Logan Donaldson

Dr. Meredith Ward

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The Law of Selective Gravitation: An Exploration of *Parasite*'s Socioeconomic Critique

Through an explosive concoction of characters spanning the socioeconomic strata, Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019) offers a pessimistic portrayal of the reigning Korean financial system. The plot follows the underemployed Kim family as they utilize unabashed deception to install themselves as service providers within the affluent Park families' minimalist home. The Kims' subsequent interactions with both the economy's elites and their impecunious peers reveals a blissful ignorance in the former, and desperate competitiveness in the latter. Such inter-class dynamics are further embodied by verticality which serves within the film as a physical manifestation of social stratification. Through character interaction, an uncompromising vertical axis, and a fatalistic conclusion *Parasite* asserts that class membership is hopelessly static.

A scarcity of opportunity rather than a lack of skill or effort is the source of the Kims' difficulty in procuring stable employment. Initially, the Kims' sole source of income is piece-rate compensation for folding pizza boxes. When the company's liaison returns to retrieve the assembled boxes the young adult Kim family siblings, Ki-woo and Ki-jung, encircle their boss while launching a convincing yet vain attempt to acquire a part-time job. Their flawless coordination suggests the scheme was rehearsed, underscoring the family's plight and accentuating that the subsequent systematic deception of the Park family is fueled by desperation rather than malice. Indeed, the document forgery, identity falsification, and ploys to usurp the current workers, which resulted in the Kim family acquiring the roles of English tutor, art

therapist, driver, and housekeeper were acts of self-preservation. And yet, despite their lack of formal qualifications, each member of the Kim family possesses the skills required to succeed in their role. The father Ki-taek showcases his masterful command of the Mercedes-Benz when he avoids spilling the overfull coffee mug being precariously held by Mr. Park in the backseat. Chung-sook, the mother, prepares Ram-don, a dish with which she had no prior experience, in mere minutes and to her pedantic employer's satisfaction. Ki-woo's college student friend Min asserts of him, "When it comes to English, you can teach ten times better than those drunken college pricks" (00:10:27). Even Ki-Jung, whose work as an art therapist has less perceptible metrics of success, performs her duties with a feigned competence that belies suspicion. The Kims are victims of a system in which the number of prospective employees dwarfs the number of opportunities, resulting in exorbitant qualifications for even entry-level positions. Ki-taek elucidates this when he happily remarks, "In an age like ours, when an opening for a security guard attracts five-hundred university graduates, our entire family got hired!" (00:52:48). The cruel irony of the Kims' reality is that upward economic mobility through a job requires a college education, a luxury largely reserved for those already belonging to society's upper rungs. The resulting static stratum membership fosters a disregard in the upper classes, as evidenced by the Park family.

Specifically, the Park family's relationship with members of the hierarchy's base is one predicated on blissful ignorance. Unbeknownst to the Parks, a destitute man named Geun-se lives in a hidden bunker under their home. Sustained with food brought by Moon-Gwang, his wife and the Parks' former housekeeper, Geun-se has lived deep underground for over four years to avoid predatory creditors. He reveres Mr. Park as his life's proprietor and pays a twisted form of tribute by turning on the three lights above the entranceway staircase in time with Mr. Park's

steps. The Park family believes the lights are motion-activated, contentedly unaware of the extreme poverty afflicting the man responsible. Moreover, Geun-se serves as a representative of all members of the lowest class living in society's gutter, those whose manual toil makes the Parks' lavish lifestyle possible. Living in a house atop a hill, guarded by a security system, and surrounded by manicured foliage, the Park family precisely regulates which portions of reality enter their consciousness. Mr. Park in particular is keenly aware when members of the lower classes emphasize their presence, as if a mere reminder of their existence is enough to shatter the carefully constructed rose-colored lens through which the Parks perceive reality. He refers to such an infraction as "crossing the line," a grave transgression that the family's service workers must surely avoid. Unfortunately for the Kims, a life of poverty has branded them with a distinguishable mark that alerts others of their socioeconomic status.

Having lived in a semi-basement for an extended period, the Kims have garnered a dank odor, described by Mr. Park as being reminiscent of an old radish or boiled rag. To the Park parents, the scent is overpowering, serves as an undeniable reminder of the Kims plight, and is a clear example of "crossing the line." However, the smell is first noted by Mr. Park's young son, Da-song, who acutely notices, "They smell the same," in reference to the Kim family, whose relationship is at the time unknown to the Parks (00:51:57). Notably, Da-song expresses his observation with curious indifference rather than aversion, suggesting that disdain for the poor is learned rather than intrinsic behavior. For the Park parents, the poor are a reminder of society's faults, that they are benefiting from the struggle of others. Da-song is too young and too sheltered to understand this broader context, so he considers the poor as equals, albeit equals with a funny aroma.

In addition to references to the Kims' odor, they are also commonly likened to insects. When a fumigation crew visits the Kims' neighborhood Ki-taek instructs his family to leave the windows open and allow the airborne pesticide to enter their home so that they may rid themselves of pests. As the rest of the Kim family coughs in the chemical fog and Ki-taek grimaces while continuing to fold pizza boxes, the analogy linking the Kim clan to bugs grows apparent. By establishing the Kims as both fetid and insect-like, *Parasite* draws a close comparison between the family and stink bugs. This suggested equivalence recontextualizes Ki-taek's groan of, "Damn stink bugs," prior to him flicking an insect from the table during the film's exposition (00:02:38). However, the unfortunate insect, showcased in a close-up shot, is clearly a cricket, a creature that "in Asia [has] a rich and significant social history" (Ryan xiii). Ki-taek misidentifying the lucky insect as a stink bug and subsequently flicking it away is a foreshadowing metaphor for the wealthy's treatment of the poor. When the needy scurry out of their dark, dank, semi-basement hiding spots to make their presence known and "cross the line," the rich unceremoniously cast them aside as if their very presence is revolting. The rich whom the Parks represent, mistake the poor as valueless stink bugs, ignoring that their posh lifestyle symbolized by motion-activated lighting, depends on the poor's essential societal contributions.

While the dynamic between the rich and poor is chiefly characterized by the wealthy's disregard, those within society's basal plane are uncomfortably and keenly aware of each other's presence. The finite and insufficient job opportunities create a zero-sum game in which one individual's financial windfall necessarily corresponds to another's equal and opposite downfall. The Kims showcase their masterful game-playing abilities when they oust the Parks' previous driver and housekeeper to obtain jobs for themselves. Following the previous worker's removal, Ki-taek ponders aloud, "You know that driver, Yoon?...The driver before me. He must be

working somewhere else now, right?...He must have found a better job?" which spurs an outburst from Ki-jung, "Fucking hell! We're the ones who need help. Worry about us, okay?" (00:59:46). Evidently, the Kims may be adept at the game, but they remain unwilling participants. Their shared experience of financial hardship with the previous workers generates sympathy and remorse, emotions that the ignorant rich cannot conjure on the poor's behalf.

Sympathies are dismissed, however, when Moon-gwang returns and reveals her husband's hidden basement dwelling. In response to the shocking revelation, Chung-sook threatens to divulge Moon-gwang's secret by calling the authorities, as being an accomplice threatens the stability of her newfound occupation. In response, Moon-gwang drops to her knees begging for mercy, "No please, sis! As fellow members of the needy, please don't," she pleads, employing a term of endearment in an attempt to engage Chung-sook's humanity (01:09:33). However, when livelihoods are at stake self-preservation overrides sympathy and the phone call would have been placed were it not for the remainder of the Kim clan stumbling down the stairs. Moon-gwang, leveraging her newfound dominance having discovered and documented the Kims' systematic deception of the Parks, forces her opponents into a tyrannical submission. Throughout the sequence, cooperation, for either side, is not an option. Whereas the economically self-assured can amicably gather to enjoy hors d'oeuvres and cocktails at Da-song's birthday party, interactions between impoverished familial cells are hopelessly competitive. The zero-sum economic machine has ingrained in them a crab mentality, forcing any individual success to regress to the impecunious status quo by means of adversaries attempting to pilfer the progress. Permanent ascension is impossible when upward economic movement inspires peers to grab hold of the fortunate individual's coattails.

In fact, the common visualization of socioeconomic classes occupying progressively higher layers within a pyramid is repeatedly alluded to by shots operating on a vertical axis. From the outset, the Kims' destitution is emphasized by their subterranean quarters. Their street-level windows ensure any passerby is viewed from a low angle, like a child craning their neck to address an authority figure. This subtle infantilization is heightened by Geun-se whose windowless bunker serves as an amplification of the Kims' demeaning semi-basement. Geun-se is entirely submissive to Mr. Park, his sole purpose in life being to demonstrate "respect" and bring value to the man who unknowingly owns the property in which he resides. He sucks milk from a baby bottle and eats bananas with a mushing motion like an infant lacking teeth. Geun-se's perpetual existence underneath the wealthy's feet has reverted him to a child-like state and stripped him of ego.

In stark contrast with Geun-se's hidden bunker stands the Parks' two-story hilltop abode, first shown when Ki-woo arrives for his initial tutoring consultation. Ki-woo passes through the security gate and begins to climb the stairs leading to the Parks' lush lawn. As the tracking shot adopts a low angle to emphasize the ascent, soft sunlight creates a lens flare. When Ki-woo reaches the stairs' zenith, the camera pans to reveal a lush lawn uniformly dotted with sprinklers. Such a majestic introduction immediately establishes the Parks as occupants of the hierarchy's apex. The physical height, in addition to serving as a class differentiator, also affords copious sunshine and impeccable drainage. Whereas the Kims' street-level windows and Geun-se's bunker restrict the passage of daylight, the Parks' glass-encased home is routinely naturally illuminated. The poor's low elevation, a product of their economic status, denies them from accessing the fundamental source of energy and driver of growth, symbolizing the hopelessness

of the poor's plight for financial advancement. However, for the rich, the sun is always shining as wealth begets wealth.

The one exception to the picturesque climate gracing the Parks' home is a torrential downpour which brings their camping trip to an abrupt end. Their unexpected return home forces Ki-taek, Ki-woo, and Ki-jung, who had been unlawfully enjoying the home's amenities in their absence, to brave the storm. Their return to the semi-basement involves an impossibly steep and lengthy decline in elevation. Lower and lower they descend in the direction of the rushing runoff, passing drainage grates carrying the wealthy's filth downward in the direction of their home. Upon returning the Kims find their abode flooded with sewage water, their belongings ruined save for a precious few items the trio manages to preserve. The storm costs the Parks a camping trip and the Kims their home. In fact, the following day, with the sun shining anew, Mrs. Park praises the rain. "So we traded camping for a garden party. Lemons into lemonade," she cheerfully proclaims to a friend (01:44:46). The correlation between the severity of the tempest's fallout and socioeconomic status is symbolic of the general effect money has on life's predicaments. Many afflictions beset the hierarchy's rungs uniformly, but financial resources allow their effects to be minimized. This dichotomy further fuels the wealthy's detachment from their financial inferiors, for they are ignorant of how a tribulation in their life may translate to disaster in the world of those less fortunate. And yet, when these world-shaking, life-altering, catastrophes arise, reactions amongst the poor diverge.

Despite all suffering from the economic machine's subjugation, the underprivileged are not a monolith. In particular, Ki-taek and Ki-woo, the impoverished father and son pair, lie on opposite sides of the pessimism-optimism spectrum. While lying in the gymnasium as a refugee following the storm, Ki-taek ruminates aloud, "Ki-woo, you know what kind of plan never fails?

No plan at all. No plan. You know why? If you make a plan, life never works out that way" (01:39:35). Ki-taek subscribes to a fatalistic worldview, having resigned himself to his current circumstances, despite them being unfavorable. Ki-woo, in contrast, has not yet been hardened by decades of systematic oppression. While listening to his father's dejected monologue Ki-woo clings to the scholar's stone that is said to bring about a financial windfall for its owner. Although Ki-woo asserts, regarding the slab, "It keeps following me," as if it is marking him for greatness, the rock, in fact, represents his own hope for the future, the trait which differentiates him from his destitute peers (01:41:28). Throughout the film, Ki-woo consistently shows a capacity for idealism. After forging paperwork purporting his college enrollment Ki-woo affirms, "I'll go to this university next year," despite his family's economic reality precluding such an event from the realm of plausibility (00:12:00). Later, after developing an attraction for Da-hye, the Park family daughter whom he tutors, he proclaims "When she enters university, I'll officially ask her out," before going on to fantasize about their future marriage (00:57:35). He even goes so far as to suggest hiring actors to play the role of his parents during the ceremony to continue the concealment of his family's identity. Such delusions are the products of an optimistic mind perpetually clinging to hope.

Ki-woo's idealism culminates in the film's conclusion as he daydreams of freeing his father who had fled to the bunker after slaying Mr. Park in a fit of unbridled rage which had festered over a lifetime of subjugation. The reverie plays out on screen with Ki-woo and his mother, now lavishly enrobed and having purchased the house, standing on the sun-bathed lawn as Ki-taek emerges from his prison. Piano notes softly emanate from the soundtrack, completing the scene's picturesque idealism. However, the fantasy is short-lived, and a slow fade transition reverts the scene to harsh reality in the Kims' semi-basement dwelling. The camera begins near

the ceiling to reveal snowflakes slowly falling through the ground-level windows before panning down to focus on Ki-woo. Contrasting sharply with the wastewater previously flowing through the Kims' home, the crisp white snow further characterizes Ki-woo as pure and innocent. His psyche remains unpolluted by the economic machine's noxious exhaust. The shot's descending motion reemphasizes the Kims' poverty one final time, firmly accentuating the impossibility of Ki-woo's dream. The hope of upward economic mobility is relegated to the minds of the naive, the ending asserts. Only the most optimistic of dreamers could possibly harbor a genuine hope for monetary improvement in a society so clearly and uncompromisingly designed to perpetuate the status quo.

Parasite's persistent pessimism recontextualizes Ki-woo's fairy-tale ending. Rather than offering hope for the future, it underscores the impossibility of escaping poverty. The resulting class membership stagnation produces a schism along socioeconomic lines which physically manifests as vertical segregation within the film. While the rich bathe in the sun, their consciences kept clean by blissful ignorance, the poor are doomed to a dehumanizing life of squabbling for scraps in society's trenches. Trenches that are impossible to escape, as the poor's predisposition for competition rather than cooperation ensures any upward movement is invariably reversed by socioeconomic peers. The rich remain aloft while the poor return to earth as if gravity itself weighs heavier on those in need.

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