

THE NARRATIVE OF SURVIVAL: FOOD AND EATING AS MOTIFS IN *PARASITE* BY BONG JOON-HO

Mahdi Teimouri¹

ABSTRACT

The 2019 Oscar-winning movie, *Parasite*, contains numerous references to food and eating. It perfectly illustrates the cultural vigor and potency of an Asian movie industry capable of commanding global attention in the same vein that its food culture has done so far. I am interested in studying this movie from the standpoint of the struggle for existence which is embodied in its title. Any form of struggle as such involves subsistence and nourishment. In this paper I wish to look at this matter starting from investigating the implications that the title of the movie has. Then I will proceed to explore the significance of food and eating as an idea that dominates the movie creating a network of signification that underlies its storyline. By doing so, I will try to review the implicit and explicit ways through which eating and food feature in the narrative structure of the movie making them recurrent motifs.

Keywords: *parasite, host, subsistence, guest, survival*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, non-western foods and drinks including those originating in Asian countries have been growing in popularity around the world. A new trend seems to have emerged according to which local and ethnic foods as well as culinary practices have transcended their national or regional borders becoming widely available beyond their natural birthplaces. We usually associate fast foods with a western style of life, the production of which was inspired by a concurrent tendency towards mass production and eliminating time-consuming methods of production. Although fast food industry represented by its world-renowned and mostly American franchisers is still a booming business as franchisees are cropping up everywhere, its ubiquity is being challenged by the mesmerizing appeal of nonwestern foods which are nudging their way toward dining tables. The interesting point for me is the way the rising popularity of ethnic foods and non-western cuisine seems to have paved the way for the acceptance of other cultural products namely cinema and music.

There are different examples of the Asian or Hispanic signature foods that have appealed to the palate of people across the globe. Since my focus here is on the Korean movie, *Parasite*, I find it interesting to note that, in my opinion this movie represents the culmination of a cultural process that started through the global appeal of Korean cuisine. The movie merits attention for its

universal theme of struggle for survival in a world divided by inequitable distribution of wealth and resources. The setting of the movie clearly demonstrates this contrast between the underprivileged the Kims and the affluent the Parks. The sharp contrast between the Parks' residence and the Kims' accentuates the disparities in the lives of these two classes of society. This contrast is even visible in the physical description of Mr. Park and Mr. Kim and their spouses. Mr. Park and his wife look slim, and fit, while Mr. Kim and his wife are slovenly, unkempt and chubby. The Kims are obsessed with food. Their basement apartment with the low roof at the end of a dead-end represents their entrapment in a miserable life where drunkard can urinate with impunity. At the beginning of the movie, the Kims make a meagre living by folding pizza boxes which is very ironical as they contribute to food industry on an empty stomach.

When we speak of survival, food, shelter and security are the notions that come to our mind. From among these, food seems to be the biggest concern of the Kims. In this movie, there are numerous references to food and eating as recurring motifs. Critics and reviewers have tended to read *Parasite* in light of class division and differences. The movie can be seen as an allegory of class conflicts in a capitalist society depicted by the stark contrast between the Kims and the Parks. The availability of food is an index of social welfare separating the two families in their approach to eating for survival and eating for pleasure. For the Kims, food is barely available: there is no food stored or a fridge packed with cans and fruits. The Kims are so much impoverished that their subsistence is literally limited to a daily basis. In addition to the two prevailing functions of food, that is, survival and pleasure, there is a third potential use for food referred to in the movie. Just as in English they say one man's meat is another man's poison, the food consumed by some can have deadly effects on others. In the case of this movie, food is even used as a weapon to overcome an opponent who suffers from food allergy. So, while the movie's central concern with survival and self-preservation is a driving force helping the development of the narrative, there are other issues that arise in connection with this struggle for survival which I intend to explore such as the ethics of eating, and the emergence of the carnivalesque. My concern in this paper is to elaborate on some of the aspects of the movie which directly or indirectly are associated with food and eating. Before I expand on them, I would like to start with the title of the movie.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE TITLE

The preponderance of food and sustenance is boldly reflected in the title of the movie. The Kims can be taken as the titular parasite who gradually and guilefully work their way into the Parks' residence and life. Parasite is a curious concept because it immediately evokes its opposite which is 'host'. This is interesting because Bong Joon-ho is known for making a movie called *The Host* in 2006. It must be mentioned that the original name for the movie was 괴물 (Gwoemul) which translates to 'Monster' but to make the title less straightforward he decided to name it *The Host* adding thus intrigue and complexity to it. *The Host*, which is a monster flick about a strange creature crawling out of the Han River a few years after toxic chemical substances were dumped into the river by an American military pathologist, is clearly ambiguous as far as the title is concerned. The host could mean both the Han River which is of symbolic and historical importance to Koreans. By extension, the host can be Korea herself which is home to American military bases. There is a historical precedent for this movie as Anthony Kao in his review reminds us: "The film's beginning scene is actually based on a real 2000 incident in which a US Forces Korea mortician

ordered his staff to dump 120 liters of embalming fluid down the drain” (Kao). When viewed in light of this historical incident, the ambiguity of the title becomes more obvious. Is the host (i.e. South Korea) responsible for the appearance of the parasite (the monster)? The South Korean government’s agreement with the military presence of the American forces based on the Mutual Defense Treaty signed in 1953 placed it at the receiving end of domestic criticism. If the host can be held responsible for the emergence and breeding of parasitic entities then it is hard to categorically separate them. In an interview, in response to the inquiry, “The monster is described as the host to a possible virus, can you also look at Korea as playing host to the U.S. and the U.S. being a viral presence?”, Boon explains that

Yes, I think that is a possible interpretation. If you look up host in the dictionary there are various meanings. One is as you just said in terms of the virus. A host is the opposite of the word of parasite. But if you were to expand on that here in the film, the central focal point of the film is the protagonist’s family. This loser family. Whatever is tormenting this family, that is making life hard for them or oppressing them, you could say that whoever, whatever is not helping them on the whole--its a host of all those things. It could be the creature itself it could be the system that doesn’t help this family, Korean society, America, a wide spectrum of meaning for the host. (Bong Joon-ho 2007)

A similar titular ambiguity is present in *Parasite*. Commenting on the dual meaning of the name of the movie, Bong clarifies that

Because the story is about the poor family infiltrating and creeping into the rich house, it seems very obvious that Parasite refers to the poor family But if you look at it the other way, you can say that rich family, they're also parasites in terms of labor. They can't even wash dishes, they can't drive themselves, so they leech off the poor family's labor. So both are parasites. (Bong Joon-ho quoted in Ankers-Range 2020)

While Bong is referring to the functional and descriptive aspects of a parasitic existence, there is another way of investigating the ambiguity of the title through an etymological analysis. This is what I want to do here drawing on a paper by J.H. Miller.

There is an intriguing relationship between host and parasite as demonstrated by Miller, a staunch proponent of deconstruction. In “The Critic as Host”, he elaborates on the simultaneous contradictions within the term parasite and its uncanny interrelationship with its opposite, the host. The oppositional relationship between these two terms forms the basis upon which the semantic and thematic structure of the movie have been founded. Yet drawing on Miller’s paper, it becomes clear that the term parasite cannot be so unproblematically placed in a neat oppositional relationship with its opposite. The reason is that the concept of parasite contains within itself indeterminacy and ambivalence. My argument about *Parasite* relies on this knowledge of the inner contradictions of the term parasite which have been pointed out through an etymological analysis by Miller in his paper. As mentioned earlier, one of the recurring motifs of this movie is eating and food and I would like to, first, explore this by bringing to light the ambiguous implications of the title of this movie. In this section, first, I am going to elucidate Miller’s discussion on the term parasite which reveals the way it is shot through with ambivalence and then I will use this discussion to run a commentary on *Parasite*.

HOST AND PARASITE: A CLOSEUP

Miller's "The Critic as Host" is a response to the disparaging comments describing deconstructive reading as parasitical. Miller's strategy is to use the very allegations and turn them upon their head by shedding light on the inherent equivocality of the term 'parasite' itself. First, he argues that the term parasite has no meaning without its antithesis, the host. In other words, a parasite almost always harks back to a host. Both terms are in a sense interdependent, or even intertwined. This according to Miller, makes 'parasite' similar to *Unheimlich*, or the uncanny as both are internally fissured (p. 441). Through a labyrinthine etymological analysis, Miller strives to show how the term parasite has become associated with different semantic variations throughout history. His purpose is to prove the double antithetical nature of it. Words are capable of having this quality because they come from different roots or are made up of suffixes and prefixes that result in ambivalence:

an 'uncanny' double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something at once inside a domestic economy and outside it, something simultaneously this side of the boundary line, threshold, or margin, and at the same time beyond it, equivalent in status and at the same time secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master. (Miller, p. 441)

Miller explains that the prefix 'para' also indicates the border or the boundary separating the inside from outside. This means that the words made from 'para' always conjure up their opposites "like a slightly alien guest within the syntactical closure where all the words are family friends together" (Miller, p. 441). Miller then focuses on the term 'parasite' itself. He points to its Greek roots and explains that it literally means 'beside the grain' (*para* means beside and *sito* means grain). Parasite originally meant someone with whom you shared your food which later came to be identified as a freeloader or a sponger both in biological and social senses. The word 'host' also comes from a befuddling past which is indissociable from the historical roots of 'parasite'. 'Host' is associated with food, victim and sacrifice as Miller reminds us of the saying: "He is eating me out of the house and the home" (Miller, p. 442). The term host is ambivalently related to its opposite 'guest' because they share the same etymological root: *ghos-ti* meaning stranger, guest and host (Miller, p. 442). After elaborate explanations, Miller states that just like parasite and host, host and guest are also intertwined. In fact, a triangulation happens as parasite, host and guest become intermingled and interchangeable. He concludes that

The uncanny antithetical relation exists not only between pairs of words in this system, host and parasite, host and guest, but within each word in itself. It reforms itself in each polar opposite when that opposite is separated out, and it subverts or nullifies the apparently unequivocal relation of polarity which seems the conceptual scheme appropriate for thinking through the system. (Miller, p. 443)

Having said this, the movie *Parasite* can be viewed in light of this triangulation which is the result of the dissemination of the meaning of the term 'parasite'. This dissemination happens both literally and metaphorically. The Kims disseminate within the host, that is, Mr. Park's residence, as soon as one of them, the son, finds his way into it. The son, Ki-woo, is followed by his sister, Ki-jung, who then by plotting against the driver and the female servant, pave the way for the hiring of their parents as a driver and a maid. By impersonating as tutors, a maid and a chauffeur they not

only hide their relationship, but also dissimulate their parasitical intentions. In the presence of their host, they successfully hide their parasitical motives through their decent and respectable comportment. As servants and guests, they can benefit from the hospitality of their gracious but gullible master/host as long as their services are required. At the end of the day, they have to leave and return to their cramped basement in the poor neighborhood. The Kim family is a master of dissimulation: their civility is beguiling and their duplicity is undetectable. They manage to maintain this veneer of respect until the movie progresses to a point where they will be offered a chance to occupy the residence in the absence of the Parks. It is at this point that their parasitic nature is fully revealed as the Parks leave on a camping trip. During this time, the Kims not only occupy the house by also take liberty with everything within it. They indulge themselves with food and drinks creating a mess. I believe this is a pivotal scene in the movie because it coincides with a revelation which complicates the host vs. parasite axis. Before this scene and its ensuing dynamics, we can argue that the host and parasite are in an obvious oppositional relationship. In other words, the 'host' and 'parasite' refer to the Parks and the Kims, respectively. This duality is soon disrupted by the emergence of a residual semantic presence inhering in the concept of 'host' which was previously discussed. As mentioned earlier, host harks back to ghost and guest. The movie displays this semantic variation in its narrative as we will see later.

The Kim family's revelry is interrupted when Moon-gwang, the former maid, shows up at the door asking to be let in. She has been biding her time until the Parks are away and she can approach the house. When she enters the house, she goes to an underground bunker, unbeknownst to everyone even the owner, where her husband has been living a clandestine life for the past four years. This is a shocking revelation which problematizes the Parks' status as the proprietor and the host. The fact that an unknown, and undetected inmate has been living in the Parks' residence problematizes the host vs. parasite opposition embodied so far by the relationship between the Parks and the Kims. The guest/ghost of the house is Geun-se, Moon-gwang's husband, who is hiding away from loan-sharks in the bunker. Later we realize that he has been living off the Parks by sneaking out of his hideout during the night to snatch food from the fridge and cupboards. The introduction of a spectral entity to the movie is interesting because just as I said, a third dimension opens up in the host vs. parasite antithesis which confounds the polarity between them. Geun-se is both a guest and a ghost as well as an unofficial host. He took up residence in the house before the Parks bought it, was familiar with every nook and cranny of it and was living secretly through the help of his wife. In a way he is the host because he preceded the real owner in occupying it yet he has no legal claim to ownership. At the same time, he is a parasite who lives off the host.

The term ghost is a derivative of *ghos-ti* which in its Proto-Indo-European root "means stranger, guest, host; properly 'someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality'" (Watkins 1995, p. 23). Once more we see how the rigidity of meanings and identities is undermined and how borders become blurred. The domestic space of Mr. Park's residence is already haunted by Geun-se whose spectral presence complicates the host vs. parasite relationship. Geun-se has lived a subterranean life for years subsisting on foods he obtained from the fridge and kitchen during his nocturnal forays. To his dismay, he does not go unnoticed as one night he is spotted by Da-song, Mr. Park's little son, who throws a fit after he sees Geun-se's gaunt and emaciated face rising into view climbing up the stairs. The son later undergoes treatment for this traumatic encounter with the alleged ghost as nobody believes him.

Had it not been for subsistence, the stranger/ghost/guest would have never been discovered. Traditionally, the appearance of ghost has been associated with exacting vengeance or the

revelation of truth. The ghost of Hamlet's father is the quintessence of both functions. In *Parasite*, Geun-se is a harmless scavenging ghost, who has been infantilized by his wife. He takes bottles of milk and appears not as mentally sharp as one expects a grownup to be. Undeniably, his appearance in the movie, problematizes the host/ parasite axis. This disruption is not only limited to the sematic structure but affects the storyline, too. Da-song's encounter with the alleged ghost affects his paintings which encourages his mother to hire Ki-jung as an art therapist to cure him. Geun-se lives up to the reputed vengefulness of ghosts only toward the end of the movie when he wreaks havoc with Da-song's birthday party causing the death and injury. Before I proceed any further, I would like to stop here and reread the same scene that led to the disclosure of Geun-se's clandestine life in Mr. Park's residence from a different angle.

UNETHICAL EATING

When Moon-gwang's haggard face appears on the intercom screen pleading to be let in, Choong-sook, her successor, finds herself in a moral dilemma. At the height of the Kims' revelries a stranger shows up at the door interrupting their joy and alerting them to the precarity of their situation. To me this scene resonates with a typical Levinasian encounter between the other and the self, involving face and hunger. Both of these terms carry tremendous ethical weight for Emmanuel Levinas, because they signify an irrecusable moral responsibility. Levinas is noted for the radicality of his ethical philosophy. Briefly speaking, for Levinas moral responsibility precedes all other concerns such as being and knowing. In other words, our being is inseparably entwined with an infinite responsibility for the other. The moral command of the other is best represented by her face as it is the most defining characteristics of all human beings. The more we recognize a familiar face in the other the more we tend to be sympathetic or predisposed to exercising sympathetic imagination *vis-à-vis* her. That is why Levinas lays a great deal of emphasis on the centrality of face in his philosophy. The face also reveals inner feelings. Facial features speak volumes for the mental and physical state of the other, be it pain, hunger, fear, anguish etc. Therefore, the face commands attention:

This gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving . . . this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give. (Levinas 1979, p. 75)

Unlike some conceptions of morality that encourage and promote ascetism and self-denial as means to achieve a higher level of moral consciousness prompting soul-searching and leading to spiritual growth, Levinas's ethics is concerned with the other. Ethics as a result leads to sociality because for him ethics begins and ends with the other. Also, the route through which the self discovers the other is not mediated by knowledge, cognition or representation but sensibility characterized by enjoyment. Life, for Levinas, is inseparable from enjoyment; it is the satisfaction of being filled with joy and pleasure of living on the environment. In contrast to Levinas, Heidegger posits a practical connectivity between us and our surroundings: our immersion in a network of interrelation is so deep and widespread that we are no longer aware of it until something goes wrong. As long as we remain enmeshed in a benumbing and desensitizing relationship with our surroundings, our consciousness remains dormant. As soon as something goes wrong, we

become alert: as Eagleton puts it “A broken hammer is more of a hammer than an unbroken one” (p. 56). Unlike Heidegger, for Levinas our relationship to the world is based on subsistence: “I eat, therefore I am” (Goldstein 2010, p. 37). How can this enjoying self be expected to be responsible for the plight of the other? Pleasure and enjoyment are part and parcel of life. We believe we are inalienably entitled to a life devoid of suffering and hunger; living in misery cannot be taken for granted because life means pleasurable subsistence and the satisfaction of needs. Our subjection to hunger and the unavoidable desire for replenishment are issues Levinas uses as a basis for the invocation of moral responsibility. As mentioned above, contrary to some moral practices and ethical codes which value asceticism and self-mortification as ways to achieve self-fulfillment, Levinas construes morality an unbreakable relationship with the other. The corollary of this argument is that those who are capable of experiencing hunger and are familiar with the joy of eating can recognize hunger in the other. An emaciated face that evinces hunger is more than a plea for help but a command for being nourished: “To comprehend hunger in another is to acknowledge that the other has a face” (Goldstein 2010, p. 41). The recognition of the hunger in the other is a reminder and an acknowledgment of my own vulnerability. In other words, “only by understanding what it means to eat can we understand the relation of the subject to otherness, and only a subject that understands what it means to eat can truly be for, not just aware of, the other” (Goldstein 2010, p. 42).

Eating and food as the sources of pleasure, satisfaction and subsistence can stimulate ethical action. The Kims’ failure to acknowledge the plight and misery of the other is thought-provoking because they have already experienced starvation and been subjected to privation and reduced circumstances. The hunger they have felt must have predisposed them to an awareness of the precarity of existence. It is very disconcerting to see how their egotism clouds their sense of morality leading to their own destruction. According to Levinas “Only a subject that eats can be for-the-other” which means that responsibility makes sense “among beings of flesh and blood” (Levinas 1991, p. 74). The Kims’ failure to live up to their moral responsibility is caused by their concern for their own safety and job security. Self-preservation and survival go hand in hand with feeding and being fed. Moon-gwang’s maternal care for her husband and the urge to save him from starvation are motives that bring her to the door of Mr. Park’s residence. Once again, the motifs of food and eating help advance the storyline. Aside from the moral implications embedded in the encounter between the two needy families, what intrigues me about this scene is the reversal of roles and positions that is caused literally by the use of food. Two times in the movie food is used as a weapon to overcome an opponent who in this case is Moon-gwang. Her allergy to peach is her weakness which is initially used to frame and then oust her from the house under the pretext that she is a tubercular and later to stop her in the scuffle over the cellphone. Before I proceed to the last scene of the movie which is Da-song’s birthday party, I would like to discuss a few points about this scene.

The confrontation between the two parasitic families and their failure to reach a compromise is a point that was touched upon earlier. I am interested in the carnivalesque atmosphere of this section of the movie. Before Moon-gwang shows up the Kims are indulging themselves with foods and drinks. They are now the master of the house while they blabber about their dreams and future plans. Their indulgent and disrespectful behavior creates a carnivalesque atmosphere involving the reversal of roles and positions. They have been offered a moment of relief to mock and ridicule their master/employer, to replace them and to take liberty with their belongings. This carnivalesque element later resurfaces as Moon-gwang is massaging his husband and does an impression of an anchor from the Korean Central Television in North Korea who raves about an

imminent nuclear attack. The scramble for cellphone that ensues is interrupted by a call from Mrs. Park who informs Choong-sook that they are on their way back home as the rainstorm has ruined their camping trip. Mrs. Park orders Choong-sook to prepare 'Ram-Don' which according to Farahbakhsh and Ebrahimi is absurd because it is

a pretentious misuse of an expensive ingredient in a cheap noodle soup, where it does not belong, just like the Park family, or similar wealthy families, who actually do not belong to a society that is predominantly composed of middle and low class people. The opposite also applies: do the Kims (or metaphorically speaking, the smelly insects) belong to the capitalistic society. (p. 105-106)

Before the Parks arrive, the Kims manage to subdue and trap Moon-gwang and her husband in the bunker, and to hide themselves in the house only to sneak out of it after everyone is asleep. They reach their flooded basement apartment and bed down for the night in a shelter set up for those affected by the storm. Next day is the big day as Da-song's birthday party preparation requires the help and attendance of the Kims. Distracted and disillusioned they need to carry out their orders and ensure that everything goes as planned. The carnivalesque undertones of the Kims' carousing and revelry the night before contained a touch of grotesqueries which ended in violence. Just as Moon-gwang and her husband are hushed and driven underground these grotesqueries are repressed temporarily to reappear later during the birthday party as the alleged ghost (Geun-se) materializes to exact vengeance. This scene is the culmination of a series of events that have driven the plot to this climactic moment. The birthday party descends into a bloody and murderous scene of score-settling where bodies are gored and impaled by kitchen utensils and barbecue skewer. The occurrence of the ghastly murders in the context of the birthday party contrasts sharply with its celebratory mood. The proximity of food and human body, the gushing and splashing of human blood on food, and the barbecue skewer loaded with grilled sausage jabbed into the body, lend this scene cannibalistic overtones, too. In the act of eating as Bakhtin argues,

the confines between the body and the world are overstepped by the body; it triumphs over the world, over its enemy, celebrates its victory, grows at the world's expense. This element of victory and triumph is inherent in all banquet images. The banquet always celebrates a victory and this is part of its very nature. . . . It is the triumph of life over death. In this respect it is equivalent to conception and birth. The victorious body receives the defeated world and is renewed. (Bakhtin 1984, p. 282-283)

In this scene, the conflation of the host as the provider of food and the host as the food takes place which is the same thing that Miller argues when pointing to the inherent ambivalence of the concept of 'parasite':

The host and the somewhat sinister or subversive parasite are fellow guests beside the food, sharing it. On the other hand, the host is himself the food, his substance consumed without recompense, as when one says, 'He is eating me out of house and home'. (442)

Following the mayhem created in Da-song's birthday party, it is Mr. Kim that replaces Geun-se in the bunker to hide from police. The Park family move out of the house which is sold to a German family, while nobody knows about Mr. Kim's whereabouts. He becomes literally the host/ghost who surreptitiously continues living in the house. The bunker becomes his abode while during the night he creeps out of his hiding like a ghost to steal food for survival.

CONCLUSION

Food and eating as recurring motifs help to advance the plot of the movie. At the same time their recurrence carries significant historical, ethical and etymological implications which I tried to tease out here. In presenting my analysis of the movie, I focused on the scenes and events that contained eating and food while each contributed to the overall theme of the movie which includes survival and self-preservation. The concern for subsistence and sustenance is embodied by the title of the movie. My analysis was an attempt to emphasize the need to look beyond a facile interpretation of the movie prompted by its title. In my argument I also tried to demonstrate how some pivotal scenes in the movie which involve food and the consumption of it can have important thematic implications.

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¹ Department of English, Khayyam University, Mashhad, Iran.
Emails: m.teimouri@khayyam.ac.ir
teymoori58@yahoo.com