

A Fantasy of Survival and Class Stink in *Parasite*

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Woosung Kang

Seoul National University

Abstract

This essay attempts to revisit Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, an internationally acclaimed film, in terms of its subtle delineation of distorted class politics and argues that the film effectively dramatizes and criticizes the cruel logic of neoliberal capitalism. Concentrating, especially, on the irony of stink as an invisible trigger of dormant class consciousness of the lower class against the rich, this paper discusses the way the olfactory smell functions as the Lacanian Real that never goes away and always returns as the indelible mark of class division. What I call "class stink" plays a crucial role in breaking apart the internalized illusion of individual survivalism: it returns as the repressed signifier that nullifies the fantasy dream of free social mobility and fair opportunity for all in the game of the survival of the fittest. Stink drives the lower class to realize the futility of outsmarting the upstart by cunning parasitism in the merciless game of social Darwinism, and it violently revivifies die-hard class antagonism lurking behind the fantasy of material affluence. Stink, like a virus, lays bare the Real of class antagonism which enables and at the same time debilitates what we call the normal: there remains something irrepressible at the normality of neoliberal capitalism. *Parasite* is thoroughly political in its radical debunking of social Darwinism in South Korea and in its subtle dramatization of the politics of class stink.

Keywords

Parasite, social Darwinism, fantasy, stink, virus

1. Anti-capitalist Ethics in Bong's Films

As many critics have already indicated, there abound lots of “references to capitalism” (Farahbakhsh and Ebrahimi 2021, 91) and its destructiveness as they manifest in Bong Joon-ho’s cinematic connection of “political economy to political ecology” (Lee and Manicasteri 2018, 3). Bong’s two recent masterpieces, *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *Okja* (2017), amply support this opinion. Bong’s political ecology actually dates further back to his monster thriller *The Host* (2006) where a man-made, lizard-like, chemical creature threatens human biosphere. Bong’s *Parasite* (2019), as many have argued, seems to continue his overall social critique in terms of political economy and social ecology. Class politics under capitalist society here also takes the particular undertone of a political ecology in the form of “class stink.” Stink in *Parasite* functions as the invisible and irrepressible olfactory blemish which instantly stigmatizes the poverty, an indelible mark of class reality that cannot be wiped out under the veneer of neoliberal consumerism. Indeed, the olfactory smell plays a crucial role in several key scenes in *Parasite* such as air sanitizer fume, urine of a drunkard, uncleanly exposed toilet, drain water flooding, and even peach fur. Most of smelly cuts are symbolized as the stigma of poverty.

This essay attempts to re-examine *Parasite* as a film about the perverse political ecology in South Korea where the fantasy of individual survivalism effectively depoliticizes and substitutes for class confrontation: neoliberalism attempts to disavow class reality by making the lower-class forge “their own destruction” (Turner 1999, 176). And I argue that stink is the invisible signifier of the Real which cracks the smooth space of neoliberal survivalism. In this respect, the South Korean society in Bong’s films is a sort of metaphorical replica of capitalist society at large, just as the luxurious mansion in *Parasite* graphically symbolizes the class division of South Korea.

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, though a box office flop, somehow garnered critical acclaim among cinephiles and festival organizers. His name was widely known for the unexpected success of his second feature film, *Memories of*

Murder (2003), which deals with the mystery of serial killing in a small town outside Seoul. Set in the 1980s when the political turmoil over democracy was at its height in South Korea, the film, together with *The Host*, questions the absurdity of the state power or the oppressive uselessness of political system in the matter of solving crimes and addressing people's sufferings. Back then, Korea was a kind of 'police state' ruled by a military dictator (Jeon 2011, 77). This film sets the tone and the style of Bong's filmmaking: an obsessive setup of every detail of the *mise-en-scène* together with his thematic search for the ethical critique of social reality. The critique is ethical because he does not directly accuse one evil target of wrongdoings but lets the film in itself stand as a powerful critique of social ills and systemic blindness (Jeon 2011, 88). This is what renders his films distinct from those of Lee Chang-Dong, another Korean *auteur* who has been preoccupied with problematizing, with firm moral sensibility, the tragic hypocrisy in a particular social phenomenon, at least, until the recent film *Burning* (2018).¹

The Host was a huge blockbuster hit, drawing more than 13 million people to about 1,800 screens nationwide. It is focused on the survival of a family living along Han River where a biological monster was accidentally created by the US army. Unlike Hollywood blockbusters of alien creatures, the film does not applaud the family who saved the whole country from annihilation as heroes. The film rather indicts the utter incapacity of the defunct state system and its biopolitics as the last resort to people's safety and survival. The bio-chemical monster could be an apt symbol of military-industrial complex which is ultimately backed by neoliberal capitalism, relentlessly driving the lives of ordinary people into the precarious and insecure competition of the survival of the fittest (Moon and Moon 2020). Allegorical as it is, the film sincerely showcases the sinister aspects of structural violence.

His next feature, *Mother* (2009), continues to develop an ethical critique of sociality in the wry portrayal of South Korean society in terms of its perverse oedipal drama: castrated patriarchy and its distorted supplementation by hysterical motherhood. Bong even goes beyond his usual ethical critique and attempts to deconstruct categories of colonial ethics themselves, obsessively ironizing the subtle conundrum of deep "familial paradigm"

prevalent in 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; South Korean society has been not only feeding on the sacrifices of neurotic women (mothers) but also mostly dependent on the hystericization of them (Kim 2010, 924). In the end, it is the very neurotic mother who holds responsible for all the social abnormality of Korean society, including the perverse masculinity and misogyny of her sons. But the final message of the film is clearly apocalyptic: “Who would throw a stone at this neurotic woman?” The society at large is also responsible for this abnormality.

As is well known, *Snowpiercer* is an overt anti-capitalist allegory, a kind of grand-scale fantasy of class struggle and the final annihilation of the capitalist system. In this respect, the film is indeed anti-systemic, but not socialist or communist in its political stance. The film is, as in any other of Bong’s films, highly critical of the ruling class or powerful people, but the director also calls our attention to the ethical, if not existential, frivolity of the underprivileged (Farahbakhsh and Ebrahimi 2021, 90). Though it avoids falling into the trap of morally taking one side over the other, the film’s ethical equivocality ends up a dream-like fantasy in which all things have to be completely destroyed, or at least derailed, in order to be reinstalled by “irrational outbursts of destructive violence” (Žižek 2012, 53). The film seems to take the stance of pure anarchism; as the director here appears to discard both his belief in the critique of systemic violence and his hope for the political resistance against the system under global neoliberal capitalism (Fisher 2009, 17).

Of course, the state *is* part and parcel of the capitalist system of exploitation; hence, the only available form of resistance against such a system would be to simply extricate ourselves from the unbridled exploitation of the wealthy and their state partner. Any effort to politically subvert the established order or attempt to stop the function of the system with glitches or frictions fail not because anti-systemic resistance lacks power or is short of valid tactics (Žižek 2012, 90). In *Snowpiercer*, the problem lies deeper than these contingent elements: it’s our own reified desire that helps lubricate

the smooth function of system itself. In this psychology of fetishistic desire, there is no difference between capitalists and workers. The ultimate message of the film would be: even if some suffer more than the others, the only way out of this nightmarish system is, in so far as we are all in the same train, to keep imagining the total derailment and complete re-installation of the system itself. In this sense, *Snowpiercer* is indeed post-apocalyptic.

Okja is a sort of ecological variation of what *Snowpiercer* has left unsolved. Multinational capitalism now goes even further than simply trying to artificially create what we call nature. In *Okja*, nature itself has to be redefined as ontologically indistinguishable from the artificial and cultural or, at the least, the idea of nature has to be deconstructed as ideologically untenable. This involves more than what we call biopolitics: it's not about controlling or manipulating the process of nature in order to secure the infinite permissiveness of our desire (Schulze 2018). What the film ultimately tells us with the awful fate of *Okja* is that the disfigured form of nature in today's capitalism is, nonetheless, neither worse than what 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 human. Human beings are described to be the most unnatural elements of the entire universe. Bong's ethical imagination allegorically touches upon the post-apocalyptic politics of ecology in which everything human loses its meaning.

2. The Popularity of *Parasite*

One of the reasons why *Parasite* achieves unprecedented applause by winning the Oscar in the Best Picture category might be that it does *not* feel like a foreign film except for an inch of subtitles (Dargis 2019).² What does it mean? Is it an acknowledgement that *Parasite*, despite its linguistic strangeness and cultural heterogeneity, is not seriously different from the familiar Orientalist delineation of its foreignness like any other such contenders before it? There is, however, nothing particularly exotic or orientalist in the way the film realistically describes the intensity of fierce battles for survival in the Korean "branch" of global neoliberal capitalism (Ehrlich 2019). The claim of *Parasite's*

universal appeal is said to come from its seemingly pro-capitalist or at least *non-anti-capitalist* stance. As for its overall political orientation, it has been argued that *Parasite* does not favor any one side of class division. Rather the film “evenhandedly,” that is, politically correctly, depicts the good, the bad, and the ugly altogether (Kim 2019). It seems to confirm that Bong’s films are ethically equivocal and that they are thereby not very political in the strict sense of the term (Klein 2008, 872; La Force 2019).

This critique becomes more complicated when a number of critics in Korea as well as those in other countries start to criticize the very “political equivocalness” or the “mechanical Political Correctness” of the film in terms of class struggle (Nam 2021, 37; Kim 2019). Their argument is 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, negatively highlighting the lack of solidarity among the underprivileged. Undoubtedly, the Kims’ brief occupation of luxurious mansion by cunning, deceit, and their violence against the housemaid couple appear doubly frustrating, not in spite of, but because of their self-inflicted humiliation: “the life of the poor floats away in the drain water” (Farahbakhsh and Ebrahimi 2021, 105). Their subsequent downfall into the pit of the flooded semi-basement home causes extreme unease in the viewer for its moral ambiguity: the Kims deserve the downfall, the viewer seems to feel, but at the same time their humiliation is unmerited and excessive. Moreover, the film’s pivotal scenes frequently appear to dramatize ugly battles in the mud among the underprivileged for their futile attempts at social ascendancy, which conveniently replace the class struggle between the have and the have-nots (Bong 2019). As one critic puts it, Bong’s gesture concerning class struggle may be termed as *cynical*: “a shrug over inequality” (Kim 2019).

Indeed, Kitaek and Gunse, the two old incapable patriarchal figures in the underworld, blatantly showcase their respect for the boss, Mr. Park, who unwittingly supports their survival. And it is ironic that these two “parasitic” families fiercely fight with each other at the basement for the fatal game of the survival of the fittest in the absence of their revered owner. Rather than the class struggle of the “downstairs” against the “upstairs,” the battle

is waged “under the ground” 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. Paradoxical 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 or political blindness. As will be made clear later on, I argue that both of them are untenable for their lack of attention to *why* and *how* the movie subtly problematizes the perversity of class politics itself.

Curiously enough, these critiques explain why *Parasite* has earned unprecedented popularity throughout the world. Those who are critical of the director’s political attitude often praise the film for its extremely realistic and detailed depiction of the very pervert class politics in South Korea and consider it as a highly symptomatic representation of global capitalism itself. As such, neoliberal capitalism tends to feed on the reified desire of the poor who become forgetful of class exploitation, entirely immersed in the endless game of individual survival; indeed, in terms of reification, no class show “any qualitative difference in the structure of consciousness” (Lukács 1968, 98). For them, *Parasite* is a must-see movie for the enlightenment of class reality after 2008 (Gabilondo 2020, 14).

On the other hand, people who are enthusiastic about the movie usually pay attention to the aesthetic quality of social satire and the unique cinematic rhythm of the plot. They specifically point out the cinematic finesse with which the director lets the viewer find out the absurdity of meritocracy and survivalism in today’s class politics. If the movie adopted the familiar formula of class struggle between the have and the have-nots, it would not have given such a pleasurable experience of watching a social drama. The greatness of *Parasite*, for them, lies in its seemingly frivolous but tragi-comical mixture of lightness and seriousness. One of the reviewers even suggests that with *Parasite* Bong’s movie finally amounts to a “*sui generis*,” a hybrid genre of film that defies easy categorization (Ehrlich 2019).

Either way, the popularity of *Parasite* seems to come from the assumption that it concerns, seriously or not, class politics itself (Nam 2021, 36).

Every character, more or less, is to be identified with a type of individual representative of a certain class, generation, and gender, easily discernible in any capitalist society, or with an aberrant who embodies deviousness and exceptionality (Noh 2020, 254). For example, Moongwang, the ex-housemaid to the Park family, is conceived of as an older-generation female worker whose self-esteem as a real host of the mansion does not coincide with her actual plight as a precarious employee. As Kijung rightly recognizes about Moongwang, “she may look like a sheep, but inside, she’s a fox. Sometimes she acts like she owns the house.” (*Parasite* 2019). Moongwang has also been secretly hiding her deranged husband in the cellar effectively parasitizing the employer and later boasts her authority as a legitimate housemaid over her substitute. In terms of her class typicality, she simultaneously plays *and* does not play a consistent role as an employee. Is *Parasite* then really a movie about class struggle or an allegory of its postmodern, neoliberal perversity?

3. A Movie about Social Darwinism

In fact, *Parasite* is not a film about class struggle or the lack thereof, in the way *Snowpiercer* is an allegory of global 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 openly laughs at the innocent credulity and blatant snobbery of the Parks. The latter scene also demonstrates that the rich people like the Parks really are *upstarts* who have no sense of “culture,” unable to distinguish the glittering surface from the cultured intellect. Indeed, so much of the humor in the movie come from this cultural blindness. Both families seem to illustrate the two different versions of *anti-intellectualism* prevalent in Korean society: a snobbish attachment to anything that smacks of intellect and a cynical disaffirmation of any intellect in the upper-class individual. As a social group, however, neither the Kims nor the Parks, except for a parasitic underground pair, are depicted to be a representative of the upper and the lower class respectively. Luxury and wealth notwithstanding, the Parks still lack the element of culture, while the Kims act as if they can enjoy the pleasures of the rich people in spite of their

shabby economic condition. Despite a clearly demarcated material division, there exists, psychologically, only *one* class in the movie, the middle-class. They seem to think and act as if they all belong to the same class. And this psychological fantasy constitutes the unconscious core of their perverse class consciousness.

What I mean by “middle-class” here is not identical with the Western notion of the “bourgeoisie” whose class instinct is defined against the upper class and the lower class (Marx 1972, 106); in the context of Korean culture, it has a specific ideological implication. 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 a strong sense of *independence* (Gabilondo 2020, 15-16). Economic independence for the Parks; psychical one for the Kims. Especially, the Kims know they are poverty-stricken but consider it as a temporary inconvenience. When Kitaek says, “She [Mrs. Park] is rich but she’s still nice,” his wife nonchalantly adds, “Not ‘rich, but still nice.’ Nice because she’s rich, you know? Hell, if I had all this money, I’d be nice too!” (*Parasite* 2019). To say that only the middle-class is represented in the film does not mean, therefore, that the film exclusively depicts middle-class realities among diverse class arrangements; rather, it means that there seems to literally exist, as far as class consciousness is concerned, only one class identity in the Korean society. That’s why no apparent class antagonism pops up even when particular scenes are expected to provoke a humiliating confrontation between the Kims and the Parks (Octavia 2021, 29). Instead, the actual conflict occurs only in the underground.

For example, Mr. Park, Kitaek, and Gunse, though clearly distinct in their current economic status, all actually share the experience of belonging 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 became bank-

rupt during the financial crisis in 1997; Gunse, an anachronistic unemployed who, as one of precarious workers whose monthly paycheck amounts to less than 1,000 dollars (the so-called “0.88-Million-Won generation youth”), entirely relies upon his wife to survive, still holding on to the dream of becoming a high-ranking law officer despite having already failed the test several times (Park 2020). Coming from diachronically different generations of the same middle-class cluster in the post-2008 South Korean history, they happen to dwell *vertically* in the same synchronic space (Gabilondo 2020, 20). Such is the reason why all these older males do not harbor any class animosity against each other.

Thus considered, the class struggle in this film, if there is one, actually showcases the psychical conflict within the self-same class consciousness. The ambivalent respect and jealousy of Kitaek and Gunse towards Mr. Park 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 economic survival. This *intra*-class affective economy of ambivalent feelings is indeed *agonistic*, not antagonistic: life is just a game of survival whose chance of winning is set equally for all participants. The only difference among them is the individual capability for social success. Thus, any means available for outwitting the wealthy opponent are allowed in so far as the rules are strictly followed. You could be winners or losers temporarily, but not a permanent victim: the game of survival is entirely contingent upon individual efforts regardless of participants’ current economic status as long as the fair competition is guaranteed (Fisher 2009, 14). What really matters in this intra-class social organism is not political justice but procedural fairness. The idea of *social Darwinism* effectively takes the place of political justice.

The law is the survival of the fittest.... The law is not the survival of the ‘better’ or the ‘stronger,’ if we give to those words anything like their ordinary meanings. It is the survival of those which are constitutionally **fittest to thrive** under the conditions in which they are placed; and very often that which, humanly speaking, is inferiority, causes the survival. (Spencer 2010, 379-80; Emphasis added)

As a disadvantaged contestant, all you have to do in this game of “winner takes it all” is not to remain a loser by any means possible. This game of survival is not about power but persistence and durability. So the socially inferior, as Spencer emphasizes it, can be the fittest for the survival without necessarily being a better or stronger one (2010, 380). In this situation, no one openly admits to their being the victim of social exploitation because the very acknowledgment of one’s own unjust victimhood could be the most pathetic way of being a loser.³ As such, *Parasite* is indeed a film of class struggle as a fantasy game of survival without justice.

Only in terms of “absent” inter-class politics for justice and the fantasy game of universal survival can the stratified relationship of three patriarchs become mutually parasitical. Kitaek and Gunse are “actual” class parasites to the host Mr. Park who unwittingly supports the bare survival of their family. Seen from the perspective of this class politics, the two parasites are indeed pathetic for the lack of what Spencer calls “social consciousness” (2010, 19; Gray 1981, 180). But when you approach this economic host-parasite relationship in terms of the intra-class psychical interdependence, Mr. Park, together with his family, is the one who completely counts upon their “parasitic labor” and requires social recognition of his superiority from them. Indeed, Mr. Park turns out to be the real parasite whose legitimacy as a host entirely relies on the acknowledgement of laboring parasites.

The same goes with Mrs. Park. After she let the first housekeeper go, for example, Mrs. Park finds herself utterly incapable of managing household affairs, even struggling to fix a meal: an ironic parasitism of the host that undercuts the logic of neoliberal meritocracy. 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 a breach of rule in this fantasy game played upon tilted ground (Farahbakhsh and Ebrahimi 2021, 100). They know they are not better or stronger than the Parks but the fittest for the game. For them, the act of outwitting the oppo-

ment supplements their inferior condition; the game is concerned less with the unjust parasitizing than the legitimate “outwitting” of inept upstarts.

The efficacy of smooth outsmarting a competitor by clever pretense of servitude and not by direct confrontation, is clearly manifested in several key scenes where the Kims celebrate their victory at a driver’s buffet, at their semi-basement abode, and at the splendid upstairs of the Parks’ mansion. They are neither ashamed of themselves nor are they feeling *guilty* at all towards the Parks, not only because they did not commit any serious fraud like violent subversion or direct occupation but because they really think they are saving the Parks out of their own stupidity. They could keep their sense of dignity or even superiority intact by assuming the invaluableness of their service relative to their humble paycheck. The Parks like to put themselves in the position of the master who orders servants around, but ironically this privilege to rule can only be possible on the condition that the trace of their becoming *nouveau riche* can be successfully covered up and that their employees dare not cross the line which separates the world of masters from that of servants (Gabilondo 2020, 17). There is nothing unjust or unfair in this intra-class rivalry between the imposture of the Kims and the snobbery of the Parks.⁴ As Kiwoo emphatically explains, “All you’ll need to do is walk up the stairs” (*Parasite* 2019). A fantasy game of social mobility only follows the logic of money and a smart game plan in the mire of mutual parasitism.

4. The Sympathy for the Vengeance

Strange as it may sound, it is this very lack of a sense of shame and guilt that explains the tragic fate of the Kims (Noh 2020, 251). Up until the discovery of a secret underground dweller, Gunse, the movie was chiefly shot through the perspective of the Kims as individuals and as a group. Especially, the two members of the younger generation, Kiwoo and Kijung, take the central place in the film’s diegetic narrative (Jeon 2021, 4). 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 neither complain of the shameful family situation in which they have to “parasite”

the neighbor's Wi-Fi service, nor feel vulnerable to unhygienic exposure to disease, nor suffer from their semi-basement stink. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that they feel uncomfortable or even ashamed of their poverty, and understandably so. When her father tries to get rid of the smell, Kijung calmly adds, "It's the basement smell. The smell won't go away unless we leave this place" (*Parasite* 2019). Therefore, either they have been so adaptable as get used to a life of minimum necessity or they imagine their indigence to be simply a matter of temporary inconvenience (Noh 2020, 251).

The Kims are not *workers* in the strict sense of the term except for doing some part-time jobs of folding pizza boxes; nor are they pursuing or planning something meaningful for 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 forgery skills. They are not typical youths of their generation in South Korea, who are driven to the world of fierce competition and surrender to the pressure of constant self-improvement (Moon and Moon 2020). They are not depressed youth of a burnout society either (Han 2015, 5). Nevertheless, they do not appear to be losers, let alone victims of social injustice like their parents precisely because they look like they have opted to *voluntarily* get out of the competition without any "plans," doing nothing for the moment, despite being constantly short of money and work. As Kitaek advises his son, "You know what kind of plan never fails? No plan. No plan at all. You know why? Because life cannot be planned" (*Parasite* 2019). 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," or the suppleness to "nudging" their presence whenever the opportunity comes up (Serres 1980, 196). The wisdom of their parasitism seems to come from "the capacity to define boundaries not as structures" but "as different operators of change to the pre-existing state of the system" (Jeon 2021, 9). Social boundaries are, for them, not an insurmountably fixed barrier but a manageable huddle to be stepped over in order to succeed. Indeed, to keep being resilient

without desperately striving to achieve something while patiently waiting for the opportunity of nudging is the very quality 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 have learned how to manage themselves in the game of survival as well as how to simulate themselves as *attractive*. As commodities that are always already available, they have learned how to enjoy themselves amidst an intolerably incompetent family. They are indeed the uncanny parasite to this culture of self-management and individual self-simulation (Jeon 2021, 6).

This is why Kiwoo has no trouble fantasizing himself as 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 but nice” Mrs. Park that they seem to really believe that they themselves are for real. Kiwoo also imagines himself to be in charge of the revival of the whole family, acting as if he is the new patriarch replacing his old “plan-less” father. Ironically, all that he plans to achieve, at a sneak party at the mansion, for the revival of the family turns out to be making money by becoming the son-in-law of the wealthy Mr. Park, which looks truly bizarre, a plan that mimics the desire of his buddy. And Bong’s black humor here is at its best when one person’s seriousness turns out to be another’s laughter for all its absurdity. He has no “real” plan of his own to fulfil for he is only good at *imitating*—or “copying and pasting,” to borrow the popular slang—what was already established. Significantly, after the penultimate catastrophe at the mansion on a rainy night, Kiwoo asks himself what his smart buddy would do in a situation like that. Kiwoo’s resilience is more akin to the desire for social recognition than that of individual independence (Jeon 2021, 7). 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 manage his life and his family would not be possible at all without parasitizing the laid out plans of others.

In this sense, Kiwoo is less a loser in the game of social evolution than an involuntary straggler maladjusted to the rule of the game despite his strong will to be a regular player in survivalism. He remains outside in

the game of resilient nudging oneself into the cracks of established order; a self-proclaimed *avenger* and *victim* of his own parasitic fantasy of becoming a man of meticulous planning and careful management. That is why our sympathy has to be drawn towards, and at the same time withdrawn from, Kiwoo precisely at the moment his fantasy drives him into sheer madness and frenzy (Noh 2020, 255). He becomes dangerous at the end not because of his possible madness for violence but because of his sheer, absurd, if resilient perseverance for planning itself. He lives in the fantasy world that dreams of restoring the crumbled patriarchy of his father. But this fantasy has already eaten him alive. He has become a parasite of his own dream.⁵

5. Stink as the Real

If we approach the film in terms of the politics of 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.⁶ 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 parasites in that they do not know much about the mansion despite being its owner (Jeon 2021, 5). The only person who really connects with and cares about the house is the ex-housemaid-cum-butler, Moongwang. Not only does she manage the house impeccably but also boasts herself to be the real caretaker of the house. For her, the Parks and the Kims are but temporary owners and imposters, that is, parasites, who have no meaningful claim of acquaintance with the house itself. At some point, she even refers to the Parks as “these kids” while speaking with the Kims. Moongwang’s intimacy with the house is revealed in the scene where she and her husband used to enjoy themselves as the “real” hosts listening to the music over tea in the living room in the absence of the actual owner. She thinks that 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 a virus (Farahbakhsh and Ebrahimi 2021, 102). As Moongwang has probably learned from the teaching of a wise architect, the house as host is not a thing to be

possessed. There is something fundamentally anti-capitalist or *communal* in the mansion, and the tragedy of intra-class resentment, 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, of 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 to 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. Gunse is wise enough to detect that the whole scenario of the Kim's occupation must come from the younger members who know how to pass themselves off as real.

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 birthday party at the mansion tacitly frames the inevitable outburst of class antagonism. 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 as an inferior employee. For Kitaek, the class humiliation by 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 Kitaek of the injustice, not unfairness, of being systematically discriminated not as an economic minority but as a nonhuman parasite. This explains why Kitaek's penultimate act of killing transforms the illusionary intra-class antagonism into a sort of anti-colonial solidarity among parasitic lower-classes (Park 2020). On behalf of smelly Gunse, Kitaek revenges against the class humiliation. It is thus quite significant that Kitaek wears a Native American warrior bonnet when he stabs his urbane, highly americanized boss to death in revenge for his olfactory disgust toward class stink. It is not Kitaek but Mr. Park who actually "crossed the line" by his overt

antagonism toward class stink. Spurred by Gunse's stink, Kitaek's unconscious sense of "basement smell" returns and makes him penetrate into the sanitized body of Mr. Park. Stink as the Real knows no boundary like a virus (Octavia 2021, 30).

In that sense, the shame of stink is the most powerful instigator of the class antagonism in *Parasite*, rendering useless the rules of the whole game the characters 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. Indeed, the most conspicuous sign of such a random intrusion is none other than Mr. Park's humiliating repugnance against 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 repugnance but also for its traumatic symptom. 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" (Ridgeway-Diaz et. als 2020, 792). Isn't Kitaek's feeling of shame and humiliation similar to what Gilles Deleuze refers to "the shame of being a man" (1997, 1)?

As long as the Kims are in control of the host of upstairs, "parasites" downstairs never worry about the danger of stink. But when they are back to the flooded, cramped quarter of semi-basement, they shudder at the sight of their crumbling "house," of what was left of their own shabby space, deeply ashamed of their poverty-driven life as parasites. Remember the powerfully emotional scenes of Kitaek looking around the flooded house when Kijung, utterly frustrated, tries to smoke at the upper-decked, backed-up flush toilet. The film realistically but at the same time beautifully traces the vertical downfall, that is, the shameful defeat, of the Kims into the pit of the dungeon. The Kims once succeeded in outsmarting the Parks and making them snobbish dupes, but they ultimately fail to pass the unexpected test of stink as the Real: "that which always returns to the same place." (Lacan 1978, 49).

In this respect, the smell of stink as the uncanny Real brings back the futility of *objet a*, a fantasy object and an absent cause of the Kims' desire to

be the winner of social survivalism. Once summoned, it demarcates you; it stigmatizes you; it humiliates you like the traumatic encounter with the monstrous real, which is nothing but the phantasmal actualization of our own perverse desire. Stink disqualifies the Kims at the game of middle-class survivalism and returns them to the place where they belong as a pathetic specimen of the lower class. Like the Real, stink haunts you; it “interpellates” you into the class antagonism rather than the neoliberal game of survivalism (Octavia 2021, 26). 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 foreclosed from the surface once again like Gunse. He persists in the underground sending unreturned signals of class antagonism, but his existence as “class stink” should be obliterated in order for the game to continue. No wonder he is doomed to replace Gunse’s invisibility as a parasite of the system itself. With stink, *Parasite* indeed becomes the revenge drama of class struggle, a perverse 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 individual ethics and ambiguous in class politics. It is ethically equivocal in that the film sympathetically depicts the agony and shame of the poor while depicting the hard reality that for all their tenacity and outfoxing there is no chance for the Kims to have done better. It is also politically ambiguous in that the devastating shame of the Kims is so powerfully affective that to imagine them to actually attempt to revenge the rich becomes difficult. *Parasite* demystifies the belief in the pre-given class consciousness of the poor and the myth of automatic solidarity among the exploited. It also de-demonizes the rich from the stereotypical configuration of monstrous evil. *Parasite* is less concerned with class politics and social critique than the psychoanalysis of perversity inherent in neoliberal survivalism.

Parasite is thus an intense meta-ethical and meta-political allegory of today’s *agonistic* parasitism under the neoliberal capitalism in South Korea.

In this respect, it is a movie dedicated not to the fantasy but to the resilience of Kiwoos and Kijungs who might have survived through the neoliberal Korean society where there are now only parasites. Though parasites, however, they might generate “fluctuating, circuitous, and potentially creative nature of living process” (Jeon 2021, 7). 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,” (Deleuze 1997, 4) will be able to change the neoliberal, class-drive capitalist system itself.

6. Stink as Virus

The stink as the signifier of class antagonism totally changes the narrative development of the film. Until Kitaek’s abrupt killing of Mr. Park, *Parasite* seems to belong to a black comedy half-allegorizing and half-satirizing the absurd class structure of the South Korean capitalism. Like the Covid-19 epidemic virus, the stink of the underground suddenly appears as the silent and fatal blow to the seemingly “bourgeois” life of the “upstairs.” The stink of the Kims and Gunse, however, cannot be eliminated not only because they actually dwell in the smelly, barely-sunlit places but also because they themselves are incapable of sensing it. Their smell turns into class stink in certain places and by a certain group of people. For it instantly stigmatizes them as the type who ontologically belongs to the lower class and hence deserves social segregation, just like black skin or virus infection. Stink effectively brings them 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 biological stink in *Parasite* illustrates how rich people, as a class, have been treating the lower class; for them the members of the lower class are not human enough to be granted equal social status and be allowed to play in a fair game. Like a virus, they must not be allowed to cross the

class dividing line. The absurd dénouement of the last sequence delivers the message that the game of survivalism is none other than the collective fantasy of the lower class who want to believe in the social Darwinism of their survival as the fittest. But there is the rub. For all their idea of meritocracy, the upper-class have always been class-antagonistic in their relationship with the lower class through and through. They are the ones who constantly cross the line they themselves make. For the rich, the lower class stink should be tightly controlled, quarantined, for that matter, in keeping with their unconscious class antagonism. But like the virus, the class stink as the Real could not be totally eliminated since the rich are not only the host unwittingly supporting parasitic people but the parasites themselves as well entirely depending upon their opponents. Ironic as it is, the stink lays bare the class antagonism concealed underneath of what we call “the normal”: there remains something irrepressible at the normality of neoliberal survivalism. After the upsurge of stink, however, there is no way back to the normal; it becomes abnormal with the perseverance of viral stink which “constitutes a dynamic of general reversibility” (Jeon 2021, 9). Indeed, stink in *Parasite* effectively disrupts what we have believed to be normal territories and divisions, breaking apart the fantasy of social mobility.

Though incarcerated like a ghost, Kitaek at last survives with his son. His ghostly presence makes it impossible for the system to return to normal.⁷ He keeps sending uncanny messages to the surface, trying to reach his schizophrenic son who still dreams of impossible subversion. Kitaek’s viral existence works like a “self-reproducing machine predominantly dependent upon the cultural and political environment to which the host organism belongs” (Žižek 2020, 79-80). Through his son, Kitaek attempts to destroy the host organism he parasites with the compulsive repetition of telecommunication. *Parasite* leaves his ghostly presence unavowed as a fatal stain or an uncontainable trauma of the surface system: Kitaek’s survival discloses the fact that “something is fundamentally wrong with this cultural and political system” (Fisher 2009, 17). *Parasite* is thoroughly political in its radical debunking of social Darwinism in South Korea and in its subtle dramatization of the politics of class stink.

Notes

1. Lee Chang-Dong's films, from *The Green Fish* (1997) to *Peppermint Candy* (1999) and to *Poetry* (2010), realistically problematize the absurdity of compressed modernity in Korean society and usually sympathize with the tragedy of social outcasts and victims. But with *Burning* (2018), Lee's cinematic realism turns towards a psychological drama. See Kang 2021.
2. As to the film's success, some critics refer to the specific Korean sentiment towards imperial past (Moon and Moon 2021). Others even point out the efficacy of "national branding" in terms of the film's cultural diplomacy (Lee 2020). But the general assessment would be that *Parasite* is no more a "Korean" film than *Snowpiercer* and *Okja* are globally-oriented ones.
3. 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 and the idea of meritocracy, 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. (Fisher 2009, 17).
4. There are indeed some complaints about the unreality of the way the Parks are depicted so ridiculously "gullible." See Farahbakhsh and Ebrahimi (2021) 104.
5. 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 in Lee Chang-dong's *Burning*, who has no desire for the social recognition. See Kang (2021).
6. Namkung is a Korean surname and the given name, Hyunja, means literally a wise man.
7. 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 infected by lively viruses; it actively transfers inert viruses into other living organisms. (Žižek 2020, 79).

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