

# **How to Talk about Class Stink in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite***

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## **Abstract**

This essay assumes and attempts to prove two argumentative claims concerning Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*: 1) it is a highly political film but not about the struggle between antagonistic classes; there is only one class in the movie, the "middle-class"(中間階級), and 2) it is the struggle within the middle-class that is the competition for survival. *Parasite* is neither pro-capitalist in its evasion of real class issues in Korean society nor anti-capitalist in its political allegorization of wealth and poverty. *Parasite* does not follow pre-established steps, provided by extra-cinematic ideas, of what and how films about class struggle should be. What appears to be class antagonism turns out to be an agonistic game of survival in which the participants lack any sense of shame. The subtle way the film weaves its narrative, by slowly shifting its point of view from the older generation to the younger, illustrates the centrality of resilience in this agonistic competition. The most

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outstanding example of the film's intricate politicality is revealed when the invisible bodily stink, just like a virus, insinuates the return of the “repressed” antagonism hidden beneath layered class divisions. What returns as the repressed is the shame of life invisibly subordinated to the underground, like a creepy virus. The stink is, like the virus, a medium that instigates the forgotten class struggle: as long as it promises to return, we are all mere parasites in the system. *Parasite* is a thoroughly political movie in its insistent depiction of the inerasable Real of class stink and in its radical demystification of the fantasy of agonistic survivalism.

**Keywords:** *Parasite*, Intra-class Struggle, Survivalism, Resilience, Stink, Virus

## **How to Talk about Class Stink in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite***

### **1. Bong's Career and Filmography**

Bong started his filmmaker's career after he graduated from Korean Academy of Film Arts as a director of his debut film *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (2000), which was a sheer box office flop but earned critical acclaim from festivals overseas. His name was widely known for his success of the second feature film, *Memories of Murders* (2003), which dealt with a mysterious serial killer at a small town outside Seoul. Set in the 1980s when the political turmoil over democracy was at its height, the film, together with a monster thriller *The Host* (2006), questions the meaning of the state power, or the idea of political state in Korea as a caretaker of people's sufferings. (Korea was back then a kind of 'police state' ruled by a military dictator.) This film sets the tone and style of his filmmaking, a meticulous obsession on every detailed *mise-en-scène*, let alone his thematic search for what I would like to call "a para-ethical critique of social reality": we could not blame for the social ills any one party, because we ourselves are all partly responsible for them, including the state itself. (Incidentally, this is what I think renders his films distinct from those of Lee Chang-Dong, which have

been preoccupied with problematizing the ethical, even hypocritical, sensibility of Korean society until the recent *Burning*).

*The Host* (2006) was a huge blockbuster hit in the box office, drawing more than 13 million people to 1,800 screens nationwide. It is focused on the survival of a family in Han River where a biological monster was accidentally created by the US army. Unlike Hollywood blockbusters, the film does not applaud the family as heroes, who literally saved the whole country from annihilation. The film rather indicts the utter incapacity of the state as the last resort to people's safety and survival. Monster could be a symbol of neoliberal capitalism which is the monstrous outcome of multinational military-industry complex, relentlessly driving the lives of ordinary people into the precarious and insecure competition of the survival of the fittest. Allegorical as it is, the film, however, sincerely problematizes the sinister aspect of structural violence.

His next feature, *Mother* (2009), continues the search for the para-ethical critique of sociality in the distorted self-portrayal of the South Korean society, especially its defunct fatherhood and colonial statehood, and its distorted supplementation by hysterical motherhood. Bong here even goes beyond his para-ethical critique and attempts to transcend the categories of ethics themselves, obsessively

problematizing the subtle irony of deep “familial paradigm” pervasive in the Korean society: a fatherless Korean man can thrive, while a man without mother is hardly able to survive. This is a crucial “cultural” question par excellence; Korean society has been not only feeding on the sacrifices of women (mother) but also dependent on the *hystericization* of them. In the end, it is the mother who holds responsible for all the social abnormality of the Korean society including the defunct masculinity of her sons, let alone their perverse misogyny. But the final message of the film is clearly apocalyptic: “Who would throw a stone to this neurotic woman?” The culprit is also within you.

As is well known, *Snowpiercer* (2013) is an overt anti-capitalist allegory, a kind of grand-scale fantasy of class struggle and the final annihilation of the world. In this sense, it is indeed anti-capitalist, but not socialist or communist in political stance. The film is, as have been in any other Bong's films, highly critical of the ruling class or the people of power, but the director also calls our attention to the ethical, if not existential, frivolity of the underprivileged. Though avoiding falling into the trap of taking one side over the other, the film's ethical equivocality ends up in a dream-like fantasy where all things have to be completely destroyed or at least derailed, in order to be reset. It seems

like the film takes the stance of pure anarchism; the director here appears to discard his last hope for the idea of good state under global neoliberal capitalism.

The state *is* a part and parcel of capitalist system of exploitation; the only form of resistance against the system available now would be to simply exit ourselves from the unbridled exploitation of the state and its global partner. No efforts to politically subvert the established order, no attempts to stop the functioning of the system with glitches or frictions are successful, neither because of the lack of power nor the shortage of tactics. The problem lies deeper than these contingent elements: it's our own desire that helps lubricate the smooth function of the system itself. In this psychology of perverse desire, there is no difference between capitalists and the workers. The ultimate message of the film would be: in so far as we are all in the same train even if some suffer more than the others, the only way out of this nightmarish system is to simply keep imagining the total re-installation. In this sense, *Snowpiercer* is indeed post-apocalyptic.

*Okja* (2017) is a sort of ecological variation of what *Snowpiercer* left unsolved. Multinational capitalism now goes even further than simply trying to create what we call nature in artificial means: nature itself has to be redefined as ontologically indistinguishable from the

artificial and cultural or, at least, the idea of nature has to be deconstructed as ideologically untenable. This involves more than what we call bio-politics: it's not about controlling or manipulating the process of nature in order to allow the infinite permissiveness of our desire. What the film ultimately tells with the awful fate of Okja is that the disfigured form of nature in today's capitalism is, nonetheless, neither worse than we have enjoyed so far nor the worst of what we have imagined. The problem is our innate anthropocentrism which tends to see nature as opposed to what we call the human. Human beings are described to be the most unnatural elements of all universe. Bong's para-ethical imagination allegorically touches upon the post-apocalyptic world of nature where everything human loses its meaning.

## **2. How *Parasite* Draws the Public Attention?**

One of the reasons for *Parasite*'s unprecedented winning of the Oscar in the Best Picture category as a foreign film might be that it does *not* feel like a foreign film except for an inch of subtitle. What does it mean? Is it an acknowledgement that *Parasite*, despite its linguistic strangeness and cultural heterogeneity, is not seriously different, like any other such contenders before it, from the familiar Orientalist delineation of its foreignness? There is, however, nothing particularly

exotic or orientalist in the way the film realistically describes the paradox of fierce battles for survival in the Korean branch of global neoliberal capitalism. The claim of *Parasite*'s universal appeal is said to come from its seemingly pro-capitalist or at least *non-anti-capitalist* stance. In its overall political orientation, they argue, *Parasite* does not favor any side of the class division, “evenhandedly,” that is, politically correctly, depicting the good, the bad, and the ugly altogether regardless of their class origins. It seems to confirm the argument that Bong's films are highly equivocal in their ethical stance and that they are thereby not very political in the usual sense of the term.

The critique becomes more complicated when we consider that lots of critics in Korea as well as critics in other countries start to criticize the very “political equivocality” or the “mechanical Political Correctness” of the film in terms of class struggle. They insist that the film does not give the working class its due, while it pays an undue respect for the magnanimity and good will of the rich and negatively highlights the lack of solidarity among the working class. Moreover, the film's main focus frequently falls on the ugly battle in the mud for the social recognition and its dire consequences, which is to be mainly waged between the weak and the have-nots. As one critic puts it, Bong's gesture concerning class struggle may be termed *cynical*: “a shrug over



inequality.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Kitaek (基澤) and Gunse (近世), the two old defunct patriarchal figures in the downstairs, openly show the respect for their boss, Mr. Park (朴氏), who supports their survival. And it is none other than the two “parasitic” families that fiercely fight, in the absence of their revered owner, with each other at the basement for the survival of the fittest. Rather than the class struggle of the downstairs against the upstairs, the battle is waged in the downstairs between the people of basement and those of semi-basement. What would have been a political confrontation turns out to be an intra-class strife for survival. Ironical as it is, both supporters and opponents of the film completely agree on the same point: *the film is not political enough*. The former valorizes the virtue of ethical evenhandedness, while the latter condemns its apoliticality. As it will be clear later on, I think they both are untenable for their lack of attention to how subtly the movie problematizes the class politics itself.

### 3. Why is *Parasite* not about Class Struggle?

In fact, *Parasite* is not a film about class struggle, or the lack

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<sup>1</sup> E. Tammy Kim, “Upstairs, Downstairs: On Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite*,” in *The Nation* (2019), available from: <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/parasite-bong-joon-ho-review/>. Retrieval date: April 15, 2020.

thereof, unlike the way *Snowpiercer* is an allegory of class struggle. There is certainly the class antagonism between the Kims and the Parks, as when the Parks keep reminding themselves and the Kims of the virtue of “not crossing the line” and as when the daughter Kijung (基婷) openly laughs at the innocent stupidity and snobbism of the Parks. (The latter scene also demonstrates that the rich people like the Parks really are upstarts who have no sense of “culture” (教養), unable to distinguish the glittering surface from the cultured intellect. Both family seem to illustrate the two different versions of *anti-intellectualism* prevalent in Korean society: a snobbish attachment to anything smack of intellect and a cynical detachment from everything intellectual) As a group, however, neither the Kims nor the Parks, apart from Gunse and a former house manager Moongwang (文光), are the representative of upper and middle class respectively; despite clear spatial and vertical difference, there is only *one* class in the movie. The middle-class or the class in the center.

What I mean by “middle-class” (中間階級) here is not identical with the Western “bourgeois” (中產階級) whose class instinct is defined against the upper-class and the lower class; it has a specific implication in the context of the Korean culture. The Korean middle-class concerns less with economic status or political power than with

cultural and psychical self-identity: the middle-class identity involves more or less with the strong sense of *independence*. To say that there is only middle-class in the film does not mean, therefore, that the film exclusively depicts middle-class realities among diverse class arrangements but that there seems to literally exist, as far as class consciousness is concerned, only one class identity in the Korean society.

For example, Mr. Park, Kitaek, and Gunse, though clearly distinct in their current economic status, all actually belong to the same lineage of individual “middle-class” entrepreneurs. The youngest Mr. Park, with good educational background, succeeds as a venture businessman probably during the upsurge of digital industry boom after new millennium; the oldest Kitaek, now dependent upon the family after a series of failures in the fierce economic competition, has the history of independent businessman who probably was forced to retire early or bankrupt during the financial crisis in 1997; Gunse is an anachronistic unemployed who, as one of “0.88-Million-Won generation” men, entirely relies upon his wife for living having failed several times to pass the test for the high law-office. Coming from diachronically different generations of the same middle-class cluster in the recent South Korean history, they happen to dwell *vertically* at the same

synchronic space.

Thus considered, the class struggle in this film, if there is one, is actually the conflict within the self-same class. The ambivalent respect and jealousy of the Kims and Gunse towards the Parks could not be the example of typical *inter*-class antagonism but the display of the loser sentiment toward the current winner in the game of survival. This *intra*-class exchange of ambivalent feelings is indeed *agonistic*, not antagonistic: life is just a game of survival equally for all participants. Any means for outwitting the wealthy opponent are allowed in so far as the rules are strictly followed. You could be winners or losers: the game of survival is entirely contingent upon the individual efforts as long as the fair competition is guaranteed. What really matters in this intra-class struggle is not political justice but procedural fairness. All you have to do in this game of “winner takes it all” is not to remain a loser by any means possible. In this situation, no one openly admits to their being the victim of cruel exploitation because the very acknowledgment of one’s own unjust victimhood could be the most pathetic way of being a loser.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The nonsensical absurdity of this game theory is indeed the gist of neoliberalism in that the ground on which they play the game in equal terms is always already “tilted.” The rule of the game itself allows the different starting point: the wealthy and privileged “gold spoons” are way ahead of the disadvantaged “clay spoons” even before the game starts. And there are a lot of under-privileged who do not even dream of competing in the game. Parasite nakedly lays bare this absurdity of neoliberal survivalism which is built upon the collective fantasy, if not ideology, that the intra-class struggle for survival has nothing to do with class struggle for justice.

Only in terms of “absent” inter-class politics for justice is the relationship of three patriarchs parasitical. Kitaek and Gunse are “actual” class parasites to the host Mr. Park who unwittingly supports the bare survival of their family. Seen from this class politics, the two parasites are indeed pathetic for the lack of class consciousness. But when you approach this host-parasite relationship in terms of the intra-class interdependence, Mr. Park, together with his family, is the one who completely counts upon the labors of the Kims and Moongwang. No wonder then that the Parks are, at some points, seen to be mere role-players in the pre-arranged game carefully coordinated by Moongwang and later by the Kims. The Kims are able to outwit the Parks precisely because they are keenly aware that the clever use of devices of imposture in intra-class struggle, such as trickery, fraud, forgery, disguise, manipulation, defamation, does not constitute the breach of the rule in the game upon the tilted ground. For them, the act of outwitting concerns less with unjust “parasiting” than legitimate “servicing” of the inept upstarts.

This sense of smooth parasiting by clever servicing, not by radical overthrowing, is clearly manifest in several scenes where the Kims celebrate their victory at a driver's buffet, at their semi-basement abode, and finally at the splendid upstairs of the Parks' mansion. They are

neither ashamed of themselves nor feel *guilty* at all towards the Parks not only because they did not commit any serious fraud like violent subversion or direct occupation but also because they really think they are saving the Parks out of their own stupidity. And they could maintain their sense of dignity, or even superiority, intact by assuming the invaluableness of their service in comparison with their paycheck. The Parks like to put themselves in the position of the master who orders, but ironically this desire to rule can only be possible on condition that the trace of their becoming *nouveau riche* be successfully covered up and that their employees dare not cross the line that separates the world of masters from that of servants. There is nothing unjust or unfair in the intra-class rivalry between the imposture of the Kims and the snobbism of the Parks.

#### **4. Why do we identify with the Kims?**

Strange as it may sound, it is this very lack of the sense of shame and guilt that draws us closer to the fate of the Kims. Up until the discovery of a secret underground dweller, Gunse, the first part of the movie was chiefly shot through the perspective of the Kims in individual and as a group. Especially, the two members of the younger generation take the central place in the film's diegetic narrative. Despite

plotting an imposture, Kiwoo and Kijung easily earn the audience's sympathy early on probably thanks to their overtly "positive" attitude towards life. They do not complain of the shameful family situation in which they have to "parasite" the neighbor's Wi-Fi service, feel vulnerable to unhygienic exposure, and suffer from their semi-basement stink; it is highly unlikely that they feel uncomfortable or even ashamed of their poverty despite all the reasons for it. Either they have been precocious enough to get used to the life of minimum necessity or they might take their indigence to be a temporary inconvenience.

The Kims are not *workers* in the strict sense except for doing part-time jobs of folding pizza boxes; nor are they pursuing something for the social success. Kiwoo is jobless in his twenties having failed three times at college admission for unknown reasons; Kijung, his younger sister, seems to idle away most of her time on gaming and surfing the web for some skills of forgery. They are not typical youths of their generation in South Korea, who are always driven to the fierce competition and pinched to the pressure of constant self-improvement. Nevertheless, they do not appear to be losers, let alone victims of social injustice like their parents, precisely because they look, despite being short of money and work, now *voluntarily* out of competition without any "plans" merely waiting for the moment. Perhaps they are simply

forced to drop out of the competition for the lack of investment for self-improvement.

What makes them peculiar, however, as the representative of the “millennium generation” in South Korea is: the sheer “resilience” to persist, or the suppleness to “nudge” their presence whenever the opportunity comes up. Indeed, to keep being resilient without desperately striving to achieve something while patiently waiting for the time of nudging is the very quality that is highly needed for the enjoyment of happiness and well-being in the era of neoliberal positivism. The film envisages Kiwoo and Kijung as those who already learned to know how to manage themselves in the game of survival as well as how to simulate themselves as *attractive* as the commodity always already available, and how to enjoy themselves amidst the life with the intolerably incompetent family. They are indeed the parasite to this culture of self-management and individual self-simulation.

This is why Kiwoo has no trouble fantasizing himself a mature man as if he already has “plans” for everything on behalf of defunct family. He and Kijung too are so adept and smooth in dealing with the “simple” Mrs. Park that they seem to really believe that they themselves pass real. And Kiwoo even imagines himself to be in charge of the revival of the whole family; he acts as if he is the new patriarch



replacing his old “plan-less” father. (Ironically, all that he plans to achieve for the revival of the family turns out becoming the son-in-law of the wealthy Mr. Park, which looks truly bizarre, and this plan is actually the desire that *mimics* that of his buddy. Bong’s black humor is at its best when one person’s seriousness turns out to be an absurdity for the other’s sour laughter.) He has no “real” plan of his own to fulfil, only good at *imitating*—or “copying and pasting,” to borrow the popular slang—what was already established. After the penultimate catastrophe at the mansion on a rainy night, Kiwoo asks himself of what his smart buddy would do in the situation like that. Kiwoo’s resilience is more akin to the desire for social recognition than that of individual independence. No wonder he feels sorry for having failed to take care of the family when he hears his father repeating the hollow wisdom of “no plan is the best plan” at the shelter. His ambitious scheme to be the host of his life and his family could not function at all without “parasiting” the pre-arranged plans of others.

In this sense, Kiwoo is less a loser in the game of social survivalism than an involuntary straggler maladjusted to the rule of the game despite his strong will to be a regular player in the survivalism. He remains outside in the game of resilient nudging oneself into the crack of the established order: a *victim* of his own parasitic fantasy of

becoming a man of meticulous planning and careful management. That is why our sympathy as the audience has to be withdrawn from Kiwoo precisely at the moment his fantasy drives him into sheer madness and frenzy. He becomes dangerous at the end not because of his possible madness for violence but because of his sheer, absurd, resilient perseverance for the planning itself. He lives on the fantasy of restoring the crumbled patriarchy of his father, but this fantasy already ate him out. He is a parasite of his own dream.<sup>3</sup>

## 5. The Class Stink

If we approach the film in terms of the politics of the space, we instantly recognize that the majority of actions take place at the mansion of the Parks, which was built by a famous architect, Namkung Hyunja.<sup>4</sup> In one way or another, all the characters in this film belong to this mansion as *parasites*. Even the Parks, the current inhabitants of the house, are parasite in that they do not know much about the mansion despite being an owner. The only person who really connects with and cares about the house is the ex-housemaid-come-butler Moongwang.

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<sup>3</sup> The unreality of Kiwoo's trait as an involuntary straggler manifests itself all the more clearly when it is compared to the social antagonism of Jongsu (鍾洙) in Lee Chang-dong's *Burning*, who has no desire for the social recognition.

<sup>4</sup> Namkung (南宮) is the surname and the given name Hyunja (賢者) means literally a wise man.

Not only does she manage the house impeccably but also boasts herself as the oldest inhabitant of the house. For her, the Parks and the Kims are but owners and imposters, that is, parasites, who have no meaningful claim of acquaintance with the house itself. At some point, she even calls the Parks “these kids” to the Kims. Moongwang’s intimacy with the house reveals in the scene where she and her husband used to enjoy themselves as “real” host listening to the music over tea in the living room in the absence of the actual owner. She thinks only she deserves to be acknowledged as the true “cultured” owner.

The house itself symbolizes the mysterious *host* on the basis of which all the middle-class parasites (bugs) survive and multiply like virus. As Moongwang probably learns from the teaching of a wise man, the house as the host is not a thing for possession. There is something fundamentally anti-capitalist or *communal* in the mansion, and the tragedy of intra-class resentments, rather than of inter-class antagonism, originates from the fierce efforts not to remain a loser in the game of occupying the house, that is, being a true host-as-parasite. This partly explains why Gunse tries to attack Kiwoo and actually killed Kijung instead of Kitaek and Mr. Park: they are the real threat for him because he knows instinctively that their resilience and nudging would easily outwit every opponent in the game. Though Gunse’s counter-attack is a

sort of act of revenge for the harm done to him and his wife, what lies beneath his resentment toward the younger generation is the precautionary measure to obviate the possibility of being outwitted.

On the other hand, it's not entirely clear why Kitaek stabs Mr. Park rather than targeting Gunse who killed his daughter, the only compassionate person who worries about Gunse's safety. The whole sequence of abrupt violence in the middle of the party at the mansion tacitly frames the inevitable outburst of class antagonism ineradicable amidst the dominance of sheer survivalism. Kitaek's unexpected reaction to Mr. Park in the middle of Gunse's intrusion has nothing to do with the game of survivalism: it concerns rather with the acute sense of shame and humiliation that Kitaek felt at that moment. For Kitaek, the class humiliation from the rich Mr. Park appears more detrimental than the Gunse's instinctive act of revenge. What spurs Kitaek's class instinct is Mr. Park's inhumane, class-ridden gesture of avoiding Gunse's stink, which reminds him of the injustice, not unfairness, of being systematically discriminated as the economic minority.

In this sense, the shame of stink is the most powerful instigator of the class antagonism, rendering useless the rules of the whole game they have been playing. Indeed, it is the rich Mr. Park, not the poor Kims, who constantly crosses the class-dividing line at will, which he himself

strictly imposed on Kitaek, and the most conspicuous sign of such a shameful intrusion is none other than Mr. Park's humiliating repugnance against the stink. The stink of the underground, especially the smell of indigence in the flooded semi-basement house, is the last thing people like Mr. Park want to share not only for its sheer stink but also for its invisible, symbolic trauma. Stink always crosses the line of class division, almost like an uncanny Real itself which is formless, invisible, silent, but deadly enough to remind you of the return of the repressed. Isn't Kitaek's feeling of shame and humiliation similar to that of Deleuze when he refers to "the shame of being a man"?<sup>5</sup>

As long as they are in control of the host of upstairs, "parasites" downstairs never worry about the danger of stink. But when they are humiliatingly back to the flooded, cramped quarter of semi-basement and shuddered to witness the crumbling of what was left of their own shabby space, the Kims are deeply ashamed of their poverty-driven life as parasites. (Remember the powerfully emotional scenes of Kitaek looking around the flooded house and Kijung smoking at the upper-decked, backed-up flush toilet) The film realistically but at the same time beautifully traces the vertical downfall, that is, *shameful defeat*, of the Kims into the pit of dungeon. The Kims once succeeded in

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<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Michael A. Greco and Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 1.

outsmarting the Parks and making them snobbish dupes, but they fail at last to pass the unexpected test of stink as the Real. In this respect, the smell of stink amounts to an *objet a*, a fantasy object and an absent cause of our futile desire to be the winner of social survivalism. Once summoned, it demarcates you; it stigmatizes you; it humiliates you. Stink dispels you from the game of survivalism and returns you to the place where you belong as a member of the class. Like the Real itself, it haunts you; it “interpellates” you into the class antagonism rather than the neoliberal game of survivalism. Unconsciously reacting to the equally instinctive hatred of Mr. Park against what reminds him of that which he tried so hard to repress, Kitaek brings back “the repressed class struggle” onto the surface. And for this upsurge of class instinct, Kitaek has to be wiped once again out as the foreclosed. *Parasite* is indeed the social drama of class struggle, a powerful one at that.

Where does the film then stand with respect to the *event* of Kitaek’s class antagonism towards the rich and Kiwoo’s fantasy of retrieving the name of the father? *Parasite* stands equivocal in ethics and ambiguous in politics. Ethically equivocal in that the film sympathetically depicts the agony and shame of the poor while it shows the hard reality that with all their tenacity and outfoxing there is no chance for the Kims to have done better. Politically ambiguous in that

the devastating shame of the Kims are so powerfully drawn to the audience that it's really difficult not to imagine them to actually attempt to demolish the system itself while the demystifying of the poor and the workers as well as the de-demonizing of the rich are not powerful and committed enough to stimulate the real political transformation.

*Parasite* is thus an intense meta-ethical and meta-political allegory of today's *agonistic* life under the neoliberal capitalism. In this respect, it is a movie dedicated not to the fantasy but to the *resilience* of another Kiwoos and Kijungs who might have survived through the neoliberal Korean society where there are now only parasites. One might say we have only one class in Korea, the class of parasites, which rely on neoliberal capitalism as host, but this may also be the delusion of our own making. It is only when the collective fantasy of becoming an independent host collapses once and for all with the intervention of class stink as the Real that these human "parasites," that is, what Deleuze calls "the missing people,"<sup>6</sup> will be able to change the neoliberal, class-drive capitalist system itself.

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<sup>6</sup> Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, p. 4.

## 6. Stink and Virus

The stink as the signifier of class antagonism totally changes the narrative development of the film. Until Kitaek's killing of Mr. Park, *Parasite* seems to belong to a black comedy half allegorizing and half ridiculing the absurd class structure of the South Korean capitalism. Like Covid-19 epidemic virus, the stink of the underground suddenly appears as the silent and fatal blow to the "bourgeois" life of the upstairs. The stink of the Kims and Gunse is not to be eliminated not only because they dwell in the smelly, barely-sunlit places but also because they themselves are incapable of feeling it. Your smell turns into the class stink in certain places and by a certain group of people. For it, just like black skin or virus infection, instantly stigmatizes you as the person who ontologically belongs to the lower class and deserves the social segregation. Stink effectively brings you back to the realm of class antagonism and the possibility of justice. When Kitaek witnesses Mr. Park, holding his nose, tries to retrieve the car key in order to simply get away from the murder scene, he seems to feel as if he is reduced to a deadly virus threatening the lives of human hosts.

The stink illustrates how rich people, as a class, have been treating the lower class; for them the lower class are not human enough to deserve the equal social status and a fair game. They must not be



allowed to cross the class dividing line like the virus. The absurd dénouement of the last sequence delivers the messages that the game of survivalism is none other than the collective fantasy of the lower class who want to believe in the possibility of their becoming the middle-class and that the upper-class have always been class-antagonistic in their relationship with the lower class through and through. For them, the lower class stink should be tightly controlled, quarantined, for that matter, along the class division. But like the virus, the class stink could not be totally eliminated since the rich are not only the host supporting the parasitic people with stink but also the parasite entirely depending upon their labors. Ironical as it is, the stink lays bare the class antagonism concealed underneath what we call “the normal”: the reality of individual struggle for survival as *fantasy*. After stink, there is no way back to the normal.

The two most painful lessons of Covid-19 virus would be: that it is no longer possible to return to the normal; that it is impossible to completely wipe out the virus from our biosphere.<sup>7</sup> This means that the

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<sup>7</sup> Virus is, like stink, as such neither alive nor dead in the biological sense of the term. Unlike stink, however, viruses thrive and reproduce themselves within living cells. They are “parasitical” lump of protein entirely dependent upon the host they come in contact with. Virus moves like a life form when it replicates, but its replication cannot lead to the evolution of a more complicated form of life. It eats out, as it were, what procures it a pseudo-life and thereby completes its own demise within the infected body. Like a cancer cell in a tumor, virus has no life of its own but is powerful enough to destroy the very organism that is the source of its life. The host is not passively

viral outbreak should not be approached strictly as a health issue, just as the stink is not a problem of hygiene. Virus works as the self-reproducing machine predominantly dependent upon the cultural and political environment to which the host organism belongs.<sup>8</sup> It aims to destroy the host system it parasites with the mechanical proliferation of reproduction. Indeed, the covid-19 virus functions, like the class stink as the Real, as a fatal chasm or an uncontainable trauma of the capitalist world system: it discloses the fact that something is fundamentally wrong with this cultural and political system. Science may prevent the infection and provide the medicine for the disease after a while, but nothing can easily cure us of the viral fear and the cultural panic which is inscribed in our body like the stink. We can hold our nose and wear a mask for the time being, but it is high time for us either to imagine the “new normal” way of living together with stinks and viruses or to start to think beyond the class-driven system of global capitalism. *Parasite* is thoroughly political in its radical demystification of the fantasy of the politics of stink.

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infected by lively viruses; it actively transfers inert viruses into other living organisms.

<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic!: Covid 19 Shakes the World* (New York: OR Books, 2020), p. 79-80.

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## 如何談論奉俊昊《寄生上流》中的階級臭味

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### 摘要

本文假設並試圖證明奉俊昊電影《寄生上流》中的兩個爭論性的論點：它是一部極具政治性的電影，但卻無關乎對立階級之間的鬥爭；在此部電影中，只有一個階級，即「中間階級」，並且其內部鬥爭（*intra-struggle*）是生存競爭。《寄生上流》既不在它對韓國社會真正階級問題的迴避中作為親資本主義者，亦不在它關於貧富的政治寓言（*allegorization*）裡作為反資本主義者。該電影並沒有遵循超電影想法所提供，關於階級鬥爭的電影應該拍成怎樣的預先步驟。這看似階級對抗的表象，最後演變成一場缺乏羞恥感的生存競爭遊戲。影片將敘事交織成某種微妙的方式，緩緩將觀點從老一代身上，轉移到年輕一代身上。這說明了在這場激烈的競爭中的韌性和推波助瀾（*nudge*）的核心。影片錯綜複雜的政治性最為顯著的例子是，當那看不見的身體臭味，像病毒一樣，暗示了埋藏在分層的階級劃分底下，那「被壓抑」的仇視感回來了。而那被壓的回歸者即是生命的恥辱，它就像令人毛骨悚然的病毒，無形地被壓制在地底下。臭味就像病毒一

樣，是煽動著那被遺忘的階級鬥爭的媒介：只要這股臭味篤定回來，我們都只不過是這個體系的寄生蟲罷了。《寄生上流》是一部徹頭徹尾的政治電影，由於它不遺餘力地描述了階級臭味那無以磨滅的真實（Real），以及它徹底將競爭生存主義的幻想給去神秘化（demystification）了。

**關鍵詞：**《寄生上流》、內部階級鬥爭、生存主義、韌性、臭味、  
病毒