



*Existential Strains in Parasite: An Analysis of Class, Power, and Despair*

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Abstract

Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019) serves as a compelling exploration of existential themes within the framework of modern capitalist society. This article analyzes the film through an existentialist lens, focusing on how class struggle, power dynamics, familial bonds, and the pursuit of meaning reveal the psychological and philosophical tensions faced by individuals in a rigidly stratified world. The film juxtaposes the lives of the affluent Park family and the impoverished Kim family to analyze the illusion of social mobility and the dehumanizing effects of economic inequality. The Kim family's infiltration of the Park household is portrayed as both a strategic survival tactic and an existential assertion of agency. However, their quest for autonomy ultimately unravels, exposing the fragility of their aspirations in the face of an indifferent social order. The characters' existential choices, ranging from deception to rebellion, highlight the paradox of freedom in a system designed to suppress it. Ki-taek's final act of violence and Ki-woo's delusional hope of upward mobility underscore the absurdity inherent in their pursuit of dignity and meaning. Drawing on existentialist thinkers such as Sartre and Camus, the article examines how *Parasite* employs visual metaphors, spatial dynamics, and symbolic dialogue to represent alienation, despair, and resistance. The semi-basement, the staircase, and the underground bunker become physical embodiments of existential liminality. Ultimately, *Parasite* emerges as a cinematic reflection on the absurdities of class and the existential costs of living under systemic oppression, challenging viewers to reconsider the nature of freedom, identity, and human worth in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** *Parasite*, existentialism, class struggle, alienation, power dynamics, absurdism, Sartre, Camus, socio-economic inequality



## Introduction

Cinema has long served as a mirror reflecting the complexities of the human condition, offering insight into philosophical, psychological, and socio-political struggles. Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019), a critically acclaimed South Korean film, transcends the boundaries of genre and geography to emerge as a powerful social commentary on inequality, identity, and survival. By weaving together dark comedy, psychological drama, and thriller elements, *Parasite* lays bare the stark divide between social classes while exploring deeper existential questions about freedom, authenticity, and the pursuit of meaning. At its core, *Parasite* is not merely a story about two families at opposite ends of the economic spectrum; it is a cinematic exploration of existential crisis within the context of late capitalism. The characters' choices, interactions, and ultimate downfalls reflect fundamental existentialist concerns: the search for agency in a deterministic world, the conflict between appearance and authenticity, and the absurdity of human aspirations in the face of structural oppression. Through its compelling narrative and visual symbolism, the film examines how individuals navigate alienation, powerlessness, and despair, raising urgent questions about whether genuine freedom is possible in a society defined by economic and social hierarchies.

This paper aims to analyze *Parasite* through an existentialist framework, drawing on the philosophical insights of thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. By examining themes of class struggle, power dynamics, familial bonds, and absurdity, the study reveals how *Parasite* articulates a profound critique of contemporary existence, ultimately challenging viewers to confront the existential dimensions of inequality and human suffering.

## Research Questions

- 1) How does Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* depict existential alienation and despair within the context of class struggle and socioeconomic inequality?
- 2) In what ways do the characters in *Parasite* exercise existential choice or resistance, and how do these actions reflect the philosophical concepts of freedom, authenticity, and absurdity?

## Research Objectives

- 1) To analyze how Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* represents existential alienation and despair through its depiction of class struggle and socioeconomic inequality.
- 2) To explore how the characters in *Parasite* engage in existential choices or acts of resistance, and how these reflect the philosophical themes of freedom, authenticity, and absurdity.

## Significance of the Study

This research holds significance both within the realm of film studies and in the broader context of philosophical and socio-political discourse. Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* is not only a landmark in global cinema but also a profound commentary on the human condition in a deeply stratified capitalist society. By examining the film through the lens of existential philosophy, particularly the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, this study aims to uncover how *Parasite* articulates the psychological and moral struggles of individuals trapped within oppressive social structures. Understanding *Parasite* from an existentialist perspective provides a deeper insight into how modern narratives reflect the alienation, despair, and moral ambiguity faced by individuals in the contemporary world. This research contributes to existing scholarship by bridging cinematic analysis with existential



theory, offering a nuanced interpretation of the film's characters and their choices as responses to systemic inequality and existential crisis. Moreover, the study is relevant in a global context where issues of class disparity, identity, and freedom are increasingly urgent. By analyzing how existential themes are represented through visual metaphors, character development, and narrative structure, this research not only enriches academic discourse around *Parasite* but also encourages viewers and scholars alike to reconsider the ethical and philosophical dimensions of everyday life in unequal societies.

### Research Methodology & Literature Review

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in film analysis and existential philosophy to examine the existential themes in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019). The study integrates cinematic analysis with philosophical inquiry, using selected scenes, dialogues, and visual elements from the film as primary data for interpretation.

The research is theoretical and analytical in nature, drawing upon existentialist philosophy, particularly the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus as the foundational framework. The design is textual and thematic, focused on interpreting how the film represents concepts such as alienation, despair, freedom, authenticity, resistance, and absurdity. The primary source for analysis is the film *Parasite* itself. Key scenes, character dialogues, spatial structures (e.g., semi-basement, staircase, and hidden bunker), and character actions were identified and examined closely. These cinematic elements serve as narrative and symbolic tools through which existential themes are conveyed.

A thematic content analysis approach is used to interpret the data. Themes such as class struggle, alienation, freedom, and resistance are identified and analyzed through an existentialist framework. Each theme is linked to specific philosophical concepts and cinematic techniques to draw meaningful interpretations. The intersection of cinema and existential philosophy has garnered increasing scholarly attention, especially in films that critique modern society through symbolic storytelling. Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019), acclaimed for its layered narrative and visual depth, has sparked a growing body of literature that explores its social, political, and philosophical dimensions.

Numerous scholars have examined *Parasite* as a commentary on class inequality and the failures of capitalist structures. According to Kyung Hyun Kim (2020), the film encapsulates South Korea's growing wealth disparity, using spatial divisions, such as the semi-basement and luxurious Park home, to reflect systemic class separation. Similarly, Cho (2021) argues that the verticality of space in *Parasite* serves as a metaphor for social hierarchy, where upward mobility remains aspirational and largely unattainable.

Existentialist interpretations of film are rooted in the works of Sartre and Camus, who emphasize themes such as alienation, freedom, authenticity, and absurdity. Film theorists like Robert Solomon and Thomas Wartenberg have long advocated for the analysis of films as existential texts. These scholars suggest that cinema offers a visual and emotional platform to explore existential dilemmas, particularly the absurdity of life, moral ambiguity, and the search for meaning.

Though *Parasite* has been widely discussed in terms of social criticism, fewer studies have directly engaged with its existential dimensions. Lee (2022) contends that the Kim family's moral compromises represent existential choices, highlighting Sartre's notion of 'bad faith,' the denial of one's own freedom and responsibility. Meanwhile, Jung (2020) interprets Ki-taek's climactic act of violence as an existential revolt against dehumanization, aligning with Camus' concept of the absurd hero who rebels against meaninglessness.



Some studies, such as those by Martinez (2021), explore *Parasite* as a modern absurdist tragedy, where the characters' attempts to transcend their socioeconomic position are continually thwarted by invisible but impenetrable social barriers. This reflects Camus' belief in the absurd—the conflict between human aspiration and an uncaring world.

While existing literature thoroughly explores *Parasite*'s class critique and symbolism, there is a noticeable gap in detailed existential analysis grounded in classical philosophy. Most studies touch on alienation and despair, but few connect these themes explicitly to the existentialist frameworks of Sartre and Camus. This research aims to fill that gap by analyzing *Parasite* not only as a social critique but also as a text of existential resistance, despair, and absurdity.

### Discussion & Analysis

Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* presents a deeply layered cinematic experience that explores the existential struggles of individuals trapped within an oppressive social system. At its heart, the film is not simply a social satire but an existential meditation on alienation, absurdity, and the search for meaning. Through the characters' experiences, the film encapsulates core existentialist themes articulated by thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, particularly in how individuals confront or submit to the conditions of their existence.

#### 1. Existential Alienation in the Context of Class

One of the film's most striking achievements is its illustration of alienation as a product of socioeconomic inequality. Sartre emphasizes that alienation arises when individuals are denied the freedom to define themselves due to external constraints. This is vividly portrayed in the Kim family's entrapment in a semi-basement apartment, a spatial metaphor that situates them neither above nor fully below ground, symbolizing their marginal place in society. Ki-taek's observation, "It's not so bad, we have a view," (00:03:20) reflects a forced optimism rooted in powerlessness, a hallmark of existential despair. The divide between the Kim and Park families is more than economic; it is existential. The Parks' casual privilege and obliviousness to suffering starkly contrast the Kims' daily fight for survival. This disparity becomes existential when the Kims begin to adopt false identities in order to infiltrate the Parks' household. According to Sartre's concept of *bad faith*, individuals live inauthentically when they deny their true selves to conform to external expectations. The Kim family's elaborate deceptions reflect their desperate attempt to transcend their social reality while simultaneously losing touch with their authentic identities.

The scene during the rainstorm (01:34:20) is a turning point. While the Parks comment on how 'refreshing' the rain is, the Kims return to their flooded basement, their belongings destroyed by sewage. This moment crystallizes the existential alienation that pervades the film, the Kims' efforts to 'rise' are literally and figuratively drowned. The system they attempt to navigate is indifferent to their suffering, which aligns closely with Camus' notion of the absurd: the conflict between the human desire for dignity and a world that offers no inherent justice or meaning.

#### 2. Existential Choice and Resistance

Despite their alienation, the characters in *Parasite* are not entirely passive. Each member of the Kim family exercises what Sartre calls radical freedom, the ability to choose in spite of constraints, even if those choices are morally ambiguous or self-destructive. The family's decision to deceive the Parks and occupy roles beyond their social status represents an act of existential defiance. Ki-woo's comment, "I'm not who I really am, but I'm going to make





them think I am" (00:24:30), reflects his awareness of the deception and his conscious decision to embrace it in pursuit of a better life.

However, existential choice is double-edged. While it allows agency, it also entails responsibility. As their scheme unravels, the consequences of their choices intensify, particularly for Ki-taek. The humiliation he suffers, especially during the birthday party skit where he is ordered to "stay in character" (01:59:30), forces him to confront the extent to which he has surrendered his dignity. His eventual act of violence against Mr. Park can be read as a moment of existential awakening. In that instant, Ki-taek refuses to continue playing a dehumanizing role and asserts his agency, albeit through a violent and irreversible act. Camus' notion of revolt is also pertinent here. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus posits that even in a meaningless world, rebellion can be a form of meaning. Ki-taek's murder of Mr. Park is tragic, but it is also a rebellion against the system that has continually rendered him invisible and disposable. It is not a solution, but an assertion of being, an anguished cry that refuses quiet submission.

Ki-woo's fantasy at the end of the film, where he imagines buying the Park house and reuniting with his father, is perhaps the most poignant depiction of existential absurdity. His dream, though sincere, is undercut by the camera returning to his reality, still trapped in the same semi-basement. The contrast between his imagined future and his current condition echoes Camus' view that the absurd hero is one who continues to hope and act in a world that offers no guarantees. Ki-woo's final voiceover, "One day, I'll walk up those stairs" (02:06:40), captures this tragic persistence of hope in an indifferent world.

### 3. Spatial Symbolism and Existential Liminality

The film's spatial architecture reinforces its existential themes. The semi-basement represents marginal existence; the staircase symbolizes futile ascent; and the underground bunker reflects total erasure and dehumanization. These spaces are not just physical but psychological landscapes. Geun-sae, the man living in the bunker, is the extreme outcome of existential defeat, reduced to a ghost-like existence, worshipping Mr. Park as a god. His condition mirrors what happens when individuals internalize their subjugation completely, a warning to the Kims and viewers alike.

Through its characters, structure, and visual metaphors, *Parasite* vividly illustrates the existential consequences of class-based oppression. It shows how individuals resist, adapt, and collapse under systems that rob them of freedom, dignity, and authenticity. While the film offers no easy solutions, it compels viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about agency, identity, and the absurdity of modern life, making it not just a powerful social critique, but a profoundly existential work.

### Conclusion

Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* is a masterful cinematic exploration of existential anxiety, alienation, and the human quest for meaning within a deeply divided social order. This research has examined the film through the lens of existentialist philosophy, particularly the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, to uncover the complex interplay between class struggle, individual freedom, and psychological despair. The film's portrayal of the Kim family's rise and fall offers more than a critique of capitalism; it serves as a haunting reflection on the limitations imposed by a system that denies true agency and authentic existence.

The analysis revealed that the characters in *Parasite* are not passive victims but active participants making existential choices, whether through deception, rebellion, or fantasy.



These choices, though acts of resistance, often lead to further entrapment, illustrating the paradox of human freedom in an inherently unjust and absurd world. The spatial metaphors, the semi-basement, staircase, and hidden bunker, serve as potent visual representations of the characters' existential liminality and unfulfilled aspirations.

Ultimately, *Parasite* embodies the existential dilemma of modern life: the struggle to assert one's identity and find meaning in a world structured to suppress both. The film does not offer a resolution but rather a mirror, forcing viewers to confront the uncomfortable truths of socioeconomic inequality and human vulnerability. By combining cinematic storytelling with existential inquiry, *Parasite* elevates itself from a tale of class conflict to a profound philosophical statement on what it means to exist in a world that often feels indifferent to that existence.

### Findings

- 1) *Parasite* powerfully illustrates how socio-economic conditions produce existential alienation. The Kim family's semi-basement symbolizes their liminal social status, physically and metaphorically below the upper class, highlighting their disconnection from the societal mainstream.
- 2) In line with Sartre's concept of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith), the Kim family adopts false identities to infiltrate the Park household. These inauthentic roles allow temporary social mobility but also deepen their loss of self and existential despair.
- 3) Despite their subjugation, the Kims make deliberate, often risky, existential choices. Their decision to deceive the Parks is not just survival-driven but a form of agency and resistance against their socio-economic limitations.
- 4) Ki-taek's murder of Mr. Park is interpreted as a Sartrean and Camusian rebellion, an extreme but conscious assertion of self in response to long-term humiliation and dehumanization, symbolizing a rupture in his subservient identity.
- 5) Architectural features such as staircases, the basement, and the bunker are not mere backdrops but existential symbols. They depict a psychological geography of struggle, marginalization, and aspiration within a rigid class hierarchy.
- 6) Ki-woo's final fantasy of buying the Park house is an embodiment of Camus' absurd hero, clinging to meaning in a meaningless world. However, the return to his grim reality exposes the futility of hope in a system rigged against him.
- 7) The Kim family begins the film as a tight-knit unit, but their pursuit of upward mobility under existential pressure leads to disillusionment, moral compromise, and eventual collapse. Their bond, once a source of strength, becomes strained and ultimately broken.

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