

Universal Cities. A Comparison between *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984) by Pedro Almodóvar and *Parasite* (2019) by Bong Joon-Ho

Alexandra Goitia Goitia

Abstract—From power dynamics to urban stratification, Pedro Almodóvar’s *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984) and Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite* (2019) dialogue in the same language: the universality of their cities. Even though the films are located in a specific space and time (Madrid in the 1980s and Seoul in the 2010s), their messages and criticisms are one and ecumenical: what happens in Spain and South Korea can happen anywhere else in the world. Thus, despite the different countries, languages, and times in which they were filmed, the present paper will delve into the analysis and comparison between *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!* and *Gisaengchung*, covering topics such as US acculturation, social immobility, and urban landscapes and their impact on social classes.

Index Terms—Parasite, Korean films, Spanish movies, world cinema

I. BETWEEN SPANISH AND SOUTH KOREAN PARASITES

In 1986, a Spanish director secured his first non-Hispanic international prize. Thirty-four years later, in 2020, a South Korean movie won the Academy Award for Best Picture for the first time in history. Seemingly distant in time and space, these triumphs marked the consecration of Pedro Almodóvar and Bong Joon-ho as world-renowned film directors. Oscars, Golden Globes, BAFTAs ... Almodóvar and Bong are known as the most representative filmmakers of their respective countries, and their movies have triumphed both at national and international scale. Still, the following paper will focus on two specific films, those that brought the directors to the attention of the general -international- public: *What have I done to deserve this?* (1984) and *Parasite* (2019).

Described by Almodóvar as his “most social” film [1], *What have I done to deserve this?* (from now on *What have I done?*) focuses on the daily life of an impoverished family in democratic Spain. The film’s main character, Gloria, tries to survive a husband, a social situation, and a city that oppresses and suffocates her. Curiously, her life resembles Kim Ki-woo’s one, the protagonist of Bong’s *magnum opus*. Released in 2019, *Parasite* focuses on the poor-rich dichotomy in South Korea, a division portrayed by the differences between the Kims (a low-income family) and the Parks (an affluent family). The Kims wish to overcome their misery and climb socially, which is why they take advantage of the Park family, who are several steps above their social status.

Manuscript received June 12, 2023; revised July 20, 2023; accepted August 10, 2023.

A. Goitia is with the Illinois State University, IL 61761 USA. E-mail: alexgoitiagoitia@gmail.com

As one can see, both movies share some similarities. As socially committed films, *What have I done?* and *Parasite* focus on dysfunctional and unstructured nuclear families whose vicissitudes are integral to the main plot. These families challenge, among others, the notion of the perfect housewife, featuring drug-addicted and mariticide wives, professional female athletes who work away from home, and housewives who cannot complete domestic tasks. Still, the similarities between the two films do not end there.

Macho husbands, useless dreams, identity fraud ... Both films share many elements and details, from the Japanese influence in their opening scenes (the viewer can see some Asics socks at the start of the South Korean film and some random men seem to be practicing kendo in the Spanish one) to the appearance of condoms in both films (minute 10:54 of *What have I done?* and 1:22:40 of *Parasite*). Additionally, both films combine dark humor with a characteristic gore tinge. In this sense, it is worth pointing out the political value of the songs featured in the films.

Music will be both an extra-diegetic and a diegetic element in both Almodóvar’s and Joon-ho’s movies. For instance, on the one hand, both filmmakers will include foreign songs in their films, such as Gianni Morandi’s *In Ginocchio Da Te* (1964) in *Parasite* (1:14:11) or several German songs in Almodóvar’s movie (e.g., at 1:09:00). On the other hand, both directors participate directly in some songs that are part of the fictional world of the movies. That is to say, for example, Almodóvar uses the popular song *La bien pagá* (1930s) by Juan Mostazo as a metafilmic resource by performing it himself in the film, while Bong composes the final song of his film (also performed by the leading actor). Moreover, it must be pointed out that both directors utilize their soundtracks for political purposes. In *What have I done?*, German songs are featured due to Gloria’s husband’s Nazi nostalgia. In *Parasite*, Jessica uses the rhythm of *Dokdo is our Land* (1982) by Jung Kwang-tae, a song that alludes to the Dokdo Islands (Liancourt Rocks), a territory whose sovereignty is contested between South Korea and Japan.

Thus, after providing an overview of the films and the significance of their directors in contemporary cinema, this paper will analyze the main symbols and the main criticisms of the aforementioned films, focusing, especially, on the relationship between space (national, urban, home) and social classes.

II. COUNTRIES, CITIES, HOUSES, AND PEOPLE: SPACES IN CONFLICT

“This is so metaphorical” or so Ki-woo says looking at a stone that we later discover is fake (7:50). “It’s so

metaphorical”, or that’s what Ki-woo expresses looking at a painting of a child, a self-portrait that a priori he mistakes for a chimpanzee (19:05). So metaphorical, because Spain, Madrid, the *Barrio de la Concepción, las Colmenas* and Gloria’s family in *What have I done?*, and South Korea, Seoul, the *Ahyeon-dong* neighborhood, the *banjiha* and the Kim family in *Parasite* will function as the height, culmination and denunciation of capitalism.

First of all, something that it must be highlighted is that both directors choose to denounce the Americanization of their cultures. Namely, the films are not talking about countries whose cultures simply have a certain American influence. According to Almodóvar and Bong, when talking about Spain and South Korea we are referring to nations that have undergone significant acculturation by the United States. For instance, in the South Korean case, as the Korean-Chinese-American author Louie points out:

Given the history of US intervention in Korea, it should come as no surprise that many Korean immigrants view the United States with a mixture of admiration, curiosity, anger, fascination, and disillusionment. Koreans call these ambivalent emotions *miguk yol* [America Fever] and *miguk byong* [America Sickness]. [2]

This will be clearly reflected in *Parasite*, where English is a status symbol and the influence of the United States (to the detriment of Korean identity) is noticeable in every aspect of the film, especially in those related to the Park family. That is to say, the viewer discovers the superior status of English thanks to the rich family. For example, when the protagonist enters the Parks’ house, on one of the walls we see different American articles and awards about Park Dong-ik (14:06), the family patriarch, who will be presented to the public for the first time with his English name: Nathan Park. Later, in the first meeting between Ki-woo and the rich mother, the latter alternates Korean with a phrase in English (minute 15:33) to warn the protagonist that his job is not secured. Afterward, at minute sixteen, the rich daughter will be seen studying English, and later, after meeting her expectations and being approved as the tutor of her daughter, Yeon-kyo decides to call Ki-woo “Kevin” (17:45).

And it doesn’t stop. At minute 18:13, the young rich son dresses as a Native American while the rich mother boast that they brought his arrows from the United States of America, a fetishization or trivialization of Native Americans that is reinforced at minute 25, when we see a room full of indigenous cultural objects (a teepee, a dream catcher, a feather headdress...) as decoration for the child’s room. Likewise, at minute 19:54, Jessica states that she does not remember her Korean name and that she studied at the US. Furthermore, at minute 21:15, it is said that the rich boy has the influence of Basquiat; and at minute 23:06, while the rich daughter writes in English, Ki-woo asks her to use the word “pretend”, which in the context of this film doesn’t go unnoticed. At minute 37:43, the viewer might notice that Nathan’s company is called *Another brick*, an English title that also refers to the song *Another Brick in the Wall* by *Pink Floyd* (1979). At minute 38:21, we find out that the car used by the Parks is a Mercedes. This choice is of great importance, given that two of the sectors that contribute the most to South

Korean GDP are the car companies Hyundai and Kia. Namely, the reason why South Korea established itself as a great power was largely thanks to these South Korean brands, but, despite this, the Park family decides to use a foreign car.

The situation doesn’t change when entering the first hour of the movie either. At minute 1:12:05, the first thing the very poor man says after being underground for so long is “fresh air” in English, and the last word he articulates is “respect”, also in English, three-quarters of an hour later, when he dies. Furthermore, at 1:27:00, one of the characters states that, since the teepee was bought from the US, it *must* be of good quality.

As illustrated, the American influence is often a prominent feature in the movie, however, sometimes that influence can also be noticed in the background of the sequences, always being present in the scene, although we don’t always pay attention to it. For example, at minute 1:22:30, an altar where we can glimpse different photos of famous foreign people like Lincoln or Mandela and canned food like *Chunky* or *La Sevillana* appears in the scene, and at minute 1:53:46 (at the bottom of the shot and despite the fact that the sunlight and blur make vision difficult), the viewer can distinguish two packets of briquettes from the American brand *Weber*.

Regarding Almodóvar’s film, there are numerous explicit references to the United States: characters who dream of going to the US (27:13), protagonists that state that “it’s not even America” (30:54), people who mention Truman Capote (35:08), characters that use -as in Bong’s film- an American name instead of their own (Cristal Scott instead of Carmen Martínez, 1:19:56), or even protagonists that say that they want to learn English to go to Las Vegas, even though they pronounce “high quality” incorrectly (1:29:12). The Americanization of the background also stands out in this film, with American comics (10:12), a newspaper article about the death of Grace Kelly (at 18:31), T-shirts (24:20) and posters (39:25) of *Kiss*, posters of Marilyn Monroe, Paul Newman, James Dean ... (28:10), a bag from the *Strand Bookstore* of New York (33:55), and finally, at minute 1:07:16, a poster for the American film *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), appearing in the background of the movie.

As it can be seen, the first space that the directors pay attention to is the national one. Almodóvar and Bong criticize the introduction of the US in all spheres and social strata of Spain and South Korea. However, it should be noted that the acculturation will not be the only thing that the films criticize. Namely, the directors also raise an internal complaint, a complaint to their own nation. Both filmmakers criticize the values of capitalism and the economic miracle of their countries, consequence of the conflicts of the 20th century. Almodóvar and Bong blame economic increase for social decline. According to the directors, there is no New Korea or Spain, the contemporary national identity is only a continuation of the previous dictatorial regime, an economic “miracle” that has enriched a few, but impoverished the majority (as is the case of Gloria’s family, who can barely pay for their apartment, their bus trips, or for food and drinks). In South Korea there is even a term to refer to the current socioeconomic situation of the country: *Hell Joseon* [3].

Additionally, according to the Oscar Award winners, it seems to be that consumerism grips today’s societies. In *What have I done?*, Gloria literally sells her youngest son to a

pedophile to be able to buy a curling iron. Meanwhile, *Parasite* shows the stark contrast between the rich family's life (who even uses a whole room to store their clothes, bags, and suitcases) and the poor family's struggle to recover their belongings after a flood. In addition, while the wealthy waste food, the humble family has to feed on moldy bread. Likewise, Bong will criticize mobile phones (the very poor family uses a phone to record the other poor family as a threat), thus denouncing both contemporary technological dependence and one of the current economic pillars of South Korea (Samsung is considered a *chaebol*).

In this sense, we must ask ourselves what is the core of and what can sustain these societies and economic models. According to Almodóvar and Bong, the answer is the cities. In both films, the cities (which are also the capitals of their respective countries) act as characters and protagonists. As I have previously pointed out, there seems to be a certain metonymic relationship between the space inhabited by the characters and the protagonists themselves. In what respect?

Despite the fact that the plot is located in the city, the space that the characters inhabit is the periphery or suburbs of the city, both physically and metaphorically. Hence, two aspects that stand out in these films are marginality and spatial stratification. The first is especially striking in Almodóvar's movie, in which the characters live on the edge of the city, with a road (the M-30) that physically and metaphysically separates them from a Madrid of which they are supposedly a part of. The second stands out chiefly in the case of the South Korean film, where the poor literally live under Seoul, in a semi-basement that is even below the garbage of the street or their own toilet (which they have to climb to access to), a city in which the levels, the stairs and the ups and downs of the characters are characteristic and transcendental.

As it was just indicated, in *Parasite*, the dichotomy between rich and poor people has a great metonymic relationship with the space inhabited by the characters, which is why climbing (20:37, 26:22, 28:52, 29: 21, 41:24, 43:25, 50:34, 1:19:36, 1:51:14) and going downstairs (19:54, 25:55, 43:00, 1:05:10, 1:17:00, 1:18:43, 1:32:44, 1:55:54) will be a constant in the film. In this sense, Bong will be able to establish a parallelism between the spatial division and the class division of the world of *Parasite*. Thus, for example, at the fortieth minute, Kim Ki-taek goes down the escalator to approach the maid, but a minute later he goes up the moving stairway to accompany the rich mother.

This both physical and metaphysical separation from the city and from the social classes will crystallize, particularly, in the spatial distribution of the houses. In Almodóvar's movie, the lack of privacy becomes a feeling of total overwhelm: there is hardly any space for a single person in Gloria's apartment, we mainly see at least two people for each shot or scene. In this sense, Maseda defends that "both kitchen and dining room are filmed as oppressive spaces. The *mise-en-scène* works in the film to confine Gloria to the kitchen, where she is meant to exist only to cook and feed others" [4].

Home becomes an oppressive space that works as a social metaphor in the films. Thus, it should be noted that the houses of *What have I done?* and *Parasite* are related to the sociopolitical, economic and historical context of their respective countries, especially because both one and the

other apartment exist in real life. *What have I done?* is set in *La Concepción*, a working-class neighborhood built during the Francoist Spain. This neighborhood is located near the M-30, a ring road that separates the buildings from other wealthier neighborhoods or areas that are closer to the center of the city.

The political significance of selecting a semi-basement as a home is also quite noteworthy. In *Parasite*, all of the houses, from the *banjihás* to the bunkers built to deal with hypothetical North Korean bombs, exist in real life and their presence in contemporary society is analyzed and criticized by academics such as Yu-Min Joo, who, speaking of the South Korean capital, says that:

Socio-economic segregation does not usually take place within individual apartment buildings or apartment complexes but rather between different housing types (apartments vs. low-rise multifamily housing units). This chapter discusses various types of housing in Seoul, including low-rise multifamily units, apartments, and high-rise towers of mixed-use apartments, and analyzes how they produce spatial and micro-segregation. More specifically, it explains the vertical stratification found in old neighborhoods comprised of low-rise multifamily housing and why and how micro-segregation also occurs in high-rise apartments that are built as redevelopment projects under the government's social-mix policy. [5]

This happens because not only countries or cities, people are also places of conflict. Rich people are rich because poor people exist. As emphasized in *Parasite*, the affluent live isolated literally and metaphorically: they live in different parts of the city, they never take the subway, they are able to copulate without realizing that poor people are literally under them (1:28:25), and have different hobbies that the poverty-stricken people cannot afford. They don't know or want to know anything about the impoverished world. No lines can be crossed. The Park family's dogs are bred dogs (a Pomeranian, a toy poodle and a beagle): there has been no crossbreeding. Those at the top strive to maintain the line between themselves and those at the bottom, ensuring that the division between them remains intact: "the young man's sex life doesn't interest me, but why in my car? And if so, why not in his seat, why cross the line like that?" (33:06); "I can't stand people who cross the line" (47:07); "although he always seems to be about to cross the line, he never does (...), but that smell does, he moves to the back seat" (1:27:47). The only moment in which the lives of the cash rich and the low-paid can intersect is when the needy works for the affluent, as it can be seen in both movies (for instance, when the impoverished clean the houses of the wealthy or act as their drivers). Hence, one can wonder if those at the bottom can even dream of a better life. Is there any hope for Gloria and Ki-woo?

III. CONCLUSION: UNIVERSAL CITIES

As we have seen, the transnational comparison between *What have I done to deserve this?* and *Parasite* sheds light to the universality of various topics. Almodóvar and Bong use the cinematic lenses to comment on issues such as the

relation between urban spaces and socio-economic dynamics, thus proving that some themes and motifs repeat itself in different time and spaces. In this sense, it doesn't come as surprise to find out that the ending of the films also seeks to transcend spatial borders. Both the Spanish and the South Korean director choose to finish their movies with a rather ambiguous ending that seeks to answer the following question: is there any hope for the impoverished?

As for *What have I done?*, Téllez-Espiga defends that "in the final scene, Miguel decides to return home because, as he tells his mother; "This house needs a man." This sentence pronounced by a homosexual boy of barely twelve years old, represents the questioning of traditional social values (...) the outcome is happy" [6]. However, Escudero argues that "the supposed final release of Gloria (...) is invalidated (...) by the return home of her youngest son who takes the place left vacant by her dead husband by stating: "This house needs a man" [7].

Parasite is not spared from final ambiguity either. Domingo-Soler & Urgellés-Molina defend that the film ends in despair [8], while Mishra believes that "at the end by murdering Mr Park or Park Dong-ik, the 'father' of the family or the 'father' of capitalism and bourgeoisie, Kim family is successful in bringing out the proletariat revolution by becoming class conscious." [9]

And why so much disparity of opinion? Well, it seems to be that the endings can be interpreted in both ways. Someone can understand that the payment for Gloria's and Kim Ki-taek's crimes are metaphorical, since both one and another remain locked in the house, completely alone, but still without being able to be heads of the households. However, it can also be interpreted that none of the murderers paid for their crimes, since the protagonists neither die nor are caught by the police, and therefore the endings are happy ones.

Nevertheless, by my reckoning, the poor can *pretend*, they can try, but they will never be able to remove "their smell". Namely, in my opinion, can the poor free themselves from their condition? No, because the issue is a structural one. "We have to get out of this house to get rid of the smell" (*Parasite* 52:14). How though? Yes, the son dreams of buying the house and be able to reunite with his father, but their situation is even worse than the initial context in which they lived: his father is locked up, his sister dead, and he has a brain injury and a criminal record (plus, in a more metaphorical sense, there is no light coming in through the small window of the semi-basement). What's more, the final song itself underlines the tragic fate of the Kims: *Soju one glass* was originally called *564 years*, in reference to the years that Ki-woo will have to work to buy the house where his father is hiding.

Of course, to some extent, there is a liberating ending in both *What have I done?* and *Parasite*. Both in one and in another film the poor protagonists accept their fate. They didn't care if they were humiliated or if their labor was used in favor of others, until they woke up and killed their oppressor. However, these deaths are not a long-term solution. The impoverished realize that their condition is immutable, that the wheel continues to turn. As Mrs. Park points out, "I only trust recommendations" (36:46). That is to say, more important than the grades, more important than the effort, is the chain maintained by those above. There is no

social mobility, no meritocracy. There's no hope. The Kim children are incredibly smart, but that doesn't change their status. Jessica dies despite being the one that best fits into the rich world and when she passes away, no one helps her. In addition, it is the children themselves who continue with said wheel. As we see in *Parasite*, it is the youngest son who smells the scent of the Kims for the first time (51:35). He was born with a golden spoon in his mouth, and there is nothing that we can do about it. The same happens with Gloria's son, who will continue the patriarchy. So yes, Gloria is finally able to reunite with her son, but sexism lives on and her story is just one more of the hive.

One more of the hive? Indeed, because *What have I done?* and *Parasite* are not a portrait of Spain or South Korea, but, in reality, they are a universal portrait. As the South Korean director himself admits:

At first, I was amazed by the response because I really thought that this film was just full of Korean details, and the actors — their performances were full of very Korean nuances. I kind of worried whether international audiences would be able to sympathize with this story. But ever since we screened the film at Cannes, it seemed that people reacted very similarly to the smallest details—even I didn't quite understand why. After Cannes, I was at the Sydney Film Festival, Munich, Telluride, Toronto — the reaction was all the same everywhere. I think maybe there is no borderline between countries now because we all live in the same country, it's called capitalism. [10]

To sum up, although both films are set in a particular place and time period, their messages are ubiquitous. These are not isolated stories: the rich white people who arrive at the end of Bong's film, Almodóvar's final camera movement that shows us that Gloria's is just one small apartment among thousands more ... The most tragic thing about the endings of the films is that the viewer realizes that what they were watching was an across-the-board situation. The directors are not talking about a specific space. What happens in these domiciles, these cities, these countries, can happen in any other place. Starting from the houses, paradoxically, Almodóvar and Bong arrive at the universal.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- [1] P. Almodóvar and F. Strauss, *Conversations with Pedro Almodóvar*, Ediciones AKAL, 2001. (in Spanish)
- [2] M. C. Y. Louie, *Sweatshop Warriors: Immigrant Women Workers Take on the Global Factory*, South End Press, 2001.
- [3] Y. Kim, "Hell Joseon: Polarization and social contention in a neo-liberal age," in *Korea's Quest for Economic Democratization*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018, pp. 1–20.
- [4] R. Maseda, "Rebelling woman: Culinary crime in Pedro Almodóvar's *What have I done to deserve this!*" *Gastronomica*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 55–65, 2018. (in Spanish)
- [5] Y. M. Joo, "Micro-segregation in Seoul, the capital city of the 'Republic of Apartments'," in *Vertical Cities*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022, pp. 284–298.
- [6] E. Téllez-Espiga, "A redemptive postmodernity: Madrid as liberation from Glory in *What have I done to deserve this!* by Pedro Almodóvar," *Iberoromania*, vol. 75, no. 1, pp. 267–282, 2012. (in Spanish)
- [7] J. Escudero, "Rosa Montero and Pedro Almodóvar: Misery and stylization of the Madrid scene," *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 147–161, 1998. (in Spanish)

- [8] C. D. D. Soler and A. U. Molina, "Power, verticality and cinematographic representation," Book of Minutes of the 10th International University Congress on Content, Research, Innovation and Teaching: CUICID 2020, in *Proc. Fórum Internacional de Comunicación y Relaciones Públicas* (Fórum XXI), 2020. (in Spanish)
- [9] S. Mishra, "A marxist analysis of class consciousness in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*," *Global Media Journal*, vol. 20, no. 51, 308, 2022.
- [10] K. Hagen, *The Black List Interview: Bong Joon-ho on Parasite*, 2019.

Copyright © 2023 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).