

# Crossing the Line: Capitalist Critique and Artistic Hybridity in *Parasite*

by Lorena Campes

*The most powerful quality any work of art can have is its ability to be criticized, or at the very least critiqued, while remaining remarkable enough to be praised for its artistry and risk-taking. I likely didn't criticize Parasite enough, since it was a film I already loved, but as an avid consumer of visual media, writing about it did force me to analyze the film industry (particularly Hollywood) more closely through a capitalist lens, recognizing how its for-profit business model can hurt truly diverse, progressive filmmaking. I was particularly interested in Bong's exploration of wealth and social class in South Korea, which is so similar to the American experience yet so poorly executed by many American filmmakers. The obvious disparity between the typical ostracization of foreign films and Parasite's global success was so vast that I felt the need to explore why it was so successful, and what differentiated it from thematically similar films. I approached this essay how I imagine film critics approach their own (admittedly far less lengthy) opinion pieces: What scenes were the most significant? What do others think about this film? What do I think about this film? In writing, "Crossing the Line: Capitalist Critique and Artistic Hybridity in Parasite," I was able to think about and discuss film more critically, focusing on more than just entertainment value and analyzing instead why it resonated so strongly with viewers.*

*The revision process for this essay focused primarily on structure, and determining a logical order by which to introduce texts and scenes so as not to confuse readers. This was particularly difficult in that, when writing about film, you must operate under the assumption that readers aren't familiar with the film you're discussing. This calls for a clearly depicted narrative arc, even when detailing events in chronological order doesn't make sense for the purpose of the essay. In a film as metaphorically dense as Parasite, this meant choosing enough relevant scenes to support the concepts of capitalist critique and artistic hybridity without giving into the temptation of referencing as many aspects of Bong's incredibly clever film as possible.*

—Lorena Campes

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It is the end of the first act of Bong Joon Ho's darkly comedic social satire, *Parasite*. The scene opens with what is perhaps one of the most ingenious, masterfully crafted montage sequences in recent cinema. The Kims—the impoverished family at the heart of the film—discuss a housekeeper, whom they plan to replace with the matriarch of their family. The housekeeper works for a wealthy family named the Parks. Over the course of the first act, the Kims have

methodically replaced other members of the Park household staff with themselves, the son posing as a tutor, the daughter as an art therapist, and the father as a driver, all while pretending not to know each other. They have recently learned that the housekeeper is severely allergic to peaches, a revelation that becomes the foundation for their plan to completely infiltrate the Park's immaculate home—never mind that it is at the expense of a woman who, like them, is also at the bottom of the economic hierarchy.

This approach to critiquing class systems differs vastly from the typical villainization of the wealthy in Hollywood films. Bong uses the presumed inverse relationship between wealth and morality as the basis for a more complex scene detailing the Kims' deception, creating a sequence that is stunningly symmetrical in its structure. First, we learn about the housekeeper's allergy, and a few shots later, she is poisoned with peach fuzz. When Ki-taek, patriarch of the poorer Kim family, spins a story about the housekeeper having a dangerous and contagious illness to Yeon-kyo, head of the wealthy Park household, the scene is punctuated by clips of Ki-taek's son, Ki-woo, coaching his father and feeding him the lines to manipulate Yeon-kyo. Most of the montage is edited this way, in a back-and-forth game that feels as if we're getting an inside look into the mind of a playwright while watching the play at the same time. This is heightened by Jung Jae-il's suspenseful score, which further dramatizes what is essentially a five-minute, three-part tragedy within the film's larger narrative.

Rarely have peaches figured so centrally in a major film—at least, not since Timothée Chalamet's famous tryst with one in Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me by Your Name*. But their role in *Parasite* is portentous in a more sinister way: peaches are what ultimately lead to the Kims' downfall. At this point in the film, the Kims have become secure in their positions within the Park family, and revel in the luxury that their newfound proximity to wealth provides. The peach in this particular scene is a weapon in class (and intraclass) warfare, which the Kims wield in an effort to lift the final member of the family up the social ladder. Simultaneously, it is a tool for director Bong Joon Ho to establish the murky boundaries between morality and the pursuit of wealth, illustrating instead the corruption that often underpins any attempt to rise in the ranks of a capitalist system. What makes Bong and his film of particular interest, however, is that this same class-related tension is reflected within the film industry itself, creating an ironic, hypocritical relationship between filmic capitalist critique and active participation in capitalism as a result. Filmmaking is a for-profit business as much as it is an art form, and it becomes difficult to draw the line between heartfelt, thoughtfully crafted narratives aiming to change audience perspectives and films simply vying for a box office hit. Even then, both types of films exist within the same system of production. Though they may operate under different principles, both aim for the same profitable cultural status.

In her review of *Parasite* for *Variety*, Jessica Kiang discusses Bong's implicit indictment of capitalism, writing, "Even this grand battle royale between the haves and have-nots will only ever be a squabble at the feet of an indifferent god, or worse still, a sideshow indulged to distract its participants from the real enemy, which is a system that creates and nourishes such divides in the first place." Kiang points out the fact that Bong's film is less about the poor finally getting their revenge on the evil upper-class, and more about a capitalist system that ensures a cyclical imbalance between classes. In fact, the Park family is never depicted as "overtly detestable"

(Kiang). Rather, it is continuously made apparent throughout the film just how nice they are (to this, Kim Chunk-sook gestures around the Parks' well-appointed home and remarks, "Hell, if I had all this money, I'd be nice, too" (00:59:16)). Meanwhile, the Kims are unexpectedly vindictive, selfish, and spiteful of every one of the Park family's blissfully ignorant, entitled moments.

There is bitter irony in that Bong is criticizing a system in which he is forced to actively participate—he is a successful filmmaker that likely has more in common with the Parks than the Kims. Toward the end of her review, Kiang alludes to this idea by stating, "This is the sad little truth evoked in the film's unexpectedly moving final moments: Eat the rich, by all means, fill your bellies, but pretty soon you'll be hungry again, and you will still be poor." The final scene is a depiction of events detailed in a letter from Ki-Woo to his father, who is trapped in the Parks' basement indefinitely after a massacre in which he killed the patriarch of the Park family, among others. While Ki-Woo's voice narrates the scene through his letter, we see events unfold in real time, watching as Ki-Woo fulfills his promise to become successful enough to buy the house in which his father is trapped. But while we see the Kim family reunited on screen, there is ambiguity regarding whether or not it is *really* happening (in the form of a flashforward), or simply wishful thinking on behalf of Ki-Woo. In any case, Bong's inclusion of such an optimistic finale (or the illusion of one) allows for some sense of redemption. At the end of the scene, the Kims reunite, but it is silent—they finally live in a wealthy man's home, but no amount of money can undo what Kiang describes as "wrongheaded violence," despite the viewers' feeling of "cathartic rightness." Their future as new members of the upper class will be forever plagued by the extremes to which they were driven in order to escape their squalid home.

For a billion-dollar industry, Hollywood has no shortage of films discussing the downfalls of capitalism and income inequality. In an *NPR* podcast about class warfare in 2019 films, film critic Bob Mondello discusses this pattern in some of the year's most successful films, including *Parasite*, *Joker*, *Hustlers*, and most interestingly, Jordan Peele's *Us*. While *Us*, like *Parasite*, is a genre-subverting film directed by a person of color, it is most intriguing in its thematic similarities. Like *Parasite*, *Us* addresses the idea of being unaware of one's own privilege. In Peele's film, the privileged are "tethered" to versions of themselves that are quite literally below them, condemned to living in the shadows of their more fortunate, more powerful counterparts. In Bong's *Parasite*, there is a similar "Upstairs, Downstairs" approach to privilege and class, as depicted by the underprivileged Kims and the wealthy Parks (Mondello). While these and other critiques of class structure are common in many Hollywood films, Bong's approach is different. In an essay for *American Quarterly*, Christina Klein discusses how "Bong does not simply mimic Hollywood. Rather, he appropriates and reworks genre conventions, using them as a framework for exploring and critiquing South Korean social and political issues" (873). Essentially, he is borrowing Hollywood's filmic language to tell his specifically Korean story, hybridizing it with elements of Korea's Golden Age of cinema from the 1950s and '60s (873). This is an important facet of his films not only stylistically, but also in terms of content—in *Parasite*, Bong uses a diverse range of filmmaking techniques to tell a story that is, on the surface, an ode to the destructive nature of capitalism in general. However, when viewed more closely, the film is indicative of a uniquely Korean experience.

At the same time, we must concede that Bong's relationship to American cinema is fundamental to his filmmaking in terms of both artistic influences and in his role as a successful filmmaker critiquing the capitalist system from the inside out. But despite the irony of such a position, critiquing a system while inside of it does not automatically discredit Bong's implicit argument that class revolution is messy, cruel, and ultimately heartbreaking. In both the real world and Bong's fictional one in *Parasite*, such a revolution is introduced out of necessity to escape a larger oppressive system. Later in her essay, Klein suggests that we might "think about the power relations of global cinematic flows through the spatial metaphor of a 'larger arena connecting differences,' in which filmmakers exert their energy not through a simple resistance to Hollywood, but through varied and often 'ambivalent' forms of 'exchange,' 'negotiation,' and 'contested transaction' with Hollywood" (874). It would be nearly impossible to separate Hollywood films and filmmaking from their capitalist, consumerist roots. However, as a person familiar with the privilege of wealth and as an international filmmaker familiar with the ostracization of outsiders specifically in Hollywood, Bong has created his own unique platform from which to criticize the social and political norms characteristic of a system he participates in.

Much of Bong's focus on capitalism and privilege centers on the competitive nature of the working class, who are pitted against each other in an effort to rise among the ranks rather than take down the upper-class root of their problem. While the Kims are on the offensive for most of the film, taking the jobs of the previous Park staff, the most prominent and visually stunning interclass struggle occurs during the film's second act. While the Parks are away on a camping trip for their son's birthday, the Kims have the house to themselves, seizing the opportunity to experience a day in the life of the wealthy. However, after the fired housekeeper shows up unexpectedly, they learn that her own financial circumstances have driven her to hide her husband in the Parks' basement for years, sneaking him food when she can. The arrival of the housekeeper marks the exact midpoint of the film, as well as the beginning of the Kims' downfall. The Kims struggle to keep their secret, kicking the housekeeper down the stairs and tying up her husband, all while her replacement Chung-sook attempts to make "ram-don" (a loose English translation for the popular Korean dish jjapaguri) for the fast-approaching Parks (Rochlin). After a somewhat violent struggle in which both parties threaten to expose the other to the Parks, the Kims gain the upper hand, but not without consequences. Ultimately, both parties are guilty to some extent, but Bong's message has more to do with criticizing the institution that encourages the problem, not sympathizing with those who fall victim to it.

Interestingly, despite *Parasite's* extraordinary screenplay, abundance of stunning performances, and overall global success, much of the conversation generated by the film centered on its status as a "foreign" film rather than its message about the parasitic nature of privilege. While this was likely not at all Bong's intention, this in and of itself creates an entirely different narrative regarding privilege and Americans' apparent aversion to that with which we aren't immediately familiar. This is typically most visually evident in American awards shows, where most of the nominees are white and international films are bumped to their own 'lesser' category. In an article for *Varsity Newspaper*, James Roché discusses this very phenomenon in relation to *Moonlight's* Oscar win, and expresses concern that "films like *Moonlight* run the risk of becoming 'the token black friend' of Hollywood." Hollywood is generally dominated by liberal ideology, films, awards shows, and actors, all of which make a point to discuss the importance of

diversity while continuing to nominate white actors and films with predominantly white casts. The awards and praise *Moonlight* received were well-deserved, but they do not, Roché says, “make up for 80 years of underappreciation.” *Parasite* made history by being the first foreign language film to win Best Picture, but the fact that Bong’s Korean film about capitalism and privilege managed to get through to the most elite of televised awards shows is a testament to the success of his message and his ability to enlighten rather than a sign that non-English language films will have guaranteed success in the future.

*Parasite* is ultimately a film about boundaries. It studies the confines of class systems, social and professional relationships, and the significance of actual, physical property lines. Throughout the film, the Parks express that their first priority is hiring staff who don’t “cross the line” (01:27:59). While this “line” is the unseen divide between the working- and upper-class, Bong’s physical use of boundaries and intersections suggested through cinematography, architecture, and blocking creates a visual as well as metaphorical separation between characters. The first and most visually striking example of this is when the original housekeeper attempts to wake up the matriarch of the Park family. She has managed to maintain her position through various homeowners because of her ability to recognize the class barrier and avoid crossing it. However, as we watch through a window—a jamb dividing employee and employer—we see her briefly cross this line physically by clapping in her dozing boss’s ear. It isn’t particularly significant at the time, but it is a sign that perhaps her status as the perfect, submissive housekeeper isn’t quite as convincing as we are first led to believe. There are other instances of this physical divide between classes: between driver and passenger, for example, or the Kims’ semi-basement home separated by what feels like miles of stairs to reach the Park home. In addition to highlighting these invisible, everpresent lines, Bong’s *Parasite* defies genre conventions while also challenging the barriers that have limited the diversity of mainstream cinema for far too long.

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