Parasite and the Ideological Barriers to Emancipatory Politics**

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Abstract

In this essay, my contention is two-fold. One, Bong Joon-ho's film *Parasite* (2019) is not simply about class inequality but more importantly addresses the question "what is (not) to be done?". To appreciate this point, we have to investigate it alongside Bong's previous films, especially *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *Okja* (2017). Although these three films possess vastly different storylines, they all wrestle with this burning political question from different angles: seizure of state power and revolution (*Snowpiercer*), "folk politics" (*Okja*), and neoliberal privatization of social problems (*Parasite*). They all implicitly demand for better or more concrete visions of systemic transformation. Two, class antagonism in *Parasite* appears more muted than in many anti-capitalist flicks. I claim that this helps to place in the foreground the ideological barriers to the development of the poor's class consciousness and solidarity, thereby buttressing the status quo. Ideology not only fools us but also seduces us with enjoyment. As such, an intellectual critique of ideology is necessary but insufficient and must be supplemented by an affective one. On the one hand, from the perspective of critical theory, the underclass acts against its own self-interest because it is duped or distracted by bourgeois tolerance and neoliberal entrepreneurial culture. On the other hand, from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory, the more obstinate problem seems to be their (capitalist) modes of enjoyment. *Parasite*'s distinctive contribution is in highlighting "enjoyment as a political factor"; that is, how capitalism also produces enjoyment to sustain itself.

Keywords: *Parasite, anti-capitalism, what is (not) to be done? ideology, enjoyment*

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**Received February 3, 2020; Revised March 30, 2020; Accepted July 25, 2021

Parasite และกำแพงเชิงอุดมการณ์ที่ขวางกั้นการเมืองเพื่อการปลดปล่อย**

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บทคัดย่อ

ข้อถกของผู้เขียนมีสองมิติ ประการแรก ภาพยนตร์เรื่อง Parasite (2019) ซึ่งกำกับโดยบงจุนโฮไม่ได้เพียงแต่สะท้อนความเหลื่อมล้ำทางชนชั้นเท่านั้น หากพยายามตอบคำถาม “จักต้อง(ไม่)ทำอะไร?” อย่างมีนัยยะสำคัญ อนึ่ง เราควรสำรวจภาพยนตร์ชิ้นนี้ควบคู่ไปกับภาพยนตร์ก่อนหน้านี้ของบงเพื่อทำความเข้าใจประเด็นข้างต้นอันได้แก่ ภาพยนตร์เรื่อง Snowpiercer (2013) และ Okja (2017) ภาพยนตร์สามเรื่องนี้ต่างพยายามจะตอบคำถามทางการเมืองข้างต้นนี้ผ่านมุมมองที่ต่างกัน ผู้เขียนมีบทสรุปดังต่อไปนี้ การยึดอำนาจรัฐและการปฏิวัติ (Snowpiercer) “การเมืองพื้นบ้าน” (Okja) และการทำให้ปัญหาสังคมเป็นเรื่องส่วนตัว (Parasite) ประการที่สอง เพราะ Parasite มีลักษณะบอดใบ้ต่อความเป็นปฏิปักษ์ทางชนชั้น มันจึงช่วยเผยให้เราเห็นถึงอุดมการณ์ที่เป็นอุปสรรคขัดขวางไม่ให้เกิดจิตสำนึกทางชนชั้นและความเป็นอันหนึ่งอันเดียวกันขึ้นในหมู่คนจน ในด้านหนึ่งหากมองจากกรอบทฤษฎีเชิงวิพากษ์ ชนชั้นล่างกระทำการขัดแย้งกับผลประโยชน์ของตัวเองเพราะพวกเขาถูกหลอกหรือถูกเบนความสนใจด้วยความอดทนอดกลั้นแบบกระฎุมพีและวัฒนธรรมผู้ประกอบการแบบเสรีนิยมใหม่ แต่ในอีกด้านหนึ่ง หากมองจากกรอบทฤษฎีจิตวิเคราะห์ ปัญหาที่ฝังรากลึกมากกว่าดูเหมือนจะเกิดจากความเพลิดเพลิน (แบบทุนนิยม)ในหมู่ชนชั้นล่างเอง

คำสำคัญ: *ภาพยนตร์ Parasite, การต่อต้านทุนนิยม, “จักต้อง (ไม่) ทำอะไร?”, อุดมการณ์, ความเพลิดเพลิน*

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Introduction: Twenty-First Century Popular Culture and the "Neolithic Age"

Widening class inequality and de-democratization are enduring problems worldwide under late capitalism. The phrase "1 percent vs 99 percent" and the political slogan "We are the 99 percent" capture well our predicament. So too do some of the jaw-dropping statistics that point toward neo-feudalism. For instance, in 2014 the richest 85 people possessed more income than half of the world's population combined (approximately 3.6 billion people) and in 2017 the richest eight people had more income than the bottom half. In 1960 the gap between the per capita income of the world's richest and poorest countries was 32 to 1 but in 2000 it widened to 134 to 1 (e.g. Hickel 2017, 16; Lawson 2019, 230). This (unprecedented) concentration of wealth is a direct consequence of the neoliberal phase of capitalism. Depending on the disciplines that explores it, neoliberalism may refer to the "drive to economize all features of existence" (Brown 2019, 11); a political project to break the power of the working class (Harvey 2005) and to squeeze the life out of any emancipatory alternative (Fisher 2018, 753-770); and a historical attempt to make the world safe for Capital, which entails "redesigning states, laws, and other institutions to protect the market" (Slobodian 2018, 6) and protecting Capital from interference by democratic demands for equality and redistributive justice as well as by popular sovereignty (Slobodian 2018, 17-18). Put another way, despite progress in numerous fields, such as in science and technology, humanity has yet to advance beyond the "Neolithic Age", which is characterized by "societies based on inequality, based entirely on the organization and conservation, by force when necessary, of significant inequalities… Capitalism is part of Neolithic culture" (Badiou and Lancelin 2019, 44-45).

Popular culture has not been unconcerned about these problems. In fact, it has enabled us to visualize them. (It is interesting to find that there is not a single chapter on Capital, class, or inequality in a leading textbook on global visual politics (Bleiker 2018).) As the world has swung increasingly to the right over the decades (Cusset 2018), a small but vocal segment of popular culture is veering to the opposite direction. This is especially true in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. Many Hollywood films, especially in the sci-fi, dystopia, and horror genres, have contested the Neolithic culture by politicizing the economy in different ways, marking the return of class politics. They show that class inequality and poverty are not natural but the products of elite decisions and policies and systemic requirements; that a rich minority is benefitting at the expense of the vast poor

majority; that there are alternatives to the unjust status quo; that great violence via state and legal apparatuses is being used to sustain the current order; and so on. They reject Fukuyama's thesis on "the end of History" and Thatcher's "there is no alternative." Put differently, these films are "corrupting" us, are saying that we don't have to accept the ways of the Neolithic Age. They are *encouraging* us to resist or rebel against "capitalist realism" (Fisher 2009). It takes great courage to fight the only game in town. A point that cannot be overemphasized is that these films are far more radical than many revolutionary visions of the present. The latter "are no longer oriented around utopian schemas aimed at systemic transformation", focusing on political change rather than socioeconomic transformation (Lawson 2019, 234). A random list of these films includes *In Time*, *High-Rise*, *Elysium*, *Upside Down*, *Repo Men*, The *Purge* series, *The Hunger Games* series, *Us*, *Mortal Engines*, *Seoul Station*, and *Train to Busan*.

It does not take talent to recognize that Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, winner of the Palme d'Or at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival, is about class inequality and class struggle (or the lack thereof). Most film critics and audience can agree on this uncontroversial point. It's no secret that Bong is anti-capitalist and leftist. In an interview in 2017 he (in Gilbey 2017) states, "All our problems arise because of capitalism. It brings pleasure but also so much pain and unhappiness." On the politics of *Parasite* Bong (in Ahmed 2019) says it best: "I think that one way to portray the continuing polarization and inequality of our society is as a sad comedy. We are living in an era when capitalism is the reigning order, and we have no other alternative. It's not just in Korea, but the entire world faces a situation where the tenets of capitalism cannot be ignored." The film therefore offers a microcosm of a universal problem. Yet, film critics don't seem to agree on whether the film has delivered a quality or original critique of class inequality and capitalism. Some have even accused the film of snobbishly looking down on and making fun of the poor, treating them as insects and passive people who are complacent with their poverty (e.g. Im 2019). Some see it as an unrealistic representation of poor people and a cynical commodification of anti-capitalism (e.g. Warit Likhitanusorn 2019). Most tend to talk vaguely about class stratification in *Parasite*, making it seem like just another film about rich and poor.

In this essay, my contention is two-fold. One, *Parasite* is not simply about class inequality but more importantly it addresses the question "what is (not) to be done?" To appreciate this point, we

have to investigate it alongside Bong's previous films, especially *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *Okja* (2017). Although these three films possess vastly different storylines, they all wrestle with this burning political question from different angles: seizure of state power and revolution (*Snowpiercer*), "folk politics" (*Okja*), and neoliberal privatization of social problems (*Parasite*). They all implicitly demand better or more concrete visions of systemic transformation. Two, class antagonism in *Parasite* appears more muted than in many anti-capitalist flicks. I claim that this helps to place in the foreground the ideological barriers to the development of the poor's class consciousness and solidarity, thereby buttressing the status quo. Ideology not only fools us but also seduces us with enjoyment. As such, an intellectual critique of ideology is necessary but insufficient and must be supplemented by an affective one. On one hand, from the perspective of critical theory, numbers of the underclass acts against their own self-interest because they are duped or distracted by bourgeois tolerance and neoliberal entrepreneurial culture. On the other hand, from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory, the more obstinate problem seems to be their (capitalist) modes of enjoyment. *Parasite*'s distinctive contribution is in highlighting "enjoyment as a political factor" (Žižek 2008a); that is, how capitalism produces enjoyment to sustain itself.

Parasite tells the story of two families violently separated by an invisible because of the de-politicized and normalized class line. The Park family is upper-class. Dong-ik or Nathan (Lee Sun-kyun) is the owner of a successful technology firm. His wife Yeon-kyu (Cho Yeo-jeong) is an air-head and jaded housewife who relies on alcohol and drugs to get by each day. She loves "parties", "events", and "surprises." She has a delusion that her mediocre son Da-song (Jung Hyun-jun) is an artistic genius. The daughter Da-hye (Jeong Ji-so), a high-school sophomore, is preparing for university entrance examination. Moon-gwang (Lee Jeong-eun), the family maid, makes sure that daily life in the Park household is smooth and orderly. She was also the housekeeper of the previous houseowner.

The Kim family is in the precarious underclass. They are comprised of father Ki-taek (Song Kang-ho), mother Chung-sook (Jang Hye-jin), son Ki-woo (Choi Woo-sik), and daughter Ki-jeong (Park So-dam). All are unemployed or have given up the search for permanent employment. Ki-taek was formerly a driver. Chung-sook was a track-and-field athlete. Both Ki-woo and Ki-jeong have failed the university entrance exams several times. The Kims eke a living by doing odd jobs.

Through a wealthy friend's connection Ki-woo becomes an English tutor of the Park's daughter but only after presenting himself as "Kevin", a graduate from a leading Korean university. Da-hye immediately falls in love with him. Ki-woo then learns that the Parks are also looking for an art teacher for their son, a position that would be filled by Ki-jeong, now renamed "Jessica" and given a new identity as well. Eventually, the whole Kim family would come to work for the Parks. Ki-taek or "Uncle Kim" became the new family driver, and Chung-sook replaced Moon-gwang. While the Parks are away on vacation and the Kims are celebrating in their boss's house, Moon-gwang returns to retrieve 'something' she has forgotten. It is revealed that the house has a secret bunker (unknown to the Parks and the Kims) in which Geun-sae (Park Myeong-hoon), Moon-gwang's husband, has been hiding from loan sharks for more than four years. Class consciousness and solidarity didn't develop among the working-class characters. The Kims want to keep their jobs and get rid of the previous housekeeper and her husband. The latter threaten to expose the Kims. A violent struggle ensues, ultimately leading to the death of Moon-gwang. To cut a long story short, in the climax scene Geun-sae escapes from confinement in the bunker during Da-song's birthday party. He goes after fellow working-class people, first severely injuring Ki-woo and then killing Ki-jeong. His appearance traumatizes Da-song, triggering memories of the "ghost" that he had encountered years before. During the commotion, Mr. Park orders Ki-taek to throw him the car key so he can drive his son to the hospital. The key lands near Geun-sae and Chung-sook who are fighting. Chung-sook eventually kills the "ghost." The 'bad smell' of poor people disgusts Mr. Park, and he retrieves the key with great difficulty. Angered and appalled by Mr. Park's reaction, Ki-taek fatally stabs him and runs to hide in the bunker. He becomes the new ghost. He sends Morse signals to the outside world to inform Ki-woo of his whereabout. Released from the hospital and later acquitted on probation, Ki-woo goes to observe the abandoned house, cracks the Morse signals, and vows to work hard, save money to buy the house and free his father.

Bong Joon-ho on "What Is (Not) to Be Done?"

Class inequality is a constant theme in Bong's films. Given space limitation, I will focus on his three latest films. In *Snowpiercer* inequality is the gulf between the two main sections of a train: the opulent front cars populated by the wealthy and the squalid rear cars inhabited by the surplus

population. In *Okja* the division is the vast distance between the mobile transnational elites living in glossy metropolises like New York and the poor peasants foraging for food in a rural backwater. *Parasite* builds on similar visual themes. The Parks live in a beautiful, spacious, and airy house on top of a gentrified hilly neighborhood. The house is surrounded by an immaculately manicured garden. Its interior is clean, slick, and minimalistic; everything is in place. The Park's house is a private place for rest and recreation and a safe haven from the outside world. On the other hand, the Kims live downhill in a cramped, cluttered, and chaotic semi-basement. It is roach-infested. Moreover, the Kim's house is not entirely a domestic sphere. The inside/outside distinction tends to break down. Their house is also a workplace. It is regularly intruded by the 'outside' (e.g. fumigation, drunk people urinating near their windows, the sight of trash bags, etc.) and highly vulnerable to natural calamity such as flooding. Thus, a torrential downpour forces numerous poor families like the Kims to spend the night in a make-shift relief center. Conversely, the Parks probably didn't even notice or care that parts of the city were flooded. They feel secured because they are rich. As such, they threw a lavish birthday party for their son right after the night of heavy rain. Can we read into this scene not only a sign of elitist nonchalance but also "apocalyptic fetishism" (Horvat 2019, 54)? The rich have bought their way out of climate change. They are prepared for the end of the world. Fighting climate catastrophe is therefore inseparable from class struggle.

There is no such thing as a relationship between the upper and the lower classes in Bong's films. In other words, they live in two different worlds, and their paths rarely cross one another. They are not on the same boat and don't fit together or complement one another. But there is a non-relation between them, which is characterized by antagonism and violence. In *Snowpiercer* the front section of the train counts on the surplus population to riot periodically and be killed in order to restore the 'natural' equilibrium of the train's closed ecosystem. The surplus population is also expected to procreate as small children are needed as "spare parts" to keep the train running perpetually. In *Okja* everything has a price. Life is economized. For the right price, the bourgeoisies will buy and sell (and lie, kill, and steal) anything. Nothing is dearest. There's very little room left for friendship and love. For the Mirando corporation, a multi-national livestock company, the peasant girl Mija (An Seo-hyun) and her friend Okja, a giant GMO-pig, are merely cheap lives existing for the sake of capital accumulation.

In *Parasite* the non-relation is akin to the relationship between a parasite and a cockroach. As agents of Capital, the Park family is parasitical. Capital has long been compared to monsters and beasts (McNally 2012). As Marx (2008, 149) famously declared, "Capital is dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks." More recently, Fisher (2009, 15) compared Capital to "an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie-maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, and the zombies it makes are us." As such, capitalism can exist without capitalists but not without workers. In the film, we don't really see the Parks working at all. They perform no socially useful function and "live off wealth" (Blakeley 2019, 218), which in turn is extracted from the work of others. We briefly see Mr. Park in his office, surrounded by a lot of workers. He isn't portrayed as someone who's pulled himself up by the bootstraps. We know that without the care-work of Moon-gwang and later Chung-sook's, the Park's household would be in disarray. Mr. Park even concedes that his wife is terrible at housework. Mrs. Park spends her days drinking, dozing off, shopping, and organizing parties. Their two children are also quite mediocre. Overall, the Parks appear shallow and unexceptional. We are left wondering how they became rich and successful in the first place. Surely, it can't be because of meritocracy. Rather, they must have been leeching on other people's labor power. Bluntly, no one can acquire immense wealth innocently. However, parasites harm or eventually kill the host. "Capitalism," Cederström and Fleming write, "has always destroyed the thing that it needs the most" (2012, 9). It relies on workers' labor power but undermines the conditions for its reproduction. In short, it does not care about the social reproduction of workers, which "encompasses activities that sustain human beings as *embodied social beings* who must not only eat and sleep but also raise their children, care for their families, and maintain their communities, all the while pursuing their hopes for the future" (Arruza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Fraser 2019, 68). The Parks don't have any qualms over-working their employees or firing them (e.g., the former driver and maid) whenever they no longer appear productive or beneficial. Parasites even feed off cockroaches.

The Kims are like cockroaches. They live in the shadows or crevices of society, out of sight, out of mind. They scattered to hide like cockroaches when the Parks cut short their camping trip and return home unexpectedly. Prior to this scene, Chung-sook even teasingly calls Ki-taek a cockroach: "Suppose Park walked through that door now, he'd run and hide like a cockroach." Later, along with

the other families in the poor neighborhood, Ki-taek and his children fled from the flooding sewer water to higher grounds like cockroaches. Above all, like cockroaches the Kims have to work or even risk their lives for food. Of course, they are faking their identities but they really have to work for money: they "live off work" (Blakeley 2019, 218). After all, cockroaches are scavengers. That the Kims 'worm' their way into the Park household does not make them parasites. They might have stolen food and booze from the Parks. However, they have to work for survival, and in so doing they risk being caught or exposed. They are often seen working in the film. Ki-jeong literally died while working for the Parks. The Kims have to compete with other cockroaches for work (from folding pizza boxes to cleaning the house) given the structural requirement of capitalism for a percentage of unemployment lest it experiences runaway inflation. Literally, they are living in the semi-basement (i.e. partially above the ground) because someone else (i.e. the surplus population) is stuck (expelled?) underground instead of them. This game of musical chairs inhibits workers' solidarity. Hence when Ki-taek worries about the fate of the former driver whom he replaced, his daughter exclaims, "Just focus on us." The class system of hilltop and semi-basement ensures that there will always be an underground.

After showing class inequality, Bong asks "what is (not) to be done"? Why aren't we doing anything or why are we often doing the wrong things? His three latest films provide three different answers. None of them has an unambiguously happy ending. Rather they are filled with contradictions. Bong shouldn't be taken as endorsing these answers, but as critiquing them or inciting our political imagination. He appears to be saying that we can do better than the protagonists of the films. Their solutions are not enough. So, what's our plan?

Of the three, *Snowpiercer* is the most forward-looking. The revolutionaries led by Curtis (Chris Evans) attempt to seize control of the train's engine (i.e. state power) and establish a new order. However, they don't have any concrete plan of what to do once they are in control of the train. As such, they risk simply inverting the unjust order. Order, hierarchy and inequality will continue to be the system's ruling ideas. Natural equilibrium on the train will still have to be blindly upheld by getting rid of the surplus population. In the end, Curtis chose to derail the train instead. Perhaps it is better to derail the train than to reproduce the oppressive and exploitative system in the name of revolution. This is because it takes more violence to maintain the unjust system rather than to break it. But there's no guarantee that life outside the train is possible. The ending of *Snowpiercer* is thus terrifying yet

hopeful. In other words, the conditions of freedom are always terrifying; those who fear freedom fear imbalance and chaos.

Okja is backward-looking and nostalgic for primitive communism or a life that is by and large untouched by Capital. Of course, Mija is very courageous to defy the Mirando corporation and save Okja. She is rebellious. She refuses to behave like the economic man who uses market values such as cost-effectiveness and the maximization of utilities to evaluate every activity. For her Okja is not food or a source of income, but a friend. Therefore, aided by a dedicated animal liberation group, Mija goes to rescue Okja (ultimately by buying her friend back with a gold bar intended as her dowry money). As they are leaving the Mirando slaughterhouse, the two friends sneak out a little piglet as well. The three return to live idyllically in the mountains. It's a beautiful and heart-warming ending. Mija and her friends have opted out of capitalism. While laudable, Mija's action and decision represent what Srnicek and Williams (2015) call "folk politics". In terms of temporality, folk politics favors the here and now over long-term strategy and aims. It is all about immediacy. In this case, saving Okja, period. There's no long-term plan to transform the capitalist food system that cheapens animal lives, that kills other Okjas every few seconds daily. In terms of spatiality, it privileges small and local projects over large-scale ones or single-issue politics such as animal liberation. "Small is beautiful." In this case, retreat to the mountains and lead a 'self-sufficient' life in harmony with nature and at a distance from State and Capital. And in terms of conceptuality, folk politics "has preference for the everyday over the structural, valorizing personal experience over systematic thinking; for feeling over thinking, emphasizing individual suffering, or the sensations of enthusiasm and anger experienced during political actions; for the particular over the universal, seeing the latter as intrinsically totalitarian; and for the ethical over the political" (Srnicek and Williams 2015, 11). Although we should be delighted that the two friends are reunited and may find Mija's choice to lead a simple and quiet life admirable, this isn't what politics is about. Politics isn't about feeling good but the common good. Politics is a collective struggle by those who are on the same side, fighting for common goals and the same political horizon (Dean 2012).

Parasite is presentist or anti-utopian and therefore the most depressing of the three films. There's no exit to "capitalist realism" in the film. Conformity and capitulation are treated as virtues or even freedom. In the last scene—as in the opening—Ki-woo is sitting under a socks hanger in a semi-

basement apartment. It is snowing outside. Elated, he has finally come up with a "plan" to rescue his father. Despite his creativity (witnessed throughout the film), Ki-woo's plan is outright wishy washy. He will 'make it big', be a winner, and buy the house. In short, he can be anything that he wants to be. Everything is DIY. The personal is only personal, and never always also political and economic. External obstacles like poverty, precarity, social inequality, and limited opportunities are simply there for him to leap over. They are not insurmountable. The real obstacles are internal—in his weak characters and poor decisions. There are no social problems, only personal opportunities. But this is a time in which, as Ki-taek observes in an early scene, "an opening for a security guard attracts 500 graduate students." This plan is thus a non-starter. Ki-woo has fallen for "neoliberal individualism" or "individualism on steroids" which promotes and justifies "the assumption that wealth and poverty, success and failure, health and illness are of our own making" (Cabanas and Illouz 2019, 9). It is a trans-individual phenomenon that is supported by a multi-billion-dollar industry. In an era of weakening class-consciousness and working-class solidarity, this neoliberal option appears to be the only 'realistic' one for many (young) people. They have internalized class antagonism. Poverty and class inequality are transformed into private matters to be overcome by individual strivings rather than systemic change or redistributive justice. While the billionaires act as a class in and for itself and get "socialism for the rich", the poor get bootstrap individualism instead. In other words, the film ends with the perils of positive thinking and absence of any collective plan to change the world, which are like the two sides of the same coin. They are the things that we shouldn't be doing. After discussing bourgeois tolerance, which undermines working-class consciousness, I explore these two issues further below, first providing an intellectual and then an affective critique.

Unpacking the Ruling Ideas: From Tolerance to Positive Thinking

In *Parasite* class antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the working class is suspiciously low-key compared to many anti-capitalist films. In fact, the working class doesn't perceive the bourgeoisie as an enemy. Rather they aspire to be like the upper-class or compete with one another to obtain favors from them. Conversely, there's open hostility between the working-class characters. In the film, an important factor that undermines working-class solidarity and class consciousness is liberal bourgeois tolerance, which makes it seem as if the real problem with capitalism today is the

dearth of 'nice' rich people. The 'bad guys' in many anti-capitalist films are often truly reprehensible and villainous. For instance, Phillippe in *In Time* is a social Darwinist; Wilford in *Snowpiercer* is neo-feudalist; Nancy Mirando in *Okja* is clearly a psychopath; the New Founding Fathers in the *Purge* series are neo-fascists; and so on. On the contrary, Mr. and Mrs. Park are polite, soft-spoken, and politically correct. They are caring parents and dog-lovers. They show no ill will toward the working class and tolerate the poor. We can't really tell their politics from their identities. Nevertheless, tolerance is contradictory. It fails even when it succeeds. Ultimately, it is an expression of the Parks' superiority and massive wealth. They are nice because they are powerful. Therefore, their tolerance must not be mistaken for care of the working class. They can afford to tolerate the poor because doing so won't dismantle class inequality. They are still the boss even when they are doing something "ridiculous" and "embarrassing" together with the poor such as when Mr. Park and Ki-taek are dressed in native American costumes waiting to surprise Da-song on his birthday. Mr. Park curtly reminds Ki-taek to see it as part of work and that he is being paid extra to do it. In any case, tolerance gives a progressive veneer to power inequality or even anti-poor positions. In one scene Ki-taek could thus feel "gratitude to the great Mr. Park". Geun-sae has "respect" for Mr. Park till his last breath. As Brown (2006, 178) reminds us, tolerance "is always conferred by the dominant, it is always a certain expression of domination even as it offers protection or incorporation to the less powerful." Hence, when Ki-taek says that "[Mrs. Park] is rich, but still nice", his wife retorts, "No! Nice because she's rich." Chung-sook then adds, "If I had all this money, I'll be nice too. Even more." From this perspective, the problem with rich people is not their wealth and exploitation, but the extent of their tolerance. Inequality is de-politicized. As long as rich people are nice and politically correct, they can shamelessly accumulate money and possessions and exploit workers. Obscene class inequality is alright as long as the rich don't look down on the poor (Michaels 2016, 101). As a result, class inequality is to be tackled by moralistic scolding or language patrolling rather than class struggle and the dismantling of the class system.

Since tolerance is an expression of power asymmetry, it works by maintaining distance or drawing the line. Not everything or everyone will be tolerated. Tolerance is not unconditional. In particular, those who crossed the line don't deserve to be tolerated. They are "beyond the pale of civilization" and can be treated violently. Brown (2006, 179) explains it this way: "Tolerance, a beacon

of civilization, is inappropriately extended to those outside civilization *and* opposed to civilization; violence, which tolerance represses, is the only means of dealing with this threat and is thereby self-justifying." Thus, "Israeli state agencies cite their superior 'gay-friendly' culture to justify their brutal subjugation of 'backward, homophobic' Palestinians" and "some European liberals invoke their own 'enlightened toleration' of LGBTQ+ individuals in order to legitimize hostility toward Muslims" (Arruza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Fraser 2019, 39). The Parks are tolerant insofar as the poor know their lot and consent to the existing class system. The tolerated Other is thus deprived of real otherness, becoming safe, subservient, and controllable. Put another way, tolerance requires the preservation of class inequality, which is also a form of racialization. It is as if capitalism not only creates upper- and lower-classes but also two distinct races of human beings: the rich who 'have it all' (the parasite) and the poor who are good for nothing/lacking (the cockroach). Here racialization refers to the naturalization of the division of human beings into superior and inferior types, not to their actual 'races'. In this view, the poor only have themselves to blame for being poor; they are poor because of their inferior nature. In this precise sense, as Edkins (2019, 200) observes, 'Class is a form of racialization… Like race and gender, class defines, separates and excludes. It draws lines.'

As mentioned above, the Parks live in an upscale, single-class neighborhood. They disdain mixing with the poor, the lesser race. The only poor people they come across are the workers who serve them. The poor are tolerable as long as they are beneficial to the rich and are kept at a distance. Mr. Park likes Moon-gwang because she's capable and never crosses the line. (His wife however fires her, believing that Moon-gwang has contracted tuberculosis without telling her employers—an irresponsible and thus intolerable act. TB does not respect distance.) On the contrary, he asks his wife to come up with some "bland excuse" to fire Driver Yoon who he believes has crossed the line by having sex with someone in the backseat of the car. As he puts it, "Does dripping his [the driver's] sperm on my backseat turn him on?" In other words, Driver Yoon has acted as if he's the boss. Perhaps, Mr. Park would not be this annoyed had the driver had sex in the front seat instead. At first, Mr. Park likes the new driver Ki-taek because the latter knows when to back off right before crossing the line. But then he's offended by Ki-taek's smell (like an old radish), which "powers through right into the backseat" of the car. It's for this very same reason that Mrs. Park says she never uses public

transportation. If Mr. Park wasn't killed first, he could easily find a lame excuse to dismiss Ki-taek as well.

Two other ideological barriers work against the development of working-class consciousness and solidarity and prop up the capitalist status quo: the disdain for an emancipatory plan and positive thinking. They can be interpreted as part of "the morals" of neoliberalism, which create subjects who "adjust themselves to [market] imperatives, which means sacrificing egalitarianism and eschewing the project of collective freedom" (Whyte 2019, 23). Ki-taek transforms the absence of a long-term plan into a blessing in disguise. He doesn't care where he is heading to, who or what he is up against, and who the agent of change might be. These questions don't matter to him. He lives for the moment and is relieved to survive day to day. Precariousness works against having long-term plans. Two successive scenes are worth mentioning. As Ki-taek and his children scatter home after the Parks cut short their camping trip, they run downhill and rest near a trash deposit area. It's raining madly. Ki-woo asks his father whether he has any plan to deal with the family's unraveling situation. Ki-taek assures his son that he has one. Later, as they are spending the night at a flood shelter Ki-taek reveals to Ki-woo that the best plan is to have no plan at all because it is "the kind of plan that never fails" as nothing will ever go wrong. The point is to 'keep calm and carry on'. This position assumes that the present is the only possible reality, and therefore we just have to go with the flow and deal with it. While appearing 'realistic' this attitude breeds resignation, exhaustion, cynicism, despair, and surrender. If we can't expect anything new to happen in the future, then there's nothing to look forward to doing. We only have to adapt to the world and try to survive on our own. Radical change is impossible. Freedom from disappointment thus deprives us of the freedom to create a post-capitalist future. Nothing will ever go wrong means nothing will ever be right too. Being 'realistic' means eating this ideological trash. Besides, Ki-taek's killing of Mr. Park may be a symptom of desperation: an explosion of blind rage that doesn't change anything the next morning. This is the only time in the film when the working-class clashes openly with the upper-class, and it amounts to nothing. In any case, like Geun-sae Ki-taek becomes a benign ghost haunting a luxurious house, a far cry from the specter of communism that greatly frightened the bourgeoisie of Marx's time.

Unlike his father, Ki-woo believes he has a killer plan. He will be a 'responsible' person and make a lot of money to buy the Park's former house. This preposterous plan is best characterized as

a form of positive thinking or "magical voluntarism," which is "the belief that it is within every individual's power to make themselves whatever they want to be" (Fisher 2018, 749). Everyone has freedom (which is an innate human capacity) and therefore is equally free to succeed. Freedom does not require material preconditions or equality. In this view, the mind works like a magnet. A positive mind draws in good things, and a negative mind, bad things. Positive thinking thus repackages unfreedom as freedom. Material conditions don't matter. Fix your head to preclude changing the world. Forget about class inequality and the fact that we were born into unequal cultural (skills and education), social (personal connections and access to powerful networks) and economic (money) capital, and that they greatly influence the chances of success in life. Having a lot of money ensures that one will also be more loaded in terms of cultural and social capital. These forms of capital are not up for grasp. We cannot build them easily, no matter how hard we try or think positively. Thus Bourdieu "argued that the unequal ability of people from different socioeconomic backgrounds to accumulate capital—economic, social, cultural—shapes their life chances profoundly and ensures that some will succeed while others will not" (Aschoff 2015, 101). In short, positive thinking transforms "social issues" into "personal troubles", thereby denying or minimizing "the power of structural forces like capitalism to create inequality and limit life choices" (Aschoff 2015, 97). It's an idea that is least useful if not harmful to poor people like Ki-woo. Therefore, it's a perfect ideology for our neoliberal times. Recall Thatcher's notoriously saying that "there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families." If there's no such thing as society, then there's also no such thing as social justice because the common good does not exist in the first place. You are on your own. Therefore, if you are poor, you have to work yourself out of poverty. At most you can rely on your family, which is to take the place of the welfare state (Cooper 2017).

Enjoying Our Loss

To sustain the system of exploitation and inequality, capitalism also produces modes of enjoyment. It 'lives off' our enjoyment and creates a lot of psychic costs. In other words, capitalism is also a libidinal economy. When subjects enjoy, they are unconsciously working for capitalism, not their own good (Tomsic 2019). As such, even when felt as personal, enjoyment is always also impersonal and trans-individual. When ordinary people regularly vote for politicians who implement

policies that harm them, support the billionaire class that is bent on destroying them, pursue a way of life that reinforces the atrocious status quo, etc., enjoyment becomes "a political factor" (Žižek 2008a).

Psychoanalytic theory contends that the more intractable problem of ideology is the enjoyment it offers. We are attached to ideology not only because of false consciousness but more importantly because of enjoyment. Put another way, making people aware that their beliefs or illusions are hurting them and providing them with the 'naked truth' instead will not necessarily diminish the appeal of an ideology. To understand why this is so, enjoyment must first be distinguished from pleasure (see esp. McGowan 2019a). Pleasure is associated with what's good for us. It brings satisfaction. It often requires conscious effort and thus goes along well with the maximization of benefits and the minimization of costs. Frequently, what's good for us is inextricable from "the goods" we consume or possess (Lacan 1992, 216). It's about gaining something. Leading a healthy lifestyle by eating nutritious food and exercising regularly brings pleasure. So too does accumulating power and wealth.

On the contrary, enjoyment is excessive and "beyond the pleasure principle." It's about missing the target or losing something. It's pleasure in pain. It's when we go to great length to act against our own best interests. A basic psychoanalytic insight is that "subjects do not seek their own good, despite their conscious intentions" (McGowan 2019b, 41). The subject of psychoanalysis is "split" or "divided" (e.g. Lacan 1991), torn between contradictory interests and desires, which are not always conscious. This means that we are far from being purely rational or transparent actors and that enjoyment has a masochistic structure. However, we are never or can never be conscious of our enjoyment. The unconscious follows its own impersonal logic— "it thinks" (Lacan 1981, 36). Ultimately, the unconscious "is a name for the inconsistency of Reason itself" (Žižek 2019, 167). In our times, the unconscious is the capitalist unconscious (Tomsic 2019).

In any case, enjoyment needs pleasure. Although opposite to one another, pleasure and enjoyment work alongside each other and operate simultaneously. Pleasure sets the scene for enjoyment by keeping it at a distance, by walling it off. As Lacan (1992, 230) put it, "What is meant by defending one's goods is one and the same thing as forbidding oneself from enjoying them." When we are consciously pursuing pleasure we are at the same time unconsciously working to enjoy,

to accumulate dissatisfaction. For instance, the goods we acquire are ultimately never the things that we are looking for. We thus consume endlessly (which is good for Capital) in order to be stuck in perpetual dissatisfaction. Enjoyment needs pleasure to sneak in beneath the radar of consciousness (McGowan 2019a, 218). He raises the example of political leaders with lots of power, contending: "When one enjoys power, one enjoys giving it up. No one just intelligently holds on to power. As power becomes secure, leaders put it at risk in wars or with actions that can only lead to failure. All leaders constantly work toward their downfall because work in this direction [is] the only way to enjoy the power of leadership" (McGowan 2019a, 209).

In the film Mrs. Park is described as someone who is "young and simple." With a mixture of disbelief and relish, Ki-taek even says, "This family [the Park] is so gullible." Many viewers claim that the film is unrealistic because the Parks are too naïve. Although it is valid to say that rich people don't have to be special and can be really stupid, we can also argue that the Parks' gullibility is a sign of their enjoyment of power. They may be simple and gullible but not powerless. To enjoy, they first have to work for Capital by accumulating pleasure in the form of wealth and power, which enables them to draw the line. Thus, the Parks could live in their own world undisrupted by the majority of people in society or even Nature. At the same time the Parks are unconsciously enjoying the loss of power and control. Mrs. Park hires Ki-woo and Ki-jeong as her children's tutors and then fires Moon-gwang and hires Chung-sook. Mr. Park replaces Driver Yoon with Ki-taek. And so on. This psychoanalytic interpretation is based on the Parks' obsession with drawing the line; that is, sustaining social inequality. Their tolerance really masks what Žižek (2008b, 41) calls "an obsessive fear of harassment", an assertion of "the right to remain at a safe distance from others." Wealth and power help create this distance. However, this distance not only keeps others at bay but also their own impenetrable enjoyment. In other words, they hate the others' enjoyment (e.g. how could poor people stand their own excessive smell? Why do they like to torment us with their bad smell?) so as to avoid confronting their own. Simply put, they draw the line to disavow their internal contradictions (e.g. self-division), projecting these contradictions into an opposition with working-class people. McGowan (2019a, 209) explains it well as follows:

Like the good, power represents an attempt to protect ourselves from enjoyment. Power is power over enjoyment. We look to gain power in order to avoid encountering the enjoyment that

threatens to upend our everyday existence. When they attain power, people use it to isolate themselves from the others' enjoyment…all so that they can avoid the disturbance that the others' enjoyment would introduce through playing loud music, producing strange smells, and even intruding on their property. Power is appealing because enjoyment is threatening. It promises to undermine our psychic equilibrium. By keeping the other's enjoyment at bay, one keeps one's own enjoyment at bay as well, which is in fact the point of creating distance from the other.

Thus, rather than seeing the Parks as gullible it is perhaps better to insist that they are enjoying power or that they don't know what they know (i.e. the capitalist unconscious).

Like the Parks', the Kims' mode of enjoyment is self-destructive. Ki-woo's "magical voluntarism" and Ki-taek's plan of having no plan are forms of enjoyment. They are unconsciously attached to failure or submission to Capital, a kind of "happiness in unhappiness" (Pfaller 2014, 198). Ki-taek doesn't know what he wants and doesn't want to confront his own desire. Without a plan of his own, he gets caught up in someone else's plan. Although he may feel free, he is stuck alone in a dark, depressing basement, and any change in his life will have to come from the outside/above. As for Ki-woo, positive thinking will likely hurt him, much like the 'scholar's rock' that almost killed him. At the beginning of the film, a rich friend gave him a rock which promises "to bring wealth and success to the family of its owner." The rock ends up being the weapon that Geun-sae uses to attack Ki-woo. Ki-woo eventually throws it away into a stream. But this may be because he has positive thinking to cling on to, and it is equally magical. Positive thinking is a form of "cruel optimism" in which "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant 2011, 1). Our passions and dreams may not necessarily be good for us. Ki-woo's plan to be a 'self-made man' will harm him not only because he will fail to buy the house but also because the flipside of positive thinking is depression. Capitalist society is structurally unfair and allows for only a handful of winners. There are no winners without creating a lot of losers. If external conditions don't matter then one must be solely responsible for failure in life. Here, freedom boils down to the freedom to punish oneself for failing. The privatization of failure therefore reinforces the depressing conviction that one is a good for nothing, a lesser being who doesn't have what it takes to succeed. As Fisher (2018, 509) nicely puts it, "depression is the shadow of entrepreneurial culture." Ki-woo's panic attack during Da-song's birthday party should be interpreted as an ingrained sense of inferiority fostered by the 'racialized'

class system: he panicked because he felt he's not cut to mingle with the upper-class even if he managed to pass as 'Kevin'.

Admittedly, the psychoanalytic insight feels like a downer. What's the point of doing anything if we are constantly derailing our own conscious plans because of enjoyment? It makes the task of any emancipatory politics even more difficult. It must not only come up with a concrete vision or project for the common good but also fosters "modalities of desire and enjoyment that might help bring about an alternative, postcapitalist global political economy or ecology" (Kapoor 2018, xxx). Perhaps, these modes of enjoyment can also be found when we lose the desires, fantasies, attachments, identities, etc. that have been produced under capitalism. Letting go of the ideological trash that we have been eating all along will be a traumatic and painful experience, because we will lose the coordinates of reality. If "freedom hurts", then it means that it is also enjoyable.

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