

Parasite: The Unrepaired Fissures between Allegorical Narration and Realism

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Abstract: *Boon Joon-ho's film Parasite inherits the allegorical narrative from his early works The Host and Snowpiercer. In The Host and Snowpiercer, the abstract, hypothetic dystopian setting goes well with the form of political allegory. However, Parasite takes realism as its blueprint and combines realism with an allegorical narrative. The combination casts a higher demand on the director who needs to fix the fissures between realism and the allegorical narrative. However, it's a pity that in Parasite, the lack of subconscious power, the straightforward representation of the silent "other", and the lack of ambiguity together make the combination incomplete and yet unbalanced.*

1. INTRODUCTION

At the 92nd Academy Awards in 2020, the Korean film Parasite (2019) made a new historical moment by becoming the first non-English language film that won Best Picture. Besides, the film at the same time won Best International Film, Best Director and Best Original Screenplay. Having received so much recognition, the film also evoked discussions regarding whether it deserves the honor. In my view, though Parasite is well-composed in terms of its theme, structure and cinematography, the film fails to fix the fissures between its allegorical narrative and its realistic theme. In this paper, I argue that Parasite is overrated for its incomplete and unbalanced combination of realism with allegorical narrative. This disappointed combination results from the film's lack of subconscious power, its straightforward representation of the silent "other", and its lack of ambiguity. I will compare Parasite to films that explore similar themes such as Claude Chabrol's La Cérémonie (1995) and Lee Chang-dong's Burning (2018), to examine what Parasite has and doesn't have.

2. LACK OF SUBCONSCIOUS POWER

To begin with, I want to emphasize that it's unnecessary to doubt the plot of Parasite out of real-life logic since the film adopts an allegorical narrative. Therefore, it's better to accept the allegorical logic first before delving into the film. Comments like "Park Da-hye falls in love with Kim Ki-woo unexpectedly" and "the two poor families should negotiate for self-protection rather than mutually harming" are beyond the scope of the film.

The allegory of Parasite is composed of two parts: the class stratification and a tragic ending that inevitably results from the class stratification. The tragedy is shown from a series of bloody events that happen on the climax – the scene of birthday party. Therefore, to combine realism and the allegorical narrative, the film is required to build up reasonable motivation for characters to behave in the climax scenes. Here, the crucial question is: within an allegorical narrative, can the external, societal factors replace the human instincts to directly explain for the characters' unreasonable behaviors in the climax?

A French film critic, Jean Douchet, once pointed out that Hollywood films are typical "behavior films", in which both characters' behaviors and conflicts among characters can be explained by the characters' psychology. In contrast, European films since Italian neorealism have been trying to disconnect the actions from the minds, allowing the minds to stay in an abstract sphere. In that way, the minds either stand-alone without actions or associate with irrelevant actions which makes it difficult to explain the causality. Gilles Deleuze considers this as a "subconscious image" in his Cinema 2: The Time-Image. To be subconscious is to be unconscious, while to be existent is to be conscious. Consciousness is the current state and the mobility, which can be also understood as "real actions" or "instant results". In contrast, unconsciousness is the memory that is uneasy to discern[1]. It is like the seven-eighths of the ice mountain beneath the sea, which supports the one-eighth above the sea.

I want to compare Parasite to La Cérémonie, directed by Claude Chabrol, a French New Wave director to whom Bong Joon-ho's Parasite pays huge tributes. Similarly, La Cérémonie delves into the topic of class stratification, but it digs into characters' mental worlds and reveals a fact that all social phenomena, despite seemingly illogical,

can be explained from both external societal factors and internal human instincts. As a character that is set up allegorically, Sophie, the illiterate housemaid, finds it tough to communicate in her employer's house, such as looking for files and shopping according to notes. Her employer's deliberate charity also humiliates her. As Sophie's secret is going to be discovered, the elements of violence accumulate, building up the tension and the suspense of the film. In the end, Sophie unexpectedly murders everyone in the house at midnight. Though the director doesn't directly create a conflict between the intellectual and the illiterate, he keeps creating the characters' subconsciousness and lets the final murder result from the "unconsciousness". In my view, this narrative technique is more powerful than "behavior films".

In comparison, *Parasite* also ends with a ridiculous murder. In this scene, Kim Ki-taek's anger is not directed toward the one who killed his daughter but toward Mr. Park who cannot endure the smell of the poor. The extreme disgust Mr. Park shows toward the smell of the poor ignites the unconscious barbarity of Ki-taek. I find the design of this climax unreasonable for the following two reasons. First, Ki-taek's violent act is evoked by the death of his daughter and his anger is subconscious and uncontrolled. Therefore, Ki-taek's anger should be naturally directed toward the murderer of his daughter. However, the film lets Ki-taek dramatically vent his anger on Mr. Park, making Ki-taek's violent act a representative symbol. In the real-life logic, Ki-taek needs to have a series of analysis to come up with the conclusion that Mr. Park is responsible for his daughter's death as a representative of the rich. However, the film's logic doesn't follow the real-life logic, making the character of Ki-taek less realistic. Ki-taek's violent act thus becomes a pure symbol that intensifies the theme of the film- the binary opposition between the rich and the poor.

Second, unlike *La Cérémonie* that meticulously designs many details which foreshadow the violence in the end, *Parasite* adopts an entertaining, symbolic way to narrate the story. Instead of showing some realistic differences between the lives of the poor and the rich, *Parasite* depicts the wealth gap as a playful game. There are many opposite elements in the film, such as the rich family lives in a luxurious villa while the poor family lives in a ratty basement; the rich is silly but kind-hearted while the poor is smart but crafty. These oppositions are shown as mere symbols of the macroscopical social hierarchy instead of as realistic depictions of the society of Korea. *Parasite* prepares the audience a suspenseful and entertaining game between the poor and the rich rather than reveals the heavy reality. The stinky smell is designed as a thrilling element of the story, making the audience wonder whether the parasitic acts would be exposed. And it is a pity that the depiction of the stinky smell doesn't help add the subconscious power to the character. In the climax killing scene, the exaggerated close-up shot of Mr. Park further weakens the subconscious power of Ki-taek, and the external societal factors completely cover the internal human instincts. The climax of the film is simply consisted of the pure actions without subconsciousness, which is not able to show the complex emotion of the characters. The audience thus is lost between the real actions and the unreal mentality. This feeling is resulted from the gap between realism and the allegorical narrative.

3. STRAIGHTFORWARD REPRESENTATION OF THE SILENT "OTHER"

Both the commercial films and artistic films of Korean cinema tend to incorporate strong images, which often adds a layer of pathos to the film. Among Korean films, two major political events are frequently referred: first is the national scars result from the North-South Korean issues, second is the dictatorship of the military government and the corresponding Gwangju Uprising. For example, *Joint Security Area* (2000) by Park Chan-wook and *The Coast Guard* (2002) and *The Net* (1953) by Kim Ki-duk both try to reveal the tragedy that was brought to people by the North-South division. Meanwhile, *Peppermint Candy* (2000) by Lee Chang-dong showcases how the young generation was persecuted by the Gwangju Uprising. The severe political issues usually influence the lower-class people the most since the lower-class is most vulnerable. Though directors often choose to film the lower-class as the subject, the lower-class remains as "the other" in the context of social hierarchy.

In the theory of postcolonialism, the "other" is a counterpart of the "local". The "other" loses its right of speech and agency as it becomes marginalized and alien. It's easy to find the attention on "the other" in films in recent years. I consider the attention as a gesture to show a humanistic concern and social responsibility. Meanwhile, this kind of films often at the same time show the artistic expression and consciousness of the directors. In Bong Joon-ho's films, the "other" often refers to the marginalized groups living in the bottom of the society. For example, the town residents who suffer from the terrifying murders in *Memories of Murder* (2003), the people who are suppressed at the end of the carriage in *Snowpiercer* (2013), and the mother who tries to save her retarded son in *Mother* (2009) can all be considered as the "other".

In *Parasite*, to show the Kim's family as the "other" and further create an allegory about class stratification, Bong

sets up many meaningful symbols, such as the basement, the bomb shelter, the viewing stone, the cockroaches, and the Indians. Such symbolic expression is also used in building up the plot. For example, in the middle of the film, the plot-twisting rain weakens the whole allegory because of its coincidence. First, the rich peacefully sleeps in their house, while the poor struggles in their flooded basement. After the rainy night, the poor grabs clothes from each other, while the rich select beautiful dresses from their sophisticated collections. The cross-cutting between the scenes of the poor and the rich is too straightforward and artificial. Second, because of the sudden storm, the Park's family must cancel their plans and return home from camping. In the meantime, the Kim's family accidentally kills the old housekeeper which leads to the revenge of the housekeeper's husband against the Kim's family. Third, in the climax, the murder at the birthday party seems to happen inevitably which marks an end to the allegorical narrative. However, based on my analysis above, what drives the plot forward and makes the ending happen is the coincident storm. The existence of the storm is like the key card in the Domino cards. This key event is not designed as something inevitable, instead, it's merely "possible" or even "coincident". In my view, the randomness of the key event further weakens the allegorical narrative of the film.

Though allegorical narrative needs binary composition to distinguish the "other", but it is also necessary to balance between symbolism and realism. If the former overcomes the latter, the director then can instruct and lead the audience from a dominant position regarding the value and aesthetic of the film. This eventually will make the story more like a political propaganda. Cognitivists once critiqued that "when modern film theories try to explain the subject with a hidden behaviorist hint, the audience automatically becomes an ideological subject who lacks the ability to understand and interpret films"[2]. As Charles Baudelaire notices, modern film theories "in essence define the audience to be passive"[3] and "the audience is not supposed to be positioned and arranged, because the arrangement makes the audience feel being pushed to a corner by perspectives, cutting, narratives, and mental inertia"[4]. Filmmakers can refuse the narrow-minded opinion of defining audience, but there is no need to reject the fact that films can alter the audience's mentality through multiple ways.

In *Memories of Murder*, Bong uses the natural lighting to film the living conditions of the town residents. The strong contrast between the dark sewer and the bright female corpse indicates a storm beneath the calm life. The highlighted wheat field under the sun in both the opening and the ending scene also constitute a strong contrast: the brightness in the beginning indicates the remaining happiness, while the brightness at the end reveals the helplessness that lasts as time passes by. In *Mother*, the composition of the scene of Do-joon being interrogated shows the unbalanced status between the police officer and Do-joon: they are separated by a crooked wall, with the police officer occupying the frame much more than Do-joon. Besides, the police officer is situated in the light, while Do-joon is posited in front of a crooked wall. The composition portrays Do-joon as the silent "other" and reveals a sense suppression and marginalization. Through composing and lighting, the film effectively conveys its key messages, constructs "otherness", and achieves its intention.

In contrast, *Parasite* adopts a more straightforward way of expression. In addition to the abundant clear symbols and loop-locked structures, some of the lines are also didactic: "Life never goes as planned", "Money is like an iron which can flatten a person", and "If I have enough money, I can also be kind". Bong revolves around the high concept, accurately designs the symbols and the film's structure, making the story well-organized with limited space of interpretation. Thus, the audience is subtly manipulated and would not cast any doubt on the theme of the film nor on the aesthetic of the film.

4. LACK OF AMBIGUITY DECREASING COMPASSION

Another Korean film, *Burning* (2018), is also favored by the Cannes Festival and won the highest award. The film discusses a similar topic as *Parasite*'s – the economic inequality and class stratification. In my view, *Burning* does a better job than *Parasite* because the former's indirect symbols and ambiguity open space for interpretation. The metaphors include - the cat that never appears but leaves some signs in Hae-mi's home, Ben's hobby of "burning plastic shelters", and Ben's calling of spaghetti as an oblation. With these metaphors and as the story proceeds, the audience has much more space of interpretation and the audience might try to decode every image and symbol. Based on my interpretation, the come and go of the cat indicates Hae-mi's unstable life track in Jong-su's heart, as well as Hae-mi's wandering between the two classes. Ben's behaviors of "burning shelters" and "making oblations", while showing the living conditions of the rich, also imply that Ben would play with lower-class women and even kill them. The ambiguity created by the symbols enables the audience to think and reflect on the subject matter which ultimately will intensify the theme. However, in *Parasite*, the signifier and the signified are fixed, the characters are flat and functional, making the messages of the film straightforward and didactic.

The highly concentrated society shown in *Parasite* seeks to find a universal meaning, while puts less value on individualism, nativism, and the authorship. The film depicts class stratification as a universal phenomenon and spreads the message through a didactic way. The audience realizes the social issues through an entertaining, stimulating, and spectacular narrative. Therefore, the audience loses his or her own interpretation that is based on his or her own experience and values. The audience might stop thinking about the issues after a one-time viewing without resonating with the characters or further thinking about the subject matter. In my view, such an allegorical narrative in *Parasite* only completes the first stage that is constructing the symbols. It stops before thinking about how to empower the audience and how to extends the discussion.

However, in *Parasite*, all the clues echo with each other and all the mysteries are resolved in the end. The film repeats the use of metaphors and symbols in a straightforward way, giving the audience an absolute answer and a fixed imagination. The stone sculpture Min-hyuk gives to Ki-woo both symbolizes the change of fate of the Kim's family and functions as the burden that Kim's family face to cross the class divide. Here, the referent (stone sculpture) is assigned with a clear function and the meaning of the symbol is fixed. The relationship between the signifier and signified is onefold and settled. Such examples can be frequently found in the film. Just as Christian Metz has criticized in his *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, when the signified is tied to a fixed signifier under the flat characterization and when the characterization is high conceptual, the film would enforce the symbolic order which facilitates the stereotypical social discourse[5]. In *Parasite*, the signifier that is not independent from the signified is unable to bring the audience to the free imaginary order proposed by Jacques Lacon, all the metaphors and critiques only function in a traditional narrative dominated by the symbolic order. It's paradoxical that the film tries to criticize the class rigidity while adopting a traditional, solidified narrative. The solidified narrative in a way can be viewed as an extension of the solidified social hierarchy. Therefore, I think what *Parasite* lacks is the courage to deconstruct the traditional narrative and the dominant social discourse. The film stops at the first level of the allegorical narration and fails to achieve a higher aesthetic.

In conclusion, *Parasite's* lack of subconscious power, static representation of the silent "other", and the lack of ambiguity gives very little room for viewers' imagination and thus makes the allegorical narrative incomplete. It's a pity that the film merely identifies and presents the problem while doesn't provide any possible solution. What the film could have had is an attempt to respond to the reality or imagine a better place and more space for audiences to contemplate.

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