Journal of Global Trends in Social Science

https://doi.org/10.70731/wch2w769

The Scars of Memory, the Trap of Desire, and the Mirror of Class: an Interpretation of Social Allegories in Bong Joon-ho's Films

Ying Ma [a,*]

[a] *Anhui University, Hefei 230039, China*

KEYWORDS

Bong Joon-Ho, Class Allegory; Desire Narrative, Scars of Memory, Korean Cinema, Social Critique

ABSTRACT

Bong Joon-ho's films are renowned for their profound revelation and critique of South Korean social realities. This paper interprets the social allegories in Bong Joon-ho's films, such as *Parasite, Memories of Murder*, *Snowpiercer*, *The Host*, and *Mother*, through the lens of the scars of memory, the trap of desire, and the mirror of class. The films touch upon the collective "scars of memory" of the Korean people, demonstrating the historical causes and social impact of the "Han" cultural psychology through metaphors and representations of historical traumatic events. Employing Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, this paper analyzes the "trap of desire" – the alienation of characters in the context of capitalism, revealing the anxiety and loss of the lower class in the pursuit of the "ideal self." Furthermore, these films construct a "mirror of class" that reflects the solidification of social hierarchy and the disparity between the rich and the poor in South Korean society by depicting the living conditions of different classes. Bong Joon-ho's cinematic allegories are not only artistic representations of social issues in South Korea but also provide profound insights into understanding the universal problems of class conflict, human alienation, and historical memory in contemporary society.

1. Introduction

Bong Joon-ho has emerged as a prominent figure in contemporary cinema, renowned for his incisive social commentaries embedded within a unique blend of genres. His films, including *Parasite* (2019), *Memories of Murder* (2003), *Snowpiercer* (2013), *The Host* (2006), and *Mother* (2009), have garnered critical acclaim and popular success globally, offering a powerful lens through which to examine the complexities of South Korean society and beyond. This paper delves into the social allegories in Bong's films, arguing that they provide a multifaceted critique of contemporary social issues through the intertwined dimensions of historical trauma, the intricacies of human desire, and the stark realities of class stratification.

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: 19112@ahu.edu.cn

Received 24 December 2024; Received in revised form 15 January 2025; Accepted 22 January 2025; Available online 27 January 2025.

While much scholarly attention has focused on the themes of class conflict and social inequality in Bong's oeuvre (Kim, 2023; S. Kim, 2019), a comprehensive analysis integrating the perspectives of collective memory, psychoanalytic theory, and spatial politics remains relatively unexplored. Existing studies have often examined these themes in isolation, failing to fully capture the intricate interplay between historical experience, psychological forces, and socio-economic structures that characterizes Bong's cinematic narratives. For instance, while some studies have applied Lacanian psychoanalysis to film (McGowan, 2007), they have not adequately addressed the unique ways in which desire operates within the context of Bong's exploration of class and social memory as informed by the concept of "Han" which is rooted in historical trauma (Lee, 1967). Similarly, the exploration of trauma in Korean cinema (Chung, 2014) often overlooks the specific engagement with the concept of "Han" in Bong's films. Moreover, though scholars like Lefebvre (1991) and Soja (1996) have provided valuable insights into the production of space and its relation to power, their theories have not been systematically applied to the analysis of spatial politics in Bong's films in relation to both class and historical memory.

This paper seeks to bridge these gaps by offering a more holistic interpretation of Bong Joon-ho's cinematic allegories. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011), Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1977), and critical spatial theory (Lefebvre, 1991), this study examines how Bong's films interweave the scars of memory, the trap of desire, and the mirror of class to illuminate the multifaceted social pathologies of contemporary South Korea. It argues that the concept of "Han" provides a crucial key to understanding the enduring impact of collective memory on the South Korean psyche. Furthermore, by employing Lacanian concepts such as the mirror stage, this paper analyzes the psychic struggles and alienated desires of characters in films like *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer*. Finally, by exploring the cinematic representation of space, this study reveals how Bong's films expose the stark realities of class inequality and spatial injustice in South Korean society.

This tripartite framework - encompassing the scars of memory, the trap of desire, and the mirror of class - enables a nuanced understanding of how Bong's films function as social allegories. They not only reflect the specific historical and social context of South Korea but also resonate with broader global concerns regarding social injustice, human alienation, and the enduring power of the past. By examining the intricate connections between these three dimensions, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Bong Joon-ho's cinematic art and its profound social and political significance. The subsequent sections will explore each of these dimensions in detail, drawing on close readings of key films and relevant theoretical insights, ultimately arguing that Bong's films offer a powerful and timely critique of the complex interplay between history, psyche, and social structure in the contemporary world.

2. The Scars of Memory: Historical Trauma and the Cinematic Echoes of "Han"

If cinema is a mirror reflecting reality, then Bong Joon-ho's films are undoubtedly a mirror laden with the collective memory of South Korea, reflecting the scars left by the nation's historical trajectory. This section delves into the theme of "the scars of memory," exploring how Bong Joon-ho addresses historical trauma in his films and how the unique cultural psychology of "Han" is presented and transformed on screen. By examining theories of collective memory and analyzing the cinematic expression of "Han" in Bong's films, we will see how the specter of history haunts the screen and is converted into a powerful force for social critique. Bong's films are not only a retrospection of the past but also an interrogation of the present. They employ highly expressive cinematic language to intricately connect individual memory with collective memory, personal emotions with national destiny, prompting audiences to profoundly reflect on history, society, and human nature.

2.1. The Genesis of "Han": Collective Memory of Historical Trauma

"Han," as a key to understanding the Korean cultural psyche, carries a profound historical accumulation. It is not merely an individual emotional experience but a collective, intergenerational cultural memory. The formation of "Han" is inextricably linked to a series of traumatic events in modern Korean history, including the Japanese colonial rule, the Korean War, and the military dictatorship. These events not only had a far-reaching impact on the political and economic fabric of South Korean society but also left indelible scars on the collective psyche of the Korean people, thus shaping a unique national character and

collective identity. As Lee O-young points out in his book In This Earth & In That Wind: This is Korea, "Han" is a collective emotion of the Korean people, deeply rooted in the historical and cultural soil of Korea (Lee, 1967). This section will first trace the historical roots of "Han," and explore, in conjunction with theories of collective memory, how these traumatic events are inscribed in collective memory and transformed into a collective emotional structure that transcends time.

Collective memory theory provides an important theoretical perspective for understanding the intergenerational transmission of "Han." French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, in his seminal work On Collective Memory, argues that individual memories are not isolated but are formed and recalled within social frameworks, influenced by group affiliations (Halbwachs, 1992). Memory is not a mere reproduction of past events but a social construction, constantly reinforced and reproduced through various commemorative activities, rituals, and symbolic representations. During the Japanese colonial rule, Korea's language, culture, and national identity were subjected to brutal suppression and destruction. This humiliating history became an indelible pain in the collective memory of Koreans. The Korean War imprinted the tragedy of national division deep in the hearts of every Korean, resulting in the separation of countless families and the loss of loved ones. During the military dictatorship, political repression and human rights violations further deepened social divisions and the suffering of the people. These historical traumatic events, through oral histories, literature, films, and other media, are constantly being narrated, recalled, and interpreted, thus constructing a collective memory framework with "Han" at its core.

This collective memory, with "Han" as its keynote, is not merely a lament and sorrow for the past, but also transforms into a potential driving force for social change. In the process of democratization in South Korea, reflection on and reckoning with historical trauma played an important role. For example, the "Gwangju Uprising," although suppressed and covered up by the authorities at the time, saw the spirit of resistance of the Gwangju citizens rediscovered and affirmed with the advancement of the democratization movement, becoming a symbol of South Korea's democratization. This pursuit of historical justice reflects the spirit of resistance and transformation embedded in the emotion of "Han". That is, the Korean people have gradually transformed the emotion of "Han" from a passive endurance to an active force of resistance and change. Lee O-young emphasizes that "Han" is not a simple hatred, but a complex emotion that encompasses pain, sorrow, regret, anger, and ultimately points to a hope for the future (Lee, 1967). They no longer dwell on past pains but draw strength from them, striving to build a more just and democratic society. This sentiment of "Han" has also profoundly influenced South Korean cultural expressions, especially in the film industry, becoming an important source of creative inspiration and a tool for social critique.

In summary, the genesis of "Han" is closely linked to the traumatic events in modern Korean history. These events are constantly recalled, constructed, and transmitted within the framework of collective memory, forming an emotional structure with "Han" at its core. This emotional structure is both a remembrance of historical suffering and an embodiment of resistance to injustice and aspiration for future change. It transcends the realm of individual emotion and becomes a cultural psychology with profound social and political connotations, providing an important entry point for understanding the spiritual characteristics of South Korean society. At the same time, it lays a solid theoretical foundation for us to understand the expression of "Han" in Bong Joon-ho's films and the historical memory and social criticism it carries.

2.2. The Shadow of "Han": Cinematic Expression of Traumatic Memory and Social Critique

Bong Joon-ho's films are renowned for their profound insights into social realities and their sharp critiques, and the cinematic expression of "Han" plays a crucial role in them. If the genesis of "Han" originates from historical trauma, then in Bong's films, this traumatic memory is transformed into a force for social critique through a highly expressive cinematic language. This section will focus on how Bong presents the shadow of "Han" in his films, analyzing how "Han" becomes a strategy for cinematic expression and how this strategy is closely integrated with social critique. Through a close reading of films such as *Memories of Murder*, *The Host*, and *Mother*, we will reveal how Bong uses "Han" as a guide to direct the audience's attention to the concealed historical truth, overlooked social injustices, and the repressed darker side of humanity.

In *Memories of Murder*, one of Bong's early masterpieces, the cinematic expression of "Han" is ex-

emplified. Based on the Hwaseong serial murders in South Korea, the film tells the story of several police officers investigating a series of murders during the military dictatorship. The film does not focus on solving the case but rather reveals the darkness and repression of South Korean society at that time through the investigation process. The police's violent law enforcement, torture to extract confessions, and disregard and cover-up of the truth all became a microcosm of that era. In the film, Park Doo-man (Song Kang-ho), as a grassroots police officer, gradually transforms from a numb and violent enforcer to a person who is persistent in pursuing the truth and full of sympathy for the victims. This transformation is precisely the process of the awakening of "Han." His "Han" towards the murderer, the system, and his own powerlessness are intertwined, pushing him to constantly seek the truth. Even if ultimately futile, his efforts are still commendable. This expression of "Han" transcends the level of individual revenge and becomes a reflection on history and a critique of social reality.

In *The Host*, Bong connects the emotion of "Han" more directly with social critique. The film uses a monster that appears in the Han River as a narrative trigger to tell the story of an ordinary family fighting against the monster. The appearance of this monster is, on the surface, caused by the US military dumping chemical waste into the Han River, but it actually serves as a metaphor for various problems in South Korean society at the time, such as government dereliction of duty, bureaucratic corruption, and disregard for people's lives. In the film, Park Gang-du (Song Kang-ho) and his family, as representatives of the lower class, not only have to face the threat of the monster but also have to deal with obstruction and suppression from the government. Their "Han" towards the monster, the government, and their own fate are intertwined and converge into a powerful force of resistance. This expression of "Han" is no longer limited to the venting of individual emotions but points to broader social issues and has a stronger sense of social critique. Through the metaphor of the "monster," Bong directly targets the flaws of the social system, prompting the audience to reflect on reality.

In *Mother*, Bong's presentation of "Han" becomes more restrained and complex. The film tells the story of a mother who tries to clear her mentally challenged son of a murder charge, pursuing the truth at all costs. The mother's love for her son and her "Han" towards those who framed him constitute the main emotional driving force of the film. However, as the plot unfolds, the audience discovers that the truth is far more complicated than imagined. The mother's "Han" is both reasonable and blind. To protect her son, she even resorts to murder to cover up the truth. This distorted maternal love is both sympathetic and chilling. Bong does not simply judge the mother's behavior but places her in a moral dilemma, leaving the audience to ponder and judge. This complex presentation of "Han" reflects Bong's profound insight into human nature and makes the film's social critique even more far-reaching. In *Mother*, Bong adopts a more restrained and introverted way of expressing "Han". This kind of "Han" no longer stays on the surface but goes deep into the characters' inner world, becoming an unspeakable and unresolvable pain.

In summary, the genesis of "Han" is closely linked to the traumatic events in modern Korean history. These events are constantly recalled, constructed, and transmitted within the framework of collective memory, forming an emotional structure with "Han" at its core. This emotional structure is both a remembrance of historical suffering and an embodiment of resistance to injustice and aspiration for future change. It transcends the realm of individual emotion and becomes a cultural psychology with profound social and political connotations, providing an important entry point for understanding the spiritual characteristics of South Korean society. At the same time, it lays a solid theoretical foundation for us to understand the expression of "Han" in Bong Joon-ho's films and the historical memory and social criticism it carries. Bong's cinematic expression of "Han" has undergone a process of development from externalization to internalization, from directness to indirectness, and from simplicity to complexity. While in earlier works such as *Memories of Murder* and *The Host*, "Han" is more manifested as a resistance to external oppression and a critique of social injustice, in *Mother*, "Han" points more to the complexity of human nature and moral dilemmas. This shift reflects Bong's deepening understanding of "Han" and gives his films richer connotations and a more profound sense of social critique. If the scars of memory constitute the emotional background of "Han," then Bong Joon-ho's films provide us with an excellent sample for understanding "Han," allowing us to see how historical trauma leaves its mark on the screen and transforms into a force that directly impacts the human heart. As Lee O-young (1967) puts it, "Han" is an "unfinished" emotion, which is both a memory of the past and an

expectation for the future. Bong's films are not only artistic expressions but also profound reflections on history, society, and human nature. They are not merely commodities for entertainment, but also a medium for dialogue and communication with the audience.

3. The Trap of Desire: Subject's Dilemma Under the Lacanian Mirror

If "the scars of memory" explores the entanglement between history and the present, then "the trap of desire" turns its attention to the psychological dimension of individuals in modern society, focusing on the disorientation and struggles of the subject driven by desire. This section will use Lacan's psychoanalytic theory as the main framework, combined with the presentation of the theme of desire in Bong Joon-ho's films, to interpret the "trap of desire" that individuals in modern society can hardly escape. We will see that in the context of prevalent consumerism and increasingly solidified class structure, how individuals fall into the persistent pursuit of the "ideal self," and how this pursuit leads to the alienation and anxiety of the subject. Through an in-depth analysis of films such as *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer*, we will reveal how Bong uses the medium of film to profoundly expose and critique the predicament of desire for modern people. This section will follow the analysis of the historical background of South Korean society in the first part and provide a psychological explanation for the discussion of class issues in the next part.

3.1. Mirror and Disorientation: the Application of Lacanian Theory in Film

Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, especially his mirror stage theory, provides an insightful perspective for understanding the desire mechanism of individuals in modern society. Lacan argues that the subject's self-awareness is not innate but is formed through the identification with the image in the "mirror stage." This "mirror" can be a real mirror, or it can be others or some idealized image. Through the identification with the image, the subject constructs an "ideal-I," but this "ideal-I" is not the real self of the subject, but a fictional, imaginary construction. In capitalist society, mass media and consumer culture construct numerous illusions of the "ideal self," inducing individuals to constantly pursue and imitate. This section will first briefly introduce Lacan's mirror stage theory, as well as the three registers of desire: need, demand, and desire, and explore how these theories can be applied to film analysis, especially the presentation of the theme of desire in Bong Joon-ho's films. We will see how Lacan's theory helps us understand the characters' motivations, psychological states, and their interactions with the social environment in the films.

Lacan's mirror stage theory suggests that between the ages of 6 and 18 months, the infant, by recognizing its own image in the mirror, forms the initial cognition of the "self" (Lacan, 1977). The "mirror" in this stage is not just a physical mirror, but can also be the mother's gaze, the reactions of others, etc. The infant identifies with the image in the mirror, forming a prototype of the "ideal-I." However, this "ideal-I" is based on méconnaissance (misrecognition) because the image in the mirror is a whole, coordinated image, while the infant's own experience is fragmented and uncoordinated. This gap between the "ideal-I" and the real self becomes the source of desire. The subject spends its entire life pursuing the unity with the "ideal-I," but this unity can never be truly achieved. In Bong Joon-ho's films, we can often see the characters' persistent pursuit of a certain "ideal self," such as the Kim family's yearning for the life of the upper class in *Parasite*, and the lower-class people's worship of the "engine" in *Snowpiercer*. These can be seen as symbols of the "ideal-I."

Lacan further distinguishes between the three registers of need, demand, and desire. Need is physiological, such as hunger and thirst; demand is directed towards others and is social in nature, such as love and recognition; desire, however, can never be fully satisfied. It points to a forever-lost "originary object" (objet petit a), which in Lacan represents the imaginary state of "completeness" that the subject lost upon entering the symbolic order. This characteristic of desire makes the subject always in a state of "lack," constantly chasing after one substitute after another, but never able to obtain real satisfaction. In Bong Joon-ho's films, the characters' desires often go beyond basic survival needs and general social demands, pointing to a deeper, ineffable "lack." For example, the Kim family's desire for wealth and status in *Parasite* is not just to satisfy material needs but also to fill a symbolic "lack" - the feeling of inferiority brought about by their position in the social structure. Their desire is guided by the symbolic system of capitalist society, pointing to the "upper class" as a constructed "ideal object." They hope to enter this

"promised land" through "parasitism" so as to obtain a false sense of "completeness."

In summary, Lacan's mirror stage theory and theory of desire provide an important theoretical framework for us to understand the desire mechanism and psychological state of the characters in Bong Joon-ho's films. Through the analysis of the formation of the "ideal-I" and the distinction between need, demand, and desire, we can gain a deeper understanding of the characters' motivations and their interactions with the social environment. Lacan's theory helps us realize that the desires of individuals in modern society are not spontaneous and natural but are constructed by social culture, especially guided by the symbolic system of capitalism. This constructed desire often leads to the alienation and anxiety of the subject, trapping them in a hard-to-escape "trap of desire." In the next section, we will specifically analyze the "trap of desire" in *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer*, further revealing Bong Joon-ho's profound insights into the living conditions of individuals in modern society.

3.2. Desire and Alienation: Subject Construction and Anxiety in Film

Under the Lacanian framework, the pursuit of desire is not a smooth path to satisfaction but rather a Sisyphean labor that never ends. When the subject projects its desire onto the socially constructed "ideal-I," it is destined to be alienated in the pursuit. Bong Joon-ho's films profoundly reveal this prevalent phenomenon of desire alienation in modern society, showing the anxiety and disorientation of individual subject construction under the influence of capitalism and consumerism. This section will take *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer* as examples to analyze the expression of desire of the characters in the films and how these desires lead to their alienation in the social structure. We will see how Bong reveals the predicament of survival and the spiritual crisis that individuals in modern society can hardly escape through the detailed depiction of the characters' desires.

In *Parasite*, the Kim family is a typical example of alienation caused by desire in Lacan's sense. They live at the bottom of society, residing in a cramped semi-basement, living a precarious life. However, they never stop yearning for and pursuing the "upper class." This yearning is not so much a desire for material enjoyment as it is a desire for a symbolic identity, a strong desire to escape their "humble" status and gain social recognition. The Kim family, through a series of carefully planned scams, "parasitizes" the Park family. They imitate the speech and behavior of the upper class, trying to disguise themselves as "upper-class people." However, this state of "parasitism" is itself an alienation. They can never truly integrate into the world they dream of, but are always in a state of anxiety and fear, afraid that their true identity will be revealed. The recurring motif of "smell" in the film is precisely a metaphor for this anxiety. The "smell" of Kim Ki-taek is an indelible mark of the lower class that he can never get rid of, and it is also an insurmountable gap between him and the upper class. This "smell" is not only an attribute of their class but also a metaphor for their inescapable fate of being excluded and negated as the "Other." Lacan, in his proposition that "the unconscious is structured like a language," points out that the "signifier" can only acquire meaning in connection with the "signified," and that human desire can only be defined and expressed in relation to others. The object of desire is always the object of the desire of the other, and human desire can only be defined through the desire of the other or as the desire of the other (Lacan, 2018). That is to say, human desire is never a spontaneous internal product, but is closely related to the relational structure with others. Therefore, the Kim family's longing for the upper-class life is not only a product of their own desire but is also formed through long-term comparison and identification with the "upper class." Their complex emotions of envy and jealousy towards the "upper class" are precisely the result of the structural alienation of their own desire.

When the Kim family takes over the Park's house and enjoys a brief "carnival," their identification with the "ideal-I" reaches its peak. They wantonly enjoy the food, wine, and space that do not originally belong to them, imagining that they have become the owners of this mansion. However, this "carnival" is destined to be short-lived and illusory. The sudden appearance of the former housekeeper, Moon-gwang, shatters their dream and pulls them back to the cruel reality. Moon-gwang and her husband, as beings more "lower class" than the Kim family, have been "parasitizing" in the basement for years, living a more miserable life. Moon-gwang represents a deeper level of exploitative relationship in capitalist society. She is the "lower class" among the "lower class." Moon-gwang's appearance is not only an accusation of the solidification of classes in capitalist society and the inability of the lower class to change their destiny

through their own efforts, but it also directly causes the Kim family to wake up from their illusory dream and realize that they are always "parasites." In the conflict in the basement, they kill each other in order to survive, eventually leading to destruction. The fate of the Kim family is a microcosm of the struggle of countless lower-class people in capitalist society. They are driven by desire, but they constantly lose themselves in the pursuit of desire, eventually falling into the abyss of despair. Žižek points out that in modern society, "ideology" is not just a false consciousness, but a "structure of fantasy" that supports our social reality (Žižek, 2008). The Kim family's fantasy of the upper class is precisely the embodiment of this "ideology." It conceals the real contradictions of capitalist society, making people forget their true situation in illusory satisfaction.

If *Parasite* shows the desire of individuals to climb up in a class-solidified society and its disillusionment, *Snowpiercer* allegorically presents the alienation and discipline of desire in an extreme environment. The film constructs a post-apocalyptic world where the surviving humans live on a train that never stops. The train is strictly divided into different sections, with the lower-class people at the rear living in dirty and crowded conditions, while the elites at the front enjoy a luxurious life. This spatial segregation is a metaphor for the social hierarchy. In Lacan's theoretical framework, the yearning of the lower-class people at the rear for the front can be seen as a pursuit of the "ideal-I." They long to escape their "humble" status and enter the "promised land" that symbolizes power and wealth. However, this desire is strictly disciplined and controlled from the beginning. The "engine worship" in *Snowpiercer* is similar to a religious fanaticism. Through the maintenance of the "sacred" engine and absolute obedience to the train conductor Wilford, the class hierarchy in the carriage and the resistance of the passengers are dissolved. Curtis, as the "chosen one," leads the "revolutionary" team all the way forward. His ultimate goal is to reach the front, control the "sacred" engine, and establish a new order. The "revolution" in the film seems to be a resistance to the existing order, but in fact, Curtis, the leader of the "revolution," has internalized the existing hierarchy, and his "revolutionary" motive is also out of a desire for power and leadership. He does not want to completely overthrow the existing hierarchy, but to become the new leader of the existing system. Therefore, this pursuit of the "ideal-I" ultimately becomes the maintenance of the existing order. Baudrillard, in The Consumer Society , points out that in a consumer society, the symbolic value of commodities replaces their use value. People consume not the commodities themselves, but the meanings and symbols they represent (Baudrillard, 1998). To some extent, the "engine" in *Snowpiercer* can also be seen as a "commodity symbol." It represents power, order, and the hope of survival, while the people at the rear are controlled by the illusion produced by "consuming" this symbol.

In conclusion, Bong Joon-ho's films profoundly reveal the "trap of desire" of individuals in modern society. Under the framework of Lacan's theory, we can see that this "trap of desire" does not originate from the "greed" or "degeneration" of the individual, but is closely related to the structural contradictions of capitalist society. Whether it is the Kim family's yearning for the "upper class" in *Parasite* or the desire of the lower-class people for the "front" in *Snowpiercer*, they all reflect a pursuit of the socially constructed "ideal-I." However, this pursuit often leads to the alienation and anxiety of the subject, trapping them in a predicament that is difficult to escape. McGowan (2007) once pointed out that Hollywood films often conceal the contradictions of reality by constructing a "fantasy space," while Bong Joon-ho's films do the opposite. He reveals the cruelty of reality by showing the disillusionment of "fantasy." Bong Joon-ho's films do not provide us with an answer to solve this dilemma, but his profound revelation of the "trap of desire" is itself a powerful critique. He forces us to think: in a society where class is solidified and the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, how can individuals escape the shackles of desire and realize their true selves? His films are not only a reflection of reality but also an interrogation of reality. Through the presentation of the "trap of desire," Bong's films form an intertextual relationship with the "scars of memory" discussed in the first part. If the "scars of memory" reflect the trauma left by South Korean society in the historical process, then the "trap of desire" reveals the spiritual crisis faced by individuals in contemporary capitalist society. This spiritual crisis stems not only from external social pressures but also from the alienation of individual desires. Jameson, in his analysis of the cultural logic of postmodernism, points out that an important feature of late capitalism is "the waning of affect," that is, people's emotional experiences become increasingly superficial, homogenized, and elusive (Jameson, 1991). This "waning of affect" is also reflected in Bong Joon-ho's films. For exam-

ple, in *Parasite*, Kim Ki-taek's final act of violence seems to be an explosion of "Han," but it is more like a kind of desperate act that has nowhere to vent and has no purpose. Kim Ki-taek's "Han" has lost its clear object and turned into a pervasive, indescribable anxiety and anger. This "waning of affect" is precisely a manifestation of the "trap of desire" in contemporary society. It makes it difficult for people to establish real emotional connections and to form effective resistance. Both of these crises are closely related to the "mirror of class" that will be discussed in the next part. It can be said that Bong Joon-ho's films, with their unique perspective and profound insights, provide us with a valuable sample for understanding the living conditions and spiritual dilemmas of individuals in modern society.

4. The Mirror of Class: Cinematic Refractions of Social Stratification in South Korea

If the previous two sections explored the "scars of memory" and the "trap of desire" in South Korean society from the perspectives of historical memory and individual psychology, this section will focus on the practical dimension of South Korean society, namely, class stratification and the social problems it brings. Bong Joon-ho's films are renowned for their keen capture and profound presentation of social class issues. They are like a "mirror of class," reflecting the harsh reality of class solidification and the widening gap between the rich and the poor in South Korean society. This section takes the perspectives of spatial politics, symbiotic relationships, and the "monster" metaphor as entry points to analyze in depth how films such as *Parasite*, *Snowpiercer*, and *The Host* present the class landscape of South Korean society and explore the social critical significance behind these image expressions. We will see how Bong uses the medium of film to put social class issues in the spotlight, triggering the audience to think deeply about social equity, justice, and other issues. At the same time, the analysis in this section will form an intertext with the previous two sections' discussions of "the scars of memory" and "the trap of desire," revealing the internal connections between the three dimensions of history, psychology, and reality.

4.1. Space and Power: the Class Geography in Film

Space is not a neutral, passive container but a product of social construction, carrying the operation and reproduction of power relations. French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, in his The Production of Space, points out that the production of space is closely related to social power structures, ideologies, and capitalist modes of production (Lefebvre, 1991). In Bong Joon-ho's films, space becomes an important narrative element and critical tool. Through the comparison and presentation of the living and activity spaces of different classes, he reveals the profound class divisions and inequality in South Korean society. This section will take "spatial politics" as a perspective, combined with Lefebvre's spatial theory, Edward Soja's concept of "Thirdspace" (Soja, 1996), David Harvey's critique of capitalist space production (Harvey, 2006), and Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" (Foucault, 1986), and Mark Gottdiener's analysis of postmodern semiotics and spatial representation (Gottdiener, 1995), to analyze the writing of space in Bong's films and explore how these spaces become metaphors and carriers of class power relations. We will see how space is produced, distributed, and contested in the films, and how these spaces, in turn, shape the characters' destinies and their relationships with each other.

In *Parasite*, the contrast and conflict of space constitute the main dramatic tension of the film. The semi-basement where the Kim family lives is a typical representation of the living space of the lower class. This kind of semi-basement is cramped, dark, damp, with dim light and poor ventilation, symbolizing the cramped living conditions and limited development space of the lower class. It is in stark contrast to the spacious and bright luxury houses of the upper class. American scholar Doreen Massey, in her discussion of "power geometry," emphasizes that different groups have vastly different mobility and accessibility in space, and this difference reflects the inequality of power relations (Massey, 2012). The Kim family's limitation and marginalization in space are precisely the embodiment of this "power geometry." In stark contrast is the Park family's mansion. This mansion is located on higher ground, spacious and bright, beautifully designed, with a wide view and plenty of sunlight. These spaces in the film symbolize different social classes and their respective social positions. More importantly, this mansion also hides a more secret basement, where the former housekeeper's husband has lived in seclusion for many years. The juxtaposition and contrast of these three spaces not only show the harsh reality of class stratification in South Korean society but also metaphorically represent the

complex power relations between different classes. Harvey (2006) once pointed out that the production of capitalist urban space is often accompanied by social segregation and marginalization. The spatial distribution in *Parasite* is precisely a manifestation of this social segregation and marginalization. Scholars like Kim (2023) have analyzed how the living spaces of different classes in *Parasite* reflect the class divisions and power relations in South Korean society from the perspective of spatial politics.

The struggle for and invasion of space constitute the main conflict in *Parasite*. The Kim family, through deception and disguise, "invades" the Park family's mansion and tries to replace the original servant team. This "invasion" can be seen as a challenge to the existing spatial order, a "transgression" of the upper-class space. However, this "transgression" is doomed to be temporary and illusory. They can never truly integrate into the upper class and are eventually expelled back to their original space. The film repeatedly shows scenes of the Kim family "escaping" from the mansion back to the semi-basement. These scenes not only show the huge gap between the two classes but also imply the difficulty of upward mobility for the lower class. Soja, in his "Thirdspace" theory, emphasizes the possibility of spatial resistance, that is, the oppressed can challenge the existing power order by redefining and utilizing space (Soja, 1996). However, in *Parasite*, this spatial resistance ultimately fails, and the Kim family can never change their class destiny. Giddens' "structuration theory" emphasizes that social structure is both the premise of social action and is also constrained by it. That is, social structure restricts the action, but it is not completely determined. Action can also affect the social structure (Giddens, 1984). The Kim family's "invasion" of space can be seen as a kind of resistance to the existing social structure, but this resistance ultimately fails to change the social structure they are in, but instead exacerbates their own predicament.

The spatial politics of *Snowpiercer* is more direct and allegorical. The whole story of the film takes place on a train that never stops. This train itself is a miniature social model. The class division of the carriages corresponds to the class division in real society. The lower-class people at the rear of the train live in a crowded, dirty environment with scarce resources, while the elites at the front enjoy a luxurious life. This spatial segregation is not only to maintain the order of the train but also to safeguard the interests of the elite class. In the film, the "revolution" of the lower class is essentially a spatial "revolution." They try to move from the rear to the front and seize control of the train. This spatial struggle can be seen as a challenge to the power structure of capitalist society. However, the ending of the film is quite ironic. Curtis eventually discovers that the order of the train is built on the brutal exploitation of the lower class, and his own "revolution" is only part of this order. This ending reveals the illusory nature of the "utopian" imagination. Foucault and Miskowiec (1986) once pointed out in his discussion of "heterotopia" that space can be a place for the operation of power and a field for resistance and subversion. The train space in *Snowpiercer* is both a place of power oppression and a stage for revolutionary imagination, but it eventually becomes a recurring "heterotopia" that cannot truly change the existing order. Bourdieu's "field theory" emphasizes that social space is a field full of competition and conflict, where different actors fight for resources and power (Bourdieu, 1990). The train space in *Snowpiercer* is a typical "field" where different classes fight for survival and power.

In *The Host*, the Han River and its surrounding space become a place where multiple meanings converge. The Han River is both a symbol of Seoul and a symbol of South Korea's modernization, but it is also a polluted and damaged space. The appearance of the monster is precisely the outbreak of the environmental crisis that has been ignored in this modernization process. In the film, the government's blockade of the Han River and the "hunt" for the monster can be regarded as a kind of control and governance of space. However, this governance is not to protect the interests of the people but to cover up the truth and maintain its own power. Haraway (1991), in Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature, criticizes the concept of "anthropocentrism" and calls for the establishment of a more equal and sustainable relationship between humans and nature. The monster in *The Host* can be seen as a kind of natural "resistance," which challenges human control and plunder of nature and forces people to rethink the relationship between humans and nature. Gramsci's "cultural hegemony" theory argues that the ruling class not only maintains its rule through coercive means but also obtains the "consent" of the ruled through culture, ideology, and other means (Gramsci, 1971). In *The Host*, the government tries to obtain the "consent" of the people by controlling information and manipulating public opinion, but it ultimately fails.

In summary, Bong Joon-ho's films profoundly reveal the class divisions and power relations in South Korean society through the writing of space. Whether it is the contrast of living spaces of different classes in *Parasite*, the allegorical spatial politics in *Snowpiercer*, or the polluted and governed Han River space in *The Host*, they all reflect the close relationship between space and power, space and class. Through the presentation of these spaces, Bong not only shows the class landscape of South Korean society but also triggers the audience to think about spatial justice, environmental justice, and other issues. These writings of space form an organic connection with the "scars of memory" and the "trap of desire" discussed in the previous two parts. Spatial segregation and inequality are both manifestations of historical trauma at the practical level and exacerbate the "trap of desire" of the lower class. In the next section, we will continue to explore the "symbiotic" relationship in Bong's films to further analyze the complex interactions between classes.

4.2. Contradiction and Conflict: Cinematic Representation of Class Relations

If "spatial politics" reveals the segregation and opposition of different classes in space, then "contradiction and conflict" directly shows the more intense and direct confrontation in class relations. Bong Joon-ho's films never shy away from class contradictions. Instead, he uses them as an important driving force to advance the plot and deepen the theme. He is adept at capturing the subtle tensions between different classes and gradually intensifying them, eventually leading to inevitable conflicts. These conflicts can be symbolic or substantial, implicit or violent. Through the presentation of these contradictions and conflicts, Bong's films not only reveal the harsh reality of class relations in South Korean society but also trigger the audience to think deeply about social equity and justice. This section will take *Parasite*, *Snowpiercer*, and *The Host* as the main cases, combined with the Marxist theory of class and Frantz Fanon's analysis of the resistance psychology of colonized people, to explore the cinematic expression of class contradictions and conflicts in Bong Joon-ho's films and the social critical significance behind these expressions.

In *Parasite*, the contradictions and conflicts between classes are vividly displayed. In the first half of the film, the Kim family "parasitizes" the Park family through deception. Although there is a huge gap between the two classes, they can still maintain a false "harmony" on the surface. However, as the plot develops, this "harmony" is gradually broken, replaced by increasingly tense opposition and conflict. The appearance of the former housekeeper, Moon-gwang, and her husband constitutes an important turning point in the film. Although they and the Kim family both belong to the lower class, they engage in a life-and-death struggle to compete for limited resources. This kind of infighting among the lower class is precisely a manifestation of the complexity of class contradictions. It shows that in an unequal social structure, the lower class is both the object of oppression and may also become victims of each other's crushing. American scholar Nancy Fraser once pointed out that the contradictions of contemporary capitalist society are not only reflected in the economic level but also in the level of identity politics (Fraser, 1998). The conflict between different classes in *Parasite* includes not only the conflict of economic interests but also the conflict of identity. The Kim family's "invasion" of the Park family is not only to obtain material benefits but also to obtain a symbolic identity and get rid of their "humble" status. British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in his discussion of "liquid modernity," pointed out that an important feature of modern society is the fragility and instability of social relationships (Bauman, 2000). The "symbiotic" relationship between the Kim family and the Park family is precisely a manifestation of this "liquidity." It seems stable but is actually fragile and can break at any time.

The climax of the film, Kim Ki-taek's stabbing of Mr. Park, pushes the class contradiction to the extreme. This behavior seems sudden but has its deep psychological and social roots. Kim Ki-taek's long-suppressed sense of humiliation, anger, and despair completely broke out at this moment. His behavior is not only a revolt against Mr. Park but also a revolt against the entire unequal social structure. Fanon, in The Wretched of the Earth, profoundly analyzed the roots of the "violence" of the colonized people. He believed that the violence of the colonized people is not only a means of resistance but also a way of self-affirmation, an effort to regain their own subjectivity (Fanon, 1961). Kim Ki-taek's "violence" can also be understood in a similar framework. Although his behavior has no political agenda, it is a spontaneous, instinctive resistance, and an affirmation of his own subjectivity. Although this resistance eventually led to his destruction, it also has a certain tragic heroism. Behind this life-or-death conflict is the eruption of the

"Han" that has long been suppressed in Kim Ki-taek's heart. He is full of complex "hatred" for the upper class represented by the Park family. This "hatred" is intertwined with his despair of his own humble social status, the humiliation of "parasitic" life, and the anger at the Park family's "innate" sense of superiority. In the darkness of the basement, witnessing the tragic fate of Moon-gwang and her husband, he realized that no matter how hard he tried, he could not change his class attributes and his fate of being "inferior." Finally, when Mr. Park once again showed his disgust for the "smell," Kim Ki-taek's "hatred" erupted like a volcano, causing an irreversible tragedy. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu put forward the concept of "symbolic violence." He believed that the ruling class not only maintains its rule through economic and political means but also instills an ideology of "legitimacy" through culture, education, and other means, making the ruled class accept their subordinate position (Bourdieu, 1977). In *Parasite*, the Park family's "charity" to the Kim family seems to be a kind of benevolent help but is actually a kind of "symbolic violence." It reinforces their superior position and deepens the Kim family's sense of humiliation. Italian thinker Giorgio Agamben, in his study of the "state of exception," pointed out that in modern society, the boundary between law and violence has become increasingly blurred, and the ruling class can legally exercise violence by declaring a "state of exception" (Agamben, 1998). To some extent, the Park family's "domination" of the Kim family in *Parasite* can also be seen as a kind of "symbolic violence" under a "state of exception."

Snowpiercer presents class contradictions and conflicts in a more allegorical way. The train in the film is a closed, hierarchical social system. The lower-class people at the rear and the elites at the front constitute the two main opposing classes in this system. The contradiction between them is irreconcilable from the beginning. The "revolution" in the film is the inevitable result of the intensification of this contradiction. In order to fight for the right to survive, the lower-class people have to resort to violence and advance towards the front. The violence of this "revolution" is different from Kim Ki-taek's individual "violence." It has a stronger purpose and is more organized. However, the film's presentation of "revolution" is not simply praise but is full of reflection. Curtis eventually finds that "revolution" itself can also become a new tool of oppression. This reflection reflects Bong Joon-ho's profound understanding of the complexity of class struggle. British scholar Terry Eagleton once pointed out that Marxist class theory not only focuses on economic exploitation but also on oppression in culture and ideology (Eagleton, 2011). The "revolution" in *Snowpiercer* is not only an economic struggle but also a cultural and ideological struggle.

In *The Host*, although class contradiction is not the main line of the film, it is also relatively fully displayed. The "monster" in the film can be seen as an "Other," an object that is excluded and feared by mainstream society. The Park family, as representatives of the lower class, has established a subtle connection with the "monster." They are both marginalized groups abandoned by the system and suffer from the oppression of power. In the film, the government's handling of the "monster" reflects the arrogance and ruthlessness of power. In order to maintain their rule, they do not hesitate to sacrifice the interests of the people and even create panic and chaos. The Park family, in their struggle with the "monster," shows the courage and resilience of the lower class. American scholar Judith Butler, in her study of "body politics," pointed out that the body can be a place for the operation of power and a tool to resist power (Butler, 1993). In *The Host*, both the "monster's" body and the Park family's bodies have become the focus of the power struggle.

In conclusion, Bong Joon-ho's films profoundly reveal the class contradictions and conflicts in South Korean society. Whether it is the direct confrontation between different classes in *Parasite* , the allegorical "revolution" in *Snowpiercer*, or the empathy between the lower class and the "Other" in *The Host*, they all reflect the complexity and diversity of class contradictions. Through the presentation of these contradictions and conflicts, Bong not only shows the reality of South Korean society but also triggers the audience to think deeply about social equity and justice. His films are not only a critique of reality but also a reflection on human nature and a vision for the future. Through the refraction of the "mirror of class," Bong Joon-ho's films bring the "scars of memory" and the "trap of desire" to a climax. Historical trauma, individual desire, and social injustice are concentratedly reflected in the intensification of class contradictions. This concentrated reflection is not only a summary of the previous two parts but also provides a key to understanding the social critical significance of Bong's films. If "the scars of memory" and "the trap of desire" focus more on individual experience, then "the mirror of class" expands the vision to the entire social level.

Through the analysis of class relations, Bong Joon-ho's films closely link individual destiny with social structure, revealing the complex and profound interaction between the two.

5. Conclusion

Bong Joon-ho's films, with their keen insight and profound critique of social reality, offer us a unique perspective to understand contemporary society. This paper, from the three dimensions of "the scars of memory," "the trap of desire," and "the mirror of class," has conducted an in-depth interpretation of the social allegories in Bong Joon-ho's films. Through a detailed analysis of films such as *Memories of Murder*, *Parasite*, *Snowpiercer*, and *The Host*, we see that Bong's films are not only artistic expressions but also profound reflections on history, psychology, and reality.

"The scars of memory" reveals the shaping of collective memory by the trauma of modern Korean history and the cinematic expression of the "Han" culture in films. "Han," as a complex emotional structure, carries the suffering of history and embodies the resistance to injustice in reality. "The trap of desire" turns its attention to the psychological dimension of individuals in modern society. Using Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, it analyzes the pursuit of the "ideal self" by individuals under the influence of capitalism and consumerism and the resulting alienation and anxiety. "The mirror of class" focuses on the practical dimension of South Korean society. Through the presentation of spatial politics, class contradictions, and conflicts, it reflects the harsh reality of class solidification and the widening gap between the rich and the poor in South Korean society.

These three dimensions are not isolated but intertwined and influence each other. "The scars of memory" provide a historical footnote for "the trap of desire," and "the trap of desire" is an important root cause of the contradictions and conflicts in "the mirror of class." Bong Joon-ho's films organically combine these three dimensions to form a complete and profound social allegory. These allegories are not only a reflection on South Korean society but also have universal significance beyond national borders. In today's increasingly globalized world, the problems presented in Bong's films, such as class solidification, the gap between the rich and the poor, environmental pollution, and consumerism, are common challenges faced by countries around the world. Therefore, his films also provide us with an important frame of reference for understanding and reflecting on contemporary society.

Certainly, this study also has certain limitations. Due to space constraints, it was not possible to conduct a comprehensive analysis of all of Bong Joon-ho's film works, nor was it possible to make a more sufficient comparison with the works of other Korean directors. In addition, research on the audience reception level needs to be further deepened. Future research can expand from these aspects in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the social allegories of Bong Joon-ho's films.

In conclusion, Bong Joon-ho's films, with their profound ideological connotations and unique artistic style, provide us with a key to understanding contemporary society. They are not only treasures of cinematic art but also important research objects in the fields of sociology and cultural studies. Through an in-depth interpretation of these films, we can better understand the various problems in modern society and think about the direction of future development. Bong Joon-ho's films, like a mirror, reflect the joys and sorrows, hopes and dilemmas of our time, and are worthy of our repeated appreciation and deep thought.

Acknowledgment

All contributions of the third parties can be acknowledged in this section.

Funding

This project is supported by the Anhui Province Institutions of Higher Education Philosophy and Social Sciences Research Projects (No. 2023AH050045).

References

1. Agamben, G. (1998). Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life. Stanford University Press. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA39548395
2. Assmann, J. (2011). Cultural memory and early civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination. Cambridge University Press. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB08121291
3. Baudrillard, J. (1998). The consumer society: Myths and Structures. SAGE Publications. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA35593048

4. Bauman, Z. (2000). Liquid modernity. Polity Press. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BC08825462
5. Bourdieu, P. (1977). Outline of a theory of practice. Cambridge University Press. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA00383060
6. Bourdieu, P. (1990). The logic of practice. Stanford University Press. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BD05712445
7. Butler, J. (1993). Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex." Psychology Press. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA21601782
8. Chung, S. (2014). Split Screen Korea: Shin Sang-ok and Postwar Cinema. University of Minnesota Press. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB20479126
9. Eagleton, T. (2011). Why Marx was right. Yale University Press. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BD00657940
10. Fanon, F. (1961). The wretched of the Earth. Grove Press. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB01473825
11. Foucault, M., & Miskowiec, J. (1986). Of other spaces. Diacritics, 16(1), 22–27. https://doi.org/10.2307/464648
12. Fraser, N. (1998). From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' age. In Oxford University Press eBooks (pp. 430–460). https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198782063.003.0021
13. Giddens A. (1984). The constitution of society : outline of the theory of structuration. University of California Press. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA00485785
14. Gottdiener, M. (1995). Postmodern semiotics: Material Culture and the Forms of Postmodern Life. Blackwell. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA24562428
15. Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci. Lawrence and Wishart. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA03625916
16. Halbwachs, M. (1992). On collective memory. University of Chicago Press. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA18953806
17. Haraway, D. J. (1991). Simians, Cyborgs, and women: The Reinvention of Nature. Free Association Books. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BC0960064X
18. Harvey, D. (2006). Spaces of global capitalism. Verso. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA76765949
19. Jameson, F. (1991). Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism. Verso. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA12119922
20. Kim, S. (2019). (In)Commensurability of Korean Cinema: international coproduction of Korean films in the 2010s. Korea Journal, 59(4), 136–166. https://doi.org/10.25024/kj.2019.59.4.136
21. Kim, S. Y. (2023). Lost in aestheticization: Bong Joon-Ho's parasite. South Central Review, 40(1), 76–95. https://doi.org/10.1353/scr.2023.0004
22. Lacan, J. (1977). Écrits : a selection. Tavistock/Routledge. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA14117655
23. Lacan, J. (2018). The four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis. Routledge. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BC12095920
24. Lee, O.-Y. (1967). In This Earth & In That Wind: This is Korea. Hollym Corp. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA04807318
25. Lefebvre, H. (1991). The production of space. Blackwell. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA12992226
26. Massey, D. (2012). Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place. In Geography (pp. 75–85). https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203977781-12
27. McGowan, T. (2007). The real gaze: Film Theory after Lacan. State University of New York Press. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA81768684
28. Soja, E. W. (1996). ThirdSpace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places. Blackwell. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA29128757
29. Žižek, S. (2008). The sublime object of ideology. Verso. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA88705503