

Korean Realist Cinema's Reflection on Society: College Students' Perspectives and Insights Through Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite*

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Abstract. Film has always been one of the most critical mediums to reflect society and culture. Korean films have always been the focus of many film-loving professionals. In the past decade or so, with the continuous development of the Korean film and television industry, last year Netflix also opened a branch directly in Korea, which has helped Korean films and television to go global and occupy a place in Asia and even the whole world; among them, the most representative and hotly debated film genre is the Korean realism film. The most representative and hotly debated film genre is the Korean realist film. Korean realist films have always been controversial, and "dare to film" and "dare to screen" have become the label of Korean realist films. The Korean realist film *Parasite* has attracted widespread discussion for its social satire in social sciences and complex storyline. This paper will explore the similarities and differences between the film *Parasite* and the Korean real society from the perspective of contemporary Korean college students by interviewing them about their views on the film *Parasite* and modern Korean society as a way of reacting to the relationship between Korean realist films and the real society. The film's exaggerated and overly fictionalized plot responds to the core issues of real Korean society, including social inequality, class disparity, and fierce social competition, and to some extent triggers some college students' fear and anxiety about their future entry into society; at the same time, the film's fictionality and plot extremes need to be taken into account in order to understand the relationship between its content and real Korean society.

Keywords: Korean College Students; Korean Film; Korean Society.

1. Introduction

The realist film genre is characterized by an attempt to respond to real life, social issues, and human experience truthfully and objectively. Films in this genre aim to capture the real emotions, relationships, and social situations of life, usually avoiding exaggerated, fictional, or overly artistic elements. As a highly regarded genre, it plays a vital role in exploring social issues, human nature, and cultural reflection [1].

Among them, modern Korean films are particularly prominent in the development of the film market. Korea is a country with a complex national culture, located in the Korean Peninsula, with a very complicated geopolitical environment. Politics and economy are incredibly dependent on the big powers, which leads to the Korean national culture being inevitably affected by the strong culture, but also makes the national culture have a great inclusiveness. These changes have also profoundly affected the foundation of Korean cinema; moreover, Korea is known as the "living fossil of Confucianism." Confucianism culture not only has a subtle influence on Korean society but also Korean cinema; secondly, social stratification. Secondly, social stratification. With the advancement of modernisation in Korea, social stratification and the gap between the rich and the poor have gradually intensified, and this has become the central theme of many realistic films. This social differentiation provides profound social issues that films can reflect and explore [1, 2].

Parasite is a film by South Korean director Bong Joon-ho, which debuted at the Cannes Film Festival on 21 May 2019 and was released domestically in South Korea on 30 May 2019; it was then released worldwide. At the 92nd Academy Awards in 2020, *Parasite* was a huge success, taking home a total of four major awards - Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay and Best International Feature.

In terms of the film's content, *Parasite* has a unique and original storyline; the metaphor of "Parasite" is used as a clue throughout the film. The story takes place in Seoul, Korea, and focuses on two families: the Kim family, who live in a poor basement in a harsh environment, and the Park family, who live in a decadent mansion that many people aspire to. One day, the son of the Kim family, Ki-Woo, starts working as a tutor in the park family through a friend. In the process, the Kim family gradually infiltrates the Park family's life, and through various clever and unscrupulous ways, helps each member of the Kim family get a job. However, when the Kim family begins to reveal some of the park family's deepest secrets, the story gradually evolves into a psychological and social struggle between the family and the social class. Combining elements of black humour, suspense, and social satire, this film deeply explores the gap between social classes and provokes deep thoughts among viewers [1, 3].

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the similarities and differences between the film *Parasite* and contemporary Korean society from the perspective of contemporary Korean university students. Korean university students are part of society, and their views and experiences reflect the younger generation's views on social issues, which makes them a suitable group to study this topic. Korean university students can provide us with their perspectives and help us better understand the relationship between the plots and themes in the films and the life experiences of the younger generation. This paper discusses in detail the iconic Korean realist film *Parasite* and the social message that director Bong Joon-ho conveys in the film from the perspective of contemporary Korean college students by understanding the context of contemporary Korean society. This paper provides an opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of the relationship between social issues and the art of cinema. In this way, a better understanding can be gained of how cinema reflects and challenges the core issues of contemporary Korean society, as well as the younger generation's view of society's future.

2. Literature Review

Social mobility has become a compelling theme in Korean cinema, especially in films directed by Bong Joon-ho. Bong Joon-ho's films, such as *Parasite*, profoundly explore the gap between social classes and the impact of the capitalist system on society. In studies such as the social implications of Metaphor in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, it is written that the film subtly reveals the reality of social inequality and class struggle through the use of metaphor and symbolism [4]. For example, through the metaphor of *Parasites*, viewers can see the interaction between the rich and the poor in a capitalist society, and this parasitic relationship is reflected in real life [5].

These films have attracted widespread attention on the international stage not only because of their directorial skills but also because of their social commentary and deep social insights. Through their visual and narrative approach, these films have made viewers reflect on social inequalities and stimulated discussions on social justice [6]. They have become a hot topic in the field of cultural and film studies, attracting scholars to delve deeper into how Korean cinema explores social mobility, class struggle, and the impact of capitalism [1].

In conclusion, Korean reality films, especially Bong Joon-ho's works, have successfully presented the importance of social mobility, class struggle, and capitalism in modern society through metaphors and symbols. These films have not only caused a sensation in the film industry but have also sparked a profound exploration of these critical themes in the field of academic research [7, 8].

3. Research Methodology

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Korean university students' perceptions of and reactions to the film, this paper uses interview. by interviewing contemporary Korean university students and analyzing their responses in order to explore the audience's emotions and understandings of the film *Parasite* and how the film affects their perceptions of society. This method

of investigation helped to provide quantitative data that provided deeper insights for the analysis of this study.

Firstly, for the purpose of this interview, the research questions and objectives were identified based on the content of the study; among them, the research question was to study the relationship between Korean modernist-themed films and the actual society as exemplified by director Bong Joon-ho's work *Parasite* from the viewpoints of university students and their reflections. There were six main interview questions in this interview plan, which are in the following order:

1. What is the most impressive episode of the film *Parasite*?
2. Tell us what you think and feel after watching the film *Parasite*.
3. What social issues do you think the director was trying to highlight in the film *Parasite*?
4. In the film *Parasite*, what do you think created the gap between the Park and Kim families?
5. Do you think the character roles and storyline in the film *Parasite* exist in real life in Korea?

Are there similar situations around you?

6. What impact did the film *Parasite* have on Korean society after its release?

The interviewees for this interview were eight undergraduates from Sungkyunkwan University in South Korea, studying in different majors, who were about to enter the society on the premise that they had watched the film *Parasite* and were familiar with its contents. After contacting them, the interviews were conducted and recorded on mobile phones for review during analysis. During the process, we learned about the connection and gap between the film *Parasite* and their living environment from childhood to adulthood from many Koreans and had a deeper discussion with them. The content and results of this interview contributed significantly to the conclusions of this thesis. In terms of film and television, this paper provides analytical methods and theories about film and how it affects the emotions and understanding of viewers by examining the field of film and television. This integrated approach contributes to an in-depth study of the intersection of film with sociology and cultural studies [6].

4. Results

The film *Parasite* is based on real social issues in South Korea; director Bong Joon-ho presents real social issues in South Korea to the global audience through film, a more communicative method, and in the film, the most authentic and prominent issue revealed is the social class division in South Korea, the film highlights the gap between the rich and the poor, demonstrates the inequality between the poor and the rich, and reflects the differences between social classes; and that Social status and family birth are significant to the people of Korea, and family birth is often seen as an important factor in judging a person in Korean society; and then, in the film, the Kim family faces the problem of being unemployed or earning a base salary, which also reflects the difficulty of employment in today's society in Korea, and there are significant challenges for young people to find employment in the future. Director Bong Joon-ho uses the influence of the film to shift the hotspot and attract more people to discuss it, thus serving as a warning to society.

However, the plots and events in the films may be considered to be overly exaggerated and extreme and far from the life experiences of ordinary college students; the plots and characters in the films represent specific cultural and social groups that are different from college students in different regions and social classes; therefore, the plots in the films may not be applicable to the experiences and perspectives of all contemporary Korean college students. As a result, many college students are unable to put themselves into the roles and find it challenging to realise the reality of social class inequality and the problem of future employment difficulties directly from the film. This also hinders the audience's awareness of the society in the film, as the exaggerated plot of the film leads some viewers to believe that the social problems in the film are also presented in an exaggerated manner, which does not cause them to think deeply and reflect on them.

5. Discussion

This paper investigates the feelings of contemporary Korean higher education students after watching the Korean realist film *Parasite* through interviews with them.

The characters in the film *Parasite* represent two classes of people in today's Korean society; however, the film also exaggerates their reality, using exaggerated characterisation to expose to a certain extent the difference in the living standards of different classes caused by the problem of wealth disparity in contemporary Korean society, and the psychological changes caused by the living environment. The film depicts the living environment, living conditions and psychology of different social classes living in the mansion and the basement [7].

The director carefully designs the appearance of each main character in the film; at the beginning, the film focuses on setting the atmosphere, firstly showing the poor semi-underground environment to the audience, and as the camera pans down, the hero Ki-woo appears in the camera; thus, it not only shows the living environment of Ki-woo's family which is dim, damp, and crowded, but also expresses Ki-woo's family's low status in the society in an abstract way; "It is not that, it is the smell of the semi-basement room, you have to get out of here to get rid of that smell" clearly shows the poor people's determination and helplessness in trying to break out of their current difficult situation [7-9]. When the camera switches to the family of the rich President Park, it helps the audience to understand the social background of the film better and paves the way for the motivation of the characters later on through the stark contrast between the residence, living conditions, and the characters' actions and behaviours [10].

At the same time, the class conflict in the film is not directly reflected in the relationship between the rich and the poor, but is depicted through side stories, such as President Park's frequent recollections of Ki-Taek's smell with his wife, and Park's youngest son's remark that Ki-Taek, Jung-sook, and Ki-Jeong smell the same, which can be interpreted more as a poor man's smell, "poor sour smell", than the smell of the underground, which is what is referred to in the film. In addition to the film's reference to the smell of the "underground subway," this smell can also be interpreted as the smell of the poor, "the smell of poverty. This highlights the fact that even though the poor and the rich are closely related in their daily lives, they are never able to integrate in terms of class. After watching the film "*Parasite*," many college students are worried and afraid of entering society in the future; the reality in the film is objective. In Korea, the plutocrats and bureaucrats have the power and status that ordinary people dare not imagine. Some people are born with prosperous living conditions, a social status that ordinary people cannot get even if they work hard all their lives, while others can only rely on their own hard work to fight for their future; most people think that this is unfair but must be accepted by default in the modern Korean society; it can be said that the film "*Parasite*" also brings the reality of the young people's fear and pressure, and at the same time clearly shows the gap between the dream and the reality.

In the film, Ki-Woo's family is just like the house they live in, dark damp, and can never get rid of the smell of the basement; and at the end of the film, Ki-Jung, the character who is the most like a rich man in the family and has the most potential to become a rich man, is stabbed to death at the end of the film; not only is she stabbed to death by a knife, but it is also the society that tells everyone that poor people cannot turn over a new leaf. Many college students will question the ability of the Ki-woo family, and they ultimately find a job to provide for their own lives. In fact, on the one hand, it reflects the reality of Korean society's high pressure of employment; on the other hand, it also shows that the bottom of the environment will be fundamentally affected by poor people's psychology.

Similarly, the characters in the film are very distinctive as film characters and leave a deep impression on the audience. However, it is difficult for contemporary Korean university students to put themselves in their shoes. Many of the interviewed Korean university students think that the characters' images and social backgrounds in the film are very far from their own upbringing and that the film is a very good one, but it is difficult for them to put themselves in the shoes of the characters and feel the feelings. Many of the interviewed Korean college students thought that the characters and the social background of the film were different from their own upbringing.

6. Conclusion

The film *Parasite* allows contemporary Korean university students to reflect on social issues and values. Through exaggerated presentation and a fictionalized plot based on real-life issues, the film allows contemporary Korean university students to see the storyline and details the difference in living standards between different classes in contemporary Korean society caused by the problem of the wealth gap and the psychological impact of the living environment; and at the same time, it highlights that it is difficult for two different classes to merge together. The film's content also triggers new insights into the real Korean society and their future plans, and to a certain extent, increases the fear and insecurity of contemporary Korean college students about entering the society, clearly demonstrating the gap between dreams and reality. Finally, through the film, director Bong Joon-ho makes more people aware of the reality of the gap between the rich and the poor and the difficulty of employment in modern Korean society. However, for ordinary college students, the plot and characters in the film represent a specific culture and social group, and many of them are not able to put themselves into the roles, and it is difficult for them to realise the inequality of the social classes and the difficulty of employment in the future directly from the film. It is challenging to realise the social class inequality phenomenon and future employment difficulties directly from the film, so it is necessary to be careful to correspond it directly with the actual social situation.

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