

HOUSE OF DREAMS, OR NOT

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Abstract

In this paper, we will discuss the role of the built environment as storytelling in the context of Oscar winner Parasite, a film by director Bong Joon-Ho (2019). We will look at the potentiality of the built environment in unveiling film narratives, especially regarding immanent forms of class struggle and exploitation in everyday life. We will investigate the troubling power relations between the rich and the poor in contemporary society and the ways that the concepts of alienation/estrangement, objectification/reification and commodity fetishism can be used to bring these relations to the fore when analyzing the movie.

Keywords: Parasite; built environment; inequality; class struggle; alienation; everyday life.

Resumo / Résumé

CASA DOS SONHOS, OU NÃO

Neste artigo, iremos discutir sobre o papel do espaço construído como narrativa no contexto de filme ganhador do Oscar, Parasite (Bong Joon-Ho, 2019). Abordaremos o potencial que tem o espaço construído em desnudar narrativas filmicas, especialmente no que diz respeito às formas imanentes de luta de classes e exploração na vida cotidiana. Investigaremos as problemáticas relações de poder entre os ricos e os pobres na sociedade contemporânea e as maneiras que os conceitos de alienação/estranhamento, objetificação/reificação e fetichismo da mercadoria podem ser utilizados para evidenciar estas relações de poder no contexto da análise do filme.

Palavras-chave: Parasite; espaço construído; desigualdade; luta de classes; alienação; vida cotidiana.

MAISON DES RÊVES, OU PAS VRAIMENT

Dans cet article, nous discuterons le rôle de l'environnement (construit), comme un élément de sens dans la narrative du film dirigé par Bong Joon-Ho, Parasite (2019), particulièrement en ce qui concerne les formes immanentes de lutte des classes et d'exploitation dans la vie quotidienne. Par l'analyse filmique, nous mettons en avant les troublantes relations de pouvoir qui se jouent entre riches et pauvres, miroitées par les deux familles mises en deux plans, l'un le négatif de l'autre, dans la société contemporaine, et la façon dont les concepts d'aliénation/étrangeté, objectification/réification et fétichisme commodité peuvent être utilisés pour mettre en évidence ces relations.

Mots-clés: Parasite; environnement construit; inégalité; lutte de classes; aliénation; vie quotidienne.

INTRODUCTION

Parasite (Director: Bong Joon-Ho; 2019) is a huge success. The movie has had three Golden Globe nominations and one win (Best Motion Picture – Foreign Language), six Oscar nominations and four wins (Best Picture; Best Director; Best Original Screenplay; Best International Feature Film) and several other awards (over 150) in 2020. This is a not-so-expensive South Korean production with costs around US\$11 million. The movie's (then) 50-year-old Director is one of the most successful South Korean directors, with other international hits, like *Okja* (2017), *Snowpiercer* (2013), and *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (2000). There have been lots of comments about the movie, its production and the several meanings that one can read from it. On the internet, many serious articles about the film can be found (including interviews with the Director). Several aspects of the movie have been scrutinized, from the more technical and artistic ones, like use of light and colors, and camera movement, to the more intellectual ones, like the meaning of the scholar rock. There have been fewer comments, however, about the setting, the two houses, one built on site, the other on set for the making of the film, especially about the latter, the poorer one. More specifically, the houses have a crucial meaning to the multiple meanings of the movie. This means that the story could not be told in a different environment and that the (built) environment is itself one strong narrative in the film. We will further pursue a discussion on the role of the houses (and the built environment) as storytelling in the context of *Parasite* towards the end of this paper. Accordingly, we will then look at the potentiality of the built environment in unveiling film narratives and vice-versa, especially regarding immanent forms of class struggle and exploitation in everyday life. More still, we will investigate the troubling power relations between the rich and the poor in contemporary society and the ways that the concepts of alienation/estrangement, objectification/reification and commodity fetishism can be used to bring these relations to the fore when analyzing the movie.

STORYLINE THAT MATTERS – PART 1

Parasite is a tale of three families, not two, as is often referred to. Their lives intertwining in such an unexpected and unprecedented ways is what makes the film so interesting. Sharp twists in the storyline and several pointed details first act as smokescreens and then incite viewers' minds to what may come later, but associations may not be so obvious at first. It may take some time after watching the movie to realize and perceive many of the details. And if one watches the movie more than once the better. All the changes of mood and directions in the storyline were carefully studied by the Director and Screenwriter, Joon-ho. He drew hundreds of storyboards detailing how each scene should look like and later followed them through.

The movie starts with a simple plot that evolves to some more complicated situations: a young man, Ki-woo, who just left high school is unemployed as are all members of his family, that is, his sister, father, and mother. This is the Kim family. Some of his well-off friends went to college. Although a good student, he could not pass entry exams; neither could he afford to pay for preparation courses to do so. The family struggles to make a living out of petty, informal, eventual jobs, like folding pizza boxes. They live in a semi-basement apartment, a situation which is allegedly common to those in underprivileged social condition in South Korea. The Kim son's best friend pays a visit; he is leaving to study abroad and asks the Kim son to temporarily replace him as English tutor for a rich family teenage girl. He plans to come back and start dating the girl, Da-hye, when she is a bit older. He knows that the Kim family is going through a bad phase. He offers, as a present, a scholar stone that allegedly will bring good fortune. The Kim family son gets the job – although his formal qualifications and certificates were forged by his sister. Mrs. Park hardly looks at his qualifications; his friend's word and a job well done are good enough for her. The Park's teenage daughter instantly falls in love with the Kim son, now called by the American name Kevin. He soon learns that the girl's younger hyperactive brother, Da-song, needs a tutor too. He has the idea to offer the services of someone he knew went to the same art school as his cousin; Jessica is her American name. But she is actually his (the Kim son) sister, Ki-jeong.

The well-off Park family is a couple with a teenage daughter and a child boy. They are all a bit younger than the Kim family. The Park mother is a naïve person who sees no malice. In the first day of

work, Jessica asks her to stay out of the room where she was going to work with her son. After that, Jessica and Mrs. Park have a conversation. Jessica explains – making believe she is an expert – that her son, although talented, is troubled and that can be read from his drawings and the painting that is hanging on the wall. Mrs. Park is impressed that she could tell that he had been through some trauma in the recent past. She explains to Jessica that her son had been traumatized by a vision he had of a ghost, some time before, when he was alone, at night, grabbing a piece of his birthday cake in the kitchen. Jessica is hired as a child specialist art teacher with skills in child psychology, after her performance during the interview. The Kim daughter is clever. She is offered a ride home. The Park family driver is ordered to take her home, but she does not go as far, stepping down at a metro station. During the drive, she thinks of a way to get the driver fired, taking off and leaving her ‘underwear’ in the car floor. Mr. Park finds it the next day and thinks that the driver is using his car for libidinous encounters, firing him.

Jessica hears the story from Mrs. Park herself and suggests that she should have an older driver; she remembers one that drove for relatives who now live in Chicago. Again, this is a fake. She then sends her own father, Ki-taek, an unemployed driver, to take the job offer. Before that, the Kim son and daughter, after doing searches on the internet, instruct their father on how to behave in a rich family’s house and how to drive a sophisticated Mercedes (even visiting a car dealer for this matter). The Park’s employ a housekeeper who takes care of everything in the house. The Kim father, son and daughter have a plan to get her too out of the way. Learning she was allergic to peaches, they set up a plan to make Mrs. Park believe the housekeeper has tuberculosis. The Kim mother, Choong-sook, is then employed in her place. By now, all members of the Kim family have been employed in the Park family house, but the Park’s think they are unrelated. They also presented themselves as highly or properly qualified (for their respective jobs), even if they had to falsify documents and certificates. The movie could have finished here but it did not. So far, there is enough to discuss the politics of class struggle, widening inequality and survival strategies of the poor in contemporary capitalist society. However, an unexpected twist to the plot happens and further complicates matters.

STORYLINE THAT MATTERS – PART 2

All is apparently well when the Park family decides to spend a weekend camping in celebration of their son’s birthday. The house is left at the housekeeper’s care (the Kim mother). The Kim family takes the opportunity to gather to spend the day in the garden, eat, drink and celebrate in their employers’ living room, dreaming that one day all that could be theirs. The teenage Park daughter is in love with the new tutor, a bit rebelling, but this is kept in secret, unknown to her parents. The Kim son seems to be respectful but plays along with that, dreaming about the impossible. They are all drunk by the time the bell rings. It is the former housekeeper, Moon-gwang. She insists to come in to pick up something she had left behind, later to be known: her husband, Geun-se. He lives in a hidden basement, an underground bunker, built by the original dweller of the house, allegedly a well-known architect. Basements, it seems, are more common than generally thought of in South Korea due to proximity to North Korea.

Once a small businessman of Korean Fried Chicken who went bankrupt, Geun-se had to hide from dangerous loan sharks (which works as a reminder of today’s debt society). The former housemaid had worked for the architect, at the same house, before the Park family bought it and there she stayed with the Park’s. Geun-se has lived there for a few years, unknown to all. The Park’s do not even know the basement exists. There is a hidden door behind a pantry cabinet that takes further downstairs. He is fed by his wife, from times to times. He is somehow thankful and tries to communicate with Mr. Park by switching on and off the staircase light using Morse code. This is never figured out by Mr. Park, who thinks this is just a faulty lamp. Moon-gwang, the former maid, tries to convince the Kim mother to let him stay there, but the drunken and curious Kim’s, hiding behind a wall, stumbled down the stairs and revealed themselves by calling the driver dad. Moon-gwang immediately perceives the fraud and, out of desperation, starts to blackmail the Kim family. However, here comes another twist.

On the telephone, Mrs. Park tells the Kim mother (the new maid) to cook food for the whole family. They will be home in a few minutes as torrential rain obliged them to cancel camping. Moon-gwang is pushed downstairs just as the Park’s arrive. The door to the bunker and the sliding

cabinet are closed. They do not see that Moon-gwang falls and hits her head. They then rush to clean up the mess they had done when they were parting and drinking, while the Kim mother did the cooking. The time is just enough for the cleaning and the Kim family, except the mother, hides under the center table in the living room. They remain there for a long time; after dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Park stay in the sofa watching their young son, who decides to camp in the garden. When the Park's fall asleep, after making love, the Kim's finally leave. They leave the house under heavy rain and rush back home. They go downhill, in the streets, running under the rain, to find their semi-basement apartment flooded. Everything is lost, floating, even sewage is coming out of the toilet in a reverse movement. They save a few things, including the Kim mother's silver medal, that is hanging in a frame on the wall, and the scholar's rock, which unexpectedly appears floating in the surface of the water.

They go to an improvised shelter in a public gym with hundreds of other people, who had lost everything just like them, only to be awakened early, the next day, a Sunday, by a phone call. Mrs. Parker decided to throw a last-minute birthday party for her son. She needs the driver. In a separate phone call, she invites Jessica, the boy's tutor. The Park daughter invites her tutor too. The Kim's had hardly had some rest. With a hangover, this is all too weird as they grab donated, second-hand clothes in the gym.

The final scenes reaffirm much of the movie's implicit ideas. Geun-se, a disturbed person from the start, had spent the night mourning about his wife's death. The party is in preparation. The Parks are unaware of any troubles. Guests arrive, lots of rich people being rich, small talk, photo opportunities, and the sort. The Kim's have to carry with them the few things they recovered from the flood, including their most precious assets, the scholar rock and the silver medal. They all wonder about what happened to Moon-gwang and her husband, Geun-se. In the middle of the party, the Kim son finally catches the opportunity to go down the basement. He carries the scholar stone with him as a protection, just in case. In fury for the loss of his wife, Geun-se takes him down, grabs and throws the stone on his head.

The party goes on when Geun-se comes out of nowhere to attack the Kim daughter, stabbing her with a kitchen knife. Mr. Park is playing with his son, forcing the Kim father to play a part as an American Indian. The Park son has a convulsion when he sees Geun-se approaching. It is the same image of the 'ghost' he had seen some time before. In this tragic, bizarre scene, the Park's daughter shows up trying to save her injured beloved tutor, carrying him on her shoulder. As the Kim father tries to save his bleeding daughter, Mr. Park looks for the car key to take his son to the hospital. The Kim mother reacts, killing Geun-se with a barbecue spit. As Mr. Park grabs the car keys, he senses the driver's strange smell once more and shows his contempt. Raged by humiliation and sorrow, the Kim father stabs and kills his employer and runs away. There is another switch in the plot then. He disappears forever as he goes back to the house from the outside, through the garage door, and hides in the basement. But, in his case, no one knows about his hideout, not even his own family.

The Kim son lost his sister; his father disappeared and is a runaway. After recovering from a traumatic coma, he and his mother are judged and set free on parole. The two of them go on living in the same semi-basement apartment. Alone, he enjoys going on a walk to a top of a hill to observe the city and think. From there, it is possible to see the Park's house. The family has moved away, and new owners now live there. He notices that the outside light trembles. Soon, he realizes that it is a message from his father, using Morse code. He does that every night trying to reach his son, just as Geun-se used to do when trying to communicate with Mr. Park to say thanks. He survives, taking food from the kitchen, from times to times, late at night.

The ending is somehow conventional. A voice-over indicates that the Kim son writes a letter, never sent, to his father. In there, he projects he is going to study at the University, get a good job, earn honest money, and buy that house so that he and his mother can reunite with his father; he has learned the lesson. The next scene brings the audience back to reality, the harsh conditions under which he lives in the suburbs and, still, in the semi-basement.

To finish, if we were to sum up the storyline in a phrase, we could say that this is a story of three families, two of which are poor and infiltrate into the good life of the third, well-off one; for different reasons, all three are parasite families living in and about the same place. The message is that we all are, as it seems, as we go on living our everyday lives under capitalism. The storyline has lots of implications for theories of alienation in contemporary society that will be discussed further below.

PARASITES

Justifying the movie's title, *Parasite*, is not really a hard task. The Director and screenwriter himself referred to it as obvious and straightforward. However, a fictional piece, as every discourse, once in the open, acquires its own life and meanings which are not really located in the linguistic form of the words but in the content negotiated by the subjects in interaction. Thus, in revealing parasitical social relations the text itself draws from cultural and historical contexts of interest. Don DeLillo, in his *White Noise*, in a short passage, writes about two of his characters – both are university professors – who had met recently and decided to socialize going together to visit a historic barn in the countryside. One is intrigued and asks the other a rhetorical question, that is, what the barn was or what it meant before being photographed and famous. For him, it is no longer possible to tell after they had read signs, banners, leaflets, learned about it, and seen other people around it, looking at it and taking pictures. It is not possible to go out of that 'aura' once you are in it. DeLillo's character strikes at the heart of the problem. This is the essence of the idea of alienation, your being unable to tell what is right in front of you just because you have already preconceived ideas about it, or you are under the spell of an aura. Either way, it is you submitting yourself to a subjectivity other than your own.

'Ceci n'est pas une pipe', René Magritte's provocation, adds yet another dimension to the problem: intertextuality or allusion, that is, the way that communication takes place, language and image confronting meaning. What we can see is also a translation of what we are or what we believe in. Alienation is driven by ideology which in turn is mediated by social being, a certain kind of knowledge that structures a certain frame of mind and comprehension about things around us. It implies that someone identifies her/himself with something that does not belong to or does not represent her/him. In this case, one may isolate, distance, or separate her/himself from other people or situations that would better fit and represent her/him. The feeling of estrangement is only seldom conscious. Alienation and ideology mold an estranged person.

Explaining alienation gets more complex and complicated in today's postmodern, high tech society of flexible accumulation, with all the dismantling of worker's movements and all else. So, how can this be any different in a society in which disadvantaged people have to struggle for what is the very basic of their needs in order to survive? What time and energy are left in their everyday life for active politics? How, in a labor society, can people adhere to and identify to each other collectively, if they are no longer able to put forward and sustain labor-related institutions and movements in their favor? Instead, they have to work part-time, short-time, as a substitute; instead, they have to work in different jobs at different times, on different days of the week.

Marx (1988; 1990) has deep concerns when addressing alienation as a result of commodity production and related social relations. The main aspect is perhaps the detachment of labor from its product. When the system of production separated intellectual and manual work, the workers lost control over the process. Work was decomposed into smaller parts, each to be undertaken separately and then assembled at the end. All that workers have to do is learn about one task and participate in a routinized assembly line. This disempowers workers as they lose control of the mental process which is necessary in the production. They lose control both of production and of the source of knowledge. Workers end up having little say and power over the whole cycle of production, circulation, and realization of commodities. This rationalization of the labor process (with the use of technology and its machines) makes industry more productive and, at the same time, allows capital to employ workers of a more general kind. That is, any worker is then capable of executing single and simple tasks in a complex production line.

But there is more. The product of labor being a commodity means that it will be circulated in the market; it will be exchanged by money. There is no longer a direct exchange between producer and consumer, so that it is impossible for workers and everyone else to know about the whole process through which many people in many places had to go in the production. Money is what makes this exchange possible. A thing is exchanged for money; money is exchanged for a utilitarian thing. Thing is disconnected from producer. The act of exchange separates producer and consumer. Marx (1988) calls this peculiar form of separation 'commodity fetishism'. This is a situation in which social relations are defined by things, not by people. Consumers no longer can relate to conditions under which commodities were produced.

Lefebvre (2002) finds that everyday life is the place of alienation (but also an arena for change). In contemporary life, in addition to economic exchanges, most social, cultural, artistic, environmental experiences are mediated by exchanges in the market. More complex systems of production require high levels of specialization of workers. Jobs become fewer, but require more qualified workforce, although in specific fields. The labor market develops both in the higher and lower ends, as is documented by Sassen (2000). Domestic services are placed at the bottom in this hierarchy. Many people, workers included, have access to high-tech devices these days, but the question is not the technological process – that has reached a much larger market. The question is the sort of power and control that private property allows capital to have over that process. Urban living today requires full commitment to the market economy. There is little escape from that. If one is unemployed and has no other source of income, desperate solutions at desperate times are ways to grant everyday subsistence. This often takes to self-alienation or self-exploitation: people often own some part of their means of production (a bike, a motorbike, a car, a cell phone, a place at home). People become providers of petty merchandise and/or relate to the immaterial production and provision of services. People are her/his own master and slave. People are being exploited in the larger context of market exchanges and are made to believe that they are self-made entrepreneurs. Alienation has always been thought of as self-estrangement but this view often assumed there was a more or less stable subjectivity that was subsequently mediated and distorted by capital as relation, commodity as being. Yet the very speed of subjectivation today, the processes of socialization and mediatization that make up identity pre-empts and prevents an assumption of such a subjectivity degree zero. Rather than alienation from this point one confronts an antinomy of alienation as this point. It is an ether of affective embrace highly resistant to shibboleths of the prelapsarian. Like the wage and the exchange function of existence the question of becoming commodity conscious has been rendered close to moot. This infrastructure of being is as powerful as any place of value extraction. Ontological speed appears to have closed off alternatives, even the escape velocity of transformation. People live the speed of circulation as an internal clock, as an organic feature of being no more artificial than a squint. Everyday alienation is the space of life itself. While it would be inaccurate to say the “parasite” is this being as a value form, or the appearance of such a form (*Erscheinungsform*, as Marx puts it), it nevertheless points to the contradictions of velocity for being because the parasite appears to have rationalized a condition of helplessness by helping themselves, as if the violence of velocity reduces class war to opportunism, a resistance reflex where timing is more important than the actual consciousness of contradiction.

By the same token, capitalists too are alienated in as much as they must play by the rules of the game. Capitalists are forced into the coercive laws of competition. They have to invest, seek productivity gains, lower labor costs, make labor process more organized and productive by use of new technology and training, and so forth. Market forces, the ‘hidden hand’, or what have you, will discipline both workers and capitalists, but not evenly despite the general equivalence of money across their differences. Capitalism has also historically generated estrangement in which solidarity is deracinated by competition, class struggle and exploitation of labor by capital. In the end, workers are reproduced in the idea they are free and willing to sell their labor-power for a wage or salary that will satisfy their basic needs, like eating, sleeping, and procreating. Yet even this is a competition that puts worker against worker and crucially, the worker against their Self or the immanent sense of it.

Inside the bunker (a symbol of Korean division yet existential in other ways), the former housekeeper implores to the new housekeeper for understanding, alleging they are both under the same condition of poverty (‘two fellow workers’), but the Kim mother is not happy with the thought of being compared to the other. The Kim father, after replacing the younger driver that got fired, argues he is young and should find another job soon. The contempt with the other reinforces the idea that the Kim’s are parasites. There is no solidarity amongst the poor, but competition. This is the order of capitalism at all levels. This is one fearful result of alienation: no class or group empathy (whereas the implication is to change that). Capitalism as a dominant ideological project is consistent with the idea of a radically inconsistent ideological identity project. Whether it is a matter of conserving and reproducing identities in social relations, or, alternatively, a matter of challenging and replacing some identities for others, it is all about an identification with what someone else has, is or possesses. I want to identify with the other so as to become the other, yet this can only be a receding horizon. Here, it is worth exploring and interrogating the more mundane side of an alienated society, the one that develops in people’s everyday

lives and, often, reflects and refracts their lifestyles. In *Parasite*, the viewer is immediately aware of sharp distinctions between the poor and the rich. These intensify as the movie develops and appears in clear form or in more discrete small clues in the narrative. Indeed, it is not just the difference in material life (properties, houses, neighborhoods, cars, clothes, etc., that they do or do not own) that strikes a wall between the Park's and their servants, either them (the Kims) or the former maid's family. They smell, look, dress, style their hair and talk differently. They have different manners. Little by little, they become aware of their differences but incapable of understanding them. Ultimately, it is really a matter of a shared understanding or, to be more precise, the challenge of an inability to see similarities in the contexts of life they all share. Although the third family – which endures traumas of the past – is aware of and content with their status from the start, pursuing their lives without concerns about that condition, the same does not apply to the Kim's family. Of course, they are well aware that as people in an impoverished condition they need jobs, and because of where they stand these are domestic services, in the lower, often blue-collar stratum of the labor market. Once they have it, they feel good, happy, and empowered, however, dreaming for more.

In the first scenes, Bong offers a composite of possibilities for the meaning of parasite. The worse-off Kim's are together, trying to connect to a wi-fi from a neighbor. They are all broke and do not have a social safety net to which they can appeal. Sitting at the table, they are beset by insects. The place is infested. A little later, when they are working together, bending pizza boxes, on the floor, municipality workers are seen fumigating the streets. The Kim father asks his son to open the windows of their semi-basement, so that the pesticide can get into the apartment and exterminate all the parasites. Killing parasites is thus a given from the start, but the idea of parasite, inherent to the movie, is not so straightforward; that parasites deserve to die is idea put forward at the beginning, but only realized much later, at the end of the plot.

Bakhtin (1990), Voloshinov (1973) and Medvedev (1985), authors identified with the Bakhtin's Circle, elaborate upon the social historical nature of language and the construction of meaning agreeing that language, in all its semiotic forms, is mediate by and as ideology. For the Circle, this is equivalent to saying that all forms of language carry values which will be created, inflected, and reproduced by people in society. *Parasite* is thus at the same time a denotative and connotative sign according to the evaluative position established from the start by Bong, by the characters in the plot and most of all by the viewers of the film. As Voloshinov (1973, p.10) explains: "a sign does not simply exist as a given part of reality— it reflects and refracts another reality". Hence, "*Parasite*" may be related to the true reality or not, it may be a way to conceive itself or the other; either way, it is subjected to myriad ideological evaluations.

In the Park family neighborhood, the problem of insect infestation is not addressed at all. There is no need for that as all the buildings and infrastructure are well maintained in urbanized and clean streets. The house itself is wide and open and has plenty of space, light, and air circulation. When the Kim family invade the Park family's life, posing as dedicated employees, the whole idea is to make viewers think that they are the parasites. This is reinforced by the fact that all of them, one way or the other, had to fake, deceive, and lie in their qualifications to get the job. The Kim son falsified his college certificate; the Kim daughter had to pose as a child psychologist; the Kim father having become the Park family's driver had to practice good manners and learn the operation of a high-class Mercedes in order to make believe he was qualified; the three of them, once employed and taking advantage of a pre-existing Moon-gwang serious allergic condition, tricked Mrs. Park into believing that the old maid might have an infectious disease – maybe tuberculosis – and got her fired. In that way, the Kim mother was employed in her place. At each moment, at each 'accomplishment', the Kim's celebrated accordingly. First, they toasted to cheap sodas; later, they had pizzas; and then, when they had the chance, they had a party at the Park's house and at the Park's expense.

The Park family is also to be regarded as parasites. They seem not to be able to do things themselves and employ a bunch of domestic employees to do things for them. They live surrounded by housekeeper, tutors, driver, gardener. The idea that they employ so many people for domestic tasks, paying good salaries, and still have enough to live a rich life suggests that income inequality is stringent and so is the level of labor exploitation. How can one be identified more as a parasite than the other? Meaning is a social construction, as identities. But there is a contradiction in the contradiction here. Moon-gwang and Geun-se are certainly thankful and submissive to the Park's for allowing, although not

knowingly, Moon-gwang to remain as housekeeper after they bought the house (and so the situation of Geun-se could be accommodated inside the unknown bunker). Geun-se even tries to communicate with Mr. Park, by Morse code, switching on and off one of the lights. He wishes to acknowledge how much he appreciates the Park's favor. In reality, however, they live like parasites at the Park's expenses.

]The Kim's find the Park's naive. But they find them to be good people. When the Kim's were celebrating at the Park's house they desired that the house would be theirs one day. One of them pounders about the Park's good nature; they are gentle and fair; they pay good salaries. However, the daughter is assertive. She worries about their own situation. They are most in need. (She is the first to get killed at the end.) To achieve what they wish, they had and have to do things to deceive the Park's. Even the Park's teenage daughter is in love with the Kim son, and he lets her play along with that. They seem to be capable to do anything, ends justifying means. What at first seemed to be a conscious outcome of well-planned actions – the word 'plan' is used quite often – is in fact a random result of some desperate people improvising, trying to make a living. In the end, the whole clumsy scheme becomes a disaster.

The Kim family advances have little to do with conscious politics and more to do with their dealing with immediate needs. One opportunity succeeds the other (but not for long). Consciousness is in fact an unstable state of mind that comes and goes, like flashes. This has an idealized world that never existed as a reference. Everyday living destroys all attempts at deconstructing power relations; thus, class struggles (and flashes of consciousness) are derailed away from any progressive way. Everyday life is the locus of alienation. Needs satisfaction takes to consumption, including of devices – like cell phones – that are used as means of communication and propaganda. Every individual is in fact alienated most of the time. (Lefebvre, 2002). But everyday life may also be an arena for change. What forces should be called upon to change this, then?

Harvey (2017) explains how 'capital fetishism' is critical in interpreting the contemporary world. This is the situation when money becomes the realization of itself. Money generates money. Just as a commodity, it has a price – interest. All you must do to make money when you have money to spare is to throw it in some sort of financialized investment that promises you a good reward. It is like a Ponzi scheme. In this case, money has little to do with the production of commodities, or there is little understanding that it has.

Instead of anti-value in money form becoming value through the cycles of production, circulation, and realization of commodities, it is anti-value generating more anti-value. It is strange and insane. It is the production of fictitious capital, based heavily on debt. The end result can be no other than crisis, destruction, and stringent inequality (Harvey, 2017; Valença, 2020). The cinematic representation of crisis in political economy is complex and contradictory. Capital as relation is always and never representable. Think of the dogged realism of Margin Call (2011) in which the snake oil opacity of mortgage-backed securities is rendered as talking heads and number mumbling; or The Big Short (2015), also about the 2008 economic meltdown, in which characters break the fourth wall to provide financial footnotes for a process that is otherwise unfilmable. Long ago, Eisenstein pondered the possibility of film Marx's Capital and struggled mightily with the prospect of formal interventions and imagistic translatability.

It is easy to "see" the fetish—just frame objecthood—but it is exceedingly difficult to visualize the capital logic that informs it and is immanent to its very possibility within capitalism. Thus, to "see" the Kims is in no way the real of realization in the formula M-M': for Eisenstein the methodological problem of cinema re Capital (and capital) is how to teach the worker to think dialectically. Bong is indeed interested in this enigma of seeing, the optical unconscious, and seeks formal expressions for contradictions too easily performed by objects or characters themselves (this is one reason that in the poster advertising for Parasite the characters' faces are blocked out or anonymized). Nevertheless, what facilitates dialectical decoding, as Eisenstein puts it, at once confronts the behemoth of global cinema where the language of spectacle strenuously seeks a universal equivalent like money itself. Here the struggle is between the fact of fetishism and its visual dissimulation—less the alienation effect and more the affect of Entfremdung.

SNOBISHNESS, NAIVETY, GOOD MANNERS, THE SMELL, MALICE AND OTHER SUBTLE TOUCHES

No one is really a bad person.

The internet changed everyday experiences. It changed our relationship to space and time. The Kim's have no connection for their cell phones. They are all unemployed. They have to find a connection to get to know about work, an informal job folding pizza boxes. Many tasks are done through the internet, even instructions on how to fold the boxes. They later find information about driving a Mercedes, ways to dress etc. There is an intergenerational gap: the Kim father gets instructions found online from his son and daughter. Jessica finds information about being an art therapist on the internet. In a bizarre scene, they do not stop looking at their cells even when they are hiding under the center table in the Park's living room. Everyone can have a cell phone these days, but there is a cost attached to keeping it operational. Internet leaves many people under the impression that they are able to effortlessly do anything and so need no training.

A scholar rock (with symbolic meanings in certain Asian societies) was given to the Kim son by his rich friend (allegedly sent by his grandpa) as a token of friendship and good fortune; and there was an immediate attachment to it by the whole family. There is here a moral suggestion that this attachment is born out of the Kim's appreciation for the rich, thus their having the boy and his gift in high regard. The rock fragment is more like a stone and is carried about in several scenes of the movie, like: it is one of just a handful of items to be saved from the flood caused by heavy rain; it is taken by the Kim son to the Park's bunker; it is used by Geun-se to knock the Kim son down into a coma; it is finally taken back to nature, after all tragic happenings, when it becomes clear to the Kim son (he had told his father the rock keeps clinging on to him) that no luck or good fortune is attached to it.

When the Kim son first arrives at the Park's house for the job interview, he is impressed by the luxurious house and garden. Moon-gwang, then the housekeeper, explains that the house was built by a famous architect, so-called Namgoong Hyeonja. The fictional architect built the house for himself, lived there and, later, sold it to the Park's. The house is a symbol of prestige. The architect is mentioned as a clear message that the house is iconic in many senses. Inside that house, a young, conventional high middle-class family lives, the Park's. They have good intentions, are honest and lawful people, and follow the social etiquette. The Park family are very seldom seen together, except for a photo hanging on a wall. The children have caretakers; each keep to their own rooms and school daily activities. The Park's have dogs that receive special treatment. Mrs. Park appears carrying one of them around on several occasions. The dogs have, each of them, special routines, foods and treats. When the Park's go camping, the housekeeper is instructed to take care of the dogs. The Park's are part of a society that follows traditional values. They have distinct manners that come out of the education they had. They have had and follow principles and ideas inculcated on them. Rich people being rich do things naturally. But what seems natural to them may be humiliating to other people, especially the ones who work for them and are nearby on a daily basis. Subtle gestures reveal structural class prejudices. But it is difficult to tell when and if they are being intentionally snobbish. They speak in low tone and with polite voice and gestures. The newly installed domestic servants try to follow the same pattern. Having said that, the Kim family knows how to play the game, or think they do.

Mr. Park likes the fact that the new driver (the Kim father) quite never 'crosses the line'. He is friendly, discrete, respectful, and agreeable. But he seems to be increasingly bothered with the driver's smell, of which he was made aware by his young, innocent son who said: they all smelled the same. The smell 'crosses the line', Mr. Park tells his wife. After describing the smell in many ways, in a despising way, he finally says the driver smells like people who use the 'subway'. Although the child's revelation worried the Kim family, the Park's do not pay much attention to it. Moreover, Mr. Park is unaware of the other household employees. They are under his wife's supervision. She is a housewife and takes care of domestic matters. The whole episode triggers a red alert, as the Kim's should not be revealed as a family, but a bunch of strangers working together. They think about buying different soaps to avoid that perception. After the kid's revelation, Mr. Park, and Mrs. Park too, scent that. Mr. Park cannot help not smelling the driver. It is more like a scent that is difficult to get rid of. Subtle humiliations are also difficult to get rid of.

References to English words and American culture may seem a bit snob, but it is allegedly valued in that context. The Kim's know that and takes advantage from it. Once employed, the Kim son becomes Kevin. When he knew about the need for a tutor for the Park son, he made up a story about this person he knew about, whose name in English was Jessica. However, he did not reveal that she was his own sister. An English name seems to be a symbol of status and an indication that she might have spent some time studying or working abroad. There are other references to the American culture in the movie, like the boy's favorite toys, the American Indian hut set in the garden, English proper names, or words, studying abroad etc. The Kim son himself had to ask his sister to falsify a certificate for him to play as English teacher. Mrs. Park hardly paid any attention to it. She does not mind about papers and formal qualifications. She is pragmatic and wants the job done. In good will, she accepts Jessica's profile evaluation of her son's drawings and of a similar picture hanging on the wall and is convinced of her qualifications as art educator and therapist. The Kim daughter seems to be the most malicious of the family. Later, she mocks about that when alone with the rest of the Kim's. They all, but she, feel bad about tricking the Park's. Although not by the Park's, who are peaceful citizens, she is the first to be intentionally killed in the movie tragic ending.

The Park house is impeccably clean and tidy. The Park's are good keepers of their children and provide accordingly. The Kim's know that which made it easy for them to convince Mrs. Park to fire the maid and employ the Kim mother in her place. The former housekeeper is a key figure in the plot and so is her husband. They make all the connections for the missing links possible. She had worked for the original owner, the architect that built the house. This explains why she knew about the bunker. When the house was sold and the architect moved abroad, she stayed behind as housekeeper and hid her husband in the bunker. As soon as she finds out about the Kim's scheme, she too shows some malice by blackmailing them into accepting her proposition (which was to leave her husband situation unaltered).

Mr. Park is overheard telling his wife that the woman's panties found in his car is cheap, but he has it as an object of desire and fetishizes her wearing it. The movie is full of these indications about class distinction and subjugation. At the beginning, when the Kim's get paid for doing a job folding pizza boxes, they celebrate with cans of soda. Later, when the son is employed, they go eat at the same pizza place. A ketchup bag is used, suggesting blood (that will appear later both in the housekeeper coughing scene and at the dreadful ending). Later, when they all are employed, when the Park's are away for the night, they celebrate at the Park's house. The Park's have to return home early and the whole family, but the housekeeper (Kim mother) have to go. After spending most of the night hiding under a center table, they run under heavy rain only to find their semi-basement apartment flooded. At the same time, for the Park's, the rain means enjoyment with their boy safely playing in the garden, camping with his American Indian tent. For the Kim's, there was total loss and desperation; for the Park's, a renewed rejoice to celebrate their son's birthday the next day, a bright, sunny day. The driver is summoned to work extra hours. He drives Mrs. Park to do the birthday shopping. Mrs. Park talks to a friend on the phone about the wonderful rain they had, that cleared the air and brought a bright, sunny day, allowing her to throw a birthday party for her son. In the party, before the tragic ending, there is more humiliation. The driver is told to impersonate an American Indian. When he shows dissatisfaction, Mr. Park reminds him that he is being paid extra, that he should take that as part of the job.

It is not a mere coincidence that the two main families in the plot have the same structure: a couple with two children. The difference is that one is better-off, the other worse-off. They are both unaware of how they see and feel about each other. They come from different backgrounds and behave accordingly. The third family is the link between past and present and to what happens to the two other families. All the time, until the fateful birthday party, the Park's are unaware of the Kim's intentions and wrong doings. Notwithstanding that, little by little, the Kim's become bothered about the Park's snobbish attitude, which seems to come out naturally.

The rich family's 'naivety' and politeness conquer the new parasites. They are often referred to as 'good people', but resentment grows out of humiliating, small actions and gestures, so that the ending is tragic for Mr. Park too, when he tries to get the car key from the driver, who is holding his dying daughter. Once more, he senses the bad scent and is killed by the driver out of rage.

Everyday life is semiotically shaped. Real life cannot be perceived as such or else by material signs and their meaning is a result of the singularity of the subject and the uniqueness of the context of production. Moreover, any point of view is an evaluative position resulting from the chronotope of the

event, of the author or both. That is why Park's and Kim's seem to flow in parallel universes only connected by the different meanings experienced in their everyday life. A rock is only a rock but not; a foreign name is just a name but carries with it a valued distinct culture, a passport for social class distinction. A smell is a lot more than just a smell. It is a trait of character of being poor, it is a threat of being poor and deceiving, it is a disgust of the different. And above all, the rain, which is the messenger of heaven, the cleaner of the polluted air announcing a bright sunny festive day, is, at the same time, the executioner of hell, with floods, losses, despair. Sunny and bright day for whom? One can only relate with the world through a material sign and meaning that is always the result of an evaluative position. Signs not only reflect the world as imprinted images but and most of all refract the world (Bakhtin, 1981).

Through signs one not only describe a reality but build, because of social historical and ideological experiences, multiple interpretations (refractions) of the reality. Truth is therefore multiple and often contradictory since they are related to the evaluative horizon of each group or person. Those multiple discourses, or social voices as Bakhtin would say (1981), are the way we attribute sense to the world. While Jean-Luc Nancy's *Sens du Monde* is of a different order, both the attribution and realization of sense relations are to some extent overdetermined by the formation of senses in general (for Marx, historical socialization is always already sense formation). The latter is a *longue durée* difficult to discern within the time/space compression of modernity and modernization. Evaluative positions, the dialogicity of speech acts, are not unaffected by the speed of living the everyday. Film attempts, synchronically, to image variable velocity in its own movement, yet editing speed is not in effect its capture. For contemporary capitalism, just in time production is consequentially never in time, by which one means that the calculation is subject to more than the decision can register.

Thus, to understand the class war, for instance, of *Parasite* is also to confront the diachronic implications of the text, "seen" not just in the composition of individual shots, but in the space-off of its imaging, the conditions of temporal mediation that give to space its sensibility and sensation, if you like, its ability to occupy.

HOUSE OF DREAMS – DESIRING A BETTER LIFE

There are two houses built for the movie. One – or the main part of it – was built for the rich family on real location; the other was built for the poor family in studio set. The rich family's house is full of natural light, wide open to a nice, tidy garden and full of windows, pale, discrete, warm, welcoming colors, and with sophisticated, almost minimalist decorations. The poor family's place is a semi-basement apartment, with an only window in the kitchen which is also a living room. It is much darker and full of disorganized, chaotic elements and colors.

The window has a view to the street, with buildings of the same sort, each with a semi-basement too. Sitting at the table, viewers have a straight look at the street level. The shots show a recurring drunken man, peeing just outside (an obvious stereotype of poor neighborhoods). In the apartment, the only bathroom has a toilet that one must climb up stairs to use it. It is leveled with the street, so that it is at the midpoint between the lower floor and the ceiling. This suggests that the toilet has to level with the outside sewage pipes that follow gravity. Air circulation is difficult in the semi-basement apartment.

While, at the two-story Park's house, each child has a room, at the Kim's semi-basement apartment there is little space so that they have to share the cooler floor in the living room for an afternoon nap or, the whole family together, to undertake the folding pizza box job. In sum, the two families' respective homes, streets, and neighborhoods (their colors, smells, infrastructure, state of conservation, etc.) depict their status quo and are a reflex of current spatial segregation.

The filmmaker chose very carefully the plot of land where the main house was built, adapting the lay-out to the best position of the sun/light. The set designer (and the picture director) had a straightforward preoccupation about framing the shots in the right format and angle so that a hierarchy of spaces was established. As with everything else in the movie – smells, clothing, language use, haircuts etc. –, the house, as well as the semi-basement apartment in opposition, are markers of distinction. Up – down, high – low, bright – dark, tidy – untidy, dry – wet are oppositions that clearly pin each setting onto its own place.

The Park's two-story, multi-level house is organized in such a way that the ground floor is taken by the family's daily activities (living room, kitchen and dining room, garden); the first floor is dedicated to the family's more reserved and intimate activities (bedrooms, bathrooms); a floor down in relation to ground floor is where there is a service area; and downstairs to that, through a hidden door behind the cabinets, there is the bunker (which is unknown to the Park's). The house is thus organized in a three-tier hierarchy: space for the Park's, space for service personnel, unknown space central to a third, desperate family in the plot. There is no hierarchy of spaces whatsoever in the Kim's semi-basement apartment, notwithstanding the toilet elevation.

The Park's house is a dream come through. The Kim son is impressed as soon as he sees it the first time. After the whole Kim family is employed at the Park's, alone, celebrating in the living room, the Kim son shows he is reading the young Park's daughter's diary, where she writes how much she is in love with him. The family then raises the possibility that the house will be his (and theirs) one day. The Kim son asks his sister which room she would choose. But crime – it is suggested – does not pay. The unexpected rain and flood, the birthday party the next day, and all the tragic events determined that the poorer Kim family, now reduced to the son and the mother, still lived in the same place, the semi-basement apartment; the richer family chose to move away after Mr. Park death. And the Kim son, after learning that his father was hiding in the bunker, finally desired to go through all that is expected from a young man in contemporary society: to get a proper university education, get a job, work hard, earn money, and buy that house. In that way, he and his mother could reunite with his father. It is, after all, in that house that he projects a happy future for him and his family.

CONCLUSION

There are many moral threads sewing Parasite's plot. These are baits to catch the viewers' attention. The Director plays with the viewers' sentiments, sense of fairness, sensibility, and relative consciousness. A few things are placed in the movie to intrigue the audience; others as a guiding torch that helps certain scenes and facts make sense. The whole idea is to show two different points of view, or two different positions in society (or maybe three), and how these relate to each other. Are they independent or mutually determined? Are the rich exploiting the two poor families or are those families taking advantage of the rich family's good will? Who is a parasite?

The Kim family's mother had been an important sportsperson, a silver medalist, then completely forgotten. She could have been someone she has not become. She might have aspired to fame, go to the Olympics or the like. The dream stayed in the past; it is just a good memory which is now valued by her family only. However, suddenly, faced with new prospects, ambition comes to terms with reality. But this is tricky. Work and well-being become associated to success and this to social and economic status. The Kim's thus aspired to become the Park's, even own their magnificent, architect-built house. The third family – composed of the former housekeeper and her hiding husband –, as suggested in the movie, is like most poor families in society. They do not aspire much; they are content with the little they have. They live each day at a time. The possibility of losing the little they have in view of the Kim's scam acts as a trigger to also reveal their resentful nature. There is no solidarity in Parasite's world.

The scholar rock that is given to the Kim's at the beginning of the movie and that accompanies the family's dreams till the end, in addition to being a distraction to viewers regarding its true nature, is soon associated with all four of them being employed. It is a symbol of good fortune turned into a token of luck and prosperity. The Kim's associate it to their own social ascension. Later, with all tragic events, Ki-woo, after almost having his skull broken by use of the rock, takes it back to nature, a creek, where it belongs, serving as any other stone nearby, with no special significance. As we all are under capitalism, our everyday lives are regulated by consumption. Everybody must try to make a living to live a good life. Circumstances – although not justifiable – may turn certain good people into bad people. Greed and use of violence are no justification for either of the parts involved in the movie's disastrous ending. Although tragic, this is necessary to operate yet another twist to the storyline and justify a morally charged ending. The result of the Kim's actions, after losses of lives, is to take them back to where they were in the first place, or worse, as the Kim father, in the bunker hideout, is now a wanted criminal. This is a clear-cut message that only honest work is capable of changing lives and attitudes in contemporary

capitalism. Or, perhaps, it is a trap. People's lives will not change despite their living an honest life. Individual efforts cannot face and change the main structures of society. Perhaps, the movie is a bit conservative or does not go far enough. It tells you that no radical change is possible in the realm of the individual or from within small group politics. A most needed class consciousness is not necessarily related to class struggle in view of inequality and uneven development. It needs a trigger.

Judging from some of the filmmaker's other movies, like *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *Okja* (2017), *Parasite* seems to be a rather critical movie about social inequality and class struggle. However, the movie presents itself as a saga of desperate attempts that go wrong. Nothing really changes in the world. Class struggle is here represented as a direct outcome of survival strategies and enduring lifestyle in the relation between the three families. Again, alienation is everywhere and of everyone. Notwithstanding, fracturing velocities between rich and poor in cities are determined by people's relative positioning. It is not only a divide between city and region, city and countryside, city and globe, center and periphery; it is a huge, deep divide between cultural positions, visions of the world. That is why Lefebvre (2002) centers his ideas about ways-out on the everyday: this is both a prison and a field for liberation. Be that as it may, it is the outsideness of a third consciousness – the viewer – that gives sense and meaning to all dilemmas explored in *Parasite's* saga. Questions seeking for answers are not the result of logical relations but a link of the infinite dialogue chain of human existence.

To close, it is at least worth mentioning the song *A glass of soju*, originally entitled *546 years*, sung by Choi Woo Shik, the actor who plays the Kim son. This is the approximate number of years that would be necessary for the Kim son to be able to buy the Park's house considering his actual status. It appears right at the end, as a background to his voiceover reading a letter to his father. The song is suggestive of the inevitability of things given his class position. The whole scene is disappointing as – despite his desires and promises in the letter – the camera takes the viewers back to the Kim's reality in their semi-basement. At the end of a hard days' work, a drink will soften your wounds, will make you remind and, perhaps, regret ...

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