

# Class and Environment in Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer*

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## Introduction

There are a wide range of films that cover the topic of ecology and the nature/human binary through different forms, from experimental to animations and more. However, those films often focus on the environment primarily as the main plot point of the story. Director Bong Joon-Ho approaches ecology and the environment differently, through different vehicles and different genres as a supporting plot point. Despite having made films over the past decade, Bong Joon-Ho has only recently risen to international fame with the release of his film *Parasite* in 2019 when it received an Academy Award for “Best Picture” (Imanjaya et al. 1). As we look back at his filmography, the Anthropocene and the politicization of nature are recurrent themes appearing within many of his films. Some of the major films in which Bong Joon-Ho explores the relationship between nature and culture include *Parasite*, *Snowpiercer* (2013), *The Host* (2006), and *Okja* (2017). While each of his films comes under various genres, such as thriller, dark comedy, dystopian, and so on, they raise the importance of ecology by representing different aspects of nature such as animal lives, climate change and pollution through the aspect of culture, more specifically class. The relationship between class and the environment is an important one, especially considering how “social relations alter the natural environment” and vice versa (Aronowitz 171). The ecological and classist-focused approach to *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite* create a general critical framework that is applicable to Bong’s other ecocentric films in order to reveal the relationship between class and ecology. Therefore, this essay focuses primarily on how Bong Joon-Ho represents the relationship between class and environment in the films *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer*. Looking at the range of films directed by Bong that touch upon the environment in relation to culture and applying an ecological reading to those films reveals the ecological and classist critical framework that Bong applies to every film, no matter the genre. Specifically, this paper will focus on the thematic concerns within Bong Joon-Ho’s

*Snowpiercer* and *Parasite* respectively and how those thematic concerns present are additionally applicable beyond these two films.

## ***Snowpiercer***

*Snowpiercer* is a politically oriented dystopian film that was released in 2013. The story takes place in 2032 and follows 2,746 passengers who are the only people left on Earth. They are aboard a moving train that continuously circles the globe when an attempt to stop global warming goes wrong. As humans attempt to stop global warming by “freezing” the earth back to normal, it instead creates a new ice age in which everything is frozen. The main character within the story, Curtis Everett (Chris Evans), is part of the lower class, living with those who boarded the train without a ticket. Eighteen years after the disastrous attempt, we follow Curtis as he attempts to lead a rebellion against the upper classes and create a place for them as actual passengers onboard. The film follows the journey Curtis goes on with several other characters as they make their way slowly towards the front of the train where we also learn about the system of the train and how each carriage is segregated into different “sections,” creating various social classes onboard. From the very beginning of the film, Bong expresses the clear class distinctions aboard the train, as those at the front of the train are treated as actual passengers whereas those at the tail are considered prisoners. The entire film is focused on the premise of the destruction of the environment that, in the end, results in a dystopian post-apocalyptic society aboard the train.

One of the most important structures within the film is the train, as it is the “analogy of this socially structured train that mirrors many of contemporary civilization’s current societal and environmental issues” (Pettigrew 2). The train, named the titular *Snowpiercer*, is separated into two main compartments, Ticketed and Stowaways. Those who are considered Ticketed, or upper class, are found towards the “head” of the train. Those who are Stowaways, or lower class, are found by the end of the train, or the “tail.” These two main categories are also segregated into smaller subcategories that are divided into classes, such as First Class, Second Class and so on. While the main characters attempt to move up in class by physically moving towards the “head” of the train, they also attempt to combat the current situation of nature at the same time. Bong essentially represents the society we live in and modifies it in the post-apocalyptic environment. With each compartment being a specific class, the characters are forced to break out of their societal labeling and move from the back of the train to the front. When characters move between classes, specifically when they move up in class, they move towards the front of the train. Doing so, Bong also emphasizes the importance of space and structure, through the storyline and with the use of certain aesthetic choices, within the film as a means of storytelling and expressing the nature outside and the society onboard the train.

Within *Snowpiercer*, the relationship between ecology and class is explicit and thematically central, putting them at the same level of importance. This also shows that Bong essentially collapses the boundaries between culture and nature within the film. Even when we focus more on the environmental side of the narrative, we can see how it is as prevalent as class. Bong constantly reminds viewers that the entire story is taking place in a frozen world through different shots of the train and its course; we are also shown how it has become a major part of torture and barrier within the film. Nature, in this case, is used as a form of torture within the film. When they disobeyed the “government” on board the train, the inhabitants of the tail are punished by having to put their hand outside the train into nature. In that way, their hands are frozen and broken off, thus amputating their arm. The environment represents a barrier and, in

fact, a threat that constantly reminds us of the post-apocalyptic world. The film repeatedly shows scenes of the outside world and the train traveling across the globe throughout.

Class distinction is also reflected in the internal environment of the train, which Bong emphasizes through the use of color schemes. The scenes at the tail within the lower classes are represented with darker colors and more muted tones. The characters that are from the tail of the train are additionally wearing darker clothing, as their faces are also covered by dirt. Additionally, the food that they eat, which consists of blocks of gelatin, is also gray and dull. On the other hand, the environment of the higher classes is extremely bright and colorful in comparison. Their clothing is white and colorful rather than dark and their food looks appealing. Hence, the setting in which each scene takes place emphasizes the clear class differences, from the food to the environment to the characters that are found within each representative class.

Bong's use of the post-apocalyptic narrative allows for a cognitively estranged perspective, which Renault defines as a "combination of scientific cognition with fictional estrangement" (114). This term is linked to the exploration of new ways of thinking about our anthropological society. Hence, he creates a cognitively estranged narrative and shows us a parallel of our current world through a post-apocalyptic dystopian lens. Bong takes our understanding of climate change and exaggerates it to create a dystopian world that emphasizes the importance of ecology. Rather than having one theme dominate over the other, Bong uses ecology to strengthen the class structure on *Snowpiercer* and vice versa. Overall, within this film, the relationship between ecology and class is explicit; both are thematically central to the plotline, so we see them being put at the same level of importance. We see the focus of the film being class, however, Bong further strengthens the social differences by using the environment as a means to enforce the clearly socially created hierarchy onboard the train. Bong represents the harsh nature within the film as a means of enforcing class boundaries, as in when a character steps out of their role within society, they are punished by being exposed to nature. However, it is different within *Parasite*, which is Bong Joon-Ho's most recent and most popular film. Noticing the cognitive estrangement within *Snowpiercer*, the same cognitively estranged narrative can be applied to a more realistic film such as *Parasite*.

## *Parasite*

While *Snowpiercer* is Bong Joon-Ho's science fiction film, *Parasite* is another politically oriented film, but it is one that explores class and ecological issues through a more realistic dark comedy. The film presents a satirical view of Korean society as Bong Joon-Ho exaggerates the extreme class differences found in Korea. Within the plot, we follow a lower-class family, the Kims, trying to infiltrate a higher-class family, the Parks, by slowly taking over their household staff. The son, Ki-woo (Choi Woo-Shik), finds his way first into the Park family by conning them into believing that he is a well-accomplished English teacher. Slowly, he devises a plan alongside his family and introduces his sister and parents into the Parks' household. The Kim family embodies the struggle lower classes face to find jobs and earn a living. This film primarily focuses on the clear class distinctions within Korea, expressing how, essentially, there are two completely different lifestyles, one for the wealthy and one for the poor. Bong Joon-Ho puts those class distinctions at the forefront of the film, using clear forms of filmography and details, with the dark comedy revolving around the importance of class.

From the very beginning of this film, viewers can see the evident different living environments between the Kim and the Park families. The film begins within the Kim family

home, which is situated in a basement, a position that spatially represents their place at the bottom of society. The film compares this location to where the Park family lives, atop a hill, which represents their high status within society and therefore “shows the differences between the classes in the film’s treatment of these two families and their daily lives” (Farahbakhsh and Ebrahimi 95). Hence, throughout the film, whenever the Kims are making their way to the Park’s residence, they are visibly making their way up an incline. The other instance in which class difference is spatially conveyed is the basement cellar within the Park household. Similar to the Kim residence, the household maid hides her husband there, emphasizing their class difference. Bong uses natural, geographical hierarchy, such as hills, ground-level and the underground, respectively, to highlight the clear class differences in society. Therefore, all characters of a lower class are found to be living underground, just like bugs, or parasites, whereas those of higher classes live on top of hills. Unlike *Snowpiercer*, the ecological aspect of the film is more subtle; however, that subtlety does not mean that it is not prevalent. Bong makes use of the natural environment within the film as a means to emphasize class distinctions.

While *Snowpiercer* explores the environment on an explicit scale, giving environment and class equal significance, Bong uses *Parasite* to express the environment rather implicitly. In other words, the environment-class scale is flipped, with class being placed at the forefront in comparison to the environment in this film. Unlike *Snowpiercer*, *Parasite* does not take place within a dystopian world but rather the world we live in today. From the very beginning, the very title of the film expresses the link between nature and culture. Parasites are essentially organisms that live within a host organism to survive, and at times, those parasites can be infectious. Bong’s decision to refer to the Kim family as parasites represents how he blurs the human/non-human binary. In one scene within the film, as the Kim family rests in its home, pest control sprays the streets with fumes in order to kill parasites. These fumes actually enter into the Kim family home and the house fills with pesticides. This is the very first sign of ecology being linked to culture. However, Bong further enhances that relationship through the environment and setting around which the characters interact. One instance we can see this distinction in is when the mother of the Park household, Yeon-Kyo (Cho Yeo-Jeong), and the household maid, Moon-Gwang (Lee Jeong-Eun), are in the background. Both characters are separated by a window that represents two different classes as they sit outside in nature. Analyzing this scene, the characters are visibly present within nature while our main character watches them through a window, an object made by man or culture. Within the scene, the main character is looking down upon them, as though he is of a higher status despite being of a lower class, inspecting how the higher class function and interact, especially regarding the house maid and Mrs. Park. Hence, Bong uses this scene to represent how class is also entirely man-made and how it is applied to nature to create class distinctions. Overall, Bong uses the environment to enhance class differences.



(*Parasite* 0:14:33)

In addition to the previously mentioned instances where we see class and nature intertwine, Bong Joon-Ho links environment to class more so with the settings found within the film. As mentioned, the evident environments of the wealthy in comparison to the poor are completely different. Similarly to *Snowpiercer*, Bong uses nature as a barrier or a setback for those of a lower class, which defines the critical framework present within the film. This is evident when the three members of the Kim family run back home in the rain. Keeping in mind that their home is a basement apartment, when they arrive, their entire house is submerged under water due to the rain and they, as a result, have to reside at a shelter until their house is habitable. Bong uses the rain and the consequential flood to express the difference between the Kims and the Parks. Because of class differences, the Kim family home is completely exposed and vulnerable to nature and becomes flooded when it rains; the Park family, on the other hand, is extremely relaxed as their house is safe from the rain. Hence, Bong primarily emphasizes the concept of class, enhancing it in the class/environmental balance. However, in filming the story, we can see the theoretical framework and use of the environment when it comes to defining and enhancing our understanding of class within *Parasite*. Despite class and environment being prime models in both Bong Joon-Ho's films, they can also be applied onto the rest of his ecocentric films as well.

### **Alternate Films: *The Host* and *Okja***

Numerous critics have recognized how Bong Joon-Ho's body of work often interrelates, linking the four films rather than simply focusing on one. Within all four films, Bong repetitively presents the same link between ecology and class, despite all four films' distinctive genres. Studying *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite* allows for us to explore alternative films that touch upon

similar ecological issues. This thematic link can be found in *The Host* (2007) and *Okja* (2017), which explore ecology by focusing on pollution and animal rights respectively. By looking at all four films together, one can see that the critical framework found within Bong Jong-Ho's films is central to his aesthetic interests and reveals his position as a political filmmaker.

*The Host* is Bong's take on a horror monster film, and it is the oldest one on his list of films. It explores "the impact of biological terror," which Bong uses as a means to emphasize the problem of pollution within our world (Imanjaya et al. 2). As a result of the pollution of toxic waste into the environment, a monster appears and proceeds to attack the population. This film also represents Bong's emphasis on slow violence against nature, as, due to the amount of pollution being dumped into it, a monster is incrementally created. Within the film, we follow the Park family as they band together to take down the monster. Applying the critical reading lens employed with the two other films reveals the thinly veiled class allegory found within the film. From the beginning of the film, Bong expresses the characters' low status as they are barely able to afford much. One specific scene within the film that displays the clear class allegory within the society is the funeral scene held for the victims of the monster attack. Within this scene, shown in the image below, the main characters mourn for their youngest family member. While they are mourning in the foreground, bodyguards escort someone of high standing through the crowd of people in the background. When doing so, they push everyone out of the way, including the main characters, as they are clearly of lower class and therefore lower standing in comparison to the person being escorted into the frame. This scene is one of the only instances in the film that visibly emphasizes issues of class and status within society. In comparison to *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite*, the environment in *The Host* is emphasized more so in relation to nature. However, contrary to *Parasite*, where class is clearly dominant, the environment is in the foreground in *The Host*. As we compare all three films to the last film, *Okja*, there are visible similarities but also differences in Bong's animal narrative film.



(*Okja* 1:35:30)

*Okja* explores animal rights, factory farming, and animal narratives through a politically oriented lens similar to *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer*, depicting the horror of the meat industry. “Particularly, it is how the food industry treats animals cruelly to be slaughtered,” which is a major aspect of our ecological system (Imanjaya et al. 3). This animal narrative reinforces the human/non-human binary but also the culture/nature binary as humans are found using animals for their consumption and benefit. The main character, Mija (Seo-Hyeon Ahn) attempts to rescue her superpig *Okja* from being killed. Bong Joon-Ho expresses the interrelationship between ecology and class through the distinct environments Mija explores. When we are first introduced to Mija, she resides within nature, living in a small house on top of a mountain in the middle of the forest. She knows when fruits are ripe, takes care of *Okja*, and explores the forest on a regular basis towards the beginning of the film, setting her up as a heroine. When Mija and the Mirando Corporation interact, they do so within a developed world filled with skyscrapers and large populations. This setting of development expresses culture in comparison to Mija’s home. Viewers can clearly see the distinction between the two, as Mija, who is part of the lower class, is surrounded by nature while the Mirando Corporation, part of the higher class, is surrounded by culture. Hence, from the very beginning, Bong defines the binary between nature/culture. Comparing these two films, *Okja* and *The Host* to *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite*, Bong is seen expressing different levels of class and environment within each.

As we compare these two secondary films provided in relation to the two primary films, it can be expressed that the critical framework found applicable to *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite* can also be applied to these two other films. If we were to compare all four films, there are clear differences on the amount of emphasis Bong applies onto the ecology and class range. Each film explores the environment and class at different ratios in relation to one another. *Parasite* explores a higher class ratio in comparison to environment, being primarily focused on social classes within Korean society, while *The Host* applies a higher environment ratio at the other end of the range, with it primarily emphasizing the consequences of pollution through the monster horror medium. Consequently, *Snowpiercer* and *Okja* can be found in between the two films, with *Snowpiercer* placing slightly more emphasis on class within the dystopian film while *Okja* places slightly more emphasis on ecology in comparison to class. Despite that, both *Snowpiercer* and *Okja* still explore their other respective themes at around the same ratio. Therefore, it is clear to say that Bong Joon-Ho’s filmography is often intertwined with ecological narratives, allowing him to express cultural aspects such as class through an environmental lens, and furthermore collapsing the binary between culture and nature.

## Conclusion

Bong Joon-Ho expresses the interrelation between the environment and culture throughout his filmography. Focusing primarily on his two main films that deal with class and environment reveals a clear critical framework that can be applied to other films within his body of work. Looking at the different genres within his filmography, from dystopian science fiction to dark comedy, he employs these generic models to explore the nature/culture binary through the relationship that links the environment to class. Within each of these films, the main characters are often those at the lower end of the social class scale. Therefore, we can apply the

thematic framework found within the two primary films to the rest of Bong's films, specifically the films that also explore the concept of the environment in different ways. Despite how diverse Bong's filmography is, nature is an underlying theme all throughout, no matter the message, plot, or genre.

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