

Portraying Social Strata: Cinematic Analyses of Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* and
Parasite

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Introduction

The 92nd Academy Awards witnessed the triumph of South Korean director Bong Joon-ho's film, *Parasite*, which secured four prestigious awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and Best International Film. This marked *Parasite* as the paramount victor of the Oscars, thrusting Bong Joon-ho back into the limelight after a two-year hiatus.

Bong Joon-ho's films abound with the exploration of hierarchical dynamics, a sentiment poignantly echoed by Amy Taubin who noted that his works encapsulate a rich tapestry of "upstairs/downstairs" relationships. Among his illustrious filmography, *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite* stand united in their portrayal of disparate social classes. While *Snowpiercer* crafts a closed class hierarchy through spatial compartmentalization, *Parasite* employs an open class structure to examine the submission of the lower class to their upper counterparts.

Utilizing horizontal and vertical spatial narratives in *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite* respectively, Bong Joon-ho navigates divergent perspectives within contemporary society. *Snowpiercer* offers a scathing critique of the capitalist system in its entirety, whereas *Parasite* delves into the parasitic relationship between affluence and

impoverishment. Guided by a discerning use of color and light, both films conjure an evocative portrayal of inter-class tensions that stimulates ethical contemplation.

Snowpiercer

In this cinematic masterpiece, Bong Joon-ho ingeniously fashions an unending train as a symbol of a totalitarian capitalist society. The film's inception introduces a semblance of order – humanity's endeavor to combat global warming inadvertently plunges the world into an icy abyss. The last remnants of humanity seek refuge within the confines of the train, embarking on an eternal sojourn. The train becomes both the vessel for the narrative and a canvas for its visual representation. Within its claustrophobic compartments, human society is distilled into distinct panels. The tail section of the train houses the passengers – the terminus of the ecological chain, primarily comprising the elderly, sick, and disabled. In stark contrast, the front section accommodates the ostensible upper class, epitomizing wealth and privilege. The perpetual motion engine, an embodiment of order, stands as both a symbol of the train and the custodian of its sublime machinery, personified in Mr. Wilford.

Bong Joon-ho's horizontal spatial narrative dismantles the conventional top-down class hierarchy, exposing the tensions, disparities, and challenges inherent in a capitalist society through compartmental division.

In a pivotal plot, the tail section, led by Curtis, orchestrates a rebellion, traversing the 18 compartments to reshape the class landscape. This transition is portrayed through nuanced camera work and adept use of lighting. The film captures

life in the tail section through shallow depth-of-field shots, accentuating the oppression amidst a dark backdrop, intensifying the sense of confinement. Upon entering the penultimate car, the passengers are greeted by a flood of light as the side window curtains are flung open, juxtaposing the erstwhile darkness. The camera slowly advances, capturing incredulous gazes as they converge towards the illuminated window. This interplay of light and camera serves to underscore the absence of natural light in the tail section. Subsequently, a point-of-view shot provides a glimpse of Gilliam, the spiritual leader of the tail inhabitants, as they catch a fleeting sight of snow outside the window. The stark contrast between the radiant snow and the grimy countenances creates a visually impactful tableau.

As Curtis and his comrades traverse a corridor adorned with transparent materials, they finally enter the upper-class realm, greeted by a panoramic view. The front of the train is replete with diverse functional spaces – from sylvan groves to aquatic sanctuaries and classrooms – each bathed in rich illumination. Bong Joon-ho employs soft light sources in this expanse, utilizing a single overhead light to echo the frigid ambiance. Throughout the train's interiors, he intentionally contrasts the sharp and cold lighting of the lower class with the softer facial contours of the upper class, magnifying the frailty and insouciance of the elite.

Additionally, Bong Joon-ho employs a distinct color palette to traverse the class differences from the tail to the front of the train, creating a visual and emotional impact on the audience. As the rebels advance from the tail, they traverse environments ranging from lush green artificial forests to crystalline blue

compartments, from aqueous amber steam rooms to neon-clad red bars. This chromatic evolution mirrors their journey from desolation to splendor, akin to an ascent towards redemption. With Curtis's departure from the children's classrooms, the palette transitions from vibrant yellows and blush pinks to regal shades of darker reds and gilded golds, emblematic of power. As the camera traces Curtis's rapid progress through a lengthy tunnel, his sporadic glances into private rooms on the left become significant. Notably, when the camera turns to the upper-class denizens in the private rooms, it slows down, highlighting the relaxed comportment of the occupants in stark contrast to the rebels' anxiety outside. This emphasizes the hedonistic indulgence of the upper class and the oppression faced by the lower class. As the camera toggles between close-ups of Curtis's anguished eyes and his surroundings, shades of pale gold accompanied by mother-of-pearl hues gradually pervade the viewer's sight. The incredulous gazes of ball-gowned individuals clutching glasses of wine foster a sense of solidarity with the protagonist, accentuating the shared struggle.



Parasite

Diverging from *Snowpiercer's* horizontal narrative, *Parasite* embraces a vertical structure that reflects its underlying themes. The film portrays a social stratification epitomized by semi-basement - basement - villa, delineating a bottom-up class space. The Kim family resides at the nadir of the social spectrum, mirrored in their spatial arrangement. In contrast, the basement housing the housekeeper's husband boasts a better condition than the Kims' quarters, positioning it as an upper-class "basement" within the confines of the Park family's villa. The Park family's residence embodies the pinnacle of the class hierarchy, a bastion of order. These three strata coalesce into a coherent hierarchy, fostering geographical and identitary consistency.

Bong Joon-ho's signature camera language masterfully captures the class disparities inherent in vertical spatial oppositions and the parasitic relationship between the impoverished and the affluent. By tracing the perspective shift from high to low through extensive shots, the film engenders a space for juxtaposition and immersive engagement. A climactic moment materializes when the Park family abandons a camping trip due to heavy rain, propelling the two parasitic families into disarray. As panic ensues, the Kim family swiftly packs, poised to seize the opportune moment for escape. Father and sons descend the villa's elongated slope, portrayed in a panoramic shot that encapsulates the scene. The shot of sewage bubbling from the sewers augurs a bleaker fate for the submerged half of the city. This descent mirrors a previous sequence wherein Ki-woo ascends to the villa, set against a sunny backdrop. The stark contrast between these two moments accentuates the protagonists'

emotional plunge.

In *Parasite*, Bong Joon-ho's manipulation of light is direct and evocative. The three spaces are illuminated with a single source, semi-natural light, and natural light combined with multiple sources. The Park family's villa exudes minimalistic elegance, with expansive windows ushering in abundant natural light, imbuing the space with a sense of pristine sophistication. The sunlight serves as a visual embodiment of the upper class, a stark juxtaposition to the subterranean abodes of the Kim family and the housekeeper's husband. From a lighting perspective, the Kim family's semi-basement is inadequately lit, with the living room being the most well-illuminated area. The basement housing the housekeeper's husband remains devoid of natural light, illuminated solely by dim lamps, casting the space into deeper darkness, akin to denizens of shadows.

The film's interplay of light and color underscores the disparate qualities of life experienced by the three families, vividly reflecting their respective social statuses. The affluent Park family resides in a luxurious villa, basking in warm sunlight that bathes their visages. This resonates with the vast expanse of green lawn and turquoise sky, creating an inviting and comfortable ambiance. Conversely, the Kim family occupies a semi-basement, characterized by cramped quarters and chaotic arrangements. The dimly lit, low-saturated color palette exudes an aura of gloom and melancholy, conveying a life deprived of natural light and hope. The association of psychological states with color is a common expressive technique, manifesting as contrasting colors in different scenes. For instance, the semi-basement window,

initially covered in dust and grime, portrays a dismal scene. However, as the narrative progresses, the warm light of a street lamp infiltrates the window, symbolizing a glimmer of hope in the darkness. The film concludes with a return to the window, where the snow outside engenders a melancholic blue hue, highlighting the characters' uncertainty and unease through color symbolism.



Conclusion

From *Snowpiercer* to *Parasite*, Bong Joon-ho consistently adheres to the juxtaposition of class within independent spatial structures or multiple distinct spaces. In contemporary film creation and aesthetic expression, the "space" structure holds a pivotal role. In the 1970s and 1980s, Western culture witnessed a surge in discussions about the "spatial turn." Michel Foucault asserted that the contemporary era has entered the "epoch of space." The anxieties of human existence and spatial concerns echo each other, forming a parallel discourse. Traditional aesthetic studies concurrently consider the dimensions of both time and space, a reflection evident in the creation and aesthetics of contemporary cinema.

Bong Joon-ho's cinematic masterpieces, *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite*, skillfully dissect the complexities of social hierarchy through spatial narratives, lighting, and

color. In *Snowpiercer*, the train becomes a microcosm of class division, where rebellion is illuminated by shifts in light and color, symbolizing the journey from oppression to empowerment. In *Parasite*, vertical spaces and strategic lighting underscore the disparity between the affluent and the marginalized, while color serves as a potent tool to evoke empathy and introspection. Bong Joon-ho's meticulous craftsmanship invites us to reflect on real-world inequalities and envision a more equitable future, leaving an indelible mark on both the cinematic landscape and our societal consciousness.