

Eat the Rich: The Parasitic Relationship Between Socioeconomic Groups in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer*

Vincent Ramos-Niaves, *Ball State University*

Bong Joon-ho's portrayal of class and the war between those who inhabit either end of the socioeconomic spectrum has long been noted and explored by critics and scholars for years. In particular, his films *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer* offer a dynamic exploration of this topic. Existing conversation about these films delves deeply into the symbolism for class and status, but rarely do they come from an emphasis in food studies and the way food can be used to denote socioeconomic structures. While that conversation is growing, I hope to expand it further by focusing on the space and method in which food is consumed in these films through a socioeconomic lens. *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer* are essential to this conversation because of their careful use of space and consumption. There is a clear spatial divide between the lower and upper classes in these movies that is examined and manipulated within either film. With this spatial divide, we see food spaces change in order to reinforce a binary idea of how class structure exists. Along with the change in space, change in method of consumption is equally important to analyze. The subtle but powerful differences create an image that serves to emphasize socioeconomic position and explain the relationship between dominant and subordinate groups.

Class is a universal tool designed to separate large groups of people into a binary world. It's a system that has divided every civilization from ancient cities to modern superpowers and, being an all-encompassing timeless force, is thus rooted in every aspect of our society. Some of these manifestations of class division are obvious, like neighborhood disparities or social division, creating a tension that is incredibly common in the literature of any culture. While exploring its roots in books and film as a derivative of the social structure established by the novel or movie can be compelling, it is far more interesting to look at the smaller, often overlooked parts of a given piece from a socioeconomic lens. Few creators understand the importance of subtle manifestations of socioeconomic principles as director Bong Joon-ho. In his films *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite*, class is at the forefront, and while the films have more obvious imagery of social division, the most subtle and complex way of viewing class in either film comes from food and the way and space in which it is consumed. Bong Joon-ho uses the subtle placement of food to explore the different class expectations as a limiting agent as well as in terms of performance, confining each social group into their respective roles through the space and consumption of food.

To analyze the socioeconomic systems in each film, I will primarily be using class as defined and studied by Raymond Williams in his book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, where he defines class as "a new binary: in Marxist language the *bourgeoisie* and the *proletariat*" (32). Williams

explores class as a binary system, disregarding the concept of the middle class as a physical entity and labelling it a “self-conscious and self-used description” (28). For the purposes of this analysis, this definition is fitting as both *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite* seek to highlight a binary interaction between the higher and lower class without an easily identifiable middle ground. While Williams does make the argument that the working class may be inducted into the middle class, both films take an approach of the upper class against any lower class, reinforcing the duality rather than complicating it. Williams further expands on this duality in his book *Marxism and Literature (Marxist Introductions)* where he conflates the bourgeois as a form of “cultural sociology” and also delves into their habit of “mass manipulation,” both of which are prevalent in these films—particularly *Snowpiercer* (136).

Beyond Williams, class is one of the pinnacles of human society, so there is a plethora of information on these aspects in both films. Pieces like “Laughing to Keep from Crying” by Ari Aster and “‘Parasite’ Review: The Lower Depths Rise with a Vengeance” by Manohla Dargis examine class in the context of Bong Joon-ho’s subversion of traditional roles and expectations of the characters to highlight a resistance against the binary class system, not unlike what Williams describes. Not nearly enough dialogue has been started on the idea of food within these class-based films despite the emphasis on food and consumption in each of them. This, along with the recentness of the films, has led to a lack of scholarly discussion regarding the specific topics of this paper. However, scholars and critics of these two films do note common threads. Chief among these is a clear reinforcement of traditional class structures, and I will be expanding on this through a close analysis of the use of food and space and by utilizing the limited criticism available. However, it is also important to note that the context of Williams’s essays is firmly rooted in British class structures while Bong Joon-ho is Korean. Many of Bong’s films do have more Western-centered images and themes, making a British analysis of class more in line with Bong’s methodology.

1. *Snowpiercer*

Bong Joon-ho’s film *Snowpiercer* (2013) is a sci-fi dystopian thriller in which the entire world has frozen over, leaving what remains of humanity to inhabit one long train. The train itself was created by the antagonist of the film, Wilford, and is meant to circumnavigate the world and never stop running. Everything needed for life on earth exists on the train. The society there is symbolic of socioeconomic structures with the poorest being all shoved together at the tail end of the train, earning the name “tailenders,” while the “frontenders” consist of the upper class. Bong Joon-ho does not spend much time in the middle of the train, making his representation of class more akin to William’s definition. The plot itself follows Curtis, the protagonist, as he and a group of tailenders seek to overthrow Wilford in a rebellion. Throughout the film, many of them die, including a mother figure, Tanya; Curtis’s close friend, Edgar; and other important tailender figures like Gilliam (John Hurt) and his surrogate son Grey. Key frontender and Wilford’s spokeswoman, Mason, dies as well. The movie ends with Curtis derailing the train, effectively killing everyone except for the two youngest who are left to rebuild a better society. *Snowpiercer’s* relevance is perhaps best explored by Ian Pettigrew in his review for *Science Fiction Film and Television*. Pettigrew notes several scenes from the film, such as that “both Korean characters are addicted to the train’s drug of choice Kronol” (151). Here, he clearly draws a connection to western

civilization's treatment of marginalized groups, reinforcing the notion of power as a manipulative force and showing Bong's attention to the real-world implications of consumption from a powerful group to a subordinate.

Snowpiercer is an understudied film, making the analysis of specific scenes essential to understanding the emphasis on food in the film and its relevance to Bong's critique of class. The most emphasized example of food's massive implications in the film comes from the item that's given the most frequently: protein bars. These initially appear to be small brown rectangles of indeterminable composition, but Bong reveals their production towards the end of the first act. In this scene, Curtis and his rebellion break into the production car where mass quantities of the protein bars are made. The tailenders rush to the conveyer belt, grabbing as many of these bars as possible, noting their warmth and marketing that feature as a luxury. However, moments later, the ingredients for the bars are revealed: ground up insects put through a high-tech grinder until they are essentially a brown gelatin-like structure. The emphasis of this role can perhaps best be compared to the role of chicken, a cheap inexpensive meat now that, while sensationalized on the train, carries a specific connotation. In her essay "More than Just the 'Big Piece of Chicken': The Power of Race, Class, and Food in American Consciousness," Psyche Williams-Forsen investigates the role of chicken as a food source primarily associated with Black culture. She identifies the origins of the stereotype as chickens being an undervalued source that enslaved people could typically get away with stealing (111). In essence, chicken gained its notoriety from being the only available option to a group oppressively denied nourishment. While chicken itself is not used in the film in this specific way, its similarities to the protein bars offer a look into the way Bong utilizes the role and consumption of food to highlight the marginalization of the lower class.

Bong directly compares protein bars to chicken, creating a more poignant emphasis on the luxury of more quality meat as a barrier between classes. When comparing the role of one food to another in *Snowpiercer*, the spaces in which the food is consumed or shown are incredibly relevant in terms of the hierarchy of the train. It's a rather straight-forward metaphor of class. Those closer to the front of the train represent the upper class while the farther back a person is, the less important a person is to the social hierarchy. Chicken, being the middle ground of the film, is the first comparison to be made in terms of food. Seconds before Curtis's rebellion begins, the tailenders antagonize the guards shouting, "we want chicken," rejecting the protein bars. This demand for the betterment of their meal at a time in which they are trying to push forward puts the protein bars spatially in the back of the train. There is a massive difference in where the film allows the bars to exist and where chicken is. When we see the protein bars being made or consumed, the car is always dark and the people grimy. The car where they find the grinder is a dingy place with little lighting, but the chicken car is well lit by florescent lights all along the walls. It marks them as a cleaner form of food, making them significantly more important in appearance when juxtaposed to the grime worn by the tailenders. It shows them as out of place next to the luxury that they haven't been afforded.

The food choices as a representation of class come together in the final scene in which Curtis is forced to have dinner with the inventor of the train, Wilford, which operates as a callback to past moments in the film and emphasizes its role as the epitome of class privilege. This scene is full of religious imagery where Wilford rules over and controls the lives of the people in the train, explaining how he

and an important figure of the tailenders orchestrated Curtis's rebellion, and how they, together, control life and prosperity on the train. All while he is explaining this, Wilford is cooking a meal for himself of steak and red wine. These two items are very emblematic of socioeconomic structures. Steak and red wine are traditionally linked with the upper class, marking their inclusion as a clear indicator of thematic importance to the film. The intentional choice of this food gives this entire scene more weight in terms of the grand scheme of the food choices throughout the film, specifically the method of consumption. At every point of the film where food is involved, the characters eat the item with their hands; even the eggs are hard-boiled so frontenders and tailenders alike eat them with their bare hands, and the daughter of the inventor, Yona, drinks champagne directly from the bottle. While this could be explained as a reinforcement of the tailenders as the "savage" end of society, another emphasis on utensils coming from an interaction between Mason and Curtis at the sushi bar brings the utensils into more critical role.

In this scene, Curtis forces Mason to eat the protein bar, thus cementing her as a part of the lower class, but moments before this, Mason had attempted to have sushi with the rest of them using chopsticks which are taken from her. By replacing this utensil with the protein bar, Curtis is essentially removing her status as a high-ranking official. This use of utensils as a symbol makes the egg scene more interesting as everyone eats the eggs the exact same way. This draws attention to the blurring of socioeconomic lines that Wilford talks about at length during this conversation. Wilford talks about working with tailender Gilliam because "the front and the tail are supposed to work together" (*Parasite*). He says this cooperation is meant to maintain order, and the tension their oppression creates is just as vital as his maintaining the engine for their society to thrive. This explains why, in the middle of the train, everyone is on equal footing, eating a simple food of moderate luxury with the same method of consumption. The middle of the train illustrates a blurring of societal lines and highlights the importance of Curtis's rebellion as a destructive but necessary force in the same way Wilford does. Still, as we will explore later in this essay, these comparisons orchestrated by food matters offers the assurance of a relationship both parasitic and symbiotic in nature. The foundation of this argument is perhaps best illustrated by another of Bong Joon-ho's films, *Parasite*.

2. *Parasite*

Parasite, released in 2019, is a social commentary thriller directed and created by Bong Joon-ho. It follows the Kims, a lower-class family unable to find work due to a lack of opportunities in South Korea. While earning some money folding pizza boxes, they meet the Parks, a wealthy family in need of some labor. Slowly, the Kims conspire to get all of the Parks' employees fired and then take those jobs for themselves. The Kims' attempted integration in the Park home eventually leads to the death of the Kim daughter and injury of the Kim son. Spurned by this, the film ends with the Kim father killing the Park patriarch and hiding in tunnels under the Park home for what we assume to be the rest of his life. The film is widely believed to be a brilliant depiction of class struggles and won an Oscar for its critique of the class system. While the film does follow Raymond Williams's definition of class, it brings the separation of lower and upper classes to the forefront, as noted by critics like E. Alex Jung and Bong Joon-ho himself as he states in an interview with *The Atlantic*: "What story could I tell with just two houses? I came up with the idea of a poor house and a rich house. . . . I was really enveloped in this story about

the gap between the rich and the poor” (Sims). This separation as it pertains to *Parasite* is best explored in the essay “Domination and Subordination” by Jean Baker Miller. Miller refers to class as a form of “permanent inequality,” meaning it’s something born and not achieved or marked by certain characteristics. According to her studies, most of these sociological groups (class, gender, race, etc.) can be separated through a binary lens made of the dominants and the subordinates. In context with one another, “dominant groups usually impede the development of subordinates” and “determine what is normal for a culture,” while subordinates attempt to follow social rules created by the dominants while motivated by their own self-interest in an act of basic survival (Miller 94-95). This insistence on dominant and subordinate social factions is the driving force behind *Parasite* as the lower class competes with the upper for domination despite living as a subordinate group.

In terms of the connotation of the food itself in the film, *Parasite* functions much like *Snowpiercer*, using well-known dishes with distinct ties to class in order to enhance the film’s central theme and identify the subordinates and dominants. For example, the Parks ask their cook, Chung-sook (mother of the Kim family), to make a simple dish but emphasize the importance of adding sirloin, a red meat symbolic of wealth (*Parasite*). Where *Parasite* deepens this meaning is the invasion and division of socio-economic spaces and their methods of consumption. The Parks eat on a long wooden dining room table, emphasizing their wealth and position as they sit far away from each other, but the Kims are often shown eating close together and with the bare minimum of utensils and care. In fact, their positions while eating are remarkably different. The Kims eat in various positions around the kitchen, close together and close to the location in which food is prepared. It is in these scenes where the Kims eat around their table that the invasion of upper-class space is planned and comprised. However, it is also a location that visually places the Kims as subordinates in their relationship with the family they serve. When looking at the way the dinner table is treated with the Parks, there is a very different experience. The Parks never sit at the table together, choosing instead to have their conversations when one of them is at the table, not eating together. By consuming their food in various locations, they take up more space, carefully avoiding the kitchen to maintain their distance from where the food is cooked. This separation is indicative of a more civilized and refined way of consumption. The two images of the consumption space allow the Parks and Kims to inhabit a food space at the peak of their class expectations. The importance of this difference is perhaps best shown through the invasion of the Park residence by the Kims (*Parasite* 00:55:11-1:24:35.)

This long scene represents the turning point of the film where the story takes a darker turn. In this scene, the Parks leave for a camping trip, leaving their home in the hands of Chung-sook. Thanks to this absence, the Kims then inhabit the Park residence and, with the arrival of the recently fired cook, learn about a series of secret underground tunnels hiding an older poor man who is the former maid’s husband. When the Parks call Chung-sook informing her of an early return, the family rushes to hide their stay, leading to the death of the Park’s former maid. Food and drink in this sequence holds a particularly interesting meaning when compared to other instances of eating in different spaces. The sequence can be further investigated by comparing two specific moments: The Parks eating on the living room couch of the Park house, and Mrs. Park eating at the dinner table (*Parasite* 00:57:11, 1:18.41). It is important to first reinforce the importance of distance and space when looking at these two scenes. The Kim family,

representing the lower-class, or subordinates, are all sitting close together as they eat and drink, but the Park family is dispersed and separated, not all eating and also occupying greater space. The two locations operate as different eating spaces in different rooms, giving them a physical barrier to separate the dominants from the subordinates, despite the fact that the Kims are still occupying a dominant space to eat. Similarly, the underground tunnels hiding the lower-class man within the Park house is hidden behind a food-space as well, that being the pantry in the basement, emphasizing the idea of the “upstairs family and the downstairs” (Jung). The couch scene opens with most of the family on the floor, pouring scotch into a clear rocks glass, emphasizing the position of an upper-class family. However, as the son pours his father more scotch, the father looks directly into the camera and says, “this is pretty classy,” reminding the viewers of the oddity of this family consuming these items. The sense of irony is only heightened by the placement of the food itself in the scene, covering the table in a disorganized clutter of mismatched foods. From there, they fall further and further from their perceived privilege, moving from drinking from a glass to drinking liquor straight from the bottle, eating food with their hands, and eventually even shattering glasses and throwing food across the floor.

Conversely, the mother of the Park family, Yeon-gyo, has a different relationship with the food she consumes in the separate scene. The food given to her is not food she found or made herself, but is rather the food she had her maid, Chung-sook, cook and then later serve to her as she sits at the dinner table. Yeon-gyo engages Chung-sook in a meaningless conversation where the Kim matriarch remains standing while Mrs. Park eats. This signifies a differentiation between the reason either woman is there. Chung-sook is there as a distraction from the attack on and essential murder of the former maid that occurred moments earlier, unable to sit at the table itself as the situation marks her as an uncivilized subordinate, while Mrs. Park represents a picture of civilized society to the wealthy, sitting at a table with a bowl with utensils and eating a meal she did not make herself. Even Chung-sook’s making of the food symbolizes the subordinate as the act was tainted both by the crime she had just committed and the lie she told Yeon-gyo. In this way, the food becomes a kind-of sickness of the lower-class infiltrating the upper-class, a fact only solidified by the fact that the meal itself is a comfort food associated with the lower class but with sirloin, an upper class meat, mixed in, highlighting the blend of class-related foods. The blending is furthered when the Park mother offers the food to every member of the house before sitting down to eat it herself, showing the infiltration in a more complete way that directly confronts the dominant social group with the subordinate.

3. Common Themes in *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer*

While *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer* are remarkably different movies, they both revolve around the theme of class and how each social group relates and connects to the other. What’s important about the comparison of the two comes from the lens through which they are told. *Snowpiercer* comes from a place where subordinates seek to become dominants in their own class system. *Parasite*, however, sees class for what it is, a parasitic relationship where the wealthy benefit and the poor have to accommodate while acting in their own self-interest. According to Jean Baker Miller, subordinates know “[their] fate depends on accommodating to and pleasing the dominants,” allowing them to infiltrate them with the knowledge of how they operate. In some ways, the thematic importance of *Snowpiercer* can be

conveyed through the single action of Mr. Kim stabbing Mr. Park at the end of *Parasite*. Still, however, that aggression and rage create a conflict between the classes that is essential in fully understanding the effects of socioeconomic barriers as they are presented in Bong Joon-ho's work. By comparing these two films, we see Bong's steady reinforcement of socioeconomic norms: the subordinates eat with their hands in close proximity to the making of the food, the dominants (or those inhabiting dominant space) drink elegant alcoholic drinks with classier connotation from glasses rather than straight from the bottle like subordinates.

Similarly, punishment for social deviance is prominent as seen through the massacre of tailenders at the end of *Snowpiercer* and the death, imprisonment, and insanity of the Kim family. In both films, Bong utilizes punishment to emphasize the rejection of shifting class structures. This comes into play in *Parasite* through the use of water. Early in the film, during the first real instance of the Kim family inhabiting of the Park home, the son of the Kim Family, Ki-woo, takes 2 glass water bottles for himself and his sister. While this in itself is an innocuous enough moment, its place as the first parasitic act of the family is central to understanding the way Bong Joon-ho reinforces socioeconomic structure through punishment of deviant behaviors. Water is influenced by Bong's idea of socioeconomic structures. The director makes it a point to display the brand and type of water being consumed, that being an expensive, imported brand, making the consumption of it an act of deviance by the characters. This deviance then leads to punishment by the end of the film, reinforcing socioeconomic boundaries. The film accomplishes this by flooding the Kim home, using that same life-sustaining food to effectively destroy the family's way of life (*Parasite*). This could be interpreted from a religious context, the Great Flood washing out sinners. This punishment is supplemented by the ending of the film in which the two most injured members of the family are the same two who drank the water. A review by John Tammy makes note of the oddity of the children's positions, stating, "Simply stated, fluency in English is a rather lucrative skill to possess . . . if he's got these skills why on earth would he be folding pizza boxes? . . . why isn't he already lucratively employed by someone, somewhere in Seoul." While Tammy notes this, he fails to acknowledge the physical and visual barrier presented by the film as the norm of this film. Taking into account the oddity of the intelligence of the Kim family that Tammy observes, the intelligence of the younger Kims marks a further deviation from their societal role, making their punishment at the end even more fitting, solidifying the importance of reinforcing socioeconomic boundaries.

This type of religious allusion is common in Bong's works, especially when it comes to the punishment of deviant behavior. For example, the aforementioned scene in *Snowpiercer* involving the eggs references the builder of the train, Wilford, as a God of the society, praying to him and saying life on the train is because of his will and grace. This allusion is further cemented by the imagery of Curtis when Wilford shows him the engine and a bright white light shines on his face. The dialogue is followed by the involvement of chicken, specifically eggs, which operate as an enforcer of class roles similarly to *Parasite's* use of water. The eggs come into play when Curtis and his allies infiltrate the education car where "children enthusiastically recite propaganda," emblematic of the American repetition of the pledge in school (Pettigrew 151). The model of the class and repetition of propaganda that Ian Pettigrew points out in his review reinforces the idea of God and prayer to the society of *Snowpiercer*. By praying to Wilford, they validate themselves as the privileged and "worthy," making the punishment of the scene

more poignant. In the scene, the tailenders and frontenders are all given free hardboiled eggs despite their place in the class system. However, the moment the eggs are consumed, and the tailenders are afforded the very luxury they sought out, they are immediately punished by the frontenders in the form of gunfire and the mass executions. This punishment is especially weighty when considering the sushi scene just prior to this one. In that scene, the tailenders are afforded a luxury that they hadn't had since before the apocalypse. Moreover, they aren't the only deviants. When Curtis and the others are forced to deviate from the assigned role, Curtis also forces Mason to do the same, having her eat a protein bar, marking her for the same punishment as them. In either case, the punishment is handed down by that film's God, enforcing Raymond Williams's idea regarding the role of inheritance in socioeconomic structures.

Food in *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite* is used to create barriers between socioeconomic groups and explore the societal reaction and impact of the blurring of those lines. The impact and importance of food as a human necessity gives it more weight to be able to highlight the infiltration of class structure in our everyday lives, creating an uncomfortable narrative that forces us to question our place within socioeconomic structures. However, these films deal with food in more than just a superficial way. They highlight the differences in food spaces as a strong indicator of class, proximity to sustainable food as an indicator of worthiness and privilege, and using religious imagery and punishment of deviant behavior to show the ramifications of stepping outside of one's prescribed barrier. Their endings and beginnings are centered around where food is from the introduction of the Kim family talking at their dinner table to the tailenders waiting for their protein bars. These films end much in the same way, with the Kim daughter being stabbed with a kebab and Curtis watching Wilford eat a steak. Both films and their messages start and end with the importance of food and space as a driving point to their careful critique of class structures. While food is just one way in which class is examined in these films, food is also the pinnacle of culture and society, the most basic human necessity. To ignore the importance of that would be to ignore the subtleties and intricacies of our class-based society that Bong Joon-ho demands we examine.

Works Cited

Aster, Ari. "Laughing to Keep from Crying." *Film Comment*, vol. 55, no. 5, Sept. 2019, pp. 32–33.

Dargis, Manohla. "'Parasite' Review: The Lower Depths Rise With a Vengeance." *New York Times*, 10 Oct. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/10/10/movies/parasite-review.html.

Joon-ho, Bong. *Parasite*. Neon, 2019.

---. *Snowpiercer*. RADiUS-TWC, 2013.

Jung, Alex E. "Bong Joon Ho on Why He Wanted Parasite to End With a 'Surefire Kill.'" *Vulture*, Vulture, 14 Jan. 2020, www.vulture.com/article/parasite-ending-explained-by-bong-joon-ho.html.

Miller, Jean Baker. "Domination and Subordination." *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, edited by Paula S Rothenberg and Christina Hsu Accomando, Worth Publishers/Macmillan Learning, 2020, pp. 91-96.

Pettigrew, Ian. "Review of *Snowpiercer*, by Bong Joon-Ho." *Science Fiction Film and Television*, vol. 9 no. 1, 2016, pp. 150-153.

Sims, David. "How Bong Joon Ho Invented the Weird World of 'Parasite.'" *The Atlantic*, 10 Feb. 2020, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/10/bong-joon-ho-parasite-interview/600007/.

Tamney, John. "Bong Joon-ho's 'Parasite' Is Overrated, Implausible, Class-Struggle Nonsense" *Real Clear Markets*, 06 Feb. 2020, https://www.realclearmarkets.com/articles/2020/02/06/bong_joon-hos_parasite_is_overrated_implausible_class-struggle_nonsense_104067.html.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Oxford University Press, 1976.

---. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1977.

Williams-Forsen, Psyche. "More than Just the 'Big Piece of Chicken': The Power of Race, Class, and Food in American Consciousness." *Food and Culture*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. Routledge, 2007, pp. 107-116.