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## *Parasite*: Genre Hybridity and Class Consciousness

Emily McDaniels

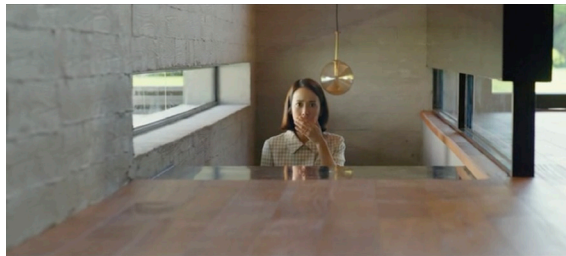
Categorizing a film into one specific genre can prove to be difficult. A film may evoke horror-esque imagery, plunging its characters into a fearsome landscape where the audience waits in anxious anticipation of what lies in store. The same film may also incorporate comedic elements, crafting moments of humor as a distracting respite from the scares. That is, an expansive and flexible use of genre can be a powerful tool for a savvy director. Genre elements can impact how a movie's plot is presented and perceived, as well as how the audience reacts, eliciting different emotions depending on the elements employed. Scholars writing about the tendency towards genre hybridity have observed that generic analysis should “concern itself less with issues of belonging and generic purity (or impurity) and more with the actual workings of generic elements in films” (Deleyto, 228). Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019) is a fascinating example of a film that exceeds classification within one single genre, inviting a close reading of its expertly deployed generic elements. The film's tone shifts wildly throughout, from focusing on the relatively comedic hijinks of the ambitious Kim family in the first half to the tense, unsettling introduction of the character Geun-sae, who lives beneath the wealthy Park family's ornate mansion and ushers in the darker tone of the film's second half. This act of genre blending creates a thrilling atmosphere for the audience and allows Bong to explore complex issues of class in South Korean society while keeping the audience engaged and guessing what will happen next.



At the beginning of *Parasite*, the story introduces the Kim family—the father, Ki-taek (Song Kang-ho), the mother, Chung-sook (Jang Hye-jin), the daughter, Ki-jung (Park So-dam), and the son, Ki-woo (Choi Woo-sik)—who are desperate for a way to pull themselves out of poverty. After Kiwoo finds his way into a position work-

ing for the affluent Park family, the Kims work together to weave a web of deception to entice the Parks into giving them all well-paying jobs. While the film was marketed as a thriller, the events of the first part of the film are more comical than those that would typically befit a thriller. However,

that is not to say that the first half is entirely comedic. As the Kims manipulate their way into employment, there is a sense of tension in wondering if their ruse will be uncovered or if they will be able to pull their lies off successfully.



A scene that demonstrates this is when the Kims are working to oust the Park family's previous housekeeper, Moon-gwang. Many stylistic and thematic elements associated with the thriller genre appear throughout this sequence, including the framing of Moon-gwang as a "fox" that must be outsmarted. Because she is a clever woman who knows the house better than anyone else, ousting her is not an easy feat. The Kim family's complicated and expansive plan is first dramatically introduced in voiceover, as Ki-woo narrates his discovery of Moon-gwang's peach allergy. They then orchestrate a scenario where Ki-taek catches her at a health clinic, shows Mrs. Park a picture he takes of her there and claims to have overheard her discuss TB, making Mrs. Park paranoid. Kijung then sabotages Moon-gwang again, sprinkling peach fuzz on her at just the right time so Mrs. Park can see her in a coughing fit and decide to fire her. The Kims treat their comically-intricate plan seriously; this attitude,

coupled with the dramatic orchestral music playing throughout the sequence, makes the situation feel like a caper film (another element of genre hybridity in *Parasite*), which grants the film some ironic levity. They're not carrying out a master plan of national espionage; they're tormenting this woman so they can all be employed together. It's a terrible thing to do, but it's played as darkly humorous—the kind of humor *Parasite* revels in, especially in the first half of the film.

The audience may be held in suspense, wondering what lengths the Kims will go to next or whether they'll be caught red-handed, but this form of suspense is not limited to thrillers. As Martin Rubin states, "Virtually all narrative films could be considered thrilling to some degree because they contain suspense.... At a certain point, they become thrilling enough to be considered thrillers" (5). That transition point in *Parasite* occurs on the night the Kim family takes advantage of the empty Park household. The tone of the film shifts to a darker register and the challenges of class difference deepen. While the family is drinking and arguing, the doorbell rings and Moon-gwang asks to be let inside, claiming she left something important behind. This request hangs uncomfortably in the air, creating a feeling of apprehension for the Kims, as they hadn't accounted for her appearance. Their apprehension only grows when she enters and behaves





erratically. She's smiling for reasons no one understands, avoiding questions regarding why she's there, and inexplicably asking her replacement, Chung-sook, if she wants to join her in the basement. As the two descend past the hidden door into the sub-basement, a more conventional, thriller-style score is introduced, composed of strings that grow louder and faster, sounding more and more frantic. As Chung-sook follows Moon-gwang down dark, narrow stairwells into the bunker, the camera follows behind her, forcing the audience to discover what has been going on at the same time Chung-sook does. At this point in the film, with the revelation of Moon-gwang's husband, Geun-sae, *Parasite's* tone shifts into that of an anxiety-inducing thriller. The Kims, as well as the audience, have been caught completely unaware. Things have not only gone wrong, but they've gone wrong in a completely unexpected way, elevating the stakes and the suspense and pushing *Parasite* into thriller territory.

It is not just how Bong structures the story of *Parasite* that makes it a thriller film; he also accomplishes this through characterization. The thriller protagonist is typically an everyday individual who, through unforeseen circumstances, gets involved in a dark and complex plot. This provides the tension and suspense of the story. Rubin notes that most thriller protagonists are characterized by “vulnerability” and are often presented as “more of a victim and less in control than hard-boiled pros like Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe usually are” (94). The Kims, however, don't seem like typical thriller protagonists. Instead of being portrayed as helpless victims, they are incredibly proactive in taking their chances, manipulating their way so adeptly that they're able to all get jobs with the Parks. It's only when they realize they've moved out of their depth that they find themselves inside a bigger plot that they don't have knowledge of or power over. In the beginning of the pivotal scene, the family is play-acting rich people, sitting in the luxury home they've plotted their way into based on their stereotypes of how rich people react and behave. Moon-gwang's unpredicted appearance breaks their control over the plot and confronts them with the real darkness and complexity of class difference.

An additional generic element of the thriller that is present in *Parasite* is that of the double. The concept of the double can function in many ways, as in the “double world” that Rubin perceives when describing the sprawling urban landscapes of many suspense films, but the concept of the double can also relate to how characters are presented (Rubin, 67). There is an obvious doubling in the Kim and Park families: both have a father, a mother, a daughter, and a son. The Parks are who the Kims want to be—they want their home, their lifestyle, and their wealth. However, it should be noted that the Kims are a far closer family than the Parks, as demonstrated by how they work together, sharing several moments that display their close bonds with each other. This is unlike the cold, clinical way in which the Parks often interact, so a source of tension in the first part

of the film is the uncertainty as to how far the Kim family will go in wanting to emulate the Parks. However, this is not the only doubling of characters. Ki-taek and Chung-sook are also doubled by the basement-dwelling Moon-gwang and Geun-sae. In both couples, the wife is more assertive, with Chung-sook being the most physically capable member of her family and Moon-gwang working to protect Geun-sae. Both husbands are noted to have a bad smell, a result of their low class and lack of access to hygiene. Additionally, both husbands find themselves trapped under the house, where both show signs of mental instability, including devotion to Mr. Park. Geun-sae's devotion stems from a place of gratitude for being able to hide in the Park's house and survive, while Ki-taek's fealty is out of guilt for having killed him. The parallels between the couples emphasize the point that those of the lower class are not all that different from one another, especially in the eyes of the wealthy.

*Parasite* interweaves the tension of its plot with themes concerning class divides and economic inequality—aspects indicative of the social problem genre. Such themes are readily apparent in multiple levels of the film's construction, from the characterization to the camerawork to the two primary sets (the Park's lavish home contrasted with the Kim's sub-basement apartment). Poverty in *Parasite* is visually associated with moving downward. In the scene that depicts the Kims fleeing the Park House, they move down various hills and stairs in a sequence that stretches on for several minutes, illustrating how low they truly are. The Parks and, by association, the wealthy



are the opposite—living atop a hill in a house that is multi-floored. Critics have commented on the purposeful representation of the two primary locations in the film, noting, for instance, that “the Kims effectively live underground, with a stairway down being their only entrance. Everything is cramped and minimal. Meanwhile, the Parks have spacious rooms and have to ascend meandering hills and opulent staircases to reach their home, crystallizing the status of wealth” (Cooper). The stark differences between the families serve to explain why the stakes are so different for the two of them. The Kims are desperate for their survival, to escape their claustrophobic poverty, and to save themselves from the space and status that are keeping them trapped. The Parks have no such restrictions and live their lives in the comfort that is granted them because of their access to space. Bong's thematic usage of the upstairs and downstairs helps to demonstrate the desperation of the Kims, framing the question of how far they're willing to go to move upwards. Their lies and manipulations are their attempts to escape the low levels of poverty and climb into wealth, but at the end of the film, they are yet again thrust back into the lower levels with no viable path leading up.

*Parasite* is an incredible testament to how flexible films can be concerning their genre categorization and how the embrace of genre hybridity can allow filmmakers to meld different generic

elements like music, narrative structure, and characterization to communicate nuanced themes. The comedic, heist-like energy of the first part of the film pulls the audience in and has them anticipating what will happen. When the film shifts, the abrupt revelation and the resulting stress the characters are under create a viewing experience that shocks and thrills masterfully. The generic shifts accompany a story that ultimately showcases the true damage poverty can do in South Korean society, both to those experiencing it and to the outsiders who suffer by association. *Parasite* takes advantage of the versatile nature of film genre and uses it to keep the audience in suspense as to where the film is going next. 🍿

*Emily McDaniels graduated with a degree in Psychology and a minor in Sociology from UW-Whitewater in May 2024. This essay was written for a Film Genre course in Fall 2023.*

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