

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

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Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

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Bong Joon-ho, *Parasite*:

A Review Cluster

(South Korea: CJ Entertainment, 2019)

A special collaborative collection from Sara L. Crosby, Shelby Brewster, and Valeria Meiller

Has *Parasite* Finally Made Ecohorror Serious?

Sara L. Crosby

My husband and I have a deal. I can drag him to trashy ecohorror flicks like *Birdemic* (2010) or *Crawl* (2019), if he can alternate with high-falutin ‘serious’ films. And so, when Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite* won the Oscar for Best Picture, I realised I had wasted a turn I should have reserved for *Platypossum* (2017).

Bong Joon-ho *is* an ecohorror filmmaker. He forces us to look straight at the abuse that humanity—particularly the wealthy and privileged—inflict upon the planet and how that horror may turn back upon us. This can be traced in his films to date: his 2006 monster movie, *The Host*, revolves around a murderous mutant creature spawned in toxic waste. *Snowpiercer* (2013) deals with the ugly aftermath of climate disaster. *Okja* (2017) tackles the horrors of factory farming.

Parasite—the full plot of which is neatly summarised in the first review below—works with similar anthropogenic environmental issues, coming to a bloody crisis through the agency of a climate-change-induced flood, but with this difference: while Bong’s earlier films presented as ecohorror movies with a submerged class critique, *Parasite* is a class thriller with a submerged ecohorror critique. This ingenious play with genre enabled the film to do something no other ecohorror film before it has accomplished: take ecohorror/ecoGothic and its critical environmental focus into mainstream ‘serious’ filmmaking.

The problem with environmental problems, as Amitav Ghosh points out, is that modernity and its respectable and acceptable works of ‘high culture’ are predicated upon transforming the nonhuman into a passive backdrop for human agency (p. 11). Thus, even though anthropogenic environmental disasters, such as climate change or pandemics like the one we’re living through now, pose a far more monumental and existential threat to human existence than any other challenges modern society has ever faced, the ‘serious’ art of that civilisation has consistently failed to grapple with such issues—or even acknowledge them—in any meaningful way.

So, the fact that *Parasite* won the Oscar (in addition to the Palme d’Or) last year is profoundly significant, and not just because it is the first non-English-language film to do so. It is profound because it is the first *ecohorror* film to win the Oscar (and also the Palme d’Or). Bong has thus done what Ghosh thought nearly impossible, and yet film critics have still been a little slow to understand this significance. The following reviews endeavour to rectify this oversight and bring to the surface the film’s crucial *ecohorror*/*ecoGothic* components.

Parasite may portend a new impactful and ‘artful’ future for *ecohorror* and the *ecoGothic*, in which they become vehicles for the ‘serious’ cultural consideration of environmental issues. Given that possibility, I suppose I don’t really regret not holding out for *Platypossum*.

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‘They Smell the Same’: Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite*

Shelby Brewster

One of the many indelible images in Bong Joon-Ho’s film *Parasite* borders on the ridiculous. Three members of the Kim family—father Ki-taek (Song Kang-ho), daughter Ki-jung (Park So-dam), and son Ki-woo (Choi Woo-shik)—flee the home of the wealthy Park family, where they are all employed as part of an elaborate scheme. The Kims run through a torrential storm down the streets of Seoul to their own home, a semi-basement apartment. Rainwater and sewage have flooded their street; they have to wade through chest-high water to rescue some of their belongings. Ki-jung climbs up to the overflowing toilet in the family’s small bathroom and reaches up to pull a packet of cigarettes from a hiding place above a ceiling tile. Sitting on the lid of the toilet as dark liquid spurts from beneath it, the surrounding flood rising, she calmly lights a cigarette, taking a brief moment of pleasure as the world falls down around her.

Parasite, a meticulous and incisive commentary on class difference, burst onto the international film scene after its 2019 release. The film collected accolades and landmark prizes throughout the awards season: the 2019 Cannes Palm d’Or; the Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture; the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film; and the Academy Award for Best Picture, among others. Stunning direction by Bong, a tightly crafted screenplay by Bong and Han Jin-won, and masterful performances by the ensemble together create a cutting analysis of global capitalism.

The film follows the struggling Kim family: Ki-taek, his wife Chung-sook (Jang Hye-jin), and their children Ki-jung and Ki-woo. None of them can find or keep steady employment. Instead, they each earn money wherever and whenever they can. At one point early in the film, they all fold dozens of pizza boxes for a local restaurant. Opportunity comes knocking when Ki-jung’s school friend Min-hyuk (Park Seo-joon) invites him to take over his ‘cushy’ job as an English tutor for the teenage daughter of a wealthy family. Ki-woo forges his university credentials, and after an interview with Mrs. Park (Cho Yeo-jeong), Ki-woo, or ‘Kevin’, lands the job. The Kim family quickly takes advantage of Mrs. Park’s naïveté and desire for domestic and social security and

variously infiltrate her household. Ki-jung, or ‘Jessica’, poses as a friend of a cousin of Kevin’s with an Art Therapy degree; Mrs. Park hires her to teach and counsel her young son. Then, after discovering a pair of cheap underwear under the backseat of their town car—planted by Jessica—the Parks fire their chauffeur and hire Mr. Kim (posing as an experienced driver). Finally, the Kims displace the Parks’ longtime housekeeper (Lee Jung-eun) and install Mrs. Kim in her place. When the Parks take a camping trip to celebrate their son’s birthday, the Kims take advantage of the empty home. They frolic in the yard, soak in a bubble bath, and sample the extensive liquor cabinet. But when the former housekeeper returns to retrieve something she has left behind and the Parks return early due to the torrential downpour that has foiled their camping plans, the Kims’ carefully constructed scam quickly devolves into shame, pain, and violence.

The film’s commentary on wealth and class manifests in the stark contrast between the families’ homes. The Parks’ modern gated home, designed by a famous architect, features clean lines, smooth surfaces, and minimalist aesthetics. The Kims’ semi-basement apartment, on the other hand, is crowded, dingy, and close. But, as Jason W. Moore (2015) argues, capitalism is more than an economic relation: it is also a way of *organising nature*. In *Parasite*, the gradual deterioration of social relations is accompanied by an increasingly unmanageable natural world.

When Ki-woo first arrives at the Parks’ for his initial interview, the housekeeper buzzes him in through the gate. He transitions from the city’s concrete and asphalt to a lush, quiet, verdant space. The Parks maintain a meticulously manicured, deep green lawn. This is nature anesthetised: carefully controlled and maintained for the pleasure of the wealthy. The wall-spanning picture window overlooking the lawn further underscores the compartmentalisation of nature, as it is literally framed for the Parks’ use. When the Kims take over the home during the Parks’ absence, they revel in the respite such a greenspace provides.

The mucky, odorous brown of the storm-generated flood that damages the Kims’ home emerges in contrast to this picture-perfect green. The brown of the sewage-rainwater mixture overflows the meagre municipal infrastructure designed to control it, flooding streets and buildings, erupting from drains and sewers. The pervasive scent of the semi-basement, which clings to the Kims even as they move through the Parks’ ‘pure’ milieu, marks the Kims as *other*—

as targets for the disgust and revulsion of those who happen to be better off. The odour is inescapable, and only becomes more so following the rainstorm and ensuing flood. The basement smell and the sewage-tainted floodwaters both embody what Gay Hawkins (2002) calls disturbance: ‘what happens when the fantasy of absolute elimination and purity is abandoned, or when a smell makes your stomach turn, or when we imagine different ways of living with shit’ (p. 54). The smell repeatedly ruptures the illusion of the Parks’ pristine world, not only as they go about their days with the Kims waiting on them, but also in the violence of the film’s climax, when the secret harboured in the Parks’ own basement erupts. The economic underclasses and nonhuman nature, both subjugated by capital, assert their agencies which, for structures of power, are ‘terrifyingly unpredictable’ (Estok, 2020: p. 29).

Though not as obvious as in his previous film *The Host* (2006), the (natural) world in *Parasite* reveals how capital seeks to control waste—both ‘surplus humans and material remnants’ (Dini, 2018: p. 4)—and how that ‘waste’ exceeds, overflows, or otherwise takes agency. In the world of *Parasite*, as Timothy Morton (2016) reminds us, there is no ‘away’ (p. 46). Just as the Parks’ ridiculous level of comfort depends upon the abasement of the Kims (and others), so too does the precarious urban milieu which they all inhabit depend upon the control of nature, and especially of waste. Losing that control is, as Simon C. Estok (2020) describes, ‘a frightening prospect’ (p. 29). The worlds which we inhabit under global capitalism are built on oceans of waste with the potential to revolt at any time.

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No Storm Can Last Forever, Can it? Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* from an Eco-horror Perspective

Valeria Meiller

From an eco-horror perspective, it is difficult not to extrapolate the plot of *Parasite* to the reality of the current health crisis. Whether it is a threatening storm that results in a flood in Seoul—as it happens in the film—or a deadly virus, it is clear that those who will be most affected will be the most vulnerable. It feels somehow eerie, though particularly relevant, to be reflecting upon this film from New York City's lockdown where the COVID-19 virus seems to be spreading more rapidly than anywhere else. Big metropolitan junctures like this—or Seoul—are spaces where

environmental disasters and global pandemics manifest the most brutally. There have been many questions raised about environmental responsibility in the Anthropocene, with the leading question being who is—or which classes and societies are—the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene. Representations such as *Parasite* stand as almost structural graphics of agents, agencies, and positions built around the questions of natural disaster and class, whether it is an unforeseen sudden natural event like the rainstorm of Bong Joo-ho's fiction, a sanitary emergency like the coronavirus crisis, or the gradual environmental deterioration of climate change.

At first, the plot of *Parasite* seems to suggest that the members of the Kim family will simply become devious parasites within the Park household, but a deeper reading raises further questions about class relationships to the environment. Who are the *real* parasites in the film? What are the class entanglements to ecology that these two families make evident? Beyond the ingenious story twists designed by director Bong Joon-ho and his co-screenwriter Han Jin-won, what the film first identifies is that the 'upper class' live in a parasitic relationship to the labour of the 'lower class'. Such parasitism in the film is embedded in a critique of capitalism, but that critique takes on different dimensions when, at the turning point of the film, an intense rainstorm falls over Seoul and reveals complex violence inside of these two families' relationships to their surroundings. What, up until now, has been worked from the biological metaphor of the parasite—exploring the manifold combinations of class and parasitism and tapping into the varied feelings and horrors of thinking about the abject parasite—is now shown from the standpoint of the environment and environmental disaster. It is a shift in scale: if the parasite and its metaphors work on the level of the micro—the biological body—the storm and its disastrous aftermath will show inequality on the level of the macro: the environment.

For the Parks, the storm cuts short a camping trip, but when they return home after the rain ruins their weekend plans, they comfortably settle back into their luxury. The trip was supposed to be the birthday celebration of their son, Da-song, who is fond of camping because of his love of 'American Indians', and the biggest drama the family faces is that, frustrated after the cancelation, Da-song decides to camp in his 'Indian' tent in the garden despite the storm. 'Is that tent going to leak?' Mr. Park asks his wife. 'We ordered it from the U.S., it'll be fine', she responds. There is something placid and ideal in this young beautiful couple looking at their son in his temporary

refuge outside, being watched and protected from all emergencies by his parents and their considerable privilege. But here the tent functions as Bong Joon-ho's most mischievous twist on subalternity: embodied by the Native American bow and the tent that his mother has had shipped from the U.S., it is actually Western culture products that feeds into Da-song's distorted fantasy of the Native American. What Da-song's problematic understanding of Native Americans—referenced as 'American Indians' and stirring up colonialist implications—actually reveals is the Parks' idealisation of America as the embodiment of a reliable nation. It is also hard not to think about the irony of Da-song's fantasy of 'sleeping outside' when the space where his tent lies is in the garden of his parents' opulent house and sleeping 'rough' is very much a *choice* made purely for entertainment.

In sharp contrast with this idealised and distorted fantasy of the subaltern in nature, the Kims, after the impromptu arrival of the Parks, must escape the house in the middle of the storm and head back home to their *banjiha* in a low-income neighborhood of Seoul. The contrast between the Kims' and the Parks' neighborhoods is radical, and so are the consequences of the rain in one and the other. Far removed from the idyllic view of the Parks' illuminated tent in the garden, the rain is threatening and apocalyptic in the area of town where the Kims live. 'This is all sewage water', says Mr. Kim as he walks down the alley that leads to their *banjiha*, past neighbors emerging from their own underground homes, crying for help, trying to rescue some of their now floating possessions. The reality of these fictional poor families does not differ much from the reality of thousands of real-life Koreans who live in similar conditions, as well as from the realities of many others around the world whose lives are affected by how urban infrastructure fails to contain overpopulated urban centers, especially in low-income areas that seem to have been forgotten by the State. The flood works as a straightforward commentary on the relationship of class and climate change: it is always the poor who will suffer the most when natural disaster hits the hardest.

The rainstorm thus presents us with completely different scenarios in the Kim and the Park residences. All that seemed idyllic and even exciting for the Parks—let's remember Mr. and Ms. Kim have sex in the living room and fantasise about Ms. Kim as a working-class prostitute while ostensibly watching over their son camping in the yard outside—is disastrous for the Kims. The

poor parts of the city are flooded; people are losing everything they own as they move through a *literal* river of shit. The contrast between the two families, however, is thrown into starkest relief when, inside their basement apartment, the Kims try to rescue some of their personal effects, and Ki-woo clutches the scholar's rock his friend Min-hyuk gave him at the beginning of the film: a rock said to bring wealth. While marginality only enters the Park's life in the shape of a fantasy—something foreign enough to be arousing—wealth only touches the Kims as a symbol of an unfulfilled promise. Furthermore, the rock becomes a metaphor of extractivism: in the most literal of ways, extractivist economies produce wealth by exploiting the environment usually implicating poor nations giving away their resources to richer ones in the same way in which the Kims offer their labour to the Parks.

The Kim family spends the night at a gym together with others who have also lost their homes to the storm. Bong Joon-ho recreates a scene that we have many times seen after a natural disaster: dozens if not hundreds of people sleeping on the floor forming an aerial patchwork of patterns with their blankets. In the dark, Ki-woo asks his father: 'What was your plan?' 'No plan at all. You know why? If you make a plan, life never works out that way', his father responds. For people in their position, it's not even worth planning. Things don't care, in the same way that people like them seem not to count for society. This scene recalls Giorgio Agamben's (1995) fundamental biopolitical question about what lives are to be protected and what lives are to be abandoned to die. In the midst of the current global crisis, it seems a little late to think about *Parasite* as a cautionary tale; nonetheless, it is still possible to look at it as a counterexample for our modes of being in the world—asking us to create solidarities and reevaluate our environmental impact. Echoing the banner we have seen appear in social media in the wake of enforced lockdown, claiming 'I stay home for you. Please stay home for me', *Parasite*'s moral can be imagined as the recognition of our divergent positions and duties within the current environmental crisis where being 'inside' and 'outside' have manifold implications, and urgently call to be reimagined. It is for those in more vulnerable situations, for those whose locations and general conditions are more precarious than ours that we need to advocate for a clearer path towards environmental justice.

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