MISFIT GENRES AND FAILING SYSTEMS: CONTEMPORARY SOCIOECONOMIC CRITIQUE THROUGH GENRE SUBVERSION IN BONG JOON HO'S DOMESTIC FILMS

by

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(Under the Direction of Mi-Ryong Shim)

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the intersection of the subversion of genre conventions and the socioeconomic hardships in contemporary South Korea through the domestic films of Bong Joon Ho, Memories of Murder (2003), The Host (2008), and Parasite (2019), respectively. Bong's unique narrative formula utilizes the Hollywood genre as a method of exposing systematic injustices that force civilians into oppression, examples include their suppression of democracy, public safety, and opportunities for economic prosperity through Cold War ideologies, neocolonialism, and neoliberalism. This suppression forces the protagonists to fail, leaving the narrative without a satisfying conclusion, creating a nihilistic outlook on Korean society at the fault of corruption. I argue that the subversion of the expectations of Hollywood genres is Bong's creative method of critiquing the consequences of the direct oppression put onto vulnerable populations.

INDEX WORDS: East Asian Studies, Korean Film, Global Cinema

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my friends, family, educators, and colleagues from the past and present who have never stopped believing in me, even when I did not believe in myself. I cannot thank you enough for your encouragement and support. I hope I made you all proud.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Before South Korean film director Bong Joon Ho won four Academy Awards in 2020 for his film *Parasite*, he had built a highly respected reputation amongst the global cinema community. He had successfully created a formula that combines his passion for film and sociology. Through his mastery of genre-bending and social commentary, Bong has grown from a filmmaker telling stories that closely resonated with Korean audiences to someone whose work is universally relatable and is outspoken about the injustices of humanity.

Bong's fascination with cinema began at a young age, as he was an avid film watcher. Through the introduction of VHS tapes, existing cinema scholarship being translated into Korean, and Hollywood and European art films playing on the American Forces Korean Network, he was encapsulated by the emerging world of modern cinema within South Korea (Lee 29). Being born in 1969, Bong Joon Ho is considered a member of the "386 generation", which was a slang term in the 1990s that describes people who were in their 30s during this period, who attended university in the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s (Lee 24). Because of the intense political tension between the government and young people, Bong was at the prime age to be fully immersed in and aware of the public demonstrations being conducted in the 1980s.

Nam Lee, author of *The Films of Bong Joon Ho*, states that the "members of the 386 generation tend to share a strong sense of social justice and freedom as well as a keen interest in class issues" (25). This internalized awareness of social issues strongly carries itself into all of

Bong's films. His academic background in sociology is emphasized throughout his work, as his cinematic formula includes the portrayal of protagonists as ordinary people, typically those who are deemed weak within society. Characters are forced into situations where the sense of justice needs to be put into their own hands, as there is a lack of competence by figures in power.

Bong's characters themselves, especially the protagonists, are always portrayed as morally gray. They commit questionable actions in order to expose their social oppressors to achieve their goals. However, justice is not usually gained, and the oppressors always somehow win. Nobody ever moves their way up in society or escapes their situation, reflecting the nihilistic reality of the "system". Although Bong incorporates some elements of fantasy within some of his films, the core critiques of society are rooted in real suffering and injustice. The lack of trust and competence in authority is a result of Bong growing up in the "386 generation," watching the government and police clash with ordinary people.

Historical Context of Developing Modern Korean Cinema and Societal Structures (1980-present)

The development of the contemporary South Korean film industry emerged from an era of political unrest, in which the postcolonial military dictatorship strictly controlled film production. In the 1980s, the Kwangju Uprising, a political demonstration that ended in tragedy as soldiers turned their weapons towards civilians, which set a dark tone over the country throughout the decade. The government possessed complete control over the film industry, controlling the narratives that could be told. It's also important to highlight the government also regulated film festivals, further pushing their political agenda by awarding films that align with

their beliefs. MPPC films were anti-communist and promoted loyalty to the state, this was shown through the amount of action films being produced. Heavy government censorship through the 1970s and 1980s negatively impacted production in the film industry.

Hyun Park's article, "Korean Cinema after Liberation: Production, Industry, and Regulatory Trends" introduces the strict regulations imposed on filmmakers during the 1980s:

> "Between 1972 and 1986, state power precluded dissent through censorship and managed the mass media to consolidate its doctrine. Like other media, cinema functioned to shape political opinion to favor the centralized government's designated political and economic goals. The censorship board operated as a means to block controversial narratives and representations that threatened political stability and unity, with support from the state that limited private competition in film production" (16).

Park refers to this as the "Depression Era of Korean Cinema," as the number of films being produced was minimal and their quality was not up to consumer's expectations (16). 1973 saw the film industry completely fall into the government's hands under the Fourth Revised Motion Picture Law, establishing the Motion Picture Promotion Corporation (MPPC) which followed strict censorship guidelines (Park 18).

In the late 1980s, the film industry transitioned from government-funded to chaebol-funded, allowing filmmakers to work directly with these companies and produce films quickly and with higher budgets (Lee 19). This shift in production power saw the film industry expand rapidly, as young creatives were eager to tell their stories, thus bringing in the Korean "New Age" of cinema. Lee defines New Korean Cinema as "the creative and commercial resurgence of Korean cinema experienced during the late 1990s and early 2000s" (20). This era of creative

freedom introduced a new generation of filmmakers, many of whom portrayed South Korean social issues that were previously banned from being represented within cinema. Lee describes this as: “The initial impulse motivating the Korean New Wave was the realistic manifestation of contemporary society. The films were sincere, insightful reflections of what the directors perceived as the existential realities of the nation. They dealt with contemporary social issues such as political oppression, anti-Americanism, labor, and student movements” (23). Without the intense censorship by the South Korean government over the film industry, filmmakers were able to openly criticize the leadership of the past and fully explore the feelings of the past few decades that were full of violence, rapid modernization, political turmoil, and cultural cleansing. Among these directors willing to dive into this unfamiliar territory was none other than Bong Joon Ho, who was born in the prime age demographic to explore these issues in a way not previously seen in South Korean cinema. With the powerful new tool of creative freedom in the film industry, Bong has made a name for himself in global cinema, capturing the attention of audiences.

This thesis will explore the connections between Bong’s creative approach to genre conventions and the negative consequences of Cold War militarism, neocolonialism, and neoliberalism on vulnerable populations in South Korea. It is important to point out that, as previously mentioned in the historical context, South Korea’s sudden political and economic influence from the United States affected how South Korea developed. Transitioning from a nation colonized by another East Asian nation to being indirectly colonized by an economically powerful Western nation arguably makes South Korea a neocolonial nation. In a way, before even analyzing Bong Joon Ho’s films for their themes of failure, it can be argued that South

Korea truly failed to be a postcolonial society. Because of the United States military and economy's strong presence in South Korea, it still depends greatly on a Western power.

Economic influence by the influx of global trade led to the introduction of neoliberalism in South Korea. Neoliberalism is an economic strategy that emphasizes individual wealth through the "free market," in which there is less government interference or regulation in the economy (Steger 23). Manfred Steger and Ravi Roy describe neoliberalism as the idea that "economic and political matters are largely separable, with economics claiming a superior status because it operates best without government interference under a harmonious system of natural laws" (24). The desperation of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 forced South Korea to put a bigger emphasis on a free market economy which then had a dominating influence in economic policy, eventually bleeding into people's everyday lives (Lee 187). One of the many factors that ties all of the protagonists in Bong's films is their economic marginalization, in which all are collateral damage for neoliberal policies.

Briefly looking at genre itself, each chapter will go into deeper depth of the purpose and tropes of the specific genres Bong uses within each film. Overall, his signature "formula" prepares audiences with certain genre expectations, either with aesthetics, basic narrative structures, or both, but then subverts those expectations completely, as if the audience is having a metaphoric rug pulled out from underneath them. It is important to mention that Bong emphasizes social commentary and societal critiques within his films, in which he includes elements of both comedy and thriller in all of his films. Park Yuhee, author of the article "From the Era of Melodrama to the Age of the Comedy and the Thriller: The Simultaneous Transformations of Korean Society and Film Genre from the 1990s to the Present," argues that

the emergence of comedy and thriller as genres became more widely accepted in the Korean film industry as South Korea democratized. She states,

> "…comedy and thrillers are intellect centered genres which require two preconditions for their development, namely that the characters maintain an emotional distance and ask questions. Therefore, this genre transition implies that such emotional distance and focus on interrogating circumstances have been increasingly accepted in our society since the 1990s" (107-108).

Park suggests that these two genres were avoided in Korean film prior to the 1990s because they questioned and critiqued authority and societal structures. In a sense, it can be argued that Bong embraced comedy and thriller as it was a new territory for Korean filmmakers, but also as a sign of rebellion. Since strict censorship laws no longer existed and dictated what audiences could be exposed to, crucial societal issues could now be creatively explored. Bringing this back to Bong's status as someone of the "386 generation," his age coincidentally aligns him perfectly with this new frontier of Korean filmmaking.

Chapter Overviews

In this thesis, I argue that Bong Joon Ho thwarts genre expectations as a tool to portray and critique the socioeconomic injustices that affect contemporary South Korea. These injustices are the negative consequences of South Korea being a postcolonial, neocolonial, and neoliberal society. Because of these societal issues, the characters of each of the films analyzed in this thesis are forced to "fail." In the context of this thesis, I define "failure" as there being barriers that do not allow expectations or goals to be met. Bong's films "fail" to meet their assigned genre expectations by Hollywood standards to enhance their social commentary, due to societal

incompetencies that have dangerous consequences, which Bong embraces as protagonists within his films. He portrays these "failures" as being at the fault of the power structures beyond the control of the characters, exposing their corruptive nature that do not have the interest of ordinary people.

The films I have selected for this analysis are all categorized as Bong's "domestic" films, meaning they were marketed to Korean audiences and emphasize South Korean-specific social commentary, rather than his "transnational films" marketed towards the United States and written in English, such as *Snowpiercer* and *Mickey 17*. Bong's projects funded by the United States contain social commentary and Bong's "formula" of storytelling and genre but tend to focus on an emphasis on the "fantastical" that comment on more universal issues, such as the environment and corrupt capitalistic industries. I am drawn to Bong's domestic films, as a majority of them tie into real historical events in South Korean society, allowing for a greater pool of information and context to analyze and critique.

Although not a Bong Joon Ho project, my inspiration for this thesis originated from a rewatch of Hwang Dong-Hyuk's 2021 drama *Squid Game* late last year with someone not familiar with South Korean culture or media. As I explained the cultural nuances and significance within the show that were lost in translation, I was actively drawing my own similarities to *Parasite,* as they both depict horrific violence amongst vulnerable populations as being seen as a last resort of extreme poverty. Remembering the impact the unit on Bong Joon Ho's filmography had on me in my Korean Film and Literature course at Arizona State University, I decided to revisit his films and was reminded of his unique patterns of storytelling. I chose to focus my research on Bong's domestic films as they hold a deep sense of national

identity, weaving in real historical and cultural elements that make his films unique to not only South Korean cinema but to global filmmaking as well.

This thesis is divided into three chapters, each of which uses one Bong Joon Ho film that serves as a primary source of analysis. Each film will have four scenes analyzed for two of its distinctive genre conventions, how certain expectations are not met, and how theoretical structures force characters to "fail." The chapters are organized by each film's release in chronological order, from 2003 to 2019. Chapter 1's primary source material is *Memories of Murder* (2003), which explores Bong's commentary on the tumultuous dictatorship during the 1980s Cold War (with lingering negative effects decades later) through thwarting the conventions of the police procedural and the neo-noir. Chapter 2 will analyze *The Host*'s (2008) commentary on the United States' military's role as a negative influence in South Korea as a neocolonial entity through the thwarting of genre conventions within the Hollywood-style monster film. Finally, Chapter 3's primary source is *Parasite* (2019), which explores the devastating consequences of neoliberalism within South Korean society through the caper film, as well as the elements of comedy and horror utilized in critical scenes. My goal is to create connections between the failures of Bong's characters and how corrupt power systems are the reason for that failure.

Chapter 1: *Memories of Murder*

Introduction and Historical Context

Released in 2003, Bong Joon Ho's second feature film, *Memories of Murder* (살인의 추억, which translates directly as "Memories of Murder") is a fictional retelling of the true story of the Hwasong Murders, which occurred in Hwasong, South Korea, in the late 1980s. The film follows a dysfunctional group of detectives, primarily Doo-Man (portrayed by Song Kang-Ho), Cho Yong-Koo (portrayed by Kim Roi-Ha), who are tasked with solving South Korea's first documented serial killer, but trouble follows them through the entire process of the investigation. With limited technology and resources, a police officer from Seoul, Tae-Yoon (portrayed by Kang Sang-Hyun), volunteers to assist with the investigation, causing tension between himself and the rural detectives. With mishandled evidence, a lack of suspects, and false leads, the investigation exposes the corruption of not only Korean law enforcement but also the effects of the military dictatorship South Korea endured from the 1960s until the early 1990s, which was considered to be at its peak during the 1980s. The film concludes without a solution to the case, leaving the viewers with the haunting reality that the real killer was still out there at the time of release, and that the tragic memories of the recent past still linger through South Korean society.

The real and fictionalized doomed investigation of the Hwasong Murders from 1986-1994 highlights the political and social turmoil South Korea faced during the military dictatorship of Chun Doo-Hwan, who was president during the events of the film. As briefly discussed in the introduction section of this thesis, South Korea endured a brutal military

dictatorship following the Korean War which was fueled by the United States, creating a divide between civilians and the government, leading to a climate of fear and a distrust in authority. The dictatorship created a harsh anti-communist climate within the government that was believed to be controlled only through military violence. This intense emphasis on military power blurred the boundaries between government affairs and military strategy, in which the two mixed into a dictatorship in the name of communist containment for not only in Asia, but the West as well.

The National Security Act of 1948, in which the state was legally able to arrest, torture, and even kill people suspected of communist beliefs is crucial to the influx of normalized violence through the Cold War (Kim 82). Civilians could be accused of being communist for participating in democratization, reunification, and labor movements (Kim 82). This violent and legally murky act allowed the police to conduct questionable interrogation techniques on the suspects as portrayed within the film, especially on people who were difficult to connect to the crimes without any sort of repercussions for false suspicions

On May 17, 1980, a student demonstration in Kwangju that opposed the martial law put into place evolved into chaos as protestors, innocent civilians, and police and military personnel clashed in the streets, killing hundreds of people and resulting in thousands of arrests on suspicion of communist beliefs (Han 1001). The government refused to acknowledge or take blame for this tragedy until decades later, as they claimed the military attack was in self-defense (Han 1017). This nationally traumatizing incident established the overarching dark tone Koreans would experience throughout the decade, where the government openly used violence against civilians who disapproved of the regime's extreme belief system, as seen throughout the film.

Memories of Murder critiques the lack of discipline toward law enforcement and the government's negligence towards civilians, as the detectives continue to fail their investigation

because of the corrupt powers that overpower them. In this chapter, I argue that *Memories of Murder* thwarts the genre expectations of both the police procedural and the neo-noir. This "failure" of genre serves as a pointed critique of the repressive postcolonial military dictatorship Korean civilians lived under for decades, and the lingering effects these consequences had on future generations.

The Police Procedural

The police procedural is a sub-genre of crime fiction that follows a full investigation of a crime from the point of view of law enforcement (Dove 47). The methods that police detectives use to solve these crimes are based in realism, following an accurate process of criminal investigation (Dove 2). There is a large emphasis on the investigation itself rather than the criminal's motives or point of view. The hard-boiled detective story portrays the private detectives as someone with otherworldly problem-solving abilities, while the police procedural explores realistic and evidence-based investigations with a group of detectives, rather than just a single person (Dove 2-3). They portray idealized relationships between the state and society by successfully solving cases and preventing crimes, leaving audiences satisfied (Winston et al 7).

The police procedural permits viewers to experience the unseen aspects of criminality while still assuring safety and closure (Winston et al 2). With the lack of a conclusion to the investigation, *Memories of Murder* removes that sense of assurance to the audience, concluding with a feeling of uneasiness and a lingering sense of danger. Because *Memories of Murder* is based on a real cold case that occurred during a tumultuous time in South Korean political history, this sense of physical and metaphorical danger was quite real for its Korean audience at

the time of release. I argue that what forces *Memories of Murder* to "fail" the expectations of the police procedural is the lack of competency of the detectives, in which is an extension of the lack of competency of the state, both of which lead to the failure to capture the killer.

The role of the police procedural is to create a positive view of the state through the detective's diligent and honest work, yet the film puts the detectives in a difficult position by their limitations due to various factors, including the lack of technology, restrictions put in place by the dictatorship, and the lack of education for the detectives. Scenes that "fail" the tropes of the police procedural that will be analyzed are two scenes that reflect one another. They are the opening scene, in which Doo-Man's unconventional entrance and behavior in a crime scene are introduced to audiences, as well as the closing scene, portraying Doo-Man revisiting the same crime scene years later, where he converses with a young girl about a man she had previously seen in the same spot, both scenes commenting on Bong's critique of how the dictatorship affected the lives of civilians.

Opening Scene

The opening scene of the film immediately subverts the expectations of a police procedural, as it is slow, lacks any suspense, and is quite unconventional in its lack of seriousness. Pulling up to the scene of the crime on the back of a slow tractor, smoking a cigarette while being chased and mocked by a group of children who throw rocks at him, rather than rushing up to the crime scene in a police car immediately sets the tone for the type of detective Doo-Man will be, as well as the type of resources this town will lack. Doo-Man's body language says it all; his body is slumped over, he is shooing off the children while holding a cigarette without showing much concern, despite being aware of what he is about to see. Once Doo-Man is shown the body in the ditch by a farmer, one of the children mocks everything he

says in a comedic manner while the other children tamper with the woman's clothing, that are now physical evidence found nearby. These children who mock Doo-Man represent not only how seriously the audience needs to take him but also how unreliable the protective power structures were at this time. Civilians did not take the police seriously, as they are an inferior extension of the state.

Because Doo-Man is the first character to be introduced, the audience's expectations are immediately set quite low for the capabilities of the police. Between his careless body language, riding on a tractor, and the bickering with the children, there is not much for the audience to root for. The police procedural has room for incompetent police detectives, but never as the focal point of the narrative. Dove describes the "number of real incompetents" as being quite small, as this is usually a comic relief character or is used as a point of difficulty within investigations, usually with a minor role (117). This "failure" in expectations of Doo-Man predicts the investigation to fail from the very beginning, making audiences ask if someone with this lack of respect and resources is capable of solving any crime.

A typical police procedural, which emphasizes audiences having a positive view of the work of police officers, would never give someone who is incapable a lead role within a narrative. As the audience is introduced to more of the officers working in town, there is no hope for them as well, as they all fall into Dove's "incompetent" role. When the police procedural is supposed to be creating a sense of security for audiences, it is nearly impossible with a protagonist who is incapable, but also if that protagonist is a member of an entire team of incompetent detectives. Tae-Yoon, who is later introduced, does fit more into Dove's description of how a leading police officer should be.

"Ordinary"

The second scene that critiques the police procedural is in the final scene, in a way mirroring the opening scene. The scene begins with a time skip to 2003, portraying Doo-Man as a clean-cut salesman in a Westernized home, with two teenage children and surrounded by modern amenities. This glimpse into Doo-Man's new life suggests he "failed" as a police officer. It is not explicitly explained what transpired to his departure from the police force, but his previously lazy demeanor fed into the corruption of the system, suggesting he wanted to break out of the system. The scene cuts to Doo-Man in the back of a van, surrounded by the products he sells, on a business call. He suddenly asks the driver to stop the car, showing him walking outside towards the ditch where the initial body was found in the opening scene of the film. Doo-Man looks into the ditch, where he is interrupted by a young girl, asking why he was looking in there.

This mirroring of the opening scene portrays Doo-Man as mature, having a real conversation with the girl rather than bickering with her, showing his personal growth. The girl states that she asked why Doo-Man had been looking in the ditch was due to a previous encounter. She says that she had seen someone else looking in the same spot, claiming that he did something there years ago and wanted to reminisce. When Doo-Man asks what he looked like, the girl describes the man as "Kind of plain…Just ordinary." Doo-Man looks directly into the camera, speechless, as the film abruptly ends.

Bong's true intention of the film and the critique of Korean society are both revealed within this scene. Doo-Man's intense stare into the camera reminds real life of the killer that what he had done was never forgotten, and that he is still at large. What makes *Memories of Murder* unique is the breaking of the fourth wall to directly address the audience, as if someone

watching the film is the real killer. With the double meaning behind the film, Doo-Man's stare is a reminder to the audience that the devastating effects of the 1980s were still haunting the civilians who lived through it in 2003. Bong conveys to his audience that everyone, in a way, is equally guilty of letting these events happen. This failure in a core component of the police procedural comments on the failure of the government to protect its people and to give its people the justice they deserve.

It is also important to mention that the child Doo-Man encounters, being written by Bong as a young girl is impactful, as years prior, she had the potential of being a victim of the killer, and even her own mother had the vulnerability of being a victim. She represents the next generation of South Koreans living after this dictatorship. She may be somewhat aware of what transpired but was not directly impacted by the weight of the suffering experienced 15 years ago, as her parents had. The girl is comfortably walking alone in the open field, unaware of the horrors that occurred and that walking alone was incredibly dangerous at one point in time. Once she reveals that she has seen who the audience and Doo-Man assume is the killer, the girl is not aware that there is still a lingering danger, as the man she had a conversation with had the potential of killing her. Doo-Man's reaction to the girl's encounter reminds him and the audience that the killer has the capability of killing again.

Neo-Noir

Memories of Murder's inclusion of an overarching pessimistic tone, the flawed protagonist who embodies the corruption of the system, and the moral ambiguity practiced by characters throughout places the film in the neo-noir style. While the police procedural embraces

the state, the neo-noir rejects it. In this analysis, I will use the definition of neo-noir as a contemporary of the film noir style. The subversion of the police procedural gives the neo-noir a cynical edge, highlighting the deeper corruption of both authority and criminal activity. Neo-noir embraces the bleak reality that not every crime can be solved, often allowing criminals to get away (Simpson 193). It can be argued that the rejection of the police procedural in itself can consider neo-noir to "fail" to fit within that genre.

In this section, I argue that *Memories of Murder* "fails" to fit into two crucial tropes of the neo-noir style, its aesthetics, and the downward spiral of an unexpected character and his denial of vengeance. The first scene that will be analyzed is the discovery of a woman's body in broad daylight after the detectives attempted to lure the killer the previous night. The second scene will analyze Tae-Yoon, Hyeon-Gyu, and Doo-Man in the tunnel, where they uncover the truth that the DNA sample sent to the United States for sampling was not conclusive.

Discovering a Body

A scene that embodies this lack of neo-noir aesthetic, especially in a moment of tragedy, is shown following the sequence where a middle-aged woman dressed in red and signing is killed in the rain. The detectives investigating the scene where her body was found is displayed in broad daylight. Tae-Yoon approaches the crime scene with a megaphone, yelling at the townsfolk and soldiers already there to stay put, as they could tamper with critical evidence. Once the rest of the detectives arrive, they examine the body of the woman, as well as the footprints found nearby.

While this specific scene is not anything special in terms of how the investigation was being conducted, the color palette of the setting and time of day are what make it stand out. The

deviation of the aesthetics of neo-noir expectations comments on the exposure of the larger power structures, refusing to let them hide in the shadows. The killer could hide in the darkness, as he kills at night. The devastating effects of the repressive government were out in the open for the audience to see; therefore, there is no hiding from the corruption they are contributing to. The film noir, literally translating to "black film," is known for dark aesthetics, either because the film was made in black and white or was produced in color but utilizes dark and contrasting lighting. The film's setting, color saturation, and lighting deviate from various aesthetic expectations of the film and neo-noir, as the setting of the film embraces brown and beige tones of the countryside. The setting inspired by Hwasong reminds the audience that the narrative is based on a true story; if the story were completely fictional, a bustling city setting would not be as effective in portraying the economic and political struggles of ordinary civilians in 1980s South Korea.

The Tunnel

The tunnel scene with Tae-Yoon, Doo-Man, and suspect Hyeon-Gyu embraces the neo-noir genre as much as it rejects it. Compared to the previous scene analysis, the tunnel sequence reflects the classical film noir style in terms of aesthetics, with dark shadows, dreary visuals, and dramatic rainfall. Before Tae-Yoon has Hyeon-Gyu cornered by a train tunnel, the previous scene is the discovery of the school girl's body. This discovery does comply with traditional neo-noir aesthetics, as her body is being examined in the rain by investigators. However, I interpret this return to traditional format as a method to create the expectation for vengeance to be served.

This scene portrays Tae-Yoon pointing a gun at Hyeon-Gyu as he is on the ground, demanding a confession to the murders. Like the other suspects, Hyeon-Gyu gives a seemingly false confession, questioning if that is what he wanted to hear. Just as the two are about to brawl,

Doo-Man rushes onto the tracks, declaring he has the results of the DNA test from the United States. Tae-Yoon rips open the document, only to see his face grow more enraged. As Doo-Man puts Hyeon-Gyu into handcuffs to arrest him, he realizes something is wrong. In English, the document reveals that the results were inconclusive.

This scene "fails" in the trope of the male protagonist's downward spiral. With Doo-Man being the male protagonist of the film, it would be expected for him to have this downfall of character, considering he better fits into the neo-noir archetype of the jaded, morally grey detective. This is the only scene within the film that depicts Doo-Man doing what is morally and procedurally correct in the investigation, as he was previously portrayed as lazy and disinterested in his work. The male protagonist's downward spiral is portrayed through Tae-Yoon, as he initially was the "straight man" who was the only detective keeping the investigation in motion. Volunteering to work on the case, being well-trained, and traveling from Seoul showed that he cared about the situation and wanted to bring justice to the victims. He was portrayed as less corrupt than the town's police force. Tae-Yoon's growing frustration towards his coworkers, inconclusive evidence, and false leads lead to his downfall, pulling him into the cliché male protagonist's downward spiral. He begins pointing fingers at everyone else, but never at the system itself.

The "fall" of Tae-Yoon's character comments on how easy it was for Koreans to fall into the government's corruption. Although he is educated, rational, and confident, Tae-Yoon cracks under this repressive system that makes it impossible to succeed, resorting to violence. As seen through the brief but violent political demonstration scene, as well as the real-life Kwangju Uprising occurring a few years before the events of the film, Tae-Yoon became what he wanted to avoid. His desperation for vengeance, regardless of the consequences and his duty to protect

the public as a police officer, mirrors those who were willing to risk arrest or even death to defend their rights to democracy. As Doo-Man allows Hyeon-Gyu to be released, denying Tae-Yoon's fulfillment of vengeance being served calls back to all of the failed demonstrations that attempted to have justice served and democracy restored for Koreans.

Conclusion

To conclude this analysis of *Memories of Murder*, Bong subverts the audience's expectations of the police procedural to remind them that the real killer was not only still free, but the generational effects of the military dictatorship were still real. Instead of offering audiences a sense of safety and closure, *Memories of Murder* creates the opposite effect, especially with the final scene of the film, making it "fail" as a police procedural film. The real killer was not caught until 2019, creating that lingering sense of danger last for over 15 years after the release of the film. However, either watching the film in 2003 or now, the government corruption and turmoil of the 1980s is still relevant, as many people who lived through these historical events are still alive. The opening scene puts audiences back into the 1980s in South Korea, where technology was almost nonexistent, police officers were not respected, and there is a sense of overall chaos. The final scene brings audiences to the present, in which the collective memory of that chaos and danger still lingers. Doo-Man, Tae-Yoon, and the rest of the rural detective team were forced to fail because of the corrupt dictatorship that emphasized civilian control over their safety.

Memories of Murder was also not allowed to fully succeed as a neo-noir because of Bong's aesthetic choices and denial of justice for Tae-Yoon. The film does achieve the overall

tone of the neo-noir, especially in terms of its sense of nihilism and moral ambiguity. Rather than embracing the dark shadows of film noir, Bong wanted to criticize the government's lack of concern for civilian safety by exposing it in broad daylight through the discovery and analysis of the multiple bodies during the day. As the film begins to come into form of a neo-noir film towards the finale with Tae-Yoon wanting to kill Hyeon-Gyu regardless or not if he's guilty, Doo-Man makes the moral decision of letting Hyeon-Gyu go. Doo-Man and Tae-Yoon's reversal of roles is Bong's way of showing that even the most educated and moral of citizens can easily become victims themselves of the regime's chaos and violence.

Chapter 2: *The Host*

Introduction

Bong Joon Ho's third feature film, *The Host* (괴물, which translates to "Monster") (2006), tells the story of a large, amphibious creature emerging from the Han River years after the United States military forced a Korean colleague to dump bottles of formaldehyde down a drain that led directly into Seoul's biggest water source. The creature snatches Park Hyeon-Seo (portrayed by Go Ah-Sung), an impoverished young girl who lives with her dimwitted father, Gang-Doo (portrayed by Song Kang-Ho, the same actor who portrayed Doo-Man in *Memories of Murder*), and her grandfather Hee-Bong (portrayed by Byun Hee-Bong), who run a small snack stand along the river. The disappearance of Hyeon-Seo reunites her father with her archer aunt, Nam-Joo (portrayed by Bae Doo-Na), and her activist uncle, Nam-Il (portrayed by Park Hae-Il), when they realize the authorities refuse to help them recover her when they discover she is still alive. The family teams up in a chaotic quest to save Hyeon-Seo from the sewers below the Han River, only to realize the corruption of the United States is much deeper than they could ever imagine.

The Host defies the Hollywood conventions of the action-packed monster film, using its defiance as a critique of the complex neocolonial influence the United States military has within South Korean society, especially on unwilling civilians. While the most surface-level metaphor of the film is the creature commenting on the harm the United States has done to Korean society, there are instances in which the genre conventions are deviated from to explore this issue from various angles. In this chapter, I argue that *The Host* thwarts the expectations of the monster film

genre through its portrayal of reveals through suspense (or lack thereof) and the absence of a true heroic figure. I argue that these deviations of expectations force the protagonists to fail their objective of saving Hyeon-Seo within the film, which is used as Bong Joon Ho's critique of the negative impacts that neocolonialism has on Korean civilians.

A Brief Definition of Neocolonialism in the Context of South Korea

In this analysis, I will be using Nicola Degli Esposti's definition of neocolonialism in her article "What Happened to Neocolonialism? The Rise and Fall of a Critical Concept." She describes neocolonialism as the direct or indirect dependence of a recently decolonized society on a pro-Western power (1,5). Although she claims that the term has fallen out of popularity in academia, I believe it is the most appropriate to describe the position South Korea is in. Korea had successfully decolonized from Japan in 1945, yet they were forced into a dependence on the United States as a Cold War strategy when the country split to contain communism by manipulating their economy and choosing government officials who aligned with their goals. Esposti uses the relationship between Western countries (primarily the United States) and South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore as examples of nations that economically thrived under intense financial support from the West (7). However, this was not met without the negative consequences of economic intervention from the wealthier nations, as harmful neoliberal policies were introduced and forced onto these nations, as is seen throughout the film with the economic struggles of the Park family, as well as the South Korean government's submission to the United States authority over the situation with the creature.

Suspense, Information, and Reveals

The Host utilizes a unique approach to suspense while revealing critical information to both its audience and characters. The film uses suspense as a consequence of crucial reveals, commenting on information as a weapon to manipulate and control, leading the characters to failure. Audiences would expect a suspenseful build-up to two of the most important reveals of information within the film: the creature itself and the United States military stating that the virus was a hoax. However, these two reveals of information take away that suspense entirely, placing that sense of anxiety afterward.

Richard Allen, author of "Hitchcock and Narrative Suspense: Theory and Practice," compares and contrasts two theorists in the space of suspense: Alfred Hitchcock and Noel Carroll. Carroll's theory of suspense consists of believing that every situation has two outcomes, one being "morally desirable but unlikely and one that is morally undesired but likely" (167). Allen challenges this theory by Hitchcock's belief that suspense is "bound up with the subversion of conventional moral co-ordinates…" (167). It seems that having only two options for the outcome of the situation puts audiences at a greater sense of ease, as they would only have two expectations, in a way defeating the purpose of suspense. Allen states that in the case of "pure" suspense, which aligns with Hitchcock's approach, "the spectator is no longer simply placed in a condition of anxious uncertainty about narrative outcome but is placed in a situation where their anxious uncertainty is itself subject to manipulation and control" (174). Within *The Host,* the audience is put into the perspective of the characters who are slowly learning crucial information to the narrative, also described by Allen as "suppressive narrative," which becomes the primary method of suspense within the film.

In this section, I will be using two scenes that reveal critical information to the characters, in which Allen's interpretation of Hitchcockian suspense is portrayed. Within his argument, Allen believes that one of Hitchcock's most effective methods of suspense is suppressed narrative, situations in which the audience is put into the perspective of the characters (172). However, the film seems to "fail" in terms of a suspenseful build-up, almost as if there is a sense of urgency to reveal this information, but it is always too late. It is best to explain this phenomenon as harmful information being revealed from the United States military, seemingly out of nowhere, to both the audience and the Korean characters. Once that information is revealed to the Korean characters, the suspense is built in on how that information will affect those who are informed, as there is always danger once the information is shown. This is Bong Joon Ho's critique of the power the United States has over important government affairs and the lack of emphasis on civilian safety in South Korea. Things are happening that affect Korean civilians that they are completely unaware of, some could be until it is too late, as portrayed in the film. Emphasizing the urgency to reveal the truth comments on the transparency desired by those who are directly affected by corruption. In other terms, Korean characters are forced into "failing" their own safety and autonomy as a consequence of this "failure" to disclose information.

In the first scene discussed, the creature's sudden reveal on land lacked suspenseful build-up, but the suspense is shifted and used to amplify the anxieties of how the Korean characters will be affected by the creature, as the two examples used are characters who are physically affected by the creature. The second scene builds up suspense after the reveal of the virus being a hoax by the American doctor, which is information given to the audience and Gang-Doo. After this information is transported, Gang-Doo is put into peril, and the suspense builds around his outcome, and his safety is put into question.

Revealing the Creature

At the beginning of the film, the creature's physical form is first revealed to the audience and those who are around the Han River. It is expected for a monster film to draw out the reveal of the creature's appearance to the audience through slight teases and a dramatic buildup. When the crowd gathers around the Han River's edge, the audience speculates about what is under the water alongside the characters. Gang-Doo initiates the first contact with the creature by tossing in a beer can. Seeing something stir under the surface, the crowd begins pelting the creature with trash. (An act in itself amplifies the environmental messaging within the film) At this point, the creature has not been fully revealed to the audience or the characters, only shown by a black shadow under the water. It would be during this moment that the audience expects the creature to dramatically make an appearance, either with a more detailed tease of its physical appearance, or an intense or dramatic movement as a method to shock the audience. Once the shadow disappears, the crowd begins to chat among themselves. The audience's expectation of the creature jumping out of the water is thwarted, easing their sense of anxiety. Gang-Doo's expression changes, and the camera suddenly shows the creature on land, running towards the crowd. This is where the suspense begins to build, as the creature is much larger than likely anticipated by the crowd and the audience. The large crowd scrambles away from the creature as the Han River erupts into full-blown chaos.

This reveal of the creature is juxtaposed with the two instances in which characters are completely unaware of the monster's presence, especially the woman with the headphones listening to classical music, and the unsuspecting Hyeon-Seo as she is dragged away by her father to safety. Suspense is incredibly high in these two instances, as the audience is aware of the severity of the situation, but the two characters are completely unaware, emphasizing the

mystery of the creature's potential as a threat. This method of suspense is also mentioned by Allen in his article, as "the anxiety provoking uncertainty of the suspenseful mystery, where the lack of knowledge itself is in some way threatening to the character and thus a source of concern to the sympathetic spectator" (173). This is an example of more traditional suspense, as the audience is invested in the safety of the two characters, but it is preceded by the important reveal that lacked any suspense at all for the characters, as they both have the commonality of "failing" to be saved.

The Doctor, The Translator, and the Hoax

The scene in which the American doctor meets Gang-Doo and discusses the current state of the virus being a hoax to the Korean doctor is another instance in which suspense is used in an unusual method of explaining crucial information to the audience and characters within the film. During a series of medical tests and experimentation, Gang-Doo begins to slowly lose his patience as he sobs and pleads for help, knowing that time is of the essence to save his daughter. An American doctor, with an almost monstrous appearance, having very pale skin and crossed eyes, emerges into the room, demanding that the nurses leave. This American doctor uses a Korean doctor as a translator to make Gang-Doo feel understood, giving Gang-Doo a sense of hope that someone of authority will help his daughter be saved. However, when speaking in English, the American doctor is hypothesizing that the virus is causing dementia-like symptoms in his frontal cortex, continuously poking his finger into Gang-Doo's forehead. Taking the translator aside, with a close-up shot of his eerie face, the American doctor reveals to the translator that there is no virus, which Gang-Doo fully understands despite the conversation being in English. With the American doctor looking shocked, the scene then suddenly portrays Gang-Doo as getting prepared for a lobotomy for knowing too much information. There is a brief

interruption by Hyeon-Seo and a young boy in the sewer, reminding the audience that she is still in danger as the creature regurgitates human bones. Gang-Doo wakes up from his lobotomy, yet it was a complete failure, as he is still aware of the truth. Taking a nurse hostage with a needle of his own blood, he uses this as a threat against the unaware Korean nurses in the hospital. Because of this, he is able to use information as his own weapon in order to escape. In this scene, the suspense lies in the fact that the audience fears for Gang-Doo's escape, as they are aware of the creature's hunger for human flesh and that time is of the essence, but also that Gang-Doo would likely be imprisoned or killed for his knowledge of the virus.

I interpret this scene as a commentary on Korean civilians being more aware of their neocolonizer's corruption than the United States military cares to believe. While seeming to be on Gang-Doo's side with his false sincerity, the American doctor shifts into convincing the Korean doctor that Gang-Doo is insane. It's assumed that this doctor likely believes Gang-Doo about Hyeon-Seo's survival, hence the emphasis on a psychosis diagnosis is fed to the Korean doctor. The doctor is assuming that Gang-Doo, someone who is not only Korean but also has a dirty, poor appearance, would not be intelligent enough to understand English. The American doctor tapping on his forehead is a tactic to non-verbally express to Gang-Doo that he has complete control over the situation as the colonizer, but also to be consistent with the lie that he is infected. However, he can understand this crucial conversation. The doctor's complete shock at Gang-Doo's ability to comprehend what he said is another example of the United States military viewing Korean civilians as inferior. To tie this scene into the element of suspense, it is important to mention that the suspense lies in the buildup of anxiety surrounding Hyeon-Seo that Gang-Doo is completely unaware of, as well as the anxiety surrounding Gang-Doo's safety and ability to escape.

The Hero's Absence

When audiences are watching any monster or action film, they expect a single protagonist, or a group of protagonists, to rise to the occasion of defeating the negative force. It would be expected of the military to team up with someone like Gang-Doo, who is aware of his daughter's disappearance and has the means to defeat the creature. The first scene that will be analyzed returns to the scene of the first encounter with the creature, in which Donald, an American soldier, attempts to take a leadership role and control the situation to kill the creature, but ends up being killed himself. The second scene that will be analyzed for its lack of an easily defined hero is the final battle with the creature, in which each member of the Park family is given a chance at redemption for their own personal failures, but each falls short because of Hyeon-Seo's death.

<u>The American</u>

The instance in which the hero is to be established would be expected by the audience to occur during the first encounter with the creature. The shock of the creature's presence is expected to bring out the protective and heroic instincts of at least one character. Besides Gang-Doo, the only other character to challenge the creature within this introduction is a blonde, white male. Much to the objection of his assumed Korean girlfriend, he begs to help Gang-Doo free a group of people trapped in a trailer. This blonde male, later in the film revealed to be an American soldier named Donald, is portrayed as immediately trying to take control of the situation. He inserts himself again by throwing a brick at the creature, then runs up to Gang-Doo

from behind to help him throw a heavy pole with a concrete base. Donald gestures to his girlfriend to run away, another instance of his instinct to control and protect.

Once the creature turns around with a man's feet hanging out of its mouth, the two realize that this creature was much more dangerous than they initially thought, forcing them to fall to the ground out of shock. The creature then pins Donald down as he dramatically grunts and tries to push it away with his bare hands. It is not until later in the film that it is revealed that Donald had died from the encounter. With the look and courage of a typical Hollywood action hero, it would be expected by the audience for the handsome, confident American to risk his life and successfully save the day, especially a group of people deemed "inferior" from a colonialist perspective.

This short instance of Donald critiques the American neocolonialism in South Korea, as well as "white savior syndrome" in Hollywood films. As described by Julio Cammarota in his article "Blindsided by the Avatar: White Saviors and Allies Out of Hollywood and in Education", there is an epidemic of white savior figures in Hollywood films that undermine the capabilities of people of color. He describes this phenomenon as a film's goal "to render people of color incapable of helping themselves—infantile or hapless/helpless victims who survive by instinct...Any progress or success tends to result from the succor of the white individual, which suggests that escaping poverty or ignorance happens only through the savior's intelligence" (244). *The Host* touches upon this issue years before the two films mentioned within the article's title were released, which emphasizes that this has been a common issue within Hollywood-style storytelling. Using *Avatar* (2009) as an example, he touches upon the criticism of the film as an example of colonized people not being able to possess not only the capacity to govern themselves but also the means to protect themselves, in which only a white male protagonist is

able to help (247). Donald forcing himself into the situation as the only white man emphasizes this negative stereotype. His defeat deviates from Hollywood expectations and is a victory in a way for people of color in storytelling.

In my opinion, this is one of the most powerful scenes in the film in terms of its commentary on American neocolonialism, in which the "failure" of Donald to kill the creature sets the expectation that this will not be the typical action thriller. From a biased perspective, it can be interpreted that because Donald physically stood out as the only white American in the crowd, he could have had a major role within the film. Cammarota argues that Hollywood films gravitate towards a single savior who attempts to save others from themselves while failing to attempt to address the oppressive structures that force those deemed inferior to not be able to succeed (246). It is also important to include his argument that most "native" people (in this case, Koreans) would not need rescuing if they were not being exploited by their white savior's people (249). The creature itself was unintentionally created by the United States military; if they had not been a neocolonial force within South Korea, the creature would not have been mutated in the first place, thus the lack of need for a "white savior."

Donald's desire to not only jump into the middle of an incredibly dangerous situation, but also immediately entitle himself to a role of authority by barking out orders to civilians, comments on the perception that the United States' desires not only to meddle in any situation, but also to take control, even if it does not directly concern them or is their hardship to fix. Donald is portrayed as someone who immediately believes he has the authority to take control and direct the civilians who are being attacked, which is emphasized once it is revealed he was in the United States military, the neocolonizers, who are the actual enemy of the film. Although the character of Donald seemed to genuinely want to help, it is a clear commentary on the role of

white saviors in Hollywood-style genre films. The early loss, or in other words "failure" of Donald foreshadows that the American military is not going to be a helpful asset to the Korean civilians, who are going to be the ones who will suffer the most in this scenario. This instance is defying the "white savior syndrome" as described by Cammarota, as this was an attempt at "saving" those deemed inferior or incompetent by the perception of the United States military.

The Final Battle

Throughout the film, the audience learns more about each member of the Park family, and how they essentially are a family of failures. With Hee-Bong failing as a father to Gang-Doo, Gang-Doo's lack of intelligence, Nam-Joo's stage fright in archery competitions, and Nam-Il's unemployment and alcoholism, they all have something to prove to themselves and their fellow family members throughout the film. Before the finale with the creature, Hee-Bong, the family's patriarch, is killed by the creature. His untimely death is almost expected in the film, but not in the way it occurs. The ultimate sacrifice of an older character is a common trope in a film with high levels of action, especially a father sacrificing himself to save his children. After discussing his failures as a father, especially with Gang-Doo, the audience would expect his death to be a sacrifice in order to save his children, proving to himself and Gang-Doo that he could be the father he wished he had been. However, living up to his failures, Gang-Doo accidentally indirectly kills Hee-Bong because of his lack of awareness. Hee-Bong is not allowed to have his moment of heroism, and Gang-Doo does not make a competent hero because of his shortcomings, and accidentally allows someone who had the potential to be the hero of the story to be killed. With one less member of the Park family to help with the rescue mission, the three siblings were Hyeon-Seo's last chance at survival.

The final scene of *The Host* that will be analyzed is the final showdown with the creature after the dropping of the Agent Orange chemical by the United States military. This scene is crucial in the failure to fulfill the expectations of the monster film, in the sense that nobody in the Park family can be defined as a "hero" as Hyeon-Seo is pulled from the creature's mouth, deceased. With the family's primary objective being to recover Hyeon-Seo from the creature unharmed, the mission was unsuccessful. As this shocking realization sets in, the family mourns for her as people around them vomit and bleed from their ears from the toxic chemicals. They then take matters into their own hands to kill the creature, putting an end to the rampage carelessly caused by the United States military.

Working with a homeless man, another marginalized person in society, the band of misfits creates a chain reaction that eventually leads to the creature's death, but not without bumps along the way. Nam-Il tosses multiple Molotov cocktails at the creature but completely misses every throw he attempts. The homeless man dumps gasoline onto the creature and directly into its mouth from above, then Nam-Joo lights her bow on fire from one of the failed Molotov cocktails. In a great triumph of her self-doubt, she hits the creature directly in its eye on the first try. After the creature violently bursts into flames from being coated by gasoline, it tries to escape back into the Han River, where a surprise impalement in its mouth from Gang-Doo finally puts the creature to rest.

The imagery of Nam-Il and Nam-Joo can be interpreted as Bong's commentary on Korean political and nationalistic culture, being entities that are strong enough to stand on their own without outside influence. Christina Klein's article, "Why American Studies Needs to Think about Korean Cinema, or, Transnational Genres in the Films of Bong Joon-ho," discusses the genre devices borrowed from Hollywood-style films and how Bong also uses genre deviations of

these Hollywood influences to bring attention to Korean social commentary, arguing that "Bong subverts genre conventions even as he invokes them" (886). In this article, she discusses the visual symbolism of Nam-Il's position within this scene:

> "The image of a young man with a backpack throwing Molotov cocktails is deeply resonant for Koreans. It gestures to the twenty-year history of violent street protests... The image also contains an undercurrent of anti-Americanism, as many of these protests also took aim at the United States, either for supporting the repressive military regimes or for pushing a neoliberal economic agenda" (887).

Nam-Il's failure to successfully throw his Molotov cocktails at the creature suggests that there is an underlying theme that taking down the American neocolonialistic regime is not possible. While protests force officials to listen to a certain cause, it does not guarantee that there will be any sort of social change. Anti-American protests did not remove the United States' influence from the country or remove the neoliberal ideologies that were introduced by the government, military, or economy, both of which directly impacted the Park family with the death of Hyeon-Seo, and many others at the hands of the military, and the poor economic state in which Gang-Doo and his family lived in.

With Nam-Il being the first of the family to fight, the next is the only member of the Park family who was able to achieve some sort of success within this scene, which is Nam-Joo. With her quick wit, she lights the tip of her bow with the fire from Nam-Il's failed Molotov cocktail. Without hesitating, she successfully hits the creature directly in the eye. Not only is this a success for Nam-Joo personally, but it also brings a sense of success to Koreans, as archery has significant cultural value. South Korean women have dominated the archery field at the Olympic Games for decades; therefore, the image of a strong Korean woman successfully hitting her

target with a flaming arrow creates a great sense of national pride. Nam-Joo's redemption is not necessarily the big "heroic" attack needed to get the revenge desired for Hyeon-Seo's death, but it was a crucial shot to get the creature disoriented enough for Gang-Doo to then kill it. Bong uses this image of a professional athlete in a traditional sport to support the idea that Korean culture is something untouchable by outside influences. The United States may have stakes in the South Korean government and economy, but it could never infiltrate Korea's sense of pride for its culture and where Koreans succeed.

The entirety of this scene deviates from what audiences expected of a fight with a mutant creature, especially with this specific group of characters. First of all, as supported by Klein, a Hollywood film would never dare to kill off a child character (886), in which the critical piece of social commentary is the emphasis that civilians, especially vulnerable populations like children and those economically disadvantaged, are the most impacted by corrupt officials. Hyeon-Seo could have survived if anyone with power or influence had taken action to find her, including working alongside the civilians who witnessed the creature's attacks, but instead, they quarantined all witnesses in a hospital to keep them quiet and to manipulate the story to the general public. When Nam-Il, a seasoned political activist who has been involved in many protests, throws his Molotov cocktails, he misses all of his attempts to the surprise of the audience. Nam-Joo, who is expected to fail due to her performance anxiety, rises to the occasion. Gang-Doo is an interesting case, as he is expected to fail, as he does not succeed in anything; however, Klein's mentioning of a child death being unheard of in Hollywood-influenced films, so there is almost an expectation for him to somehow succeed, either completely on his own or with the help of his siblings. He successfully completes his mission of killing the creature, but instead of Hyeon-Seo being saved afterwards, the killing seems to be out of revenge rather than

to avenge. Because of the incompetence and disinterest of authority figures, it took the socially weakest character to kill the monster, but at the loss of his father and beloved daughter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Host*'s "failure" to accurately fit into the Hollywood monster film highlights the corruption and injustices of neocolonial influences on South Korean civilians. Portrayed through delayed suspense, information manipulation and the absence of a true "hero," the film stretches beyond the creature of being the "monster" of the film. South Korea's location and vulnerability and failure to transition into a true postcolonial country exposed its people to the consequences of neocolonialism. The characters were unable to be successful due to their lack of autonomy as a nation, with Nam-Il and Nam-Joo being physical embodiments of Korean culture and history, although they had the ability to stand on their own. The United States military and South Korean government worked together to ultimately fail their most vulnerable, a poor child. The lack of justice in *The Host* is Bong's critique of these imbalanced power structures that are still in place, with the reality that will likely never change.

Chapter 3: *Parasite*

Introduction

2019's *Parasite* (기생충, translated directly as "parasite") gifted Bong Joon Ho his first batch of Academy Awards in 2020, including Best Director, Best Foreign-Language Film, Best Original Screenplay, and most importantly, the highest honor of Best Picture, an incredible milestone in both South Korean cinema and Bong's career as a filmmaker. *Parasite* tells the story of the Kim family, consisting of father Ki-Taek (portrayed by Song Kang-Ho, the only actor to appear in all three films in this thesis), mother Chung-Sook (portrayed by Jang Hye-Jin), daughter Ki-Jung (portrayed by Park So-Dam), and brother Ki-Woo (portrayed by Choi Woo-Sik), who live in poverty in a semi-basement apartment in Seoul. When the opportunity arises for Ki-Woo to be employed by the rich Park family, the family works together to scheme their way into infiltrating all employment opportunities inside the Park home. Finally believing their luck was going to change, the Kim's scheme begins to unravel, as they realize they are not the only people who are taking advantage of the Parks, leading to bloodshed.

Although difficult to place within a specific genre, in this chapter, I argue that it is best to describe *Parasite* as a caper film with elements of blended comedy and horror, but it "fails" to fully meet the expectations of these genres. The thwarting of genre expectations in the film is the driving force behind the "failure" of the three families portrayed in *Parasite,* which critiques South Korea's embrace of neoliberalism and how it negatively affects people of all levels of socioeconomic status.

Defining Modern Neoliberalism in South Korea

Before neoliberalism is explored within South Korea's economy and society, it is important to gain a better grasp of this concept and how it affects populations overall. Neoliberalism, as described by author Steger, mentioned in the introduction, in basic terminology, is an economic policy that decentralizes the government's interference with the economy. Looking at Adam Smith and David Ricardo's *laissez-faire* economic strategies, proponents of neoliberalism preached the idea of separating economics and politics in government, as previously implemented systems, such as mercantilism, were unbeneficial to a majority of people (Steger & Roy 23-24). According to neoliberalists, "the state is to refrain from 'interfering' with the economic activities of self-interested citizens and instead use its power to guarantee open economic exchange" (23).

To connect neoliberalism to the previous chapters in this thesis, these policies were heavily emphasized after the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, in which, in order to bail out a failing economy, free markets are an easy way for big corporations to get out of debt. This financial crisis is still reflected in the job market in South Korea today, as described by young people as "Hell Joseon," and even referenced by Kim Ki-Taek himself with the film, as he states that even a security guard needs a college degree. In *The Host* and *Parasite* (both of which take place after 1997) portray their protagonists as being impoverished and members of the self-employment phenomenon as described by Yoonkyung Lee, author of the article "Labor after Neoliberalism: The Birth of the Insecure Class in South Korea," stating:

> "During the Crisis …(highly skilled laborers) were laid off and few of them were able to return to a job similar to what they had been dismissed from (Lee, 1999). Many of these middle-age, male breadwinners became self-employed, small business owners in the service sector. Women and young job-seekers also turned to self-employment as they faced a greater barrier in entering the labor market" (189).

The Kim family is portrayed as having several failed businesses in the past, as well as their short employment at the pizza shop folding boxes, a reflection that most people in South Korea cannot get to the point of stability through their self-employment. Steger and Roy mention, "it makes sense to think of neoliberalism as a rather economistic ideology, which, not unlike its archrival Marxism, puts the production and exchange of material goods at the heart of the human experience" (30). Because of this mindset, today's culture emphasizes the importance of monetary value or transactions in human interactions.

Because people are making stagnant wages as inflation increases, the desire and desperation for extra income have become normalized in our daily lives. The Kims, and later we find out Moon-Gwang and Geun-Se, are representations of all of the civilians who had no other choice but to face instability in the economy that left them behind.

The Caper Film

According to author J.P Telotte of the article "Fatal Capers," the caper film is a subgenre of the film noir genre, in which organized criminal activity is orchestrated by people on the fringe of society (163). Telotte argues that these activities are thoroughly planned and usually well-executed, but there is some kind of intervention, leading to a fatal downfall. The Kim

family and Moon-Gwang's scheme "fails" to perfectly fit into the narrative expectations of the caper film. Although a doomed scheme is expected, how the schemes are portrayed is how Bong is critiquing the neoliberal system that forces vulnerable civilians into poverty. The two scenes in which I will be analyzing that represent the caper genre include the peach scheme, in which the Kim family takes advantage of resident housekeeper Moon-Gwang's peach allergy that leads to her dismissal from the Park's residence, as well as the basement scene, in which the Kim family realizes that they were not the only family to infiltrate the Park home, and finding that "intervention" as described by Telotte.

The Peach

The scene in which the Kim family orchestrates and executes a thoroughly detailed scheme to remove Moon-Gwang, the family's long-time live-in housekeeper, follows the format of a typical caper heist. The scene is played out with the family conversing off-screen while the plan is being acted out in real time. Ki-Woo explains that Moon-Gwang has a serious peach allergy, while the imagery shown portrays him using a razor blade to carefully shave the fuzz off of the peach into a pen cap. While distracted, he taps the fuzz onto her back. The scene then shows Ki-Woo walking down the street while there is a sound of choking and intense coughing. Moon-Gwang is then portrayed at the hospital, likely waiting to receive treatment for her allergy. Ki-Taek stealthily sits near her, taking a selfie with her to later show Mrs. Park.

The scene is then interrupted by the Kim family within their own apartment, rehearsing their lines for Ki-Taek's conversation with Mrs. Park. This sudden interruption takes the audience out of the sequence, portraying how intensely the Kims planned this scheme out to begin with. Their observation skills are sharp; they are able to predict exactly how Mrs. Park will respond to Ki-Taek in this conversation by bringing up factors that could be harmful to the

family if they keep Moon-Gwang as an employee, including the mention of her beloved son Da-Song. After Ki-Jung manages to expose Moon-Gwang to more peach fuzz, the timing of Ki-Taek and Mrs. Park is perfectly synced to her allergic reaction. In the final step of deception, Ki-Taek's usage of the hot sauce mimics the appearance of blood on Moon-Gwang's tissue in which horrifies Mrs. Park.

Caper films portray the protagonists using some sort of technology in order to successfully execute their plan, but the Kims rely on their charisma, observation skills of the Parks and Moon-Gwang, as well as their ability to choreograph a successful "heist" together cohesively. Although a single peach cost the Kims a small bit of money, it was well worth the small investment for what they believed to be an upcoming big payout. This elaborate infiltration scheme deviates from the typical caper film because it is believed by the family to be a long-term solution for their years of poverty, but in reality is not sustainable. Telotte quotes Frank Krutnik, who states "a transgressive fantasy which is marked . . . by the inevitability of its failure" (164). Even if the Kims successfully eliminated all of their obstacles in the Park home for employment, they still are relying on the income from another family, rather than a corporation with benefits and stability. Eventually, the Parks may want to fire or replace any of the Kim family members. It is also important to mention that the heist of a caper film is quite short and typically on a large scale. The seizure of the Park family's employees by the Kims within one household is on a much smaller scale in comparison.

The manipulation of Mrs. Park to remove Moon-Gwang from the household, which is the small-scale "heist" in this situation, comments on the fierce competition neoliberalism has forced most people into. Rather than robbing large banks and immediately gaining immense wealth in minutes, the Kim family finds what they believe to be a more low-key and long-term method of

gaining income. Having reliable employment is a luxury in South Korea, as briefly mentioned when Ki-Taek states that even low-level security guards need a college degree. This plan appears to the Kims as their ticket out of the semi-basement without any legitimate qualifications, but in reality follows the caper formula of becoming metaphorically and literally fatal.

The Basement

At the exact halfway point of the film, the narrative completely shifts from light-hearted to terrifying, as the Kims realize they were not the only family with devious intentions against the Park family. The Kim family takes advantage of the Park's empty home when they are away on a camping trip for Da-Song's birthday. They enjoy the luxurious space by playing outside in the yard with the Park's pets and later indulge in liquor and food. Rain pours outside as the family plays and laughs together, a sudden ring at the doorbell brings the film to a standstill, dramatically shifting the tone from lighthearted to one of unease. Chung-Sook speaks to a wet, disheveled Moon-Gwang, who pleads to be let in as she has forgotten something in the Park's basement. Chung-Sook hesitates but eventually allows her to enter, revealing that the wires to the CCTV camera had been clipped outside, meaning that the audience is going to be experiencing something that they do not want the Parks to see. Following behind Chung-Sook as she chases Moon-Gwang down the stairs, the audience discovers that Moon-Gwang is crying out to her husband, who is residing in the basement.

Because of their extreme debt, Moon-Gwang hid her husband, Geun-Se, within a secret bunker away from the Parks, taking any opportunity she could to sneak food to him. In this instance, both schemes are revealed to each family, realizing that they both had intentions of taking advantage of the Park family. This disturbing discovery leads the audience and Kim family to realize that they were not as creative as they thought they were in the grand scheme of

things, as people were already squatting within the home. The Kim family may live in a semi-basement, but Moon-Gwang and Geun-Se live completely out of society's view. Putting this idea into the context of "Fatal Capers," the article mentions that there is a lack of higher power to protect the protagonists against fatal plans (Telotte 163), as there is no protection of people of average or low income to be protected from the cut-throat encouragement of the neoliberalist agenda.

Horror, Comedy, and the In-Between

It is difficult to call *Parasite* a true horror film, as its occasionally disturbing imagery is not prominent enough to fit into that genre. However, there are elements of horror Bong intentionally put into the film to put the audience into a state of discomfort. Discussing class conflict and poverty can be uncomfortable, especially for those who are directly impacted by poverty. The disturbing content is a reminder for the audience that neoliberalism is something that needs to be feared, as it hurts more people than it benefits. On the opposite end of the spectrum, comedy is just as prevalent in *Parasite* as horror, reminding audiences that this film is indeed satire. Noel Carroll, author of the article "Horror and Humor," describes the intersection between these two seemingly juxtaposing genres, which lies in the deviation of one's expectations. With *Parasite*'s unexpected narrative and tonal twists, scenes which create discomfort lie between horror and comedy, especially within the climax of the film, the birthday party.

The two scenes that will be analyzed in this section include the retelling of Da-Song's traumatizing encounter by Mrs. Park to Chung-Sook with scary imagery, as well as the infamous

birthday party sequence. I argue that the reveal of why Da-Song is believed to be disturbed could be categorized as horror and what that represents, and the birthday party scene has elements of both horror and classic comedy to further the film's commentary on the "horrors" of poverty.

Da-Song's Traumatic Past

Immediately after the basement sequence that was previously discussed, once the Park family is home, Mrs. Park begins to tell Chung-Sook the story of Da-Song's past. On the night of his 7th birthday, Da-Song snuck downstairs to eat some of his leftover birthday cake. As this scene is occurring, the audience is immersed in the experience as Mrs. Park describes it, as if they are alongside Da-Song while the story occurs. She states that Da-Song had seen a ghost at the top of the stairs in the darkness, which is then followed by a horrifying shot of the top of a man's head with large, white eyes staring back at Da-Song. The audience is then brought back to the kitchen with Mrs. Park and Chung-Sook. With Chung-Sook now knowing what he saw, she plays along with Mrs. Park to reassure her that Da-Song did not see a ghost. Mrs. Park describes Da-Song as foaming at the mouth, having to go to the hospital to recover from a seizure.

Da-Song, the youngest member of the Park family, is central to the film's foreshadowing of the housekeeper living in the basement for the Parks, being the only member of the family to have seen the man who secretly lives in their home. Not only is the image of Geun-Se peering over the top of the stairs visually terrifying, but there seems to be a lack of concern by his parents to directly address what he witnessed. This reveals that the family is aware that there is something not quite right, either with Da-Song or with the house, or perhaps a mixture of both, but it is never directly addressed. The Parks, blinded by their finances, just see Da-Song as "quirky," rather than a child who was traumatized by a truly real threat, an intruder in his own home who is later revealed to be dangerous. It can be assumed that the described "self-portrait"

of Da-Song in the kitchen is actually a picture of Geun-Se, a constant reminder to the family that there is unaddressed issues with Da-Song and that there is someone in constant surveillance of the house.

The horror element in this scene is Bong's commentary on the disturbing nature of poverty. The visual scare of Geun-Se not only traumatized young Da-Song, but also scares the audience who already knows what he looks like. This exaggerated image shocks the audience into seeing how not only the Parks view poverty, but the Kims as well. The Kims view themselves as superior to Moon-Gwang and Geun-Se, even though both families are committing the same schemes and are in similar financial ruin. It is not certain whether or not the immersion of this scene is how Mrs. Park visualized the occurrence or Chung-Sook, but this disturbing image is a visual manifestation of the fear of being so impoverished one ends up underground (a point of no return), as if they are already dead. Mrs. Park referring to Geun-Se's incident as him seeing a "ghost" has a significant meaning. The word "ghost" is Bong's commentary of how people who are victims of socioeconomic inequality are merely existing but not living, as seen with Geun-Se who has no autonomy (Kim 24). Ghosts are also embodiments of revealing the truth, as if they always have something that needs to be said (Serrano 192-193). Geun-Se's presence in the home comments on the reality that people are suffering from the policies of neoliberalism that reward people like the Parks. Those left behind in society become "ghosts."

The Birthday Party

As disturbing and chaotic Da-Song's birthday party scene is within *Parasite*, it is interesting to look at it through a comedic lens alongside the horror elements. Although audiences are horrified by the incredibly graphic violence, there are instances of traditional slapstick comedy that peek through the blood and gore, in which Bong is borrowing elements

from both genres. In between cuts of the peaceful, lavish garden party, a bloodied Geun-Se is making his way upstairs. After beating Ki-Woo in the head with the scholar's stone, he takes a large knife from the kitchen. As Geun-Se charges towards Ki-Jung with the knife as she holds Da-Song's birthday cake, a representation of Da-Song overcoming his "trauma," in classic horror movie fashion, he stabs her without any emotion. However, rather than slaying Ki-Jung in the shadows, she is killed in the middle of the party in front of all the Park's guests. Ki-Jung protects herself by shoving Da-Song's cake in his face, but it is much too late. After a series of violent altercations, amongst the families feuding for the Park's wealth, Geun-Se is dead, and Mr. Park is stabbed by Ki-Taek. Ki-Taek retreats into Geun-Se's bunker, becoming stuck even further into poverty than before.

The climax of *Parasite* is shocking and unexpected. The elements of physical comedy that follow acts of horrific violence add a bizarre tone to the overall scene. For example, Ki-Jung hitting Geun-Se in the face with the birthday cake, and the dogs pulling pieces of cooked meat off of the kabobs lodged into Geun-Se's abdomen. As mentioned in the introduction of this section, Carroll argues that the most crucial connection between comedy and horror is "the shock factor." He believes that horror is supposed to create the feeling of claustrophobia and suppression, while comedy invokes expansion (Carroll 143). For example, audiences hold their breath as Ki-Jung gets brutally stabbed but are followed by that release of tension when she smashes the cake as it is intended to be humorous.. This feud also comments on the competition between not only the wealthy vs the impoverished, but also the competition between those who live in poverty as well. The Kims and Moon-Gwang (as well as her husband) are essentially battling one another to keep their place within the Park family home, even going as far as killing to get one step ahead.

Conclusion

Parasite is a film that broke boundaries for South Korean cinema and foreign-language media, and it is understandable why. Although this is one of Bong's domestic films, the story is universal in its theming of the vulnerable being victims of the neoliberal policies forced upon people in capitalist societies. The scenes in which the Kims are defying the genre expectations of the caper film by their usage of wit in order to con their way into employment, rather than a large-scale heist, where the payoff is immediate. This comes to a halt when the Kims realize that another family had essentially committed the same act, commenting on the competition of the current neoliberal climate of South Korea. The theme of horror is introduced when Mrs. Park reveals why young Da-Song is disturbed, in which the fear of poverty is introduced as the metaphoric horror villain of the film. Bong comes into his element as a filmmaker with his mastery of horror, with hints of comedy throughout the film, particularly in the birthday party scene. The audience, being tossed into feelings of fear, suddenly shifts into comedy, comments on the instability faced by vulnerable people, emphasizing the satirical messaging of the film. Considered a masterpiece, it is understood that this film is Bong Joon Ho's magnum opus, as it is thrilling, comical, and thought-provoking, essentially a culmination of all of his films and his mastery of genre.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the filmography of Bong Joon Ho highlights the importance of calling out unfair systems of power and how devastating the effects of incompetent power structures can be. Bong's domestic films in particular. His ability to contort and blend different aspects of genre expectations and conventions is a powerful tool in his style of storytelling, as it not only keeps the audience's attention but also is an effective method of social commentary. With protagonists that Bong himself describes as "losers," his films critique the injustices the average civilian faces from the South Korea's status as a post-war, neocolonial, and neoliberal society, and how these three factors influence the decision-making of the South Korean government.

I must acknowledge actor Song Kang-Ho's work in all three of the films within this analysis. Being the lead protagonist in three narratively different films, he is, in a way, playing the same character in all three films. Although *Memories of Murder* his character has an important job, the status of police detective in the 1980s was viewed as an inferior extension of the state. He is portrayed as lazy and not good at his job. Being located in a small, rural area also emphasizes the lack of economic prosperity for those who reside there, including Doo-Man himself, as seen in his small home. In *The Host*, Song's character is also lazy and on the outskirts of society for his poor economic status as a snack stand vendor, but is also portrayed as dirty and dimwitted. His grown-out blonde roots and baggy clothes emphasize the look of someone who does not keep up with their appearance. Song's character in *Parasite* is no different from the other two; again, he is poor and lives in dirty conditions. It can be argued that his character is indeed lazy, as he and his family look for quick schemes to earn money, but compared to his other two characters, Ki-Taek is quite intelligent, as he is a con artist. I argue that Bong uses

Song as the "face" of the average Korean. Instead of casting actors that audiences would deem as "attractive" within the context of South Korean beauty standards, it seems that Bong sees Song for his talent, but also for the fact that he is arguably someone who is physically average. His range of characters seems quite limited to the charismatic but unlucky protagonist in Bong's films, but Song's characters are the heart of the social critiques, as he is the victim in every circumstance.

To briefly review what this thesis discussed, Chapter 1 discussed *Memories of Murder*, and its shortcomings as both a police procedural and a neo-noir. Although in terms of the subgenres of crime films, these two would typically juxtapose one another. Combining two opposing genres to convey a story heavily inspired by real historical events offers audiences a glimpse into what life was like in rural South Korea during a tumultuous time in its political history. As the detectives fail consistently in solving the crime, it is a direct critique of the postcolonial government, which is consistently failing the people. Emphasizing civilian control over civilian safety created endless barriers for the police detectives within the film and in real life. This film is a bittersweet letter to an era of violence and fear, but also to a generation of Koreans who wanted justice and fair democracy.

Chapter 2 analyzed the tropes of an action-monster film through *The Host*, where the narrative falls short through its usage of suspense and establishing a "hero," leading audiences and the protagonists to feel a sense of injustice and dissatisfaction. The film critiques the presence of the United States military and its status as a neocolonial power in contemporary South Korea. The lack of suspense for reveals acts as commentary for the lack of information given to unsuspecting civilians until it is too late. Each step of the way the Parks face resistance from the government, who do nothing to help, just like the previous film, comments on the

corruption of the government and their lack of interest in public safety. This sense of failure is unusual in monster films, as it is expected for the child to be saved and the monster to be killed in order to prevent it from hurting others. It is also unheard of for the everyday person to be put into the role of the monster slayer, as audiences would expect the military to bring the monster into the world and have the role of taking it out. *The Host* exposes the potential dangers of South Korea being a neocolonial state through the incompetence and distrust of authority figures in civilians' desperate times of need.

Finally, Chapter 3 looked at the film *Parasite*, which can be argued to almost transcend genre as its blending of multiple genres and social commentary drives the narrative. Through the caper film and the comedy-horror genres, the film highlights the devastating effects of poverty and the consequences of a neoliberal society on the most vulnerable. With the Kim family's lack of resources, they must get creative in their scheme to earn money. The subversions of the audience's expectations comment on the desperation of people who are victimized by the neoliberal policies put into place by the government, and how this economic theory only benefits very few people, leaving the majority behind. *Parasite*'s unique storytelling critiques the intense competition and desperation of the modern neoliberal world, critiquing the unequal distribution of wealth and the lack of solutions for those in poverty.

Prior to the Korean New Age Cinema described by Nam Lee in the introduction, the Korean film industry was heavily regulated with censorship. Bong's coincidence of pursuing filmmaking in an era of emerging genres granted him the freedom to discover these genres and put his own creative interpretations of them. Addressing the past through comedy and thriller is Bong's way of acknowledging that South Korean civilians have been ignored for decades by imbalanced power dynamics between the government and its people. Overall, filmmakers like

Bong Joon Ho are important in today's society, as they use their platform to use creative methods of speaking out against the injustices the average person faces.

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