

SURVEILLANCE AND CLASS HIERARCHY PORTRAYED THROUGH SPATIAL
DYNAMICS IN BONG JOON HO'S *PARASITE* (2019)

By

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requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing a degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

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Abstract

This thesis studies how Bong Joon Ho's Oscar winning film *Parasite* (2019) approaches themes of class dynamics, hierarchy and class-based surveillance. This research analyzes how these concepts manifest spatially in the movie. It studies class dynamics from a Marxist lens, and takes a Foucauldian approach to examine class-based surveillance portrayed in the film, by focusing on its dialogues, character interactions, direction and camera placements. Studying the works of Hagen Koo, the study also takes the South Korean social dynamic regarding class into consideration. This analysis aims to contribute to the film and media studies by providing an in-depth reading of class representation in a South Korean context captured in contemporary cinema.

Keywords: *Parasite* (2019), Bong Joon Ho, Michel Foucault, Karl Marx, Surveillance, Panopticism, Capitalism, Class Conflict, Urban Space, Class Hierarchy, Spatial Dynamics, Power, Inequality.

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Chapter 1- Introduction

Visual media, such as films, TV shows etc. serve as a mirror of society, providing essential social commentary on various aspects of human lives and community. In the twenty-first century, capitalism has become one of the most fundamental driving forces of modern society. Naturally, the visual media produced across the world have also turned their gaze on various aspects of late-capitalist society that shape modern reality. Commentary on capitalism, particularly surveillance and class conflicts have become popular themes in contemporary media. The rising South Korean entertainment industry has also gained international popularity and critical acclaim by portraying these elements, especially in the context of the highly capitalist socio-economic reality of the country. In South Korea, the class inequality and social disparity caused by the country's fast expanding capitalist economy shapes the socio-cultural reality of its people and heavily dictates the quality of their lives. The movie *Parasite* (2019) in particular, is a successful example of the nation's media capturing the various aspects of capitalism, including class-based surveillance and social tension, and how it affects people's lives and choices. Instead of reading *Parasite* as a simple "rich versus poor" narrative, this research foregrounds how surveillance is embedded in space; households, basements, staircases and camera angles shaping characters behaviour and reinforcing ideological divides.

1.1 *Parasite* (2019): At a Glance

Bong Joon Ho's Oscar winning film *Parasite* is a South Korean dark comedy thriller that explores social inequality through the lives of two families: the poverty-stricken Kims and the extremely wealthy Parks. The Kim family includes the father Ki-taek, the mother Chung-sook, the son Ki-woo, and the daughter Ki-jung, who live in a narrow semi-basement and survive on

low-paying jobs and scams. Their fortunes shift when Ki-woo starts working as an English tutor for the Parks' daughter Da-Hye, and secretly brings in all his family members under various false disguises: his sister as the Parks' son Da-Song's art teacher, his father as their driver, and finally, his mother as the housekeeper in the luxurious Park mansion. This process requires a lot of meticulous planning by the Kim family, and sabotaging the jobs of the Parks' previous driver and housekeeper for their own gains. This exposes their desperation to climb the social ladder of class hierarchy in order to improve the quality of their lives. The plot thickens when the overthrown housekeeper, Gook Moon-Gwang arrives to the Park household while the family was out on vacation, and the Kim family had been secretly living there to have a taste of the luxurious lives of the Parks. With her arrival, it is revealed that Moon-Gwang had been secretly keeping her husband Oh Geun-Sae in a hidden bunker under the Park mansion to hide from loan sharks. As she was pleading with Mrs. Kim to keep her secret, she gains an upper hand over the Kims due to the Kim family accidentally revealing themselves in front of Moon-Gwang, exposing their deception. The two families begin to fight, the Parks return, and the Kims succeed in confining the couple into the basement, where Moon-Gwang dies from a head injury. The Kims return to their actual home drenched in the rain, and find their household completely flooded. The next day, the Parks arrange a garden party for their son's birthday, and Geun-Se emerges from the basement to avenge his wife. He ends up stabbing Ki-Jung and Da-Song gets a seizure seeing him. Ki-taek fatally stabs Mr. Park, and hides in the bunker to escape the law. The film ends with Ki-woo imagining a hopeful future of wealth and a reunion with his father, who remains trapped in the bunker. The film provides profound social commentary by portraying the stark contrast in the lives of different classes, how the classes perceive each other, and the social reality that puts

the lower class in their miserable position, along with criticizing the illusion of upward social mobility in a capitalist society.

1.2 Research Objective and Questions

The disparity between rich and poor in society is a fundamental theme in the movie. It depicts class inequality using the narratives, characters, and technical elements such as cinematography, shot angles, camera position, editing etc. The commentary provided by the film can be viewed from multiple perspectives. This research aims to study how surveillance is used to construct class distinction and how these differences manifest in *Parasite*, portrayed through its use of spatial dynamics. In the movie, capitalism is portrayed as a force that controls, humiliates and commodifies human life. By addressing this text in conversation, this study explores how surveillance operates simultaneously as an unnoticed routine embedded into everyday domestic life and as a commodified display designed for entertainment. To observe class distinction manifesting through spatial dynamics, this research refers to elements such as the arrangement of the houses, the spaces occupied by the characters, the camera placements, architectural structures etc.

As the primary scope of this analysis is focused on the film *Parasite* as a reference to portray different dynamics of class, surveillance and space through a Foucauldian-Marxist lens, it does not aim to provide an all-inclusive interpretation of the entire film or its many of the subplots. It focuses on using the film as a case study to investigate concepts of power, visibility and hierarchy, providing insights into capitalism in South Korea and the representation of capitalist inequality and control in the nation's visual media. The central objective of this study is to explore how visual and spatial elements of surveillance in contemporary media construct,

reinforce, or challenge class hierarchies and power dynamics. Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* provides an intriguing case of how surveillance can be tangible—such as through observation and monitoring systems—and at the same time symbolic, through spatial structures like basements, staircases, and architectural divisions, which regulate visibility, access, and social control. Employing Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism, this study investigates how observation and spatial organization internalize power; while a Marxist perspective considers how capitalist systems use surveillance to control labor, suppress resistance, and make class distinctions both visible and concealed. This project contributes to film and cultural studies by drawing attention to cinematic form and its role beyond mere entertainment, highlighting how film offers valuable social commentary through depictions of how power is structured through observation and space. It emphasizes not just the portrayal of the text, but also the manner of the portrayal— the editing, how the cameras work, sound mise-en-scene and performance make the operations of surveillance and class visible. To fulfill this objective, this thesis is guided by the following research questions:

1. What does the film say about the impact of capitalism in Korean society? How does its characters represent class hierarchies and conflicts in the context of Marxist critiques of capitalism?
2. How does *Parasite* (2019) portray mechanisms of surveillance used to discipline, control, and commodify individuals under a capitalist system?
3. How does spatial organization serve as a visual representation of surveillance and class hierarchies in the film?

1.3 Methodology

This thesis follows a qualitative approach for its methodology. The primary text of this research is Bong Joon Ho's 2019 film *Parasite*. The analysis focuses on identifying key scenes where surveillance and space intersect, demonstrating the cinematic devices at work. It provides a close reading of the movie with detailed attention to the cinematic form, including visual compositions and cinematography. For this purpose, the thesis draws on the theories of Michel Foucault and Karl Marx. Foucault's concept of Panopticism and disciplinary power creates a ground for analyzing how surveillance works as a mode of social regulation that makes inequality spatial and bodily practices. Karl Marx's critique of capitalism, on the other hand, offers a complementary lens that illustrates the objectification of human life and transformation as a tradable asset. Where Foucault's insights foregrounds the fundamental power dynamics of society in relation to class and surveillance, Marx focuses on the economic reality of society that forms such power hierarchies. Together, their perspectives offer a crucial framework for examining how spatial arrangement and surveillance in the film expose the core relationship of discipline and commodification in maintaining class power.

Chapter 2- Literature Review

While existing scholarship on *Parasite* has explored class struggle, spatial politics and surveillance, most studies treat these themes separately other than in relation to one another. Readings of the film are mostly focused on its critique of capitalism and architectural metaphors. However, what remains unexplored is a sustained analysis of how surveillance, space and class are deeply interconnected. Surveillance is often limited to the discussion of CCTV or digital monitoring, while spatial analysis often fixates on metaphors of height and depth, overlooking the ways architecture itself operates as a tool of control and discipline. Therefore, this study aims to address that gap by asking: How do space and surveillance work together as instruments of class discipline in contemporary media? By placing this text under an analytical lens, this thesis brings together surveillance studies, spatial theories and class analysis, arguing that space operates not as a neutral backdrop but as an active participant in reproducing capitalist power. By applying the aforementioned theories and scholarly opinions by connecting them with close textual analysis, the thesis successfully establishes an approach that demonstrates how *Parasite* portrays surveillance as a mechanism of capitalist power constituted through space in cinematic form.

This research consults a number of scholarly literature studying various themes related to the use of surveillance and space in relation to capitalist class dynamics in South Korea. For that purpose, this research studies the socio-economic context of capitalism in South Korea and how it is portrayed in *Parasite*. The primary theoretical and critical lens of this study draws on the works of renowned thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Karl Marx. It connects the themes of surveillance present in these works with Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power from

the 1975 text *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* to discuss the concept of surveillance as an exercise of power. Moreover, the thesis also criticizes the class disparity caused by capitalism and how it manifests in different spaces by consulting ideas from Karl Marx's seminal 1867 text *Capital: Volume I*. The thesis borrows ideas regarding the relationship between class and space from Thrift and Williams' 1987 text *Class and Space: The Making of Urban* to show how space is essential in determining and reinforcing class status by analyzing urban designs, particularly in the context of the UK and the USA in the 19th and 20th centuries. These works contribute to this thesis by establishing the framework for an in-depth analysis, and at the same time, helps to identify the research gaps it seeks to address.

2.1 Marx's Theory of Capitalism and Class Dynamics

The thesis discusses the fundamental concepts of capitalism and how the capitalist economic system impacts social dynamics, considering the theories from Karl Marx's *Capital Volume I*. His critiques of capitalism offer a complementary lens to this study that illustrates the objectification of human life and transformation as a tradeable asset. Marx's ideas are essential to understanding the film's core messages on modern social dynamics driven by capitalism. With the plot, setting, and characterization, *Parasite* heavily criticizes the effects of capitalism on individuals.

In *Capital*, Marx exposes the central logic of the capitalist economic system. Capitalism is a profit driven economy that commodifies human labour and transforms the workers into expendable resources. In this system, the bourgeoisie or capitalist group owns the modes of production and purchases labour from workers or the proletariat. However, the labour value produced by workers is more than the wages they get paid, and the surplus value goes to the

capitalists as profits, making them more wealthy over time. This separates the producers from the means of production and creates a socio-economic imbalance between the ones owning the means of production and the ones actively involved in production. The bourgeoisie becomes richer and richer, able to access all resources and luxuries in the world, while the proletariat exhausts themselves by spending their time and energy to producing things, yet being unable to enjoy the fruits of their own labour, as they cannot access enough resources due to having the surplus value of their labour taken by the capitalists.

In this process, capitalism creates a huge disparity between the lifestyles of the rich and the poor. It is a system where the rich gain more and more wealth, power, and status, while the poor remain as they are, unable to climb the economic ladder to prosperity and ensure a decent lifestyle for themselves. Marx's analysis also demonstrates the economic dimension that the Foucauldian discipline highlights; the management of bodies and labour through surveillance sustains the economic reproduction of inequality, an idea this study discusses in its later chapters. The capitalists assert control over the workers' bodies, time and productivity by maintaining strict schedules, continuous surveillance, and controlling their every activity to maximize generating profit. These procedures of reorganizing human activity directly contribute to the generation of profit for the bourgeoisie, none of which go to the working class actually performing these activities. Moreover, capitalist production also creates a "surplus population", "a relatively redundant population of labourers [...] a population of greater extent than suffices for the average needs of the self-expansion of capital" (590). This unemployed and underemployed group of workers exist to keep wages low, which further reduces the quality of life of the working class. Such reduction of human lives to exchangeable commodities further dehumanizes the working class, and compels the bourgeoisie to contempt them even more. In

this way, the established dynamic between the classes is that the capitalists exploit and rely on the labour of the working class to keep hoarding capital and maintain a luxurious lifestyle, yet at the same time they view the proletariat as lesser beings. The bourgeoisie does not recognize the fact that their empire of wealth stands on the surplus value of the proletariats' labour which they are systematically denied. This contributes to the growing inequality between the classes, and the capitalists continue to assert such control over the proletariat to sustain their power and privileges.

However, in the final chapter of *Capital Vol.1*, Marx also hints at the possibility of a shift in the socio-economic dynamic. He predicts that the existing class dynamic cannot exist forever. The tension between classes in a capitalist society will lead to an inevitable proletarian revolution. According to him, the working class will soon become aware of their exploitation and the bourgeoisie's disdain toward them. As a result, they will unite and rise up against the capitalist order. He believes that the existing class conflict will manifest into a working class revolution which will overthrow the exploitative capitalist system. Eventually, this will pave the way for a classless society where every individual will collectively own the means of production and everyone will equally benefit from their own labour.

2.2 Foucault's Concept of Surveillance and Discipline

The social commentary provided by Marx discusses the foundations of a capitalist society, while Foucault's analysis reflects how disciplinary power is exercised by social authorities and its various institutions. Michel Foucault's famous 1977 text *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* serves as the foundation of this analysis. According to Foucault, in the modern era, power is decentralized, invisible, and embedded in our everyday lives, like a

“network of relations” (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 26). This form of power also does not assert itself through violence alone. It is an interconnected force that controls individuals by determining “correct” and “normal” behaviours, which contribute to sustaining and strengthening the existing order of power. This network of relations include the various social institutions, such as schools, barracks, hospitals, prisons, workplaces etc. These systems continuously monitor the subjects, document their information, and enforce and normalize certain behaviours as “discipline.” “The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes” (183) and creates a normative order that every individual is pressurized to adhere to. This process also determines which behaviour or individual is considered acceptable in society, separating, isolating and suppressing all deviant tendencies.

This standard of normalcy extends to an emphasis on financial productivity in a capitalist society. Philo (2024) also explains this idea in relation to Foucault, and shows how societies have repeatedly spatially marginalized groups it has deemed unproductive. Drawing on *Madness and Civilization*, Philo emphasizes Foucault’s “geometry of negativeness” where groups such as lepers, the idle poor, and the mad are pushed into “marginal, sterile and haunted spaces” (Philo 496). He highlights Foucault’s shift from “exclusion-as-exile” to “inclusion-as-confinement,” where modern institutions—prisons, disciplinary schools, psychiatric hospitals—bring the excluded inside as visible, monitored subjects under regulation (2). In Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975), this becomes clearer: space itself becomes a tool of social engineering, where cells, wards, and corridors transform the “bad” into compliant subjects. As Philo puts it, society moves “from exile into operation” by using spatial arrangements to manage and discipline marginalized populations (5). This idea resonates with the focus of this thesis, as *Parasite*

similarly uses different spaces such as mansions, basements, and various forms of confined architectures as sites of surveillance and class discipline.

Foucault's observation on social surveillance takes place indirectly in a nuanced psychological manner, and becomes more effective than active assertion of power through violence. Foucault uses Jeremy Bentham's concept of a panopticon to explain how power is maintained through surveillance in the modern era. A panopticon is an architectural model for prisons, which involves a central watchtower surrounded with a circular building consisting of prison cells. Every single cell in the prison can be visible from the watchtower. The purpose of this model is that the prison guard will reside in the watchtower, from which he can observe any inmate at any given moment. The inmates however, cannot know whether the guard is watching them. As a result, the inmates internalize the idea that they are being watched by authorities all the time, and they continue behaving accordingly. This model also increases efficiency, considering instead of assigning one guard for every cell, the authorities now need only one guard for the whole prison. Therefore, this "state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 201). He shows how the panopticon model creates a sense of being under constant state surveillance within the subject, and regulates their behaviour. To avoid facing punishment or social judgement, the subject of the panopticon internalizes the behaviour expected from their authorities and begins to act accordingly. This research aims to put this phenomena into the capitalist social context of South Korea and how this contributes to building class hierarchy, by constantly putting the lower class under surveillance of the upper class, allowing the rich to practice social power and authority due to their class status.

2.3 The Role of Space in Constructing Social Hierarchies

Class based social hierarchies and modes of surveillance are prevalent in every aspect of a capitalist society. This paper aims to analyze these concepts in the particular context of space. The 1987 text by Thrift and Williams titled *Class and Space: The Making of Urban Society* discusses how space can often become an active force in creating and reinforcing social or class dynamics. Throughout the book's various chapters, the contributors aim to establish how the existing class relations in society are often based on spatial relations—the places where people live, work, move and interact in—determine their class status, and the modern social structure, particularly urban societies also assign spaces to its residents in a manner that reinforces class-based surveillance and hierarchies. The text focuses on the urban landscape and housing patterns of areas dominated by different classes in England and the United States, spanning from the 19th to 20th century. However, the structures observed by the contributors remain mostly unchanged in the contemporary urban setting of South Korea, therefore, their arguments remain applicable in this context as well. Their views are also reflected in the spatial representations of class dynamics in the film *Parasite*, which this thesis addresses later on.

Thrift uses the example of 20th century Britain to discuss how space is being shaped in modern capitalist society. “First, it is becoming a more and more concentrated space. Most large cities have expanded well beyond their official limits and have coalesced” (Thrift and Williams 210). Secondly, “many spaces in Britain are now artificially created milieux predicated not just on relations of production but also relations of consumption” (210-211), meaning, a huge area is currently occupied by establishments created with the purpose of consumption by the upper-class and intended to be accessed by people owning surplus wealth, such as luxurious mansions, shopping malls, restaurants etc., rather than emphasizing on fulfilling bare necessities of the

working class. Thrift identifies consumption culture as an important determinant of class formation (212) and a capitalist society dedicates a significant amount of large space for that purpose. Therefore, it can be observed that in a capitalist society, transactions serve the central purpose of most occupied space, and such spaces are naturally, only accessible by people who hoard more wealth than they need. As a result, the working class are pushed into the peripheries of urban society. Being unable to afford the bare minimum resources to survive, they are forced into terrible living conditions and cannot access the resources needed for a comfortable lifestyle.

The dynamics of class and space become intertwined with surveillance while taking the aspects of visibility into consideration. In a modern metropolitan city, the spaces of consumption only accessible by the upper class take the central stage, and the working class are made intentionally invisible. The residential areas and the central roads in the city are dedicated for the households and transportations of the upper class. As seen in the case study of the lower middle class in Huddersfield by Denis¹, the lower class are generally located in areas furthest away possible from the mainland of the city, with the least resources made available to them (73). However, at the same time, the upper class ensures surveillance of the lower class by controlling the access of visibility. The working class are not allowed to access the establishments dedicated to serve the upper class. However, the working class themselves are constantly subjected to the gaze of the capitalists. They conceal the lives of the working class from constant visibility yet observe them like a voyeur. At the same time, the upper class also controls what aspects of their lives are visible to the lower class. They maintain control by keeping themselves inaccessible and untouchable, and determine the visibility of the lower class according to their whims. These

¹ See chapter “Class, behaviour and residence in nineteenth-century society: the lower middle class in Huddersfield in 1871” in *Class and Space: The Making of Urban Society*

themes of surveillance, discrimination and spatial exclusion can be observed in *Parasite*, particularly through the Park family representing the upper class.

2.4 Capitalism in Contemporary South Korea

To contextualize the theories of Marx and Foucault in relation to South Korean society and portray how various elements of South Korean capitalist society are represented in the film, this thesis examines a number of relevant scholarly literature. Lee and Kim cites Whittekar et al. and defines the nature of South Korean economic growth as “compressed development,” characterized by rapid socioeconomic development within a short time of only a few decades—a feat that took other developed countries over a century (Lee and Kim 174). The condensed nature of the nation’s economic development was beneficial in the beginning, however, the study identifies it as the cause of the country’s slow economic growth and rising class inequality in the last two decades (175). This contributed to the modern day South Korea’s socio-cultural sentiments being shaped by the desperate pursuit of climbing the economic ladder. As analyzed by Bohyeong Kim, “a spirit of capitalism” has emerged among the population of South Korea (Kim 3). He coined the term “critical capitalism,” which involves ordinary lower, middle, and lower-middle class people form a community together which is dedicated to asset accumulation in the forms of stocks, real estates, investments etc. Such activities are a direct response to the economic crisis caused by rising class inequality the country has been enduring for decades. Kim also examines the sentiments behind it, arguing that the South Korean cultural values of prioritizing monetary wealth is not driven by greed or individualism. Rather, he claims that the anxiety, discontent and sense of betrayal experienced by the masses is caused by the state’s unmet promises of stable employment, social mobility, and economic security, therefore, leading the population’s desperation to accumulate assets as an attempt to gain control and dignity in a

system that marginalizes them. However, as Kim points out, it is quite a paradox, the way the lower class members of South Korean society are aware of the system of inequality and discrimination maintained by the upper class, yet they thrive to become a part of the very wealthy community that marginalizes them. Such contradictory values are reflected in various characters of *Parasite*, particularly the Kim family, and this thesis elaborates on these notions in its later chapters.

The aim of this thesis is to discuss how surveillance and class hierarchies are always considered in urban spaces, particularly in the context of the movie *Parasite*. By analyzing the relationship between class and surveillance, the class hierarchy and established power dynamics between classes, the role of space in constructing social hierarchies, how surveillance is embedded in our everyday spaces and the portrayal of class distinction and surveillance through spatial arrangements in *Parasite*, this thesis aims to create a multidimensional approach to film and media studies through incorporating these ideas.

Chapter 3: Class-based Surveillance in *Parasite* (2019)

This chapter explores the relationship between surveillance and power in *Parasite*. According to Michel Foucault, surveillance is inseparable from exercising power. Power produces mechanisms of surveillance to exercise itself continuously and effectively, making its subjects internalize the idea of surveillance. These notions are essential thematic elements in the film *Parasite*. Through visual storytelling, it establishes a commentary on capitalist power by portraying the mentioned Foucauldian notions. This chapter discusses how class-based surveillance is portrayed through the dialogues and actions of each character from the respective classes they represent, the narrative method of the film, as well as subtle camera actions and mis-en-scenes by conducting an in-depth scrutiny of the movie.

3.1. Mechanisms of Surveillance

Surveillance is an essential element for asserting authority over the residents of a society. In a capitalist social structure, mechanisms of surveillance are adopted by the powerful upper class to maintain influence and control. The mechanisms of surveillance discussed by Foucault are also portrayed in *Parasite* through its critique of capitalism. In the movie, the upper class—represented by the Park family appear very polite on the surface. However, they are constantly monitoring individuals beneath their social class—particularly the Kim family, to ensure they are adhering to the appropriate social standards. For example, when Ki-woo first arrives at the Park residence disguised as the home tutor “Kevin,” Mrs. Park asks “For your first lesson today, do you mind if I sit in?” (*Parasite* 00:15:31). Although it was presented as a question, Mrs. Park’s expression and authoritative tone made it appear that it was more of a declaration to exercise her power as Ki-Woo’s employer. Ki-Woo also brings his sister Ki-jung,

disguised as his cousin's classmate "Jessica" to tutor Mrs. Park's son, Da-Song. Ki-Jung, however, resists Mrs. Park's desire to observe and control her in the same way during her lesson, saying, "Madame, please leave us" and as Mrs. Park replies "What?" in disbelief, she calmly states "I never teach with a parent in the room" (00:25:33-00:25:36), a statement that asserts her desire for agency and privacy. This practice of surveillance is also exercised by Mr. Park, in the scene where the newly hired Ki-Taek is taken for his first test drive (00:38:14-00:39:20). Despite Mr. Park stating "This isn't any sort of test drive, so don't be nervous" (00:38:16), the camera is placed close to his face highlighting his expressions, which show him scrutinizing not only Ki-Taek's driving abilities, such as his reliance on GPS or his cornering skills, but also observing his small mannerisms, like his way of speaking or level of respectfulness toward Mr. Park. The Park couple's watchfulness serves two purposes: firstly, to ensure the expertise of their employees, as having access to the most remarkable resources is a symbol of their class status, and secondly, to observe if the lower class people entering their home are behaving in accordance with their class status.

The Smell

Although the Kims manage to deceive the Parks and succeed in securing jobs for themselves, they fail to discard the significant markers of their lower class identity. In *Parasite*, it is symbolized through "the smell." Ki-Jung claims "it's the semi-basement smell" (00:52:24), a result of their poverty-stricken household, and at the same time it symbolizes the significance of class status in a capitalist society, and how it shapes not only the human mind but also leaves a mark on the body that can be sensed physically. Although the Kims convincingly change everything about their original identity, the Parks still recognize the defining attributes of the lower class that separates the Kims from the Parks through the smell. In a particular scene where

Mr. Park returns home with Mr. Kim bringing toys for his son, Da-Song begins to sniff Mr. and Mrs. Kim, and exclaims, “It’s the same! They smell the same!” (00:51:43). Embarrassed, Mrs. Park responds, “What are you talking about? Go up to Jessica” (00:52:00), to which the boy replies, “Jessica smells like that too” (00:52:04). Moreover, after the Park family returns unexpectedly from the picnic, the Kims fail to escape from the Park mansion on time, and hides under various furniture to avoid being caught by the Parks. In the scene where the Parks are lying down on the living room sofa, unaware of Mr. Kim, Ki-Woo and Ki-Jung hiding under it, Mr. Park recognizes the smell and discusses it with his wife:

MR. PARK. Where’s the smell coming from?

MRS. PARK. What smell?

MR. PARK. Mr. Kim’s smell.

MRS. PARK. Mr. Kim?

MR. PARK. Yeah.

MRS. PARK. Not sure what you mean.

MR. PARK. Really? You must have smelled it. That smell that wafts through the car, how to describe it?

MRS. PARK. An old man’s smell?

MR. PARK. No no, it’s not that. What is it? Like an old radish? No, you know when you boil a rag? It smells like that (*Parasite* 01:27:18-01:27:56).

After this exchange, the camera focuses on Mr. Kim lying under the sofa with an ashamed expression, who pulls up his t-shirt and puts it under his nose in an attempt to find this stench they are speaking of. This action shows Ki-Taek's growing self-consciousness about his place as a lower class individual in society, and how he is perceived as an unwanted outlier by the upper class. It reflects Foucault's concept of panoptic gaze, which forces individuals to always be aware of the fact that they are under a constant state of surveillance. As a result, this gaze becomes internalized, and every individual begins to see themselves from the gaze of authority and regulates their own selves. Farahbaksh and Ebrahimi argue that "the film metaphorizes the working class's social position as an object of disgust, contamination, and invisibility" (5). The authors refer to the aforementioned exchange between the Park couple and terms it as 'spatialized disgust' (6), that reinforces how the upper class's surveillance of the lower class is reproduced through the body, extending beyond cameras to include sensory codes. The Kim family, though physically close to the Parks, remain symbolically and ideologically distant as marked by their semi basement dwelling and "disgusting odor". However, in Foucauldian terms, these are forms of micro-discipline—subtle, pervasive markers that normalize class stratification and render the poor visible only through signs of deficiency. These sensory metaphors, according to Farahbaksh and Ebrahimi, function as a 'panopticon of smell', where the lower class is always marked, subject to social judgement, and forced to be self-conscious of their own bodies to cater to the upper class. Through the theme of "the smell", Bong Joon Ho not only highlights how under capitalism class identities become inseparable from one's physical self, and the visibility of one's lower class status subjects them to surveillance, disgust and humiliation by the upper class.

3.2. Reverse Surveillance of the Kim Family

In *Critically Capitalist*, Kim shows how the working class adopts bourgeoisie strategies of accumulating wealth in order to survive in a capitalist economy and prevent facing class-based systemic marginalization. Through the Kim family in *Parasite*, Bong Joon-Ho shows in their desperation to earn more money and secure a dignified lifestyle for themselves, the Kims adopt the upper class strategies of surveillance. As the rich always monitor the working class, in the movie, the Kims also observe the Park family and act in a way that adheres to the expected standards and behaviours likely to be exhibited by the respective roles they are playing. The Kim siblings change their identities into university students belonging from wealthy families, which is why they adopt Westernized names. Ki-Woo takes the name “Kevin” and Ki-Jung calls herself “Jessica” to convince the Parks about their affluent background. Before Ki-Woo’s first visit to the Parks, Ki-Jung is seen in a cyber café forging a false university certificate using photoshop for her brother (00:11:07) to back up the falsely claimed credentials. Moreover, before Ki-Jung enters the Park household for the first time, she practices the key information she memorized about her persona “Jessica” with her brother using a rhyme, “Jessica, only child, Illinois Chicago, classmate Kim Jin-mo, he’s your cousin.” (00:20:54-00:21:00). A significant part of the movie is the Kim family working together to make Moon-Gwang, the housekeeper, lose her job. As Ki-Woo states, “So according to what Da-Hye told me, she’s got a very serious allergy to peaches. You know that fuzz on a peach’s skin? If she’s anywhere near it, she gets a full body rash, has trouble breathing, asthma, a total meltdown!” (00:40:24-00:40:44). In this way, the Kims are seen to observe the Parks and extract crucial information from them for their own gain. During the monologue, the film shows Ki-Jung stealing a peach from a store, Ki-Woo shaving the fuzz and putting it into a pen’s cap, and finally, throwing the fuzz on Moon-Gwang secretly,

whose coughing fit could be heard from the Park mansion as Ki-Woo leaves it behind (00:40:44). Then the film shows Mr. Kim following Moon-Gwang to the hospital, secretly taking her picture, and showing it to Mrs. Park while grocery shopping (00:40:58-00:41:07). Their conversation as follows:

MR. KIM. Madame, this woman behind me, is that-?

MRS. PARK. Oh, it's our housekeeper!

MR. KIM. So it's true. Oh, how sad. I wasn't sure if that was really her. I've only seen her a couple of times in the living room.

MRS. PARK. This was in the hospital?

MR. KIM. A few days ago I went for my annual medical exam. I took a selfie for my wife and there she was behind me.

MRS. PARK. Is she talking on the phone there?

MR. KIM. Anyway, I wasn't trying to eavesdrop... (00:41:07-00:41:40).

Then the camera focuses on Ki-Taek enthusiastically repeating the same line in his own household, holding a written script, revealing that he had been practicing this conversation with Ki-Woo beforehand. Ki-Woo guides his father about his emotional expression, tone and delivery, gesturing with his hand, "Cut! Cut! Dad, your emotions are up here. Bring them down to about here" (00:41:45-00:41:53). The camera continues to go back and forth between showing the practiced dialogue between the father and son and the actual conversation that took place with Mrs. Park, showing Ki-Woo's dialogue "Do people still get TB?" (00:42:25) and his facial expression matching exactly with Mrs. Park (00:42:28). Ki-Woo's ability to predict Mrs. Park's

exact responses show his thorough understanding of the upper class's mentality and mannerisms, and it is achieved through the Kim family turning the tables, and subjecting the Park family to the same manner of surveillance the lower class experience in the vicinity of rich people. Moreover, the Kim family weaponizing the housekeeper Moon-Gwang's peach allergies and falsely accusing her of catching TB to kick her out of her job and instill Mrs. Kim in her position shows how the lower class observes the surveillance strategies of the upper class and internalizes them. They apply these strategies against their fellow working class members to ensure their own survival and achieve upward social mobility. According to Mishra (2022), Bong Joon-ho portrays the Kim family not as revolutionary actors or survivors but as victims of an ideology that they slightly internalize. She argues that their infiltration into the Park household is not a form of resistance but entering an established capitalist structure. "This working class rises up to challenge such established convictions by infiltrating into [the Park family's] homes and disguising their identities"(Mishra 1). This infiltration, however, is far from revolutionary, and "reinforces class hierarchies through performance rather than disrupting them" (5). The Kims' mimicry of upper class identity operates like a disciplinary mechanism that also echoes Foucault's panopticism; they regulate to blend into elite space, fearing exposure. While there is no literal CCTV involved, the visual surveillance enforced by class-coded behavior and aesthetics (speech, dress, behaviour) demonstrates a panoptic gaze. The motivation behind their action also echoes Kim's argument of the working class needing to resort to behaviours and actions of the wealthy, often at the expense of their own class, in a desperate attempt to improve their lives.

3.3. Surveillance Portrayed Through Space

This thesis establishes constant monitoring of the working class by the Bourgeoisie as a mode of discipline and control. This dynamic inevitably extends to the spaces occupied by both classes. In a capitalist society, surveillance through spatial aspects also becomes an instrument of discipline and regulation. For example, in the Park couple's conversation about "the smell," Mr. Park states, "Anyway, even though he always seems about to cross the line, he never does cross it. That's good. I'll give him credit," and immediately follows with a disgusted tone and expression, scrunching his nose and cursing, "but that smell crosses the line, fuck" (01:28:00-01:28:13). It reflects the Foucauldian notion that the systematic hierarchy of power in society differentiates people through their physical bodies, and compels the upper class in positions of power to constantly monitor and want to control the defining aspects of their bodies. He further states, "People who ride the Subway have a specific smell" (01:28:25-01:28:35). Ha et al. show the Subway ridership rate being lower in the socio-economically privileged areas of Seoul (5), implying it is most commonly used by the working class. The film provides this context through Mrs. Park's statement as well, "It's been ages since I rode a subway" (01:28:29). With these remarks, Mr. Park reveals his disgust toward working class people and the spaces they occupy (in this case, the subway). His prejudice reveals how class-based surveillance by the upper class extends beyond their own spaces. Through Mr. Park, the film shows how lower class bodies, spaces and lifestyles are subjected to negativity in a capitalist society.

The Glass Windows

The Park mansion's architectural design also reflects the capitalists' tendency of monitoring people outside their classes. The vicinity of their residence is under CCTV

surveillance at all times, and anyone wanting to enter the home first must show themselves in the monitor. As seen in the scene when Moon-Gwang tries to enter the Park household when the family was out to have a picnic, her face is visible in the security monitor (01:03:26). It shows how the rich ensure visibility of the working class in their own premises to assert control, while keeping their personal lives hidden and inaccessible. Moreover, the Park household is surrounded by huge glass walls and windows to allow enough light inside, also letting its residents to monitor people outside their social classes. Bong Joon-Ho uses the glass windows as a metaphor for a transparent barrier between the two classes, that separates their spaces and allows them to gaze at each other from a distance, yet always remain out of reach. For example, in the scene where Mrs. Park lays off Moon-Gwang, they are sitting on the front lawn, and Da-Song observes their housekeeper being forced to quit through the window, and the camera placement is on his side of the window to convey his perspective of not understanding why she has to leave (00:45:51). Someone of Da-Song's age and privileged background does not understand the complex struggles of Moon-Gwang as a member of the working class, and the glass window he gazes through represents that invisible barrier that can only be felt. The use of glass walls and windows also show the separation of spaces designated for the upper class and the working class. For example, when Ki-Woo came to the Park household in the very beginning as a tutor, he saw Mrs. Kim for the very first time through a glass window (00:14:24). Similarly, when Ki-Taek goes to Mr. Park's office as a candidate for the newly vacant driver's position, their first scene shared together is one where they are placed on two different sides of a glass wall (00:37:53). During the garden party, Ki-Woo is also seen to monitor the activities of the Park family's guests from the glass window of Da-Hye's room (01:45:53). Here also the camera is placed on Ki-Woo's side of the window focusing on his expression as he observes how

naturally people of the upper class can assimilate into the luxurious setting, saying, “Everyone looks so gorgeous, right? Even for a sudden gathering, they are so cool. And look so natural” (01:46:05-01:46:16). As Ki-Woo says this, the camera captures his own face reflecting on the glass. The glass window serves as a barrier here as well, and the reflection symbolizes Ki-Woo’s self-consciousness as a lower class individual, stemming from monitoring the everyday lives of the upper class. His longing to feel included in such an attractive lifestyle opposed to his own is communicated to the viewers as he asks Da-Hye, “In this setting, Do I fit in?” (01:46:28), to which Da-Hye nods in agreement, without really understanding the gravity of Ki-Woo’s question. In this way, Bong Joon-Ho uses glass windows to show the invisible yet apparent divide between the two classes. The characters from opposite socio-economic backgrounds are intentionally placed on two different sides to convey a message regarding the class reality. The transparent, yet undeniably present glass wall shows that even when the characters from different classes share the same space on a scene, there is always an invisible barrier between them, which is impossible to overcome.

The visibility provided by the transparent windows allows both classes to recognize their differences and the barrier symbolizes their inability to truly understand or assimilate with the other. However, for the capitalists, surveillance is a mode of asserting control, while for the working class, it stems from the desire to access the privileges society keeps out of their reach.

The Basement

The portrayal of basements in the movie also shows how the upper class controls visibility of the working class in a capitalist society. The opening scene of the movie highlights the Kims’ small semi-basement apartment, particularly its view from a small window, which

shows only portions of the front street visible from the inside (00:00:55), conveying that their apartment is located in a manner that is invisible from the outside. This positioning reflects Denis's argument on class visibility. His case study portrayed how the lower class workplaces, transportations, and overall lifestyle are hidden away from the sight of the upper class, while establishments made with the aim of promoting consumption and only accessible by the rich take the central stage in an urban landscape, as discussed by Thrift and Williams. According to Noh, the semi basement flat of the Kim family and the hidden cellar beneath the Park residence represent the invisible zones of capitalist exploitation. The semi basement, "a space that is neither fully above nor below ground" (Noh 4) symbolizes the precarious social position of the working class beneath the socially accepted standard of normalcy. The film *Parasite* also metaphorically conveys this sentiment through the positioning of the Kim household, showing how the working class, represented by the Kim family, are systematically made invisible.

Moreover, capitalist society is arranged in a way that limits the working class's vision and controls the sights they can access. When the Kim family stays in the Park mansion while they are out on vacation, they indulge in different forms of entertainment they cannot experience in their own home. For example, in a particular scene Ki-Woo is seen reading a book while lying down in the sun outside in the Park's front lawn. Mrs. Kim asks, "Son! Why are you laying down outside?" Mr. Kim also asks, "Isn't he feeling hot out there?" To their remarks, he replies, "I am gazing at the sky from home. It's so great." (00:55:45-00:56:04). This exchange refers to the fact that nothing of the natural world can be seen from their actual home, like the sky or the sun. It shows how the systemic oppression of the working class not only determines their visibility but also their vision, by determining their visibility and maintaining surveillance by controlling the spaces they can access.

However, the bunker under the Park mansion serves as a symbol of escape from the class-based surveillance. The former housekeeper's husband had been living here for the past four years. After his business failed, the couple had to borrow money from loan sharks, ending up in heavy debts instead. As the wife appeals to Mrs. Kim, "We have no house, no money, only debts. [...] Even after four years of hiding, those debt collectors won't give up. They're still searching for him, threatening to stab him" (01:09:43-01:09:55). This shows the absolute helplessness of the working class and inability to exist in society under the capitalists' constant surveillance. It shows how under capitalism, it is impossible for the poor to climb the economic ladder and improve their situation, let alone barely sustain themselves. Under the ruthless economic system, the only methods accessible to them drive them further into poverty and isolation. Capitalism leaves them no choice but to rely on loan sharks to simply be alive, but despite being unable to fulfill their basic living conditions, they are still expected to pay back their debts to people, who are not struggling financially nearly as much as the couple. In this way, the capitalist monitoring system controls their lives, and prevents them from being a part of society because of their poverty. In order to escape from this surveillance, the husband has no choice but to hide himself away from society and all human interactions, living a parasitic life in the Park basement. Mr. Kim also ends up in the same situation at the ending of the movie, by going into hiding to avoid punishment for stabbing Mr. Park. Therefore, in this context, the Park basement becomes a space where one can escape from capitalist surveillance, conveying that the only way to escape from the capitalist system is absolute social exclusion.

Chapter 4- *Parasite* (2019): A Glimpse into South Korea's Capitalist Social Hierarchy

Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* is fundamentally a critique of capitalism and its impact on society. It sheds light on how a capital-driven, class-based society creates an hierarchy that influences the dynamics among the people living in said society. It also highlights how the exploitative nature of capitalism creates prejudices and conflicts between people in society. The film also shows how the working class, under a system that puts them into a position of constant surveillance, exclusion, discrimination and exploitation, rises up against the upper class in a desperate attempt to claim dignity and agency. This thesis will analyze these themes in context of the theories discussed above.

4.1. Representations of Class Dynamics and Hierarchy

The capitalist society sustains itself by creating and maintaining a distinct division between the classes. Koo (2001) shows how such class hierarchy defines the workplace environment in South Korea and plays a significant role in defining the relationship between the upper class and the working class. He defines the attitude of the managers towards factory workers as "authoritative and patriarchal." Rather than focusing on technical rules applicable for the workers, the factory managers functioned in a despotic and personalistic manner, subjecting their employees to constant verbal and physical abuse (Koo 66). "Like the patriarchs in traditional society, Korean industrialists and managers exercised their authority not on the basis of legality or contractual relationships, but largely on the basis of cultural tradition" (67). Workers were expected to be completely obedient and respectful to their immediate authority, while their authority figures were under no obligation to be concerned about the workers'

personal wellbeing. Factory work in particular “was widely regarded as low status, dirty, and unrespectable” (62), but the general contempt and disrespect for people belonging in the working class strongly sustained in the South Korean society even beyond an industrial setting.

The Line

A representation of the aforementioned class dynamics in South Korean society can be found by analyzing the relationship between Mr. Park and Mr. Kim. Throughout the movie, Mr. Park enforces the concept of a “line” that exists between him and his employees. After Moon-Gwang, the previous housekeeper loses her job, Mr. Park discusses her service with Mr. Kim:

MR. PARK. Sure, it’s easy enough to hire a new one. Still, it’s a shame. She was a great housekeeper.

MR. KIM. I see.

MR. PARK. She kept the house in great shape, and she knew never to cross the line. I can’t stand people who cross the line (00:47:03-00:47:23).

The “line” refers to an arbitrary boundary between classes that is never explicitly clarified in the movie, however, Bong Joon Ho gives the audience various hints on its implications through Mr. Park’s subtle change in expressions and demeanor toward Mr. Kim. For example, when Mr. Park says, “My wife has no talent for housework. She’s bad at cleaning, and her cooking is awful,” and Mr. Kim asks smiling, “Still, you love her, right?” (00:47:54-00:48:02). Mr. Kim’s response makes Mr. Park pause, the camera captures him looking offended and in disbelief, until he laughs to hide his tense expression and replies, “Of course. I love her. We’ll call it love”

(00:48:10-00:48:16). A similar exchange is also seen at the garden party, as they were dressed as native Americans to surprise Da-Song:

MR. KIM. I guess your wife likes events and surprises.

MR. PARK. Yeah, she does. But she's particularly into this party.

MR. KIM. You're trying your best too. Well, you love her after all (01:47:49-01:48:08).

At this, Mr. Park stops smiling and looks subtly angry as he says, "Mr. Kim. You're getting paid extra. Think of this as part of your work, okay?" (01:48:12-01:48:27). It can be seen that as Mr. Kim initiates personal conversations, Mr. Park reminds him of his position as an employee and warns against overfamiliarity. This shows the refusal of the upper class to acknowledge the lower class as fellow human beings and form a connection with them. In this way they reinforce class hierarchies to maintain the status quo, making it impossible for different classes to form meaningful relationships.

Bong Joon Ho also visually portrays the "line" in various scenes of the film. For example, even before the aspect of the "line" is mentioned in the film, Bong Joon Ho foreshadows the idea during Moon-Gwang and Mrs. Kim's first interaction in the film, as Ki-Woo watches them from a glass window. The glass window has a line, and the two characters, Mrs. Park and Moon-Gwang are placed on two sides of the line, physically portraying the abstract boundary, or "line" that exists between the two. (00:14:24). It reinforces Mr. Park's later statement on Moon-Gwang never crossing the line as a working class individual. Her awareness of this boundary, which is not only abstract but also physical, sustained her influence in the Park household. However, during the conversation with Mrs. Park when the housekeeper is fired, she is shown to be on the same side of the line as Mrs. Park (00:45:57). This scene conveys the

accusation of Moon-Gwang hiding her illness implied she put the wellbeing of the Park family at risk, and she had therefore, finally crossed the “line”. And as a consequence of doing so, she was removed from the family’s service. The audience also finds use of the “line” in the first meeting of Mr. Kim and Mr. Park (00:38:06). Both the separation of space through glass and the use of line are symbolic divisions of their class status. Particularly when these characters meet for the first time, this boundary is the most apparent, as a commentary on their obvious differences. However, over time, the characters of the Kim family manage to assimilate with the lives of the Park family, they attempt to slowly overcome these boundaries, spatially as well as mentally, which leads to the film's eventual climax.

The film’s title also provides noteworthy commentary on portraying the Marxist class dynamic through the Parks and the Kims. It is titled *Parasite* because the Kim family infiltrates the Park household as employees in secret and experiences their luxurious lifestyle when the Parks are not at home. It also refers to the former housekeeper’s husband, who had been overwhelmed with debt. To escape loan sharks, he had been living in the mansion’s basement for many years by feeding off its owner, much like the parasitic creatures living in households. Mrs. Kim also makes this comparison, “Suppose Park walked through that door now, what about your dad? He’d run and hide like a cockroach. Kids, you know at our house, when you turn on the light and the cockroaches scatter?”(01:01:50-01:02:09). Mrs. Kim’s statement foreshadows the ending of the film. After the garden party, the Park family leaves the house and it remains empty for a long time, until it is sold to a German family. In his letter sent to Ki-Woo in morse code, Mr. Kim admits to hiding in the basement. The film shows him coming up at night secretly and taking food from the fridge, his letter stating, “Each time I go upstairs, I take my life in my hands” (02:03:15-02:03:35). These aspects point at the fact that the lower class people in society

become compelled to live such parasitic lives because the capitalist society does not allow them to exist otherwise. Viewed from a Marxist lens, the film also poses the question: between the Parks and the Kims, who is the real parasite? The Kims and the housekeeper couple struggle to afford basic human living conditions, while the Parks accumulate more wealth than they need to live in such luxuries. The wealthy status of the Parks is a product of the exploitation of people like the Kim family or their former housekeeper. Despite relying on the lower class's labour for maintaining their lifestyle, the Parks view their employees as easily discardable objects they can replace anytime. Therefore, considering the film from a Marxist perspective, it can be said that the upper class, represented by the Parks, are the real parasites of society.

4.2. Class Conflict and Spatial Division

Space can be considered as one of the many determining factors behind the social relationships based on power and class. Spatial dynamics are central to understanding how social hierarchies are constructed and maintained. *Parasite* communicates how class division is not only present in everyday aspects of our lives, they are also embedded in the way different types of spaces are arranged, particularly in a contemporary urban context.

The Park and Kim Households

The film draws our attention to the overt difference in the spaces occupied by the two families in the film. The distinct “smell” of the Kim family is a result of living in their semi-basement home. Their identity as the lower class members of society is determined by the space they live in, and this change is irreversible. Moreover, it is important to note that the Kim household is located in a semi-basement. Meaning, it exists in an in-between place of having a socially acceptable, comfortable financial condition and absolute poverty. The symbolism

conveyed by the location of their house is confirmed through their lifestyle, which shows how they are not facing absolute poverty and starvation, but barely making ends meet to stay afloat. Observing the state of the Kim household, it is evident that they cannot afford many basic necessities. Mrs Kim states “Our phones are shut off, now our wi-fi is shut off” (00:02:11) after their neighbour changed her password, implying that their phones do not get network from their basement, and they also cannot afford to pay wi-fi bills. It portrays how the only spaces cheap enough for the lower class to inhabit bars them from accessing the basic human right to communicate with the outside world. Moreover, their semi-basement apartment is also seen to be too small for a four-person family. Their rooms are small, corridors are narrow and the place is cluttered with various objects due to the lack of space. After the rain, their semi-basement home gets completely flooded, their toilet is also seen to get clogged with fecal matter pushing out of it (01:35:20-01:36:20). This state of the Kim household shows the spaces designated for the working class often fail to fulfill the basic human needs of its dwellers, such as access to the outer world and information, enough room for its residents, a functioning sewage system etc.

The Parks on the contrary, occupy a space that fulfills far beyond their fundamental necessities. Every family member has their designated bedroom, the living and dining areas have a large amount of free space, and the house also has a spacious garden in the front. Their bathrooms are larger than a bedroom of the Kim household. Although both families have the same number of members, the disparity between the spaces allocated to them brings attention to the class disparity in society. The capitalist class not only owns all means of production, but they also occupy a large amount of space in urban areas to show off their wealth. Which is why despite being only a family of four, the Park family lives in a two-floored mansion. The luxuries the Parks indulge in within their space shows the habit of overconsumption within the capitalist

class, and they consciously maintain this lifestyle to validate their class identity. However, the space they occupy is not only built on the labours of the working class, but also a result of depriving the working class of their basic necessities. Because of rich people's homes, like the Parks, taking up more space than they need in the urban landscape, the working class is deprived of the space necessary to live a comfortable life. They get forced into subpar living conditions without their needs being met.

Shujaat, Sherazi and Elahi (2025) emphasizes the symbolic and material functions of key spatial structures in the film, the semi-basement, the Park family's elevated home and the hidden basement as layered metaphors of social (in)visibility, psychological repression and structural violence. The semi-basement represents a liminal zone, the Kims are not completely underground, but not entirely part of the world above either—a metaphor for their precarious, peripheral existence. As the authors explains, “the half-buried space captures the family's social position: they see glimpses of prosperity but cannot access it (128). The Park home, by contrast, sits on higher ground both literally and symbolically, its architecture designed to conceal rather than reveal. Most crucially, the hidden cellular, even unknown to the Park family, becomes the ultimate symbol of suffering and suppressed social reality that Shujaat, Sherazi and Elahi calls a “spatial graveyard of the surplus population-unseen, unheard and unaccounted for in the public imagination (130).

Moreover, the film differently positions the spaces inhabited by its characters with the intention to provide a crucial message on class disparity. It can be seen that the Parks are portrayed as literally the “upper” class. Their mansion is physically above the rest of the city. Reaching their residence and navigating the inside of their household requires a significant amount of climbing upwards. The film portrays this aspect by showing the characters' constantly

climbing upwards or using stairs within the household throughout the film. For example, when Ki-Woo enters the Park mansion for the first time, he is seen walking along a road that moves in the upward direction. Moreover, inside the Park residence, the audience is shown more stairs, to reach the garden, then the living space, and the bedrooms afterwards, requires constant climbing of stairs. This positioning of the Park household, and the characters having to move physically upwards to reach the Parks' personal space metaphorically represents socio-economic upward mobility.

On the contrary, the characters need to go downwards to reach the Kim residence. In this context as well, the film uses visual portrayal of stairs to represent that the Kims are not only at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, but are physically placed below most people due to their poverty. For example, when Ki-Woo, Ki-Jung and Ki-Taek escape from the Park mansion to return to their own home in the pouring rain, they are seen to climb down a lot of stairs, and the roads they take also lead to a downward direction. This symbolizes that their joyful moments at the Park mansion were temporary, because they were only pretending to be above their class status and experience having access to wealth. However, now they have to literally return to the "lower" class again.

The Rain

Moreover, the film's depiction of rain also hints at how social spaces are specifically structured to benefit the upper class. When the Kim family is returning to their home, the camera is moving down, then cuts to Ki-Woo looking down at the rain water accumulating on the streets moving downwards with them (01:34:54-01:35:04). Then they go home and find the water has entered their home and completely flooded the entire place, drowning and destroying everything

they own. This scene conveys that the water-management system of their city is designed in a manner that keeps the rich unaffected by any weather-related inconvenience. However, the comfort of the upper class is achieved at the cost of the wellbeing of the lower class. All the rain water accumulates in the lower region of the city, and the people who have no choice but to live there, suffer the consequences of the rich people's privileged lifestyle. As rain continues to fall, the water level in their home rises even more. The Kims helplessly scramble to get their belongings somewhere safe, the lights flicker to show their electricity shutting down, and the camera points to the window showing the slow rise of water submerging the entire space (01:38:06-01:38:40). This scene is intended to symbolize how the Kims continue to drown their sufferings induced by poverty, and it is near impossible to escape their situation. In this way, the film hints at how the construction of spaces varies in relation to class dynamics. It points out the evident disparity in space allocation and construction that determine comfort and privilege in a class-based society.

The film shows the division of spaces between classes to comment on the capitalist social system. Spatial division is essential to maintain the established class hierarchy in society. The capitalist class is entitled to a huge area of space which is more than they need, and also likes to assert control over spaces occupied by the working class by subjecting them to surveillance. However the opposite happens when a member of the lower class enters their space. It causes the upper class to feel uncomfortable, as it is subversive of the social dynamic natural to them. They cannot accept or trust the working class members existing in the spaces of the capitalists, because they do not view people of lower class as equal to themselves. The film captures this capitalist crisis by showing the discomfort of the Parks when a lower class member enters their space. For instance, Mr. Park finds women's underwear in the car (which was previously left by Ki-Jung),

and assumes that his driver has been having sex in his car. He remarks, “A young guy’s sex life is his own business, that’s all fine. But why in my car? And if so, why not in his seat? Why cross the line like that?” (00:33:11-00:33:19). He is angry about an employee being sexually intimate in his car, but he is more offended at the idea of the driver doing so in Mr. Park’s seat. Mr. Park is particularly upset at the idea of someone from the lower class entering and becoming intimate in his own space, which he calls “crossing the line.” Throughout the movie, Mr. Park repeatedly insists on maintaining this arbitrary idea of a line, which reinforces and maintains established class hierarchy. Mrs. Park also shows similar sentiments as her husband while sharing space with a member of the working class. For instance, she calls Mr. Kim to the sauna room to secretly discuss the dismissal of their housekeeper. However, the moment Mr. Kim enters the closed space, Mrs. Park becomes visibly uncomfortable at the proximity. It shows how as a member of the upper class, she is uncomfortable with a person of the lower class being in physically close vicinity. Moreover, when Mr. Kim offers his hand to her for a handshake, as a gesture of their mutual collaboration, Mrs. Park is seen to hesitate to offer her hand and try to pull away. Upon Mr. Kim’s initiative, they end up shaking hands, but Mrs. Kim immediately asks him whether he has washed his hands (00:45:45). This interaction shows how the wealthy perceive the poor as inherently unhygienic, and feel physical interaction with them as a threat to their own wellbeing, let alone share a space with them.

4.3. Proletariat Resistance in *Parasite*

The Kims eventually become aware of this unfair class disparity. Mr. Kim’s realization is seen as the camera focuses on his expression as he drives Mrs. Park driving after grocery shopping for the garden party, while she states “Today the sky is so blue, and no pollution! Thanks to all the rain yesterday” (01:44:38). This shows her complete lack of awareness about

other people's sufferings. The Park family has the luxury to enjoy a garden party on a sunny day after rain, while the Kim family has lost everything because of it. Along with the Park couples' constant remarks on "the smell" also adds to his growing awareness of the fundamental difference between the classes, along with the fact that these differences are a product of the situation society forces the lower class to be in.

Geun-Sae's Emergence

The Kim family's growing self-awareness fuels the climax of the film. After Moon-Gwang arrives in the Park household, the Kim family becomes aware of the presence of the basement and her husband living there. Accidentally, the Kims fall over the stairs while eavesdropping on Mrs. Kim's conversation with Moon-Gwang, and their lies become exposed to the housekeeper couple (01:10:37). The two families get into a fight to expose each other to the Parks, and the Kims manage to escape while Moon-Gwang gets a concussion from falling down the stairs, and eventually dies (01:37:25). After this incident, the Kim family attempts to show various acts of compassion toward the housekeeper couple despite their initial conflict. For example, during the garden party, Ki-Jung wants to go down in the basement and have a discussion, as the Kims don't know about Moon-Gwang's death yet. Mrs. Kim hands her a plate of food, saying, "Take this down to them" (01:48:58). Moreover, Ki-Woo is seen taking the rock given by his friend Min in the beginning of the film to the housekeeper couple (01:49:30). Min had mentioned that "this stone here is said to bring material wealth to families" (00:07:53), and the Kim family improved their financial status through affiliation with the Park family after receiving the stone. Therefore, Ki-Woo takes the stone down to the housekeeper couple, hoping it would bring fortune to them as well. These acts of compassion show their empathy and a growing understanding about solidarity with their fellow working class members. However, in a

fit of rage, Geun-Sae comes above the basement and fatally injures Ki-Woo with the stone (01:51:27). He enters the garden party with a knife in hand, looking for the other Kim family members to avenge his wife. Geun-Sae's emergence from the basement and coming before the Parks is a symbolic rise of the lower class against the invisibility imposed upon them by the upper class. By losing Moon-Gwang, Geun-Sae reaches the point of desperation where he no longer cares about the laws that oppress him. His rise represents an act of resistance against a society that takes away his agency and visibility.

Mr. Kim's Resistance

Mr. Kim also conveys a similar act of resistance in the film by stabbing Mr. Park. Geun-Sae charges toward Ki-Jung and stabs her in the chest in the garden party, and Da-Song suffers from a seizure in fear from seeing him (01:53:11-01:53:20). The Parks are in a rush to take the boy to the hospital, while the Kims hold their daughter in their arms as she bleeds to death. Unaware of the relationship between the Kim family members, Mr. Park commands Mr. Kim to take Da-Song to the hospital. Mr. Kim, however, freezes in panic, and the camera focuses on his helpless expression to emphasize his inability to keep up the act with the Park family (01:54:11). Mr. Park screams for the car keys, and Mr. Kim throws it toward him, but it falls under Geun-Sae struggling with Mrs. Kim (01:54:28). As Mr. Park attempts to retrieve the key, he moves away his face immediately, frowning in disgust, and takes the key away while holding his nose (01:54:54-01:54:58), again disgusted at the smell. At that moment, the camera focuses on the shift in Mr. Kim's expression, something triggering in him, and he instantly gets up and stabs Mr. Park in the chest (01:55:01-01:55:13). This action can be seen as an act of resistance by the working class against the bourgeoisie, who, despite relying on the proletariat's labour to maintain their lifestyle, are disgusted and prejudiced towards them. Mr. Kim stabbing Mr. Park is

a revolutionary symbol of the proletariat finally asserting their agency and standing against the constant dehumanization of the upper class demanding respect and compassion.

Both the actions of Geun-Sae and Mr. Kim reflect Marx's prediction in the *Capital*. Marx believed that one day the working class will unite and rise up against all the oppression, dehumanization and prejudices they have been subjected to by the bourgeoisie, and bring forth a communist revolution. However, the ending of the film also shows Mr. Kim's further demise. After stabbing Mr. Park, Mr. Kim slips into the bunker and escapes being captured for his crime. Like Geun-Sae, he continues to live in the bunker. Meanwhile the Kim family's condition deteriorates. Ki-Jung is dead and Ki-Woo recovers from a month-long coma from his brain injury and faces trial with his mother, and keeps struggling financially as they once used to. Mr. Kim's descent from a semi-basement to a fully underground basement symbolically shows the deterioration of his condition. The film's ending hints at the impossibility of the working class to overcome the oppression of capitalist society. However, Ki-Woo still dreams of one day buying the Park mansion, freeing his father, and making his family united again. However, the film leaves it ambiguous whether he is actually able to accomplish that in the future by keeping it open-ended.

Chapter 5- Conclusion

In conclusion, *Parasite* (2019) demonstrates that surveillance, class division and spatial dynamics are a part of the overall social system that reinforce and maintain the capitalist structure. By consulting notions from the text *Discipline and Punish* by Michel Foucault, the film portrays surveillance as a disciplinary mechanism run by the upper class that regulates behavior, reinforces the social norms expected of particular classes and maintains the established class order, by portraying “the smell” as a mechanism of controlling the body of the lower class. However, it also inspires the lower class members like the Kim family to learn from these behaviors and subvert traditional class dynamics by subjecting the Park family, representing the upper class, to surveillance instead. The film also portrays the glass windows and the basement as physical representations of surveillance. Moreover, *Parasite* also actively portrays the complex class dynamic between the Kim and the Park family by highlighting their interactions throughout the film. This research studies how these social commentaries on class dynamics and class hierarchy are portrayed from a Marxist point of view by analyzing dialogues, character interactions and visual themes. The class dynamic between the Park and the Kim family is portrayed through the concept of the line. Class conflict is also reflected through the film’s use of space by portraying the contrast between the Park and the Kim household. Moreover, the scenes during the rain also showed the arrangement of domestic and urban spaces as a visual representation of class disparity and how it shapes individuals’ movements, interactions, and visibility within the social order. The film illustrates how architecture and geography become tools through which surveillance is enacted and class distinctions are maintained. Together, these elements reveal that surveillance functions not only through direct observation but through spatial and social structures that normalize unequal relationships between the social classes.

Ultimately, *Parasite* offers a cohesive critique of capitalism by demonstrating how surveillance disciplines individuals into hierarchical roles, how class identities reflect systemic conflicts rooted in labor and economic power, and how spatial arrangements crystallize the boundaries that separate and define social groups. In bringing these mechanisms into alignment, the film presents a comprehensive commentary on the ways capitalist societies reproduce inequality through intertwined systems of control, representation, and organization, making clear that these forces operate collectively rather than independently.

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