

How Does the Architecture in The Movie “Parasite” Help Portray the Social Class Differences?

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ABSTRACT

Social class difference is the central plot in the film “Parasite”. The movie shows the difference in lifestyles of the upper-class and lower-class. One way it does so is through the architecture portrayed in it, which is precisely what this research paper focuses upon. The subthemes of architecture chosen for this paper include spatial elevation, interior orientation, and perspective of the outside world from the upper-class and lower-class streams. Different points are characterized into these three groups and are explored as a whole in the film. This research paper also tries to identify why a certain setting has been used, why has the layout been made a certain way, and why has a certain object been placed in a particular spot. All the answers to these questions mainly point in the direction of creating an empathetic response from the audience. This refers to the audience feeling sorry for the low-income Kim household and hence actively depicting their plight. As the film is set in South Korea, it can be derived that it not only highlights the general wage gap but rather specifically the one in Korea as it is filled with poverty and unequally distributed income. Moreover, architecture itself might have been one chosen medium to bring the social difference to notice as it is very subtle in nature. It makes the audience sympathize without them even realizing when or why.

Introduction

When the movie “Parasite” was released in 2019, it took no time in becoming renowned all over the world for being a work of art. As a matter of fact, it was even awarded the Best Picture at the Oscars. However, given the mighty uproar it caused, that definitely did not come as a surprise. The director Bong Joon-Ho aimed to portray differences in social class structures in Seoul through the depiction of two families: the Kims and the Parks, symbolizing lower-class and upper-class settings, respectively. One of the primary ways in which he was successful in doing so was through the architecture and spatial composition of the film - the distinct design features of the two houses, and the representation of two diverse sections of the same city. Their contrasting conditions are embodied through the composition of the spatial elevation, interior orientation, and perspectives of the outside world from the inside of the houses. This paper will investigate how these elements are used to successfully expand both Parasite’s narrative and thematic impact on the audience.

Perspective from The Inside

Perspective carries great significance in architecture- it helps in the concepts of visualization and communication. This idea has been used in “Parasite” to implicitly communicate the idea of inequality in the movie. The view of the world- Seoul to be specific- from the Kim family’s eyes and the Parks’ eyes, are very different.

This theme emerges at the very beginning of the movie; it starts with the look of the city through the dirty windowpanes of the Kims. This highlights the fact that they do not even have access to basic resources to

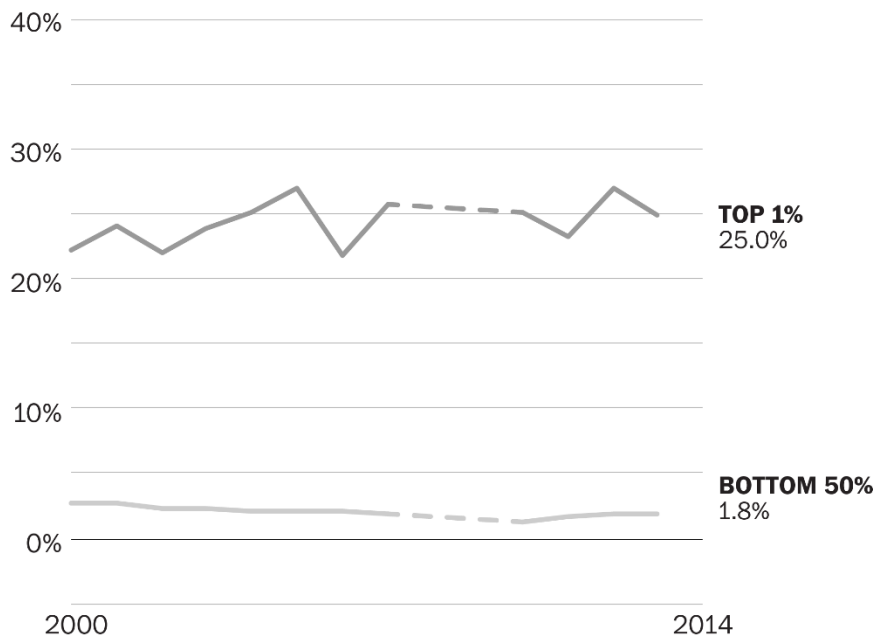
keep their house clean and maintain basic hygiene. Hence, this shows lower living standards. It can also be interpreted as the poor perception the Kims have of the outside world.

Now, this poor perception may be due to the fact that they are furious at the world because of their inability to be on par with them. This is probably why Mr. Kim stabbed Mr. Park at the end of the movie. Mr. Park covered his nose to be safe from the stench and Kim thought he did this due to the supposed stench coming from his daughter. This set him off as Mr. Park had commented upon this earlier as “abhorrent” and “low-class”.

This “low-class” nature can also be inferred from the placement of the window. The window might have deliberately been placed at the ground level to show how the Kims live even below the ground level, indicating that they might conceivably be more impoverished than ordinary people. Poverty in South Korea is widespread. The statistic below shows how 50 percent of the population accounts for just 1.8 percent of the wealth.

South Korea’s wealth gap

Share of national wealth among top 1 percent and bottom 50 percent of adults in South Korea



Source: World Inequality Database

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Figure 1. Table showing wealth gap in south korea in 2014. (2020)

Right after this, fumigation is seen being done. In this process, smoke seeps in through the window and clouds the Kim house. Besides, people are frequently caught urinating outside this particular window. The urine in the atmosphere around their house creates not only a sense of disgust but also highlights the unhealthy living conditions. People living in these conditions in underdeveloped or developing areas are usually at a higher risk of contracting parasitic infections. Hence, the fumigation upon them from above, the sense of disgust, and high chances of infection upon the family suggest that they themselves are the “parasites”, who are looked down upon. This is all again in consideration to the house itself. Because the house is submerged in the ground, the

family is able to witness the aforementioned processes and the audience gets an idea of how people of a higher class look down upon the people of a lower class. The Kims, by looking up out of the window at such stuff make the audience sympathize with them.

Furthermore, towards the movie's end, the city encounters a storm. While the storm hits, the Kims are stepping back into their house. They go down an extremely large staircase in the city. As it pours, the belongings inside the Kim house and their neighbour's gush out like streams of water. The drainage system is not so apt, for something as small as rain can flood their house. Being inside their house is not safe for them as it is filled with water. On the other hand, at the same time, the kid in the Park house is spending the night outside in the pouring rain on their splendid lawn. The Kims are not safe inside but the Parks are safe even outside. This shows the nature of the high-end luxury house the Parks live in. Furthermore, it also demonstrates the effect architecture can have on the immediate safety of human beings and how an effective design-of drainage system in this case can help raise the quality of life. The rain also washed away the personal property of the Kims and invaded their private space. This incident also shows how little security they have.

The term "high-end luxury housing" is exactly what can perfectly describe the Park house. What in particular does the term mentioned above include in relation to the Park house? There is a "splendid lawn" that can be seen from the Parks' clean and large window, which is in accordance with the 2.35:1 ratio (O' Falt, 2019) of the widescreen cinemascope format shown below. Both these aspects are highly contrasting in nature with the window talked about at the Kim house. It is to be noted that while the lawn here covers a great amount of space, there is no sign of or even space for greenery outside the Kim house. The Kims always have darkness around their house, whereas the view from the window of the Parks is mostly shown with plenty of light coming through. In addition to the rain mentioned before, the Park couple sits comfortably in their living room drinking wine and looking out at the pleasant scene. Moreover, sprinklers in the garden can be seen during the day that is used to water the lush green trees. In contrast to the water, the liquid outside the Kim house is urine. This again illustrates the difference in living conditions. The Parks inhabiting such a privileged residence brings them confidence and saves them from trips to the hospital. In contrast, the Kims being surrounded by their respective environment creates negative energy. Such negativity has an impact on both their cognitive fitness and physical health. Being surrounded by malodour and literal darkness can not only lead to a person being depressed but also increases the risk of contracting diseases as mentioned before. This atmospheric distinction enables the observers to empathize with the Kims.



Figure 2. Figure showing window inside the park house. (O' Falt, 2019)

Interior Orientation

In addition to the placement and perspective from outside of the houses, interior orientation is also another theme of the movie that brings out class differences. The density of the Kim household is comparatively more than the Parks'. The Kims comparatively own fewer things than the Parks yet their apartment is packed with objects relative to its small size. Therefore, there is hardly any space to walk around their house without crashing into cartons or other items lying around on the ground. On the other hand, as Kevin walks through the Park house for the first time with the housekeeper showing him around, he is left mesmerized by its spatial lavishness as evidenced by his facial expression during this scene.

Apart from the sizes of the same places in the houses, there are other factors too that differentiate them. The washroom in the Park house is grandiloquent and massive. It is presumably half the size of the entire Kim home. It has a huge bathtub and flat-screen. The Kim bathroom on the other hand just has a little area for taking a shower with a tap and bucket. This disparity underlines the extravagance inside the Park house. Both of the areas inside the houses are bathrooms but the things inside the two show the wide wage gap. To broaden the wage gap is the distinction between the dining table. The dining table at the Park House is of course bigger but way cleaner than the one at the Kims'. The Kims' dining table has cockroaches all over it, again coming back to hygiene and increased chance of contracting diseases.

In the Kim house, they climb up the stairs to get to the toilet which is where they get to network. Usually, in houses, the stairs lead up to the bedrooms like in the Park house but here they lead up to the toilet. This shows the difference in living standards.

Elevation

While going to the Park house for the first time, Kevin is evidently seen climbing a ramp. A ramp is purposely shown to highlight climbing up in the social structure. It elevates his status in society. Similarly, it could have also been put there to illustrate the wide gap between the lower-class neighbourhood of the Kims and the upper-class neighbourhood of the Parks.

(Flight, 2020)

Another instance is exhibiting an identical piece of architecture: the staircase (shown below) that the Kims use to get to their neighbourhood when it is raining and need to get out of the Park house. It also shows quite a bit about the difference in the city. It appears as if the city has diverged into two halves. One half is over the staircase, at the top, while the other is below it. One half has a higher level than the other. One half has a sounder measure of residency than the other. Moreover, the sheer length of the staircase shows the extent to which this difference is there. This dissimilarity can also instantly be noticed from one sight of the staircase. The walls that are seen from the lower end of the staircase are rusty and seem as if they are crumbling like paper. The contemporary, extravagant houses are situated on the upper end of the staircase.

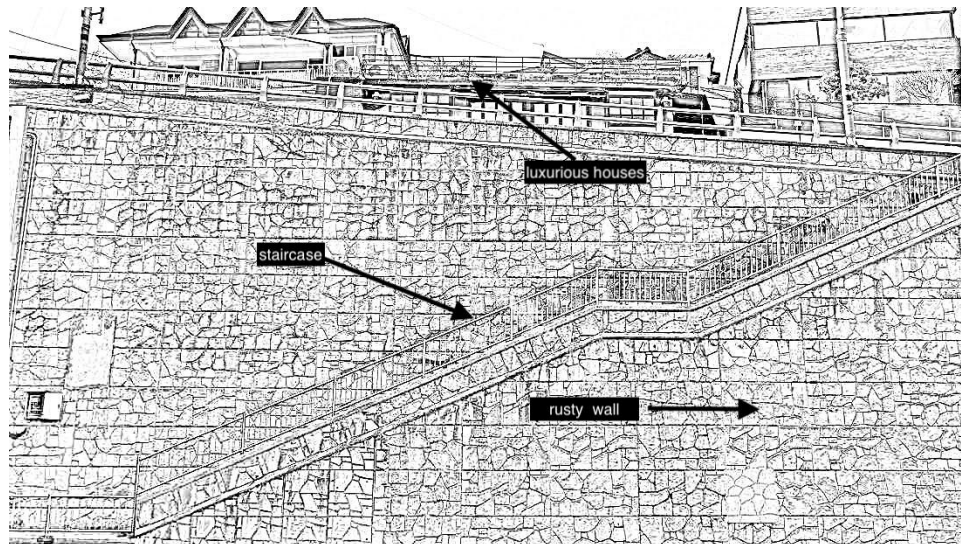


Figure 3. Figure showing staircase connecting the two parts of the city. (Maggie Hiufu Wong, 2020)

Even the staircase inside the Park house leading down to the basement where the housekeeper's husband has been living has been put to portray the same. However, this staircase is way longer than the one before and the previous one was pretty long too. It is as though it is never-ending. This staircase is shown as never-ending as the man living in the so-called "room" below it is in debt. Debt is a vicious cycle of poverty that is very tough to get out of and continual. Hence, the staircase is shown as never-ending. The debt keeps piling up and the difference between the rich Parks and the man keeps increasing and increasing.

Conclusion

To conclude, through the differences in the design structures of the two houses, the various staircases, the carefully placed surroundings, and the interior of the houses of the two families, the film strongly conveys the difference between the social class structures. The creators of the film perhaps chose architecture as a medium to stress social issues as it is the most subtle yet effective way of doing so. While watching the film the audience would have never thought of how they know about the wide income gap that exists between the two. But the subtle nature of the architecture would have deliberately planted this thought in the viewer's brain from the very beginning. Moreover, the architecture also helps pronounce the stark contrast between the socio-economic class of the two families.

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