

## **EXTENDED ESSAY**

English | Category 3

### A Dream Deferred: Bong Joon-ho and Parasite

How does Bong Joon-ho examine the role of capitalist dreams in the movie *Parasite*?

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## I. Introduction

*Parasite* is a South Korean black comedy thriller. It follows the story of the Kim family, a poor family living in a semi-basement apartment in Seoul. The father of the family, Ki-taek, and his wife, Chung-sook, are unemployed, while their two adult children, Ki-woo and Ki-jung, are also struggling to find work. When Ki-woo comes across the opportunity to become an English tutor for the wealthy Park family, he takes it and sets in motion a plan to infiltrate the Park household. With help from his sister, Ki-woo gets himself, his parents, and Ki-jung hired by the Parks as a tutor, chauffeur, housekeeper, and art therapist respectively. The Kims get a taste of the life of luxury, basking in the Park family's wealth. However, their newfound prosperity is threatened when a previous worker, Moon-gwang, returns and reveals her husband, Geun-sae, has been living in the secret bunker of the Parks' house for years, surviving on food he secretly pilfers from the refrigerator at night. Moon-gwang and Geun-sae fight with the Kim family, threatening to expose their schemes. Ultimately, Chung-sook injures Moon-gwang, who then dies, triggering a cycle of violence.

*Parasite* is written and directed by renowned auteur Bong Joon-ho. I was first drawn to *Parasite* after authoring a short critique on it as part of my weekly movie reviews. As the first non-English film to win Best Picture at the Academy Awards, *Parasite's* unique ability to portray universal themes through cinematic techniques piqued my curiosity. Themes of wealth, disparity, and socioeconomic conflict intrigued me, especially as these are prominent issues within my own Tlingit community. I will answer the research question, how does Bong Joon-ho examine the role of capitalist dreams in the movie *Parasite* (2019)?

A capitalist dream is the idea that everyone can obtain success, financial freedom, and upward social mobility through hard work. Capitalist dreams emphasize the importance of individualism and the power of personal ambition to create a better life for oneself and one's family. I initiated my research around *Parasite* by depicting examples of capitalist dreams within the film and relating them to the current socioeconomic structure of South Korea. I then focused on analyzing how these examples were communicated to the viewer through Bong's storytelling and use of cinematic techniques. In this film, the examination of capitalist dreams shows why people in capitalist countries are working longer hours and yet are faced with increasing economic disparity. I will answer my research question by looking at three facets of the capitalist dream. First, I will analyze how the upper class convinces the poor to believe in the dream. Secondly, I will illustrate how the upper-class benefits from the dream. Lastly, I will look at the death and renewal of the dream.

## **II. Convincing the Poor to Believe in the Dream**

Bong Joon-ho initially shows how the upper class instills hope in the lower class in a scene at the beginning of the film where the Kim family, depicted as poor, are eating dinner after a failed pizza box folding job. The group shot is interrupted with the introduction of the Suseok (Scholar's Stone). The Scholar's Stone is a large rock that resembles the natural landscape and signifies good fortune. The stone is given to the Kims from Ki-woo's wealthy friend Min-hyuk (Min). In the film, the heavy rock symbolizes hope for potential wealth as Min states, "This one is supposed to bring luck. And money" (Bong). The Scholar's Stone is given to the lower class from the upper class, enticing the lower class with the idea that they too can become wealthy.

Min enters the Kim family's semi-basement apartment to present them with a mysterious gift. As Min opens the box, he reveals the stone. Bong uses a close-up shot (Figure 1) followed by a point of view shot of Ki-woo's face from the perspective of the Scholar's Stone (Figure 2).



Figure 1: The Scholar Stone is revealed (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

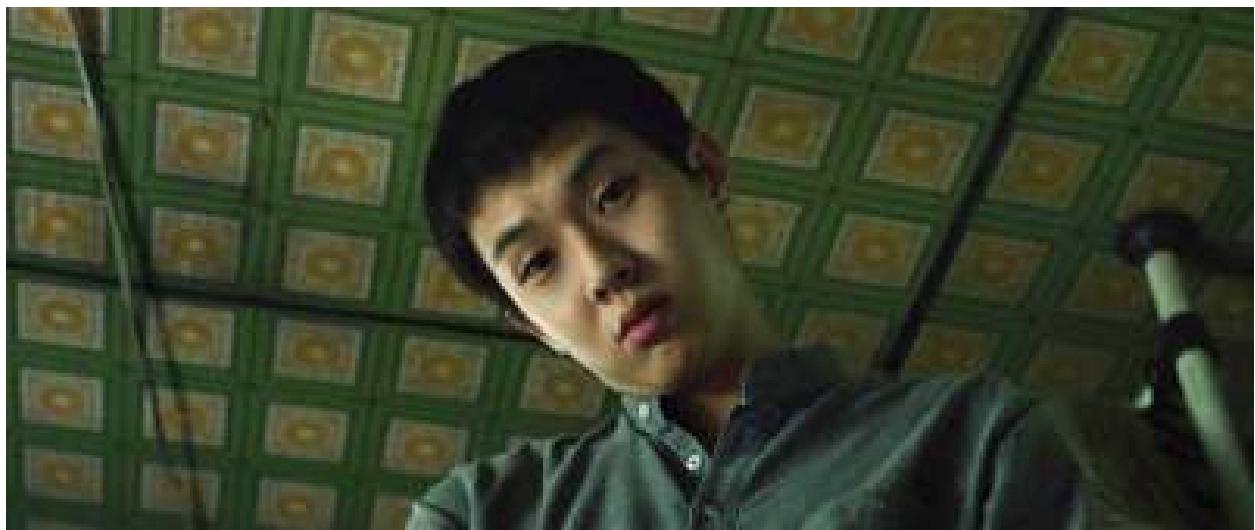


Figure 2: Ki-woo examines stone (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

The close-up of the stone emphasizes its beauty, potential, and irresistibility as it fills the center of the frame. The close-up image of Ki-woo's face allows the audience to examine Ki-woo's reaction; his facial expressions show his awe of the Scholar's Stone. He looks down at the rock intently as he slightly raises an eyebrow, fully entranced by the powerful hope represented in the stone.



Figure 2: Ki-woo examines stone (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)



Figure 3: Kim Ki-Teak holds stone (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

The next cut is a break in continuity, a jump in time. The film cuts from the close-up of Ki-woo to a medium-wide shot of the rock in Ki-taek's hands, with Ki-woo looking in a different direction.

The audience views the stone from Ki-woo's perspective. After the beauty of the Scholar's Stone mesmerizes Ki-woo, it is almost as if Ki-woo and the viewer lose track of time and snap back to reality a moment later, realizing time has passed. The filmmaker creates this feeling to show how people are engulfed by the hope of being a part of the upper class and how easily a gesture from the upper class can evoke these emotions in the lower class. In the later scene of the Kim's semi-basement apartment being flooded, the Scholar's Stone is floating on water, demonstrating that it is hollow and fake. The lack of authenticity in the stone symbolizes the hope instilled by the stone is a false hope, only there to benefit the upper class.

Ki-woo is entrapped with this false capitalist dream in the following scene. After Min presents the Scholar's Stone to the Kim Family, Min and Ki-woo talk at a local corner shop. In Figures 4 and 5 below, Min and Ki-woo converse through small talk, seen through alternating over the shoulder shots.



Figure 4: Ki-woo talking to Min (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)



Figure 5: Min Talking to Ki-woo (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

The visual composition of the scene changes when Min says, "Ki-woo, think about it. How many times have you taken the college exam?" (Bong). Min attempted to persuade Ki-woo into thinking he can make a substantial amount of money by agreeing to the promising opportunity of tutoring one of his students.



Figure 6: Ki-woo listening (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)



Figure 7: Min proposes idea (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

The switch to a close-up (Figure 6 & 7) shows Min's persuasiveness as his face fills a larger portion of the frame making him and what he says even more enticing, while the close-up of Ki-woos' face shows he's intrigued. Additionally, the scene breaks the pattern of alternating cuts between shots when the camera pans left from Min to Ki-woo. The panning movement emphasizes Min's persuasive words and the trustworthy connection between them, due to the transition from face to face being smooth and slow paced. After Ki-woo doubts himself Min says, "We'll embellish a little. You'll be fine. You'll have my recommendation" (Bong). Min minimizes the harmfulness of fraud, convincing Ki-woo and the audience that moving up is possible for them through a system of embellishment. Through dialogue and change in composition, the viewer and Ki-woo become more hopeful that obtaining wealth is possible. However, since Min wrongly portrayed the path to wealth as easy and achievable through fraud, the dream passed down from the wealthy, like the Scholar's Stone, is fake and hollow and only there to benefit the upper class.

Bong also illustrates how the wealthy instill hope in the lower class through the motif of glass windows. After Ki-woo enters the Park's home for the tutoring interview, the housekeeper Moon-gwang leaves to retrieve Mrs. Park who fell asleep outside, leaving Ki-woo to observe them through the window (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Ki-woo stares through glass window (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

In the over the shoulder shot above, Ki-woo looks through the window and sees Mrs. Park. Transparent glass around the Parks' house allows Ki-woo to view what's happening inside and outside. The glass creates a feeling that being in Mrs. Park's position and the upper class is within reach, providing Ki-woo with hope that he can work toward wealth. The window represents how the upper-class designs their wealth for Ki-woo and the lower-class to observe. The glass encourages hope for obtaining the capitalist dream while forever keeping those striving for the capitalist dream like Ki-woo behind the glass pane. In addition, Bong frames each shot to show the barrier that makes the capitalist dream unattainable. In Figure 8, a line divides the window separating Ki-woo and Moon-gwang from Mrs. Park. The subtle line indicates that

although Ki-woo and Moon-gwang can hope to be prosperous, they will always be divided from the upper class.

In a later scene with Ki-taek, Bong again uses the motif of glass windows and framing techniques to demonstrate how the lower-class are lured in with the visible success of the wealthy but are inadvertently divided by a barrier. After Ki-jung successfully sabotages Parks' driver by framing him for sexual activity in Mr. Park's car, Ki-taek interviews Mr. Park to be his new personal driver. After arriving at Mr. Park's office, he waits patiently to audition for Mr. Park by driving him home (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Ki-taek watching Mr. Park (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

Like the Parks' house, Mr. Park's office has glass walls. The glass allows Ki-taek to look in with desire at Mr. Park's opulent lifestyle as a businessman. However, like in the earlier scene with Ki-woo, the window pane separates Ki-teak from Mr.Park. In this wide shot, the line separating the glass panes also divides Ki-taek from Mr. Park horizontally, symbolizing the impenetrable barrier between them. In both scenes, the upper class surround themselves with glass because

they need the poor to see their lives and hope to be wealthy. It is this aspiration of a better life that allows the upper class to benefit from the lower class.

Ultimately, the system of capitalism needs the unfulfillable dream for wealth to exist. In the Kim family, this dream is represented by a “plan”. The Kims mention the plan 20 times throughout the movie. The plan symbolizes their dream of becoming wealthy.

### **III. Benefactors of the Dream**

The upper class instills hope in the lower class, encouraging them to work hard so they too can achieve wealth. The wealthy do this because they need the lower classes' labor.. Bong states, “the rich family are parasites, too, in terms of labor — they leech off of the poor family's labor in driving, housekeeping, and tutoring ”(Hagen, 2019). One example of the upper class dependency on the lower class is the character of Mrs. Park in her role as a mother. Her son, Da-song, is disobedient, constantly acting out by shooting arrows and running around the house dressed as an American Indian. Mrs. Park claims Da-song has attention problems. After Ki-woo's first successful tutoring lesson, Mrs. Park introduces Ki-woo to the housekeeper Moon-gwang before she is interrupted by Da-song's arrow attack (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Mrs. Park explains Da-song's problems (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

Mrs. Parks' attitude toward the situation can be seen in the following dialogue.

MRS. PARK: I apologize. Our son is a little -- unique.

KI-WOO: Unique is good.

MRS. PARK: He has trouble focusing. ADHD. We signed him up for the Cub Scouts hoping the discipline would help, but he's become an even bigger weirdo. Now he's obsessed with Indians—(Bong).

Mrs. Park cannot see the problem is not her son's mental health issues, but that he needs a mother figure. So instead, the wealthy outsource to the lower class for the solution. Ki-woo helps Ki-jung obtain a job as an art tutor. In the following scene inside the Park house, Ki-jung holds her first art lesson in private. She has Da-song sit on her lap, like a mother would with her son.

After, Da-song becomes obedient (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Da-song bows to Ki-jung (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

Ki-jung gives Da-song the attention he has been craving from his mother. He has been acting out to get attention, and his mother chose to solve the problem by hiring an art tutor. Bong further conveys Mrs. Park's inability to understand the nature of Da-song's problem through her reaction after the lesson ends. The screenplay notes, "Yon-Kyo and Mun-Kwang are stunned to see -- Da-Song obediently bowing and heading up the stairs. What?!" (Bong). Mrs. Park's failure to see the problem makes the Park family reliant on the Kims, displaying how upper-class families would be dysfunctional without the Kims and other lower-class servants.

Da-song replacing his lack of a relationship with his mother through Ki-jung is a pattern replicated in the rest of the Park family. In a continuous shot, Moon-gwang enters each room revealing the jobs of each of the family members. Figure 12 is one of many images in a montage demonstrating this pattern, as Ki-jung is playing the role of an attentive mother letting Da-song sit on her lap. Every Kim family member plays a role that goes above and beyond their actual duties. Ki-woo is both a tutor and a boyfriend, Ki-taek is both a driver and companion, and housekeeper Moon-gwang is also a friend.



Figure 12 : Moon-gwang enters Ki-jung's lesson (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

Once all Kim family members have been employed in the Park household, Bong shows how the Park family depends on them for order in their lives. The montage shows the viewer that the Parks' dependency is working. The Park family benefits from the work of Kims, providing them with a well-run household.

Another way the director exemplifies the Parks' reliance on the Kims is through the earlier conversation between Mr. Park and Ki-taek. In this scene, while Ki-taek is driving Mr. Park home, Mr. Park asks for a good take-out recommendation, leading to Mr. Park discussing the dismissal of long-term housekeeper Moon-gwang, which happened in the prior scene.



Figure 13: Mr. Park talking to Ki-taek (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

Mr. Park states, "She was with us for a long time. I don't know why she suddenly left. Mrs. Park wouldn't even tell me. I mean, there's no shortage of housekeepers looking for work so I guess we can just hire another one. But it's a real pity. She was a great lady" (Bong). Mr. Park's words bluntly highlight how someone of the upper-class benefits from the endless supply of lower class willing to work for the wealthy, like him. Ki-taek continues the conversation saying, "I guess Mrs. Park will need to find a new housekeeper soon."

Mr. Park nods in understanding, replying, "Or the house will descend into chaos. I guarantee she won't be able to survive a week without one. Shambles, I tell you. My clothes will start smelling—" (Bong).

Here, Mr. Park shows his awareness of how he benefits from and depends on the lower class. If he could not find a new housekeeper, he would stink, which for him is associated with being poor. The motif of a bad smell represents the lower class in the film.

Bong further reinforces the upper class' dependency on the lower class in Figure 14.



Figure 14: Mrs. Park tries to operate the dishwasher (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

After Ki-tae and Mr. Park's conversation in the car, a shot reveals Mrs. Park on the phone with "The Care," the fake employment agency created by the Kims. The shot of her and the dishes shows her overwhelmed by the task of doing dishes, just like her husband Mr. Park predicted. The low angle emphasizes the massive number of dishes, giving the mundane task a daunting feel. Mrs. Park looks at the dishes in horror as if loading a dishwasher is something unfamiliar to her. These scenes demonstrate how the upper-class benefit from the capitalist dream they

implement to inspire the lower class. They are dependent on the work of the Kim family and other lower-class families who work hard to achieve that dream.

#### **IV. Death and Renewal of the Dream**

At the movie's climax, Ki-taek loses hope and the capitalist dream dies for him, which sends the ordered world of capitalism into chaos. In a conversation between him and Ki-woo, he demonstrates this departure by denouncing "his plan."



Figure 15: Ki-taek talking to Ki-woo (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

Ki-taek and Ki-woo lie on the floor of the gym after their semi-basement apartment is flooded by a rainstorm. After a moment of silence Ki-taek asks his son, “Do you want to know how you make a foolproof plan?”

“How?” asks Ki-woo.

Ki-taek replies, “Don’t plan at all. Have no plans. If you plan, something will always go wrong. That’s life” (Bong). Ki-taek gives up on his plan and therefore the dream. Bong emphasizes this

turning point through the slow high notes of the piano and gloomy, cool colors. In the same scene, Ki-taek states, “That's why you should never plan. If you don't have a plan, you can't fail. You can't do anything wrong. Doesn't matter if you kill someone or commit fucking treason” (Bong). This dialogue foreshadows the next scene, which will portray a massacre at Da-song's birthday party. In this scene, a massive fight breaks out as Geun-sae attempts to kill Ki-jung and Chung-sook. Amid the fight, Mr. Park asks for the car keys from a struggling Ki-taek, to drive his traumatized son to the hospital. The keys end up landing under Geun-sae. Mr. Park shows no empathy toward the slowly dying Ki-jung and Moon-gwang who was stabbed, by plugging his nose, picking up the keys, and walking away. Mr. Park's lack of empathy causes Ki-taek to stand up and stab Mr. Park (Figure 16).



Figure 16: Ki-taek stabs Mr. Park with knife (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

By killing Mr. Park, Ki-taek follows through on the death of his capitalist dream that he alluded to previously. The death of his dream is the death of the upper class. Mr. Park's death is not at the hands of Ki-taek but at the hands of the broken capitalist system. Once the lower class, like Ki-taek, realizes the dream is broken, the wealthy can no longer survive. For capitalism to truly

work, there always needs to be somebody standing up at the top—and then the people who want to be up there as well. (Bean, 2020)

Although Ki-taek breaks the system, it is temporary and minuscule in the larger scheme of things because others continue to latch on to the dream, like Ki-woo. After the murder of Mr. Park Ki-taek escapes to the secret bunker where Geun-Sae previously lived. When Ki-woo learns his father is living in the bunker he makes another plan and elucidates it through a note to his father, which he will never be able to deliver.



Figure 17: Ki-woo sleeps with note (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

During the shot shown in Figure 16, Ki-woo says, “ Dad, today I made a plan” (Bong). This plan reveals he still has the dream his father abandoned. The overhead shot shows Ki-woo sleeping with the note and creates a sense of hopelessness as the audience is looking down on Ki-woo, curled up sleeping. The symbolism of Ki-woo’s note representing the capitalist dream is emphasized by Ki-woo physically sleeping with the note.



Figure 18: Ki-tae hugs Ki-woo in newly bought house (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

Bong further depicts Ki-woo's dream by revealing what he plans to do. The fantasy scene consists of Ki-woo buying the Parks' house in the indefinite future. The shots consist of bright colors and natural lighting that contrast with the cool colors of his actual situation. Ki-woo states, "Once I buy the house all you need to do is walk up the stairs"(Bong). Bong complements this dialogue by a complete stop in the music and an abrupt switch to ambient diegetic sounds, including footsteps, bird chirpings, and the ruffling of clothes. This change in sound design gives the reader the feeling the film has switched to reality, as Ki-woo buys the house and hugs his father (Figure 18).

This scene then fades to black and maintains a black screen for over a second, a standard indicator that a film has ended. However, the shot tilts down from the black screen to the Kims' semi-basement window covered in snow and the viewer realizes the previous scene was a dream.

This false happy ending, where the capitalist dream prevails, shows the viewer, like Ki-woo, still holds the dream and operates within the system.



Figure 19: Ki-woo sitting at the beginning of film (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)



Figure 20: Ki-woo sitting at the end of film (taken from *Shot.Cafe*)

The last shots of the film (Figures 19 and 20) use the same camera movement with the same angle and framing as the opening shots. This framing shows the never-ending cycle Ki-woo

is trapped in. Unlike his father, Ki-woo still holds on to the dream. It is this dream that benefits the Park family and the upper-class. This final shot creates a feeling of doubt through cool colors and sad music, leaving the viewer to believe Ki-woo's effort of buying the house and freeing his father will forever remain a dream.

## V. Conclusion

Bong Joon-ho examines the role of capitalist dreams in the movie *Parasite* by showing how the upper class implements the dream of socioeconomic success to benefit from the lower class and how the lower class' rejection of the dream can result in the death of the wealthy. Through cinematic techniques Bong Joon-ho effectively portrays the complexities of the capitalist dream and the cycle it creates. Globally, the belief in social mobility is popular. However, as social inequality increases in many capitalist countries, some people are deciding to stop dreaming and instead take a deeper look into the system, like Kim Ki-tae. Those like Alberto Gallo at the World Economic Forum believe, "The American Dream is broken" (Gallo). Gallo explains how inequality is only increasing in the United States due to the rich benefiting from neo-liberal policies.

The same effect is occurring in South Korea, where Bong Joon-ho was raised. Kim Kyung-Ho, an editorial writer for The Korea HeraldIn, states, "In the early stages of the country's economic development, Koreans had dreams that they could move up the social ladder if they worked hard, and such beliefs enabled them to endure hardships "(Kyung-Ho). However, the determination to become rich ultimately resulted in lower social mobility, and now many Koreans are looking to change their conventional policy framework as a solution. Bong's thematic ability to entice the audience into the same feelings as the Kim family for a deceptive ending allows him to start universal discussions on conventional policy frameworks that many

Koreans are now confronting. Although “ Others complained that the film offered no alternatives to capitalism and therefore simply reinforced its quasitheological hold over us ” (Hassler-Forest, 2020). Bong’s examination of the capitalist dream brings forth the value of class consciousness. Bong was able to uniquely examine the capitalist dream through the complex relationship between the Kim and Park family, and represent the effects of the capitalist dream with a cruel and sad ending of Ki-woo’s reality. Bong states, “There are people who are fighting hard to change society. I like those people, and I’m always rooting for them, but making the audience feel something naked and raw is one of the greatest powers of cinema,” he says. “It’s not about telling you how to change the world or how you should act because something is bad, but rather showing you the terrible, explosive weight of reality. That’s what I believe is the beauty of cinema” (Jung, 2020).

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