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Movie Review: Parasite

Abstract

"Although *Parasite* is above-average cinema... it is not the artistic and philosophical tour-de-force that an award-winning, 99%-approval-rated film ought to be."

Posting about the movie *Parasite* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/movie-review-parasite/>

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Comments

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February 13, 2020

Movie Review: *Parasite*

Josh Matthews

★★★★

Title: *Parasite*

Written & Directed by: Bong Joon Ho

Starring: Kang-ho Sang, Sun-kyun Lee, Yeojong Jo, Woo-sik Choi, So-dam Park, and Jeong-eun Lee, and Ji-so Jung

Music by: Jaeil Jung

By now in February 2020, Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* is one of the most lauded films of the 21st century. It won the coveted Palme D'Or prize at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival—the top honor at a world-renowned event, unanimously selected as a winner by a jury full of directors, actors, and cinema connoisseurs. It's also one of the rare foreign-language films (it's Korean) to receive an Academy Award for Best Picture. It's received a remarkable 99% approval rating on *rottentomatoes.com*. Dozens, and perhaps even hundreds, of movie critics have named it one of the 10 best movies of 2019, many even arguing that it is #1.

With all of that acclaim, you'd think that *Parasite* would be a stunning masterpiece.

I dissent. It is not. It's a fine, above-average comedy with dark humor and sentimentalized social commentary, with too many clichés and obvious plot-twists to make it worthy of the remarkably high acclaim that it's received. *Parasite* is currently overrated. Although it's an unpopular opinion, my view is based on straightforward observations of basic elements of the movie.

Let's discuss the plot. *Parasite* is about the Parks, a poor nuclear-family of four in South Korea—a father and mother, probably in their early 50s, and two adult children who look like they are in their late teens or early 20s. The movie begins by depicting The Parks as living in a cramped basement apartment in South Korea, with socks and underwear hanging from the ceiling, scummy walls and floors, and an elevated toilet on which both kids disgustingly perch as they search for a connectable wifi network.

The Parks are impoverished, but they are also schemers. The plot begins when the son lands a tutoring job with an extremely wealthy Korean family. That rich family, the Kims, is a typical nuclear clan as well. Nearly mirroring the Parks, they also have an average family of four: father, mother, teenage daughter, and younger son. The Kims need a counsellor for their son, and so the Parks scheme to get their daughter hired in that position, with brother and sister Park working for the Kims but also pretending not to know each other. Then the Parks scheme to get the Kims' chauffeur and maid fired, so that Mr. and Mrs. Park can also work for the Kims.

All of this plotting occurs because the Parks are poor and, presumably, because employment is hard for them to come by. The Kims are oblivious to the fact that the Parks are scamming them.

What I've described is the first half of the movie, filled with darker screwball-comedy elements and containing a couple of great sequences, including one that involves probably the first use in film history of the skin of a peach as a weapon. The second half of the movie begins with a mild surprise—one located in the Parks' huge, modern home—to the knowledge of almost no one in the movie. From there, *Parasite* becomes even darker, and its "rich vs. poor" messages become louder and more blatantly obvious as the movie progresses.

Although *Parasite* is above-average cinema—it's an amusing two hours containing beautiful shot-making and some fun, humorous passages—it is not the artistic and philosophical tour-de-force that an award-winning, 99%-approval-rated film ought to be. For one, all of the characters are reductively stereotyped. The Parks are clever schemers who use their God-given high-IQs in only one way: to commit crimes. If the Parks represent "Poor People" in general—and my best sense is that they do, at least for critics who write about the movie as if it's a remarkable critique of the wealth-gap between rich and poor—then *Parasite* is labelling poor people as vulgar, manipulative, and devious. As well, the Kims are Rich People, who, according to this movie, are oblivious idiots who unwittingly say snobbish things in front of the poor people, offending them to the point where Mr. Park really resents the Kims.

I tried to see all of the movie's characters as particular individuals within a particular context, and I believe that to South Koreans, *Parasite* could feel more like a national commentary on Korea than a skewering of global capitalism, which is how most of the world's movie critics have watched it. Yet, from my view, as the movie progresses, it really turns the Parks and Kims into a battle of "All Poor People in the World" against "All Rich People in the World." Which means that the battle is really pitting the poor schemers, who are corrupt only because they want money, against the rich idiots, who are unethical only because they have money. This movie invites a classical-Marxist analysis, and it may even be seen as siding with the Marxists.

While *Parasite* makes us sympathize to some extent with the plight of the Parks, and thereby with poor people everywhere, it is odd to see how rich the poor-ish Parks in this movie really are. Because of that, the movie's critique of capitalism falls completely flat for me. Yes, the Parks' apartment is decidedly a thousand times worse the Kims' house. Yet, they still have indoor plumbing, running water, access to endless heaps of food, and the highest of hi-tech machines (i.e., smartphones). The movie begins with the Parks' vain attempts to find a wifi connection so that they can keep using their smartphones.

In terms of the "poor vs. rich" dynamic that *Parasite* wants to loudly harp on, the Parks are richer than all people in the history of the world prior to, say, 1950—all except the richest of rich kings. They live in an era in which they are actually wealthy, even though by comparison to others in their highly civilized lives, they believe that they are poor.

The movie also has many plot elements that have been labelled by critics as classic, unnecessary clichés since even the 1930s. The plot itself, although possibly offering surprises for inexperienced viewers, will not stun anybody who has watched even a few screwball comedies. For example, you know the kind of scene where the parents leave their house to their kids on the weekend? The parents go away, and the kids think that they can do whatever they want. So what do they do? They have wild parties and trash the place. Only, they get a phone call from the parents, who say that they will be home early—in fact, in five minutes. So, the kids have to scramble to clean up their party, hide drunken guests in closets, and appear spotless in front of their parents.

That plot cliché occurs in *Parasite*.

You also know when characters are secretly listening to other characters, only the plot needs the hidden characters to be revealed so that the story can move forward? Thus, at just the right time, the hidden characters sneeze, cough, or make some kind of noise, inadvertently revealing themselves.

This, too, happens in *Parasite*. And more.

I am only saying that the number of clichés it contains makes *Parasite* something less than the greatest movie of the last several years. *Parasite* does not deserve the 2020 Oscar for Best Picture. But, if you significantly lower your expectations going into it, believing it to be just another movie, *Parasite* will be a pleasant surprise.

Note: here's an amusing element to look for: Parasite contains what must be the longest Morse-Code message ever sent in movie history. Because it's the longest, it's the most impractical. This fact might be a key to the ending, or it might be meaningless.