

Visualization of Social Inequality in South Korea in Bong Joon-ho's Parasite

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Abstract

Social inequality in South Korea is considered a huge problem that has been rising over these past decades. Known as one of the poorest countries in the aftermath of the Second World War, South Korea's economic growth soared significantly in the early 1960s through rapid industrialization and export-led development, turning South Korea into a developed country in a short period. However, the rapid economic growth initiates the highly competitive job markets that cause a high unemployment rate and worse income distribution, generating massive contrasts in social hierarchies among South Koreans. The upper-class societies, embodied by chaebols, South Korea's large conglomerates, dominate 60 percent of the country's GDP (Gross Domestic Product), while the rest are filled up by the middle-class and lower-class societies. Terms referred to the rising inequality in South Korea, such as "Hell Chosun" and "Spoon Class Theory", are widely spread, implying South Koreans' deep sentiments on this issue. One of the most intelligible indicators which contributes to stipulating a considerable contrast between the upper-class and lower-class societies, exposed in an Oscar-winning South Korean film, *Parasite* (2019), directed by Bong Joon-ho. This film contains various implied signs and symbols related to the vertical comparison of high and low which depicts a vast disparity between the upper-class and lower-class families, represented by their residential conditions, which stands for the reality of social gaps in South Korea that reveals the existence of social inequality.

Keywords: Social Inequality, South Korea, Sign, Parasite, Semiotics

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Introduction

Every nation in the world, even the most developed ones, must have been struggling with the social inequality issue for hundreds of years. Social inequality becomes a huge problem within many countries since it deals with unequal distributions of resources and opportunities needed by all people in society (Hiraide, 2013). In other words, certain groups of people get a bigger chance to gain more wealth, income, power as well as wider access to social goods, such as employment, health, and education, while the rest does not, which gives rise to the division in the society into classes or stratification, for instance. The high class, middle class, or lower class are the social class categories that sound very familiar and common in our society. However, the wide gap between the richest and the poorest has consciously or unconsciously created an unfair system that could harm the inferior ones.

The phenomenon of social inequality occurs in many countries, which includes developed and developing countries around the world. One of them is South Korea. South Korea is famous for its rapid economic growth, from one of the poorest countries to a developed, high-income country (Nordea, 2020). However, the spectacular economic transformation of South Korea does not make the people free from economic problems; it, on the contrary, creates a large gap between the rich and the poor and leads to extreme poverty in that nation since the employment markets are highly competitive and cause high rates of unemployment and worse income distribution (Chung, n.d.). Meanwhile, the family-owned conglomerates called *chaebol* dominate South Korea by operating many business lines simultaneously (Ahn, 2016). This fact, consequently, provokes the decrease in South Korean public sentiment toward social class mobility (Arirang News, 2016).

The social inequality issue is considered a politically sensitive topic; yet, many people are concerned with this issue as they live with it daily. To talk about the issue a bit “safely”, a film can be used as a visual medium to represent reality and communicate thoughts due to the combination of sound, image, and story as three powerful elements which are able to give context as well as meaning to the film (Cloete, 2017). Owing to the fact that a film narrates stories about day-to-day experiences, it could help the audiences understand the societal opinions and even unmask the issues within society (Pautz, 2014). Consequently, a film is attractive to people of all ages on account of the stories with which they could associate.

Film is considered language on grounds that it fits the definition of language as a ‘medium’ that uses signs along with symbols to represent concepts, feelings, and ideas in a particular culture (Hall, 1997, p. 1). Nonetheless, these concepts, ideas, or feelings may not always be conveyed explicitly as sometimes they tend to be implicitly conveyed.

In this regard, this paper aims to find out not only the explicit but also the implicit meaning in *Parasite*, an Oscar-winning film released in 2019 and directed by Bong Joon-ho, a South Korean writer and director. Bong Joon-ho is well-known for his satirical style about social phenomena and he often applies social themes in most of his films which are wrapped up in a black comedy and genre-mixing (Lim, 2020; Su, 2020). Besides *Parasite* (2019), other Bong’s films are *The Host* (2006), *Mother* (2010), *Memories of Murder* (2003), *Snowpiercer* (2013), and *Okja* (2017), which are all considered the greatest films of the decade that involve black humor as well as social critique as Bong’s outstanding characteristics (Lim, 2020; Su, 2020).

Parasite (2019) becomes fascinating to analyze considering that it includes remarkable symbolism and visual metaphors as the elements that contribute to forming the underlying message of the film (York, 2019). This South Korean film has a genre of black comedy thriller as it raises a serious or taboo subject matter, which is the social inequality issue in South Korea, which is packed with humor and a few violent acts. The plot is evolved on the members of the poor Kim's family who are struggling in their tiny and cramped semi-basement flat since they are jobless. By virtue of opportunity, wits, and luck, they can infiltrate the incredibly wealthy Park's family by conducting fraud to be employed in their household. However, everything turns out to be chaotic in the end as they find a ghastly fact that someone has been hiding in the Parks' underground bunker for four years to escape loan sharks.

Many scenes of this film portray an extreme contrast between the Kims' and Parks' living conditions through not only explicit but also implicit signs which imply their social classes respectively, one of which is their residential conditions. Their residential conditions are richly imbued with implicit signs and symbolisms related to vertical comparisons, representing a vast disparity between the upper-class and lower-class way of living, which then unfolds the social inequality issue. Consequently, the residential conditions of those families become compelling to be analyzed further. In analyzing the signs and symbols of this film, theories of representation and semiotics are applied.

Hence, the problems that are going to be answered are:

1. What are the implicit signs found in *Parasite* that show the vertical comparison between the upper and lower classes?
2. How do those signs found in *Parasite* represent social inequality issues in South Korea?

Literature Review

Representation

To understand both the explicit and implicit meanings of the symbolism and metaphors in this film, the representation theory is applied. Representation is "the production of meaning through language" (Hall, 1997, p. 28). In producing meanings, representation works through two processes. First, in one's mind, one indeed has the concept of anything which is called mental representation (Hall, 1997, p. 17). In short, if one has the concept of something, one will know what it 'means' in one's head. Nevertheless, the concept of meaning in one's mind is different from that in other people's. Accordingly, one needs to represent or exchange this concept of meaning through language. This leads to the second system where language is needed to communicate the meaning of something to other people. Language consists of signs that are recognized by society (social convention), which makes it possible to represent the concept and meaning of the 'real' or 'imaginary' worlds (Hall, 1997, p. 17).

Semiotics

In interpreting the meaning produced by a film, Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs in Semiotics is employed as a tool to analyze the signs and symbols in the film. In his theory, he claims that sign is structured by three interrelated parts: sign, object, and interpretant, with the sign to signify something else beyond itself, the object as the thing that is being signified, and the interpretant which explains how the relationship between sign and object could be

generated (Atkin, 2010, p. 367). By understanding this triadic model of signs, he divides signs into three fundamental types: icon, index, and symbol.

An icon is a sign that shares similarities or resemblances between its object or what it signifies (Atkin, 2010, p. 367). A realistic sculpture of an existing object could be an icon if it resembles the object in real life. Another example is the sound effects in a film, such as the sound of a door opening or a water stream. They are icons since they imitate the actual sounds in reality. An index is a sign that has some direct physical or causal connection between the sign and the object (Atkin, 2010, p. 367). In short, the sign and the object have a causal effect relationship and nearness in space and time. For example, smoke is a sign of fire, while a facial expression indicates emotion. A symbol, furthermore, means a sign that is understood to signify something because of some convention, law, or general agreement that connects the sign with the object (Atkin, 2010, p. 367). This makes the interpretation of symbol different depending on the society, for example, red symbolizes happiness and property in Chinese culture but love in Western culture. Here to notice, a sign can be a symbol if there is no resemblance between the sign and the object; thus, their relationship must be learned (Chandler, 2017), for instance, a dove symbolizes peace.

There are several previous academic researches using the Semiotics analysis method to analyze a film, three of which are by Paramuswari, Lesmana, and Budiana (2017); Syafei, Nurhadi, and Raturahmi (2017); and Baharsyah, Ardayati, and Triyogo (2020). Syafei et al. (2017) with their data from an Indonesian film, *Kawin Kontrak*, along with Baharsyah et al. (2020) with their American film, *Get Out*, as the data source, use Peirce's theory of icon, index, and symbol. Nevertheless, Syafei et al. additionally apply Hall's representation theory to find out how Sundanese culture is represented through the verbal and visual signs in the film, whereas Baharsyah et al. merely focus on classifying and describing the icons, indexes, and symbols of the signs in the film without relating them to a particular issue. Paramuswari et al. (2017), on the other hand, study the African American representation in an American film, *Ghostbusters*, by employing John Fiske's semiotic method of reality, representation, and ideology, which accordingly carries the racism issue.

Methodology

In analyzing the implicit signs in *Parasite* and relating them to the concept of social inequality, this research adopts qualitative and descriptive research methods. This analysis begins with collecting relevant screenshots of the film which contain signs and, afterward, selecting the main screenshots based on their relevance to the social inequality issue as well as classifying their signs into icon, index, and symbol. The main screenshots taken as the data represent the vertical contrast between the rich and the poor portrayed by their residential conditions so that the class division or social stratification between those classes can be thoroughly analyzed. The findings, therefore, are classified into two major categories: the geographical positions and the housing conditions. Furthermore, in supporting the interpretative analysis of the signs, the library research is utilized by means of gathering information and comparing the findings with other literature to find possible explanations (O'Connor & Gibson, 2003, p. 76).

Findings and Discussion

Geographical Positions

Geographically speaking, the geographical locations where Kim's and Park's families reside are vertically disparate, signaled by the existence of some stairs as the pathway between Kim's and Park's houses. Figures 1 and 2 are the main screenshots that show the residential areas of Kim's and Park's houses, whereas Figure 3 emphasizes the contrast between their residential positions.



Figure 1: The Low Residential Area of Kim's House

Figure 1, taken during the rain when Kim Ki-Taek, Kim Ki-Woo, and Kim Ki-Jung are running towards their house in the night, provides a portrayal of Kim's residential location. The man on the stairs, Ki-Taek, is going down the stairs since his body is facing forward to the road although his head is directed to the audience because in this scene he is shouting to Ki-Woo to hurry. The stairs at the bottom middle of the screenshot serve as an icon which refers to "a set of steps that lead from one level to another, especially in a building" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Stairs are typically used by people to move upward or downward because it performs as a bridge of a vertical distance – between the upper and lower levels. Considering that Ki-Taek and his children are moving downward to go to their house through the stairs, it indicates that their residential area is on the low ground, or lower than where they come from.

The angle of the shot in Figure 1 also supports the position of the Kims' residential area. It is shot with a high-angle shot, a cinematography technique in which the scene is taken from an elevated perspective in which the camera looks down on the subject (StudioBinder, 2020). It is said that a high-angle shot is used to make the character in a film look powerless (StudioBinder, 2020), which implies that the high-angle shot not only emphasizes the descending road from the top to the Kims' residency but also indicates the Kims' vulnerability.

On the other hand, the Parks' residential area is depicted in Figure 2 below where there is a slope between two great buildings.



Figure 2: The High Residential Area of the Parks' House

The scene happens when Ki-Woo is going to the Parks' house. The slope in this screenshot, which exists between the two buildings, is an icon, which refers to the "ground that forms a natural or artificial incline" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). It means that some points on the slope are higher than the others due to the inclination. The highest point of the slope in this screenshot is on the spot where Ki-Woo is standing. Because the slope is the road or path to Park's residence, it indicates that Park's residential area is higher than Ki-Woo's previous location since he must walk higher and higher through the slope to reach Park's residence. Thus, the slope is an index of Park's residential area which is in a high location.

Besides, different from the previous main screenshot, this screenshot uses a low-angle shot which is done by positioning the camera angle below the eye level and pointing upward (StudioBinder, 2020). The purpose of using a low-angle shot in a film is to make the character seem powerful as well as increase the perceived height of an object (StudioBinder, 2020). This camera angle, as a result, emphasizes the elevating road of the Parks' neighborhood and implicitly expresses the Parks' power. This also indicates that Park's residential area is in a high position; therefore, the low-angle shot is an index.



Figure 3: Stairs in *Parasite*

The vertical disparity between Kim's and Park's families is emphasized more through Figure 3 that provides several pictures of stairs appeared in the scenes when Ki-Taek, Ki-Woo, and Ki-Jung are going from the Parks' mansion to their semi-basement apartment. They go down these stairs to reach their residential area, which conveys that the stairs function as the infrastructure to go from the Parks' residence to the Kims' dwelling place or the other way around. In other words, the stairs connect the Kims' residential area to the Parks', which consequently shows that the Parks' residential area is much higher than the Kims'. The stairs, as a result, emphasize the contrast between the geographical positions of the Kims' and Parks' residential areas.

The stairs which function as a vertical link between the Kims' and Parks' houses also carry a symbolic meaning. The stairs shown in this film symbolize the social stratification of Kim's and Park's families. As proposed by Hiraide (2013), social stratification refers to the way society is arranged into a hierarchy based on the distribution of socioeconomic resources which are wealth, income, status, and power. In the social stratification system, the most privileged groups are on the top layer, while the misfortunate ones are at the bottom of the strata (Hiraide, 2013). This implies that the top layer of social stratification is more powerful than the ones at the bottom due to access to socioeconomic resources. Since both the stairs and social stratification involve the concept of vertical levels, it could be concluded that the contrasting geographical areas of the Kims' and Parks' residences symbolize their social stratification in the society where Park's family belongs to the upper class, while Kim's family belongs to the lower class. Owing to the fact that social stratification leads to the division of society, which is unequally ranked based on their resources, this symbol definitely contains a social inequality issue.

Housing Positions

In the film, Park's and Kim's families are depicted to come from totally different social levels as shown through the homes they live in. Among other differences, the existence of the window is one of the most noteworthy elements that uncovers a huge contrast to the Parks' and Kims' dwelling places.

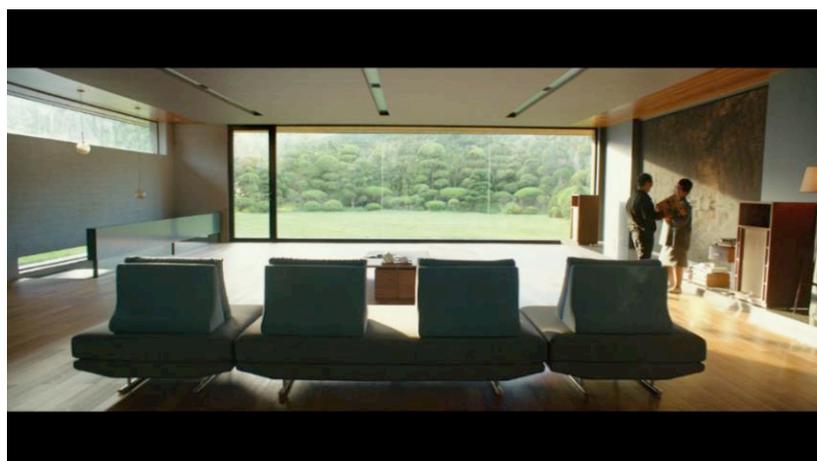


Figure 4: Parks' Huge Transparent Glass Window

Figure 4 shows that Park's family's house has a giant transparent glass window that covers the entire side of the wall, from floor to ceiling; accordingly, it serves as not only a window but also a wall. The glass window wall, based on YR Architecture Design (2016), is one of

the most defining characteristics of modern and contemporary residential architecture, which is shown in the picture below.



Figure 5: Glass Window Wall

The floor-to-ceiling glass window wall in Figure 5 is similar to the Parks', with its huge clear glass material occupying the entire side of the wall to let the inhabitants look outside without any distractions, which allows much sunlight to come in. Likewise, in Figure 4, the room where the window is installed seems spacious with a minimalistic design which is also one of the characteristics of the modernist architecture style (Spacey, 2019). The Parks' large glass window wall accordingly serves as an index of Parks' house being modern and contemporary.

As a house that applies a modern architectural design, the Parks' house must have been constructed by a professional architect, which would cost dearly priced. More than that, as cited in Daily Monitor (2013), to construct a glass window wall in a house, professionals are required because it needs significant consideration to avoid any risks in the future. In the film itself, the house is mentioned to be designed by a famous Korean architect, as shown in the utterance of Moon-kwang, the housekeeper who has worked for the architect of the house and Park's family, when she lets Ki-woo see inside the house, "You know the architect Namgoong? He's famous. He used to live in this house. He designed it himself." Through her utterances, it could be concluded that Park's family's house is built by a professional who has good calculation and consideration. Over and above, YR Architecture Design (2016) states that the glass window wall is a big concern for most people for its high cost. This again confirms the indication that the Parks' house is assuredly expensive.

In addition, according to InterNations Go (2020), every square foot that is available in densely populated South Korea is precious. For South Koreans, a big and spacious house is reserved mostly for rich people by virtue of its high price. Thus, the spacious room and wide garden behind the glass window wall cue that the size of Parks' house is remarkably large and therefore, it must be absolutely expensive. In consequence, the Parks' house is an index of an upper-class house in South Korea.

Besides, considering that the window functions as a path for the sunlight to come into the house, its size and location would influence the amount of sunlight exposure inside the building. The smaller the size of the window is, the less sunlight will come in through it (Eljojo, 2017, p. 1). On top of that, the smaller the sky section that is seen through the window is, the less exposure to daylight goes into the building (Müller, 2013, p. 237). Since

the Parks' house window is made entirely of crystal-clear glass with an enormous size from floor to ceiling, it indicates that the Parks' house receives an abundance of sunlight; therefore, it functions as an index.



Figure 6: The Window of Kim's Family's Semi-Basement

The other window that appears in the film is Kim's family's house window in Figure 6 above. The window in Figure 6 is an icon since it relates to the previous definition of a window as "a space usually filled with glass in the wall of a building or in a vehicle, to allow light and air in and to allow people inside the building to see out" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In the screenshot, the Kims' house window is depicted to be small in size, has a rectangular shape, and is covered with an iron trellis. The position of the house window is literally close to the ceiling as there are socks in front of the window hanging from the ceiling; consequently, it could be interpreted that the window is located in the highest position of the house wall where there is no other remaining space above it. Nevertheless, the outlook behind the window installed near the ceilings begins from the street surface, which signifies that Kim's family's house is placed below the street. To support this interpretation, here is Figure 7 which shows the position of the Kims' house window if it is seen outside their house.



Figure 7: Kims' Semi-Basement Window Above the Ground

It could be seen in Figure 7 that the Kims' house window is placed above or near the ground because they live half underground, or in other words, they settle in a house that is partly below the ground level called a semi-basement or *bajinha* (a Korean term for a semi-basement housing), which is presented in Figure 8 below.



Figure 8: The Window of *Bajinha* in South Korea

Figure 8 gives a portrait of a real semi-basement flat in South Korea captured by Lam Yik Fei, a journalist photographer for The New York Times (2020). This semi-basement flat is similar to Kim's family's flat in Figures 7 and 8, where the floor is halfway below the ground and there is a small rectangular window barred with a metal trellis. This kind of window is a typical window of semi-basement apartments. Indeed, the reason why most semi-basements have a small window is due to their underground location so that the window could only appear on the side of the wall that is partly above the ground to allow the air and sunlight in. Since the location of the window is literally on the street level, it increases the chances for outsiders to access the window. Accordingly, to protect the semi-basement apartment from any harmful and threatening conditions – such as robbery, burglary, and theft – the dwellers have metal trellis bars installed. In conclusion, the window of the Kims' house is an icon of a window in a semi-basement or *bajinha* on account of the similarities they share.

As mentioned before, the size and location of a window affect the amount of sunlight exposure to a house. The decreasing size of the window and its lower position to the sky would diminish the daylight that enters the room. Thus, the semi-basement window is an index because it indicates that Kim's family's semi-basement gets minimal sunlight owing to its small size and location which is on the street level.

In South Korea, semi-basements have become one of the affordable housing options since house prices are rapidly growing (KBS News, 2018). Based on a website of an international relocation service company named InterNations Go (2020), the price of a dwelling place might depend on several factors, two of which are which floor the apartment is on and which side the windows are facing. The higher the floor is, the more expensive it would cost. The more sunlight comes into the window, the higher the price would be. For the reason that a semi-basement is partly underground, which could be said at the lowest floor of an apartment as well as getting limited exposure to sunlight, it makes the price of a semi-basement apartment cheaper than other housing alternatives. As a result, it could be afforded by the lower-class society, which means that *bajinha* or semi-basement is an index indicating the house where the lower-class society lives in South Korea.

The distinction of the ground level between the Park's and the Kim's houses is made on purpose to illustrate their social class discrepancy. Again, in social stratification, the high-class people are on top, while the lower-class people are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The Kims' *bajinha*, which is semi-underground, implies the Kims' position in society as lower-class people who have no power, resources, and capital to afford a more livable place

for themselves. By living underground, they have sparse exposure to sunlight, which is one of the natural resources that can be enjoyed by all human beings, and higher risks to be exposed to any crimes since it has limited security. This shows their helplessness as lower-class people who are more vulnerable.

The Parks, on the other hand, live above the grounds, with huge space, a beautiful garden, an outstanding interior, and considerable exposure to sunlight. Park's house, in the film, is at the highest point of the residential area since stairs are needed to go to the house. The Parks' housing position represents their position as the upper class who have an abundance of resources, power, and capital. The garden itself functions as the boundary that separates their house from the outside surroundings, which makes them exclusive. Thus, their housing position strengthens their upper-class characteristics that are powerful and exclusive.

To conclude, the vertical contrast of their housing placements symbolizes their positions in social stratification, with Kim's family belonging to the lower class, whereas Park's family is the upper class. This, for sure, leads to the symbolism of social inequality that is implicitly conveyed.

Conclusion

Overall, this research examines the visualization of class divisions in the film *Parasite* shown by three icons, seven indexes, and two symbols. In relation to the social inequality issue found in the Parks' and Kims' residential conditions, index is the most dominant type of sign compared to icon and symbol. Considering that index is a type of sign that possesses a cause-effect relationship with its object, the audiences, therefore, could observe as well as figure out easily what the film director, Bong Joon-ho, tries to convey or represent in his film. The interpretation of the indexes in the analysis of geographical positions and housing conditions has explicitly revealed the social classes of the Parks and the Kims because of the fixed relationship between the sign and object, which is something that happens on a day-to-day basis. Above that, indexes are also dominantly used to portray the social classes since the film director wants the audience to be able to interpret the film by connecting the signs in the film so that the plot becomes understandable and easy to follow.

Despite the fact that indexes appear dominantly, the use of symbols is the most influential in conveying the social inequality issue implicitly. The symbols consistently lead to the social inequality issue by presenting the contrast between the upper-class and lower-class families through the vertical distance between the Parks' and the Kims' residential positions, while the icons and indexes do not relate to the social inequality directly owing to the fact that they function as a bridge which clarifies the signs and their contexts to build symbolisms. For this reason, the vertical discrepancy between these families' residential positions could become an intriguing element as it represents something deeper than what is explicitly shown.

The application of icons in the film gives the understanding that the plot happened in South Korea as it portrays the housing conditions in South Korea through the appearance of *banjinha* as one of the common housing options available for the lower class. By this perception, the icons indicate that the film is based on the real living condition of South Koreans.

Besides, showing the opposites between the upper-class and lower-class society through the vertical comparisons between their geographical and housing positions is indeed a smart way

of getting to the idea of social inequality so that the issue could be easily comprehended. All signs in this analysis successfully show the gap between the upper class and lower class – represented by the Kims and the Parks – as they are on different levels. This reflects the reality of social stratification in South Korea as a result of worse social inequality.

However, this research has limitations because it only discusses two major signs, which are the geographical positions and housing conditions of the families out of the many signs in the film due to time constraints. Hence, future researchers are recommended to continue the research by analyzing the other signs. It is also necessary to have extensive knowledge of South Korean culture to be able to grasp the signs in order that the study could be more accurate and thorough.

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