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PARASITE AND THE GLOBAL ARRIVAL OF KOREAN CINEMA

Notes from the underground

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Year 2019–20 marked the moment of arrival of the Korean Wave in the world, and in the United States in particular. Twenty years after the term *Hallyu* was coined by Chinese journalists, Korean popular culture scored a remarkable dual success in America: The K-Pop group BTS topped the Billboard charts, performed a sold-out concert at CitiField in New York, appeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine and made the rounds of TV talk shows; and Bong Joon-Ho's film *Parasite* was released to rave reviews, winning the Palme D'Or at the Cannes and the Best Picture award at the Oscars. *Parasite* was the first foreign-language film ever to win the Best Picture Oscar, a remarkable achievement for a national cinema barely known in the United States just two decades ago. This chapter explores the global success of *Parasite* within three intersecting contexts – the rise of the Korean Wave, and Korean cinema specifically, over the past few decades; the development of contemporary neoliberalism and the accompanying emergence of a global precariat, which inform both the production and plot of *Parasite*; and memories of the repressed in modern Korean history, including the economically marginalized sectors of society and the subversive political “underground” of divided Korea since 1945. The global success of *Parasite* is both a singular achievement for Korean cinema and a mirror to the fractured and profoundly unequal world of the advancing twenty-first century.

Parasite centers on the relationship between a poor urban family, the Kims, and a wealthy family, the Parks, with whom each of the four members of the Kim family gains employment through various fraudulent means. Halfway through the film a third family is introduced, the husband living in the sub-basement of the Park house unbeknownst to the home's current owners, fed and cared for by his wife who works as the Parks' housekeeper. Throughout the film extreme economic inequality is an overarching theme. This inequality of status

and opportunity has been a growing source of anxiety for South Koreans since at least the late 1990s and increasingly so in recent years. Although the precise expression of this economic gap in *Parasite* is distinctly (South) Korean, this theme seems to have struck a chord with audiences around the world, including the United States, where inequality was already more acute for some time and has been sharply on the rise. In this regard, *Parasite* might be considered the definitive film to date of the neoliberal order that has come to dominate the world over the past 40 years, since the Thatcher-Reagan free market revolutions of 1979–80. *Parasite* remains resolutely within a South Korean social and cultural context, yet has achieved an unprecedented resonance with global audiences, reflecting the film's considerable artistry as well as its ability to tap into some of the deepest anxieties of the contemporary world. The irony of *Parasite* is that the crowning achievement so far of global Korean cinema is itself a scathing critique of contemporary South Korean society.

The Korean Wave and Korean cinema: conglomeratization and soft power

The rise of the Korean Wave, including cinema, tracks closely with the liberalization of the South Korean economy, especially since the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s (Yecies and Shim 2016). The term *Hallyu* (*Hanliu* in Mandarin), translated into English as “Korean Wave,” was apparently invented in China around 1998, referring to the sudden explosive popularity of South Korean TV drama and pop music in that country (Kim 2013: 1). The Korean Wave seemed to come out of nowhere; while Japanese popular culture dominated East Asia in the 1980s, and Chinese popular culture had a strong following among the Mandarin- and Cantonese-speaking populations of “Greater China” and Southeast Asia, the rise of Korean popular culture was a singularly new phenomenon. The Korean Wave emerged out of South Korea's post-crisis economic restructuring and has become Korea's most successful post-industrial export. Some of the scholarship on *Hallyu* has focused on its development as Korea's “culture industry,” borrowing the term coined by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in the 1940s to analyze American popular culture, especially Hollywood cinema (Horkheimer and Adorno 1997; Lie 2015: 154). Adorno (1991) once explained that he and Horkheimer adopted the term as a substitute for “mass culture,” in order to make it clear that this kind of culture was not one that “arises spontaneously from the masses themselves.” The culture industry, by contrast, “intentionally integrates its consumers from above” (Adorno 1991: 98). Adorno's concept has often been criticized for its overly deterministic, not to say pessimistic, view of modern culture. But if we shift the modifier and modified more in keeping with the “mass culture” term it replaced, “culture industry” becomes *industrial culture*, which rather accurately describes what South Korea created and perfected from the late 1990s to the present. K-pop, TV dramas and films were promoted

for export, much like automobiles and mobile phones, and South Korea has become a powerhouse of popular culture as it had been in other more material industries. In the case of film, big conglomerates or *chaebol* (e.g. Samsung) have played a role and smaller independent companies, sometimes with *chaebol* connections, have made Korea a global force. The Korean Wave arose out of Korea's evolution from a more state-directed protectionist economy in the 1980s to a more liberal or neoliberal, globalized economy in the 2000s. In post-financial crisis South Korea, national wealth and global recognition have risen in tandem with societal fragmentation and individual economic instability.

In the mid-1980s, the South Korean film industry was in crisis. Under intense pressure from Hollywood, South Korea removed barriers to foreign film distribution that had been designed to protect the domestic film industry. By 1988, US companies were allowed to distribute films in Korea directly and limitations on foreign film imports were lifted (Yecies and Shim 2011: 5; Cho 2019: 52–53). At the same time, the government removed longstanding restrictions on the establishment of private production companies, and with the end of authoritarian rule in the late 1980s also relaxed film censorship, eventually dropping government censorship and introducing a rating system in 1996. Just as filmmaking in South Korea was permitted unprecedented artistic and financial freedom, the Korean film industry faced the prospect of being crushed by the Hollywood juggernaut. South Korean cinema could have been reduced to a small, government-protected niche industry while the country's screens were overwhelmed by Hollywood and other foreign imports, as was the case with some other national cinemas. But this is not what happened. On the contrary, exposure to foreign films and newfound artistic freedom rejuvenated the film industry, and by the late 1990s a coterie of new directors, with some assistance from the quasi-governmental Korean Film Council (KOFIC), was making creative and highly popular films that were competing successfully with Hollywood for the domestic box office. South Korea by the early 2000s was one of the few countries in the world where locally made films dominated the domestic market. At the same time, Korean films were coming to the attention of foreign audiences as well (Paquet 2009; Choi 2010).

The financial crisis that hit South Korea and other Asian countries in 1997 had a devastating effect on the Korean labor market and caused widespread bankruptcy and unemployment but did not undermine the film industry. On the contrary, as more traditional industries suffered, film – and popular culture in general – became new targets of investment for conglomerates and small companies alike. In the early- to mid-1990s a number of established conglomerates, including Samsung, SK and Daewoo, set up their own production companies to make films, mostly romantic comedies (Cho 2019: 55). But after the financial crisis and the liberalization of the South Korean economy, newer and more specialized companies such as CJ Entertainment and Orion entered the film-making business. This coincided with the introduction of multiplex cinemas in 1998, vastly increasing the number of screens in South Korea and giving a

further boost to the film industry. Cinemas and filmmaking are closely linked industries in Korea, with many of the same companies involved in both film production and theater ownership. Three companies (CJ CGV, Lotte and Megabox) are responsible for some 90% of the cinema screens in the country. The South Korean film industry is its own distinct oligopoly (Cho 2019: 58). After the financial crisis, Korean film production shifted from government and *chaebol* dominance to smaller independent companies (Yecies and Shim 2016: 157–81). Among these new producers, arguably the most successful has been Miky Lee (Lee Mi-Gyeong), granddaughter of Samsung founder Lee Byung-Chul (Pyne 2020; Siegel 2020; Sun 2020). As vice chair of the Samsung spinoff company CJ Group, Lee had been an early investor in Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks in 1995 and has produced four of Bong Joon-Ho's films, including *Parasite*; she gave the speech accepting *Parasite*'s Best Picture award at the Oscars. Lee's CJ Entertainment, created by CJ Group in 2011 and now called CJ E&M, became the largest media conglomerate in South Korea (Yecies and Shim 2016: 159); as CJ CGV, the company owns around half of South Korea's cinema screens. CJ E&M also runs a K-pop "training camp," M Academy, and manages K-pop artists, music distribution and performances.

There are significant parallels and corporate connections, as well as some sharing of star talent, between K-pop and popular Korean cinema. As the sociologist John Lie (2015) points out, in the pre-Korean Wave period it was not at all obvious that K-pop would become an export industry. Korea's domestic market is not particularly small by world standards and could have sustained a popular music industry on its own (Lie 2015: 114). Much the same could be said of Korean cinema. But the South Korean economy has been geared to produce for export since the rapid industrialization of the 1960s. Export orientation has become the default position of Korean business; it is only a question of what product is to be exported, and where. Within the Korean culture industry, K-pop is perhaps the most obvious case of strategic corporate production and marketing for export, but the Korean film industry has also actively pursued global recognition and market share. Over the course of a decade, from the late 1990s to late 2000s, South Korean film rose from relative obscurity to international acclaim. Korean cinema's first international hit was Kang Je-Gyu's spy thriller *Shiri* (1999), which broke box office records in Korea and became the top film in Japan as well. A slick, action-packed movie along the lines of the James Bond franchise, *Shiri* was the first domestic film labeled a "blockbuster" in Korea and demonstrated that Koreans could make a Hollywood-style film with high production values that appealed to both domestic and international audiences (Choi 2010: 31). The artistic value of Korean cinema was coming to be recognized as well, with Korean films winning accolades at the world's most prestigious film festivals, notably Cannes. Im Kwon-Taek's *Chunhyang* (2000) was the first Korean film to be selected for the Cannes Film Festival, and Im won Best Director for *Chihwaseon* at Cannes in 2002. Park Chan-Wook's *Oldboy* won the Cannes Jury Grand Prix in 2004, followed by Jeon Do-Yeon's Best Actress award at

Cannes for her performance in Lee Chang-Dong's *Miryang* (Secret Sunshine) in 2007 (Kim 2013: 9). International prizes and popular appeal formed a virtuous cycle raising Korean film's global stature, culminating in *Parasite*'s dual victory at the Cannes in 2019 and the Oscars in 2020.

Film scholar Kyung Hyun Kim has noted that Korean cinema in the 2000s was a singularly successful example of imitating Hollywood (Kim 2011: xv). This is certainly true as far as it goes, especially for early Korean Wave films such as *Shiri*. But over the past decade or so Korean films have gained a reputation all their own – characterized by such features as genre blending, abrupt changes in mood and great kinetic energy – and have come to influence Hollywood and other national cinemas themselves. Sometime in the early 2010s the world came to agree that Korea was “cool” (Hong 2014), and Hollywood itself attempted to ride the Korean Wave, including producing several remakes of popular Korean films such as *The Lake House* (2006) and *Oldboy* (2013). Despite initial success in Japan, the new Korean cinema was slow to penetrate the mainstream Western market. Early on, Korean films were a fairly niche item in the United States and other Western countries, attractive to the film cognoscenti precisely because of their novel and distinctive features, especially violent horror films and thrillers of which Park Chan-Wook's *Oldboy* was the paradigm. *Oldboy* captured the attention of critics and film students, but it was Bong Joon-Ho, already one of the leading directors in South Korea, who reached a mainstream American audience with his sci-fi monster horror-comedy-drama *The Host* in 2006. *The Host*, having broken box office records in Korea, was one of the first South Korean films to gain widespread US distribution, setting Bong on the path to his own Hollywood stardom. After the further success of *Mother* (2009), Bong moved into a radically transnational direction with his next two films, *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *Okja* (2017). *Snowpiercer*, based on the French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige*, is set in a dystopian future in which the last remnants of mankind ride a perpetually moving train around a frozen Earth. The cast is international, including such prominent Hollywood actors as Chris Evans and Tilda Swinton, and the dialogue is mostly in English. *Okja*, another science fiction-themed film, this time dealing with a genetically modified super-pig, is partly set in the South Korean countryside but places much of its action outside of Korea and also features a largely English-speaking cast. With *Parasite* Bong returns to South Korea, and contemporary Seoul specifically, but in some ways, it may be Bong's most transnational film, insofar as it has been embraced by a global audience and a subtitle-resistant American audience in particular. *Parasite* may have been the most successful Korean film in the US market in recent years, but Yeon Sang-Ho's zombie-action thriller *Train to Busan* (2016) and Lee Chang-Dong's *Burning* (2018), among others, also garnered favorable reviews and wide distribution in the United States. By the end of the 2010s, Korean cinema was no longer an exotic and specialized commodity but part of the global cinematic landscape, adorned with Hollywood's and the American moviegoers' seals of approval. Korean cinema had arrived.

If the first Korean Wave arose in the late 1990s, a second Korean Wave or “*Hallyu* 2.0” was visible from about the mid-2000s, spearheaded by K-pop and disseminated through the Internet and social media rather than CDs, DVDs and broadcast or cable television (Lee and Nornes 2015; Choe 2016: 10; Jin 2016). The global popularity of Psy’s “Gangnam Style” in 2012, the most viewed song on YouTube at the time, was the breakthrough event of this second wave, and K-pop has been on a relentless upswing ever since. This second wave had a less direct and immediate effect on film, although Korean films gained steady recognition abroad and streaming services such as Netflix began to acquire, and even produce, more and more Korean content. The second wave, capitalizing on the success of the first, involved more deliberate design and promotion by private companies and strong support by the South Korean government. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism sought to identify *Hallyu* as Korea’s “brand,” promoting concerts and films through overseas consulates and encouraging tourism to South Korea in general and to location sites for movies and dramas in particular. The government and the media spoke frequently of *Hallyu* as a form or expression of South Korea’s “soft power,” borrowing the influential term from the Harvard scholar Joseph Nye (Nye 2004; Nye and Kim 2013). Writing about the United States amidst the flailing war in Iraq, Nye (2004) defined soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.” In contrast to military or economic power, soft power relies on culture, values and moral authority. Nye’s concept has been taken up by governments from China to Turkey, the EU and Brazil. But in Korea, a country at a historic disadvantage in “hard power” compared to its much larger neighbors, the explosive growth of *Hallyu*, first in East Asia and then around the world, represented a unique and unprecedented type of South Korean soft power.

The meaning and measure of “soft power” has long been debated. It is almost impossible to quantify, compared to military hardware or GDP, and is often viewed instrumentally – as a means to some other presumably more “real” power. Who is the “you” who gains “the ability to get what you want”? Nye’s original focus was on the state. But clearly not only governments gain from the accumulation and use of soft power. Perhaps *Hallyu* has helped the South Korean government diplomatically by improving South Korea’s image, although any direct connection would be hard to trace. Certainly, *Hallyu* has made South Korea a more attractive place for foreigners and has been a boom to tourism, thus bringing more foreign income into the South Korean economy. And of course, *Hallyu* has been highly profitable for the companies that produce South Korean pop music, television, films and video games. It can be argued that *Hallyu* spurred the “creative economy” in South Korea and thus opened up new employment opportunities and helped push the country further in the direction of a post-industrial, information-based economy and society. However, the importance of *Hallyu* may be less material or measurable than any direct diplomatic or economic benefits. *Hallyu* has made Korea more visible to the world, in a positive light, than anything before in Korean history. A country long either ignored or

identified with war and poverty is now associated with cutting-edge cinema, spectacular pop performances and high-quality TV programs. This no doubt makes Koreans prouder of their own country and culture, which is not insignificant, and has made Korea an important contributor to global culture. For the first time, the world is paying attention to Korean experiences, tastes and histories projected through Korean music, film and television dramas (Chang 2016: 42).

Neoliberalism and the global precariat

The Korean culture industry thus enters and influences global popular culture at the moment in which market-oriented reforms have come to dominate much of the world, not least South Korea itself following the profound shock of the late-1990s financial crisis. As these neoliberal reforms have progressed over the past few decades, economic inequality has increased around the world, with the United States the most unequal among advanced industrialized countries and the UK second most unequal (Stiglitz 2012). According to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2020a), income inequality was higher in 2017 among the world's more advanced countries than at any time in the previous 50 years. The United States is by far the most unequal rich country and has been since the mid-1980s; South Korea has been growing more unequal since the 1990s but by global standards it is still a relatively egalitarian society. It is perhaps not the objective level of inequality but the speed at which inequality has grown that has made it so noticeable in South Korea. The extraordinarily fast pace of change in South Korea's economy, culture and society under rapid industrialization from the 1960s to the 1990s, followed by liberalization from the 1990s to the present, has been aptly called "compressed modernity" by the sociologist Kyung-Sup Chang (Chang 1999). Possibly no society on earth has developed economically as quickly and as extensively as South Korea, and thus the changes and contradictions of the global economy are especially visible there. Just as the divided Korean peninsula often appeared as a microcosm of the global Cold War (Henderson 1974), so the stark inequality of contemporary South Korea brings into sharp relief the global growth of inequality, in part because South Korea was a much more equal society in recent memory. In the space of half a century South Korean society has traveled from shared poverty to relatively shared affluence to a growing and visible gap between rich and poor. Based on the Gini Coefficient, the standard measurement of income inequality, South Korea ranks the 28th least equal society among the 37 OECD member states, slightly ahead of Britain and the United States and slightly behind Japan, but well behind Canada, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries (OECD 2020a). South Korea also has the highest suicide rate in the OECD, especially among the elderly (males in particular) and increasingly among teenagers and young adults (OECD 2020b). An underdeveloped welfare state, the breakdown of the extended family on which the elderly previously depended and job insecurity for older males contribute to suicide among the older population; intense pressure

for educational achievement (especially college entrance) and lack of employment opportunities contribute to suicide among youth. This too is a relatively recent phenomenon; the suicide rate in South Korea was not particularly high before the mid-1990s. As brilliantly exposed in *Parasite*, South Korea has become a society of tremendous competition, economic insecurity and social division. The pursuit of economic advantage is quite literally a struggle to the death.

Parasite not only stays within South Korea, it never leaves the city of Seoul, and with a few exceptions the entire film is confined to two locations – the semi-basement home of the Kims and the hilltop mansion of the Parks. The contrast between the dark, dreary and dysfunctional Kim basement and the stunning, light-filled and ultra-modern Park house is one of the key features of the film, and the Parks' house in particular – built as a set for the film – is practically a character in itself. The use of domestic space in *Parasite* hearkens back to Kim Ki-Young's seminal 1960 film *The Housemaid*, a film Bong Joon-Ho himself has called “the *Citizen Kane* of Korean cinema” and a direct inspiration for *Parasite* (Berry 2019: 147; Ulaby 2019; Klein 2020: 228). *Housemaid* (*Hanyeo* in Korean, meaning female servant – literally “woman below” or “lower woman”), which might be called a domestic horror-crime-melodrama, centers on an aspiring middle-class couple who hire a young housemaid to help with caring for their two children and their newly built two-story house. The maid, a recent transplant from the countryside, envies her employers' middle-class domesticity and seduces the husband, leading ultimately to the destruction of the family (Kim 2004: 140–46). In both *The Housemaid* and *Parasite*, members of the lower class embed themselves in the homes of wealthier patrons, and a series of events leads to the violent collapse of class separation and domestic order. But the differences between the two films reflect, among other things, the vast differences between South Korea in 1960 and South Korea in 2020. *The Housemaid* shows less physical and social distance between economic classes: The husband plays piano for a group of female factory workers, the wife does piecework to make extra money to build their home, and both the workers and the middle-class couple aspire for a better life that seems somehow achievable. In *Parasite* the upper-class Parks are fully ensconced in their elite status and would not dream of riding the subway, much less visit the dwellings of the poor. The Kims live on the edge of destitution, scraping together a living from disparate gigs and only getting ahead through trickery and deceit. The rich live in a separate world from the poor, while the poor are too consumed with their precarious struggle for survival to realistically dream of, much less achieve, advancement into the upper classes.

At the beginning of *Parasite*, audiences see that the four members of the Kim family are clearly members of the “precariat,” a term that originated in the early 1990s combining the words “precarious” and “proletariat” to describe the growing class of people on the margins of the workforce without stable employment (Standing 2016). The Kims have recently lost their mobile phone and Wi-Fi service, presumably for failure to pay their bills. Their latest gig is folding pizza boxes for a fast-food restaurant, which nearly ends in disaster. The *pater*

familias, Gi-Taek, has engaged in a series of failed businesses including working as a parking attendant and running a fried chicken restaurant and a Taiwanese Cake (“castella”) shop. Gi-Taek’s experience is stereotypical of South Korean workers after the 1997 financial crisis, particularly male white-collar workers, many of whom lost job security due to labor restructuring and went into small businesses, especially restaurants, a highly competitive and risky field. Gi-Taek’s wife, Chung-Suk, was once a champion hammer-throw athlete. All four of the Kims are intelligent, resourceful and talented in their own way, but lack the credentials such as university degrees that could enable them to enter the middle or upper classes and have fallen on hard times. In any case, as Gi-Taek remarks, such credentials mean little when a single job ad for a security guard attracts applications from 500 university graduates. By contrast, the four members of the ultra-wealthy Park family seem rather dim, except perhaps for the father Dong-Ik (“Nathan” – the use of English or rather American names is a recurrent symbol of cosmopolitan status), a successful entrepreneur. Early in the film, a friend of the Kims’ son Gi-Woo, a college student named Min, offers to introduce Gi-Woo to the Park family and suggests he take over Min’s job of tutoring the Park’s high-school age daughter. In order to make Gi-Woo appear qualified for the job, his sister Gi-Jeong creates a fake diploma from Yonsei University, one of the top universities in South Korea (and Bong Joon-Ho’s alma mater). One by one, each of the Kims finagles his or her way into the Parks’ employment – as tutor, art therapist, chauffeur and housekeeper – through clever and deceitful means. Everything goes well, until it does not.

As the audiences learn halfway through the film, a man named Geun-Sae, the husband of the Parks’ former housekeeper Mun-Gwang whom Chung-Suk replaced, has been living in the Parks’ basement for the past four years, unbeknownst to the Park family; the basement was built secretly by the house’s architect and original occupant Nam-Gung. Like Gi-Taek, Geun-Sae also ran a cake shop that failed, but in Geun-Sae’s case his business failure put him massively in debt to loan sharks, from whom he fled to the safety of the Parks’ bunker, hidden and cared for by his wife Mun-Gwang. In the frenetic and violent climax of the film Gi-Taek kills Mr. Park, and in the confusion he flees through the garage into the basement to take the place of Geun-Sae, who has also been killed, as have Gi-Jeong and Mun-Gwang. No one knows where Gi-Taek has gone, and he is declared a missing person. Sometime later Gi-Woo, who was badly injured by Geun-Sae in the climactic struggle, awakens from a coma; he and his mother receive probation for their crimes and return to life in their semi-basement apartment. After spying on the Parks’ former house (now owned by a German family), Gi-Woo eventually discovers that his father has been trying to communicate to him from the basement by manipulating the house lights in Morse code. Gi-Woo writes to his father, promising to someday amass enough wealth to buy the house and rescue him. The audiences see this all take place, culminating in Gi-Taek emerging from the basement into Gi-Woo’s embrace, but it is only a fantasy. There is no realistic hope of rescue, no escape from poverty, and Gi-Taek will,

the audiences are left to assume, spend the rest of his life in the cellar sending notes from the underground in Morse code.

The Korean underground

Like Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis* and Jordan Peele's *Us* (also released in 2019), *Parasite* dramatizes the division between the upper and lower classes of society, the latter living literally underground, and opens up the possibility of revenge by the lower on the higher. In *Us*, the primary division is racial, befitting the American setting ("us" being both the first-person plural object and the abbreviation for "United States"), whereas in *Parasite* the division is primarily economic. Class division and class conflict, in various ways, feature in most of Bong's films. In the case of *Snowpiercer*, class division is distributed horizontally (rich people in the front of the train, poor in the back) rather than vertically, and conflict between rich and poor is bloody indeed. But whereas class difference is just as great in *Parasite* as in *Snowpiercer*, the main conflict in the former is not between rich and poor but between poor and poorer, the occupants of the semi-basement and those of the windowless full basement. At one point this becomes a literal, physical fight between the Kims and Geun-Sae and his wife in the Parks' home while the wealthy family is away on a camping trip. The precariat lives in constant fear of falling even lower down the social ladder, but in the end Gi-Taek's attempt to improve his and family's lot in life fails, and he replaces Geun-Sae in his basement prison. Yet for both poor families the Parks are by and large the object of sympathy and admiration rather than resentment or hatred. Gi-Taek remarks that rich people like the Parks are "nice" (*chakhae*) because they do not have to deal with personal suffering and thus have the leisure for kindness. Geun-Sae does not resent Mr. Park but is grateful to him for employing his wife and supplying the house, albeit without knowing it, in which he hides. "Respect!" he says repeatedly in English. When Gi-Taek finally breaks and stabs Mr. Park to death in spontaneous rage, the outcome is disaster.

Perhaps poor people are not the only secret kept hidden underground in *Parasite*. The clandestine basement was built, as Mun-Gwang explains, by the house's architect as a hiding place in the case of a North Korean invasion. This was once somewhat common practice on the part of well-to-do South Koreans. Such underground quarters probably go back to the Korean War if not earlier but are more directly a product of the simultaneous emergence of a wealthy South Korean bourgeoisie in the 1980s and the discovery of tunnels built under the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to infiltrate North Korean soldiers into the South. "The underground" is thus both a place of refuge (for the rich) and a source of fear and disruption. There is a second reference to North Korea when the Kims are overcome by Geun-Sae and Mun-Gwang and blackmailed with a video that would reveal their fraud to the world. While the Kims are held captive, Mun-Gwang parodies a news announcement in the voice of a North Korean television anchor. Such a humorous reference to the North Korean media

would have been unimaginable, not to mention seditious, in a South Korean film a few decades ago. North Korea was once seen by South Koreans as a mortal threat, and to some extent still is, but it can also be treated as a joke if not ignored altogether. And part of the fear that North Korea represented was the overturning of the political as well as social order in South Korea, including especially the position of the wealthy elites. Communism, after all, was supposed to break down class barriers and bring about an egalitarian society. For decades, movements dedicated to democracy and social justice were associated with North Korean subversion by the South Korean authorities. Throughout the period of authoritarian rule criticism of the military regime and the class structure that supported it was confined to the underground. In fact, South Korea's most prominent dissident writer of the 1970s was a poet calling himself "Kim Ji-Ha," literally "Underground Kim." But by the second decade of the twenty-first century the threat of a North Korean attack, to say nothing of a radical underground movement within South Korea, had receded or even disappeared in the consciousness of most South Koreans. The democratic movement that shaped members of Bong Joon-Ho's generation, South Koreans born in the 1960s, is long past and the prevailing economic order appears unchallengeable. Correspondingly, Bong's recent films show both the severity of class conflict and the impossibility of overcoming it. In *Snowpiercer*, the rebel leader Curtis (played by Chris Evans aka Captain America) discovers that lower-class revolutions were designed by the train's planners to be periodic events that kept the population down, and as with Neo's rebellion in the *Matrix* film, rebellion was actually built into the system and can never truly succeed in overthrowing it. Similarly, Gi-Taek's burst of violence in *Parasite* only results in chaos and death, including the death of his daughter, and in the end the family is worse off than when the film started.

Who are the parasites in *Parasite*? The Kim family worms its way into the Parks' home and personal trust, exploiting the clueless wealthy for their own material gain. But they do so through remarkable ingenuity and hard work, and despite the Kims' deceptive behavior and tragic fate the audiences are clearly meant to sympathize with them. However, the Park family, for all its wealth, is unable to carry out day-to-day activities such as driving, cleaning the house or washing the dishes without the hired help, who are far more resourceful and independent than they. The wealthy are parasitical toward the poor, yet even attempting a small redistribution from the former to the latter ends up a catastrophic failure. Even in the face of natural disaster, such as the human-induced global cooling in *Snowpiercer* and the torrential rain in *Parasite* (which may be linked to climate change), the rich maintain their privileged position and the poor are made to suffer. Ten days before the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awarded the Best Picture Oscar to *Parasite*, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus originating from China to be a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern," and on 11 March 2020, WHO declared the newly named Covid-19 a global pandemic. By that time the

virus had already claimed many victims in South Korea, Italy, the United States and other countries. Covid-19 turned out to be the ultimate parasite, infecting, sickening and sometimes killing tens of millions of human hosts all over the world, perhaps the product and symbol *par excellence* of contemporary globalization. Yet as an agent of globalization, Covid-19 did not erase national boundaries or class divisions; on the contrary, the virus deeply exacerbated them. Countries across the globe closed their borders to halt the spread of the disease, businesses shut down worldwide and unemployment skyrocketed especially among the working poor, who unlike the white-collar labor force could not work remotely. Cinemas, potent vectors for spreading the virus in their crowded enclosed spaces, were closed down all over the world, and the process of making film and television programs was hobbled by Covid-19 as well. Meanwhile, the world's wealthy grew far wealthier, with the fortunes of the world's billionaires increasing by some 25% during the spring and summer lockdowns (Neate 2020). The United States maintained the highest rate of Covid victims among advanced industrial countries and suffered a public health and economic disaster unparalleled in the developed world. Bong Joon-Ho's brilliant, humorous, absurd and terrifying film, firmly situated in the Korean present yet also effortlessly universal, could not have arrived at a timelier moment.

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