

Parasites, Pests, and the Working-Class Necropolitical Extermination in *Parasite*

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Keywords: Class Struggle, Dehumanization, Film Studies, Necropolitics, Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, Spatial Inequality

Trigger Warnings: Discussions of death and dehumanization

Abstract:

Bong Joon-ho's Parasite (2019) offers a scathing critique of class disparity when viewed through the lens of necropolitics, illustrating how the systemic dehumanization of the working class relegates them to conditions akin to "social death." Through its portrayal of the Kims—an impoverished family infiltrating the affluent Park household—Parasite uses physical spaces, metaphors, and the concept of necropolitics to critique capitalism's role in perpetuating class stratification. The Kims' semi-basement apartment, a space marked by environmental toxicity, flooding, and overcrowding, becomes a symbol of their marginalization, reflecting Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics, whereby the lives of the poor are governed by forces that dictate who should live and who must die. In contrast, the Parks' spacious, elevated home symbolizes a stark separation from such precarious conditions. Through this spatial divide, the film demonstrates how capitalism's structural inequalities push working-class populations into vulnerability, stripping them of agency and dignity. Moreover, Bong's use of pest metaphors, such as the comparison of the Kims to cockroaches, underscores the dehumanizing effects of this systemic violence. Parasite ultimately presents a dual parasite metaphor: while the Kims rely on the Parks for survival, the Parks, in turn, exploit the Kims' labor. The violent climax suggests that this mutually parasitic system is unsustainable, as it collapses in on itself, implicating even the wealthy in the systemic violence. By exposing the precariousness of social hierarchies, Parasite serves as a reminder of the shared vulnerabilities that underpin global capitalist systems and the urgent need for collective action to challenge them.

Bong Joon-ho's 2019 South Korean dark comedy *Parasite* provides a satirical account of the class difference between two families, the working-class Kims and the wealthy Parks. It demonstrates the Kims infiltrating the lives and household of the Parks in search of better lives. Using physical spaces, metaphors, and necropolitics as frameworks, Bong critiques the systemic dehumanization and "social death" inflicted upon the Kims. Ultimately, *Parasite* portrays capitalism as a necropolitical system that distinguishes the working-class as the parasites and pests of society, who are sacrificed so that the upper-class may thrive.

Bong's portrayal of physical spaces depicts the influence of spatial necropolitics in the Kims' lives. While the Parks reside on a hill in a tastefully designed, spacious home (*Parasite* 13:27-14:07), the Kims are confined to a dark, cramped, semi-basement apartment, where they struggle to make ends meet (01:01-03:19). The Kims' neighbourhood is in a low-income area that is often adversely affected by pollution, uncleanliness, and a urinating drunkard (06:08-32). Unlike the Parks' affluent neighbourhood, the Kims' poverty-stricken neighbourhood and semi-basement apartment are also prone to flooding with sewage water (01:35:40-01:36:53). This creates a zone of death as the Kims are segregated into spaces with limited access to healthcare, clean water, and sanitation, exposing them to severe health risks. As such, they significantly lose control over their health and bodies. Such debilitating circumstances, Sang-Keun Yoo explains, subject the Kims to necropolitical environmental toxicity, where systemic forces compel working-class populations to endure life-threatening conditions (Yoo 62). Achille Mbembe's "necropolitics" – which refers to the institutional powers that govern which populations should live and which must die (Mbembe 92) – provides a framework to understand the Kims' challenges. Seoul's semi-basement apartments were originally built in the 1970s during the Cold War to serve as emergency shelters, but "became permanent dwellings" due to a housing crisis (Yoo 63). These conditions render the Kims partially dead, as they are partly buried in a substandard residential environment and

are subject to conditions that strip them of agency and dignity. Likewise, Geun-sae's condition in the Parks' basement further resembles a living corpse fully deprived of necessities (*Parasite* 01:09:01-10). In contrast, the Parks are not subject to the same toxic environmental conditions as the Kims or Geun-sae, suggesting how spatial necropolitics predisposes working-class populations to adversity and health crises while protecting the upper-class.

Serving as a bleak commentary on class-specific environmental toxicity and spatial necropolitics is the architectural build of the Kims' toilet, which becomes a symbol of their poverty (Yoo 63). With "the city's sewer pipeline [running] higher than the floor" (63), The Kims are forced to climb the stairs for even the most basic human functions. The health risks of such endangered spaces evoke sympathy for Geun-sae as he represents the working-class population that is even more dilapidated, invisible, and marginalized than the Kims. As an individual who is hiding from loan sharks (*Parasite* 01:09:12), he is factually homeless. Additionally, by imagining a metaphorical "wedding" ceremony (01:22:31-48) in the basement bunker, Geun-sae indicates his comfort in such precarious conditions. Agreeably, Yoo's claim that "the most terrifying aspect of [Geun-sae's] metamorphosis is his normalization of necropolitical conditions" (Yoo 61) is persuasive, because Geun-sae's behavior reflects his psychological adaptation to and wholehearted acceptance of substandard living conditions, reflecting his loss of rights over his body and mind. Geun-sae's state is what Mbembe aptly describes as "social death," a condition where one loses control of their home, body, and political agency (Mbembe 75). The Kims' and Geun-sae's tolerance of such spatial inequality and environmental toxicity underscores how necropolitical exploitation can become so seamlessly integrated in the minds of the working-class that they begin to identify with a life that is determined by death, devastation, and dehumanization.

The precarious conditions of the spaces that the Kims and Geun-sae are seen in depict the predatory nature of capitalism, suggesting a

Illustration by Hilary Vuong



neglect of the working-class populations on the system's part to the extent that it subjects these populations to death-like circumstances. The capitalist system in *Parasite* resonates with Mbembe's concept of "sovereign," the higher constitution that "largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die" (Mbembe 66). Mijeong Kim explains that this neglect could be largely because the system views the Kims as a "surplus" to the economy who do not deserve to be saved (Kim 22). These boundaries underscore how capitalism cancels the working-class populations so that the wealthy can flourish. One might therefore argue that Bong portrays capitalism as a necropolitical system that governs lives not for the benefit of individuals (Simpson) but for the functioning of the system and the maintenance of social hierarchies. Consequently, it feels reasonable to posit that the Kims' apartment is not only a portrayal of the working-class' subterranean existence but also their undeniable proximity to death. Death is almost declared and imposed upon the Kims and Geun-sae, and as working-class individuals who do not possess any power, they cannot escape this institutional control. Instead, they internalize these mechanisms of control, demonstrating how necropolitical influence forces the working-class to transform into languid and almost lifeless, or, "[socially dead]" entities (Mbembe 75).

Besides treating them as living corpses, necropolitical forces also subject the Kims to subhuman treatment. When city workers spray insecticide near their semi-basement apartment, Ki-taek insists on leaving the windows open to benefit from the "free" fumigation (*Parasite* 03:24-55). As the chemicals used during fumigations in Korea are "heavily toxic to human bodies" and increase air toxicity, Yoo's argument about the health risks being greater in the Kims' neighbourhood than in the Park mansion is logical (Yoo 64), but one might explicate that the fumigator in this instance symbolizes the necropolitical influence that swears to eradicate the Kims, as though they are pests (Farahbakhsh and Ebrahimi 99). This represents the dehumanization of the working-class (Simpson), as the fumigator literally and metaphorically

"metamorphosizes" (Yoo 66) the Kims into disease-causing insects. The pest imagery recurs when Chung-sook jokingly compares Ki-taek to a cockroach that would hide if Mr. Park suddenly returned home (*Parasite* 01:01:53-58), and that is what precisely happens as Ki-taek hides under a table upon Mr. Park's return (01:25:35). Cockroaches are often associated with filth and darkness, and this imagery underscores that the poor, like pests, often remain hidden in the presence of the wealthy. Albeit jokingly, Chung-sook's dialogue echoes the societal constraints that the working-class must accept to survive in a capitalist system. Alternatively, Alireza Farahbakhsh and Ramtin Ebrahimi also offer another interpretation of this scene, mentioning that the Kims "can only become themselves in the shadow of the rich, or through hiding their true identity during the day" (99). Accordingly, this fear and instinct for survival attaches an almost non-human, vampiric characteristic to the Kims, as they embrace their identities only at night, away from the eyes of the Parks. The cockroach imagery thus critiques the necropolitical "sovereign" (Mbembe 79) that promises the wealthy a life of light, comfort, and luxury by sharpening the boundaries between the upper- and working-classes, predetermining the latter to both social and literal death.

As the Kims metamorphose into subhuman, insect-like creatures, the metaphor of the title *Parasite* takes greater significance. Effectively, Bong invites his audience to recognize that the pest references and the metaphorical connotations of the film's title are interwoven (Simpson). Although the cockroach imagery exclusively signals the subhuman treatment of the Kims, the parasite metaphor functions omnidirectionally (Simpson). The Kims and Geun-sae are undeniably parasitic to the Parks. However, the Parks are equally parasitic to the Kims. The Parks remain oblivious to the challenges the Kims undergo (*Parasite* 01:44:18-32) but continually rely on them for the various laborious services that help manage their lifestyle. While the Parks assume that they are immune to hardships, the violence in the climax of the film (01:50:56-01:56:15) suggests otherwise. As the rich experience the same outcomes as the poor – literal death – the dual function of the parasite

metaphor further unravels. Although Ki-taek knows that Mr. Park is repulsed by his odor, his galvanizing moment of recognition strikes only when Geun-sae is subjected to the same aversion (Simpson). This suggests that the actions of the necropolitical system produce repercussions that are problematic to the system itself – the thematic violence portrayed throughout the film manifests literally in the climax (Simpson) as the system’s reliance on exploiting and dehumanizing the poor backfires. This collapse of social hierarchy reveals that the systemic violence that is confined to the working-class can dissipate, implicating even the wealthy into chaos, destruction, and death.

Bong’s *Parasite* portrays capitalism as a necropolitical system that normalizes the exploitation and dehumanization of the working-class. Bong’s film ultimately prompts us to understand that class and wealth disparities are universal challenges, and various global systems of power often determine who is deemed worthy of a dignified existence and who is destined for death – social or literal. But, most importantly, Bong uses his film as a reminder that we can all find ourselves in the same plight as the Kims unless collective action is taken to prevent these systemic forces from invading our lives.

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