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### Korean Cinema: The Messages Within

Korean cinema has recently attracted the attention of the whole world. Despite Korean cinema having existed for over a hundred years since 1919, attention to its social messages has peaked interest recently worldwide. I would argue that the attention to Korean cinema is because it has been recently showing social issues and tensions such as classism, capitalism and the objectification of women, and a host of many problems plaguing Korean society. Firstly, in the example of the film, *Parasite*, we see Bong, Jun Ho depict the clash between the rich and poor, the privileged and underprivileged. Secondly, in the film, *Jung\_E*, director Yeon, Sang Ho shows how the lower classes are subject to unchecked capitalism and mistreated, and the objectification of women and humanity through AI by companies. Thirdly, in the series, *Squid Game* by Hwang, Dong-Hyuk, we see many different themes such as: industry tycoons, chaebols, taking advantage of the poor to host a savage and bloody survival game, the discrimination of foreigners, and the marginalization of North Korean refugees.

I am not arguing that all Korean cinema covers social tensions, this would only lead to arrested development of Korean cinema and lack of variety in Korean cinema. My argument is that by looking at Korean cinema, one can find many examples of many films that address social issues that are not easily discussed in Korean society. One may also argue that Korean cinema is shallow and that social issues are only an interpretation by viewers and a coincidence. Korean cinema is much deeper, and Korean directors and creators explain how they convey such issues in their films.

Firstly, let me address my argument regarding the social tension between the rich and the poor and the privileged versus underprivileged through the question of the film *Parasite* by Bong Jun Ho. The film is about two families from different economic and social statuses. The rich and privileged family lives in a gorgeous mansion on a hill, has a housekeeper maid, and they enjoy a comfortable and economically secured life. The father of this family, Dong-ik, is a CEO of an IT firm, and the mother, Yeon-kyo, is a housewife who does not work at all. They have two children, Da-Hye and Da-Song, who both go to the best schools and have a private tutor. Meanwhile, the poor and underprivileged family lives in a rented basement in the poor part of Seoul, and they live a poor life, folding pizza boxes to make a living. The father of this family, Ki-taek, is a failed businessman with no job, and the mother, Choong-sook, is a former national hammer thrower athlete who has no job after her retirement from sports. They also have two children, Ki-woo and Ki-jung, who have not been able to go to college because they could not afford it. The two families cross paths when the rich and privileged family needs a new English tutor, and Ki-woo takes the job by deceiving the family with fake college credentials. Ki-woo starts to earn money that he has never had, and he realizes that his family can deceive the rich and privileged family just like has. They plot to take over the current jobs of the housekeeper, chauffeur, and bring in a art tutor. All of these jobs are filled in by Ki-woo's family, and they are able to deceive the rich family. Ki-woo and his family slowly cross the line, by eating and drinking the rich family's food and alcohol, and holding a party while the family is out. As the days pass, the rich family starts checking the behavior of the poor family, and puts them in their place, showing their disgust directly. The story comes to an end when Ki-woo's family realizes that no matter how much they pretend to be rich and try to break out of their social economic

status, the rich family will never see them as equals, and will look down on them. Ki-taek stabs and kills Dong-ik, and he goes into hiding within the mansion's basement. The rich family move out, and Ki-woo's family are punished for their crimes.

*Parasite* shows how Korean society is divided into the rich and poor, privileged and underprivileged, and how these classes are at odds with each other. Bong Jun Ho expresses this clash between the two classes throughout his film, by using vertical visual cues and settings, and smell as a motif device to distinguish the classes.

The rich and the poor are divided into different levels in a vertical structure. The rich family lives on a hill while the poor lives in a semi-basement. Bong Jun Ho explains in an interview, that "it's a very vertical structure where the rich are on top ... so the visual strategy of this film was that sense of vertical top to bottom flow" (Bong, Golden Derby). Meanwhile, the "semi-basement homes are only half underground. That's very similar to the psychology of [the poor]" (Bong, NPR). I argue that this vertical structure shows the class divide that the classes exist in. The rich stay at the top, and never come down to a lower level. Instead, the poor try to break into higher levels and clash with the rich on top. Further, Bong says that he wanted to show the class divide. "In reality, it's very difficult for the poor and the rich to come together physically... Even in the same space, they're segregated. In planes, you have regular people in economy class and you have first-class" (Bong, iNews).

I argue that Bong Jun Ho intentionally uses smell to express the class divide, hatred and clash between the rich and the poor. The rich and the poor have different smells, and this is shown throughout the film. Bong uses smell as a motif, and he specifically directs his actors to portray the smell. "Cinema is about sound and images but smells aren't as easy to convey.

Whenever we had a scene with smells in it, I talked about it with the actors” (Bong, Screen Daily). In the movie, we see the rich express their disgust of the poor, the poor family feels inferior, and this becomes the point of conflict. Bong intentionally uses smell as a component of the clash of both classes. When the rich ridicule the poor for smelling like fermented radishes, pesticide fumigation, and subway urinals, Bong explains that

“These [are the] moments where the basic respect you have for another human being is being shattered... Even when you sense the smell of someone else, you don’t talk about it in the open, because it can be rude” (Bong, Independent).

Bong further explains his intention of using smells as a motif to depict the clash between the rich and poor. “By talking about different smells, the film puts the class issue under the microscope. Through smells, the film’s tension and suspense mount, which eventually [leads to the] upcoming” clash of the classes (Bong, Independent). I argue that Bong was showing the rich clashing with the poor through pointing out the smells of the poor.

Secondly, the film, *Jung\_E* shows director Yeon Sang Ho depicting how corrupt companies in capitalism abuse the lower classes, and objectify women. The film takes place in a future dystopia in which technology has developed to a point where humans can live forever by transferring their consciousness into another robotic body. In this world, corporations provide this service of transferring one’s consciousness after death, and people have the option to choose between three options: A, B and C. Option A gives the person a full body with full human rights and is the most expensive option. Your consciousness is your own and you are not controlled by anyone. Option B is cheaper than option A, but restricts some human rights such as marriage, adoption, and the freedom to move anywhere. Your consciousness is owned by the government.

Option C is the cheapest option; you have no rights and your consciousness is owned by a corporation that can use your consciousness commercially. While you become the product of the company, the company pays your family money and compensation. In this world, a researcher named Seo-Hyun works for a company called Kronoid, and she is figuring out how to create the perfect AI soldier. To do this, Kronoid is experimenting on the consciousness of Jung\_E, a legendary soldier who died on the battlefield. Jung\_E also happens to be Seo-Hyun's mother, who chose option C to pay for her daughter's surgery and future tuition. Kronoid repeats simulations of Jung\_E's last battle and death, despite Jung-E's consciousness showing fear, pain and confusion. The only problem is that Kronoid cannot figure out why Jung\_E keeps dying, and the budget for this experiment is running out. Seo-Hyun must figure out why Jung\_E keeps dying or Kronoid will delete Jung\_E's consciousness and stop the project. Seo-Hyun eventually discovers that her mother Jung-E kept dying because of a good luck charm that she gave that Jung\_E finds in the battle. Jung\_E kept dying to pick up the charm, and this moment was represented as love for her daughter in the brain scans. Seo-Hyun realizes that her mother loved her till the very end, and decides to give her mother full autonomy and freedom from Kronoid.

*Jung\_E* shows how capitalism can violate people's rights and freedoms. Only the rich can afford to be human and have full rights, but those who are not rich either become the property of the government or companies. I would like to argue that Yeon Sang Ho depicts how Korean capitalism mistreats and discriminates the poor and objectifies women as products.

The rich in the dystopic future of Jung\_E have full rights and retain their humanity while the poor are mistreated, losing their rights and becoming property. Yeon Sang Ho shows how even in a fictional world like *Jung\_E*, unchecked capitalism can steal someone's rights and

humanity. He explained, “Jung\_E [covers] unexpected stories between humans and nonhumans, which will also give the audience an opportunity to ponder whether humanity really belongs to humans” (Yeon, Korean Herald). I argue that Yeon Sang Ho wanted us to think of the possibility of the corrupt chaebol corporations stealing and abusing Koreans’ rights and humanities, just like Kronoid. Chaebols, family-run conglomerates, in Korea control and lobby for favorable rules that benefit their companies at the expense of Koreans (Stanley 187). For example, the heiress of Korean Air, a chaebol, once abused her position and made a whole flight return. She “demanded the plane return to its gate” just because the stewardess served her nuts in a bag instead of a porcelain bowl (Berlinger and Jeong). While this may have been a scandal in America, this incident did not shock Koreans, as it was one of many cases of chaebol abuse of power called ‘gapjil’ (Yonhap).

This abuse of power also translates into the objectification of women. Yeon Sang Ho shows this through his film that unchecked capitalism objectifies women as products. Jung\_E is a heroic idol, an idol that Kronoid owns. Because of this, Kronoid decides to use her for various products, and that also includes a sex doll for sexual use. At minute 59 of the movie, Seo-Hyun finds out that one of the Jung\_E androids is taken out for use without her knowledge. The new administrator has taken one of the androids out for another new project. When she tracks down the android, she finds that the company has decided to use her mother’s image as a sex doll:

Seo-Hyun: New project?

Jae-Kyung: Yes, well, she was like a celebrity war hero, you know. We saw value in using it for sexual use. It has the potential to be developed into a high-value product, don't you think? The bereaved gave their permission, no? Type C!

*(Jung\_E 01:01:07)*

Further, Yeon states that he created Jung\_E's character to represent the actress "Kang's story, a story for herself and a story for the rest of her female colleagues" (Kim, Yonhap). By tackling such heavy issues such as the objectification of women through film, I argue that Yeon uses film as a device to ask viewers to question their society.

Lastly, I would like to address the argument that the tv series, Squid Game, shows Hwang, Dong-Hyuk tackling the issues of chaebols taking advantage of the poor, the discrimination of immigrants, and the mistreatment of North Korean refugees. The film starts with Gi-hun, a struggling divorcee and a failed dad, who has a gambling problem and lots of debt. A mysterious man appears and offers a chance for Gi-hun to make a lot of money by joining the Squid Games. Gi-hun joins to support his mother and daughter, but he quickly finds out that the Squid Games are a series of games that one must risk their life on. Besides Gi-hun, there are other characters with similar financial struggles, who have all joined this game. The Squid Game is hosted by a group of rich business tycoons who bet on participants' lives.

Squid Games shows the problems in Korean society. The rich take advantage of the poor, immigrants are poorly treated, and North Korean refugees are at a disadvantage compared to South Koreans. I argue that Hwang, Dong-Hyuk uses each characters' unique story and situation to reflect on the issues in Korean society.

Hwang portrays the rich taking advantage of the poor by attracting them with a huge cash prize to join the Squid Games. Of course, this cash prize is not free. You risk your life to play in every game. While this is a dystopic setting, Hwang notes that "We are living in a Squid Game world," and that Korean society is "infested by the rules of survival of the fittest, corruption and

immorality” (Hwang, *The Guardian*). As each contestant dies, we see money drop into a transparent piggy bank that hangs from the ceiling. The contestants watch this, covered in blood, and watch each life’s worth, ₩100,000,000 which is roughly \$76,000, fall into the piggy bank. The rich have determined the value of a life equal to a car. The rich abuse the desperate situation of the poor, and they watch, laugh and gamble on each person’s life. Hwang criticizes the rich and the unfair capitalist system, created by the chaebols, stating that we fight “for our lives in very unequal circumstances” (Hwang, *Guardian*).

Hwang also tackles the immigrant issues in Korea, using the character of Ali in *Squid Game*. Ali is a migrant worker from Pakistan who came to Korea for a better life. However, he is unpaid by his boss, not reimbursed for his hospital bills from his workplace accident, and people mistreat him for being a foreigner. Ali confronts his boss for not paying him, and the boss ignores Ali’s request, shouting curses at Ali:

Ali: Sir, please give me my money.

Boss: How dare you touch me, you son of a bitch!

Ali: Don’t swear at me!

Boss: You fucking son of a bitch!

Ali: You got money here!

(*Squid Game* - Episode 2 00:33:19)

Even in the game, where everyone is equally fighting for the same purpose, Ali is not fully accepted into Korean society until he is betrayed by Sang-woo, who uses the cultural acceptance of allowing Ali to call him ‘Hyeong’ which is the equivalent to brother to betray Ali. Even though Ali tries hard to fit in with the other contestants in the Squid Game, he is ultimately used

and thrown away, just like immigrants living in Korean society. Hwang states his reason for creating the character, Ali. “Through Ali, I wanted to show viewers that migrant workers are just like any of us. They might even be working more desperately to be recognized and survive in Korea” (Hwang, Vulture).

Hwang also included the character, Sae-byeok, to portray the struggles of North Korean refugees, and how they are marginalized as a minority in their own land, Korea. Sae-byeok left North Korea with her family to pursue a better life in South Korea. Her parents die while escaping, and Sae-byeok and her younger brother survive. While Sae-byeok risks her life to escape a dystopic North Korea, she ends up risking her life once again in the Squid Games. Life is not better in South Korea:

Ji-yeong: Why did you come here from the North?

Sae-byeok: I thought it'd be better here.

*(Squid Game - Episode 6 00:26:20)*

I argue that Hwang used the character of Sae-byeok to bring attention to the treatment of North Koreans in South Korea. Hwang states that North Koreans are “probably the biggest minority in South Korea” and that they are marginalized members of Korean society. While they risked their lives to come to the south, they are met with discrimination by fellow Koreans. Through the characters in Squid Game, Hwang wants “to tell all of us 'that's not us'” and bring attention to issues because we are all “a good person at heart” (Hwang, The Korean Times).

While we can now understand about Korean cinema is the director and creatives’s intention to comment on the issues of Korean society through the use of film. My argument has revealed that Korean cinema tackles social issues that are rarely given attention to, and not

openly discussed in society. What we can now see that was not clear before is the way that directors like Bong, Yeon and Hwang use film composition, motifs, and story-telling to deliver messages about social issues. Bong delivers the clash of the rich and poor, the have and have-nots by using vertical visual cues and settings, and the motif of smell. Yeon uses the metaphor of a future dystopia to highlight how unchecked capitalism in modern society can easily violate people's rights, freedoms, and objectify women as products. Hwang also uses powerful stories of individual characters to deliver the message that Korea is plagued with the problems of the rich taking advantage of the poor, people mistreating immigrants, and the marginalization of North Korean refugees. All of these powerful stories carry messages, allowing viewers to empathize with each story. I argue that this delivery of messages in Korea cinema allows the directors to deliver warnings that plague society and messages of hope, allowing Koreans to look into themselves; by reflecting on these messages, society can move in a positive direction. Like Hwang said, "society doesn't have to be one where we need to kill others and override them to go up" (Hwang, The Korea Times). We should reflect on the messages from these films to heart.

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