to feed from their labor like parasites. Similarly, Guen-sae’s hidden bunker is several stairwells deep below the hill on which the Park family lives, perhaps even lower than the Kim family’s own basement apartment dwelling, showing his and Moon-gwang’s own lower positioning within the lower class they share with the Kim family. Through the consequences of not only his own intra-class conflict with Guen-sae and Moon-gwang, but the inter-class conflict with Mr. Park, Ki-taek is forced into the even deeper, more distressed socioeconomic position that Guen-sae once occupied.

In addition to stairwells, the cramped space of the Kims’ apartment and the small living area of Guen-sae’s bunker similarly create a sense of imprisonment and claustrophobia within their impoverished socioeconomic status, whereas the free, open-spaced living arrangement of the Park family home and their wide, gracious lawn give a sense of freedom, isolated far away from the lower class and given space to roam. Their freedom from the limitations of the lower

class is literally manifested within their own wealth through their home's arrangement. This freedom is further shown through the story, as they quickly fire and hire whichever lower class workers they wish as quickly as they find convenient, and are able to rush off to a campsite outside of Seoul whenever they please. When a camping trip is "ruined" by a monsoon rendering the land inconvenient for a birthday party for their son, the Parks quickly return to home with little notice or forethought. This freedom comes totally from their wealth, and at the same time, at the expense of the lower class workers they have hired.

Parasite (2019) stands as a masterful cinematic work, that, through its' influential exploration of its choice material, shows a deeper insight into the consequences of South Korea's economic system. Through careful and meticulous storytelling, director Bong Joon-ho challenges the societal norms of his country's system, and provokes a deeper introspection from the audience. The film's exploration of social hierarchy and economic inequality turns it into a poignant critique of contemporary South Korean society and the ramifications of its inherent function.

Works Cited

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