

Landscapes of Crossed Lines: Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite*

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Bong Joon-Ho's film *Parasite* (2019) has received wide acclaim from critics and audiences around the world. Reviews of Bong's film have emphasised its commentary on class inequalities in South Korea that are often elided when the country is held up as a shining example of a capitalist success story. Various reviews have applauded the film as "an essential thrill ride about social inequality" (Wilkinson 2019), "a bizarre black comedy about social status, aspiration, materialism and the patriarchal family unit" (Bradshaw 2020) and depicting how "the lower depths rise with a vengeance" (Dargis 2019). It famously became the first foreign language film to win an Oscar for Best Picture at the 2019 Academy Awards. *Parasite's* seemingly progressive discussion of class-inequalities is arguably central to the attention the film has received.

In this review we ask whether the film's discussion of class holds up under greater scrutiny. Our review draws attention to how lines of demarcation function in the film. The idea of 'lines' that demarcate boundaries is arguably central to the narrative of the film. Classed by Bong as his 'stairway movie' (Jung 2020), the main characters of *Parasite* are constantly discussing, trespassing, and re-demarcating lines of separation between each other throughout the film. The demarcation of these lines draws our attention to the landscapes on which inequalities and insufficiencies are constructed, subverted, challenged but also sustained and reinforced. Therefore, our review focuses on a number of seemingly objective landscapes – the staircase, the windows, the car, the sofa, and the light bulb – that are central to the film's discussion of class inequalities.

Two Lines: Stairways and Windows

The lines of demarcations between rich and poor are constantly contemplated throughout the film. The staircase is one of the more obvious symbols that Bong uses in *Parasite* and has received significant critical attention and discussion (Sunio 2020; Desowitz 2019). Building on this work, we note that the staircases are emphasised and intertwined in the long con that the Kim's play on the Park family. It is noticeable that when Ki-woo (Choi Woo-shik), the first person to infiltrate the Park household, leaves home the camera tracks him climbing the stairs from the Kim's basement apartment. However, when Ki-jung (Park So-dam) is introduced to the Park family, the audience meets her as she ascends the steps to the entrance of the Park house. Significantly, as their con comes off, the first sight of the mother of the Kim family, Chung-sook (Jang Hye-jin) in the Park home is as she ascends the staircase, dressed as a housekeeper and with a fruit platter in hand. In other words, the staircases are used by Bong as a symbolic means of following the ascendance of the Kim family as they climb the social ladder from their semi-basement apartment to the comforts of the Park's architect designed home.

Stairways are also used to mirror the Kim's spectacular fall from grace as well. When the former housekeeper, Gook Moon-gwang (Lee Jung-eun), surprises the Kims at the Park residence to rescue her husband who has been trapped in the basement of the Park house, we find that the symbolic function of the staircase also shifts. When the camera follows Chung-sook down into the basement behind Moon-gwang, we sense that a significant narrative shift is about to take place. Down in the basement, Moon-gwang's repeated attempts to set

up a form of class solidarity between herself and Chung-sook is first ignored and then emphatically rejected, refusing to accept the possibility of a relationship as “sis” or the claim to being “fellow members of the needy”. Significantly, the rest of the Kim family hides at the bottom of the staircase listening to the entire exchange. However, it is as Moon-gwang again claims a class kinship between herself and Chung-sook (calling her ‘sis’) that Ki-woo’s unfortunate accident on the staircase gives away their position and relationships to each other.

The shift in the power dynamic that follows is evinced by Moon-gwang’s emphatic rejection of Chung-sook’s attempt to establish a form of class kinship by calling her “sis”. The camera focuses on the basement dwellers, Oh Geun-sae (Park Myung-hoon) and Moon-gwang’s ascent up the stairs from the basement even as they brandish their newfound power over the Kim’s like a sword. The tension over staircases emerges again almost immediately after the Park’s sudden arrival home, as Moon-gwang’s attempt to run up the stairs from the basement to warn her former employer is ruthlessly extinguished by Chung-Sook’s calm dispatch of her predecessor with a swift kick, again, down a staircase. Ki-taek’s (Song Kang-ho) struggle to drag Moon-gwang’s body back down the staircase is also arguably a commentary by Bong on the ways in which class mobility, particularly from unemployment/underemployment to formal employment and stable jobs, can only emerge out of the violent rejection of the possibility of solidarity with other urban poor who are also struggling to ascend the social ladder. Thus, we believe that the staircases function in the film as a careful and nuanced commentary on the ways in which class mobility is structured and coded for the poor.

The window is another significant symbol that Bong deploys to comment on the borders that separate the three class communities that are at the core of the film’s narrative. The film’s opening credits play out on the window of the Kim’s semi-basement apartment, suggesting its importance to the film as a whole. The window is open to the road and the only source of natural light for the apartment. However, the window also underscores the difficulties the Kim’s face in distinguishing themselves from the rest of the city. The Kim’s window allows in the fumes of the disinfectant, the urine of the drunk man, and in the final acts of the film, the sewage of the city. Thus, the window of the Kim family home is tied to their real conditions of existence and marks out their home as a space that is shared with their environment. In contrast, the main

window of the Park family home is tied to a fantasy of social mobility for the poorer families. The ability to enjoy the view of the lush garden through the window is constantly emphasised in the film as a moment that affirms (albeit fleetingly) the achievement of class mobility. For example, after the Park family leaves for their camping trip, the camera keeps focusing on the view through the window as a way of affirming the achievement of the Kim family. Ki-taek’s comment that “this is pretty classy, rain falling on the lawn as we sip our whiskey” as the camera focus on the view through the window emphasises the way in which the ability to enjoy that view of this garden through the window is embedded in the capacity to achieve class mobility. Furthermore, when Moon-gwang and Geun-sae best the Kim’s and move into the main house, they mock the Kims as being unable to enjoy the “artistic spirit” of the architect, “the great Namgoong”, that suffuses the house. To contrast them with the Kims and emphasise their ‘ability’ to enjoy this artistic spirit, the perspective shifts to a flashback of the two of them enjoying the view of the garden through the window. The final scene of the flashback is of Moon-gwang and Geun-sae enjoying the view of the garden while sipping tea. For both families, the capacity to enjoy this view is temporary and tied to the absence of the rich owners of the house. In other words, for the poorer families in the film, the window in the rich family home arguably represents a fantasy tied to dreams of social aspiration and ascent. Concomitantly, the window of the Kim’s semi-basement home is an intimate and very real reminder of their poverty and marginality.

In contrast, the rich Park family’s engagement with the view through the window is quite different. In much of the film the space of the garden is closely associated with the scion of the family, Da-Song (Jung Hyeon-jun). Except for a brief moment at the opening of the film, the garden is often in the background for most of the first half of the film. The 2nd Act of the film opens with Da-Song in the garden staring at the sun through a pair of sunglasses and communicating with his father by walkie-talkie. It is Da-Song who also decides to spend the night of his birthday camping in the garden in a tepee, forcing his parents to sleep on the couch so that they can watch over him through the window. Finally, Da-Song’s impromptu birthday party in the space of the garden becomes the setting for the film’s final act of violence and excess. In short, the space of the garden and its view through the window is heavily tied to the character of Da-Song. One way of reading this connection of this space with Da-Song

is as a reminder of the ease with which Da-Song will come into his family's wealth. For Da-Song there will never be a struggle for ownership over that space or for that view. In contrast, the right to own the garden and the ability to view the garden is entwined in struggle for the poorer families. Moon-gwang and Geun-sae's wistful reminiscences of their time spent in the garden distracts them for long enough that they are physically overpowered by the Kim family. Similarly, Ki-Woo's imagination of a future life of prosperity culminates with him and his mother standing in the garden rather than in any other space of the house. Furthermore, his father sees him for the first time through that window and their joyful reunion takes place on the border between the window and the garden. Thus, the window is a powerful symbol deployed by Bong to map the borders between the class communities that are central to *Parasite's* narrative.

The staircase and windows therefore function as symbolic markers of the boundaries between the Kim, the Park, and the Geun-sae families. They appear to us to work towards establishing stark lines of demarcation between those who have a little, those who have some, and those who have a lot. Based on these two objects alone, it might be easy to conclude that the film's narrative arc establishes a clearly distinguishable hierarchy among these three symbolic communities that is never transgressed. However, a closer reading of the film suggests that there is a constant negotiation of the lines that demarcate the boundaries between each of these communities.

Three Objects: The Car, Sofa, & Light Bulb

Bong is also sensitive to the ways in which these lines are constantly transgressed. After all, he has said that without the title, *Parasite* could refer to the rich family just as much as it does to the poor ones in the film (Ankers 2020). It would therefore seem that Bong is very much aware that the drawing of stark lines that demarcate boundaries between class communities alone would be an inadequate approach to the complex class politics of the film. As a result, there are also a number of symbols in the film that emphasise the transgression of the seemingly stark boundaries between rich and poor. Therefore, in this section we look at three symbols that arguably explore the parasitic nature of class relationships during late-stage capitalism – the car, the sofa, and the light bulb.

The Park family car may at first viewing appear to be a symbol of their wealth and class position. Park Dong-ik (Lee Sun-kyun) is constantly aware of the need to ensure that the line between the front seat and the backseat is constantly maintained. However, in practice, the car is presented as a space of intense negotiation between the class communities in the film. What becomes apparent within the space of the car is the intense intimacies that are shared between these communities. Ki-taek constantly interacts with the Park family whether it be when driving Dong-ik home or helping Choi Yeon-gyo (Cho Yeo-jeong) with her shopping. Questions about the love between Dong-ik and Yeon-gyo and the conspiratorial whisperings about Moon-gwang present Ki-taek as more of an intimate friend than a mere driver. There are also other intimacies that the film makes apparent – most notably perhaps, that of scent. The scent/ odour of the Kim family that plays such a critical role in the film (Chennur 2020) is most emphatically highlighted in the space of the car. After all, it is in the car that Dong-ik becomes most aware of the scent of Ki-taek. Similarly, the interactions between the two families in the car are crucial to the Kim family's con. In fact, the time spent by the Park family in the car in *Parasite* is on the relatively brief drive back from their failed camping trip. In short, the car plays an important role in driving (no pun intended) the action of the film by intensifying the intimacies between the Kim and Park families. Therefore, though it may appear to be symbolic of the Park's wealth, in practice, the space of the car is one of shared intimacies that evocatively emphasises the parasitic nature of the relationship between the rich and the poor.

The light bulb above the staircase to the main living area of the Park family home is another unusual symbol of the interactions that undercut the seemingly clearly cut distinctions between class communities in the film. Unlike the car, a space shared only by the Park and Kim families, the light bulb is a symbol of the complex interactions between all three families. One significant symbolic function of the light bulb is its work as a reminder of the ways in which physical labour is repressed and re-presented as an automatic function, devoid of human input. It is worth remembering that the first moment in which the audience's attention is drawn to the light bulb is intimately tied to Dong-ik's first appearance in the film. In fact, before the audience meets the patriarch of the Park family, the camera focuses on the gradual and seemingly automatic switching on of the lights above the staircase even before Dong-ik emerges into the living area. In this

sense, the light bulb is closely tied to the identity of the tech entrepreneur, Dong-ik. Yet, like his virtual reality product line, the light bulb functions as a tool that enables the Park family to inhabit a virtual reality that is blind to the labour taking place around them. As we discover later in the film, the light bulb is not automatic but remotely operated by Geun-sae from the basement. In other words, while the light bulb is physically located in the upper floors of the Park family home, the labour required for it to function is hidden and repressed in the basement of the house. In a moment that highlights the way in which Bong masterfully plays off dualities against each other, Ki-taek and Geun-sae's conversation about the hidden labour of switching on the lights in the basement is interspersed with a conversation between Chung-sook and Yeon-gyo about Da-Song's 'trauma' after seeing Geun-sae emerging from the basement. In the course of the women's conversation, Yeon-gyo also notices Geun-sae's plea for help in Morse code but puts it down to a 'batty' sensor. This is perhaps the second way in which the light bulb stands in for the symbolic interaction between the class communities in the film – as a silent mode of communication that interrupts the seemingly well-partitioned hierarchies between class communities. For Geun-sae, the light bulb is initially at least, a mechanism that allows him to communicate his appreciation to Dong-ik for supporting his parasitic existence. It is then his means of telegraphing his call for help which is interpreted by Da-song. It is also the mechanism through which Ki-taek, now residing in the basement, tells his story to Ki-woo who has returned to their semi-basement apartment. Though controlled from the basement, the Morse code communication using the lightbulb encroaches on the space and existence of the rich family. However, both the Park and the German family that stays in the house after them continue to be unaware of the message that is being transmitted to/ through them.¹ Therefore, although the bulb may illuminate the space of the rich family, its communication is directed from the basement towards the semi-basement. In other words, the light bulb can be read as a powerful symbol of the limits of the intimacies that are shared by the rich, poor, and poorer families in the film.

The sofa in the living room of the Park family home is another space of shared intimacies between all three families. When the Parks leave for their camping trip, the Kims are finally able to claim ownership of the Park family home. It is the moment in which all their plans and cons have miraculously come to fruition. Bong makes the unusual choice of emphasising this triumph

by capturing Chung-sook and Ki-taek having a nap on the sofa together. It is an unusual shot in the film given that at first view it may seem as though the triumph is emphasised through the enjoyment of leisure time for the working class. However, as Chung-sook rises from her sleep, the figure of Ki-taek resting behind her confronts the audience with one of the first glimpses of their intimacy as a couple. Similarly, Moon-gwang and Geun-sae's ascent to the Park family home following their triumph over the Kim family is celebrated on the sofa. Significantly, this celebration emphasises their intimacy as a couple with Moon-gwang massaging Geun-sae's back and foot simultaneously. It could be said that for both couples the sofa functions to emphasise both their intimacy and social ascent. It is also significant that the sofa also emphasises the intimacy of the Park couple when they watch over their son, Da-song, through the window. In contrast to the other two families, the tense sex scene between Dong-ik and Yeon-gyo on the sofa emphasises their imagination of a social descent as they fantasise about being a drug addicted, working-class couple engaging in hurried sex in the back of a car. The comic outlandishness of Dong-ik and Yeon-gyo's playing out their fantasies of working-class lives on the sofa is subverted by the presence of the Kim family an arm's length away, hiding beneath the coffee table. If the sofa functions as a symbol of temporary ascent for the Kim and Geun-sae families, for the Parks the sofa symbolises a temporary descent down the class ladder. Although the class trajectories symbolised through the sofa may differ for the rich and poor families, what all three families share however is a commitment to the bourgeois, heteronormative institution of the family.

As our discussion above hopefully demonstrates, *Parasite* presents and confronts the audience with a complex landscape of relationships and interactions between the three class communities that are central to the film. Class hierarchies are often established and then re-negotiated. Spaces are partitioned and then encroached on. In all of these negotiations, the film confronts the viewer with the complex landscapes of class relationships that are integral to the function of capital in South Korea.

The Ambiguities of “Sure Fire” Conclusions

The conclusion of the film has been described by Bong as a “sure fire kill” (Jung 2020). It is worth remembering that the closing shots of the film return the audience

back to the window of the Kim's family basement. Whereas a few moments prior to this we had been fantasising with Ki-woo about his plan to one day own the Namgoong house, the return to the basement which closes the film leaves us with no doubt that this dream is unlikely to be a reality. As Bong says in his discussion of the ending, "It's quite cruel and sad, but I thought it was being real and honest with the audience. You know and I know — we all know that this kid isn't going to be able to buy that house. I just felt that frankness was right for the film, even though it's sad" (Jung 2020). Ki-woo's miraculous survival (after all, his head bashed in with the scholar's rock twice and he is carried to safety on the back of the teenaged Park-dye) suggests that the dream of achieving social mobility for the Kim family is still alive. Yet, the camera's final return to the basement is a stark reminder of how much of a pipe-dream such hopes truly are in the hands of a character like Ki-woo.

To fully understand the ambiguities of this conclusion, however, Ki-woo's final pipe dream needs to be contrasted with the extinguished dream of Ki-jung in the film. Of all the poor characters in the film, it is Ki-jung who is constantly emphasised as the one most likely to transition from her poorer surroundings to the life of luxury the Park's enjoy. Her brother, who observes her taking a luxurious bath in the Park house, comments later that seeing her like that made him realise that she "fit in here". He goes on to say that "this rich house suits you. Not like us". This sense that Ki-jung is the most prepared to ascend the social ladder is constantly emphasised in the film. It is also worth remembering that Ki-jung is the only 'poor' character in the film to have occupied the back seat of the Park family car. It is also Ki-jung who is given the honour of carrying Da-song's birthday cake in the final act, an act described by Yeon-gyo as "today's highlight". In this sense it is Ki-jung who is presented as the most likely member of the poorer families to achieve the kind of class mobility

that her brother fantasises about throughout the film. Yet, it is also Ki-jung who is first stabbed by Geun-sae. This is in spite of the fact that Moon-gwang dies affirming Chung-sook's name as the direct cause of her death, and even though Chung-sook is only a few feet away. Furthermore, when she is stabbed, Ki-jung is standing directly in front of Da-song who promptly passes out after seeing Geun-sae with the bloody knife in his hands. In other words, it could be said that Ki-jung's death symbolically redirects the anger against the rich away from the Park family towards the only person presented in the film as being an actual threat to the neatly bounded class hierarchies of the film.

Having opened up such a daring challenge to the status quo, the resolution that follows may seem hollow. But, when Ki-taek eventually stabs Dong-ik at the climax of the film, the blood on his hands is not that of Dong-ik's but that of his daughter. Ki-taek's act of creeping into the basement to escape the law mirrors Geun-sae's own descent into the basement as a way to evade his creditors. And so, the cycle of parasitic relationships between basement, semi-basement, and architect designed home is re-established. Like Geun-sae, Ki-taek struggles for food when the house is empty but lives much more comfortably when a rich family occupies the house. But even as this exploitative cycle is re-established, it is worth remembering that the act that requires a descent into a basement has shifted from evading creditors to violently claiming a rich man's life. While Bong's claim that the conclusion is a sure-fire kill may seem true at first viewing, a closer reading suggests that the ground that underpins these sureties has subtly shifted. Thus, although Bong attempts to foreclose the discussion, the film's conclusion suggests that beneath the seeming unambiguous re-establishment of rigid class hierarchies and relationships, the subtle ripples of resistance that may eventually transform this cycle of parasitical relationships may be beginning to take shape.

Notes

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1 Even Da-song who translates Geun-sae's cry for help chooses to ignore this information.

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