

A Study of Cross-Cultural Genre Strategies and Thematic Expressions in Bong Joon-ho's Social-Issue Films

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Abstract: *Background:* In today's global cinema, Bong Joon-ho is often discussed through the concept of auteur theory or as a representative of South Korean cultural export. Such perspectives tend to overlook the concrete formal techniques he uses to transform genre conventions into tools for cross-cultural social critique. *Purpose:* This study aims to examine how Bong Joon-ho reworks genre forms through narrative, spatial, and visual strategies to make class antagonism and structural inequality understandable to transnational audiences. *Methods:* Using qualitative textual analysis and case study methods, this research examines selected films directed by Bong Joon-ho. Using postmodern genre theory, cinematic space theories, and psychoanalytic film criticism, the study analyzes narrative structure, spatial organization, visual style, and genre hybridity to clarify how social meaning is created through cinematic form. *Results:* The analysis shows that Bong Joon-ho's films consistently highlight class division, wealth inequality, and institutional violence. Rather than abandoning genre formulas, his films strategically reshape conventions associated with thriller, dark comedy, monster film, and disaster cinema. Spatial strategies such as vertical hierarchies, enclosed interiors, and restricted thresholds create social divisions and guide spectator focus toward marginalized subjects. These formal operations translate South Korean experiences of modernization into narratives influenced by global capitalism, enabling cross-cultural intelligibility while preserving local specificity. *Conclusion:* This study suggests that Bong Joon-ho's filmmaking exemplifies a successful blend of auteurist expression and genre-based address, offering insight into how national cinemas can achieve international circulation through formally grounded social critique.

Keywords: Bong Joon-ho, Genre hybridity, Cinematic space, Social inequality, Transnational films

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

South Korean director Bong Joon-ho creates films that integrate ideological depth, artistic merit, and commercial appeal. With a background in sociology, he is known as a "cinematic sociologist," as he sheds light on South Korea's historical and contemporary traumas while offering profound reflections on human nature and society.

In 2019, *Parasite* won both the Palme d'Or and the Academy Award, demonstrating its core style: balancing auteur films (emphasizing personal expression) and commercial genre films (functioning as social collective "myths"). His emergence marks the maturity of the South Korean film industry, symbolizing a shift in East Asia's cultural industry from a national to a regional focus (Ahn, 2012).

Genre films, including Westerns, gangster films, and science fiction (sci-fi), follow fixed plot patterns with one-dimensional characters, simple motivations, and closed melodramatic structures. They employ complete visual codes, such as desert settings and cowboy attire commonly found in Westerns. By using characters that represent

social ideologies, genre films provide imaginary resolutions to social issues, reflecting the collective unconscious. These films can be defined as “myths” (Schatz, 1981).

Hollywood genre films are regarded as “vernacular modernism,” facilitating the global spread of Western modernist culture with a hegemonic role in art production. Localized adaptations contribute to indigenous modernity, exemplified by 1930s Chinese films adopting Hollywood star styling (Hansen, 2000).

While “vernacular modernism” focuses on the dissemination of Western modernity and the development of local industry, Bong’s films adopt a radical deconstructive approach. In postmodern contexts, he uses genre films to question Western modernity and highlight unresolved problems in East Asian modernity.

This “problem-posing without problem-solving” model rejects melodrama’s closed narrative and presents a comprehensive approach to confront reality. It redefines film beyond simple entertainment, using accessible methods to reflect on important social issues.

1.2 Research Objectives

Through targeted textual analysis, this study identifies the common themes in Bong Joon-ho’s films. It explores how the symbolism of cinematic spatial imagery constructs allegorical narratives and addresses social issues. Furthermore, it examines how the social issues raised by Bong Joon-ho—expressed through culturally specific details—convey a unique understanding of East Asian modernity. The reflections triggered by the moral and ethical tragedies in his works not only inspire reconsideration and criticism of modernity but also prompt audiences to think about personalized solutions.

1.3 Research Content

South Korean director Bong Joon-ho, who has a background in sociology and strong filmmaking skills, has directed and written seven core films, including *Memories of Murder* and *Parasite*. He combines the narrative techniques of Hollywood social-problem films with Eastern thematic expressions, characterized by “the shell of genre films + the core of social criticism.” His works focus on the real lives of ordinary South Koreans. He breaks Hollywood’s fixed editing principles (e.g., abandoning shot/reverse shot in the interrogation scenes of *Memories of Murder*) and closed plot patterns, rejecting the stereotyped ending of “justice prevailing.” By creating symbolic cinematic spaces such as basements and semi-basements, and using images like monsters and super pigs, he presents the alienation of humans in modern society, metaphors for history and social structure, and in-depth themes beyond class. *Memories of Murder* deconstructs the teleological structure of detective films, using an unsolved case to metaphorize the social chaos during the rise of South Korean modernity and the elusiveness of historical memory, while *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite* condense social classes through carriage spaces and present spatial opposition between semi-basements and villas, respectively, exposing the essence of capitalist fetishism combined with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Meanwhile, integrating Eastern family ethics and environmental concern, his films encourage audiences to reflect deeply on modernity, human nature, and solutions to social problems with an open mind, achieving a successful combination of auteur style and genre films and becoming a model of cross-cultural communication.

1.4 Research Methods

This study adopts case analysis and comparative research to categorize and discuss the seven films directed by Bong Joon-ho (as shown in Table 1). It investigates the interactive relationship between humans and the environment, exploring complex issues such as the symbolism of “monsters” in fantasy genre films. For individual cases, the

study focuses on Bong Joon-ho's innovations in genre films ("genre tweaking"), namely, his realism-oriented creations. The spaces in these works are carefully designed to serve as the film's core "characters" (Bordwell, 2016). An analysis of the symbolic systems of cinematic spaces shows that the films transcend the realistic visual style. Bong Joon-ho's works also embody Brecht's theatrical theories, thereby subverting traditional cinematic narrative.

Table 1. Films Involved in the Study

No.	Year of Release	Film Title (Chinese / English)	Bong Joon-ho's Role
1	2000	Barking Dogs Never Bite	Director, Screenwriter
2	2003	Memories of Murder	Director, Screenwriter
3	2006	The Host	Director, Screenwriter
4	2009	Mother	Director, Screenwriter
5	2013	Snowpiercer	Director, Screenwriter
6	2017	Okja	Director, Screenwriter, Producer
7	2019	Parasite	Director, Screenwriter, Producer

2. Literature Review

Since the rise of South Korean cinema in the 1990s, the adoption of realistic themes and narrative styles has become a distinctive artistic feature. This type of "social-issue film" or more widely known as "social problem film" (SPF), aims to expose dark realities and is mainly categorized as crime genre cinema. SPFs are also referred to as "problem films" or "allegorical films" (Cagle, 2016).

Bong Joon-ho's films are representative of this genre. Their plots revolve around class conflicts and carry allegorical meanings. The characters have a certain degree of typicality, each representing a distinct social class. The conflicts among these characters illustrate the struggles between social classes. Changes in character relationships and overall plot structures represent social contradictions and their imaginary resolutions.

However, analyzing the film text solely from the narrative level is insufficient. The most prominent feature of Bong Joon-ho's works is the construction of cinematic spatial imagery. Jameson (1995) argues that spatial issues in films are highly significant, suggesting that what is presented in films is often "ideologized form and space". The uniqueness of space in Bong Joon-ho's imagery lies not only in its correspondence to different social classes but also in its hybridity, which reflects the complexity of social problems. Additionally, cultural conflicts stemming from class conflicts are embedded in these spaces. Through the symbolism of space, we gain insight into the inner worlds of different groups of people, a concept referred to as "spiritual images" by film researchers (Li, 2021).

Bong Joon-ho's unique genre strategy is also a key focus of research. By inheriting and subverting the rules of genre films, he opens up new spaces for meaning-making.

He first adopts the story structures of genre films. For example, *Memories of Murder* follows the framework of a classic detective film, but its ending—without revealing the murderer—subverts audience expectations.

Du (2007) argues that the "unsolved state" is the core of Bong Joon-ho's cinematic expression. East Asian modernity has long remained unfinished: globalization has driven rapid social development, yet issues such as identity anxiety and cultural crises arising from drastic shifts in reality have not received sufficient attention or reflection. Their universally accepted solutions are even difficult to obtain. In particular, the conflict between tradition and modernity in national culture continues.

While genre films centered on social issues imply specific social contradictions and their possible resolutions, Bong Joon-ho's films reveal not only social problems but also the underlying cultural contradictions. Instead of offering imaginary solutions, they encourage audiences to engage in collective reflection.

Researchers note that Bong Joon-ho's films incorporate "environmental theater" from contemporary drama—a concept that views real-life scenarios as theatrical performances. In his films, this is manifested through the division of screen space, creating two parts within the cinematic space: the "viewer" and the "stage" performance area (Zhang & Zhou, 2020). Through Godardian film techniques, his works achieve the effect of reflecting on the fictional reality of the images themselves.

3. Film Analysis

3.1 Overview of Creations

In the late 1980s, Bong Joon-ho studied sociology at Yonsei University in South Korea, witnessing the country's social changes and democratic development firsthand. He then enrolled in the Korean Academy of Film Arts in 1993 to study film production.

Bong writes and directs almost all his films. Influenced by his social environment and educational background, each of his works carries a strong sense of social criticism. Moreover, every film showcases a distinct personal style, from his debut feature *Barking Dogs Never Bite*, which uses surreal techniques to depict the real-life struggles of ordinary people, to the globally acclaimed *Parasite*. His works combine the dramatic techniques of the 1930s Hollywood social-problem genre films with Eastern-themed narratives. Most of his works assume social responsibility through moral orientation.

Hollywood's realistic films can span genres like gangster films, suspense thrillers, and film noir. These visual narratives, which expose society's dark sides, mainly focus on "conflicts between individuals and social institutions—such as government agencies, enterprises, and political parties. They often depict the experiences of victims or attempt to achieve fairness and justice through the efforts of social reformers" (Gehring, 1988).

However, Bong Joon-ho demonstrates the intellectual concern, the height of philosophical thinking, sharp insight, and profound humanistic care. He grasps the fundamental problems of society from a broad perspective and conducts in-depth reflection and criticism on modern society through film language. He turns his camera to the real lives of ordinary South Koreans, presenting plausible daily events rather than exaggerated dramatic incidents. His personal values and reflections on real-world issues are the soul and source of thematic expressions in his auteur-style films. It can be said that Bong Joon-ho's films are "social scalpels" wrapped in the outer packaging of genre films, constructing a set of "visual pathological systems for diagnosing the ills of contemporary civilization" (DiMaggio, 1987).

By comparing Bong's works across different periods, we can trace the deepening of his social reflections. By challenging traditional narrative rules and moving beyond closed melodramatic narratives, he reveals the social reality hidden beneath the surface of daily life.

The spatial metaphors in *Parasite* are directly linked to character development. The film opens by showing the protagonist's family's living environment—oppressive yet empty, cramped yet exposed. It creates a stark contrast with the spacious and bright courtyard of the wealthy family. The symbolic use of "height" and "light/darkness" in space had previously appeared in *Barking Dogs Never Bite*.

Memories of Murder parodies the detective genre and points to the "truth" of history and its inaccessibility. The associated social truth lies in capitalist economic problems and the universal alienation of human nature caused by modernization. Only two children remain at the end of *Snowpiercer*, prompting the audience to reflect on humanity's future. In *Mother*, the mother who seeks revenge for her son eventually falls into an abyss of sin. In *Okja*, the protagonist's actions fail to save the genetically

modified pig, implying irony and metaphor. These films break the audience's expectation of "justice prevailing".

3.2 Transcending Realism

Hollywood genre films adhere to fixed visual norms for their narratives. For example, character relationships are revealed through frame composition, and spaces depicted in films usually serve either as settings for the story or as a means of creating a specific atmosphere. For instance, underground parking lots in crime films are often used as locations for illegal transactions. Visual narratives adhere to dialogue-driven storytelling and the editing principle of shot/reverse shot. This ensures the audience remains unaware of the editing process, allowing them to be fully immersed in the plot (Comolli, 1980). However, Bong Joon-ho's films break these Hollywood editing principles through unique directorial techniques. In the interrogation scenes of *Memories of Murder*, the conventional shot/reverse shot between the police and the suspects is absent. This conveys the interrogators' weariness with their work and presents a non-dramatic narrative that aligns closely with everyday details. At the end of *Parasite*, after the protagonist commits a crime, the slow-motion close-ups of his face and hands also deviate from the visual style of realism.

The most significant subversion lies in Bong's rebellion against the plot patterns of genre films. If Hollywood genre films create an illusion of reality, then breaking the audience's expectations of plot frustrates the desire to represent reality—thereby highlighting the complexity of reality itself. Traditional social-problem films not only depict unfavorable social conditions but also express specific attitudes toward social issues (Roffman & Purdy, 1981). In contrast, Bong adopts an open attitude toward social issues, leaving the unresolved to the audience.

3.3 Thematic Analysis

1) *Multidimensional Presentation of Human Alienation*

Human alienation in modern society is a recurring theme in Bong Joon-ho's films. Using genre films as a testing ground, he makes the state of human alienation visible through social examples.

In *The Host*, the Han River is polluted, causing mutations in aquatic organisms. When the monster abducted Park Gang-du's daughter Hyun-seo, there was no hero to rescue her. The powerless Park family must rely solely on themselves. Their courage is admirable, yet they face repeated failure. This scene reveals human limitations and the alienation of interpersonal relationships in modernized society. Reportedly, *The Host* is adapted from South Korea's well-known "formaldehyde incident," and its creative inspiration stems from Bong Joon-ho's firsthand encounter with an unidentified creature. The film reflects the irreconcilable contradiction between South Korea's rapidly developing industrialization and the destruction of natural resources. The monster is not only a symbol of external threats but also a metaphor for environmental pollution in modern society.

Okja tells another story about a "monster," which seems warm yet carries deeper pessimism. The film features genetically modified animals that symbolize the alienation of humans and other beings by consumerism. Mija grows up with Okja, a "super pig." Although Mija teams up with an animal protection organization to fight against the conspiracy of the Mirando Corporation, she receives no substantial assistance from the organization. This exposes the corporation's disregard for animal lives behind its "green" ideology. In the end, Mija rescues Okja on her own, but the Mirando Corporation's commercial conspiracy remains unshaken.

The Host embeds class standpoints more deeply into its plot, while *Okja* transitions from a rescue story to a demonstration of the overall operational structure of capitalist commercial society. Bong Joon-ho does not use genre models or dramatic storytelling to

obscure reality. The appearances of the monster and the super pig do not transcend the logic of reality. Evidently, Bong differentiates his works from typical Hollywood monster films.

In realistic films that address social issues, creators often act as social analysts, assuming the “role of social critics”, who can perceive, understand, and clearly criticize social issues (Walzer, 1993). Bong Joon-ho’s *Barking Dogs Never Bite* explores multiple social issues and transforms them into a coherent story, integrating absurdity and black humor into its realistic plot. “Black humor” refers to the use of tragic stories combined with exaggerated, sarcastic narration to create a blend of sadness and joy. This technique often emphasizes pessimistic emotions and optimistic endings, thereby building dramatic contrast (Xiu, 2005). The film centers on a dog’s safety. It features typical characters, such as a university professor, a community staff member, and a homeless person, each of whom serves as a metaphor for a distinct social class. By portraying “dogs standing in for humans,” the film reveals the spiritual crisis and survival dilemma of humans in modern society. In daily life, “our reactions to people or things within a specific area involve continuous information transmission, which is analogous to the nature of film” (Wang, 2007). The film breaks the assumption that space and social classes correspond perfectly, highlighting the complexity of spatial symbolism.

Yun-ju, a university lecturer, struggles with poor interpersonal skills. He faces setbacks in his promotion to professorship, leading to career frustration. His pregnant wife’s nagging only adds to his annoyance. One day, the constant barking of a neighbor’s dog triggers the pent-up resentment in his heart, and he even entertains the evil thought of throwing the dog off the building or hanging it in the basement. In a moment of impulse, he abducts a dog that happens to pass by, only to discover it cannot bark due to throat surgery. After a security guard boils and eats this dog, Yun-ju, seeking revenge, abducts and throws the barking dog off the building. Yun-ju is a young man struggling to survive in the lower rungs of society; the dog’s barking is actually a projection of his psychological problem. When people are overwhelmed by life’s pressures, unable to change their circumstances or control their anger, they can only vent their frustration by harming the vulnerable. This is essentially a form of resistance and escape from real-life pressures. After killing the dog, the camera follows Yun-ju as he walks into the sunlight, and the frame overexposes and fades to whiteness. Here, “brightness” contrasts with the character’s sorrow and despair. The film blurs the line between good and evil; the audience witnesses “the dark and limited sides of the characters, understands the helplessness of those who do evil, and feels regret and empathy for their actions” (Liu & Liao, 2022).

In *Barking Dogs Never Bite*, Bong Joon-ho demonstrates an awareness of how to create unique cinematic spaces. The contrast between light and darkness in different spaces endows the film with “a solid depth of field and a distinct, distorted perspective” (Deleuze, 2016). In the basement of the residential building, a security guard and a boiler engineer from North Korea reside. According to the security guard’s account, we learn the engineer was killed for exposing safety hazards in the building’s boiler—only later do we discover the engineer has been hiding in a pile of debris in the basement, unharmed. The film does not specify how the engineer survived or whether the security guard was aware of his presence. The dark basement in the film is key to interpreting the theme: in this space, the security guard, despite his negligence at work and involvement in killing and eating dogs, remains unpunished; in contrast, the boiler engineer, due to his North Korean identity, is taken away by the police from the basement—leaving the boiler unmaintained and the residents’ safety at risk. Here, the dark basement symbolizes evil, yet it is also a place where justice resides. The film employs expressionist techniques to depict the basement, using light and darkness to create a fascinating visual space.

Bong Joon-ho is fond of the imagery of sewers and basements, which can be linked to the light-dark contrast in his film frames to form a complete light-shadow meaning

system. In his films, dark basements are spaces where the lower class hides and lives, symbolizing poverty, oppression, and despair. They are not only physically low-lying areas but also the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. However, basements are also open spaces—their boundaries with the above-ground real world are not distinct, or rather, any attempt to completely separate the underground from the above-ground is futile.

In *Parasite*, the “semi-basement” represents the urban poor. They are parasitic or rely on wealthy families above ground, who can only briefly experience a wealthy lifestyle. In *Barking Dogs Never Bite*, the boiler engineer living in the basement climbs to the rooftop, where he is seen by a girl who rescues a dog, yet his face remains unseen. This anonymity highlights his lack of identity. Yun-ju, a university lecturer belonging to the middle class, even spends a night in the basement after getting drunk. It may imply his inner struggle to survive and his desire to break free from poverty, yet an invisible force holds him back.

At the end of the film, Yun-ju, now a professor, has his students draw the curtains in the classroom to watch a projection. His face gradually fades into darkness, indicating that despite his improved social status, he has not been freed from the dark cage of society; instead, he has learned to compromise for fame and fortune, falling into the abyss of inhumanity. The scene shifts to an outdoor space, where the girl is on an outing in the wild. She holds a mirror and walks into the depths of the scene. The mirror is the same as the one she kicked off a stranger’s car on her way. The flickering reflections in the mirror remind the audience that while the bright open space may seem welcoming, it can conceal underlying evil, making it difficult to perceive. In contrast, the dark underground space harbors genuine humanity and twisted, suppressed kindness. The security guard who eats dog meat in the basement may represent the indifferent masses who turn a blind eye to both the light and dark worlds. His lack of awareness and inability to reflect on his surroundings serve as a critique by Bong Joon-ho of the indifferent masses, urging people to recognize their position in an increasingly alienated world.

The film uses two nearly identical scenes to show Yun-ju getting drunk at a subway station, just like his deceased rival (as shown in Figure 1). However, he avoids misfortune at the last moment and finally achieves his goal. This implies Yun-ju’s spiritual death or rebirth. After discovering that Yun-ju is the dog killer, the girl who rescues dogs undergoes a profound spiritual shock. The film achieves black comedy effects through the characters’ limited awareness. Whether the characters can recognize themselves is irrelevant, as even recognition rarely changes their circumstances. The audience witnesses the separate growth of Yun-ju and the girl, who reflect each other’s struggles. This transformation is not only the spiritual redemption of the characters but also prompts the audience to reflect on and be alert to the absurd realities of society. Only when people can identify the logic alienation in fictional stories can they possibly decipher the survival code of real life.



Figure 1. Yun-Ju’s face is over-illuminated.

Source: https://movie.douban.com/subject/1401587/all_photos

2) Metaphors for History and Social Structure

Bong Joon-ho's films "excel at embedding real historical contexts and practical issues into the textual framework of genre narratives, thereby interpreting the socio-political significance of the text" (He & Xia, 2018). *Memories of Murder* deconstructs the teleological structure of detective films. While capturing the killer is the desire of all and the typical ending of most crime films, the truth rarely unfolds as neatly as it does in movies. This reflects the reality of life.

The emergence of violent crimes in the rural area depicted in the film symbolizes the full-scale rise of modernity in South Korea. Although the film is based on a true event, it is less likely that people would remember what happened in the past. Like empiricist historians, detectives cannot definitively establish the truth. In this way, the film metaphorically links the historical trauma of lost memory to the unsolved criminal case (Joseph, 2011). Adapted from a real legal case, the film tells the story of a serial murder case that occurred in Hwaseong, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea, in the 1980s. Bong Joon-ho has stated that he was drawn to this unsolved murder case. Before creating the film, he spent months investigating the case, hoping to understand why the killer was never caught. His conclusion was that South Korean society at the time was underdeveloped and lacked the necessary factors to solve the case.

As a detective film adapted from an unsolved case of the past, it retains traditional narrative features—tight pacing and intense cinematography. At the beginning of the film, the police immediately identify three "suspects" based on preconceptions. To solve the case quickly, the investigating officers force the "suspects" into confessing their "memories of murder." These memories are not merely about a simple serial murder case but a collective recollection of the social chaos of that era. The film presents historical scenes such as the ruling authorities suppressing mass movements, recreates the 1980s South Korean environment through street props, and carefully designs character conflicts to help the audience understand the mindset of people at that time.

At that time, rural police stations in South Korea considered using violence and torture as standard law enforcement practices, and Detective Park was one of the officers who resorted to such violence to deal with cases. Detective Park claimed he could solve cases through observation, but his reasoning was simply irrational speculation lacking analytical and logical judgment. If Detective Park in the film corresponds to the "eyes" and "brain" (observation and thinking), then Detective So corresponds to the "hands" (advanced investigation procedures). The two officers influence each other in their interactions. Eventually, Detective So is gradually integrated into the law enforcement environment of the rural police station and cannot help but become violent as well. In the end, Detective So injures his hand while holding a gun, a symbol of the difficulty in solving the case under the conditions of law enforcement at that time.

The scene in which Detective So injures his hand takes place by the railway tracks on a rainy day. The heavy rain symbolically erases the identities of both the detectives and the suspect. It eliminates their status differences during the confrontation and forces them to face each other's inner selves. At a critical moment, when Detective So is about to pull the trigger to shoot the suspect, Detective Park rushes in with a DNA test report from the United States, showing that the suspect is innocent. The case again falls into a dead end. Detective So is left with no choice but to fire a few empty shots, and, unwillingly, convinced by Detective Park, to let go of Park Heung-gyu, the criminal. Notably, throughout the film, the police chief repeatedly criticizes Detective Park and Detective So for their impatience.

The film questions the credibility of scientific rationality, as shown by the DNA test report. The audience clearly expects the killer to be arrested, especially when all evidence points to Park Heung-gyu. However, he escapes and walks calmly into the tunnel, despite the incriminating evidence. The film's central theme conveys the sorrow and powerlessness of ordinary people in the face of major events within a specific historical context. The audience may reflect on the specific era depicted in the film to

form their own conclusions about the causes of the case and the likelihood of similar future recurrences. This leads to a reevaluation of the film's structure and narration, which leaves some suspense unresolved. On one hand, the authority of the detectives is dismantled, highlighting the limitations of time and prompting reflection on the challenges of seeking justice. On the other hand, the suspect Park Heung-gyu is portrayed as an ordinary person, challenging the rigid stereotypes often associated with criminals.

It is often true that in the real world, one of the serial killers has been identified, but related doubts have not been clarified. Park Heung-gyu in the film is not a specific suspect but a "signifier" of a suspect. His dialogue with the detectives directly highlights the theme: the suspect's madness symbolizes the madness of attempting to fully understand and reckon with history. The real world and history resist all forms of oversimplification. The confusing murder case parallels the unknowability of history, echoing the relevant historical facts implied in the pictures. In a sense, the film guides the audience from the story on screen to reflect on themselves and the real world. Because the case had not been fully resolved when the film was released, the sense of crisis and fear also prompted unease among the audience (as shown in Figure 2).



Figure 2. The portraits face the audience just like they are on a theatrical stage.
Source: https://movie.douban.com/subject/1300299/all_photos

3) Beyond Class Issues

The Host adopts the model of Hollywood high-concept blockbusters. This has helped the South Korean film industry integrate into the Hollywood-centered global system (Lee, 2011). *Snowpiercer*, by contrast, sets its scenes outside South Korea and begins to explore international issues. Stylistically, it incorporates more exaggerated visual elements, making the originally heavy social-analytic theme more relevant to the real world. It even "uses satire within the framework of B-movie traditions to convey its political and sociological themes" (Paquet, 2011).

Bong Joon-ho seeks to demonstrate that progress depends on the development of a new ethics, as reflected in images of marginalized groups. The family is a concrete example and small model of moral ethics in East Asia. This allows interpersonal emotions to build a new sense of self, namely "emotion-based subjectivity." Li (2005) argues that this emotion-based subjectivity can make up for the suppression and destruction of emotions and the body by rationalism. The new subjectivity can also free people from nihilism in the postmodern context.

Comparing Brecht's educational theater with Bong Joon-ho's genre-film model offers valuable insight. Although Brecht's theory was designed for theatrical works, it also helps explain Bong Joon-ho's creative intent. The comparison highlights the similarities and differences between Western and Eastern creative ideas. Lehmann argues that the focus of educational theater is on engaging participants in the performance. By reenacting the "sacrifice-redemption" stories of medieval religious

plays, participants can experience the sense of sublimity missing from modern life and thus receive an education. The protagonists of such educational plays usually die individually, symbolizing spiritual escape (Chen, 2024).

Brecht's educational theater was based on reflections on the social and spiritual crises of his time, and he reinterpreted the Christian ideological tradition by using the sacred yet popular form of religious plays. Similarly, Bong Joon-ho chose the genre film model, which is easily accessible to the audiences. In his films, he presents realistic and incisive views, debunks illusions created by various discourses, highlights the country's desperate situation, and uses an ethical imagination to enlighten people. The allegorical form of spatial imagery in his films makes the analysis of social issues more distinct and thorough, emphasizing that solutions lies in reconnecting to people's inherent social concern and, most importantly, valued family ethics.

Bong Joon-ho's films carry two meanings of "nature" imagery. It appears as a symbolic space outside the film's realistic world, but it does not offer a way out. For instance, the mountain village setting in *Okja*—a paradise far from the hustle and bustle—represents the desire for harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Nature does not possess the redemptive power of an idyllic poem, but serves as an escape from the city, with utopian connotations.

In *The Host*, the family lives on the riverbanks because poverty has driven them to the outskirts of urban civilization. When the monster attacks, those enjoying the beautiful scenery by the river flee in all directions. The tragic death of family members in this setting highlights the fact that the idyllic imagery of nature in the city offers no protection.

In *Barking Dogs Never Bite* and *Parasite*, young people experience temporary displacement, finding themselves in natural spaces with crises. This portrayal reflects Bong Joon-ho's desire to place hope in their awakening. After all, they are marginalized groups who tried with all their efforts to survive spiritual as well as material hardships. However, the future of these young people remains uncertain, and their fate is in doubt.

In *Snowpiercer*, the protagonist finally walks into the snowfield. The nature here, untouched by humans, expresses a new environmental ethics. An ethical respect for non-human nature as a virtue (Altshuler, 2014). *Snowpiercer* illustrates the concept of a class-based social structure. As global warming continues, humanity is plunged into an ice age. Only a small group of people is allowed to board the "Snowpiercer," a perpetual-motion train that allows them to live a self-sufficient life. The living conditions of people in different carriages reflect the reality of social classes. Furthermore, the film also encourage the audience to reflect on multiple dimensions such as human nature, the environment, and freedom. It effectively condenses human society into a single train, highlighting critical issues as wealth gap, class conflict, and social injustice through the division of social classes within the carriages.

The train is divided into different classes from left to right. The rear carriages are occupied by the underclass laborers represented by Curtis, who work all day long to provide necessities for the entire train. Just near them are occupied by the train service workers with certain skills, who are required to serve the upper classes in the front carriages. Children from the middle class in the other carriages have the opportunity to receive proper education in well-lit classrooms, however, the curriculum is determined by the upper elites in the front carriages. The upper class enjoy a lavish lifestyle, yet they are not the controllers of the train. At the very front of the train, Wilford resides in a special carriage that houses the engine that controls the train's operation. As the supreme ruler, his job is to ensure the smooth operation of the train.

As leader of the underclass, Curtis has always adhered to the principle of "liberty or death," and his hatred for Wilford is deep-rooted. To win freedom and dignity for the underclass people, he risks his life in the first-class carriages in an attempt to find and kill Wilford. When he finally meets Wilford, the latter admires him and intends to make him his successor, but Curtis refuses. He does not believe in Wilford's sincerity or good

intentions, as the social divide of the train designed by Wilford has caused suffering and oppression for the underclass. Choosing between dying freely and living like a parasite, Curtis opts for the former. He destroys the perpetual-motion engine, wrecks the train, and breaks everything to pieces in the ice and snow. The ending of the film “does not eliminate the class divide; it merely destroys both the underclass and the rulers at the same time” (Ou & Yang, 2023). It is true that Curtis is determined to sacrifice his life for people of low social status implies a powerful act of subversion(as shown in Figure 3).



Figure 3. The only remaining passenger walks toward the snowfield.
Source: https://movie.douban.com/subject/3071441/all_photos

Parasite continues the allegorical model of *Snowpiercer*. Unlike myths, which aim for reconciliation, allegories subvert and expose injustice (Noh, 2020). Some scholars argue that the relationship between the Kim family, who live in the semi-basement, and the Park family, who reside in the villa, can be likened to the “ego” and “id” in psychoanalysis (Wang, 2020). From a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, this analogy is particularly relevant to Ki-taek’s actions. The act of murder stimulates him to break free from the “symbolic order” and come into contact with the “real order”. Evidence of this is that he no longer uses “language and words” associated with symbolic order (Lacan, 2001). After escaping to the basement, he can only send Morse code via skillful lighting technique.

What is surprising after the murder is that Ki-taek returns to the villa and hides in the basement. This is the film’s greatest suspense, as it reveals Ki-taek’s inner spiritual world. He exposes the deception inherent in social discourse and, at the same time, reclaims his own subjectivity. At the beginning of the film, Min-hyuk, Ki-woo’s college friend, asks Ki-woo to take over his tutoring job while he studies abroad, and also gives Ki-woo a small rockery as a gift. To secure this job, Ki-woo forges a diploma from a top South Korean university and successfully becomes the English tutor for Da-hye, the Parks’ daughter. The Kim family sees this as a great opportunity for upward mobility. Subsequently, through a series of lies and coordinated actions, they manage to take over all the household amenities of the Park family and start to have a lavish lifestyle.

Because their absurd and exaggerated plot succeeds so easily, the Kim family becomes complacent and greedy. They even deceive themselves into thinking they are the real owners of the house and have become members of the upper class like Mr. Park. This delusion continues until an unexpected encounter between the two underclass families on a rainy night, with pouring rain revealing the truth of their situation. The Kim family’s desire for the Park’s villa symbolizes the “sublime object of ideology” that is capitalist fetishism (Moriarty, 2001).

In detail of the film, a bloody fight breaks out in the Park family’s mansion, eventually leading to the deaths of Mr. Park and Kim Ki-jung. The Kim family is plunged into crisis, and Ki-woo flees back to his waterlogged home. At this moment, the rockery that Min-hyuk gave to Ki-woo emerges from the water. Ki-woo thoughtfully picks up the rockery. However, this does not indicate that he understood his plan and

dream were merely a reflection of the “symbolic order” in the Lacanian term. He still believes in the symbolic order and desires what it promises him.

The eerie, dark door to the basement and its passageway represent the boundary of the symbolic order (as shown in Figure 4). This black entrance is comparable to the “gaze”—the invisible blind spot of the subject (Žižek, 1989). The gap leading to the real world is represented by the magical rockery, which serves as a marker of the symbolic order that traps Ki-woo at the entrance.



Figure 4. The eerie entrance leading to the basement.

Source: https://movie.douban.com/subject/27010768/all_photos

The later destruction of the semi-basement implies that after experiencing a wealthy lifestyle, the Kim family can no longer return to their former home. After the flood, Ki-taek and his son sought shelter in a stadium for refugees. Ki-taek says he finally understands that the best plan is to have no plan—indicating that he has lost faith in the possibility of rebuilding his home. Ki-taek finally acknowledges his failure and realizes that he will never own the villa in his lifetime. He then hopes to return to the dark basement of the mansion and accept what he refers to as “social death.”

The final scene of Ki-woo standing in the snow-covered mountains carries a deep chill and foreshadows the slim hope that he will earn enough money to buy the mansion and rescue his father. A key aspect of the film is to reflect on the survival of Ki-woo and his mother. The film ends with the son’s longing for his father, suggesting his movement toward redemption and emphasizing the importance of ethics within the family.

4. Conclusion

Bong Joon-ho’s films, influenced by both Korean and Western cultures, exemplify the high production standards of the South Korean film industry as well as his exceptional skills as a director. He excels in crafting multi-layered plot structures and a rich visual language to construct compelling narratives that examine social issues in South Korea and beyond. By utilizing the “shell” of Hollywood genre films to encapsulate social criticism, he replaces and reconfigures genre elements to challenge the ideology inherent in American popular culture within genre cinema, indirectly critiquing the global capitalist system that supports Hollywood’s dominance (Luo, 2019). This cross-cultural integration is manifested in both his narrative innovations—such as abandoning shot/reverse shot in *Memories of Murder* and subverting closed genre endings—and his exploration of universal themes like class conflict, human alienation, and social injustice. These themes resonate globally, reflecting the shared emotions of oppressed groups.

Rooted in reflections on South Korean social phenomena and their political-cultural origin, Bong’s works vividly illustrate East Asia’s “unfinished modernity,” addressing the ongoing conflict between modern civilization and traditional culture. What distinguishes his creations is the integration of unique Eastern ethics—emphasizing

family bonds and environmental harmony—thereby offering potential solutions to pressing social issues. By elevating ordinary people’s stories into profound explorations of significant themes through film, a mass medium, he achieves a remarkable synthesis of artistic innovation, social criticism, and cross-cultural communication. His reconfiguration of genre conventions to reflect the complexities of East Asian modernity proves that localized narratives can transcend boundaries, provoking universal reflection on humanity and society.

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