

Post-colonial film criticism: a study of *Parasite*'s class narrative and the output of the South Korean local film and television industry

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Abstract. With the continuous development of world cinema, South Korean cinema, through sustained exploration, has risen from a position of near obscurity to become a film-producing force attracting the attention of more than half of global audiences. The efforts behind this achievement and the process of its development merit analysis. From the perspective of post-colonial film criticism, this article discusses the class narrative represented by *Parasite* and the output of the South Korean local film and television industry, and, drawing on an extensive body of literature, conducts an in-depth study of *Parasite*'s post-colonial class narrative, communication, and audiences. The findings indicate that, through extensive background exposition and spatial narration, including class narration, the film presents a realistic work free from cultural barriers. It is precisely for this reason that the film has been favoured by audiences in countries across the world, meeting the cultural needs of the public and enabling viewers to gain insights from its expression without requiring an excessive understanding of the film itself. The film also successfully enabled Korean cinema to break through its constraints and to present a new image before global audiences.

Keywords: post-colonial theory, spatial dimension, class narration, cultural audience, communication

1. Introduction

As the first non-English-language feature film to win an Oscar for Best Picture, *Parasite* has paved the way for South Korean cinema, facilitated the global dissemination of Korean film productions, garnered worldwide audience attention, and exerted a lasting influence on the subsequent international outreach of Korean films. The South Korean film industry has undergone a process of transformation from decline to strength. Initially, because of its limited prominence, it sought to "break out of its circle". Consequently, it began to emulate Hollywood in promoting domestic films to the world. Following its award-winning success, it gradually began to display its own style, articulating individual expression on the basis of an established audience. South Korean films not only reveal the development of the film industry, but also portray the misfortunes of Korean culture and history, as well as the social problems widely prevalent across Asia during earlier periods of warfare.

Accordingly, this article focuses on class-based narrative and the exportation of South Korean films, employing post-colonial theory and geographical space as analytical approaches, and indirectly presenting the developmental process of South Korean cinema through an analysis of this film. This study also analyses the viewing experiences and perspectives of the film's audience, thereby providing a reference for the future development of Korean cinema, particularly films that portray social realities [1].

2. Core theoretical foundation

This article draws primarily upon post-colonial film and television theory to analyse the social context in which the film is set and the contemporary social reality of severe class stratification. Post-colonial theory principally examines the social problems and phenomena experienced by certain countries following the trauma of war or colonisation. It reveals deep-seated social inequalities: during periods of war and colonisation, colonisers sought to shape and cultivate a class of subjects resembling themselves—that is, the colonised. Ultimately, however, this subject class was still required to serve the colonisers, with all actions subject to their commands. The excessive disparities between the colonisers and the colonised in terms of food, clothing, daily necessities and social status gave rise to social inequality and an ever-widening gap between rich and poor. At the same time, the traumatic effects inflicted upon colonised regions in the aftermath of such trauma are analysed [2].

Secondly, its effects are analysed through neoliberalism. Neoliberalism was a theory advanced by certain colonised countries in the post-war period in an attempt to restore social order; its principal aim was to restore the power of capitalism. However, this consequently generated greater social disparities: some wealthy people restored the economy through the exploitation of people at the bottom of society, resulting in a polarisation between rich and poor [3].

Finally, this is substantiated through the "triple space theory" proposed by the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre divides space into three dimensions: perceived space, namely the ordinary, accessible space of people's everyday lives; conceived space, namely the dwellings and buildings meticulously created by designers or capital, which constitute the order of a city and are imbued with the disciplining of people in the substratum; and lived space, namely the places inhabited by people in the substratum, which are filled with emotion and discontent and represent the existence of a spirit of resistance [4, 5].

3. Class narratives from a postcolonial perspective

3.1. Narrative structure

The film *Parasite* principally recounts how the Kim family, who live in a semi-basement, seize a fortuitous opportunity: Ki-woo is first introduced to the Park family through a friend, after which the family gradually employ minor schemes to replace the Park family's tutor, housekeeper and even driver with members of their own family, all on seemingly reasonable grounds. In this way, the Kim family of the social substratum complete their "parasitism" upon the upper-class Park family. However, at the climax of the story, during a heavy rainstorm, the Kims' scheme is discovered by the former housekeeper. Upon learning at the same time that the Park family are returning home, the Kims have no choice but to run frantically home through the rain, only to find that their home has been inundated. This sequence of events ultimately leads to Ki-woo's outburst.

The inequality in South Korean society represented in the film constitutes a reflection of reality. In its early history, South Korea underwent many years of Japanese colonial rule, after which it was also subjected to

cultural intrusion and capitalist penetration by the United States. In the society that emerged after colonial invasion, a form of contemporary neoliberal development arose. As society and the market continued to expand, substantial disparities emerged between permanent and temporary workers, as well as between employees of large-scale and small-sized enterprises. Consequently, the gap between rich and poor was further widened, producing an upper class comprising the top 10 per cent and lower-middle classes comprising the remaining 90 per cent. It is thus evident that the gulf between the upper and lower classes is even greater and remains permanently unbridgeable [6]. Subsequently, a precariat group emerged within society, comprising impoverished people produced by the aforementioned historical context and the extreme disparities within society. These people generally live at the social substratum, with the majority employed as temporary workers. Their work is highly unstable, thereby rendering everyday life uncertain. Under such extreme living conditions, many begin to experience increasing impatience and anxiety, giving rise to an impetus to strike back from below.

All these events and forms of treatment have caused colonisers and the colonised gradually to evolve into what are now termed the upper and lower social classes: namely, the upper-class Park family and the lower-class Kim family and the family of the former housekeeper in this film. These differences between social classes give rise to the anger and resistance of those at the bottom of society, ultimately producing tragedies within both society and the family.

3.2. Characterisation

This film principally portrays the Park family at the top of society, the Kim family at the bottom of society, and the family of the Park family's former housekeeper. However, the main narrative thread unfolds through the Kim family's "parasitism" upon the Park family.

With regard to the Kim family, the father, Ki-taek, lost his job some years earlier and subsequently attempted to start a business, which ended in failure; he has therefore remained unemployed and at home for many years. He is extremely adept at exploiting loopholes. After taking on work folding pizza boxes for a pizza shop, he completed the task by exploiting such loopholes, yet the quality of the work was inadequate. This is also evident in his refusal to close the windows when an insecticide-spraying vehicle passes by, in the hope of exterminating the insects in his home; this reveals his tendency to take petty advantage. Yet, despite being such a person, he possesses an exceptionally strong sense of self-respect. Whenever the Park family mention "the smell of the basement", he reacts most strongly. This also shapes the tragic nature of his ending: the humiliation accumulated over a long period eventually erupts and culminates in a tragedy.

The mother, Chung-sook, was once a champion athlete and is highly capable. However, after retiring from competition, she shifted her focus to the family, had no stable employment, and occasionally took on casual work with her family to make a living. Her daily routine at home after retirement consisted of washing the family's clothes and doing household chores; consequently, she was later able to take over effectively the role of housekeeper for the Park family, demonstrating strong executive capacity and practical ability. Kim Ki-woo, the son of the Kim family, failed the university entrance examination on four occasions. When a friend recommended that he become a private tutor to a rich girl, he was greatly tempted, as he had no proper occupation and his family was short of money. He therefore had his technically adept sister forge university academic credentials, enabling him to enter the Park family successfully. However, after entering the Park household, he became dissatisfied with the status quo: he wished to place all his family members in the Park household and even entered into a romantic relationship with the rich girl. This ambition to transcend class and rise above ground is also revealed later, during the family's conversation in the living room on a day of heavy rain.

Ki-jung, the daughter of the Kim family, is the most quick-witted and calculating member of the household. She is proficient in art and PS technology, and the documents she forges for her brother are exceptionally convincing. She is highly talented, but her family's lack of money prevents them from supporting her education. Later, using the identity forged through her brother, she enters the Park family's household as a tutor to their youngest son, the most difficult child to manage. Moreover, while being driven away by the Park family's chauffeur, she silently begins to devise her next plan from inside the car, discreetly laying the groundwork for her father's subsequent successful entry into the Park household.

The family of four symbolises the social substratum. Unlike the former housekeeper's family, who likewise belong to the substratum, they harbour dreams and have not always occupied such a low social position. For instance, the mother had previously been an athlete and had won awards; the daughter possesses considerable artistic ability; the son is eager to study and improve himself; and the father had once started a business. This suggests that the family is unwilling to remain ordinary: they seek contact with the upper strata of society and, after entering the Park family's household, even attempt to transcend class boundaries directly. Such deluded ambitions also bring about their ultimately tragic fate. Perhaps the family's life was already extremely difficult at the beginning of the film, yet, by its conclusion, the daughter has lost her life and the father is forced to hide in the underground secret room, unable to show himself. Their circumstances are even worse than at the outset, thereby foreshadowing the impossibility of crossing social-class boundaries.

Park's chairman is presented in the film as a successful businessman: he possesses wealth, enjoys a life of luxury and has a good reputation. Having long occupied the upper echelons of society, he socialises exclusively with other high-achieving elites. By contrast, the Kim family are fabricated talents. As a result, Park's chairman, and even the members of the Park family, are able to detect a subterranean smell.

The chairman's wife, by contrast, is relatively naïve and readily trusts others; within the household, she also at times occupies a weaker position. It is precisely this naïveté, coupled with her reluctance to tell her husband upon learning that the housekeeper might have a contagious illness, that enables the Kim family, through continual introductions and recommendations, to secure positions for every member of the family within the Park household.

First, Park's chairman's status itself strongly symbolises the successful figure of the upper class. This is also reflected later, when the members of the Kim family, in conversation, observe that it is not innate kindness but sufficient capital that sustains the Parks' kindness. They represent the upper strata of society: sensitive to, ignorant of, and yet arrogant towards those in the lower classes. It is precisely for this reason that, when the two social classes collide, the tragedy of the ending is inevitable.

The former housekeeper's family, meanwhile, had originally been parasitic upon the house itself. They had lived there before the Park family moved in: the housekeeper had already served in that capacity under the previous owner, while her husband had lived in the underground secret room ever since the previous household moved away. She used her own salary to buy food and deliver it to him. Thus, in comparison with the Kim family, who later became "parasites", the housekeeper's family had continuously parasitised affluent households, subsisting beneath the homes of the wealthy. Their social status is comparable to that of the Kim family. At the same time, the husband's backstory in the film—namely, that he had once started a business but ultimately failed—also suggests that Kim Ki-taek's eventual fate is likewise destined to be tragic.

3.3. Spatial narrative

The film comprises three principal spaces: the magnificent Park family home, the Kim family's semi-basement, and the underground secret room located beneath the Park family home. These three spaces can be related to certain views of the French philosopher Lefebvre. He considers housing issues to symbolise, at the

same time, the tendency for everyday life to be encroached upon and planned. In his view, with the development of industrialisation and globalisation, the city is a place replete with differences. Moreover, the different social groups, value systems, cultures and differentiated social activities within society also lead to an expansion of social disparities. Through his profound insights into society, Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space*, divides space into three dimensions: perceived space, conceived space and lived space. Perceived space refers to space that can be apprehended in real life; conceived space refers to space imagined by experts and elites; and lived space is the space of residents' everyday lives, emotions, memories and resistance.

These three dimensions correspond precisely to the Park family, the Kim family and the housekeeper's family. The Park family corresponds to conceived space: a residence designed by professional architects for the upper class, featuring a minimalist style of interior decoration and extensive spatial emptiness. The Kim family, by contrast, corresponds to perceived space, representing the actual living environment of those at the bottom of society: their home is cramped and confined, with no surplus space available for design; instead, its limited interior is filled with various household items, all crowded together. The underground secret room occupied by the housekeeper's husband corresponds to lived space. Having been left penniless by debt, they reside there; likewise, at the end of the film, Kim Ki-woo hides in this underground secret room after killing Park's chairman. This space, in fact, symbolises a certain form of resistance: they observe every aspect of the rich people's lives while concealing themselves within a space of which the householders are entirely unaware, subsisting there as dependants. The spatial positioning of these three spaces is also highly suggestive. The affluent Park family lives entirely above ground; moreover, after passing through the entrance gate, one must ascend a further step before actually reaching the house, symbolising the unbridgeable gulf between the upper and lower classes. The Kim family, by contrast, occupies a semi-basement: they are situated partly underground and partly above ground, and their home has only one window through which they can see the scenery and objects above ground. The secret chamber occupied by the housekeeper's husband is located entirely underground, and requires one to descend a staircase. These three spaces may be understood as three vertically arranged levels, each of which also symbolises the corresponding social status. At the same time, the director effectively links these three spaces through staircases and ascents and descents, enabling the audience to sense that those in the lower strata must undertake a long and arduous journey before they can see and come into contact with the landscape of the upper classes.

4. Cross-cultural communication

4.1. Globalization output

The success of *Parasite* is not merely attributable to the personal will of its director or producers, but also to policy support within South Korea. In 1998, President Kim Dae-jung began to promote the outward communication of South Korean films. Through the establishment of funding infrastructure, deregulation and an export-oriented approach, South Korea consequently developed a solid foundation for collaboration with the global film industry, enabling South Korean films to enter the world with greater confidence. Subsequently, cooperation between South Korea and the United States, including Hollywood remakes and transnational remakes, enabled South Korean films to reach broader audiences. In 2010, with the rise of a new platform known as Netflix, South Korea began co-productions with Netflix, including *Okja*, a film directed by Bong Joon-ho, the director of *Parasite*, in collaboration with Netflix in 2017. The development of this industry provided South Korean films with broader resources for overseas development. At the same time, through the high quality of his works, Bong Joon-ho established a foundation for both filmmaking and reputation, laying a solid basis for the overseas communication of *Snowpiercer*, which he later directed, and

Parasite, the work analysed in this article [7]. Moreover, this film serves as a work of cultural diplomacy through which South Korea shapes its national brand. The production team of this film consists entirely of Koreans, and it does not require its creators to introduce the film to "foreign" audiences for viewers to discern the meaning that the director intends to convey. The three spaces represented in the film, together with the trajectory from the Kim family to the Park family and then to the basement, including the "smell of the basement" frequently mentioned by the Park family, deeply imprint the film's theme upon the mind of every viewer. At the same time, the film draws attention to another spatial element: the underground secret room, which is also an air-raid shelter. The air-raid shelter was designed at the time to provide refuge from colonial aggression and war, a context that also enables audiences in numerous countries around the world to empathise with it [8]. This film was distributed on film and television platforms in multiple countries and received acclaim from a broad global audience for its historical scars and profound reflection on social realities. The film was extensively promoted on international websites, with its overall strategy divided into two approaches. One involved promotion in English, focusing on the film's quality and paradigmatic framework in order to attract viewers worldwide; the other involved promotion in Korean, directed primarily at domestic Korean audiences and concentrating on cultural, historical and social contexts so as to attract greater audience attention [9].

4.2. Differentiated interpretations

Russian audiences tend to favour plot-driven narratives, comedy and profound stories, all of which are encompassed in *Parasite*; consequently, the film has been widely acclaimed in Russia. The film has also attracted considerable attention in Colombia, owing to its profound satire of capitalist disparities, which bears a certain relation to the country's national conditions and is capable of eliciting audience resonance. From the German perspective, the film has been highly praised because it boldly exposes the real problems of its own country and society; viewed from this angle, it demonstrates considerable courage, as this is by no means an easy undertaking. The Chinese audience, meanwhile, has evaluated the film as fearless in its willingness to portray South Korean political and social issues. However, this also prompted the question of whether such impoverished families truly exist in the world. The answer is affirmative. Since the national conditions of each country differ, and South Korea has a land area of approximately 100,000 square kilometres and a population of more than 50 million, as well as being mountainous South Korea, the social problems represented in the film are not fictional but reflect the actual living conditions in South Korea. Moreover, Chinese audiences are keen to learn about the social cultures of other countries through film, and they particularly enjoy the works directed by Bong Joon-ho, because the content reflected in his works is profound, elucidating the deeper structures and darkness of society [10].

5. Conclusion

The above has principally introduced several major theories employed in the analysis of *Parasite*, examined the film's class narrative from a postcolonial perspective through an analysis of its production, and developed this discussion across three dimensions: narrative structure, characterisation, and the spatial dimension. A detailed analysis has been conducted of the real social issues expressed in the film and of class differentiation. The industrialised export of South Korean cinema and the interpretations of this film in different countries have also been analysed.

Although this study has been conducted through extensive literature-based research, it lacks certain forms of theoretical practice. Future research will integrate theory, practice and detailed survey data; furthermore,

during the literature search, some sources could not be accessed for various reasons, and consequently certain aspects of the research have not been examined in sufficient depth. Although relevant material was found in other sources, it was still less detailed than the original material. In future, more literature platforms will be explored in order to make the article more comprehensive.

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