

Somewhere Over the Hollywood Sign: Bong Joon-
Ho's Claim to Fame in American Cinema

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Many famous directors in cinema have been classified as “auteur directors”. Alfred Hitchcock, who is known as the very first auteur director, began this idea of how much power one director can hold over the movies they create. Other directors that seem to fit the mold of an auteur are Martin Scorsese, Tim Burton, Wes Anderson, and many more. For the twenty first century, I believe that many directors have already created a name for themselves regarding Hollywood standards. However, when Bong-Joon Ho took home the awards for Best Motion Picture, Best Achievement in Directing, and Best Original Screenplay from the 2020 Oscars, many people started to recognize directors who were not in the Hollywood spotlight. Through his many movies that deal with themes that can connect to one another and his sense of movie making that has become his signature style, I believe that Bong Joon-Ho has become one of the newest members to join the auteur director club.

Bong Joon-Ho has started to be recognized for his dialogue on societal issues, specific camera shots that connect to symbolism shown in his films, and a sense of reality that seems to transcend out of his films and into conversations about the real world. Whereas his movies seem very dystopian in their production, the actual horror behind Bong Joon-Ho’s films is how close our society can begin to crumble and become the apocalyptic existence that is shown in these movies. Despite the fact that *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite* seem like two completely different movies, they share many similar themes and styles within their plot. Class separation, rebellion, and sacrifices are some themes that begin to scratch at the surface of the connections between these two films.

Snowpiercer, made in 2013, is an earlier Bong Joon-Ho movie that is starting to gain more praise as people begin to wonder what other types of films he has created in his lifetime. This film is set inside a train named the Snowpiercer where the survivors of the entire globe are

now residing. After trying to stop global warming, the population instead created the next Ice Age that begins the push for everyone to live on the train. Everyone agrees to live on the Snowpiercer, and they do for over seventeen years. However, tensions rise on the train when a hierarchy starts to take place and class systems fall in line for separate carts that house the population. The last cart on the train holds the lowest class of citizens, while the first train holds who people on the train think are the most elite. Curtis, played by Chris Evans, is our main protagonist as we watch him create an uprising from the last cart to march all the way to the first cart and destroy the entire train that has kept everyone in poverty for so long.

Parasite, made in 2019, is a more subtle take on class distribution that skyrocketed Bong Joon-Ho's career outside of Korea. Set in South Korea, we follow two distinct families that are vastly different from each other. The Kim's, who are more the main characters of the film, is the family that is brought up through poverty. They live in a semi-basement type house and every person in the family doesn't seem to have a job until they become acquainted with the Park family. The Park family has been brought up through wealth and lives inside a beautiful mansion that seems to be too enormous for the small household of four. The big question that plagues this movie is who is the real parasite? Is it the Kim family who come into the Park's life and create deceit and destruction that they can never forget? Is the parasite the Parks who keep a judgmental eye and ignorance of what the Kim family has gone through based on their rich lifestyle? Or is the actual parasite class inequality that keeps this distance between families like the Kims and the Parks?

Currently there already is the connection of classism between these two movies, but this theme and many others go deeper than a summarized version of their plots. One of Bong Joon-Ho's styles that has helped solidify him as an auteur is his dialogue that shines through both of

these films. Although *Snowpiercer* is based on a graphic novel from Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette, Bong Joon-Ho created a majority of the dialogue himself. Looking at the screenplays for both films, there is a connection to the way Bong Joon-Ho talks about class discrimination in subtle ways. In *Parasite*, he brings up this notion of poor people smelling “bad”. The first person to bring it up is Mr. Park to Mrs. Park, who then starts to believe that their workers, The Kim family, all have this terrible odor around them from sewage to old soap. This idea of poor people having a different smell from rich people is what sets off the violence Mr. Kim does to Mr. Park at the end of the movie. In *Snowpiercer*, the discussions between Yona and Curtis give us a glimpse into how when you’re born into poverty, you mostly like stay poor. Yona describes this in a somewhat child-like sense by asking Curtis if his life has always been crowded and dirty, which seems to ask if Curtis has always had a rough life or just had no money to fix it. This helps to give a feeling that there does seem to be a difference in the happiness of life between the people who live in the last cart, and those who live in the first which helps to push our protagonist to start a rebellion against the people who are at the front of the train.

Bong Joon-Ho’s specific camera shots further helps to give his films a sense of relation to one another. One definitive camera shot that is in both of these films have to do with windows. In *Snowpiercer*, it seems that only the elite get to have massive windows in their carts. Some are just small windows at the top of the cart while others have their carts floor to ceiling in windows. He shows these windows through many scenes within the movie, such as having small lighting come through for the last carts, to having eyeline matches looking out the windows, and even showing the windows on the outside of the train covered by the ice. Bong Joon-Ho seems to use this symbolism of windows in the *Snowpiercer* to show the juxtaposition of the outside world versus life on the train. Being able to look outside and not having a feeling of empathy for where

the planet has gone connects to the feeling a lot of people have for the 1 percent. Since they have so much wealth that they do not know what to do with, rich people seem to start to care for themselves more than for what is around them. By using this idea of windows, Bong Joon-Ho connects this idea of not only class separation between the rich and the poor, but class separation between the rich and the world. *Parasite* also uses a symbolism of windows, but not as heavily as *Snowpiercer* does. While the son of the Kim family goes to have an interview with the Park family to teach their daughter English, we get a camera shot of Mrs. Park napping outside on a table. What Bong Joon-Ho does that is interesting is that the windows are floor to ceiling again, but they intersect one other which helps to show the vast backyard the Parks have. On the left side of the window, we see the maid of the house trying to quietly wake up Mrs. Park who is on the right side. When that doesn't seem to work, the maid slowly moves towards Mrs. Park and claps her hands together to try and wake her up. Doing so, the maid crosses the intersection of the windows in the house. These windows hold a lot of symbolism, both for their placement and their style. Having large windows allows people both to look into their nice mansion, while they are able to look out at their beautiful backyard which creates this seamless view of their rich lifestyle. However, this additionally helps to create another barrier between the rich and the poor as the son from the Kim family is watching through the glass instead of going outside to Mrs. Park. Finally, the intersection of the two windows helps to create this feeling of separation as well between the house maid and Mrs. Park which she ultimately crosses, which can symbolize her crossing over boundaries between the rich and the poor which are not usually crossed.

Towards the end of both movies, we slowly start to see the rebellion of both the Kims and Curtis turn into heavier violence. Throughout *Snowpiercer*, many characters fight on the side of the last train cart's rebellion against the hierarchy that the front trains have made which helps to

push Curtis and his group of friends closer to the train's engine. This rebellion is seen as more of a larger group of a lower social class fighting for their rights against a small group of a higher social class, which can connect to many protests and riots around the world where many groups that are classified as "lower" are pushing against systematic oppression made by "higher" groups that keep them in those lower sanctions. At the end, Curtis is able to get to the engine of the train, but he sacrifices himself to save a child which cuts off his arm and in turn allows them to blow up the front of the engine. This sacrifice helps to end the suffering of everyone from the last train carts, but it also helps to end the majority of humanity. In many revolutions, many sacrifices and revolts are made, but they are not always as grandiose as *Snowpiercer*. *Parasite* shows class rebellion in a much smaller sense than having major groups of people fight against each other. Towards the end of the movie, the fathers of both families are working together to throw a fun birthday party for the Park family's son. While everyone is enjoying the festivities and about to watch their son blow out his birthday candles, a man from the basement covered in blood runs out to stab the Kim family's daughter. As the son faints, Mr. Kim has to make a split decision: does he drive Mr. Park's family to the hospital to save their son or does he stay with his wife to watch their daughter bleed out on the lawn? As he is thinking for too long, Mr. Park makes the decision to grab the car keys and drive his son himself. However, Mr. Park covers his nose as he is passing by the dead man from the basement which triggers something in Mr. Kim. He believes that he is covering his nose because the overwhelming stench of a poor person is too much for him to handle, and without realizing it Mr. Kim stabs Mr. Park, ultimately killing him. After he realizes what he has done, he goes back down to the basement of the mansion and locks himself in, never to be seen from again. Now in this scene in particular, there can be 3 identified sacrifices. The first sacrifice can be seen as the man from the basement who stabbed the Kim

family's daughter and sacrificed himself for the respect he had for Mr. Park. Secondly, Mr. Park sacrificed himself for his family when he went to grab the keys to drive his son to the hospital. Furthermore, after killing Mr. Park, Mr. Kim sacrificed himself down to the basement to try and save his family's name while also sacrificing himself by knowing that he may never be able to see them again. These types of sacrifices are in a much smaller scale than the ones in *Snowpiercer*, but they hold just as much meaning for any sacrifices made for change in a classist society.

Although the idea of an auteur director seems long forgotten, many new directors are bringing back this film phenomenon. Bong Joon-Ho's films deal with a plethora of themes through a mix of film genres that should not go together, but they do. This mix of having real life scenarios combatted with intense plot lines is exactly why Bong Joon-Ho's name is known in Hollywood. His attention to details that can further a movie's symbolism, to similar camera shots in different films, and his connections of reality to the big screen has solidified his name as an auteur director in modern cinema.