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Citation

Tilland, B. R., & Tsai, B. (2023). Of fleas and Parasite: unpacking class and space in Bong Joon-ho’s Barking Dogs Never Bite. *New Review Of Film And Television Studies*, *21*(4), 668-685. doi:10.1080/17400309.2023.2246349

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Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3674434

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

New Review of Film and Television Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfts20

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To cite this article: Bonnie Tilland & Beth Tsai (2023) Of fleas and *Parasite*: unpacking class and space in Bong Joon-ho's *Barking Dogs Never Bite*, New Review of Film and Television Studies, 21:4, 668-685, DOI: 10.1080/17400309.2023.2246349

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2023.2246349

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Published online: 24 Nov 2023.

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NEW REVIEW OF FILM AND TELEVISION STUDIES
2023, VOL. 21, NO. 4, 668–685
https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2023.2246349

Of fleas and *Parasite*: unpacking class and space in Bong Joon-ho's *Barking Dogs Never Bite*

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that amidst the hype of *Parasite* fever, it is instructive to revisit *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (2000) in order to better understand the director's aesthetic and signatures. Not only does *Parasite* (2019) echo Bong's debut feature in narrative structure and visual style but both films depict the friction between power and the powerless through spatial metaphors. By offering a closer look at *Barking Dogs Never Bite* from an interdisciplinary approach – intersecting auteur theory and cultural studies approaches to class mobility and space – we indicate how the hybrid style of commercialism and social commentary in Bong's films are deeply rooted in the South Korean context.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 23 October 2020; Accepted 30 April 2021

KEYWORDS Bong Joon-ho; Korean cinema; Asian studies; space; class; language

After *Parasite*'s Oscars win in early 2020, a substantial number of articles and commentary began to surface on news media and streaming sites, drawing attention to director Bong Joon-ho's filmmaking career to date and offering via streaming services nearly every one of Bong's movies. Interestingly, when it comes to the director's debut feature *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (hereafter *Barking Dogs*) (2000), the director himself has disowned it in interviews by saying, 'Please forget it, it's a very stupid movie' (Kang 2019). Bong's debut feature remains something of an enigma beyond South Korea – partly because so few academic articles in English to date have been dedicated to this film, and partly because at first glance *Barking Dogs* tells a story without the recognizable style typically associated with Bong's films. Bong's stylistic characteristics include sudden cuts to wide shots that isolate a character against the background as a reflection of that character's state of mind. Bong's favoring of overhead shots also provides viewers a flat bird's-eye view of characters and their conflicts. Among the most signature trademarks

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is the use of tracking shots in narrow alleys and long hallways, in particular, during fight and chase scenes. Even if *Barking Dogs* does not fully have the look we have come to associate with Bong, an auteur director's first film will often contain themes, ideas, and stylistic cues that will reoccur in their later work. In particular, many elements audiences find refreshing in *Parasite* – visual style, linguistic play, and blatant social commentary – already exist in *Barking Dogs*. In fact, *Parasite* echoes Bong's debut feature in the ways that it exposes and dismantles idealized images of class mobility. *Barking Dogs* is more specific in its criticism of corruption issues in South Korea – namely, that of the construction industry and academia – as opposed to *Parasite*'s more generalized critique of social inequality. Yet both films highlight residential spaces in matching ways, in contrast to Bong's genre films' working within the conventions of murder mystery or dystopian monster movies.

In her recent book, *The Films of Bong Joon-ho*, the first comprehensive work on the director in English, Nam Lee contends that *Barking Dogs* and Bong's fourth feature and thriller film *Mother* (2009) are most similar, focusing on 'the extent to which morality has been driven out of contemporary Korean society' (2020, 114). While Lee's discussion of *Parasite* was cursory due to the film's recent release, this article argues that *Barking Dogs* and *Parasite* should be compared due to their substantive stylistic and thematic overlaps. Further, existing scholarship on Bong primarily focuses on the cultural expression of South Korea's ambivalence toward Hollywood's global dominance. A number of scholars, most prominently Christina Klein, have noted how Bong 'uses global Hollywood's language of genre to tell uniquely Korean stories' (Klein 2008, 874). Indeed, articles published[1] in the last decade or so have mostly treated Bong's work following his second feature *Memories of Murder* (2003), focusing especially on *The Host* (2006) and his first English-language film, sci-fi feature *Snowpiercer* (2013), since these works are widely distributed in the United States.[2] Joshua Schulze argues that Bong's films are in a constant dialogue with Hollywood, and his work's transnational, 'glocal' nature results in a cinema that mediates 'between American form and Korean content' (Schulze 2019, 22), creating a peculiar hybrid of 'commercial power, artistic precision and socio-political commentary' (Paquet, 2009, 108).

Arguably, much has already been said about seeing Bong's work as a symptom of American imperialism and the monster in *The Host* as representing a 'parasitic entity lurking on the periphery' (Schulze 2019, 25). The question is, does *Barking Dogs* fall into such a classification, as the film is missing the appropriation and subversion of Hollywood genre conventions that are so visible in Bong's later work? By offering a closer look at *Barking Dogs* from an interdisciplinary perspective – intersecting auteur theory and cultural studies approaches to analyzing cinematic uses of space as well as interconnected treatments of class mobility and language – not only can we claim *Parasite*'s unprecedented success was long predicted, we

also reveal the degree to which the hybrid style of commercialism and social commentary in Bong's work is deeply rooted in the South Korean context. By drawing a comparative analysis between his first and (as of this writing) most recent features, we contend that the understudied *Barking Dogs*, as much as the celebrated *Parasite*, registers the sense of 'absurdity plus corruption' encapsulated in the Korean term *pujori* frequently cited both by scholars of Bong's films and Bong himself (Lee 2020, 5).

Visual styles and urban landscape

Barking Dogs tells the story of an unemployed adjunct lecturer, Ko Yun-ju (Sung-Jae Lee), who lives in an apartment on the outskirts of Seoul with his pregnant wife. Desperate to become a professor, Yun-ju's stress is aggravated by the barking of a neighbor's dog, even though tenants in the apartment complex are not permitted pets. Eager to identify the offender, Yun-ju snaps and starts dognapping and killing ostensible culprits. This does not, nevertheless, solve Yun-ju's larger problem: in order to become a professor, he needs to bribe his dean with money that he does not have. Adding insult to injury, his wife brings a dog home. His life continues in a downward spiral when Yun-ju loses his wife's dog. Thankfully, Hyun-nam (Bae Doona) – the female protagonist in a parallel narrative, who works in the apartment complex's management office – is able to rescue the dog from a homeless man who was preparing to roast and eat it.[3] The film ends with Yun-ju achieving his dream of becoming a professor, and Hyun-nam hiking the mountain behind the apartment with her friend Changmi (Su-hee Go), something she had expressed interest in doing earlier in the film.

As a globally recognized auteur, Bong Joon-ho is a filmmaker known for tackling various film genres and defying these conventions at the same time with absurd humor and social satire. Yet Korean film critics sometimes note that there seems to be a disconnect between *Barking Dogs* and the rest of Bong's oeuvre. In response to Lee Dong-jin's noting, 'It is difficult to evaluate *Barking Dogs Never Bite* as Bong Joon-ho's first work' (in Korean, translated by the author) (D. Lee 2020, 277), it is useful to recall Peter Wollen's maxim: 'What the *auteur* theory does is to take a group of films – the work of one director – and analyze their structure', and suggestion that films should be studied 'not only in their universality (what they all have in common) but also in their singularity (what differentiates them from each other)' (Wollen 1972, 93). Of all the seven feature films that Bong has made to date, patterns can be easily spotted among crime dramas and serial murder mysteries (*Memories of Murder*, *Mother*); monster and biopolitical action films (*The Host*, *Okja*), and dark comedies (*Parasite*, *Barking Dogs*) alike, which leaves *Snowpiercer* as an ostensible stand-alone, although its dystopian future can be easily connected to *The Host* and *Okja*. On the surface, the only scene in

Barking Dogs that bears a resemblance to Bong's distinctive visual techniques is an apartment chase sequence that starts with the camera following Hyun-nam chasing Yun-ju down the stairs and into the hallway with a jazz drum score in the background. After that, the camera abruptly cuts to a long shot immediately followed by two symmetrical wide shots, accentuating the claustrophobia created by the cookie-cutter layout of the apartment complex (see Figure 1). This singularly precise way of presenting 'the chaser and the chased' action, in which people pursue others down narrow paths and passages, appears in all Bong's subsequent films, most strikingly in *Memories of Murder* and *Mother* (both prominently featuring grimy, dank alleys in economically stagnant small towns), as well as in *Parasite* when audiences are introduced to the secret basement and we follow wife Chungsook (Jang Hye-jin) running through the maze-like tunnels.

However, the visual styles of *Barking Dogs* share still more commonalities with the early student work Bong had created while attending the Korean Academy of Film Arts, most notably his 16 mm short film *Incoherence* (1994).[4] This four-part work shows many traits that Bong would go on to use in his feature films. Each episode tells a different story but of the same theme, all featuring absurdly-behaving men who commit petty crimes: a college professor tries to hide his embarrassing compulsion to look at porn magazines in his office; a jogger steals milk from a porch daily; and a drunken man decides to take revenge on a security guard for treating him like a commoner. In the epilogue, all three characters appear on a television show to discuss the moral crisis in South Korean society – the irony being that these three protagonists each hold a respectable position in society, but their hypocritical comments indicate that they themselves are the real moral problems.

Figure 1. Hyun-nam (Bae Doona) chases Yun-ju (Sung-Jae Lee) through the hallways of the apartment complex in *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (2000). © CJ Entertainment.

Thematically, the close resemblance between *Incoherence* and *Barking Dogs* is most obvious in episode one: both feature an academic and the ethical wrong doings they themselves commit. While all of Bong's films feature chase scenes of one type or another, the scenes in *Incoherence*, *Barking Dogs* and *Parasite* in particular transverse vertical space more than his other films, bouncing among roofs, basements, hallways, floors, staircases, and elevators. Bong's signature reversal within the hunting-down scene – when the chaser becomes the chased – appears in episode two of *Incoherence*. Although Bong executes the details in a much more elaborate way in his later films, his student work already presents an underlying thematic dyad of absurdity plus misconduct – accentuated by compelling, driving, but sometimes incongruous musical accompaniment.

Perhaps then the most obvious reason *Barking Dogs* appears to be an outlier is due to its realistic urban landscape, which displays South Korea's mode of modernization and global ambitions. In its depiction of an 'everyday Korean' setting, Bong's debut feature delves into the living arrangement of most of South Korea's twenty-first-century population: the urban or suburban high-rise apartment. In contrast, Bong's other films are set in relatively novel locations for the majority of the South Korean population: Bong's second and fourth features share a rural sensibility, with *Memories of Murder* taking place on the outskirts of Suwon in Hwaseong – which was much more rural in the film's setting of the 1980s than it is today – and *Mother* in a still more countryside town. *The Host* is set smack in the middle of Seoul, and *Okja* moves between the rural idyllic setting of Samcheok in South Korea's northeast, before shifting to chaotic Seoul and New York City. The world of *Barking Dogs* is more self-contained than in any of Bong's other films – except perhaps *Snowpiercer*, set almost entirely on a train – in that it takes place in and around a nondescript, peripheral urban apartment complex.

These uses of urban settings are not merely backdrops; they are instrumental in lending Bong's films political weight that can be read as critiquing state-guided capitalist development in South Korea. Gary Indiana points out that Bong 'highlights the surreal condition of everyday life and the weirdly configured spaces people inhabit and work in', and that 'the director often features characters who aren't expecting anything, or can't get anywhere, or have already been flattened by the economic system' (Indiana 2007, 221). Case in point, the vast apartment complex in *Barking Dogs* is the first of Bong's metaphorical architectural spaces – a thematic approach also undertaken, and that evidently stood out, in *Parasite*. Just as the mansion and basement apartment in *Parasite* signify the startling divide between rich and poor, the apartment in *Barking Dogs* signifies the precarious and limited social mobility of the middle class. Through spatial metaphors, such as the bland high-rise apartment complex and dilapidated basement below, *Barking Dogs* depicts how the elite are unable or unwilling to see what is really going

on with the underclass who serve them. For instance, Yun-ju's financial dilemma is a symptom of South Korea's history of academic corruption. On the one hand, Yun-ju seems hesitant about bribing the dean to obtain a position; on the other, he contrives to find the money and his biggest worry is about getting caught rather than taking a stance against the corruption in academe. In any case, Yun-ju cannot simply move up through this social structure in a smooth manner. If architectural space is a stand-in for Bong's characters' psyches, then in *Barking Dogs* Yun-ju is haunted by the traumatic history of Korean apartments – as told in the ghost story of 'Boiler Kim', discussed later – which causes him to strive for upward social mobility if only to avoid metaphorically ending up in the basement himself (Lee 2020, 59).

Burrowing in the basement

One of the most striking parallels between Bong's first and latest features is the use of basements. *Parasite* tells the story of the Kims, an impoverished family, who manages to insinuate themselves in the life of an upper-class family, the Parks. The film starts off with the Kims conning the Parks by leveraging the rich family's need for all kinds of services, from private lessons for their kids to chauffeuring, cooking, and housekeeping. However, they are not the only ones taking advantage of the Parks' obliviousness. Halfway through the film, a plot twist reveals a hidden basement where a second 'parasitic' family – the former housekeeper and her husband – dwell. This basement is a secret bunker like those many rich families have ('in case North Korea attacks or if creditors break in'), and because the original house owner-cum-architect was embarrassed by this (we can assume due to the fragility it signifies), the Parks do not know about the space. *Parasite* makes apparent at once that the rich and the poor live in parallel worlds: it opens and closes on the Kim family's unbearable living conditions – the opposite of the Park's beautifully decorated, minimalist mansion. The Kims live in a crowded half-basement at the bottom of a hill where drunk people urinate and which is prone to flooding, demonstrated to maximum effect toward the end of the film in the epic monsoon flood scene. Poverty constricts the Kims' exposure to sun and consigns them to lack of privacy (Parasecoli 2019).

As in *Parasite*, *Barking Dogs* introduces the basement early on, and as the plot progresses here, too, we keep coming back to the same space. The basement is where Yun-ju, who is tormented by the barking of a neighbor's dog, hides his first canine victim. Yun-ju feels remorse upon realizing that it is in fact another dog that has been barking, and goes to free the captive dog. Instead, he is shocked to find that the dog has been nabbed by security guard,[5] Mr. Byeon (Byun Hee-Bong), in the process of turning it into dog stew (*bosint'ang*) on a portable stove. When another guard comes by on his rounds, Yun-ju, hiding in the basement closet where the dog had been

kept earlier, overhears the ghost story of 'Boiler Kim'. Further, back in the basement, there too exists another 'parasite' – a homeless man who sleeps under a pile of old clothes and rags. As will be discussed later, this layered reveal of two separate 'ghosts' receives parallel treatment in *Parasite*, but in *Barking Dogs*, the story of Boiler Kim and the homeless man, both manifested in the shadows of the lower-middle-class apartment complex are specters of South Korea's recent past. In *Parasite*, the sudden revelation of a bunker that is even lower than the Kims' basement dwelling represents the still further depths of poverty into which some South Koreans have fallen amid the by now complete absence of a stable middle-class.

It is this same basement space that signifies the underclass as termite-like agents burrowing in the host's dwelling and eating away the rich's food while toiling in precarious jobs. Unlike in fellow South Korean auteur Hong Sang-soo's films, in which characters are frequently seen sharing meals but rarely actually eating (Choe 2009), food consumption in Bong's corpus is rendered as a symptom of class struggle. When the homeless man eats Mr. Byeon's dog stew when he is not looking, he is exercising his 'right of the hungry'. This act, or *seo-ri* in Korean, is a term used more explicitly in *The Host*; there, the little boy Se-ju (Dong-ho Lee) is first introduced as he and his older brother pillage an abandoned snack stand looking for food. Se-ju wants to keep the cash he finds there, but his brother reminds him that they are not stealing, only engaging in something like 'melon *seo-ri* at a farm'. *Seo-ri*, the brother explains, is a borrowing game that kids play, but it is also 'a right of the hungry'. Perhaps having a homeless man consuming dog stew to satisfy his hunger is not just indicative of lower class hunger and poor food access, but because dog meat consumption can be considered cruel and a risk to human health in places that prohibit the habit, it also begs the question of whether the man is only consuming what he needs, or whether this constitutes a savage act. And it is not just the homeless man who is eating someone else's food; Mr. Byeon also 'steals' food by seizing pet dogs (dead or alive) that did not belong to him in the first place. Minor stealing also occurs when Hyun-nam's friend, working at the stationery store (a *mungu*, a shop located near apartment complexes and schools) casually snacks on the food or smokes cigarettes from the store inventory. Through stealing, food becomes the symbol Bong uses to make class inequalities more visible. Further, this act is most likely to be exercised in abject spaces: the bunker in the mansion in *Parasite*, the basement of the apartment complex in *Barking Dogs*, and the sewers in *The Host*. The subterranean, then, becomes a confrontational space between the lower class and the even-lower class.

On a larger scale, these examples illustrate how the underclass – the homeless, the under/unemployed, and the surplus population – is depicted as lurking in the periphery, ready to pounce on their target or snatch things they feel deprived of. Their existence is often overlooked and treated as

disposable; aligning with Marx's discussion of the relation between the bourgeois and the worker under such class hierarchy, in which labor is considered cheap and expendable (Marx 2000). Bong, who majored in sociology in college, consistently uses screen direction in his films to dramatize the inequity among socioeconomic classes. Very often, the lower level is associated with food and sustenance (either abundant or lacking), while the middle level is linked to schooling and education. The upper level, needless to say, is filled with luxury goods, extravagant services, ample space, or by extension, a promise of utopia for the middle and lower levels, onto which they project aspirational visions of idealistic resolution that help them escape their unbearable reality. *Parasite*, *Barking Dogs*, and *Snowpiercer* all share the same visual and thematic codes in regard to class: in *Parasite*, Mr. Kim (Song Kang-ho) is seen stealing food and bringing it to the basement, and if we count the ground floor in the wealthy Park's house as its middle level, it is where Ki Woo (Choi Woo-sik) first received his offer of a job as the family's private tutor. Yun-ju, who lives in a typical lower-middle-class apartment complex in *Barking Dogs*, believes that so long as he is offered a professorship, in a deus ex machina-style intervention all of his life problems will be resolved. *Snowpiercer*, then, offers the most explicit metaphor for a Marxist analysis of class structure as clearly illustrated by the film's plot and visual compartments (the poor in the train's tail section try to stage a revolution by fighting their way to the front), except that the screen direction moves horizontally from left to right instead of moving from bottom to top.

If the upwardly mobile Yun-ju and stagnant Hyun-nam (both lower-middle-class) in *Barking Dogs* are both terrorized by what the basement represents (the abject lower-class in the form of the homeless man), then the wealthy Parks in *Parasite* are completely oblivious to the basement, as they are so far removed from its dangers. However, there are subtle signs that the Kims and the Parks both at one time belonged to the broadly construed 'middle class' – as Nam Lee points out, at one point the wealthy couple discusses the subway, saying they had not taken it for a long time. Mr. Park (Lee Sun-kyun) is a middle-class success story, having ridden the venture tech wave, and Mr. Kim and his even more abject double, Keun-sae (Park Myung-hoon) in the bunker, are middle-class failures, both having helmed failed franchise eateries.[6] The difference between the lower-class and lower-lower-class is one of degree, as Mr. Kim is merely left broke, whereas Keun-sae has borrowed money from predatory private lenders and been forced to go underground to escape violent loan collectors. The upwardly mobile lower-middle-class and stagnant lower-middle-class of *Barking Dogs* have yielded to the increasingly desperate lower-class and even-lower-class in *Parasite*; while Yun-ju and Hyun-nam briefly worked together to 'do the right thing' and search for Yun-ju's wife's missing dog, the two poor families in *Parasite* battle for scraps, showing no class solidarity. The horizontally

ordered class solidarity rendered literally in the space of the train of *Snowpiercer* is nowhere to be found in *Parasite*, which leads Nam Lee to claim that it is by the far the most despairing of Bong's films: 'Bong displays what has happened in Korean society in the last twenty years since the neoliberal restructuring: the collapse of the middle-class . . . .The only source of community and solidarity left in Korea is within the immediate family; however, all three families disintegrate at the end' (2020, 140). While Yun-ju attains social mobility in *Barking Dogs*, the underclass in *Parasite* is truly 'surplus', or *ing'yo*, and *Parasite*'s great success comes at a time when *ing'yo ingan* (surplus humans) is a common self-deprecating slang term – and hence a regular feature – in South Korean society.

Labor precarity and corruption culture

While *Parasite* in 2019 exposes social inequality and labor precarity in South Korea – and by extension, globally – *Barking Dogs* in 2000 highlighted labor precarity alongside some particular Korean problems of corruption. Perhaps, it does not need to be said that South Korea at the turn of the millennium was still a developing economy, while by 2019 it had become a global leader in many respects. In *Parasite*, Bong criticizes South Korean society for ignoring the underclass who still lives in startlingly substandard housing despite the country's economic rise; in *Barking Dogs*, he criticizes the society for having developed the country on shaky foundations, ignoring the lessons to be taken from the frantic pace of industrialization and development of the 1970s and 1980s. Case in point: five years before the release of *Barking Dogs*, the Sampoong Department Store in Seoul collapsed, killing more than five hundred employees and customers trapped inside.[7]

This structural failure is neither singular nor inconsequential; it speaks to a large-scale issue of corruption in the country. There are disturbing parallels here with the Sewol Ferry disaster of 2014, in which a combined passenger-cargo ferry was extremely overloaded, causing its capsizing and deaths of more than three hundred, many of them high-school seniors from a relatively poor neighborhood in the Seoul suburb of Ansan on their graduation field trip. Disregarded safety regulations combined with neoliberal labor conditions in which the ferry was entirely staffed by private contract employees – including the ship's captain – who had not received any emergency training, creating a perfect storm for disaster. The ferry lacked life jackets and the inflatable emergency rafts did not work, as they had been neither checked nor maintained. The 2014 incident caused many South Koreans to flash back to the 1995 department store collapse and 1994 Seongsu bridge collapse, both results of construction corruption and human greed and incompetence. This triggered questioning of whether the country could continue to be served by politicians in the pockets of the construction

industry and unscrupulous conglomerates,[8] and led indirectly to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye in 2016.

This cultural wariness of labor precarity and corruption culture is manifested in *Barking Dogs*' retelling of a fictional ghost story. Although Bong has called his debut feature a 'stupid movie' and lamented that he regrets 'not being able to control the humor' (or effectively use the 'absurdity'), in Mr. Byeon's recounting of Boiler Kim, the simple tale speaks volumes not just about South Korea's development, redevelopment, and construction corruption histories, but also about the marginalization of regional identities as delineated through the subtle detail of accents. As Mr. Byeon narrates, shortly after the apartment was built and residents had moved in, the boilers started malfunctioning. A man known as 'Boiler Kim' was called in for repairs, and as he worked he discovered that the apartment had been shoddily built, apparently due to someone having scrimped on materials in order to embezzle a good share of the construction funds. When he confronted the building manager with his suspicions, a scuffle ensued on-site, and Boiler Kim fell backward into a protruding nail and died instantly. A rumor emerged that his body had been encased in concrete in the apartment walls, and his spirit heard emanating from the boiler is said to haunt the apartment complex. Mr. Byeon's dark story is made humorous by the exaggerated re-telling, and in particular Mr. Byeon's mimicking of Boiler Kim's thick Chŏlla province accent.

The extended monologue recounting the 'Boiler Kim' story is striking because it is by far the most words per minute spoken in the film; fixated on his career prospects, Yun-ju does not talk much with his wife Eunsil (Ho-jung Kim), and Hyun-nam spends most of her time puttering around the apartment complex, breaking the monotony only to occasionally visit her friend Changmi in the adjacent shop. Yet the ghost story is more than a humorous plot device; a certainly not meaningless detail is the fact that Boiler Kim is from Chŏlla province in South Korea's southwest, an area that was marginalized in South Korea's industrialization, and the site of a bloody government crackdown on its own citizens – mostly university students – protesting for democracy in May 1980. The sound of Boiler Kim's ghostly voice audible from the boiler is that of South Korea's marginalized citizenry taking developers to task for their corruption. Though the 'Boiler Kim' tale may seem to jarringly interrupt the narrative of *Barking Dogs*, it contextualizes the film's setting within South Korea's broader traumatic history. The shaky foundation of the apartment complex supports an anxious and precarious lower-middle-class, and the bunker of the Parks' house in *Parasite* is built as a hypothetical escape for the rich (in case of North Korea's nuclear strike), but instead houses the abject lower-class. The traumatic basements of the past and traumatic bunkers of the present leave no room for a secure middle-class in Bong's filmic universe.

By contrast, there is no extended ghost story monologue delivered in *Parasite*, but the wealthy Mrs. Choi (Cho Yeo-jeong) discloses to 'Jessica' (the lower-class Kim family sister, played by Park So-dam) that her son Dasong (Jung Hyun-jun) was psychologically scarred by witnessing a 'ghost' coming up the stairs from the basement on the night of Dasong's birthday. The 'ghost' was in fact Keun-sae from the bunker, emerging at night to steal food from the refrigerator, as Mr. Kim must do later when he replaces Keun-sae down below. When Keun-sae is arrested after murdering Jessica, he is depicted in the media as 'a random homeless man' who crashed the Park family's party. Notably, *Barking Dogs* also ended with the incarceration of the homeless man, who conveniently took the fall for Yun-ju's dog murders. The 'ghosts' of the corruption of the nation's urban development in the form of Boiler Kim and of the late 1990s financial crisis in the form of the homeless man are reincarnated as the precarious lower or lower-middle class 'ghosts' of *Parasite*. While Bong's early films (*Barking Dogs*, *Memories of Murder*, and the student film *Incoherence*) critique corruption endemic to society at the time, his later films (*Snowpiercer*, *Okja*, *Parasite*) address runaway inequality. The corruption portrayed in *Barking Dogs* in fact leads to the inequality that operates so starkly in *Parasite* two decades later; the inescapable inequality in turn yields even greater corruption.

Sonic space and linguistic play

As mentioned previously, Bong makes fairly frequent use of establishing and wide shots to connect characters' states of mind with landscapes. There are few shots without people occupying the frame whether shot in densely populated cities or featuring wide-open countryside vistas. Bong asserts his characters' 'rights of the hungry' but also their 'rights to the city' and 'rights to space' in Lefebvre's terms – or in David Harvey's extension thereof, 'the right to change ourselves by changing the city' (2008). Lefebvre's three conceptualizations of space – perceived space, conceived space, and lived space – are useful in thinking through Bong's representations of space. If 'conceived space' is the top-down visions of cartographers, urban planners, and developers, 'perceived space' is that of everyday life and common sense usage. While *Parasite* illustrates stark class disparities by having the poor Kim family transverse the space between their basement apartment in one of Seoul's left-behind neighborhoods and the spacious, gated mansion of the elite Parks residing in the hills, *Barking Dogs* highlights a space loaded with upward social mobility aspirations in early-2000s South Korea. A number of scholars across disciplines have written on the importance of high-rise apartment development to South Korean social structure (Nelson 2000; Gelezeau 2007; Jung 2017; Yang 2018), and the story of the rise of apartments in

South Korean urban and suburban space is, ultimately, a story about the rise of the middle-class. It is also a story about South Korean conglomerates – Samsung, LG, etc. – and their dominance in South Korean life, for with the exception of public housing, South Korean apartments are prominently marked with the conglomerate name along with that apartment complex's corporate brand.

Interestingly, Bong's camera takes care to hide the apartment's logo in *Barking Dogs*; apparently Bong searched for an apartment with 'ㄱ'-shaped (a letter in the Korean alphabet) corridors for shooting, which would have indicated an even slightly more out-of-date apartment style, but unable to find one he ended up using his own then-apartment located in Seoul's up-and-coming suburb of Seongnam, an area incongruous with the establishing shot of the apartment, shot near Kŏyŏ subway station, a neighborhood that is 'home to lower-middle-class residents' (lee 2020, 59).[9] On the other hand, South Korean apartments, despite increasingly luxurious lay-outs and brand status, are notoriously poorly insulated, and sounds of walking across the floor upstairs and noise carrying through pipes in bathrooms are a frequent cause of neighborly strife. In *Barking Dogs*, the titular sound is amplified by this poor insulation, with Yun-ju's intolerance intensified by his resentment at pet-keeping residents sufficiently rich to purchase purebred dogs. Consistent with Bong's thematic preoccupation with social (im)mobility, the dogs are emblematic of their owners' ascent up the social and class ladder, which only reminds him of the job security he lacks. Yun-ju, in despising the dogs and grumbling about pet-owners ('must all be millionaires, raising those expensive dogs'), likens the possession of dogs as pets to that of wealth, with his attempt to throw the dogs off the apartment roof a form of transference aimed at getting rid of the constituency that these dogs represent.

In addition to the piercing barks of small dogs, the film is punctuated by the familiar four-note chime over the intercom system cuing intonations that always begin 'This is an announcement from the management office'. Such announcements are a ubiquitous part of the sonic landscape of middle-class life in South Korea, conveying to the hundreds of complex residents throughout the day reminders about (il)legal parking, elevator maintenance, (im)proper recycling, children in distress on the playground, and 'noise between floors',[10] imploring residents to keep children from running on hardwood flooring and to silence pets. The significance of these public announcements also offers a false sense of authoritative power for Hyun-nam when she broadcasts news of the missing dogs, which goes against the actual nominal position she holds.

Another spatial configuration worth pointing out in Bong's film is the director's fixation on small, confined spaces, as demonstrated by the tiny *mungu* (stationery store) where Hyun-nam's friend Changmi works. The cramped (even by Korean standards) space of the *mungu* in *Barking Dogs*

finds echoes in the tiny food stall on the Han riverbank in *The Host*, as well as in the cluttered rooms of the Kim's basement abode in *Parasite*. Just as Yun-ju constantly finds excuses to leave the apartment, Hyun-nam's escape from her day job is Changmi's claustrophobic stationery store, where the friends lay on a mattress crammed in the corner and smoke or drink. We also see Hyun-nam sleeping in a room with her sister and mother, in what looks to be a working-class low-rise lodging. In interviews, Bong frequently mentions his obsession with cramped space:

> I have a lot of interest in people who exist in narrow spaces. If you see the lottery ticket booths in subway stations, those people who work in that narrow space all day long . . . I really wonder how they feel looking out from those narrow spaces. In *Barking Dogs*, I was interested in putting an overweight character [Changmi] in that narrow space. The little store in *The Host* functions as the only refuge for that family. Narrow spaces are cozy spaces, and often the only spaces where the underclasses can lay down and have a rest (D. Lee 2020, 313).

Bong is very specific about the sense of space in his films because it not only highlights the conditions of the working class, it also provides a voyeuristic look that reveals how vulnerable to the outside world the poor are.

The last of Lefebvre's spatial typology, 'third space', refers to lived space that is only 'kept alive and accessible through the arts and literature' (Shields 2011, 281). In Bong's films, this might be extended to the spatial fantasies of the characters. Yun-ju is terrorized by the ghost story he hears in the apartment basement and imagines hiking the nearby mountain. Hyun-nam is freed from the apartment management office where her labors were unappreciated – and her friend Changmi makes a temporary escape from her cramped stationery store – to hike the same mountain. The hiking trail shows the blurred line between suburban and rural space in South Korea, as many apartments have easy access to hiking trails, which apartment residents take advantage of. In *Parasite*, Ki-woo fantasizes about residing in the unique house built by a famed architect, not as a lowly tutor but as the master of the house. But can these dreams of, and rights to, lived space lead to any actual change in an atmosphere of increased precarity and class polarization?

Finally, we can analyze Bong's engagement with the symbolic power of titles and speech registers as specific to the Korean language's form in ways that effectively supplement the spatial allegory. In a scene of marital conflict, Yun-ju protests when his wife Eunsil urges him to return to the store to get strawberry milk for the dog he did not want in the first place. He grumbles that it is a full 100 meters back, to which she snaps that it can't be that far, telling him that if she is right he should call her *noona* from now on. Among South Korean couples, women who are younger than their partners – the social norm – tend to call their male partners *oppa* ('older brother'). While older coupled

women should rightfully be called *noona (*'older sister'), more conservative-minded men in particular will prefer not to call attention to this, and instead both members of the couple will call one another a more neutral term, such as *yeobo* ('honey'). Yun-ju rolls a 100-meter roll of toilet paper down the street to measure the distance – and it seems that Eunsil was right, born out in a later scene in which we hear him address her as 'older sister'.

This speech play is employed again in a pivotal scene in *Parasite*, when former housekeeper Moon-kwang (Lee Jeong-eun) returns to the Parks' house, while the Kims are letting loose in their employer's absence, pretending the house is their own. Once wife Chungsook discovers that Moon-kwang has been hiding her husband in the basement, she threatens to call the police, whereupon Moon-kwang pleadingly calls her *ŏnni* – older sister as addressed by another woman. Chungsook protests that Moon-kwang must be older than she is, but even when she is corrected, she ingratiatingly calls Moon-kwang 'older sister' once the tables are turned and Moon-kwang has caught the Kim family in their own lie. Both women at different points snap, 'Don't call me sister!' Whereas in *Barking Dogs* the denial of 'older sister' is to leave a (temporary) power differential obscured, in *Parasite* it is a rejection of identification with a fellow member of the working class.

One final detail to point out regards the use of a name repeated throughout Bong's filmography, in such a way that connects his three films dealing most directly with class. In *Barking Dogs*, the name Namgoong Min is given to another insecure academic (Seong-hae Kang) who preceded Yun-ju in also trying to secure a permanent position by bribing the dean. Namgoong is an uncommon surname in South Korea, and one of few two-syllable surnames (most are only one syllable). *Parasite* also contains a Namgoong, the Korean-French architect Namgoong Hyunja (Shin Seung-min) who built the Parks' mansion and lived in it previously. The academic Namgoong falls onto the subway tracks in a drunken stupor, and the architect Namgoong designed the bunker intended for upper-class escape but ultimately used for lower-class refuge. It can hardly be coincidence then that Song Kang-ho's character in *Snowpiercer*, the security expert on the train who knows its layout in detail, is named Namgoong Minsu. In Bong Joon-ho's cinematic world, rare Namgoongs open up routes for ordinary, striving Kims, Parks, and Kos.

Conclusion

When Bong has dismissed his debut feature in interviews, and even openly expressed relief that it was omitted from the Bong Joon-ho retrospective programmed at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (Kim 2020), South

Korean audiences who remember *Barking Dogs* have read between the lines and recognized Bong's self-deprecating words as disappointment over his failure to play with genre effectively, something he has done so definitively in all his films since. Bong lamented that it was difficult to market *Barking Dogs* as a genre film and thus viewers did not know what to expect from it. In many ways, *Parasite* was finally able to extend the scathing social critique and engagement with twenty-first-century South Korean culture's messy morality that began two decades earlier with *Barking Dogs*. After two murder mysteries, a monster movie and a dystopian science-fiction film, Bong's Netflix original *Okja* shares horror elements with *The Host* but takes up *Barking Dogs'* uncomfortable animal cruelty to launch a bold critique of the multinational food industry and corporate global reach. Moreover, the corruption of Korean academia foregrounded in *Barking Dogs* is taken to extremes in *Parasite*: while Yun-ju had a guilty conscience over committing bribery to obtain a position, poor son Ki-woo shows no shame in forging a college diploma, quipping that he is just doing things in advance, as he will eventually gain admission to the university. This is a striking example of the moral corruption and delusional thinking symptomatic of what Lauren Berlant calls 'cruel optimism', a 'relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility' (2011, 24). Even after everything falls apart, Ki-woo still dreams of someday somehow being able to buy that house and inviting his fugitive father up from the bunker. In its concluding note of false hope, it is a profoundly more devastating ending than the aftermath of the relatively mild deceptions and dreams of *Barking Dogs*.

In this article, we have demonstrated that spatial/class metaphors and linguistic play link *Barking Dogs* and *Parasite*; moreover, recurring motifs that make Bong's work distinctive – thematic elements of absurdity and corruption, tracking shots in narrow spaces – were activated in *Barking Dogs* and continue throughout the director's oeuvre up to *Parasite*, in which they reach their most mature expression to date. It is easy to forget, but before parasitic families stormed from the basement to capture global attention by winning Oscars and the Palme d'Or for Bong Joon-ho, barking dogs voiced their protests of social ills from basements and rooftops.

Notes

1. See, for example, Lee (2011) and Taylor (2016).
2. Although *Memories of Murder* (2003) is the first to have received a distribution deal in the U.S., even with a limited theatrical release, *The Host* (2006) is the film that put Bong on the map for American audiences. *Snowpiercer* (2013), on the other hand, was slated for a nationwide release by The Weinstein Company, but due to a disagreement between the director and Harvey Weinstein, who insisted on editing Bong's theatrical cut, was bumped down

to a platform release on Netflix after a very limited theatrical run under distributor Radius-TWC.

3. While slaughtering dogs and eating their meat is a longstanding custom in South Korea, most of the younger and middle-aged generations of South Koreans claim not to eat dog meat, and would be repulsed by the idea of eating a pet dog. However, anthropologist Julien Dugnoille claims that dog-eating is still more widespread than it appears in South Korea despite the increasingly popularity of raising dogs as pets, arguing that 'the symbolic charge of dog meat in Korea often leads individuals to turn a blind eye to preexisting intersubjective relationships they had developed with companion dogs' (Dugnoille 2018, 229).
4. Originally a 16 mm print, this film was digitally restored in 4K by the Korean Film Archive under the supervision of the director Bong Joon-ho in 2019. Interested viewers can access the film on digital platforms such as YouTube and the Internet Archive (archive.org).
5. The *kyŏngbi ajŏssi* ('security men') are a ubiquitous feature of high-rise Korean apartments, as they sit in guard stations at all entrances and work with the *kwalli samusŏ* ('management office') – where the character of Hyun-nam works – to do rounds at regular intervals. The management office also generally takes care of repairs, but sometimes duties overlap. Security men are most often in their fifties or older, men who have had to retire from their previous careers and earn a low salary to watch over apartments.
6. At one point in *Parasite*, Mr. Kim (Ki-Taek) and Kun-Sae share a moment when it is revealed that both had failed at 'Taiwanese castella shops'. Food trends in South Korea come and go extremely quickly, and Taiwanese castella franchises had the highest failure rate among franchises in 2017, due to rumors of their using low-quality ingredients (Jackson, 2017).
7. Causes of the collapse included the building being built despite warnings of unstable ground, having unauthorized restaurants that used heavy underground pipes for heating (*ondol*) built on the top floor, along with heavy air conditioning units that created cracks in the floor when they were installed in 1993.
8. *Barking Dogs* was also released before the nation's complete recovery from the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 (known in Korea as the 'IMF crisis'), and the figure of the homeless man Choi is a reminder of this hardship, particularly in his statement upon his arrest that he is 'looking forward to finally having a good meal in jail'. Following the IMF crisis, hordes of newly homeless men laid off from company jobs waited in line for food donations around Seoul Station, where reports of petty crime skyrocketed, with many perpetrators quoted as saying that they hoped to be jailed for shoplifting in order to have basic subsistence needs met.
9. While Bong tends to utilize a comic-book aesthetic rather than dwell in literary references, it cannot be coincidence that Kŏyŏ was also the setting of Cho Sehui's famed novel *The Dwarf* (1976), in which residents of a *p'anjach'on* (shantytown) are driven out due to redevelopment. Adding to the Boiler Kim story that makes up the mythology of the apartment's construction in the film itself, this allusion to yet another haunting extends beyond the film to the South Korean modern literary canon.
10. Banners around apartment complexes remind residents to do what they can to minimize *ch'ŭng'gan soŭm* ('noise between floors'). At least a few murders reported in newspapers each year are attributed to conflict over noise.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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