

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
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Parasite / Gisaengchung (dir. Bong Joon-ho, 2019)

The Kim Family (Poor)

Ki-woo (son): Choi Woo-sik: Bong's *Okja* (17); popular action flick *Train to Busan* (16)
Ki-jung (daughter): Park So-dam: Possession thriller *The Priests* (15); mystery *The Silenced* (15)
Ki-taek (dad): Song Kang-ho: Huge Korean movie star, central to many of Bong's films
Chun-sook (mom): Jang Hye-jin: Tiny parts in great dramas *Secret Sunshine* (07) and *Poetry* (10)

The Park Family (Wealthy)

Yeon-kyo (mom): Jo Yeo-jeong: *The Servant* (10); lots of awards buzz in Korea for *Parasite*
Dong-ik (dad): Lee Sun-kyun: Most famous as a corrupt policeman in *A Hard Day* (14)
Da-hye (daughter): Jung Ji-so: Japanese Occupation drama *The Tiger* (15) is her only prior film
Da-song (son): Jung Hyun-jun: First-time actor, becoming a media darling in South Korea

Other Characters

Moon-gwang (servant): Lee Jeong-un: Arguably better-known in Korean film than her mistress
Geun-se (husband): Park Myeong-hoon: Even Korean viewers unlikely to recognize him
Min (the first tutor): Park Seo-joon: Big TV and film star; like his character, he's "elite"
Yoon (the first driver): Park Keun-rok: Relatively new actor; already his second film with Bong

Off Camera

Writer/Director: Bong Joon-ho: One of South Korea's star directors, famed for mixing genres
Cinematographer: Hong Kyung-po: Major figure in Korea; works with several top directors
Film Editor: Yang Jin-mo: Most of his major credits have been action or military films
Production Design: Ha Jun-lee: His sets for this film have already sparked big talk in Hollywood
Original Score: Jung Jae-il: One of many *Parasite* team members who worked first on *Okja*

A word about South Korean cinema...

South Korean cinema is often described as having two "Golden Ages." One stretches from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s. Many of its famous titles are melodramas or domestic dramas, such as *The Housemaid*, but they aren't quaint. Many movies from this era took major thematic risks, challenging prevailing social and sexual norms and/or boldly addressing the recent wars.

After a few decades of what you might call a slump (induced in large part by strict government censorship and the glutting of local cinemas with US fare), Korean cinema roared back in the 21st century, generating several art-house triumphs saluted all over the world *plus* a vibrant commercial cinema of action films, police thrillers, and comedies, eyed closely by Hollywood.

Where does *Parasite* director Bong Joon-ho fit into this...

“Fitting in” is a tough concept to apply to Bong, since his movies have always defied traditional genres. It’s no accident that his first movie came out in 2000, just as the industry rebounded from new laws protecting Korean cinema from Hollywood competition, and independent films with unusual sensibilities got more support. Bong’s movies—including *Parasite*—play to Korean audiences as mall-style blockbusters, though the US treats him as an “art” filmmaker. Major Hollywood talents have sought him out, and his previous two movies were in English (one produced by Netflix). For Bong, then, *Parasite* is sort of a homecoming back to Korea.

Other films by Bong Joon-ho...

Barking Dogs Never Bite (2000) – This oddball sorta-comedy offers, like *Parasite*, a peculiar and sometimes brutal analysis of South Korean society, with particular attention to social class, and how living spaces reflect wealth and status. The main character is an unemployed academic with a pregnant wife. In his mounting stress (don’t read this, Susan!) he decides to murder the loud, yappy dog of a neighbor in his building...but he picks the wrong dog. And someone else in the building is picking off dogs, too. And the female residents have had enough of all this.

Memories of Murder (2003) – This serial-killer drama elicited global acclaim, dramatizing an actual (and rare) case of such a murderer in 1980s South Korea and alleging that corruption and incompetence among the police were partly to blame for the killings never being solved. Amazingly, the perpetrator of these murders was finally caught in South Korea just this year!

The Host (2006) – Sort of a Korean *Godzilla*, but the monster has been produced by the combined US/South Korea military alliance dumping all kinds of toxic sludge into the Han River; once again, Bong uses a very popular, even “low” genre to launch a societal critique. He also refuses the myth that average citizens would rise nobly to the task of defeating a shared threat.

Mother (2009) – A hit all over the world and a major prize-winner for its lead actress (including in the US), this movie combines Bong’s repeated interests in justice and violence with a rare dip into women-centered melodrama, as the title character seeks to defend her mentally disabled son from charges that he raped and murdered a schoolgirl—but *is* he innocent? Is the mother?

Snowpiercer (2013) – Bong’s first English-language movie, based on a French graphic novel and soon to be a Netflix series, is a sci-fi thriller, a parable of ecological crisis, and (like *Parasite*) an undisguised class critique. After an effort to halt global warming accidentally freezes the whole planet, the only survivors inhabit a high-speed, climate-controlled train that keeps circling the Earth. Even here, the Haves rule tyrannically over the Have-Nots, who are plotting a rebellion from the back of the train. Stars include major Bong champion Tilda Swinton, *The Help*’s Octavia Spencer, *Rocketman*’s Jamie Bell, and *Captain America* himself, Chris Evans.

Okja (2017) – Like *Snowpiercer*, *Okja* has a quasi-science fictional premise: in the near future, as the world’s food supply runs out, a powerful corporation attempts to breed a synthetic brand of adorable “super pigs,” a sustainable and delicious alternative to meat. But of course, these animals are treated horribly—vegans everywhere love this movie—and it’s up to one small Korean farmer’s daughter and a ragtag band of animal activists to rescue the pig *and* topple the evil corporation (headed again by Tilda Swinton). Think *Charlotte’s Web* combined with *1984*, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, and Occupy Wall Street. You can rent this any time on Netflix.

Facts about *Parasite* you may appreciate...

Bong's idea for *Parasite* began with his own experiences tutoring children in families wealthier than his own. Not only did he get a first-hand and often disarmingly intimate glimpse of how the rich lived, but he came to think of himself as a sort of working-class "parasite" living off the wages (and also the intellectual shortcomings) of his patrons. As he developed the idea, he realized you could also reverse the power dynamic, seeing the rich as living parasitically off poor people's labor. (Bong's family, incidentally, was much more advantaged than the Kim family in *Parasite*, including several academics and distinguished artists, though less comfy than the Parks.) Here is the text Bong composed as part of *Parasite*'s global press release:

For people of different circumstances to live together in the same space is not easy. It is increasingly the case in this sad world that humane relationships based on co-existence or symbiosis cannot hold, and one group is pushed into a parasitic relationship with another. In the midst of such a world, who can point their finger at a struggling family, locked in a fight for survival, and call them parasites? It's not that they were parasites from the start. They are our neighbors, friends, and colleagues, who have merely been pushed to the edge of a precipice. As a depiction of ordinary people who fall into an unavoidable commotion, this film is: a comedy without clowns, a tragedy without villains, all leading to a violent tangle and a headlong plunge down the stairs. You are all invited to this unstoppably fierce tragicomedy.

Virtually everything location you see in *Parasite* was built from scratch, including the posh home of the Park family. (The architect they keep invoking is fictional.) Every room, wall, corner, and stairwell of the house was designed for the maximum impression of "open space" even as the characters find seemingly infinite perches for spying on each other. The wide but low-ceilinged living room is designed on purpose to have almost the same visual proportion as a movie screen, since the Parks' lifestyle is, for many people, unreachable Hollywood fantasy. This is an unusual degree of original set construction; most crews would modify an existing house. However, as a student of mine noticed, [competing media accounts](#) suggest there were more digital and modular dimensions to the set-building than some of *Parasite*'s PR admits.

Bong's team, led by Ha Jun-lee (who gave this [great interview](#) about his process on this movie), also built the Kims' sub-basement apartment, a close replica of many such units in Korean cities, including one that Bong shared with some roommates after college. The elevated toilet is a true-to-life detail, albeit slightly exaggerated. (Bong calls it "the temple of excrement," up there on its own platform.) Many such apartments only get 15-30 minutes of sunlight per day. Indeed, the entire *neighborhood* is a constructed set, since they couldn't flood a real one!

Unusually, Bong's editor consulted in person throughout the 77 days it took to shoot *Parasite*, suggesting shots or scenes that could be axed before they were filmed, and discussing with Bong some different approaches the actors might take to their scenes. The huge range of tones in *Parasite* remains a challenge to balance, but it helps for the editor to have had early input.

Parasite was the first Korean film to win at Cannes, in what the jury (led by *Birdman* and *The Revenant* director Alejandro González Iñárritu) described as a unanimous decision. Hopes are high that it will also yield South Korea's first-ever, long-overdue nomination in the renamed International Film category at the Oscars. The team is pushing for Picture and Director, too.

Broad conversation topics about *Parasite*...

Who is the “Parasite”?: You probably saw this one coming! Did you see the Kim family as leeching off the money and opportunity they dishonestly wheedle away from the Parks? Did you feel the Parks would be helpless without the work of people like the Kims, or the other service workers they displace? And speaking of them, how did your idea about “parasitism” in the film change (or not) once you discovered what’s been going on in the basement?

Gender and Patriarchy: The frictions around social class are the most obvious inroad into *Parasite*, but the movie has much to say about the chauvinism baked into its characters’ lives. Note how the Kim parents, even though they seem to extend similar affection to both their children, can’t help salivating over Ki-woo’s “perfect” friend Min, an alleged paragon who lusts after his young female tutee. In the Park household, not only is the father relatively disconnected and the mother almost fogged out by her lack of practical function in the home, but both parents perpetually encourage the slightest talent in their young son (is he really a great artist?) while sometimes forgetting to even feed their daughter. I think it’s debatable whether *Parasite* totally works its way out of patriarchal thinking, even as the movie indicts it. The last scenes are built entirely around the romance of father-son unity; in a minor but revealing decision, the two top-billed actors in the end credits are the men who play the dads!

English and Assimilation: The Park family, especially the mother, sometimes drop random phrases in English as a kind of evidence of global sophistication. (Compare this to how fairly or unfairly using “foreign” phrases in casual American conversation is often seen as a marker of education and/or pretension.) Ki-woo and Ki-jung immediately recognize that the Park family will receive them more avidly if they use the Americanized names “Kevin” and “Jessica.” How can we read this motif against the fact that this is Bong’s return to Korean-language film, after two big-budget, résumé -building films in English with major US stars?

Climate Disaster: The rainstorm that initially feels like an almost clichéd element of atmosphere during the Parks’ surprise return home (*on a dark and stormy night...!*) gradually shifts from background to foreground. We realize too late this storm is a genuinely catastrophic event, especially for poor folks who live on literally lower ground than the Parks on their high hill. Bong stages the flood with such intensity and scale that I imagined the film was changing course yet again, into a kind of Noah’s Ark parable of survival. Still, I’ve heard some people argue you could almost remove the storm from *Parasite* and its plot would still make sense. Does this feel like a crucial element to how you interpret the film, or a lavish digression?

Technology and Communication: The film has some fun at the expense of Ki-woo’s constant, openly sexual texting with his young tutee, Da-hye, though she starts most of the exchanges. This thread sustains the satire of tech-addicted kids that began in the opening sequence, with Ki-woo and Ki-jung desperately seeking free WiFi in their apartment. Compared, though, to Park Da-hye’s addiction to her cellphone, which the movie lampoons, the fluency that men and boys maintain in outmoded languages of Morse code and telegraphy turn out to be life-savers. Is this yet another instance where a girl “texting” is seen as frivolous and salacious, but a boy or a man “texting” is ingenious and effective? Do you think *Parasite* makes any overall statement about modern technology? (Moon-gwang also uses it very cleverly.)

Impersonation: Mr. Park and Mr. Kim, dressed as “Native Americans” to delight little Da-song at his party, culminate a theme of imposture that runs through the film. The women are especially good improv players: Ki-jung can whip up a “college transcript” in no time, and Chun-sook figures out how to make sirloin ram-don, which she’s never heard of. Meanwhile, men often discuss fatherhood as a routine they must master, to placate their kids and wives. Though both dads express this idea several times, Mr. Park ultimately takes great offense at Mr. Kim’s presuming to relate to him, and specifically to his comment that Mr. Park is “just trying to do his best” with this silly party. Mr. Park puts Mr. Kim in his place, reminding him forcefully that he is a paid servant, as though class and power are *real*, not play-acted games.

Violence: I didn’t warn you about the violent climax of *Parasite* because we agreed at the prior meeting that I wouldn’t tip you off to any of the plot turns in this very twisty movie. Of course the bloodbath at the birthday celebration is tough to sit through, but do you think the violence is crucial to the movie’s themes and its story’s trajectory, or did it feel gratuitous to you? A relevant comparison-point might be 2017’s *Get Out*—like *Parasite*, a commercial thriller that also became a critical and awards sensation, with an examination of race in the US that shares some features with *Parasite*’s diagnosis of unsustainable class disparity. If you saw both films, how would you compare their bloody finales, or their overall themes?

Some suggestive details from *Parasite*...

Image: The first shot of *Parasite* is of dirty laundry, in all its literal and figurative dimensions, as what the movie is about to “air.” Furthermore, it entails a camera movement *downward*, which is a direction so much of the movie takes: the Kims’ travels up and down the social ladder, the revelations in the basement, the mudslides of rain, the tragic conclusions for all...

Design: The Kims’ job assembling pizza boxes has a precursor in Bong’s work. His contribution to the anthology film *Tokyo!* (2008) was about a Japanese shut-in whose apartment is filled with towers of pizza boxes he orders over time, to avoid going outside. That short film was widely seen as a comment on alarm expressed throughout Japanese society about growing numbers of people (from unemployed adults to gaming-obsessed kids) who stay inside their walls...but *Parasite* uses the same object of the pizza box to make an economic point about threadbare job opportunities. It is also significant that this object bridges two films set in Japan and South Korea, two nations whose historical frictions continue through the present.

Space: Not only is the Kims’ apartment smaller and more cluttered than the Parks’ airy home, but they have a tendency to crowd the *frame* of the movie, too. For instance, in the episode with the girl running the pizza service, more and more family members show up in the initially spacious shot until they bully her into accepting their shoddy work. You might even see the Kims as *invading* the space of the screen, one by one, just as they invade the Parks.

Design: When we finally get a full look at the Parks’ dining room table, you might notice it has ten chairs: a ghostly echo of the ten major characters in the film, though the whole point is that the four Parks, the four Kims, the housekeeper, and her husband will *never* sit together. I also like how the skeletal design of the chairs, totally in keeping with the Parks’ minimalist aesthetic, means they have no back at all: chic objects offering no actual support whatsoever.

Music: *Parasite* enlists completely different instruments almost every time it uses music. A kind of harpsichord sound accompanies Ki-woo's first visit to seek work with the Parks. When his sister meets her new art pupil, the soundtrack fills with anxious, hand-plucked strings. The revelation of Ki-jung's underwear in Mr. Park's car prompts a surge of loud brass. Other sounds (piano, Theremin, children's choirs, cellos played with bows) get featured "solos," such that the score seems totally inconsistent...much as the *genre* of film *Parasite* inhabits keeps changing on us. A major exception happens as the storm escalates, when several of the instruments that have previously been featured separately are all blended into the agitated music. I took this as a sonic hint that this event is "bigger" than everything else, marking an escalation but also a turning-point across every conflict and character arc already in the film.

Lighting: The first time we see the entrance to the Parks' secret basement-beneath-a-basement, the portal is an absolute void of blackness...and it remains one almost every time we return to it during the film. There's an implication here, through lighting, that Moon-gwang and her husband inhabit not just a dungeon but a *void*, a *netherworld*, more desperate, more hidden-away, more impossible to fathom or escape than even the Kims' sub-basement apartment.

Music: Around the middle of the film, the Parks play a Western opera on their sound system: it's Handel's *Rodelinda*, whose starts in some ways reflects how *Parasite* ends: with a disgraced husband, presumed dead by everyone, secretly monitoring his surviving wife and son, who are forced into difficult choices to keep themselves alive under a new regime. Soon enough in the plot of *Rodelinda*, the husband in question, called Bertarido, inhabits secret hallways that nobody knows about, and even sneaks out of jail through a series of hidden passageways beneath the palace of his enemy. I suspect the Parks enjoy *Rodelinda* as yet another signifier of Western culture and their own sophistication—but they ought to listen more closely!

History: Don't miss the important detail that the invented architect Namgoong built this secret bunker in what became the Parks' house as a refuge from North Korean military attacks or, just as bad, from desperate creditors arriving to reclaim imaginary debts. As often happens in South Korean film, events and spaces often betray the residues of North/South conflict and of other histories of violence and threat that span East Asia, even if they aren't obvious.

Art and Culture: Once Moon-gwang and Geun-se discover the Kim family's ruse and take them hostage, they complicate the class dynamics of *Parasite* by chastising the Kims as uncultured rubes, totally unaware of the house's architectural distinction. They omit entire histories of creative endeavor that the Parks rightly honor, all for the sake of free booze.

Space and Design: Bong and his production designer purposely included no television in the main floor of the Parks' apartment, believing that they prefer to "watch" the elegance of their own lives rather than any broadcast entertainment. They also like to monitor their children, being ambitious "helicopter parents" but also anxious aristocrats, worried about their progeny measuring up. Notice how Mr. and Mrs. Park not only rearrange their sleeping plans to keep an eye on their son when he impulsively sets up a tent in the backyard, but the next day they build an entire *birthday party* literally around him, without forcing him to budge an inch.

Other films you might rent if you enjoyed *Parasite*...

The Housemaid (1960) – This domestic thriller is often cited as the most revered Korean film of all time. The plot concerns an attractive woman who takes a post as a servant for a rich family, which is soon enough coming apart at the seams. The braided commentaries on class and on gender/sexuality link it strongly enough to *Parasite* that you might understand the new movie as declaring an explicit relationship to one of its home nation's cinematic landmarks. The two films also share an affinity for suspense and for blending realistic and exaggerated details. You can rent *The Housemaid* on iTunes or Amazon Prime. Make sure to get the 1960 version, not the 2010 remake, also from South Korea, which is perfectly okay but not in the same league.

Caché (2005) – If you stay on a foreign-language kick, and you don't mind being unnerved, I highly recommend this critically revered French mystery/thriller, about a privileged Parisian family (Juliette Binoche plays the mom) who start finding videotapes on their doorstep from someone who seems to be filming the outside of their home at all hours, for no reason. Then, strange drawings start appearing in the mail. The husband, wife, and child have very different ideas about what the unseen enemy might know or dislike about their lives, and they are not entirely honest with each other. Like *Parasite*, *Caché* (which means "hidden") works as both an interpersonal suspense drama and a wider political comment on its country's history.

Borgman (2013) – Still macabre, but in a more black-comic key, this underseen Dutch movie from earlier in the decade is about a homeless stranger who shows up at the door of a generally well-to-do family, claiming to be an ex-lover of the wife and mother. She and her husband doubt the man, but the wife cannot help wondering, and she hides him in the family shed, allowing him the run of the house when her husband isn't home. To say the least, the new arrival shakes up the whole family's routine, including that of the kids. I found this film a deliriously wild ride.

Shoplifters (2018) – A smallish group of us had an especially excellent discussion last March of this recent Japanese movie—which, like *Parasite*, won the Cannes Film Festival and became a worldwide hit. Though very different in tone and plot, *Shoplifters* is also about a close-knit but economically stressed family that resorts to various crimes and deceptions (including of themselves) to stay together and keep their heads above water. Both are very rewarding to rewatch.

Us (2019) – I already compared *Parasite* to Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, but an even closer analogy in some ways is Peele's second movie, *Us*, a blockbuster last winter. A middle-class black family, while trying to enjoy a beach vacation, are visited at night by a strange quartet who look like zombie versions of themselves, bent on some mysterious and violent revenge. Some aspects of plot echo that of *Parasite* to an unusual degree, especially the mid-film revelation of an entire secret world underground that mirrors the one we all know. The violence is not for the faint of heart, but Lupita Nyong'o is excellent in a double role, and there's lots to discuss and debate.

Joker (2019) – Yet another dark, violent film, likely to be rewarded with Oscar nominations this January, if only for Joaquin Phoenix's magnetic performance. This film, too, picks openly at the barely-healed scabs of class resentment. When young Ki-woo ends *Parasite* with PTSD and cannot stop laughing, I found it hard not to think of the Joker and his mad cackle. It was also the surprise winner of the Venice Film Festival, the next most prestigious after Cannes.