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Parasite: A Film Review on Capitalism

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Bong Joon Ho's critically acclaimed *Parasite* (2019) brings a refreshing perspective on capitalist ideology that dominates the Western world today. Its clever and thrilling commentary on the various aspects of capitalist ideology is as vast as it is sophisticated. The aim of this paper is to use Slavoj Žižek's ideas on ideology and Michel Foucault's work on discourse to unpack some of the main arguments the movie makes about capitalism. Admittedly, in drawing out the film's scenes as ingredients that comprise a set of arguments about capitalism, I am essentially constructing a framework, a sort of constellation to connect the parts of the movie as I see fit. Despite the drawbacks of this method, I believe there are critical lessons to learn from the movie about how capitalism functions and fails in our world. I begin by discussing the film's central commentary on capitalist tenets and move onto the film's use of "unspoken" or "unassimilable" statements. I close with a brief discussion on the symbolic significance of the landscape rock.

Capitalism as Ideology

I begin with the basic premise that capitalism is the dominant ideology of many Western societies today, including South Korea. Part of what it means to identify with capitalist ideology is to subscribe to its rules of discourse, or procedures, practices, and codes of what one can and can't say, under what conditions, etc. Put simply, identifying with ideology entails a specific manner of speech and rituals for discussion. Take the wealthy Park family as an example. When the mother of the family, Yeon, first meets Kevin (son of the poor Kim family), she doesn't first broach the topic of money; she instead seems overly fixated on his qualities, expertise, and competence. Following a common custom of wealthy circles, she doesn't talk about money when she deals with her seller. Doing so is considered gauche, burdensome, and "stingy." Of course, as a necessity, she mentions his pay when she hands him his first paycheck, but the point

is that in the discussions surrounding some object or service considered for purchase, Yeon and her husband Nathan treat affordability and access as brief and almost frivolous topics. The rich couple need not ask “How much is this,” but merely “How good is this, and how well would it enhance our life?” A frugal calculus of bargaining never enters their conversation: they don’t attempt to haggle for a better price or ask why something costs what it does. Talk of money is muted and nonchalant in their discussion. In sharp contrast, we see the poor Kim family speak about money meticulously and carefully. It is the first and last thing to speak of.

When the Kims receive a complaint from the pizza store for their unsatisfactory work folding pizza boxes, their primary concern is not their shoddy performance, but the reduced



compensation they’ll receive. Additionally, when Min introduces Kevin to the rich Park family, the first half of the conversation is centered around money. For the less well-off, money constantly enters the day-to-day discussions of life with all its seriousness and gravity.

Quite fairly, one could say that this difference between the rich and the poor on the talk of money is not a product of ideology per se. The Parks don’t talk about money simply because they don’t need to; they can afford pretty much anything they desire, while it’s the complete opposite for the Kims. Moreover, neither the Parks nor the Kims are consciously subscribing to capitalist tenets when they speak or don’t speak about money. Nonetheless, there’s a point to be made that ideology is at work. One of the ways the Parks show that they’re rich is precisely

with this manner of speech surrounding money. In fact, the Kims consciously mimic this ritual surrounding the talk of money as they put their plan into action, fully aware that the rich eschew the topic of money in their discussions. As Kevin introduces Ki-Jung, his sister, and as she introduces her father, and so on, they shrewdly avoid any serious talk of how much the service would cost the Park family. Instead, like the Parks, they focus on the quality of service, the exclusive and inaccessible nature of the commodity, and its utility. In short, the film shows how the talk of money differs between the two families and suggests that this difference is a widespread phenomenon of capitalist societies today.



Ideology is also at play in one of the film’s motifs: the “plan.” The discourse of the Kim family is heavily centered on this idea of the “plan,” and while they never explicitly say what the “plan” is *for*, it quite clearly implies a concern for money and financial security. I find the term as an artful distillation of one of capitalism’s core ideas: if you

have a desire to earn money, *plan* for it smartly and enact that plan diligently, some measure of success will come your way. Conversely, if you don't have a plan, and live life aimlessly with little interest in earning money, you're bound to be poor. The "plan" cleverly points to how capitalist ideology veils the structural inequalities that its systems of production entail, and instead posits the success of the individual as solely contingent upon that individual's desires, intentions, and capabilities. The Kim family articulates this central tenet of capitalism frequently throughout the film, another major departure from the wealthy Park family who never speak of a "plan." It's almost bizarre that the Parks never use the word at all, and perhaps, the word was intentionally restricted by the director to drive the point home that the "plan" is a worldview confined to the poor Kim family. There's also a point to be made that the Parks feel no need for a "plan." They are the financial horizon that the Kims hope to reach; the Parks have no need to talk about a plan for financial security—they have already acquired it. In any case, the unfolding of the Kims' plan is painted idyllically with humor, wit, and joy, while the moral consequences of the plan's success are overlooked (at least in the first half of the film).



The gloom and disappointment of the other workers employed by the Park family who are usurped by the Kims are largely ignored. Quite clearly, the film subtly mocks the way capitalist ideology veils the road to financial success as a picturesque journey, where morality and humanity are set aside for the sole objective of money. Drawing from Zizek's work on ideology, I find in *Parasite* a clear line of thought that capitalist ideology works, in part, by creating fantasies for the subject, and one prevalent capitalist fantasy is the blithe, fulfilling, and ethically serene road to financial success.



Further drawing from Zizek, I believe there's an undeniable importance to the house of the Park family as a materialized form of ideology. Zizek argues that the "materialization of ideology in external materiality reveals inherent antagonisms which the explicit formulation of ideology cannot afford to acknowledge" (Zizek 4). This is quite dense, and I won't attempt to find a strict application of this thesis in the film, but the basic idea is that the house embodies core features of capitalist ideology. For one, the house, in its very design, works as a hierarchy. As we later find out, the former maid of the Parks, Moon, and her husband who I'll call the "underman," had secretly lived in the underground bunker of the house for four years.

The fact that the man's name is never mentioned could demonstrate the anonymity and invisibility of the poor. While the former servants eke out a living in the bottom-most floor of the house, the wealthy Parks enjoy their lavish pleasures on the second floor of the house. In fact, even when the Kims infiltrate the Park's home, the film seldom shows the Kim family interacting with the Park family on the second floor—the bulk of their interactions occur on the first floor.

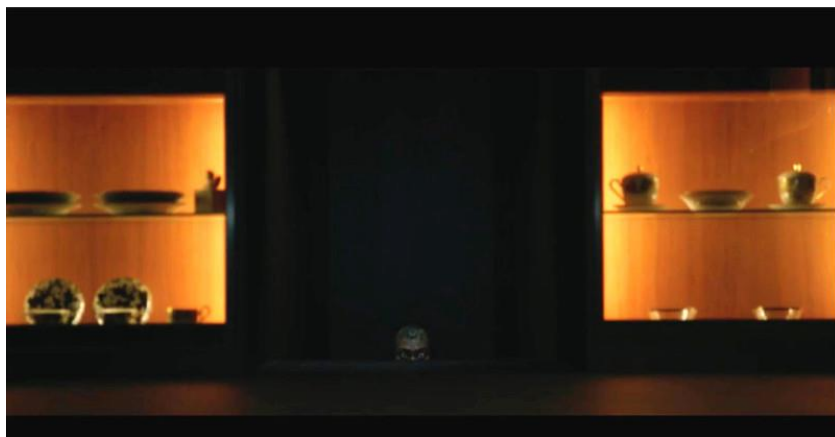


The house itself presents the stark picture of the wealthiest on the top, the less well-off in the middle, and the abjectly poor on the bottom, and thus reflects and articulates the larger hierarchical divisions of capitalist regimes.

Furthermore, one should note that the Park's house is not a neutral space in which people simply live—it's also a violent site of class struggle. Said differently, the house occupies a central seat of desire for both the Kims and the Moon-Underman couple, and it is precisely within the confines of the house that their violent competition takes place. If we return to our earlier point that the house embodies capitalist tenets, that it's a materialization of the capitalist

order, then the violent struggles that occur in the house also reveal the “antagonism” of capitalist ideology that Zizek speaks of. What is this antagonism that is revealed through violent struggle? On one hand, capitalism promises order in society. Through efficient modes of production and a healthy civil-consumer society that upholds laws of ownership, property, and financial exchange, capitalist societies promise prosperity and peace. But if this is what capitalist ideology purports, the general application of capitalism shows something very different. A troubling feature of capitalist societies is pervasive violence, war, and death. In fact, it is through the violent suppression of the working class and the forced extraction of their labor that the general structure remains intact. The antagonism, put simply, is that capitalism promises prosperity and peace for all, while necessitating a consistent measure of violence for it to exist. Both are conflicting aims that co-exist in capitalist societies, and this antagonism is something that capitalist ideology constantly seeks to conceal. I believe the Park’s house displays this antagonism beautifully in the scenes leading up to the climax. In the basement floor, we see Kevin fighting for his life against the crazed Underman, but on the ground floor, there’s a lavish party taking place with abundant games, food, and laughter. By its very design, the house can allow for a life-and-death struggle to take place concomitantly with a luxurious indulgence of pleasures. In the film’s denouement, Kevin realizes that his father is hiding in the very basement floor he once abhorred and promises his father to make enough money to buy the house. Consequently, the film’s ending promises its viewers that the house itself will continue to exist as a site of residence, and simultaneously, as a site of violent struggle. What the house shows convincingly is that the structures of capitalist regimes are hard to dislodge, and as they tenaciously persist, violence and peace, order and chaos, death and prosperity will continue to blend and emerge as conflicting, co-existing elements of society.

If one further entertains the idea of the house as a site of capitalist ideology, then the climax presents a Marxist scenario of how ideology is disrupted and suspended. As Da-Song's birthday party continues with increasing anticipation and excitement, and as Nathan and Ki-Taek await in their Indian costumes, the Underman suddenly breaks through the crowd and stabs Ki-Jung, the daughter of the Kim family. Pandemonium, shock, and panic quickly ensue. The whole subterfuge of "the plan" collapses as the Kim family is forced to reveal who they are, and the ridiculous caricature of the Indian costumes are thrown in sharp relief. The pristine and untarnished birthday party is drowned in blood as the life-and-death class struggle engulfs the whole house. In short, the truth of all secrets and the facts hidden from the veil of ideology erupt through violence. The scene resonates with one of Marx's core ideas that the veil of capitalist ideology can only be lifted through the violent revolution of the working class. As the Underman violently confronts all those who had lived "above" him, the pretenses and facades that the house had sustained suddenly vanish. Death and violence disallow fantasy from emerging—there is only the fight to the death without illusion, caricature, or secrecy. Moreover,



we see the Underman's confrontation as the "ghost" who emerges in the flesh, the specter that becomes a man, the phantom that is realized. Recall how Da-song once

saw the Underman sneaking up to the ground floor and fainted from fear. From then on, the Park family held onto the notion that a "ghost" was hiding in the house. This "ghost," this thing which was at once immaterial and real, materializes fully in the climax through the figure of the Underman. Put simply, this shocking climax is the point at which falsehoods, secrets, and the

“unreal” are terminated and the truth is allowed to surface. But if this climax represents the violent revolution that liberates the Truth, the denouement features the return of the capitalist order and a revival of ideology. Kevin, after learning the location of his father, drafts a “fundamental plan” to free his father from the underground bunker; he will make money, so much in fact, that he’ll buy the house and call upon his father to climb up the stairs to his freedom. Kevin still understands freedom as tied to money, as the reward of successfully scaling the capitalist hierarchy. He sees no recourse in breaking into the house or fighting the new owners of the house to pull his father out. By the end of the film, the ideology once suspended by the Underman’s violent confrontation returns, and Kevin remains committed to the notion that financial success is the path to liberation.



The Unassimilable Statement

So far, I've sketched a rough portrait of how the film depicts and comments on the various features of capitalist ideology. The next object of concern is the "unassimilable statement" which is a concept I draw from Foucault in his lecture "The Order of Discourse." The idea of the unassimilable statement is straightforward: it's a statement that is rejected, excluded, and disallowed by a certain discourse, doctrine, or ideology. A great example of such statements is Ki-taek's idea of the "no plan," the aimless, drifting, and nihilistic approach to surviving in the world. When Kevin asks his father what their "plan" is for the Moon-Underman couple who threaten to disclose their subterfuge, Ki-taek responds by saying that the best plan is to have no plan. Without any plan, there is neither responsibility nor disappointment, neither failure nor success. Plans are bound to fail, so the best way—the only way—to live is without goals, objectives, and ambition. Ki-taek sharply articulates that which cannot be said in capitalist discourse—namely, that capitalism provides no coherent plan for human liberation, progress, or transcendence, that capitalism does not steer the world toward a horizon of prosperity but instead towards environmental and social disasters. Ki-taek concisely describes how many who live under capitalism don't have plans for financial success, and even if they do, the forces of the world will indifferently subdue them to a path they had never intended. The plans of a willing, goal-driven subject are powerless against the larger structures that govern the pecking order of society. Disavowing the very idea of a plan and acquiescing to the swarming vicissitudes of life is depicted as vulgar, offensive, and pitiable in contemporary capitalist culture, but the film also shows how this unassimilable statement is rendered "unreal." The Underman who lives out this intolerable and forbidden worldview of the "no plan" is not only rejected and excluded but turned into a specter by the Park family who are ignorant of his existence. For the Park family, the possibility of a leach who lives under their house is simply unfathomable, and thus, they rely on a fantasized,

phantom object to render this Underman intelligible. The Kim family, on the other hand, who have partly lived out this worldview of the “no plan,” are aware that this “ghost” the Park family believes in is a ridiculous artifice, that the real figure is simply the Underman, and that those who live out this worldview are certainly real but merely excluded and marginalized.

Another “statement” that remains unassimilated throughout much of the film is the



Morse-code message the Underman transmits through the blinking lights. Admittedly, this Morse-code message isn't completely unassimilable but remains unintelligible to the Park family who are totally oblivious to the Underman's existence (Da-song seems partly

aware that these blinking lights are coded messages, but it's implied that he fails to grasp the full implications of the messages). Indeed, to the viewers and the Kim family who learn of the Underman, the blinking lights articulate that which cannot be said in the film: that the Park family is a blind host to the Kims and the Moon-Underman couple who secretly live off their resources. But in addition to articulating the forbidden statement these coded messages are unnoticeable for the Park family; they're nonsensical flashes of light that have no meaning. This form of speech is only intelligible to members of the underclass, to those who live life beneath the ground. Indeed, these messages represent the sheer blindness of the upper-class to the cries of help that stem from the underclass. The language of poverty and abjection is simply unfathomable to the rich as they live a life completely removed from the material realities of the underclass. Of course, the Morse-code messages are actually coded in secret, but even a small child like Da-song can understand them well. In a sense, living lavishly like the Parks makes one apathetic and deaf to the real voices of despair that pervade society. It's quite telling that

the hierarchical structure of the house funnels the messages from the bunker into this slow, muted, and elementary form of speech that the rich fail to grasp. What remains unassimilated in capitalist discourse, the things spoken that remain unheard, are the testimony of the poor.

Perhaps most important among these unassimilable statements is the smell of the Kim family. Unbeknownst to the Kim family, a particular scent follows them around wherever they go. They first learn of this smell from Da-song who smells Ki-taek and remarks how his tutors, the new maid, and Ki-taek all smell the same. Later, Ki-Jung, the daughter of the Kims, point out that the smell doesn't come from their brand of soap but from the semi-basement itself—it's the smell of the underclass, of the world beneath the ground. This smell is something that literally cannot be spoken



or put into words, and yet it “speaks” on behalf of the Kim family. In a sense, the smell is an emblem of class and social status that subjects the four

members of the Kim family; regardless of what they might say, or how well they perform the customs of the rich, the smell re-articulates their social position in spite of their efforts to move beyond it. Foucault is of great help here when he says of doctrine that “it puts the speaking subject in question through and on the basis of the statement” (Foucault 110). If we crudely extrapolate this idea to the film, the smell is the “statement” which constantly asks the poor Kim family who they are and where they belong. Much like the blinking lights, the smell is an “unspoken” speech-act that articulates a forbidden statement: the four workers of the Kim family are in fact a poor family colluding together to live off the Parks for as long as possible. Moreover, the

smell of the Kim family is something that “crosses the line” for Nathan Park. In this way, the smell is precisely the unwanted appendage of the Kims that signal their invasion of the rich Park family. It is the thing which the Park family can detect as an emblem of poverty that constantly tries to make its way into the circles of the rich. If the blinking lights are “statements” from the poor that remain undetected, the smell of the Kims is the statement that intrudes upon the wealthy class without finding an appropriate place. The smell is the unassimilable statement which constantly barges its head into the realm of spoken words and the emblem of class that intervenes in the Kims’ tactful mimicry of the customs of wealth that the Park family know so well.

The Rock

As my closing remarks, I’d like to briefly discuss the nature and role of the landscape rock that Min gifts to the Kim family. It’s difficult, and perhaps undesirable, to definitively claim what the rock can mean for viewers of the film. Nonetheless, the film offers some helpful clues. Of the Kim family, Kevin is the one who is most attached to the rock; at certain points in the film, we see a mesmerized and almost bewitched look on his face as he holds it. And several times throughout the film, we hear him say that the rock “clings” to him. So, what exactly is this thing that “clings?” The thing that clings is...a parasite! What is suggested here is not only that the rock functions like a parasite, but more importantly, that by virtue of Kevin’s attachment to the object, the object takes on a life of its own. A bit of cinematic magic is employed towards the climax when the Underman nearly kills Kevin with the rock he so dearly cherishes. In the denouement, however, when Kevin begins to write his letter to his father about his “fundamental plan,” we’re shown a brief shot of Kevin placing the rock into a flowing river. No one carried the rock out during the

climax, and Kevin could not have returned to the house to retrieve it, so how did he get the rock back? Somehow, the rock magically returns to him and clings, like a parasite.

Surely the rock is not alive, but it acquires meaning and significance as it occupies a firm place among the living. The rock and its host family are both parasites. But perhaps this description doesn't capture the full picture, because in the beginning act of the film, the rock heralds good fortune for the family. Like the Kim family who live off the Parks by offering great service, the rock brings something valuable to the family. But as we see in the end of the film, it demands a high price as the Underman uses it as a weapon against Kevin. As I mentioned earlier, the rock takes on a certain life of its own and its true meaning or use is never determined once



and for all. It is at once a good omen and a weapon, a parasite and a provider. Its nature can't be fixed nor commanded into being.

I'm reminded of Heidegger's work on technology, where he argues that our "gaze" which renders objects into meaningless tools misses out on the inherent life, significance, and meaning that dwells within those objects. If a simple rock is

something that can slip beyond our attempts to frame it into a certain kind of entity, can the same case be made about money? Is it really what we have made it into? Perhaps, but it can also demand a costly toll from those who claim to own it, control it, and define it. It can be a parasite in its own right.

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