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Global Cult Cinema

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### Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite* as a Cult Classic Under Late Stage Capitalism

*Parasite* (2019) directed by Bong Joon-Ho achieved unprecedented international success for a South Korean film. Bong Joon-ho was the first Korean director to win the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and the film also made history as the first Korean film to be nominated for Best Picture at the Oscars. "Parasite" won Best Motion Picture in A Foreign Language at the Golden Globes, "bracketing the film's much deserved fan-fare since its USA release in October 2019." It is even more impressive to discover that a film shot entirely in Korean received the highest honor at the Oscars, a generally domestic film festival in the United States. Admittedly, the filmmaker, Bong Joon-Ho was not only already a top-tier director in South Korea, but also a reputable auteur of cinema who had gained international fame since the early 2000s and made major films in the United States (Noh). It is important to note the reasons as to why this film drew in such a large cult following in the west. Presumably this has to do with its themes, content, and cinematography. This is significant because it shows how Bong Joon-Ho was able to create a transnational film under the era of globalization in 2019, proving it's cultural relevance and showing how it is a sign of the times. Bong Joon-ho's storytelling techniques of comparison between the two main families show contrast between their economic status, and thus emerges greater themes such as violence and deception under capitalism and colonialism as well as

infrastructural collapse that bring in a western cult following for the film *Parasite*. The innately political concept of parasite represents the ironically interdependent nature between the poor and the rich who are all embedded in the capitalistic structure. The film can be interpreted as a cinematic parable of global capitalism that employs the effective analogy of the parasite and the host. Through themes such as class inequality, the family unit, and infrastructural collapse, Bong Joon-ho poses larger questions about the state of the world that draws in a western audience disillusioned by late-stage capitalism, relating to the thematic and symbolic content of the film. I argue that the core narrative of *Parasite* and its concomitant affects effectively showcase these aspects of capitalism, thus becoming a universal parable of contemporary capitalism (Noh). Furthermore, I argue that through a critical analysis of the film's anatomy, it can be seen that the film is innovative, transgressive, gorey, and displays intersexuality. Also, the cultural status of the film characterized by its cultural sensitivities and political nature also prove to be crucial elements that comment on the subject of wealth inequality in the west, as it is often taboo to talk about money in the US in a critical way. Overall, the thematic elements, anatomy, and cultural elements all work together to prove that *Parasite* has the possibility of becoming a cult film in the future.

Mathijs and Mendik categorize cult films through four major elements: Anatomy, Consumption, Political Economy, and Cultural status. Anatomy is the film itself—it's features such as contact, style, format and generic modes. Consumption is the way in which the film is received—the audience reactions, fan celebrations, and critical receptions. Political economy is the financial and physical conditions of the presence of the film—it's ownerships, intentions, promotions, channels of presentation, and the spaces and times of its exhibition. Cultural status is the way in which a cult film fits a time or region—how it comments on its surroundings by

complying, exploiting, critiquing or offending (Mathijs and Mendik). Parasite can be characterized by its anatomy due to its innovative, transgressive, and intersexual nature. I argue that it is innovative through its blending of genres. Mathijs and Mendik argue that cult films are often made within the constraints and possibilities of genres and as such they adhere to generic regimes of production. Yet, as a rule they blur and push generic conventions they are supposed to respect. They do this by mixing genres, exposing and/or mocking genres' unwritten rules satirically or hyperbolically exaggerating those rules (Mathijs and Mendik). Parasite is a blend of horror, comedy, drama, and thriller, making it the perfect example of how a cult film can exhibit hyper-genres. The film proves to be transgressive because it breaks the barriers of good and bad. It challenges one or more conventions of film making, in this case, moral and political qualities. It does this through critiquing the family unit, going against social norms.

The film also appears to be intertextual because it proves to be a sign of the times sociopolitically. This is because one of the most evident and persistent themes in the film is class inequality. At the start of the film, we are introduced to the Kims, a family struggling to live under impoverished conditions. They get jobs working for the Park family, a very affluent and wealthy family, replacing their old house staff, and they begin to immediately contrast the difference between their lives, seeing that the park family does not have to struggle to make ends meet. Throughout the film, they covet the lives of their employers, trying to benefit from the wealth of the Park family. "Parasite" opens with a view of the Kim family as they struggle in their semi-basement apartment. The Kims struggle to pay bills, surviving through low-paying jobs and terrible working conditions. The story of the contrast between parasite and host starts off with the son, Ki-woo, who is brought an opportunity by his old friend to pretend to be an

English tutor for the Parks. Thus sparks the Kim family's plot to replace the Parks' helpers, unknowing of the secrets that lurk under the Parks' estate. (Bottom Line)

Another aspect of the film that could consider it a cult classic in the future is its violence and Gore. According to Mathijs and Mendik, this not only relates to films that transgress on the level of explicit violence or presentation of uncomfortable material. Often these will be horror films though not necessarily exclusively so. It also relates to films whose content and style invokes a sense of impurity or endangerment of the human body's physical integrity (Mathijs and Mendik). Violence emerges slowly in the film, as a companion to class inequality, deception, and desperation. Firstly, there is the psychological and political violence that the Park family acts out on the Kim family excluding them in ways that make clear their economic differences. There is a variety of violence in the film, with the final scene being the most intense out of all of the movie. This occurs when all of the subdued and implied violence of the structural positions of the two families comes out into the open very barbarically. Another key element besides violence is deception – A large part of the pleasure of the film is watching the Kim family outsmart the Parks through their many schemes. It is a thrill for the audience to witness the Kim family's plot falling impeccably into place such as forgery, the framing of previous employees of the Parks, and identity theft. The deception and fraud are justified in the logic of survival and as an opportunity for escaping dire poverty. Capitalism as an agent of disenchantment is what propels the actions of the characters. It is evident that utilitarianism derived from capitalism is a firmly shared worldview of the characters: after all, it is about money (Noh). While the Parks do not know it, not only are all of their employees' qualifications fabricated, but they are all part of the same family. This creates suspenseful dramatic irony, in which the viewer watches the Kims

struggle to keep their deep dark secrets. In a way, this contrast annihilates the concept of the nuclear family—making the entire family unit a subject of satire.

Finally, *Parasite* is likely to be considered a cult film due to its cultural sensitivity and political nature. Mathijs and Mendik claim the status of a film as a cultural representation is related to its cult reputation. In fact, that reputation increases the more dubious or ambiguous its status as a culturally acceptable representation is, especially in its treatment of cultural sensitivities. Cult films often walk a blurry line between exposing and capitalizing on these sensitivities, regularly giving the impression that they problematize as well as reinforce prejudices (Mathijs and Mendik). *Parasite* does this by commenting on how capitalism has recreated the way humans understand their existence, value, and purposes based on the fetishization of material culture, money, and the greater power given to those who own more of these types of capital. In this respect, the Kim family in *Parasite* show this when they justify and ground their behavior in the name of making a living, i.e., in the name of money. Their plot is not actually a crime in the logic of capitalism when money is the ultimate—even a moral—goal. “The reason the audience is absorbed in the crime narrative of the Kim family is because they more or less sympathize with the capitalistic motivations of the family. Living in a half-basement apartment, a symbol of poverty in urban South Korea, the family is plunged in inescapable penury in which they cannot even pay for their Wi-Fi bills—an ultimate nightmare for any individuals living in a contemporary capitalistic society. The audience intuitively knows that the family’s situation is universally adverse, and this is because they too are participants in the religion of capitalism. The categorical imperative implicitly agreed-upon between the Kim family and the audience is to do whatever it takes to obtain the sacrament of capitalism” (Noh).

Bong Joon-ho sets the stage for poor characters to have a lower quality of life and to have their entire existences in fight or flight mode. For example, the rain storm represents a challenge to the Kims and not the parks. While the parks simply had to cancel their camping trip, Kims return to their semi-basement apartment where their whole street is flooded with sewage and their bunker apartment is completely unlivable. “There's more than one bunker in the movie, but the semi-basement bunker is the primary home for the Kim family, who serve, more or less, as *Parasite's* anti-heroes. These bunkers were filled with mold and pests, and prone to floods; people who lived there developed chronic coughs and skin conditions. Over just a few decades, South Korea went from being one of the world's poorest economies to the eleventh-largest.” (NPR) Bong shows that being poor is not just about not having the same luxuries enjoyed by the rich, but more importantly, a circumstance of high vulnerability to the exposure to the elements, illness, and environmental and infrastructural deterioration.

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