

Social Realism and the Aesthetics of Inequality in Bong Joon Ho's Cinema

George Qiao

*Léman Manhattan Preparatory School, New York, USA
georgeqiao12@outlook.com*

Abstract. The research paper examines Bong Joon Ho's cinematic works through social realism and inequality analysis using aesthetic and sociological and semiotic approaches. The paper examines ten key academic studies to demonstrate how Bong Joon Ho's film analysis spans multiple disciplines from spatial theory to food studies and color semiotics and historical allegory. The review demonstrates how Bong uses visual and sensory elements to convert realistic elements into political and moral artistic expressions. Through his films *Parasite* and *Memories of Murder* and *The Host* Bong Joon Ho presents cinematic techniques which reveal social class systems and material possessions and emotional responses in contemporary capitalist societies. The synthesis demonstrates how Bong Joon Ho transforms twenty-first-century realism through his fusion of emotional storytelling with intellectual analysis which enables viewers to experience social inequality through spatial and auditory and chromatic elements instead of passive observation.

Keywords: Bong Joon Ho, social realism, film studies, inequality, semiotics

1. Introduction

Bong Joon Ho has become a major focus of academic research since his films started gaining international recognition following the worldwide success of *Parasite* (2019). The academic field of film studies, together with sociology, media studies, cultural studies, and film theory, have studied his films through various analytical frameworks including class inequality, food studies, semiotics, color theory, and historiography. The article will comprehensively review the scholarship by reviewing ten studies on Bong Joon Ho's films in order to scrutinize his artistic contribution in cinema and social-political implication beyond cinema.

2. Approaches and positionalities

Theoretical diversity defines Bong Joon Ho scholarship. Researchers have approached Bong's cinema through diverse theoretical lenses, each highlighting different aspects of his visual storytelling. Palamattom and Mathew analyze *Parasite* through semiotics by using Christian Metz and Roland Barthes to analyze the film as a visual sign system [1]. They concentrate on Bong's conceptual framework and theoretical methods, their contribution to poststructuralist signification debates, and their ability to generate various interpretations through visual abbreviations and codes.

The study uses Barthes' five narrative codes to show how semiotic theory continues to be useful for analyzing modern cinema of the twenty-first century.

Cinematic realism as moral inquiry. The system of modern conveniences exists because of structural exploitation. His form of realism gains moral depth through this hidden stream which requires viewers to think for themselves instead of feeling sympathy. Bong Joon Ho uses his realistic approach to show inequality while forcing viewers to examine their personal connection to social injustices. Through his storytelling Bong presents ethical conflicts within typical family settings which turns personal feelings into matters of public discussion. Through his visual storytelling Bong reveals the hidden work that supports contemporary comfort so viewers can examine their role in maintaining daily life.

Philosophical dimensions of realism. Philosophical dimensions of realism. Bong Joon Ho presents his interpretation of realism through a philosophical lens which connects to both André Bazin's cinematic truth theory and modern postmodern thought. Through his visual approach Bong Joon Ho presents an alternative version of reality by combining contradictory elements with ironic perspectives. Through his technique viewers experience two opposing perspectives which show the disorder of real life while maintaining a detached perspective. Through his combination of dark humor and frightening elements Bong Joon Ho demonstrates that realistic storytelling can create authentic emotional connections while challenging established beliefs.

Sociological readings emphasize class and sensory perception. Bhandari presents an explicitly sociological analysis of *Parasite* through her work as a sociologist who positions the film within worldwide discussions about social inequality [2]. She argues that the film achieves realistic effects through its focus on sensory elements including smell and sight, which function as social class indicators. Bong's cinematic methods connect to Richard Sennett's "hidden injuries of class" theory.

Spatial theory deepens the understanding of social hierarchy. Patkós examines Bong's work through spatial theory in a conference proceedings volume [3]. The author focuses on the "paradox of enclosed spaciousness" to connect the Park mansion with the Kim semi-basement through metaphors that represent social hierarchy. The paper uses cultural geography and architectural metaphors to analyze the subject matter instead of focusing on semiotics or color theory.

Food studies link material culture to inequality. Two researchers from the field of food studies examine Bong's work through their articles: Turner and Teimouri [4,5]. Turner stands out because she recognizes the absence of established research about food and class in film studies while using broader media and film scholarship about food. The author combines socio-economic principles with food theory to show how food functions as social content instead of background material.

Deconstruction connects food and memory to survival. Hong analyzes *Memories of Murder* through the lens of Korean historical scholarship [6]. The film functions as a historical archive, within the post-historical period, which he connects to Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*. The study demonstrates how Bong's films address historical loss and the failure of collective memory through eating motifs that construct narratives of survival. It extends Bong scholarship beyond the themes of basic survival and labor by employing deconstructive theory to analyze the dual meaning of "parasite" as both guest and host.

Common motifs unify interdisciplinary perspectives. Although Hong, Turner, and Teimouri all addressed the function of food, they present different concerns and focuses. The studies by Turner and Teimouri examine symbolic food consumption, class differences, and philosophical meanings of food. The research demonstrates that food functions as a unifying motif which scholars from different fields use to explore their specific interests in media studies and literary theory.

Color theory adds aesthetic and cognitive depth. Marschall introduces a new approach to film studies through sociological case studies of inequality, cultural semiotics, and cinematic color analysis [7]. The author examines Bong's work through three perspectives: aesthetic methodology, historical archive, and cultural semiotics. Color functions as an aesthetic and cognitive tool to guide audience perception of classed environment.

3. Social realism and the aesthetics of inequality in Bong Joon Ho's cinema

Bong Joon Ho redefines realism for global audiences. He established himself as a leading figure in modern film scholarship through his internationally recognized work after *Parasite* (2019) won both the Palme d'Or and the Academy Award for Best Picture. The worldwide success of *Parasite* established Bong as a transnational filmmaker while social realism became central to theoretical discussions in film studies. Through *Memories of Murder* (2003), *The Host* (2006), *Snowpiercer* (2013), and *Okja* (2017), Bong continues to explore how power structures affect personal and bodily experiences and domestic environments.

Interplay between genre and social critique. The relationship between genre elements and social commentary in Bong's work. Bong achieves his distinctive cinematic language through genre fusion which combines thriller elements with comedy and horror and melodrama to reveal modern social contradictions. The film *Parasite* uses its comedic and intense moments to demonstrate how social inequality exists within the framework of entertainment and consumer activities. Bong distinguishes himself from previous realist directors through his genre fusion approach which unites political understanding with viewer entertainment. Through his films Bong achieves dual effects that make his work both easy to understand and disturbing to watch while showing that realistic storytelling can engage minds without sacrificing visual appeal.

His realism emphasizes emotion over replication. Bong presents a unique form of realism because he shows the opposing forces of late capitalist society instead of replicating reality. Through his films, he creates sensory and spatial experiences that transform cinematic form into a tool for developing critical awareness about social inequality. The artistic practice of social realism exists to portray working-class life and social dynamics through political objectives.

Korean filmmakers link realism to moral responsibility. According to Lee, South Korean filmmakers have consistently linked realism to their national obligation to document historical traumas and represent marginalized voices [8]. Bong transforms traditional realism into "spiritual realism," which emphasizes emotional connection and conflicting elements instead of perfect representations. His characters exist as complex individuals struggling between survival and dignity.

Architecture visualizes class divisions. Kim analyzes Bong's realist approach by showing how he uses architectural spaces to create social metaphors throughout postmodern Seoul [9]. The architectural elements of basements, staircases, and rooftop slums represent how social classes are organized in space. *Parasite* shows social advancement through physical movement—rising leads to wealth, descending leads to decline. Kim explains that Bong uses structural visualization to modernize social realism for neoliberal cities by replacing observational techniques with allegorical storytelling.

Urban modernity as psychological confinement. The psychological effects of urban modernity create a feeling of being trapped. People become trapped within the psychological boundaries of urban modernity. The physical separation between the Park family and the Kims in *Parasite* reveals both economic inequality and social isolation that exists within the crowded urban setting. The Park family's tranquil house symbolizes their social isolation from society yet the Kims' cramped underground space shows their continuous stress while they pursue better lives. Through these

contrasting settings Bong illustrates that people must maintain physical and emotional separation from their service providers to achieve success.

Sensory politics reveal hidden inequalities. Bhandari supports the sociological approach to *Parasite* through her analysis of how the film examines “the politics of the senses” [2]. She demonstrates that social class differences in smell and sight create stronger distinctions that surpass economic differences. The Parks' reaction to the “subway smell” of the Kim family shows how inequality manifests through physical sensations.

Food exposes cycles of exploitation. Turner expands this research using food studies to show how the film presents capitalism as a metabolic system through contrasting dining scenes [4]. Through food, audiences can understand social status as it reveals who consumes resources and who becomes a resource. Teimouri builds on this by applying deconstruction to show how the title *Parasite* breaks down the traditional victim-oppressor binary [5]. The two families exist in a continuous cycle of exploitation because they play both roles of host and guest.

Psychological realism reveals domination and care. Nam interprets the violent relationships between family members in *Mother* (2009) as symbolic representations of social domination [10]. The maternal figure represents both protection and destruction, revealing how emotional control mechanisms function in a stratified society.

Color and space communicate class experience. Marschall presents her analytical framework called the “KinematoGramm” to examine how cinematic color functions as a storytelling element [7]. The golden tones of the Park mansion create a sensory experience of class differences, contrasting with the grey tones of the Kim family's semi-basement. Patkós adds that Bong uses architecture to create the contradictory effect of being both spacious and enclosed [3]. Kim explains that the vertical growth of Seoul's urban structure makes social status directly dependent on residential height [9]. The film's rain-flood sequence represents the destruction of dreams and enduring inequality.

Semiotic realism merges form and meaning. Palamattom and Mathew use Barthes and Metz's theories to demonstrate how Bong uses visual elements as systems of signs [1]. The staircase and basement in *Parasite* serve as visual symbols representing social mobility and exposure. Marschall's color analysis supports this method because it demonstrates that aesthetic choices can function as realistic elements when they represent actual social structures of inequality.

Historical allegory connects memory and morality. Hong applies Derrida's *Archive Fever* to *Memories of Murder*, analyzing it as a historical archive of South Korea's failed attempts to confront its authoritarian past [6]. Lee explains that Bong's cinematic work functions as spiritual memory through his moral perspective [8]. Bong uses allegorical storytelling in genre films to represent historical events. *The Host* reveals environmental and political failures, *Snowpiercer* condenses global disparities into a single train, and *Okja* investigates the moral implications of biotechnology and consumerism.

Contemporary relevance and global impact. Academic discussions about *Parasite* extend past Korean cinema because of its critical success which enables scholars to study its similarities with Ken Loach and Alfonso Cuarón and Jordan Peele. Bong's method of portraying class conflict creates universal metaphors from local settings which scholars believe works across different languages. Through his unique blend of comedic elements with tragic and realistic storytelling Bong shows how movies can tackle worldwide capitalist systems while preserving their cultural essence. The continuous academic interest in Bong's work establishes that social realism continues to be essential for understanding contemporary identity alongside ethics and economic disparities.

Unified perspectives on Bong's social realism. The collective research demonstrates that Bong's realist approach unites sensory experiences with spatial elements and symbolic representations. Through his films, Bong teaches viewers to recognize how everyday elements like scents, colors, and food reveal the operation of social systems.

4. Conclusion

Bong's realism redefines cinema's political purpose. The synthesis reveals how film theory has progressed through time. Realism in the twenty-first century no longer requires documentary aesthetics or non-professional actors. Instead, it emerges through stylized, ironic, and fantastical elements that reveal structural truths. Bong combines horror, comedy, and melodrama to create a realism that expresses emotion rather than replicating reality.

His films transform sensory experience into moral insight. Scholars agree that Bong's films establish a new way for viewers to experience inequality through their senses. According to Bhandari, the scent of poverty reveals human defenselessness [2]; Turner and Teimouri show how eating expresses survival [4,5]; Marschall connects emotion to color [7]; Patkós and Kim use architecture to depict class [3,9]; and Hong and Nam explore resonance and ethics [6,10]. Bong transforms emotions into understanding, proving that cinema remains a moral and political art form in the twenty-first century.

Bong Joon Ho's writing skills excel at uniting common human feelings with precise social commentary. His storytelling presents a mix of emotional accessibility and intellectual complexity which creates empathy without becoming overly sentimental. Through his perfect blend of artistic skill and critical perspective Bong Joon Ho established himself as a filmmaker and writer who influences worldwide cinematic language while making audiences view reality through emotional and rational perspectives.

References

- [1] Palamattom, R. K., & Mathew, S. (2024). Unfolding the visual abbreviations: A semiotic reading of Parasite directed by Bong Joon-ho. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 5(1), 510–515.
- [2] Bhandari, P. (2020, February 10). Parasite: A defining film on class relations and inequality. *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/>
- [3] Patkós, G. (2023). The paradox of enclosed spaciousness and metaphors of resonance in Bong Joon-ho's Parasite (2019). In M. Pantea (Ed.), *Cultural Texts and Contexts in the English-Speaking World* (Vol. VIII, pp. 131–143). University of Oradea Press.
- [4] Turner, E. (2021). The parasite of society: Food and class studies in Bong Joon-ho's Parasite. *Journal of Cultural Critique*, 7(3), 60–115.
- [5] Teimouri, M. (2024). The narrative of survival: Food and eating as motifs in Parasite by Bong Joon-ho. *Sarjana*, 39(1), 10–30.
- [6] Hong, S. (2023). Korean cinema as historical archive in the era of post-history: Memories of Murder (2003, Bong Joon-ho). *TechArt: Journal of Arts and Imaging Science*, 10(2), 13–23.
- [7] Marschall, S. (2025). ColourReflections: A study of colour in cinema using the example of Bong Joon-ho's Parasite. *ColourTurn Journal*, 1(1), 60–110.
- [8] Lee, C.-Y. (2019). The spiritual picture in Bong Joon-ho's realistic movies. *Journal of Film and Cultural Studies*, 17(2), 45–58.
- [9] Kim, H. J. (2022). Social realism and postmodern space in Bong Joon-ho's cinema. *Korean Journal of Visual Culture Studies*, 29(4), 110–129.
- [10] Nam, S. (2023). The semiotics of violence and family in Bong Joon-ho's Parasite. *Asian Journal of Communication and Media Arts*, 14(1), 72–90.